# A Brief Introduction to Role-playing Games and Cousin Activities

Sarah Lynne Bowman ❖ Elektra Diakolambrianou
Angie Bandhoesingh ❖ Guus van Tilborg
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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