Theory, Key Concepts, and Inspirational Materials

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3.1 Introduction

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

3.2 Key concepts

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

a) Role-playing as a transformational container

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

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

i. Immersion, alibi, and affordances

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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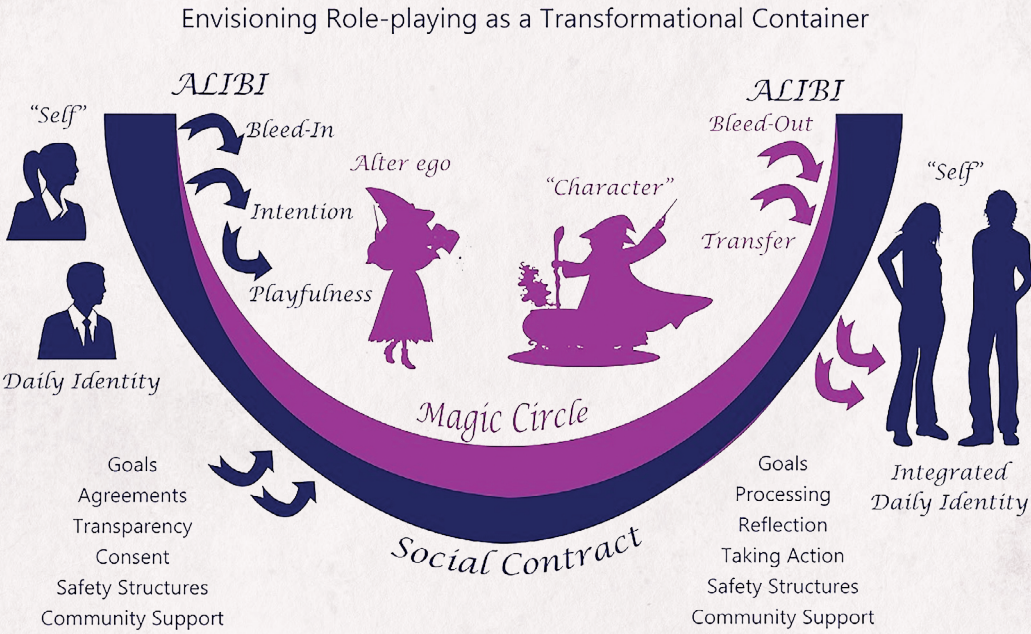
Envisioning Role-playing as a Transformational Container

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

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

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

3.3 Transformation theories

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

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

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

a) Transformation and role-playing games

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

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

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

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

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

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


3. Things Move Backwards

4. Things Collapse

Change as a Circle

2. Things Hit a Wall; Movement Stops

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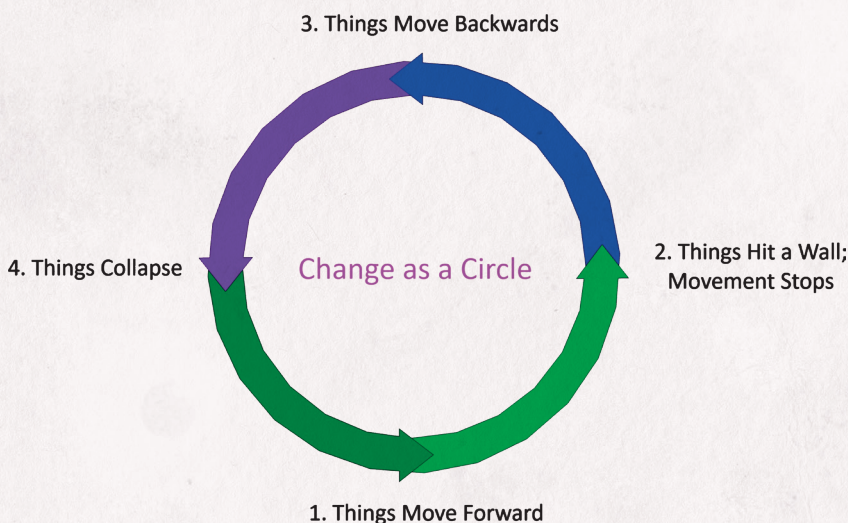
John Paul Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (2014)

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

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

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

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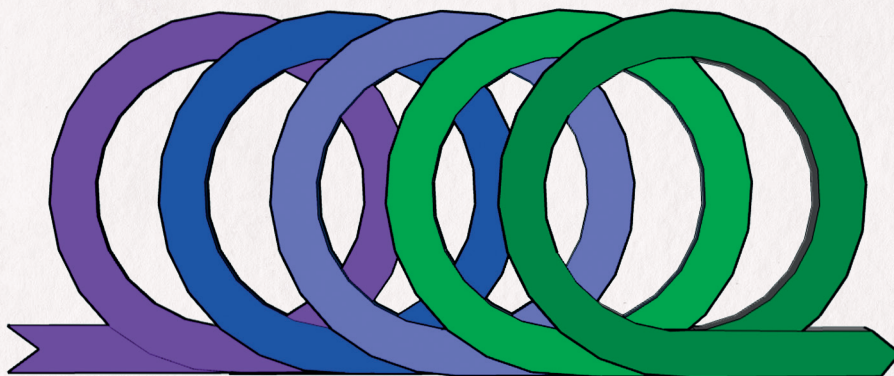
Lederach, *Little Book of Conflict Transformation* (2014)

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

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

i. Resistance to change

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

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

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

Some common examples of resistance to change may revolve around:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

b) Reflection models

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

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

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

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

1. **Concrete Experience**: Might be a new experience, or the person reinterpreting an existing experience due to new concepts.

2. **Reflective Observation** of the new experience.

3. **Abstract Conceptualization**: Might be a new concept, or modified form of an existing concept after reflection.

4. **Active Experimentation**: Application of the modified or new ideas. (Kolb 1984)

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

1. **Description** of the experience, in detail, focusing on what happened;

2. **Feelings** and thoughts about the experience, and how they may have impacted the experience;

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.4 Immersion theories

a) Definitions

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

b) Types of immersion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.5 Mechanisms of transformation

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

a) Ritual

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

b) Bleed

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.6 Identity theories

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

a) Definitions of identity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

i) Identity as a social construct

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

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

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

ii) Narrative identity

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

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

iii) Identity as psychodynamic

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

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

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

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

2. Exerting power over others;

3. Portraying undesirable personality traits;

4. Expressing mental health challenges; and

5. Exploring dysfunctional or maladaptive social dynamics.

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

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

iv) Identity as a mosaic

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

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

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

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

b) Role-playing and identity

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

i) Nine types of characters

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

c) Identity shifting in RPGs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.7 Psychotherapeutic approaches and theories

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

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

a) Standalone role-playing techniques and Fixed Role therapy

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

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

b) Psychodrama and sociodrama

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

c) Drama therapy

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

- **Dramatic Projection**: The process through which participants project aspects of themselves and their experiences onto theatrical and dramatic material, thus externalizing internal conflicts.
- **Therapeutic Performance Process**: The process of identifying the needs for expression of specific aspects that a participant would like to explore, and turning that material into a performance.
- **Dramatherapeutic Empathy and Distancing**: Two distinct but correlating processes, that refer both to active participants and to "witnesses" of the

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

d) Play therapy and conditions for facilitating therapeutic change

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

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

1. "The therapeutic relationship must be engaging, inviting, and warm from the beginning.

2. The child must be unconditionally accepted by the therapist.

3. The therapeutic environment must be totally non-judgmental for the child to feel uninhibited and willing to express emotions, feelings, and behaviors.

4. The therapist must be attentive and sensitive to the child's behaviors in order to provide reflective behaviors back to the child, this way he or she may develop self-awareness.

5. The child must be able to find solutions to his or her problems whenever possible. This way the child understands that they are solely responsible for the changes in behavior that he or she does not make.

6. Through dialogue and actions, the therapist acts as a shadow, allowing the child to lead the way through this therapeutic journey.

7. The therapist recognizes that the procedure is steady and should progress at the child's pace.

8. The only limitations are ones that ensure that the therapeutic process stays genuine and the child remains in the realm of reality, that he or she be aware of their purpose and role in the therapy" (Axline 1991).

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

1. "Two persons are in psychological contact.

2. The first person (i.e., the client) is in a state of incongruence.

3. The second person (i.e., the therapist) is experiencing **congruence** in the therapeutic relationship.

4. The therapist experiences **unconditional positive regard** for the client.

5. The therapist experiences an **empathic understanding** of the client's internal frame of reference.

6. The communication to the client of the therapist's empathic understanding and unconditional positive regard is to a minimal degree achieved." (Rogers 1957)

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

e) Narrative psychotherapy

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

f) Examples of modalities used in therapeutic role-playing

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

Example modalities include:

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

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

3.8 Theories of interaction

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

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

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

a) Group and leadership theories

i) Tuckman's stages of group development

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

- **Pre-group phase:** The direction, purpose and framework of the group needs to be considered;

- **Stage 1. Forming:** A phase of orientation. Discussing norms, confidentiality, attendance, rules of communication and participation, time frame/termination of the group, emphasis on trusting leadership;

- **Stage 2. Storming:** A phase of transition, during which group members may experience conflict, ambiguity and anxiety, and/or may test rules and attempt to redefine the norms and themselves within the group through acting out. A group climate in which members feel safe to disagree and confront each other needs to be created;

- **Stage 3. Norming:** A phase of cohesiveness, during which the group members construct and reconstruct standards and therapeutic alliance forms and norms that are specific to the group;

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

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

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

ii) Courau's group roles

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

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

iii) Belbin's team roles

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

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

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

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

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

b) Therapeutic group theories

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

i) Aveline's principles of leadership in groups

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ii) Encounter: A person-centered approach to groups

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

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

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

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

1. Milling around

2. Resisting personal expression and self-exploration

3. Describing past experiences and feelings

4. Expressing negative feelings

5. Expressing and exploring material that is personally meaningful

6. Expressing current interpersonal feelings within the group

7. Developing a healing potential within the group

8. Accepting the self and beginning to change

9. Cracking of mask and façades

10. Receiving feedback

11. Confronting

12. Developing helping relationships outside the sessions

13. Encountering authentically

14. Expressing positive emotions and feelings of closeness

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

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

iii) Yalom's 11 therapeutic forces in groups

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

c) Feedback and self-exposure in groups

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

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

i) Rogers' 5 types of feedback

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ii) The Johari Window

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

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

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

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

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

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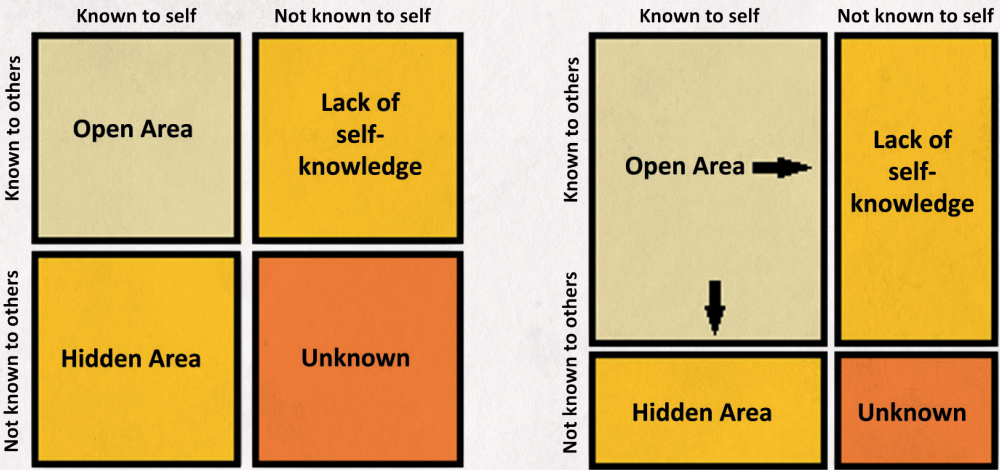
The Johari Window

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

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

iii) I-Messages

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

d) Interpersonal theories

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

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

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

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

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

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

i) Transactional analysis

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

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

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

i) Parent, Adult, Child

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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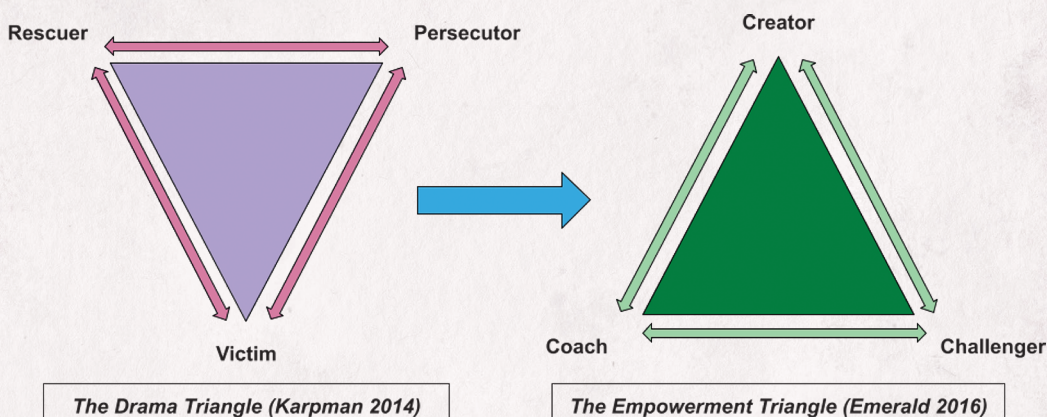

The Drama Triangle (Karpman 2014)

The Empowerment Triangle (Emerald 2016)

Figure 5: The transformation from the Drama Triangle (Karpman 2014) to the Empowerment Triangle (Emerald 2016). Image adapted by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas.

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

can "win" in a mutually fulfilling way. In this model, the Persecutor focuses upon their Assertive tendencies; the Rescuer, their Caring tendencies; and the Victim, their Vulnerability.
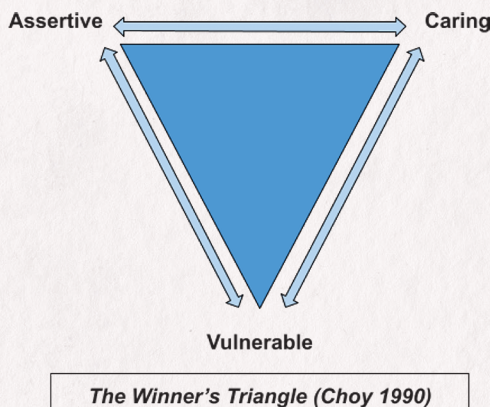

Figure 6: The Winner's Triangle (Choy 1990). Image adapted by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas.

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

iii) Attachment Theory

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.9 Educational theories

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

Why are educational learning theories relevant to RPGs?

- Different practices and ways of reasoning around learning come from different theoretical backgrounds. Knowing about these can help with creating a deeper understanding of teaching and learning;

- By knowing about the perspectives and theories you acquire the language to talk and think about your practice and methods;

- Knowing the perspectives and theories may help you recognize other people's paradigms for teaching and learning through RPGs;

- Acquiring the language can help you find and understand research about role-playing and learning;

- Knowing the theory can help you solve design issues in your educational games.

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

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

The four perspectives are:

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

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

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

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

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

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

3.10 Summary

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

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