Transformative
Role-playing Game Design

Edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman, Elektra Diakolambrianou, Simon Brind

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Preface

About this textbook

We believe that role-playing games have the potential to change us: to affect our relationship with ourselves and with the world in positive ways. Our focus for this textbook is analog role-playing game design with an emphasis on encouraging explicit transformative impacts in participants. By analog role-playing games, we mean tabletop, live action role-playing (larp), and Nordic and American freeform. The principles described in this book should be roughly transferable between these different formats, even if the practices associated with them can vary, e.g., levels of physicality required.

This book does not cover digital role-playing games facilitated by computer software such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) or *Final Fantasy* (Square and Square Enix 1987). We emphasize games in which spontaneous co-creative improvisation between participants forms the basis of play. While we acknowledge that such experiences are possible in digital spaces, the role-playing experience of a typical digital RPG has constraints due to the pre-programmed interface. However, the principles described in this book could apply to improvisational role-playing occurring in online spaces such as MOOs, MUSHes, MMORPGs, or Discord servers, as well as analog role-playing games that are played online through platforms such as D&D Beyond or Zoom.

Because the emphasis is on game design specifically, many of the recommendations in this book are geared toward practitioners aiming to design role-playing games for applied purposes based on our model. Notably, while our model is a synthesis of work from a wide variety of sources as evidenced by our references, we do not claim these practices to be the only methods for creating transformative role-playing games, nor is this book comprehensive or inclusive to all methods. Our model is intended to give designers specific instructions grounded in theory for their design work, with an emphasis on creating short nano-games with explicit goals. Our next book in this series, *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*, will provide more extensive instructions for scaling up these projects and cultivating transformational communities around them. We also highly recommend reading two central books in our field: *Larp Design: Creating Role-play Experiences* (Koljonen et al. eds. 2019) and *The Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Game Studies* (Zagal and Deterding eds. 2024).

Finally, because this work is a textbook, we have endeavored to make the tone readable and engaging, reducing the number of citations we would normally add to academic work. However, we have compiled extensive bibliographies on these topics, which can be found at this link and are ever expanding. The intention is to provide an easy entry point for designers and scholars alike, while also sharing the wealth of resources available for future research. This balancing act is not always easy, so

we hope the textbook serves you. Furthermore, if you have additional sources to recommend specifically on analog role-playing game design, you can send them to edge-speldesign@uu.se. We know this field is expanding rapidly. We hope to provide a centralized archive for researchers on an ongoing basis, so your recommendations are encouraged.

The chapters in this textbook are as follows:

- **Chapter 1: A Brief Introduction to Role-playing Games and Cousin Forms**
  This chapter briefly introduces various categories of analog role-playing games, as well as "cousin forms" that share similarities with transformative RPGs. This section is not intended to be comprehensive, but rather establishes key terms and genres that we will use throughout the book.

- **Chapter 2: Transformative Role-playing Games: Types, Purposes, and Features**
  This chapter outlines our definition of transformation, describing the three types of transformative role-playing games we emphasize in this book: transformative leisure, therapeutic, and educational. We also provide a brief overview of our model of transformative game design, upon which we expand in later chapters.

- **Chapter 3: Theory, Central Concepts, and Inspirational Materials**
  In this chapter, we highlight the many theories and concepts that have informed our theoretical framework and curriculum in transformative game design. Reflecting our interdisciplinary backgrounds, these theories arise from role-playing game studies, peace and conflict studies, psychology, social psychology, sociology, counseling, pedagogy, anthropology, and several other fields. Key concepts include bleed, alibi, RPGs as transformational containers, immersion, identity, transfer, ritual, psychotherapeutic techniques, various interaction theories, and educational theories, among others.

- **Chapter 4: Practice: Transformative Role-playing Game Design and Research**
  This chapter offers practical recommendations for designing transformative role-playing games based on our model. Topics include designing transformative goals, framing activities such as workshops and debriefs, narrative design, and culture design.

- **Chapter 5: Safety and Community Container Setting**
  In this chapter, we emphasize topics related to establishing and maintaining psychological safety, as well as methods for community container setting, meaning ways in which to cultivate transformational communities around games. Topics include safety strategies before, during, and after games; working with specific populations; crisis management; and sensitive content and representation. In particular, we discuss politics, culture, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity, neurodiversity, and accessibility.

- **Chapter 6:** Key Concepts and Techniques: Myth, Symbolism, Ritual, Narrative, Culture, and Conflict
  This chapter highlights key concepts and techniques for transformative role-playing game design. Working with myth, symbolism, and ritual are age-old practices that can deepen the role-playing experience and its impact. We explore narrative work and postmodern magic as methods for transforming the stories of our lives. We also discuss the many forms of culture within and around RPGs, as well working with conflict in scenarios related to politics, culture, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. We close with thoughts around the use of RPGs to foster activism, advocacy, inclusion, and accessibility.

- **Chapter 7:** Research in Transformative Game Design
  Finally, in this chapter, we offer considerations for researchers studying transformative role-playing games. We introduce academic writing in terms of argument, structure, theory, method, data collection, ethics, and other considerations. We briefly introduce key methods including Research through Design, ethnographic methods, and other forms of qualitative and quantitative data analysis. Finally, we provide an overview of some of the evidence-based research available on the effects of role-playing games, organized according to cognitive, affective, and behavioral impacts.

We recommend scanning the Table of Contents for each chapter for additional information about the content contained within them. Furthermore, if you learn well from videos, much of the content in this book can also be found on the Transformative Play Initiative YouTube page.

About the project

"What we have been, what we now are, we shall not be tomorrow."

- Ovid, Metamorphoses (1960)

This textbook is a culmination of materials developed for the Transformative Game Design Master's programme at Uppsala University, further expanded upon in the Erasmus+ Higher Education project EDGE (2023). The collaborating organizations are two universities—Uppsala University in Sweden and Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland—as well as three RPG design organizations—Dragons' Nest in Greece, Avalon Larp Studio in Norway, and Chaos League in Italy. Thus, the book features content from practitioners from several countries arising from a variety of play cultures, although most authors are connected in some way to the Nordic larp tradition (Stenros and Montola 2010).

Collectively, we have backgrounds in tabletop, freeform, and larp communities in many countries, as well as board games, card games, and video games. In addition to gaming, we have within our writing team experiences within other alternative

communities, including subcultural groups and activities associated with neo-spirituality; transformational work; visual arts; creative writing; music, including guitar and bass guitar playing, choir, karaoke, and DJing; queer performance; tap dancing and irish traditional dancing; Burning Man; theatre; improv; reenactment; archery; powerlifting; gymnastics; and building.

Politically, we have authors associated with various movements emphasizing universal human rights and countering oppression and discrimination. Several of our authors have multicultural backgrounds and experiences of discrimination based on immigration status, race/ethnicity, class, religion, gender/sexuality, among others. Several of us are neurodiverse, with backgrounds including autism, ADHD, giftedness, sensory processing disorder, anxiety disorders, and complex PTSD, including as a result of abuse. Other perspectives in our team include backgrounds personally or within our family with chronic pain, disability, alcoholism, and depression. Thus, our writing team is strongly committed to work that betters the lives of people, especially individuals who experience marginalization.

Academically, our team has interdisciplinary backgrounds in game studies, design, and development; media studies; psychology, including person-centered counseling, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, applied art therapies, and social psychology; anthropology; cultural geography; education; humanities; creative writing; English literature; musicology; gender and sexuality studies; peace & conflict studies; nature science; public administration; software engineering; business/system analysis; and project and product management. Methodologically, we have phenomenologists, structural functionalists, narratologists, quantitative and qualitative empiricists, participatory action researchers, and ethnographers, including participant observation and autoethnography.

Members of our team have offered interventions to a variety of populations, such as children, including with neurodiversity; youth and youth workers; college and university students; admin staff; teachers; researchers; public sector employees; convicts and ex-convicts; adults with disabilities; queer folks; migrants and refugees, including unaccompanied minors; and others. We have designed and facilitated transformative role-playing games for several of these populations and believe strongly in its power to catalyze change.

We hope you enjoy the textbook.

-- Sarah Lynne Bowman, Elektra Diakolambrianou, and Simon Brind, editors
December 2024

Acknowledgements

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A Brief Introduction to Role-playing Games and Cousin Activities

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Alessandro Giovannucci ❖ Taisto Suominen

1.1 Introduction

This chapter will briefly introduce the origins of role-playing as a human impulse to use play and storytelling to understand the world and ourselves, as well as practice specific skills. We will discuss different ways in which role-playing games and cousin activities have been designed to encourage personal and/or social change. Then, we will describe several types of role-playing games, with the understanding that generalizations always have exceptions and nuances that cannot be expressed in a short text. Some of the categorizations are our own words; you may find other labels elsewhere. The intention is to give readers a basic language for communicating about types of RPGs and cousin activities before we launch into a discussion of transformation, which is reserved for Chapter 2.

1.2 Role-playing as an age-old human activity

Role-playing games in their current form are a recent subcultural manifestation of an age-old human activity. As humans, we make meaning by telling stories and enacting them together in communities. We imbue these stories with meanings, whether realistic, mythical, or supernatural, which provide guidance for us on our life journey. We create rituals within which these stories can be performed in a participatory way rather than simply heard or read.

Many of us also engage in pretend play as children, often as a means to explore social roles and practice key skills that will become important in life. We are not the only species to play; for example, many mammalian species engage in *chase play*. Nor is play always a positive activity for everyone involved. For example, if play is non-consensual and forced upon others, called *dark play*, it can be harmful (Stenros 2015; Trammell 2023). Such play can occur in role-playing games, often protected by the *alibi* of play: the psychological defense mechanism that claims, "It wasn't me, it was my character" and provides social permission for unusual behavior (Deterding 2017) or even transgression (Bowman and Stenros 2024). For this reason, we acknowledge the importance of alibi to allow us permission to play, but also emphasize *playing for*

empathy: for other participants and people who are different from ourselves (Brown and Morrow 2015).

We believe that designers of role-playing games intended for transformational purposes have a responsibility to use this potent tool as a means to increase peace and justice for all people, not only some. In order to best do that, we should understand the complex structures that underlie our role-playing processes, as well as the sociocultural contexts and the corresponding conflicts that surround them. With this heightened awareness, we can create opportunities for powerful and unique experiences, tailoring scenarios explicitly with growth-related goals in mind.

a) Role-playing and human cultural development

Our model of transformative game design is based on analog role-playing games, a specific cultural phenomena arising from several leisure communities around the world in the latter part of the twentieth century. The practices contained within this book draw mainly from the discourse communities creating theory and design around such games. However, role-playing more generally can serve a variety of critical functions within the broader context of human cultural development, such as: exploring identity, influencing group dynamics, or contributing to social cohesion. Therefore, analog role-playing games are also understandable as examples of cultural phenomena that serve these functions in society.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Émile Durkheim (1964) stressed the importance of so-called collective rituals, such as play in a group context, to maintain social cohesion, i.e., unity. Durkheim's (1964) concept of *collective effervescence* captures the idea that when people band together in a shared activity such as a role-playing game, they experience an increased sense of collective energy (Bastarrachea Magnani 2023). Resulting from this experience are stronger social bonds and a pronounced collective participation. These factors have the potential to accumulate in a player's sense of belonging and identity in relation to a group, e.g., in an off-game (sub)culture or an in-game *Dungeons & Dragons* adventuring party.

Goffman (1959) argued for an understanding of all social interactions through a theatrical lens, considering them as performances. Like Shakespeare's famous quote, "All the world's a stage, and [we] are merely players" (Folger n.d.), Goffman makes a case that individuals perform roles in everyday life on a social stage that depends on various contexts. Consider how you interact with different people in various settings. How do you behave and talk in a private setting compared to a professional environment, for instance? This perspective underlines the fluidity between traditional role-playing and the way we perform everyday performances; enacting roles is the structure to our social life. Additionally, through role-playing and code-switching between several roles, people can explore and negotiate their social identities, gaining insights into the dynamics of social interaction and the construction of self. (See Chapter 3 for more information on identity).

The concept of *deep play* sheds light on the cultural significance of play. Geertz (2005) used the term deep play to describe activities that go beyond mere entertainment, embodying deep social, moral, and personal meanings. Doris Rusch (2017) has described *deep games*, which are designed to help players explore transformative existential questions through metaphor and allegory (Rusch and Phelps 2020). Such play dances on the border of the *magic circle* that defines game from daily life (Huizinga 1958; Salen and Zimmerman 2003), such that the realities of play and real-life become intermingled.

Role-playing can also play a crucial role in the transmission of cultural knowledge. For example, think of *rites of passage* in role-play culture—shared experiences that all players go through, such as their first game—or on a smaller scale, house rules for tabletop or larp scenarios. As an age-old human activity, role-play has served as a pedagogical tool with the enactment of stories, myths, and historical events, allowing people to internalize and preserve cultural knowledge. Role-playing games are examples of the preservation of intangible cultural heritage traditions, which can more generally include practices such as dances. As an example, many larpers practice and revive historical dances through play, preserving and transmitting intangible cultural heritage. On the other hand, the spontaneous co-creative nature of role-play allows us to revise and reinvent existing reality, experiencing heritage in a more personal way (Mochocki 2021). Furthermore, role-players create their own worlds, scenarios, and realities limited only by imagination, and thus generate living culture in the moment.

Importantly, while we use terminology and concepts from early scholars, we recognize the biases inherent to early psychology, sociology, and anthropology in the twentieth century, in which (usually) Western, White men imposed interpretations of cultural activities outside of their own background. While we may find some terms helpful, we acknowledge how such bias affects studies in play and games, including an emphasis on the productive elements rather than the more neutral (Stenros 2015) or destructive (Trammell 2023) elements. Aaron Trammell (2023) discusses examples in which Western European play is often held as superior to play in other contexts, furthering a colonialist agenda particularly toward people of color. While our study of transformative play also emphasizes the more "productive" aspects, we encourage using these tools for explicitly anti-colonialist and anti-fascist goals, such as countering oppressive structures or political practices or that reinforce racism, misogyny, or other forms of discrimination. Transformation can take many forms, including working to subvert inequitable structures and beliefs. Thus, our work emphasizes game design aiming to increase peace, justice, and wellbeing for all people, not just for some.

1.3 Games for transformation

A popular claim in recent years is that games can change the world.[1] They can certainly teach people about themselves and—when correctly applied—can be a powerful medium for personal and social development. Such impacts are increasingly reported in research on leisure role-playing, especially connected to the popular game *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D* 1974). In terms of personal change, research has demonstrated that role-playing in leisure contexts contributes positively to exploration of one's identity (Bowman 2010) including gender and sexuality (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019; Baird 2021; Femia 2023; Sottile 2024), as well as mental health (Causo and Quinlan 2021; Walsh and Linehan 2024). Such gains arising from role-playing games are also commonly connected to social skills development (Meriläinen 2012), including improving social relations (Adams 2013; Blackstock 2016; Causo and Quinlan 2021), providing social support for group members (Walsh and Linehan 2024), and practicing democratic skills (Adams 2013) among others.

Interest in using role-playing games as a medium for transformation in applied settings is also increasing. Such interest often arises from a participant with a background in leisure role-playing games who has either witnessed or experienced some sort of significant positive change. These players then wonder how such games might be used in applied settings. For example, role-players may run games with important themes to raise awareness on social issues for participants engaging in their leisure time (see e.g., Stenros and Montola 2010; Groth, Grasmo, and Edland 2021). Such works may even be commissioned by funding bodies as non-formal education for political or social aims, see e.g., *Baltic Warriors* (Petterson and Pohjola 2015) and *Halat hisar* (AbdulKarim et al. 2013).

Tabletop role-playing games have become an increasingly popular medium for educational (Garcia 2016; Cullinan and Genova 2023; Cullinan 2024; Riel and Monahan 2024) and therapeutic interventions (Gutierrez 2017; Bean et al. eds. 2020; Ball 2022; Connell 2023; Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023). Larps are also increasing in use in both sectors; designers and facilitators are experimenting with in therapeutic practice (Bartenstein 2022, 2024; Diakolambrianou 2021, 2022) and paraprofessional spaces (Lehto 2024), while edu-larp is developing as its own pedagogical subfield (Bowman 2014; Balzer and Kurz 2015; Fey et al. 2022; Johansson et al. 2024). Among these these developments are professional meetings devoted to educational RPGs, such as those held in the Nordic countries from 2014-present (see e.g., before Solmukohta 2024), Italy (Geneuss, Bruun, and Nielsen 2019), the US (Bowman, Torner, and White eds. 2016, 2018), and Brazil (Iuama and Falcão 2021), as well as conferences on related role-playing activities such as Reacting to the Past (see e.g., Reacting Consortium 2024). Research is also increasing with regard to these developments, especially in therapeutic RPGs, to the degree that a handful of review pieces have recently been published

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1   The following subsections are largely excerpted from Bowman, Westborg, Hugaas, Diakolambrianou, and Baird (in press for 2024).

summarizing the literature with an emphasis on its benefits (Henrich and Worthington 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022; Baker, Turner, and Kotera 2022; Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024). For more extensive lists of the researched benefits of role-playing games, see Chapter 7.

In order to best capture what design practices encompass all of these outgrowths, we define RPGs designed for the purpose of encouraging personal and/or social change under the umbrella term of *transformative analog role*-playing games.

We subdivide transformative role-playing games into three related, but somewhat distinct categories:

1. Transformative leisure
2. Therapeutic
3. Educational

We use the phrase "somewhat distinct" here because the experience of transformative play does not fit neatly into specific settings or even expectations. Players often describe leisure role-playing experiences as "therapeutic," sometimes even joking about it as "free therapy" (Bowman 2010). Technically, any activity can be therapeutic if it has a positive impact on one's mental health, even leisure and educational games. The term "education" is similarly confusing, as role-playing games can occur in informal, non-formal, and formal educational environments (Baird 2022). Furthermore, many of the same skills are trained in each of these respective categories, e.g., social skills training in therapeutic (Kilmer et al. 2024), educational (Bowman 2014), and leisure (Katō 2019) settings, as well as in-between spaces such as after-school (Bandhoesingh 2024) and camping activities (Hoge 2013), blurring the lines further.

Finally, while role-playing games are a unique outgrowth of several subcultural groups—e.g., wargaming in the US (Petersen 2012), Tolkien fandom in Russia (Semenov 2010) and Hungary (Túri and Hartyándi 2022)—role-playing as a technique far precedes many of these more recent developments. An early use of the term was coined by Jacob L. Moreno (Fatland 2014), who developed psychodrama role-playing techniques for individual catharsis and sociodrama for social development (Moreno and Zeleny 1958). Role-playing in education is also quite common, especially in the field of *simulation* (Hallinger and Wang 2020; Duke 1974), which is a popular training method in health care, military, business, government training, and traditional educational classrooms (Bowman 2010), e.g., theater improv, language learning, and debate courses.

We consider these aforementioned uses of role-playing as a practice in education and therapy as "cousin forms" (Bowman 2014), reserving "role-playing games" to refer to activities emerging out of the aforementioned subcultural activities, i.e., leisure groups and their associated discourse communities. While the fundamental act of role-playing is much the same regardless of community, the practices, norms, discussions, and innovations within each group differ. Analog role-playing games often have

passionate and vibrant discourse communities surrounding them, e.g., the Forge and Story Games diaspora in tabletop (White, 2020); the Nordic Larp discourse originating from the Knutepunkt/Solmukohta conferences and their respective yearly publications (Nordic Larp Wiki 2022); among others.

Within these communities, even the term "leisure" can be called into question, particularly with the amount of labor required from designers, organizers, facilitators, and players to help create a good experience (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016). Additional leisure labor is involved in contributing to the popular discourse itself, which often takes place on social media or online forums rather than more traditional publication channels. Some of this volunteer work has subsequently received a degree of academic and artistic legitimacy, for example, articles in the Knutepunkt and *Wyrd Con Companion Books* or the the web magazine Nordiclarp.org, which are often cited as key texts in role-playing game studies (Harviainen 2014).

At the same time, digital games have their own lexicon, theory, and practice around transformative play (Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2015), see e.g., Serious Games (Chen and Michael 2006), Games for Change (2022), gamification (Deterding et al. 2011), game-based learning (Plass, Mayer, and Homer eds. 2020), and deep games (Rusch 2017). While our work is informed by these game-related discourses, we also integrate broader educational and therapeutic concepts. Thus, our work is part of a growing body of literature that situates practices of transformative role-playing game design and implementation alongside these other cousin practices, hopefully resulting in the "best of all worlds" (Burns 2014; Pitkänen 2019; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023). However, for the purposes of limiting the scope of this book, we will mostly limit our discussion to discourses related to applied analog role-playing games specifically.

This textbook seeks to address this muddiness in the conceptualization of terms like role-playing games, transformative, therapeutic, and educational. We will center practices surrounding analog RPGs specifically, while acknowledging that these discourses often point to larger cultural conversations and practices. Such clarifications not only help us situate our work within these broader conversations, but allows us to be more precise in our theory and practice. While transformation cannot be confined to any one setting—or even guaranteed by any set of design practices—we can aim to refine the processes by which we design, implement, and play role-playing games to maximize their beneficial impacts.

1.4 Analog role-playing games

For our purposes, *analog role-playing games* include tabletop, live action role-playing (larp), and freeform games arising from the Nordic and American traditions.

Analog role-playing games are "co-creative experiences in which participants immerse into fictional characters and realities for a bounded period of time and improvise through spontaneous, emergent playfulness" (Bowman 2022). Generally speaking, analog role-playing games are a form of collaborative storytelling. Players

usually meet in person to assume the roles of characters that either designers have made for them or they have created themselves. These types of games are usually led by a facilitator, often called the *game master* (GM) or the Storyteller (ST). The story unfolds in real time and the players have an active role in co-creating it with the facilitator. Thus, according to Gary Alan Fine (1983) role-playing takes places within several social frames (Goffman 1986), a "primary (social) frame inhabited by people, secondary (game) frame inhabited by players, and tertiary (*diegetic*) frame inhabited by characters" (Montola 2008). Diegetic refers to all of the facets of the game that transpire within the fictional world. For example, in a *D&D* game, a player might roll a die non-diegetically to try to climb a castle wall, which happens in the game frame, but diegetically their character is performing the physical action.

The practice of role-playing games arises from an inherent impulse in humanity that can take many different forms. It may include character embodiment and/or symbolic enactment, such as performing rituals based on narratives and symbols important to a specific culture or the human experience (see Chapter 6). It may involve puzzles and problem-solving. It may take the form of community-building rituals or interactive storytelling. It may also include fiction writing based on role-playing characters or experiences, such as backstory development or recounting of game events.

a) Tasks in analog role-playing game design and implementation

We delineate between different tasks throughout this textbook, which may be assigned to individuals or groups. Notably, these roles sometimes overlap and communication should be consistent between them throughout key phases of the project to ensure consistency in design and implementation.

By *designers*, we mean the people who create the scenario, the characters, the character relations, the mechanics, and sometimes design aspects of the run-time execution, e.g., structure and safety design. Designers may work with external advisors, such as cultural consultants and sensitivity readers. By *organizers*, we refer to the various tasks required to run the production of the game (Pettersson 2021), including project managers, logistics specialists, communication representatives, safety coordinators (Brown 2017), accessibility advisors, run-time organizers who make sure the game runs according to plan, and others.

By *facilitators*, we mean organizers who work directly with players during the game, including Storytellers who guide the narrative through role-play or other means, sometimes called *game masters* (GMs); *non-player characters* (NPC) who role-play with the participants and often have limited agency (Stenros 2013); more complex *support characters* who guide participants through specific narrative experiences (Fido-Fairfax 2024); safety team members responsible for providing emotional support to players (Berthold 2024); and non-player specialists who assist facilitation, such as therapists, educators, museum guides, or administrators.

Finally, a game needs *players*, who enact roles within the fiction and perform actions relevant to the setting. In some cases, players have a high degree of responsibility to help the game run smoothly, especially when cast in key roles that require following a set schedule or running in-game events (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016), e.g., professors in a college larp (Koljonen et al. 2016; Homann 2020) or other leadership roles (Jensen 2021; Hartyándi and van Bilsen 2024).

Depending on the type of design, different tasks are required before, during, and after the process. While in this textbook we will primarily teach you how to design nano-games, which require far fewer tasks, many of the games described in this book are generally larger in scale. We will cover each of these tasks in more depth in the *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

b) Types of role-playing games

We define six distinct categories of role-playing games:

- Digital role-playing games,
- Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs),
- Live action role-playing games (larp),
- Freeform (in particular, Nordic and American),
- Technology-infused variations, and
- Solo games.

The next section details these six types for classification purposes, although regional differences exist and new categories are emerging as we write. While overlap exists between these categories, our textbook focuses upon the types most clearly associated with analog role-playing: tabletop, larp, and freeform.

i) Digital role-playing games

In digital role-playing games, the players immerse themselves in a virtually simulated environment, while assuming the roles of characters that are often customisable to personal taste. These games use a console or a computer as a medium. Digital role-playing games are either multiplayer games, such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment 2004), or solo adventures, like *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian Studios 2023). They are characterized by computer-facilitated pre-designed *worldbuilding*, storylines, quests, and extensive virtual environments, factors that can help the player immerse into the game. While they do not require a human facilitator or even role-playing one's character, players still actively contribute with their actions and choices, which activate the pre-designed narratives and storylines.

ii) Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs)

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), or *pen-and-paper,* are typically played around a table and sometimes include dice, character sheets, and miniatures. They tend to be less physical and more verbal; players may shift between the first person and third person when describing their character's actions.

The players usually enact characters and describe their actions while interacting in real time with the *game master* (GM) or the Storyteller (ST). In traditional tabletop RPGs, this person narrates the story and enacts *non-player characters* (NPCs), roles that are created to forward the narrative or inhabit the game world. There is a formal system of rules, often using different dice or other randomisers, such as a deck of cards. One of the most popular examples of tabletop role-playing games is *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974). However, games that do not necessitate a game master ("GM-less") games also exist, e.g., *Dream Askew* (Alder 2018). In such games, the players assume shared responsibility for describing the game world and the consequences for characters' actions.

For more information on tabletop RPGs, we recommend reading White et al. (2024) in the *Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Game Studies*.

iii) Live action role-playing games (larp)

In live action role-playing games, players physically embody and enact their characters, usually while interacting with each other. Sometimes the players dress up in costumes, use props, or play in special locations to enhance their immersion into the fictional world. In other cases, costuming is minimal and play transpires in comparatively non-descript settings, e.g., a classroom, hotel conference room, or black box theatre.

As described in more detail later in this chapter, many different types of larps exist, such as combat, theatre style, black box, and many more. In larps, GMs are usually present to facilitate, but are not always narrators during the run-time. Larps are often larger and have more organizers than other RPGs. As with tabletop, GMs or other players may embody NPCs. In some cases, NPCs also monitor physical and emotional safety of players (Bowman et al. 2017), which is especially relevant in transformative game design. In other cases, support characters are included, who are expected to have more complex backgrounds and the independence to help guide the story along for players (Fido-Fairfax 2024).

For more information on larp, we recommend reading Harviainen et al. (2024) in the *Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Game Studies*.

iv) Freeform

The term freeform is widely used in a number of contrasting ways. For the purpose of this book, our design is based most strongly on Nordic (Westerling 2013) and its younger sibling, American freeform (Stark 2014). Nordic freeform developed as a "middle child" between tabletop and larp, featuring aspects of both but also emerging as its own respective medium. These styles of freeform often do not require costumes or special locations for play. Depending on the scenario, they may be played sitting down or in a more physically embodied way. While Nordic and American freeform are technically distinct forms, some players use the terms "larp" and "freeform" interchangeably.

v) Technology-infused variations

Depending on the style of game, the genre, and the play group, these definitions can shift. Larp tends to be more "physically embodied" in that players are expected to move around the space enacting the actions of the character to greater or lesser degrees, but all play is technically an embodied experience. Larps set in a meeting room can look identical to a tabletop RPG given the right set of circumstances. Some of these games have no costumes, dice, or character sheets.

Furthermore, while analog games get their name due to their non-digital nature and generally do not require a computer interface to play, these distinctions are becoming less and less meaningful. Recently, several shifts have made technology more present in role-playing, e.g., the popularity of livestreaming RPGs (Jones ed. 2021), sometimes called *actual play*; play-by-post and forums (Zalka 2019); online tabletop (Sidhu and Carter 2020); and online larp (Reininghaus 2019). Livestreaming in particular breaks the format of the typical analog role-playing game by having an external audience, while classically, RPGs only had a *first-person audience* in which participants were both playing and witnessing the game at the same time (Sandberg 2004). Lately, an increasing number of analog role-playing games are designed to be played virtually, aiding with inclusion and ignoring the physical distance between people. Especially during COVID-19, many platforms thrived that ease the facilitation and play of tabletop role-playing games virtually, such as Roll20. Indeed, such hybrid forms can even be experienced as transformative by viewers through vicarious experience and social bonding (Lasley 2021).

For our purposes, we will include in "analog" any role-playing that allows for free spontaneous improvised co-creation within the framework of the game rules, even if played online. This definition distinguishes them, for example, from most computer role-playing games (CRPGs), which are heavily mediated by the computer interface and have limited coded options for engagement.

vi) Solo games

Despite our definition of role-playing games as inherently social, solo games have increased in popularity in recent years, especially during the pandemic, such as on the free online platform itch.io. Solo games vary in form, but generally involve actions the player takes individually as their character as directed by the game design. Examples include rolling dice to determine randomized story moments, journaling, and/or walking to an outdoor location to perform a ritual alone. Notable examples include *Thousand Year Old Vampire* (Hutchings 2020) and *Wait for Me* (Shim and Kulp 2021).

From the perspective of relationships and co-creation, solo gamers can be said to be relating not to other players in this case, but rather to the designer, the game design, the fictional world and story, one's sense of self, and one's own character (Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2021). Furthermore, other characters can be embedded in solo game design with which player-characters have relations, for example, non-player characters (NPCs) written into the games (Beltrán 2021).

While we acknowledge the impact solo games have had in recent years on role-playing game play, design, and research (see e.g., Fuller 2024), for our purposes, we will focus on games that involve interacting with at least one other person. The nano-game design described in this book involves creating short games for 1-4 players that are facilitated by a GM. Furthermore, we emphasize social engagement as inherent to the form and key to the process of transformation; role-players usually belong to the smaller community of their gaming group, but also larger communities related to the subculture. However, if you are interested in designing solo games, consider how you might adapt the recommendations we provide in this book to that format.

1.5 Functions of role-playing games

Regardless of their form, role-playing games can create space for important experiences. Through role-playing, participants can experience agency and empowerment, as well as develop an internal locus of control rather than feeling like their lives are out of their influence. They can experiment with social rules and learn to collaborate. They can explore different views through perspective-taking, and thus enhance their empathy. Moreover, because they experience dual consciousness as both player and character at once (Stenros 2013), they can expand their meta-reflection abilities and skills (Lukka 2013, 2014; Levin 2020; Bowman and Hugaas 2021), as the game framework, while engaging, provides distance from one's daily life that can lead to important insights.

According to Bowman (2010), there are three functions of role-playing games:

a) Community creation, e.g., ritual enactment and other community building activities;

b) Skill training, e.g., scenario building, problem-solving, and practice of prosocial behaviors; and

c) Identity exploration, e.g., personality development, self-discovery, and alternative gender expression.

1.6 Cousin forms of transformative RPGs

There are numerous experiences adjacent to transformative RPGs, which we call "cousin forms." We will briefly present some of them in the following sections.

a) Childhood pretend play

Like RPGs, childhood pretend play is a human spontaneous expression based on emergent playfulness that often includes role-enactment. Most people, but not all, engage in pretend play as children. It tends to involve comparatively loose frameworks for rules and characters, and instead focuses mainly on emergent imagination.

Pretend play may involve individual play or co-creative expression. When enacted alone, it may take the form of:

- *Imaginary friends* (Carlson et al. 2004): interacting with beings arising from the imagination;
- *Transitional objects* (Winnicott 1971): imbuing inanimate objects with magical powers, consciousness, personality traits, or other special qualities;
- *Paracosms* (Cohen and McKeith 1991): creating imaginary worlds; and/or
- *Identity play* (White et al. 2017): imagining the self as someone else.

When in groups, pretend play often includes enacting roles in specific circumstances, and can take the form of social games such as *chase play* (e.g., Tag, Hide and Seek); domestic play (e.g., Playing House); professional play (e.g., Playing School); games of the Cops and Robbers type (a combination of chase play and professional play with moral connotations); as well as *dark play*, whether consensual or non-consensual, such as bullying (Stenros 2015; Trammell 2023).

b) Board games / card games

Board games and card games are usually strategy games played at a table. They can be collaborative (e.g., *Pandemic;* Leacock 2008) or competitive (e.g., *Monopoly;* Darrow 1991). They sometimes use randomizers like dice in order to add an element of chance. They often use objects to physically represent characters, items and locations; those can be cards, miniature figurines, tokens, or terrain. Some of these games emphasize the use and display of skills, such as remembering facts (e.g., *Trivial Pursuit;* Haney and Abbott 1981), solving puzzles (e.g., mahjong), improvising communication with a partner (e.g., *Pictionary;* Angel 1985), counting cards in a deck (e.g., bridge), or social maneuvering (e.g., *Werewolf;* Davidoff 1986). Other games focus upon gathering resources (e.g., land, wealth, treasure, allies) and thus can be categorized as resource gathering games, such as *Catan* (Teuber 1995) or *The Game of Life* (Markham and Klamer 1960). While extensive role-playing is not common in board and card games, a role is sometimes associated with the player's actions. Examples are Miss Scarlet in the murder mystery *Cluedo* (Pratt 1949), Russia in *Diplomacy* (Calhamer 1954), a Green Planeswalker wizard in *Magic: The Gathering* (Garfield 1993), or a trainer in *Pokémon Trading Card Game* (Ishihara et al. 1996).

c) Simulations

Simulations and other forms of educational role-playing are intended to enact specific scenarios for training purposes (Harviainen 2022). While not all simulations are explicitly designed to be educational, they are often based on real-world systems and realistic activities and thus have learning potential. They have been used in educational settings since at least 1965 (Hallinger and Wang 2018), although wargaming scenarios are far older: the precursor of chess, *chatrang*, dates back to the

7th century (Mark 2007); in WWII, military simulations were referred to as "games" (Duke 1974), etc. Role-based simulations and other educational role-playing activities use spontaneous expression based on specific learning goals or parameters as a form of experiential learning and may include more or less creativity depending on their structure. Sometimes they are abstracted like tabletop games, while other times they are physically-embodied like larps.

Simulations are often used to train specific skills or competencies, whether technical or social or both, often connected to some form of professionalization. Professional fields where such simulations are often used include military, healthcare, government, first responder training, therapy, and business (Bowman 2010). Military simulations are a common example, which can include a variety of training elements, including practicing the use of weapons and technologies; medical triage; managing resources; communication; and simulating battles.

d) Educational drama and improv

Other forms of role-taking in educational settings aim less to simulate reality and more to creatively express through dramatic and theatrical techniques. An example is *process drama*, also called Drama in Education, based on the work of Brian Way (1998), Dorothy Heathcote, and Gavin M. Bolton (1979; Heathcote and Bolton 1995), which involves solving problems together through imagination and unscripted play.

Role-playing is also used in Theatre of the Oppressed developed by Augusto Boal (1993), sometimes called Forum Theatre. In this form of activism, communities come together to share conflicts present within the group that are acted out in a dynamic, dramatic form based on the suggestions of the community members. This practice was influenced by Paolo Freire's educational theory in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), which encouraged active participation of students in their development of a *critical consciousness* toward traditional education and knowledge. Both forms focus on drama as a political act intended to increase awareness, improve democratic participation in community matters, and promote greater justice.

These cousin forms are sufficiently similar to educational larp (edu-larp) that Mochocki (2013) suggests considering edu-larp a kind of Drama in Education. Alternatively, Iuama (2022) has boldly asserted, "I am pretty sure if Boal was alive today, he would not talk about theatre; he would talk about larps."

Related to educational drama and theatre is improvisation (improv), which sometimes takes place in learning contexts. Similar to our definition of role-playing games, a key feature of improv is that it involves spontaneous co-creative expression based on emergent playfulness (Johnstone 1987). Although improvisation can be a part of most forms of performative art, for example, in music, improv usually is encountered in its theatrical form, and often enacted for comedic purposes. It usually involves short scenes and characters that are sometimes enacted for the group itself (first-person audience) while other times for an actual audience (third-person audience). Some

variations of improv include J. L. Moreno's Theatre of Spontaneity developed in the 1920s (Moreno, Zerka 1987) and, later, TheaterSports (Foreman and Martini 1996), a form of game-like improv where improvisers gain points based upon their ability to entertain creatively on demand. Similar to larp is long-form improv, which involves repeated enactment of certain characters in new settings and situations.

Notably, marathon improvisational performances can occur in which long hours (and sleep deprivation) may lead the actors to immerse so deeply into their character that the lines between diegetic and non-diegetic reality can become blurry (Brind 2022). Long-form improv comedy actress Cariad Lloyd, while discussing a 53-hour-long non-stop improv show in which she played the wife of a character dressed like the musician David Bowie, explicitly mentioned that "halfway through my brain broke, and I thought he was real, and I thought, 'I am married to David Bowie'" (Herring 2016, qtd. in Brind 2022, 151). Such experiences bear striking similarities to the role-playing phenomenon of *bleed*. Bleed refers to the experience of psychological contents spilling over from the player to the character and vice versa (Hugaas 2024), in this case, relationship states (Waern 2010; Bowman 2013). We will discuss bleed in more depth in Chapter 3.

e) Therapeutic role-playing

Therapeutic role-playing involves spontaneous expression based upon specific scenarios intended to evoke a certain response or practice a skill related to emotional growth within a psychotherapeutic setting. This form of role-playing may take place within individual therapy, family therapy, or group therapy. Therapeutic role-playing may include more or less creativity, as well as more or less involvement of the therapist in the role-playing depending on the approach and structure. Therapeutic modalities that utilize forms of embodied role-playing include psychodrama, drama therapy, Gestalt therapy, family constellations, Internal Family Systems, dissociative identity work, etc (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023).

* * *

Although each of these cousin forms has similarities with analog role-playing games, pointing to a shared cultural context and perhaps even impulses in human nature, we consider RPGs unique due to their long-form structure, the co-creation of a fictional world, embodiment into character for long periods of time, game-like characteristics that may be included, etc. In general, they tend to have a lot of flexibility in terms of the format, although specific scenarios provide guardrails for what players should do.

Ultimately, we define transformative role-playing games as distinct from similar modes such as simulation, as they have emerged from subcultures surrounding larp and tabletop, which have specific codes, jargon, and practices unique to their communities. In the next sections, we will describe briefly how some of the most influential of these

subcultures emerged, as well as providing examples for different types of role-playing games within each category.

The history and permutations of various role-playing games are complex and beyond the scope of our discussion here. Our intention is to give newcomers a basic understanding of the different formats. Note that we emphasize group play here, although solo games do exist.

For more information about the development of tabletop role-playing games, some good starting points are White et al. (2024), Schick (1991), Peterson (2012), Horvath (2023), and Sidhu, Carter and Zagal eds (2024). For more information about the development of larp, good starting points are Harviainen et al. (2024), Fatland (2014), Stark (2012), and Stenros and Montola (2010). While none of these resources are entirely comprehensive of all RPGs, they offer orientation for people interested in learning more about these games and their respective lineages.

1.7 Types of tabletop role-playing games

While terminology varies from community to community, we have divided tabletop role-playing games into two basic categories. *Traditional* tabletop RPGs may change genre and use different terms, but they tend to bear striking resemblances to the first tabletop RPG, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974). These resemblances shape game play in important ways. *Indie* tabletop RPGs refer to games that were often developed in reaction to traditional role-playing games, innovating the form in important ways. We divide these two strands for convenience; in reality, some popular indie games have developed their own ludic conventions that have forged traditions of their own. However, broadly speaking, the emphasis in indie games tends more toward radical innovation and an emphasis on collaborative storytelling over game-centric considerations, such as extensive rules that emphasize winners and losers for actions.

a) Traditional tabletop role-playing games

Tabletop role-playing games emerged in 1974, when Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson created *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, which is enjoying a surge of renewed popularity at the time of this writing. *D&D* is notable for popularizing a new style of gameplay that combined elements of improvisation, character enactment, and storytelling within fantasy wargaming scenarios (Peterson 2012). *D&D* is heavily facilitated by a game master, who describes all events and officiates actions, often via dice-based resolution mechanics. The game involves players enacting specific characters in a collaborative adventuring party who may:

- Explore maps, including dungeons and other fictional locations;
- Interact with other fictional characters in the world;
- Solve puzzles;
- Plan tactics, especially for battles, i.e., clear "win" conditions;

- Enact violence upon or collaborate with other characters;
- Gather treasure, or "loot"; and
- Level up and become more powerful with experience.

In the following decades, many tabletop RPGs emerged inspired by *D&D*, introducing a wide range of genres, different game mechanics, and settings. Popular examples include *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen 1981), a horror RPG based on H.P. Lovecraft's mythology; *Shadowrun* (Charrette et al. 1989), a cyberpunk urban fantasy RPG; and *Vampire: The Masquerade* (White Wolf Publishing 1991), an RPG about supernatural politics and "personal horror" set in the modern world.

b) Indie tabletop role-playing games

For our purposes, indie refers to games that are self-published or produced by a company considered independent from traditional tabletop game publishing and/ or their associated large parent companies. Some indie tabletop RPGs emerged from discourse communities reacting to traditional tabletop design such as the Forge and Story Games (White 2020), while others developed for other reasons or in isolation from popular RPGs. They vary widely in themes and structure. A common example is Story Games, a design philosophy often promotes:

- Stripped down mechanics, often focusing on telling an interesting story, rather than characters "winning";
- Distribution of creative agency, allowing many players to have ownership of the narrative world and characters within it, not just the game master (GM)

In cases such as Avery Alder's *Dream Askew* (Alder 2018), they may even be designed to run without a game master ("GM-less"), a radical shift in power dynamics from traditional RPGs (Stein 2021; Bisogno 2022).

Two of the most influential indie tabletop role-playing games are *Fiasco* (Morningstar 2009), "a game of powerful ambition and poor impulse control" in a caper-gone-wrong genre; and *Apocalypse World* (Baker and Baker 2010), which features simplified mechanics and "moves" that incentivize telling an interesting story, even when failing. Both games emphasize simpler character creation, fewer rules, and "losing" as a potentially fulfilling outcome for the players, if not the characters. Since its inception, hundreds of designers have developed Powered by the Apocalypse games based loosely on *Apocalypse World*'s model.

1.8 Types of larp and freeform

Larp in its many permutations has less clear direct roots as tabletop, in part because many larps emerged in specific local communities with different backgrounds and needs. While some groups aimed to play *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) in a more physical manner, others arrived at larp from different channels, such

as *Hobbit Games* (Semenov 2010) in Russia and Ring Camps in Hungary (Túri and Hartyándi 2022), which were inspired directly by J.R.R. Tolkein's *Lord of the Rings* (1954) series. While tracing roots directly can be difficult when studying larp communities, some related forms include:

- Historical reenactments (Mochocki 2021) and the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), inspired by research into history but allowing imagined deviations (Stallone 2007)

- Improvisational theater (Blatner ed. 2007)

- Educational role-playing, a form of experiential learning (Bowman 2010), e.g., Model UN, simulation, etc;

- Therapeutic role-playing, such as psychodrama, Gestalt, family constellations, sandplay, and others (Burns 2014; Pitkänen 2019; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023); etc.

a) Traditional larp

Traditional larp often replicates popular genres of fiction, e.g., fantasy, science fiction, supernatural horror, cyberpunk, and post-apocalyptic. Some games in this category arise from their tabletop counterparts, with adapted rule sets for larp, for example, Mind's Eye Theatre's adaptation of World of Darkness games. Sometimes these games are similar to *Dungeons & Dragons* but reinvented in a unique fantasy world, such as *Treasure Trap* in the U.K. (1982) or NERO in the U.S. (1986-).

i) Combat larp

Combat larp, sometimes called *boffer larp*, emphasizes physically enacted violent encounters, often played in outdoor or rural locations. These larps usually use special safe foam weapons called boffers, but some use live steel, rattan, or other weapons. They often have rules for physical combat, magic, and also safety rules and guidelines, although the extensiveness of these rules depends on the play culture. Some degree of costuming is usually encouraged and sometimes even strictly enforced. Some combat larps also feature artistic expression, such as crafting and performance; cultural activities related to realistic or fantastical societies; and/or political play between factions and social hierarchies.

> **Examples:** *ConQuest of Mythodea* in Germany (Burgschneider GmbH 2004-), *Treasure Trap* in the UK (Kostick et al. 1982), *NERO* in the United States (Various 1986-), *Hobbit Games* in Russia (Semenov 2010), *Drachenfest* in Germany (Drachenfest ug Haftungsbeschränkt 2002 -), *Dystopia Rising* in the US (Most Improbable LLC n.d.), *Bicolline* in Canada (Kornaga, Renard, and Dubé 1994).

ii) Chamber larp

Chamber larp—sometimes called parlor larp, theater style, UK freeform, or interactive literature (Budin 2012)—focuses mainly on interpersonal interactions.

These larps usually take place in smaller, more intimate and usually indoor settings, such as hotel convention rooms, bars, and homes. Depending on the play culture, physical contact may be entirely representational for example, through mechanics, or may be more embodied, but combat is usually not the focus. An early form of chamber larp is the *murder mystery*, in which players try to deduce the killer at an event. Imported from the U.K, these larps have become hugely popular in recent years especially in China, giving rise to *jubensha*, a format that has expanded to include other settings, for example, historical dramas (Xiong, Wen, and Hartyándi 2022). Chamber larps often require extensive preparation, such as internalizing lengthy character sheets, setting documents, or secrets that may be revealed during play, e.g., the *secrets and powers* genre (Budin 2015).

> **Examples:** World of Darkness theater-style larps by Mind's Eye Theatre, Intercon interactive fiction larps in the US (1986-), *jubensha* in China (2013-).

b) Experimental larp / freeform

Here, we categorize as "experimental" anything that strays from traditional RPG design, and is often specifically created as a response to it. This is a catch-all term to refer to games that might be outside the norm of what is typically considered larp, although certainly some games are more experimental than others. We refer to Nordic and American freeform to describe two specific design communities. We identify experimental Nordic freeform as arising from the interaction between Swedish and Danish designers in the mid to late '00s, e.g., *jeepform* (Jeep 2007) and other internationally run and designed games developed around that time. American freeform refers to games by North American designers inspired by Nordic freeform, but with modified constraints and practices (Stark 2014).

Games within this category can take many forms. Sometimes, these games are designed in reaction to existing role-playing styles, e.g., rejecting the typical tropes of traditional role-playing games or reducing rules to a bare minimum (White 2020). Other forms arise from different roots, such as the performance art or theater world, even if still technically classified as "games" (Stenros 2010). Thus, we use experimental larp as an inclusive term that integrates many developments in recent years.

i) Collaborative larp

Collaborative larp is our preferred term for games that emphasize collaborative play that is negotiated between players. These games can range in terms of facilitator involvement in the narrative from providing player-requested scenes through the use of NPCs (see e.g., College of Wizardry 2014-) to a flat hierarchical structure where no main organizers exist at all and the game is created collectively among the players (Svanevik 2005).

In collaborative larps, players work toward a mutually fulfilling game experience usually featuring strong emotional play, with an emphasis on *playing to lift* one another, *playing to lose*, or *playing for drama* (Vejdemo 2018). They often feature little to no

conflict resolution mechanics and instead rely on calibration between players (Koljonen 2020), such as in many Nordic or Nordic-inspired larps. While collaborative larps can arise from any genre, including supernatural horror or fantasy, they sometimes emphasize socially realistic themes and issues of real-world oppression, a departure from many traditional larp genres. Some collaborative larps strive for a high degree of realism or believability in props, costuming, and location called the *360 degree aesthetic* or *illusion* (Koljonen 2007). An American variant is *emergent larp*, which combines consent-based play with the focus on win conditions still prevalent in traditional U.S. games (Skirpan 2019).

> **Examples:** *1942* (Raaum et al. 2000) in Norway, *Till Death Do Us Part* (AbdulKarim et al. 2012) in Palestine, *Inside Hamlet* (Participation Design Agency 2015, 2017, 2018) in Denmark, Dame

ii) Blockbuster larp

Blockbuster larp refers to games played in highly realistic or otherwise appealing locations, usually in a collaborative playstyle. Sometimes called *destination*, *tourism*, or *castle larp*, these games often have high ticket prices in exchange for high production values and atmosphere. While some blockbuster larps settings are invented by the designers, these games are commonly based on existing intellectual property (IP), such as *Harry Potter* (Rowling 1997), *Battlestar Galactica* (Larson 1978), *Game of Thrones* (Martin 1996), *Downton Abbey* (Fellowes 2010), *His Dark Materials* (Pullman 1995), or *Call of Cthulhu* (Lovecraft 1928), which can be attractive to new and existing larpers alike. While such themes are similar to traditional larp genres, the games are usually created in a more bespoke, individualized fashion rather than mirroring older game designs.

> **Examples:** *College of Wizardry* (Various 2014-) in Poland and related spinoffs, the *Sahara Expedition* in Tunisia (Chaos League 2020 - 2024), *Dragon Thrones* in the U.S. (The Game Theater 2017 -), *The Monitor Celestra* (Alternatliv, Bardo and Berättelsefrämjandet 2013) in Sweden, *Daemon* in Denmark (Wind 2021), and *Fairweather Manor* in Poland (Various designers 2015-).

iii) Black box larp

Black box larp features scenarios played in a black box theater or another neutral space. Sometimes, these larps feature stage lights and music. The design aesthetic tends toward minimalism, with symbolic use of costumes or props and abstract approaches to the themes, the passage of in-game time, and character creation. While most black box larps are relatively short, between 2-6 hours including workshopping and debriefing, longer, more extensive blackbox scenarios exist as well (Nordic Larp Wiki 2019). For our purposes, debriefing refers to structured or semi-structured discussion sessions after game play ends in which players process their experience. Shorter, published black box scenarios are more likely to be replayed elsewhere in the world.

Examples: *Delirium* in Denmark (Høgdall 2010), *White Death* (Essendrop and Hansen 2013) by in Denmark, *Mellan himmel och hav* (Wieslander and Björk 2003) in Sweden, *Fallen Stars* (Nielsen et al. 2010) in Norway; *Sarabande* (Bergmann Hamming and Bergmann Hamming 2013).

iv) Nordic and American freeform

As mentioned before, *Nordic and American freeform* games fall somewhere between tabletop RPGs and larps (Westerling 2013). Unlike traditional larps, which often involve elaborate costumes, props, and combat mechanics, freeform often requires no costuming, scenography, or preparation. They often follow a tightly structured narrative with strong direction from the facilitator (Stark 2014), who sets a series of discrete scenes. They may have meta techniques, which are methods for communicating aspects of the fiction from player-to-player, e.g., *monologues* revealing the character's inner thoughts (Boss and Holter 2013). As discussed before, one well-known "brand" of Nordic freeform is called *jeepform* (Jeepen 2007), referring to a style developed by members of the *Vi åker jeep* design collective emphasizing *playing for bleed*, in this case, emotional bleed (Montola 2010).

Many freeform larps are playable in a black box as described before, but are just as likely played in classrooms or hotel convention rooms. Some traditions, such as Fastaval in Denmark, encourage designers to publish these scenarios publicly for replayability, a process we also encourage in our model of transformative game design.

Examples: *Deranged* (2015) by Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming; *My Girl's Sparrow* (2012) by Troels Ken Pedersen; *Metropolis* (2012) by Evan Torner, *Under My Skin* (2009) by Emily Care Boss in the U.S.; *Love and War* (2021) by Fia Idegård and Anna Westerling in Sweden; *Naive* (2019) by Axelle Cazeneuve in France; *Dangers Untold* (2014) by Shoshana Kessock.

Note: The term freeform is also used in other communities, such as online forum role-play or in U.K. and Australian traditional larp scenes. We consider this latter example more akin to chamber larp, hence our delineation of Nordic and American freeform, which are closely related.

1.9 Technology and medium

As described before, role-playing games can be played in a variety of mediums. In this section we will expand upon the integration of technology within specific mediums of play.

a) Fully analog

When we refer to "analog" role-playing games, traditionally we refer to games that are played in-person without any complex mediating technologies. This term is usually used to separate these types of RPGs from digital or video games. When role-playing games first grew in popularity for example, with the rise of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974),

players often found each other through analog communication, for example, by sending in a letter to join a fan club; recruiting family members or friends from school; or posting a flier at a gaming store with one's phone number.

b) Hybrid

Some games may be played in a hybrid fashion, for example, with some players experiencing the game in person, with others calling in through video conferencing software. Players may also use tools such as digitized character keepers and dice rollers that process the results of a roll with various modifiers.

Similarly, larps sometimes integrate simple technologies such as lights, sound, and basic special effects. Players may need to interact with technology in certain games, for example, solving a puzzle on a computer to simulate researching a cure to an illness. Other games may provide a technological interface for communication, or a simulated version of technology that feels realistic, for example, a bridge simulator for a science fiction game.

c) Online

As mentioned before, in recent years, technology has become essential to many people's play experiences. Not only do players often find each other through online mediums such as websites, forums, and social media sites, but analog play itself often happens paradoxically online, especially in tabletop. Discussions around these games also often occur in online spaces.

Dungeons & Dragons (1974) has experienced a huge surge in popularity due to the rise of online tools for playing tabletop such as Roll20 and D&D Beyond. Similarly, online larps, sometimes called live action online games (LAOGs, Reininghaus 2019) have become more popular, especially during the height of the pandemic when larps around the world were canceled and players sought an outlet for their social activity and creativity. Finally, older forms of online role-playing still exist, including text-based versions such as MUDs, MOOs, and MUSHs (Bowman 2010); play-by-post forum play (Zalka 2019); MMORPGs (Zagal and Deterding eds. 2024). Newer platforms such as Discord are often used to facilitate games, with options for text, audio, and/or video.

d) Mediated / Actual Play

Finally, some viewers experience RPGs through the lens of someone else playing (Jones ed. 2021). Examples of this phenomenon include the increase of positive media representations of RPGs in the media, e.g., *Stranger Things* (The Duffer Brothers, 2016 -), as well as the surge in popularity of livestreams or pre-recorded RPG sessions, often with professional actors, e.g., *Critical Role* (Geek & Sundry, 2015-2018, Critical Role Productions, 2018 -). Sometimes, these live sessions are played in theaters, a significant example being the 2023 *Critical Role* play session that took place in a sold-out Wembley Arena in the UK (Teh 2023). Similarly, influencers on popular sites such as TikTok share

costuming for larps or experiences with *D&D*. Such factors have led to a reduction of stigma and strong increase of interest in analog RPGs (Sidhu and Carter 2020).

Furthermore, watching such shows may have therapeutic or even educational impacts, for example, contributing to wellbeing by developing parasocial relationships with the cast members or experiencing a feeling of belonging through membership in the fan community (Lasley 2021).

1.10 Summary

This chapter briefly discussed different types of RPGs with an emphasis on analog role-playing games, situating these games alongside other forms of play for change. Of course, any attempts at definitions will always have exceptions, so the intention here is to provide a basic understanding rather than a nuanced or thorough understanding, especially for readers unfamiliar with these different forms. In the next chapter, we will transition to discussing what we mean by the term *transformation* and present our model for designing for transformative impacts.

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Transformative Role-playing Games: Types, Purposes, and Features

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter deepens into our definitions of transformation, discussing the way that transformative role-playing games should be focused on specific goals, ideally ones that are transparent to players. We will briefly introduce our three major categories for these games: transformative leisure, therapeutic, and educational. We will then present an overview of our model for transformative role-playing game design. Chapters 4 and 5 will deepen into design practices with greater specificity.

2.2 Definitions of transformation

Many different definitions of transformation exist. Our definition is drawn from John Paul Lederach's (2003) conceptualization of conflict transformation, "engaging [oneself] in constructive change initiatives that include and go beyond the resolution of particular problems." We can extend this definition beyond conflict to refer to initiatives that move beyond specific moments in a game to effect longer-term change. Inherent to this concept is the word "initiative," which insinuates active involvement on the part of the participant, rather than a passive, unconscious, accidental or incidental change.

In the context of this book, we define transformation as both:

- **A prolonged and sustained state of change:** In other words, a shift in one's state of consciousness that is not temporary but has lasting after-effects.

- **A process or series of processes that lead to growth:** This growth, depending on the person and the circumstances, can be personal, interpersonal, social, or even societal and cultural.

Thus, we view transformation as a state that is inherently progressive and:

a) Alters a person's view of themselves, others, and the world in lasting and significant ways;

b) Shifts the way a person relates to others interpersonally, e.g., shifting the foundation of the relationship itself, improving communication, and other prosocial impacts; and/or

c) Has the potential to shift social and cultural dynamics in ways that can build toward greater awareness, peace and justice.

In the next section, we will aim to address the ways in which such transformation can occur through role-playing games.

a) Personal and social change

We make a distinction between personal and social change, although these processes are sometimes intertwined. Personal change involves transformation that affects an individual player. While games can be designed to impact players in specific games, personal transformation can be unpredictable and highly specific to individual players. For example, a game may be designed to teach math skills, but the player may have a revelation about their own experiences connected to gender bias and math. This impact was not necessarily foreseen by the designer, but is still important to process, and may even far exceed the original goals of the game in terms of transformative potential. Thus, we make space for both planned and spontaneous transformation in design and implementation practice.

Social change is far more difficult to encourage because it requires dedication and coordination from multiple actors. An individual player may walk away from a game feeling personally transformed and members of the group as a whole may express such sentiments, but such impacts still remain individual without either specific group actions taken afterward or individual actions taken that have an impact on social structures. An example of group action might be a play group deciding to form an activist or advocacy group after a game that is related to game content. An example of an individual action that can have impacts on social structures might be a player experiencing increased awareness of a specific social cause, then enacting change within their role as an influential member of a social system, e.g., in educational institutions, governmental bureaucracy, or politics. This form of transformation is also more challenging because social systems are often designed to resist such change and actors within them are often taught to reinforce and maintain the existing structures.

b) Transformation and role-playing games

Following the previously mentioned definitions of transformation, we are interested in transformation that can be inspired by role-playing experiences. Such transformation can remain prolonged and sustained long after the game has concluded and may affect the player in multiple ways:

- How the player views themselves, i.e., their identity;
- How the player views reality, i.e., their paradigm;

- How the player views others and interacts with them, i.e., their relationships;
- How the player views society, including its structures, their place within those structures, and the roles of others within it; and
- How the player views cultures, subcultures, and countercultural movements.

As Jonaya Kemper puts it (2020), role-playing games allow us to *wyrd the self*, consciously transmuting our identities through intentional play, a process which is also called *steering* (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015). Role-playing games hold the potential to provide a vehicle for change processes to occur for all participants, including designers and facilitators.

We are interested in using role-playing games as a medium to help people:

- Progress from one state to another one that is more beneficial to both the individual and the group;
- Commit to processes of change that are necessary for personal and social growth;
- Work to reduce suffering in themselves and others and improve overall well-being;
- Align with a sense of purpose, meaning, and authenticity when possible; and
- Connect with other people in ways that build confidence and trust, in the hopes of renewing faith in the human capacity for care and support.

Thus, when we describe transformative role-playing games, we emphasize games that improve the lives and/or work toward greater peace and justice for all people, not just a select few.

c) Applied role-playing games

As we mentioned before, role-playing activities are already taking place and being utilized in a variety of settings. *Applied role-playing* can be encountered in areas such as:

- **Professional training:** Leadership workshops and teamwork in business, organizational development, teacher training, i.e., "teaching the teacher";
- **Educational interventions:** Classroom settings, experiential learning, Drama in Education, field trips, interactive museum exhibits;
- **Crisis management:** First-responder training, military simulations, futures scenarios, contingency planning, Mental Health First Aid;
- **Health care:** Medical pedagogy simulations, physical therapy, communication in healthcare, empathy training for medical professionals;

- **Therapeutic interventions:** Drama therapy, psychodrama, Gestalt therapy, narrative therapy, trauma recovery, rehabilitation;
- **Personal development:** Spiritual guidance, self-improvement workshops, well-being interventions, social skill acquisition groups; and
- **Community outreach:** Youth camps, activism, aid work, conflict transformation training, civic education.

In terms of RPGs, applied role-playing games focus on particular educational, therapeutic, professional, or well-being goals. These goals may focus on enacting change at one or more of the following levels: personal, relational, structural, or cultural (Lederach 2014).

Applied role-playing games take elements from the leisure activity and apply them to specific settings, often focusing on practicing specific skills through experiential learning and behavioral rehearsal. Here are some examples of ways that designers can innovate existing role-playing practices in simulation and other areas by applying an RPG lens:

- Adding fantastical elements or other purely fictional contents;
- Further developing characters and relations between them;
- Creating more narrative complexity;
- Introducing combat systems, such as boffer fighting;
- Including mechanics that represent various physical, mental, and emotional phenomena;
- Integrating more immersive settings, costuming, and props; or
- Affording players with more narrative agency outside of training one specific skill, giving them meaningful choices.

2.3 Transformative goals

The most important component that distinguishes a transformative RPG from other types is establishing one or more specific impacts or goals that participants are intended to experience. These goals are not exactly the same as a character's goals in the game itself, but they can be aligned with specific skills the game seeks to train through practicing in-character (Balzac 2011).

Role-playing as a medium is capable of training many skills at once, including multiple types of cognitive, affective, and behavioral learning (Bowman 2014). Furthermore, we believe RPGs can be used to explore almost any topic. The imagination is the limit. Here are some broad categories that provide some examples (Bowman and Hugaas 2019):

a) **Educational Goals:** Critical thinking, systems thinking, problem solving, perceived competence, motivation;

b) **Emotional Processing:** Identity exploration, identifying / expressing emotions, processing grief / trauma, practicing boundaries;

c) **Social Cohesion:** Leadership, teamwork, collaboration, practicing communication skills, community building; and

d) **Political Aims:** Awareness raising, perspective taking, empathy, conflict transformation, paradigm shifting.

a) Educational goals

When a game is designed with a specific educational purpose, the transformative impact that the designers are aiming for is called an *educational goal*. Critically, educational goals are often framed as learning objectives, which may be tied to curricular needs, e.g., in a school setting (Cullinan and Genova 2023).

One can categorize educational goals further. Here are some suggested sub-categories (Bowman 2014; Bowman and Hugaas 2019):

- Intrinsic motivation
- Content exposure / Mastery
- Promoting active engagement
- Self-efficacy / Perceived competence
- Multitasking
- Problem solving
- Scenario building
- Creative thinking/Innovation
- Critical thinking
- Skill training
- Understanding systems

i) Learning objectives

When educational goals are included as part of a formal education process, they are often framed as *learning objectives*. A helpful tool when structuring and formulating such learning objectives is *Bloom's taxonomy* (Bloom 1956). This structure offers a tiered hierarchical overview of different cognitive skills used to construct specific learning objectives related to the mental complexity required by the activity (Heick 2021):

- **Tier 1:** Remembering
- **Tier 2:** Understanding
- **Tier 3:** Applying
- **Tier 4:** Analyzing
- **Tier 5:** Evaluating
- **Tier 6:** Creating

Notice that "creating" is the most difficult tier in Heick's version of the taxonomy, which includes role-playing. Designers should consider the degree to which the goals they have for players are feasible within the given context, the populations in question, and the degree of cognitive load required by game activities.

b) Emotional processing

When a game is designed with transformative impacts that engage with emotional and/or psychological aspects of the players, the impacts can be categorized as a form of *emotional processing*. While these kinds of impacts can be part of leisure and educational games, a game designed to be therapeutic has to include them. Alternatively, games with transformative impacts that sort into this category can be run for therapeutic reasons by professionals, but do not have to be.

One can categorize emotional processing further. Here are some suggested sub-categories (Bowman and Hugaas 2019):

- Exploring aspects of self / selves
- Exploring aspects of personal experience
- Shadow work
- Trauma / Grief processing
- Building confidence
- Practicing emotional regulation
- Catharsis
- Practicing mindfulness / Meta-awareness
- Transforming the ego
- Identifying / practicing personality traits
- Reframing past experiences
- Being seen / Witnessed
- Recognizing desires / Fears
- Self-expression
- Sense of belonging

c) Social cohesion

When a game is designed with the intention to impact how players perceive and interact with others and social systems, the impacts can be categorized under *social cohesion*. One might argue that role-playing games have an intrinsic effect on many potential social cohesion impacts, but in order to achieve impacts connected to more complex social concepts, intentional design is required.

Here are some suggested sub-categories of social cohesion (Bowman and Hugaas 2019):

- Increasing empathy
- Teamwork
- Leadership
- Holding space
- Conflict Transformation
- Prosocial communication
- Perspective taking
- Collaboration / Co-creation / Cooperation
- Building understanding
- Exploring intimacy / Relationship dynamics
- Exploring community dynamics

d) Political aims

When a game is designed with a specific political message in mind, the transformative impact that the designers are aiming for is called a *political aim*. Whereas we might think about these aims as motivated along progressive political lines, it is important to understand that any political message might be embedded in a game. When games are designed to deliver one-sided political messages that are intended to oppress oppositional thinking, they can be viewed as *propaganda*. However, as mentioned before, our interest is in games that increase peace and justice for all people, including games with a prosocial political message.

One can categorize social political aims further. Here are some suggested sub-categories (Bowman and Hugaas 2019):

- Raising awareness
- Challenging default assumptions
- Paradigm shifting
- Promoting activism

- Social engineering

- Persuasion/Rhetoric

- Critical ethical reasoning

- Debate

- Global citizenship

- Expansion of worldview

Larp as a form of political communication and political protest is also possible. In such a way, it is possible to draw the participants into the specific politically-motivated situation that resembles reality, as larps are effective in stimulating activity and encouraging critical thinking. For instance, the *Baltic Warriors* campaign used larps to highlight environmental issues in the Baltic Sea region (Pettersson 2016).

Larp enables the contextualisation of a political case since it provides the participants with the possibility of engaging within a safer environment. Such simulations can relate to past experiences, current politics, or politics that one may anticipate in the future. However, players should not assume they understand the experience of others simply because they played a scenario based on real events or social dynamics (Kangas 2017).

In conclusion, it is possible to state that there is a special connection between larp and politics and their influence on each other is rather significant. Thus, political larps can be seen as an effective tool for studying, explaining, and shaping politics and political processes. As unique forms of communication, larps can encourage real-life political activism; support educational events and programs; and enhance participants' grasp of political realities.

* * *

While these lists are sometimes based on anecdotal accounts and theoretical formulations, preliminary research has been conducted to assess the effectiveness of RPGs in skill development in several dimensions (see Chapter 7 for examples). However, more research is needed in this swiftly expanding field.

2.4 Categories of transformative role-playing games

We distinguish transformative role-playing games into three main categories: *leisure*, *therapeutic*, and *educational role*-playing games.

Leisure role-playing games are designed and played for a variety of reasons, mostly personal and individualized, even if the game has a specific goal in mind. They are voluntary for players to participate in during their free time and are often a form of recreation.

Therapeutic role-playing games are designed and played with explicit therapeutic goals in mind. They are (and should be) facilitated with emotional support from

a mental health professional or paraprofessional, e.g., a therapist, social worker, counsellor, coach, Mental Health First Aid worker, or community healer. Participation in such games may be voluntary, but can also sometimes be mandatory, e.g., in cases when they are required by someone's legal guardians or the court system.

Educational role-playing games are designed and played with explicit and/or implicit educational goals in mind. They may be voluntary, but can often be mandatory, e.g., in classrooms during school time.

These categories are, of course, not mutually exclusive and there can be an overlap or a crossover between types of games. Examples include a leisure larp having onsite support from a psychotherapist, a therapeutic larp also guiding participants to learn social skills and emotional intelligence through practice, etc.

a) Transformative leisure

Leisure is often distinguished from work as an activity a person does in their spare time and does not get paid to do. It is thus often associated with playfulness as a counterpoint to work. However, some leisure activities are associated with states of flow (Csíkszentmihályi 1990), as people engaged in them may be energized and hyperfocused on a particular action that is challenging and requires skill.

When it comes to leisure role-playing games, and although they are distinguished from professional ones, many role-players engage in labor in order to make games happen (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016; Torner 2020). That includes not only game designers and facilitators, but also players. It also includes different types of labor: physical, emotional, and creative. For example, servant characters may literally perform the labor of serving others; psychologist characters may literally perform emotional labor while helping other characters process their feelings; and performance-based characters or crafters may contribute their creative labor during the game. Therefore, RPGs can become a second job for many passionate members of the community. Some even perform their daily jobs in role-playing games, e.g., real-life teachers instructing fictional students at a wizard school (Homann 2020).

So, what is it that distinguishes leisure role-playing games from professional ones, if not labor? This, of course, may vary, but some general factors include:

- **Goals:** Participants engage with leisure games in their free time, and have various reasons for doing so, ranging from "entertainment" to social connection to self-actualization. These goals do not always overlap. Some players insist that games are just "fun," "entertainment," or "escapism," downplaying their meaning, while other players find profound meaning in these experiences and intentionally use them for personal and social development. However, even players only intending to experience "fun" often engage in learning, and practice skills, as necessary parts of the structure of games.

- **Settings:** Leisure games are often played in non-professional spaces such as homes, hotel conference rooms, camp sites, and rented vacation locations.
- **Social roles:** Leisure games are often played as one's "off-work" leisure identity rather than as part of one's responsibilities as a professional.

However, many of the benefits of role-playing in professional contexts are often experienced in leisure ones. Ritual anthropologist Victor Turner (1974) emphasized how leisure activities are about the exercising of "an individual's freedom . . . growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence." He also argued that leisure activities are imbued with pleasure in ways that other expected activities such as work are not, and are thus "potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticize or buttress the dominant social structural values" (69).

Thus, professional role-playing activities that emerge from leisure communities are often also imbued with these qualities, adding new interesting types and dynamics of play, as well as mechanics, meta-techniques, safety structures, and other best practices.

b) Therapeutic role-playing games

Role-playing games can be considered adjacent to many psychotherapeutic modalities that use storytelling and/or role enactment. These include (but are not limited to) psychodrama (Lukka 2013; Burns 2014; Diakolambrianou 2021), sociodrama, Playback Theatre (Pitkänen 2019), experiential therapies, Gestalt practices, narrative therapy, Internal Family Systems, inner child work, Family Constellations, drama therapy, shadow work (Beltrán 2013), adventure therapy, etc. Moreover, therapeutic role-playing is also used as a form of community activism, e.g., using practices such as the Theatre of the Oppressed for therapeutic purposes in a group setting. A therapeutic view of role-playing games acknowledges the self as a *mosaic*, i.e., composed of parts or configurations of self (Rogers 1959; Diakolambrianou 2021). See Chapter 3 for more information on these concepts.

In the framework of transformative role-playing games, we consider therapeutic role-playing a *transformational container* (Bion 2013; Bowman and Hugaas 2021), a secure enough holding environment (Winnicott 1960) in which playful experimentation and authentic expressions of self can emerge (Winnicott 1971). Such a space is facilitated and held by professionals or paraprofessionals who help participants process the experience. In this context, RPGs can be a therapeutic experience themselves, but also support other therapeutic processes occurring parallel to play, before, or after, such as individual and group therapy, journaling, debriefing, etc.

Therapeutic role-playing games are grouped according to the goals of the client and therapist. Key factors include the types of activities expected to take place, e.g., the ratio of playfulness to processing time, the degree to which therapeutic modalities will be introduced in play or supplement it, etc. Also important to establish are the types of support agreed upon between the therapist and client, e.g., the amount of processing between therapist and client that will occur before, during, and/or after a game, sometimes established by a legal contract and/or ethical code (see e.g., Atwater and Rowland 2018).

Thus, there are three main types of therapeutic role-playing games:

- **Therapy:** This category includes games designed to support therapeutic goals, such as trauma processing and other mental health challenges. The games may be run by the therapist themselves, or in collaboration with the client's therapist. In this type of game, there are high expectations of emotional processing before, during, or after the game. An example of this is the work of the Bodhana Group, a non-profit in the U.S. that has run interventions for therapeutic treatment of sexual abuse, trauma from grief, etc (Varrette et al. 2022).

- **Social Skills:** These types of games are designed to support social development goals, such as learning how to make friends, communication skills, conflict resolution, and other forms of *behavior rehearsal* (Munday 2013). They may sometimes be contracted from an outside group as an adjunct to therapy. These games include medium expectations of emotional processing before, during, or after the game. An example of this category is the work of Game to Grow, a non-profit in the U.S. run by trained therapists that often focus on social skills groups, including working with neurodiverse populations. They have their own role-playing system called *Critical Core* (2021) that guides players to build social confidence, communication, and collaboration skills, as well as to develop frustration tolerance, emotional awareness, and caring for others.

Note that ethical training on social skills from our perspective should not be a form of conversion therapy, in which neurodiverse people are trained to mask as neurotypical[2] or try to change their nature. Rather, such training is intended to help improve quality of life and social relationships by helping neurodiverse clients better understand social rules and communication patterns, as well as helping neurotypical people understand and adapt to behaviors associated with neurodiversity.

Our last type of therapeutic game is:

- **Recreation:** These games are designed with an emphasis on the importance of the activity itself as therapeutic rather than on specific goals to achieve or skills to learn. In other words, the games are viewed as a form of recreational therapy. Thus, there are low to no expectations of emotional processing before, during, or after the game. An example of this type is the work of RPG Therapeutics, a U.S. company that works with clients with a variety of psychological challenges and physical disabilities. Their work includes running larps for children with muscular dystrophy to improve physical and psychological well-being, traveling to various sites with a wheelchair-accessible trailer to run tabletop games for clients with disabilities, etc.

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2   While neurotypical is the most common and all-encompassing term currently, we acknowledge that it defines neurodiverse people as not "typical," which is not an ideal term when working toward inclusion.

c) Educational role-playing games

As mentioned before, role-playing games have been used in educational settings in different shapes and forms for a long time. To be classified as an educational game, either the game itself or the activities before and after the game should be designed for the specific educational agenda (see e.g., Andresen ed. 2012). When using RPGs in education you can choose one of the following options:

1. Use an existing educational RPG;
2. Adapt an existing leisure RPG to fit into new educational structures and curricular learning objectives; or
3. Design a new educational RPG to target your specific learning objectives.

Given the right design, role-playing games can be adapted to teach virtually any subject, training cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills, e.g., through *edu-larp* (Bowman 2014). Role-playing can also be a useful tool to contextualize previous knowledge by asking the participants to apply that knowledge in a new setting. Since role-playing is a social activity, it focuses not only on content learning but also on social learning, empathy, and personal development (Hammer et al. 2024; Westborg 2024). Role-playing is also co-creative, which leads to a more even distribution of power compared to what is commonly seen in a classroom (Geneuss 2021; Westborg 2024).

This change in power dynamics in combination with the emergent play inherent in RPGs means that RPGs can be unpredictable in their impacts and lead to a certain loss of control. This unpredictability can be mitigated in different ways, for example, intentionality at all stages—design, implementation, and play, which can help groups steer toward a designer or facilitator's desired transformative impacts (Bowman and Hugaas 2019). Another key to success and to mitigate control-loss is reflection and processing. Learning in relation to RPGs can happen before, during, or after the game, with after being the most important part. (For more information about framing the game, see our model in this chapter and Chapter 4).

When working with educational RPGs, it is important to set the container and work with expectation management. By helping the participants know what is going to happen and how the game will work, they can focus on the task at hand. If about 40% or more are experienced players, then the other players can look at them and figure out what to do, which means the group has a *herd competence* (Lundqvist 2015). When working with a group that is new to RPGs, then expectation management and setting the container becomes even more important, to compensate for the lack of herd competence (Westborg 2019). In a group with less experienced players, it is not uncommon for players to go out of character when they do not know what to do (Westborg 2016). By having a more structured and planned run-time game design, the risk for this happening is lessened. You can also have extra tasks available to give out to help keep them engaged. Another helpful thing is to stay in character yourself to help bring the players back into the game world.

2.5 Types of learning

a) Informal, non-formal, and formal

One way to address what type of learning you design for is by using the concepts of formal, non-formal, and informal learning, which are used in educational theory (Eshach 2007; Westborg 2022d).

Formal learning includes established educational systems like schools, universities, and training institutions. It has specific learning outcomes and a syllabus. Learning outcomes are usually measured through some type of assessment.

Non-formal learning has a specific purpose, but the experience happens outside of the established formal educational system. Examples include having a sewing circle, learning to play the guitar through YouTube videos, or learning a language from a phone app. In non-formal learning some kind of organizational framework usually exists. Often, this framework is linked to community groups or other organizations in which participants learn from each other, but non-formal learning can also occur on an individual level. Non-formal learning often has learning objectives but does not have to follow a formal syllabus. There are usually no assessments, at least not for an external audience.

Informal learning is the type of learning that happens throughout everyday life by just existing and interacting with one's environment and other people.

By thinking about the type of learning in these terms, you can consider how each situation will impact your design and what you need to address during the design process. For games this is relevant when working with any type of learning, whether it is an edu-larp in a school or a freeform game about exploring identity (see e.g., Baird 2022a; Baird 2022b; Westborg 2022e; Westborg 2023).

b) Mandatory vs. voluntary

Many times, participation is mandatory and not optional when designing educational games (Lundqvist 2015), which affects the design. When a player chooses to sign up for a game, they are there because they want to be, have an interest, and want to engage, at least on some level. These factors are not always the case in educational settings. Whether or not participation is voluntary can have a big impact on motivation for the group. If you design a mandatory game, you need to consider how to get your participants to agree to play and, for those that do not agree, what to do instead.

For those who do not want to participate, it is important to understand why since this will affect the course of action. There can be many reasons for them not to want to participate; it might have to do with fear of losing face, not feeling secure enough, some type of disability, trying to get time off, being uncomfortable with the

performative part, or just not being interested in games. To find out why, make sure to talk to the participant in question and ask them about how they are feeling. For this conversation, it is good to have some alternative assignments prepared that any teacher or other person involved from the outside agrees is comparable, but facilitators should also be open to improvising. Maybe the students get to join another class or do homework as pre-prepared alternatives to participating. In general, letting them stay and watch is not a good idea since that often leads to them judging the other participants and affecting the whole climate in the room. However, this also depends on why they do not want to participate; for example, if it is because of a disability, then staying and watching might be a valid and inclusive option. If it turns out that they are, for example, extremely uncomfortable with the physical materials in the costumes that are part of the game, then maybe you can improvise and find a solution that will work for them, such as wearing something else or a token to represent the clothes.

Your run-time design will also be affected by mandatory participation. You will probably get players with different play preferences, experience levels, motivational levels, disabilities, and so on. We recommend preparing for these factors, considering them in your design, and communication with your players or a similar population ahead of time. Things you can do to handle these situations include (Westborg 2019, 2022b, 2022c, 2023):

- Designing ways for players to choose their engagement level, e.g., through different types of characters;
- Have ways to opt-in and out of parts of the play;
- Have different types of gameplay available since not all players will like the same type of play, e.g., have different quests with some more physical, some more social, and some more intellectual; and
- Design for safety and inclusion.

We will discuss designing for safety and inclusion in more depth in Chapter 5.

2.6 Populations overview

While specific considerations are necessary for first-time players (van Bilsen 2024), our belief is that role-playing games can be applied for any target group, or *population*, given proper design and safety considerations. The following lists include some illustrative examples from the literature, although many other references exist in many cases.

RPGs are used with populations of all ages:

- **Children** (Zayas and Lewis 1986; Enfield 2007; Callina, Colbert, and Gray 2018; Bandhoesingh 2024)
- **Adolescents** (Kallam 1984; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Enfield 2007; Shanun 2013; Gutierrez 2017; Harris 2018; Katō 2019; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer

2020; Davis and Johns 2020; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022)

- **Young adults** (Shanun 2013)
- **Adults** (Shanun 2013; Lehto 2024)
- **Older adults** (Atanasio 2020)

Note that adolescents and young adults are especially primed for identity exploration due to their stage of development, in which role-playing can provide space for a *psychosocial moratorium*: a journey of self-discovery (Erikson 1968). However, role-playing can be helpful for participants of all ages.

RPGs also have been and are used in various levels of educational, skills training, and professional development settings:

- **Elementary students** (Carter 2011)
- **Primary and secondary school students** (Abdul Jabbar and Felicia 2015; Geneuss 2021; Cullinan 2024)
- **Middle schoolers** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021; Katō 2019)
- **Youth in after-school programs** (Callina, Colbert, Gray 2018; Bandhoesingh 2024)
- **Youth in summer camps** (Hoge 2013; Fein 2015; Faros 2018; Turi and Hartyándi 2023)
- **College students** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020)
- **Health practitioners** (Standiford 2014; Riser et al. 2024)
- **Mental health practitioners** (Gutierrez 2017)
- **Camp counsellors, trainers, teachers, players,** or **researchers** (Daniau 2016)
- **Youth workers** and **volunteer managers** (DiveIn Consortium 2021; Ladišić and Prkosovački 2022)
- **Government employees and politicians** (van Bilsen 2024)
- **Business professionals** (Branch 2018)
- **Leaders seeking professional development** (Jensen 2021; Hartyándi and van Bilsen 2024), among many other professional contexts.

Moreover, role-playing games can and have been used as interventions for a range of medical and psychological needs, including people with neurodiversity; disabilities or atypical abilities; developmental and personal needs; to more complex psychological and psychiatric needs, including addressing marginalization, trauma, and abuse. We present these together not to conflate them with one another, but rather to show the large range of applied situations in which RPGs have been used with diverse populations:

- **LGBTQIA+** (Connell 2023)
- **ADHD** (Enfield 2007)
- **Autism spectrum** (Fein 2015; Harris 2018; Helbig 2019; Katō 2019; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Davis and Johns 2020; Harada, Katō, and Fujino 2022)
- **Dyslexia** (Davis and Johns 2020)
- **Interpersonal difficulties** (Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021)
- **Social anxiety** (Atanasio 2020; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Varrette et al. 2022)
- **Generalized anxiety** (Scudder 2018; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Varrette et al. 2022)
- **Fear of making mistakes, rumination about the past** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021)
- **Isolation** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Atanasio 2020)
- **Hopelessness and loss of personal meaning** (Atanasio 2020)
- **Loneliness** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Atanasio 2020)
- **Depression** (Hughes 1988; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Suicidal thoughts** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021)
- **Grief and loss** (Atanasio 2020)
- **Mental health recovery** (Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Insomnia** (Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Physical disabilities** (Kallam 1984; Atanasio 2020)
- **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)** (Sargent 2014)
- **Bullying** (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021)
- **Abuse** (Enfield 2007; Gutierrez 2017; Atanasio 2020)
- **Trauma** (Sargent 2014; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Addiction** (Causo and Quinlan 2021; Bartenstein 2022, 2024)
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** (Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)** (Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Antisocial behavior and aggression** (Gutierrez 2017)

Notably, although some researchers have cautioned against the use of RPGs for populations with delusional tendencies (e.g., people with schizophrenia or similar

psychotic conditions; Blackmon 1994; Gutierrez 2017), others argue that there are indeed potential benefits of some types of RPGs for people with psychosis (Olivet et al. 2018). See Chapter 6 for more details on populations and safety.

2.7 Our model of transformative game design

In this section, we will outline our process for designing transformative analog role-playing games. Later chapters in this book will describe these processes and the theoretical and practical concepts grounding them in more detail.

a) Type of game

Your first step is determining what type of game you are designing (see earlier in this chapter). Your choice has implications in terms of the way the experience is framed for your players; the setting in which the game is played; the amount and type of support you will provide; the degree of processing expected; and the degree of additional activities expected of players. You should choose from:

1. Transformative leisure
2. Therapeutic
3. Educational

When you have chosen your type of game, you can then establish your desired impact or goal.

b) Impact/goal

The next step is identifying the specific impact(s) you want your players to experience and/or goal(s) you want your game to achieve. These goals can be specific, e.g., practicing fractions in Mathematics, or quite broad and more general, e.g., forming social bonds through the activity of the game. They can be made explicit to the participant or remain implied. However, we recommend being as transparent with your players as possible to help earn their trust (Torner 2013). Not only is transparency important for safety and consent, but obtaining buy-in from your players ahead of time may reduce defensiveness and make it more possible for them to experience the impact you desire. Keep in mind also that players may experience transformative impacts that are beyond what you as a designer have anticipated. We recommend embracing the sometimes chaotic and unpredictable nature of the medium, as these unexpected impacts might become exceptionally important in the players' lives.

We use three different terms to indicate these impacts in specific settings and target groups, as the design implications may be distinct, providing examples from the categories introduced previously: transformative impacts, therapeutic goals, and learning objectives.

i) Transformative impacts

For transformative leisure role-playing games, which can include games designed for both entertainment and artistic purposes, we use the term *transformative impacts*. This term can also be used to describe the goals of transformative game design as a field more broadly.

As a reminder, leisure environments do not have the same expectations and structures of educational rigor or therapeutic care. Players may attend the games for a variety of reasons, including ones unrelated to the transformative impacts indicated, but should be made aware of the goals of the game and thus be open to experiencing these impacts regardless. Some examples:

a) **Educational Goals:** Exploring a particular time period in history, e.g., the Suffragette movement (see e.g., Algayres 2019);

b) **Emotional Processing:** Experiencing gender inequalities common to this time period and the subsequent emotions arising from them;

c) **Social Cohesion:** Trying to unify as a group despite different political perspectives and life experiences; and

d) **Political Aims:** Raising awareness on historical inequities in order to promote values associated with social justice.

Note that you may not have all of these types of goals in your game, but thinking through their implications and the aspects of personal or social change they target can be helpful.

ii) Therapeutic goals

Therapeutic goals can be quite general or more specific depending on the needs of the client(s). For example, a therapist may run a *Dungeons & Dragons* group as a means to provide social engagement and reduce symptoms of depression in older clients (Atanasio 2020). In these cases, any game might provide a therapeutic outlet regardless of the design. Alternatively, therapeutic goals may be quite specific and geared toward the needs of the particular target group, for example, practicing social skills in mindfulness, impulsivity, or turn taking (Kilmer et al. 2023). In these cases, the game should integrate the desired skill into the design and/or facilitation in some way. Some examples:

a) **Educational Goals:** Learning about a specific type of neurodiversity, e.g., ADHD, with regard to impulsivity;

b) **Emotional Processing:** Experiencing and voicing emotions related to impulse control within the game setting, practicing emotional regulation;

c) **Social Cohesion:** Practicing impulse control in the form of turn taking, e.g., allowing each participant to share the "spotlight" in the scene during their turn; and

d) **Political Aims:** Celebrating neurodiversity and creativity within the group to counter stigma, while cultivating stronger social bonds.

Importantly, as mentioned before, these games take place within a therapeutic context in which a specific professional relationship is established between client and therapist. Thus, expectations of continued care and emotional processing around the play are higher than in a leisure game. Therapists may also work explicitly with goals that might be considered taboo in leisure environments, e.g., intentionally working through trauma and grief through play.

We also do not recommend thinking of therapeutic games as a way to "fix" something "wrong" with someone, but rather as a means to increase wellbeing and thriving in clients. A best practice is to establish these therapeutic goals in collaboration with the client, ideally as a result of their own interest or impetus, i.e., "I repeatedly receive feedback that I interrupt others and that upsets them. I would like to work on my impulsivity as a goal."

iii) Learning objectives

Educational goals may be framed as learning objectives, outcomes, or similar depending on your educational system. Regardless, these objectives refer to specific educational knowledge you want your participants to walk away from the game possessing or academic skills you want them to have practiced. Sometimes the designer can choose the learning objectives, but often they are provided (Cullinan and Genova 2023), e.g., developing an edu-larp to address existing learning objectives from an established Science curriculum.

Learning objectives tend to be most effective—and easiest to design for—when they are framed using Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom 1956). In Bloom's Taxonomy, specific actions are included that indicate an action verb that students should do related to the curricular content. These actions are organized according to overall categories related to the mental complexity required by the activity, e.g., remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Heick 2021). Therefore, learning objectives tend to be specific and targeted in a way such that teachers can evaluate whether or not learning has taken place. Some examples:

a) **Educational Goals:** Analyzing factors that contribute to climate change;

b) **Emotional Processing:** Understanding the impact of climate anxiety on decision making;

c) **Social Cohesion:** Evaluating strategies to address climate change through debate and creating consensus; and

d) **Political Aims:** Applying knowledge related to climate change in active discussion.

Each of the objectives may be possible to assess in some meaningful way to ensure that the desired learning has taken place. See Chapter 7 for examples of assessments from the literature.

c) Safety

Along with physical safety, psychological safety should be considered at all stages of the design process. While no experience can ever be considered fully safe, the perception of safety is important to establish and maintain in role-playing communities. Safety allows participants to lower their vigilance and surrender more deeply to playfulness as a central part of the transformative process. Safety necessitates enthusiastic consent, the ability to opt-in and opt-out, as well as calibration and other forms of negotiation and self-advocacy. As mentioned before, situations in which play can be forced on participants without negotiation or agreement may backfire in terms of transformative goals. We will discuss safety in more depth in Chapter 5.

d) Workshop

Many RPG designers focus on the mechanics, setting, and other factors of the game play itself. These aspects are certainly important, as all activities within the game should ideally contribute in some way to the transformative impacts you desire to occur. However, in transformative role-playing game design, we consider the design of the framing around the game just as important as the game play itself, to the extent that the two are intertwined when we refer to the "game" as a whole. Framing activities refer to the structures before and after the game that prime the participants for change. While we recommend offering ways for players to opt-out if needed in exceptional circumstances, the framing activities should be established as important parts of the entire game experience rather than optional "bonus" features.

Before the game, we recommend having a workshop that helps onboard the players onto the experience. Many workshop activities exist, for example, warm-up exercises in improvisational theater (Drama Notebook 2021). They can have many purposes (Holkar 2015) that may or may not be appropriate depending on your goals, so careful consideration is needed, especially since workshop time is often limited.

In transformative game design, workshop activities should prepare players for playing the game, ideally with the transformative impacts desired in mind. For example, if your goals involve learning key historical figures who are characters in the role-play, a "name game" exercise in which players say their character's name along with some sort of gesture, which are repeated by the whole group, may help establish embodied memory. Similarly, if your game focuses on developing debate skills, a short workshop activity in which players practice a simple debate might help prepare them for play. If your game focuses on exploring social dynamics within specific relationships, a character relation workshop within which players establish these dynamics will be critical.

Importantly, workshops should feature some element of "doing" rather than just "telling." When we tell players about the game's topic, the transformative impacts, the safety techniques used, the schedule for play, or other logistical details, we are *briefing* them, which requires passive attention from them. When we ask them to perform

an action, we are encouraging them to be active participants, which is important for role-playing. Not only can players build confidence to engage in this way, but they learn they have agency in taking actions within the environment. Actions that are helpful are practicing any meta-techniques that might be used during play, such as asking players for a monologue, in which they briefly share their character's inner thoughts (Jeepen 2007; Boss and Holter 2013). Also important when possible is practicing safety techniques in an embodied way, for example, learning how to *Cut* a scene or use the term *Softer* to request a decrease in intensity (see Chapter 5 for more details). Sometimes, the end of the workshop may lead the players into the game to ease the transition, e.g., with a countdown from 10 to 1, or playing a thematically appropriate song.

e) Game

The game itself will have many facets that can differ from situation to situation. However, the game usually includes:

- **A setting** in which the play takes place, whether based on our world or something else.

- **Characters** who take some sort of action within that setting. These actions may be strongly impactful to the world around the characters, e.g., students organizing a successful revolution, or they may focus more on internal play, e.g., a political prisoner on death row reflecting on life while awaiting death. Regardless, available actions should be connected to the desired impacts whenever possible.

- **Relationships** between characters, usually with some sort of established dynamic, e.g., one student inspired the other to join the revolution; one prisoner was the others' political rival before they were both imprisoned, etc. Ideally, these relationships deepen play and pave the way for the desired transformative impacts to take place, while also making room for unexpected surprises, e.g., a specific player working through the recent loss of an important friendship through play.

- **Conflicts** embedded within these various factors (optional, see Chapter 6). Conflicts can be internal, e.g., a character trying to overcome issues of envy, or external, e.g., a political situation that is hostile to a character's belief system. Many RPG designers claim that conflict is essential to an engaging game (see e.g., Baker 2003-2004), but a good challenge might be to explore games without explicit conflicts designed, for example, your goal may be to cultivate healthy, loving communities through play.

- **Rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques** that help the players take specific actions within play. These rules may be minimal, e.g., "Stay in character for the duration of play" or they may be more complex, e.g., a combat system that requires rolling dice for conflict resolution. Again, make sure that any

rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques serve the goals of the game, as extraneous features may distract from the impacts you desire the players to have. For example, if you want players to feel agency through their successes in combat situations, having too many rules may make some players feel insecure about their own abilities, counteracting your goals. For this reason, some designers and facilitators may handle complex rules themselves to avoid barriers to entry, e.g., in many tabletop therapy games.

f) Debrief type

Central to the transformation process is that any insights gleaned from the game experience should be distilled as takeaways in some meaningful way. These takeaways should be *integrated* into daily life somehow rather than remaining bounded by the game experience. At minimum, as with best practice in psychodrama and simulation (Moreno, Zerka 1987; Crookall 2014), we recommend debriefing as a core integration activity that any transformative role-playing game should include (Daniau 2016; Westborg 2022a).

i) Structured vs. unstructured

Debriefs can fall on a spectrum between *structured* and *unstructured*. In both cases, a moderator is present, ideally one of the facilitators of the game, or any adjacent helpers, such as a client's therapist or the teacher of a class. In a debrief, the group is given specific questions to answer that are designed for certain types or processing.

In a structured debrief, each player is allowed a set amount of time to speak and should not interrupt or engage with someone else's sharing, e.g., should not "crosstalk," as in psychodrama (Moreno, Zerka, Blomkvist, and Ruetzel 2000). This practice allows space for each person to be heard, which is especially important for participants who are shy or experiencing strong emotions. The facilitator may use a participant's sharing as a jumping off point for highlighting key concepts or learning, or may remain quiet and ask for the next person to speak. If a participant wants to pass, they should be permitted, but a best practice is to ask again later if they are ready to share in case they had needed more time to think. Structured debriefs are helpful for allowing everyone to take part equally, but are not good spaces to work through any interpersonal dynamics that may have occurred.

Unstructured debriefs likely also start with preformulated questions, but the conversation is less formalized and not everyone may end up sharing. Unstructured debriefs lead to a more natural flow of conversation, but can run the risk of not carving space for all participants to share, which may lead to feelings of alienation or exclusion depending on the situation. Semi-structured debriefs are also a possibility, although finding the right balance between making sure all participants can share and allowing for a more authentic flow of discussion can be challenging.

Structured and unstructured debriefs can be used in concert with one another, e.g., having a structured debrief with the whole group, then assigning *debriefing buddies* to have more open dialogue afterward.

Regardless of the type of debrief, designers should be aware that you will likely have a limited number of questions to ask due to time constraints. Therefore, the questions should be carefully chosen to focus on the transformative impacts you want to encourage. Questions that are imprecise or "filler" might end up distracting from your goals. We specify three types of processing around which debriefs can be designed: emotional, intellectual, and educational.

ii) Emotional processing

In our view, whenever possible, at least one emotional processing question should be part of the debrief and should usually come first. This is because regardless of your goals, unpredictable emotions can arise. One of the key benefits of role-playing is the socio-emotional learning (SEL) inherent to the form, so emphasizing the emotional is important. Furthermore, some players may bypass the most important learning if they skip straight to intellectualizing, or may not be able to process complex concepts if they are still emotionally engaged with the game.

Depending on the type of game, different emotional processing questions might be more appropriate. Our most used question is, "What was your most profound or intense moment of the game?" This question allows players to opt-in to how much they would like to share. It also makes space for a large range of emotional responses, e.g., the intensity might be tied to exhilaration from winning a battle, grief over losing their comrade in arms, a strong feeling of belonging with one's combat group, or anger at the prevalence of senseless violence in the world. However, in therapy for example, questions that are more targeted toward a specific players' emotional landscape might be more effective.

iii) Intellectual processing

Intellectual processing refers to inviting a more analytical stance to the discussion. Intellectual processing questions can be general, e.g., "What was the most interesting or insightful part of the experience for you?" Again, intellectual processing questions are usually best to introduce after some emotional processing has occurred. While players may still discuss their emotional reactions, the invitation is to analyze the experience for takeaways that can lead to insight. Ideally, these insights will enrich the player's lives after the game and contribute to some kind of meaningful positive change, including taking action on their goals.

iv) Educational processing

Educational processing refers specifically to questions designed to target learning objectives. For example, asking a general question about what interested players about the game may lead the conversation in dramatically different directions, ones that may not relate at all to the learning objectives. In this case, being more precise is helpful,

e.g., "What thoughts did this game bring up for you about the history of feminism?" or "What challenges did this game highlight regarding climate change?" Keep in mind that direct questions may be ineffective or overly pedantic, for example, "What did you learn about feminism from this game?" Thus, sculpting educational debrief questions that are sufficiently open to interpretation and free of confusing jargon while also addressing the desired learning goals can take practice, trial, and error.

Furthermore, debrief questions can have more explicit educational goals relative to how designers want players to work with the knowledge. We have identified three additional goals, which can be used to structure questions accordingly (Westborg and Bowman, in press for 2025):

- **Connection:** Reflecting on the experience in relation to specific learning objectives or curricular content, as described before.

- **Abstraction:** Relating takeaways from the RPG experience to concepts or experiences in the wider outside world, e.g., seeing the game experience as a connection point to larger trends in society over time.

- **Contextualization:** Learning additional information about the context surrounding the topic or granular facts related to it as a means to enhance the learning, e.g., specific subject matter knowledge that was not possible to cover thoroughly during the game.

Contextualization can also occur before and after the debrief, e.g., assigning additional reading or viewing materials, researching, or watching a documentary on the topic. Also note that contextualization, in this case, is different from learning in various *contexts*. It refers to gaining greater understanding of the topic at hand, not the environment within which learning occurs.

Debriefing is especially important if the goals of your game are very specific and the material is sensitive, for example, decreasing stereotypes and increasing empathy for marginalized people, failing to include a proper debrief with well-designed questions can backfire (Aarebrot and Nielsen 2012). The role-play experience is subjective, meaning players only see a small part of the game based on their character's perspective. Role-playing can also be chaotic, meaning the intended goal may not have emerged as key components of the player's experience regardless of your design. Debriefing helps ground everyone into a shared understanding of the learning it intended to encourage.

However, it is important to establish expectations and transparency before and after play about these learning goals. Having "surprise" takeaways or educational points might backfire, leading the players to feel betrayed and potentially reject the content altogether. Ideally players, designers, and facilitators are all working toward the same shared goals throughout the process. Furthermore, some players may not be ready to debrief directly after the game, which is okay. In exceptional cases, perhaps they may need to opt-out. Ideally, the rest of the group still engages in the debrief and the player feels comfortable discussing with the facilitator or other group members later.

g) Integration practices

In addition to debriefing, many other integration processes are possible. Integration involves goal setting and post-game activities that should be taken after the game to crystalize intention into action. For example, a person may discover a leadership skill within a game they were not aware they had, but applying for a leadership job afterward will require additional steps.

Furthermore, different players have their own unique ways of engaging in integration. Some prefer verbal communication with others, for example, whereas others may create art. Other forms of integration practices can include (Bowman and Hugaas 2021):

1. **Creative Expression:** Some players choose to integrate their experiences by creating new works of art, including journaling, studio art, performance art, game design, fiction writing, storytelling, etc.

2. **Intellectual Analysis:** Players may also engage in cognitive processing where they seek to analyze their experiences on an intellectual level. This may include contextualization, researching, reframing experiences, documentation, theorizing, applying existing theoretical lenses, reflection, etc.

3. **Emotional Processing:** Participants often find valuable the ability to emotionally process their experiences, either individually, one-on-one, or in a group setting. This may include debriefing, reducing shame, processing bleed, ego development/evolution, individual or group therapy, validating one's own experiences, identifying and acknowledging needs/desires/fears, identifying and acknowledging Shadow aspects, distancing identity from undesirable traits/behaviors explored in-character, etc.

4. **Returning to Daily Life:** On a psychological level, participants sometimes find a variety of practices useful in helping them transition from the headspace of the game frame to that of their daily lives and identities. Examples include de-roling, managing bleed, narrativizing role-play experiences, distilling core lessons/takeaways, applying experiences/skills, engaging in self-care/grounding practices, transitioning between frames of reality, incorporating personality traits/behaviors, etc.

5. **Interpersonal Processing:** Some participants find social connections important after a role-playing experience, which helps them transition from the social frames of the game to their off-game interpersonal dynamics. This may include connecting with co-players, re-establishing previous social connections, negotiating relationship dynamics, sharing role-playing experiences with others, engaging in reunion activities, etc.

6. **Community Building:** Some players take the lessons learned in role-playing further, deciding to create or transform the communities around them. Examples include networking, planning events, collaborating on

projects, creating new social systems, sharing resources and knowledge, establishing safer spaces, creating implicit and explicit social contracts, engaging in related subcultural activities, evolving/innovating existing social structures.

Ultimately, transformation is a process that requires some degree of effort after a game is complete. Designers can consider ways to encourage or even include some of these activities into the game process as a whole to help players crystalize core takeaways into meaningful positive change.

2.8 Summary

This introductory chapter has introduced our definitions of transformation and transformative game design. We have also outlined the basics of our model for designing transformative analog role-playing games. The following chapters will deepen into these contents, examining the theoretical foundations upon which this work is situated; specific design practices; safety; additional core concepts related to transformative games; and strategies for research.

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Theory, Key Concepts, and Inspirational Materials

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3.1 Introduction

Our model of transformative game design is based on many years of theoretical and practical exploration in role-playing game communities and academia, as well as applied concepts from other fields. Having a basic understanding of theory helps make more concrete the processes underlying transformative game design. Theory also gives us language to communicate with one another about the impacts we are trying to achieve and the underlying mechanisms we are activating when we play. Furthermore, theory can also serve as a design inspiration, for example, in creating experiments around how to work with certain types of bleed in character creation. Finally, as researchers, design is expected to be grounded by a theoretical framework, which this chapter can help you explore (see also Chapter 7).

3.2 Key concepts

This section will outline briefly the main theoretical concepts that inform our transformative game design model. These concepts are further expanded later in this chapter.

a) Role-playing as a transformational container

Following Wilfred Bion (2013) and D. W. Winnicott (1960), our model emphasizes cultivating communities around games that help establish and maintain a *transformational container* (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Baird and Bowman 2022). In the transformational container, consent is emphasized, boundaries are established, and play content is calibrated throughout the experience to help maintain the perception of psychological safety. Note that consent can be difficult in mandatory play situations (as described in Chapter 2). In such situations, a best practice is to offer players varying degrees of engagement, the ability to opt-out, or alternative assignments. Goals should be stated ahead of time, either privately between the facilitator and the player or with the whole group, onboarding all participants onto the notion that transformative impacts are normative in this space rather than something to be feared. Leisure role-playing games already have established methods for this kind of discussion, including

Session 0s, safety mechanics (Reynolds and Germain 2019), consent and calibration discussions (Koljonen 2020), post-game debriefing (Brown 2018), etc.

i. Immersion, alibi, and affordances

Once the container is established, players can leave their default identities from the external world and adopt new characters within the fictional world through the *immersion* and the *alibi* of play (Deterding 2018). *Immersion* refers to a shift in a state of attention focused on aspects of the RPG. The six types of immersion are: immersion into activity; immersion into game; immersion into environment, immersion into narrative, immersion into character, and immersion into community (Bowman 2024). These concepts are expanded further later in this chapter.

Alibi allows participants to act within the game with lessened social consequences (Deterding 2017), which can encourage greater risk taking and willingness to fail. Alibi is established as an implicit or explicit social contract between players, along with other agreements and rules about appropriate ways to engage within the *magic circle* of the game (Huizinga 1958; Salen and Zimmerman 2003).[3] All RPGs (and arguably games in general), can be said to have a magic circle, whereas a transformational container has properties specific to the goals, processes, and support needed for lasting change.

Alibi is also connected to *affordances*, meaning the actions the environment offers or provides us (Gibson 1986). While the spontaneous, co-creative, improvisational nature of analog role-playing games technically affords us infinite possible actions (Montola 2012, inspired by McGonigal on video games), in practice, we are constrained by social rules that shape both in-game and off-game interactions. When we consider alibi as providing certain affordances, we can imagine how choices we make in our design might invite specific actions, or *verbs* they can perform. In her application of affordance theory to larp, Lampo (2015) suggests:

> Certain kinds of larp scenarios may afford certain kinds of actions for the players. For example, a scenario, where two players are performing a fight between their characters, may afford that the players insult each other's characters, glare [at] each other intensively, or even make peace. A scenario where two characters are in love, on the other hand, may afford that the players flirt with each other's characters, hold hands, or even hug or kiss. (39-40)

Lampo (2015) indicates that the possible affordances are open to interpretation by the player, who may behave in-game based on this interpretation in ways deemed conventional or unconventional to the play community. While designers cannot

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3   While the boundedness of the magic circle has been heavily debated in video game studies (cf. Consalvo 2009; Zimmerman 2012; Stenros 2012), the debate is not as present in analog role-playing game studies. We suspect this is because the porousness between game and life has been acknowledged for some time, e.g., through the emphasis on subcultural research (Fine 1983), social conflict and bleed affecting RPG communities (Bowman 2013), but also because the ritual of play is reminiscent of psychomagical rituals themselves (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Diakolambrianou 2021; Cazaneuve 2021).

predict how players will enact their characters when gifted with alibi, they can provide constraints that guide the player toward certain actions and away from others. Nano-game design requires strong consideration of these factors.

While helpful in providing a perception of safety, when considering role-playing games as transformative containers, alibi should not be so strong that players are encouraged to completely disassociate their daily identities from their characters' identities. Role-playing games allow us to experiment with identity, accessing parts that can sometimes paradoxically feel more authentic than our daily selves (Winnicott 1971). Ideally, players are encouraged to thoughtfully reflect upon the parts of their characters they would like to take with them and leave behind after play, not just as a standard de-roling technique (Brown 2018), but as an extensive process of *wyrding the self* (Kemper 2020): actively shaping their *identities* into what the participant would like them to be moving forward (see Figure 1).

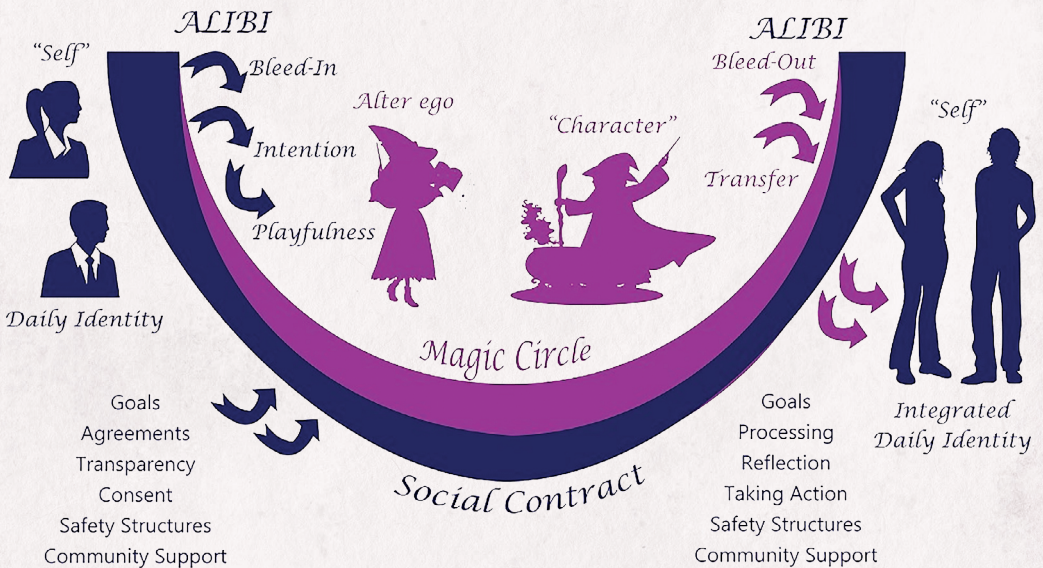Envisioning Role-playing as a Transformational Container

Figure 1: Envisioning role-playing as a transformational container. Explicit goals, agreements, safety structures, community support, and integration practices facilitate changes in participants' identities over time (Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

Important to this model is the element of community, which is primed to expect transformation to happen, and to support change processes before, during, and after play. Some players may have had transformative experiences within games, but not feel fully supported by the community playing them, e.g., having a gender affirming experience within a tabletop game, but not feeling supported by one's co-players in coming out (Baird 2021). We believe making clear the intention before, during, and after a game can help align everyone within the play community toward a shared

intention. For example, if the design includes practicing a pronoun correction workshop (Brown 2017) or expressly stating that the game is intended for exploring or expressing non-normative genders (Baird, Bowman, and Toft Thejls 2023), the community is more calibrated toward supporting players in however they present their genders in the moment, both on- and off-game. While problems with acceptance can still arise, the norms of the group make lasting change more plausible.

3.3 Transformation theories

Transformation is distinct from *transition*, although often the two concepts can be confused. Therefore, we believe it is important to theoretically distinguish the two before going into a deeper analysis of transformation.

Many definitions of transition exist. According to the one we use here, a transition is a *temporary shift* from one state of consciousness to another. By temporary, we mean literally bounded by time (and sometimes space).

As we have mentioned in the previous chapter, transformation is defined as a prolonged and sustained state of change, a shift in one's state of consciousness that has lasting after-effects. Thus, the distinction between transition and transformation has to do with the duration of the shift in one's consciousness or the impacts of such a shift.

a) Transformation and role-playing games

In role-playing games, most shifts are transitory, or in other words temporary. This includes the transition between player and character and vice versa, the transition between daily life and the magic circle of play (Huizinga 1958; Salen and Zimmerman 2004), as well as the transition between what is socially prescribed and accepted as "reality" and "fiction."

Experiencing transitions in states of consciousness can be a goal in itself for some people. By participating in a role-playing game, we are usually not in danger of "losing touch with reality" or shifting into our characters indefinitely. During play we have alibi (Montola 2010; Deterding 2017), which means we are not held responsible (for the most part, at least) for what occurs during these temporary states of transition. Therefore, we can experience a sense of liberation when transitioning into a playful state, even in a serious style of game. Some players refer to games as "fun," "entertainment," or "escapism," thus reducing the meaning and importance of these transitional states. Other players, on the other hand, find profound meaning in these transitional experiences; however, they still keep them mostly bound in the magic circle, transitioning back to roughly the same identities, ways of relating to others, and lifestyle choices after the game has come to an end.

Transformation, on the other hand, means that the shift in consciousness that the player experiences during the game remains prolonged and sustained after the game has concluded. The lasting after-effects of such an experience may affect the player's

identity, paradigm, relationships, societal views, as well as their positions towards cultures, subcultures, and countercultural movements.

Transformation may also affect how others view the player outside the game. An example of this is gender exploration. Players often explore different genders during a role-playing game (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019; Baird 2021; Sottile 2024). While this sort of experience may not lead to any sort of lasting change at all, and may even reaffirm one's previous identity, for some players, this kind of play can feel emancipatory or liberatory (Kemper 2020), for example, for queer players who experience marginalization in their lives. Emboldened by the experience within the game, a player may decide to shift gender in their daily life and not just within the magic circle. While this process is commonly called *transitioning*, within our theoretical framework, since it is a shift that is prolonged and sustained, it therefore is an example of transformation rather than a temporary transition. If this transformation is accepted by others outside the game, the experience can be intensely validating for the player and verify their own sense of identity (Baird 2021).

Another notable view on change is that of the peace studies scholar John Paul Lederach (2014), who studies conflict transformation. His approach is a paradigm of viewing conflict situations as opportunities to collaboratively envision positive futures rather than destructive forces. Rather than a linear process, Lederach (2014) views change as a circle, where things may move forward, hit a wall, move backwards, collapse, and then move forward again.


3. Things Move Backwards

4. Things Collapse

Change as a Circle

2. Things Hit a Wall; Movement Stops

1. Things Move Forward
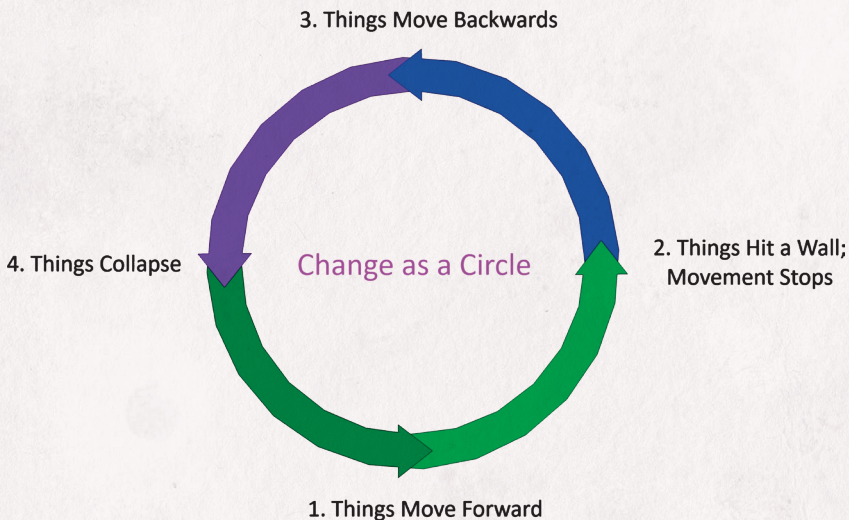
John Paul Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (2014)

Figure 2: Image adapted from Lederach (2014) by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas.

Similarly, Lederach (2014) emphasizes change not as a single event, but as a series of change processes that require many strategies to address the complexity of the conflict. These strategies are envisioned within this framework as a spiral containing a "web of dynamic circles that create... momentum and direction." This approach allows

us to embrace our need for linearity and forward movement, but also the "feedback loops" and iterations that are necessarily associated with circularity. At the same time, it encourages us to integrate both short-term and long-term strategies, employing a "yes, and" type of thinking. This approach is relevant to game design, improvisation, playfulness, learning, and many other human processes. For more on peace and conflict theories and RPGs, see Chapter 6.

A Simple Process Structure
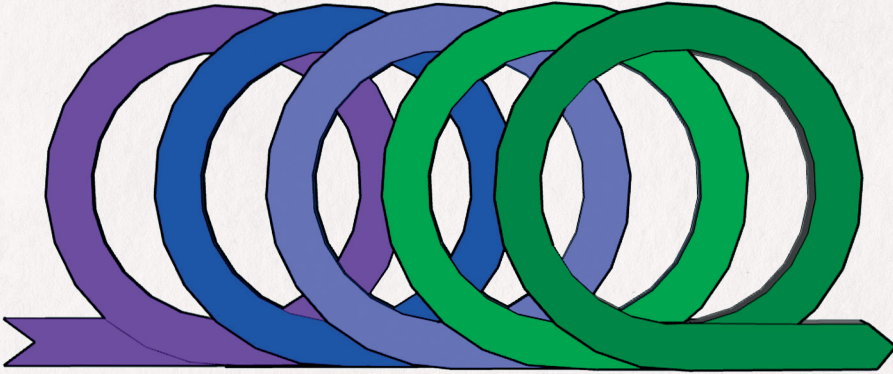
Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (2014)

Figure 3: Image adapted from Lederach (2014) by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas.

Growth is, of course, a highly individual process. Depending on the situation and the person, it happens at different speeds, rates, frequencies, and intensities. Growth can often be messy in the moment, embroiled in internal and/or external conflicts that must be addressed, and therefore is often symbolized by the caterpillar's transformation into a butterfly. The person experiencing it may have a growth mindset and embrace it, but they may also resist it. The psychotherapeutic practice of motivational interviewing—widely used in but not limited to the field of addiction recovery—envisions the processes of individual change in a way that is quite similar to Lederach's circular model. Their model is a Wheel of Change, or an "upward spiral," with several steps (Accend 2021): Precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, relapse, and then precontemplation again.

i. Resistance to change

In our conception of change, relapse to previous states and resistance are thus not always a bad thing; on the contrary, they are considered central components of the change process. Resistance refers to an unwillingness, inability, or ambivalent/conflicting attitude toward change related to a specific aspect of the person's life (Arkowitz 2002). According to Arkowitz (2002), resistance is observable at multiple levels:

- **Cognitive**, at the level of one's thought processes;
- **Affective**, at the level of one's feelings;

- **Behavioral**, at the level of one's behavioral patterns/actions;
- **Interpersonal**, at the level of interaction with others, e.g., a therapist, educator, or other significant people in a person's life.

Some common examples of resistance to change may revolve around:

- **Loss:** Letting go of someone or something important, including our feeling of control.
- **Intimacy:** Opening up to others and potentially getting hurt.
- **Vulnerability:** Lowering defense mechanisms that have kept us safe in the past.
- **Identity:** Any process that might invite us to question our sense of self.
- **Paradigm:** Any process that might invite us to question our worldview.
- **Status quo:** Any process that might destabilize our perceptions or disrupt our desire to keep living our lives the way we currently are.

Change often involves learning, and learning is a complicated process, wherein we must confront new material and figure out whether or not to integrate it. That may entail various complications. One of the most common is the phenomenon of *cognitive dissonance*, when new information contradicts someone's existing model of reality or worldview (Festinger 1957). Another similar phenomenon is that of *identity defense* (Illeris 2004, building upon Jean Piaget's theory), when a person is compelled to reject new information because it threatens their paradigm or because it is perceived to be incompatible with their identity.

In psychotherapeutic terms, and more specifically in terms of the person-centered approach, cognitive dissonance can be related to the state of incongruence (Rogers 1959), a state where the person's experience is inconsistent with their self-image, or where there is a notable discrepancy between the real and the ideal self. Similarly, through this lens, an identity defense can be related to the tendency of the self-image to preserve itself and defend itself from experiences that may threaten it. This often brings the self-image in conflict with the *actualizing tendency* of the person (i.e., the tendency of the organism to survive, evolve and thrive towards its full potential), and can potentially lead to denial, distorted perception of the lived experience, as well as self-fulfilling prophecies.

As adults, we tend to deal with new information, i.e., experience a *conceptual change* (Posner et al. 1982), in one of three ways:

a) **Assimilation:** Absorbing/collapsing it into existing cognitive schemas, perceptions, and understandings (McLeod 2020);

b) **Cumulation/mechanical learning:** Absorbing information outside of an existing context of understanding (Illeris 2009); and

c) **Accommodation:** Revising existing schema to make room for new knowledge. Accommodation can be demanding or even painful, requiring a strong supply of mental energy (Illeris 2009).

Within this framework, transformation can be thus viewed as a process of accommodation: restructuring clusters of schema, as the result of a "crisis-like situation" where "challenges are urgent and unavoidable," often requiring personality changes (Illeris 2009).

Notably, in addition to pedagogy, these theories have also been applied to personality (Allport 1961); persuasion and attitude change (Sherif, Sherif, and Nebergall 1982); communication (Giles ed. 2016); and social/cultural assimilation (Taft 1957), including related phenomena such as rumors (Allport and Postman 1946-1947) and prejudice (Allport 1979). These theories vary with regard to the application of the concepts, such as the role of assimilation and accommodation along particular "stages" of development and other interpretations. Thus, a thorough explanation of these nuances is beyond the scope of this textbook. Suffice it to say, the variability of these applied contexts indicates that interacting with unknown or conflicting information has far-reaching implications for how we engage with the world around us, how we come to understand social reality, how we connect with each other, and the degree to which we feel like we belong in a particular group.

With these theories in mind, as designers, we must accept that change is rarely linear in humans. Consequently, clear input/output goals such as "to design a game for X impact" will rarely result in predictable changes in the involved participants. Narrow goals may actually miss out on the most interesting aspects of change that arise due to emergent play and each person's individual life journeys. Therefore, it is better to think of games as transformational containers that hold the potential for many kinds of change, and try to plan for the unexpected and serendipitous while designing for intended goals. Many different types of change can be valuable if they are meaningful to the participant, and/or if they contribute to greater awareness, joy, peace, and/or justice for the group as a whole.

Role-playing, like other altered states of consciousness, can challenge us to face points of resistance. We can release control of how we typically present ourselves to the outside world and instead present someone new. We can choose to open up and experience connection with others, inside and outside of the fiction. We can inhabit ways of being, thinking, and perceiving that might be radically different from our own lived experience (Leonard 2021; Leonard, Janjetovic and Usman 2021). This process allows us to temporarily release our attachment to our identities, potentially bypassing the identity defense that would normally arise. This bypass is experienced as a relaxation of our usual vigilance, due to the playfulness, the role, and the fiction, which makes space for transformation in ways that are not always as quick, potent, or even possible in other contexts (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023).

Importantly, players may need encouragement to take these steps of entering into a playful state. J. L. Moreno believed that spontaneity and creativity, while potent, also counteract our instinctive need to conserve energy by replicating known behaviors rather than co-creating new ones. Moreno believed that humans "will fear spontaneity until [they] will learn how to train it," for example through role-playing

(qtd. in Moreno, Zerka 1987). Along these lines, psychodrama specialists have observed that some participants struggle with adopting roles due to *mental rigidity* (Sylvester 1970), either due to resistance to or difficulties with adopting a *theory of mind*. *Theory of mind* is a phenomenon in which one imagines and builds a mental model about the perspective of others. While exact mechanisms are unclear and results uneven, researchers are investigating the correlations between the development of theory of mind and social pretend play especially in young children (see e.g., Dore, Smith, and Lillard 2015). Presuming the ability to adopt a theory of mind, then resistance is likely the result of the identity defense's unwillingness to surrender vigilance. In our experience, while this form of total resistance is quite rare in transformative processes, it can happen and must be addressed, as it can become disruptive to the experience of the rest of the group.

When effective, the process of bypassing the identity defense through role-playing leading to change is not merely hypothetical or aspirational. Since the mid-1960s, psychologists have observed what they called *the role-playing effect*, in which people who play characters discussing political views different from their own have shown a greater attitude change after the play than people in a control group who were exposed to similar information, but did not role-play (Elms 1967; Bowman and Lieberoth 2024). From our perspective as designers, we are only scratching the surface of the kinds of transformation this form can provide space for players to experience.

Some examples of change processes that can be set in motion by shifting states of consciousness in role-playing games include:

- Deciding to leave an unfulfilling relationship after having experienced a more authentic style of relating through play;
- Deciding to change careers due to experiencing a boost of confidence after playing a new social role in a game;
- Deciding to leave social groups and coping mechanisms that one finds unhealthy or detrimental; and
- Deciding to shift one's beliefs on a particular issue and even engage in activism around that issue.

These changes often are not immediate, but rather are processes, requiring commitment, persistence, and determination long after the play process has ended. Transformation should thus emphasize consciously choosing to change, or learning how to navigate a change that is inevitable.

Ultimately, we should be able to choose the degree to which we face our own points of resistance. Undergoing processes of transition or transformation should always be consensual. We may not always be aware of processes of transformation as they are happening, but we should always be able to calibrate with others and self-advocate as needed. A healthy role-playing community fosters safety, calibration, communication, and self-advocacy. At the same time, it discourages peer pressure on people to push past their boundaries and instead invites people to explore their edges for growth (see Chapter 5).

b) Reflection models

An important factor in the process of change and transformation is not only the experience itself, but the reflection on that experience, be it a self-reflection or a facilitated one. The Reflection Toolkit (University of Edinburgh 2024), which offers information and support on facilitation, defines reflection as:

> the conscious examination of past experiences, thoughts, and ways of doing things. Its goal is to surface learning about oneself and the situation, and to bring meaning to it in order to inform the present and the future. [Reflection] challenges the status quo of practice, thoughts, and assumptions and may therefore inform our decisions, actions, attitudes, beliefs, and understanding about ourselves. (University of Edinburgh 2024)

There are many ways of reflecting, e.g., private reflection, reflection with an audience, or within a group. Reflection can take many forms: it can be written, verbal in conversation, or even be produced with the use of creative media. Sometimes it is a structured process, e.g., during the debriefing after a game, while other times it is free-form reflection, e.g., meta-reflection during a leisure game (Levin 2020, 2023) or individual reflection after one. The basic reflection process follows the ERA model – Experience, Reflection, Action (Jasper 2013) – and most reflective models and tools have an underlying structure that expands on it. The Reflector's Toolkit offers tools for a wide variety of reflection processes; we will present only a few selected reflection models that we believe can be useful within the transformative role-playing games framework.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984): Also referred to as Kolb's Reflective Cycle, it is primarily an experiential learning theory that focuses on the learner's internal cognitive processes, describing a continuous cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation, "whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb 1984, p. 38):

1. **Concrete Experience**: Might be a new experience, or the person reinterpreting an existing experience due to new concepts.
2. **Reflective Observation** of the new experience.
3. **Abstract Conceptualization**: Might be a new concept, or modified form of an existing concept after reflection.
4. **Active Experimentation**: Application of the modified or new ideas. (Kolb 1984)

Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs 1988): One of the most well-known reflection models, offering a structured framework to learn from single or repeated experiences alike, thanks to its cyclical nature. It covers 6 stages of exploring the experience:

1. **Description** of the experience, in detail, focusing on what happened;
2. **Feelings** and thoughts about the experience, and how they may have impacted the experience;

3. **Evaluation** of both the good and the bad aspects of the experience, trying to assess what worked and what did not in an as much of an objective and honest way as possible;

4. **Analysis** to make sense of the situation and to extract meaning from it;

5. **Conclusion** about what learning came out of the experience and what could have been done differently; and

6. **Action plan** for dealing with similar situations in the future, general changes that might seem appropriate, or decisions on what to take away from the experience. (Gibbs 1988)

What? So what? Now what? (Driscoll 1994): A much simpler framework for structured reflection, guiding you through 3 reflective stages:

1. **What?:** Description of the experience, including the identification of both the facts and the feelings of the situation;

2. **So what?:** Focusing on the implications of the experience and extracting meaning and learning from it; and

3. **Now what?:** Creating an action plan for the future, or simply thinking about what this experience means for the future. (Driscoll 1994)

Free-form reflection: While helpful, a predefined structure is not a necessary characteristic of reflection, nor are specific stages to go through or a set of questions to answer. Every approach and order of content is valid; some people find it easier and/or preferable to follow a free stream of consciousness in order to reflect, prompted by their learning and takeaways or feelings from the experience. The main benefits that free-form reflection can offer are:

- Not being restricted by a specific model or a particular set of questions;

- Approaching reflection in an individualized, free, and non-directive way;

- Choosing questions that arise from the reflection process itself and not from a model;

- Compared to structured reflection, it may feel more like an outlet to some people; and

- It can be used as a standalone approach or as a complementary tool within structured models of reflection.

No matter the model or approach, the reflection process can foster and facilitate transformation, while also making it potentially more intentional. While often imagined as a process that is applied to distinct, individual experiences, reflection gains more transformative value when repeated again and again for a series of experiences. This way, a reflective cycle can be turned into an ongoing process of reflection, helping the individuals to build a reflective habit and mindset, as well as to increase their willingness and ability to gain from their experiences.

3.4 Immersion theories

a) Definitions

The term *immersion* is used by multiple disciplines and practices to describe first person environments where a participant believes they are "surrounded by a completely other reality" (Murray 1997, 124). Cognitively, immersion requires the attention of the participant (Järvelä 2019, 23); whether this attention is active or passive, the player needs to focus on the *diegetic frame* in order to immerse. The diegetic frame or *diegesis* describes "things that exist inside of the fiction . . . for example, music during run-time is part of the diegesis if the characters can hear it, and non-diegetic if only the players hear it" (Koljonen et al. 2019, 413-414).

In larp discourse, "immersion as a state means the subjective experience of being someone else in an alternative, diegetic reality" (Lukka 2014, 88), but as Petri and Järvelä (2012) demonstrate, differences of opinion exist as to how this state is described, as well as where the "being someone else" occurs, e.g., in the diegesis of the fiction as a character, or in really "becoming" the other person cognitively speaking (Petri and Järvelä 2012, 18).

There are degrees of diegetic reality. For example, both Juul (2005) and Aarseth (2007) suggest that immersion in games is different from fictional immersion because of the participatory nature of the form. This element of participation brings the experience closer to reality; as the player is present in the game world, this is different from immersion into the fiction of a novel or a movie.

Some sources use the word *presence*, which seems to be roughly synonymous with sensory immersion. This concept can be found in Mäyrä and Ermi's (2005) proposed a model with three types of immersion: imaginative, challenge-based, and sensory. Immersion is not a binary state as the degree of immersion can be "objectively measured by counting the number of the users' senses that are provided with input and the degree to which inputs from the physical environment are 'shut out'" (Lombard and Ditton 1997, 199). Thus, we may be immersed differently in a book, in a VR world wearing a headset, or in a theatrical experience.

According to the *immersive fallacy* (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, 450-455) although the ideal may be "to sensually transport the participant into an illusory simulated environment," digital gaming has not yet delivered on the promise of the Holodeck, but some larps can get considerably closer to this ideal. This is because the immersion into a larp is different; the illusion seems more real because we are using much of our body whilst also being present in the diegesis as a character.

Irrespective of the degree of presence, this idea of immersion is fundamental to the design of transformative play, because it is an experiential experience: the body can experiment, learn, or process while the game is being played. Thus some of the workload moves from the player to their character. While the player still

steers the experience, many players report immersion as like being the passenger in a car. Turkington (2006) also suggests degrees of immersion by reflecting on the manifestation of the character: character as marionette, puppet, mask, and possessing force. These concepts are explored in more depth later in this chapter.

For more details on the history of immersion theories in RPG discourses, see White, Boss, and Harviainen (2012).

b) Types of immersion

Bowman (2017) describes six types of immersion, emphasizing what aspects hold the player's attention at any given moment, which mostly align with categories previously defined by Calleja (2011) regarding video game immersion:

- **Immersion into activity:** In tabletop games, immersion into activity might involve rolling dice and counting, whereas in larp participants often physically act something out. Some activities rely upon representational mechanics, such as using one's hands in rock-paper-scissors in a *Vampire: The Masquerade* Mind's Eye Theatre larp. Others use a mixture of embodiment and mechanics, such as hitting a combatant with a foam sword and calling out numbers to represent the amount of damage incurred (Bowman 2017). Other larps expect the players to actually complete the activity without a representational layer, for example, painting wooden toys as Santa's elves in a larp like *Midwinter* (2020) and *Midwinter Revisited* (2022) (Pettersson 2023).

- **Immersion into game:** This type of immersion derives from what Forge theory described as *gamism* (Edwards 2001). Participants focus on their character's achievements (solving puzzles, acquiring wealth, achieving high status politically) and "winning" when possible.

- **Immersion into narrative:** The playstyle that relies on finding and following a story as the primary route to immersion is called *narrativism* in Forge theory (Edwards 2001). Well understood story structures help to *transport* the participant's to another place and time (Gerrig 1993) and enable grammar essential to shared communication and a rapid transfer of ideas between players (Brind 2022, 212).

- **Immersion into environment:** Forge theory refers to this mode as *simulationism* (Edwards 2001). It describes a route to immersion via the physical exploration of a *storyworld*. Whilst a design focus on realism does not always equate to immersion (Salen and Zimmerman, 2004, 451; Koljonen 2007), *360 degree* design can ease the transition from lifeworld to storyworld, for example, *Black Friday* (2014 and 2016)

- **Immersion into character:** Immersion into character is one of the most common definitions of immersion. Immersion into character refers to the degree to which the participant "loses themselves" in the thoughts

and feelings of the fictive persona they embody. This type of immersion is privileged in discourse by the Nordic larp community who state *immersionism* as the primary goal of role-playing (Bøckman, 2003; Pohjola, 2004). However deep immersion into character often relies on other forms of immersion described before.

- **Immersion into community:** Role-playing games are (in most cases) social activities (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2003). Role-players immerse socially with one another both inside the game world and as a gaming community. It is not easy to separate these social contexts, norms, and cues (both in-game and off-game) from the experience of role-playing immersion (Bowman 2017). Some players enjoy immersion into community more than other more typical definitions of "games."

When we understand the different ways in which players immerse into games, we can design more intentionally around the types of experiences we want them to have. For example, if you are teaching mathematics, it might be important to include more game-like elements in which players practice their math skills. However, extensive math drills may get in the way of learning if you are trying to teach specific historical details embedded within the environment of the game, etc. Therefore, types of immersion can be leveraged to facilitate certain goals—and including too many elements that compete for your player's attention might detract from those goals, causing cognitive overload.

3.5 Mechanisms of transformation

If immersion is the process through which we become deeply connected to a game experience, other practices can aid the transformation process. We call them *mechanisms of transformation*. While these practices often happen unconsciously or intuitively, they can be designed, facilitated, and played in intentional ways.

a) Ritual

Role-playing games themselves can be viewed through the lens of ritual theory (Bowman 2010; Harviainen 2012). Ritual is a powerful human activity that is visible in many activities that we take for granted, with the participants becoming actors in a specific social stage (Goffman 1959). For example, in the classroom, the ritual space includes individuals who shift roles into teachers and students for a bounded period of time. After that point, these individuals enter other social stages which have different roles and expectations. *Rites of passage* are especially important, for example, a graduation ceremony in which officials from the school lead individuals through one life stage (the student) to another (the person with the degree). Many key life events are marked by rituals, including entrance into young adulthood, marriage, and death.

Rituals can also take place in leisure settings, for example, attending concerts, sport games, or other forms of entertainment. From this perspective, role-playing

games are understandable as ritual activities. If RPGs are rituals already, adding ritual activities within the game itself and the framing around it can deepen the role-playing experience (Bowman 2015).

Ritual involves three stages (van Gennep 1960; Turner, Victor 1969):

1. **Preparation:** A departure from the mundane world with thorough separation,

2. **Liminal:** An entrance into an in-between "threshold" state called liminality, and

3. **Return:** A return to the mundane world with an incorporation of the liminal experiences.

The before phase, or *preparation*, can include workshops, lectures, costuming, and other ways to prepare for the ritual. The *liminal* stage is the game itself (Harviainen 2012), an in-between phase where social identities within a community can shift (van Gennep 1960; Turner, Victor 1969). The after phase, or *return* can involve de-roling, debriefing, processing, and other integration practices (see Chapter 2).

Notably, rites of passage are often witnessed by the larger community, for example, friends and family, so that everyone present acknowledges this shift in social status. As such, anthropologist Victor Turner discusses how the ritual process creates *communitas*, or a sense of community. From this perspective, the magic circle of play is literally a ritual space rather than just a concept.

Other forms of cultural leisure rituals such as those intended for entertainment are optional and less consequential; the group does not believe in the social truth of the activity in the same way. For Turner (1974), RPGs would then be *liminoid*, as they do not result in a permanent change of social status for participants, e.g., one does not literally become a wizard in society's eyes from playing *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) in the same way one becomes a person with a degree after graduating. However, Turner (1974) emphasizes the power of liminoid experiences as mediums within which one can exercise one's individual "freedom... growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence." He also describes how liminoid experiences are imbued with pleasure in ways that other expected activities such as work are not, and how they are "potentially capable of releasing creative powers, individual or communal, either to criticize or buttress the dominant social structural values" (69-69).

These statements point toward the potential potency of RPGs as transformational containers, in which we are interested in blending the liminoid and the liminal. Role-playing games can lead to transformative experiences that are sometimes more profound than more widely socially sanctioned rituals; in our previous example, for some players, enacting a wizard in a fictional college for a short time may lead to a larger shift in identity or self-confidence than obtaining an actual degree. As such, strengthening the belief in the potency of the activity within role-playing groups is a key component to maximizing this potential. Furthermore, supporting each other in

processes of change through *communitas* can help make desired transformation more concrete in social reality outside of games. We will return to the design of rituals in transformative game design in Chapter 6.

b) Bleed

What can help this process is the role-playing specific phenomenon known as *bleed*, coined by Emily Care Boss (2007), in which contents spill over from the player to the character and vice versa (Hugaas 2024). This section will explore the different types of bleed that can occur, which are especially important to know when designing for specific aspects of transformation.

While some players claim not to experience bleed (Pedersen 2017), an argument can be made that bleed as a phenomenon happens to all players, the relevant question rather being whether it has surpassed the player's *bleed perception threshold* or not (Hugaas 2024). Noticing bleed is not necessary for transformation to occur, but can be a catalyst for deep reflection. In transformative play, we should not assume players will necessarily experience noticeable levels of bleed, but we can still choose to try to design with the intention to maximize the potential for it in various ways. While there is no real data or even designer consensus around how one can go about designing for bleed, suggestions range from e.g., creating close-to-home characters that the players may find relatable (Jeepen 2007b); strengthening alibi through numerous safety measures; the creation of strong transformational containers (e.g., Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2021); or even depriving players of physiological needs such as sleep and food (Leonard and Thurman 2018).

Bleed can take many forms, including but not limited to (Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2021; Hugaas 2024):

1. **Emotional Bleed:** Where emotional states and feelings bleed between player and character (Montola 2010; Bowman 2013), e.g., negative experiences in play leading to animosity between players.

2. **Procedural Bleed:** Where physical abilities, traits, habits, and other bodily states bleed between player and character (Hugaas 2019), e.g., how we carry ourselves, ticks, movements, reflexes; or learning how to move in a way that physically exudes more sensuality or confidence.

3. **Memetic Bleed:** Where ideas, thoughts, opinions, convictions, ideologies and similar bleed between player and character (Hugaas 2019), e.g., values of equality and equity embedded in structure in the game, leading to players adopting these views outside of the game.

4. **Ego Bleed:** Where aspects of personality and archetypal patterns bleed between player and character (Beltrán 2012, 2013), including as a precursor to a process of *individuation* (Jung 1976), e.g., playing a resilient and strong character leading to greater confidence for the player. (More details later in this chapter).

5. **Identity Bleed:** A more extensive form of bleed where aspects of a sense of self, self-schemas, and similar identity constructs bleed between player and character (Hugaas 2024).

6. **Emancipatory Bleed:** Where players from marginalized backgrounds experience liberation from that marginalization through their characters. Players can choose to steer toward such liberatory experiences as a means to challenge structural oppression (Kemper 2017, 2020), e.g., overthrowing an oppressive structure in play leading to players processing aspects of real life oppression in their own lives.

7. **Relationship Bleed:** When relationship dynamics off-game resemble in-game ones and vice versa. A common example is *romantic bleed*, where players feel attraction or even fall in love with fictional characters (Waern 2010) and/or players (Harder 2018) after an intense role-playing experience.

Bleed offers one of the mechanisms that can help us understand pathways to transformation. We can become more aware that the frames (Goffman 1986) of in-game and off-game experience are more porous than we may realize. From that awareness, we can then acknowledge this porousness as a space of great potential for steering (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015), including in a liberatory fashion (Kemper 2020), meaning intentionally guiding play toward transformative experiences. We can then use bleed as a way to unlock aspects of our life that we would like to design differently, such as our identities, our self-concepts, our communities, our paradigms, and our relationships (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Hugaas 2024). From that point, we can integrate our role-playing experiences, including bleed, into our lives intentionally and express ourselves in ways that feel more authentic as discovered through play (Winnicott 1971).

Notably, bleed is not always experienced as transformational or even pleasant. Some players experience bleed as negative and damaging (Bowman 2013), whereas others have difficulty perceiving having experienced it even if they desire to do so (Pedersen 2017). One can still gain powerful insights from games without bleed, for example, by engaging in methods of integration, such as intellectual analysis (Bowman and Hugaas 2019).

3.6 Identity theories

Related to this last point, this section will explore notions of identity in more detail. So far, we have been discussing "player" and "character" as distinct entities with clear boundaries and definitions. However, when digging deeper into identity theories, conceptualizations of "self" are far more complex (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023). Understanding theories of identity helps us dive deeper into the mysteries of the role-playing process and, importantly, lead to insights into the nature of our psychology such that we can better understand our consciousness, what is being expressed in RPGs, and what might need deeper integration outside of play.

a) Definitions of identity

If we look up the word "identity" in Dictionary.com (2024), we will come up with a variety of definitions, each of which underlines another aspect of what identity means and includes:

- "The state or fact of remaining the same one or ones, as under varying aspects or conditions." Identity is thus characterized by sameness over time, unchanging despite circumstances.

- "The condition of being oneself or itself, and not another." This condition underlies our sense of individuality.

- "Condition or character as to who a person or what a thing is; the qualities, beliefs, etc., that distinguish or identify a person or thing." This definition focuses on specific personality and cultural traits.

- "The sense of self, providing sameness and continuity in personality over time and sometimes disturbed in mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia." In other words, a sense of continuity of selfhood, or 'sense of self.'" (Dictionary 2024)

Regardless of the definition, there is a clear emphasis on perception: how others see us and how we see ourselves. Identity can indeed influence the way we view ourselves on many levels: in regard to our own self-worth, to other people, to groups, to society, and to culture and ideologies.

Another point of emphasis is stability. It is comforting for people to have a sense of a fixed identity, to feel that they are consistent and unchanging. That comfort is particularly potent when one's identity is connected with a sense of belonging in various groups; a position in the societal structure; a feeling of purpose, etc. Similarly, humans also expect other people's identities to stay fixed, which is equally comforting. People can predict what to expect from each other, understand the status structures and hierarchies, know how to appropriately behave, how to properly categorize one another, etc. As a result, shifts in identity are often viewed as destabilizing, suspicious, or even dangerous.

Thus, these shifts can feel destabilizing for others: they may feel that they no longer "recognize" someone, know how to categorize them or behave around them. They may perceive that someone is behaving outside of socially prescribed norms and is not performing their identity based upon our expectations, or even shaking up established social hierarchies. Consequences may thus arise when someone is noticeably shifting identity. Here, we emphasize identity as a social state.

Shifts in identity can also be destabilizing for ourselves, as they may lead us to feel like we do not have a coherent sense of self, in other words, cause *identity confusion* (Erikson 1968; Schnall and Steinberg 2000). In this case, our behavior, desires, or needs may feel incoherent with our established identity. Moreover, we may switch from one identity to another distinct personality, whether intentionally or unintentionally,

which is called *identity alteration* (Schnall and Steinberg 2000). These identities may or may not be aware that each other exist or in relationship to one another. Identity alteration can either be a functional way of adapting to social expectations of behavior and personality, or a coping mechanism for dealing with trauma and other psychological ruptures, e.g., *dissociative identity* (Schnall and Steinberg 2000).

Here, we emphasize identity as a psychological state rather than a fixed entity. We offer the following categories as ways to further complicate our notions of identity based on theories in psychology and counselling (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023). Our intention is to demonstrate that the division between "player" and "character" is not always clean-cut, and that our sense of self is not always as coherent as we might like to admit. This multiplicity of self is not a negative thing, as it forms the basis from which transformative role-playing can emerge. Understanding the complexities of our own identities can help us positively interface and interrelate with the identities we play in games, learning valuable insights from their enactment.

i) Identity as a social construct

The field of social psychology emphasizes the societal aspects of identity. According to Tajfel and Turner (1979), *social identity* includes the aspects of an individual's self-image that derive from the social categories to which they perceive themselves as belonging, as well as the importance and meaning that this sense of belonging holds for them. According to Doise (1986), social identity can be analyzed on four levels: the intrapersonal, the interpersonal, the positional, and the ideological. Furthermore, according to Goffman (1959, 1986) and Butler (1990, 1993), we are always playing a role and performing according to expectations.

Through the perspective of social psychology, identity is not viewed as a fixed internal state, but as rather emerging and changing in response to environmental factors. These factors may include social and cultural expectations, e.g., social roles and norms; relationship dynamics with others; requirements due to life circumstances; experiences leading to revelations about the self; and many more. In any case, identity is mediated through the person's relationship with the external world and is thus inherently social, i.e., socially constructed (Butler 1990; Montola 2012; Stets and Serpe 2013; Baird 2021). For marginalized people, these definitions by society often overlay a person's sense of self, leading them to experience *double consciousness* in which they are forced to view themselves through the often-judgmental eyes of others, in addition to their own sense of authentic self-expression (DuBois 2015; Kemper 2017).

As role-playing is often a social activity and roles are usually designed in connection to social structures, understanding how identity is shaped by social factors is helpful for designers when designing for transformation.

ii) Narrative identity

According to the theory of narrative identity, people construct their identities through the integration of their life experiences into a perpetually evolving internal

story of their self that gives them a sense of coherence and meaning (McAdams 2001). This life narrative includes the person's perceived past, present, and future, with autobiographical memory playing a pivotal role as a narrative identity construction mechanism (Wortham 2001). Like every story, the life narrative includes a setting, characters, plots, arcs, scenes, as well as a storytelling process which is equally important in order to understand narrative identity (McLean et al. 2007). In other words, our stories we tell about our lives shape our sense of identity in many ways.

iii) Identity as psychodynamic

According to psychodynamic psychology, a person's identity is composed of several parts, some of which are conscious but many of which are not. These parts have different relationships with one another, which can vary from harmonious to antagonistic. Each of these parts develops or expresses itself more prominently in different circumstances, while some of them may be hidden indefinitely. In this framework, a coherent sense of self is a psychological construct and serves as a safety mechanism, keeping the fragmented nature of the psyche hidden in the unconscious.

Among the theories that view identity from this perspective, the most influential one is Sigmund Freud's (1990, 2013) structural model of the psyche in psychoanalytic theory. According to Freud, the psychic apparatus consists of three distinct agents: the *id*, the unconscious set of needs, instincts, impulses and desires; the *superego,* the critical and moralizing internalization of cultural rules and ethos; and the *ego,* the organized and realistic agent that mediates between the id and the superego. The preponderance of themes in games focused on *violence* (Albom 2021), *sexuality* (Grasmo and Stenros 2022), and *death* (Hugaas 2023) can be understandable through the lens of the id.

Similarly, Carl Jung (1976) divides consciousness into parts, including the *persona,*or public mask; the *ego*, colloquially known as the personality; the *personal unconscious*, aspects repressed in the individuals' psyche, such as *the personal shadow*; and the *collective unconscious*, aspects of our shared humanity, including the *collective shadow*. The concept of shadow is similar to id in that it contains aspects that one may not find socially acceptable or otherwise wish to reject or disown on a conscious level. However, much of the transformative power of psychotherapy involves interfacing and coming into harmonious relationship with these parts, a process that role-playing games can help facilitate in a way that may feel safer than other methods. Examples of shadow explored through games include (Bowman in press for 2025):

1. Experiencing loss, violation, and/or trauma;

2. Exerting power over others;

3. Portraying undesirable personality traits;

4. Expressing mental health challenges; and

5. Exploring dysfunctional or maladaptive social dynamics.

From our perspective, in order for such experiences to be considered transformational, players should engage in some sort of processing around their play, distill takeaways, and integrate the experiences, i.e., engage in *shadow work* (Bowman in press for 2025). See Chapter 2 for more information.

Players can also draw strength through enacting empowering *archetypes*, or common patterns of character types that appear in many cultures in societies and may arise from the collective unconscious (Beltrán 2012). While the hero is a common example (Campbell 1973), other potent archetypes include the Divine, the Trickster (Turner, Allen 2021), the Great Mother, the Witch, and others (Bowman 2024). Interacting with these archetypes, either within oneself or in relationship with others (Beltrán 2021) through a process of *active imagination* can aid individuation, in which a person's ego can evolve into a more mature Self (Jung 1976). We will explore these concepts further in Chapter 6.

iv) Identity as a mosaic

Similarly to psychodynamic psychology, other theories also view the self as consisting of parts, but not parts that are the same for everyone. They rather understand identity as a mosaic, involving clusters of parts that derive from the individual's life experiences, personality structure, and level of self-awareness, and are therefore unique (Burns 2014). In a similar metaphor, in role-playing game theory, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas (2019) has likened identities to stained glass windows in which the pieces of glass become rearranged through the process of play.

One such conceptual example comes from the person-centered therapy, where the self is described as a mosaic of configurations: a variety of distinctive self-concepts that arise in different situations and circumstances. Every configuration of self encompasses a congruous pattern of feelings, thoughts, behaviors, needs, attitudes, desires, and worldviews. Depending on the circumstances, different configurations may take the reins, without the person being consciously aware of this process. These configurations may coexist harmoniously and functionally within the person, or become a cause of internal conflict and psycholgical distress (Rogers 1959; Mearns and Thorne 2000; Diakolambrianou 2021).

Another example is George Kelly's theory of *personal constructs*. According to Kelly (1955), our identities are formed by the various mental constructs through which we view reality. These constructs are essentially our own theoretical frameworks, based on our experiences and observations, and used to interpret and navigate the situations we encounter in life. There is thus an emphasis on individuality, as each person has an inherently personal and unique system of constructs.

These theories can help us understand how we can so easily shift from one personality to the other in play, adapting to our circumstances as well as our own unique inner world. Considering identity as a mosaic can help us consider how we can consciously rearrange our identities in games and in life.

b) Role-playing and identity

As we have discussed, during the game, identities are expected to shift in role-playing games, i.e., our daily identity or "self" is expected to shift into an alter ego or "character." This section discusses what the qualities of these characters might be like and how players relate to these qualities.

i) Nine types of characters

Based on participant-observation ethnographic research (see Chapter 7), Bowman (2010) has categorized 9 types of characters, distinguished by putting emphasis on how the players described their characters in comparison to their own identity or identities. The themes were pulled from interviews with players who engage in long-term, campaign-style play where they design their own characters. However, even in short-term games or RPGs with pre-written characters, players likely have similar relationships to their characters, as they draw from parts within themselves to enact them, often also emphasizing or embellishing a particular element based on their own interests or inclinations. We will present here these 9 categories, while keeping in mind that they are not exhaustive, and characters often fit into more than one category (Bowman 2010):

1. Doppelganger Self: The player and character are nearly identical or extremely similar. Examples include:

- A new player embodying a character similar to themselves to try out role-playing;
- An experienced larper playing "close to home," i.e. a character with a similar identity or set of life circumstances as their own;
- A group playing fictional versions of themselves in an alternate timeline.

2. Augmented Self: The player and character are nearly identical or extremely similar, but the character has an important addition or augment that shapes their identity. Examples include:

- The player's identity plus extreme wealth;
- The player's identity plus superpowers.

3. Devoid Self: The player and character are nearly identical or extremely similar. but the character has an important aspect removed that shapes their identity. Examples include:

- The player's identity minus growing up in a loving family;
- The player's identity minus empathy.

4. Fragmented Self: A facet of the player's personality, life, or interests that is magnified to become a central part of that character's identity. Most role-playing characters are based on one or more fragments or parts of the player,

whether consciously or unconsciously, forming new mosaics of configurations. Examples include:

- The player's interest in cooking manifesting in the character of a food critic;
- The player's anger manifesting as the character's default emotion and form of expression;
- The player's interest in spirituality manifesting in the character being a spiritual guide as a profession.

5. Repressed, or Regressive Self: The character resembles a regression into an earlier stage of humanity, consciousness, and/or an animalistic state. Examples include:

- The player embodying a six-year-old at a larp about a birthday party;
- The player embodying a character from a preverbal culture;
- The player embodying the character of an anthropomorphised cat.

6. Idealized Self: The character is someone the player admires or wishes they could be more like. Examples include:

- The player embodying an extremely brave hero character who always does the right thing;
- The player embodying a healer character who is always compassionate and selfless regardless of circumstances;
- The player embodying an extremely empowered character who never backs down from achieving their goals.

7. Oppositional Self: The character is someone who the player believes is entirely different from their own self-concept. They may even have an aversion toward the character, or the character amplifies an aspect of their unconscious that they find abhorrent, i.e., the shadow (Beltrán 2013). Examples include:

- A player embodying a villain character who engages in acts that the player finds repugnant;
- A player embodying a character who has a completely different political and religious background from their own;
- A player drawing upon traits from someone they know and dislike to express through the character.

8. Taboo Self: A character who engages in behaviors that the player and/or society at large find taboo or transgressive (Stenros 2015; Bowman and Stenros 2024). The player may still believe the behaviors inappropriate after play.

Alternatively, the player may not find these behaviors problematic, but society at large or certain groups within it may. In some cases, the player may find the experience

liberatory to important parts of their identity that have been repressed, e.g., the *golden shadow* (Miller 1992). Examples include:

- A player embodying a character who is a cannibal; or
- A player embodying a character who has a gender identity different from the one assigned to them at birth.

9. Experimental Self: A character that the player creates as an experiment to explore a certain personality type, character concept, costume style, aspect of performance, etc. Examples include:

- A player embodying a character that requires extensive prosthetics and props to appear realistic;
- A player creating an unusual character in order to see how that personality would interact within a particular role-playing fiction, i.e., "I wonder what would happen if…"

c) Identity shifting in RPGs

As mentioned before, identity shifting in RPGs occurs through immersion, and more specifically through immersion into character (Bøckman 2003; Bowman 2014). This type of immersion includes pretending to believe that our identity is different (Pohjola 2004), adopting the worldview of the character while still retaining the player's agency, i.e., perspective taking (Kaufman and Libby 2012). Players then often think, respond, and behave according to this new identity. Returning to the player's daily identity (or identities) after the game can lead to empathy for the character, and thus potentially for people in the outside world with similar worldviews, personality traits or experiences as that character (Meriläinen 2012; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). However, enactments of marginalizations the player does not share with the character should be handled with care in order to avoid harmful stereotypes (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021)

There are various metaphors often used to describe and explain the phenomenon of immersion into character. One of them is the driving metaphor (Bowman 2015; 2024), according to which the player can be:

- **In the driver's seat:** The player feels they have full control of the character's actions;
- **In the passenger's seat:** The player shares some control of the character's actions;
- **In the backseat:** The player is watching the actions, but the character has control; or
- **In the trunk:** The player and the character are undifferentiated and merged and/or the character controls all action.

The driving metaphor is similar to the concept of steering (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015), according to which players consciously steer the direction of character actions due to a variety of reasons. This may include practical reasons, the need for a smoother play experience, aesthetic ideals, specific desired personal experience, as well as ethical or unethical motivations.

Another notable metaphor is the theatrical performance metaphor (Bowman 2015; 2024). As Moyra Turkington (2006) describes, these degrees of immersion indicate the degree to which the character can function as a:

- **Marionette:** Where the player directs the character as if it were an external object, which is "nothing more than a tool with good aesthetic value";
- **Puppet:** Where the player partially inhabits the character, but they have control of how the character behaves and the reasoning behind it;
- **Mask:** Where the player maintains a distinct identity, but has an emotional, empathic connection with the character, which influences the character's actions; or
- **Possessing force:** The player abandons personal identity, surrenders to experiencing the full subjective reality of the character. (Turkington 2006)

Even within the role-playing world, attitudes towards immersion differ, where some communities discourage deep immersion into character, whereas others consider it an immersive ideal (Pohjola 2004). It is important to note here that, although fears around RPGs often center upon players "losing touch with reality" or "losing themselves in the character," that is actually highly unlikely to happen unless the player has a general difficulty with differentiating in everyday life i.e., psychosis involving delusional tendencies (see Chapter 5).

In other words, and regardless of our attitudes towards these states, it is important to keep in mind that it is highly unlikely for role-players to remain "in the trunk" or experience the character as a "possessing force" for long. Instead, there may be brief Golden Moments for players (Bowman 2013), where they experience a reduction in self-conscious hyperawareness and can fully embody the experience of the character (Lukka 2022). The bottom line is that, while bleed and intensely immersive experiences can happen for some players, and these shifts can be disorienting, role-players do not forget "who they are" or what reality is. But RPGs do allow players to wyrd the self (Kemper 2020), exploring new facets of identity.

3.7 Psychotherapeutic approaches and theories

As we briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, there are many psychotherapeutic modalities that employ storytelling and role-playing as tools. At the same time, there are ways to incorporate role-playing games into psychotherapeutic approaches that do not explicitly use role-playing as a technique; and vice versa, there are ways to incorporate elements and concepts of various psychotherapeutic approaches and theories into

the design and implementation of a role-playing game (Connell 2023; Hand 2023; Bartenstein 2024). While there is certainly not enough space in this textbook to analyze all these approaches and theories, we will here introduce some that we consider to be among the most relevant to role-playing games.

a) Standalone role-playing techniques and Fixed Role therapy

Role-playing can often be implemented as a standalone technique in a psychotherapeutic session, e.g., a short role-playing scenario in which the therapist impersonates someone the client is finding hard to confront, thus giving them the opportunity to try out new approaches. This practice can be and is used by various psychotherapeutic modalities. A characteristic example is Gestalt Therapy, where therapists often use the Empty Chair technique: The clients are invited to role-play addressing an absent person, or even a part of themselves, as though they were sitting on the chair across them. Gestalt therapists also use the Topdog-Underdog technique, where two parts of the self confront each other through role-play (with one part portraying social expectations, while the other embodying self-sabotage). Another example is Dialectical Behavioral Therapy (DBT), where hypothetical role-playing scenarios can be used in order to provide the client with a safer environment to practice and develop new interpersonal skills (Mission Australia 2015). Similarly, in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) experiential role-playing can be used as part of therapeutic and psychoeducational interventions (Bilich and Ciarrochi 2009); this includes Superhero Therapy, a method that combines ACT with geek popular culture to make mental health a *hero's journey* (Campbell 1973; Scarlet 2016). Other psychotherapeutic approaches that often use role-playing as complementary techniques include experiential psychotherapies, systemic therapy, adventure therapy, inner child work and reparenting etc. (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023).

However, there are psychotherapeutic approaches in which the element of role-playing and storytelling is not a complementary technique, but the central therapeutic tool. One of these approaches is George Kelly's Fixed Role Therapy. It was developed in 1955 as a form of brief, constructivist and "dramaturgical therapy" (as quoted by Horley 2006), where the therapist invites the client to step into the shoes of a new role in their real life for about 2 weeks. This new role is drafted by the therapist, and the goal of this embodied practice is to actively explore alternative self aspects and worldviews. This practice derives from Kelly's theory of personal constructs that we have previously mentioned. The personal constructs that people develop as mental representations of the world (which they then used to understand their observations and to construct meaning from information and experiences) include their self-perception. Based on Kelly's concept of constructive alternativism (ie that events are subject to multiple interpretations), a new role can serve as an alternative lens through which the person can view and interpret their world and lived experiences (Kelly 1955; 1963).

b) Psychodrama and sociodrama

Among the psychotherapeutic practices where role-playing is a main element and medium, drama-based approaches are prevalent. An early use of the term "role-playing" was done by Jacob Levy Moreno, whose study of children's play steered him to invent the methodologies of psychodrama and sociodrama (Blatner 2004), together with his wife Celine Zerka Toeman Moreno. When referring to these techniques, we will reference "the Morenos." According to Eirik Fatland (2014), the lineage of contemporary larp can be traced back to the development of psychodrama in the early 1920s. Thus, many of the key insights in role-playing game theory are similar to concepts developed by the Morenos (Pitkänen 2015).

Psychodrama is a psychotherapeutic method through which internal conflicts can be explored through their dramatical reconstruction in a group context, under the guidance of a trained psychodramatist. An early innovator in group work, J. L. Moreno has described psychodrama as "an action method" and "a scientific exploration of truth through dramatic art" (Moreno, J. L. 1946, 37-44). His emphasis on the improvisational and political aspects of theater, in accordance with his earlier innovative work titled Theatre of Spontaneity, is apparent in his theoretical model of psychodrama, as well as in his subsequent work on the method of sociodrama. Through sociodrama, groups can reenact situations of social conflict and explore intergroup dynamics of oppression, in both non-therapeutic and therapeutic contexts (Hickling 1989; Leveton 2010; Giacomucci 2017).

The Morenos emphasized the value of role-playing as a tool for improving mental health and fostering well-being, approaching the dramatic role as an acting and interacting entity. They viewed it as something that is actively embodied instead of passively worn, contrary to the zeitgeist of their time that favored a cognitive approach to the dramatic role, as "a part of the self that has been absorbed by the mind" (Landy 1993, 52-54).

Unlike most role-playing games, psychodrama is characterized by methodological directivity; spontaneity is, of course, a desired and necessary element when it comes to the content that members bring to the group as well as the manner in which they engage with it during the psychodramatic process, but the psychodramatist has a central role in directing this process, through giving instructions and guidance to the members, and through suggesting selected exercises, approaches and techniques (Jennings and Minde 1993)

Moreover, unlike in most role-playing games in which players are considered heroes in their own stories (Kim 2004; Sandberg 2004; Page 2014), in psychodrama *protagonist* play, each scene has a specific central group member. The rest of the group serve as an audience or characters within the protagonist's subjective memory or experience (Moreno, Zerka 1987; Diakolambrianou 2022).

Core to the Morenos' model is the process of *role reversal*, in which the participant steps out of their own role/self and takes on the role of either another person in the

group (*reciprocal)*, or a significant person in their life or the incident they are enacting (*representational*) (Kellerman 1994). As with other forms of role-playing, role-playing in psychodrama is intended to reduce bias, resolve interpersonal conflicts, and cultivate empathy for more functional relationships (Kellerman 1994, 279), During this process, several key techniques are used:

- **Mirroring:** The participant observes as the therapist(s) and sometimes the group members become their *auxiliary egos*, and reenact a part of the participant's psyche or an event they have previously discussed or acted out;

- **Doubling:** Another group member impersonates the participant, adopting their behavior, and articulating the feelings and thoughts they believe the participant has; and

- **Soliloquy:** The participant expresses their inner thoughts and emotions to the audience (Cruz et al. 2018).

These practices involve a reframing of *projective identification* (Klein 1946) as a "pathway for psychological change" in which one person helps process another's emotions, which are then "internalized in an altered form" (Ogden 1979). In psychodrama, such processes promote *tele*, a sort of "two-way empathy" (qtd. in Moreno, Zelka 1953).

Some of these techniques are similar to phenomena in role-playing games, whether consciously integrated or not. A form of role reversal in RPGs might be when players either create or receive a character whose personality traits or backstory elements are similar to a person in their real lives; this can potentially build empathy and help illuminate obscure dynamics in relationships. Mirroring is less common, but could occur for example in other players enacting a flashback scene the character has described while they watch, or through role non-monogamy (Jeepen 2007c), e.g., when the group takes turns enacting the game's protagonist in various situations. Another form of mirroring could occur, for example, if a facilitator enacts a scene that is close-to-home to the player's real-life experiences. The resemblance between techniques in psychodrama and meta-techniques developed by the jeepform collective, while "accidental," is acknowledged by the authors, e.g., in the scenario for *Doubt* (Axelzon and Wrigstad 2007).

Doubling can occur if a facilitator or co-player expresses emotions in-game that the player can relate to out-of-game. Alternatively, in close-to-home play, players may enact the inner thoughts of the person's character, which likely mirrors similar thoughts of their own, for example with the *bird-in-ear* meta-technique (Jeepen 2007a; Boss and Holter 2013) or embody inner thoughts coming from the angel and devil on each shoulder (Boss 2009). A common example or plays a character quite similar to them; this can give the player opportunities for self-awareness, self-compassion, as well as constructive self-analysis. Lastly, soliloquy is used in the monologue meta-technique, in which other players, the facilitator, or the player themselves can briefly ask the player to share their character's inner thoughts (Jeepen 2007d; Boss and

Holter 2013). With this technique, the players hear these thoughts, but the characters do not, which enables participants to steer play toward greater drama for the player accordingly (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015).

Similar forms of self-disclosure can occur in-game when characters choose to talk about their personal thoughts and feelings to others; most importantly, it is a central element of the debriefing between players. In psychodrama, this phase is called *Sharing* and involves each group member discussing their own experience with relationship to their role-play, also called *role-feedback* (Kellerman 1994), without crosstalking or offering therapeutic analysis. As in psychodrama, the time and space allocated for reflection and discussion about the role-playing game events is necessary for the experience to be processed, leading to meaning and transformation (Diakolambrianou 2021).

While psychodrama often focuses on the group enacting personal difficulties experienced by one of the group members, sociodrama focuses more on perspectives on social issues present in the entire group. Examples include exploring themes of race/ethnicity relations, dynamics between genders, ethical dilemmas, or intergenerational issues that exist within the minds of the participants (Sternberg and Garcia 1989; Blatner 1997) and likely within wider society. In the 1970s, this method would become the foundation for Augusto Boal's activism-focused Theatre of the Oppressed (Castillo 2013), which was also inspired by Paolo Freire's (2005) Pedagogy of the Oppressed. This crossover from the therapeutic to nonformal education and back again is a running theme in the history of many of these role-playing techniques (see e.g., Proctor et al. 2008; Dwyer 2007; Sajnani 2009; Smith 2024).

c) Drama therapy

Drama Therapy is a term that broadly refers to the application of drama in psychotherapeutic contexts and settings (Jennings 1998); there are numerous different exercises, scenarios and techniques that are used in dramatherapy, as it would be more accurately described as a methodological framework rather than as a specific therapeutic model. Nonetheless, in his book *Drama as Therapy – Theatre as Living* (1996), dramatherapist Phil Jones describes and analyzes nine core processes that he has identified as common ground across the various implementations of dramatherapy, thus explaining its psychotherapeutic effectiveness:

- **Dramatic Projection**: The process through which participants project aspects of themselves and their experiences onto theatrical and dramatic material, thus externalizing internal conflicts.

- **Therapeutic Performance Process**: The process of identifying the needs for expression of specific aspects that a participant would like to explore, and turning that material into a performance.

- **Dramatherapeutic Empathy and Distancing**: Two distinct but correlating processes, that refer both to active participants and to "witnesses" of the

dramatic material, and that can occur interchangeably or simultaneously. Dramatherapeutic empathy encourages the resonance of feelings and the intense emotional involvement, while dramatherapeutic distancing encourages thinking, reflection and opinion forming.

- **Personification and Impersonation**: Two techniques through which participants can express their inner material while exploring the meaning these processes have for them during and/or after their development. Personification refers to representing personality characteristics or aspects using objects in a dramatic way, while impersonation refers to creating a persona by adopting and portraying characters and roles.

- **Interactive Audience and Witnessing**: The process through which participants can become audience and witnesses to others but also to themselves through a framework of deep self-awareness and personal development.

- **Embodiment**: The actual or envisioned physical expression of personal material, and generally the connection that the participants form with that material in the here-and-now.

- **Playing**: The creation of a playful atmosphere and a playful relationship with reality, in which the attitude towards facts, consequences and dominant ideas can be flexible and creative.

- **Life-Drama Connection**: The conscious or spontaneous process of forming distinctly direct or seemingly indirect connections between drama and life, that often become evident only after the dramatization is over.

- **Transformation**: Transformation is the end result, as well as a multidimensional process itself. Real life is transformed into dramatized representations, roles and characters, and alternate experimental realities; while at the same time the participation in the drama itself leads to a transformation of identities, perceptions and emotions. (paraphrased from Jones 1996)

All these processes can be encountered in role-playing games, and can be theoretically related with the concepts of alibi, immersion, aesthetic distance and metareflection (Diakolambrianou 2021). Moreover, they are especially encouraged in role-playing games designed for transformation (Berg 2016; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023).

d) Play therapy and conditions for facilitating therapeutic change

Role-playing is also a vital element of play therapy, and encountered in many of the various play-based psychothepeutic modalities, such as cognitive-behavioral play therapy, psychoanalytic play therapy, sandplay, ecosystemic play therapy, parent-child interaction therapy, reflective family play, etc.

Virginia Axline was one of the pioneers of play therapy and developer of Nondirective Play Therapy, later called Child-centered Play Therapy, an approach that views the play process as well as its combination with the therapeutic relationship as a catalyst of change and growth. Axline (1991) identified eight core principles of play therapy:

1. "The therapeutic relationship must be engaging, inviting, and warm from the beginning.
2. The child must be unconditionally accepted by the therapist.
3. The therapeutic environment must be totally non-judgmental for the child to feel uninhibited and willing to express emotions, feelings, and behaviors.
4. The therapist must be attentive and sensitive to the child's behaviors in order to provide reflective behaviors back to the child, this way he or she may develop self-awareness.
5. The child must be able to find solutions to his or her problems whenever possible. This way the child understands that they are solely responsible for the changes in behavior that he or she does not make.
6. Through dialogue and actions, the therapist acts as a shadow, allowing the child to lead the way through this therapeutic journey.
7. The therapist recognizes that the procedure is steady and should progress at the child's pace.
8. The only limitations are ones that ensure that the therapeutic process stays genuine and the child remains in the realm of reality, that he or she be aware of their purpose and role in the therapy" (Axline 1991).

Axline's approach derives from person-centered psychotherapy, and the core principles she identified are largely based on Carl Rogers' (1957) conditions of therapeutic personality change:

1. "Two persons are in psychological contact.
2. The first person (i.e., the client) is in a state of incongruence.
3. The second person (i.e., the therapist) is experiencing **congruence** in the therapeutic relationship.
4. The therapist experiences **unconditional positive regard** for the client.
5. The therapist experiences an **empathic understanding** of the client's internal frame of reference.
6. The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved." (Rogers 1957)

Many of the core principles that Axline identified are not only important to foster a perception of safety in psychotherapeutic game contexts, but likely also relevant and helpful in leisure contexts (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023). At the same time, when ensuring that Rogers' conditions are present in a debriefing, the players are facilitated towards actualizing the transformative and therapeutic potential of the game (Diakolambrianou 2022).

e) Narrative psychotherapy

Next, we will mention a psychotherapeutic approach that uses stories and storytelling as a therapeutic medium. Narrative therapy was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by Michael White and David Epston, and emphasizes the importance of the narratives we construct and cultivate through our lives. These narratives bestow meaning to our lived experiences, life events, and social interactions, whilst also influencing our self-image and worldviews (Brown and Augusta-Scott 2007).

The narrative paradigm is based on the concept that reality is constructed socially, thus viewing narratives as necessary means in order to maintain and organize our personal reality and make sense of our lived experiences. Although the narratives we carry are usually numerous and multidimensional, there is often one that is more dominant in comparison to the rest. When this dominant story is somehow problematic, i.e. when it is constructed around a negatively distorted view of ourselves, it may become an obstacle to our personal change and growth, and it can cause us distress, emotional pain, and dysfunctionality. Such a dominant narrative may derive from judgemental and negative external evaluations that have been internalized, as well as from sources of societal and systemic influence and pressure. This process of internalization may lead us to consider our problems as attributes that define us personally, and may also result in a form of a self-fulfilling prophecy where we unintentionally remain trapped in behavioral patterns that essentially reproduce and perpetuate this problematic dominant narrative (Freedman and Combs 1996).

In order to foster mental and emotional well-being, narrative therapy aims to explore and understand the person's narratives, as well as to eventually challenge them with alternative healthier narratives and redemptive narrative arcs (McAdams 2011). This can be realized through a variety of techniques that are often called *conversation maps*, which intend to distinguish the person from the problem, to dissect and deconstruct harmful meanings, and to offer the person the ability and agency to choose and construct their own stories, and ways of experiencing, living and being (White 2007):

- **Putting together the narrative:** Helping the person gain awareness of their narratives, trace their origin and recognize the meanings and values they convey.

- **Externalizing conversations:** Helping the person distance themselves from the problematic stories and their relationship with them, through an externalization process that allows them to become self-observers.

- **Deconstruction:** Helping the person achieve clarity about their stores, particularly in cases of dominant narratives that are so prolonged and persistent that end up overwhelming the person and leading to overgeneralizations.

- **Unique outcomes:** Challenging the dominant narrative, by proposing alternative perspectives, and by exploring aspects of the person's experience that may have been overshadowed by a dominant story that is perceived as de facto and explicit.

- **Re-authoring identity:** Assisting the person in the creation of new stories that are more authentically meaningful and precise to their lived experience (White and Epston 1990).

Similar techniques can be drawn from the work of Susan Perrow (2014) and Stefan Hammel (2019) on therapeutic storytelling, i.e., the approach of identifying, developing, inventing, telling, and experiencing stories and metaphors as part of the psychotherapeutic process.

All these techniques and processes are relevant to the narrative creation that transpires within role-playing games (Diakolambrianou 2021), and the game experience can enhance them through fiction, alibi, and character. However, integration is necessary for full transformation to become initiated. For example, players can experience either a cautionary tale or an inspirational one through a role-playing game, then use that story as a means to reconstruct or reinterpret their own identities, life stories, or future potential, *restorying* their own lives in empowering ways (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Tanenbaum 2022).

In Chapter 6, we will explore further the ways through which we can make use of narrative therapy elements in order to facilitate players to actively engage with identity-shifting and manifestation processes.

f) Examples of modalities used in therapeutic role-playing

Lastly, we have put together a short list of references on therapeutic modalities that have been used, discussed, and researched in relation to role-playing games. Note that while many of these examples have been used specifically by mental health professionals, in some cases, they have served as an inspiration for leisure transformative games. While this list is not exhaustive, it reflects the wide range of techniques compatible with RPGs, further emphasizing the flexibility of the medium.

Example modalities include:

- **Psychodrama** (Hughes 1988; McConnaughey 2015; Pitkänen 2019) and **sociodrama** (Lehto 2021; Pitkänen 2019)
- **Drama therapy** (Mendoza 2020, Diakolambrianou 2021, Bartenstein 2022b, Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Fixed role therapy** (Kelly 1955, 1963)
- **Person-centered therapy** (McConnaughey 2015; Diakolambrianou 2021; Hand 2023) and **Humanistic therapy** (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Narrative therapy** (Enfield, 2007; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Harada, Katō, and Fujino 2015; Franco 2016; Polkinghorne et al. 2021; Kilmer et al. 2023; Hand 2023; Varrette et al. 2023)
- **Depth psychology** and **Jungian therapy** (Beltrán 2012, 2013; Shanun 2013; Burns 2014; Hand 2023)

- **Psychodynamic therapy** (Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022; Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Transactional analysis** (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023; Hand 2023)
- **Cognitive Behavioral Therapy - CBT** (Carrasco 2016; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Arenas, Viduani and Araujo 2022; Bartenstein 2022a, 2022b, 2024; Connell 2023; Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023; Varrette et al. 2023)
- **Dialogical Behavioral Therapy - DBT** (Atanasio 2020; Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Acceptance and Commitment Therapy - ACT** (Connell 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023, Hand 2023)
- **Solution-focused brief therapy** (Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Interpersonal psychotherapy** (Kilmer et al. 2023).
- **Gestalt therapy** (Mendoza 2020; Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Systemic** and **family therapy** (McConnaughey 2015; Kilmer et al. 2023; Hand 2023)
- **Group therapy** (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Gutierrez 2017; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Shanun 2013; McConnaughey 2015; Hoberg and Scott 2019; Hand 2023)
- **Play therapy** (Shanun 2013; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023; Hand 2023)
- **Adlerian therapy** and **Adlerian play therapy** (Hand 2023; Rosselet and Stauffer 2013)
- **Attachment theory** (McConnaughey 2015; Hand 2023)
- **Inner Child work, re-parenting** and **Internal Family Systems** (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023)
- **Positive psychology** (Kelly and Bird 2020)
- **Geek therapy** (Bean 2020)
- **Superhero therapy** (Scarlet 2016)
- **Adventure therapy** and **recreation therapy** (Hawkes-Robinson 2016)
- **Release therapy** (McConnaughey 2015)
- **Exposure therapy** (McConnaughey 2015; Gutierrez 2017; Bartenstein 2022b)
- **Hypnosis** (Rivers et al. 2016)
- **Psychomagic** (Rusch and Phelps 2020)
- **Neuroscience** and **neuropsychology** (Leonard and Thurman 2018)
- **Supervision** (Diakolambrianou 2022; Hand 2023)

3.8 Theories of interaction

Role-playing in our model is primarily a group activity, and running a role-playing game often requires facilitation skills. At the same time, groups and whole communities form around role-playing games, and thus there is a space where group dynamics and processes unavoidably occur. For these reasons, we think it is important to briefly mention here some theoretical frameworks around groups that we think are relevant to role-playing.

We will also discuss the interpersonal relationship dynamics that can unfold in role-playing games, e.g., within the game as narrative patterns, which can impact both in-game and off-game dynamics. We will also discuss a few leadership models of facilitation that practitioners have found useful for fostering development, particularly in therapeutic environments. (For a more comprehensive exploration of leadership in larp, see Hartyándi and van Bilsen 2024). Related to these topics is the importance and types of *feedback* facilitators and players can give and receive within group settings, which is a designable surface as well.

We believe an understanding of interpersonal, leadership, and group dynamics can help designers and facilitators better understand how to shape communities around role-playing experiences, with aims of encouraging transformation and decreasing toxicity. These topics will be unpacked in more detail in the next book in this series, *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*, but we will outline some key concepts in this section.

a) Group and leadership theories

i) Tuckman's stages of group development

Just as individuals change over time, so do group dynamics. Bruce Tuckman (1965) and Mary Ann Jensen (1977) describe 5 stages that can groups go through, as well as a pre-group phase:

- **Pre-group phase:** The direction, purpose and framework of the group needs to be considered;
- **Stage 1. Forming:** A phase of orientation. Discussing norms, confidentiality, attendance, rules of communication and participation, time frame/termination of the group, emphasis on trusting leadership;
- **Stage 2. Storming:** A phase of transition, during which group members may experience conflict, ambiguity and anxiety, and/or may test rules and attempt to redefine the norms and themselves within the group through acting out. A group climate in which members feel safe to disagree and confront each other needs to be created;
- **Stage 3. Norming:** A phase of cohesiveness, during which the group members construct and reconstruct standards and therapeutic alliance forms and norms that are specific to the group;

- **Stage 4. Performing:** A working phase, characterized by increasing individual growth, and enhanced team effectiveness and productivity. Experimentation with new ideas, views and behaviors is fostered, and egalitarian group dynamics are developed;

- **Stage 5. Adjourning:** A phase of termination. The closure may concern the whole group or specific individuals that are leaving. It includes discussing and reviewing concrete outcomes and accomplishments, considering viewpoints of what worked and what did not, and exploring any emtions of loss. This is not an appropriate time to introduce new concerns or further initiatives.

Importantly, not all groups reach these later stages of development. Some role-playing dissolve or bifurcate into new groups if the Storming phase is not successfully resolved, i.e., experience *schisms* (Bowman 2013). Others never move beyond the Forming stage. Notably, researchers have applied Tuckman's theory directly to role-playing games (Bowman 2013; Balzac 2016; Leonard 2016; Lasley 2020), indicating its value as an explanatory, if not prescriptive model of group dynamics.

ii) Courau's group roles

In groups, participants often gravitate to certain roles, often unconsciously. Sophie Courau (2004; 2007), author of books on adult education, and on the use of play and role-playing in education, has made an attempt to map the roles that can be identified in groups and among group members. Here are some examples she came up with by examining educational groups:

- The silent member
- The know-it-all
- The provocateur
- The harmoniser
- The group savior
- The debater
- The meticulous member
- The tension releaser
- The interpreter, etc.

iii) Belbin's team roles

While there are many roles that can be observed in a group setting, not all of them constitute a useful and effective contribution to the group performance. Meredith Belbin (2012) has identified 9 clusters of behavioral attributes (referred to as Team Roles) that are helpful and essential in facilitating team progress. These roles are further divided into Social roles (1-3), Thinking roles (4-6) and Action / task roles (7-9) (Belbin 2012):

1. **The Resource Investigator** is inquisitive, finds ideas, and brings them back to the team.
2. **The Teamworker** is highly versatile, identifies the required work, and completes it on behalf of the team.
3. **The Co-ordinator** focuses on the team's objectives, delegating work appropriately, and inspiring team members to work on specific tasks.
4. **The Plant** solves problems in creative and unconventional ways.
5. **The Monitor Evaluator** is logical, makes impartial judgements, and weighs the team's options.
6. **The Specialist** offers in-depth knowledge in special topics to the team.
7. **The Shaper** drives the team to keep moving, maintaining focus and momentum.
8. **The Implementer** plans an effective strategy, carrying it out efficiently.
9. **The Completer Finisher** provides polish and scans for errors to ensure high quality control. (Belbin 2012)

Belbin's team role theory has been used in the edu-larp *7 Samurai* (Novak and Branc 2015), an assessment center larp situated in feudal Japan that gamifies assessment processes in order to help the participants develop their leadership skills and potential (Branc 2018). In-game tasks were aligned with specific leadership skills based on Belbin's 9 team roles (Hartyándi and van Bilsen 2024).

Other examples of leadership theories that have been used in role-playing game theory and practice include Endre Sjøvold's (2007) Systematizing Person-Group Relations (SPGR) theory, used by Maria Kolseth Jensen (2021) a a larp designed as part of the curriculum of the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy.

Although the variety of such roles is vast and probably difficult to fully map, we think roles such as these are often also encountered in role-playing contexts. Therefore, while the group has its own identity, like members of a specific larp community, distinct roles within these groups are also present. An interesting trajectory of study considering this theory is comparing the off-game group roles players exhibit with their in-game character behavior.

b) Therapeutic group theories

Most role-playing games have one or more facilitators who guide the process. With a basic understanding of leadership theories, designers can give explicit instructions to facilitators to help them understand their responsibilities, as well as provide relevant activities to foster transformative experiences.

i) Aveline's principles of leadership in groups

Mark Aveline (1993) identifies 5 aims of group facilitators in therapeutic contexts:

1. **Containment of anxiety**: Exploration of anxiety sources, group structure that soothes anxiety;

2. **Establishment of therapeutic climate:** Norms of support, acceptance and autonomy.

3. **Goal-setting:** Appropriate and achievable within the time frame;

4. **Group pace:** Appropriate pace that does not lead members into forced or harmful self-exposure; and

5. **Closure:** Ensuring a safe transition.

We believe these aims can be mapped to transformative role-playing game containers to great effect, whether they are therapeutic in nature or not.

ii) Encounter: A person-centered approach to groups

Within the framework of humanistic approaches, an encounter group is defined as a form of group personal development and/or psychotherapy that is based on trusting the members' self-developing potential and process, on mutual acknowledgement, and on the willingness to encounter the group members as authentic persons beyond masks (Schmid 2017). The use of encounter groups is widespread, especially in settings focused on helping professions and/or helping relationships (Rogers 1970). It is notable that in encounter groups there is a group facilitator instead of a group "leader," as non-directiveness is a key concept of this psychotherapeutic approach.

What makes encounter groups psychotherapeutic are the conditions of therapeutic change, as modelled and provided by the group facilitator. The three core conditions are authenticity, empathy, and unconditional positive regard. These conditions aim at creating a climate of trust, where growth is possible for each member and the group as a whole. This climate allows for a process of personal and group development that can enable individual and group potential, fostering intragroup and intergroup connections and relationships. The interpersonal relationship is considered a therapeutic agent itself within this approach.

However, the process of each is not linear and cannot be predicted; actually, having specific expectations from the group can be a hindrance to the development process. On the contrary, the encounter takes place in the "here and now," a concept that emphasizes the existential attitude of presence. Moreover, the encounter group is viewed as a meaningful confluence of individuals and society, and therefore encompasses a vigilant purpose for sociopolitical change and for sociotherapeutic effect (Rogers 1970; Schmid 2017).

Here are some process patterns that can be identified in encounter groups, presented in a roughly sequential but not strict order (Rogers 1970; Schmid 2017):

1. Milling around

2. Resisting personal expression and self-exploration

3. Describing past experiences and feelings

4. Expressing negative feelings

5. Expressing and exploring material that is personally meaningful

6. Expressing current interpersonal feelings within the group

7. Developing a healing potential within the group

8. Accepting the self and beginning to change

9. Cracking of mask and façades

10. Receiving feedback

11. Confronting

12. Developing helping relationships outside the sessions

13. Encountering authentically

14. Expressing positive emotions and feelings of closeness

15. Changing of behaviors within the group (Rogers 1970; Schmid 2017):

These patterns are likely also present in therapeutic role-playing game groups, as well as transformative groups more generally. Therefore, designers can apply this theory to practice by meaningfully shaping and redirecting activities according to what is needed and desirable in the moment.

iii) Yalom's 11 therapeutic forces in groups

One of the most influential theorists among group therapy practitioners, including RPG therapists, is Irvin Yalom. In his book, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy*, Yalom (1970) identifies 11 therapeutic forces in groups:

1. **Instillation of hope:** Encouraging others through the sharing of stories, experiences and information;

2. **Universality:** Recognizing a common experience and realizing that difficulties are usually not unique;

3. **Imparting of information:** Educating each other about issues and potential solutions or treatment options;

4. **Altruism:** Being supportive and feeling able to help others to contribute in building self-esteem and developing coping mechanisms;

5. **Simulation of the primary family:** Having the opportunity to identify and change dysfunctional patterns that have been acquired in the primary family, along with the roles that accompanied them;

6. **Development of social skills:** Exploring new ways to express emotions, to share thoughts, and to voice concerns;

7. **Imitative behavior:** Learning from another person's behaviors, reactions, recovery and resilience skills;

8. **Interpersonal learning:** "Second-hand" learning, discovering ourselves and others through the group process. Yalom further described 3 fundamental notions; (a) the importance of interpersonal relationships, (b) the corrective emotional experience, and (c) the group as a social microcosm;

9. **Group cohesiveness:** The sense of belonging, and appreciating the group;

10. **Catharsis:** Expressing intense feelings in a safe space;

11. **Existential factors (i.e., risk, responsibility):** Learning the importance of taking responsibility for our actions. (Yalom 1970)

As with encounter groups, while some facets of the experiences described are specific to therapeutic settings, many of these concepts are also transferable to other transformative contexts such as leisure RPGs.

c) Feedback and self-exposure in groups

Feedback is a crucial component of group processes and is especially important for facilitators to consider with regard to how they shape the experience. The following sections provide different models of feedback, which are often connected to the self-exposure of group members.

It is noteworthy to make a distinction between feedback on the content and/or feedback on the process. The feedback on *content* focuses on words, arguments, and meaning, while the feedback on *process* focuses on the relationship dynamics and the essence of the interactions in the here and now.

i) Rogers' 5 types of feedback

In person-centred psychotherapy, the group facilitator serves two main functions within this framework: Facilitating (a) the self-reflective loop, and (b) the group-as-a-whole process commentary (Rogers 1970). According to Rogers (1961, 1970), who believed that feedback is always an opportunity for growth, there are 5 types of feedback:

1. **Evaluative:** Evaluation of the content and/or the process. Trying to evaluate the action instead of the actor, being descriptive;

2. **Interpretive:** Requesting a message to be clarified or confirmed, often phrased as a question. Paraphrasing or summarizing. Restating the key points in order to communicate attention;

3. **Supportive:** Responding to communicate support and encouragement;

4. **Probing:** Communicating the need for concrete information, while at the same time clarifying and promoting a certain position;

5. **Understanding:** Communicating sympathy for the sender of the message, and empathic understanding for their views. Responding to the innate desire of humans to be heard and understood. (Rogers 1970)

When it comes to role-playing contexts, it is important to also distinguish between feedback on the character and feedback on the player. One strategy utilized by Game to Grow, a therapeutic tabletop RPG company, is to attribute positive feedback to the player, e.g., "It was so awesome how brave you were standing up for yourself," while attributing negative feedback to the character, e.g., "It felt disruptive when your character attacked the bartender without reason" (Kilmer, Davis, Kilmer, and Johns 2023). Such practices

not only emphasize how character behaviors reveal a range of behaviors the player can also access through practice, but also how to receive feedback for problematic behaviors without having it define who we are as people. Another strategy is to create structured space for players to give one another certain types of feedback in-game and off-game, which can help them reflect on how their behavior is perceived by others. This example highlights the importance of feedback in the transformative process.

ii) The Johari Window

The Johari Window is a conceptual model for comprehending perception bias (both conscious and unconscious), that can contribute to increasing our self-awareness as well as our understanding of others (see Figure 2). It takes its name from the two people who coined the term: Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham. According to Luft and Ingham (1955), interpersonal awareness can be modeled by a schema that includes 4 areas:

1. The *open area* or *arena,* which includes the things known to the self as well as to others;

2. the *hidden area* or *facade,* which includes the things known to the self but not to others;

3. *Lack of self-knowledge*, which includes the things known to others but not to the self; and

4. *The unknown* (our version of the term, which includes the things not known to self nor others).

As can be observed in Figure 4, the process of disclosing or giving feedback as well as actively asking for feedback in groups can help expand the Open Area and gradually reduce the space that the other three areas are taking up.
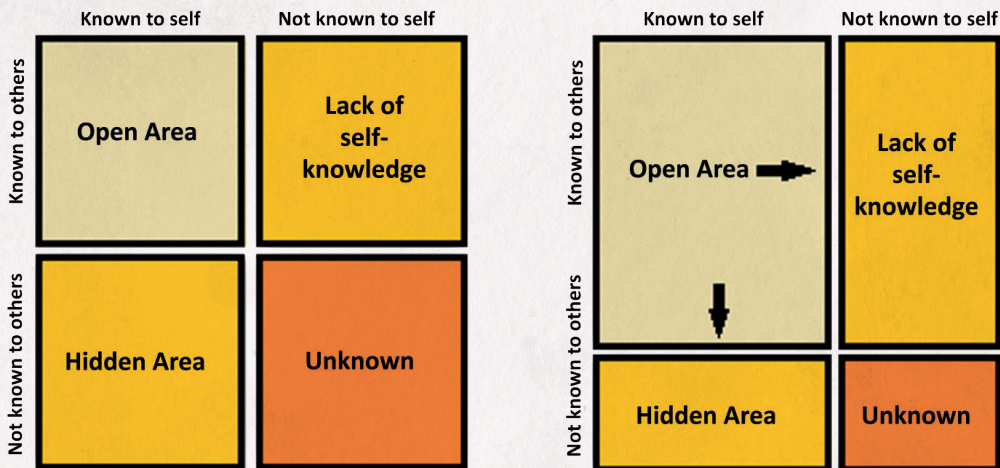
The Johari Window

Figure 4: The quadrants within the Johari Window. Image adapted from Luft and Ingham (1955) by Elektra Diakolambrianou.

The Johari Window can be expanded by the role-playing experience itself, for example increasing awareness on a key topic or perspective. For such awareness to be most fruitful, we recommend combining such activities with specific debriefing questions, feedback sessions, and integration activities.

iii) I-Messages

Generally speaking, the I-Message is an effective communication tool that facilitates assertiveness and clear expression of needs. At the same time, it can also be used as a tool for feedback, self-exposure, as well as for the prevention of conflict escalation. It focuses on expressing ourselves and our lived experiences. It belongs to the "toolbox" of the Gordon Model (a.k.a. The Gordon Method), a model of communication skills developed by Thomas Gordon in the 1960s and 1970s as a complete method for establishing and nurturing effective, healthy and democratic relationships.

According to Gordon (2000, 2003, 2011), the effective I-Message is threefold and is comprised by three components: (a) behavior (a concise description of the behavior, devoid of blame or judgement); (b) consequences (the factual and tangible impact of the described behavior on us); and (c) feelings (the emotions that are prompted by those consequences, expressed honestly and genuinely).

Furthermore, Gordon describes 4 different types of I-Messages: (a) the declarative I-Message, (b) the positive/appreciative I-Message, (c) the preventive I-Message, and (d) the confronting I-Message. Here are some examples inspired by the role-playing context, in order to demonstrate the structure and types of I-Messages:

a) **Declarative:** "I enjoy cooperative games. Having the opportunity to work with others as a team is meaningful and makes me feel fulfilled";

b) **Positive/Appreciative:** "Thank you for notifying me in advance about your absence, it gave me time to adjust my plans accordingly and I feel grateful";

c) **Preventive:** "Next week I will be very busy, so in case you cannot make it I would be very grateful if you could notify me in advance so I can adjust my schedule"; and

d) **Confronting:** "When you talk simultaneously I have a hard time concentrating and that really frustrates me."

In some cases, I-messages have been modified to reflect more of a script that can be learned and practiced, for example, in trainings. Here is a version from the Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management (2000):

- **I felt** _____ (describe your own feeling without judgment)
- **when** _____ (describe the other person's action or behavior neutrally)
- **because** _____ (describe the need or value that you have underlying this response).
- **Can we try** _____ ? (offer a potential solution that will benefit both of you, working toward a common agreement where everyone can win if possible)."

This I-message script has been practiced through role-playing games including, e.g., in conflict transformation trainings (Taraghi, Bowman, and Khosrospour 2022; ROCKET 2024) and *The Deadline* (Bowman et al. 2024), a scenario in which interdisciplinary research team members address escalating conflicts in order to complete their grant writing task.

d) Interpersonal theories

In addition to group processes, leadership, and feedback, participants in games experience interpersonal relationship dynamics, both in-game and off-game. These dynamics sometimes shape interactions in important ways. The following theories can help illuminate interpersonal dynamics in RPG groups, as well as serve as design concepts, whether intending to incentivize, discourage, or shift them throughout play. Here are a few examples.

Importantly, players are in many different kinds of relationships within the fiction and outside of it (Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2022). They can relate to:

- The designers and the game design;
- the role-playing community within which they play;
- the co-players within a particular game;
- the facilitators running the game; and/or
- the fictional world and story, including the storyworld, plots, and the unfolding emergent narrative (see Chapter 4).

Relationships can also develop between (Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2022):

- Characters when contemplating, planning, or enacting the
- fiction;
- one's sense of self and one's own character;
- one's of self and another person's character;
- one's character and another person's character; and/or
- one's sense of self and another person's sense of self.

Understanding some basic interpersonal theories that can unfold can help designers better understand the dynamics within their play group and how to design for specific effects. Note that while these theories come from therapeutic practice, they have been adopted more widely in transformation work. We place them here to highlight their emphasis on interpersonal relationships.

i) Transactional analysis

Transactional analysis is a psychotherapeutic subfield that explores interactions between humans as "games people play" (Berne 1996), with a particular emphasis

on dysfunctional relationship dynamics. According to transactional analysis, all interactions are desires to gain *strokes* in social dynamics, i.e., to receive some form of attention, power, or leverage over one another, which can happen in dysfunctional ways. These strokes become *transactions* between people that calcify in predictable interactions in which individuals try to "win," even when such wins are short-lived and do damage to their relationships.

Such dynamics are distorted ways that people try to get their basic human needs met, such as power, love/belonging, safety/security, freedom, and fun (Glasser 1998). They are often handed down by cultural or familial norms and are therefore less conscious and/or normalized. Understanding these patterns can help us better relate to one another and figure out more mutually fulfilling ways of interacting. A larp that consciously explores such shifts is *Symbiosis* (Bowman and Higgins 2016).

i) Parent, Adult, Child

One concept within transactional analysis is Parent, Adult, and Child. This theory posits that throughout the day, any given adult likely shifts between ego-states unconsciously, often based upon context and the people with whom they are interacting: the Parent, the Adult, and Child. (Berne 1996). When one shifts into the Parent, they often express traits similar to what they experienced as a child (or wish they had experienced). They may display more *nurturing* behavior, or *criticizing* behavior at any given moment.

The Adult represents the present-state self of the individual in their level of psychological development. The Adult is autonomous, can fairly objectively evaluate reality, and can make decisions for themselves. In contrast, the Child expresses more youthful qualities and emotional responses. This ego state may manifest as *free*, especially if they feel safe and nurtured by parental figures, or may express *adaptive* behaviors in response to more criticizing parental behavior, such as the Rebellious Child or Good Child. Some people may toggle between the two, or have multiple Child states. Note that none of these ego states is inherently flawed or superior, although some dynamics are more empowering than others, as we will see in the next section.

This concept is important to understand not only because role-playing games often cast players in roles that require enactment of family dynamics, but also participants sometimes unconsciously inhabit these states off-game, e.g., a facilitator adopting a parental role and the participant responding in a child-like state. Furthermore, from a transformational perspective, helping players experiment with the ranges of these different roles can help them break less functional patterns and develop greater autonomy and self-advocacy.

iii) The Drama, Empowerment, and Winner's Triangles

One of the most important transactional dynamics when considering storytelling, not to mention one's self-esteem more generally, is the Drama Triangle, explored in Stephen B. Karpman's *A Game Free Life* (2007, 2014). In the Drama Triangle, people

enact certain roles when they feel disempowered in some way: the Persecutor, the Rescuer, and the Victim. Unconsciously, the Persecutor tries to exert power over the Rescuer and Victim through domineering behavior, the Rescuer tries to save both Persecutor and Victim in order to feel more in control of the situation, and the Victim expresses helplessness in an attempt to get the Persecutor and Rescuer to do something for them. The Persecutor reflects the Controlling Parent, the Rescuer the Nurturing Parent, and the Victim, the Adapted Child (Norman n.d.). While most people on the Drama Triangle have a typical "default" position, they can sometimes shift roles, e.g., the Persecutor feels victimized, the Victim lashes out, the Rescuer feels like a martyr, etc.

Note that such dynamics are entirely understandable and often warranted in situations where abuse and oppression occur. However, the underlying dynamic reflects feelings of disempowerment for all parties, which can make it difficult for people to "step off the Triangle." Importantly, these dynamics are often embedded in the storytelling structures that inform Western media in general and role-playing games in particular, especially within the fantasy and superhero genres, but also in more socially realistic RPGs.

Less common to explore is ways to shift these roles into greater empowerment. One model is the Empowerment Dynamic (Emerald 2016). The idea is that the impulses behind these roles are not problematic in and of themselves, but rather distorted ways to relate to others and get one's needs met. In the Empowerment Dynamic, the Persecutor becomes the Challenger, helping the others achieve their potential without harming them. The Rescuer becomes the Coach, who helps encourage the others rather than doing things for them, which can become disempowering, even if helpful in the moment. The Victim becomes the Creator who is able to transmute their challenge into something new to offer the world or express themselves.
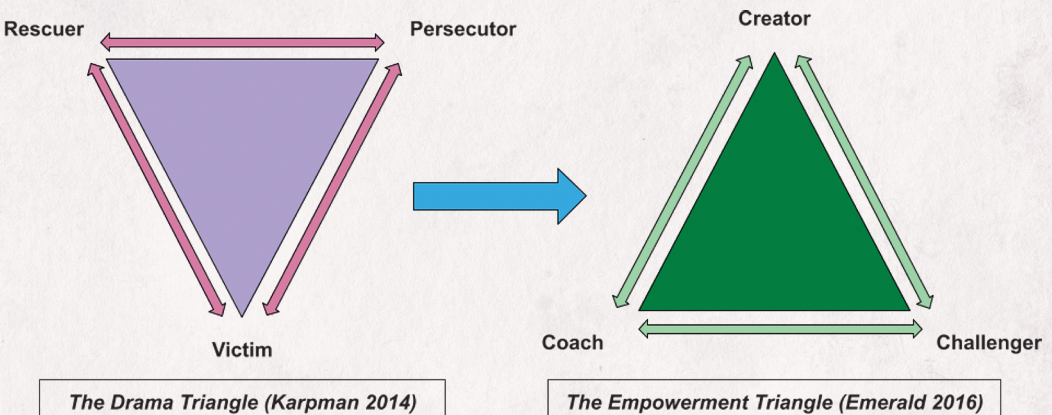
Figure 5: The transformation from the Drama Triangle (Karpman 2014) to the Empowerment Triangle (Emerald 2016). Image adapted by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas.

Another model is the Winner's Triangle (Choy 1990), which focuses on shifting the emotional core of each participant, which transforms the dynamic so everyone

can "win" in a mutually fulfilling way. In this model, the Persecutor focuses upon their Assertive tendencies; the Rescuer, their Caring tendencies; and the Victim, their Vulnerability.
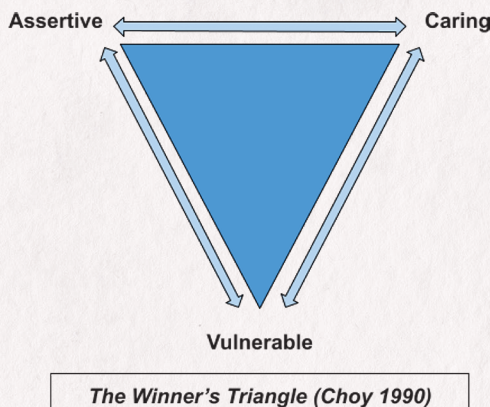
Figure 6: The Winner's Triangle (Choy 1990). Image adapted by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas.

Such theories are rife for exploration in RPGs, as they easily communicate character types and their relevant traits.

iii) Attachment Theory

Another important model that has gained popular attention in recent years is *attachment theory*. Attachment theory is part of a larger trend in psychoanalytic theory to study *object-relations*, which explores how one's psychology develops based on our relations with others (Klein 1975). Originally developed by Mary Ainsworth and S.M. Bell's (1970) initial research, and John Bowlby's (1983) follow-up research, attachment theory arose from studies of early childhood development. Toddlers were observed to see how they reacted to their caregivers leaving the room, then assessed according to their relative degrees of security in their attachment (Bowlby 1983). The theory has since expanded to connect to adult relationship dynamics, with the following styles articulated (Kirschner 2020; Bockarova 2019; as described in Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2022):

1. **Secure Attachment:** When a person tends to feel that their emotional needs will be met consistently by their partner;

2. **Anxious Preoccupied Attachment:** When a person tends to fear abandonment and requires consistent reassurance;

3. **Fearful Avoidant Attachment:** When a person tends to fear engulfment but also craves intimacy;

4. **Dismissive Avoidant Attachment:** When a person tends to fear engulfment and convinces; themselves they do not need love;

5. **Disorganized Attachment:** When a person engages in several of the styles, usually as a result of extreme trauma.

Notably, the term "secure" is used similarly to Winnicott's (1960) notion of a secure enough holding environment: the loved one does not need to react perfectly or meet every need, but rather provide consistent care in a way that helps the other person feel reasonably sure they will do so in the future.

Many character relation dynamics (see Chapter 4) inherently work with attachment styles, whether the design is conscious of them or not. Like in transactional analysis, dysfunctional dynamics instantly create conflict and potentially interesting relationships. While playing out such dynamics can bring insights later (Bowman in press for 2025), from a transformational perspective, exploring more secure styles of relating may be advantageous for player development, especially if they struggle with attachment difficulties in daily life.

Now that we have explored many Interpersonal theories, we will transition to more general philosophies of learning and educational psychology.

3.9 Educational theories

Educational learning theories describe the conditions and processes through which learning occurs. Learning theory is multidisciplinary and based on research from many different fields such as psychology, pedagogy, computer science, philosophy, anthropology, neuroscience and other fields with a connection to learning (Westborg 2022a).

Why are educational learning theories relevant to RPGs?

- Different practices and ways of reasoning around learning come from different theoretical backgrounds. Knowing about these can help with creating a deeper understanding of teaching and learning;
- By knowing about the perspectives and theories you acquire the language to talk and think about your practice and methods;
- Knowing the perspectives and theories may help you recognize other people's paradigms for teaching and learning through RPGs;
- Acquiring the language can help you find and understand research about role-playing and learning;
- Knowing the theory can help you solve design issues in your educational games.

Learning theories can be tricky because there are different ways of categorizing the perspectives and theories, and the categories also change over time. For example, what was called the *cultural-historical theory* in the 90's is now more often referred to as *social constructivism.* Here we will use the categorization from the chapter "Learning and Role-Playing Games" in *The Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Game Studies* (Hammer et al. 2024). The authors use four overarching perspectives.

Each of these perspectives includes multiple different theories that have evolved over time and might differ from each other (Illeris 2018). When working with learning and teaching in practice you will probably use things that relate to all of them in different ways, even if some probably will resonate more strongly with you than others.

The four perspectives are:

1. **Behaviorism:** Learning is seen as a change in behavior through external events (Westborg 2022b; Woolfolk 2010). The external events could be for example, getting praise or getting scolded. Learning is also seen as something that happens passively;

2. **Cognitivism:** Learning is seen as information processing, including how it is received, organized, stored and retrieved (Westborg 2022c). Learning is also seen as an active process. Often uses a computer metaphor when talking about how learning happens;

3. **Constructivism:** This category is very close to cognitivism but here learning is seen as an *individual* inner construct; the mental models are individual rather than universal. This means that in a classroom you would have to cater the teaching to each individual student and not to a whole group.

4. **Social Constructivism:** Learning is seen as first social and then individual, and always as happening within a culture (Westborg 2022e). We don't have to learn everything from scratch; since we are part of a culture, we can learn from what others have done before us. We use tools to learn and think (Illeris 2018), both physical (like a hammer or glasses) and mental (like language or counting). Under this pretty wide umbrella we find perspectives such as sociocultural theory, pragmatism, and situated learning (Westborg 2024). Many of the perspectives in social constructivism see transfer effects as weak. Transfer is a concept in education about how you can take knowledge from one situation and use it in a different situation (Westborg 2022f; Woolfolk 2010; Illeris 2015). For example, situated learning is the idea that we learn in a specific situation and that the knowledge we get is situated in *that* specific context.

Hammer at al. (2024) also briefly mention *constructionism*, which is basically constructivism with the added idea that learning happens particularly well when the learner is engaged in constructing something, for example, working with a physical object such as LEGO. The idea is that the external learning will enhance the internal learning (Westborg 2022d). Constructivism believes in strong *transfer effects*, e.g., by working with LEGOs, you practice spatial perception and therefore will be better at packing your car for the holiday.

Transfer is a particularly important concept when considering integration of takeaways and learning from role-playing experiences (see Chapter 2). We will consider ways to best facilitate transfer in the next chapter, which provides a deeper dive into designing transformative RPGs.

3.10 Summary

This chapter offers a variety of different theories related to transformation from role-playing game studies and many other fields with an emphasis on education, psychology, and counseling. As we will discuss in Chapter 7, such theories can be especially helpful when designing research projects around your games, but also in general. Having a deeper understanding of theoretical concepts can help you create more compelling and powerful gaming experiences for your players. The next chapter will focus on the practical nuts and bolts of designing games for transformative impacts.

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Practice: Designing for Transformative Goals

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4.1 Introduction

This chapter is intended to guide you through the process of designing your own transformative role-playing game. The format we are emphasizing here is a *nano-game*, like the *#Feminism* (Bushyager, Stark, and Westerling, eds. 2017) games we mentioned in Chapter 2. For our purposes, nano-games can be played in one hour or less, including workshops and debrief, and focus on one or more short scenes with 1-4 characters. While this format may seem restrictive, we find that restrictions can often be helpful not only for creativity, but for narrowing your focus so that your design clearly connects to your transformative goals. Furthermore, focusing on smaller groups can help you design for highly specific types of interactions, which larger games may not.

Fortunately, nano-games are generally simpler to *playtest*, meaning you can have players try some or all of the content, then *iterate* based on their feedback. This process is central to *Research through Design*, which we discuss in Chapter 7, but is also important for any design project.

In our second book in this series, *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*, we will explore methods for scaling your design up, i.e., expanding your game in terms of scope, time, number of players, etc. We will also detail methods for hacking existing games, another form of design that is beyond the scope of this book. For more general information on RPG Design, see Björk and Zagal (2024).

Note that much of the theory and practice in this chapter is adopted from larp discourses. However, you can apply many of these principles in tabletop or freeform design depending on the context. If you do not plan to design larps, think of "larp" as a placeholder term for "role-playing games" as you read. Consider if the principle will still apply in other forms of role-playing game design or if it is specific to the larp format. Similarly, some of the advice is geared toward larger games. Consider if the principle is still relevant in a nano-game format or more appropriate to a scaled up version while reading. In practice, be cautious of the tendency toward over-designing. This tendency is particularly common when thinking about character creation and worldbuilding. For any element of the process, ask the question, "Am I working on this because it helps the design, or am I writing this because I am enjoying the process of creating?"

4.2 How to design a transformative analog role-playing game

As we have discussed throughout this book, designing transformative analog role-playing games can be quite different than other forms of game design or even transformative video game design (Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2015), e.g., Serious Games (Chen and Michael 2006), Games for Change (2022), gamification (Deterding et al. 2011), game-based learning (Plass, Mayer, and Homer eds. 2020), or deep games (Rusch 2017). However, our hope is that the design principles and the theories informing them arising from role-playing game studies will positively contribute to these existing discourses and establish a fruitful dialogue. Thus, this chapter does not attempt to cover all aspects of design, but rather our method, which will likely evolve over time.

Importantly, we understand that design practices are not always linear. Therefore, while we are presenting this process in a linear, step-by-step fashion, creativity is unpredictable. Wherever you end up starting, we recommend returning to the steps and making sure you are integrating each of them throughout the process. For example, you may end up refining your transformative impacts over time, but when you do so, reevaluate all the work already completed to make sure your choices align. Similarly, safety should be a consideration throughout the process. If you start with a highly challenging concept that may have ethical consequences, for example, you should consider what safety structures may be needed to help your players engage in each section of your game.

Finally, we recommend reviewing Chapters 1-3 before starting your design. Understanding the overall structure of these games and the theoretical concepts behind them will help the processes described in this chapter flow more easily and better motivate your design choices.

a) Identify transformative impacts

While many RPGs have elements that are incidentally transformational, educational, or therapeutic, our model emphasizes identifying explicit impacts your game seeks to have on your players. By explicit, we mean writing out the goals of the game not only for yourself and anyone who might run your game, but also sharing these goals with your players ahead of time. Transparency allows players to feel like the process is consensual (Torner 2013) and can even prime them to be more likely to achieve the desired impacts or even to steer consciously toward them during play. While secrecy can add to surprise, it might backfire, leading the participants to feel manipulated or deceived. Such emotions can lead players to lose trust in you and reject the learning altogether, which in our view is a fail state for a transformative game.

Before you determine the transformative impacts, you should consider who will play this game, who will run it, in what setting, and what implications that setting might have on the desired impacts.

i) Identify the type of transformative role-playing game

As a review, we have three main types of transformative role-playing games, which each have specific design features:

1. **Transformative leisure games:** Voluntary and played in leisure times for a variety of reasons. We recommend preparing participants for processing around transformative goals, as they may not be used to such practices.

2. **Therapeutic games:** May be voluntary or mandatory. Played in collaboration with or facilitated by a trained mental health professional or paraprofessional who has a relationship with the players as clients. May be played in a formal setting, such as a therapists' office or at another location, e.g., a therapeutic larp played in the woods (Bartenstein 2022). All parties have expectations of emotional processing around the game focused on explicit therapeutic goals.

3. **Educational games:** May be voluntary or mandatory. Usually played in formal or non-formal contexts that are explicitly educational, e.g., schools, museums, afterschool programs. However, they can also be played in leisure environments as informal education (Baird 2022). All parties have expectations of educational processing around the game focused on explicit learning objectives.

Your choice of type of game influences whether you will choose *transformative impacts, therapeutic goals,* or *learning objectives* for your participants, which have different implications in terms of design, especially with regard to the workshops and debriefs.

ii) Identify desired target groups

The next question to answer is: What target groups do you plan to serve with your game? As outlined in Chapter 2, target groups, also sometimes called "populations," are specific groups of people who likely have different backgrounds and needs. While we will cover the facilitation component in more detail in our next book, *Implementing*, considering populations now will help you make solid design choices throughout the process.

If you are gearing your game toward a *general population*, e.g., museum-goers, your group may not be familiar with role-playing, so you must have some sort of onboarding processes to explain to them what they will do. You should consider that all instructions should be easy to understand, avoiding complex jargon unless you plan to explain it. While role-playing can be intimidating for anyone, inexperienced players may be especially nervous. As with any group, consider how you will work to establish trust early on and provide scaffolding for starting to play.

Related to this you might want to still define an age group, for example, adults over 18, young children, adolescents, older adults, or a mixed group of intergenerational players (Tangen 2019). These groups will have different needs, for example, whether or not you need consent from adults and assent from the young people involved; what

environment is most appropriate for play; who you may need to bring into the process such as teachers, camp counselors, or retirement home nurses; what the expectations for supervision are, etc.

If working with an experienced population, you might be able to skip some of the onboarding related to "how to role-play." However, we recommend calibrating play styles within the group in order to manage expectations, e.g., how to steer toward transformative impacts, what this game will feature vs. will not. Examples include answering: will the game focus on brief scenes in which you role-play, staying in-character for several days straight, and/or heavy rulesets and number crunching? What one person considers an RPG can be vastly different from another depending on their play communities, for example, their attitudes around playing to win vs. playing to lose (Nordic Larp Wiki 2019b).

With all populations, but especially in therapeutic games, you should consider if and how your game can accommodate players with specific physical or psychological needs and whether or not your populations require additional support. If you design an ecologically-focused game that is played by a class while hiking and do not include recommendations for players with functional variations or disabilities, you might unintentionally exclude people from the start. Furthermore, your game instructions should consider the medium within which your game will be played, for example, an online larp is difficult to play while in a swimming pool. Considering adding optional instructions might help here, e.g., "If played in person, do X steps. If online, do Y."

Another factor to consider is whether the players are strangers or whether they already know one another. Do you need to provide an introductory activity to break the ice? Related to this is whether they are playing in a known social context—e.g., colleagues in the same workplace with established social dynamics and hierarchies—or whether these groups are separated, e.g., bringing together employees from different departments together who work at the same organization. These questions are also related to how risky play might feel: what would be the cost for your players of losing face or behaving in a way that is inconsistent with their daily roles?

These considerations affect the transformative impacts you decide to choose. For example, if you have a learning objective that involves analyzing complex systems related to climate change and you are working with a primary school population, you will likely run into difficulties. You can still try the learning objective, but your activities will need to be pared down to be appropriate to your population's cognitive development. You may also want to adjust the difficulty level. Returning to Bloom's Taxonomy (see Chapter 2), perhaps "Identifying" is a more realistic level of cognitive engagement than "Analyzing" (Bloom 1956).

iii) Identifying impacts

With these factors in mind, you can now start to solidify your desired impacts. Keep in mind that through the design and playtesting process, you will be able to further refine them before releasing your game, but establishing them early on will help inform all of your design choices. For example, if your transformative impact is to explore the

history of feminism, then adding a science fiction setting with many aspects that differ from our world might distract the players from the goals, requiring cognitive effort to continually process information according to the setting. However, a light science fiction conceit might provide players with enough distance to feel able to engage. Alternatively, if extensive details end up being quite important, a more complex setting might be appropriate if your transformative impact is adjusted to emphasize them, e.g., designing around "exploring gender roles in unique and complex social contexts." Regardless of the impact you choose, since we are designing nano-games for this exercise, we recommend focusing primarily on the type of *interactions* you want players to have throughout your design and add details that contribute to those interactions first and foremost.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the four main categories of transformative impacts we cover here are *educational goals*, *emotional processing*, *social cohesion*, and *political aims*. Your game may have desired impacts from one, some, or all of these categories. Consider what is feasible to cover in a short nano-game and avoid expecting the format to do too much. For example, players may have trouble if their characters are exploring specific science content while also debating complex political concepts while also processing grief from the loss of their in-game child, as each of these goals may interfere with one another in a short scenario. When the mind is overwhelmed by competing demands, it experiences *cognitive overload*. Sometimes cognitive overload is desirable in play, but often it will distract from your desired goals.

For the purposes of the nano-game process, we recommend having 1-2 transformative impacts in mind. You should word them carefully depending on the types of experiences you want your player to have. Taking the science fiction feminism game as an example, you might have the following impacts in mind:

- **For a transformative leisure game:** Exploring how gender roles function in unique social contexts.

- **For a therapeutic game:** Reflecting upon one's own gender identity in different contexts.

- **For an educational game:** Analyzing gender as a social construct that depends on context.

These goals are similar, but will have slightly different implications in terms of design, especially in the framing around the game, but possibly also in the setting, the characters, the relations, and the meta-techniques or rules embedded in the game. We will elaborate on these topics later in this chapter.

b) Framing according to transformative goals

As mentioned in previous chapters, the framing is the most important component of a transformative role-playing game, which can seem a bit counterintuitive to creative people, especially experienced leisure game designers. Historically, much of design theory has focused on the game play itself, with little attention paid to workshops and debriefs as important (Bailly 2024). However, as Johanna Koljonen et al.

(2019) describe in the *Larp Design* book, all aspects of a game are *designable surfaces*, including the framing.

Our model focuses attention on these framing activities in deliberate ways. Not only does deliberate framing enhance the ritual experience as a whole (see Chapters 3 and 6), but also helps with introducing and processing content relevant to your goals. For example, including new knowledge during a game is often harder for players to retain that reviews knowledge from a lecture provided beforehand (Mochocki 2013a). However, with all of these activities, keep in mind the time constraints relevant to nano-games, as over-designing can also be an impulse. Sometimes, simplicity is easiest for your participants to grasp, requiring a bit of discipline.

You may discover that designing the framing is easier once your core game design is established, for example, realizing which specific scene you want to include or skill you want to train in the scenario. This starting point is fine as long as you then align your framing with the game play.

c) Pre- and post-game work

Consider what work needs to occur before the game and include it in your instructions. List anything logistically-related the facilitator will need to bring, e.g., printouts, props, pens, music players. List also what the players may need to bring themselves to be able to engage, e.g., headphones, a laptop, a costuming piece, a prop. List aspects of the setting that are required, e.g., a public place, a quiet room.

Also important in transformative role-playing games are any preparations related to studying game content required. Do facilitators need to memorize extensive rule sets? Do players need to read and internalize setting documents or character sheets before they come to the game? Do they need to learn a particular concept, attend a lecture, or watch a documentary? While excessive preparation can detract especially from a nano-game, in some cases, some preparation may be necessary for engagement.

As mentioned before, in educational games, this process is exceptionally important, especially when working with subject matter knowledge or other curricular-based learning objectives. The players ideally should already have familiarity with the concepts rather than introducing them during play, as they are less likely to retain it that way, e.g., subject matter revision is better than initial subject matter exposure (Mochocki 2013a). Ideally also this material is covered again after the game. For example, a teacher might have a lecture on gender roles one class day, run the science fiction gender roles nano-game the next, ask participants to journal about the experience, then connect the material to their next lecture, providing consistency from beginning to end and multiple ways to process the information.

Similarly, a therapeutic game would likely involve an intake process, preparatory one-on-one and/or group sessions focused on establishing the desired therapeutic goals, the game, then processing one-on-one or as a group afterward around those therapeutic goals. In both of these examples, the game session is part of a more extensive process.

d) Workshops

A well-designed workshop assists the players in learning about the game, and forming connections with other players. As time is always a factor, workshops must balance covering all important elements, while also reducing extraneous activities that are unnecessary for playing this specific game.

Here are some guidelines for workshop design.

i) Define the purpose of the workshop

A good workshop should:

- Prepare participants in terms of the themes and patterns of the game;
- Develop trust and confidence among the participants. While trust is never guaranteed, you can design your workshop with activities that help build it;
- Explain any material players need to learn, practice necessary skills, and introduce safety structures; and
- Avoid the use of complicated and/or ambiguous words.

ii) Structure the workshop

When structuring your workshop, consider the following:

- Include one or more warm-ups to ensure that people in the group are familiar with each other;
- Clearly state the game's subjects, context, and goals;
- Introduce and practice any game-specific mechanics, rules, or meta-techniques; and
- Use exercises that mirror in-game activities to help players practice what they will be doing during play. When possible, we recommend giving brief demonstrations of all exercises before asking players to try them.

iii) Build characters and relationships

Workshops should address characters and relationships in some way:

- Provide time for players to develop their characters, whether pre-written or designed by them, including backstories and motivations; and
- Organize workshop activities that will foster relations between different characters.
- In a short game, this might look like a simple activity such as Ball of Yarn (Hernø 2019) in which players take turns handing the ball to one another (literally or metaphorically), improvising a piece of fiction about the characters' shared backstory for the other person to accept or reject.

- In longer games, backstory development could take hours, weeks, or months depending on the complexity of the relationship. Consider how to direct your players toward establishing key facts efficiently within your precious workshop time.

iv) Negotiation and calibration

Make sure to set aside time to let your player discuss tone, content, touch (if relevant), and play style with one another:

- Manage expectations by asking the players to discuss their possible actions within the game; and
- Give them time to find a common ground through consent negotiations and calibration.

Note that in nano-game design, you may not have much time to set aside for negotiation and calibration. In these situations, we advise giving players a simple phrase like "off-game" that will enable them to break character and negotiate as needed. In some cases, you can also provide them with some choices that are relatively quick to make. Examples include a choice of what character to choose, what relationship dynamics are between the characters, one theme they definitely want to explore, or any content one or more players want to remove from the game.

v) Safety and comfort

Every workshop should address safety in some way:

- Introducing safety procedures and practicing safety mechanics;
- Ensure the participants understand that they can decline any of the exercises that you conduct without having to give a reason, i.e., opt-out (Koljonen 2019);
- Encourage participants to engage actively through asking questions; and
- Be ready to attend to the participants' needs or any issues they want to share during the workshop. As discussed in Chapter 5, players have a range of different comfort levels, accessibility needs, and other safety concerns.

In nano-games, you do not have much time with the players, so you may need to make some difficult choices in terms of which safety structures to include and exclude. However, we strongly recommend having at least one safety principle or mechanic and workshopping it with your players to emphasize the importance of safety and consent (see Chapter 5).

vi) Nano-game workshop design

Designing a workshop for a nano-game can be challenging due to the time constraints. For our model, a workshop should be between 5-15 minutes depending on the complexity needed for onboarding your players. It should contain the following features, some of which can be quite short if you are efficient with your design:

1. **Briefing:** A brief overview of the game setting, the structure, and the desired transformative impacts.

2. **Safety:** A brief overview and practice of any safety mechanics you plan to include, for example, how to Cut a scene, how to remove undesirable content using an X-Card (Stavropoulos 2013), how to opt-out (Koljonen 2019) (See Chapter 5 for more examples).

3. **Character Creation/Assignments:** An activity to assign characters, whether co-created with the players or pre-written.

4. **Character Relations Assignments:** An activity to assign relations between characters, whether co-created with the players or pre-written.

5. **Preparatory Activity:** A workshop activity that prepares the players to engage in the game. For example, if the game involves debate about gender roles, you might include a brief debate activity to practice the skill beforehand.

6. **Transition Activity:** A method for transitioning from the workshop to the game and character, e.g., counting down from 10 to 1, with brief phrases in between like, "You are on another planet, with gender roles quite different from those in our society..." Alternatively, you might play part of a thematically appropriate song, but be careful in assuming players will understand the lyrics if they are important to the design.

For a more detailed list of the many purposes for specific workshop activities, see Holkar (2015). Reviewing such a list when you design can help you be precise in your design and maximize your workshop time effectively. For example, some designers might assume several warm-up activities are needed in a row, while players are ready to move on to other forms of play preparation, such as character creation. Considering what information you might need to know to play your own game is a helpful strategy. Having other designers review your workshop can help as well.

Once your workshop is done, you are ready to start game play. In our nano-game model, the game play should be between 15-25 minutes.

e) Debriefs

As described in Chapter 2, the debrief structure and the questions asked are also designable surfaces that require extra attention. Depending on the length and intensity of the game, you may need a longer or shorter debrief. Finding the right balance can be difficult, as some players need more time to process independently than others, while some are ready to talk right away. Players should always be given the opportunity to opt-out or pass on a specific question. Also, a transformative experience likely requires more than one processing session. Consider the structured debrief only the beginning of a longer process. The debrief is a place for players to express what is most present for them in the moment or focus on specific interactions rather than to make sense of every aspect of the experience.

Bowman (2021) has designed a generic sample debriefing exercise for longer leisure games that is adaptable to your context. The debrief is meant to run for 45 minutes to 2 hours. It focuses on questions pertaining to emotional processing, intellectual processing, and reflections on group dynamics. Keep in mind that players may become fatigued or have other tasks they need to complete after a game that limit the amount of time that can be reserved for debriefing. Always build the debrief time into the game structure itself rather than as an optional add-on. While players can opt-out at any time like in any activity, the default should be that to participate in the game, you are also agreeing to participate in the debrief. In other words, after the game play is complete, players should still show responsibility toward the needs of the group rather than returning immediately to their individualized daily lives.

In a nano-game format, you may only have 10-20 minutes for the debrief, in which case you have a limited number of questions you can ask, likely 1-3 core ones. Make sure to ask open-ended questions that invite discussion rather than closed-ended questions that can be answered "yes" or "no." An example of an open-ended question is, "How did gender roles play out in this game?" An example of a closed-ended question is, "Did the game make you think about gender roles?"

In terms of structure and content, we recommend including a structured debrief that is moderated by the facilitator or a volunteer from the group depending on the number of players. In a nano-game of 1-3 players, the facilitator would run the debrief.

In a structured debrief, every player is given roughly the same amount of time to answer each question with the option of passing if needed. We recommend that your debrief includes:

1. **One de-roling activity:** Help players leave their role in a simple, ritualized way, e.g., "I was playing Mary, I am now Kelsey." You can also have them remove any costuming, badges, or other aspects associated with the game, such as changing their screen name back to their own in video conferencing. For more information on de-roling, see Chapter 5.

2. **One emotional processing question:** Depending on your type of game, this question could be open, such as "What was your most profound or intense experience?" Or it could be specific to transformative impacts, for example, therapeutic goals, "How did it feel to experience your character's gender in this setting?"

3. **One intellectual or educational processing question:** It can be nice to transition from an emotional question to one requiring more cognitive engagement. Sometimes, players need to process emotions first before they can intellectually work with the content. Depending on the type of game, this question can be more general, for example, an intellectual debrief question like, "What thoughts do you have about gender roles in your own life after playing this game?" If you are running an explicitly educational game, you should include at least one, if not more, educational processing question connected to your learning objectives. Remember the three types

of educational processing questions we discussed in Chapter 2 (Westborg and Bowman, in press for 2025):

a) **Connection:** Reflecting on the experience in relation to specific learning objectives or curricular content, as described before, e.g., "What aspects of this game connected to the concept of gender as a social construct we learned about before?"

b) **Abstraction:** Relating takeaways from the RPG experience to concepts or experiences in the wider outside world, for example, seeing the game experience as a connection point to larger trends in society over time, e.g., "How did the gender roles in the game reflect gender roles historically?"

c) **Contextualization:** Learning additional information about the context surrounding the topic or granular facts related to it as a means to enhance the learning, e.g., specific subject matter knowledge that was not possible to cover thoroughly during the game. An example might be introducing the concept of the gender binary during the debrief, then asking, "Did you experience gender as more binary or fluid in the game? Why?"

Depending on how forthcoming your group is, you may want to prepare follow-up questions, but make sure these questions are not central, as you should ask the core debrief questions first. Otherwise, the conversation can go in a radically different direction.

Adding up all of these stages, a good balance for a 45 minute nano-game in terms of workshop/gameplay/debrief could be 10 / 15 /20 or 15 / 20 /15. The balance depends on the length of time needed to onboard, have meaningful interactions designed for your transformative goals, and enough time to begin to process the experience.

After the game, encouraging your players to engage in additional techniques can help with processing further beyond the debrief, such as assigning debrief buddies to check in on each other after the game. As a whole, we call these integration activities.

f) Integration activities

In Chapter 2, we introduced a range of different integration activities available to you. While integration normally happens outside of the game context, designers can assign these activities as official or unofficial homework, strongly encouraging players to engage or even providing time and space for these activities to happen. Based on our example, here are some options (Bowman and Hugaas 2019):

1. **Creative Expression:** Getting involved in a creative outlet after the game, e.g., creative writing about the game events or the backstory from that character's perspective;

2. **Intellectual Analysis:** Engaging in cognitively-focused analysis, e.g., writing a paper on gender studies integrating the game as an example of playing with different gender roles;

3. **Emotional Processing:** Individually processing one's emotions alone, e.g., writing in one's journal about one's feelings after the game;

4. **Interpersonal Processing:** Connecting with others after the game to discuss; e.g., discussing insights on gender expression in one's own life;

5. **Community Building:** Engaging in activities that strengthen communities, e.g., forming a student group on campus supporting diverse gender expressions; and

6. **Returning to Daily Life:** Connecting back to one's life in a meaningful way, e.g., going through one's closet to find clothes to wear that most communicate one's gender to others.

Integration is the least understood area of transformative role-playing game design and from our perspective, is rarely discussed in the discourse (an exception is Teteau-Surel 2021). However, when considering that change must be sustained and prolonged long after the game, integration is the crucial piece for crystallizing important takeaways into meaningful actions in life. Processing and reflection are important components, as are planning action steps and following through with them. Therefore, integration will likely need to happen in both short-term and long-term practices.

Therapeutic role-playing games have specific needs with regard to post-game processing. These games are likely most effective when run as adjunctive to other therapeutic processes (Bartenstein 2024), such as more traditional one-on-one therapy or group work. Before the game, the mental health professional will usually spend one or more sessions assessing whether or not the client is a good fit for the game intervention or group work in general. If the intervention is suitable, during these sessions, the mental health professional will establish therapeutic goals with the client to explore in the game. If the game is run as a series, the mental health professional might check in with the client in between sessions and make agreements about how to proceed, especially when integrating sensitive content. After the game, additional processing usually occurs within group and/or one-on-one sessions.

Similarly, educational role-playing games require consideration in terms of the best ways to augment learning from the game. Educators should present information important to the game before the game, ideally outside of a workshop, e.g., assigning homework or giving a lecture on the topic. We recommend that educators make the learning objectives of the game clear and transparent before play. Educators should also consider adding activities after the game that reinforce specific concepts or expand upon knowledge gained in the game.

4.3 Design tools

a) The Mixing Desk of Larp

In 2013, Martin Nielsen and Martin Andresen (2013) published the Mixing Desk of Larp (Nordic Larp Wiki 2019a). The Mixing Desk is a tool that visualizes design choices as sliders, visually demonstrating that most choices are not "either/or" but rather exist on a spectrum. Examples of sliders in the Mixing Desk discussed in this chapter include *character creation responsibility* (organizer vs. player) and *story engine* (collaborative vs. competitive).

Regarding this latter fader, while your design choices incentivize certain actions, Juhana Pettersson (2021) has referred to players as *engines of desire*, meaning that your design is not ultimately what motivates the players; their own desires do. Considering how to align your goals and design choices with their desires is a fruitful approach, although of course desires are different from player to player. Some players may desire winning at competition, whereas others may prefer exploring the complexities of relationships with no clear winners. Signposting is helpful in this regard, i.e., clearly signaling what kinds of play the game will include and what kinds are outside the scope. For a great example, see the procedures created by the UK larp festival The Smoke to disclose in advance the features of each scenario (Wood 2022).

b) The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp

An adapted tool specific to transformative play is the Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp (Bowman 2018, 2022). While the tool focuses on education-specific faders, many of them are likely relevant in leisure transformational and therapeutic games as well. One can imagine a similar tool developed explicitly for therapeutic contexts, e.g., the Mixing Desk of Therapeutic Larp.

The sliders for the Mixing Desk (see Figures 1 and 2) are as follows:

- Performative/behavioral ←→ Introspective/reflective
- Cognitive ←→ Affective
- New subject matter ←→ Subject matter revision
- Thin character / role ←→ Complex characterization
- Social play ←→ Individual play
- Competition ←→ Cooperation
- Creativity of expression ←→ Pre-designed tasks
- Many perspectives ←→ One primary perspective
- Measurable goals ←→ Freedom of exploration
- One specific subject ←→ Interdisciplinary
- One specific task / modality ←→ Multiple skills / knowledges
- Leadership opportunities ←→ Equality of player status
- Soft skills ←→ Hard skills

- Individual interactions ←→ Large group interactions
- Ethics / social issues ←→ Non-social / cognitive focus
- New social dynamics ←→ Existing social dynamics (among the player base)
- Equal degree of participation ←→ Variable degrees of participation
- High cognitive load ←→ Low cognitive load
- High social risk ←→ Low social risk
- Failure conditions ←→ No failure conditions
- Extensive play preparation ←→ No play preparation
- Extensive debriefing ←→ Little debriefing
- Status and power play ←→ Character equality
- Skilled facilitation ←→ Beginner facilitator-friendly

The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp

Soft Skills	Individual Interactions	Ethics/ Social Issues	New Social Dynamics	Equal Degree of Participation	High Cognitive Load	High Social Risk	Failure Conditions	Extensive Play Preparation	Extensive Debriefing	Status and Power Play	Skilled Facilitation
Hard Skills	Large Group Interactions	Non-Social/ Cognitive Focus	Existing Social Dynamics	Variable Degrees of Participation	Low Cognitive Load	Low Social Risk	No Failure Conditions	No Play Preparation	Little Debriefing	Character Equality	Beginner Facilitator-Friendly

The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp

Performative/ Behavioral	Cognitive	New Subject Matter	Thin Character/ Role	Social Play	Competition	Creativity of Expression	Many Perspectives	Measurable Goals	One Specific Subject	One Specific Task/Modality	Leadership Opportunities
Introspective/ Reflective	Affective	Subject Matter Revision	Complex Characterization	Individual Play	Cooperation	Pre-Designed Tasks	One Primary Perspective	Freedom of Exploration	Interdisciplinary	Multiple Skills/ Knowledges	Equality of Player Status

Figures 1 and 2: The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp (Bowman 2018)

Some of these faders correspond with specific recommendations by educators, some of which are also featured in this chapter. For example, Michał Mochocki (2013a) advocates using larp only for subject-matter revision rather than introducing new content, which is difficult to learn while also role-playing. Mochocki (2013b) also argues for less extensive character and plot design in edu-larp, which can be difficult for new players to assimilate and may distract from learning goals. Frederikke S. B. Høyer (2024) from the larp boarding school Østerskov Efterskole in Denmark advocates for distributing power amongst younger players, giving them meaningful choices in games that feature a range of ages (see also Hyltoft, 2010; Jansen 2012). As with the Mixing Desk of Larp (Nielsen and Andresen 2013), this tool is meant to be flexible for additions and revisions based on the needs of the designer.

4.4 Considerations when scaling up

You may wish to scale up your game in the future. Examples of scaling might include making the game 4 hours instead of 1 with additional scenes, making it a campaign with multiple game sessions, increasing the number of players, and/or playing at a new location. To make this work, you may need to include additional design elements such as character factions, multiple facilitators, more physical spaces, a logistics team, and a safety team. We will cover techniques for this process more thoroughly in our next book, *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*. However, for now, consider the following points.

If your core nano-game is working well, make sure that all aspects you add enhance that core rather than distracting from it. In our science fiction example, if you add to your game many political factions or scientific advancements that do not relate to gender, you risk the game losing focus on your desired transformative impacts. Alternatively, if you can manage to weave these elements into issues connected to gender, like political factions having specific agendas related to gender roles or scientific advancements that impact reproductive possibilities and, thus, gender roles in this world, these enhancements might deepen the game.

You will likely also need to scale up your workshops, debriefs, and integration processes. For example, if you scale up to a three-day game, you will likely need several hours of workshopping and a much longer debrief. You may also choose to include some additional integration activities on site, such as making art or journaling.

Before scaling, however, we recommend refining your nano-game so that the core is solid by conducting multiple playtests and iterating your game design document accordingly.

4.5 Design specifics: "Everything is a designable surface"

As mentioned before, everything is a designable surface (Koljonen et al. 2019). For example, if a lot of attention is placed on the mechanics of a game, but no attention is placed on the safety structures around the game, we consider it imbalanced in design. Thus, all of the components in this chapter should be given careful consideration.

a) Designing based on theory

When doing Research through Design (Zimmerman and Forlizzi 2014) work in an academic context (see Chapter 7), additional considerations should be paid to designing based upon a theoretical framework. In many cases, the theory will inform the design well before the seed of the game is born. Design work can replicate all the components of complex theory or it can be based on smaller parts, but the theory should either a) inform the *practice*, i.e., theories about larp design, or b) inform the *content*, i.e., concepts from other theoretical models and disciplines.

In our educational example before, theories of gender as a social construct were used as an inspiration for the larp content. They could also be used more specifically through the larp's structure itself; for example, the players could undergo some sort of in-game ritual in which their character's genders are assigned to them and they learn what expectations are placed upon these genders in this science fiction world. The degree to which you integrate one or more theories is up to you, but basing design work on theoretical concepts can be quite enriching. We will discuss this practice in more depth in Chapter 7.

b) Safety design

As discussed before, safety is an important component to design work. Designers should consider safety during all three phases of the game (see Chapter 5 for more details). A few examples include:

1. **Before the game:** For example, including pre-game sessions to agree upon content and negotiate consent, also called Session 0 in tabletop. Safety workshops where key techniques are explained and practiced is also an example.

2. **During the game:** For example, including using the techniques mentioned in the workshop, such as the Okay Check-In, an off-game signal that allows a person to check in with a player off-game and for them to respond if they need care (Brown 2016).

3. **After the game:** For example, the emotional debriefing question might be important to allow people the chance to share any lingering feelings, or having debriefing buddies assigned who can check in on them during the week.

Other aspects of safety that are important to include involve issues of responsible engagement with content related to different cultural backgrounds, inclusion, and accessibility, which we will discuss in later sections and in Chapter 5 and 6.

c) Narrative design

Within our context, *narrative design* is the "practice of creating larps where meaningful, interesting stories can be told by participants within the frame permitted by the design" (Koljonen et al. 2019, 91). When applied to transformative play, this design creates the space where that transformation can happen. This space involves both the design and implementation of a setting that is believable, logical and stimulating for the players. In turn, this entails proper assessment of the narrative features, the chosen genre, diegetic setting, and the social as well as cultural context surrounding the actions to be performed in-character.

Whilst there is a significant overlap between the two processes and skills involved with design and writing, a distinction exists between the structural elements of this frame (the design) and the creative writing process.

The purpose of narrative design is not to tell a story, but to enable a story to emerge that is told collectively and meaningfully by all participants. *Story* here is used in the sense of storytelling. This is what happens during the game. Story is created in real time from the moment the game begins until the players are done playing (Brind 2020). This is distinct from *Plot, used* in the sense of plotting. These are the pre-planned parts of the game; the worldbuilding, backstory, and any events of the game that the designers design or write in advance of the game and expect to happen (Brind 2020).

When considering worldbuilding, one approach is to select theme(s) that you want players to experience, which can be helpful in forming a general sense of the type of game as well as the atmosphere of the game you are planning. For instance, a theme of "death and rebirth" might apply to a dark fantasy setting while a theme of "social justice" might be dominant in a dystopian or cyberpunk setting. These are examples of *genres*, which are recognizable setting structures that replicate in the dominant cultures or subcultures. The genre will often aid in limiting the sorts of activities and narratives that will occur, which may or may not be desirable depending on your design goals.

For the purposes of interrogating a larp specifically, the concept of heterocosm seems useful. Originally coined to describe the difference between the universe created by God and the secondary universes created by humanity (Baumgarten 1735), in this context, we use it to describe a fictional or poetic world that is perceived as different from the real world. While for Bolter (2001), heterocosms imply a passive reading of a text where the reader "loses themself" in the story (Bolter 2001), we are expanding this notion, as larpers cannot be passive. Someone who is simply an audience member in costume is not larping; they are scenery or a voyeur at best. Whilst modes and levels of engagement in the process of play (and larp) undoubtedly shift during the course of the

game, if a participant does not engage, does not assert their agency to affect the story, or does not play their character, then they are not a serious part of the diegesis (see Chapter 3). If they do, however, then they are playing, thus Vella's (2015) distinction of ludic heterocosm. We can extend this to describe the transformative ludic heterocosm.

We are looking to build a space where a transformative story can emerge through play. This space is a designed entity—a shared fictional world with both transformational, and playful or playable elements:

- The *storyworld*, metaphysics, and cultures of the game, which may or may not relate to a specific genre;
- Specific scenes, plots and structures (acts, the order of events, the degree of player agency to affect the story); and
- Characters, their relationships, and what they actually *do* during the game.

Furthermore, there are non-diegetic aspects to this work, for example, whether information is transparent: the distinction between "what players know, what characters 'know,' [] how that knowledge filters into the larp" (Torner 2019, 98), and to what extent that is important. For example, if the thematic verbs of a game include *solving mysteries* and *discovering,* then you might not wish to give the players the answers that their characters seek in advance of the game.

i) Worldbuilding

> In a fully immersive fantasy, the actors must be able to engage with their world; they must be able to scrape at its surface and discover something deeper than a stage set.
>
> **— Farah Mendlesohn, 2008, 65**

We define *worldbuilding* as the creative design of the storyworld which the characters will inhabit and where the participants will play and experience the story together. Worldbuilding can be a conversation with many participants, "where both the meanings evoked by works of fiction and the ways of making such meanings are communally explored" (Roine 2016, 237-238). Worldbuilding also incorporates the underlying metaphysics of a world—particularly in a fantasy or sci-fi setting—so that the designers, writers, and sometimes players understand the nature of the world.

The science fiction writer, M. John Harrison (2007) describes *worldbuilding* as "the great clomping foot of nerdism." In some larp discourses, there is an argument that the richness of detail in available source material does not enable the player or their play, and thus is not good narrative design. The student handbook for the Polish larp *College of Wizardry* (Various 2013-), presented to players as they arrived on site, was over 500 pages long. Estimated word count for the Wiki for the UK larp *Empire* (Profound Decisions 2013-) is 5.2 million words. For some participants this is a delight; being able to immerse themselves in rich detail enhances their experience. For other players it is inaccessible and off-putting.

For a nano-game, expecting players to make effective use of a large scale of material is unreasonable. You need to create something that is quick and easy to assimilate. As discussed in Chapter 3, assimilation here is a term in cognitive psychology, in this case used to describe information that is understood, remembered, and is playable (McLeod 2020). The output of worldbuilding is the storyworld, which Ryan and Thon (2014, 2) define as representations that (can) transcend media, so in our field these are diegetic constructs that can move from the written page to the immersive experience.

Note that the storyworld may be based in the reality of this world or more fictional in nature, which will affect your worldbuilding. For example, the setting of *1942* (2000, 2017) was an occupied Norwegian village during WWII and emphasized historical accuracy. Alternatively, the setting of a fantasy game allows for the invention of cultures, languages, and traditions that may or may not share similarities to our world; for example, the open world of Lorient Trust's *The Gathering* (1992-) has allowed for players to bring in character concepts from fantasy races such as Orcs and Goblins, but also Victorian-era vampire hunters, and evil clowns.

Not every narrative design relies on written worldbuilding. Some games create the storyworld collectively in workshops; in the tabletop RPG *Apocalypse World* (Baker and Baker 2010), for example, such collaborative worldbuilding is fairly easy, as the fiction is set in a trope heavy setting that many players already understand. Thus the world does not need a thorough description, because we know it well enough to play in it. Alternatively, *Winson Green Prison* (Sandquist and Göthberg 2016) is a larp about suffragettes set in the early 20th century. The larp runners gave participants a brief introduction to the historical setting and read out a paragraph about the fight for women's votes.

Fortune & Felicity (Westerling and Hultman 2017) was based on the novels of Jane Austen. Thus, its world was a fictional pseudo-historical Regency setting; the larp pre-supposed players would have a passing knowledge of Austen's work and her world. At the other extreme is Nina Essendrop's *No Island is an Island* (Essendrop 2017). Here, the storyworld only exists inside the heads of the individual players. They create soundscapes together and then explore them—blindfolded—using touch and hearing only; at no point do they discuss or agree on a single objective interpretation of the storyworld. That being said, in most cases a shared understanding of the storyworld is important to RPGs because, unlike a novel, there is more than one person engaged in the story.

When it comes to worldbuilding, we can borrow from other fields. Baur's (2012) work is particularly insightful—although perhaps prescriptive—suggesting that worldbuilding should be no more than 10% of word count, and that as a world builder we have little control over how our ideas are "bent and twisted" (Baur 2012, 87). If the game uses existing intellectual property (IP) such as *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkein 2020), then Roine's distinction between *canonical* worlds and fan-created *fanonical* worlds is useful here, in that players will modify the worldbuilding through their play.

ii) Specific scenes

Designing specific scenes is a part of the plotting process, which is different depending on the purpose of the scene. Scene types include:

- Opening / closing / transitional scenes
- Set piece scenes / nodal scenes
- Cool scenes
- Pivotal scenes

1) Opening / closing / transitional scenes

Some scenes open and end a game, or help to differentiate between elements of the piece, like act change breaks. An opening scene describes how players should start the game and it can be an important tool in the designer's portfolio to help them get into character and into play.

Consider the following descriptions: "*At the start of the game, your character has just arrived in a strange country house for a meeting with experts and academics in their field. They do not know anyone.There will be a welcoming speech from your host and then the game* will begin."

or

"*The larp begins with a game of Hide and Seek. Your host will begin counting at 13, and when they get up to 100 they will start the search. Run* and Hide!"

These are two different approaches to an opening scene that privilege different emotions and playstyles.

Many larp narratives fit Horace's description, "(The author) always hurries to the outcome and (they) plunge their listeners into the middle of the story as though they were already familiar with it."[4] (Horace and Wilkins 1964) in as much as the player – in a hurry – assumes the character, already knows the background to an event, and is able to start the story in the middle. This is a common design practice.

Transitional scenes need to be clear. If you want players to steer their characters in different ways or to explore different themes, then they need to be clearly guided. Musical cues, lighting changes, or act breaks are useful here, although not all larps rely on these methods.

From a dramaturgical point of view, if nothing else, knowing how a nano-game will end is important. This principle is much like the end of a play, where the audience needs to know when to applaud. Good narrative design allows for a satisfying conclusion that brings the players and their characters together in a moment whilst also making it clear that the moment is the end of the story and of the game.

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4   Original Latin: "*Semper ad eventum festinat et in medias res non secus ac notas auditorem rapit.*"

2) Set piece scenes / nodal scenes

Lindley and Eladhari (2005) break down the diegesis of a story into specific objects and events and suggest that the plot is a presentation of these elements, with "expressive variations of emphasis." Whilst this definition of plot seems to work on a textual level—i.e., if we were looking at the text of a narrative—it is less useful when discussing these games because for us the word *plot* tends to describe a planned series of events that have not yet happened, or to describe those pre-planned events after the fact.

Certainly plot in larp has more in common then, with the active term "plotting" — scoundrels planning in dark basements—than with E.M. Forster's (1927) example of a plot: "The King died, and then the Queen died of grief." In larp, a plot would more likely be "The King dies and then the players need to do something or the Queen will die of grief."

Nodal—or branching path—narrative design is a feature of interactive new media. Marsh (2003, 94) describes these user-controlled non-linear narrative structures as similar to a spliced storyline or edits of a film, but we like the analogy of a Choose Your Own Adventure (CYOA) story. This design acknowledges some agency on the part of the players to select a direction for the story to take at specific points during the larp, but controls both when these choices can be made and what the choices are. Harviainen (2008, 225) describes these as "plot waypoints." These may be set piece encounters, significant battles, political decisions, or success/failure points during the plot/story interface.

These scenes are usually planned to happen in the game, regardless of what the characters do; however, these scenes come with risk. Depending on the players and the size of the game these set piece scenes may never happen, nor make sense in context. The marriage scene between the prince and princess cannot take place if she murdered her fiancé in Act 1. This risk still applies to tabletop RPGs, although with the facilitator taking an active role, it might be less likely to happen than in a larp.

3) Cool scenes

Cool scenes are moments where the characters get to do something that the players ideally will remember long after the game (see Thomas 2017). These are often scripted moments, where the outcome is more important than agency. Thomas (2017) describes *moment-based design* in which such scenes are more spectacle than play, momentarily shifting the larper into audience mode: a ghost throws themselves out of a first-floor window or possibly the players perform the Murder of Gonzago in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (2024). Cool scenes are distinct from *fateplay*, which is a suggestion or instruction from the organizers to play towards a specific outcome or to play a specific scene (Fatland 2013).

There is a transformational opportunity here because players tend to remember these moments. By combining the "cool" scene with the pivotal scene, you can

reinforce the learning; every time the player remembers the cool moment, they will also remember the associated lesson.

4) Pivotal scenes

A pivotal scene is a fixed point in time, a designed moment where the game designer intends for players to learn, experience, or discover something. Sometimes these scenes involve coming together at the same time, for example, a ritual scene where characters say goodbye to one another, or a one-to-one audience with a divine entity speaking to a character individually and sharing sacred wisdom. Unlike the nodal scenes, pivotal scenes *must* happen, as the design of the larp relies upon them. If two characters are late, they miss their chance to say goodbye; if they do not turn up at all then the magic of the larp may be lost. These scenes often need off-game scaffolding and organization to ensure that they happen on time. Pivotal scenes, like everything else, are designable surfaces.

iii) Character design

A character is a playable fictional construct by means of which the participant enters the storyworld. Whilst a character seems to be synonymous with a character in a digital game, there is a marked difference when we discuss larp. The relationship between a larper and the character they embody is a counterpoint to Salen and Zimmerman's *immersive fallacy* (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 450-451) because—unlike in a digital game or a tabletop RPG —player and character fully share the same body and the reality is physically complete enough for the player to believe they are a part of the imaginary world. The more players experience actual presence (see Chapter 3; Harviainen 2016), theoretically, more aspects of the character will be affected and informed by the participant (and vice versa). However, presence is not the only factor that contributes to immersion; a player may feel more immersed in the fiction of an intense game of the tabletop RPG *Dread* (Ravachol and Barmore 2005) then in a larp with a lot of environmental immersion but varying degrees of immersion into character, such as *Bicolline* (Kornaga, Renard and Dubé 1994).

Different larp traditions and styles have their own approaches to character creation (van der Heij, 2019, 205; Weißenfels, 2017, 184, 191; Shockley 2017, 203-205; Algayres 2017, 259-260). In some traditions characters are pre-written by the organizers and assigned to participants via a casting process. Some larps will create characters during the workshops. Others do not provide pre-written characters at all, and players are responsible for creating their own character and backstory. In some cases, these characters are co-created (Holkar 2019, 211) or are reviewed by the organizers to ensure plot consistency, or to mine the character's background for plot ideas that can be used during the larp.

We will not unpack the logistical process of writing characters in detail here, other than to acknowledge that the output ranges in terms of detail, length and quality. For some larps character creation is a matter of deciding where to spend skill points, or

the selection of a character class. This mechanical/mathematical form of character creation—derived from tabletop RPGs—defines what the character can do, their relative strengths and weaknesses. It is less common in Nordic larp and derivative forms, but it ties to a desire of participants to understand what a character is for, as well as how good they are at their skills and abilities.

At the most basic level, pre-written characters usually consist of the following sections:

- Character Name,
- Personality,
- Background,
- Function, which can include skills, abilities, and powers or other diegetic purposes with or without game mechanics. For example, if a character is a doctor, the player will assume that they have some affinity for medicine. This becomes an alibi for interaction with others. Functions may also be defined by one's role as a member of a faction, and
- Relationships (see later in this chapter).

There are different approaches to pre-writing characters, which we will cover in more depth in the next book in this series, *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

Characters need to be:

- **Readable:** Can the player understand the character?
- **Playable:** Does this character have something to do, playable goals, clear wants and needs driving their behavior, alibi to interact with others, agency to affect play, a plot trajectory? A despised servant in a room full of nobility might sound interesting, but it is not easily playable without some additional scaffolding.
- **Assimilable:** Is the character designed and written in such a way that the player can understand and retain the details?
- **Coherent:** Do the details within the character sheet make sense to the reader?
- **Consistent:** Does the character make sense in relation to the storyworld and the other characters in it? Are the characters connected consistently to the theme and setting? For instance, a political intrigue larp might coherently include diplomats, spies, and nobility, while a whimsical and eccentric inventor character might be out of place.
- **Symmetrical:** Is the information in one character sheet reflected in other character sheets? We recommend designing symmetrically unless you have a good reason not to do so.

An example of *symmetrical character design* is: If the town guard owes a debt to the sailor for saving their life, it is important that the sailor's character sheet mentions this act of heroism. Note that the same event does not need to be described in the same way on both character sheets. The sailor may have fallen into the river and saved the town guard by accident rather than it being a selfless act.

Alternatively, in a non-transparent or mystery game, *asymmetrical character design* might look like: The Queen's dressmaker stole the string of pearls. The Queen does not know who stole the pearls. This design choice has risks; the Queen's lack of knowledge may lead to a lack of play on the missing pearls plot, which might lead to the dressmaker having less interaction in the game. On the other hand, if other parts of the design ensure that the pearls plot emerges, the lack of knowledge could turn into a welcome surprise and an interesting mystery for the Queen to solve.

Needs and wants should be the main determinants of the goals of the character. These can relate to self-interest, such as revenge or love, or societal interest, such as political power, social reforms, etc. Goals are beneficial in a sense that they influence players' actions and make the game interesting. Ideally, these goals incentivize behavior conducive to the overall aims of the game.

Sometimes as a creative you want to do something clever with the formatting or style of a character, for example, "Let's represent the character with a single postcard." This is a legitimate design choice; however, it can affect the readability.

All of these factors are sliders on the Mixing Desk of Larp (Nielsen and Andresen 2013; Stenros, Andresen, and Nielsen 2016), but they do affect one another in complex ways. The participant who receives the character sheet will have a different reading of the character from the writer, or from another player reading the same sheet. Workshopping a shared understanding of characters is particularly useful for transformative play.

iv) Relations design

Relations design refers to creating (pre-written) relationships between characters. These are seeds for play and give players—who may be strangers to one another—diegetic reasons to interact.

In this section we will look at *group design* as a way to ensure that relations are balanced and enable the maximum breadth of opportunity for play, and at *relationship design* as a writing task.

1) Group design

By assigning a character to multiple groups, you can ensure that there are multiple opportunities for players to interact with others. For example, the designers of the Norwegian larp *1942* (Raaum and Andersen et al. 2000, 2017) used the Three Affiliations Model to design activities and relationships for their characters (see Figure 3).
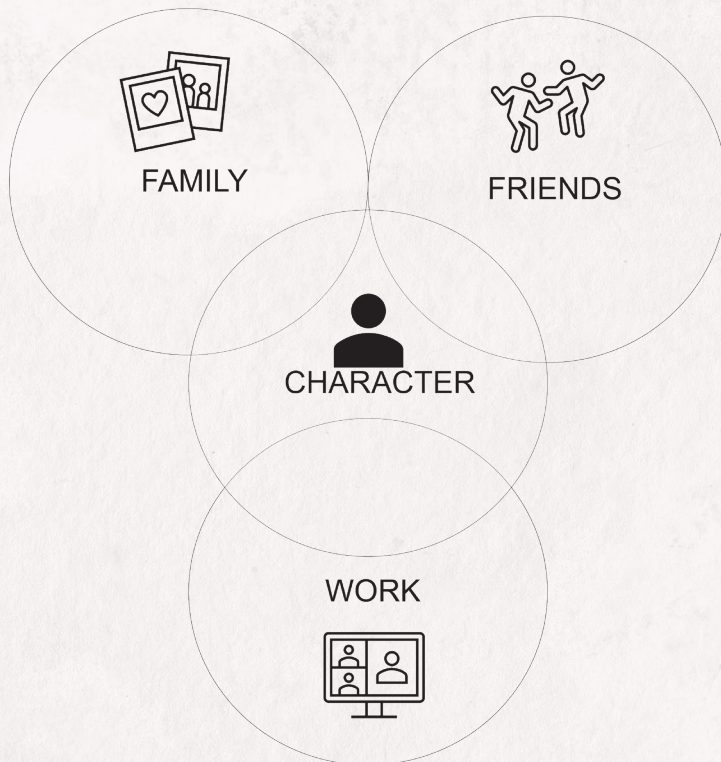
Figure 3: The Three Affiliations Model (Raaum and Andersen et al. 2000, 2017)

The three group dimensions here give the character a working group to interact with during the day, a (close) family group with all of the tensions and loyalties one may find from one's relatives, and a set of other friends to interact with. Fatland (2010) explains that this model was successful enough that it became popular for Norwegian larps that focus on the living of daily life in smallish communities.

Sometimes the group design has a functional element to it, e.g., nobles / servants in an *upstairs / downstairs* larp, or members of different political parties in a larp about diplomacy. Sometimes the characters are designed to compete, sometimes collaborate, and sometimes both. At this point, the group may need to become less about relationship design and more about playability. However, these approaches are useful when players do not gel as they build redundancy of functional play across groups into the larp design. This approach is common to larger larps such as *College of Wizardry* (Various 2013-), *Bunker 101* (Chaos League 2018, 2019), and *The Last Song* (Justesen et al. 2022). Whilst group design may not be a factor in a four player nano-game, it becomes relevant once you get much larger than that. On the other hand, you can design your nano-game characters with distinct group affiliations, even if other members of the group are not present in the play.

2) Relationship design

It is difficult to embody a character in isolation because they need others to validate their existence; often our understanding of the character comes through how they

interact with others. Or as Pettersson puts it, "Characters are defined by their social connections" (Pettersson 2019, 201).

However, an over-reliance on pre-written relationships carries a risk. If a player is unable to attend, or if two participants do not feel some form of chemistry, which need not always be physical, a pre-written relationship might fail (Nøglebæk 2023). This latter issue is a particularly common failure mode for romantic relationships.

Fortunately the affiliations/group approach to character design also enables complex playability and plotting. For example, Fatland (2010) identifies that something as simple as a fisherman who illegally gambles married to a woman who is a member of a Church Committee Against Gambling goes with intrigue, and potential conflict. These sorts of relations are *plot* wrapped up in the dynamic between two characters and these tend to be more successful.

Whether relations are being pre-written or co-created we suggest a balanced selection of supportive relations—where the characters are friendly—and some more challenging relations. This does not mean that the characters must be enemies (although they can be) but rather that their interactions may take one or both out of their comfort zones.

Relations should contain alibis for interaction. If you create a relation between a high-status character and a low status character, the lower status character needs to be able to get meaningful access to that high status character or the relation is not playable.

- How do the two characters know one another?
- What do they want from one another?
- Do they have a shared secret?

3) Faction design

Another way to create interesting conflict or dynamism in a larger game is through faction design. As social animals, humans often divide into groups, which causes what social psychology describes as *in-group* vs. *out-group* thinking (Tajfel 1974,1979). We often belong to several in-groups and out-groups at once that may overlap or contradict one another. For example, a person may be part of the in-group of a class at university, but also feel left out of other in-groups in the class due to their marginalized identity or affiliation with a minority culture. Thus, our social affiliations are complex and rife for interesting play dynamics. Factions are possible to include even in nano-games. Examples include a short scenario in which characters from different countries in conflict practice diplomatic relations, or a game exploring power dynamics in high school in which two members of a popular clique tease a student from a less influential social group.

Importantly, faction play can also lead to some players feeling excluded from the in-group, both in- and off-game, especially if the factions are not equal in terms of in-game power or status (Algayres 2019). Consider carefully how to mitigate this risk.

Also, note that while common in role-playing game design practice, games do not have to include established factions. For example, an interesting design challenge might be to design a factionless society or start the game with no established factions to see which directions players take the interactions and group formation.

d) Culture design

We define *culture* as a set of customs, norms, and behaviors of a group of people; in a larp or tabletop RPG, this is a diegetic culture as it describes the inhabitants of the storyworld. When we play in a culture that we understand—the modern day in the country where we live—the complexity of our culture is second nature to us; however, when we move away from that into a historical or fantastical setting, the information we require to play meaningfully in that setting becomes more complex; the characters would have a lifetime experience of living within the diegetic culture (Nielsen and Strand 2019, 151) but we as players do not.

Culture design therefore is the process of creating, describing, and teaching the players how to interact not with just one another, but also within the constraints of the storyworld. It encompasses not only overall details about the culture, but also the roles, values, power relations, and norms within it. While we will touch upon culture design here, Chapter 6 expands in more depth about cultures within and surrounding games, as well as rituals, symbolism, and other important facets of cultural communication.

Nielsen and Strand (2019) recommend designing workshops in which players enact scenes or otherwise define together the following three categories:

1. **Everyday scenes,** which emphasize normative behavior within the culture;
2. **Rites**, including rituals members of the culture would know and understand; and
3. **Taboos**, meaning behaviors that are considered inappropriate or prohibited in the culture.

Due in part to our tendency as humans to rely on stereotypes to represent cultures with which we are less familiar, your challenges with culture design are:

- Definition,
- Taboos,
- Appropriation, and
- Inclusion.

i) Definition

How will you define the culture in a way that can be assimilated and replayed? What methods will you use to communicate that culture? Remember if you are using someone else's IP without permission, you may end up having to deal with lawyers.

ii) Taboos

If it is a culture with rituals and taboos, what happens if the players get it wrong? There is a material difference between a character breaking a taboo and dealing with the consequences of that action, and a player inadvertently doing something that their character would not do.

iii) Appropriation

By drawing inspiration from or playing within cultures that are not their own, game designers may run the risk of being accused of or perceived as culturally appropriating (Kessock 2014, 125). There are various approaches to handling existing cultures in your design. The most simple approach is "don't do it." Another option is to include designers from the culture you want to draw inspiration from in the design process, or to involve paid sensitivity readers.

iv) Inclusion

When we design a larp with a Eurocentric/Nordic/North American and/or heteronormative, able-bodied, relatively young, cis-gendered man in mind as a player, we can end up reinforcing harmful structural patterns and stereotypes (Jones, Holkar, and Kemper 2019, 167). Therefore, a part of your culture design process should involve acknowledging and considering intersectionality (Crenshaw 1997), meaning the ways the character's social identities afford privilege or marginalization, and how these identities intersect within a person, group, or culture. For example, in a Western context, a White, heterosexual, middle class woman will likely have had a different life experience than a Black, gay, upper class cis-gendered man. Consider what ways such intersections might affect the lives of these characters when designing.

To not include marginalized identities might seem like a simple design choice, but it is one that is hard to justify. To remove an identity or a structural oppression from the storyworld risks erasing the lived experience of players (Svanevik 2018). Respectfully including nuanced characters from marginalized backgrounds can not only make your designs more authentic; it can also signal to players from similar backgrounds that their perspectives are valuable and, on a more basic level, that this community might feel safe to play within (see Chapter 5 for more on perceptions of safety). However, as mentioned before, including marginalized experiences should be done with great care and, ideally, consultation or collaboration with someone who has that identity or experience, which we discuss further in Chapters 5 and 6.

v) Approaches

There are a number of approaches to the creation and communication of diegetic cultures.

1) Organizer-created long form text

Long form text requires players to have time to read and assimilate and often leads to multiple readings and understandings of the culture. This method can be especially

effective when used in conjunction with popular IP because players may have already assimilated that culture (Brind 2021, 170). However, when considering integrating IP, refer to our previous note about obtaining permission.

2) Organizer-created micro fiction/video

If you can write short pieces of text that describe key aspects of the storyworld and/or present them as video, your players will have an easier time assimilating ideas.

3) Rehearsal of rituals and culture in workshops

If you have a designed world, practicing some of the cultural norms and rituals together helps players to develop a shared understanding. While challenging in a nano-game due to time constraints, if such a practice is central to the goals of the game, a simple exercise like deciding how characters from one culture ritually greet each other can help establish a sense of having shared cultural norms.

4) Player co-creation

The hands-off approach allows the players to create, develop, and agree on the details of the storyworld. This works better with small groups and short form or nano-larps. This is a very rapid method of creation and—as the participants are actively engaged in the process—they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and of belonging to the culture they have created. The most obvious risk is a tendency toward appropriation, particularly with inexperienced players. We will discuss these topics in more depth in Chapters 5 and 6.

e) Rules, mechanics and meta-techniques design

Considering how modern role-playing games partly originate from wargaming (Petersen 2012) and similar conflict-heavy settings, it is no wonder that *rules* and *mechanics* played and continue to play an important part in many games and communities. Rules refers to "implicit and explicit agreements of what is being done and how" whereas mechanics "focus the narrative or [] represent acts that would be impossible, dangerous, or excessively intimate, such as magic,

violence, or sex" (Stenros and Montola 2019, 18). Rules and mechanics are used, for instance, as a way to resolve conflict and to figure out "who won" an encounter or battle, or to facilitate player safety (e.g., Brown 2018).

Similarly, *meta-techniques* (Westerling and Hultman 2019) are ways to maneuver in the space that exists between what the player knows / is capable of and what the character knows / is capable of, developed in parallel. For instance, when playing fantastical characters capable of feats of magic, players need some way to signal to the other players that their characters cast a certain magic spell, as players are not capable of it themselves.

When designing for transformation, it is important to consider what rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques to add to your game. As game designers, many of us are always thinking of elegant ways in which to nudge our players towards specific

types of play, but we advise to try to reduce rather than increase the number of rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques when trying to maximize the transformative potential of your game.

Our main reasons for these considerations are:

- Immersive play depends on the players' cognitive capacity. Too many rules might overwhelm the players and hamper their immersion.
- The culture of the player group is more powerful in defining play than any mechanic. By this we mean that one might be better served spending time on pre-game workshops that set the expectations and limits of play, rather than relying on mechanics that might or might not work.

Nevertheless, there are of course many occasions where rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques are needed in your game. Here are some helpful guidelines when choosing what to add.

As mentioned before, players need cognitive capacity in order to immerse into your game, so we advise you to keep what you add as simple and easy to both understand and employ as possible. For example, if you decide that you need some sort of physical fight resolution in your game, you want your players to resolve quickly and not spend a prolonged time considering hit points, weapons, and similar.

Furthermore, seeing beyond one's own cultural bias is difficult, but try to consider whether what you add relies on your own specific cultural knowledge. This is especially important if you expect your player base to be culturally diverse or you want your game to be accessible for players from different backgrounds. For example, even though the translation of the Norwegian *kutt* and *brems* to the English *cut* and *brake* led to extensive use of these safety tools in the Nordic larp communities, the way the last one can also be heard as *break*, has made the technique more ambiguous and less useful than it originally was.

Always keep your intended transformational impact in mind, and make sure that everything you add supports it. If you find that something you added does not create affordances for your transformative impact, then be strict with yourself, and remove it. By loading a game with mechanics, for example, one runs the risk of unintentionally creating a *procedural rhetoric* (Bogost 2007) with messages that are not aligned with what the designer is trying to communicate. By procedural rhetoric, we mean that the rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques, as well as the systems and models that are created from them can make claims or arguments by themselves. If we are unaware of this, such claims might end up going contrary to what you want your players to take away from the game. For example, games that reward characters for violent actions or incentivize them through mechanics make an implicit rhetorical argument about what behaviors are most valued by the system (Albom 2021). This argument may run counter to the transformative goals of the group, for example, training skills in debate, persuasion, or collaboration.

f) Accessibility design

> Accessibility [in terms of universal design] is a term that can include a wide range of characteristics including gender, sexuality, race and socioeconomics as well as access needs required for disability or chronic illness.
>
> **— Robin Tynan 2018, 50**

Accessibility in terms of universal design is not just including a wheelchair ramp, although that is often where the thinking process starts. Players and volunteers making larps have a wide variety of needs and, as a designer, you cannot easily anticipate or accommodate all of them. Tynan (2018) provides an important introduction and summary to the processes of accessibility design.

We suggest that you consider a spectrum of needs as a part of your design process and consider the impact of your choices on different minds and bodies. When approaching universal design, this process usually involves hiring an accessibility advisor, asking the players about their needs, and consulting existing guidelines. (For examples from esports events, see Hassan, Baltzar, and Kämäräinen 2025).

Accessibility design often comes with difficult decisions. You need to be honest about your intentions and about the subsequent decisions you will need to make. As Tynan (2018) explains, sometimes you will decide that a particular location—for example, a castle—is where you *want* to make your larp. By making that decision you are choosing to make the larp less accessible or even inaccessible to some folks with physical needs.

Accessibility includes physical access, sensory access, and an awareness of neurodiversity and the needs that come with it. There are some players with medical needs, for example, to refrigerate and/or take medicine in a sterile setting; dietary or digestive requirements; or something as simple and fundamental as a clean place to use sanitary products. Some larpers are happy to relieve themselves in a bush; others cannot. The cost of some larp events also restricts access to some players (Ford 2020).

If your spatial design involves darkened areas or low lighting then you are choosing to make those parts of the larp inaccessible to people with specific visual access needs. Questioning those decisions might be difficult—diluting your artistic vision is not easy—but you owe it to your players and potential players to ask and answer those difficult questions. Although nano-larps tend to be more accessible, that does not mean you should think less about the adjustments that some players may need. For more on this topic, see Chapter 5.

g) Documentation design

Documentation is a controversial subject in larp design (MacDonald 2015). Documentation is often needed to promote larp as a form of art or academic topic of study (Pettersson 2015). It is also used in promotional materials and documentary journalism. In addition, some players highly appreciate in-game documentation, especially photos of their characters, e.g., from a larp. They may even feel transformed seeing the photos, as they can witness moments from the larp that had an impact or a certain bearing that has changed in themselves (Paisley 2022).

However, in-game photography and other forms of documentation can also change the dynamics of play. When players are aware they are being photographed, they may become self-conscious or get distracted from the scene. Having the photography take place taken by an in-game photographer can help, or having an off-game space for players to opt-in to posing for photos they want taken. For example, in-game photography in physical space may be more challenging in games with historical themes that predate photography, but taking a screenshot in an online larp with the same theme might be less obtrusive.

Ethical concerns may also exist. Some players worry about documentation of their role-playing experiences being shared due to social stigma or people misinterpreting the nature of the in-game actions depicted. Considering the purpose of the documentation is important, including what is being shared, what consent needs to be obtained, and how the documentation might impact the players depicted. Furthermore, if taking documentation for an academic project, you may be required to obtain ethical approval (see Chapter 7).

Whatever your documentation policy is, make sure to be transparent with your players about it, ideally before they sign up to the game. Providing options for reviewing documentation before it is released to the public is a good plan in case players want something deleted. Obtaining written or verbal consent to use specific images in certain contexts is a best practice (and sometimes legally needed in the case of research or publication).

However, other forms of documentation are possible, for example, ephemera from the game not attached to a specific person or images of the set design. Aspects that are not often considered documentation but are very useful in research are the written documents produced by designers, just as we recommend producing for your nano-games and scaled up versions.

i) Manuals, design documents, larp scripts, and character sheets

There are many types of documents that can be used to cover the design of a role-playing game. Here, we will mention some of them, but for a more extensive list, see Westborg (2022). You may hear these documents called by different names; this section is intended to categorize them for the purposes of our model.

One of the most important things about these documents is thinking about who they are written for and what information is needed for that person. For example, organizers and players need very different types and levels of information.

The first type of document is the one aimed at the players: the *player's handbook*. It should contain all the information a player needs. In the player's handbook for a larp, you would find things such as practical information like times and dates; safety information like content warnings and information about the safety staff; narrative information like the setting and the vision; dress code information; meta-techniques, transparency, and so on. A tabletop player's handbook might focus more on setting information and rules. Note that some games feature this information on a website rather than a separate document.

The other player-facing document is the *character sheet*. Not all larps have these; as mentioned before, in some larps, the characters are created during workshops. A character sheet is designed to give a player the right amount of information for them to be able to play a designed character with reference to other characters. There are many different approaches to character writing and some of these are more or less successful depending on the recipient players. It is worth keeping in mind that people assimilate information in different ways. One person might need a short set of bullet points, while others might relish pages of backstory.

In addition, we have documents that are written for the facilitators. These are internal documents and not something that would be shared with players, although in some communities, the larp script is available beforehand for players to read, e.g., on certain larp festival websites.

The first is the *larp script* (Nilsen, Stark, and Lindahl 2014). It includes everything you need to facilitate the larp. This includes characters (if pre-written), groups, relations, meta-techniques, what happens during the playtime, and the full framing, including pre-game and post-game activities such as workshops, de-roling, and debriefing. It also includes annotations with comments about how to facilitate the larp and minor preparations like organizing the room or hiding props. The larp script can be organized in different ways, from as simple as overarching headings to meticulous, such as exact timestamps for every part. This is a helpful document to cover the whole design from the facilitators' perspective.

If the larp is part of a larger campaign, there might be a need for a *campaign document* where you find the overarching information for all the games. It can include world info; systems for fighting or economy; what players are allowed to change or not in the setting; visual guidelines; etc. A lot of the info in the *player's handbook* should be placed here if you are running a campaign larp. This document is helpful for having a coherent world while having many larps run by different organizers.

Then, we have the *design document.* This can sometimes be the same thing as the larp script since it contains everything you need to facilitate the entire larp experience. However, there are cases where you have a larp experience that contains more than one larp. In that case, each of the larps would have its own larp script, while the whole larp experience with schedule and both larps included would be the design document.

Finally, we have the *design bundle*. It contains everything you need to organize/re-run a specific larp. It includes the design document but will also include things like production info, a list of necessary props to have, promotional material, and maybe a budget. It could also include relevant articles about the larp. By giving someone the design bundle, they would be able to run the larp with only this information. This also means the design bundle often is less of a document and more of a folder with multiple documents in it. For an example, see Groth, Grasmo, and Edland (2021).

Some documents are written for both the players and the facilitators, i.e., *manuals*. A historical legacy of traditional larps, these documents are often rules-heavy guides

for players and game masters containing a long list of skills, character classes, combat mechanics, and spells, similar to traditional tabletop role-playing games.

ii) Documentation after the game

As mentioned before, sometimes documentation is shared after the game. This type of work is especially important in journalistic and academic articles covering a specific game. RPGs tend to be fairly ephemeral in that the experience itself cannot be replicated. Sometimes, documentation is the only tangible evidence that a game occurred. These documents are helpful for researchers understanding trends in design, art, and community building; for other designers in learning techniques, best practices, and mistakes; and for players in discovering games and play styles they may not have otherwise known about or might want to play in the future. Furthermore, documentation can be made by players, designers, facilitators, or outside observers, although individuals in the last category may misrepresent the game without sufficient research.

Documentation is also a designable surface. Consider how documentation will happen, who will compile it, whose voices will be included, and in what format it will be, e.g., film, written article, etc. Consider if this documentation is intended for private use among the players and their private social media accounts or if it will be made public and the implications of what is portrayed as a result. Make sure to be transparent with your players about these processes and have clear strategies for opting-in, opting-out, and obtaining consent if needed.

iii) Tech design considerations

As mentioned in Chapter 1, analog role-playing games can integrate technology in interesting ways. However, designers should carefully consider the following questions during the design process:

- Will this technology make something possible that would not otherwise be available, e.g., an online larp for players who would not otherwise find gaming accessible? Or might it provide a barrier to entry, e.g., players who do not have access to VR headsets?

- Will this technology enhance the immersion of players into the game environment or interfere with it? (See Chapter 2 for more on immersion).

- Will this technology inhibit the ability for players to spontaneously co-create the fiction, e.g., limiting character actions via the use of a pre-programmed computer interface? If so, how will that contribute positively to their experience rather than restricting it?

- Will the technology enhance or interfere with the desired transformative impacts? If it might distract from your transformative goals, you might reconsider including it. On the other hand, if your goals include developing a relationship with technology, e.g., stimulating interest in STEAM and self-efficacy in girls (Fey et al. 2022), then including it might be essential.

You can learn more about the integration of advanced technologies with RPGs in our upcoming Tech Toolkit from the Erasmus+ EDGE project (2023).

4.6 Summary

This chapter has expanded upon our model for designing transformative games shared in Chapter 2 to elaborate on specific design practices, including designing the framing, the characters, the environment, the production and so on. While many of the concepts in this chapter focus on larger event design, for example, with larps, consider how the principles conveyed might be useful in other RPGs. We will expand upon facilitation practices in *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*. As we have discussed, psychological safety is important to consider throughout the design process and thus will be the topic of our next chapter.

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Safety and Community Container Setting

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5.1 Introduction

As we have discussed in previous chapters, psychological and physical safety are important to consider throughout the game design process. This chapter will elaborate on these points with an emphasis on ways to establish and maintain psychological safety in the role-playing transformative container (Bion 2013; Bowman and Hugaas 2021). The safety discourse has expanded considerably in the last fifteen years or so, with a marked increase in discussion and awareness around particular techniques in larp, freeform, and tabletop. Compilations now exist that are freely accessible and commonly used and featuring known tools and consent strategies, e.g., the Consent in Gaming checklist discussed in this chapter (Reynolds and Germain 2019), the TTRPG Safety Toolkit Guide (Shaw and Bryant-Monk 2021), and others. Such tools are also making their way into mainstream traditional games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*' *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (Wizards of the Coast 2021) and *Dystopia Rising* (Most Improbable LLC n.d.). In short, the wisdom contained within this document has been accumulated over the decades from many designers in larp, tabletop, and freeform. We recommend reading the citations for more about the origins of certain practices.

With the exception of accessibility, considerations around physical safety will be reserved for our next book, *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*, although they should also be considered throughout a game design project.

5.2 Conflicts within role-playing communities

Before discussing safety in depth, we will mention the stakes. When players feel unsafe, unheard, or unappreciated in communities, such feelings can lead to conflict. Just as in other aspects of life, conflicts emerge within role-playing communities on a regular basis (see Chapter 6 for an exploration of conflict). When we discuss conflict *surrounding* role-playing communities, we refer to issues that arise when players feel their needs are not getting met in some important way. Note that this use of the term conflict does not refer to conflicts embedded within the game fiction explicitly, for example, rivalries between in-game factions, but such conflicts may influence off-game dynamics. Bowman (2013) discusses many examples of conflicts reported within role-playing communities including:

1. Schisms in role-playing communities when players take sides and form off-game factions;

2. Issues with online communication;

3. Issues arising from intimate and/or romantic relationships;

4. Creative agenda disputes, i.e., when participants have different styles of play they most enjoy;

5. Power struggles between players and facilitators; and

6. Bleed-in and bleed-out that has not been processed sufficiently (see Chapter 2).

This chapter will add additional sources of conflict to this list, including issues related to:

1. Inclusion;

2. Accessibility;

3. Crisis states; and

4. Sensitive content.

Some of these conflicts are internal within the psychology of individual participants, whereas others arise from the ways in which players, facilitators, and designers interact interpersonally. We will explore several of these issues in Chapter 6 as well.

Conflicts should not be viewed as always negative, as they can make us aware of areas where support, learning, growth, and even healing are needed. However, when conflicts are not addressed in a satisfactory fashion, participants may begin to feel unsafe or unwelcome within the community. Alternatively, when psychological safety is established and maintained within a group, players sometimes report feeling safer and more included than elsewhere in society. Thus, psychological safety is essential for the development of a transformational container (Bion 2013): a holding environment (Winnicott 1960) within which players feel safe taking risks. Such spaces establish alibi for players to feel safe behaving in ways that might draw social scrutiny or even feel impossible otherwise.

Note that while nano-games are relatively short, conflicts related to these topics can still emerge. Awareness of these risks is important for you to carefully consider when making design choices.

5.3 Setting the container

As we have discussed in previous chapters, role-playing games are ritual spaces. Rituals have a beginning, middle, and end and have specific framing practices that guide participants into the liminal space and out of it (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1995). In transformative game design, we consider ways to onboard the players into the experience, such as through workshops, as well as guiding them through practices of processing and integration after the experience, such as through debriefing.

These framing phases are also crucial times for establishing and maintaining psychological safety. In order for participants to surrender to the experience of inhabiting different identities within fictional worlds, they need to have sufficient trust in the group to decrease the vigilance our minds often have in social situations. Humans are social creatures and as such, we are often tracking how we are being perceived by others, whether consciously or unconsciously. Whether aware of it or not, many of us are often assessing whether we will be included in a group or ostracized from it, as acceptance into a community is often directly tied to survival and thriving in life. Evidence of disapproval or judgment from others will increase vigilance, whereas signals of acceptance and approval can increase feelings of group belonging and trust.

Important to note is that safety in this sense is a *perception* rather than a fact. Just because someone feels unsafe in a situation does not mean there is, in fact, danger. Alternatively, a person can surrender completely to the role-playing experience and feel safe and then end up feeling unsafe over time due to others' behaviors. Furthermore, contrary to the notion of "safe space," we adhere to the notion that no activities can ever claim to be fully safe. As Johanna Koljonen (2016b) puts it, "Larp isn't dangerous, but life is."

Thus, we prefer the term *safer space* to indicate that the community held within the transformational container actively takes steps to prioritize psychological safety as a primary value and practice. We can help others feel safe by making clear these priorities throughout the ritual process, for example, including safety mechanics in a workshop or holding a structured debrief in which players are encouraged to process their emotions without judgment from the group. Inherent to safer space is an understanding that risk is always present.

5.4 Philosophies of safety

Many philosophies of safety within the discourse surrounding role-playing communities exist (Bowman and Hugaas 2023, in press for 2025). While the nuances of these discourses are beyond the scope of this textbook, we will mention some of the tensions inherent to role-playing and the themes in the discourse surrounding them. Some groups prefer "a cult of hardcore" approach in which players are implied to consent to a certain degree of emotional intensity or actions taken on their character simply by signing up to participate (Bowman 2017). Other groups prefer to create *safer spaces*, as we described before. On the other hand, some people contrast safer spaces with *brave spaces,* meaning that safety is important, but if the safety of others is too strongly emphasized, players may not dare to take risks (Friedner 2020).

Others still advocate for different language when discussing these topics, for example, using the term "support" instead of "safety," or for a *risk assessment and mitigation* approach. Risk assessment and mitigation accepts that certain risks are potentially part of the RPG experience and may even be more generalizable to wider human experience. This approach thoroughly evaluates all possible risks and ranks

them according to severity and likelihood, which determines how the designers and facilitators will prioritize their responses (Sinking Ship Creations 2020; Losilla 2024). Possible responses can include removing the risk completely; adding, modifying, or removing aspects of the original plan; or guiding participants in how to behave to best mitigate the risk. Instead of claiming to create a safe space or brave space, which some might interpret as dismissive of actual risk, for example, to marginalized people, some groups prefer to frame safety activities as establishing *spaces of acceptable risk* (Rikard and Villarreal 2023). Related to these topics is the degree to which safety is the responsibility of the individual players, the play group, the organizers, the designers, or the community as a whole (Kessock 2014; Bowman and Hugaas 2023), as explored later in this chapter.

While each of these stances has merit in certain circumstances, ultimately, we advocate for a *risk aware design* that establishes and maintains *safer spaces*. We believe the term "safety" is important to include, as it is the inherent human need connected to the stakes in these situations. In our view, safer spaces empower bravery and the distinction is a false dichotomy. Because we are often dealing with potentially deeply personal or socially fraught content when working with transformation, a certain degree of risk is always present. Risks can include:

1. *Emotional flooding,* when a participant is cognitively incapable of processing further information due to psychological overwhelm (Leonard and Thurman 2018);

2. *Dysregulation*, when a participant's psychological well-being falls out of balance, which can lead to distress or difficulties effectively interacting with others;

3. *Activation and/or triggering*, when a situation activates a survival response in a person, e.g., fighting, flight, freezing, or fawning. This activation may or may not be the result of the triggering of previous trauma (Brown 2014), as we can get activated in any situation in which our basic human needs feel threatened (Glasser 1998);

4. *Harm*, when a person or a situation inflicts harm on another person. Whether the harm is purposeful (Brown 2017a) or accidental (Friedner 2020), our view is that the transformational container should meaningfully and appropriately respond to harm, providing support to the highest degree possible. Such support may be in the form of consequences for the person who inflicted harm, actions of care for the person who has been harmed, and/or referring the person who has been harmed to appropriate care structures outside of the group, e.g., counseling services and crisis hotlines.

Thus, in risk aware design for safer spaces, we consider the possible ramifications of certain conditions of play and design structures around the container to help address them, which we will discuss at length in this chapter.

a) Zones of safety, challenge, and risk

Certain types of play are inherently more risky than others. Risk is not necessarily always negative, as in some cases, risk may be necessary to achieve the intended transformational impacts, e.g., the risk to try something new in front of a group. On the other hand, if a person experiences any of the risks listed before, for example, emotional flooding, they may have difficulty engaging with play at all. Not only is such a response undesirable in that it likely will cause distress for the player, but it can often interfere with reflection and processing, which as we have discussed are critical for transformative processes. That being said, some designs rely on emotional flooding as part of the experience, for example, to build empathy for others experiencing such circumstances as enacted in the game, which we would consider high-risk design meant to facilitate *brink play* (Poremba 2007).

Each person has different limits, and one's limits might even change throughout one gaming session. Furthermore, a game experience may radically shift in tone, intensity, and content throughout play, whether designed as such or not. We consider these factors that contribute to risk to greater and lesser degrees. We frame risk as a spectrum, separating low risk from medium risk and high risk play in the following section (Bowman and Hugaas 2023). We will focus primarily on this conceptualization as a tool for design, although these categories are also useful in considering where a particular player falls in terms of preferences and their different psychological experiences they might have over time in a game.[5]

Zone 1 (Green): Comfort Zone

Some role-playing game experiences exist primarily within a player's comfort zone. Such games may include light themes, inconsequential narratives, familiar character types, or otherwise "entertaining" play. Such game experiences still involve some degree of risk and reward and can be highly engaging for certain players, e.g., the risk of playing at all, the risk of social interaction, the risk of public silliness, or the risk of harm to one's character. However, no game can guarantee a Green Zone experience, as players can sometimes become highly activated even in games with light material—perhaps even more so if certain content or interactions take them by surprise. What feels playful for one person may feel threatening to another, especially if coming from a background of marginalization (Trammell 2023). Furthermore, if you design for a Green Zone experience, all players in the group must try to adhere to maintaining the same intensity and tone, otherwise the play may suddenly feel unsafe. Calibration and preparing for sudden rapid escalations through emergent play can help prepare players for these occurrences.

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5   The following subsections on the Zones are largely excerpted from Bowman and Hugaas (in press for 2025).

Zone 2 (Yellow): Growth Edges and Zone of Proximal Development

Players often describe risky in-game situations as providing powerful moments of catharsis, insight, and even personal transformation. From this perspective, some players may wish to lean into riskier play as a means to step out of their comfort zone and explore within their *growth edges*. A growth edge is not the same as a hard limit. Here, it refers to the psychological space in which individuals can experience identities and behaviors outside of their normative socially prescribed roles in ways that make them uncomfortable in a constructive rather than overwhelming way.

From a Vygotskian educational psychology perspective, the growth edge can be considered within the *zone of proximal development* (Vygotsky 1978). Importantly, this concept refers to the area within which a person feels safe enough to explore in order to learn while supported by the scaffolding of another person or structure. This external person may simply be watching the participant learn—e.g., a teacher overseeing a class doing individual tasks—or they may be actively supporting the learning process, e.g., a teacher giving a student hints to help them accomplish the most challenging part of the task. The classroom structure and the activities within it provide containment for the activity. In this way, the game designers, organizers, and co-players can be said to offer scaffolding for players seeking to learn about themselves and the world around them during play (see e.g., Brown 2017b).

Zone 3 (Red): Brink Play

Finally, some play is experienced outside of the growth edge in a place approaching or exceeding one's *hard limits*. A hard limit refers to a boundary that a person is normally not willing to cross for any reason because it feels unsafe or undesirable. Some players enjoy brink play, which for Poremba (2017) blurs the boundary between game and not-game through forbidden play. Brink play dances on the line of "too much" in some particular way, e.g., when boundaries are seriously transgressed. "Too much" in this case might refer to physical sensations, such as pain or eroticism; or emotional intensity, such as in-game romance or abuse. What is "too much" will vary from player to player and moment to moment, but some participants prefer this sort of edgy play to safer play within the comfort zone or growth edge (see e.g., Nilsen 2012).

The riskiness inherent to such play can provide an adrenaline rush or other forms of emotional flooding that are experienced as pleasurable and sometimes "positive[ly] negative" (Hopeametsä 2008; Montola 2010). While such experiences can be unpleasant or even disturbing in games and yet highly valuable learning experiences, causing *positive discomfort* (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018). In this case, Red Zone experiences can be high risk, but also high reward for players consenting to take part in them. Furthermore, some players may not perceive themselves to have a hard line, or may feel highly tolerant toward brink play, making it easier for them to engage in such scenes than for others. Thus, our intention is not to emphasize low risk play as more preferable when considering frameworks for growth, but rather to emphasize that higher risk means a higher possibility for the sorts of unintended consequences mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Importantly, while a game's design can establish certain parameters for content, it is inadvisable to push someone to explore a topic if they are not ready and willing to do so, e.g., advising a player to experience triggering content as a form of "exposure therapy," especially since leisure role-play does not take place in an therapeutic setting. Only each individual player can know what their growth edges or acceptable brinks are at any given moment and whether they feel safe and willing to explore them.

What complicates matters further is that often, we are not fully aware of our own limitations ahead of time, and may only discover them when harm has occurred. Such harm can happen in any zone, although Red Zone experiences are more likely to incur risk. While this issue is not fully solvable in role-playing games, integrating safety mechanics and related practices can help players articulate when a boundary has transgressed; ideally, they can then request to receive care from others or feel able to disengage from play as needed.

Thus, we can conceive role-playing experiences as existing along a continuum based upon level of risk (see Figure 1).

Zones of Safety, Challenge, and Risk

Zone 1: Green Zone
Comfort Zone
Low Risk

Zone 2: Yellow Zone
Growth Edges
Medium Risk

Zone 3: Red Zone
Brink Play
High Risk

At the edge of comfort

At the edge of "too much" or "too hard"
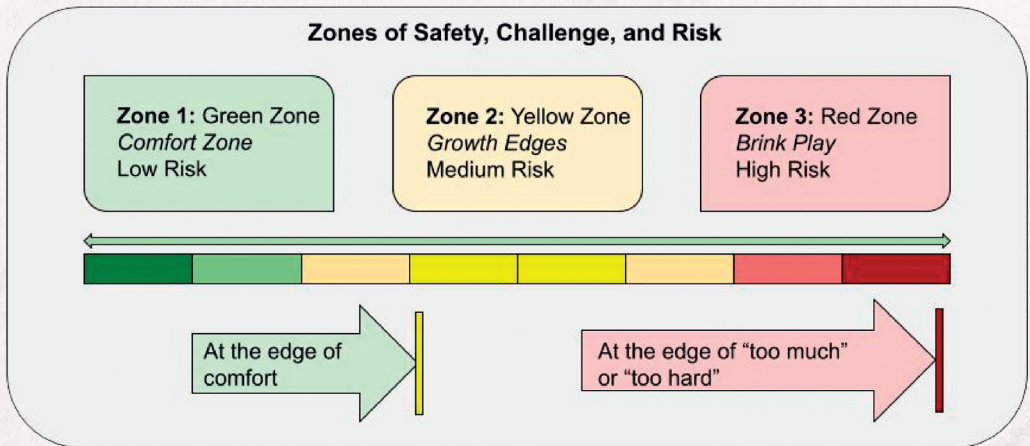
Figure 1: Bowman and Hugaas' (in press for 2025) model of Zones of Safety, Challenge, and Risk. Green Zone (Zone 1) play is in one's comfort zone and low risk. Yellow Zone (Zone 2) play is on one's growth edges, which transitions from the edge of comfort, and is medium risk. Red Zone (Zone 3) is brink play (Poremba 2007), and is high risk at the edge of "too much."

Note that even if you design for a specific Zone, they will be different for each individual player and circumstance. Easy, comfort zone play for one person may feel incredibly risky for another person. Furthermore, a player's zones may change over time and may depend upon who their co-players are. What might feel high risk (Zone 3) at the start of the larp might become a growth edge by the end (Zone 2) or be less challenging when playing with a trusted friend. Alternatively, a player may realize half-way through a game that content they may have been willing to experience initially now feels higher risk. In other words, one's growth edges might expand or shrink over

time as a result of experience. Furthermore, some players may never want to engage in brink play or explore their growth edges. The more your design enables players to communicate their needs with one another and calibrate, the easier players will likely find it to course correct before and during the game.

The purpose of this theory is not to prescribe what players or designers should be aiming to create, but rather to describe certain psychological states as they pertain to perceptions of safety and discuss design implications for each. For example, some designers or organizers will engage in *zoning* (Bowman 2018), physically demarcating spaces within the location for green, yellow, or red zone play, defining what types of activities are allowed within each. Zoning is also possible in tabletop, such as the facilitator bringing a player into a private room for an intense scene, or different breakout rooms in video conferencing or Discord established for certain kinds of play.

In addition to physical space, these zones of psychological safety are understandable as taking place within several contexts:

- **Individual experience**: Each player's subjective experience falls somewhere along the spectrum at any given time. Thus, zones can be highly different from player to player and from moment to moment. Also, players may have different triggers or topics that cause activation, making it difficult to plan content in advance for all safety situations.

- **Interpersonal play**, in which two players create a Zone together through calibration, e.g., agreeing to tone down physical aggression so that one player's experience does not exceed Zone 2, or deciding to play a relaxing friendship dynamic to remain in Zone 1.

- **Group play,** in which a group of three or more players calibrate to a certain Zone through calibration, e.g., deciding the baseline limit of sexual touch within the group will be kissing to remain in a particular player's Zone 2, or deciding all sexual activity is permissible, even if such play is within Zone 3 for some individuals.

- **Entire game,** in which the designers or organizers decide the types of play, content, and/or hard limits for the game, e.g., "This game will not feature sexual or violent content" in order to remain in most people's Zone 2, or "This game will push players to their physical and emotional extremes" in order to encourage Zone 3 play.

In the example provided before, calibration between players is considered here primarily with regard to safety and risk. In other words, players should calibrate (or agree not to calibrate) based upon their desired level of risk and intensity. However, players can calibrate for many other reasons, for example, to seek out more interesting and stimulating play outside of the context of safety (Koljonen 2019, 2020). Furthermore, we are considering calibration here as only one of many tools that can contribute to feelings of safety and mutuality, as we will describe in the next sections.

Now that we have explored some of the theories surrounding psychological safety, we will focus more concretely on strategies for design in terms of the structure of the games themselves; the needs of the populations they serve; the settings in which they take place and subsequent expectations of care; and the content within the games.

5.5 Core components of safety

Role-playing games can be intensely enjoyable, cathartic, and even liberating (Kemper 2017, 2018a, 2020), but at the same time, they can be mentally, emotionally, and sometimes physically exhausting (Leonard and Thurman 2018). They can lead to intimacy and vulnerable exposure of parts of the self that are normally hidden or protected, as during play, vigilance is relaxed and playfulness is activated. They can also lead players to push past points of resistance due to the perception of safety, "fictional" identities, and circumstances. Moreover, they are experienced as both "fictional" and "real" by the brain at the same time (Lankoski and Järvelä 2012; Järvelä 2019; Leonard and Thurman 2018).

As a result, players in role-playing games may neglect their physical or emotional needs due to their investment in the role-playing experience. They may also feel more safe than they actually are, and/or open themselves up to predation, harassment, or other forms of boundary-pushing behaviors from other participants, e.g, by "missing stairs" in a community who are harmful but who's behaviour the group excuses (Brown 2017a). Moreover, they may experience trauma triggers and other forms of activation that they find overwhelming or distressing (Brown 2014). Lastly, they may experience microaggressions, racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism or other harmful stereotypes (Holkar 2016; Garcia 2017; Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2021; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021), as the alibi of the game can permit certain kinds of behavior that would otherwise be unacceptable (Deterding 2017).

Taking all these points into consideration, from a risk-aware perspective, the question is not what to do *if* but *when* participants have experiences of feeling overwhelmed or unsafe. If treated with proper seriousness and care, safety issues, when they arise, can be learning experiences for everyone involved. If treated badly, however, they can cause lasting damage to individual lives as well as to the health of the community. Preparation on the part of the designers, facilitators, and player group can help, including actions that can be taken before, during, and after the game, as we will see in more detail later. Simply normalizing the discussion of safety can help participants feel safer (Pedersen 2015), and it is crucial never to forget that players are more important than games (Brown 2016; Koljonen 2020).

As we have discussed before, role-playing games can be transformative, especially when players perceive themselves as safe. Transformation should thus emphasize choosing to change, or learning how to navigate a change that is inevitable in one's life. Ultimately, we should be able to choose the degree to which we face our own points of resistance. Undergoing processes of transition or transformation should always be

consensual. We may not always be aware of the transformation processes as they are happening, but we should always be able to calibrate with others and self-advocate as needed. A healthy role-playing community fosters safety, calibration, communication, and self-advocacy, while at the same time it discourages peer pressure on people to push past their boundaries. Instead, it invites people to explore their edges for growth (or brink zones if enthusiastic consent is granted).

Importantly, *informed consent* is not always possible in games that feature spontaneous improvised co-creativity, as the topics and behaviors that arise are unpredictable. Therefore, designers cannot fully disclose all contents of a role-playing game. However, they can perform a risk assessment and disclose themes they know are embedded in the design or are likely to arise. Thus, strategies for communication and negotiation before, during, and after should be considered as part of the design's safety strategy. Such strategies can be pre-established, like many of the tools we will present in this chapter, or designed in a bespoke way based on the aesthetics and needs of the specific game. Either way, it is advisable to consider how easy any given tool is to use at the moment, especially if a person is already activated or overwhelmed. Having too many tools can overwhelm players, leading to cognitive overload and lack of retention. However, too few tools can also lead to ambiguous situations in which consent might feel murky.

In your nano-games, we recommend choosing one strategy before, during, and after the game to practice integrating safety techniques and playtest how they work when possible. The following sections will cover the broad principles of safety design. Consider if and how each principle might be translated to the nano-game format. For example, instead of a safety team, perhaps your nano-game requires only one support person who also serves in the role of the facilitator. In that case, the facilitator must understand when to stop doing one task and perform the other, such as checking in on a player who appears emotionally overwhelmed.

a) Before the game

Here are some strategies for establishing structures for play and safety before the game starts:

i) Security measures

1) Safety team

The safety team should be established before a game is promoted or played. It could consist of one person (like a facilitator), or a team of people (like in a large-scale larp); in a larp, ideally, the safety team is separate from the main organizing team, but in smaller games such as tabletop, tasks might overlap. It is recommended to try to find diverse safety team members who are enthusiastic volunteers (Brown 2017b, 2017e), as well as distinguishing between safety team members and other organizers who should remain focused on logistical tasks (Berthold 2024). In some therapeutic practices, for

example, a game might feature two facilitators: one responsible for game mastering the story, mechanics, and other details, while the other is responsible for monitoring the emotional state of the players and providing therapeutic processing as needed. Ideally, safety team members are involved throughout the process of design and implementation, not just during the game (Berthold 2024), emphasizing that safety is important to consider at every stage.

When possible, safety teams should include team members from diverse backgrounds, including marginalized groups, as some players may feel more comfortable sharing emotional difficulties with them. Safety team members may have various levels of responsibility, which should be detailed in an *internal procedures document*. These may include some or all of the following:

- Upholding the *code of conduct*, which establishes consequences for unacceptable behavior;
- monitoring play activities;
- receiving reports from players;
- addressing conflicts that erupt in real time;
- helping players in states of crisis, overwhelm, or bleed;
- meeting to discuss details of reports and decide on actions; and
- enacting consequences or boundaries.

2) Player screening through flagging

Some games and conventions provide a way for players to report behavior by another participant they find concerning, or ask not to play closely to that person. For example, the safety team may have an email address for community members to send reports, or the organizers may send out the list of players asking if anyone has safety concerns about individuals who have signed up. This process is called flagging.

The flagging systems used by organizers vary and evolve over time. Imprecise flagging systems can lead to ambiguities as to the nature of the report about the person's behavior (Brown and Teerlahti 2024), e.g., preferring not to play closely with one's ex is not the same as flagging them for abuse or sexual misconduct. We recommend the specific procedure proposed by Laura Wood and Mo Holkar (2024), which includes the following flagging options:

- **Red flag:** "I believe that this person is unsafe to larp with." This may include behaviors such as bullying, harassment, or abuse.
- **Orange flag:** "I'm unable to attend if this person is participating." This option may be chosen if someone is unable to attend an event where another person is participating, for personal reasons and not for reasons of safety.

- **Yellow flag**: "I don't want to play in a close relationship with this person." This option may be chosen if someone is unable to play closely with another participant for personal reasons and not for reasons of safety.

- **Request not to play closely with a specific person:** This applies to cases of people who often play closely together, or are real-life partners, or want to explore play with different participants, etc.

In this practice, people are not obliged to explain the reasons why they flag someone, and the flagged person is not informed about who flagged them. Red-flagged people are excluded due to safety concerns. For interpersonal issues not related to general safety, depending on the severity of the dispute, one or other person will self-exclude or the participants will be cast apart if possible and practical. Note that while it can be challenging to cast people in such a way that they have little interaction in a larger larp, this becomes almost impossible in tabletop and smaller freeform games. Also, some games have space constraints, or do not feature casting, such as larps in which players make their own characters. Therefore the interactions are more difficult to control and exclusion may be a better option, if not ideal.

Ultimately, inclusion practices should not mean "inclusive of everyone." Some behaviors should not be allowed, particularly when they have the potential to cause additional harm or make players feel unsafe in the group. Moreover, some participants come from vulnerable populations, and it is important to consider how to make gaming spaces safer for them especially (Brown 2017a).

3) Code of Conduct

As mentioned before, we recommend establishing a code of conduct, which details unacceptable behavior, particularly with regard to discrimination, harassment, or abuse. The code can be based on examples from other communities (with credit), but should at the same time be specific to the needs of your community. It should establish clear boundaries of what behavior is not acceptable, and also specify what actions may be taken if such behavior takes place. It is generally best to leave some flexibility here and operate on a case-by-case basis, while it is also important to follow up if a report is made and take it seriously. Additionally, you can include a list of encouraged behaviors that you would like to see in the community, as a way to share values. For an example, see the Living Games Code of Conduct (Living Games Conference 2018a).

4) Internal Procedures document

We also recommend creating an internal procedures document. (see e.g., Living Games Conference 2018b). If someone breaks the code of conduct, this document details for organizers what steps should be taken and by whom. This document should also include clear steps for the safety team to follow in the event of a crisis, including who will receive reports, who has access to them, how the safety team will be informed during the event, who makes decisions regarding a report, etc. Ideally, it also contains instructions on what to say (and not say), how to hold one's body, and indications of one's responsibility when in crisis situations.

We also recommend including links and phone numbers for contacting trained professionals for additional support if needed, such as counselors, crisis hotlines, etc. Calling the police should be the last course of action as engagement with police officers and the legal system can lead to deeper traumatization; however, in cases where a crime has been committed, it may be unavoidable and even legally required. It is advisable that you know the local laws for various situations, for example, what your responsibilities are if a crime is committed on your watch, what the legal limit for intoxication is, including in situations of sexual consent, etc. While such topics may seem beyond the scope of running a game, as an event organizer, you have certain responsibilities that are important to consider.

Furthermore, not all moments of crisis are a result of the behaviors of others. As mentioned before, a player may become triggered by certain content, emotionally dysregulated, for example, due to lack of sleep or food, or simply overwhelmed by the amount of content or intensity of the game. In many cases, simply providing care and a space to share one's feelings can help de-escalate the situation, e.g., in an *off-game safety room*. When appropriate, the safety team member can also offer advice for how to re-engage in the game scenario if desired by the player (Bowman et al. 2017).

Importantly, the safety team is not responsible for therapeutic processing, nor is the game itself the proper space for such intensive work unless there is a specific client-professional relationship established with the safety team member, e.g., in therapeutic role-playing games. However, it is advisable for safety team members to improve their basic skill set for crisis management if possible, e.g., taking a course in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA).

5) Online interaction

When cultivating community especially around transformative play, we recommend monitoring and moderating online spaces you create related to your game and related environments. Facebook groups, Discord channels, etc. can be great places for consent and calibration conversations to occur. They can also provide opportunities for players to find co-players who would like to engage in specific types of play. At the same time, however, they can become spaces of escalated conflicts between community members. We recommend having enough flexibility in your code of conduct to enable you to take action on behavior that occurs outside of your purview, for example, incidents of stalking or harassment elsewhere on social media.

6) Safety mechanics, calibration tools, and other protocols

Safety mechanics, calibration tools, and other protocols (Koljonen 2020) should be featured prominently on your website and included in player's handbooks if applicable (see Chapter 2), or otherwise disclosed to potential players. Openly establishing such practices before sign-up can help establish the safety culture of the game, indicating that safety will be taken seriously within the group, and signaling especially to vulnerable populations that their needs will be considered (Pedersen 2015). However, do not assume players have read or memorized any information before the game. Make

sure you reinforce safety throughout play, not just in the beginning. Modeling safety mechanics during play can be helpful, for example, when facilitating or playing a non-player character (NPC).

7) Workshops

As discussed in our model, workshops and debriefing are important components to transformative game design. Include a section in your workshops on safety, introducing mechanics, the safety team, the location of the off-game room, and other protocols. Ask participants to practice safety mechanics in the workshop; they are much more likely to use them with embodied practice. Give participants the opportunity and tools to negotiate consent, especially for violence, sex and/or sexuality, romance, phobias, or other types of situations. When possible, provide time and space for players to calibrate as a group, so that participants can get their needs met and self-advocate.

Some players assume that safety mechanics or protocols will inhibit play. For some, this may be true, but in our experience, the vast majority of the time, these protocols allow participants to feel safer taking risks (Brown 2016). Most importantly, spending time in workshops on safety emphasizes that safety is valued in this community (Pedersen 2015).

8) Session 0

Session 0 is a method in tabletop that players can use to establish the social contract before play. Session 0s are especially common in campaign play that takes place over multiple sessions. During Session 0, players can establish the tone, mood, and themes of the game, as well as negotiate boundaries and consent. They can create Yes lists for the content players would love to include, and No lists for the content players want to veto (Reynolds and Germain 2019). They can also use it to agree upon the creative agendas of the game (Kim 1997; Edwards 2001), for example, the degree to which combat and leveling will be emphasized versus a compelling storyline. Lastly, they can discuss safety mechanics, and get to know one another off-game before immersing into their characters.

Session 0 should be conducted completely off-game (and signaled as such). If a gaming group turns out to have incompatible goals or values—no problem. It is better to know that before the start than after significant investments of time, energy, or money have been made. If you are running a one-shot nano-game and do not have time to hold a Session 0, consider which of these strategies you could integrate in a short workshop.

9) Consent in Gaming by Monte Cook Games

Consent in Gaming by Monte Cook Games (Reynolds and Germain 2019) consolidates many of the best practices in tabletop role-playing games into a short, freely available document. It provides an RPG Consent Checklist with Stoplight colors for each theme:

- Green for enthusiastic consent,
- Yellow for "may be okay under certain circumstances," or
- Red for "hard line, do not include"

It also includes sections for content related to horror; relationships; social and cultural issues; mental and physical health; and blank spaces for players to fill in. The answers need no justification, but the player can request support from the GM if they would like to discuss anything further.

Note that while we mention Consent in Gaming, many other great toolkits have been created along these lines, as this area is growing rapidly, especially in tabletop communities. We recommend doing your own research to see what is currently in use and best for your context.

10) Trigger warnings, content advisories, and ingredients lists

We recommend disclosing sensitive content ahead of time, e.g., explicit violence, sexuality, phobias, etc). Disclosing may take the form of:

- Trigger warnings,
- Content advisories, or
- Ingredients lists.

Some players object to the term *trigger warning*, as it lumps together trauma triggers (Brown 2014) with other kinds of activating material. *Content advisory* is more general, but has a connotation of warning nonetheless. *Ingredients lists* present sensitive content as more of a feature than a warning, which might attract certain players while repelling others. Either way, *signposting* your game can help with expectation management among players (Koljonen 2016a).

These forms of disclosure can be applied to the entire game or just for specific scenes or characters. They can be listed on websites, in player's handbooks, in Session 0s, or before a specific session or scene. The purpose of these disclosures is to help players opt-in or opt-out of specific content. If the activity is part of mandatory participation, e.g., in an educational or therapeutic setting, we recommend offering alternative assignments or activities with similar goals.

As mentioned regarding informed consent, predicting all possible activating content is impossible. For example, trauma triggers may not be known to the participant ahead of time and may not be entirely clear in the moment. A player might feel okay with engaging with the content before the larp, but have different boundaries throughout the larp experience. Therefore, having other safety mechanisms in place can help empower players to have more control over their own experience, such as the X-Card (Stavropoulos 2013) and the Lookdown (Koljonen 2016c), as we will explain in the next section.

b) During the game

Safety mechanics are off-game ways to signal to the players and facilitators safety needs in the moment. Related to safety mechanics are calibration meta-techniques, which are ways for players to signal their desires for play to one another during the game. Some theorists prefer to distinguish calibration from safety (see e.g., Koljonen 2020), as calibrating intensity or content with another player may be a matter of preference rather than a safety concern. However, practically speaking, the two often overlap. Therefore, we will include examples of both here.

Some common safety mechanics include:

- **The Door is Always Open:** Players can leave at any time without explanation, although it is kind if they check in with the facilitator later to make sure they are okay.

- **X-Card:** The X-Card means, "Please remove this content" (Stavropoulos 2013). In tabletop, the X-Card may be represented by a card on the table with an X drawn on it. Players can point at the card and say, "X Card: spiders" or whatever content they want to be removed, no questions asked. The X-Card can be used before the game when planning, as well as after the game. In larp, placing one's arms in an X and saying "X-card" or "X-arms" can be a clear visual alternative.

- **Luxton Technique:** For some trauma survivors, the X-Card is supportive of their needs to not have to discuss trauma triggers or other activating content with co-players. However, for others, the implication that players must remain silent about their triggers is reminiscent of previous experiences, e.g., feeling silenced by abusers. Therefore, some groups with high trust use the Luxton Technique (Lee 2017 qtd. in Sheldon 2019), in which the group agrees to process trauma off-game if it arises during play.

- **Okay Check-in:** The Okay Check-in is a way for participants to ask off-game if the other person needs a break or support (Brown 2016). A signal is used to check-in, such as making an "O" with one's hand, which is a nonverbal way to ask, "Are you okay?" The player may answer using thumbs up, down, or flat hand/so-so. Depending on their answer, a follow-up question may be, "Do you need help?" or "Would you like to walk outside with me?"

- Hand signals are useful, as players may have difficulties being verbal when they are activated. The hand signals are also discreet and do not usually interrupt the scene going on around the players in question. However, when overwhelmed, some players may forget the responses. As an alternative, some groups will simply use the term, "Off-game" and then verbalize the check-in to the other person. No safety tool is perfect, but having some means of communicating is important, emphasizing that it is normal in this community to check on one another and prioritize safety.

- **Lines and Veils:** Arising from tabletop (Edwards 2003), a *line* means "Do not include this content" (similar to the X-card). A *veil* means, "You can include this content, but fade to black in scenes if it arises."

- **Lookdown:** The Lookdown means, "Please don't interact with me or my character now" (Koljonen 2016c, developed with Trine Lise Lindahl). In larp, the Lookdown is signaled by holding a hand over one's eyes. The player may choose to leave the scene while still holding their hand over their eyes, or may stay in the scene. Either way, no one should approach the character and the players should improvise a way to graciously avoid discussing this character or their actions. In online environments, one might grey out one's visual representation of character or turn off one's camera to signal "not available." In this case, follow-up is not desired. This mechanic is sometimes called Bow Out, or "See No Evil" (Koljonen 2016c).

- **Tap out:** Tapping-out is a nonverbal cue that involves tapping "your co-player's arm or another convenient part of their body twice, and repeat this action as many times and as hard [within reason] as you need to get their attention. (Typically, once and quite softly is enough)." (Koljonen 2016d).

- **Script Change:** Script Change is a set of tools that allow players to start, pause, resume, rewind, fast forward a scene, etc (Sheldon 2023). For example, these tools can be helpful if play feels overwhelming and the player needs a break, or if a player wants to move to the next scene rather than experiencing the gory details of a violent combat sequence.

- **Stoplight:** A common tool is stoplight. Like with a spotlight, the players can indicate *red* for stop, *yellow* for slow down/caution, and *green* for enthusiastic consent. These terms can be said verbally, or placed on a badge where the player can point.

- **Ribbons, buttons, or other markings:** Signaling systems on the body can include wearing ribbons, buttons, or other markings indicating what types of play are acceptable or off-limits. Examples of this can be a headband indicating a non-combat character, a ribbon indicating interest in romantic play, a button saying, "Please no hugs," etc. These methods are handy because they allow players to know what sort of play or contact to avoid. At the same time, flexibility can be helpful, i.e., being able to change one's mind during the course of play. For example, if players have three ribbons for Stoplight (red, yellow, green), they can indicate what sorts of play they are comfortable with at the moment by changing the ribbon. Such markings can also help signal which pronouns the player would like others to use (Brown 2017d). However, keep in mind that color codes may create an accessibility issue; not only in cases of people with color blindness, or visual impairment, but also in cases of low-light conditions or darkness.

- **Consent negotiations:** Negotiating consent allows players to ascertain if participants are interested in playing certain content with that particular player, e.g., romance, sexuality, aggression, etc (Bowman 2017). Negotiation techniques can be formally taught during workshops, such as a consent negotiation script. Alternatively, they can be more informally discussed off-game between players, or during the game starting with the phrase "Off-game" before the discussion ensues. The important part is to make sure all involved players agree, and no one feels pressured.

- **Monologue:** This meta-technique is often used for story purposes (Jeepen 2007; Boss and Holter 2013), but can also be used as a means of calibrating and bringing players into a scene. Asking a player to monologue means they should answer out loud, "What is your character thinking right now?" Players and/or facilitators can ask for a monologue in certain games. Monologues are often good for helping players who are shy, reticent, or experiencing strong emotions to verbalize/participate. Information can also be shared that gives others an indication of what might be interesting to play upon, even if the information is technically conveyed out-of-character. Such a practice can be a good way to help players feel included, including those from marginalized backgrounds who may not be as used to taking up social space.

- **Spotlight:** A similar practice is Spotlight, which can be used to bring quiet players into a scene or making sure players get roughly the same amount of time for expressing their character, e.g., in a tabletop game. Saying "spotlight" as if shining a spotlight on another player means, "What is your character wanting to do now?" This could be initiated by a game master or a player. Spotlight can also be insinuated rather than said out loud, for example, if a game master or player shifts attention in the group toward a particular player.

- **Act breaks:** Act breaks are built into the game and provide a short or long pause in between scenes or longer periods of play. Built-in and workshopped calibration discussions during Act breaks can help participants identify where they would like play to go so that they can *steer* toward the kind of play each other wants (Montola, Stenros, Saitta 2015).

- **Escalation techniques:** Escalation techniques invite players into more intense play. This can practically include phrases like "*harder*" i.e., "I can handle more intensity," or thematic code phrases everyone knows is an off-game signal to escalate, i.e., "It would be *horrible* if you continued to yell at me…" The player can then escalate, choose not to respond, or respond with a de-escalation technique.

- **De-escalation techniques:** De-escalation techniques are used to instruct other players to tone down the intensity. These can include phrases like "*softer*," i.e., "Please speak more softly/slowly/less aggressively"; "*brake*",

i.e., "Let's put the brakes on this scene"; or thematic code phrases, i.e., "I miss the *safety* of my home village..." For an example of an escalation/ de-escalation mechanic bespoke to the theme of the game, see the use of *rotten* and *pure* in Participation Design Agency's *Inside Hamlet* (Participation Design Agency 2015, 2017, 2018; see Lane 2018). Note that one drawback of such phrases is that co-players may not detect the signal when integrated into the flow of role-play. This drawback can be a problem particularly when one player misses another's cue to de-escalate.

- **Techniques to pause or stop play:** Finally, some techniques pause or stop the play altogether, for example, "*cut*," i.e., "Let's stop the scene for now." Anyone can call cut for any reason, and the play stops. There may or may not be a discussion about why, and the play may or may not be resumed afterwards, depending on the needs of the players.

c) After the game

Techniques after the game can help players transition from the play experience to life again and process their experiences. The two major phases we strongly recommend including after any transformative role-playing game are *de-roling* and debriefing.

i) De-roling

Common in acting circles (Arts Wellbeing Collective 2019) and psychodrama, de-roling activities are rituals that mark the shift back to the daily frame of life and identity (Brown 2018). They can include removing the character's costume, props, or name tag. They may also include each player stating something like "I was Hathor, I am now Linda," and/or re-framing their perspective to the third person by saying "Hathor did X..." rather than "I did X..." Often they also include sharing one thing they would like to take with them about the session and one thing they would like to leave behind.

ii) Debriefing

As discussed in Chapter 2, common in simulation and other forms of educational role-playing (Crookall 2010, 2014), debriefing offers space to verbally process emotions and experiences with the play group in a serious manner, whether structured or unstructured (Fatland 2013; Stark 2013; Bowman 2014).

Structured debriefing is moderated by a facilitator or a member of the group. Structured debriefs allow the players to take turns answering the same question, moderated such that each player has roughly the same amount of time to speak, with the option to pass or opt-out available. Crosstalk, when players try to engage with each other or comments they made, is discouraged, similar to how the Morenos asked psychodrama participants in the post-play *sharing* phase to focus on their own experience, otherwise the therapeutic value of group process is missed (Moreno, Zerka, Blomkvist, and Ruetzel 2000).

Unstructured debriefing does not have the same restrictions. While not all players feel the need for a debrief or are ready to discuss a game experience immediately after play, in transformative game design, we recommend always having a debrief as part of the experience. Debriefing in our model is not only included for safety reasons, but as a means to process the experience and distill takeaways, leading to a greater probability of knowledge transfer (Crookall 2014).

iii) Narrativizing

When players freely tell stories about the play experience, usually in a more light-hearted or humorous tone, some communities call this practice *war storying* (Brown 2018). This practice can help with de-roling and community building, but not always with deeper processing. Note that the term war story itself can be insensitive, especially when players have experienced war themselves recently or in places where war is ongoing (Kasper and Leipoldt 2016). Therefore, we recommend the term *narrativizing*, which is more neutral.

Narrativizing can be important in creating distance between the player and the fiction and character. As with debriefing (Montola 2010), narrativizing can help mitigate negative experiences of *bleed* (Bowman 2015), for example, if a person still feels antipathy toward another player for actions their character took in-game (Bowman 2013; Leonard and Thurman 2018).

iv) Post-game processing and integration

As discussed in previous Chapter 2 and 4, many other forms of post-game processing and integration are possible. We remind you of them here because engaging in post-game activities can also be important for safety and emotional well-being (Brown 2018). Forms of processing and integration activities (Bowman and Hugaas 2019) include: creative expression, emotional processing, returning to daily life, interpersonal processing, and community building (see Chapter 2).

In terms of safety, aftercare (Friedner 2020) is another important factor to consider during the integration phase. Providing support and care for participants after a game can be especially important when players have engaged in in-game antagonism or oppression, but is also kind to offer for anyone in the community if time and energy allows. It is important to take into consideration that some players struggle with post-larp blues or depression (Bowman and Torner 2014), including after RPG conventions or conferences in which role-playing may or may not be present (Nilsen 2015); others may simply find returning to life disorienting or lonely.

d) Community

Safety should be considered beyond the game itself in order to cultivate transformational communities. Unfortunately, issues of conflict and harassment can negatively impact community dynamics. While such interactions are not always the designer or facilitator's responsibility strictly speaking if they fall outside the purview

of the game event, we believe that holding containers for transformation requires fostering a community of play surrounding the event that is conducive to growth in which toxicity is minimized. Here are recommendations to consider implementing when holding a transformational container:

i) Presence in the community

It is important to consciously moderate specific player spaces, e.g., official forums, Discord, blogs. For expectation management, organizers should also be clear which spaces are not moderated, e.g., player-run discussion groups for particular factions in the game. Regardless of the moderation level, we recommend having some flexibility worked into your Code of Conduct in case you want to take action regarding behavior in unofficial spaces, e.g., issuing a ban on a player's attendance at a game after they participated in harassing behavior on social media.

There should be clear and transparent communication about the designer and/ or organizer's ambitions in terms of their goals for the game, the themes present, as well as their limitations, especially up front at sign-up (Torner 2013; Koljonen 2016a). Compassionate, inclusive values should be placed at the center of all communication, especially when sharing limitations, e.g., areas of accessibility that the organizers cannot accommodate.

Similarly, designers' values should be written down as part of the player's handbook, and communicated clearly to players from the start, e.g., anti-racism and inclusion. These practices signal to marginalized players that you will endeavor to help them feel safe in the space. In practice, as we have discussed earlier, safety is a perception that must be established, maintained, and, if necessary repaired in order for the community members to feel comfortable engaging. You must never promise a safe space, but rather make clear how you will work to create a safer one, e.g., having members of the safety team from marginalized groups when possible.

We recommend the Code of Conduct, including guidelines for encouraged behavior, to be a document that players actively accept and even sign to make it more likely players will read them. These documents should be open to change based on feedback and experience as the community unfolds over time. Breaching the code needs to lead to actual consequences, which the safety team should evaluate on a case-by-case basis rather than trying to apply a generalized rule to all situations, as safety situations can be complex in practice. Possible consequences should be outlined clearly in the code. Although you may endeavor to enact such consequences justly and fairly, be aware that pushback may still occur.

ii) Educating players and facilitators

Educating players can help elevate the skills and the knowledge of the group. This practice may include tips and tricks about role-playing in general, sharing articles, or teaching terms that give players the tools to talk about their experiences, e.g., bleed, alibi, etc. Educating players should reinforce the values of the game, inclusivity, and prosocial behavior.

You may also choose to establish some form of facilitator "school" or other training opportunities. Examples include educating facilitators in prosocial and inclusive ways to run games, understanding power imbalances and dynamics, methods for how to spotlight each player with equity at the forefront. You can use role-playing itself as a tool to practice difficult scenarios that might arise when facilitating a game, considering how to respond based on the code of conduct and internal procedures (see e.g., Steele, Hart, Stavropoulos, and Bowman 2016). Facilitators should obtain certificates relevant to addressing physical and emotional certificates when possible.

iii) Cultural sensitivity

When possible, diversity in the team should be transparent and foregrounded. It is advised to hire cultural consultants and sensitivity readers and make recommended changes when dealing with sensitive themes (Kemper 2018; Leonard 2021; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). Furthermore, working towards diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and cross-cultural competency for organizers and players are important goals. Training can even occur through role-playing practices themselves (Schreiber 2022; ROCKET 2024). Such work is never "done," as team members and players can always learn more. While challenging, a commitment to DEI requires a degree of humility and openness to listen, learn, and adapt.

5.6 Safety for specific populations

In Chapter 2, we provided an overview of some of the populations that transformative role-playing games have been designed to reach. Here, we will highlight a few important ones that have special safety concerns, but keep in mind that the needs of any population must be considered carefully in design.

a) Children and intergenerational play

Children cannot consent the same way that adults can because they cannot fully grasp the implications of their consent, even if we explain it to them in age-appropriate language and in as much detail as possible. Therefore, we need to design with safety in mind.

- **Caregivers:** When it comes to children, it's good practice to involve and inform caregivers as much as possible. Explain the activity you are going to do with their children in a way they will understand, and allow them to ask questions before they consent for their children to participate. You may even ask them to sign an *assent form*, which is necessary, for example, in some ethical procedures or for legal reasons.

- **Transparency:** Transparency is one of the most important safety measures because it enhances trust and safety between facilitators and caregivers. It means that whatever happens, good or bad, we report back to the caregivers in an honest and transparent manner, making sure that they are equally aware of achievements and mishaps.

- **Facilitators:** It is highly suggested that the facilitators have experience working with children in formal, non-formal, or informal educational settings.This ensures that the facilitators will have structured knowledge of how to interact with a group of kids; how to monitor the dynamics within the team; how to help them regulate emotions and conflicts that might arise; and how to communicate properly with caregivers and upper administration (if relevant).

- **Facilitator to children ratio** must be well thought out, to ensure meaningful engagement with each player, but also to ensure that someone is always available to deal with a potential crisis.

- **Age gap:** When it comes to children, it is best that the age difference between them is not vast, as each age group will engage in play differently and have distinct needs.

- **Content:** Keep the content age-appropriate, without coddling or hiding the truth from children. Keep them curious, keep them asking, and tackle topics while always considering the age of the children you are designing for.

- **Immersion:** Children tend to have a natural inclination toward immersive role-play, as most can easily engage in imaginary play. It is a good idea to clear distinctions between the role-playing world and the real world. This can be done in many different ways, such as having a clear start and end point of the game; using costumes; using differentiated characters; including de-roling activities such as removing their costumes while saying: "I was *character name,* and I am now *real name*"; model fictional distancing behavior by talking about things that differ between you and your character, etc.

- **Emotional Safety:** Children are not always in the same position to speak up and advocate for themselves as we would expect an adult to do. The facilitator's role is extremely important as they are responsible for the emotional safety of the group. They need to be able to understand when a child might be feeling unwell or uncomfortable and help them express themselves.

b) Youth work

Another common practice is working with youth outside of formal education settings, for example, in summer camps (Hoge 2013; Fein 2015, 2018; Fey et al. 2022), after-school programs (Bandhoesingh 2024), or community centers (Turner 2017a, 2017b). We consider these forms of youth work non-formal education, as they often still have specific learning goals and expectations, whether led by camp counselors, teachers, or community leaders. Role-playing games make excellent activities to engage people throughout the stages of development, but are particularly potent throughout the process of adolescence, as players at that age are exploring their

identities more generally (Bowman 2010; Hugaas 2024, based on work by Erikson 1968). Even when technically mandatory, for example, parents signing up students for the activity and requiring them to attend, working with these populations requires thorough consent practices with legal guardians. In addition, it requires gaining the assent of the participants themselves and establishing practices of opt-in and opt-out participation (Koljonen 2018) when possible.

Furthermore, you will want to consider the physical space in which these populations will be playing in terms of safety and accessibility design. A tabletop game played at a community center likely has different safety concerns than a week-long summer camp in the woods. We will discuss these topics in more depth in *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

c) Therapeutic clients

Working with populations who struggle with mental health challenges has specific risks. While we detail some of these risks in this section, keep in mind this list is not exhaustive.

i) Risk 1: Lack of training

As Gutierrez (2017, 28) outlines, "Believing that because you come from a background in playing TRPGs, you can implement it therapeutically" is a risk. When using role-playing games with therapeutic clients, it is crucial and necessary to include at least one mental health professional both in the team of the designers as well as the team of the facilitators of the game. A trained clinician can play a significant role in designing and curating the game, with contributions deriving from theoretical models and practitioner-oriented approaches of mental health, emotional well-being and psychological processes; at the same time, during the implementation of the game, they will be essential in creating emotional safety and potentially providing emergency care if necessary.

Especially when the game is focused on specific mental health issues or participant groups, a profound scientific comprehension of these issues and/or populations is vital both for the game design and the implementation, in order to provide emotional safety for all the people involved (Connell, Kilmer and Kilmer 2020; Diakolambrianou 2021). This is also true for games designed for specific populations with mental health challenges that are not explicitly included in more extensive therapeutic treatment. For an excellent example of a design and implementation collaboration with a mental health practitioner, see Lehto (2024).

ii) Risk 2: Delusional tendencies

As we briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, it is considered risky to use role-playing games with people that have delusional tendencies (e.g., people with schizophrenia or psychotic conditions; Blackmon 1994). There is serious concern that an intervention involving role-playing games could have negative consequences with people who

find it difficult to determine the boundaries between reality and fantasy, and possibly further loosen their grip on reality (Gutierrez 2017). Therapists may deem RPGs contraindicated if the client cannot successfully pass a reality test.

However, it is important to also mention that other researchers argue that there are indeed potential benefits of some types of digital role-playing games for people with some forms of psychosis (Olivet et al. 2018), so not all types of psychosis are concerning in this case, although certainly violent thoughts or actions toward others would be another cause for concern depending on the client. Furthermore, recent experimental studies have successfully explored the practice of clients creating virtual representations of the voices they hear in a digital environment, then learning how to self-advocate while therapists' role-play the voices (Leff et al. 2013; Craig et al. 2018; Kleeman 2024). This technique is consistent with research and practices in the fields of drama therapy and psychodrama (Casson 2004; Gal 2020; Mortan Sevi et al. 2020) where fiction and dramatic techniques are used with people who hear voices and people with psychosis, in playful ways that make the suspension of their delusions possible and bring them closer to reconnection with themselves, their lived experience, and others (Gal, Leroy-Viemon, and Estellon 2020). Thus, role-playing games could be a helpful tool for clinicians with specialties working with clients with delusional tendencies in certain contexts.

iii) Risk 3: Incompatibility of group members

The dynamic of a group is a crucial factor of effectiveness as well as safety in group therapy, and there are many aspects to take into consideration in a screening process to select group members appropriately. A first step is to ensure there is not a high level of heterogeneity when it comes to the mental health issues that the group members face. However, not every person with similar mental health challenges will necessarily be an appropriate group candidate. Group readiness is another important element to take into account, as it can predict the risk of group dropout and/or poor therapeutic outcomes; there are tools one can use to assess it during the screening process, such as the Group Readiness Questionnaire (GRQ; Baker et al. 2013).

Moreover, it is crucial to consider the potential group inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as the contraindications to group therapy; this can include people who have very recently experienced trauma or acute psychological distress, people with certain conditions and/or significant cognitive impairment, people who are actively suicidal or violent, as well as people with acute psychotic symptoms (Ezhumalai et al. 2018; Novotney 2019).

iv) Risk 4: Confidentiality and privacy

When implementing therapeutic role-playing games in a group context, establishing some commonly accepted rules at the very beginning is essential, like in any group therapy setting. Confidentiality as well as privacy issues should be central matters discussed within this framework. Anything disclosed within the group should be confidential, and confidentiality rules do not only apply to the group facilitator,

but also to the group members. At the same time, it must be made clear that privacy is respected within the group; no member is ever obliged to answer a question they do not want to answer, disclose anything they do not feel comfortable with sharing, or participate in any activity they do not wish to participate in (Breeskin 2011). Exceptions of confidentiality apply only to the group facilitator, and are defined and regulated by the code of ethical practice of their professional associations as well as their relevant national laws.

d) Neurodiversity

Role-playing games can be especially helpful interventions for neurodiverse players given the right circumstances, including autistic players (Fein 2015, 2018; Helbig 2019; Katō 2019; Atherton et al. 2024; Visuri 2024), players with ADHD (Enfield 2007), and PTSD (Sargent 2014; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021). Creating an inclusive and respectful environment is one of the most important factors to facilitate safety in games including individuals with neurodiversity. Specifically:

- **Expectations:** Set clear expectations of behavior, social rules, and communication.

- **Accommodations and flexibility:** Make sure you are prepared to accommodate the needs of an individual with neurodiversity within your group of players: they might need to fidget, get up and walk, take breaks and more. Being flexible enough to accommodate the needs of all the players is creating an inclusive environment of mutual trust and understanding.

- **Self-advocacy:** Empower your players with neurodiversity to advocate for themselves, to express their needs freely and speak up when they are feeling overwhelmed or uncomfortable. Creating a non-judgmental, supportive and understanding environment is crucial to help players with neurodiversity feel safe within a group.

e) Disability

As discussed in Chapter 4, accessibility is a key consideration when making design choices and is especially important from a safety perspective. Some players experience temporary or permanent disabilities, which may be visible or invisible. Limitations from disabilities and other factors can make certain aspects of game experiences more challenging or impossible (Butzen 2024; Livesey-Stephens and Gundersen 2024). These disabilities might be visible or invisible. Providing accessible spaces for players of all abilities should be a primary goal when creating safer containers of play (Kessock 2017; Kim, Cook, and Foxworthy 2018). However, in those instances where environments or playstyles may provide obstacles to entry or are inaccessible in other ways, these should be clearly communicated to all involved before they attend any play event. Be thorough in your considerations of your entire space of play for physical, sensory, and

other access needs. There are resources to determine the relative accessibility of venues that can be sourced locally or from the venues themselves.

Sleeping arrangements should also be considered, as some players need specific accommodations: Do players have access to power outlets for breathing aids? Will they be expected to role-play throughout the night and/or get woken up for in-game reasons, e.g., for combat or a dramatic scene? Will they be able to sleep alone or must they share a room with others?

Also consider the accessibility of all the information that you will share with players, e.g., accessibility to websites, printed material, or any other communication. Try to review your materials with a screen reader to make sure information is conveyed accurately with as few complications as possible, such as long URLs or numbers, important images without alternative text descriptions, etc. Include in any communication with players before play a request for any specific needs they may have. Not that not all needs can be accommodated, so be clear in your communication before the event what elements you can and cannot accommodate.

A good practice is to hire an accessibility specialist to help you assess the needs players might have when engaging with design materials or playing the game itself. We will explore disability design in more detail in *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

f) Queer identities

Being aware that cis- and hetero- normativity is all too often assumed in all aspects of society (including in games) is an important part of providing safer spaces for LGBTQIA+ players. Including options for players to express their gender and sexuality should be considered for most any play scenario. Designers may employ practices such as writing characters that are gender neutral, i.e., allowing players to choose the character's gender, which might be appropriate in certain settings. However, if the game is set in a culture and time period in which marginalization exists for queer people, failing to consider gender and/or sexuality in the design can have the unintended consequences of erasing the lived experiences of queer people (Saitta and Svegaard 2019).

On the other hand, games that overtly include topics related to disparity or oppression based on gender and sexuality need to be clearly communicated to players. Organizers must consider carefully whether or not to include these elements due to the potential bleed or distress they may incur (Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2021). If a game has built-in oppression dynamics, be aware it creates alibi for play that can feel unsafe, regardless of the players' intention. Furthermore, consider what activities may occur in the game and any difficulties that might arise for queer players accordingly, e.g., some trans players may be uncomfortable with compulsory nudity (Saitta and Svegaard 2019). Such features, even if only potentially impacting players, should be signposted during sign-up. Again, hiring consultants with these backgrounds can assist in assessing and mitigating potential risks.

g) Incarcerated populations

Role-playing games are often a leisure activity for inmates, one that can notably prove to be cathartic and transformative for them (Blakinger 2023). Especially when conducted within a group therapy framework, games can benefit participants in numerous ways: improving institutional adjustment and interpersonal relations; reducing and managing anger, anxiety and depression; internalizing the locus of control, meaning players feel more in control of the events that happen to them and their own agency; raising self-esteem; developing motivation, empathy and problem-solving; as well as reducing the negative impact of imprisonment (McMahon 1997; Morgan and Flora 2002). However, there are some points to take into consideration concerning safety when organizing role-playing games in prisons, especially as an external consultant.

i) Risk 1: Prison regulations

Some correctional institutions prohibit the use of dice in order to combat gambling, or pencils as potential weapons, while some others prohibit role-playing games in general (de Kleer 2017). Needless to say, it is crucial to not put the inmates at risk of disciplinary action or harm by organizing anything that goes against the regulations.

ii) Risk 2: Group dynamics

As with therapeutic clients, compiling the right group is very important. In case you are not already working at the specific correctional institution, it may be advisable to collaborate with the prison staff and/or social workers for the screening process; they will likely be familiar with interpersonal dynamics and conflicts that may need to be worked around or avoided. They can probably also inform you about the potential mental health challenges of inmates that need to be taken into consideration. Lastly, they will likely have insight to help you determine potential exclusion criteria for the group, e.g., aggression or violent behavior; anger issues; substance abuse; recent solitary confinement; probation; or serious criminal record. All these factors may raise potential safety concerns; inmates with these characteristics may not necessarily put others at risk, but may be putting their own selves at risk by participating (O'Reilly 2011; McClain 2024).

iii) Risk 3: Confidentiality and privacy

Importantly, have the safety of the inmates in mind when choosing or designing the scenario, plots, and characters of the role-playing game, as well as during the debriefing activities. The participants should not be required to take part in activities or discussions that may in any way lead them to disclose information that is sensitive, on a personal or legal level, as the challenges to confidentiality and privacy can be very intense within an imprisonment setting (Tingué 2020). Consider what themes are most appropriate to play in that setting, avoiding ones that may unintentionally alarm non-players and authorities or make the players vulnerable to increased stigma.

5.7 Crisis management

Regardless of how carefully and safely participants play with one another, designers should plan ahead in case of a crisis. A best practice is to prepare for "not if, but when" a crisis emerges. Again, this is not to say that role-playing or engaging in transformational processes are inherently dangerous, but rather to say that these practices are transformational due to their inherent potency. The very aspects that reach players on a deeper level—such as bleed, immersion, identity play, and interpersonal intimacy—can also activate protection mechanisms that surround the vulnerable parts of ourselves.

Furthermore, role-players often enjoy engaging in emotionally intense experiences for prolonged lengths of time. Because of the immersive nature of role-playing, players may forget to put attention into their own self-care (Dalstål 2016). Some role-playing environments encourage pushing the boundaries of comfort and safety, for example, by using sleep deprivation, hunger, or physical exhaustion as design strategies to increase emotional impact. These factors may not only affect the neurochemical responses of players in the moment, but also can intensify the subsequent *bleed-out* effects players might experience (Leonard and Thurman 2018). Returning to the concept of vigilance, when we are vigilant, our mind is alert, aware, and wary of danger. When we surrender within the transformational container, we afford a level of trust to our co-players, while also relinquishing a degree of vigilance, which might lead to us pushing past our physical or emotional boundaries.

When we do so while playing another character in a fictional world, we also have the potential to bypass a state of vigilance we described before called the *identity defense*. For example, one's character might stay up all night keeping watch because they identify as a protector in a dangerous world, pushing their boundaries in ways the player might not normally do. Again, we consider the bypassing of the identity defense in part one of the very practices that can lead to transformative learning (Illeris 2004), but it can also lead to identity confusion, emotional flooding, or post-event *drop*, in which a player experiences symptoms of depression or "the blues" after play (Bowman and Torner 2014).

Such responses should not be considered a failure state of the design, the game, or the player, as they are natural outcomes after an intense experience. Indeed, such responses can even indicate the very places within a person that need transformation, for example, experiencing an expansive feeling of bonding with other people within the gaming group, then feeling isolated when returning to daily life and becoming aware of how deeply one needs more regular social connection (Nilsen 2015). Having such experiences while shifting in- and out-of-character may even increase a player's emotional regulation capabilities (Leonard and Thurman 2018), making them more capable of experiencing a full range of emotions while feeling in control in the future. However, we believe that transformational containers can be strengthened with safety practice that prepare for such reactions should they occur, for example, having an off-

game space with a safety team member waiting in case emotional flooding occurs or scheduling debriefing calls three days after an intense larp experience to help players process it and support one another.

Unfortunately, however, harm can occur in communities, especially if a player in crisis feels unsafe and that perception of safety has not been reestablished by their co-players, the facilitators, or the group as a whole. Such harm can be unintentional or the result of predatory behavior, the latter of which, while usually only describes the actions of a small number of people, is an unfortunate reality facing many communities that can have tremendously negative impacts.

Ideally, safety team members have skills in crisis management, e.g., in a professional capacity as therapists or as volunteers crisis management training. As another form of training, crisis management strategies can even be role-played by facilitators before the event, as knowing theoretically how to deal with a conflict situation is very different from experiencing a fictional version of it (Steele, Hart, Stavropoulos, and Bowman 2016). Furthermore, designers should consider such practices not only in the context of supporting players, but also in caring for other designers and organizers who may experience states of crisis throughout the process, i.e., *organizer safety* (Stark 2014; Berthold 2024). Finally, keep in mind that safety team member work itself is often difficult and behind-the-scenes compared to more visible design and organizing work. We recommend reviewing Anita Berthold's (2024) work on the topic, and considering her recommendations for safety people, organizers, and players.

Finally, it is essential for safety team members to know when a crisis situation is beyond their capabilities and where to refer a participant for future support (Living Games Conference 2018b). Even if a safety team member is trained as a professional, unless they have an explicit therapist-client relationship with the player and have arrangements for deeper processing within therapeutic sessions, extensive work is likely beyond the scope of their capabilities in a crisis management situation. Thus, it is best to think of such interventions as ways to address an immediate need for care and support, reestablishing a feeling of safety, rather than therapy itself.

We will discuss these practices in greater detail in the *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

5.8 Sensitive content and representation

Some of the most transformative play can arise from scenarios that have emotionally complex, difficult, or even taboo topics. As Jonaya Kemper (2017, 2018a, 2020) describes in her *emancipatory bleed* concept, sometimes the most liberating forms of play arise from players directly confronting and possibly even conquering structures of oppression in games that challenge their daily lives. Examples include structural racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, colonialism, and other vectors of marginalization. However, engaging with such topics in play requires care and consent.

We will explore some examples of safety issues that can arise from play on sensitive topics in the following section. Chapter 6 will expand upon design considerations upon these topics in more detail, including recommendations for less harmful representations of specific communities (see also Mendez Hodes 2023; Burton, Trammell, and Jones 2024).

a) Politics and culture

Topics surrounding specific political beliefs, conflicts, or cultural practices that exist in humanity's past or present can be especially fraught, with multiple perspectives that are difficult to predict based on your player base. If your game is designed with a specific political aim in mind, such as raising awareness about a political conflict in which one side is particularly oppressed, keep in mind that your players may bring in different interpretations, beliefs, and experiences around the conflict. While a well-designed game might help challenge default assumptions, in some cases it might instead reinforce reactionary belief systems or provide alibi for players to enact stereotypical or otherwise offensive character behaviors. Whether intentional or not, such behavior can cause harm. Having clear guidelines in the workshop about how to play and not to play on specific topics can help, but remember player behavior is unpredictable.

Furthermore, your own knowledge of the specific theme or setting might be limited, which might incur critiques around cultural appropriation or similar issues (Kessock 2014a; Mendez Hodes 2020). Cultural consultation can help you determine whether a topic is feasible to design and play responsibly. Including members from that political conflict or culture throughout the design and implementation process is highly recommended.

b) Gender/sexuality

Topics relating to gender and sexuality are some of the most common and also personal/sensitive topics that are addressed in games, whether implicitly or explicitly. One could argue, these topics are likely to come up in every game, as gender/sexuality, like some of the other topics mentioned in this section, pervade our cultures on the most fundamental levels. There is no way to consider our own socio-cultural realities without them; designing genderless societies can be exceptionally challenging, as players may bring in norms from their own cultures or identities regardless.

It is important to develop an awareness that playing on gender norms and stereotyping may always be challenging to some players. Topics that are particularly sensitive are structural inequalities and the policing of gender or sexuality. These topics can incur in-game behaviors such as homophobia, transphobia, compulsory heterosexuality, or cis-centerism. While these topics can be included, it is important to consider exactly what function they play in your designs, what outcomes you are pursuing, and the potential unintended or negative consequences that might arise for players from marginalized sexualities and gender backgrounds (Holkar 2016; Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020; Saitta and Svegaard 2019).

Furthermore, in terms of safety, we must recognize that traditional role-playing communities have historically been spaces that rewarded a particular form of geek masculinity e.g., games based on fantasy stories about male heroism and "epic glory" (Martin et al. 2015; LeClaire 2020; Bowman 2024); discourses around games heavily focusing on rules lawyering and gamesplaining (Dashiell 2020). While women and other minorities have always been a part of these communities, they have often had to navigate the complicated relationship between the game, masculine power fantasies (Nephew 2006), and sexist tropes (Trammell 2014; Stang and Trammell 2020; Stang 2021). In some cases, players have been able to find empowerment in combat play, for example, women in specific chapters of boffer larps (Eddy 2024) such as *Dagorhir* (Dashiell 2023). However, in chapters of *Dagorhir* elsewhere in the United States, women have felt excluded, minimized and/or erased (Martin et al. 2015; LeClaire 2020). Similarly, when queer genders or sexualities in games are not present or represented in a tokenized manner, players can feel alienated or unwelcome in communities (Paisley 2015; Neko 2016). As with other issues of representation, one way to try to ameliorate these issues is to have women and/or queer folks in prominent leadership roles or playing high-status characters.

c) Race/ethnicity

Analog role-playing games and the communities that surround them have historically been overrepresented by White people, especially in countries such as the United States (see e.g., George 2014; Beltrán 2015). Because of this, people of color sometimes question whether or not role-playing communities are inclusive of their presence (Kemper 2018b), a question that can lead to avoiding engaging at all or being forced to experience in-game stereotypes and off-game racism. When players from marginalized groups enact characters with the same backgrounds, they often must experience prejudice in the game similar to their experiences in daily life, which Holkar (2016) calls the *fun tax*. Therefore, for many players from these backgrounds, playing in a game is not just a matter of having an enjoyable experience, but rather *steering for survival*, which Saitta, Kemper, and Koljonen (2020) describe as "trying to get through the game without being hurt more than they can afford, while hopefully getting some of the positive or healing things they'd hoped to find." If the themes of a game focus on oppression, scenes that might feel playful for people from a background of privilege can feel non-consensual or even torturous for people from marginalized races and identities (Trammell 2020).

In terms of themes, as a result of racism embedded in Western culture, harmful tropes and essentialized ideas of race (Eddy, Samantha 2023) are often reproduced in role-playing games, e.g., the racist and sexist stereotypes inherent historically in the Drow species in *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), a matriarchal culture of dark-skinned elves who are "born evil"; normalized racism in *Call of Cthulhu* (Peterson 1981); and other "evil" representations, such as the Asian-appearing vampire Venger the Villain in the *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon in the '80s (Chang 2024). Such tropes reproduce problematic themes traced to the source material, e.g., racism toward people of color in

Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (Mendez Hodes 2019a, 2019b) and the work of H.P. Lovecraft (Petersen 1981). They often place players of color in the difficult position of having to identify with the White characters in order to imagine themselves as heroes in the story (Chang 2022, 2024), or accept the negative stereotypes often projected onto non-White characters in these traditional games.

Examples such as dark elves become even more complicated when viewed through the lens of larp, as some communities have normalized the use of black body paint to simulate skin color, which many interpret as a form of blackface, a harmful stereotypical depiction of people of African descent. Because such representations are often deeply entrenched in a larp community, with players believing their engagement with these practices to be harmless, respectful, and/or earnest, defensiveness and protectiveness around the practice can arise (Dashiell 2022), as well as aggressive behavior toward people who raise concerns (Kemper 2018b). Such reactions can lead to people from marginalized races and ethnicities feeling even less included and unsafe in role-playing communities that feel exceptionally inclusive and safe to other players. This disparity of experience makes discussing racism within role-playing communities especially challenging and fraught.

From the perspective of safety and inclusion, designers should take care with the references they place in games, as well as the settings and themes they choose to enact. If you plan to design based on themes of oppression, whether drawn from actual history or an invention, strongly consider whether you are the best designer for this setting. While such themes can lead to moments of great insight for players, they can also cause harm if approached inappropriately.

Including cultural consultants, sensitivity readers, and designers from the backgrounds in question throughout the process can help address these issues (Kemper 2018; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021; Leonard 2021). However, importantly, people of color and other marginalized groups are not a monolith, meaning that a representation deemed acceptable by one person may be considered harmful by another, and both reactions are valid (Kemper, Holkar, Kim, Skjønsfjell Lakou, Jones, and Cheung 2018). We recommend having strong reasoning and informed, considered, and compassionate communication around your game if you choose to proceed with such themes. Be open to feedback and realize that the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion is never done; we always have more to learn.

Signaling that players from these backgrounds are welcome is not often enough to establish and maintain safety. Consider including players from diverse backgrounds on your design, organizing, and facilitation teams. As with all play, calibration and consent negotiations are critical, not just between a small group of players, but amongst everyone in the game. Some players may wish to explore marginalization similar to their own lives through play, whereas others may want to avoid it. A nimble design makes space for a range of different experiences. For example, the U.S. run of *Just a Little Lovin'* (2017) adapted the characters to reflect racial and ethnic backgrounds more explicitly as requested by players, as well as a Playing Difference workshop, which gave explicit instructions for how to opt-in or out of play on discrimination (Torner 2017), including using the black box as a private

zoned space for intense play on such topics. In this case, people of color were in prominent positions of leadership in the organizing team and within the larp, which can help people from similar backgrounds feel safer in such communities.

d) Neurodiversity

Addressing topics of neurodiversity, like so many of the topics in this section, has unfortunately often been handled poorly in wider media and culture. It is important for any game designer including themes related to neurodiversity to be aware of these stereotypical representations and consider consultation from experts if that theme is outside of their own experience. Furthermore, be mindful of the impact games that address these themes directly might have on people with neurodiversity.

When dealing with heavy themes, we need to be mindful of all players, but we might need to take our considerations one step further for players with neurodiversity. Some examples include:

- **Trigger Warnings, Content Advisories, or Ingredients Lists:** As discussed earlier, make sure you are very clear on the topics, using one of these three variants as an advance notice. Help players prepare for what to expect and give them the opportunity to decide ahead of time if they want to participate. If participation is mandatory, e.g., in a classroom setting, consider having an alternative assignment or similar activity that conveys the same content or achieves the same learning objectives.

- **Safety:** Emotional safety should be a priority for all players. To ensure players with neurodiversity feel safe, have a clear structure and set expectations while establishing an inclusive and understanding environment that empowers open communication and self-advocacy. Additionally, having mechanics and flexibility that allows players to opt out as needed, without judgment, is very useful.

- **Preparation:** Organize some sort of pre-game preparation, either in the form of an information pack or an actual session before the game, where you can explain the rules and safety mechanisms and also have a pre-game discussion about the sensitive topics they might encounter during play.

- **Facilitators:** While dealing with sensitive topics, many intense emotions might surface during play. It is always useful to have a facilitator responsible for emotional safety available to all players at any time of the game. At any point, players should be able to opt out and approach the safety team member, and talk with them as needed. It is preferred if said facilitator has a background in psychotherapy, so they can assist a player through a crisis if that becomes necessary.

Finally, while we will explore facilitation recommendations in more detail in the *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*, tabletop (How to ADHD 2010) and larp communities have established concrete tips to make games more inclusive for players (Dolk, Haldén, Isen, and Peregrin 2021; Isen 2019) .

e) Disability

Like many of the topics discussed here, issues related to disability are often structurally excluded in many designs unintentionally. This does not necessarily pertain to the actual accessibility of your games as discussed before, but rather to representation through content that references, makes presumptions about issues related to disability, or even reveals ableist attitudes. This can occur through the simple exclusion of people with disabilities and disability-specific needs from characters and narrative design or through the reproduction of harmful stereotypes and tropes, some of which are so ubiquitous in many socio-cultural contexts as to have become implicit or unnoticed.

For example, in many games, characters are able by default and tend to be rather homogenous in terms of abilities. Furthermore, games that reference mental health facilities or use terminology related to mental health are quite prevalent in the more commercial sphere of design; sadly, these games often do so with little consideration of representing actual experience with mental health authentically or positively. Examples include "derangements" in earlier versions of World of Darkness games, "insanity" in *Call of Cthulhu*, and "conditions" and "madness" in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Jones 2018). These representations provide alibi for stereotypical or otherwise problematic role-playing from players, especially if they have little knowledge about mental health. The original Malkavian sourcebook for the *Vampire: the Masquerade* game describes the three "stages of Malkavian development" as: Fool, Maniac, Madman, Lunatic, then Fool again (Greenberg 1993). In other cases, disabilities are portrayed as superpowers for specific characters, e.g., "hearing voices that guide the players," such as the Malkavian Madness Network (Greenberg 1993).

Physical disabilities are also represented in problematic ways, for example, giving "extra points" to a character in World of Darkness for taking a disability as a "flaw" (Henry 2015). Players with disabilities often have to create a character that is able or write their disability into the character in order to play, and therefore feel compelled to reveal their differences in ability to the group. Games are rarely designed so that all characters have disabilities and thus represented as equal to one another.

It is important to educate oneself on the topic of disability, most especially when including ir explicitly in the narrative or characters in your designs. Be particularly mindful that certain disabilities are often invisible and thus discounted in common discourse even when disability is discussed (Kim, Cook, and Foxworthy 2018). For example, hidden disabilities like hearing loss, mental health issues, or chronic pain, are often forgotten or discounted when disability is considered. Be mindful also that the degree to which one can gain greater empathy by "walking in the shoes" of someone else by mimicking a disability has been broadly critiqued. We will explore in more detail the limits of perspective taking and empathy in Chapter 6.

f) Ethical content management

Finally, considerations around the ethics of including specific content are important throughout the design process. As mentioned before, one of the ways in which conflicts can emerge and even harm can occur is when a particular player or a group of players

find content upsetting, triggering, or objectionable. While aesthetic sensibilities can sometimes be a matter of perspective, for example, whether or not it is okay to play on certain topics such as enslavement or fascism, often issues arise because designers have not considered that such designs might upset people from affected marginalized groups, or individuals with the relevant backgrounds have not been consulted to assist on the design.

Individuals from marginalized groups may even view such play as *dark tourism*, in which one's identities or historical or intergenerational experiences of suffering become an experience of entertainment for people with relatively higher degrees of privilege in their leisure time (Nakamura 1995; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). Even in situations where designers have done work with inclusion of key voices in the design and implementation process, some people will reject the idea of playing on certain content at all. One thing to consider is that people living through an experience of marginalization, oppression, or tragedy cannot simply "opt-out" of that experience, whereas players can. Even referring to an experience based on sensitive themes as "play" or a "game" may be inadvisable; designers have strayed away from these terms in larps such as *The Quota* (2018) about refugees (Brind 2020, 10) and *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-) about the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s (Torner 2018; see Groth, Grasmo, and Edland 2021 for full script).

As discussed before, some content cannot be predicted, which is why design tools that can help adjust content on the fly are advisable, for example, calibration between players, consent negotiations, and use of the X-Card to remove content (Stavropoulos 2013). Following Kessock (2014b), from our perspective, ethical content management like other aspects of safety is the responsibility of everyone within the transformative container: the individual players, the play group, the organizers, the designers, or the community as a whole. As designers, our job is to provide all participants with the tools necessary to advocate for their needs and be responsive to the needs of others.

The next chapter will discuss issues of ethical content management in more detail, for example, in ways to represent other cultures and marginalized groups respectfully and avoid appropriation.

5.9 Summary

Ultimately, the more we can create an inclusive environment in which people feel safe to creatively express themselves, the greater potential we have to create transformational containers for more people. This chapter has discussed various considerations around establishing and maintaining psychological safety before, during, and after a game. Despite the challenges that can arise, we acknowledge that some of the most potent role-playing experiences have themes related to conflict, politics, identity, culture, and so on. The next chapter will discuss these themes in more detail, as well as the ways these topics can influence the design, play, and discourses surrounding these games.

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Chapter 6:
Myth, Symbolism, Ritual, Magic, Narrative, Culture, and Conflict

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6.1 Introduction

So far, we have explored the structure of transformative role-playing games and their design with particular attention on the framing surrounding them and safety practices. In this chapter, we will dive more deeply into the types of mythic and symbolic content, cultural representations, conflicts, and ritual activities embedded in the game's design itself. While the structure provides the container within which transformation can take place and the safety within which it is held, the content within RPGs provides the narrative and metaphorical potency that often activates processes of transformation.

6.2 Myth

As humans, we tend to crave explanatory models for our experiences in life and the big questions surrounding existence. These models can be scientific in nature or they can be more humanistic and metaphorical. Myth allows us to contextualize important moments in humanity within a larger-than-life, epic, or supernatural framework. Typical questions we seek to answer through myth include:

1. **Creation:** Understanding how life began, how humans came to be, and our relationship relative to forces greater than ourselves;

2. **Maturation:** Coming into one's own as an individual being, finding inner strength to face challenges, understanding one's role in relation to others, and learning how to engage in the world ethically according to a moral code; and

3. **Apotheosis:** Facing the inevitable end of the self and the world as we know it, transcending human limitations, and learning what happens to our consciousness after death.

Such stories not only provide guidance in times of questioning, but they also imbue life with meaning far beyond our mundane experience.

Note that while some people experience myth as purely metaphorical or even literary, others believe in the absolute truth of such stories. Regardless of whether or not literal "truth" is embedded in these stories, the experience of something profound and true within them can be intensely moving for individuals.

It is this productive space between the "real" and "not real" within which much of role-playing games take place, whether realistic, fantasy, science fiction, or some other genre. We can consider the transformative space within games occupying this "somewhat" real space. The narratives are fictional, but often the potency of their symbols or the meanings particular moments communicate to us are profoundly important. When deeply immersed in a role-playing game, we *pretend to believe* that the events that take place are happening to us through the lens of our character's subjectivity (Pohjola 2004), also called perspective taking (Kaufman and Libby 2012). Unlike the *willing suspension of disbelief* (Coleridge 1985), in which we suspend social reality to passively encounter the narrative of another person as with traditional storytelling, when we pretend to believe, we actively adopt belief in the storyworld, and the people within it.

Such myths are especially important in an increasingly fragmented and secularized society within which common myths and rituals surrounding them are less common, which gives role-playing games a particularly important space to fill (Beltrán 2012). Playful engagement with living myth is one of the methods through which we can directly re-enchant everyday life, even if viewed through an *ironic imagination* that understands such stories to be fictional (Saler 2012). Returning back to concepts from Chapter 3 regarding narrative therapy and identity, these stories can become ways to make our own lives more intelligible and even rewrite the stories we tell about ourselves into ones that are more empowering (Andersen and Meland 2020; Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Tanenbaum 2022; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023).

Inspired by the work of Stephen Larsen (1990), Craig Page (2014) has explored the ways that players engage in mythmaking around particular larp communities. He identifies three layers of myth occurring in the context of a long-term post-apocalyptic campaign larp, *Dystopia* Rising (2009-):

1. **The World Myth,** or broader fiction within which the game takes place. Within the World Myth, he further delineates the *a) Immediate Myth,* or the Lie Agreed Upon, the basic information everyone should know entering the game; and *b) The Meta Myth*, the overarching metaplot within which these events are situated. Page explains that the Meta Myth is not always necessary for play, describing a short freeform larp as a counter example;

2. **The Heroic Myth,** referring to the character's journey, an "even playing ground" within which the players explore their character and themselves. As self-discovery is central to this layer of myth, the degree to which the character's archetype is "heroic" is less important;

3. **The Player Myth**, referring to the stories players tell after the game about their own characters and the stories of other characters. Page (2014)

explains that these stories "take on lives of their own, become learning experiences, and form the basis for cultural identity in the group in their making" (68).

Thus, just as myths often serve as the foundation for social structures in larger cultural contexts, mythmaking in role-playing games can similarly unite players under the same shared fictional umbrella, with the specific codes, meanings, and jargon attached to it. For more on narrative more broadly, see Chapter 4.

a) The hero's journey, archetypes, individuation, and counternarratives

Page's Heroic Myth references a pivotal theory related to myths of maturation called the *hero's journey*, or *monomyth*. While several versions of the hero's journey arose in the early twentieth century (see e.g., Rank 2004; Neumann 2014), by far the most well known was popularized by Joseph Campbell (1973). In its most simplified form, the hero's journey involves a male protagonist embarking on a quest within which he faces obstacles, often in the form of "monsters" that he defeats, in order to step into glory. Such glory can include receiving an important item, taking a role in helping rule the society he defends, and/or entering *apotheosis*, or spiritual transcendence in some form.

While the hero receives help along the way, side characters are there to support his individual success rather than existing in a symbiotic community structure. For this reason, the hero's journey has been critiqued as a Western male individualism fantasy which reproduces colonial structures, particularly when reproduced as violent power fantasies within RPGs (Bowman 2024). *Dungeons & Dragons* in particular models the less psychologically potent aspects of the hero's journey in the form of defeating "monsters," leveling, and gaining items. However, it is important to note that some players still find great empowerment through playing the hero's journey through *D&D* (see e.g., Walters 2021).

What is often missed in critiques of the hero's journey is its metaphoric role as evocative of the awakening of human consciousness, confrontation with one's Shadow within the unconscious, and growth into maturation (Bowman in press for 2024). The Shadow refers to the personal aspects of one's consciousness that one seeks to deny, suppress, and disavow. Also contained within the Shadow are aspects of the collective that societies hide underneath a peaceful surface exterior, for example, our tendency toward cruelty and destruction.

For Campbell, this inner journey is one of *individuation*, a concept by Carl Jung (1976) referring to the process by which people engage in *active imagination* in which they unearth their "inner images" similar to a waking dream; interact with *archetypes* within both their personal and collective unconscious; and evolve their Self-concept as a result of this confrontation. A concept arising from Plato's ideal forms, archetypes refer to archaic patterns embedded within human consciousness that express themselves through culture in limited ways, but have an essential potency that causes

them to replicate cross-culturally (Jung 1964). Regardless of whether one views these archetypes as inherent structures within all humans or a result of cultural patterns, this process has been connected to the process of enacting characters in role-playing games (Beltrán 2012, 2013; Burns 2014; Bowman 2012, 2017a, in press for 2025).

As evidenced by *D&D* and other RPGs, archetypes can be powerful design tools (Bowman 2010), as players can easily slip into the familiar character types. Notably, according to Jung, no one representation can reflect an entire archetype, so characters tend to highlight certain aspects like facets on a diamond. Two key tools are worth mentioning here that are sometimes used in character and relation design: tarot cards and Jung's 12 archetypes. Tarot cards are deeply laden with archetypal meanings and can be interpreted in a number of ways, which make them useful bases upon which to build characters (see e.g., Groth, Grasmo, and Edland 2021), or to use during play as an emergent narrative tool (see e.g., Kim, Nuncio, and Wong 2018; Nøglebæk 2021). While the 12 Archetype model is often ascribed to Jung, it was fully articulated by Carol S. Pearson. Pearson (2015) details the characteristics of the Innocent, Orphan, Warrior, Caregiver, Seeker, Lover, Destroyer, Creator, Ruler, Magician, Sage, and Fool, which have evolved to have different names over time depending on interpretation as archetypes tend to do. These archetypes give clear guidance for possible character personality traits, and are also often positioned in relationship to one another in dramatic tension, a practice that is highly informative for game design (see e.g., Bergmann Hamming and Bergmann Hamming 2013). We are using this model for character creation as we develop a transformative larp intended to teach some of the main principles featured in this book in an embodied fashion.

Importantly, while stories within role-playing games can reinforce existing beliefs within society, for example, hyperindividualism or colonialism, their collective and co-creative nature can also offer spaces for challenging existing myths and resisting the notions inherent to *dominant narratives*. A dominant narrative is a pervasive story present within the *collective consciousness*, which Émile Durkheim describes as "the body of beliefs and sentiments common to the average of members of a society" (qtd. in Oxford Reference 2024). Instead, players can choose to enact *counternarratives*, or other versions of stories that have explanatory power about the world and social relations within it. Such stories are not "new," but rather uncovered through a process of unearthing and giving voice to perspectives not often highlighted in the dominant culture. As the hero's journey has become a dominant narrative in modern storytelling even among psychoanalysts, counternarratives have developed, for example, heroine's journeys in which a woman character becomes heroic by striving to rescuing her loved ones, restoring her community (Frankel 2010), and becoming whole within herself by transcending the gender binary (Murdock 2020).

Enacting counternarratives in RPGs is also possible through exploring other archetypes within the typical mythic structure including the Witch (Rusch and Phelps 2022; Tannenbaum 2022) and other forms of the Monstrous (see e.g., Beltrán, Kelly, and Richardson 2017), Tricksters (Turner 2021), the Divine (Bowman 2024), and even Companion side characters-turned-protagonists in the hero's journey (Simpson 2020).

Designers, facilitators, and players can also choose to unravel typical Western narrative structures themselves, defying expectations by "hacking reality" in productive and empowering ways. Therefore, while examining traditional mythic symbols and narratives holds some explanatory power for understanding common role-playing game narratives, the RPG medium holds transformational power in its co-creative, spontaneous nature, in which players often have a great deal of agency to tell stories that are important to them, including counternarratives and non-Western story structures (Bowman 2024).

6.3 Ritual

One of the primary means through which myth is experienced is ritual (Turner 1995). A ritual is a repeatable compound of action, space, and time designed with a specific intent or purpose in mind. Ritual gives context and personal relevance to mythic content, allowing us to experience the power of narratives first-hand in an embodied way. If role-playing is a ritual in which players enter an altered state of sorts, rituals within games draw them deeper into this state and add extra layers of consciousness on top of them.

For example, if a player enacts a priestess character in a larp, then plays a scene in which the character briefly embodied a goddess in order to perform a religious ritual for the other characters (Brown et al. 2018), we have at least four layers of consciousness: the player, the character's personality, the social role of priestess, and the goddess. Similarly, if ritual deepens our social bonds through *communitas* (see Chapter 3), then we have three layers of social connectedness: the play group, the character relations, and the roles played by the character in the liminal ritual space, within which previous social roles are often reassigned and imbued with new meaning.

For this reason, ritual is a powerful technology within role-playing games that designers can use consciously and carefully to construct transformative experiences for individuals and groups alike.

a) Ritual theory

As discussed in detail in Chapter 4, ritual theory involves three stages (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1995):

1. **Preparation:** A departure from the mundane world with thorough separation,

2. **Liminal:** An entrance into an in-between "threshold" state called liminality, and

3. **Return:** A return to the mundane world with an incorporation of the liminal experiences.

However, what happens within the liminal state is also a designable surface, one which can be maximized for depth and specificity according to the transformative

goals informing your design. Rituals can be tightly structured, or they can be highly improvised, for example, players in a magic school collaboratively inventing components of the ritual on the spot through emergent playfulness (Bowman 2016b).

b) Ritual design

There are rules and norms to rituals that can be taught or assimilated. Rituals are common to all human societies and there are many common themes and techniques that can be found across cultures. However, some concepts, words, and images are unique to a single culture and context, often a sacred one; ritual design for transformative play needs to be sensitive to this and avoid appropriation (Kessock 2014; Mendez Hodes 2020). For example, while the use of masks in rituals is common, some specific masks have religious and cultural significance. Similarly, integrating religious or spiritual content from other cultures can be potent, but may have unforeseen consequences such as alienating players who are from those cultures, and therefore should be handled with care (Kim 2022). The symbols, colors, and props chosen should be culturally appropriate to the specific setting in which they will be applied and included responsibly. Furthermore, as Meguey Baker observes, a ritual "has a definite pattern, and if a part of the pattern is missing, the ritual will feel hollow, incomplete, or simply not work" (Baker, Meguey 2021).

The *basic* elements of a ritual are:

1. People
2. Space
3. Symbols / Methods
4. Time
5. Energy

It may help to think of a ritual as a map that describes the route from where you are now to where you want to be, or to what you want to become. For example, how can you design meaningful rites of passage that signify a character's social transformation from one identity to the next? These rites can be based on existing ones, e.g., marriages, funerals, or graduation ceremonies, or can be invented from scratch to serve the fiction, e.g., a magical acolyte being officially inducted into a wizard society (for more examples, see Bowman 2016b).

According to researchers at the Ritual Design Lab (2017), ritual requires "a deliberate and artificial demarcation"; for it to be effective, you should explicitly and carefully manage the entry and exit, and make it clear when the ritual has started and when it is complete. When designing a ritual, consider whether the ritual serves a specific function in the context of the game world, for example, a rite of passage ceremony or a sacred service. Make clear what the contents of the ritual are, as well as player roles and responsibilities, e.g., the ritual leader, assistants, and general participants. Detail tasks to participants clearly to minimize overlap. Integrate safety practices and make the participants understand that they can withdraw from the

ritual. You may even wish to debrief the ritual in-game, which can often be a potent experience for both characters and players.

Here are some guidelines for each phase:

Preparation: The process begins when participants prepare to enter the ritual space, and it ends when they return to the world. In a diegetic ritual, the participants are returning to the storyworld rather than the lifeworld (see Chapter 4).

However, as some participants need time to prepare themselves and get into the right state of mind and body to perform a ritual, consider starting with a meditation to ground oneself, dressing in ritual clothing (or removing clothing), fasting, bathing, anointing, and/or preparing the ritual space. Group silence can be a simple but effective tool to guide players into a ritual mindset.

Signal the passage from the everyday into the formal setting of the ritual during this separation phase. Liminal comes from *limen*, meaning "threshold" in Latin (Turner 1969). You can have players walk through an actual doorway from one room to the next to indicate the shift into the liminal space, or describe this shift in more metaphorical ways, e.g., guided meditations.

Liminal: Liminality refers to the central part of the ritual in which the major activities are contained. The ritual performer or participants go through the symbolic actions, e.g., chanting, dancing, making offerings, or other actions. Participants often take on new, temporary roles within the ceremony.

Whilst it is tempting to allow one person to take the lead in creating the ritual—particularly if they have experience of the form—some aspects of co-creation are useful. Participants who are actively invested in the ritual from inception tend to bring more energy to the experience.

Some rituals use storytelling, guided meditations, visualizations, symbols, or dance to guide participants through the ritual. Others rely on rhythms or chanting to raise energy in the ritual group and to release that energy to affect change. When designing your own ritual, consider:

- How can you use these components?
- What additional materials do you need?
- What are the ritual techniques you want to use?

Menter and Venkataramani (2021) suggest that you should focus on the participants the whole time, and from a facilitation point of view, keep returning to the emotional responses of the people in the ritual. Ask yourself:

- What will they be doing?
- What will they be feeling?

In a question that originates from larp design, we often ask "What are the verbs?" Ritual design is no different. Promote and facilitate players' engagement by the

inclusion of elements into which they can contribute and become involved, e.g., repeating something, performing an action, or providing an object for the ceremony.

Return: The return phase features a common ending to close the ritual and socialize participants back into society. At the close of the ritual, some signifier is also useful: a recognition of change in the form of a symbol or token; a celebration; as well as a time to decompress, to absorb, and to process. Whilst the ritual may be complete, this "landing time" is a part of the ritual design process.

For a more nuanced and detailed overview of ritual design in larp, please see Murphy's (2023) lecture, "Ritual: The Importance of Framing Transformational Experiences."

6.4 Symbolism

As mentioned before, symbols can be archetypal and replicated cross-culturally, for example, the Witch, Trickster, or Hero. Alternatively, they can be culturally specific, originating from a clear and explicit entry point, for example, the blue phone box called the Tardis in *Doctor Who* or the elder god Cthulhu. While these symbols may originate from deeper urges within human consciousness, for example, the desire to fly or escape the passage of time, or the fear of the overwhelming monstrous, they originated from particular authors within popular culture, then spread into a cultural phenomenon. Role-playing characters and symbolism within games are often inspired by one of these two origin points (Bowman 2010).

6.5 Narrative and postmodern magic

In this next section, we will explore the power of narrative in shaping our concepts of ourselves and our understanding of our lives. We will also explore forms of postmodern "magic," in which players can use the power of intentionality, ritual, and action to help shift their self-concepts. Note that the psychological potential of such acts is potent regardless or not if magic is "real" in the literal sense. These concepts can help us further understand the deeper mechanisms underlying transformation through play, as well as providing language and conceptualizations for how players can empower themselves more directly.

a) Narrative therapy and narrative identity

In Chapter 3 we introduced the concept of narrative identity, i.e., "the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life" (McAdams 2011). We also talked about narrative therapy, a form of psychotherapy developed by Michael White and David Epston (1990) that emphasizes people's personal stories and the meaning around them, with the intention to explore them, understande them, and ultimately challenge them through alternative healthier stories (White 2007) and redemptive narrative arcs (McAdams 2011). Here we will

explore a bit further the ways in which we can use these elements to facilitate active engagement with identity transformation for players.

As we previously discussed, people use narratives as a way to organize stimuli into coherent concepts and patterns; to manage information overwhelm; and to consequently make sense of their experiences. Thus, the narratives people construct play a central role in meaning making and self-perception, and coalesce into their narrative identity (McAdams 2011). When negative external evaluation or systemic pressure becomes internalized into a core belief, people are led to the construction of problematic dominant narratives. These stories often encompass limiting beliefs about the person's competences and about reality itself, particularly when reinforced by frustration, disappointments or trauma. Especially when combined with social identities that are marginalized or oppressed, these internalized beliefs can prove remarkably hard to question, as various social interactions, stereotypes and prejudices may reproduce and reinforce them.

Narrative therapy aims to deconstruct such harmful meanings, and to give the person the agency to construct their own stories. By employing techniques such as externalizing conversations, deconstruction, and unique outcomes , the narrative therapist aims to facilitate the process of re-authoring identity (White and Epston 1990), often in the form of a redemptive story arc (see Chapter 3). The process of constructing and narrating such redemptive arcs has significant transformative potential, as it works to reframe one's viewpoints, enhance personal agency, and modify the core principles that influence a person's lived experience (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023; Murphy 2023).

Players are building a narrative through the process of content creation, often reproducing their dominant stories, especially when the player is playing close-to-home, thus turning the game content into potential psychotherapeutic material (Diakolambrianou 2021). In other cases, however, the differences between the players and their characters can give role-playing games the opportunity to illuminate the connection between the narrative identities of the character and the player (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). The player may realize that some of their character's abilities are, in fact, their own. Alternatively, the character's story may function as a cautionary tale for the player. Experiences like these are reinforced when the other players acknowledge and validate the person as capable in-game, i.e., playing to lift (Vejdemo 2018), and are particularly powerful when the person is acknowledged as capable out-of-game (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023).

Furthermore, the gameplay itself may often operate as a narrative therapist. Embodying characters can act as an externalizing conversation, and may often provide unique outcomes, since the other people we are playing with may at times, knowingly or unknowingly, challenge our dominant stories. Furthermore, transformative role-playing experiences can provide the players with realizations that make them aware of their stories and help them deconstruct them, resulting in one or more re-authored identities (Tanenbaum 2022); fundamentally, the embodiment of every

character embodiment can be viewed as a re-authored identity. Nontheless, the role of processing, preferably in the form of formal or informal debriefing, in the actualization of the psychotherapeutic potential of these processes is vital. These transformative impacts can also be facilitated by pre-game workshop activities for character creation (Diakolambrianou 2021, 2022).

b) Role-playing and postmodern magic practices

The term "postmodern magic" refers to magical schools of thought based on the notion that all faiths and creeds can generate magical outcomes. Given the fact that any belief system, religious or magical, contains unverifiable and/or fictional elements, then we can presume that a fictional dogma would also have the ability to produce similar effects, provided that the magician performing the ritual genuinely believes in its truth. Thus, postmodern magicians argue that individual belief, and not partaking in certain magical traditions, is what leads to magic (Evans 2007, as cited in Harviainen 2011). In this section we will discuss how such magical practices can be seen as relevant to role-playing and inform its transformative potential and processes.

i) Magic as "the larping that is not larp"

In his article "The Larping that is not Larp" (2011), J. Tuomas Harviainen discusses the components of forms of role-play considered adjacent to larp, and thus showcases that the practice and phenomenon of larping can be encountered in fields that are not defined as such. One of these areas is postmodern magic.

Harviainen relates the invocation techniques used in postmodern magic practices to the role-taking and immersion into character processes encountered in larping. He describes the invocation of deities as a three-way process, where the magicians invoke the deity in the third, then second, and then first person, until they "become" that deity. He notes that essentially "the magician pretends to be the deity until a (supposed) possession is reached" (Harviainen 2011, 182). Furthermore, he mentions that in certain practices such as chaos magic, performing a magic ritual can be described as heavily resembling psychodrama, as well as highly formalistic larps; he specifically notes that "questions of magic's veracity aside, there is form-wise nothing that separates a chaos magic invocation ritual from a larp" (Harviainen 2011, 183).

Given the common elements upon which both larp and postmodern magic rituals are constructed, combined with the playful approach they share, it becomes evident that there are links and common spaces between them in terms of forms as well as function (Harviainen 2011). At the same time, certain kinds of magic are discussed by their practitioners as "acting through the idea of a virtual world where change is possible" (Dukes 2001, as cited in Harviainen 2011, 183); a phrase that could potentially be used to describe the transformative potential of role-playing.

ii) Magic as a poetic act

Psychomagic is a form of shamanic psychotherapy created by Alejandro Jodorowsky (2010, 2015), which utilizes the powers of dreams, art, and theater to empower people to heal personal and generational wounds. In order to allow psychological realizations to cause true transformation, Jodorowsky employs "poetic acts," i.e., symbolic and/or ritualistic acts aimed to heal the unconscious mind. He argues that in order to reach the unconscious we must not rely on rational thought, but use the language of the unconscious to communicate with it, i.e., the language of dreams, art, and symbolism. In his *Manual of Psychomagic* (2015), he offers numerous psychomagic remedies for a variety of psychological, psychosexual, emotional, as well as physical issues, along with guidelines for practitioners who want to develop their own unique psychomagic solutions. These poetic acts are part of a strategy aimed to shatter the dysfunctional façade of the person and allow connection with a deeper, more authentic self.

In their article "Existential Transformational Game Design: Harnessing the 'Psychomagic' of Symbolic Enactment," Doris Rusch and Andrew Phelps (2020) explore indexical symbolic enactment as a factor that can enhance the transformative potential of games, and discuss Jodorowsky's psychomagic within this framework. They utilize the concept of symbolic enactment as an fundamental element of pretend play, and more specifically the symbolic enactment of indexical symbols, i.e., symbols that refer to intangible and psychologically ineffable concepts. Thus, they argue that indexical symbolism has a lot to offer to game design in terms of personal transformation and growth potential. Although they focus on digital games, the guidelines they identify as ways to utilize games in fostering authentic and harmonious ways of being and living are very relevant to analog role-playing.

One of Jodorowsky's poetic acts Rusch and Phelps explicitly refer to as an example is called "To Die and Be Reborn," aimed at people "who cannot free themselves from the feeling that they have failed" in their life (Jodorowsky 2015, 44). The psychomagic solution guides the person through an intricate procedure of symbolic death and rebirth, that involves a funeral speech and ritual, getting buried in a shallow pit, and being "reborn" with a new name, while also burying the belongings of their old self in the pit. Rusch and Phelps (2020) discuss the various indexical symbolisms present in this poetic act, as well as the deeper meaning of the "identity rebooting" process that is rendered tangible and attainable through these symbolic actions. At the same time, they refer to the work of anthropologists Thompson et al. (2009), who underline the significance of performance in the context of transformation-oriented symbolic work within a therapeutic context, and argue that the effectiveness of psychotherapy is actually linked to its performativity. Thus, attempting to assess the value of exploring poetic acts such as Jodorowsky's in constructing theoretical approaches to deep game design, Rusch and Phelps (2020) conclude that, although one cannot really die and be reborn, in the words of Thompson et al. (2009, 134), "doing (even in the mind's eye) makes it so."

Related to this topic, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas (2023a, 2023b) has conducted quantitative research exploring whether or not playing out death in larp affects players' death anxiety, avoidance, or acceptance (Ray and Najman 1974; Gesser, Wong, and Reker 1987). One of the notable findings of this study is that larpers in general appeared to have a greater acceptance of death than comparison groups. An interpretation of this data is that enacting many lives—not only deaths—may lead players to be more willing to confront death in their daily lives.

iii) Magic as manifestation

In their article "Magic is Real: How Role-playing Can Transform Our Identities, Our Communities, and Our Lives" (2021), Sarah Lynne Bowman and Kjell Hedgard Hugaas discuss magic as a form of manifestation. There are many different conceptualizations of manifestation as a magical process, some of which derive from modern witchcraft and focus on spell-casting, while others employ a New Age perspective and focus on summoning desired experiences into our lives by aligning our attention and imagination toward them. While acknowledging the limitations of such concepts, e.g., potentially dismissed as unscientific and/or coming from a place of privilege in the arena of structural inequalities, Bowman and Hugaas are interested in examining the transformative insight that manifestational theory and practice can offer to role-players.

Within this framework, they employ the perspective of Mat Auryn, who views manifestation as the ability to utilize intentional thinking, willpower, and creative action in order to alter ourselves and the world. In his book *Psychic Witch* (2020), he explicitly connects role-playing to magic and recommends an exercise he calls "psychic immersion" as a way for psychic practitioners to notice their inherent abilities by role-playing a gifted psychic for a day—an exercise not far away from the practice of Fixed Role Therapy that we discussed in Chapter 3.

Furthermore, Auryn describes seven dimensions of reality, within each of which several steps need to be made in order for manifestation to take place. Following the emphasis he puts on inspired action, willpower and envisioning the imagined desired reality as cornerstones of the manifestation process (Auryn 2020), Bowman and Hugaas (2021) draw further parallels between role-playing and manifestation magic. They argue that the basic principles Auryn is describing are relevant in a wide range of growth and creativity processes: Space for the person to grow needs to be established; sentimentality, cognition and intertionality need to be purposefully aligned; action based upon this focused willpower needs to be taken; and the person needs to let go of any attachment to the result. They believe these processes can enrich our conceptualization of participating in role-playing games, as well as the integration of our desired transformative goals after the role-playing experience, "establishing space and time to process the events of play; distilling takeaways; and continuing to align thoughts, emotions, and actions toward concretizing these takeaways in daily life" (Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

iv) Magic as a world-changing shift of consciousness

In their article "Larp as Magical Practice: Finding the Power-From-Within" (2021), Axiel Cazeneuve combines the witch philosopher Starhawk's vision of magic with Jonaya Kemper's work on emancipatory bleed (2017, 2020) to provide a deeper understanding of the world-changing potential of role-playing.

Starhawk is an ecofeminism activist, philosopher, and Neopagan witch who believes that consciousness and reality shape each other mutually and simultaneously. Within this interdependent process, she views magic as "the art of changing consciousness at will" (Starhawk 1997, 13). Finding this magic path to changed consciousness can be facilitated by various practices, both practical (e.g., activism) and esoteric (e.g., mindfulness). No matter the path, magic is essentially about finding the *power within*, i.e., the power that derives from our agency and capability, as opposed to *power over*, i.e., the power derived from hierarchy, constraint, or force (see also Hunjan and Keophilavong 2010, see later in this chapter). Finding the power within and the consequent shift of consciousness leads to actions and choices aimed to induce change, thus contributing to reality itself evolving to a different balance (Starhawk 1997; Cazeneuve 2021).

Cazeneuve argues that the greatest thing that can be achieved through roleplaying is namely that shift of consciousness which, although temporary, can have long-lasting repercussions that allows role-playing games to influence the world. Such a shift, however, is much more profound that pretense and shallow impersonation of a character; for magic to happen, we need to intentionally dive deeper into our sense of identity and allow our core beliefs to be shaken and redefined. Furthermore, Cazeneuve links the concept of "wyrding the self" (Kemper 2020) to an internal struggle of not exercising our power-over while increasing our power-from-within. Within this framework, they view emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017) as a way through which role-playing can help us overcome our internalized limitations, thus allowing magic to change our mental structures, achieve personal liberation, and, ultimately, take meaningful collective actions towards changing the oppressive societal and cultural structures around us (Cazeneuve 2021).

6.6 Culture in RPGs and communities

Culture is a complex topic that infuses play experiences both within and outside of role-playing games. Furthermore, role-playing games are part of culture themselves, with subcultures forming around them. While we cannot go into much depth on these complex topics, as a shorthand, we will discuss culture in five different ways with regard to transformative role-playing games: 1) fictional and real cultures and subcultures portrayed in games; 2) wider cultures and subcultures to which players belong; 3) design cultures and styles; 4) play cultures; and 5) discourse cultures.

a) Five types of cultures and subcultures in RPGs

i) Fictional and real cultures and subcultures portrayed in games

Exploration of cultures, either within a single culture, or cultures clashing, can be highly rewarding in role-playing games. Most RPGs feature some element of culture, whether from highly accurate and realistic real world settings or wildly fantastical ones. When we design or play a game, we bring with us cultural lenses, assumptions, understandings, and biases based on our upbringing and life experiences. When we lack knowledge about a specific culture, we tend to rely on stereotypes, cobbling together assumptions based upon what little understanding we have or on inaccurate representations we may have seen (Burton, Trammell, and Jones 2024). Therefore, even when designing fantasy worlds, if the cultures in your game are inspired by real-world groups in any way, it is best to conduct research in order to portray them respectfully. Furthermore, strongly consider adding a cultural consultant to your team who is knowledgeable and/or is from that culture, ideally involved throughout the design process.

1) Fictional culture design

When designing a fictional culture, culture design can be considered within the Venn diagram that overlaps worldbuilding and character design (see Figure 1).
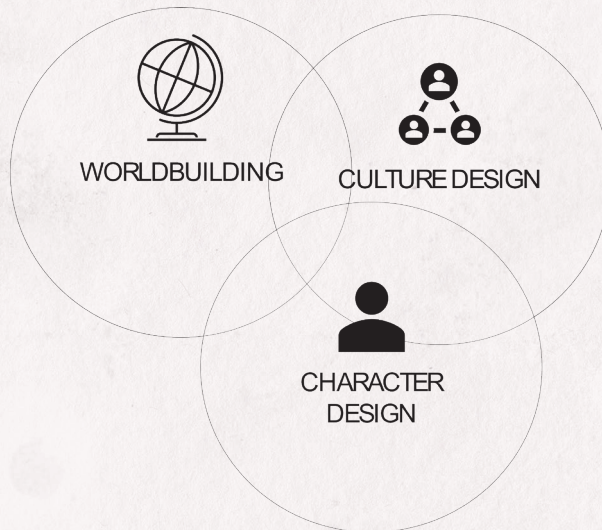
Figure 1: The overlap between worldbuilding, character design, and culture design.

Fictional cultural design is a creative task that represents a playable subset of worldbuilding. For example, if we consider Tolkien's (2020) Middle Earth to be an example of worldbuilding, with its rich history and cartography, myths, legends, and languages, the society of the Shire represents a culture design within it. It explains the way that the people who live in the world behave and interact with one another; their cultural norms and taboos; and their values. It does not describe the individual characters or their interactions, but rather gives a broad guide to what it is to be a hobbit.

The other key word here is playability. Some ideas for culture design may be interesting, but may adversely affect the play experience of certain types of characters within the storyworld. For example, in a society where low status characters are forbidden to speak to high status characters some additional design effort is required to ensure that the game is interesting to all players. Playability is particularly important to consider in a nano-game, as playtime is limited and less opportunity exists to hack the experience or course correct. For more details on designing narratives and cultures, see Chapter 4.

ii) Wider cultures and subcultures to which players belong

As covered before, scholars such as Turner (1982) classified play as an activity that can be regarded as a form of ritual and cultural expression. Play allows players to deepen their social bonds and engage in communitas: a common experience in which a community, or a wider culture or subculture in the cultural context, engages. James Paul Gee (2017) allotted this concept to spaces, whether they are physical, virtual, or a hybrid. An assembly space for communitas is what he calls an *affinity space*. In such spaces, people gather because of a shared interest, generally disregarding the players' (real life) background, such as race and occupation. Ideally, these spaces aim for a magic circle-like experience. Of course, this is an ideal scenario, since cultural clashes can still occur during play, in addition to other phenomena like dark play and inappropriate use of alibi (Stenros 2015; Trammell 2023).

Cultures and subcultures of role-play can act as affinity spaces. There, players can seek out connections with peers who share a similar interest. As Henri Tajfel's (1974) *social identity theory* suggests, people appreciate a way to self-identify and resonate with a bigger community such as a (sub)culture; this also applies to those engaging within the realms of role-playing games. As a result, the behavior of members of these larp cultures can be influenced and informed by their engagement with these cultures. Note that engagement here does not only refer to play itself, but also to subcultural activities surrounding play, such as attending conventions, engaging in online discussions, or watching live streams of Actual Play (AP) sessions with other fans.

Expression and active engagement in such cultures has been widely studied. One prominent scholar of subculture and fandom studies is Henry Jenkins (1992), who has been studying the phenomenon of *participatory culture:* the notion that interaction with a medium, such as a role-playing game, can transcend the mere consumption of it. In fact, it has the potential to be a source for newfound creativity and consumer-generated content, such as fan fiction or art (Jenkins 1992).

Players often base their perspectives and expectations on their own experiences and worldviews on play. The way players act, interpret, and contribute to a role-playing game subcultures is heavily dependent on their cultural background. For example, a Swedish player may have a very different approach to a larp than a Chinese player. Think of the ways people socialize: is it more common to be reserved in their culture or more outspoken? The way players approach social interaction in their daily lives in their own culture can heavily impact the steps and barriers a player must overcome before engaging in role-play.

All these different views and expectations of role-play can be a challenge for designers; they may have to incorporate many elements to appeal to a broad multicultural audience. It should be noted that there is no perfect culturally informed template or standard for the approach to larp that is deemed the correct way. *Cultural relativism* (Encyclopedia of World Problems 2020) advocates for the idea of an equal cultural playing field in which no culture can be objectively ranked or judged as superior or inferior. For more on this concept and how culture can affect design, see later in this chapter.

iii) Design cultures and styles

Another important form of culture that influences RPG practice is the culture around design, which also includes the discourses and gaming styles shaped by it. This book would not be possible were its authors not engaged in these discourses, as they have been relevant to our specific entry points and cultural contexts. Furthermore, in this book, we are forming our own discourses around transformative game design that are informed not only by our scholarly and practical work on these topics, but also through our interactions with each other and the learning occurring. Thus, one could say this book is emerging as evidence of design cultures and discourses in action.

While many notable discourse communities have emerged in role-playing game studies (see e.g., Torner 2024), we will touch upon a few here that have been especially important to the innovation of RPG design and practices surrounding it:

1. **Wargaming and simulation:** The first official role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) emerged from wargamers and simulations funded by the US government (Peterson 2012; Trammell 2015). From these roots grew the mechanized combat systems and tactical emphasis visible in much of traditional tabletop and larp design, especially in the US.

2. **Gothicpunk™ and personal horror:** The next most popular role-playing games emerged from the World of Darkness in the 1990s, shifting the emphasis from heroic fantasy play to internal and external "darkness." The World of Darkness explicitly uses the Jungian concept of *shadow* in its design (Beltrán 2013), emphasizing personal horror and the confrontation with one's own unconscious as main themes of the game (White Wolf 1991). However, the mechanized combat, supernatural abilities, and tactical emphasis inherited from *Dungeons & Dragons* are still visible in much of WoD tabletop and larp design.

3. **The Forge and Story Game diaspora:** In the late '90s, a design community originating from online discussion forums developed that challenged traditional role-playing game design. Members of the Forge discussion forum often broke traditional and indie tabletop games into their component parts, analyzing their affordances in terms of the *creative agendas* of their players, e.g., interest in the story (*narrativism*); rules and tactics (*gamism*); or simulating a realistic scenario and character

(*simulationism*) (Kim 1997; Edwards 2003). This community analyzed their play sessions with one another, which they called Actual Play reports at the time, without the implications of recording that has come to be associated with the term (Torner 2021). An emphasis on designing for co-creative narrative agency, or "Story Games," and on supporting community projects developed out of this group, influencing the seminal indie games *Fiasco* (Morningstar 2009) and *Apocalypse World* (Baker and Baker 2010) among others.

4. **Nordic larp and adjacent communities:** Meanwhile, in the Nordic countries, a group of larpers interested in avant-garde aesthetics and pushing the boundaries of play began to collaborate across boards. A style of play later called "Nordic larp" emerged, which is difficult to define, but often features collaborative playstyles; realistic scenarios on serious themes; immersive environments that aid for a 360 degree illusion (Koljonen 2007); discouragement of "win conditions" with an emphasis on playing to lose (Nordic Larp Wiki 2019), playing for drama, or playing to lift (Vejdemo 2018). *Immersionism* was added to the creative agenda framework to indicate prioritizing deeply immersing in the thoughts and feelings of one's character (Bøckman 2003). This playstyle has spread to influence many different communities, including recent versions of World of Darkness tabletop (Renegade 2023) and larp (Participation Design Agency 2016, 2017; Dziobak 2016). These developments are examples of these subcultures of design that were previously separate learning from one another and synergizing (for World of Darkness examples, see Bowman 2016a, 2016c, 2017b; Pettersson, Juhana 2018; Pettersson, Maria 2018).

These accounts of design communities make up the dominant narrative, so to speak, of role-playing game theory. However, of course many other design communities exist around the world, developing their own terminology, norms, and innovations around play, e.g., in Russia (Fedoseev, Harviainen, and Vorobyeva eds. 2015), the Arab World including Palestine (Anderson, Kharroub, Levin, and Rabah 2015), China (Xiong, Wen, and Hartyándi 2022; Botts 2023a), Brazil (Iuama and Falcão 2021), Japan (Kamm 2019, 2022), and many other places in Europe, e.g., the UK (Brind et al. eds. 2018), Italy (Giovannucci et al. eds. 2022), Hungary (Botts 2023b, 2023c; Turi and Hartyándi 2023), Czech Republic (Kuběnský and Vávrová 2021a, 2021b), Croatia (Fors and Hell 2017; Botts 2022a), Greece (Kontiza 2021; Botts 2022b; Alexiou 2022), and others. With the ease of access afforded by social media and Internet websites, it is far easier for subcultures to share knowledge with one another, even when their groups play very far apart from one another. Such cultural exchange is not always easy, but often leads to innovation and growth that would occur more slowly or not at all without communication.

iv) Play cultures

Even more diverse than design cultures, but strongly influenced by them, are the play cultures surrounding RPGs. Play cultures refer to the norms within groups around what role-playing games are, what they should look like, and how play within them should unfold. As with wider cultural concepts, the norms within such groups strongly define behavior within them, as well as what sorts of game experiences are considered part of the *in-group* vs. the *out-group* (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

The types of norms developed within play groups are numerous and sometimes overlap, but can inform aspects such as:

1. **Genre:** What types of genres are most typical, e.g., fantasy, science fiction, post-apocalyptic, romance, realism?

2. **Character design:** Who designs the characters, e.g., designers, facilitators, players, or a mixture? Are characters pre-written or devised during the game itself?

3. **Format of play:** Is the game limited to one session as a one-shot, is it a series, or a campaign played over multiple sessions, sometimes indefinitely?

4. **Mechanics, Rules, and Meta-techniques:** What are their purposes and how do they define play, e.g., do they convey story information; serve as communication tools between players; define what can and cannot be done; function as conflict resolution mechanics?

5. **Size of game:** Are games played in small, medium, or large groups, e.g., a 4-player tabletop game, a 30-person chamber larp, or a 5000-person combat larp?

6. **Role of facilitator:** Is the facilitator or organizer someone who arbitrates rules, tells the story, establishes the frames, or simply sets up the logistics?

7. **Purpose of play:** Are the games meant as "entertainment," art, or personal or social development, e.g., in education or therapy? Is discussion around the player's emotional or intellectual responses to the game common or even acceptable?

8. **Locations:** Does play take place in homes, forests, large fields, community centers, hotels, festivals, museums, therapy offices, castles, or classrooms?

9. **Community building:** Is the game itself the only space for interaction? Or are the players friends, colleagues, classmates, or members of a larger community? Does the group take part in non-game activities, e.g., charity work, travel, grant projects, or activism?

10. **Immersion:** Does the game culture emphasize immersion into activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and/or community? (See Chapter 3 for descriptions).

While some of these categories might seem more neutral than others, players will often define what is normative based on their experiences within their early play

groups. Broadly speaking, players within groups that encourage trying out many different formats tend to be more accepting of innovation, whereas players of more traditional games that focus on one genre and style tend to be surprised when they learn about different formats, and possibly even suspicious or rejecting of other styles (Vanek 2011). We can interpret these latter reactions as a form of identity defense (Illeris 2004; see Chapter 3). For example, due to a strong identification with the group, players may feel threatened by forms that have a different purpose, e.g., fantasy boffer larps intended for entertainment vs. art larps intended for personal or social development.

Spaces such as festivals and conferences that provide platforms for people from different play cultures to share can be quite important in breaking down these silos. In fact, such spaces can be considered their own play cultures to a degree with norms around openness to new types of games or styles of play and trying different games over the course of a weekend.

v) Discourse cultures: Leisure theory, art, academia, journalism

Finally, discourse cultures surrounding games are also important to consider, i.e., the ongoing discussions surrounding role-playing games. These discourses are often related to design and play cultures, but can also be connected to other concepts or disciplines, for example, applying theories from one's art or psychology background to a game. Discourses can be multi-purpose, but broader categories exist, including ongoing conversations in leisure theoretical, academic, journalistic, and arts-based spheres.

These discourses can take place in many locations:

1. **Online discussions,** including forums or social media posts, e.g., Facebook groups, TikTok, Twitter/X, Discord, the Forge and Story Games forums;

2. **Publications,** including zines, magazines, blogs, books, anthologies, and journals, e.g., the *Larp Design* book (Koljonen et al. eds. 2019); *The Routledge Handbook of Role-Playing Game Studies* book (Zagal and Deterding eds. 2024); the *International Journal of Role-Playing, Analog Game Studies, Nordiclarp.org*, the *Nordic Larp* book (Stenros and Montola eds. 2010); the Knutepunkt/Solmukohta books (Nordic Larp Wiki 2022); the *Wyrd Con Companion Books* (2012-2015).

3. **Conferences, seminars, and symposia,** including disciplinary, interdisciplinary, or transdisciplinary gatherings, e.g., Knutepunkt/ Solmukohta, GENeration Analog, Living Games, the Popular Culture Association, Edu-Larp Conferences.

4. **Museum and gallery spaces,** e.g., edu-larps or lectures in museums, special exhibits related to RPGs, other public spaces with room for discussion, such as panels, gatherings, Q&As, and local initiatives. Such events can occur in places such as libraries, schools, cultural centers, heritage sites, places of worship, town halls.

Importantly, many of these spaces were created as a direct result of conversations about RPGs often being marginalized or stigmatized in more mainstream publications. As such, engagement in broader cultural conversation, for example, through public journalism, can also be seen as a form of activist outreach.

b) Benefits and risks of integrating cultures in design

Franz Boas, who is considered the founder of American anthropology, introduced the idea of *cultural relativism* (Encyclopedia of World Problems 2020). This concept argues that cultures cannot be objectively ranked or judged as superior or inferior. Instead, every culture is viewed through its own unique lens, with people interpreting and evaluating the world according to their culturally ingrained norms. Boas believed that the aim of anthropology is to gain a better understanding of how culture shapes people's perceptions and interactions with the world.

In the context of live-action role-playing experiences, designer and researcher Kaisa Kangas (2015) advocates for the application of *experimental anthropology* in the design process, essentially embracing Boas' idea of cultural relativism. At the 2015 Nordic Larp Talks in Copenhagen, Kangas argued how the simulation and recreation of events to experiment with the social, cultural, and behavioral aspects of human life allow for reflection on societal and cultural questions. This way, complex cultural aspects can be put into practice, making them more tangible and concrete.

She gives examples of such experiences, like *KoiKoi* (2014; see e.g., Fatland and Edland 2015) a game about a fictional hunter-gatherer society inspired by real tribes, and *Brudpris* (2013; Linder Krauklis and Dahlberg 2015) a game centered around a patriarchal honor culture. Experimental anthropology experiences like these emphasize the importance of immersion and reflection to explore cultural diversity. However, it is crucial to approach this integration with sensitivity and authenticity to avoid misrepresentation and appropriation, ensuring that the benefits of cultural diversity and representation are realized without causing harm (Beltrán 2015; Kessock 2014; Mendez Hodes 2020)

When executed well, the inclusion of minority settings in RPGs can be an enriching experience for players, according to Beltrán (2015). She argues that the increased visibility of underrepresented cultures combats a Western-centric *defaultism*: the normative bias of over-representing Western cultured storytelling that overshadows less represented cultures.

George (2021) offers an interesting insight into the design process of a successful cultural integration in design that worked to avoid potential misrepresentation or offensiveness. He describes his experience writing for *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (2021), highlighting the challenges of being the first writer of Indian origin to contribute to Indian-inspired content to *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974). His goal was to draw from a diverse range of Indian cultural elements, while avoiding harmful stereotypes to create a respectful and authentic portrayal of Indian-inspired horror. To achieve this, George focused on the customs of the fictional location Kalakeri, steering clear of cliched characters. He developed the Favor system, inspired by

Hindu mythology and the caste system, allowing players to gain favor with powerful characters through specific actions. This system governs social interactions in Kalakeri, reflecting the complex dynamics of Indian society, and requires players to navigate these intricacies to survive and influence power struggles within the game.

In a later publication, Kangas (2017) concludes that engaging with the stories of others does not evoke the same emotions or experiences that they have gone through. This avoids the problematic presumption that games will necessarily lead to empathy as players "walk a mile" in the shoes of another person (Pozo 2018), as one cannot fully understand the experiences of another person. However, with appropriate post-game reflection, engaging with stories of others can enhance our understanding of their circumstances and create a sense of solidarity. Additionally, participating in others' narratives can offer insights into ourselves, causing us to reevaluate both our social and cultural environments.

In addition to post-game reflection, Nielsen (2014) argues for pre-game *cultural calibration*: a workshop approach before the start of a larp to make players aware of the experience that is to come. This way, players can mentally prepare and ground themselves. Furthermore, Nielsen (2014) mentions that a key component of the workshop method is the use of test-scenes, in which players enact scenarios that reflect cultural norms within the game world. These scenes are observed by other participants, who then discuss and evaluate the cultural norms portrayed. This iterative process helps refine and align the players' understanding of the culture before finally participating in the actual larp.

While larp might not perfectly simulate living within another culture, it serves as a potentially powerful tool for integrating culture in design. Here is a brief overview of potential benefits and risks:

Table 1: Overview of benefits and risks of integrating culture in design synthesized from Beltrán (2015) and Nielsen (2014).

Benefits	Risks
• Diverse storytelling (i.e., combatting Western-centric defaultism)	• Cultural misrepresentation
• Increased visibility of minorities and underrepresented cultures	• Cultural appropriation
• Cultural reflection	• Superficial "flat" representation (tokenism)
• Transformative potential with proper contextualization (workshops and debrief)	• Uncomfortable themes and roles for some players, e.g., colonialism, oppressor and oppressed.

6.7 Conflict in RPGs and communities

This section will discuss several aspects of conflict within RPG design, play, and the communities surrounding them. We will discuss the way that conflict is often a central component within much of role-playing game design, but also the way conflicts can arise among designers, organizers, and players for a variety of different reasons.

a) Definitions of conflict

Conflict has many definitions, from rather trivial clashes such as scheduling conflicts, to extreme fights, such as physical violence and wars (Dictionary.com). Our definition of conflict is broad and meant to be inclusive of many different experiences: a disruption of harmony arising when positions, interests, feelings, and needs differ or feel threatened. Such a disruption can occur within a person's own psychology, i.e., an *internal conflict*, or between one or more parties, i.e., an *external conflict.* Conflict can affect us in four major ways: personally, relationally, structurally, and culturally (Lederach 2014).

Many of us have been taught to recognize conflict only when it presents in a certain aggressive, often violent way, but it is important to understand that conflicts are not always visible. In fact, we may not always notice when conflicts are impacting us or affecting our interactions with others. A common example is underlying power dynamics, which are often a factor in any given interaction, but may not always be obvious to one or more people in the situation. Alternatively, we may only notice the *presenting issue* or *triggering event* in a conflict rather than its deeper roots and history. For example, if someone experiences a *microaggression*, in which another person makes a comment that they feel targets them due to one of their marginalized identities, the instance itself is only the presenting issue, whereas the conflict itself is often informed by the person's entire lifetime of experiences of marginalization.

i) Conflict transformation

Our model of role-playing game design seeks to use play as a potential site of *conflict transformation*. John Paul Lederach (2014) defines conflict transformation as a process intended:

to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict as life-giving opportunities for creating constructive change processes that reduce violence, increase justice in direct interaction and social structures, and respond to real-life problems in human relationships. (16)

Unpacking this notion of conflict as providing "life-giving opportunities," Lederach distinguishes between *destructive* and *constructive* approaches. Conflict transformation involves initiating and maintaining change processes that help people heal from "long-standing cycles of hurt and destruction" (17) and "maximize the potential for growth and well-being in the person as an individual human being at physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual levels" (25).

Such processes often necessitate the cultivation of *positive peace* in communities. While *negative peace* focuses on reducing *direct violence* in communities, whether physical or emotional, positive peace involves striving to ensure all members' basic human needs are met (Addams 1907; Galtung 1969), e.g., love/belonging, safety/ security, freedom, fun, and power (Glasser 1998). From this perspective, constructive forms of power strive to avoid exerting power over others, instead cultivating shared *power with* others (Follett 1940), the *power to* advocate on behalf of others (Pansardi and Bindi 2021), and *power within* to increase self-advocacy, agency, and fulfillment (Hunjan and Keophilavong 2010).

Furthermore, this perspective raises awareness on other forms of violence in society beyond direct harm: *structural violence*, in which discrimination is embedded in laws and other institutions (Galtung 1969); *cultural violence*, in which oppressive beliefs permeate socio-cultural contexts and interactions (Galtung 1990); and *symbolic violence*, in which people internalize these external forms of violence into their beliefs about their worth, their ability to act, and their behaviors in the world (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), further reinforcing privilege and marginalization in society.

Positive peace, the types of power, basic human needs, and the types of violence are all fruitful concepts to explore in role-playing game design. RPGs have historically emphasized actions of *power over* as the default verbs available to players (Albom 2021) and rewarded by the system, e.g., acts of violence leading to experience points. While exerting power over others through games can lead to important insights through shadow work or other forms of processing (Bowman in press for 2025), games that reinforce more constructive ways to get the characters' needs met would align better with a conflict transformation approach. Furthermore, even in teamwork scenarios in which power with is essential for success, such as with *D&D* adventuring parties (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020), nonviolent communication strategies (Rosenberg 2015), collaborative forms of power, and peacebuilding strategies are worth practicing in transformative RPGs (Hugaas and Bowman 2024).

Important to our study of role-playing, Lederach (2014) specifically encourages acknowledging identities as important factors within conflicts, as well as adopting a both/and mentality in which parties collaborate to envision solutions that are beneficial to everyone, as opposed to either/or thinking. This notion is similar to the "yes and" approach to improvisation that often makes for good role-playing, in which players accept new fiction offered and add additional details rather than shutting down the creativity of others. The same process can be applied to conflict.

With regard to RPGs, conflict transformation can be embedded in:

- The goals of the transformational container surrounding the game, e.g., a game in which characters oppress one another in-game, but care for each other off-game; or

- The activities within the game itself, e.g., practicing prosocial behaviors, engaging in democratic processes to increase peace and justice for everyone in the community.

However, we believe that games without a sufficient container to frame and process such experiences may fall short in terms of transformative goals. For example, communities that fail to support one another as they are experiencing difficult bleed or processing important takeaways from an intense role-playing experience may interrupt or stall change processes that person is undergoing. This does not mean transformation cannot occur; we know that players within leisure games intended for "entertainment" and lacking the framing of a transformational container can still experience incidental or accidental change catalyzed by play. However, we believe that role-playing game practice has only scratched the surface of the potential of the medium for conflict transformation and encourage further design innovation in this area.

ii) Types of conflict in RPG design

Literary analysis often emphasizes a close reading of a text that identifies internal and/or external conflicts. As with other techniques from this field (Jara and Torner 2024), the same method can be used to understand much of role-playing game design.

Conflicts can be understood as occurring on various levels. Some examples that might emerge in role-playing games include:

- **Intrapersonally**, or internally in one's own psychology, e.g., an "inner committee" of parts of the self arguing over how to proceed in a situation;
- **Interpersonally**, or between two people, e.g., a romantic couple on the brink of breaking up;
- **Intragroup**, or within a group, e.g., members of a family arguing over inheritance;
- **Intergroup**, between groups, e.g., factions within a larp maneuvering for power;
- **Regionally**, e.g., rival schools playing a football match for a championship;
- **Nationally**, e.g., a civil war;
- **Internationally,** e.g., diplomatic negotiations between two nations to avoid violent hostilities escalating;
- **Interplanetary,** e.g., colonization of one planet by another;
- **Interspecifically**, e.g., two species vying for dominance in a particular territory;
- **Within objects**, e.g., interactions at the molecular level;
- **Between objects**, e.g., a debate between two non-living objects.

A common way to formulate conflict in role-playing games is *player vs. player,* or PvP (sometimes called *character vs. character*, or CvC), in which characters compete against one another or role-play antagonistic relationships. This type of conflict is often contrasted with *player vs. environment*, or PvE, in which the characters bind

together for a common cause, usually against an external enemy or force. Some games feature both types, e.g., the *Dystopia Rising* (2009-) zombie post-apocalypse game, in which factions squabble amongst themselves for resources until the zombies come and they must set aside their differences and band together to stay alive.

Notably, in role-playing game design, the imagination's the limit in terms of what kinds of conflicts can be represented. For example, the freeform *Still Life* (2014) focuses on intrapersonal conflicts within rocks who discuss deep philosophical questions with one another. Therefore, additional categories may very well exist or develop over time. Furthermore, whether conflict is a necessary component of design is a matter for debate, as arguably conflicts will likely emerge in play regardless of pre-designed dynamics; alternatively, many experiences in life can be interesting without a strong component of conflict.

iii) Dystopia/oppression vs. utopia/hopepunk

With the first popular role-playing games evolving from wargaming (Petersen 2012; Trammell 2015), it is no surprise that violent conflict still plays a big part in contemporary mainstream role-playing games. As discussed before, many indie role-playing designers historically have believed that conflict is crucial for creating interesting play (see e.g., Baker, Vincent 2003-2004), even those that explicitly state that they wish to create games without violence. The main argument seems to be that games centered around achieving prosocial goals are believed to be unengaging or boring for the players, lacking the dynamic tension that stems from conflict. While designers such as Victor Baker (2024) have reconsidered such claims in recent years, the sentiment is still shared commonly in discourses around role-playing games.

When role-playing games have been designed to envision potential futures, this belief in conflict as central to any game experience, coupled with an understanding of conflict as something necessarily volatile and violent, has probably been one of the main drivers of the countless dystopian future games that have been created over the years. While there are merits and transformative potential in exploring dystopian futures, such as for instance practicing ethical decision making, through debating moral dilemmas (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020; Hollander 2021), showing mercy, or disobeying orders, we believe that the practicing envisioning utopian futures holds just as, if not greater transformational power. The genre hopepunk imagines future scenarios that offer "radical hope for living better" (BBC 2022), similar to imaginative practice also undertaken by futurists (McGonigal 2023). Furthermore, we should carefully consider what skills would be most helpful to practice considering the need to carve a resilient future for ourselves in the face of climate collapse, wars, and other tragedies.

b) Conflicts embedded in RPG design

Regardless of the setting, the conflicts embedded in role-playing games often reflect issues embedded in human cultures. As discussed in Chapter 5, games can explore themes of prejudice based on "sex, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion, disability/impairment, neurodiversity, body shape/size" and others (Holkar 2016). Examples include larps focusing on women's and queer histories (Friender 2022) or themes of class divides (Holkar 2017). Holkar (2016) discusses five levels in which such material can be included, indicating the escalating intensity levels represented by each one respectively:

- Prejudice exists in the background materials;
- The character has been victimized by prejudice in the past;
- The character has been prejudiced against others or expressed it in the past;
- The character is expected to be victimized during the game; and
- The character is expected to feel or express prejudice during the game. (Holkar 2016)

Alternatively, games can *erase* issues of prejudice that are uncomfortable, difficult, or inconvenient to handle (Holkar 2016). This practice is common and often unconscious, as the narratives reinforced in Western history often elide these stories (Friedner 2022), e.g., emphasizing the Great Man theory of history rather than a people's history that is inclusive of many groups (Zinn 1989). While this strategy might be better in some cases than handling such materials inappropriately, it runs the risk of erasing the lived experience of people living in conditions of marginalization—experience that is often central to their identities. Erasure tends to further reinforce dominant narratives, one that is often rooted in imperialism, colonialism, misogyny, racism, homophobia, etc. Deciding whether to approach conflicts rooted in culture, politics, and/or prejudice, and if so, how to include such topics respectfully, are essential considerations in RPG design. Furthermore, learning how to design for intersectional identities is an important skill to develop (Jones, Holkar, and Kemper 2019). As we have explored in Chapter 5 and will unpack in the following sections, each design choice has potential benefits and consequences.

i) Politics and culture

Political concepts are often so embedded in role-playing games that we often do not even recognize it. Consider how often we see the classic fantasy RPG regional/national conflict with an adventure party supporting a people's revolution against a tyrannical king. One might not reflect much over this central and old RPG trope, but at its core, it is an exercise in promoting the virtues of democratic engagement over the flaws of tyrannical autocracy, whether realistic or not for the setting. This phenomenon is called *larp democracy* (Fatland 2006), which can be considered a form of memetic bleed (Hugaas 2019), where players' ideological values bleed-in to their character's actions in the scenario.

Other examples of often encountered political concepts beyond systems of government embedded in RPG are different versions of:

- Nationalism (national / intergroup),
- Varieties of cultural exclusion (international / national / regional / intergroup / intragroup),
- Different economic systems (international / national),
- Struggles for civil rights (national),
- Colonialism (international),
- Jingoism (international), and
- Crime and punishment (intergroup / national / regional).

The list is far from complete. When we start to consider how many different political concepts we engage with when role-playing, we quickly realize how embedded these are in our games. Of particular importance are topics related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality, about which we go into more detail later in this chapter.

Similarly, culture also permeates RPGs. One can make an argument that geek culture historically has been predominantly White, male, and also mostly middle class, and it is no surprise that early games were heavily influenced by this lens. Although these demographics have been and are changing these days, one can further argue that the historical inheritance is still strongly affecting contemporary game design.

In particular, the concept of *Othering* (Said 1978) has and is still affecting game design and game play. In *Orientalism: Western Concepts of The Orient*, Edward Said (1978) challenged the continued contemporary *orientalism* practices of Western scholars, and argued that the creation of the postcolonial anthropological lens is partly a result of Western culture's need for an Other: another culture to define one's own culture in opposition toward. In other words, Othering is the way in which we define ourselves as the norm in opposition to those who do not fit that norm. For instance, in a classic fantasy setting, the world is based on an idealized Europe in the Middle Ages and every concept and character is defined to fit into this imagined setting. Everything outside of this is *the Other*: that which is not the mythical norm (Kemper 2020) and therefore threatens it. Even more concerning is that a game design tradition that does not challenge this hegemony, will, often without realizing it, recreate conflict lines that exist in our own postcolonial world, effectively Othering players whose background does not fit neatly into the frames of the games.

We advise game designers who wish to create transformative games to do what they can to become aware of these embedded cultural conflicts, so that they minimize the risk of re-creating them in their own games. A transformative game should try its utmost to be accessible to players of all cultural backgrounds.

On the other hand, role-playing games can be designed specifically to address as well as to counter these issues. An example of that was the Erasmus+ Programme "DiveIN" project from 2019-2020. Within the project, five edularp scenarios were

created to address the various stages of the radicalization process among young people, and their effectiveness was assessed by a mixture of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The findings indicated that the edularp methodology indeed has the potential to deeply impact people's political attitudes, including those that can function as an immunity barrier from radicalization processes (Dive In Consortium 2021).

Games can also touch on political themes in a less obvious way, i.e., through the narrative and game mechanics. An example is Johan Eriksson's *Oceania 2084* (2024), "an Orwellian TTRPG about resistance against a totalitarian world, ushered in by ecological collapse and authoritarian populism." While a leisure game with science fiction themes, Eriksson's goal was to symbolically represent existing and often silent structures of surveillance and suppression within contemporary Swedish society (Eriksson 2023).

ii) Race and ethnicity

As discussed in Chapter 5, role-playing games emerged from Western culture with embedded racist tropes in its fictional progenitors such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (Mendez Hodes 2019b, 2019c) and H.P. Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos (Goldfond 2021). As a result, themes of overt racism are often embedded in role-playing games. Examples include discrimination toward non-human "races," recently corrected to be labeled "species" (Dashiell 2024) in *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974); fear of the Other expressed as tribal cultures and dark, monstrous gods in *Call of Cthulhu* (Petersen 1981); entire species of mutants born into enslavement in *Dystopia Rising* (2009-); and appropriating Indigenous sacred practices in New England larp (Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020). Such themes are found in more socially realistic games as well, e.g., enslavement and subjugation in a Danish–Norwegian colony in the Caribbean in 1792 with the larp *St. Croix* (2015, Norway; Holkar 2016); discrimination between cultures and against Black and Indigenous American characters in the Western larp *Hell on Wheels* run in the Czech Republic (2013; Staňková and Appl 2016).

As with any form of role-playing, such experiences can increase perspective taking and empathy, raising awareness for people who do not experience that same marginalization in daily life (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). Furthermore, players with backgrounds of racial and ethnic discrimination can experience emancipatory bleed, in which they are able to challenge systems of oppression while steering toward liberatory play (Kemper 2017, 2020, see Chapter 3). However, such play can also invite stereotypical in-game behavior, especially if the player base has little understanding about the groups represented (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). Players from oppressed racial and ethnic backgrounds are often imposed upon to educate White players about the problematic nature of these themes, often without compensation (Eddy, Samantha 2020). To support more responsible play, some cultural consultants offer their insights to the community in the form of articles, such as James Mendez Hodes (2019a) offering recommendations for how to respectfully play

characters from another race than the player. Whenever possible, including the direct involvement of paid consultants throughout the design process is best practice.

Another issue that can arise especially in games designed by White, Western teams is stereotypical depictions of groups outside the default mythical norm (Garcia 2017; Kemper 2020), which is based in colonialist structures (Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020). For example, while *Oriental Adventures* (Trammell 2016) is an early form of representation of people of color in *D&D*, the content is problematic and exoticized. Furthermore, non-White (or non-human) groups are often not represented at all (Beltrán 2015), or *symbolically annihilated*, as in early versions of the 5th edition Player's Handbook of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Long 2015, 2016). As mentioned before, one approach *D&D* has taken recently is to hire people from diverse racial, ethnic, and cultural groups to design fantasy settings with reference to their backgrounds, e.g., in *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* (2021; see George 2021), and *Journeys through the Radiant Citadel* (2022; see Denkmann and Burrows 2022; Higgins 2023). Such practices not only are less likely to incur cultural appropriation (Kessock 2014; Mendez Hodes 2020), but often help players from marginalized backgrounds feel more included in gaming subcultures.

iii) Gender and sexuality

Conflict in relation to gender and sexuality can be explored in several ways. Perhaps most obvious is the exploration of interpersonal conflict as it pertains to relationships in regards to sexuality. Another design consideration is whether or not such relationships are also considered in terms of a socio-cultural context that casts such relationships as taboo or illegal, thus leading to themes of potential cultural or intergroup conflict. The struggle of dealing with socio-cultural policing of gender and sexuality could be internal as well (intrapersonal conflict) as an individual may struggle with the desire to express themself within a context which would punish such subjectivity. The exploration of issues that arise out of internalized sexism, homophobia, and transphobia could be approached through many of these forms of conflict navigation and transformation, e.g., including regional or national conflicts in terms of the beliefs of different groups/countries/states within a culture. Intragroup conflict could also be explored in terms of, for example, an LGBTQIA+ group trying to determine the best way to advocate or lobby for their rights to self-expression.

These sites of conflict must be considered carefully for the very real impact they may have on players who experience them even within a safer container of play. Considering safety practices specifically related to these topics (see Chapter 5) is critical therefore, because what may even appear on the surface to be innocuous conflict related to gender and sexuality, may have profound impact on players who have had to experience such conflict consistently in their everyday lives. Care should be taken to avoid stereotypical depictions (Trammell 2014; Stang and Trammell 2020; Stang 2021).

Attempts to create transformative games to explore gender and sexuality and the conflicts that often arise related to these topics are laudable in their goals,

e.g., in games like *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-; Groth, Grasmo, and Edland 2021). However, as with all sensitive content, such designs should be informed by careful consideration; education on the history and socio-cultural contexts of such conflict; and safety mechanisms.

iv) Benefits and risks in conflict design

The exploration of conflict in a safer container of play has the potential to have a number of related benefits. First, players can explore a complex or fraught dynamic without the usual risks inherent to doing so in everyday contexts. Examples can be as mundane and interpersonal as avoiding the possibility of irking a friend as you explore the positions of an argument, to the reproduction and exploration of extremely harmful global, social, cultural, or intergroup conflict and/or violence.

Second, such designs offer the opportunity to practice conflict transformation and to "practice difference" (Turkington 2016). Practicing difference can involve inhabiting different senses of self or subjectivity, before consciously attempting to embody such identities in everyday life outside of the game. Role-playing conflict in safer containers of play provides the player the opportunity to practice being in potentially challenging situations with fewer consequences to their actions. They can steer play towards strategies they wish to experiment with or play out different reactions to various forms of conflict. Even without conscious steering of play, engaging with fictionalized conflict may allow players to informally learn through doing, including how to engage with conflict when it may arise in everyday life.

Third, role-playing provides the opportunity to explore alternative positions in a conflict, which may provide insight in a way less possible in everyday life. As discussed before with Kangas (2016), such play must be done with consideration and care, not with the presumption that by simply exploring the fictionalized position of another, that one implicitly understands said position. However, by role-playing conflict from different perspectives in safer containers of play, players are presented with the opportunity to "walk with" (rather than "walk in the shoes of") persons with different experience. In addition, by exploring such positions, empathy may be fostered for those we find ourselves in conflict with, even if their arguments may be different from our own in everyday life.

On a broader level, if a small community, organization, or group role-plays conflicts that pertain to their collective experience or interests, they may be able to seek out common solutions without the usual consequences of such engagement in their everyday lives. They may be able to experiment with strategies or solutions to "play out" where they may lead, both positively and negatively, in order to consider the possible outcomes of different engagements with their collective points of potential conflict. On an even larger scale, one could consider the knock-on influence this could potentially have; those who have been able to experiment with these forms of role-play may be able to explore solutions and strategies, employing them in broader communities outside of play.

The potential benefits of conflict role-play however, must be considered in relation to the potential risks associated. First, we cannot assume that empathy will certainly be created through any specific gameplay; game-based learning will always be subject to a variety of factors including group dynamics, context, and socio-cultural positionality. Designing on the presumption that your game will *definitely* lead to an empathetic response, is likely to be frustrating at best and potentially problematic at worst. Empathy arising from an overly simplistic conception from playing a role that one does not express in everyday life is likely to lead to overly simplistic conceptions of similar roles and how they function in society.

Such practices can also lead to serious issues of potential misrepresentation and dark tourism (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). Problematic misrepresentation of real historical, socio-political, and interpersonal conflict can range from representing individuals and groups in stereotypical ways to being potentially offensive, disrespectful, or minimizing the impact such conflict can have in everyday life. Misrepresentation can also lead to fictionalized conflict becoming real conflict as players in the game are harmed by each other and/or the game design as played.

An overly simplistic understanding of conflict in general can lead to other safety issues. Role-playing fictionalized conflict in a container of play that feels unsafe for players has greater potential to lead to significant discomfort and harm. When the fictionalized conflict becomes more intense and/or touches on particularly sensitive topics for players, this risk becomes greater. When designing with conflict in mind—whether your design attempts to recreate fictional conflict explicitly or not—safety mechanics that allow players to express discomfort or resolve real conflict which may arise during gameplay are essential (see Chapter 5).

v) The Representation Tier List

Furthermore, when considering representing a community, we recommend reflecting upon your design choices according to James Mendez Hodes' Representation Tier List (2022). He specifies six categories or representation ranging from most harmful to best:

- **F Tier:** *Negative stereotype* of the group in question, which has a high chance of causing harm;

- **D Tier:** *No representation at all*, i.e., erasure;

- **C Tier:** *Generic negativity*, meaning negative tropes unrelated to stereotypes about that community; or *positive stereotypes*, which can be rationalized as "just a compliment";

- **B Tier:** *Generic positivity*, meaning positive representations that are not culturally specific, and/or *Kinda the same*, meaning the representation presents this community as "kinda the same" as everyone else;

- **A Tier:** *Identity-specific struggles and content,* meaning themes, conflicts, and topics specific to a community; and

- **S Tier:** *Constructive criticism, identity trauma narratives, and reclaimed stereotypes,* which are extremely difficult to present in ways that are authentic and meaningful without causing harm or offense (Mendez Hodes 2022).

We recommend comparing your attempts at representation with this list before sharing your design with players.

c) Advocacy, activism, inclusion, and accessibility

This section will offer some general comments on the use of larp to further social causes, advocate for others, work toward greater inclusion, and design regarding accessibility. We will discuss these topics in more detail in *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*.

i) Advocacy/Activism

There are potential benefits to practicing engagements with political conflict in RPGs, an endeavor that is often particularly fraught, unsafe, and with potential dire consequences in everyday life (Kangas, Loponen, and Särkijärvi, eds. 2016). Through role-play, the complex engagements that advocacy and activism require can be explored in a safer container of play. Such play includes navigating the arguments contained within any particular action of advocacy and/or activism, but also practicing doing so within the potentially heated and inequitable structures that might necessitate it. The skill and confidence to advocate for the self, group, or organisation can be practiced and role-played from different angles and perspectives, with the potential to bleed out into everyday life.

ii) Inclusion

The opportunity to design for different societal structures is inherent to all game design and art. Role-play design in particular allows for the exploration of those structures in a co-creative way. Of particular interest to social transformation is the ability to design gameplay experiences seeking to model or replicate more inclusive environments for its players. By exploring the possibilities of more inclusive social dynamics and the creation thereof, role-playing has the potential to provide space for imaginative solutions to real-world conflict. As with any transformative game, the difficult step after design, implementation, and play are done is figuring out how to distill the takeaways from the experience and use them to build more inclusive structures in our own societies.

iii) Accessibility

There are numerous ideas and tools designers can utilize not only to make role-playing games more accessible, but to furthermore give space and voice to communities that equally deserve to see themselves represented in the fictional worlds we create. Through intentional design choices and inclusion of disabled people in the design process, disability can become an asset and the creative potential of the disabled community actualized into transformative potential. In this way, our design choices can

contribute in combating the paradigm of narrative prosthesis[6] and eugenics,[7] not only in the role-playing community but in society in general (Kretchmer 2022).

6.8 Summary

This chapter has covered many topics and practices that can enhance transformative role-playing game experiences. We discussed the inclusion of myths, symbolism, archetypes, and rituals. We also presented various forms of culture as represented within games, as well as informed by and surrounding games. We presented concepts from conflict transformation that might be helpful when using design as a means to explore difficult personal and social conflicts. We discussed several examples of topics that can be represented within role-playing games, often through the lens of conflict, including politics, culture, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. While such topics can lead to raised awareness, perspective taking, and empathy, we also discussed ways in which such representations can be fraught and challenging to explore without causing harm. Finally, we discussed the potential for topics within role-playing games to cultivate skills in activism, advocacy, inclusion, and accessibility.

In our final chapter, we will shift our attention to the process of academic research in general and studying role-playing game design in particular, giving a brief overview of existing studies that have focused on the largely positive impacts of such games on participants.

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6   Narrative prosthesis is a theory introduced by critical disability scholars David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder (2000) that discusses the pervasive appropriation and use of disability in literary works as a storytelling device for character development, a narrative obstacle, a tool for representation, or a metaphor for morality.

7   Eugenics is the scientifically inaccurate theory and practice of improving the genetic quality of the human species by selectively mating people with specific desirable hereditary traits, thus "breeding out" diseases, disabilities and other so-called undesirable characteristics from the human population (History.com Editors, 2019). Jennifer Kretchmer (2022) advocates that the exclusion of a group of people from idealized fictional worlds and their erasure from imagination is indeed a form of eugenics.

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Research in Transformative Game Design

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7.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide some basic considerations about researching transformative role-playing games. While many methods for researching games exist, we will discuss two primary strategies:

a) Researching the design, playtesting, iteration, and analysis of transformative role role-playing games based on a theoretical framework, i.e., Research through Design

b) Researching the impacts of transformative game design on players, i.e., player studies

While we acknowledge that other approaches exist and the methods mentioned here can be used in concert with others, in general, we aim to teach you how to answer the following overall questions:

1. Can role-playing games help achieve a desired transformative goal? If so, what processes can help optimize transformative analog role-playing games to help achieve this goal?

2. What impacts do analog role-playing games designed and facilitated for transformative goals have on designers, facilitators, and players?

While related, this chapter will not provide a comprehensive literature review of the strategies and methods for studying game-based learning, simulation, gamification, or Serious Games. Instead, we will emphasize our own approach to research, focusing on considerations specific to the design and implementation of transformative analog role-playing games. However, we recommend diving into a broader literature search on these topics if you aim to expand your skill set beyond the information featured here.

7.2 Developing your research acumen

a) Barriers to identifying as "researchers"

When people hear the word "research," some respond with excitement, whereas others may respond with boredom, fear, intimidation, or resentment. Some of us may

have experienced shame or even trauma in our educational experiences, e.g., as a result of neurodiversity, bullying due to gender/sexuality, race/ethnicity, appearance, disability, culture, or any number of other factors. In fact, we may be approaching this work with a strong commitment toward alternative methods of education, ones that prioritize the student experience, experiential learning, meaning, and personal relevance to content.

Traditional educational environments are often designed counter to these priorities, which Freire describes as the *banking model* of education (Freire 2005), in which a teacher's job is to deposit relevant facts into the minds of students. In the banking model, the students job is to become perfect receptacles for the information, which means that one's personal interests, insights, critiques, and even participation in the learning process are not welcome and should be set aside. While educational psychology, pedagogy, and didactics have shifted in terms of recommended practices toward more group-focused and participatory work, many of us still hold resentments about the educational process. These resentments can lead to barriers to conducting research, as we may harbor insecurities or fears about our own possible contributions.

We would like to emphasize that if you design games and share them with others to play, you are likely already researching in one way or another.

b) Research design

Game designers often reflect upon their own process in design journals or game design documents, which they may even share with the outside world. They also often connect with discourse communities around design (see Chapter 6), learning the relevant techniques and theories that can inform their game design and improve it based on their goals. Game designers also often playtest their games before releasing them into the world, collecting data about the experiences of their players through observations, informal chats, or more formal methods, such as surveys or interviews. The processes we will describe in this chapter are meant to augment practices you likely already undergo, helping you refine your practice and investigate the impacts of play in a more focused way. We refer to *research design* as an important component of this process, which means that to a certain degree, researchers are often designers as well.

For our purposes, research design means identifying key factors before beginning the process, including:

a) **A research question** you seek to answer, which may have sub-questions attached to it;

b) **The background information** informing the topic you are exploring, including e.g., aspects related to socio-cultural contexts and other relevant literature in the field;

c) **A theoretical framework** that will inform your design, which can arise e.g., from established concepts in academia or design-based concepts from other practitioners;

d) **A brief description of the game** you plan to design in order to answer these questions, informed by your theoretical framework;

e) **The method** you plan to use when researching your game, which should be relevant in helping you answer your research question; and

f) **Your positionality and reflexivity** as a researcher and your personal background, which may inform the way you research and analyze your data.

Note that some of these details will change during the research process. Documenting these changes can be helpful in making sense of the process as a whole, especially in design research. Projects are not static; they can change over time. As long as the final product of your research is described as a coherent whole with a "red thread" connecting each of the sections, your work will be in good shape.

After you complete the research, you will add:

a) **The results** that emerged when you conducted your research according to the method;

b) **A discussion** of these results, returning to your socio-cultural context and theoretical framework, as well as any new concepts that now might be relevant. Limitations should also be included, i.e., places in which your research design and findings are limited;

c) **A conclusion,** in which you briefly summarize your project, discussing its larger implications and any directions you or other researchers might follow for future research related to these topics.

This format is sometimes called the *hourglass* method of academic writing: establishing one's work within the relevant context is the "big picture," which narrows when gathering research data according to this specific project, and then expands again to look back at what these findings might contribute to the "big picture."

Another way to think of academic research is attempting to answer these questions:

- **Why** is this research important? (Background, Discussion, Conclusion)
- **Who** will be involved in this research? Who are the researchers? Who or what is the object of study? (Research Question, Method)
- **What** will the research entail? What theories inform it? What will you learn from it? (Theoretical Framework, Method, Results, Discussion)
- **When** will the research take place and in what historical contexts? (Background, Method)
- **Where** will the research take place and in what social or cultural contexts? (Background, Method)
- **How** will you conduct the research? (Method)

c) "Objects" of study and research questions

One of the questions before was, "Who or what is the object of study?" In other words, what is most interesting to you in the research process? Examples include:

- A game, including its ludic, narrative, and symbolic structures;
- Games in terms of technologies, including the impact of certain technologies on analog play;
- Yourself as designer, facilitator, or player;
- Another player;
- A group of players;
- A subculture;
- A culture; and
- Multiple cultures.

You may be interested in researching all of these "objects," but you will need to narrow the scope of your research to 1-3 of them depending on the study. Note that the term "object" here does not mean that research is always objective or that we should think of our players as objects. We will use the term for now with regard to identifying the "object of study," but many researchers prefer terms like research subjects, participants, or even co-collaborators to discuss the people taking part in the study.

Returning to our previous research questions, we can inquire "Who or what is the object of study?" Depending on how we frame each question, we will have a different primary object of study.

1. Can role-playing games help achieve a desired transformative goal? If so, what processes can help optimize transformative analog role-playing games to help achieve this goal?

   - Emphasis on the game as the object of study

2. What impacts do analog role-playing games designed and facilitated for transformative goals have on designers, facilitators, and players?

   - Emphasis on the self and other player(s)

Additionally, these questions are quite broad. We will now want to add specifics, perhaps related to the Who, What, Why, questions from before. For example, if you are designing a nano-game intended to increase empathy in cis-men for people from marginalized genders, you might refine the questions accordingly:

1. Can role-playing games help increase empathy in cis-men for people from marginalized genders? If so, what processes can help optimize the game for this purpose?

2. What impacts do analog role-playing games designed and facilitated to increase empathy have on designers, facilitators, and players?

However, if your object of study is a specific game, you might want to narrow your question even further:

1. Can a specific role-playing game help increase empathy in cis-men for people from marginalized genders? If so, what processes can help optimize the game for this purpose?

2. What impacts does a specific role-playing game designed to increase empathy in cis-men for people from marginalized genders have on designers, facilitators, and players?

Furthermore, investigating the impacts on designers, facilitators, and players may widen the scope too much. Perhaps you are only interested in your own process as a designer, a research subject's experience as a facilitator, or a player's experience. Whatever you choose, you would want to narrow your question accordingly, especially for smaller research projects.

i) Difficulties identifying research topics

Having trouble determining what topic to choose is a common issue writers encounter. We recommend starting with yourself, your own interests, and your positionality and reflexivity. You can even use autobiographical content as a starting point, especially for design work (Kim 2019) or autoethnographic work (described later in this chapter). For example, you can distill your interests into core categories or questions such as:

*   What am I trying to say?
*   Why is this topic important to me?
*   What key experiences have I had when role-playing, e.g., "a-ha moments?"
*   In what ways am I biased?
*   Why does this topic matter and to whom?
*   Who might be harmed by this research? Is it worth it?
*   Who might not be represented by this research? Are there ways to involve them?
*   Who else has attempted to answer similar questions? (Assume others have).
*   Is this research best suited for a popular or an academic audience? ("Both" is a great answer).

Remember that everyone has a contribution to make. Finding your unique, authentic voice, whether as a designer, an author, or both is important to the process.

d) Description of the game

At this point, you should start considering the basic concept and design for your game. Note that in a research paper, you will likely not include all of the details of the game unless you add an Appendix, e.g., with your game design document or larp script

attached. Instead, you will provide enough information for you to get started designing your game, as well as for readers to understand game elements attached to any data you will describe later in the paper.

Note that inspiration for game design is often not as linear as we have described here. Maybe you have basically your whole research design completed before you think of a game idea, or perhaps the inspiration for your game comes first, or maybe you are inspired by the background materials you read. However, we do recommend making sure these steps are considered before testing your game or applying other methods. For example, you should likely connect your game design choices to your theoretical framework before you begin, otherwise the framework may turn out to be less relevant and it might be difficult to test whether or not the theories were useful in the end.

7.3 Background, literature review, and theoretical framework

After you identify your research questions and describe your game, you should begin conducting preliminary investigations into the literature. Think of what information you need in order to conduct your research, as well as what background information readers will need to help contextualize your project.

Important to this information gathering process is reviewing relevant literature on the topic. By literature, we do not mean fiction writing in a literary canon, but rather a more general term that refers to academic publications on your subject. Returning to our example, you are likely not the first person who has tried to design a game to improve empathy. Research other work that has investigated this topic, whether related to your target group, another target group, or in general. You may actually find relevant literature reviews already conducted that summarize the topic, e.g., about studies on empathy in games (Schrier and Farber 2021) or RPGs in therapy more broadly (Mendoza 2020; Henrich and Worthington 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022; Baker, Turner, and Kotera 2022). While you do not have to cite all the sources in such a study, the main themes of the review itself will likely be very useful to you. Consider if there are any gaps in the literature, but be careful about assuming that if you have not found literature on your topic, it must not exist. Academic search engines often fail to locate the wide range of literature on various subjects.

Furthermore, even if you cannot find information on your specific topic, you can always widen your search to include more general literature. For example, maybe you include psychological studies of empathy tied to watching movies or reading books. Maybe you find studies focusing on developing empathy through video games instead of analog role-playing games. Maybe you decide to write about the study of empathy itself and how it has evolved over the years. A thorough literature review will give a broad sense of the importance of the topic based on your unique approach and provide any relevant background materials that will help the reader follow your chain of logic. Background sections should also aim to answer the question, "Why should I care about this topic?" Reward your reader by walking them through the important concepts, themes, and findings of your paper.

Theory is another way in which you can deepen your work. Theories refer to a set of principles or ideas that help us understand some aspect of the topic of study. A theoretical framework weaves together multiple theories in order to address the research question in a deeper way. You can find many examples of theory in Chapter 3, but you also may include theories from further afield, such as other disciplines, or from design literature not included in this book.

In the case of game design, the theoretical framework and the concepts within it should inform your design choices in some meaningful way. For example, perhaps you are using a theory that delineates different types of empathy. You might learn about *cognitive empathy* (Smith 2006), which refers to processes of thinking, such as imagining how experiences of misogyny might impact a person's choices in life. You might learn about *emotional empathy* (Smith 2006), which refers more to processes of feeling, such as imagining how it might feel to experience sexist remarks as a child. In your game design, perhaps you decide you most want to explore emotional empathy. You would then consider what specific design choices might help increase emotional empathy. For example, perhaps you include the meta-technique of *monologue* (Jeepen 2007; Boss and Holter 2013), in which you ask the character what is happening in their inner thoughts when they hear the sexist comments as a child in the scene. Perhaps you ask them to emphasize what sensations their character is feeling in their body to enhance the emotional connection.

In your paper, you would describe this application of theory to design. You would then likely also design methods to study whether or not the theorized effect occurred, for example, asking debriefing questions about how the other players felt when hearing the monologue from the character in the scene. If they reveal that they felt nothing, it could mean many things, which you could then consider in your Discussion section. For example, it could be a result of the theory itself not being relevant, the meta-technique not being useful in this context, the player's identity defense activating and creating a block to transformational learning (Illeris 2004), the facilitator not using the monologue at the right time, or the player not being able to adequately describe the sensations in the character's body. Regardless, the discussion will reflect upon the results with regard to larger socio-cultural contexts and reflect back on the usefulness of the theory in this context.

Some general tips for literature reviews include the following. First, as role-playing game studies is interdisciplinary, and possibly even anti-disciplinary (White, Torner, and Bowman. 2022), learn how to "code switch." For example, if you have a humanities background, learn how to "role-play" as a social scientist in your literature review. Be as thorough as possible in your research to avoid "vacuum" studies, i.e., research that takes place in a vacuum without reference to other sources in the field. Unfortunately, many key studies in our field are not available in indexed university libraries, so try Google Scholar first. You can also mine the bibliographies of other studies and follow the rabbit trail to find new sources. Cite both academic and popular sources when relevant, especially in design research. We also recommend that you cite sources that use the same or a similar methodological approach, ideally in your Methods section.

7.4 Methods

A method is a procedure that you follow while gathering and analyzing data that attempts to be rigorous and structure your process. Methods not only help focus your project, but they help other researchers potentially replicate your research in the future, which can add to the academic outputs connected to your work. However, methods are often a bit different in the social sciences and the humanities:

- **Social sciences:** How can I best *observe* my object of study?
- **Humanities:** How can I best *interpret* my object of study?

Note that these questions are framed differently, with social scientists imagining themselves as observers, whereas humanities scholars emphasize their unique interpretations as central to the work. As we mentioned before, some social scientists attempt to position their work as "objectively" as possible, considering themselves neutral observers as researchers and reducing bias when they are able. As we will discuss in the positionality and reflexivity section, such "objectivity" is not only suspect, but also not necessarily desirable. As a designer, your unique subjectivity is what informs your work and shapes it accordingly. We consider this process a positive rather than a negative. From this perspective, design work is often interdisciplinary—you are observing, but you are also creating, interpreting, and reflecting on the process.

Regardless of your approach, importantly, the method you choose will affect the results that you find, the process by which you analyze these results, and possibly even your conclusions about the results. Whether we are aware of it or not, our methods are usually interpreted through a *methodology*, which is an overall paradigm or philosophy about research. To use our example from before, if our methodology views ourselves as neutral observers and our players as research objects, we are likely to adopt a rather mechanized approach to understanding design and player experience. If we assume that players cannot accurately describe their own experiences in interviews, we will likely rely on quantitative surveys that are predesigned to measure a specific effect, or we may reject certain interview data as implausible because we doubt the authority of our players' interpretations. If you consider yourself an *auteur*, meaning the ultimate authority and author of the "text" of your game, perhaps you will dispense with player data completely, and instead focus on your own process of creation as paramount. However, if we perceive our players as co-creators of research and meaning, collaborators in the process, and if we trust them to be the experts of their own experience, then we are likely to feature their quotes throughout our paper and rely on their expertise in our analysis.

As you likely gathered, we favor this last approach above the others for design-based work. However, each researcher has their own methodological standpoint, often informed by the disciplines and even subdisciplines within which they have studied, and should position themselves accordingly. In other words: the methodology informing your data collection and analysis will affect the results that you deliver and your discussion of those results. Considering your methodology and how it affects your reflexivity as a researcher is an important part of the research process (see later in this chapter).

Another thing to consider is the sources of your data. Your data comes mainly from you, for example, in observations or interpretations. Observational data can come in many forms, but some examples include taking field notes while running your game or afterward, or could include adding checkmarks to a questionnaire in assessing the behavior of your players. Interpretive data could include applying specific theoretical lenses when interpreting the design of your game, including the relevant symbolism, or interpreting another person's game and the implications of using certain symbols, i.e., conducting a close reading. If you are gathering data from your players, you should consider if you are gathering quantitative, qualitative, or both types of data (see later in this chapter). Consider which tools would be most useful in answering your questions; which are feasible given the scope and timeframe of your project; and which are beyond the scope.

a) Research through Design

Our default method is Research through Design (Zimmerman and Forlizzi 2014; Coulton and Hook 2017) when writing a paper based on your design work. Research through Design involves posing a research question that the research will try to answer *through* design, as described before. Research through Design involves creating a prototype for the game based upon the theoretical framework, which may include the entire game, such as a nanogame, or a smaller part of the game that you hope to test, such as a specific mechanic or one of three scenes within the nanogame.

Then, the researcher will conduct playtests of the prototype, usually observing the players engaging in the game, as well as gathering quantitative and/or qualitative feedback data from the players afterward (as discussed later in this chapter). The research will analyze the results, then adjust the design (as needed) based upon the findings, which is called *iteration*. Ideally, this process will unfold over at least two iterations so that the researcher can chart the evolution of the game and how the iterations impacted game play. Finally, the results of these iterations, and the changings in findings which occur across them, can then be analyzed in relation to the research question posed and the theory upon which the game was designed. You may see different definitions for Research through Design in the literature, so please follow this one.

Furthermore, Research through Design is only one method through which you can investigate game design. Other similar approaches you might find helpful are:

- Practice-based research,
- Arts-based research,
- Design through research,
- Action research, and
- Any other methods centering upon analyzing the artistic process.

Importantly, returning to the object of study, although the player experience is part of the iteration process, it is not the primary focus: the game is. If you want to study the design process of your game and also study the impacts on your players, you will need to use a mixed method approach, gathering additional quantitative or qualitative data.

b) Quantitative data analysis

Quantitative data analysis involves using statistical methods to describe, summarize, and compare numerical data with the aim of identifying cause-effect relationships in order to be able to make generalized claims and predictions. The four generally recognized methods of quantitative analysis are *descriptive*, *correlational, causal-comparative / quasi-experimental*, and *experimental*. We mostly employ quantitative data analysis in RPGs when researching player base make up, aspects of players' psychology, and/or player behavior. While a vast selection of different tools exists for both data collection and statistical analysis available to researchers, not all of these are relevant to conducting research on RPGs.

i) Surveys

Surveys are one of the frequently used methods to collect quantitative data in RPGs. In order to translate player base make up, player psychology, and player behavior into numbers, we use surveys with closed-ended questions, meaning that we do not give respondents the option to answer open-ended questions freely, but rather have them answer a multiple-option questionnaire. A common way to do this is by the use of a *Likert-scale*, giving the respondents the option to answer questions along a scale from for instance "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" or "never" to "always." A Likert scale is commonly employed along a 5- or a 7- points scale. There are many established Likert-scale based survey instruments from fields such as psychology, and social psychology that can be useful for RPG researchers.

ii) Biometrics

The purpose of biometric methods is to measure psychological responses. One does this through measuring players' physiological responses while they play. Common methods include:

- **Galvanic Skin Response (GSR):** GSR measures skin conductance, and is used to analyze level of psychological arousal and as an indicator of emotional intensity.

- **Electroencephalography (EEG):** EEG measures electrical brain activity, and is used to analyze mental effort and processing engagement.

- **Facial Electromyography (fEMG):** fEMG measures facial muscle activity, and is used to analyze emotional intensity and emotional valence.

- **Facial Expression Coding:** Facial expression coding measures visible expressions, and is used to analyze emotional intensity and emotional valence.

- **Heart rate (HRV, ECG):** HRV and ECG is used to measure heartbeats per minute, and is used to analyze level of psychological arousal.
- **Pupil Dilation:** Pupil dilation measures pupil diameter, and is used to analyze level of psychological arousal, mental effort, and cognitive load, as well as an indicator of emotional intensity.

When the data is collected, we can then employ a number of different statistical methods to glean insights from it. This is often a highly complex process, and requires knowledge and insight beyond what we present in this book.

c) Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves analyzing non-numerical data with the aim of having a deeper understanding about humanity, meaning, and the unique subjectivities of research participants. While quantitative data can provide precise measurements on specific phenomena e.g., through research surveys, it may not be flexible enough to capture the nuances of an experience. To use our empathy game example, several quantitative scales to measure empathy exist, so it would make sense to ask players to take one of them. However, they will not provide nuance, for example, which particular scene or line from the monologue was particularly evocative and inspired empathy. Surveys may not ask questions that are hugely relevant to the study that can arise in a post-game debrief, feedback session, or interview, for example, experiences in early childhood a player may have had that contributed to their empathy in the scene.

Qualitative data gathering and analysis can include one or more of the following methods.

i) Interviews

Interviews feature structured, semi-structured, or unstructured open-ended questions that allow participants to speak at length on a topic. These can be synchronous (in-person, over chat, over video conferencing), or asynchronous (emails, letters, other documents). Important to transformative game design, the interviews themselves can be a form of processing through debriefing (Montola 2010).

Interviews produce large transcripts of data that need to be coded according to a specific methodological process. Transcripts used to be produced by hand from video or audio recordings, but are much faster to produce now with transcription and captioning software readily available. However, the transcripts still should be read thoroughly and corrected for inaccuracies with the original recording playing. As such, conducting and coding in-depth interviews with large numbers of participants is difficult to accomplish. While interviews often produce rich data, they are often considered more "subjective" and "anecdotal," which some social scientists find less persuasive and not generalizable. However, importantly, even if you gather only a few interviews, they can generate impressive amounts of codes and results. Thus, a smaller sample size is considered acceptable in qualitative research if the dataset contains a high degree of rich detail.

A common and practical method for coding transcripts is thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), in which the researcher searches the data for key themes according to interview prompts, as well as other themes emerging from the data. Unlike *grounded theory*, thematic analysis assumes the researcher is starting with a hypothesis. As our practice starts with research questions that we attempt to answer through design, thematic analysis is often an appropriate approach. You can also choose to quantify the number of codes in the qualitative data, which can help you chart trends over the entire corpus of data.

ii) Focus groups

Alternatively, researchers can organize focus groups, in which players answer interview questions in a group setting. Again, these sessions can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured with open-ended questions. Focus groups have the advantage of group dynamics, for example, players reminding each other of key moments or responding to each other's comments, but are less intimate than one-on-one interviews, meaning players may self-censor more in a group. Players can be from the same game or different play communities depending on the research design.

While not explicitly run as focus groups, a similar source of data could be a group debrief, provided the participants provide consent for their responses to be researched.

iii) Ethnography

One of the most popular methods for studying role-playing games, ethnography involves embedding oneself in the research as a subject in some significant way. Different types of ethnography exist that depend upon the degree to which the researcher's experience is foregrounded vs. the participants'.

In *autoethnography*, the main participant is also the researcher, e.g., providing a personal account of one's experience in a game (Kemper 2020; Baird 2021; Cazeneuve 2022). Autoethnography centers the implicit subjectivity of game experiences in an honest way that other methods sometimes obscure, especially those that create distance between researcher and participant experience. Such pretense at difference may be artificial, such as striving toward "objectivity" while studying a fundamentally experiential medium, or actual, such as studying players far outside the context of play or the researcher never having played themselves. Thus, autoethnography boldly foregrounds the lived experience of the researcher, often in vulnerable and personal ways. *Duoethnography* is similar, except it shares perspectives from two or more researchers as the primary subjects of the study.

Another example is *participant-observation*, in which the research embeds themselves in a community, studying it from the inside. In participant-observation, the researcher is one of several research subjects within the "natural habitat" of play, providing them with an insider's view of the data gathered, including observations of play sessions. Sometimes, participant-observers may observe trends players may not notice (see e.g., LeClaire 2020). The first study in the field of role-playing games, Gary Alan Fine's *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) is a participant-observation ethnography, influencing many such studies in the future. This method

is also particularly helpful for role-playing in that studying the psychological states and social codes inherent to play are difficult without this embeddedness. Pairing ethnographic research with interviews can often deepen into the lived experience of play for the researcher, adding more context to play moments. Furthermore, research participants often feel more trust toward participant-observers than other types of researchers.

Ethnographers need to balance how many details to add with what might be of interest to a reader. A common issue is ethnographies about role-playing in which the researcher recounts extensive details about the game or characters that are overly specific to that setting. While interesting to the researcher, this approach can backfire by alienating the audience. Alternatively, if ethnographers do not reveal much about their own experience or do not participate extensively, the work can sound overly clinical.

iv) Actual play and documentation analysis

Researchers can also record gaming sessions and transcribe them, a practice called "actual play." Actual play can originate from the researcher, i.e., recording a group of tabletop players, or it can arise from pre-recorded material, such as livestreams. Unlike interviews or focus groups, which often focus on individual or group reflections after a game, actual play analyzes moments that occur during play or are described after a game (White 2016). Other forms exist, such as documentation articles and books written by players, designers, and organizers. Examples can be found on Nordiclarp.org and the *Nordic Larp* book (Stenros and Montola eds. 2010).

v) Stimulated recall

Another interesting approach is stimulated recall, in which researchers record play events, then play them back for participants to reflect upon (Pitkänen 2015). This method is particularly interesting in phenomenological study, i.e., trying to understand the role-playing experience itself, as players are prompted by their actual reactions in play rather than the revised version of events our minds naturally create after a game experience (Waern 2013).

vi) Analysis of game texts

Researchers can also interpret games as texts themselves, including game design documents, player's handbooks, and other game-related texts. Researchers can glean useful information from game texts, including design principles, symbolic structures, and the underlying cultural norms or assumptions in various play groups (see Chapter 6). These texts can be interpreted in a number of ways.

Textual analysis involves interpreting the symbolic and narrative structures, whereas *formal analysis* focuses upon how formal elements of the game make meaning, including mechanics and other structures. These can also be considered *close readings*. *Discourse* analysis evaluates the way a particular topic is discussed with relation to power dynamics, whereas *rhetorical analysis* focuses more on the way the text persuades us in particular ways. *Content analysis* researches the amount of instances

of particular types of words, whereas *emotion analysis* extracts content related to the inflection of emotions in textual data. Note that these latter approaches can also be applied to interview data, actual play transcripts, etc.

As a final note, some readers from the social sciences will immediately reject qualitative data with a preference for quantitative. Alternatively, other readers may reject social science altogether, e.g., researchers from the "hard" sciences. Do not let the judgments of others stop you from applying the method that is best for your research agenda.

vii) Methods are merely tools

Note that many other methods exist, for example, viewing larp through the context of performance-based research (Waldron 2014) or experimental anthropology (Kangas 2015) among many others. What is most important is figuring out which tool is best in investigating your object of study and finding your voice within it. Different methods will have different advantages and disadvantages, no method ever being a perfect fit for what is being studied. One's choice of methods depends in part on the object of study and the theoretical framework being applied. Some methods will lend themselves better to certain research questions than others and to the data needed to answer it. For example, if the researcher desires to seek out data on player experience, but the players in question may be difficult or impossible to reach for one reason or another, the researcher may wish to engage in an autoethnography (Brown 2015), which involves the rigorous examination of the researcher's own experience with a game as the data source in order to answer the research question. The researcher does need to be aware of the scope such a method can be applied to and that there may be limitations to such an approach.

7.5 Ethics

Good research practices are generally based on a set of fundamental research ethics principles that should be considered during all stages of a research project that involves "human subjects," i.e., studies about specific people.

The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity (2023) identifies four main principles that should guide individuals, institutions, and organizations in their research work:

- "Reliability in ensuring the quality of research, reflected in the design, methodology, analysis, and use of resources.
- Honesty in developing, undertaking, reviewing, reporting, and communicating research in a transparent, fair, full, and unbiased way.
- Respect for colleagues, research participants, research subjects, society, ecosystems, cultural heritage, and the environment.
- Accountability for the research from idea to publication, for its management and organization, for training, supervision, and mentoring, and for its wider societal impacts" (ALLEA 2023, 5).

Similarly, the Belmont Report (1979), published in the US by the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, focuses on the following basic ethical principles (City University of London n.d.):

- **"Respect for persons - autonomy and protecting those with diminished autonomy:** Every research participant must participate voluntarily, without coercion or undue influence, and their rights, dignity and autonomy should be respected and appropriately protected. In case a potential participant cannot make autonomous decisions, they are required to be protected against harm, even by being excluded from the research if needed.

- **Beneficence and non-malevolence:** The value provided by the research should outweigh any risk or harm. The aim should always be to maximize the benefit of the research and minimize the potential risk of harm to participants and researchers. All potential risk and harm should be carefully assessed and reduced by taking all necessary precautions.

- **Justice:** In research, there should be equal treatment of members and/or social groups. Careful consideration must be given to the overall societal impact of the research, both in the selection of participants, as well as the benefits and burdens arising from it.

- **Informed consent:** Research staff and participants must be given appropriate information about the research, in a comprehensible manner, without duress or inappropriate inducement. The information should include the research procedures, purposes, risks and anticipated benefits, as well as a statement offering the participant the opportunity to ask questions and to withdraw at any time from the research. The manner and context in which information is conveyed is equally important for the participant to make an informed choice, and therefore the researchers must ascertain that the participant has comprehended the information. Voluntariness requires that participants make their decisions without an overt threat of harm, an improper reward, or any other unjustified pressure to obtain compliance.

- **Confidentiality and data protection:** Individual and group preferences of research participants regarding anonymity should be respected. Moreover, requirements concerning the confidential nature of information and personal data should be respected. The data gathered must be stored securely and appropriately, per relevant legislation and institutional policy.

- **Integrity:** Research must be designed and reviewed in ways that ensure recognized standards of integrity, quality and transparency. Unacceptable research practices include fabrication, falsifications, plagiarism, misrepresentation of data, etc.

- **Conflict of interest:** The independence of research must be made clear, and any potential conflicts of interest or partiality should be made explicit.

Anything that may be perceived as a potential conflict of interest must be disclosed, even when no conflict exists" (City University of London n.d.).

In an attempt to translate these principles into practical guidelines, here is a list of requirements for you to consider in order to research role-playing games ethically:

- Your research should include a signed consent form that explains the purpose of the study, how data will be stored, who has access to it, for how long, who is supervising the project within the university (or other authority), and how to contact them.

- If your participants are underage, have their parents sign a consent form.

- If you are using photographs, obtain the permission of the people depicted, disclose that you will reproduce their image for research purposes, and credit the photographers.

- You should not involve deception during the study, unless it is impossible to answer the research questions otherwise (not advisable).

- You should aim to present the participants in a fair light, even if their opinions differ from your own. In many cases, we also recommend avoiding including data in your study that could adversely impact the public's perceptions of your participants, even if they gave you overall consent to use their data.

- You should obtain an ethical approval for your research by a university ethics committee or another board of experts who have the authority to grant permission (where applicable). Be advised that if you conduct research in other countries, some ethical boards will require you to follow the guidelines of that country instead of your own;

- Human subjects research usually involves collecting personal and/or sensitive identifying data, which must be handled ethically:

- Pseudo-anonymize the data by removing any identifying features, and assigning a pseudonym or alphanumeric code to each participant. An exception to this rule is if the identity of the person is necessary, e.g., as an expert in the field. You must have explicit permission from your participants to use their name or other identifying details, called *personal data* in the EU.

- When conducting qualitative research, avoid sharing sensitive observational information that is not present in the interviews.

- Let participants decide what they feel comfortable sharing, and, ideally, check with them after writing sections about them to make sure they approve of the depiction.

- Consider which data should be paraphrased in order to be made less specific to one person, thoroughly anonymized in quotes, or not included at all.

- Consider the impacts on the participants beyond your study, including any stigma, financial repercussions, etc.

- You must store data responsibly according to GDPR in Europe and at your institution, e.g., in encrypted drives hosted in the EU and/or your educational institution, and only on your personal device (if allowed).

- Unless you have special permission, you must not share the dataset with anyone other than members of your project, and possibly your supervisor and examiner depending on the situation.

- You must delete all data after the study is complete depending on the stipulations of your ethical approval. Some approvals require immediate deletion, whereas others allow you to store the data for several years

- You should make sure your research practices are not harming your participants.

- You should strive to honor your participants with your work.

7.6 Adapting research to your practical needs

A critical aspect of research approach decisions is an assessment of the access to both methods and resources in the research process, but also the accessibility of the data being sought.

For example, if a researcher is keen to explore players' attention in-game through the use of eye-tracking technology, access to such tech would be necessary to conduct such a study, as well as the expertise to use said technology and analyze the results of this type of data.

Similarly, the researcher needs to consider how accessible the data may be in itself. For example, if wishing to track the experiences of a large group of people over a significant amount of time, what logistics would be needed to accomplish such a study? Will you be able to manage the amount of data and time resources required for such an endeavor? In another instance, a researcher may be keen to record the experience of people who for one reason or another may not be easy to access, whether because they are far away or unknown to the researcher, or they have reason to withhold their experience (which may also pose an ethical concern, see before).

In instances where the scope of the study outstretches the research question, scholars usually have two options: alter the research question and/or alter the scope of the research to a manageable level. The decision of which path to take depends on what you want to discover and how you might be able to further knowledge through the design of your research. For example, one can address a simpler or preliminary stage of a wider research question. Alternatively, one can begin with a smaller (or even pilot) study, which may inform or further determine subsequent research in the future.

By managing the scope of the research itself, the researcher may be able to produce more useful knowledge and more accurately answer their (potentially narrower) research question by avoiding the difficulties associated with an over-committed research project.

7.7 Challenges with researching RPGs

Role-playing games are particularly difficult to study comprehensively, especially when considering their effects. The chaotic, emergent, improvisational, and co-creative nature of RPGs makes isolating specific variables complicated and leads to a variance of play experiences. Formal assessment methods have not yet been standardized in how to measure player experiences in these games (Liapis and Denisova 2023). Also, the role-playing process and the heightened emotions around them often causes a high degree of cognitive load for players, which can make accurate reporting of events challenging.

Furthermore, even if we see trends regarding transformative impacts in participants, we should always be careful not to conflate correlation with causation, as any number of other factors can contribute to change. For this reason, we prefer to think of the game experiences as catalysts for processes of growth that were likely already underway, processes that are highly personal and also context dependent upon many social variables.

Additionally, as the researchers are often designers, facilitators, or players themselves, we may have a bias to find data that supports positive impacts while overlooking negative ones, which requires a bit of reflection on the part of researchers. In some cases, having non-role-players on the data analysis team can double check responses and ensure accurate analysis in a helpful manner, but the participants should be made aware that their data will be viewed by additional researchers during the consent process.

Other issues include balancing the use of popular vs. academic sources, as different publications have their own norms with regard to citation. Finally, researchers should avoid positioning their work as wholly new or unique. The field is scattered and multidisciplinary, which means other sources likely exist, but are difficult to find. As mentioned before, researchers claiming to be the first often run the risk of being seen as producing "vacuum" studies, claiming no one has covered their topic, when in fact, unbeknownst to them, several scholars have researched it before.

7.8 Examples of research into the effects of RPGs

Overall, we need more data collection on the transformative effects of role-playing. Early research on the psychological impacts of tabletop was mixed, with some therapists claiming the practice to be helpful (Hughes 1988; Blackmon 1994) and others warning of its harmful potential (Ascherman 1993). However, the number of studies on this topic has increased in recent years, especially due to the resurgence of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) through online play, popular culture representations, and Actual Play livestreams. While a thorough literature review is not possible here, examples are

present in the *Routledge Handbook of Role-Playing Game Studies* (Zagal and Deterding eds. 2024), particularly in the "Psychology and Role-playing Games" chapter (Bowman and Lieberoth 2024), as well as several review articles e.g., on therapeutic role-playing (Mendoza 2020; Henrich and Worthington 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022; Baker, Turner, and Kotera 2022; Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024).

a) Benefits research

One approach to researching impacts, particularly from a psychological perspective, is to consider social skills and other benefits that can be trained through role-playing. Organizing such skills into language a reader can understand can be a challenge, but some categories we have used are cognitive, affective, and behavioral skill development (Bowman 2014). Examples include:

- **Cognitive Domain:** Understanding complex systems, perspective taking, intrinsic motivation/self-determination, self-awareness, critical ethical reasoning, perceived competence, self-efficacy, expansion of worldview, making content relatable/memorable, etc.

- **Affective Domain:** Processing emotional and/or autobiographical content (e.g. trauma, grief, memories), empathy, identifying and expressing emotions, self-expression of under-expressed personality traits or abilities, (e.g. performance, gender exploration, shadow work), etc.

- **Behavioral Domain:** Impulse control, practicing social skills: etiquette, turn taking, boundary setting, leadership, teamwork, self-advocacy, making friends, conflict resolution, debate, persuasion, diplomacy, etc.

Importantly, these categories are somewhat artificial, as on some level everything is cognitive, emotions, thoughts, and behavior are not always easy to delineate, etc. Thus, these categories often overlap and are concurrent.

Furthermore, while challenging to gather, we need more longitudinal research in order to track change over time, especially after the peak experience of the game has long ended. As we are interested in prolonged and sustained change, charting the long-term impacts will require devotion to the research process.

The following categories feature examples of evidence-driven research on various topics related to RPGs, mostly framing them in a beneficial way. These lists are not comprehensive of all skill training, but represent the range of literature and benefits available, especially in recent years.

i) Cognitive domain

— **Perceived competence / self-efficacy / successful / capable / agency** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Davis and Johns 2020; Atanasio 2020; Daniau 2016; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Causo and Quinlan 2021);

— **Engagement** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Varrette et al. 2022; Cullinan 2024);

— **Motivation / self-determination** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Algayres 2018; Hixson, West, and Eike 2024; Walsh and Linehan 2024);

— **Creativity / creative thinking** (Kallam 1984; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Chung 2011; Meriläinen 2012) and **creative expression** (Walsh and Linehan 2024);

— **Imagination / imaginative potential** (Karwowski and Soszynski 2008; Meriläinen 2012; Dyson et al. 2015);

— **Critical thinking** (Daniau 2016);

— **Decision making skills** (Daniau 2016; Varrette et al. 2022);

— **Complex problem solving** (Kallam 1984; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Bowman 2010; Dyson et al. 2015; Daniau 2016; Atanasio 2020; Varrette et al. 2020);

— **Finding meaning** (DeRenard and Kline 1990; Atanasio 2020);

— **Exploring character arcs different from one's own life story/challenges** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);

— **Self-reflection** (Blackstock 2016); and

— **Moral development** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020).

— **Subject matter revision** (Mochocki 2014)

— **Perspective taking** (Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016);

— **Working with subject matter in game** (Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016);

— **Complex reflection about self** (Pitt et al. 2023);

— **Compex reflection about teamwork/group dynamics** (Pitt et al. 2023);

ii) Affective domain

— **Agency / empowerment** (Daniau 2016; Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022);

— **Empathy** (Daniau 2016; Rivers et al. 2016; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021);

— **Identity development / exploration/experimentation** (Blackmon 1994; Bowman 2010; Meriläinen 2012; Blackstock 2016; Davis and Johns 2020; Baird 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Ball 2022; Walsh and Linehan 2024; Sottile 2024);

— **Gender exploration/expression** (Baird 2021; Sottile 2024);

— **Identity reconstruction through character** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);

— **Stress / pressure relief** (Blackstock 2016);

— **Enhanced Quality of Life (QoL)** (Katō 2019);

— **Personal development** (Daniau 2016);

— **Emotional regulation** (Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Atanasio 2020; Causo and Quinlan 2021)

— **Processing trauma** (Causo and Quinlan 2021; Lehto 2024);

— **Coping / adaptive skills** (Atanasio 2020; Causo and Quinlan 2021);

— **Expressing personal challenges** (Daniau 2016);

— **Working through difficulties** (Ball 2022) **without having to talk about them** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Gutierrez 2017; Walsh and Linehan 2024);

— **Engaging in shadow work** (Blackstock 2016; Walsh and Linehan 2024; Bowman in press for 2025);

— **Game as metaphors for internal struggles** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);

— **Self-esteem** (Hughes 1988);

— **Sense of accomplishment** (Zayas and Lewis 1986);

— **Feelings of belonging** (Sargent 2014);

— **Fulfilling needs** (Adams 2013; Blackstock 2016; Varrette et al. 2022) including **social needs** (Adams 2013; Causo and Quinlan 2021);

— **Self-confidence** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Walsh and Linehan 2024) including **confidence/coping when making mistakes** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);

— **Social confidence** (Blackstock 2016);

— **Lowering of perceived social stakes** (Cullinan 2024)

— **Transfer of traits or skills from character to player** (Daniau 2016; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Katō 2019; Blackstock 2016);

iii) Behavioral domain

— **Prosocial behaviors / social skills** (Meriläinen 2012; Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Sargent 2014; Helbig 2019; Katō 2019; Atanasio 2020; Davis and Johns 2020; Varrette et al. 2022; Bartenstein 2022a, 2022b, 2024);

— **Practicing social skills without serious repercussions for mistakes** (Pitt et al. 2023);

— **Freedom as stress relief** (Blackstock 2026; Walsh and Linehan 2024) **from social mores / to explore relationships** (Blackstock 2016; Katō 2019);

— **Improved social interactions/relations with others** (Blackmon 1994; Blackstock 2016);

— **Group consensus building** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);

— **Balancing self-interests with community responsibility** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);

— **Connecting despite differences** (Katō 2019);

— **Debate / persuasion** (Daniau 2016);

— **Conflict management / resolution / transformation** (Atanasio 2020; Carter 2011; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Pitt et al. 2023);

— **Practicing democratic skills** (Adams 2013);

— **Collaboration** (Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016);

— **Confidence in boundary setting** (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022);

— **Confrontation, i.e., standing up to a bully** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021) or **authority** (Varrette et al. 2022);

— **Self-advocacy** (Enfield 2007; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);

— **Group development** (Daniau 2016);

— **Camaraderie / group cohesion / connectedness** (Zayas and Lewis 1986; Shanun 2011; Katō 2019; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021);

— **Friendship development** (Adams 2013; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020, Katō 2019; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);

— **New social connections** (Cullinan 2024);

— **Development of affinity groups as described by Gee (2017)** (Cullinan 2024);

— **Development of social support networks** (Atanasio 2020; Walsh and Linehan 2024);

— **Teambuilding** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Daniau 2016);

— **Cooperation** (Enfield 2007; Davis and Johns 2020; Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);

— **Improved communication skills** (Enfield 2007; Daniau 2016; Katō 2019);

— **Social emotional learning (SEL)** (Ruff 2021);

— **Decreased impulsivity** (Enfield 2007); and

— **Making active changes afterward** (Lehto 2024).

Note that some of these studies report quantitative and qualitative data in a systematic way, whereas others are more generalized case studies, assertions based on work in the field, or autoethnographies. Systemic assessment of impacts is important for the field moving forward. Importantly, we also need research on potential negative impacts and best practices to avoid these drawbacks in the future to balance the literature.

iv) Pros and cons of benefits research

Since our topic of study is transformative game design, we naturally seek to find information supporting the claim that games can positively affect players. Some pros of benefits research are that such studies can:

- Help answer the larger question "Why is play important?";
- Identify core, measurable aspects of play to show it "works" and is "valid";
- Help us as role-players move past the stigma and judgment that has historically affected public perceptions of what we do;
- Help us get funding for role-playing projects and research; and
- Help practitioners explain what they do to non-gamers.

On the other hand, some cons of emphasizing the benefits are that such research can:

- Elide or ignore important critiques, e.g., community toxicity, addiction, perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, sexism/racism/homophobia in gaming texts and practices, etc. (See chapters 5 and 6);
- Seek to attribute solely to role-playing qualities inherent to many other ritual bonding experiences;
- Conflate correlation with causation.

Thus, caveats are necessary when writing research claiming benefits of role-playing games.

Acknowledge critiques of the argument, foreground your limitations, make modest claims, and avoid positioning gaming as a "magic wand" that will fix all ills. Make sure to gather, analyze, and report "negative" findings as well, e.g., no change over time or a negative impact. This practice not only helps us reduce bias, but also can lead to insights on how to make transformative experiences safer and transformational containers stronger.

7.9 Basic resources on academic writing

Academic work is unique because it requires a thorough engagement with others in the discourse, or "scholarly conversation." In role-playing games, this discourse also includes more informal or "popular" sources, such as magazines or social media threads, since our work is practice-based. Whether engaging with scholarly or popular sources, we recommend presenting your work in a formal academic manner.

As we have explored, academic writing is different from creative writing in that the information is highly structured up front for the reader with a strong degree of rigor. Part of this structure is the argument, which means a structured, focused claim that is supported with reasoning and evidence.

a) The Rhetorical Triangle

When constructing an argument, a certain degree of balance of elements is necessary. According to Aristotle (1991), the three elements that should be present in an argument are *ethos, pathos,* and *logos,* which make up the rhetorical triangle (MindTools n.d.).

Ethos refers to both the ethics of your argument and your credibility as an author. Regardless of your rank as an academic, you can increase the credibility of your work by citing credible sources, ideally ones that are also ethically sound and peer-reviewed for quality control. Note that peer-review does not ensure the information in a source is correct; instead, it means that the source has been vetted by experts in the field, not only editors, but outside reviewers that theoretically have no conflicts of interests. Sources often go through multiple rounds of review before publication in order to improve the scholarly quality of the work. However, you can also establish credibility by citing popular sources depending on your topic. As a game designer, for example, showing a breadth of understanding about design practices in different communities is a form of credibility.

Pathos refers to the emotional component of the argument. Pathos does not mean writing in an overly emotional way per se, although depending on the discipline, such writing might be welcome, e.g., in a humanities thesis using an autoethnographic method. Instead, pathos moves us and gives us a reason to care about what you are writing. When pathos is tied to ethos, for example, we may feel emotionally persuaded by an ethical argument and be more inclined to listen to your reasoning. Too much pathos, on the other hand, can feel manipulative or illogical, especially in academic writing. Some disciplines strongly encourage subjectivity or emotional appeals. Knowing your audience is important in these cases.

Finally, we have logos, which is the category people tend to associate with academic writing. Logos refers to the reasoning and evidence you present in your argument. When constructing logos, we recommend using the Toulmin Method, as discussed in the next section.

b) Toulmin Method

This method was developed by Stephen Toulmin as a means to map the logic of persuasive arguments. While different sources offer distinct terms for each of the categories within the method, we follow Nesbitt (2022), who labels the categories of Toulmin as follows:

- **The Claim:** Your hypothesis or argument, often formulated as an answer to your research question. In a Research Through Design paper, this will be a hypothesis based on your research questions. However, you should also be open to the testing proving your hypothesis wrong, which can be part of the design process.

- **Qualifiers:** Statements that qualify the claim, for example, narrowing the scope as we did with the previous example, or adding "hedging" words, e.g., many, several, sometimes, often.

- **Exceptions:** Components that render the claim no longer valid, for example, "except in the case of X, Y, Z."

- **Reasons:** The reasoning that supports the claim, which should be both relevant and effective. In a Research through Design paper, your reasoning may come from other sources in your literature review or your theoretical framework.

- **Evidence:** The supporting material that back up our reasons, including "facts, examples, statistics" and expert testimonies (Nesbitt 2022). In a Research through Design project, your observations, feedback and other data gathered from your players counts as your evidence. Your evidence should be sufficient, credible, and accurate.

- **Anticipated Objections and Rebuttals:** A good argument anticipates what counter-arguments, or *objections*, a reader might raise and discusses these in the text. Ideally, you will then offer *rebuttals*, in which you address each counter-argument with additional reasoning and evidence when possible.

7.10 Summary

Here at the close of this textbook, we hope you feel prepared to begin to tackle the challenges ahead of you, whether working with theory, design, research, or writing. Remember that your voice matters as an artist, a practitioner, an academic, and a human. We each have gifts to contribute to the world. We encourage you to be bold and do your part in guiding others through processes of transformation.

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Further Materials in the Field

The following sections offer links to resources that will help you further structure your claims and integrate all the important components needed for a persuasive paper.

Structure:

Caulfield, Jack. 2020. "How to Structure an Essay | Tips & Templates." Scribbr, September 28.

Scribbr. "How to Write a Research Paper | A Beginner's Guide."

Argument:

Liu, Jessica. 2020. "Develop a Theoretical Framework in 3 Steps | Scribbr." Scribbr. YouTube, August 20.

Theoretical Frameworks:

Vinz, Sarah. 2022. "What Is a Theoretical Framework? | Guide to Organizing." Scribbr, October 14.

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Bios

Josephine Baird is a lecturer at the Uppsala University's Game Design Department and a Ph.D. candidate at Tampere University. She is a game designer and game design consultant, as well as a writer and visual artist. Her work often relates the intersection between games, identity, gender, and sexualities. Her research and recent publications present the theoretical and methodological basis for her thesis that role-playing games might provide a potent opportunity for people to explore their gender subjectivity in safer environments. Her current research will conclude with the design of a live action role-playing game that puts this theoretical work into practice. She is also an actor, public speaker, and co-host of the podcast *It Is Complicated*. More information can be found at https://josephinebaird.com/.

Angie Bandhoesingh (Antzela-Sita Bandhoesingh) is an educator and larp designer with extensive experience in non-formal education. She has an educator's degree from the Literature, Philosophy and Psychology department of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and has worked as a private tutor, a child animator, and a non-formal education facilitator since 2010. She has experience in youth work across multiple projects, including several in Erasmus+. Angie is a co-founder of the Dragons' Nest nonprofit organization (formerly RPG4Kids), is the company manager, and is the educational content supervisor for extracurricular school activities for children aged 5-12. She also co-founded the LARPifiers non-profit organization, where she is an edu-larp designer and organizer, including having co-designed the grant-funded edu-larp Superhero Union. A larper since late 2015, she has been an organizer of local larps from 2016-2019. She has been exploring arts and crafts as a way of personal expression and informal learning activities. Her interest in non-formal education stems from a desire to transform formal education into a children-friendly, student-centric environment.

Sarah Lynne Bowman is a scholar, game designer, and event organizer. She received her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin in Radio-Television-Film and her Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Dallas in Arts and Humanities. Bowman has taught in the Humanities, English, and Communication. Currently, she is an Associate Professor and Docent in Game Design at Uppsala University Campus Gotland. She formerly served as Coordinator for the Peace & Conflict Studies program at Austin Community College, where she teaches Humanities. Bowman is a founding member of the Transformative Play Initiative, who research analog role-playing games as vehicles for personal and social change. She co-edited The Wyrd Con Companion Book (2012-2015) and currently edits for the International Journal of Role-Playing and Nordiclarp.org. Bowman has co-organized several conferences, including Living Games (2014, 2016, 2018), Role-playing and Simulation and Education (2016, 2018), and the Transformative Play Initiative Seminar (2022). More information at sarahlynnebowman.com.

Simon Brind is a larp writer and academic from London, England. He received his Bachelor's degree in English Literature from University College London, has a Master's degree in Software Engineering from the University of Westminster, and a second Master's in Creative Writing from Middlesex University. He completed his Ph.D. in 2023 at the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England.

His thesis, Combat Narratology: Strategies for the Resolution of Narrative Crisis in Participatory Fiction, is available from the Digital Cultures Research Centre, (UWE), Bristol. His research looks at emergent narrative structures in participatory fiction and the tension between authorial and participant agency. He has been a larper since 1983, a larpwright since 1986, and is a founding member of Avalon Larp Studio. He has worked on some of the largest and longest running larp systems in the UK as well as projects across Europe and North America.

Elektra Diakolambrianou (Ilektra Diakolamprianou) is a licensed psychologist and psychotherapist, a certified adult educator, and a larp designer. She has a B.Sc. in Psychology from Panteion University, a Pg.Dip. in Person-Centred Counselling from the University of Strathclyde, a Prof.Cert. in Art, Drama and Play Therapy from Edexcel, and is a European Certificate of Psychotherapy holder. Currently she is pursuing a M.A. in Creative Writing offered by the Hellenic Open University. A certified trainer of communication skills by Gordon Training International and member of the trainers' pool of the Greek National Agency for Erasmus+ Youth 2014-2020, Elektra has had continuing education in cinematherapy, music therapy, bibliotherapy, therapeutic writing, gamification methods, game-based education, restorative justice, and social psychology. Since 2012, she has been working as a psychotherapist working with socially vulnerable groups, including: unaccompanied minors, refugees, immigrants, NEETs, unemployed people, former prisoners, and women. Since 2013, she has been an academic staff member at the Institution for Counselling and Psychological Studies in Athens. Her academic work emphasizes the potential of larp as a medium for personal development and psychotherapy. She is also a co-founder of the LARPifiers. Elektra has experience in working as an emotional safety person in games and projects, as well as in curating larp designs for emotional safety.

Alessandro Giovannucci is an award-winning game designer and theorist working in the field of larp and immersive experience. He co-founded the larp collective Chaos League in 1992 and wrote the manifesto "Southern Way – New Italian Larp." His work focuses on political and social topics, experienced through the participatory nature of larp. He has worked on different formats and styles of games, going from small ones (First They Came) to some of the bigger and most successful international larps (Sahara Expedition, Miskatonic University). Very active in the field of online larp, he designed games and organised several online festivals in the last years including the International Larp Festival. Alessandro is also regularly invited to host talks, larp design workshops and seminars all over Europe and their games are hosted in some of the most important festivals. Has already participated, both as a partner and leader, in European funded projects related to larp, civil rights and education. Alessandro is also a music teacher at the University of Teramo and University of Chieti, researching the relationship between materialism and storytelling in the arts.

Kjell Hedgard Hugaas is a Northern Norwegian game designer, organizer, writer, theorist, and trained actor. In particular, he is engaged within the Nordic larp tradition, where he has been active for a bit over two decades. The last few years he has explored the transformative potential of games, and has proposed specific intentional game design practices that facilitate transformative effects. As well as being a founding member of the Transformative Play Initiative, Hugaas has theorized how ideas impact

players through the processes of memetic bleed, procedural bleed, and identity bleed. His work on bleed has so far culminated in his 2022 Master's thesis in Game Design at Uppsala University, and he is planning to expand on this theoretical work in the future. In 2023, he completed a second thesis for UU on the impacts of larp on participants' attitudes and anxieties around death. In addition to his project assistant work on EDGE and the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership ROCKET, he is the co-founder and CEO of the game studio and research company Evocative Games AB, where he currently works as a consultant, researcher, narrative designer, and writer.

Taisto Suominen is an Associate Professor at the School of Information and Communications Technology of Turku University of Applied Sciences in Game and Interactive Technologies. He holds a Master of Engineering degree and has worked for 20 years in TUAS. He is a cofounder of Turku Game Lab and its predecessor Game Tech Arts Lab. He has been an active and key person on the TUAS game development curriculum design and Turku Game Scene activities. He was a board member of Neogames Finland 2018-2021 and continued in 2022 and 2023 as an observer member of the board. Neogames is a nonprofit association for the game industry to coordinate and support the growth and development of the Finnish game industry. His research interests include utilization of game and interactive technologies on various domains, serious and entertainment games, extended reality, game graphics and content creation.

Guus van Tilborg is a Ph.D. student at Groningen University. Originally from the Netherlands, he recently graduated with a Master's degree in Game Design from Uppsala University Campus Gotland. Guus received an M.A. in History (American Studies), an M.S. in Social-Cultural Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, and a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Besides his academic pursuits, Guus has been actively teaching in various settings, ranging from language tutoring college students to teaching immigrants civics and history. Throughout his career, the central theme has been "belongingness" and how to make people feel welcomed and accepted: a theme that also happens to be his main research interest. Guus is a volunteer with Erasmus+ EDGE.

Josefin Westborg is one of the world's leading designers in edu-larps. She has a background in game design and pedagogy and is one of the founders of Lajvbyrån (previously LajvVerkstaden Väst). Josefin has worked as a research assistant and teacher at Uppsala University's Department of Game Design where she was a founding member of the Transformative Play Initiative with focus on analog role-playing games. Westborg co-designed curriculum for Uppsala's Master's in Transformative Game Design and has worked as a teacher in its introductory courses, upon which EDGE is based. She has also been a teacher in game design at both Chalmers University of Technology and the University of Gothenburg. She recently published an article for the International Journal of Role-playing entitled "The Educational Role-Playing Game Design Matrix: Mapping Design Components onto Types of Education." In addition to EDGE, she also works as a project assistant in the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership ROCKET. Throughout her career Josefin has met thousands of students of all ages, and run and designed larps for them. She is passionate about designing for interaction, storytelling and learning. When she is not involved with games you will probably find her at the dance studio doing ballroom dance.

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This textbook describes theory and practice in analog role-playing game (RPG) design that encourage specific transformative impacts in participants, including tabletop, live action role-playing (larp), and Nordic and American freeform. We describe three types of transformative RPGs: transformative leisure, therapeutic, and educational. We present our model of nano-game design, offering recommendations for designing transformative goals; framing activities such as workshops and debriefs; narrative and culture design.

This interdisciplinary book highlights theories from role-playing game studies, peace and conflict studies, psychology, social psychology, sociology, counseling, anthropology, pedagogy, and several other fields. Key concepts include bleed, alibi, RPGs as transformational containers, immersion, identity, transfer, ritual, psychotherapeutic techniques, group theories, and educational theories. We emphasize psychological safety before, during, and after games, as well as strategies for cultivating transformational communities. Key topics include working with specific populations; crisis management; and sensitive content and representation.

Then, we discuss working with myth, symbolism, ritual, narrative, and postmodern magic as methods for transforming the stories of our lives. We cover forms of culture within and around RPGs, as well working with conflict in scenarios related to politics, culture, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity. We share thoughts around the use of RPGs to foster activism, advocacy, inclusion, and accessibility.

Finally, we offer considerations for researchers studying transformative role-playing games, including academic argument, structure, theory, method, data collection, ethics, and other considerations. We introduce key methods, including Research through Design, ethnography, and qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The book closes with a summary of evidence-based research available on the cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects of role-playing games.

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