



Revista Pensamento Contemporâneo em Administração  
ISSN: 1982-2596  
jmoraes@id.uff.br  
Universidade Federal Fluminense  
Brasil

Lopes Azevedo, Arthur; Dias Fantinel, Letícia  
SPATIAL STORIES: WHAT CAN RPG TEACH TO ORGANIZATION STUDIES?  
Revista Pensamento Contemporâneo em Administração, vol. 18, núm. 3, 2024, pp. 55-71  
Universidade Federal Fluminense  
Rio de Janeiro, Brasil

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12712/rpca.v18i3.62524>

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## SPATIAL STORIES: WHAT CAN RPG TEACH TO ORGANIZATION STUDIES?

HISTÓRIAS ESPACIAIS: O QUE O RPG PODE ENSINAR AOS ESTUDOS ORGANIZACIONAIS?

Recebido em 08.04.2024 Aprovado em 29.08.2024

Avaliado pelo sistema double blind review

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12712/rpca.v18i3.62524>

### Arthur Lopes Azevedo

[arthurlopes\\_93@hotmail.com](mailto:arthurlopes_93@hotmail.com)

PPGADM/UFES - Vitória/ES, Brasil

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2473-1185>

### Letícia Dias Fantinel

[leticia.fantinel@ufes.br](mailto:leticia.fantinel@ufes.br)

PPGADM/UFES - Vitória/ES, Brasil

Adm/UnB - Brasília/DF, Brasil

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4589-6352>

### Abstract

Like RPG, organizations depend on interactions between actors with different roles that follow negotiated rules to generate events organized by narratives. Organizational everyday life is constantly permeated by fictional/narrative elements, mobilized to produce/give meaning to actions and objectives. We used RPG to explore the narrative nature of organizing and understand how narrative practices shape and organize everyday life. We focus on De Certeau's the discussions about spatial stories to analyze data from an ethnography on the organizing of RPG. It contributes to understanding of organizing processes in which narrative practices occupy a central position, by integrating materiality, interactivity and narrativity.

**Keywords:** Practice theory. Narratives. Michel de Certeau. Space. Ethnography.

### Resumo

Como no RPG, organizações dependem de interações entre atores com diferentes papéis que seguem normas negociadas para gerar eventos organizados por narrativas. A vida organizacional cotidiana é constantemente permeada por elementos ficcionais/narrativos mobilizados para produzir/dar significado a ações e objetivos. Usamos o RPG para explorar a natureza narrativa do organizar e compreender como práticas narrativas moldam e organizam o cotidiano. Focamos na discussão de De Certeau sobre narrativas espaciais para analisar dados de uma etnografia sobre o organizar do RPG. Isso contribui para entender processos organizativos em que a prática narrativa ocupa uma posição central, integrando materialidade, interatividade e narratividade.

**Palavras-chave:** Teoria das Práticas. Narrativas. Michel de Certeau. Espaço. Etnografia.

## Introduction

In this study, we focus on the narrative nature of organizing to critically engage with De Certeau's theoretical contribution to Organization Studies. We explore the constant movements that shape organizing dynamics (Chia, 1995) by focusing on spatial stories, practices concerning everyday tactics that organize the daily lives of subjects (De Certeau, 1988). For this we take the study of organizing processes popularly known as Role Playing Games (RPG) to understand how narrative practices shape and organize everyday life.

RPG are playful interactional forms that function as a mediated theater which we consider to have a lot to teach organization scholars. Players are constantly articulating strategies and tactics, dealing with rules, and building narratives that keep moving. We understand that RPG behave like organizing processes moved by spatial stories, since narrative practices are repeatedly being mobilized by players in order to push the game flow. To develop such understanding, we follow De Certeau's (1988) understanding that such narrative practices are able to connect and articulate spatial practices by means of an ongoing dynamic of asymmetric power relations, that can be observed in the uneven and ever-changing positions occupied by elements of RPG games, such as the players and the Dungeon Master. The game is then understood as a constant movement process, in perpetual becoming, not something static or fixed. In this process, players act collectively in order to achieve something, which refers to the Weick's (1979) classic concept of organizing.

Despite their importance for the relational dynamics of operations that act in the construction of everyday life, narrative practices are still little explored in the organization studies, especially those concerning organizational spaces (Ropo & Höykinpuro, 2017). Given this scenario, one of us conducted an ethnography of the organizing of Role-Playing Games, through an analysis of the spatial organizing practices that comprise them. We treat practices and space as a reflective co-production phenomena, aiming to meet the call of Cnossen and Bencherki (2019) for more studies that promote this type of analysis.

As a theoretical frame, we appeal to theories of practice, a field that still presents itself as fragmented and heterogeneous (Schatzki, 2001). Such an approach, as stated before, is that of Michel de Certeau, one of the prominent authors of the practices (Denis, Langley & Rouleau, 2007). The author addresses the construction of everyday life through a dynamic of practices (De Certeau, 1988). With this approach, we could analyze the game and its organizing processes at different levels and perspectives, understanding how they permeate individuals, the game and the space. It is important to highlight that we approach space not only from a physical, palpable perspective, but also a fictional one. Based not only but specially in De Certeau (1988), Ropo and Höykinpuro (2017) and Cnossen and Bencherki (2019), we understand space as practiced through narration and as an ever changing configuration that is not static, but uniquely experienced and organized in relation to/with everyday practices, something that can be strongly observed in RPG. When narrating an RPG game, players are also narrating a story, which often takes place in imaginary universes, making of it a practice enacted in diverse dimensions interconnected by narrativeness.

By using such an approach, we could develop an analytical model, which can be used to understand organizing processes where narrative practices occupy a central position. This evidences the role that narrative practices play in the organization of spaces and also in everyday life, as a practice that, as De Certeau (1988) himself highlights, is performative in itself.

Our model consists in articulating narrativity to other two dimensions of the practice: materiality and interactivity. We highlight how narrative practices are in the center of organizing processes, articulating material elements and interactive dynamics. Material elements relate to fictional and physical universes and shape the narrative construction. The interactional dimension addresses established dynamics between strategies and tactics, widely discussed in De Certeau's theory (Buchanan, 2000). Spatial stories

are produced and reproduced as social phenomena that narrates and also practices, what we believe is a key aspect to further and better understand the ever going dynamics between space and practices.

The analytical model proposed here is the main contribution of our research. It allows us to better understand the articulation of narrative practices, bringing them to the center of the analysis. It enables to deepen the understanding about the double role performed by narrative practices, which can also trace the paths that De Certeau (1988) seeks to understand with his theory while connecting spatial practices. The narrativity of the ways of doing is essential for expanding the range of possibilities of blows and moves articulated by individuals in everyday life. Developing this approach allows us to show performative and enunciative characteristics of narrative practices of organizing.

## Organizing Practices From De Certeau's Perspective

For this research, we use a framework that responds to the emerging complexity of organizations and their organizational processes, promoting discussions that lead to the emergence of new onto-epistemological paradigms to better understand them (Cooper & Burrell, 1988), and highlighting a critical perspective of traditional organizational theoretical approaches (Calás & Smircich, 1999). From this view, approaches emerge that understand the organization not as a fixed entity with defined borders, but as a dynamic process (Czarniawska, 2008). This perspective arises from the ontologies of becoming, which address the eternal becoming of entities (Chia, 1995), and materializes approaches such as the organizing ontology, in which the organization is an entity that encompasses this process of constant happening and transformation (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005).

Throughout the 1970s, cultural theories became more present on social theories and, more specifically, on organizational studies, resulting in the emergence of the interpretive turn (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices Theories approach is among such emergent theories (Reckwitz, 2002), a theoretical field that presents some variation when it comes to the concept of practices and its relations, but most of its theorists agree that practices can be understood as “arrays of human activity” (Schatzki, 2001).

Given this conceptual heterogeneity, we choose to approach this research with a theoretical background composed mainly by the concept of practices of a single theorist: Michel De Certeau. One of the main authors of the so-called practice turn (Denis et al. 2007), De Certeau (1988) focused his theory on the construction of everyday life, bringing back ordinary people, the carriers of the practices, and ordinary language, to the core of scientific practice and analysis. Everyday practices enacted by people dynamically construct and reconstruct everyday life (De Certeau, 1988; Courpasson, 2017). Analyzing those practices requires understanding that such a process, both operational and relational, emerges from the constant struggle of subjects to subvert, throughout time, dominant institutions (De Certeau, 1988). We believe that this dynamic and political feature between practices that organizes everyday life reinforces our ontological basis on organizing.

Such a micropolitical perspective allows us to go forward by considering narrative not only as a methodological resource or writing genre, but also as a theoretical object and phenomenon of interest to organization studies. In this sense, we agree with Czarniawska (1998) by highlighting that narratives are socially constructed and negotiated in a way that they must be meaningful. Therefore, organizations are shaped by narratives, and narratives are forms of praxis (Fenton & Langley, 2011). When we focus specifically on De Certeau's spatial stories, what we are saying is that narratives produce spaces and places that organize everyday life. For this reason, we are committed to articulating a practice-based approach to narrative that takes into account emerging political dimensions of the relationships produced between subjects in everyday life.

To De Certeau (1988), spatial stories are created by narrative practices. The author distinguishes between two types of practices, those that emerge from the “producers” (strategies), and those enacted by “consumers” (tactics). Strategies emerge from dominant institutions that aim to stabilize,

domesticate everyday life, making it more predictable by creating safe zones that overcome time: a place of its own (De Certeau, 1988; Buchanan, 2000). On the other hand, tactics are “non-domesticated” practices that aim to resist and subvert such strategies (De Certeau, 1988; Buchanan, 2000). Nevertheless, they cannot create a place of their own, which leads them only to a temporal basis, at the place of the other. At a first glimpse, such practices might differ radically or even poles apart, but they are part of a unique dynamic, in which tactics draw and mobilize elements from strategies in the process of subverting them (Dey & Teasdale, 2016). The actual difference between them lies in the manner they approach us in everyday life, being strategies capable of establishing places while tactics subvert those (Buchanan, 2000).

Place, alongside space, are central concepts to De Certeau’s (1988) theorization. While space is related to the idea of stability, space relates to mobility, it is the space being practiced (De Certeau, 1988). This dynamic that constantly turns places into space and space into places acts on the production of everyday life, creating an association between the concepts of strategies-place (stability) and tactics-space (mobility) (Buchanan, 2000). As the ordinary individual walks throughout the places in everyday life, he moves and turns those into spaces, and vice versa, when spaces become places, turning strategies and tactics into spatial practices (De Certeau, 1988). We believe these everyday footsteps that mark the spatial dimension of De Certeau’s theory of practices brings us closer to understanding practice and space as a dynamic and reflexive co-production, answering Cnossen and Bencherki (2019) call for studies that approach this kind of relation.

Such an understanding of space is not a stranger to organizational studies, giving that studies about how power relations are related to spatial configurations has become one of its main approaches, especially from a post-structuralistic perspective, in which space is not only limited the material dimensions of organizing, but also the social one (Ropo & Höykinpuro, 2017). Departing from such an understanding of space, as dynamic and ever-changing process that is coupled with power relations, we believe it’s possible to access it’s organizing and emergency by means of it’s reflexivity with social practices of everyday life (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019), such as narrative ones (De Certeau, 1988; Ropo & Höykinpuro, 2017).

Accordingly, narrative practices are capable of locating the individual in a given context of space and time (Maclean; Harvey & Chia, 2011). They shape places and spaces; they transit from a stability of places to the operationalization of movements that constitutes spaces (De Certeau, 1988), connecting spatial practices (Humble & Pedersen, 2015). However, they go beyond mere connection between spatial practices: they are performative practices per se, capable of founding spaces (De Certeau, 1988). Such capacity gives them a central role on De Certeau’s (1988) movement of “bringing back in” the ordinary language and everyday life into social science. His goal is not to analyze a static path statistically traced in the cities by an individual, an immovable set of motion vectors, but a contextualized and emerging understanding of the dynamics between the practices enacted in the game that is everyday life. A game that has its rules and statements temporally subverted when, in the place of the other, the cunningness of tactics takes advantage of given moments to articulate moves and coups (De Certeau, 1988).

That said, we understand that narrativity becomes a dimension that characterizes De Certeau’s (1988) practices: learning the rules of the game (whether figuratively or literally, if we consider the case of RPG), the strategies of everyday life happen by means of narrativity, in the context of an ordinary language. And the same thought applies to tactics, moves and coups that can be narrated, learned, memorized and reproduced through ordinary language, widening the repertoire of subversions enacted by ordinary people in everyday life (De Certeau, 1988).

## **The Ethnography of RPG Organizing Practices**

In order to reach our foreseen objectives, we adopted a qualitative approach (Creswell & Poth, 2013) in which the first author conducted an ethnographic-based research (Yanow, 2012). The aforementioned

author was already an insider in this field, what required him to be careful in researching a familiar environment. On the way to “defamiliarization” (Graizbord, Rodríguez-Muñiz & Baiocchi, 2017), the role of the second author was fundamental, always revisiting the data from the perspective of someone who was not close to this field in any way. Our work consisted in, together, produce complementary gazes on data, seeking to reflectively analyze what was being produced during the research (Cunliffe, 2010).

Therefore, he immersed himself in the gaming practices of a group of RPG players between July and November in 2018, with weekly sessions lasting an average of 6.5 hours. Altogether, there were 11 sessions that totaled approximately 71 hours of collection. The RPG chosen for the development of the research was “Legend of the Five Rings”, with a samurai theme. The constructed narrative was divided into two arcs that had a total of six participants. The group was initially composed of four members: a DM and three players (one man and two women). At the end of the first arc, one of the players left the group and was replaced by another player for the second arc. We also had the special participation of an extra player, invited to join the group during a session.

Each of the observations yielded a field diary elaborated under the principles of thick description (Geertz, 1973). In addition to this combination of participant observation and field diaries, we also conducted semi-structured interview, a perceived demand in the development of the research to understand the narrator’s perspective in the process of organizing the game.

Although the origins of RPG are uncertain, with reports of similar gaming practices that goes back to Ancient Sumerian, the first officially commercialized RPG can be traced back to the decade of 1970 in the United States of America: Dungeons & Dragons (Serbena, 2006). And to understand how this game is played, it is interesting to think of a theater improvisation, in which actors and directors co-work to create an unique narrative (Saldanha & Batista, 2009), like a collective storytelling practice. In the specific case of RPG, there are five elements that constitute its structure: Dungeon Master (DM), Players, Rules Systems, Scenario/Background and Main Plot (Serbena, 2006).

Developing a Main Plot is the major aim of the group that plays/enacts the RPG practice, achieved by means of an organized interaction between the other game elements: Players, that incorporate the role of a character of their own creation that inhabits the game’s Scenario and interacts with the narrative concept of the Main Plot created by the DM, taking in consideration the Rules Systems and the Scenario. This Main Plot consists in a series of challenging and mysterious quests proposed by the DM that are to be faced and solved by players’ characters.

Dense instructions on how to proceed with the mentioned organized interaction and descriptions regarding the game’s Scenario and Rules Systems are normally located on voluminous Core Rulebooks and Sourcebooks. Back in 2018, when conducting the research, “The Legend of the Five Rings” had one Core Rulebook and two Sourcebooks published in Brazil, coming up to approximately a thousand pages that deeply describe the rules and characteristics of Rokugan, the imaginary universe in which the game takes place. Heavily influenced by the Japanese feudal culture and folklore, Rokugan is inhabited by samurai and magic creatures that build and are surrounded by political, economic, social and ethical structures and intrigues.

Such deep descriptions on the game’s Scenario (Rokugan) and its Rules System are the basis that the DM uses to create the “backbone” of the Main Plot, with some initial thoughts on how it is going to begin, develop and end. We choose to use expressions like “backbone” and “initial thoughts” because that is what they are: an initial concept of how the Main Plot will be organized. Although in an asymmetrical power position that allows a “lesser” voice on the development of the game narrative, the Players are also active voices on the game. And it is by means of their voices that they bring to life their characters and the actions that they enact in Rokugan, possibly (and probably) leading the Main Plot

throughout new paths never imagined by the DM.

Beyond that, the actions of both Playable (controlled by the Players) and Non-Playable Characters (those controlled by the DM) are based on their skills and characteristics, which, like in real life, may lead to failures. The success or failure of a given action is decided by the toss of dice: the number of dice that one can roll depends on how well prepared a character is for conducting a specific action, based on how their skills and characteristics are built, and the difficulty level of the action is decided by the DM, based on the Rules System. Breaking down a robust door, for instance, might be a level 20 challenge, and a character with more physical strength will have more dice at their disposal when he/she tries to reach this value with their summarization than a character that focused their development on social skills. If the summary of the dice reaches 20, then the action was a success and the door was opened; if not, it was a failure and the consequences are decided by the DM, based on the Rules System and how far from 20 was the result, ranging from a mere bruise to a broken bone. The Legend of the Five Rings uses D10, a dice with ten triangular sides.

That is the main dynamic of a RPG. DM and players gather and develop a compelling Main Plot by means of narrative practices. By using their voices, they bring to life characters and stories from an imaginary and static universe that resides into Rules Systems and Scenarios described in books. The following fragments from field journals written during the data production can show us a bit of such narrativity.

DM, addressing the novice player, stated that her character had arrived at a small merchant village, where, like the other players, she would meet Samurai Ide San, so that we all could travel together. She claimed that her character headed to an inn. The DM then stated that there she heard rumors about war conflicts approaching through the territory of Clan Unicorn. Being that her first experience in RPGs, she replied to the DM:  
"I want her to ask the innkeeper about the veracity of these rumors!" The DM replied, "Ask then [playing the character]." The player then, a bit shy and embarrassed, greeted the innkeeper, who was played by the DM, and asked him about the veracity of such rumors.

Although RPG's may seem a bit of a different or at least not usual choice of empirical field for an organizations studies paper, we do believe that it offers an unique perspective for a better understanding of power dynamics that are centered on narrativity. From a everyday situation such as friends gathering for an informal game session, emerges a complex and highly organized process in which, by means of their voices, interactions and some material objects, such as a table and a rulebook, an entire universe gains colors, movements and becomes alive.

Our data showed us how, by means of narrative practices, the elements of the game alternate between asymmetric power positions, which allows an collective organizing dynamics that not only creates a compelling story but also shapes spaces, as being as well shaped by them.

Such data was treated and organized with the support of descriptive analysis, often used in conjunction with ethnography and participant observation (Angrosino, 2007). As Wilson and Chaddha (2009), we believe in the importance of the theory in the process of doing ethnography. This is why we developed reflective processes in back-and-forth movements between theory and data, producing insights neither purely inductive nor purely deductive.

Through readings and re-readings of field diaries and the interview, we identified some practices that we considered key to understand the organizing process of RPG. Aiming to promote an analysis of these in a didactic way, we articulate three dimensions: material, interactive and narrative. They mix and occur concurrently, and the elements of one are constantly present in others, so that they have the same importance for the analysis process. They are presented in the next topic.

## The Organizing of RPG

Considering that the main objective of RPG is to build an immersive, interactive, unique and fun narrative, playing means getting involved in the midst of an organized array of practices, enacted by means of narrative and material interactions between the elements of the game. Such interactions, although asymmetrical, lead to relations and spaces that are built and practiced throughout the game and it is our understanding that this gaming process can be analyzed in three axes: Room, objects, artifacts; Master, players, scenario, rules, plot; Narratives. Each axis has its focus, as a magnifying glass that helps us analyze specific details on the RPG organizing, but we highlight that this is a didactical distinction created by us to better explain our findings. In practice, they are intrinsically intertwined, happening and acting at the same time in the RPG context.

### Room, objects, artifacts

In this dimension we focus on the physicality and materiality of practices that build the RPG organizing process. We begin by approaching what we have chosen to name “Living-to-play Room”, bringing the ontological understanding of such space as process and also as description of its organization, given that all the RPG sessions happened in the living room of the DM’s house. Traditionally in Brazil, that is a space for welcoming and entertaining visitors, but this living room in particular seemed to have no other use beyond welcoming players and hosting RPG games.

It had a four-people dining table positioned with one of its headboards ending on a wall. The other end had a notebook accessory table, with the DM’s notebook on top of it and a computer chair. On one side of the table, a set of a two-seats sofa and an armchair. On the other side, an iron chair. No other type of decoration was present, only the internet router positioned on an ottoman positioned at the side of a small and old bedside table with nothing on its top. On the table, there were always “The Legend of the Five Rings” books, the markers used to represent the characters’ spells, the Characters Sheets and pencils and erasers. Such elements did not change from one week to another, indicating that the room had no other function than hosting games, as can be seen in the following excerpt from the field diaries:

Again, there seemed to be no preparation for welcoming the players, as the markers used to represent the spells and void points were still scattered on the table, apparently immobile since last week’s session, as were the books and even the rubber powder.

As Cnossen and Bencherki (2019) highlight, the reflexivity between practices and space acts on the emergency of specific organizational conditions, in a way that the performance of some practices become more or less suited to a given space, which gives those practices a particular meaning. The same way, spaces are shaped by the practices there performed (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019), which, in our understanding, leads to a *certeuanian* dynamic between the ideas of stability and movement, strategies and tactics, from which an specific organizational context emerges.

By means of the data regarding the material dimension of the RPG practices here analyzed, is possible to observe that the space were shaped by gaming practices, creating an sort of stability on the room: it should be used for RPG games. That way, practices that were not related to games would mean a form of resistance, which actually happened when one of the players had food delivered during the game and used the dining table for dinner. Such action generated levels of discomfort amongst other players and DM, being it a subversion to the room strategies. This appropriation that enacts spaces through means of subversions constitute tactics, coups enacted in time (De Certeau, 1988) that confronted the logics of the “Living-to-play Room”. Logics that were reinforced by the judgmental looks that others threw at the player while she ate, as a way of reestablishing the strategy of the room, domesticate its organization (Buchanan, 2000) so that new subversions that took away the focus from the gaming practices and

immersions would not happen again, showing how space also shapes practices (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019).

We believe that this also highlights the social dimension of the space organizing process (Ropo & Höykinpuro, 2017), given that narrative practices constantly produced and reproduced at the “Living-to-Play Room” reinforces its stability as a playing environment shaped by interactions between players and DM. Few interactions regarding topics other than the game itself were articulated, being the narrative practices focused mostly on RPG experiences, even though most of the player knew each other for years. On the other hand, at the house porch, topics like music, work activities and studies were quite common.

We understand that material aspects of the room, such as the long dining table and the absence of house decorations made it harder for the emergence of intimacy feelings or interactions, showing us how this social dimension of space is organized in a reflexive relation with the practices performed (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019), and also with material elements that are involved, bringing us closer to an socio-material understanding of spatial practices on a micropolitical perspective, regarding the dynamics between strategies, tactics and narratives practices (Certeau, 1998).

On that matter, the books were another example of reinforcers to the strategies of gaming immersion of the room. Always at hand, DM often used those to quickly answer players’ questions regarding Rules System or Scenario, avoiding the use of smartphones to consult the PDF version of the book and possible distractions that may come from app notifications. The non-analogic tool that was often used to reinforce the gaming immersion was DM’s notebook, that held spreadsheets filled with information regarding the Main Plot, NPC’s and playable characters that appeared in the narrative, places and spaces from Rokugan that appeared or would appear later on the plot as well as other information regarding prior sessions. The DM constantly used this package of information to bring the player into the plot, designing situations that could not be ignored by them and deepening the relation between players and their character and narrative involvement. Beyond that, the notebook also provided immersion via Spotify and Youtube, used to reproduce samurai-themed soundtracks, transporting both players and DM to Rokugan.

This conglomerate of practices was able to domesticate the “Living-to-play Room” the way the DM (and owner of the house) intended for most of the research time, characteristic of the stability frequently associated with strategies (De Certeau, 1988; Buchanan, 2000). It is our understanding that the DM’s practices, associated with the materialities of the room, built up to his specific “Ways of Dungeon-Mastering”, that involves serious, focused and immersive gaming practices, and players who want to be part of it must “follow his letter”.

Although dice are central to the dynamics of RPG and therefore will be present in the three dimensions that we aim to analyze, they are undoubtedly material, which leads us to a major focus on their descriptions here. Given that they play a central role in determining the success or failure of characters actions, a curious dynamic emerged through the RPG sessions: the “lucky hands” superstition. Before every session begins, every player tossed the dice a couple of times aiming to identify who had “lucky hands” on the day. And until the end of the session, this player was the chosen one to use their character, when possible, to try to perform the challenges created by the DM to be accessed by any of the characters. Taking in consideration that these opportunities emerged from the DM’s descriptions and narratives of the scenes, we observed this as cunningness from the players, a dynamic between tactics, that mobilized elements from strategies (Dey & Teasdale, 2016) that emerged from the DM’s efforts to lead the narrative to subvert those, taking, momentarily, the control of the narrative.

Another situation involving this dynamics, superstitiousness and the materiality of dice relates to the “cursed dice”, three transparent dice that often presented his lowest sides when tossed, resulting in frequent failures. Although all dice were owned by the DM, they spent most of the sessions in players

possession, since they had to roll them frequently. Thereby, it was normal that the DM had to borrow the dice from players to test the actions of NPC's on game events that might negatively affect the playable characters. When that happened, cunningness led players to deliver him only the "cursed dice", a mere superstition that became a frequent practice enacted by players on their attempt to, momentarily, control the events regarding their characters and the plot.

### **Master, players, scenario, rules, plot**

We understand that the first aspect of discussion at this point is the dual role played by the DM on the RPG organizing, constantly switching between the enactment of strategies and tactics, reinforcing De Certeau's (1988) theorizations regarding the ordinary individual in everyday life: it is in the midst of practices and of a micropolitical context.

Such micropolitical context is based on the understanding that the game elements are involved in a dynamic of power that goes on an organizing process as the game happens. We raise such a discussion based on the fact that the set of rulebook and sourcebooks used in the gaming practice research totaled approximately a thousand pages, filled with an extensive set of rules and specific instructions on how to proceed on innumerable situations that might have happened in the game. Although that is useful for deeply setting the Scenario and the organization of Rokugan's universe, it also results in narrative restraints for the DM, who frequently had to oblige to the Rules System, even though the Main Plot developed called for a different approach in a specific narrative moment.

This can result in discouraging moments for players and DM or even compromise the intensity and immersiveness of the narrative. The DM then assumes the role of an articulator of tactics, aiming to subvert some Rules or Scenario elements so that the development of the Main Plot's narrative becomes fluid and interesting. The following excerpt exemplifies these DM's practices:

We were publicly warned by the governor, in front of most of the townspeople. However, DM stated it was a light warning, as then the governor also thanked us for our bravery in the mountain battle. The DM could not let our behavior go unnoticed, after all, we made a serious mistake by not purifying ourselves before entering the Ikoma Castle, especially in a festival, but we satisfactorily concluded the quest he had prepared for us. Thus, although warned, we were also praised by our heroic battle actions.

This is a dynamic in which the DM cunningly enacts such tactics by articulating elements from the strategies of the Rules System, applying and subverting it on a narrative coup that allows a better understanding of why strategies and tactics are not approached as opposed, but dynamical (Dey & Teasdale, 2016). The strategy's attempt to domesticate everyday life (Buchanan, 2000), represented by the voluminous set of Rules and Scenario that applies to the Main Plot under construction turned up to be a binding that limited the DM's choices, leading him to subvert and reappropriate the game's narrative space through tactics and achieve its main objective: a compelling story.

Beyond the Rule System, we also highlight the DM's interaction with Players as a key part of the RPG organizing process and Main Plot development. Players get more involved in the plot by means of DM's effort and provocations to create relevant and challenging narrative situations that regard their characters. These situations are called quests in RPGs and present themselves as opportunities for the Players' practices of developing the plot and using their voices and characters to momentarily take hold of the plot. By narratively describing their character actions, they attempt to overcome the quests, trying to maximize their success and minimize the damage to their characters. This may lead them to narrate situations unexpected by the DM, that on the other end is trying to lead the plot towards that "backbone" initially idealized, as happened on the research that we have conducted. To accomplish that, the DM used his deep understanding of the game's Scenario and Rules but also the spread sheets

set with information regarding the plot and characters, as the example below:

The cave described by the DM gave us goosebumps. And after such exhausting and dangerous recent events, we chose not to explore it. DM, however, did not give us much choice. As we did not enter it and turned around to leave, DM consulted his notebook and described a chill that ran down Isawa San's spine, a feeling that reminded her of her brother's tragic death, that compelled her to enter the cave, she simply needed to do it. And she entered the cave, being followed by the other samurai.

That information set also served the DM at other moments, as the following example shows. Here, he calls upon characteristics of a player's character to force this person into an intense interaction with a specific scene that was part of his plans for the Plot:

While Akodo had the "Balanced" advantage, Mirumoto had the "Impulsive" disadvantage, which, according to the DM, made the character not able to withstand the accusations and insults of the festival hostess. DM then required the player controlling the character to make a Willpower Test to decide if she would be able to control herself in that situation. She rolled the dice and it resulted in failure, which led Mirumoto to unsheathe her katana.

These practices dynamics between all the game elements are essential to the development of the story being created and told. This distribution of active voices that narratively organizes and tries to take hold of the plot pushes the game forward, as we can present below with another excerpt from the diaries, showing how the players dealt with Mirumoto's failure above mentioned, narrating an attempt to control the situation and lead their characters to safety.

Then, I stated that my character, Akodo, who was standing next to Mirumoto, tried to stop her from drawing her sword, and the DM asked me for a Strength Test. I spent a Void Point to achieve an extra dice on the roll and was more successful than Mirumoto, thus managing to prevent her from drawing her katana. This was enough to prevent a duel, but not enough to stop Mirumoto from being arrested for her behavior.

We understand that the RPG dynamics is embedded in a distinctive narrativity that is highly relational, a dimension highlighted by De Certeau (1988) that is central to the organizing of the game. As our prior examples shown, this relational narrativity emerges in the interactions between elements of the game, while players and DM interchange from tactics to strategies, from active to passive voices in the development of the Plot, being the dice a kind of mediator of these interactions, that decides if the characters' actions were successful or not, leading players and DM into new efforts to set the course of the story. And discussing this relational narrativity is our aim for the next session of the article.

## **Narratives and stories**

The interactive practices previously discussed are capable of making the organizational process of the RPG game happen, being responsible for promoting the progress and development of the Main Plot. What we aim to highlight is that this organizing process is fully permeated by narrative practices enacted by the DM, along with Players, that moves the game universe, turning its stability into a space that, on the other hand, acts reflexively on the gaming practices performed.

In such context, speaking often means having a negotiated power over the plot construction and development, offering us a dynamic in which narrative practices "push the game forward" on a negotiated asymmetrical interaction with other game elements, such as the Rules and the Scenario, that must observed, and material artifacts previously commented, such as the dices and the Character Sheets. This again brings together social and material dimensions of the reflexive relation between

space and practices (Ropo & Höykinpuro, 2017; Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019)

Michel de Certeau's concept of "passage", an operation that lies between the stability of the places and the operations that move it (De Certeau, 1988) can be observed on this organizing dynamics that moves and spatializes Rokugan's fantastic universe. A static place on book pages comes to life through the narratives of the DM, whose in-depth descriptions paint and inhabit Rokugan, allowing Players to also enter this universe and interact with it.

These movements allow individuals to create an association with a story (De Certeau, 1988) and attach themselves in that space, time and context (Maclean et al., 2011), which, in the case of RPG, emerges through the interaction of its five elements, one that conduct its organizational process. Such interaction takes place through practices of strategies and tactics interconnected by narrative practices, that promote constant transition between places and spaces, as proposed by De Certeau (1988). The following example of spatial description enacted by the DM illustrates how narrative practices moves Rokugan from place to space, painting a colorful image of the mentioned castle into the minds of players:

We have entered Governor Ikoma's mansion, described by the DM as "unlike any other forts, castles or mansions we had visited before". He stated that despite having similarities with the bellicose appearance traditionally held by the Lion Clan mansions, the decoration was different, with walls covered with colorful and modern works of art, not the traditional landscape paintings that decorated the rooms of reception of Rokuganian properties.

By connecting spatial practices (Humble & Pedersen, 2015), narrative practices are enacted by both DM and Players aiming to build a compelling story: the DM tries to lead it towards his initial plans while players try to achieve a successful ending for their characters. The voice of each one becomes the tool for achieving such objectives, being the active speaker of a given moment, the one who momentarily "tells the story", as the DM often does:

When my character returned to the warehouse to fetch the wooden stump, the DM drew my attention to a tool stand that had an empty space, indicating that one was missing. I decided that Akodo would approach the booth, aiming to investigate it. As I approached, the DM pointed out that my character noticed a wooden door at the back of the warehouse. So I decided to open it. According to him, I came across a dirt path that led to a clearing. In his description, he clearly stated that the path did not seem natural, that it had been constructed by a living creature. The center of it presented what was left of the trunk of a large tree, and stuck in it, an axe: the tool that was missing from the stand. Beside it lays a long forgotten skeleton.

Through narrative practice, the DM was able to force the player's character to investigate, showing how the voice becomes dominant institutions, defining strategies (De Certeau, 1988; Buchanan, 2000) to lead the plot. The narrative voice can also be cunningly used by the DM to subvert the rules of the game, as we have stated before, and also by players to protect their character and solve the game quests. It allows then to densely describe their actions and mobilize their character resources and skills, trying to minimize possible damages that may result from dice results, as we see in the following excerpt:

We rolled dice to determine the order in which the characters would act and I ended up getting the highest result. So I went on to describe my action: "I tie my hair [my character's twirl], pull out my katana, and run towards the first of the merchants on the ground. I will attack him using the fire position [full attack]." When attacking him, I rolled my numerous attack dice, as my combat skills are remarkable, an important characteristic of Clan Lion members. My dice roll result was excellent, well above the required ten points, meaning I was able to hit the merchant. I then rolled the damage dice for using my katana. Luck was on my side and I have rolled a 0, which on the ten-sided dice represents the number ten, that is, maximum success on that roll. This allowed me to roll that dice again, keeping that ten already in the summation of my final damage. Luckily, another 0 came out on the roll and I could still roll it a third time!

The results of these three rolls added to the other dice I rolled reached a total of 43 points, surprising the DM, who was forced to narrate the result of my attack as a success of undeniable accuracy: “Your character attacked the merchant indefensibly, and with a quick and precise cut from your katana, he was decapitated and his body collapsed lifeless to the ground”.

What might be seen as a tactic to minimize damage to the character is then incorporated into the Plot and becomes part of the story being told, the active voice given to the player might turn it into strategies. But we highlight that, as stated by De Certeau (1988), narratives are practices per se, going beyond the connection of spatial practices and actually building spaces. It is our understanding that such gaming practices presents an opportunity to discuss this overlooked dual role (foundation and connection of spaces) played by narrative, being that our main aim at the following session.

## Discussion

From the research carried out, we organized the ethnographic data in three axes, which have equal importance and participation in the understanding of the organizational process of RPG. The first concerned the non-human elements that organized the physicality of the game: the playing room, the dice, the board, etc. The second specifically addressed the interactions among the five elements of the role-playing game: master and players, scenario, rules, plot. The last axis is what is built from the interaction between all those elements: the narrative itself.

As Role Playing Games, organizations depend on interactions between actors with different roles that obey to negotiated rules to generate events that will be organized by narratives. Organizational everyday life is constantly permeated by fictional and narrative elements mobilized to produce and give meaning to the actions and objectives.

We used those three axes (or dimensions) to scan the practices that shape the RPG organizing process. In doing so, we have explored the notions of materiality, interactivity, and narrativity to understand how narrative practices shape and organize everyday life. Given our major interest in digging in the narrative nature of organizing, we focused on spatial stories (De Certeau, 1988).

Cnossen and Bencherki (2019) had already discussed the reflexivity between spaces and practices. Space, which in this study concerns not only its material and symbolic character, but also its fictional character, is shaped in the relational dynamics between strategies and tactics. At the same time, it shapes the players’ and master’s definitions and understandings of reality.

Our first dimension is materiality, responsible for addressing the practices observed through a perspective that highlights their physicality. The second one is interactivity, whose focus is the practices that permeate the interactions among the five elements of the RPG, which are responsible for developing the dynamics that make the narrative move forward. The third and last dimension is narrativity, which focuses on the process of construction and organization of the narrative, enabling a more specific approach to the spatial stories.

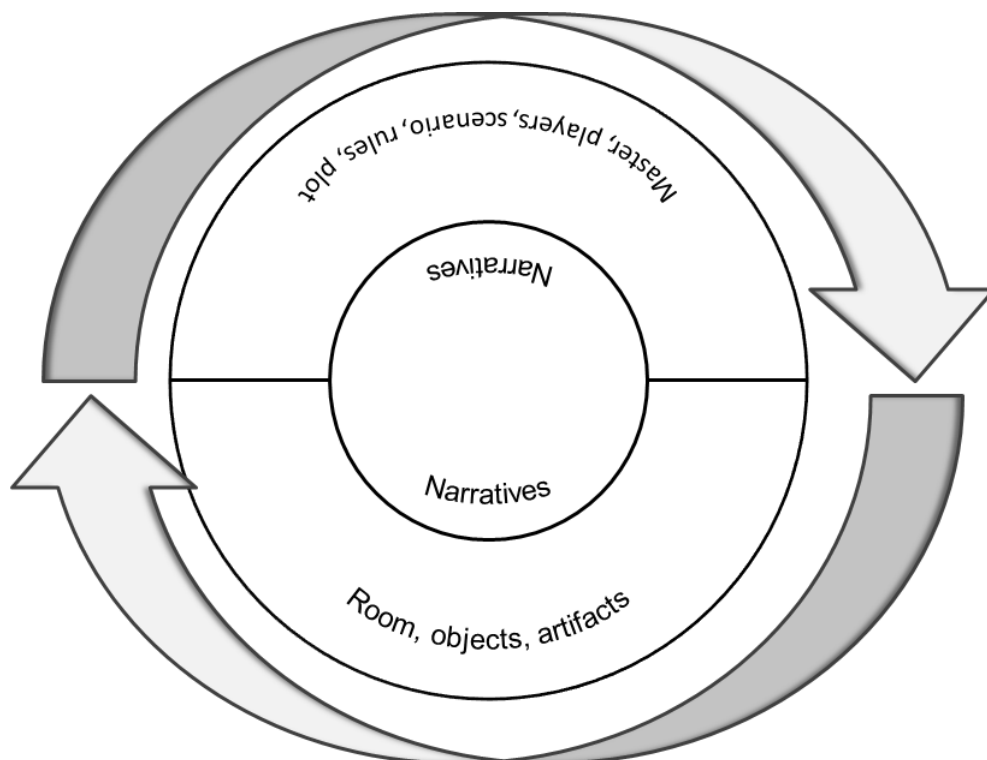
In RPG, tacit and explicit understandings of the rules are built to the same extent that they are learned, according to reports of previous games, of experiences lived in the rooms, mixed with the reports produced there as they played, and a situated statement of practices emerged that trace a spatial path of the room and its artifacts.

Although the reins of narrative are constantly divided between master and players, the dice are an element of uncertainty for both parties. This uncertainty forces the DM to redo his plans and articulate tactics to get the narrative back on track, so that it reaches the expected point. The same happens with the players, who can also be equally surprised by the rolls, being forced to think about new ways to overcome the challenges proposed by the narrator.

Deviations in the narrative promoted by dice rolls, when associated with the players' actions, can reach different proportions with regard to the master's initial planning. During the narrative, for example, the death of a player's character was not surprising, being a fatality resulting from unsuccessful rolls in the middle of a battle of great difficulty proposed by the Storyteller. However, a major change in the plans of this one occurred in the first arc of the narrative, entitled "The Ikoma Tragedy". In an interview, the master stated that in his original plans, this arc would end with the death of an innocent woman who was taking care of a baby at Ikoma Mansion. However, the paths taken by the players and their dice rolls guided the narrative down a different path, resulting in an ending without the tragedy.

Thus, a dialogue is developed between all the parts that make up this process, showing that it is not one-dimensional, even if the Master is the main responsible for proposing the progress of the narrative. It is possible to state then that the report occupies a central position in the organizational process of RPG games, since it is, through these narrative practices, that the game materializes in the reality of the players and the Master. Such practices are able to connect all the others that make up this process, being a vehicle for the dynamics of movement that constantly transform places into spaces and vice versa, but also being a performative practice in itself.

The narrative of a RPG can be explained by De Certeau's (1988) spatial stories, with a narrative that traces paths, stories and actions that move the places from which they emerge. In the fabric of practices that constitute this process of organizing, the accounts are the threads that sew it, connecting the practices, but also the needle that guides the thread in its paths, occupying a central performative position. Spaces are built and connected by such practices, just as these are also connected and built by them, in an imbricated relationship. This role that reporting practices assume in the organizational process of RPG led us to develop the explicative scheme represented by Figure 1, which has the narrative dimension as its central point.



**Figure 1**

*Explicative scheme of organizing processes inspired on RPG*

Font: Created by the authors

The first dimension analyzed was materiality, which highlights the physicality of this process and how it relates to the fictional and social perspectives of the game. This initial link between the game universe and the physical universe in which it occurs is the basis for other dimensions. Interactivity encourages discussions that involve the notions of strategy and tactics, discussed here in the dynamics among the elements that develop the game. The interactions articulated by strategies and tactics allow highlighting the *bricolage*, a dynamic that produces spaces of power for De Certeau and exercises the subjects' artisanal and inventive making (Jarzabkowski, 2004).

The great focus, however, is on spatial stories. The intense descriptions of ambiances, environments, spaces and actions that enable the game to occur and the construction of a mental image of everything that is happening in the game universe. The fictional place keeps immobile in the game's rulebooks until someone starts to practice spatial stories. Research members moved it, practiced it through their reports, spatializing it. It is the narrative that connects spatial practices (Humble & Pedersen, 2015). With this in mind, we can understand why we focus on narrativity, which highlights how this practice is able to promote such a connection between spatial practices.

The analysis of each of the dimensions provides insights that contribute to the understanding of organizing processes. Although all dimensions are constantly intertwined and have equal importance for research, narrativity emerges in the center of our scheme, as explained. The intense overlap between them makes them mix, showing the presence of elements from one dimension to another. In the external areas, there are the Material and Interactive dimensions, connected to each other and also to the narrative dimension, which occupies a central position due to its focus on the practice of reporting, which is enunciative and performative (as it narrates, it performs) and also acts in the connection of the other dimensions, which takes place through the relational way. By acting as a vehicle for other practices and also practicing the organization of the game, the report assumes the role of the main articulator in the development of the narrative, and approaches to it are inevitable, even when this is not the focus of the discussion, as in the Material and Interactive dimensions. Around the model, the circular arrows indicate the procedural character of constant movement that characterizes the organizing of the RPG.

Going back to De Certeau's (1988) approach of practices, we observe a relational understanding of everyday life, in which dynamics of practices organize the elements that are part of such an ongoing process. We believe that our model is capable of highlighting such relational discussion, bringing closer the social and material dimensions of De Certeau (1988) practices, having narrative practices as the element that further unite them.

As stated before, De Certeau (1988) is concerned with bringing ordinary language back to the sociological analysis of social sciences, and we believe that by approaching his idea of spatial stories, we were able to observe the reflexivity between space and practices (Cnossen & Bencherki, 2019) on a narrative perspective. When we discuss how the "Living-to-Play Room" came to be so, we can debate social elements such as the way that intimacy practices are constricted by material elements of the room spatial organizing, but also how such organizing is shaped by narrative RPG practices.

We do that by highlighting the micropolitical relations that are involved and involve such a context, in which strategies and tactics are performed through narrative practices, emerging on a relational perspective from several agents that are not only human, but also non-human. The dices, for instance, frequently occupied a central role on the plot ongoing construction, being a material element that acts on the storytelling process, but also gains symbolic meanings when is integrated to superstitious practices enacted by the players on their attempts to pass on the "cursed dices" to the DM.

This ongoing shift on meanings and positions that characterizes the observed context reinforces De Certeau's (1988) understanding on how strategies and tactics are part of a unique dynamic, connected by narrative practices (Humble & Pedersen, 2015), but also to the understanding that they are capable of

founding spaces. The narrative practices performed on the RPG campaign were capable of connecting the interaction of game elements and organize the asymmetries of power that are characteristic of such relations, but also act on the founding and the understanding of the context of a “Living-to-Play Room”, by the symbolic transformation of the room and its furniture, again, bringing social dimension of spaces to the narrative debate (Ropo & Höykinpuro, 2017).

Overall this work shows how the interrelationship between materiality, interactivity, and narrativity can be discussed in order to emphasize the narrativity of organizing everyday life. We understand that these circular movements engaged by narrativity are characteristic of RPG and they can teach to Organization Studies how to understand complex articulations of practices and how they shape organizing dynamics.

Although RPG games constitute our field of research, the phenomena that we’ve approached with this text can be observed in several contexts, in which agents have to articulate strategies and tactics, deal with rules, and build dynamic narratives that create meanings in their everyday life in organizations in order to make “the organizing game” flow. Likewise, for De Certeau (1988), spatial stories give movement to practice, we understand that narrativity can be analyzed in this way when we consider organizational dynamics. When we connect narrativity to materiality and interactivity, we highlight how we can understand the double role performed by narrative practices, mobilizing performative and enunciative features of narrative practices of organizing.

## Conclusion

In this study, we claim that Role Playing Games are a clear and didactic way to understand the relational dynamics of ways of doing operated in the construction of narratives, in a situated and contextualized way. Practices move and build spaces, promoting an association of individuals with a story (De Certeau, 1988) and locating them in space, time and context (Maclean et al., 2011). There are several organizational forms that can be observed in everyday life in which spatial stories occupy a central position, being responsible for promoting articulations and acting on the existing dynamics between the elements that compose them. In this sense, spatial constructions take place in a reflexive way to articulate practices: space is built through practices, at the same time that it had an influence on the performance of these practices, making it possible to respond to the call of Crossen and Bencherki (2019) for more studies that treat practices and space in a balanced way.

We contribute to De Certeau’s (1988) approach by developing the explicative scheme of organizing presented in Figure 1. We believe that its usage can help to investigate and further understand their main relational characteristics of several contexts such as the ones discussed on the previous paragraph and also bring more attention to narrative practices on a ceriteaunian perspective.

The study also does an effort on bringing closer social and material dimensions of spatial organizing (Ropo & Höykinpuro, 2017), discussing narrative as practices that not only connect spatial practices, but also found spaces (Certeau, 1988). This understanding allows us to discuss not the meanings that material elements assume on given contexts, but also the agency that such element has on the organizing process, bringing out debate closer to an relational approach.

By addressing such materiality in an integrated manner with other dimensions, we present a more specific way of raising discussions about materiality in De Certeau’s theory. Although at times the author compares tactics to movements of plants and fish and states that when operating reports, elements such as things and animals become part of the interactions as “actants”, the author is understood by many theorists as humanist in his practices approach, as he delegates the position of vehicle of practices to ordinary individuals. Recently, a “material turn” has emerged, in which materiality gains space in organization studies, either because of its role in the performance of practices or its relationship with individuals (Carlile, Nicolini, Langley & Tsoukas, 2013), also observing an

emerging post-humanist debate (Bispo, 2016). By connecting such dimensions, we believe that is possible to further use De Certeau's (1988) approach alongside such contemporary onto-epistemological and paradigmatical debates.

That's a similar conception to the proposal in Hanquinet, Roose & Savage (2014) by promoting some updates in the debates proposed by Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical aesthetic approach. Understanding that, as Bourdieu, De Certeau is a man of his time, we can seek and find ways of articulating his propositions with more contemporary approaches to practices.

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