A dramaturgic perspective: seeing digital role-plays as drama and theatre. What are the epistemological and pedagogical consequences?

Introduction
During the spring of 2008 the first Norwegian white paper on digital games was released, published by the Norwegian Parliament. The white paper discusses research and education on digital games and suggests continuing the pursuit of a subsidy scheme for developing Norwegian digital games. In the field of digital game research, a dichotomy has arisen between researchers who are interested predominantly in plays as plays (the ludologists) and those who claim that the plays first of all have a narrative structure (the narratologists). Besides, a growing body of research suggests and discusses the hypothesis that digital games are good for learning (Shaffer et al., 2005; Gee, 2006).

I will briefly mention the two main positions on digital games research – narratology and ludology – and argue for a third position, the use of a dramaturgic theatre-theory as an alternative tool for analysing the phenomenon.

In this article I want to formulate a general analytical framework for analysing digital role-plays by drawing on dramaturgic theory. Secondly, I want to analyse what kind of interaction digital role-plays invite their players to perform and thirdly, I want to investigate in which ways a dramaturgic approach will contribute to digital games research when it comes to being a context for learning. Among all game genres, I have chosen to focus on digital role-plays.

Dramaturgic theories will see and analyse these games as a means of theatrical practice. I will use dramaturgic theory and models to analyse the way games are built in addition to an analysis of what kind of interaction they invite the players into. Finally, I want to draw a picture of...
ture of how the dramaturgic position may offer an alternative and complementary understanding of the phenomenon, especially according to an understanding of the interaction in digital role-plays. Dramaturgy is here understood as the milestones of a performative expression, primarily used in terms of theatre and film. Specifically, I ask what perspectives on digital role-plays, their interaction and educational goals will be achieved when considering them as theatre. Interaction is often regarded as an indication of an ongoing learning process, since being a co-producer in a learning process is often considered to be of higher value than just being a mere consumer. I will choose some central dramaturgic concepts that are present in digital games and discuss how and why these concepts might offer interaction, insight, fellow creativeness and involvement, and thus be a powerful context for learning.

Historical background

Celia Pearce (2003) emphasizes that these games are like a dynamic bidirectional medium that can develop a new form of narrative ideology, where the designer of the game does not function as a storyteller, but rather as a creator of narrative structures/frames for the players’ own playing narrative. Janet Murray (1997) used theories on storytelling; narratology to explain the phenomenon. The disagreement gradually developed on whether to study and understand the computer games as a pure media and fictive phenomenon or whether they should rather be understood by extending existing play- and game theories.

The ludologists (Frasca, 2003; Juul, 2005; Aarseth, 2003) have their main focus on the game itself, research on the distinctive characteristics of play and game, where as the narratologists are preoccupied with the structures of the storytelling; on temporality and causality. These two contrapositions are often seen as obstinacy in their view upon digital games and what is worth focusing on and researching.

The dramaturgic perspective

Instead, it is my premise that we can say digital role-plays are means of a theatrical practise, or, rather, have so many common features with drama and theatre that dramaturgic concepts and theory can be used in their analysis. It is all about playing roles, about going into fictions where the player is invited to improvise and interact with other roles in a virtual world, often characterized by fantastic elements.

Narratology and ludology versus dramaturgy

Even if narratology and dramaturgy have much in common (for instance, both emphasize fiction and the essence of fiction), there are important differences between these two theoretical positions. A game usually has an integrated story; however, the story appears as a
performance, and this is one of the reasons why the conception of dramaturgy is such a suitable tool for analysing the phenomenon.

A central concept in narrative theory is the concept of diegesis. This is a literary term that means “what is told”, in contrast with “what is performed”, which in dramaturgic theory is called mimesis. Mimesis shows rather than tells. Diegesis is the telling of the story the way it is told by a storyteller. Dramaturgy is about structure and the effect of structure. Aristotle was the first who put this into a system. Dramaturgic theory is on the one hand about capability of imitation (“mimesis”) and on the other having a sense of melody/rhythm/song and dance. In this context I will focus on the way Aristotle uses the concept of mimesis in contrast to the way Plato uses it. Aristotle emphasizes the creative process in his conception of the word and is not so concerned about pure imitation. The German hermeneutist Hans-Georg Gadamer also emphasizes this meaning of the word mimesis. He says that what is significant in plays and games is mimesis, not as pure copying, but as cultural production, which gets its material from the children's own reality. Mimesis is taken not to mean “to reproduce”, but rather "to create pieces of art that can be recogniz-able for both creator and spectator". How the spectator responds to the theatre performance and how the audience can have a co-creative function is something that has been the subject of increased focus in postmodern society. Digital games in many ways have captured and further developed this by focusing on co-creativity and interaction.

Aarseth (2003) argues that narratology has been the premise provider for the understanding of human and man-made expressions to too great an extent, and he emphasizes the problems in seeing a game as a text that can be analysed with conceptualization derived from narratology. Games are games and not first and foremost narratives, even if in most games certain forms of sequential narrative structures are built in. This is different to traditional theatre because the gamer is participant and co-producer instead of spectator and consumer. But it also has several similarities with newer forms of experimental theatre and process-drama, as used in drama in education.

Classroom drama differs from traditional theatre because nobody is exclusively an audience, everybody joins the creative process, and this process is often of more value than the product itself. The game master (the teacher) is most often on the outside of the activity as a facilitator and organizer, but when it comes to the drama-in-education method teacher-in-role, the game-master (teacher) takes part by playing his/her own role. This has similarities with the structuring of digital role-plays, in which the development of the play happens as an interaction between the game master/producer and the players. When avatars are brought in, it is as if the gamer has got an alter ego: he/she has become an actor within the game. From my point of view, this deals with gaming, story-telling, interaction, simulation and representation.

The ludologists are concerned about typological concepts such as agon (competition), alea (luck), ludus (the pleasure of playing) and paidea (to let go of one self) (Sørensen,
These are important aspects in games, but do not include the important social component that is internalised in crossing the “stage ramp” and becoming an interactive co-producer of the dramatic lapse/performance. When the ludologists speak of simulation instead of representation, it seems that they think of theatre as when A plays B and C watches. This theatre practise is today expanded and neo-postmodern theatre practices have been developed that emphasize interaction, co-creativeness, or indeed, simulation, if that term is preferred.

To sum up this section, we can say that while narratology examines what is told, a dramaturgic position will, as it is understood in this article, examine what is performed.

The theory of dramaturgy

The theory of dramaturgy most often reflects the way in which a drama is built or constructed. The word dramaturgy derives from the Greek words dramatourgos, drama and ourgos (dramaturg, action, work). Drama means action and dramaturgy in this context means “to create action”. This not only has to do with a narrative principle – how we structure and tell a story – but also with how a play is constructed and performed and how it affects the audience. In this way, one must distinguish between the dramaturgy of the text and the dramaturgy of the performance: the framing of the written and of the performed. Text and performance will most often be in some sort of balance, but are never identical. There will be two different aesthetic expressions, the text with its linear written expression and the performance distinguished by its visual bodily and auditory expressions in time and space. The perceptual situation will as well be different. The text can be read and thus be controlled in its objective form (one can repeat, leap over, etc.) while the theatre situation is a communicative situation taking place in a shared time and space between actor(s) and audience, where both parts more or less influence each other. The theatre performance can apply itself close to the conventions of the text or work against the text and “rewrite” it. Janek Szatkowski sees the relationship between text and performance as a form of hermeneutic circle in which the performance is part of the unity of the text and the text is part of the performance. In every dramatic text a performance is enacted and every performance has some kind of text integrated into it. The object of dramaturgic textual analysis is the written text itself (Szatkowski, 1989). The object of performance analysis is the performance, and the performance I am talking about in this article is the digital game. The digital role-play is thus the performance that can be the subject of a dramaturgic analysis. The term dramaturgy is used differently in different contexts. Goffman, for instance, uses it to understand individuals’ actions as role-play and dramatic tension. “The post-modern man stages himself in a lot of different contexts which is why dramaturgy has become an attractive metaphor for other disciplines beyond theatre” (Østern, 2006).
What is a digital role-play?
Human societies feature many different sorts of role-plays, from dice and board games to role-plays connected to drama in education, which is a typical mental and verbal activity based on oral or written role-patterns. Live role-play is a form of role-play that takes place primarily among young people who physically meet, perhaps outdoors, to play.

Throughout the world there is research on digital role-plays. What are the characteristics of these plays? In “When the story invites us in”, Danish researcher Kjetil Sandvik claims that role-plays are all those plays in which the player is given a role that is influenced by and dependent on the players’ actions (Sandvik 2006). The role-plays must, in addition, both in regard to the roles and the dramatic-narrative framework, be open enough for the participants to settle into and develop them. Even the already established characters are not fully developed in many games, so the players are able to develop them in one way or another. This is a main assumption for the interaction that takes place here and in which this paper is most interested.

Dramatic storytelling can be understood as the characters’ deliberated designed actions in time and space (Lehmann and Szatkowski, 2004, my translation). The main point when it comes to digital role-plays is that it is possible to join an interactive dialogue with the games’ interactive and play-focused dramatic storytelling. The player is offered the role as the main character in single-player adventures like the classic Ultima games, or multiplayer community worlds like Everquest and World of Warcraft, a MMORPG (Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game). In both cases, the player controls and evolves a character over time within a narrative and dramaturgic setting. These games are merely made for entertainment and their possible educational goals are more indirect than direct, while digital games with educational features; edutainment games or serious games, can be exemplified by titles like Global Conflicts: Palestine and Oregon Trail.

“Virtual reality” is a term that has been problematized by numerous researchers. Espen Aarseth calls this a semiotic project; one wants to turn reality into a sign and he shows us in this way the self-contradiction in the term. Aarseth emphasizes that something that is “virtual” claims to be something that it is not. Virtual reality will then be something absent that is present or a reality that is not real (Aarseth, 2007). I will instead use the theatrical term “fiction” with its meaning of something made up or invented, as this is not an actual historical incident. Fiction has an “as if” dimension; we pretend something to be so which is not actually so at the time of speaking or writing. Alternatively, one might say we simultaneously hold two worlds in mind. Fine (1983) says that role-play is constituted by three different frames: in the outer frame we find our daily life, as a person in a social setting, while in the next we find the context of play following certain rules that govern one’s actions, as a player in a game. In the inner circle we find the fictive frame, in which the participants are governed by a common understanding of the
A dramaturgic perspective: seeing digital role-plays as drama and theatre.

Situations in which one is pretending to be someone else in a pretend situation or context (that is, adopting a fictive persona in a fictional situation). Salen and Zimmerman (2004) note that this can also be said about digital games. (Linderoth, 2007, my translation).

To see digital role-plays as a means of theatrical practice is influenced by, among others, Janek Szatkowski who, in the article “The role-play’s challenge – challenges to role-play” (2006, my translation) problematizes whether a role-play in which nobody is an audience, but everybody is part of the fiction, can be called theatre at all. He argues that we can talk about a theatre for and a theatre with an audience. Digital role-plays belong, according to this distinction, to the latter category. Sandvik refers to digital role-plays as interactive, emergent theatre performances (Sandvik, 2006). He insists that one of our main challenges will be to create a conceptual formulation and analytical approach/method that will function when it comes to analysing phenomena of multimedia or digital expressions that combine text, picture, sound, music and animation. Theatre is in its character multimodal; most theatre forms contain a combination of many different art expressions or combination of signs. These signs have their own separate meanings, as autonomous signs, or can have multiple meanings, as polysemous signs.

The Polish semiotic researcher Tadeusz Kowzan claims that the art of theatre gets its object from all art categories and as such must not be related only to literature and narratology. The same can be said about digital role-plays, especially those having the dramaturgical definition “a knowledge of the narrative logic behind pictures in motion” (Szatkowski, 1991, my translation). The games are more than stories; they are in addition pictures in motion, music, animations, set design, costumes, light and sound, etc. To interpret and understand these artistic expressions, narratology and ludology can be extended with help from the dramaturgical field.

**The connection between theatrical fiction, dramatic fiction and fiction in digital role-plays**

Fictions, due to this topic, can be divided into three types, with different levels of integrated interaction; the theatrical, the dramatic and the fiction found in digital role-plays. Generally, theatre (the theatrical fiction) will be defined as when A plays the role of B and C is a spectator and knows that A plays the part of B (Bentley, 1992). In other words, someone is performing and someone is watching. Dramatic fiction as it appears in classroom drama/drama in education is different, in the way that C is also part of the fictive universe. In this context, there is no audience, everybody participates in the dramatic process, and all are both physically and mentally constituted. The fiction in digital role-plays has much in common with both, but is similar to the dramatic in the way that the separation between participant and spectator is partly neutralized. One difference is that this happens to avatars in a digitalised medium instead of physically, here and now, present in the same shared space. Szatkowski (1985) says that the theatrical fiction is a premise for dramatic fiction,
and it is my view that it is also a premise for the fiction in digital role-plays. From my point of view, these games can be understood in a different way after analysing them as a means of theatrical and thereby fictional practice, because they are performative and structured by the dramatic basic elements; character, plot, space and time. In addition, the games are structured with the help of dramatic tools such as focus, rhythm, tension and contrast, symbol, form and subtext that communicate with the players much the same way as the communication contract operates in open and innovative forms of theatre.

**Digital role-play as a dramatic narrative: A dramaturgic approach**

A dramaturgic approach will, among other factors, take into consideration the spatial conception as it is used in the temporary science of theatre. Traditionally, there has been a common understanding that theatre only exists in a space in which there is an audience present. On the other hand, digital games need an active player to be realized. I want to emphasize that postmodern forms of theatre and genres also have an interactive, built-in function. The actor and the object are simultaneously present in a common space and the borders between participant and spectator are partly repealed.

The games have built-in rules and frames of interaction that the player either knows beforehand or gets to know as an introduction to the game. In the classic theory of theatre, this is known as the fictional contract. Frasca (2004) points out that simulation makes it possible for the player to engage in a dynamic system from an experimental point of view and that a significant value of this direct involvement comes from the freedom of interacting with and taking control over the simulation. I understand the way Frasca thinks that simulation in games is what invites and leads to interaction, while representation is understood as if the spectator produces a mental representation of the narrative. “Unlike narrative, simulations are a kaleidoscopic form of representation that can provide us with alternative points of view” (Frasca, 2004).

In other words, a game is more than a story and a story is somehow different from a game. The computer or the game console enables interaction, and this is what makes playing digital games a different experience to watching a film, reading a book or attending a theatre performance. Classical narratology assumes that the whole story is closely tied together by causality, but this is not the fact when it comes to digital role-plays. They have a structure that in some ways is more loose and free. The main character’s wandering in and exploration of the given space/environment is an important component and the narrative is woven together by shorter sequences. The player/main character can, for instance, interact with objects that seem peripheral to the main plot or do not take/lead the story further ahead. A game assumes an active player; if not, there would be neither a game nor a narrative sequence. In this way, producing a narrative and being narrative must be distinguished. *Ludus* is separated from the narration by the player being actively playful and directly co-creative through fictional action.
It can be claimed that digital role-plays have some sort of narrative structure and that they are also play-centred. Another characteristic is that they are role-plays. They appear as fictions in which the participants are invited to share the playground and where the participants are offered the leading role. This turns out to be a collective creative process. As a form, this has similarities with other drama and theatre phenomena, for instance "The Open Theatre"\textsuperscript{13}, the process of production in the theatre of performance, also called a devising process, Augusto Boal’s "Forum Theatre"\textsuperscript{14} and the collective creative process in educational drama. "The Open Theatre" also invites the "spectators" to participate, but not as in traditional interactive theatre where the plot is predetermined and the audience merely participates as if. Being part of "The Open Theatre" the spectator is not invited into an accomplished, arranged theatre performance, but instead the frames are constructed in such a way that neither form nor content is predetermined; this is what the participants contribute to as being part of the shared collective process. The focus is based on a fiction that is supposed to be a creative process, with the “audience”/participants having the opportunity to acquire and rehearse methods of acting and dramaturgic competences that are needed to build the fiction (Sandvik, 2004). This is also typical of digital role-plays, where in addition to tools for role building and character building, participants find training paths where they can try out their characters and rehearse in the making-dramatic-action process. In this way, players become involved in building the action. They also get trained in playing the game as well as possible. Ludologists, too, emphasize this, calling it "simulation" and claiming that games are a special way of structuring simulations\textsuperscript{15}. From a dramaturgic perspective, we would say that simulation can never be equivalent to the thing being simulated; i.e., to imagine something can never be the same as experiencing the actual thing. According to traditional theories about theatre, there will always be an element of as if in the representation. “Being “as if” is the self’s fictional mode of operation.” (Courtney 1990). This operation takes place in different spheres of life, although it is particularly noticeable in expressions where role-taking plays an important part. We imagine, and thereby think of possibilities. "When we take one of these possibilities and externalize it in action, we try to make creative ideas (hypotheses and models) work in the world." (ibid). We try to act as someone else. "In any world of “as if” there are two types of transformation. First people think “as if” (or think and act “as if”) they are different from their everyday selves. They transform themselves into another. “(....). “Second, “as if” acts transform what we know. Transformation of the persona gives us a new perspective on an event: we learn more about it and this changes our knowledge of it." (ibid). This can be said to be hermeneutics for practical trial and error.

**The dramaturgy in digital role-plays emphasizing figure, plot, fiction and interaction**

If our purpose is to gain deeper insight into the world of digital role-plays through the notion of dramaturgic theories, it is natural to select a few terms as tools for analysis.
I have chosen “role/figure”, “plot” and “fiction”. In all role-plays, players are assigned particular roles and playing a role means following some set of rules of behaviour. The player becomes someone else, an invented figure, at the same time as he or she simultaneously will be him- or herself. This is called an “aesthetic doubling” (Szatkowski, 1985). When participating in different forms of dramatic acts one can experience both oneself and the others on different levels. Outside the world of the dramatic play there will be a one-to-one relationship in a meeting with another person. Being in role means that these meeting points are doubled; this is aesthetic doubling. The doubling situation occurs because the person acting is both himself and the role. To enter the fictive universe contributes to the same; one is both part of the fiction and the real world at the same time.

The fiction can create the necessary distance to make it possible to explore the role/human being and the relationship between the roles/human beings. Gavin Bolton speaks about “holding two worlds in mind at the same time” (1984, p. 141; 1992, p.11). This is exactly what Szatkowski (1985, p.144) calls the aesthetic doubling: “The participants/performers are simultaneously having an experience of being in the fiction in addition to having an experience of the fiction, a notion as a figure/role and a notion of being the one creating the figure/role.” (my translation). In other words, they are participants and spectators at the same time, both audience and actors. There will be an impression that whatever happens here and now, it is I who makes it happen. Everyone in the play is audience to each other at the same time as being part of the play. This also happens in digital games; the player is both him-/herself and the role and thus communicates on many different levels. This notion of creating one’s own role is probably even more accurate and obvious in digital games than in many other dramatic fictions and genres because one is sitting on the outside of the machine viewing one’s role visually materialized on the screen. Instead of acting in person, physically, an avatar materializes the players role. This means the player stands on the outskirts and can observe and evaluate his own figure. The interaction will be on at least three different levels: what one experiences in playing the role, what one experiences together with the other roles and, finally, the interaction between oneself and the role, holding the two worlds in mind at the same time. Therefore, it is not only the notion of living through the role that is of importance, but just as well becoming and being the role.

Jesper Juul argues that the fascination of playing has to do not necessarily with identifying oneself with the figure on stage/screen, but can be linked to the commission one has achieved as a real-life subject (Juul, 2001). If by this Juul claims this to be an antagonism, I have difficulties in seeing this antagonism. From my dramaturgic point of view, the first aspect has to do with living through the role, and can easily be related to the ludological thinking that it is the commission or task itself that fascinates the player as himself. I think it is exactly the combination of the two that carries them away.
During the digital role-play, the ordinary boy and girl have become part of the game by taking roles and taking an active part in playing. In other words, they are not trained actors. This is similar to the genre of performance. What the performer performs is called “non-acting”. This implies that he or she is not making a role-gestalt of psychological depth, but is rather rehearsing fragments of temporary identities. In the same way as can be said about the theatre of performance, digital role-plays do not try to communicate one particular truth/version as we see in Aristotelian and epic dramaturgy, but rather present different perspectives that materialize during the searching process of production. During these meetings, the different perspectives can together communicate an enlightening, ambiguous and pluralistic perspective. Indeed, it can be argued, that pictures, animations and sounds, etc. are as important as words. All artistic expressions are equal and have approximately the same expressive importance. This corresponds with the aesthetics of theatre and is, in addition, one of the reasons for examining digital games with dramaturgic terminology.

**An epistemological and pedagogical approach to dramaturgic models and digital role-plays**

Examining and understanding these role-plays as drama and theatre can help us see and understand the interaction, and thereby the learning models, constituted between the different participants of the communicative process from a new perspective. The theoretical position we take will have a great effect on what possible learning outcome we will look and argue for.

In Nordic drama pedagogy, the idea of double perception has been termed “aesthetic doubling” (Szatkowski, 1985, pp.143–144), which is precisely the phenomenon that the drama-in-education field internationally argues is a core premise for learning in or through drama. Gavin Bolton speaks as already mentioned about “holding two worlds in mind at the same time” (1984, p. 141; 1992, p. 11, Eriksson, 2007).

Many researchers have pointed out that it makes no sense to ask *if* we can learn from digital games, but that the question should rather be, *what* can we learn? From my point of view, the question *why* is of equal importance. What can the phenomenon in itself offer as a means of understanding and learning and why is it so? Cognitive processes have been emphasized with the focus on problem solving, metacognition, cooperation abilities, game literacy and computer literacy, among others. Both the Formalists’ category of *forma*, which is a category chiefly concerned with analysing style and genre aspects, and the *content* of the games have been of epistemological interest.

Even if the digital role-plays cannot be said to be fully constructed by an Aristotelian dramaturgy, one can still claim they have many similarities with this form. Besides being constructed by a linear structure that is cause and effect related, the classic Aristotelian dramaturgy has as its main characteristics action/plot and dramatic tension. The story is...
supposed to both catch and keep the recipient’s interest. If the recipient is in addition the player, the same can be said about the digital role-plays, except that these do not have a linear structure, but have a spatial organization (Murray, 1997, p. 130). Instead of a beginning, a middle and an ending, as found in Aristotelian dramaturgy, we find ourselves in a constant middle. In the Aristotelian theory, the plot will follow a linear, cause–effect, logical curve of tension. The story is from the exposition logically united and motivated towards a climax that points to a decomposition of the conflict. The difference is that in these games we will always proceed to new conflicts.

Szatkowski argues that theatre in its classic dramatic form is a closed form, because the drama closes around itself in an attempt to create a totality that exists independently before an audience (Szatkowski, 1989, p. 43). We are going to believe in the fiction and we are dragged into the fictional universe that occurs on the stage, a universe that is supposed to look like the real world being portrayed. Even if other narrative forms have come and gone, this form has survived, perhaps because it offers empathy, dramatic tension and redemption. We are presented with a manageable world in which everything is noticeable and controlled by the theatrical interpretation of life itself (Szatkowski, 1989). Even if the members of the audience in these role-plays have become co-actors, they can only control the development to a certain extent through different possible choices and contingencies that the game-master has built in. Can this still be called a genuine interaction? My opinion is that this dramaturgic form creates an interaction where, through lack of willpower, one is controlled by the plot and the figures, and where one lives through the plot in a way that prevents one stepping backwards and critically analysing what is witnessed. Aristotle calls this catharsis. My conception of catharsis is the emotional purification one experiences when one identifies with the plot and characters in the play and obtains a form of climax in living through what happens to the protagonist.

Stephan Grätzel (2003) argues that each day we are captured by and locked within the narratives in which we participate, but from which we are unable to distance ourselves. The theatre is important because from a distance it shows us that we have been captured. It is the same notion of distance that can be seen in epic dramaturgy and that, from my point of view, could be utilized in epistemic games, for instance. Grätzel emphasizes that to achieve this distance, theatre must take place on a stage with an audience present. The opposite can also be said: that by taking on a role and being both oneself and the role, one is able to identify oneself with the role and critically reflect upon what is experienced when being in the role to an even greater extent than one is a member of an audience. The dialectic exchange between “being” and “pretending” is mentally an exchange between primary and secondary processes. Gregory Bateson defines the function of the ego as a process in which the individual is capable of separating between different levels of communication. This means that they can separate between different communicative forms both in the self itself and between self and others. Erling Lars Dale (1986, p. 185) describes
how the human being who, in the primary process, dreams, fantasizes and lives through emotions, dissolves as a subject. The primary processes are characterized by subconsciousness. The secondary processes are organizational activities that are characterized by dimensions of time, logical judgement, decision making and critical thinking. Knowledge and understanding are reckoned to be secondary processes. (See Allern, 2005). Play, drama and narratives are characterized by the combination of both primary and secondary mental processes; I think the same about digital role-plays. The child's intention of being immersed in a role is only possible when the child temporarily puts him- or herself on the sidelines and suspends the rules of common logic. Educational drama has as its basis the wish to merge fiction and reality in a here-and-now situation. In digital games, the physical presence of classroom drama is replaced by a virtual presence in which the phrase “there and now” might be more applicable than “here and now”. Bateson is concerned about the “as if” in playing, and thus in the communication process, the dramatic structure and the context of the play. When building meaning is contextualized, the meaning of the communication is changed when the context is changed. When play invites one to see that contexts are created, one can also see that contexts can be changed (Bateson, 1956, p.148). These plays allow participants to evolve practices that draw both on the experience of everyday life and the experience of being immersed in the fiction. Through imagination and transformation the player will experience and become a co-creator and the gaming situation can thus be a context of learning which encourages the players actively to engage, reflect, rehearse and make choices.

Brian Sutton-Smith refers to all these expressive acts as “quadrologic”, which means that the participants are dramatists, actors, instructors and audience at the same time. He speaks about play in general, but the same can be said about playing digital games. In many ways they contain all these functions at the same time, even if the main focus will be on playing the role as well as possible. It is a common assumption in drama theory that the participants in a dramatic fiction in their communication process switch between being an audience and being the performers. In a dialogue, there will be a constant switch between being active oneself and at the same time being an audience, both to oneself and to one's partner/s. In digital gaming, the player is in fact in addition viewing his or her own actions—the actions one's avatars carry out can be seen on the screen. This offers a potentiality for metacognition in being able to reflect in and out of role. (See Allern, 1995).

The aesthetic doubling I have been writing about can be said to create both distance and reflection. The word “distance” is a compound concept. In the domain of theatre poetics, for example in Brecht's work, it is used stylistically – to create an avoidance of emotional involvement with characters and events. It is also used to distort familiar, routine conceptions by applying distancing devices – to make the familiar strange. Used this way, the word is supposed to effect a reflective “stepping back” and to encourage critical
examination. In the domain of drama/theatre education – in art didactics – the uses above are being applied educationally, and framing and protection, two of the more or less implicit extensions of the distance concept, are often applied (Eriksson, 2007, p. 6).

In his article about distance, Eriksson uses, among others, Ben Chaim’s concept of distance. Chaim divides this basic principle of distance, which he defines as the awareness of fiction, into three components: tacit knowing, volition and perception as unreal. The mental processes involved operate from the tacit awareness of the reality/fiction relationship (ibid).

The concept of distance, borrowed from Brecht’s “Epic Theatre”, is, from my point of view, central to the notion of digital literacy. Being both part of the dramatic fiction and at the same time fully aware of what some drama theorists call *metaxis*: holding two worlds in mind at the same time. Augusto Boal proposes the same term to express the experience in which the participants in a dramatic process partake actively in two different and autonomous worlds, the real and the fictional. This means that, on the one hand, the player is fully involved emotionally in the play, but at the same time is able to observe the self from the outside when taking on a role and playing a part in a fiction. This double notion implies that one is able to reflect critically upon what is going on at the same time as one is playing an active part. Brecht calls this *Verfremdung* in his epic dramaturgy, and his idea was to make theatre performances in which there were “breaches” that would prevent the audience from fully “living through”, as in an Aristotelian dramaturgy. Instead, Brecht wanted theatre to show that it is theatre, so that the audience would pause to reflect critically upon what was going on. This should, on another level, influence the spectators to go out and change society. The concept of distance can make the game become the object of theoretical analysis and adaptation. “When we think and act dramatically we create a fiction. But this fiction is not false; it is not a lie. It has a cognitive purpose. It is a way of looking at the environment that complements the actual world and, in so doing, it provides us with a new perspective on it. If we put the two together, the actual and the fictional, our understanding of the world will change. We have learned and thereby we have improved our cognitive abilities in highly significant ways.” (Courtney, 1990, p. 11). Simultaneously holding two worlds in mind, as the player does when she/he is playing, gives a potential for experiencing being in someone else’s shoes in another fictional time and space. By being both oneself and the role, one is able, as oneself, to reflect on what happens when one is in a role and thereby to reach a level of metacognition. They can become more aware of themselves as learners and be able to transfer what is experienced here and now to new situations. Transfer is defined as the ability to extend what has been learned in one context to new contexts (Byrnes, 1996). Impersonation, being in someone else’s shoes, can from this point of view be a prime activator for learning.
Conclusion

In this article I have argued for bringing dramaturgic theories into the digital role-play research field in order to investigate and discuss some implications for understandings of interaction and learning.

An intense debate is raging about digital games and whether they can be regarded as forms of art. Art itself is often subject to criticism of its very existence or definition, and to complaints that it is only important to a marginal elite and that it does not communicate well with “ordinary” people. However, we can insist that digital games turn this upside down; the spectator becomes participant and there is an interaction incorporated between the gamer/spectator and the “art” object. Despite this discussion, digital role-plays might be developed that consider content as well as artistic value, and games that are both innovative and experimental. If this is going to be realized, the game producers and the game creators can, among other perspectives, use dramaturgic thinking and theory. They have the possibility to take into consideration aspects such as figure, plot, space, time, interaction, fiction, distance, dramatic tense and contract and discuss how these influence each other. Dramaturgic analysis and dramaturgic models can be useful tools for the game developers, but not as a dogmatic postulate that closes down more than it opens up. Such a tool would ideally have an initial function as a tool box. In this way, one can be reminded of what elements or building blocks the different dramaturgic models contain, what effect the different models might have on the player/spectator, what type of interaction is desirable and what is likely to be achieved by the different dramaturgic models. This will be useful even if the game is considered first of all as a game. In any case, the game will contain certain figures/avatars that interact within a fictional world in a make-believe/virtual space and a make-believe/virtual time. This is what makes dramaturgic model thinking useful both for game developers and for the field of research and analysis. In addition, this implies many pedagogic consequences. We can create serious games that utilize the inherent potentiality of joy and motivation as a didactic tool.

My theoretical framework is derived from a dramaturgic position. This does not mean that I consider ludology and narratology to be without current interest as insightful ways of understanding the phenomenon, but rather the opposite way around. My main point of view is that all three theoretical positions are relevant and make important contributions to understanding the phenomenon, and that they are complementary rather than mutually exclusive. In addition, it may be suitable for the purpose not only to clearly divide between what is role-play and what is the surrounding world, but at the same time to examine the phenomenon as so multifaceted that it can be understood and analysed from different theoretical perspectives.

The theoretical framing I have used in this paper is taken primarily from the classical Aristotelian dramaturgic model, but it also refers to modern and postmodern thinking. The basic theatrical elements I have used as entries have been figure/role, story/plot, space...
and time, where I have chosen to emphasise role/figure and story/plot as central parts of the digital fiction. As part of the digital fiction I have taken a closer look at the notion of “aesthetic doubling” and “as if” and compared the fiction we find in digital role-plays with dramatic and theatrical fictions. In addition, I have examined briefly some dramaturgic models to see what kind of interaction occurs in the meeting point between game and player. Still, it can be said that as long as the Aristotelian dramaturgy remains in its hegemonic position according to the construction and structure, players are manipulated by the pre-programmed simulations. The player is being controlled into and entertained by fictions that are, to a certain extent, predetermined, without reflecting on where this comes from, who created them and what is the purpose. In contrast to traditional stories, the fictions and simulations open up countless representations where alternative scenarios can be tested. In serious games production, there is a potential in producing games for children that are both pedagogic and entertaining, although such games will benefit from being produced to focus on both form and content and the story and figures will have to be interesting, challenging and exciting enough to motivate the pupils. There will be requirements, of course, to be historically accurate and not give a one-dimensional picture of an incident when society and/or history might be the subject. In one way or another, the game will have to challenge the pupil’s predetermined ideas and inspire critical thinking. Going in and out of roles, playing with and experiencing different imagined worlds, reflecting in-role and out-of-role can stimulate a wide variety of cognitive processes. The future will show if the potential of this, especially in serious games, can be exploited to a higher extent as emancipation rather than preservative.

Notes
1 Stortingsmelding nr. 14, 2007–2008
2 The word role-play means to identify with a role and to act in accordance to this role. In digital games this is not physically constituted by playing with one’s own body, but happens via an avatar. Peter Slade (1954) divides it between personal play and projected play, where the first is through one’s own body and the latter is through an object.
3 See also Vangsnes, Vigdis (2008): “From narratology and ludology to dramaturgy”
4 Performance is here used in the sense of a performance of a play
5 “Classroom drama” / “Drama in education” emphasizes drama as a medium for learning by going in and out of fictions and roles rather than “playing” theatre
6 The drama-method “teacher-in-role” was developed in England by the drama educationalists Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote in the 1970s and 1980s.
7 Roger Caillois introduced the term ludus to apply to play/games with a
clear ending and in which someone wins or loses, while paidea is a play without evident aims, for example, playing with a doll.

8 This can refer to both theatre and film
9 "Virtual" is the opposite of real. The term is disputed. In ICT terminology we often see the term simulation used to prevent the dualistic border between a virtual and a real world
10 "Fiction" derives from the Latin word fingere, which means “think of/invent”
11 In our postmodern society several forms of theatre have appeared that are more open-structured and where this border line in many ways is invalidated, but the traditional theatre is often referred to by this definition. (Post-dramatic ways of understanding theatre).
12 The way drama most often appears in pedagogic contexts, usually referred to as process drama.
13 “The Open Theatre” is a form of theatre and Danish researchers in particular use this terminology.
14 In “Forum Theatre”, which was developed by the Brazilian Augusto Boal, the spectator is invited to take over the protagonist’s role, i.e. the oppressed character’s part in the play. In this way the spectator can be transformed from being a passive recipient to an active participant. Boal calls this a spect-actor.
15 "To simulate is to model a (source) system through a different system which maintains to somebody some of the behaviours of the original system." (Frasca, 2003)
16 Aristotelian dramaturgy is also referred to as dramatic, classical or the Hollywood-model.
17 Epic dramaturgy refers to Brecht and his notions of Verfremdung, distance and compound.
18 Dramatic tension indicates how the fiction is constructed in order to involve the spectator/player as much as possible in the task.
19 The classic dramatic form is as well known as the Aristotelian dramaturgy.

References
Aristoteles (1961). Om diktekunsten, translated by Sam. Ledsaak, Oslo, Tanum


a dramaturgic perspective: seeing digital role-plays as drama and theatre. 37

pædagogisk og kulturell sammenhæng. Århus: Århus Universitetsforlag
Vangsnes, V. (2008). From Narratology and Ludology to Dramaturgy: a Theoretical Analysis of Digital Role-Plays as Narratives, Games or as a Means of Theatrical Practice. (Unpublished scientific essay written as part of PhD-degree).