Playing fiction: The use of semiotic resources in role play

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Abstract
By taking two different kinds of role playing as examples, this article explores how semiotic resources are utilised within a certain context. Regarding these role-playing activities as examples of participative narratives, we discuss how the playing and fiction interaction works as semiotic remediation practices for teenagers and young adults. While actively becoming part of the story and ‘making’ themselves in interaction with fiction, they use semiotic resources not usually included in literacy competencies such as the body and various artifacts. This kind of participation in narrative indicates that we have a need for play not only as a first step in our socialisation to become a reader, but also as a tool for reading development throughout life.

Keywords: cosplay, role playing games, play, narrative, semiotic resources, literary education

Playing Fiction

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In today’s media landscape young people not only want to be spectators or consumers but they also want to be active participants and co-creators of cultural products, for instance in computer games and fan fiction. In short, they want to be prosumers – i.e. both producers and consumers of media content (Jenkins 2006a; Olin-Scheller & Wikström 2010). In ways that often are creative and playful, prosumers transform content into something of their own and make this content available in various media formats. This is also true when it comes to fiction and storytelling. The contexts in which prosumers can spread and take part in storytelling have a function of informal learning environments. When participating in these environments, a wide range of semiotic resources are used. By taking two different kinds of role playing as examples, in this article we focus on how semiotic resources are utilised within this particular context. Regarding these role-playing activities as examples of participative narratives, we discuss how the playing and fiction interaction works as semiotic remediation practices (Prior et al. 2006, see below) for teenagers and young adults. The main research question in this article is thus: How are semiotic resources used in role play as an example of a participatory narrative?

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Since the activities analysed are various forms of narrative and fiction, the results we present should be read in line with research considering reading development and literary socialisation (e.g. Appleyard 1991). Based on our empirical study of semiotic resources in role playing, we argue that several of the competencies developed today in informal learning environments are vital for the process of ‘becoming a reader’ outside of formal learning environments. These aspects are often considered when it comes to the reading development of young children in preschool and junior levels of school (cf. Lindqvist 1996). However, these aspects are rarely explored in literary education for older children and teenagers. Our study should be viewed in this context, and in our concluding remarks we therefore discuss some facets of semiotic resources and semiotic remediation in participatory narrative in relation to literary socialisation and literary education in school.

**Methods and materials**

The two kinds of role playing that are analysed in this article are, opposed to a lot of role-playing games among young children, partly organised and formalised activities. They should, however, not be confused with the kinds of pedagogical role playing appearing in educational contexts. Role playing as a formalised leisure-time activity arose in the 1970s and has since developed in many different forms. The phenomenon thus has a pre-digital history, even though the digitisation of media in recent years has most certainly contributed to the spread of role playing.

The first type we study is called cosplay¹ or costume play - a widespread phenomenon among animé and manga fans in both Japan and the West². Cosplay, a term coined in the 1980s (Bruno 2002, Winge 2006), is a recurring activity at conventions organised around fan culture. Although in Japan cosplay has the broader meaning of a costume event, Western fans also gather at conventions for a few days creating a world in which they can meet, socialise and engage in their common interest. Here many fans dress up and paint themselves as characters from manga, animé and computer games. By dressing up as a character they love, the fans show their affection for the story at the same time as they interpret, perform, extend and remediate the narrative by putting the characters in new contexts.

A cosplaying fan at a convention is normally dressed up and expected to – at least in some way – act in line with their character during the whole time (1–3 days). The fans often take pictures of each other when posing and expressing their views of the manga or animé figures’ actions and characteristics. These photographs are frequently spread and published at various fan sites as well as the fans’ own home pages. For the fans, the pictures have the function of taking and being a part of the narrative as well as extending it by adding new ideas and interpretations. Conventions normally include a cosplay competition where the best dress, best character, best performance etc. is named and acknowledged at a special ceremony. Some of these competitions also include stage performances for which the fans have prepared a shorter role play.
Similar to other fan activities such as fan fiction, fan art or fan film, these role plays are based on already published works and produced by the fans themselves without any commercial purpose (cf. Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins 2006b; Olin-Scheller & Wikström 2010). Here the original settings and characters are moved into other contexts in which new stories are created. Thus, fan activism including activities such as cosplay is a way of creating meaning and interpreting narratives.

The second type of role play studied here is called pen-and-paper role-playing games in which the most common activity is when a group of gamers meet regularly to play a campaign, i.e. to build a coherent story together. Usually four to six people participate and most groups play for five to eight hours, one day a week. A campaign can sometimes last for several years. At the game sessions, one person is usually the game master, meaning they are responsible for creating the story. The other players act one fictional character each and interact in the fictitious world. The result of this ‘acting’ is a story made up of utterances and descriptions of the environment that the players encounter. In some situations, dice are rolled to determine what happens in the story. Other tools frequently used to help create the world are books and maps, but the participants seldom dress up in costumes as happens in cosplay. The pen-and-paper concept is largely misleading since only small parts of the activity actually use pens and papers. Instead, oral communication is the dominant resource.

These two types of role playing will be analysed separately, but with common overarching theoretical frames. However, each analysis focuses on different semiotic resources. In many respects, the same resources are used to extend the narrative and create stories in the two role-playing types, but by focusing on these two activities individually we want to illustrate and highlight the resources that are specific to different types of participatory storytelling. This does not mean that these resources are unique to role playing; instead, they occur in many different types of participatory narrative.

The empirical material for the cosplay analysis consists of observations at three different manga conventions in Sweden (May 2010, April 2011 and June 2011). In addition, 12 manga fans aged 14–21 were interviewed individually. Even though contacts with the informants were made during the conventions, no interviews were conducted there. Instead, further contacts were made after the convention, with the interviews being carried out 2–4 weeks after each convention. Seven interviews were made by e-mail, three at actual meetings and two by telephone. Where appropriate, the interviews were recorded and then transcribed and analysed. The empirical examples used in this article can be regarded as representations of a larger group of utterances regarding similar aspects of cosplaying. Before taking part in the study, all of the interviewed fans, and where applicable their parents, were given essential information about the study as well as about the conditions for participating in it. Everyone asked was willing to participate and several of the fans also voluntarily provided photographs of themselves when cosplaying. In this article, some of those
pictures are used to illustrate cosplay as a phenomenon\(^3\). All of the other information, however, such as the names of the fans, is anonymous.

For the pen-and-paper game analysis the material consists of audio recordings of gaming sessions and 18 interviews with nine role players aged between 18 and 42 years. The gamers were contacted through a gaming club in Sweden and everyone interested in participating in the survey was given a place in a gaming group, resulting in two separate groups. The gaming sessions, as well as the interviews, took place on the gaming club’s premises. However, the interviews were conducted individually on separate occasions. The material is comprehensive, totalling over 100 hours of audio recordings, and the examples presented in the analysis are strategically selected to provide typical examples of semiotic resources in pen-and-paper role-playing games. All of the empirical data derive from the informants’ leisure-time activities and participation in the survey was voluntary. The informants were also informed that they could at any time withdraw their participation. As for the cosplayers, the actual names of the gamers have been changed. Since the material does not contain information that can reasonably be perceived as sensitive to the participating individuals, there was no need for any further ethical evaluation.

**Today’s media landscape – participation, multimodality and learning**

The role of the prosumer and Web 2.0 have together led to new media practices that have changed the conditions for cultural activities as well as the creation of cultural products. This change can partly be described in terms of the so-called convergence culture (Jenkins 2006b). In addition to the dissolving borders between consumers and producers, the convergence culture is also about how a source text is remixed and distributed through a variety of media, creating huge text universes\(^4\). This development has, according to many researchers, changed the conditions for learning in both formal and informal learning environments (Gee 2004, Elmfeldt & Erixon 2007, Buckingham 2008, Olin-Scheller & Wikström 2010).

The stories of convergence culture are thus prosumed in many different forms of media, where the production modes combine several traditional ways of encoding content. At the same time, any form of representation has its own unique conditions for mediation. However, the spread of interactive multimedia including a diversity of communicative modes - language, image, music, sound, texture and gesture – is giving rise to new theories regarding developing and learning through semiotic resources. Among other things, these changes challenge a narrow definition of literacy (i.e. being able to read and write). Instead, having developed in the last 20 years in particular multimodality and multimedia literacy is an approach which refers to different media that utilise several modes to communicate. Prominent contributions include Bolter & Grusin’s research on remediation (e.g. 1999) and Kress’ research on multimodality (e.g. 2003 and 2010). The present study follows in this tradition of
research but, because our focus is on situated activities associated with literary socialisation, we will confine our theoretical concepts to certain aspects related to this.

**Theoretical foundation of the study**

Several researchers have highlighted the importance of play for young children to increase motivation for learning, as well as the significance of expanding different positions in literary socialisation (Appleyard 1991; Vygotsky 1995, Lindqvist 1996; Ingemansson 2010). Appleyard (1991) argues that young people gradually conquer new reader roles which, among other things, allow a broader and deeper understanding of text types, literary forms and stylistic approaches. These roles are all culturally rooted. Appleyard points out that, while growing up, children develop an understanding of different forms of storytelling. In this process, the ability to select between different reading strategies also matures.

The first role achieved is “The Reader as a Player”, which is reached when the young reader’s connection between reality and fiction is being developed. By playing, the child’s experiences are mirrored and repeated and, consequently, the perceived reality can be manageable for a small child, Appleyard argues. However, in our study the structures of play - with the fictional text as a starting point - seem to remain important even for older children and young adults. Play as an important part of literary socialisation is therefore a common theoretical base in this study. In line with Mackey (2007), we use the word “play” when referring to the interpretive elements held in common in a “variety of activities, with multifaceted and multimedia connotations” (p. 166.). According to Mackey, play always involves make-believe in one way or another, or “a shift to the world ‘as if’” (ibid.). We also use the idea to distinguish shifts when stepping into a fictional universe, i.e. discerning between narrative and non-narrative. Mackey (2007: 172) states that playing:

/.../involves a commitment of the mind as well as appropriate behavior of the body, a fruitful concept for considering the activities of text processing. Furthermore, the word play makes room for a kind of mental and dispositional ‘on-switch’ – an active commitment to the engagement – whose importance is sometimes overlooked in ordinary language about different kinds of text processing.

We thus regard play as a vital aspect of human interaction depending on the participants’ situated activities. Consequently, it is in this interaction that sociality, learning and development need to be studied (Melander and Sahlström 2010). Goodwin (2010) argues that participants in any context use the structure of the surrounding activity as a resource when they create meaning. In line with this, Prior et al. (2006) offer a way to understand how cosplayers and pen-and-paper role players create meaning in their situated activities through the concept of *semiotic remediation practices*. The multidisciplinary scientific basis the concept includes (for example language, gesture, media, literacy) provides opportunities to identify
general semiotic principles in situated activities and, at the same time, draw attention to variations in the products created. This is what we intend to do in this article when analysing semiotic resources in relation to role-playing activities. The perspective taken also involves an attempt to examine categories that can be accommodated in a more comprehensive theory of multimodality as social semiotics in the way Kress (2010) calls for.

Prior et al. also suggest that their perspective, as opposed to a traditional analysis of conversation as situated activity, provides the opportunity to study the dynamic transformation from mind to sign and back to mind – i.e. a movement between text and life. Interviews here fulfil a methodological function. “Semiotic remediation practices are not simply instances of communication [...] but also engines of distributed cognition and moments in the ongoing, historical and dialogic production of people, societies, and environment” (Prior et al. 2006, p. 762). For example, a theatre can be understood as a “complexly laminated set of interwoven frames” (Prior et al. 2006, p. 759), where the actions and words are produced and understood. The show is host to many semiotic resources such as voice, gestures, clothes, activities etc., and these are not separate domains but together constitute the whole of the creation. The activities we study in this article are also defined in both time and space as a theatre, while the larger social context in which they appear is not part of the study. However, following the research of both Appleyard (op. cit.) and Prior et al. (ibid.), we will give some examples of how the practices we examine also hold significance for the participants in a broader perspective.

When participating in cosplay and pen-and-paper role play, genres and text universes function as backdrops to the activity. The activities obtain their meanings as they are performed within structures of participation in which semiotic resources are available as a kind of toolbox. Goodwin (2010) calls the semiotic structures, or areas, the participants are oriented towards contextual configurations. A contextual configuration allows alternative structures for participation, but not just any. Nor is it viable to use any semiotic resource at any time. Participating requires a reflexive awareness of the configurations that form the situation and also of the other participants’ activities. When analysing activities within contextual configurations, we are given the opportunity to see how language, body, material structures and other semiotic resources interact in the creation of meaning.

By giving empirical examples of the utterances, actions and performances of the cosplayers and pen-and-paper role players we highlight the importance for both groups of being an active part of the story, as suggested by Jenkins (2006b) and others, as well as the significance of ‘playing’ fiction to create meaning in the way Appleyard argues. Analysing role playing as semiotic remediation practices enables an empirical study of how meaning is created, along with an examination of the semiotic tools and communicative skills the contextual configurations require.
More broadly, we argue, it is important to discuss the significance of this in relation to the literary socialisation that teaching in schools seeks to achieve.

**Cosplay as a semiotic remediation practice**

In this article we wish to highlight certain aspects of how different semiotic resources can be related to learning and meaning creation when a fictional text is the starting point. Among the many semiotic modes used in cosplayers’ activities, the body stands out as one of the most significant resources. The importance of embodiment in relation to literacy is still a relatively unexplored area. Recently, however, it has been increasingly noted that thought, feeling and willingness depend on the body for their expression (Nielsen 2011). The body is, as it were, our access to the lived space we always find ourselves in. Even though it is possible to create our own separate spaces, for example through fiction, the body is still the means to achieve this. Sometimes a fictional room can even appear physically when, for instance, a book is used as a shield against the surrounding environment. When ‘playing a text’ we not only make-believe, but we also perform this make-believing. Consequently, performing as activity always involves some kind of bodily immersion (Mackey 2007). When embodiment is regarded as a significant factor of understanding, the consequences for learning issues are that knowledge, understanding and skills can be created through sensual experience and that understanding can be expressed through the body. Or, as Mackey (2007: 167) puts it, “the mind is hard at work, even if we call it play”.

Thus, cosplay is a way to continue the narrative and remain in the meaning creation process of a source text. The similarity between this activity and, for instance, the feeling of here and now which characterises theatre is obvious. Common to these mediations is that the body is used as a means of expression and semiotic resource. Although the boundary between audience and participants is fluid, the fact that there is an audience – as well as the response from this audience – also plays a big part. This is obvious when the fans describe their interest in cosplay. Linda, 18, says that you “feel so good when other cosplayers respond to you, when they praise your cosplay and other things”⁵. She also says that she finds it important in her reading process to be able to move closer to her favourite character by dressing up, and “for a day or two be able to walk in its shoes and live out my true acting skills”. Another manga fan, Anton, 19, says:

> I like to dress up as Naruto [a widely spread manga character, see Figure 2] and I bought the suit when I was in England. Then I also cut my hair to his hairstyle. When cosplaying, you feel free in a different way; you play someone else and you can try out how this feels. Sometimes you can be met by strange looks from other persons, but I think this is fun and I feel happy if I can honour my character in a good way.

Anton’s statement indicates that, for him, cosplay is associated with using his body to transform the narrative. By being a part of the so-called “remix culture” (Lessig 2008)
or “participatory culture” (Jenkins 2006a) where together with others a cultural content is remediated, the cosplayers build communities where they can remain in the narrative and become part of the story in order to create new meaning. Cosplayers also increase their involvement in the story by physically going to a convention where they become a part of the story by appearing in costumes and through sentiment actions – bodily. For role players, being involved in the story is tantamount to finding common contexts where they can physically meet and interact with words, voice, facial expressions and body. Cosplay can therefore in many ways be said to be about discovering fiction in relation to body and place. Cornelia, 14, says:

> When you’re dressed up at a convention, you feel proud and beautiful because you’ve made the clothes yourself. People at conventions treat you as if you are any human being, and give you a lot of positive feedback. When you’re dressed up outside the convention you can be treated as if you are odd or strange and some just stare, comment on you, whispering and pointing. I just cosplay because I like to play. And it’s very funny too. We usually dress up, do a lot of posing, take pictures and make films.

Cornelia’s statement also reveals that she connects cosplaying with entertainment and that the elements of playing are motivational factors for her. Another cosplayer, Maria, 17, shares Cornelia’s opinion about the playfulness connected to the activity. She says:

> I go to conventions five-six times per year and I cosplay every time. The funniest things with this are to be able to be somebody else and to play around and act a bit geeky together with people that share your interest.

Playing is clearly an important factor for the cosplayers when engaging in their interest (also see Illustrations 1–2). In line with Appleyard (1991), we regard playing with fiction as a powerful tool to create semiotic resources used when developing as fiction readers. While playing, experiences are mirrored and repeated and, consequently, the perceived reality can be manageable for children as well as young adults. When playing, one moves between perceptions of how the ‘Self’ is perceived.
by others and how one filters perceptions of the ‘Other’ and the unknown. For a fan, cosplay activity can be regarded as a semiotic structure that the participant is oriented towards – in short, a contextual configuration (Goodwin 2010). Thus, the cosplayers’ movements between ‘the Self’ and ‘the Other’ are dynamic transformations from mind to sign and back to mind – i.e. a movement between text and life. As such, it can be considered a semiotic remediation practice and part of the reflexive awareness required for creating meaning when being a part of and expanding the narrative (Prior et al. 2006; Goodwin 2010). Distinguishing ‘the Self’ in relation to ‘the Other’ is fundamental in the creation of identity (Griffiths 1999; van Dijk 2004; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin 2007), but it is also a vital component of the processes involved when playing (Appleyard 1991) as well as reading fiction (Felski 2008).

Felski (2008) states that, when taking part in fiction, recognition is a prerequisite for understanding a narrative. Recognition relates to experiences of what we already know, but also what is possible to know (Felski 2008). In addition, recognition involves a dynamic movement between ‘the Self’ and ‘the Other’. Lundström and Olin-Scheller (2010: 112) argue that a collective, participatory culture, characterised by sharing and repeated aesthetic and emotional choices, is created within the various multimodal environments where cosplayers meet. Hence, by being a part of remediation practices, it ultimately amounts to repeating things already known in a number of different ways and placing them in a new context. The meaning making and learning processes are sustained by a constant movement between ‘the Self’ and ‘the Other’ (see e.g. Olin-Scheller 2011). The cosplayers cited above all give examples of this movement. So does Simon, 21, when he states that he dresses up “as a figure that feels relevant and complex enough”. Being dressed up “among 150 other people who regard cosplaying as an everyday phenomenon” is something he really likes.
Simon’s utterance shows that the convention as well as the audience has an important role in what he wants to accomplish. Schegloff (2010) claims that in a series of situated activities and utterances, such as embodied and verbal expression, the participants confirm allusions, i.e. the content of the preceding communication. The confirmations also apply to non-explicit hints. Confirming allusions in this way provides the basis for meaningful conversations and therefore seems to be an important mechanism in the joint creation of meaning. The activities obtain their meanings as they are performed within structures of participation in which semiotic resources are available as a kind of toolbox. Moreover, the cosplayer Simon wants to challenge himself in his choice of a character that is “complex enough” and to place himself physically in a context where cosplayers together create a playful community with its own rules and regulations. By doing this, he orient towards a specific and framed semiotic structure or a contextual configuration, and for the situated activity to become meaningful Simon depends on having his allusions, e.g. his costume, confirmed by the other participants. Thus, for Simon and the other cosplayers, playing fiction by using and remediating a number of semiotic resources is a vital aspect of the processes of creating meaning and identity.

Pen-and-paper role-playing games as a semiotic remediation practice

The main focus in cosplay is on performing the narrative through costume and bodily actions. Here, conversation is sparse and, in order to grasp the processes the participants are involved in, we interviewed the cosplayers. In contrast, in pen-and-paper role-playing games it is easy to observe the role players’ verbal interaction. Therefore, our empirical material for this part of the study is mainly concentrated around the conversation made by the participants.

The research concerning pen-and-paper role-playing gaming is scant, although there are millions of practitioners around the world. In one of the few studies, Gary Alan Fine (1983) uses Erving Goffman’s (1974) concept of frames to describe the gaming situation. Participation takes place at several levels simultaneously, where different rules of behavior apply at every level. We will develop this argument here by giving examples on how semiotic resources are used in situated activities. In these, the available utterances, actions, artifacts etc. are limited by the different contextual configurations that constitute the situation. A number of people find themselves in a room and have decided to play a pen-and-paper role-playing game (configuration 1). The gameplay follows a set of rules and a story that one person, the game master, has prepared in advance (configuration 2). The players also take the role of a fictional character that moves within the fictional universe (configuration 3). Activities and utterances are directly related to any one of these three parallel configurations, but not to several at the same time. The activities and utterances can, however, obtain significance in any of the other configurations by semiotic transformation.
The following transcribed excerpt from a role-playing session illustrates the argument with the help of Andreas (who plays the character Esme) and Gunnar (Bethir). There is also a game master whose duties, among other things, are to illustrate the fictional world, to play the characters the players encounter in the world (in this case an innkeeper) and to interpret the rules of the game. In the excerpt, the setting is a medieval-based fantasy and the players have just arrived in a village where mysterious things seem to be going on. They have decided to try to obtain more information from the innkeeper at the village inn.

1. Andrea (Esme): [...] There have been some irregularities that have been heard of from this village and we are from ... hmmm ... the imperial ... I don’t know anything, I mean off I don’t know anything, but ... 

2. Game master (GM): You’re going to roll for a bluff of some kind here?

3. A (E): Yes, damn, I can bluff ... We are from the imperial tax office and ... hmmm ... irregularities have occurred and we would like to find out what is going on here. We will find out in one way or another. There are two ways you can do this, the easy way or the hard way ...

4. GM: Okay, roll for a charm test then. You don’t have the skill or?

5. A (E): Yes, I have, though I roll too high of course, so I’ll use a fate point to re-roll. [Rolls the dice] But what the hell is this?! I brutally fail. Why can’t I ever roll low on skills? It’s impossible.

6. GM (the innkeeper): I really have to take care of the dishes now.

7. Gunnar (Bethir): Actually, we are trying to help you ... I run the good cop- version ... There is of course a certain compensation for helping us.

Utterance 1 shows how Andreas alternates between different configurations (2 and 3) when he first speaks as the character Esme (in italics) and then leaves the fiction to point out that he does not know anything about what the government of the fictional world looks like. Andreas marks the shift by using the expression “off”, which is a common semiotic tool among role players to show that one is breaking the frames of the fictional world. With the shift he also switches to the configuration of the gameplay (2) in which other semiotic resources are available and other types of utterances and activities are possible. Now he can speak as the player Andreas, whereas in the fictional configuration (3) he could only make utterances that could be assigned to the character Esme.

In the game master’s following line (utterance 2), Andreas’/Esme’s wish is confirmed in both configurations. Thus, it is by confirming allusions that participants build the story and it is in that way we can observe the creation of meaning which takes place in the situation. The character Esme tries in her utterance to lie to the
landlord they encounter. In the game context, this means that a different semiotic resource is put to use. Esme has a defined skill level (a number) of how good she is at bluffing and Andreas has to roll a dice against that level to determine whether Esme succeeds in her attempt to bluff (utterance 7). The dice roll is a resource used within the game context, but not within the fiction. Instead, the result of the dice roll is transformed into an activity that Andreas lets Esme perform in the fictional world.

Since Andreas fails with his dice roll and thus Esme’s attempt to bluff, the game master transfers the result to the fictional world and lets the landlord talk about the dishes instead of revealing the information Andreas/Esme wanted (utterance 8). The transition between Andreas’ resigned statement that he never succeeds with dice rolls and the landlord’s remark about the dishes may seem sudden, but is a very common type of situated activity in role-playing sessions. During gameplay the participants develop a reflexive awareness of how to navigate between the demands of the different configurations, meaning that the activities do not present any difficulties for the creation of meaning among the participants.

Eventually, Gunnar (Bethir) tries to help the situation. His opinion, “I run the good cop-version” neither originates in the fiction nor in the game context, and would not be understood solely from these. Instead, it receives meaning as situated activity through transformation from the everyday context the players belong to outside the gaming session (configuration 1).

The pen-and-paper role-playing situation is thus characterised by requirements of reflexive awareness involving multiple simultaneous configurations. We believe this characterises participation in many kinds of text universes based on fiction. The creation of meaning through play, and thus the learning that takes place in this case, certainly depends on the complexity offered by the role-playing situation as a whole, but to understand how utterances and activities are only permitted in certain conditions in certain situations it is useful to stratify the configurations in the way that was done here.

Spoken language is the most obvious semiotic resource used in pen-and-paper role-playing games, but far from the only one. As shown above, even randomness in the form of rolling dice has a bearing on what happens. In order to design the world and create desired moods, the gamers also employ a wide range of other semiotic resources such as maps, drawing tools, body, miniature figures, music and candles. Knowing how and when to use these resources in the story-making process requires sophisticated reflexive awareness.

In the interviews all of the gamers highlight social reasons to explain why they attend role-playing games. Gunnar says that it is about “social learning” and that he, through the fiction, learns to “understand different people’s situations”. Andreas justifies their gaming by saying that “it’s fun” and continues by giving reference to sociality and creativity: “to be a part of making an interesting and exciting story, to create and lead a story”. In this form of “as-if” play (Mackey 2007), just as in cosplay,
participants face both others and themselves inside as well as outside the fiction. Through playing, rather than gaming, with fictional characters, experiences can be gained that otherwise would not be possible, but it is equally important that the experiences can be examined, repeated and varied ad infinitum while the related background, in the form of a joint text universe, remains stable. The example presented here takes place against the backdrop of a text universe called Warhammer. This means the participants imitate, confirm, refine and innovate the stories of the text universe within the frames of the contextual configurations.

When striving to make it through the often problem-oriented stories, players are constantly looking for creative solutions to achieve what they want. The greater the effort, the more complex the story appears. In the example above, Andreas (Esme) and Gunnar (Bethir) employ two different ways of trying to obtain information from the landlord. A third alternative is offered by Eskil (Sigismund) when he threatens to use force against the landlord:

9. E (S): [aggressively] I would really like you to tell us. I roll for intimidate instead. I have got 62 in strength and it is based on that.

Another participant, Daniel, states in an interview that by playing pen-and-paper role-playing games “you become good at figuring out what will happen in movies”. This might seem like a strange statement since role playing has no obvious connection to watching movies, but it is an example of how the players develop literary socialisation by playing in the way Appleyard describes. Participation in role play storytelling requires knowledge of text types, literary forms and stylistic approaches much in the same way as movies do but, as we have shown, it also includes other important dimensions such as creative playfulness and the ability to transform semiotic resources between contextual configurations. All of this knowledge and these abilities together are what allows Eskil, as well as the other role players, to see another viable option to move on with the story. In our conclusion, we will discuss what this means in a broader perspective.

**Conclusion**

In this article, we have so far shown how different kinds of role playing as leisure-time activities demand not only a complex understanding of how meaning is created through remediating statements of different modalities and contextual configurations, but also how playing fiction is a vital aspect of the processes of creating meaning and identity. These aspects are intertwined in semiotic remediation practices in the way the participants expand the narratives in participatory storytelling. In our concluding remarks we will therefore highlight some prominent aspects of participating in these practices and discuss some consequences of our results in a wider perspective.
Cosplay and pen-and-paper role play are examples of actions that characterise what Appleyard (1991) calls “The Reader as a Player” where fiction functions as a starting point for activities containing a playing structure. This play is, however, something that requires advanced knowledge in several areas and is therefore primarily aimed at students who already are, or are in the process of becoming, adults. Thus, limiting ‘playing fiction’ simply to a part of childhood is not at all useful. On the contrary, as we have shown, the structures of play and playing – with the fictional text as a starting point – also remain important for older children and young adults when developing as readers in today’s media landscape. For many cosplayers and pen-and-paper role players it is important to be an active part of the narrative and simply ‘play’ fiction in order to develop semiotic tools used when creating meaning. Playing is important because it is about exploring and discovering ‘the Self’ in relation to ‘the Other’ while moving between recognition and new content (cf. Felski 2008). In these processes, play and creativity are important tools, not least because they offer the participants an opportunity to use the body and brain, as well as other resources, in a constructive way to create meaning and identity.

Through their active participation and co-creation of multimodal text universes pen-and-paper role players and cosplayers use different semiotic resources when they recreate the source text in a creative way (cf. Olin-Scheller & Wikström 2010, Olin-Scheller 2011). To be able to do this, it is necessary to understand narrative structures and be able to distinguish a plot regardless of the medium where the story occurs. These are some aspects of what we call narrative competence (Lundström & Olin-Scheller 2010). Other aspects of this competence are the necessary social interactions, linguistically and bodily, that the pen-and-paper role players and the cosplayers use when engaging in a multimodal text universe.

In role playing the participants are construed in ways that differ from more traditional reading contexts. These activities represent ongoing socialisation towards a role. We are, so to speak, always about to become participants in various reading contexts (cf. Mehrstam 2010). Among other things, it is impossible to ignore the collective aspects of these activities. In the collective narrative, there is a subversive force and a creativity that differ from traditional use in fiction where, instead, individual learning aspects are dominant.

We have also given examples of how multimodal storytelling is characterised by transformation and how through a series of semiotic remediation practices the cosplayers and the pen-and-paper role players reproduce and remediate the source text in creative and innovative ways. In this process, they use various semiotic resources such as the body, artifacts and oral storytelling, when they actively become part of the story and ‘make’ themselves in interaction with the fiction. This kind of participation in narrative indicates that we have a need for play not only as a first step in our development as a reader, but also as a tool to develop and establish identity and meaning throughout life. It also indicates the use of resources.
connected to literacy and literary socialisation that, in its complexity and demands for reflexive awareness, extends beyond the literacy practices traditionally taught in formal learning environments (see e.g. Kress 2003, Gee 2004, Ermelldt & Erixon 2007, Mackey 2007, Olin-Scheller & Wikström 2010).

Pen-and-paper role play and cosplay take place outside a formal learning environment where the participants themselves can shape the framework and conditions for their participation. Using fiction as a point of departure, role players negotiate and renegotiate meanings and identities. One would expect formal learning environments to be such an arena where the creation of meaning is supported and developed. However, Bruner (1986) argues that traditions of “cultural mediation” characterise school and, instead of creating a creative learning environment, formal pedagogical traditions are merely passing on values from those who supposedly know more (i.e. teachers) to those who supposedly know less (i.e. students). This limits children’s ability to construct knowledge of their own.

The manga conventions and pen-and-paper role-playing campaigns can be regarded as dynamic collective informal learning environments displaying a number of interesting aspects of learning and development. In spite of this, we do not think it would be a good idea to move these activities as such into the classroom. Young people search for fan cultures and other contexts online and offline where they can explore themselves without the involvement of the adult world. However, in this article we have highlighted several aspects of learning in informal learning environments that the teaching of fiction could benefit from, including the importance of regarding play as a tool for creativity, motivation and learning in all age groups. We have also shown the importance of developing reflexive awareness and transformation skills to be able to participate in multimodal fiction. If literary education is supposed to help students develop as fiction readers and give them tools for identity formation, then schools must, besides being conscious about the importance of play, also be open to the role of semiotic remediation practices in different learning processes connected to literacies. In doing so, we can increase opportunities for divergent thinking in formal education which, in turn, would increase the possibilities for creativity and motivation in school.

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Notes

1 The Scholarship Foundation for Studies of Japanese Society has financed a smaller part of the empirical material concerning cosplay.

2 Manga is the name of a specific type of animated and printed comics, while the animé genre includes films.

3 Both pictures were provided by young people over 18 years of age. The young people who appear in the photographs have given their consent for their picture to be used in scientific work.

4 A text universe should be understood here as the body and the variety of multimodal, narrative content originating from a certain story.

5 This quote, along with other quotes from role players, is translated from Swedish.

6 The transcription is based on a method in which the sound recording is interpreted into an essentially written linguistic form for ease of reading (Brinkmann and Kvale 2009). Italics are used to indicate when it is reasonable to interpret the utterance as if it is meant to be from the played character rather than by the gamer, i.e. a diegetic utterance. The translation is made from Swedish.

7 The gaming session includes two additional players.
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