Practice: Designing for Transformative Goals

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4.1 Introduction

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

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

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

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

4.2 How to design a transformative analog role-playing game

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

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

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

a) Identify transformative impacts

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

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

i) Identify the type of transformative role-playing game

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

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

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

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

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

ii) Identify desired target groups

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

iii) Identifying impacts

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

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

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

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

- **For a transformative leisure game:** Exploring how gender roles function in unique social contexts.
- **For a therapeutic game:** Reflecting upon one's own gender identity in different contexts.
- **For an educational game:** Analyzing gender as a social construct that depends on context.

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

b) Framing according to transformative goals

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

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

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

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

c) Pre- and post-game work

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

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

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

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

d) Workshops

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

Here are some guidelines for workshop design.

i) Define the purpose of the workshop

A good workshop should:

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

ii) Structure the workshop

When structuring your workshop, consider the following:

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

iii) Build characters and relationships

Workshops should address characters and relationships in some way:

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

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

iv) Negotiation and calibration

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

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

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

v) Safety and comfort

Every workshop should address safety in some way:

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

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

vi) Nano-game workshop design

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

e) Debriefs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

f) Integration activities

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.3 Design tools

a) The Mixing Desk of Larp

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

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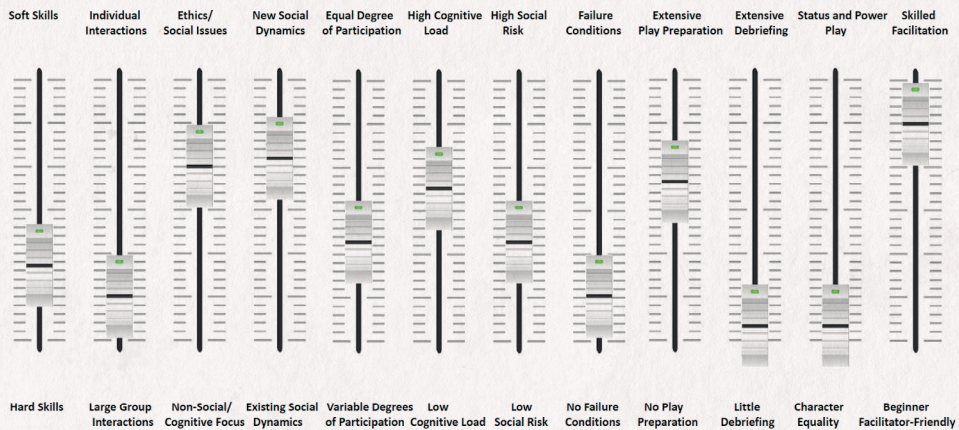
b) The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp

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

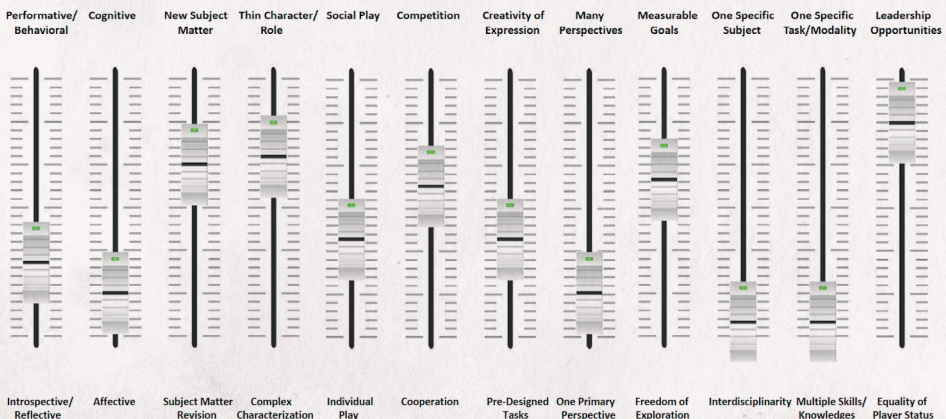The sliders for the Mixing Desk (see Figures 1 and 2) are as follows:

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

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

The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp

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

The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp

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

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

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

4.4 Considerations when scaling up

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

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

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

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

4.5 Design specifics: "Everything is a designable surface"

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

a) Designing based on theory

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

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

b) Safety design

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

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

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

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

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

c) Narrative design

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

i) Worldbuilding

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ii) Specific scenes

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

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

1) Opening / closing / transitional scenes

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

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

or

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

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

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

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

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

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

2) Set piece scenes / nodal scenes

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

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

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

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

3) Cool scenes

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

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

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

4) Pivotal scenes

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

iii) Character design

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Characters need to be:

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

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

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

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

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

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

iv) Relations design

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

In this section we will look at *group design* as a way to ensure that relations are balanced and enable the maximum breadth of opportunity for play, and at *relationship design* as a writing task.

1) Group design

By assigning a character to multiple groups, you can ensure that there are multiple opportunities for players to interact with others. For example, the designers of the Norwegian larp *1942* (Raaum and Andersen et al. 2000, 2017) used the Three Affiliations Model to design activities and relationships for their characters (see Figure 3).
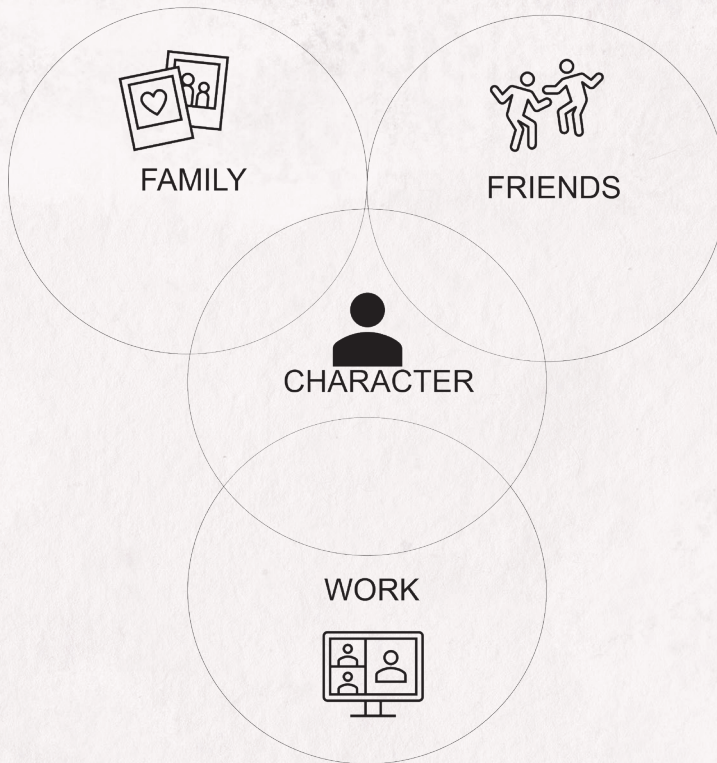
Figure 3: The Three Affiliations Model (Raaum and Andersen et al. 2000, 2017)

The three group dimensions here give the character a working group to interact with during the day, a (close) family group with all of the tensions and loyalties one may find from one's relatives, and a set of other friends to interact with. Fatland (2010) explains that this model was successful enough that it became popular for Norwegian larps that focus on the living of daily life in smallish communities.

Sometimes the group design has a functional element to it, e.g., nobles / servants in an *upstairs / downstairs* larp, or members of different political parties in a larp about diplomacy. Sometimes the characters are designed to compete, sometimes collaborate, and sometimes both. At this point, the group may need to become less about relationship design and more about playability. However, these approaches are useful when players do not gel as they build redundancy of functional play across groups into the larp design. This approach is common to larger larps such as *College of Wizardry* (Various 2013-), *Bunker 101* (Chaos League 2018, 2019), and *The Last Song* (Justesen et al. 2022). Whilst group design may not be a factor in a four player nano-game, it becomes relevant once you get much larger than that. On the other hand, you can design your nano-game characters with distinct group affiliations, even if other members of the group are not present in the play.

2) Relationship design

It is difficult to embody a character in isolation because they need others to validate their existence; often our understanding of the character comes through how they

interact with others. Or as Pettersson puts it, "Characters are defined by their social connections" (Pettersson 2019, 201).

However, an over-reliance on pre-written relationships carries a risk. If a player is unable to attend, or if two participants do not feel some form of chemistry, which need not always be physical, a pre-written relationship might fail (Nøglebæk 2023). This latter issue is a particularly common failure mode for romantic relationships.

Fortunately the affiliations/group approach to character design also enables complex playability and plotting. For example, Fatland (2010) identifies that something as simple as a fisherman who illegally gambles married to a woman who is a member of a Church Committee Against Gambling goes with intrigue, and potential conflict. These sorts of relations are *plot* wrapped up in the dynamic between two characters and these tend to be more successful.

Whether relations are being pre-written or co-created we suggest a balanced selection of supportive relations—where the characters are friendly—and some more challenging relations. This does not mean that the characters must be enemies (although they can be) but rather that their interactions may take one or both out of their comfort zones.

Relations should contain alibis for interaction. If you create a relation between a high-status character and a low status character, the lower status character needs to be able to get meaningful access to that high status character or the relation is not playable.

- How do the two characters know one another?
- What do they want from one another?
- Do they have a shared secret?

3) Faction design

Another way to create interesting conflict or dynamism in a larger game is through faction design. As social animals, humans often divide into groups, which causes what social psychology describes as *in-group* vs. *out-group* thinking (Tajfel 1974,1979). We often belong to several in-groups and out-groups at once that may overlap or contradict one another. For example, a person may be part of the in-group of a class at university, but also feel left out of other in-groups in the class due to their marginalized identity or affiliation with a minority culture. Thus, our social affiliations are complex and rife for interesting play dynamics. Factions are possible to include even in nano-games. Examples include a short scenario in which characters from different countries in conflict practice diplomatic relations, or a game exploring power dynamics in high school in which two members of a popular clique tease a student from a less influential social group.

Importantly, faction play can also lead to some players feeling excluded from the in-group, both in- and off-game, especially if the factions are not equal in terms of in-game power or status (Algayres 2019). Consider carefully how to mitigate this risk.

Also, note that while common in role-playing game design practice, games do not have to include established factions. For example, an interesting design challenge might be to design a factionless society or start the game with no established factions to see which directions players take the interactions and group formation.

d) Culture design

We define *culture* as a set of customs, norms, and behaviors of a group of people; in a larp or tabletop RPG, this is a diegetic culture as it describes the inhabitants of the storyworld. When we play in a culture that we understand—the modern day in the country where we live—the complexity of our culture is second nature to us; however, when we move away from that into a historical or fantastical setting, the information we require to play meaningfully in that setting becomes more complex; the characters would have a lifetime experience of living within the diegetic culture (Nielsen and Strand 2019, 151) but we as players do not.

Culture design therefore is the process of creating, describing, and teaching the players how to interact not with just one another, but also within the constraints of the storyworld. It encompasses not only overall details about the culture, but also the roles, values, power relations, and norms within it. While we will touch upon culture design here, Chapter 6 expands in more depth about cultures within and surrounding games, as well as rituals, symbolism, and other important facets of cultural communication.

Nielsen and Strand (2019) recommend designing workshops in which players enact scenes or otherwise define together the following three categories:

1. **Everyday scenes,** which emphasize normative behavior within the culture;
2. **Rites**, including rituals members of the culture would know and understand; and
3. **Taboos**, meaning behaviors that are considered inappropriate or prohibited in the culture.

Due in part to our tendency as humans to rely on stereotypes to represent cultures with which we are less familiar, your challenges with culture design are:

- Definition,
- Taboos,
- Appropriation, and
- Inclusion.

i) Definition

How will you define the culture in a way that can be assimilated and replayed? What methods will you use to communicate that culture? Remember if you are using someone else's IP without permission, you may end up having to deal with lawyers.

ii) Taboos

If it is a culture with rituals and taboos, what happens if the players get it wrong? There is a material difference between a character breaking a taboo and dealing with the consequences of that action, and a player inadvertently doing something that their character would not do.

iii) Appropriation

By drawing inspiration from or playing within cultures that are not their own, game designers may run the risk of being accused of or perceived as culturally appropriating (Kessock 2014, 125). There are various approaches to handling existing cultures in your design. The most simple approach is "don't do it." Another option is to include designers from the culture you want to draw inspiration from in the design process, or to involve paid sensitivity readers.

iv) Inclusion

When we design a larp with a Eurocentric/Nordic/North American and/or heteronormative, able-bodied, relatively young, cis-gendered man in mind as a player, we can end up reinforcing harmful structural patterns and stereotypes (Jones, Holkar, and Kemper 2019, 167). Therefore, a part of your culture design process should involve acknowledging and considering intersectionality (Crenshaw 1997), meaning the ways the character's social identities afford privilege or marginalization, and how these identities intersect within a person, group, or culture. For example, in a Western context, a White, heterosexual, middle class woman will likely have had a different life experience than a Black, gay, upper class cis-gendered man. Consider what ways such intersections might affect the lives of these characters when designing.

To not include marginalized identities might seem like a simple design choice, but it is one that is hard to justify. To remove an identity or a structural oppression from the storyworld risks erasing the lived experience of players (Svanevik 2018). Respectfully including nuanced characters from marginalized backgrounds can not only make your designs more authentic; it can also signal to players from similar backgrounds that their perspectives are valuable and, on a more basic level, that this community might feel safe to play within (see Chapter 5 for more on perceptions of safety). However, as mentioned before, including marginalized experiences should be done with great care and, ideally, consultation or collaboration with someone who has that identity or experience, which we discuss further in Chapters 5 and 6.

v) Approaches

There are a number of approaches to the creation and communication of diegetic cultures.

1) Organizer-created long form text

Long form text requires players to have time to read and assimilate and often leads to multiple readings and understandings of the culture. This method can be especially

effective when used in conjunction with popular IP because players may have already assimilated that culture (Brind 2021, 170). However, when considering integrating IP, refer to our previous note about obtaining permission.

2) Organizer-created micro fiction/video

If you can write short pieces of text that describe key aspects of the storyworld and/ or present them as video, your players will have an easier time assimilating ideas.

3) Rehearsal of rituals and culture in workshops

If you have a designed world, practicing some of the cultural norms and rituals together helps players to develop a shared understanding. While challenging in a nano-game due to time constraints, if such a practice is central to the goals of the game, a simple exercise like deciding how characters from one culture ritually greet each other can help establish a sense of having shared cultural norms.

4) Player co-creation

The hands-off approach allows the players to create, develop, and agree on the details of the storyworld. This works better with small groups and short form or nano-larps. This is a very rapid method of creation and—as the participants are actively engaged in the process—they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and of belonging to the culture they have created. The most obvious risk is a tendency toward appropriation, particularly with inexperienced players. We will discuss these topics in more depth in Chapters 5 and 6.

e) Rules, mechanics and meta-techniques design

Considering how modern role-playing games partly originate from wargaming (Petersen 2012) and similar conflict-heavy settings, it is no wonder that *rules* and *mechanics* played and continue to play an important part in many games and communities. Rules refers to "implicit and explicit agreements of what is being done and how" whereas mechanics "focus the narrative or [] represent acts that would be impossible, dangerous, or excessively intimate, such as magic,

violence, or sex" (Stenros and Montola 2019, 18). Rules and mechanics are used, for instance, as a way to resolve conflict and to figure out "who won" an encounter or battle, or to facilitate player safety (e.g., Brown 2018).

Similarly, *meta-techniques* (Westerling and Hultman 2019) are ways to maneuver in the space that exists between what the player knows / is capable of and what the character knows / is capable of, developed in parallel. For instance, when playing fantastical characters capable of feats of magic, players need some way to signal to the other players that their characters cast a certain magic spell, as players are not capable of it themselves.

When designing for transformation, it is important to consider what rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques to add to your game. As game designers, many of us are always thinking of elegant ways in which to nudge our players towards specific

types of play, but we advise to try to reduce rather than increase the number of rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques when trying to maximize the transformative potential of your game.

Our main reasons for these considerations are:

- Immersive play depends on the players' cognitive capacity. Too many rules might overwhelm the players and hamper their immersion.
- The culture of the player group is more powerful in defining play than any mechanic. By this we mean that one might be better served spending time on pre-game workshops that set the expectations and limits of play, rather than relying on mechanics that might or might not work.

Nevertheless, there are of course many occasions where rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques are needed in your game. Here are some helpful guidelines when choosing what to add.

As mentioned before, players need cognitive capacity in order to immerse into your game, so we advise you to keep what you add as simple and easy to both understand and employ as possible. For example, if you decide that you need some sort of physical fight resolution in your game, you want your players to resolve quickly and not spend a prolonged time considering hit points, weapons, and similar.

Furthermore, seeing beyond one's own cultural bias is difficult, but try to consider whether what you add relies on your own specific cultural knowledge. This is especially important if you expect your player base to be culturally diverse or you want your game to be accessible for players from different backgrounds. For example, even though the translation of the Norwegian *kutt* and *brems* to the English *cut* and *brake* led to extensive use of these safety tools in the Nordic larp communities, the way the last one can also be heard as *break*, has made the technique more ambiguous and less useful than it originally was.

Always keep your intended transformational impact in mind, and make sure that everything you add supports it. If you find that something you added does not create affordances for your transformative impact, then be strict with yourself, and remove it. By loading a game with mechanics, for example, one runs the risk of unintentionally creating a *procedural rhetoric* (Bogost 2007) with messages that are not aligned with what the designer is trying to communicate. By procedural rhetoric, we mean that the rules, mechanics, and meta-techniques, as well as the systems and models that are created from them can make claims or arguments by themselves. If we are unaware of this, such claims might end up going contrary to what you want your players to take away from the game. For example, games that reward characters for violent actions or incentivize them through mechanics make an implicit rhetorical argument about what behaviors are most valued by the system (Albom 2021). This argument may run counter to the transformative goals of the group, for example, training skills in debate, persuasion, or collaboration.

f) Accessibility design

> Accessibility [in terms of universal design] is a term that can include a wide range of characteristics including gender, sexuality, race and socioeconomics as well as access needs required for disability or chronic illness.
>
> **— Robin Tynan 2018, 50**

Accessibility in terms of universal design is not just including a wheelchair ramp, although that is often where the thinking process starts. Players and volunteers making larps have a wide variety of needs and, as a designer, you cannot easily anticipate or accommodate all of them. Tynan (2018) provides an important introduction and summary to the processes of accessibility design.

We suggest that you consider a spectrum of needs as a part of your design process and consider the impact of your choices on different minds and bodies. When approaching universal design, this process usually involves hiring an accessibility advisor, asking the players about their needs, and consulting existing guidelines. (For examples from esports events, see Hassan, Baltzar, and Kämäräinen 2025).

Accessibility design often comes with difficult decisions. You need to be honest about your intentions and about the subsequent decisions you will need to make. As Tynan (2018) explains, sometimes you will decide that a particular location—for example, a castle—is where you *want* to make your larp. By making that decision you are choosing to make the larp less accessible or even inaccessible to some folks with physical needs.

Accessibility includes physical access, sensory access, and an awareness of neurodiversity and the needs that come with it. There are some players with medical needs, for example, to refrigerate and/or take medicine in a sterile setting; dietary or digestive requirements; or something as simple and fundamental as a clean place to use sanitary products. Some larpers are happy to relieve themselves in a bush; others cannot. The cost of some larp events also restricts access to some players (Ford 2020).

If your spatial design involves darkened areas or low lighting then you are choosing to make those parts of the larp inaccessible to people with specific visual access needs. Questioning those decisions might be difficult—diluting your artistic vision is not easy—but you owe it to your players and potential players to ask and answer those difficult questions. Although nano-larps tend to be more accessible, that does not mean you should think less about the adjustments that some players may need. For more on this topic, see Chapter 5.

g) Documentation design

Documentation is a controversial subject in larp design (MacDonald 2015). Documentation is often needed to promote larp as a form of art or academic topic of study (Pettersson 2015). It is also used in promotional materials and documentary journalism. In addition, some players highly appreciate in-game documentation, especially photos of their characters, e.g., from a larp. They may even feel transformed seeing the photos, as they can witness moments from the larp that had an impact or a certain bearing that has changed in themselves (Paisley 2022).

However, in-game photography and other forms of documentation can also change the dynamics of play. When players are aware they are being photographed, they may become self-conscious or get distracted from the scene. Having the photography take place taken by an in-game photographer can help, or having an off-game space for players to opt-in to posing for photos they want taken. For example, in-game photography in physical space may be more challenging in games with historical themes that predate photography, but taking a screenshot in an online larp with the same theme might be less obtrusive.

Ethical concerns may also exist. Some players worry about documentation of their role-playing experiences being shared due to social stigma or people misinterpreting the nature of the in-game actions depicted. Considering the purpose of the documentation is important, including what is being shared, what consent needs to be obtained, and how the documentation might impact the players depicted. Furthermore, if taking documentation for an academic project, you may be required to obtain ethical approval (see Chapter 7).

Whatever your documentation policy is, make sure to be transparent with your players about it, ideally before they sign up to the game. Providing options for reviewing documentation before it is released to the public is a good plan in case players want something deleted. Obtaining written or verbal consent to use specific images in certain contexts is a best practice (and sometimes legally needed in the case of research or publication).

However, other forms of documentation are possible, for example, ephemera from the game not attached to a specific person or images of the set design. Aspects that are not often considered documentation but are very useful in research are the written documents produced by designers, just as we recommend producing for your nano-games and scaled up versions.

i) Manuals, design documents, larp scripts, and character sheets

There are many types of documents that can be used to cover the design of a role-playing game. Here, we will mention some of them, but for a more extensive list, see Westborg (2022). You may hear these documents called by different names; this section is intended to categorize them for the purposes of our model.

One of the most important things about these documents is thinking about who they are written for and what information is needed for that person. For example, organizers and players need very different types and levels of information.

The first type of document is the one aimed at the players: the *player's handbook*. It should contain all the information a player needs. In the player's handbook for a larp, you would find things such as practical information like times and dates; safety information like content warnings and information about the safety staff; narrative information like the setting and the vision; dress code information; meta-techniques, transparency, and so on. A tabletop player's handbook might focus more on setting information and rules. Note that some games feature this information on a website rather than a separate document.

The other player-facing document is the *character sheet*. Not all larps have these; as mentioned before, in some larps, the characters are created during workshops. A character sheet is designed to give a player the right amount of information for them to be able to play a designed character with reference to other characters. There are many different approaches to character writing and some of these are more or less successful depending on the recipient players. It is worth keeping in mind that people assimilate information in different ways. One person might need a short set of bullet points, while others might relish pages of backstory.

In addition, we have documents that are written for the facilitators. These are internal documents and not something that would be shared with players, although in some communities, the larp script is available beforehand for players to read, e.g., on certain larp festival websites.

The first is the *larp script* (Nilsen, Stark, and Lindahl 2014). It includes everything you need to facilitate the larp. This includes characters (if pre-written), groups, relations, meta-techniques, what happens during the playtime, and the full framing, including pre-game and post-game activities such as workshops, de-roling, and debriefing. It also includes annotations with comments about how to facilitate the larp and minor preparations like organizing the room or hiding props. The larp script can be organized in different ways, from as simple as overarching headings to meticulous, such as exact timestamps for every part. This is a helpful document to cover the whole design from the facilitators' perspective.

If the larp is part of a larger campaign, there might be a need for a *campaign document* where you find the overarching information for all the games. It can include world info; systems for fighting or economy; what players are allowed to change or not in the setting; visual guidelines; etc. A lot of the info in the *player's handbook* should be placed here if you are running a campaign larp. This document is helpful for having a coherent world while having many larps run by different organizers.

Then, we have the *design document*. This can sometimes be the same thing as the larp script since it contains everything you need to facilitate the entire larp experience. However, there are cases where you have a larp experience that contains more than one larp. In that case, each of the larps would have its own larp script, while the whole larp experience with schedule and both larps included would be the design document.

Finally, we have the *design bundle*. It contains everything you need to organize/re-run a specific larp. It includes the design document but will also include things like production info, a list of necessary props to have, promotional material, and maybe a budget. It could also include relevant articles about the larp. By giving someone the design bundle, they would be able to run the larp with only this information. This also means the design bundle often is less of a document and more of a folder with multiple documents in it. For an example, see Groth, Grasmo, and Edland (2021).

Some documents are written for both the players and the facilitators, i.e., *manuals*. A historical legacy of traditional larps, these documents are often rules-heavy guides

for players and game masters containing a long list of skills, character classes, combat mechanics, and spells, similar to traditional tabletop role-playing games.

ii) Documentation after the game

As mentioned before, sometimes documentation is shared after the game. This type of work is especially important in journalistic and academic articles covering a specific game. RPGs tend to be fairly ephemeral in that the experience itself cannot be replicated. Sometimes, documentation is the only tangible evidence that a game occurred. These documents are helpful for researchers understanding trends in design, art, and community building; for other designers in learning techniques, best practices, and mistakes; and for players in discovering games and play styles they may not have otherwise known about or might want to play in the future. Furthermore, documentation can be made by players, designers, facilitators, or outside observers, although individuals in the last category may misrepresent the game without sufficient research.

Documentation is also a designable surface. Consider how documentation will happen, who will compile it, whose voices will be included, and in what format it will be, e.g., film, written article, etc. Consider if this documentation is intended for private use among the players and their private social media accounts or if it will be made public and the implications of what is portrayed as a result. Make sure to be transparent with your players about these processes and have clear strategies for opting-in, opting-out, and obtaining consent if needed.

iii) Tech design considerations

As mentioned in Chapter 1, analog role-playing games can integrate technology in interesting ways. However, designers should carefully consider the following questions during the design process:

- Will this technology make something possible that would not otherwise be available, e.g., an online larp for players who would not otherwise find gaming accessible? Or might it provide a barrier to entry, e.g., players who do not have access to VR headsets?

- Will this technology enhance the immersion of players into the game environment or interfere with it? (See Chapter 2 for more on immersion).

- Will this technology inhibit the ability for players to spontaneously co-create the fiction, e.g., limiting character actions via the use of a pre-programmed computer interface? If so, how will that contribute positively to their experience rather than restricting it?

- Will the technology enhance or interfere with the desired transformative impacts? If it might distract from your transformative goals, you might reconsider including it. On the other hand, if your goals include developing a relationship with technology, e.g., stimulating interest in STEAM and self-efficacy in girls (Fey et al. 2022), then including it might be essential.

You can learn more about the integration of advanced technologies with RPGs in our upcoming Tech Toolkit from the Erasmus+ EDGE project (2023).

4.6 Summary

This chapter has expanded upon our model for designing transformative games shared in Chapter 2 to elaborate on specific design practices, including designing the framing, the characters, the environment, the production and so on. While many of the concepts in this chapter focus on larger event design, for example, with larps, consider how the principles conveyed might be useful in other RPGs. We will expand upon facilitation practices in *Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games*. As we have discussed, psychological safety is important to consider throughout the design process and thus will be the topic of our next chapter.

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