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.

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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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