

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 better 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
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