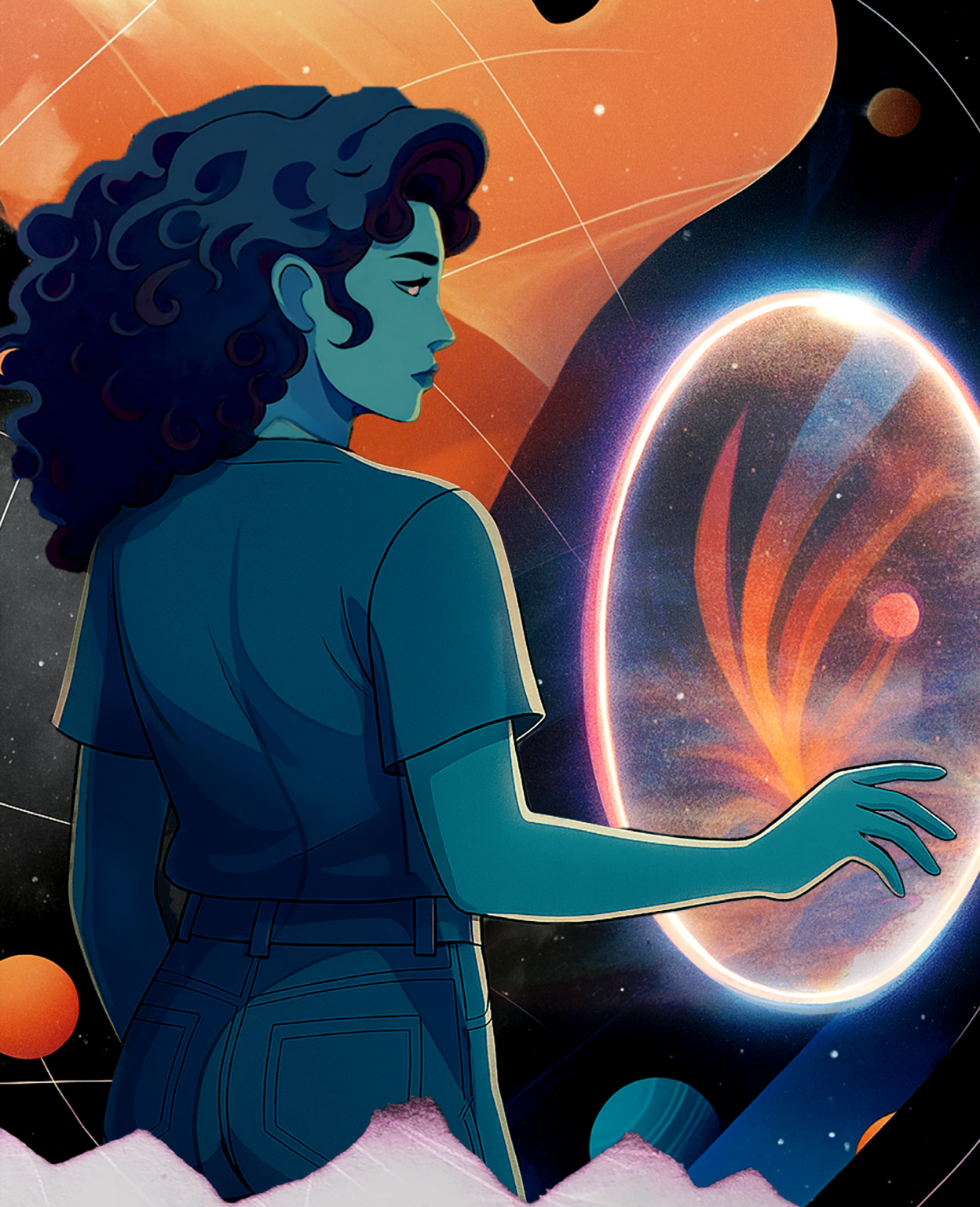




Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games

Sarah Lynne Bowman, Simon Brind, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, editors

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Foreword

About this textbook

We believe that role-playing games have the potential to change us: to affect our relationship with ourselves and with the world in positive ways.¹ Our focus for this textbook is analog role-playing game design with an emphasis on encouraging explicit transformative impacts in participants. By analog role-playing games, we mean tabletop, live action role-playing (larp), and Nordic and American freeform. The principles described in this book should be roughly transferable between these different formats, even if the practices associated with them can vary, e.g., levels of physicality required.

This book does not cover digital role-playing games facilitated by computer software such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard 2004) or *Final Fantasy* (Square and Square Enix 1987). We emphasize games in which spontaneous co-creative improvisation between participants forms the basis of play. While we acknowledge that such experiences are possible in digital spaces, the role-playing experience of a typical digital RPG has constraints due to the pre-programmed interface. However, the principles described in this book could apply to improvisational role-playing occurring in online spaces such as multi-user dungeon (MUD) object-oriented (MOO), Multi-User Shared Hallucination (MUSHes), massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), or Discord servers. They might also be applicable to analog role-playing games that are played online through platforms such as D&D Beyond or Zoom, e.g., online larps, sometimes called live action online games (LAOGs) (Reininghaus 2019, 2021; Reininghaus and Hermann 2024).

Because the emphasis is on game design specifically, many of the recommendations in this book are geared toward practitioners aiming to implement role-playing games for applied purposes based on our model. Notably, while our model is a synthesis of work from a wide variety of sources as evidenced by our references, we do not claim these practices to be the only methods for implementing transformative role-playing games, nor is this book comprehensive or inclusive to all methods. Our model is intended to give organizers specific instructions grounded in practice and hard-won wisdom through experience, with an emphasis on scaling up the short nano-games designed in our previous textbook in this series, *Transformative Role-playing Game Design* (2024). We also emphasize the player experience in this book, as well as methods for cultivating transformational communities around these games. As this textbook represents the second in a series, we often note where we expand upon sections from the previous book. In this way, we hope to emphasize the interwoven nature of design, implementation, and play.

1 As the team and approach are the same, much of the contents of this Foreword are borrowed from our first book in the series, *Transformative Role-playing Game Design* (Bowman, Diakolambrianou, and Brind eds. 2024).

In addition to the textbooks, we highly recommend reading three central books in our field: *The Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Game Studies* (Zagal and Deterding eds. 2024); *Larp Design: Creating Role-play Experiences* (Koljonen et al. eds. 2019); and *What Do We Do When We Play?* (Saitta, Koljonen, Särkijärvi, Grove, Männistö, and Makkonen, eds. 2020). If you are working with educational games, we recommend checking out the first anthology in the recent series *Education and Analog Role-Playing Games vol. 1* (Haarman ed. 2026) and keeping watch for the second volume, which should be out in 2026.

Finally, because this work is a textbook, we have endeavored to make the tone readable and engaging, reducing the number of citations we would normally add to academic work.² However, we have compiled extensive bibliographies on these topics, which [can be found at this link](#) and are ever expanding. The intention is to provide an easy entry point for designers and scholars alike, while also sharing the wealth of resources available for future research. This balancing act is not always easy, so we hope the textbook serves you. Furthermore, if you have additional sources to recommend specifically on implementing analog role-playing games, you can send them to edge-speldesign@uu.se. We know this field is expanding rapidly. We hope to provide a centralized archive for researchers on an ongoing basis, so your recommendations are encouraged.

The chapters in this textbook are as follows:

- **Chapter 1:** The Basics of Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games

This chapter foregrounds central considerations when implementing transformative role-playing games and scaling up from nano-game design. These considerations are presented as important to decide at the initiation phase, before the game, during the game, and after the game.

- **Chapter 2:** Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games in Specific Applied Contexts

This chapter emphasizes implementation practices for running role-playing games in specific applied contexts, such as transformative leisure, educational, and therapeutic applications. We discuss recommendations for hacking existing games, framing the game, scaling up existing designs, adapting to the needs of specific populations, creating functional groups, and working with stakeholders.

- **Chapter 3:** Production and Logistics for Transformative Role-playing Games

This chapter covers many practical considerations when producing and running logistics for scaled up transformative role-playing games. Examples include project management, organizational teams, establishing the setting, character writing, location logistics, as well as tech, interaction, and sensory design. We offer suggestions for communication, casting, documentation, guiding player preparation, workshop design, and onsite logistics. Finally, we discuss post-game emotional safety and feedback practices.

² Note that in a few short sections, Deep Translate has been used by one of the authors to improve readability.

- **Chapter 4:** Theory and Practice in Facilitating Transformative Role-playing Games

This chapter describes different facilitation roles in which organizers engage directly with players during run-time, including in-game and off-game responsibilities. We describe several skills associated with good facilitation in general and in transformative role-playing games in particular. We offer recommendations for working in different settings, including informal, nonformal, and formal education, transformative leisure, therapeutic, and train-the-trainer environments.

- **Chapter 5:** Cultivating Safer Transformational Communities

In this chapter, we present general principles and recommendations for cultivating safer transformational communities surrounding play, including practices before, during, and after play. We discuss physical risks in implementation for both organizers and players, such as injury, as well as psychological risks, such as psychologically overwhelming reactions to play and addressing issues of inappropriate behavior in the community.

- **Chapter 6:** Theory and Practice in Playing for Transformation

This chapter discusses various theories connected to the player experience, including motivation, creative agendas, and labor. We then present several concepts related to transforming one's self concept, social identity, relationships with others, and spiritual development through transformative play. We discuss various practical recommendations for working with preparatory activities, steering, bleed, different types of immersion, interpersonal dynamics, and group dynamics. We close the chapter with a discussion about sharing play experiences through feedback and documentation.

- **Chapter 7:** Playtesting and Researching the Implementation of Role-playing Games

The textbook closes with a chapter offering considerations for playtesting and iterating upon role-playing games based on feedback. We also provide more complex and practical advice for conducting research on transformative play, including study design, ethics, data gathering, and analysis. We conclude with a collection of studies providing empirical evidence on the affective, cognitive, and behavioral benefits of role-playing games.

About the project

From out of the community come the people and gifts necessary to initiate, support, help create, and sustain the understandings that are reached.

John Paul Lederach (2014)

This textbook is a culmination of materials developed for the Transformative Game Design Master's programme at Uppsala University, further expanded upon in the Erasmus+ Higher Education project EDGE (2023). The collaborating organizations

are two universities—Uppsala University in Sweden and Turku University of Applied Sciences in Finland—as well as three RPG design organizations—Dragons' Nest in Greece, Avalon Larp Studio in Norway, and Chaos League in Italy and several volunteers. Thus, the book features content from practitioners from several countries arising from a variety of play cultures, although most authors are connected in some way to the Nordic larp tradition (Stenros and Montola 2010).

Collectively, we have backgrounds in tabletop, freeform, and larp communities in countries spanning Europe, North America, and Latin America, as well as board games, card games, and video games. In addition to gaming, we have within our writing team experiences within other alternative communities, including subcultural groups and activities associated with neo-spirituality; transformational work; visual arts; creative writing; music, including guitar and bass guitar playing, choir, karaoke, and DJing; queer performance; tap dancing and Irish traditional dancing; Burning Man; theatre; improv; reenactment; archery; powerlifting; gymnastics; and building.

Politically, we have authors associated with various movements emphasizing universal human rights and countering oppression and discrimination. Several of our authors have multicultural backgrounds and experiences of discrimination based on immigration status, race/ethnicity, class, religion, gender/sexuality, among others. Several of us are neurodiverse, with backgrounds including autism, ADHD, giftedness, sensory processing disorder, anxiety disorders, and complex PTSD, including as a result of abuse. Other perspectives in our team include backgrounds personally or within our family with chronic pain, disability, alcoholism, and depression. Thus, our writing team is strongly committed to work that betters the lives of people, especially individuals who experience marginalization.

Academically, our team has interdisciplinary backgrounds in game studies, design, and development; media studies; psychology, including person-centered counseling, psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, applied art therapies, and social psychology; anthropology; cultural geography; education; humanities; creative writing; English literature; musicology; gender and sexuality studies; peace & conflict studies; nature science; public administration; software engineering; business/system analysis; and project and product management. Methodologically, we have phenomenologists, structural functionalists, narratologists, quantitative and qualitative empiricists, participatory action researchers, and ethnographers, including participant observation and autoethnography.

Members of our team have offered interventions to a variety of populations, such as children, including with neurodiversity; youth and youth workers; college and university students; admin staff; teachers; researchers; public sector employees; convicts and ex-convicts; adults with disabilities; queer folks; migrants and refugees, including unaccompanied minors; and others. We have designed and facilitated transformative role-playing games for several of these populations and believe strongly in its power to catalyze change.

We hope you enjoy the textbook.

-- Sarah Lynne Bowman, Simon Brind, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, editors

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CHAPTER 1

The Basics of Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games

Sarah Lynne Bowman

1.1 Introduction

This chapter covers basic information you will need to consider when implementing role-playing games for transformative purposes. When implementing these games, you are not only a designer and guide, but also an event organizer, which requires additional skillsets and planning beyond just the run-time itself.

This chapter is meant to briefly introduce key categories in implementation and provide an overview of concepts that we will expand upon in future chapters. Depending on your project, you will need to focus on some of these categories more than others. For example, a small tabletop game held in a home has far less considerations than a multi-day larp in a realistic setting with costumes and props. When you identify those categories, we recommend focusing on sections that provide more concrete information relevant to your current project. That being said, awareness of all the contents of the book will help you make judicious decisions about how to scale in future projects, not to mention developing a deeper appreciation for the work that goes into running larger productions.

This book is meant to complement the first book in the series, *Transformative Role-playing Game Design* (Bowman, Diakolambrianou, and Brind eds. 2025), which we will also reference as *TRGD* moving forward as shorthand. Therefore, we recommend reading that book first and familiarizing yourself with the contents, as we will only briefly touch upon the theory and practice around role-playing game design here. We will try to indicate such areas with the term “review” when possible.

Furthermore, even if you are designing for tabletop, we highly recommend familiarizing yourself with the *Larp Design: Creating Role-play Experiences* (Koljonen et al. 2019) book, which while larp-centric, has chapters that are relevant for many types of design.

a) Review: What are transformative role-playing games?

Role-playing games are “co-creative experiences in which participants immerse into fictional characters and realities for a bounded period of time and improvise through spontaneous, emergent playfulness” (Bowman 2022). Such play occurs

within the framework of explicit and implicit rules that set the parameters for actions taken within the game (Montola 2008). While such play can take place in virtual environments, here we emphasize mainly analog role-playing games, which afford players with a high degree of agency to take action, interact with others, and co-create emergently within the fiction.

Transformative role-playing games are intended to provide a vehicle for personal and social change among the participants. They are highly similar to many cousin activities in leisure, therapy, and education, such as improvisation, psychodrama, simulation, and many others (see Chapter 1 in *TRGD*). However, the term *role-playing game* here refers to theories and practices that have emerged from various subcultures of play, including tabletop, larp, and freeform. Therefore, while role enactment and game play are age-old practices, here we focus on more recent developments tied to specific subcultures, including those influenced by the first tabletop role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), Tolkien's (2020) *Lord of the Rings*, and other popular sources. Therefore, the term role-playing game here refers mainly to a lineage connected to leisure play traditions, although certainly the advent of these games was likely also influenced by earlier formats (Fatland 2014; Johansson et al. 2026).

The main types of analog games we cover in this book are:

- *Tabletop role-playing games* (TTRPG), which are usually played sitting around a table, sometimes with miniatures, character sheets, and dice;
- *Live action role-playing games* (larp), which are usually more physically embodied and sometimes features props, costumes, and special locations; and
- *Freeform*, which refers to a spectrum of games somewhere between larp and tabletop, particularly in the Nordic and American style, e.g., highly embodied play in a neutral space without costumes (Stark 2012, 2014a; Torner 2019). For more details, see Chapter 1 of *TRGD*.

b) Game design vs. implementation design

As in other fields such as simulation (de Wijse-van Heeswijk, Klabbers, and Meijer 2026), we make a strong distinction between game design and its implementation, including facilitation techniques. While in practice, sometimes these categories overlap in terms of personnel involved and the timeline for their associated activities, having clear terminology to make clear these different phases and the roles attached to them is important.

As the excellent *Larp Design* book (Koljonen et al. eds. 2019) asserts, everything within and surrounding role-playing games is a *designable surface*. When we refer to role-playing game design, we focus primarily on the work needed to bring the game contents into existence, such as the narrative, characters, storyworld, mechanics, and other key factors. We call the people involved in these practices *designers*.

When we refer to *implementation*, we focus primarily on the logistical aspects needed to organize and facilitate the game after its initial design (Bowman 2023; Westborg 2023), which can include matters related to e.g., the physical space, the involvement of stakeholders, the means of social interaction between players, and the psychological well-being of participants, among others. The choice of running a game with technical enhancements will also affect this process. Notably, while implementation practices still require design, we use different terms to distinguish between the people involved in the heavy game design work and the various other duties within an implementation team. We will discuss these roles in more detail later in this chapter, but for now, we refer to *organizers* as the people responsible for implementing the game, which often includes one or more *facilitators*, who guide players through the fictional process and framing activities.

Thus, this book covers many factors related to *implementation design* before, during, and after role-playing games designed for transformative purposes. However, you will see moments of overlap, as the two are often interconnected and interdependent; it can be difficult for an organizer to know what props to order for the game until additional scenes are designed. Furthermore, these roles sometimes overlap, for example when the designer, organizer, and facilitator are the same person.

1.2 Scaling up nano-games

In *Transformative Role-playing Game Design* (2024), we emphasized nano-game design as a means of providing highly specific experiences for a small group of players based on one or more desired transformative goals. In our model, these impacts fall into four categories: *educational goals*, such as playing to achieve specific learning objectives in a classroom curriculum; *emotional processing*, such as using RPGs in therapeutic interventions; *social cohesion*, such as practicing team building skills at a larp camp; and *political aims*, such as raising awareness on important societal issues in a leisure transformative game.

While the nano-game design focused on games that were no more than 45 minutes in length, including workshops, gameplay, and debrief, this book will focus on games with a broader scale. In our Transformative Game Design curriculum, we ask designers to create an *implementation plan* for scaling up their nano-games according to the various considerations mentioned in this chapter after they playtest and complete them.

While we recommend this gradual process in order to stay focused on the basic gameplay connected to your transformative goals, we recognize that many readers will likely start by designing games at a broader scale. Therefore, this book can also serve as a starting point for a longer and more elaborate game. However, for the purposes of best understanding this content, we invite you to adopt the perspective of someone who has completed their nano-game and now wishes to scale up. Instead of considering

all possible activities, we will ask you to focus on one *run* of your game: one instance or iteration that you hypothetically could implement if you had the required resources.

For this exercise, try to be realistic in your scope. For example, many of us would love to run our games in remarkable but costly locations, but consider what you could make happen with your own resources and/or a little extra support. As an example, perhaps you wrote a nano-game intended to help players process their feelings around loss. You may wish to scale up your game to a longer version specifically for players experiencing grief as part of a therapeutic process in collaboration with their counselors. In this case, you should likely have an idea of where you might find these counselors and their respective clients, e.g., through members of your extended community. Otherwise, you may be overscoping your game and may want to consider a different target group and framing.

When reading the rest of this chapter, we will ask you to carefully consider each element you include in your implementation design. Each additional element can increase the complexity and/or cost of your plans, which might distract from your transformative goals, as we explore in more depth in Chapter 3. Therefore, this book is intended to help you think through your choices, their potential *affordances* (Gibson 2015; Lampo 2015) and some (but not all) possible drawbacks. By affordances, we mean aspects of the design and environment that allow for a specific range of activities, e.g., a convict confined to a decommissioned prison cell has different affordances than wizard school characters who have an entire castle within which they can roam freely.

We have divided this chapter into four overall phases: **Initiation, Before the Game, During the Game, and After the Game**. However, keep in mind the aspects on this list may not always occur chronologically, although some features will be important to determine early in the process, as your choices for those may dramatically affect the rest of the larp. We advise considering all of them at the outset of your project through the creation of an implementation plan.

1.3 Initiation Phase

a) Medium

Historically, our curriculum has been taught in an online format to accommodate learners in multiple locations and time zones. Therefore, the nano-game design has required us to implement using an *online larp* format, which is a hybrid version of larping that takes place over video conferencing. Such games should not include pre-programmed game facilitation, e.g., in multi-player online role-playing games (MMORPGs). In analog RPGs, the technology is intended to be as non-intrusive to the creative flow and interaction as possible to avoid inhibiting improvised play.

Therefore, the first question to ask when scaling up your nano-game is: should you run your game fully online, in-person, or a hybrid mixture of both? Fully online

games are sometimes more accessible, but long scenarios can be tiring over video conferencing calls. In-person games can be highly engaging, but require far more logistics to implement and may be prohibitive to players who lack the ability or means for mobility.

A hybrid version may sound appealing as the best of both worlds, but can be extremely challenging to synchronize with technology in a seamless way for in-person and online participants. Hybrid sessions usually require tech onboarding for online users, which might disrupt the fiction of the game, in-person players may forget to interact with online users, and often online players may have trouble engaging meaningfully, maintaining a reliable internet connection, or even hearing what is happening in a noisy environment. For organizers, such issues can increase stress and monopolize time needed for other tasks.

On the other hand, hybrid sessions might make participation more accessible for players with limited geographical or physical mobility or who cannot attend for financial reasons. In these cases, it might be best to integrate these players for short periods of time in targeted ways, e.g., having them pre-record videos then streaming them live, short one-on-one video calls, or text-based communication. In general, as with all choices, such integration should be considered from the beginning of your planning and align with the setting and/or goals of your game. We discuss tech integration in more detail later in this chapter and sprinkled throughout the rest of the book.

b) Length

The length of your game can vary greatly depending on format. Is your game an extended version of your single-session nano-larp with additional content or scenes, e.g., a 4-hour version? Is it a multi-day larp, e.g., lasting 36 hours? Does it take place over several sessions with the same characters and/or setting, e.g., a series of 8 sessions lasting 2 hours each?

Here is some terminology to help you determine the details of your game:

- **One-shot:** A game with characters and a fiction that are discrete and bounded in the one game session, i.e., the fiction does not continue when the game ends (Stark 2014b). One-shots can be run multiple times, but the runs do not affect one another story-wise.
- **Series:** Several games in the same persistent setting, which may or may not have the same characters across runs. Sometimes called a *campaign* or *chronicle*.
- **Single run:** A one-shot game of any length that will only ever be run once.
- **Re-run:** A one-shot game or game series that will run multiple times, sometimes by different organizing teams.

- **Re-play:** A one-shot game that players are able to re-play in a different run as the same characters or different ones.
- **Playtest:** An unofficial preliminary run of some features or the whole experience, usually before the game is released.

The length of a game and/or series sometimes has a direct correlation with the amount of people who are able to play it. Some players have relatively few responsibilities and time commitments, whereas others juggle busy schedules balancing work, projects, and family life. Consider the feasibility of your choice; it may be desirable to dream of a long series of games in your persistent fiction, but may not be realistic for players to attend or sustainable for you to run. You may wish to run a 4-hour game in a classroom setting for secondary school students, but such a long block of time may be unfeasible given their other required lessons. On the other hand, longer engagement often means deeper player engagement, commitment, and investment, which can lead to powerful outcomes over time.

You should also consider length with regard to your playtests. Will you playtest the whole game or just parts? Do you need the full cast of characters, or only a few? How much can you feasibly playtest before the game is “good enough” to run for your target group? Is it possible to playtest at all, and what are the potential consequences of not doing so?

Finally, consider that length also refers to pre- and post- game work required of both you and your participants. If players need to sign up several months early, select characters from a list, or pay by a certain date they need to be informed of the longer timetable, not just the run-time schedule. For example, tabletop role-playing games often include a Session 0, in which players meet before the game starts to calibrate about their desired content in the game. Such requirements should be transparent to potential players.

c) Population

One of the most important factors to consider is your target audience, or *population*. For example, you may be gearing your game toward a “general” population, but depending on where and how you recruit, you will likely have different levels of familiarity with role-playing, openness to trying new experiences, and willingness to behave in ways outside the norm. On the other hand, if you only promote your game to other role-players, you should not consider these players part of a general sample, as they likely have developed player skills and adopted norms over the years that will impact how they engage with play. We will discuss player skills in more detail in Chapter 4.

You may also wish to work with more specific populations, such as:

- People at a specific stage of life ranging from children to older adults;
- Students in primary, secondary, higher, or postgraduate education;

- Youth in after-school programs, summer camps, or outreach events;
- Medical health or mental health practitioners;
- Camp counselors, trainers, teachers, players, or researchers;
- Youth workers and volunteer managers;
- Government employees and politicians;
- Business professionals;
- Leaders seeking professional development;
- Members of a specific organization or field, e.g., for-profit, NGO, or municipal;
- People seeking spiritual direction;
- People with specific psychological needs, such as neurodiversity;
- People with specific medical needs, such as disabilities or atypical abilities; or
- People with complex psychological and psychiatric needs, such as addiction, marginalization, trauma, or abuse.

For more details and relevant literature on working with various populations, see Chapter 2 of *TRGD* and Chapter 2 of this textbook.

You will need to design your scaled up version according to the needs and capabilities of your desired population. Does your target group have limited cognitive abilities to handle complexity, e.g., children in an early developmental stage? Does your target group require special care when approaching sensitive topics, e.g., trauma survivors or clients with depression?

Other important considerations include:

- **Language:** In what language(s) will your game be run? Is your population fluent in that language, or is adaptation or localization needed? Is multiple languages possible to include effectively, or will some participants be excluded from certain activities? Will certain players have an advantage if the chosen language is their first language? If so, how will you mitigate these risks, if possible?
- **Accessibility:** Is the game site accessible for your target population physically and/or financially?
- **Participation cost:** Are they required to pay, and if so, how much do you need to charge your participants in order to balance your game's budget? Is this amount realistic to expect from this population or their caregivers? If you are expecting to get paid as a professional, is the added cost realistic for the group?

- **Stakeholder coordination:** Do you need to coordinate with relevant stakeholders when working with this population, e.g., parents, teachers, counselors, church leaders, prison wardens? If so, how will you involve and onboard them? We discuss examples in Chapter 2.
- **Team needs:** You should also consider your own needs and those of your team. Are there risks to your mental or physical health when working with this population? How will you assess and mitigate these risks? We will address organizer safety in more detail in Chapter 6.

d) Size

How many players would be ideal for your game? Do you want to keep the nano-game format of 3-4 but increase the length? Do you want to run your game for 10 players? 30? 100? Each of these decisions will have design and implementation consequences, e.g., regarding the number of organizers and support staff needed; the space required for play; the cost; and other factors. We will discuss these factors in more depth in Chapter 3.

e) Type

Another important consideration is the type of game. Will this game be tabletop, larp, or freeform? How might your choice impact other factors, e.g., where you can run your game, how many rooms you will need, and what props or other special items are required?

Related to your transformative goals, you should also determine how you frame your game to your participants. Is your game intended to be transformative leisure, therapeutic, or educational?

- **Transformative leisure role-playing games** are voluntary and played in participants' free time. While they are designed with specific transformative goals in mind, players may engage for a variety of other reasons.
- **Therapeutic role-playing games** are facilitated by or implemented in collaboration with a mental health professional or paraprofessional. These games may be voluntary or mandatory depending on the context. They may be played in a formal setting, such as a therapists' office, or at another location, e.g., a therapeutic larp played in the woods (Bartenstein 2022). All parties have expectations of emotional processing with a mental health professional before, during, and after the game focused on explicit therapeutic goals, whether in a group setting, 1:1, or both.
- **Educational games** are usually played in formal (Heath 2013) or nonformal contexts that are explicitly educational (Baird 2022), such as schools, museums, afterschool programs, as well as youth adult education more broadly. However, they can also be played in leisure environments as a

type of informal education (Baird 2022). All parties have expectations of educational processing around the game focused on explicit learning objectives. These games may be voluntary or mandatory (Bowman et al. 2024; Roda Martínez 2025).

We will expand on how to design for each of these types of games in Chapter 2.

f) Organizing team

You should carefully consider how many organizers you will need based on your population, size of game, and other factors. As we will explore in later chapters, the *ratio* of players to organizers is sometimes important, especially when e.g., working with vulnerable groups or playing a scenario that requires a lot of interaction from the facilitators. If you are running a small transformative leisure freeform game, you may perform the roles of an entire organizing team by yourself. If you are running a therapeutic tabletop game, you might handle the run-time facilitation while an additional mental health professional observes and helps with emotional processing.

In addition to your core team, when running larger larps, especially on location, several additional roles are likely needed, including cooks, medics, etc. You may have multiple facilitators: some responsible for workshops and debriefs, and others responsible for run-time narrative facilitation. Other team roles that might be needed throughout the implementation planning process include:

- Project manager
- Producer
- Accountant
- Physical logistics specialist
- Scenographer
- Communication specialist
- Safety specialist
- Accessibility specialist
- Cultural consultant / sensitivity reader
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion specialist
- Education specialist
- Therapeutic specialist
- Workshop designer
- Documentation lead
- Worldbuilder
- Narrative designer

- Character writer
- Sound designer
- Graphic designer

Run-time roles include:

- Game runner(s)
- NPCs and support characters
- Onsite crew
- Facilitators
- Safety team
- Medics
- Mental health professional or paraprofessional
- Educator
- Documentarian, e.g., photographer, researcher, or journalist

We will discuss these roles in more detail in Chapter 3.

In some cases, you will have a team for a specific role such as safety, in which case one or more people might serve as the lead.

Importantly, sustainable implementation design focuses on efficiency in an effort to avoid the *infinite hours* model of organizing, in which members of the team work themselves to exhaustion, sometimes on game aspects with minimal player impact (Pettersson 2021). This issue is especially important to consider in terms of the logistical and health challenges potential illness might bring (Deutsch 2025).

As role-playing games are a passion for many organizers, burnout can also occur (Holkar 2022; Bailly 2023), especially when *harmonious passion* transitions into *obsessive passion* (Dalpé et al. 2019). Harmonious passion indicates a high degree of work involvement without negative consequences, whereas obsessive passion can lead to detrimental effects. Therefore, the right balance of organizers can make a tremendous difference not just for the player experience, but also the well-being of the organizing team. Furthermore, pre-planning can go a long way, such as creating checklists for organizers that include a timeline for each day with important tasks that need completing.

Some guiding questions include:

- How many members will your core organizing team include?
- How many external volunteers, consultants, or other contributors will you include?
- What roles do each of these members have during the design phase?

- What roles do each of these members have during the implementation phase?
- How will the space be arranged in which the organizers run the larp? Do they have places to communicate confidentially as a team, or rest if needed?
- How will you make sure tasks are completed?

We will discuss many of these topics in more detail in Chapter 3.

g) Facilitation

An especially important organizer role is facilitation. As mentioned before, facilitation refers to the delivery of the pre-, during, or post-game content.

Workshop and *debrief facilitators* focus on the framing of the game in terms of the transformative impacts, as well as emotional and physical safety considerations. Workshops may also contain *briefing* materials about the game world, relevant contextual information, learning materials, or logistical aspects.

Run-time facilitators, sometimes called *storytellers* or *game masters*, help the players negotiate the fiction in important ways. Some games have a highly active facilitator who determines how all conflicts are resolved and/or presents the fiction of the world beyond the player-characters. However, in some cases, the facilitator may be entirely passive, invisible, or even non-existent, although for support reasons, such a design might not be desirable when running games for transformative impacts.

A *non-player character* (NPC) is a type of run-time facilitator who plays a role and interacts with players in-character in order to serve some sort of narrative or logistical function (Stenros 2013), while a *supporting character* aims to help guide the player's experience in-game (Fido-Fairfax 2024). These characters can be quite simple with very little backstory or agency, or highly psychologically complex. In some cases, such characters are embedded in the game and secretly serve a narrative function unbeknownst to the players, whereas in others, their purpose is transparent to the participants.

Consider the following questions:

- How many facilitators will you need vs. your desired number?
- What responsibilities should each of these facilitators have during the implementation phase?
- How will run-time storytelling occur?
- Are external responsible parties/stakeholders required, i.e. teachers or counselors? If so, will they help facilitate or remain off-game?
- Do you need NPCs and/or supporting characters? If so:
 - What are their functions?
 - What will their experience be like?

- How are they defined for the players?
- Are they intended to undergo transformative effects as well?
- If so, how do you account for them undergoing this process in your design, e.g., if the process becomes emotionally overwhelming for them?

As facilitation is an important and complex topic, we have devoted Chapter 4 to discussing it in detail.

Keep in mind that your initial plans will likely evolve over time. For example, at a later stage of development, you may include a game activity that makes clear you need extra facilitators. Figure out what are the bare minimum logistical considerations for your design and whether these are achievable with your team and resources. If not, you may have to adjust your plan, gather more resources, or recruit new team members. Furthermore, we strongly suggest performing a risk assessment and planning for potential safety issues ahead of time, which we cover in more depth in Chapter 5.

1.4 Before the Game

The majority of your implementation plan will be developed in the Before the Game stage. This chapter will offer some initial considerations, with many additional details offered in Chapter 3.

a) Game design and implementation

Many choices will become clearer when you finalize key features of your scaled up game design, which may evolve as your implementation plan becomes more detailed. This section will explore some of these factors.

i) Game activities

One of the most important considerations is what additional game activities and/or modules you will add to your original game. If you are scaling up, you will likely need to add more scenes, characters, plots, rituals, and/or other activities. The amount of activities depends heavily on the degree to which you are scaling up. We can be tempted to add more complexity to our game when we have more time with players. However, additional complexity can sometimes distract from the previously designed and well-considered activities tied to their respective transformative impacts in your nano-game, so caution is advised.

What specific activities or modules will you prepare? What intended transformational goals and/or learning objectives do these activities have? Are these goals the same as the nano-game or are they new? If new, are they compatible with the previous goals? As an example, if your previous goal was improving teamwork skills and you decide to include a one-person puzzle to train critical thinking that takes hours to complete, those goals may not align. You might want to adjust this exercise to

make it more like a puzzle room, e.g., giving each player a piece of the larger puzzle and requiring them to coordinate to succeed. Furthermore, if each individual character has win conditions that incentivize competitive behavior, such a design might undermine your goal of teamwork.

Designing can be fun and rewarding, especially when we get into a creative flow. However, we may become attached to ideas that interfere with or distract from the transformative goals. We recommend returning back to your goals and refining your activities accordingly in a consistent iterative process as you scale, ideally with smaller playtests of the new content.

ii) Creation

Different play cultures have different norms around the creation of the fiction (Stark 2016). Some play cultures expect the player to generate a character, but the rest of the world is narrated by the facilitator. Other play cultures have pre-designed characters that the players are expected to faithfully inhabit to maintain the carefully designed fiction. Sometimes, the player chooses these pre-designed characters, and in other cases the organizers cast them according to the perceived needs of the game and/or strengths of the player. In some games, worldbuilding and character creation occur before the game, and in other games, such as in the tabletop RPG *Apocalypse World* (Baker and Baker 2016), they happen during the game through improvisational co-creation.

Another aspect of creation to consider is the degree to which players can spontaneously create fiction through emergent play during run-time. While all role-playing games feature this element to some degree, some scenarios are more flexible than others in terms of player agency. Your nano-games likely featured restrictions on what players could and could not do, whether stated explicitly or not, especially if you wanted them to engage in a specific activity or type of discussion. For example, is magic allowed in this scenario? If so, is it governed by strict rules? Or can players invent the way it works in the moment during play?

From a transformational perspective, all of these design features have pros and cons. Watching one's own player-created character organically evolve over time can be incredibly powerful, especially when tied toward one's own understanding of their identities and life stories (Bowman 2010; Bowman and Hugaas 2021). On the other hand, restrictions can paradoxically afford agency to engage in certain behaviors because of the constraints. Being handed a character can give players more *alibi*, i.e., permission to behave in ways that might be socially problematic or embarrassing in daily life (Deterding 2018). For example, if the transformative goals of a game involve *shadow work*, i.e., playing with undesirable aspects of the personal or collective unconscious as a means to process or come into balance with them (Bowman 2025), then being cast as the villain and being expected to behave in accordance with the shadow might feel safer than generating one's own character. Finally, sometimes the experience is more about experiencing a lack of agency than empowerment, e.g.,

as a means of awareness raising (see e.g., the larp *Prisoner for a Day*, Aarebrot and Nielsen 2012).

Some guiding questions when considering co-creation and player agency:

- Who is responsible for the creation of the fiction?
- How will worldbuilding and character creation occur?
- Is there casting?
- To what degree can player choices impact the game during runtime, i.e., what is their degree of agency?

b) Logistics, production, and atmosphere

Logistics refers to a large range of considerations related to this specific run of your game. In larps, key practical factors are tied to the physical location, including food, sleeping arrangements, sanitation, weather, transportation, physical safety, and accessibility. Other considerations are more atmospheric in nature, including scenographic design such as sound and lighting; narrative elements such as props and costumes; and other spatial design such as designated areas for physical combat.

Another aspect to consider is: what *tools* will be needed for the game to be implemented? Here, tools is a general term referring to the specific items needed for implementation and play. Costumes and props are tools, but so are printers for character sheets. Any sort of required technology fits into this category, for example VR goggles or a smartphone with a specific app installed.

While short freeform and tabletop sessions can be less logistically complex, we advise that you still consider these factors. For example, would your tabletop game be enhanced with music? Or might music distract players with specific sensory needs? Does your freeform game involve yelling? If so, do you have a location private enough to not disturb outsiders? Do players need to bring their own dice, pencils, and character sheets to your tabletop game, or will you provide them? All of these factors should be considered when planning *production*. Production refers to all of the logistical elements necessary to successfully implement a game.

Ultimately, even production decisions should connect to your transformative goals. Do the atmospheric elements you want to add enhance or distract from specific activities or skills you want players to perform? For example, searching a castle for a super cool magical sword prop might be fun, but may distract from your goals if the characters are supposed to be practicing their political debate skills in one room. If certain elements are at risk of distracting from your goals, how will you mitigate this issue? In some cases, the distraction might be worth it, e.g., if players are allowed to pursue side plots that may encourage personally transformative moments relevant to their specific needs.

We will discuss logistics, production, and atmosphere in greater depth in Chapter 3.

i) Economy

Related to these topics, the economy of the project should be a primary consideration throughout the implementation process, especially after your design sketch is done. Economy here should include all necessary costs, including preparing for potential losses, accidents, or insurance requirements. Economy includes the budget, financing, and accounting. When working in funded projects, economy also includes reporting to the funding bodies and providing documentation of costs upon request.

The economy should include approximations and/or limits on the amount of work hours each organizer will contribute. These hours may be paid, but in many cases are donated as volunteer work. Even volunteer hours should be considered in the overall economy; after all, human time and effort is also a resource. Such practices can help address the *infinite hours* issue mentioned before, in which organizers spend the majority of their time and energy engaged in larp-related tasks, many of which may be unnecessary or redundant (Pettersson 2021), leading to a high risk of burnout. Such costs may make the project untenable.

c) Technology

As mentioned before, the inclusion of technology can add elements of enhanced engagement and accessibility in the right contexts. However, it can also interfere with the role-playing process and potentially affect the transformative potential of the game. As with all the other elements of this chapter, the inclusion of technology should be carefully considered throughout the design process. This planning is especially important if technological elements will be developed for the game itself, such as custom apps, VR environments, virtual representations of characters, or other factors. Inclusion of tech will also likely affect other aspects of production, necessitating special equipment, for example, access to power outlets, internet access, and other factors.

Because the topic of the inclusion of technology is too complex to cover sufficiently in this book, we have created the *Erasmus+ EDGE Tech Toolkit* (Suominen 2025), which details the possibilities and risks of including various advanced technologies into role-playing games. [You can access the link to the Toolkit here](#). In the meantime, here are some questions to consider:

- What basic and/or analog technologies do you plan to include, if any? These might include basic sound and light setups, analog dial-up telephones, projectors, etc.
- What advanced and/or digital technologies do you plan to include, if any? These might include virtual, augmented, or mixed reality, as well as AI.
- What considerations should you make ahead of time to ensure such technology is possible to implement?

- How will technology contribute to the goals of your game?
- Will technology be necessary for successful game play? If so, what risks are present?
- Should you include more embodied or less embodied tech, e.g., 2D versus 3D tech in larp?
- Are there any safety considerations with using these forms of tech?
- Is the game still playable if the tech fails? How disruptive will tech failures be to the game experience?

In some cases, the inclusion of tech may be central to your transformative goals, and therefore should be foregrounded in your implementation plan, e.g., if your goal is to increase player interest and confidence with computing through the in-game use of wearables (Fey et al. 2022). In others, tech might just be an augment to the core experience. In others still, tech might be fully integrated to the story and essential to the way characters interface with the game, e.g., through the use of QR codes and apps (Webb 2015).

d) Framing

In our model, *framing* refers to the activities before, during, and after the game that are intended to support your transformative impacts. The experience of play can sometimes be accidentally or incidentally transformative. For example, inhabiting a confident, wealthy, and or confident character can lead to transformative insights, e.g., for players struggling with low self-esteem due to depression (Grønningsæter 2021) or poverty (Ford 2021). Alternatively, a player may access deeper levels of grief or be able to process grief experiences more completely through leisure play (Clapper 2016; Greywood 2025). Some players may intentionally play a leisure game with the intention of deep emotional processing of personal content (Velilla 2026). Since we are implementing with specific impacts in mind, the framing surrounding the game can help direct the intentionality accordingly for players.

At minimum, we recommend plenty of time for workshop activities before your game and debriefing after your game. While many designers focus almost exclusively on the game play and leave the workshops and debriefs as an afterthought (Baillly 2024), our model requires carefully designed framing activities. Workshops allow you to onboard your participants on to the intentionality of the game in terms of desired impacts; the logistics of the game site; the safety structures; the game world; their characters; and their relations (Holkar 2015), e.g., by enacting scenes guided by organizers pre-game (Holkar 2021).

Importantly, if you have key skills or activities you want participants to practice in play, also called *exercises*, you can present warm-up activities in the workshop that teach them this skill (Hernø 2025), which can help them more confidently and frequently engage in that activity during play. If you need to teach them important

information, do so before the game, not during, or else they might be too distracted during play to remember it.

Similarly, we recommend at least one de-roling activity after the game in which they clearly step out of character and back into their daily identity, followed by a debrief, whether structured (Brown 2018), semi-structured, or unstructured. The debrief should focus exclusively on processing their play experience and focus on questions geared toward your transformative goals.

As with your nano-game, any additional questions you add should be structured for emotional, intellectual, and/or educational processing depending on the type of game and target group. We recommend all longer games start with at least one emotional processing question, as sometimes cognitive processing can be difficult before strong emotions are expressed, acknowledged, and witnessed by others. Intellectualizing processes can create emotional distance, which can be helpful for analysis, but can also bypass key emotional processes important to transformation, e.g., sitting in the discomfort of complicated feelings around one's character's actions.

Intellectual debrief questions focus on more general reflections on a topic or theme, whereas educational processing questions are specifically structured around learning objectives. In terms of educational processing, such questions might guide players to make *connections* between the experience and specific curricular content; engage in *abstraction*, in which they relate takeaways from the experience to the wider outside world; or experience *contextualization*, in which they learn additional content about the topic, e.g., facts, personal experiences. See Chapter 4 of *TRGD* for more information about designing the framing.

In summary, here are some guiding questions when designing the framing:

- How will you frame the game according to your desired transformative impacts and/or learning objectives?
- What workshops will you include and how will they contribute to the desired transformative impacts?
- How will debriefing take place? What are the new questions to be added, if any?
- What other post-game processing activities do you have planned?

e) Support and safety

Critical to our model of transformative play is community support and emotional safety. Community support is often necessary for processing experiences before, during, and after the game. Having a supportive play group can help extend the *transformational container* (Baird and Bowman 2022) beyond the game itself, for example, checking in with debrief buddies in the months after the game and holding space for their reflections related to the process.

Psychological safety allows players to surrender their vigilance during play and feel more comfortable bravely taking risks and trying new things (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). While no game can claim to be completely safe and safety is, to a certain degree, a perception, implementation practices that establish, maintain, reinforce, and repair the container can help the space feel safer for players. (For more information, see Chapters 2 and 5 of TRGD).

Therefore, considering the support and safety structures that will be presented and upheld during play is a vital part of our model. These structures need not be complex, but they should be robust, meaning that players should feel supported and contained when boundaries are tested. Explaining, practicing, and modeling safety mechanics are examples of such strategies. Clearly indicating who the members of the safety team are, listing their time availability, and showing players the location of the safety room are other examples.

Physical safety is another critical aspect of implementation. Engaging in risk assessment and mitigation, for example, can help address problems before they arise (Sinking Ship Creations 2020; Losilla 2024). Such risks include food allergies, combat injuries, and dehydration among others. When working with external stakeholders such as parents or school officials, being able to articulate risks while avoiding overemphasizing their potential to occur is a challenging, but important skill. In other words, we cannot create a risk-free space, especially since transformation itself is inherently risky to some degree, but we can create a more aware space in which certain risks are acceptable (Rikard and Villarreal 2023).

Support and safety are, to a certain degree, the responsibility of everyone involved: the designers, organizers, facilitators, players, and other stakeholders. In transformative play, a certain degree of support and mutual commitment to safety is expected. However, all parties must also be mindful of their personal limits. Ideally, you will have a plan for requesting additional support when needed if a player's needs exceed organizers' competencies or capacities, such as external parties in some cases. Players should know when the safety team should get involved, but also the safety team should know when an external mental health professional should be called in situations of extreme distress or crisis.

Finally, support and safety should be considered at all stages of the design and implementation process, ideally in collaboration with external stakeholders and safety team members (Berthold 2024).

While we will discuss these topics in more depth in Chapter 6, some questions to consider at this stage are:

- How will facilitators support players before, during, and after play?
- What can players expect in terms of support vs. what is beyond the scope of organizers' competencies and capabilities?

- How will players be instructed to support one another before, during, and after play?
- What safety mechanics and/or techniques will you include?
- If relevant, how will additional responsible parties support learning and emotional well-being beyond the game experience, e.g., parents, teachers, or counselors?

f) Interaction

Other important factors to consider are various aspects related to interaction. In our model, analog role-playing games are inherently social activities to greater or lesser degrees. In traditional tabletop role-playing games, the players often interact heavily with the facilitator in- and off-game, who acts as both storyteller and rules arbiter, while also inhabiting every aspect of the fiction outside of the player-characters, including all other characters and the world itself. This model requires not only a tremendous amount of interaction, but also a reliance and even an incentivization to role-play with the facilitator, even if interpersonal dynamics with other player-characters are important to the group.

In GM-less games such as *Dream Askew* (Alder 2018), these responsibilities are divided up among the players, such that they interact only with each other and not a dedicated facilitator, whether in the guise of their character, as an aspect of the game world, or as an NPC. Larps are often similarly designed, with the main interaction occurring between player-characters rather than facilitators, although this varies from play culture to play culture.

If you are implementing a transformative game that requires your expert facilitation skills, then an emphasis on facilitator interaction might be desirable, e.g., when inserting a therapeutic exercise into the game or guiding players through a specific emotional process. On the other hand, if your goals are suited toward prosocial development, teamwork, or persuasion skills, you might consider implementation practices that direct player attention toward each other, e.g., the facilitator-run NPC leaving the scene for several minutes to encourage interaction between players.

Consider also the activities you are asking the players to do during run-time. How do they affect interaction? Are you incentivizing, for example, interacting with a computer terminal at a spaceship bridge larp? Are the characters required to do complex puzzle solving or math? If so, do those processes connect with your goals, e.g., to improve problem solving skills? Or do they distract from interacting with each other?

Whatever you choose, as always, reflect on how your decision might affect your desired transformative impacts.

Guiding questions for interaction include:

- How will players interact with each other during the game?
- How will players interface with the facilitator and/or NPCs?
- How will players establish character relations?
- How will they interact with the game world and/or environment?

g) Communication

Communication is another important factor in implementation, e.g., communication within the organizing team, between organizers and players, and between players. In some cases, this net extends beyond the play group, for example, if your game is discussed on social media. As we mentioned above, some games have a dedicated role for communication on the organizing team, ideally not someone who is also handling many other logistical tasks. Before and after the game, communication here includes email, social media, website, video calls, text messages, and face-to-face discussions. Communication during the game is also important, for example knowing how to contact organizers who do not have run-time facilitation duties if possible.

Organizers should clearly communicate all the information players need to know before the game in any promotional materials such as websites (Hannula 2015; Elofsson and Lundkvist 2017). For example, sharing accessibility details or content advisories before a game on the website can help players manage expectations and decide whether or not to opt-in (Koljonen 2016). For smaller scale games such as tabletop, sharing such details in an email or over chat may suffice. The important thing is that everyone is aware of important factors that could affect their participation.

Another aspect to consider is the degree to which players should be encouraged to communicate with each other before the game, as well as your relative involvement with that process. Should players engage in pre-game role-play or planning before arriving at the game site (Svanevik and Brind 2016)? Or will that expectation put some players at a disadvantage, e.g., those without as much free time? Will you create a social media community for them to join? If so, who will moderate the posts there, if anyone? What happens if a conflict erupts? Who is responsible for responding publicly or privately on behalf of the team?

Some guiding questions regarding communication are:

- How will you promote this game and recruit players?
- Through what channels will organizers communicate with players throughout the process? How often will you contact them?
- How can players contact you before, during, and after the game session(s)? How often will you be available for contact?
- Will players be able to contact each other before the game? If so, by what means? Are they allowed to engage in pre-game role-play or planning? Or is that discouraged?

h) Preparation

Related to communication, you should also make players aware of any preparations needed to ensure smooth implementation. Should they coordinate travel with other players or calibrate boundaries before the game? Do they need to memorize any lore or rules related to the game? Do they need to bring anything, such as towels or their completed character sheet? Would other preparations be nice to have but not necessary, such as bringing an instrument for the musical ritual that will take place around the bonfire at midnight?

Connected to logistics is the question: what preparations do you and any other organizers need to make before play can begin? We will discuss preparations in more detail in Chapter 3.

i) Documentation

An increasingly relevant topic related to implementation is documentation. Documentation refers to practices such as publishing the game design document or larp script, but also to academic and journalistic accounts of the game. These accounts may be geared toward the public as popular sources, or published as scholarly sources, e.g., in research articles. They may be written by designers, organizers, players, or even third-party witnesses in some cases.

Some players love documentation of their characters, especially photos and written accounts of play, whereas others find such documentation too exposing (Pettersson 2015). Documenting during the larp, for example with an in- or off-game photographer, can momentarily disrupt the immersion process for some players or lead to self-consciousness. Documenters should be careful where and how they share photos or videos with sensitive content, as such images could be misconstrued out of context (MacDonald 2015); some players risk losing their job or security clearance, or might face confrontations with disapproving family members if such documentation became public.

Documentation of transformative play is a particularly sensitive issue and has a number of ethical challenges related to it. On one hand, we need more data on both the negative and positive effects of role-playing games, especially from a research perspective (see Chapter 7 of TRGD). On the other hand, players may feel inhibited or judged if a researcher is watching them or documenting, particularly if that person is not also a participant. Establishing trust between documenters and players is an important part of the process. Ideally, documenters are part of the *in-group* (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1979), meaning they are role-players themselves.

Consent for documentation should be obtained, for example sharing photos after the game and allowing players to request removal of photos of themselves within a period of two weeks before the photos are released outside the play group. Being clear about where and how the documentation will be used is also important, as well as being as responsive as possible if someone removes consent after publication. Let players

know what is and is not possible, e.g., removing a photo from an article on Nordiclarp.org might be a relatively easy process, whereas removing documentation from an edited academic journal might not be possible.

For smaller games, this might feel less important, but keep in mind that role-playing games are still stigmatized activities in certain communities. At the very least, the transformative process itself is a vulnerable one and we should try to help players feel protected when revealing their vulnerability to the group.

Some considerations around documentation:

- Will there be a game design document and larp script? If so, does it contain all the instructions needed for play?
- How will you document the game before, during, and after, if at all?
- How will you obtain consent for documentation?
- In what contexts or publication venues will documentation be used? Be specific.

j) Economic, environmental, and social sustainability

Finally, due to issues related to climate transition, we find it important to remind you to consider sustainability in your implementation practices. We include here:

- Economic sustainability, referring to minimizing the costs associated with producing and playing these games;
- Environmental sustainability, referring to minimizing the impacts of these activities on our planet; and
- Social sustainability, referring to organizing and playing in a more personally and socially resilient way (Deutsch 2025).

Environmental sustainability, for example, can include finding methods to travel in a less harmful way, e.g., in the case of international larps; using reusable materials instead of disposable ones, e.g., cutlery and props; storing reusable items in a relatively inexpensive way; and offering vegetarian or vegan food instead of meat. In general, we recommend referring to the UN's Sustainability Goals and consider which ones are most relevant to your role-playing game practice.

1.5 During the Game

Many designers tend to focus on the game design itself rather than runtime logistics, which is understandable. Game design can be, after all, quite fun, and scaling up your game to include new game modules might be a highly engaging activity. However, your game may fail completely without a strong plan for implementation during the game. Therefore, you will need to make clear and structured plans for tasks needing to occur during the runtime, tasks that are often not present in the Game

Design Document itself but are still necessary. Examples include preparing the space, briefing facilitators, running the game itself, debriefing, and cleaning the space. We will discuss these factors in more detail in Chapter 3.

1.6 After the Game

Similarly, many organizing teams spend their energy preparing for the game and running it, rather than thinking about what happens when everyone leaves. However, how participants integrate the experience after the larp is likely just as important to the transformative process as the game itself, if not more important. If a player has a profound realization about their identity during a game, but does not take steps after the game to integrate the insights from this realization, the transformation process might be interrupted.

a) Integration

Consider what integration processes you will recommend, facilitate, or brief others on how to facilitate. Which practices are possible and/or most appropriate for your target group? Which processes are beyond the scope of what you can offer to facilitate, but good to recommend to players?

Examples of integration practices include:

- *Creative expression* through writing about the game events from that character's perspective;
- *Intellectual analysis* through writing a paper on the topic;
- *Emotional processing* alone through writing in one's journal about one's feelings related to the experience;
- *Interpersonal processing* through discussion about how the events during the game are part of one's own transformative process;
- *Community building* through creating a weekly meetup with co-players to continue the transformative process; and
- *Returning to daily life* through deciding how many of the character's costume pieces will be integrated into one's own wardrobe.

See Chapter 2 of *TRGD* and this textbook for more examples.

b) Post-game emotional safety

Another underestimated area is the need for post-game emotional safety. Longer games can be more intense and therefore more emotionally and physically exhausting both for you and your players. Some guiding questions:

- In what ways will you encourage organizers to recover after a game, e.g., self-care, breaks from game-related engagement, and boundaries with players?
- How will you encourage post-game practices for players related to emotional safety, e.g., aftercare, journaling, and additional debriefing? See Chapters 3 and 5 for examples.

c) Feedback

While many of us would love for our games to be “perfect” the first time we run them, realistically such assessments are not likely or even possible. Different players have distinct interests and needs with regard to game play, as we will see in Chapter 6 of this book. Feedback is often necessary to see what aspects of the game worked and what aspects require further iteration. Consider the following:

- How will you gather feedback?
- How will your team interpret the results of the feedback? How can you encourage them to approach feedback with curiosity and openness rather than defensiveness?
- How can you discern the difference between player preferences and critical issues with the game needing adjustment?
- How will you iterate based on this feedback?

See Chapter 3 for strategies for obtaining post-game feedback.

1.7 Summary

This chapter has provided a brief overview of many topics relevant to role-playing game implementation with an emphasis on transformative play. We will cover details for several of these categories in future chapters, including best practices when implementing for certain target groups, logistical concerns, safety strategies, facilitation advice, and research implementation. We will deepen into these topics starting with Chapter 2, which will detail best practices when working in specific transformative play contexts, e.g., in transformative leisure, therapeutic, or educational settings.

While we acknowledge these considerations may seem daunting, we encourage you to be brave, go forth, and implement, as the world needs more transformative play.

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CHAPTER 2

Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games in Specific Applied Contexts

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2.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses specifically on additional considerations when applying role-playing games in specific contexts, i.e., running *interventions* with target groups. Transformative leisure, therapeutic, and educational games each have unique concerns regarding implementation factors, as do working with specific target groups and in particular applied settings. While we cannot give a comprehensive roadmap for implementing in these various contexts, this chapter is intended to provide a starting place when planning for more complex applied role-playing situations. We will discuss more general logistics and production in Chapter 3 and facilitation in Chapter 4.

Importantly, in our model, games themselves do not change people. Instead, participants engage in games with a certain unconscious or conscious willingness to change; experience situations in play that may catalyze processes of change; and then must reflect and take action after the game to integrate desired change. Thus, games are better understood as catalysts that help jumpstart change that occur within larger processes of transformation than causes of transformation themselves. This textbook is intended to help you optimize their potency within these overall processes.

2.2 A review of transformative role-playing game design

a) Transformative goals

As a reminder from *Transformative Role-Playing Game Design (TRGD)*, Bowman, Diakolambrianou, and Brind eds. (2024), our model involves several components in order to be considered a transformative game design.

First, the designers should establish transparent, intentional goals for the scenario, which can be predetermined, designed in collaboration with the participants, or both. These goals should be appropriate to the type of game you are designing. Is your game

meant to be run in a leisure setting for people in their spare time? Is your game meant to be run in an educational setting? Or is your game part of a therapeutic intervention? As we will see, the goals can be similar in all three settings, but the framing structures and articulation of the goals will likely change.

Here are some examples of broader categories and more specific goals associated with them (Bowman and Hugaas 2019):

1. **Educational Goals:** Examples include critical thinking, systems thinking, problem solving, perceived competence, motivation;
2. **Emotional Processing:** Examples include identity exploration, identifying / expressing emotions, processing grief / trauma, practicing boundaries;
3. **Social Cohesion:** Examples include leadership, teamwork, collaboration, practicing communication skills, community building; and
4. **Political Aims:** Examples include awareness raising, perspective taking, empathy, conflict transformation, paradigm shifting.

Another way to identify goals is to consider: Are the desired impacts primarily *cognitive*, *affective*, or *behavioral*, or some overlap in between? In other words, are you trying to help participants to *think* in a certain way or reflect upon their own thinking patterns? Do you want players to *feel* a certain way or come into contact with their emotional landscape? Or do you want to encourage them to *behave* in a certain way regarding their actions in the world and interactions with others?

Note that such goals should always emphasize the consent, willpower, and identities of the individuals in question; we are not using role-playing games to change people into who we want them to be, but rather inviting them to change based on their own volition and inclination. Furthermore, we are interested in types of change that cultivate greater peace and justice for oneself and all others in society, not types of change that emphasize exclusionary or discriminatory thinking or valuing one group of people over another. Broadly speaking, we consider these prosocial and progressive goals. Thus, role-playing games can become a vehicle for increased self-actualization, agency, and ability to help ourselves and others get our needs met in society outside of the game.

For more on transformative goals, our theoretical model of transformation, and the research on the benefits of role-playing games, see Chapters 2, 3, and 7 of *TRGD*.

b) Structure of a transformative role-playing game

These role-playing games are best undertaken within a supportive *transformational container* (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Baird and Bowman 2022). Ideally, the play group of the specific game -- and members of the wider community of transformative play advocates -- can serve this role for each other before, during, and after play.

The following components form the structure of a transformative role-playing game in our model. As discussed in more depth in Chapter 6 of *TRGD*, role-playing

games are a ritual activity at their core (Long 2026). Rituals are highly important and potent methods of reinforcing group cohesion in human culture. They have three main phases: preparation, liminal, and return (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1995).

i) Safety structures

Throughout the design and implementation of your game, you should consider which safety structures to integrate, including both physical and psychological safety. While no space can ever be fully safe, transformative play requires players to perceive themselves as safe enough to lower their vigilance during play and dare to try new things. While we recommend having at least one member on your safety team when implementing, upholding safety structures should be the responsibility of everyone in the process, including the designers, organizers, and players themselves. We discuss safety in more detail in Chapters 5 in *TRGD* and Chapter 5 of this book.

ii) Workshops

To more robustly ritualize the role-playing experience and help frame the activity, we recommend clear starting and ending phases. Workshops are an excellent way to start a game. They can include activities for example that brief players on key information they will need; guide them through practicing key skills or interactions they will use in the game; encourage them to try any safety mechanics included; and develop their characters and in-game relations with others. See Chapters 2 and 4 in *TRGD* and Chapters 3, 4, and 5 in this book.

iii) Game play

This phase can take many forms, but from a ritual perspective, it serves as the entrance into *liminality* (Turner 1995): the space in which social roles and behaviors can change within a community for a specific purpose, i.e., the role-playing game itself. Game play should focus as concretely on your transformative goals as possible and remove activities that might distract from them. For example, if you want your participants to practice complex systems thinking, including a strong romance plot might derail that activity. On the other hand, such a plot might make the stakes more personally relatable and motivating for the participants if it was tied directly to play activities related to the system. This consideration is especially important when scaling up a smaller game with relatively simple design to add one or more of the following: a more complex design, more players, additional mechanics, comprehensive lore, and/or a larger play space.

iv) Debriefing

All transformative games in our model require some sort of debriefing: a processing exercise that serves as the closing ritual of the game. The first stage should involve some sort of *de-roling*, a short ritualized activity in which players indicate they are exiting the character, e.g., taking off an article of costuming, saying, “I was Hathor, I am now Jan.” Then, players should process the experience in some meaningful way, usually through serious discussion, as opposed to more relaxed and entertaining regaling of memories after the game.

Debriefs can be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured. We recommend structured debriefs, in which each player is asked the same question and given roughly the same amount of time to share about their own experience, moderated by a facilitator or group leader. Crosstalk between participants should be discouraged and players should focus on their own experience. Depending on your goals, you may structure these questions to focus more on *emotional*, *intellectual*, or *educational* debrief questions, which are tied to your transformative goals and the setting. Their responses to these questions will help them distill takeaways to aid in their transformative process. See Chapters 2, 4, and 5 in *TRGD* for details.

v) Integration strategies

Finally, we recommend including some integration strategies in your design. Integration practices help participants to continue processing their takeaways from the experience in their daily lives, as well as instigate and maintain processes of long-term change. Examples include (Bowman and Hugaas 2019; qtd. from Bowman et al. 2024):

1. **Creative Expression:** Integrating their experiences by creating new works of art.
2. **Intellectual Analysis:** Engaging in cognitive processing by analyzing their experiences on an intellectual level.
3. **Emotional Processing:** Processing emotional content of their experiences, either individually, one-on-one, or in a group setting.
4. **Returning to Daily Life:** Transitioning from the headspace of the game frame to that of their daily lives and identities.
5. **Interpersonal Processing:** Processing relationally to transition from the social frames of the game to their off-game interpersonal dynamics.
6. **Community Building:** Creating or transforming existing communities around them.

If integration processes are not undertaken, takeaways from the experience may have no long-term effects or, worse, have negative effects. If a person has started a process of transformation, such as gaining increased confidence through their character, then fail to integrate this belief about their own abilities, they may end up reinforcing a *limiting belief*, e.g., they are less capable than they are and attribute that trait only to the character and fictional setting.

Therefore, in our model, games themselves do not change people. Instead, participants engage in games with a certain unconscious or conscious willingness to change; experience situations in play that may catalyze processes of change; then must reflect and take action after the game to integrate desired change.

Note that many of these integrative processes are beyond the scope of the design and organizing team's responsibility. We recommend assessing what integration practices the implementation team is willing to offer, such as assigning debrief buddies to check in with each other and process after the larp. Other activities can be recommended, such as sharing a list of ways in which players can integrate the

experience, or better yet deputizing someone within the play group willing to lead others in these activities. This latter practice incentivizes collective responsibility for the integration process, as well as a greater commitment to leadership and support among the player base. For examples from our own design practice, see later in this chapter.

For a deeper dive on implementing framing practices, see the latter sections of this chapter, as well as Chapter 3 and 4 of this book.

2.3 Hacking existing games for transformative purposes

A common and less-time intensive strategy is adapting existing role-playing games for use in applied settings. The most common example is *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*, Gygax and Arneson 1974), considered the first RPG. To this day, *D&D* is the most commonly played game in its various editions and permutations, with the 5th edition considered the most friendly to new players due to its more accessible approach.

D&D is a fantasy role-playing game in which a small adventuring party embarks on quests, often with epic outcomes. The game encourages a large degree of creativity of action and self-expression through its magical world. Therefore, theory, practice, and empirical evidence is increasingly demonstrating how *Dungeons & Dragons* is an important site for players in leisure settings, offering benefits in, for example:

- **Exploring identity** (Bowman 2010; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Davis and Johns 2020; Atanasio 2020);
- **Experiencing gains in mental health** (Walsh and Linehan 2024; Baker, Turner, and Kotera 2022; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022);
- **Practicing democratic decision making** (Adams 2013; Garcia 2016; Haarman 2023),
- **Developing moral and ethical skills** (Hollander 2021; Wright et al. 2020);
- **Participating in problem solving** (Bowman 2010; Atanasio 2020; Daniau 2016; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Varrette et al. 2020); and
- **Practicing creative thinking** (Carter 2011; Dyson et al. 2015; Chung 2013) and expression (Walsh and Linehan 2024).

Notably, the development of such skills have been either theorized or empirically supported outside of applied settings. Indeed, many practitioners have “a-ha moments” during their own leisure play, realizing games like *D&D* could be helpful in other contexts, such as in more intentionally transformative leisure settings, therapy, or education. Others become interested in RPGs and want to learn more after already having a solid professional background, e.g., in counseling or youth work. Whether your entry point is as an experienced gamer or a professional who is new to RPGs, a viable approach is to integrate an existing system into your practice rather than designing a new game from scratch.

In our model, adapting existing games requires *hacking* the game for your desired transformative impacts and constructing the framing around the game accordingly. For example, you may include more targeted workshops and debriefs, or recommend specific integration activities relevant to your goals. In terms of game play, you may adjust plots and in-game activities, e.g., to foster more prosocial behaviors through meaningful moral dilemmas or situations that can be solved non-violently (cf. Albom 2021).

As Kilmer et al. (2023) discuss, you may choose to remove many of the mechanics or to handle all mechanics yourself to reduce the cognitive load and make the game easier to access for new players. Alternatively, you might choose a more story-focused game with less mechanics if you are focusing primarily on interpersonal relationships or creative thinking, such as *Kids with Bikes* (Gilmour and Levandowski 2018; see e.g., Varrette et al. 2023). On the other hand, you may wish to foster problem solving and math skills in your participants, in which case a complex rule set may offer an appropriate challenge, especially for more experienced players.

Whatever game you choose to hack, you should have a strong command of the rules and mechanics yourself. Your players should have the physical and cognitive capabilities needed for play. Furthermore, the themes and setting should be both engaging and appropriate for your population, e.g., for their age or knowledge level (Kilmer et al. 2023). Popular genres include high and low fantasy; science fiction; superhero; steampunk; horror; romance; modern and historical realism; games based on popular culture; and mixtures of these (Kilmer et al. 2023), e.g., a post-apocalyptic horror game with science fiction themes.

You also may choose to insert specific techniques from your given modality or teaching method into game moments, e.g., encouraging players to practice cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) techniques while enacting the character in the fictional setting (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Connell 2023; Bartenstein 2022, 2024; Varrette et al. 2023). Alternatively, such techniques might be integrated in the framing activities surrounding the experience, including any intensive classroom discussions or 1:1 therapeutic sessions.

If you have specific skills you want to train that require a considerable amount of practice, you might choose a more focused system or scenario. As mentioned before, the more expansive the game world and the possible actions within it, the less likely one specific activity will be practiced at length. In our transformative game design programme, we have asked students to practice their hacking and facilitation skills through:

- Simpler leisure scenarios from the Golden Cobra Challenge (2014-);
- Transformative leisure games such as from the *#Feminism* anthology (Bushyager, Stark, and Westerling, eds. 2017); and
- Existing educational scenarios with learning objectives of their own, such as in the *Roll for Learning* anthology (Zamboni, Farber, and Merchant eds. 2024).

This approach may be more effective depending on the specificity of your goals, whereas an open world might be fine for more general goals, like increasing social connectedness between players.

a) Ethical concerns when hacking existing games for applied purposes

Keep in mind that hacking existing games may come with unintended consequences based on the original design. For example, *D&D* and other games have been critiqued for problematic content and character behavior related to:

- **Violence** (Torner 2014; Albom 2021; Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2024; Dashiell 2026);
- **Reproducing exclusionary mythical norms** (Garcia 2017; Kemper 2018a, 2020b);
- **Performing problematic forms of geek masculinity** (Martin et al. 2015; Dashiell 2020; LeClaire 2020);
- **Sexism** (Nephew 2006; Trammell 2014; Stang and Trammell 2020; Stang 2021);
- **Racism** (Kemper 2018b; Mendez Hodes 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Trammell 2020; Baker 2022; Dashiell 2022; Eddy, Samantha 2023);
- **Queerphobia** (Paisley 2015; Koski 2016; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019);
- **Colonialism** (Kemper 2020a; Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020);
- **Cultural appropriation and stereotypical representations** (Kessock 2014a; Trammell 2016; Mendez Hodes 2020; Leonard 2021; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021);
- **Insufficient representation** (Long 2015, 2016; Sihvonen and Stenros 2015).

Experiencing such content or behavior can lead players from marginalized backgrounds to feel that they must pay a *fun tax* to play (Holkar 2016), accepting that their backgrounds may be represented stereotypically or erased completely from the fiction. During play, they may feel the need to *steer for survival* (Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020), e.g., trying to avoid certain content, or to hack the game from the inside to be playable. Having such experiences will likely run counter to your transformative goals. Even if players do not react strongly to such content, consider what values and behaviors the game is communicating through its structure, narrative, and mechanics, e.g., its *procedural rhetoric* (Bogost 2007). What verbs are encouraged through play (Townser and Li 2019; Brind 2022), and how might those actions be interpreted as harmful or oppressive to marginalized groups?

While many applied facilitators hack their games to address such challenges, designing a new system from scratch with similar themes might be a better approach, as the therapeutic tabletop RPG company Game to Grow has done with their game *Critical Core* (2021). In other situations, it might be advantageous to play upon such

themes if run in a consensual manner with all participants agreeing and wanting to explore them through play within a supportive safety structure. For more on these topics, see Chapters 5 and 6 of *TRGD* and Chapter 5 of this book.

Furthermore, you should consider your players' identities when choosing an existing game (Kilmer et al. 2023). For example, an Indigenous population may resonate more strongly with the game *Coyote & Crow* (Alexander, Connor, et al. 2022); an LGBTQIA+ group might find *Monsterhearts* (Alder 2017) relatable. Ultimately, you should consider the specific needs of your population and your chosen transformative goals when hacking an existing game.

2.4 Scaling up transformative game design

As discussed in Chapter 1, if not hacking an existing game, you may be designing a larger-scale implementation plan from scratch or scaling up from the nano-game design process described in *TRGD*. While this textbook will often refer to scaling up your previous design, you will likely find these recommendations helpful regardless of your entry point.

Within the transformative framework, scaling has different considerations depending on the applied setting. For example, you may take the nanogame you playtested with other students in your course and run it for a new target group, such as primary school students or trauma survivors, or in a new environment, such as a prison or museum.

We recommend keeping the following general advice in mind regardless of the context.

a) Transparency of communication and goal setting

We believe that transparency is extremely important in transformative role-playing games. We recommend communicating with your players as much as you can regarding not only the transformative goals you have for the experience, but also themes present in your game, e.g., through content advisories, ingredients lists, or consent checklists (see e.g., Reynolds and Germain 2019). You may also want to explain any other parameters of the game, such as whether it will be verbal or non-verbal and what sort of movement is required (see e.g., Wood 2022).

While many larps on serious themes have been designed for instance by the Nordic larp movement (Stenros and Montola eds. 2010) and adjacent communities, the goals of such games may not always be clearly articulated either within the design team or among the player base. For example, the Nordic larp *System Danmarc* (Opus 2005; see e.g., Munthe-Kaas 2010) was designed to explore themes of homelessness. After the multi-day larp, the organizers showed a documentary directly after the game with footage of unhoused individuals in contemporary Denmark as an awareness raising exercise. While such contextualizing framing activities are often helpful for learning, because this aspect of the design was not transparent, the exercise backfired for some players, who were unaware of these political aims of the larp and felt betrayed after this experience (Nordic Larp 2011).

As trust is essential to establish and maintain in transformational communities, we recommend designing and implementing transparently (Torner 2013), unless absolutely necessary for your goals. While secrecy can be exciting and is even expected in some communities, sensitive themes or unexpected experiences can affect the player experience negatively. Transparency of communication should happen far in advance, e.g., on the website or other promotional materials (Budin 2010), so that players have the opportunity to manage expectations and opt-out (Koljonen 2016). Having players present who are unprepared for the game to focus on transformation might cause conflicting incidents in terms of playstyle, intensity, and expectations of care.

Alternatively, if all players are ready for transformative play, the group can likely work more deeply and supportively toward their goals as an ensemble (Tolvanen and MacDonald 2020). Importantly, fully informed consent is not possible in role-playing games due to the spontaneous co-creativity inherent to the form, which is why we recommend including calibration mechanics in order to communicate preferences and needs before, during, and after play (Koljonen 2020). For example, players should also be aware of the greater expectations of care for others and off-game processing necessitated by transformative play. See Chapter 5 in *TRGD* and Chapter 5 in this book for more details on psychological safety.

b) Embracing individual goals and emergence

While setting goals for the game as a whole is important, for scaled up designs, we also recommend helping players identify individual goals for themselves. Players arrive at games with their own subjective worldview, experiences, and needs at any given moment. Some may be highly enthusiastic about your intended impacts, whereas others may be more interested in exploring other aspects of the design or themes of the game. Others still may want to experiment with aspects of their life path, identity, interpersonal dynamics, or social structures that are highly personal to their own experience. Scaled up role-playing games can often accommodate a variety of different goals.

One design approach is to consider your players as *engines of desire* (Pettersson 2021; see also Li 2012), and your job as a designer and/or organizer as providing means to meet those desires. For example, in the *College of Wizardry* (2014-) style of larps, players can request scenes from NPCs that are highly specialized for their particular emotional processing needs or story arc. If you have sufficient staff, you may be able to accommodate such requests. In other cases, players are not fully conscious of these desires or needs, but they become apparent through *emergent play* (Torner 2018). One of the skillsets of facilitating role-playing games effectively is learning how to pivot accordingly, or help shift in-game dynamics between players to meet player's needs and desires.

Alternatively, some desires may not be appropriate given the overarching goals of the game or the needs of other participants. For example, you may wish to set limits for the group up front on romantic, sexual, violent, or antagonistic play if you think it will derail or distract, e.g., from professional or prosocial skill building. Furthermore,

small actions of players in the game can form a *domino effect* through emergence that can strongly shape the game narrative for everyone and stray from your intentions (Bowman 2018). A common, somewhat rueful adage in role-playing game communities is, “No plot survives contact with the players.” This chaotic environment can sometimes be challenging in applied settings, e.g., for teachers who are used to having a strong degree of control in the classroom (Larsson 2004; Harder 2007; Hyltoft 2010; Bowman 2014). While role-playing games can likely be used to meet any goals, they cannot meet *all* goals at the same time, nor can they accommodate all emergent play, as some actions may break the structure of the game or logic of the storyworld.

Ultimately, the individual subjectivity of players and emergence in improvisational play are two of the unique features of analog role-playing games. Some of the most profound transformative impacts from these games have occurred “accidentally,” as in the examples of the incidental benefits of leisure *D&D* play. Rather than fighting against them to meet our artistic vision, we should embrace these more unpredictable forms of transformation insofar as we can. We will discuss facilitation strategies in more detail in Chapter 4.

c) Ensuring transformative goals are consistent in every element

While the actions of the characters during game play can be unpredictable and largely outside of the control of designers and organizers, what can be controlled is the number and nature of designed elements. As discussed in Chapter 3 of *TRGD*, analog role-playing games provide an exceptional amount of *alibi*, meaning social permission to behave in a wide range of ways that might be unavailable or socially scrutinized in daily life (Montola 2010; Deterding 2018). These behaviors can be described as the range of verbs (Townser and Li 2019; Brind 2022), or types of actions a player is incentivized to take by the design. The design presents an environment in which *affordances* (Gibson 2014; Lampo 2015) make themselves available, which may or may not be desirable.

Some questions to ask yourself when evaluate your design, especially if you are adding many elements to your scaled up version or you have multiple designers with different creative styles on your team:

- What alibi are we providing with the setting, the characters, the story, the mechanics, and the relations?
- What affordances are provided through these elements?
- What verbs are likely to emerge as a result of these elements?
- To what degree are certain verbs likely to become dominant in emergent play if such alibi and affordances are present?

Too many verbs or too much alibi for extreme behavior might stray beyond your intended goals. For example, if you have explicit rules for how to negotiate sexual intimacy, romance, violence, or sexual assault in your game, then you are indicating

to the players these actions are not only possible, but probable and even desirable for the game under the right circumstances. Similarly, if you have conflict resolution mechanics for such actions built into the game, you are communicating that players should anticipate initiating them or being on the receiving end, and that such interactions have winners and losers.

Again, if such content is relevant to your goals, then such a design may be appropriate and desirable. However, in certain applied settings, for example working with underage people on prosocial skills, you may wish to communicate clear guardrails to help keep emergent play within bounds of the sort of actions you want players to perform. In these cases, trying to hack existing games with massive lists of combat mechanics to focus on nonviolence may be more trouble than it is worth. A bespoke design may prove more useful, meaning a design that is created from scratch for a specific aesthetic (Koljonen 2019) or practical purpose.

This process is also important in implementation. For example, if you want to avoid potentially uncomfortable or ethically problematic situations, you may wish to make a rule for underage players that they cannot initiate romantic role-play with the non player-characters (NPCs) of adult facilitators. On the other hand, if the purpose of the game is to learn about consent, you may prefer that the adult facilitator fields such interactions, giving young players the chance to practice saying yes and no in a safer space than daily life might be.

Inherent to these examples is a question of interaction incentivization: is your facilitation inviting players to interact e.g., with each other, their own inner world, non player-characters, the game system? In what ways and to what end?

To help with consistency, we recommend engaging in *constructive alignment* when designing and implementing your game. You can use tools like Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom 1956; Heick 2021) to help you structure goals with concrete action verbs that players should perform in play and aligning your game activities accordingly, i.e., creating opportunities that incentivize or require those actions. Whatever verbs you permit or incentivize through play, they should a) be aligned with your transformative goals; b) be thoroughly assessed in terms of risk to your target group (see Chapter 5 of *TRGD* and Chapter 6 of this volume).

This practice is also especially important when adding *modules* (sometimes called *mods*), side quests, or other additional content to an existing design. Consider how much time the activity will take, the accessibility of the location, who will be invited, what risks are involved, and if the activity serves the larger goals of the game. Will the activity require cognitive activities that distract from the role-playing or vice versa? Is that desirable, e.g., training how to respond to crisis situations within a group? Or is it distracting, e.g., trying to solve a puzzle during a game focused on complex diplomatic negotiations? We discuss these topics later in this chapter in more detail.

d) Goals of personal vs. social change in implementation

One thing to consider when planning your goals is whether you are interested in cultivating personal development or social change or both. Importantly, separating these two areas is a bit of a false dichotomy, as they can overlap and are not mutually exclusive. They are best understood as a spectrum of goals that often overlap or reinforce each other: personal reflection may spark social engagement, and vice versa. This reinforcement is particularly relevant in activist larps or identity-based play, where the act of embodying a marginalized perspective can simultaneously support individual empowerment and broader cultural critique. Scott Nicholson (2015) discusses how personal relevance and social connectedness are two overlapping forms of intrinsic motivation players can have simultaneously in games intended for learning.

Nonetheless, to a degree, the planned activities may need to shift depending on your emphasis. For example, if your goal is to uplevel the skills of a group in deliberation as in *The Assembly* (Bowman, Öberg, Rydberg, and Hugaas 2025; see also Bowman et al. 2025), the structure of the larp will likely need to focus on group discussions. Allowing for complex interpersonal dynamics between two people in side scenes or a person's personal journey as they wander through different parts of the game world will likely become distracting. Conversely, long meetings with several characters may derail from other personal plots, such as proposing to one's fiancé, plotting secretly with co-conspirators, or any number of other individually-motivated actions that could otherwise happen. In such cases, meetings might be shortened, limited only to key decision makers, or made more interesting (Axner and Vejdemo 2016).

On the other hand, personal transformation can be worked into a group process, whether in-game or off-game. A therapeutic group can have both individual goals for each player, e.g., learning to self-advocate, and compatible goals for the group, e.g., practicing building a community based on consent. Children in a larp camp may be working on bravery and self-confidence on a personal level, while also practicing teamwork when solving a puzzle together. Thus, considering what degree the players are having an independent vs. shared experience becomes important, as well as what activities will best suit personal vs. social change.

Finally, consider the scope of social change you are hoping to see. Some examples:

- Are you hoping players will become better friends with one another and connect off-game?
- Are you cultivating an ongoing community of players that should persist after the game session?
- Are you aiming to create a cohesive community of activists that will go out and make change in the world afterward?
- Are you trying to affect social dynamics within an existing organization such as a business, governmental organization, or non-governmental organization (NGO) (see e.g., van Bilsen 2024)?
- Are you hoping to affect politics on a national scale?

Each of these goals will have different design and implementation concerns beyond the play itself. While some individuals may be motivated to continue to engage in social change processes, we cannot expect players to do so without support from the community. Evaluate how much your implementation design can help scaffold the desired social behavior you hope to see, e.g., through structured group integration processes.

Most importantly, while ambitious goals are laudable, make sure they are practically feasible and reasonable for your participants. If our expectations of others are too high, sometimes they can feel like a failure or we can project failure onto them if the expected outcomes do not occur. We recommend instead having small-scale goals that should be attainable in the contained group community, e.g., increasing discussion on an important social issue. You can present more lofty goals as aspirational, e.g., forming an ongoing activist group on the issue after the game.

e) Co-creation with populations

Finally, both in design and implementation, consider the degree to which your target populations should be involved with co-creation. While analog role-playing games are inherently co-creative due to their improvisational nature, integrating the perspectives of target groups in- and off-game in a more comprehensive way can enrich everyone's experience and be more culturally responsive (McIntosh and Marques 2017). Such practices are important for example in participatory design (Björgvinsson, Ehn, and Hillgren 2012) and Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal 1996, 2002), in which the content of play is sourced from the play group.

Co-creation can take many forms:

1. Deciding together which transformative goals will inform the design and/or implementation;
2. Paying members of a specific population for cultural consulting or sensitivity readings;
3. Involving members of a specific population in the design team throughout the process;
4. Calibrating with players within the population as design and play unfolds to ensure the process is appropriate to their needs;
5. Integrating workshop activities before the game that invite co-creation, e.g., character, relation, faction, and culture design;
6. Creating opportunities in-game for co-creation to occur, e.g., developing a ritual as a group or deciding on the norms of the community through discussion;
7. Asking players from the population to develop and lead their own activities through play;
8. Receiving feedback after the game and iterating accordingly;

9. Onboarding new team members in ongoing design processes after play, e.g., when playing games in a series, or designing new ones; and
10. Teaching players the tools of transformative game design so they can create their own experiences.

Co-creation carries political weight: it challenges hierarchical authorship and invites collective meaning-making. In some contexts, this kind of participatory process can be transformative, especially when working with historically excluded or marginalized groups. However, we should also acknowledge situations in which co-creation is not always aligned with the experience we want to offer—especially in tightly scripted, emotionally guided, or aesthetically cohesive games. If you are wanting to create a highly specific experience, it may not make sense to include co-creation. Therefore, we recommend balancing the enthusiasm for co-creation with an honest view of its limits. Not every process needs to be democratic to be impactful—but when it is, it should be done with intention and care.

Furthermore, in some cases, co-creation may not be possible or even desirable. For example, if your participants are children who have not developed cognitively enough to understand complex systems, then involving them to help design your game's magic system would likely be confusing. Additionally, co-creation can be difficult with an international group without a shared cultural baseline. Design and implementation skills sometimes take time to develop; one design workshop with no playtesting will likely not result in an optimized design. While input into the process is helpful, be mindful also that you are not placing unrealistic expectations on players that are counterproductive to your goals. On the other hand, co-creation can take many forms; for example, establishing a creative atmosphere in drama classrooms can make space for small elements of student creativity to become playable fictional tropes or *bits* enjoyed by the group through emergent play (Wolgel 2024a, 2024b).

We will discuss more specific methods for co-creation in Chapter 7.

f) Ratio of organizers to players and group composition

In applied settings, considering the ratio of organizers to players is often critical. While a leisure game may be able to run for dozens of players with only one organizer if the design is minimal enough, expectations and needs are often different at scale in various applied settings and when working with specific populations.

When working in school settings or with youth in camps, it may be required to have a certain *ratio*, e.g., of adults or teenagers to children, such as 1:5, 1:10, 1:30. This ratio can be necessary for multiple reasons, including:

- Expectations of supervision;
- The necessity of working closely with a guide to scaffold learning; and/or
- Narrative reasons such as having an NPC facilitator direct the exercise.

For populations who are under supervision, the ratio may be necessary also for legal reasons, like in retirement facilities, schools, or prisons. For example, parents may want to know how many adults will be on the premises during a larp camp activity.

Therapeutic processes can be time intensive and require extensive processing, e.g., when working with trauma survivors or clients with mental health challenges such as severe depression. In such cases, it may be preferable to have a higher number of facilitators, e.g., 2:2 or 4:1 in a tabletop role-playing game in order to provide more targeted support for therapeutic goals of clients. These facilitators can have different roles as well, e.g., one mental health professional running the game, while the other one observes or focuses on the off-game processing.

Furthermore, in therapeutic settings, 1:1 sessions with the client's therapist may take place between group sessions, which can become important for discussion around personal goals or sensitive topics related to the play experience, e.g., considering how the player can adopt their character's bravery in specific challenging life circumstances. This therapist may be part of the facilitation of the game or external to the process, e.g., contracting the facilitators to run the game as adjunctive to a group or 1:1 therapeutic process.

Group composition is also important to consider. You may choose to include participants with compatible challenges and goals, while avoiding pairing players who might exacerbate each other's challenges. Thus, in therapeutic role-playing, group composition usually involves a 1:1 intake process to assess the suitability of the group method for specific clients in certain configurations.

In leisure games, players may be asked to engage in a *flagging* process to indicate if members of the group have concerns about each other before the start of the game. Such concerns may be minor -- such as not cohering well with that person's playstyle or wanting to avoid one's ex -- or could represent more serious safety concerns. While this process is controversial and sometimes messy (Brown and Teerilahti 2024; Wood and Holkar 2024), we believe that some sort of vetting process is important in community creation and maintenance. Whatever the process, role-playing games are at their core about human-to-human interaction; considering the personalities, behavioral tendencies, and needs of the individuals within the group is part of implementation design.

See Chapter 5 of *TRGD* and Chapter 5 in this book for more considerations around flagging and vetting.

g) Time

Finally, you should carefully consider the amount of time you actually have to run the game. How much time do you have with the target group? Are you squeezing in a game session during their lunch break or do you have them for a week during the summer? Will you only meet for one session or will play extend over several sessions? Plan your time accordingly.

Similarly, are players engaging in their leisure time or during work or school hours? Is play mandatory or voluntary (Roda Martínez 2025)? Consider how much time for preparation, play, and post-game processing you can reasonably expect from your population given these constraints. If your leisure participants have jobs and families, can you expect them to engage in extensive pre-game planning? If running a game for students, will you “borrow” time from the teacher by asking them to lecture the class on important concepts beforehand? Will the teacher help them process the experience and connect it to the existing curriculum after you leave? Can you trust this process will happen sufficiently?

Will the game be interrupted by outsiders, e.g., a school bell ringing, the school principal entering the room, nurses coming in to administer medications? If interruptions will happen, make sure to plan accordingly, e.g., starting the game play part after the planned interruption, or having smooth meta-techniques for entering and leaving play. Do you have a hard limit on when you have to leave the building, or can you potentially stay later to finish the session? Make sure what you are planning is feasible given the time constraints and setting.

Remember to add time for proper framing before and after your event when planning. The amount of time needed for workshoping and debriefing is likely longer with a scaled up design than for a nano-game.

2.5 Implementing based on the needs of the setting and group

We might assume that certain settings always focus upon specific types of learning objectives, e.g., educational goals in schools. However, these categories often overlap. For example, LajvVerkstaden and Lajvbyrån have run scenarios for thousands of Swedish children in schools, but the focus is not on established curricular outcomes connected to subject matter (cf. Geneuss 2021; Cullinan and Genova 2023), but rather on socio-emotional learning about culture (Westborg 2016). Similarly, while the company Game to Grow focused on therapeutic role-playing, they often emphasized developing social skills (Kilmer et al. 2023, 2024), rather than, for example, processing trauma.

From this perspective, you should consider the needs of your population based upon the goals, not just the setting. For example, if you do not need to adhere to specific curricular learning objectives, you may not need as much educational framing in the form of lectures or homework. Similarly, *social skills-based therapeutic interventions* likely do not recover the same degree of emotional processing as more *intensive therapeutic interventions*; a facilitator may decide to do a quick check-in and check-out procedure to frame the game rather than a full 1:1 emotional processing session with individual clients.

Furthermore, more extensive processes might be run by someone else, e.g., the group’s regular teacher or a mental health professional outside of the game. In these

situations, we recommend providing materials to support them in facilitating the process, as they may not have relevant expertise to frame the experience properly, e.g., additional learning content or debriefing questions specific to the game.

a) The Educational Role-Playing Game Design Matrix

When working with educational games, consider which aspects of the game are intended to be educational. The Educational Role-Playing Game Design Matrix (Westborg 2023b) is a tool to help identify if a game fits the intended learning, and also to help design or re-design a game for this purpose. The matrix has two axes: gameplay design and framing design. Both axes range from leisure to educational, creating four quadrants. (See Figure 1).

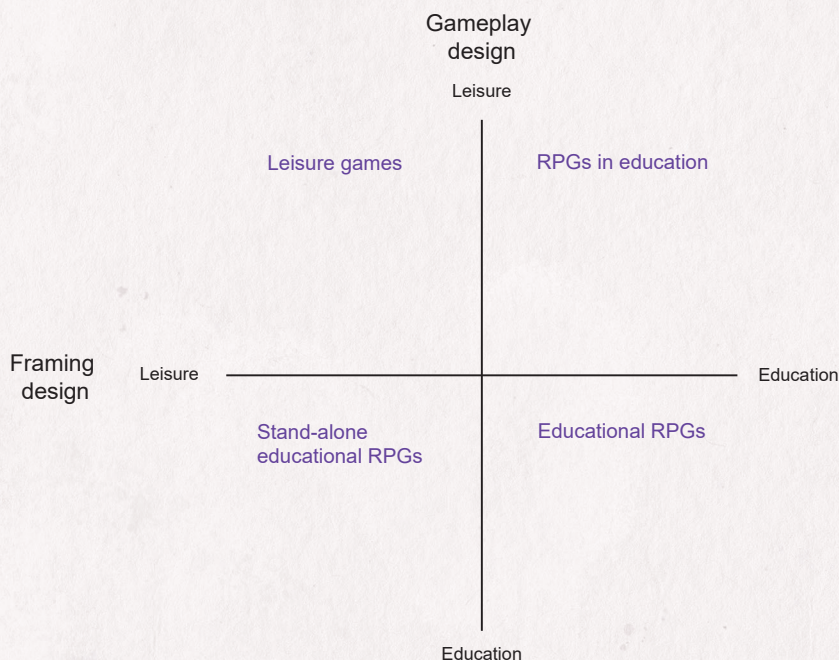


Figure 1: The Four Quadrants (clockwise) -- Leisure games, RPGs in education, standalone educational RPGs, and educational RPGs (including edu-larp).

This figure shows how different parts of the game can be designed for specific learning outcomes. A leisure game has neither the gameplay nor the framing designed for a specific learning outcome. An RPG in education hacks a leisure game by designing the framing for a specific learning outcome. In stand-alone educational RPGs, the gameplay is designed for a specific learning outcome, but not the framing. This practice is more common in digital games for young children, such as math games played on a tablet, but it is not common for RPGs. It might work well for practising physical skills or internalizing rote knowledge, but not for more complex learning, making it less relevant for transformative games. Finally, we have educational RPGs (bottom right corner) where both the gameplay and the framing are designed for a specific learning outcome.

Westborg (2023) further connects the matrix to the different types of education: informal, nonformal, and formal (see Figure 2).

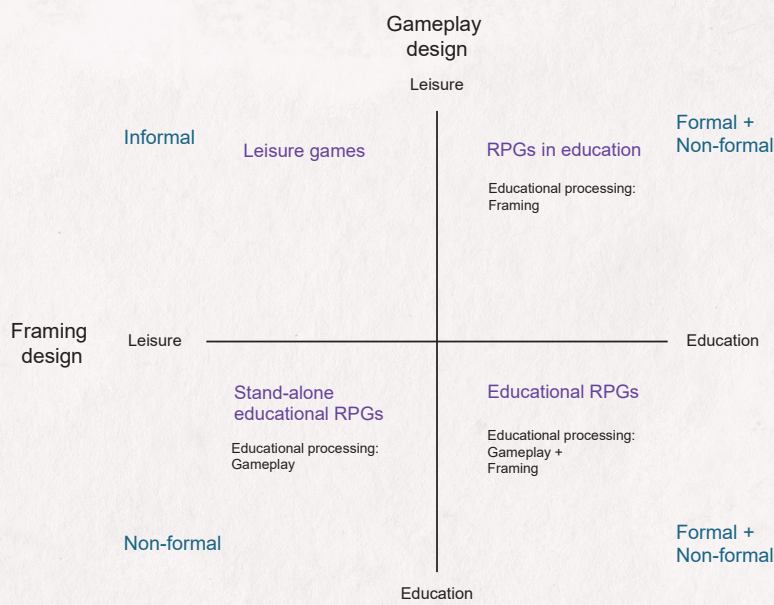


Figure 2: The types of education suited for each quadrant: informal, non-formal, and formal.

While all quadrants facilitate learning, the educational processing happens in different ways. For example, teachers are generally skilled at designing educational framing, enabling them to adapt leisure games to RPGs in Education and thereby making games fit for formal education.

For more information about the types of education, see chapter 2.5 in *TRGD* and Chapter 4 of this textbook.

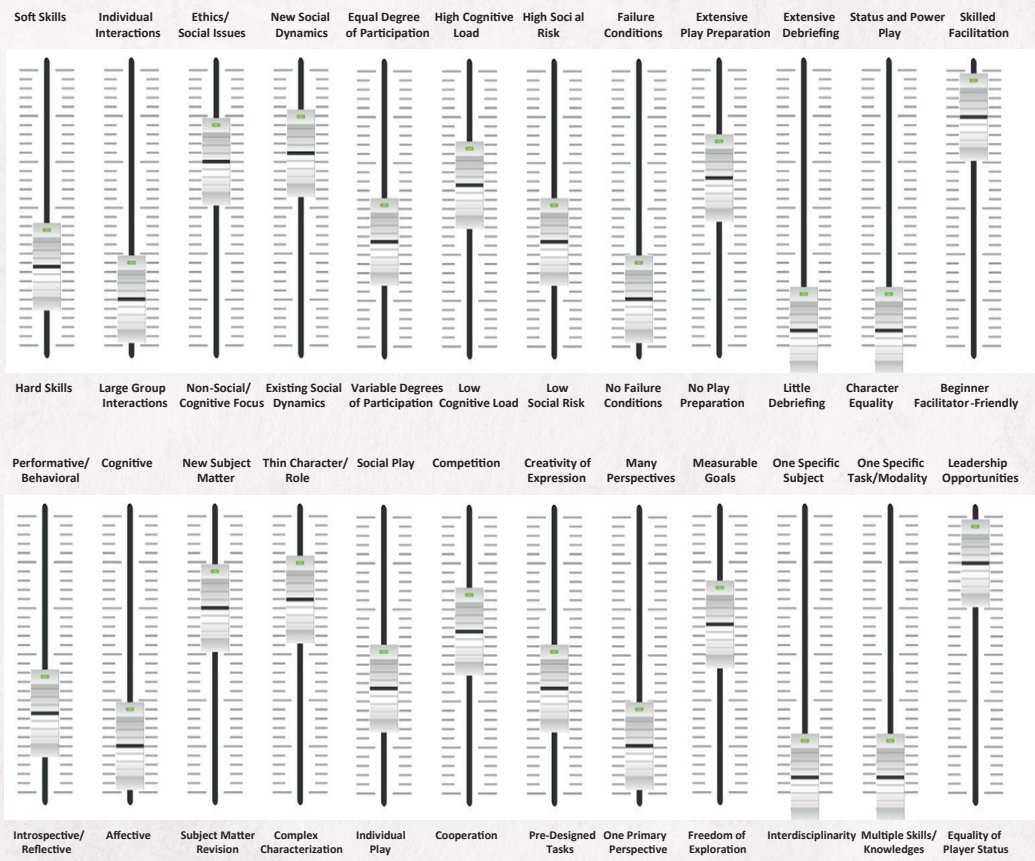
b) The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp

As we discussed in Chapter 4 of *TRGD*, The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp might help not only during the design process, but also when scaling up during implementation. For example, if you are adding new activities, you might want to consider the various “sliders” on this metaphorical mixing desk. These sliders represent choices you make when implementing educational games, although many of the principles are likely also important to consider for leisure and therapeutic games.

The sliders for the Mixing Desk (see Figures 3 and 4) are as follows:

- Performative/behavioral ↔ Introspective/reflective
- Cognitive ↔ Affective
- New subject matter ↔ Subject matter revision
- Thin character / role ↔ Complex characterization
- Social play ↔ Individual play
- Competition ↔ Cooperation
- Creativity of expression ↔ Pre-designed tasks
- Many perspectives ↔ One primary perspective
- Measurable goals ↔ Freedom of exploration
- One specific subject ↔ Interdisciplinary
- One specific task / modality ↔ Multiple skills / knowledges
- Leadership opportunities ↔ Equality of player status
- Soft skills ↔ Hard skills
- Individual interactions ↔ Large group interactions
- Ethics / social issues ↔ Non-social / cognitive focus
- New social dynamics ↔ Existing social dynamics (among the player base)
- Equal degree of participation ↔ Variable degrees of participation
- High cognitive load ↔ Low cognitive load
- High social risk ↔ Low social risk
- Failure conditions ↔ No failure conditions
- Extensive play preparation ↔ No play preparation
- Extensive debriefing ↔ Little debriefing
- Status and power play ↔ Character equality
- Skilled facilitation ↔ Beginner facilitator-friendly

The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp



Figures 3 and 4: The Mixing Desk of Edu-Larp (Bowman 2018)

For more information about implementing in education, see Westborg (2019, 2021, 2023c).

2.6 Interventions: Mediums, modalities, approaches, and techniques

In many cases, you will likely be integrating strategies from your professional background into the implementation of your game. Previous knowledge and practice often informs our conceptualization of what form a transformative game or process should take. This section will list several examples, expanding into more depth on a specific example: spirituality-focused games.

In general, you should consider how your background will impact how you view game play. Examples include:

- **Medium:** Do you work with a specific medium, such as visual arts or physically embodied performance art? Media here do not necessarily refer to technologically mediated work.
- **Modality / Approach:** Do you have a specific theoretical or praxis-based lens that informs how you approach games, e.g., cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), person-centered psychology, or psychoanalysis?
- **Techniques:** Do you have specific techniques you employ in your work that might be practiced within a game, e.g., mindfulness or a dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT) script?

As an example, perhaps you work with clients primarily through visual art therapy through a depth psychology lens. You create an exercise in which you prompt participants to first draw a representation of their personal shadow: aspects of themselves they wish to suppress or disown. Then, participants role-play these parts, enabling participants to connect and empathize with these disowned parts of self. As a final exercise, you have them draw their shadow again, then debrief about any changes that might have occurred.

a) Types of transformative leisure interventions

In this section, we will list various examples of ways in which existing leisure practices can either augment or be augmented by role-playing games for transformative purposes.

i) Arts-based interventions

As discussed in the previous example, you may be trained in the arts or wish to integrate artistic practices in role-playing games. These artistic expressions may be performed by participants during the intervention, e.g., expecting players to compose, improvise, and/or perform songs during play (Blancarte 2025). Alternatively, artistic content may serve as inspiration for play, e.g., creating characters and embodying them based on specific works of art within a museum (*Hyvät museovieraat* [Eng: Dear Museum Visitors] 2024; Kangas 2025). In other cases, art may be a source of critique play, e.g., discussing art at a museum from the perspective of different movements, see e.g., *Mantles in the Museum* (Cox and Lewis 2020, 2023; Cox 2025).

Examples of artistic media include:

- **Visual arts:** Engaging in painting, sculpture, or other visual arts before, during, or after play.
- **Crafting:** Creating props, costumes, or other crafts.
- **Performative arts:** Dancing, performing plays, playing musical instruments, singing, or other types of performance.
- **Recorded media:** Integrating recordings into the play or recording during play, e.g., film, television, radio, or music.
- **Mixed media:** Integrating some combination of artistic media.

ii) Creative writing-based

Other interventions rely on creative writing as part of the process. Creative writing is often inherent to role-playing games, especially if they contain elements of fictional worldbuilding or character writing. Integrating creative writing before, during, or after a game allows participants to actively engage with this process and contribute to the fiction of the game world. Such exercises can encourage solo creative writing or group compositions.

Examples include:

- **Backstory writing:** Composing fiction connected to a character's history and significant events in their lives.
- **Worldbuilding:** Composing written fiction related to the storyworld of the game.
- **Journaling:** Writing journals as one's character before, during, or after a game.
- **Narrative accounts:** Writing post-game descriptions of game events in the first-, second-, or third-person.
- **Poetry:** Composing poems related to the game or during runtime.
- **Storywriting:** Composing stories that will be used during the game or are inspired by it.

iii) Game-based interventions

In some cases, you may wish to integrate methods from game-based media adjacent to role-playing games. Game-like activities have been developed within several different subcultures, practices, and disciplines. Indeed, many of our common techniques in RPGs originated elsewhere, such as in theatre exercises. You may wish to hack these existing practices by integrating role-playing game meta-techniques, or integrate exercises from other game-based media to your game.

Examples include:

- **Theater and improv games:** Integrating existing theatre workshops, exercises, techniques, or improv games intended to promote spontaneous creativity (see e.g., Spolin 1986; Johnstone 1987; Foreman and Martini 1996).
- **Group games:** Running existing icebreakers, party games, social deduction, or other games meant for groups.
- **Tabletop games:** Integrating components from other tabletop games, such as card, dice, and board games (Eladhari 2018a, 2018b).
- **Digital RPGs:** Continuing play or augmenting analog role-playing with digital formats, e.g., MMORPGs, MMOs, text-based formats such as play-by-post (for a leisure example, see Zalka 2019), or online larps, sometimes called LAOGs (Reininghaus 2019).

When integrating existing games, carefully consider whether or not the design is cooperative or competitive. A social deduction game in which players are encouraged to deceive one another may be fun and exciting, but may not be the best choice if trying to foster trust among strangers. On the other hand, competitive games are sometimes more motivating than cooperative ones, e.g., in school environments in which individual students want to excel in comparison with others.

iv) Politics-based interventions

You may choose to integrate political activities into your games, or role-play as part of a broader political activity. Examples include:

- **Theatre of the Oppressed / Forum Theatre:** Integrating techniques such as those developed by Augusto Boal (1993, 2002) in order to play out power dynamics and conflicts within a specific social group;
- **Sociodrama:** Integrating techniques from Jacob L. Moreno on therapeutic group work for political purposes (Moreno, J. L. 1946; 37-44; Moreno and Zeleny 1958; Lehto 2021; Pitkänen 2019);
- **Activism:** Using role-play for activist purposes, such as pervasive play in public spaces or specifically designed scenarios to raise awareness on a political issue (Johansson et al. 2026). Example activities include:
 - Protesting (Pöllänen and Arjoranta 2021) and
 - Lobbying (Pettersson, Maria 2018).
- **Diplomacy and peacebuilding:** Using role-playing to practice skills related to peace and conflict:
 - Understanding and/or deescalating conflict situations (Taraghi, Bowman, and Khosropour 2022; Bowman et al. 2024),
 - Negotiating peaceful terms (National Museum of American Diplomacy 2022)
 - Providing humanitarian aid (Smith 2025)
- **Debate and deliberation:** Practicing adopting multiple perspectives; debating (Pettersson, Juhana 2015) by arguing persuasively to convince others; or deliberating on key issues to arrive at a shared understanding (Levine 2018a, 2018b; Bowman et al. in press).

v) Spirituality-based interventions

Designers and organizers can include a number of spirituality-based techniques into role-playing game interventions. For our purposes, spirituality can refer to:

- Having a phenomenological experience of connection with the divine, the universe, nature, or deities, i.e., an expanded, non-ordinary, and/or mystical state of consciousness;
- Philosophies and practices surrounding such states; and
- Philosophies and practices that explore human ethics, meaning, and purpose, e.g., existentialism.

While spirituality is often conflated with religion, for our purposes, religions refers more to social structures and cultural practices reinforcing certain belief systems and behaviors in a top-down fashion rather than a more bottom-up experience of personal connection with the spiritual, e.g., interfacing with the mystical or numinous. Thus, while spirituality is sometimes connected to religious dogma or informed by religious cultural practices, the two should be considered separate for our purposes.

While a full description is beyond the scope of this book, spiritual practices in role-playing games might include the following activities, whether they are considered truly spiritual or fictional or both:

- **Providing spiritual direction** to explore meaning, purpose, and/or ethics through embodied play (Cohen 2023);
- **Mystical journeys**, such as exploring the inner imagery of one's mind through spiritual communion;
- **Spiritual rituals** in groups (Kim, Nuncio, and Wong 2018; Bowman 2023);
- **Storytelling and mythic enactment** (Beltrán 2012; Page 2014);(Brown 2018)
- **Dream analysis**, including precognitive dreams;
- **Working with aspects of the personal or collective unconscious** (Jung 1976; Bowman 2024a), including **shadow work** (Beltrán 2013; Bowman 2025)
- **Communicating with the spirit world or traveling** through it;
- **Aspecting parts of deities or channeling the deity**, whether from existing cultures or invented ones (Jones 2017; Brown et al. 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Milan 2023);
- **Meditation and mindfulness** practices;
- **Tarot, oracle cards**, and other forms of **divination** (Nøglebæk 2021; Mutsaers 2022).
- **Prayers, invocations, and appeals to divine forces** or the **natural world**;
- **Breathing and movement exercises** based on spiritual philosophies;
- **Sacred sexuality**, eye gazing, and other intimacy practices;
- **Cultivating power-within**, e.g., through manifestation or other psychomagical practices in- and off-game (Cazeneuve 2021);

- **Hypnosis** and other guided states;
- **Invoking aspects of one's character in off-game situations**, e.g., “borrowing” a character's confidence in job interviews.

Importantly, when integrating spiritual practices, your player base may have different beliefs regarding how “real” such practices are, so you should address this with the group, either only inviting individuals who share the same worldview or encouraging respectfulness (see e.g., Bowman 2023).

Furthermore, when including such techniques, facilitators should carefully explain what practice will take place, what kinds of effects it could have, and the origins of such a practice, integrating techniques from other cultures responsibly or avoiding cultural appropriation entirely. Risks associated with such practices should be explained both in-game and off-game when possible. If players ask to integrate such practices through emergent play, we recommend giving them clear guidelines for how to do so responsibly, and possibly vetting the content for appropriateness.

We recommend that organizers signpost spiritual techniques before the game so players are not surprised in a way that disrupts their experience. We also recommend having in-game debriefs after such practices to help the player process them through the lens of the character directly after the experience to avoid disorientation. As role-playing itself can be considered an expanded state of consciousness, adding additional expanded states can have unpredictable or overwhelming impacts. However, such experiences can be profoundly transformative under the right circumstances.

For more on psychomagic and working with beliefs through play, see Chapter 6 of *TRGD*.

b) Types of therapeutic interventions

Role-playing games can augment or include a variety of types of therapeutic modalities and techniques. For example, expressive arts therapy includes many of the media mentioned above, but is conducted as part of a therapeutic practice. Indeed, several therapeutic practices already use forms of role-play, identify parts of the self, or work with narrative as a core component of the processing. While a complete list is beyond the scope of this textbook, below are some key examples.

i) Narrative-based interventions

Some therapeutic approaches focus on the use of narratives, whether real or imagined, as intrinsic to building relations with the client and helping them process their experience. Examples include:

- **Narrative therapy / narrative identity / restorying:** Working with a client's life story in order to identify limiting beliefs and construct more empowering or redemptive narratives (Brown and Augusta-Scott 2007; Diakolambrianou 2021; McAdams 2011; Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Tanenbaum 2022).

- **Geek therapy:** Working on media connected with geek culture within a therapeutic setting, often connected to narrative (Bean, Daniel Jr., and Hays eds. 2020).
- **Superhero therapy:** Using the symbolism of superheroes to help the client make mental health a hero's journey, combining ACT with geek popular culture to (Enfield 2007; Scarlet 2016; Swaby 2021).

ii) Play- and role-based interventions

Other techniques employ embodied play and/or role-playing as part of the process, whether in 1:1 therapy or enacted physically as part of a group process, including:

- **Psychodrama:** Using role-playing techniques developed by J. L. and Zerk Moreno such as role reversal, mirroring, doubling and soliloquy (Cruz et al. 2018)
- **Gestalt therapy:** Integrating role-playing techniques to practice dynamics, such the Empty Chair and Overdog/Underdog (Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman 1951; Naranjo 2000; Mendoza 2020; Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Play therapy:** Including play dynamics as central to the process, such as in *sandplay* with children (Axline 1991).
- **Drama therapy:** Embodying narratives and characters relevant to the client's life (Jones 1996; Berg 2016; Diakolambrianou 2021; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Family Constellations and Internal Family Systems:** Embodying internal or external relational dynamics (Franke 2017; Schwartz and Sweezy 1995; Burns 2014; Devorak 2022; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023).
- **Recreational therapy:** Focusing on play as a form of recreation that is inherently therapeutic (Austin and McCormick 2015; Hawkes-Robinson 2016)

For more extensive lists and information about these techniques, see Chapters 2 and 3 of *TRGD*.

c) Types of educational interventions

Finally, many types of educational interventions already exist that likely inform an educator's background that may be compatible with role-playing games. General categories include:

- **Experiential learning:** Experiencing education in an embodied way, i.e., learning-by doing (Kolb 1984).
- **Situated learning:** Engaging in learning experiences within relevant contexts outside of a classroom setting, e.g., practicing skills onsite or in a similar location as where the learner will use it later (Lave and Wenger 1991; Westborg 2024)

More specifically, educational interventions can be:

- **Adventure-based:** Including quests or other forms of adventures as motivating for learning (Gass 1993).
- **Nature-based:** Having relevant learning experiences in the outdoors (Russell 2000).
- **Game-based:** Using gamification or other forms of game-based learning.
- **Drama-based:** Integrating embodied play as part of the learning process, whether highly structured or improvised, e.g., Drama in Education (Way 1998; Heathcote and Bolton 1995; Mochocki 2014);
- **Arts-based:** Integrating visual, performing, or mediated arts in learning (Cox 2016).
- **Digital-based:** Leveraging technology for educational experience, whether online or offline.
- **Emotion-based:** Integrating socio-emotional learning, emphasizing emotions as important to motivation / self-determination, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan and Deci 2017; Algayres 2018).

For examples of educational larp implementation, see Geneuss (2021, 2022).

2.7 Population types

As discussed in Chapter 2 of *TRGD*, role-playing games are used for a variety of populations (see e.g., Kot 2018). We will reiterate them here and encourage you to follow the cited sources for specific information about working with these groups or conducting research.

Role-playing has been applied for people of all ages in the lifespan:

- **Children** (Zayas and Lewis 1986; Enfield 2007; Callina, Colbert, and Gray 2018; Juustila 2019; Bandhosingh 2024)
- **Adolescents** (Kallam 1984; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Enfield 2007; Shanun 2013; Gutierrez 2017; Harris 2018; Katō 2019; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Davis and Johns 2020; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022; Kilmer et al. 2023)
- **Young adults** (Shanun 2013)
- **Adults** (Shanun 2013; Brom et al. 2029; Varrette et al. 2022; Slaughter and Orth 2023; Lehto 2024; Tsiaras and Neofotistos 2026)
- **Older adults** (Atanasio 2020)

As role-play can be a powerful way to train skills, RPGs are sometimes used in the following contexts:

- **Elementary students** (Carter 2011)
- **Primary and/or secondary school students** (Schmit, Martins, and Ferreira 2009; Abdul Jabbar and Felicia 2015; Cook, Morgan, and Gremo 2016; Geneuss 2021; Gjedde 2014; Cullinan 2024; Stubbs and Sorensen 2025)
- **Middle schoolers** (Mochocki 2013; Bowman and Standiford 2015; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021; Katō 2019; Fey et al. 2022)
- **Youth in after-school programs** (Callina, Colbert, Gray 2018; Bandhosingh 2024)
- **Youth in summer camps or weekend larps** (Hoge 2013; Fein 2015; Faros 2018; Westborg et al. 2020; Pohjola 2022; Turi and Hartyándi 2023; Chronicle 5 WCVB 2024)
- **College / university students** (McDonald and Kreizenbeck 2012; Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020; Mercer, Harris, and Swab 2021; Torner 2021, 2022; Zhang, Xu, and Li 2025)
- **Health practitioners** (Standiford 2014; Riser et al. 2024)
- **Mental health practitioners** (Gutierrez 2017)
- **Camp counselors, trainers, teachers, players, or researchers** (Daniau 2016)
- **Youth workers and volunteer managers** (DiveIn Consortium 2021; Ladišić and Prkosovački 2022)
- **Government employees and politicians** (van Bilsen 2024)
- **Business professionals** (Pouchlá 2013; Branc 2018), including **entrepreneurs** (Swab, Mercer, and Harris 2024)
- **Leaders seeking professional development** (Funk 2021; Jensen 2021; Mercer, Harris, and Swab 2021; Lasley 2024; Hartyándi and van Bilsen 2024), among many other professional contexts.

In addition, role-playing games have been adapted to work with a variety of populations with specific needs, including:

- **LGBTQIA+** (Connell 2023; Rosenblad et al. 2025)
- **ADHD** (Enfield 2007)
- **Autism spectrum** (Fein 2015; Harris 2018; Helbig 2019; Katō 2019; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Davis and Johns 2020; Harada, Katō, and Fujino 2022; Atherton et al. 2024; Visuri 2024; Rosenblad et al. 2025)
- **Families** (Breen and Woodin 2025)
- **Veterans** (Kilmer et al. 2023; Battles, Curland, and Cruitt 2025)
- **Refugees** (Misje, Nielsen, and Andersen 2014)

- **Forensic clients** (Slaughter and Orth 2023)
- **Occupational difficulties** (Hazlett et al. 2024)
- **Interpersonal difficulties** (Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021)
- **Social anxiety** (Atanasio 2020; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Kroplewski, Łoś, and Pawlicki 2025)
- **Generalized anxiety** (Scudder 2018; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Rosenblad et al. 2025)
- **Fear of making mistakes, rumination about the past** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021)
- **Isolation** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Atanasio 2020)
- **Hopelessness and loss of personal meaning** (Atanasio 2020)
- **Loneliness** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Atanasio 2020)
- **Depression** (Hughes 1988; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Rosenblad et al. 2025)
- **Suicidal thoughts** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021)
- **Nightmares** (Rosenblad et al. 2025)
- **Grief and loss** (Atanasio 2020)
- **Mental health recovery** (Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Insomnia** (Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Physical disabilities** (Kallam 1984; Atanasio 2020)
- **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE)** (Sargent 2014)
- **Bullying** (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021)
- **Abuse** (Enfield 2007; Gutierrez 2017; Atanasio 2020)
- **Trauma** (Sargent 2014; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Addiction** (Causo and Quinlan 2021; Bartenstein 2022, 2024)
- **Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** (Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD)** (Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID)** (Rosenblad et al. 2025)
- **Antisocial behavior and aggression** (Gutierrez 2017)

2.8 Adapting to needs of the population

Finding ways to adapt for the needs of your target group as a whole, and specific individuals within it, is important. The following sections will discuss general recommendations when assessing your participants' needs and making adjustments accordingly.

Keep in mind that members of your group may have conflicting needs. For example, one person may need low lighting to decrease stimuli, whereas another may have difficulty seeing under such conditions. You should take these needs into account when considering group composition and compatibility, as discussed later in this chapter. Sometimes, compromises are possible, whereas in other situations, the group may become untenable. Similarly, you may have to adapt your game content or implementation plan to the needs of your population.

a) Cognitive load, attention span, developmental stages

When working with transformative games, consider the cognitive needs of your population. These needs will vary depending on the group, e.g., age; neurotype; mental and physical health; and/or differences in ability. In this section, we will focus on factors related to cognitive attention and memory more generally, but we recommend adapting this content based on any relevant differences when working with your target group.

You usually need to convey information before, during, and after a game. For longer games, you may have provided this information before the event, e.g., on your website or Player's Guide. However, since you can't be sure the players have engaged with the information, we recommend mentioning the most important parts in a briefing or workshop before the game to make sure everyone is up to date. If you are running a shorter game and/or do not have the opportunity of informing participants beforehand, then conveying the information at the game is essential and you should plan for enough time.

When planning, you should take into account how the brain processes information. We have three parts of memory: *sensory memory*, *working memory*, and *long-term memory* (Woolfolk 2010). Sensory memory helps sort through all the input (stimuli) with which we are constantly bombarded, such as sights, smells, sounds, etc. Sensory memory helps make sense of all this input and, through perception and attention, decides what will be kept in the working memory for further processing. In working memory, the new information is related to information from long-term memory. Well-established information that has been thoroughly processed becomes a part of the long-term memory and can be recalled when needed by the working memory. Thus, when you deliver new information, it will be processed in participants' working memory.

Cognitive load is the amount of information the working memory can process at any given time. If the cognitive load is too high, the participant will get cognitively overloaded and be unable to retain the information. There are three aspects that affect the degree of cognitive load:

1. How complicated the information is,
2. How much external irrelevant input comes in, and
3. How the information is presented.

Participants can more easily retain information if they recognize it from before and are receiving it in a calm environment where it is presented in a clear way through both visual and auditory means. Conversely, retaining brand new information is more challenging, as is learning in an environment where people are trying to talk to the participant at the same time and/or while the information is presented by someone who reads it quickly out loud from a paper. We recommend practicing any briefings ahead of time so you can more engagingly and effectively convey information.

Our working memory can usually keep about five to nine things at the same time, but only actively process around two to four at the same time (Woolfolk 2010). Our brain does not excel at handling many processes at the same time. Even if the number of things our memory can keep and process is consistent, the degree of cognitive load in any given situation is individual, as it is dependent on factors such as emotional well-being and prior knowledge. For example, if a participant is not used to reading texts about role-playing, then when seeing the acronym “RPG,” they will have to stop and process what the abbreviation means, which takes up slots in their working memory. Alternatively, if they are familiar with the acronym, then they do not need to process it, only retain it in long-term memory, which is less mentally challenging. To use a game example, chess experts do not improve at processing the information and thinking additional steps ahead; they recognize patterns and recall previous plays.

Closely tied to the working memory is the ability to maintain prolonged attention (Wilson and Korn 2007). No universal amount of time exists for how long we can keep attention or focus on something; it is highly individual and depends on things such as how interesting the participant finds the subject, how motivated they are, and how the information is delivered. However, repeating information is helpful for retention, as is connecting the information to something the participant already knows, and asking them to apply the information.

When planning how to convey your information, consider focusing only on crucial information is crucial. What previous knowledge do your players have? Do not waste time slowly reiterating things they already know, but try to attach the new information to previous knowledge.

Let us take safety mechanics as an example. Start by considering which safety mechanisms you need. Try to use as few as possible that still cover the situations that could be relevant to this game (Koljonen 2020). Each mechanic will take up space in

the memory, and if your participants get cognitive overload, they may forget important ones. Make sure to describe the mechanics but also invite players to practice them. When describing them, try to use visual aids such as demonstrations or illustrations. Do not ask participants to read a text containing different information than you are saying aloud, since they can only focus on one type of input at a time.

Similarly, some games invent bespoke words for consent mechanics that fit into the universe of the larp to avoid breaking immersion with meta communication. In the larp *Inside Hamlet*, the word “rotten” means that you like the direction of the play and to escalate, while “pure” means the opposite (Participation Design Agency 2015, 2017, 2018; see Lane 2018). While in principle, these terms can be helpful for immersion, i.e., maintaining sustained attention on playing, when analysing it from a cognitive perspective, the players need to learn a new mechanic for every larp (Fischer 2020). They will have to process the new word when it is used or search their working memory to find it instead of being able to recall something they have learned before, which might also lessen immersion. It might still be a valid design choice, depending on how much other information you have to convey and how much of it is new to the players, but we recommend keeping it simple. For example, if phrases are generic enough that they are used at many games, they can be repurposed for yours, and are more likely to be used by participants who have encountered them before.

b) Constraints on time

As mentioned earlier, when working with specific populations, they may need to follow a specific schedule. For example, when working with a school, the students often have specific starting and ending hours that are not flexible, or they might have a lunch break at a certain time. Another example in business settings that have established coffee breaks and everyone assumes you will stop the game for it. Make sure to check with your population what their schedules are, what is flexible and what is not, so you can adjust beforehand. We also recommend clarifying whether they can drop into your activity late or not. In general, we do not recommend allowing players to join late since they will likely miss key safety information and may disrupt the group dynamic that was established in the beginning.

If time constraints necessitate cutting parts of your game, we recommend reducing gameplay time rather than framing activities. The pre-game workshops are usually necessary to explain the game and create a container that feels safe and therefore needs to be kept. Often, people instead cut time from the debrief since they want the players to play as much as possible, but for any type of transformative game, the debrief is the most important part and should not be cut. Our experience is that cutting the debrief can interrupt the transformational process.

For more information on facilitation, see Chapter 4.

c) Constraints on space

When running a game in a new location, you need to assess both the needs of your game and for the needs of your population. Does your game require multiple rooms? Is this a must, or can you make one large room work by creating discrete sections on the floor using masking tape? If you have a participant showing up in a wheelchair, will they be able to access all parts of the game? What about visual or hearing disabilities? Do participants need to read small text in a space that is designed to be dark and cosy? Is there a lot of background noise in a large open space, making it hard to hear? Consider establishing one easily accessible, calm, and quiet space where people can take a break.

We will discuss locations in more detail in Chapter 3.

2.9 Working with external parties and stakeholders

When working with specific populations or in certain locations, you will likely also need to communicate and coordinate with key stakeholders. In general, you should consider how to meet the needs of your framing design with these stakeholders. Do you need a mental health professional to follow-up with a client? Do you need a teacher to cover certain content before you arrive? Does a camp counselor need to run a debriefing activity in the following week to help cement the knowledge and skills gained? If so, make sure to be transparent and offer support in helping them follow through. Alternatively, if you do not make an effort to connect with stakeholders, you may end up having to answer difficult questions about what you are doing or even face legal ramifications, so onboarding them ahead of time is wise.

These individuals may not know much about role-playing games, so finding ways to contextualize what you are doing within a framework they find relatable is helpful, such as comparing it to theatre, improv, Model United Nations (MUN), or other recognizable activities. We also recommend having ready credible materials to help explain similar activities, such as articles (or even these textbooks).

In this section, we mention some examples of stakeholders you may encounter when working with your target group.

a) Teachers

If you are running a game for a specific class with an assigned teacher, you will likely need to coordinate schedules. Teachers often have a tightly constrained timetable, so you should demonstrate how the activity will be helpful for their students and figure out how to best support what they are already learning. You can also ask the teacher to play a role in the fiction, ideally one with a lower power position than they usually hold.

Teachers have likely spent significantly more time with their students than you and therefore have better insights about their individual needs. Don't hesitate to ask

questions and take their input into account to better understand your players and create a more tailored experience for them whenever possible.

In some cases, the design cannot support major changes, so communicate these constraints ahead of time as well. If your scenario can only take 12 players and cannot be scaled up to a class of 30, it may not be a good fit for their context.

b) School administrators

A few schools in the world use a larp-based pedagogy throughout the year, such as Denmark's Efterskolen Epos (2014) and Østerskov Efterskole (Harder 2007; Hyltoft 2008, 2010, 2012; Gjedde 2013, 2014; BBC 2023). See Van Hauwaert (2025) for practical advice on how to establish such a school.

However, in most cases, you will need to engage with administrators overseeing a school, who may not be RPG-aware at all. Administrators may not have an active role in the game itself or the learning, but they can be quite important for helping with logistics. As examples, they can make sure legal bases are covered in terms of consent forms, make available locations in the school for play, or help to coordinate field trips.

Additionally, administrators are often the decision makers when approving activities, so make sure they clearly understand the benefits of your work. When presenting the opportunity, make the process understandable and clear for them so they can support the needs and requirements of the game more efficiently.

c) Legal guardians

When working with minors or with adult clients who require supervision, you likely need consent from their legal guardians. At minimum, usually the guardians need to sign a consent form informing them of the activity, and the clients likely need to sign an assent form. We recommend establishing a direct line of communication and keeping guardians updated about the activities, especially if the activities will unfold over time and an ongoing relationship is involved, e.g., running a tabletop campaign after school (Bandhoosingh 2024).

Legal guardians are not necessarily familiar with role-playing games, so use accessible language when describing your game and seeking their consent. You may need to dispel myths about role-playing connected to moral panics or pop culture stereotypes. Sometimes, the presence of a legal guardian or caregiver is required for the child's participation, e.g., for accessibility. In these situations, if possible, we recommend including them in the game as a player with a dedicated role rather than having them observe, which can make the experience more seamless for everyone involved.

d) Mental health professionals

You also may need to communicate with a client's therapist, counselor, social worker, coach, or other mental health professional assigned to them. Ideally, you can share your goals for the activity and they can discuss with you important factors to know when working with this client. Briefing them regularly and planning next steps together can help augment the therapeutic process.

Similarly, checking-in with your client throughout the process to make sure they are still comfortable with the direction of play may be appropriate, as may engaging in a co-creation process with your client as described earlier in this chapter.

e) Museum staff and librarians

Museums often have wonderful spaces and evocative surroundings for play. Museum staff are often seeking nonformal educational experiences to host at the site and are especially interested in more interactive forms of engagement. Depending on the content of the game, they may become interested in playing themselves, or at the very least promoting your activity, so connect with them as early as possible in the process. For an example, see *Mantles in the Museum* (Cox and Lewis 2020, 2023; Cox 2025).

Libraries are also often seeking out engaging activities, so make sure to build a relationship with the local librarian. Often, they will be eager to help provide readings or other materials to support the learning.

f) Camp counselors

Summer camps are spaces in which role-playing games are often fairly easy to integrate. Some camps specifically emphasize larp (see e.g., Hoge 2013; Faros 2018), whereas others may have space for role-play activities to be run. Camp counselors are often youth themselves and may be quite excited to help you run games. In addition, having more camp counselors on board means you will have a higher ratio of facilitators to players, which is usually desirable. Counselors could play a role in the fiction, help officiate, or simply monitor the activities.

g) Prison wardens

For clients who are incarcerated, onboarding prison wardens and other staff is imperative. Some prisons allow special classes or activities to take place, offering them as a reward for good behavior. However, prisons often have strict rules that might limit how you can play, e.g., no violence allowed in the fiction, no pencils or dice permitted on the premises. Make sure you understand and follow these rules or you could be putting your clients at risk of punishment.

h) Public servants

In some cases, you may need to negotiate with local or regional authorities to have access to a specific space. As before, make sure you understand the legal requirements, e.g., permits you might need to have.

i) Law enforcement

Similarly, you may need to engage with law enforcement, especially when role-playing in public spaces. Letting the police know ahead of time can sometimes help build trust and provide more leeway to the activities (Minor 2014). You can also clarify any rules with them to make sure you are operating within legal bounds, which is especially important when running events in other countries.

Be especially careful if alcohol or other substances are present at your event, as you will likely be subject to following local laws. You should conduct a risk assessment for your event (Sinking Ship Creations 2020; Losilla 2024) that includes consequences for your team and your participants for engaging in illegal behavior.

j) Management

When running events within an organization or at a specific location such as a hotel, you will likely need to negotiate with management. Within an organization, the management may need to help you coordinate to make sure the members are signed up and are available for the activity. In hotels and similar rented venues, you may need to share the space with people not involved in the larp activity. Make sure you clearly communicate the timetable and spaces for your activity. You should also make clear if you will be wearing costumes or engaging in unusual or concerning behaviors through play. Ideally, you will have some privacy, but in the event that other guests have questions, give the managers some short explanations to share that will hopefully help allay any concerns or satisfy curiosity. In this way, management might help provide a buffer between you and non-larpers who might otherwise disrupt the activity with questions or try to engage with the players.

k) Veterans affairs

When working with veterans, you may need to contact a veterans affairs office or something similar in order to get access to members of the population. The office may be able to help coordinate sign-up and, if running events at a veterans home, give you access to spaces. In some cases, they may also be able to help connect you with mental health resources available, e.g., counselors at the veterans home.

l) Community organizers / activists

If you want to run events within a specific community, we recommend connecting with the organizers who serve as leaders for that group, whether in an official or unofficial capacity. Community leaders can often be passionate allies and can help encourage group members to attend.

Similarly, you may need to coordinate with activists who organize within communities when working with specific topics or target groups. Make sure to come prepared with an explanation of how your activity will help contribute to the overall cause.

m) Religious officials

In some cases, you may be running games within a religious organization or in a church, mosque, synagogue, or temple. For example, in Denmark, larp has been used in confirmation practices for young people as a way to teach ethics in collaboration with the local church. Make sure these officials understand the nature of the content you are playing and find it appropriate for their setting. In some communities, religious people have been taught to mistrust role-playing games and other forms of media (see e.g., Stark 2012; Laycock 2015). Ideally, you can find ways to reassure them your game is not threatening to the values of the religion or norms of the group.

n) Artists and gallery owners

In some cases, you may collaborate with local artists or gallery owners. Such collaborations can be fruitful, especially if you can find a way to streamline your goals with the aesthetic sensibilities of these stakeholders. In this way, both the art and the play can be augmented by one another.

o) NGO workers / charities

You may also choose to work with non-governmental organizations, non-profits, and/or charities formed around a specific cause. Sometimes, these organizations are quite small and low on time and resources, so be aware of those limitations. In other cases, the organization may be quite large and require navigation to find the right stakeholders who can support your activity.

2.10 Group selection and formation

Another important factor is group selection. While the individuals in a given group may be well-suited for the role-playing activities, sometimes the group dynamics between these individuals are strained for various reasons. When possible, you should try to assess not only whether each individual is a good fit, but also whether the group members cohere well together and are compatible. This process is especially important when playing campaigns or other long-running group activities.

In some cases, 1:1 work may be more appropriate, e.g., in therapeutic settings in which players have incompatible diagnoses, or if an individual is not yet ready to work within a group setting. Make sure to also keep in mind any contraindications, for example delusional tendencies. While contraindications do not necessarily rule out participation, they may make the activity more risky for the participant and the rest of the group. For more information on contraindications, see Chapter 2 of *TRGD*. See Chapter 5 of this book for more on vetting procedures and group safety.

2.11 Implementing the framing

As we have explained, one of the most important questions is: How will you frame the game according to your desired transformative impacts and/or learning objectives?

a) Implementing workshops

You often have limited precious workshop time before the game. Carefully consider what workshops you will include and how they will contribute to the desired transformative impacts.

First, consider including only the amount of *briefing* that is needed, meaning the amount of time in which you are delivering information and they are passively receiving. How short can you make any information delivered via speech from facilitators? We recommend getting players in the mode of *doing* as quickly as possible, while still conveying important information to them. For example, if the players need to learn each other's character names, you could do a Name Game workshop, in which all players stand in a circle, say their character's name with a gesture connected to their personality, and everyone then repeats the name and gesture.

We recommend including only workshop activities that relate to one or more of the following ends (Holkar 2015):

- Group formation,
- Any activities you would like them to perform in the game,
- Character building/relationships,
- Developing cultures,
- Physically embodying certain actions,
- Practicing mechanics/techniques, and
- Safety.

Consider how many activities you absolutely need for each of these purposes and avoid overloading the workshops with excessive content. Avoid spending too much time on “warm-up” activities that do not directly relate to the skills needed to play the game or practice key skills. If you have participants perform three improv exercises in a row but fail to give them enough time to discuss their character relations with each other, that is likely not the best use of your time.

b) Implementing debriefing

Debriefing should be considered and prioritized throughout the implementation design process. As mentioned above, if you have to cut some of the run-time of the game for debriefing, that is time well spent. We recommend having a plan for the debrief well in advance, with questions carefully chosen for emotional, intellectual, and/or educational debriefing (see Bowman et al. 2024). Some guiding questions:

- **When will debriefing take place?** Do you debrief only at the end of the game or during Act breaks throughout the run-time?
- **Where will debriefing take place?** Is everyone expected to attend? Is the space easy to find? Are there other activities happening at the same time that might be distracting to the debriefing, such as packing up to leave or attending the afterparty? Do they need access to technology to debrief, e.g., logging on a few days later?
- **How will debriefing take place?** How long will it be? Remember that a long debrief is not necessarily more effective than a well-planned efficient one, at least for the initial round of processing.
- **How structured is the debrief?** Should they follow a clear structure guided by a facilitator in which each person takes turns speaking with no crosstalk? Should the discussion be semistructured, with the facilitator steering the conversation at certain moments? Or should it be unstructured, allowing the participants the option of what to discuss?
- **In what sized group will they debrief?** Groups of 2? 4? 6? 8? Combinations of different sizes depending on the exercise? Does the whole group debrief together? Keep in mind in a structured debrief, you will need to plan for each person to be able to talk, e.g., 4 players with 5 minutes each = 20 minutes max per debrief question.

c) Implementing integration activities

Finally, you should consider how you want players to integrate the experience well before the end of the game and ideally during the implementation design phase. As a reminder, many activities are possible and may be preferable depending on your player base, which we have organized into six overarching categories (Bowman and Hugaas 2019).

Here, we will share with you the recommended integration practices for the larp developed by several of the authors of this book for the Erasmus+ EDGE project, *Lumen* (2025):

“We hope you will consider integrating your experience after the larp, whether with yourself, with others, or both. Here are some possible actions to take this week. We will also send these to you digitally.

- **Creative expression**
 - Write a story about your character journey.
 - Create a piece of art representing the lesson you would like to take away.

- **Intellectual processing**
 - Write a documentation piece or research article about the larp. (We would love to hear about your experience on Nordiclarp.org or the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, for example).
 - Discuss the game design with others.
- **Emotional processing**
 - Debrief again this week. (We would love volunteers willing to run Zoom sessions).
 - Journal about your experience.
- **Interpersonal processing**
 - Plan reunion activities with other players, for example at conferences or conventions, or in local meetups.
 - Discuss the experience with someone not present at the larp.
- **Community building**
 - Plan a new project with other players.
 - Continue to use the Discord as a space for discussing your journey moving forward. (We would love to hear how you use this work and how you process the experience long-term).
- **Returning to Daily Life**
 - Apply skills you learned in your work and daily life.
 - Ground yourself by doing activities that bring you comfort, like sleep, food, social activities with friends, or watching a good show.”

Giving players a range of activities, some of which are social, whereas others are solo, can be supportive of people with different needs. Similarly, providing a mixture of activities can be helpful: some that are more verbal and some more physical and/or non-verbal. You may also choose to have some of these activities take place on site, e.g., having them create a piece of art or writing that represents what they want to take away from the experience (see e.g., Bowman 2023).

d) Implementing participatory framing

In participatory settings in which players co-create the game, invite players to help define the frame so that the purpose, norms, and intended skills reflect their goals. The facilitator should focus on eliciting, synthesizing, and checking understanding rather than prescribing content. Keep briefing time short and move quickly into action. Consider facilitating a short co-framing activity during workshop time. Here is an example:

Ask each participant to write one sentence about what the game is about for them today and what a good outcome would be. Read several aloud, cluster similar ideas, and craft a two-sentence shared statement that names the purpose; the skills or decisions to practice; and one explicit boundary for safety. Keep it visible during play and revisit it at act breaks if needed.

Translate the shared frame into observable cues for play and one simple success criterion. For example, you might track how many proposals come from different voices, or note one rule negotiation that increases inclusion. These cues help players align behavior during the run and give you concrete material for the debrief.

Support broad participation while setting the frame. Rotate who speaks first, invite quieter participants, and record minority views without pressure to conform. If someone prefers to stand aside on part of the frame, document that choice and adjust safety or facilitation so participation remains viable.

Avoid common pitfalls. Over-briefing dilutes agency, so keep instructions lean. Vague aspirations are hard to use in play, so ask what you would see during play if the frame is working. Hidden dissent can surface later as conflict, so normalize quick check-ins and small revisions to the frame during breaks.

2.12 Game activities

As discussed in Chapter 1, whether starting from scratch in your design or scaling up your nano-game, you should carefully consider which activities you are adding to the game, which will impact your implementation plan. What intended transformational impacts and/or learning objectives do these activities have? Are they different from the original game's objectives? If you have multiple impacts in mind, do they align or contradict one another?

For example, you may dream up a super cool poker room embedded within your sci-fi larp about surviving on a spaceship. Perhaps the overall goals of the larp are practicing teamwork against all odds, whereas the poker room is intended to teach bluffing and strategic thinking. Now consider that the characters may end up betting what little resources they have left to try to win at poker. You have inadvertently created a situation in which a cooperative game is now competitive and high-stakes, which could create conflict between the players contrary to your teamwork. On the other hand, you may want to emphasize the difficulties of working together within a community, so the contrast between cooperative and competitive play is then important to your goals. Whatever you decide, be intentional about the activities you include and make sure they are well-motivated.

a) Designing for the six types of immersion

Related to this principle is remaining aware of the different types of immersion incentivized by your design (Bowman 2024b). As discussed above, immersion refers to attention to game-related processes (Lankoski and Järvelä 2012). As discussed in

Chapter 3 of *TRGD* and Chapter 6 of this book, different game content incentivizes specific forms of engagement (see Calleja 2011 for video game examples). In other words, your players have a limited amount of attention to devote within the game. Understanding what sorts of demands certain activities make on players' attention can become quite important. While role-playing can be quite useful in training multiple skills at once, multitasking may prove more difficult for players if the tasks compete with one another for their attention.

Consider the following when deciding whether or not to integrate a task:

- **Immersion into activity:** Does the task require strong focus on engaging in a specific activity repetitively or for a long period of time?
- **Immersion into game:** Does the task require strong focus on tactics, rules, strategy, achievements, or other game-related factors?
- **Immersion into environment:** Does the task focus on simulating a realistic experience: physically, mentally, or both?
- **Immersion into narrative:** Does the task focus on aspects of story or plot that are central to engagement?
- **Immersion into character:** Does the task emphasize strong identification with the character's thoughts and feelings in the moment?
- **Immersion into community:** Does the task focus on in-game activities related to social dynamics and roles within a community?

In the previous example, the teambuilding activities may have been most closely tied to immersion into the community, or related to immersion into the narrative. However, introducing the poker game incentivized immersion into an engaging activity, one that is also a game within a game. You now have four types of immersion competing with one another for character attention.

On the other hand, if the goal is for the spaceship to feel realistic, then having social activities such as poker outside of their work shift might help with immersion into the environment, or increase feelings of community. Experiencing the rising tension of gambling might help the player immerse more deeply into their character. So, it also depends on the inclinations of the player and what parts of the activity they find engaging.

Remember that you can onboard your participants during your framing activities and indicate how you would like them to play, e.g., "In the poker room, try to focus on the shared camaraderie you feel when engaging in social activities on the ship rather than the competitive elements." You could also put time limits around specific activities to make sure they do not monopolize player attention, e.g., "Poker games will only be 30 minutes of game time, as you will be needed on the bridge for teambuilding exercises."

b) Designing for group size and specific interactions

Thinking through these elements will help mitigate the risks presented by unclear design, which can lead to players directing their attention away from the desired activities. On the other hand, overdesign can lead to incoherent goals or too many types of stimuli demanding the player's attention at once.

Another thing to consider is how many players can and should be included in an activity. If you want to incentivize larger group scenes, consider including activities that require some form of participation from several people, e.g., voting, deliberating, speeches, eating together, partying, or attending a performance or class. If you want to incentivize one-on-one or small group interpersonal scenes, you may want to include structured activities along these lines, e.g., therapy sessions, tutoring, mentoring, or even elements that incentivize romance or intimacy, e.g., everyone should find a date for the ball before Saturday night. Other kinds of activities may be highly engaging, but do not incentivize direct interaction between the player-characters, e.g., scouting, crafting, fighting monsters, meditation, having psychic or magical encounters, or interacting with NPCs, animals, or other external characters.

c) Designing for metareflective moments

Metareflection can be quite helpful when designing for transformative impacts (Levin 2020, 2023). Metareflection occurs when the player has a moment of pause during the runtime and is able to process the experience. These moments may happen organically, for example if a character is walking alone in the woods and the player's thoughts become more dominant. They can also be designed and integrated into the game. For example, in the larp *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-; Groth, Grasmø, and Edland 2021), at midnight, all characters are expected to drink the Green Drink in a ceremony. The Green Drink is a meta-technique in the larp that encourages players to reflect upon their game so far and steer toward where they would like it to go next. Metareflection can also occur during pauses for calibration with other players or Act Breaks, especially if a debriefing component is present. Finally, metareflection can be fostered in workshops (Hernø 2026).

d) Designing specific scenes, quests, or modules

Sometimes, a game will include a specific scene, quest, or module (sometimes called a *mod*). This activity may be open to all characters or geared toward a certain few characters. Narratively speaking, sometimes these scenes are tied to *plot*, which some players seek as a sort of currency or status in the game. In other words, consider who has access to these scenes, why, and who might feel excluded if they are not invited or permitted to join.

When designing these scenes, consider the following questions:

- Do the scenes build on one another in terms of knowledge or experience gained, i.e., are they sequential? Or are they unrelated, i.e., episodic?
- How much commitment do they require compared to other important game activities?
- Do the scenes relate to your transformational goals? How?
- Do the scenes require specific subject matter knowledge or skill training essential for your goals? If so, how will you scaffold this information with preparatory activities before and after?
- Are the scenes mandatory or optional? If optional, are there other activities players can experience that will aim for similar transformational goals?
- What concerns should you consider and communicate in terms of accessibility? Does the scene require a certain degree of physical ability? Does the terrain where the scene will take place hold any risks?

2.13 Processing

In general, it can seem like the understanding of the importance of providing players with spaces to process their game experience is gaining traction across most larp traditions. Yet, it is important to understand that different role-playing game groups will have their own cultures and norms around how or even whether at all designers should create such spaces for players. If you are running a large international larp or facilitating your game at a tabletop RPG convention, understanding these differences becomes even more important, as you might have a player base with varying ideas of what is needed and even acceptable.

When talking about processing, we make the distinction between off-game processing and in-game processing. In short, by off-game processing we mean the reflection that takes place when the players are out-of-character, and by in-game processing we mean reflection that occurs when they are in-character.

a) Off-game preparation and processing

i) Establishing norms around processing

Since players from different scenes might have different ideas about the need for processing, take the time to establish how reflection will work in your game.

While pre-game workshops are important to establish shared norms among the players, you can also seed the importance of reflection earlier: in game design documents; texts and documents handed out to players; website material; and social media. It is important to note that even if you actively establish norms in these different channels, the only way you can make sure that every player has been exposed to your game's norms is in the onsite pre-game workshops.

The following recommendations offer structures that support processing for different types of games.

ii) Transformative leisure games

If you are running a leisure game, consider the following as a minimum:

- Pre-game materials that explain the norms at the event with a high degree of specificity.
- Presence in social media that explains and reinforces the provided information.
- Pre-game workshops where the relevant information is explained and rehearsed.
- A dedicated safety lead or safety team available at the game and after.
- A short and mandatory structured debrief that includes processing suggestions.

Note, that this list might change if you wish to run a leisure game with heavy and/or emotionally activating themes. In this case, you might want to add some items from these additional lists.

iii) Therapeutic games

If you are running a Therapeutic game, consider adding the following to the Transformative Leisure list:

- A process of player selection and casting that is an integrated part of the overall design.
- A dedicated safety lead or safety team available before, during, and after the game.
- A mental health professional that is available to do 1:1 counseling.
- One or more mental health professionals that can run group therapy sessions.
- A mandatory structured debrief that includes processing both in the present and as part of integration processes after the game.

iv) Educational games

If you are running a Educational game, consider adding the following to the Transformative Leisure list:

- Pre-game lectures covering the educational content
- Post-game lectures covering the educational content
- A mandatory structured debrief that includes processing both in the present and as part of integration processes after the game.
- Homework covering the educational content, connected to the structured debrief.

b) In-game processing

Sometimes, you can engage in processing within the game through the lens of the character. Since the character and player experience are not identical, the character lens may provide unique and valuable insights. The fiction may afford alibi to discuss topics that otherwise might feel too vulnerable for the player to share. In-game processing can also lead to character growth, which in turn can then be reflected upon and integrated off-game.

For example, when running a ritual or special activity in-game, you can apply the same framing logic as you do outside of the game: having a workshop to guide the characters into the experience and having an in-game debrief. They will be experiencing multiple layers of identity, e.g., the player, the character, and the character playing a role in the ritual. Therefore, having a clear way to guide them in and out of the experience can be less jarring and more beneficial for staying immersed in the fiction. Furthermore, running characters through multiple intense rituals back to back without in-game processing time might lead to emotional or cognitive overload. Any learning you expect to occur may get lost without in-game debriefs.

You may also choose to integrate facilitators who play a special role in the game that help characters in processing their experiences, e.g., school counselors in *New World Magischola* (Bowman et al. 2017), or similar support roles. Ideally, these facilitators are also part of the safety team. Since these characters are embedded, they tend to have a much stronger idea of what is happening in the fiction and may have even been present for the event the character is processing. Make sure you are clear with your players about what kinds of support you are offering off-game versus in-game, i.e., if your in-game support staff are not actually counselors in real life, but are playing one in the game. Try to avoid these characters becoming too involved in the plot of the game or taking sides with certain factions, as that might distract them from their support duties or confuse players as to their intended role on staff.

Ideally, you will also always have an off-game safety staff member available at all times, especially in larger larp settings. This principle is also helpful in therapeutic tabletop groups, e.g., having one facilitator focused solely on emotional processing. See Chapter 4 on facilitation and Chapter 5 on safety for more information.

c) Designing experience based on reflection models

In some cases, you may want to use an existing reflection model as the basis for your framing activities, e.g., Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs 1988), Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb 1984). Keep in mind that the game itself is not likely to provide enough time for players to experience all of these steps. Consider what other types of framing might be appropriate and how long they will take. For example, should you organize another debrief in a week? Six months?

Remember you can tailor your questions to mirror the kinds of reflection you are inviting, e.g., referring to the Reflector's Toolkit (University of Edinburgh 2024). See Chapter 3 of *TRGD* for more information.

2.14 Assessment

In many cases, assessment might be desirable or even required when running role-playing games in applied settings (Westborg 2023a). For example, you may wish to know how effective your game was at helping players meet specific goals. You have options for assessment in this case. *Formative assessment* involves checking in during the learning process and offering feedback on the individual or group development. *Summative assessment* evaluates how successful the individual or group ultimately was at the end of the activity (Whitton 2014).

Formative assessment can be quite helpful at specific checkpoints during the role-playing activity and sometimes can even be delivered through the game itself, e.g., through a facilitator in-character, or through a feedback mechanism within the game, such as success or failure at a task. These check-in points can provide powerful learning moments for players moving forward, helping them build confidence to complete difficult tasks later in the game or indicating areas of improvement. For example, if a leader character has to deliver a persuasive speech at the climax of a larp, having the character practice the speech and receive accurate feedback from facilitators in the role of in-game advisors can help scaffold the learning process.

While it may be tempting to tie the activities in the game to summative assessment like a grade, e.g., how well did the player perform at a specific task, such practices run the risk of making the learning activity too high stakes for playful engagement. Ideally, players will feel safe enough to try something challenging and fail, or to brainstorm creative, out-of-the-box solutions to a problem, which they may be less likely to do if they are being graded. Instead, you can assess their progress through reflective exercises such as journals. Ideally, they will not be graded on the content of their work, but rather the completeness of the task, e.g., whether or not they answered all the questions on the prompt. Alternatively, players can discuss assessment questions together during the debrief, e.g., asking for feedback on their characters' actions or their demonstrated skill level within the game.

We discuss assessment during the game in more depth in Chapter 4.

2.15 Summary

This chapter has offered some brief strategies for implementing transformative role-playing games in applied settings and for specific populations. In the next chapter, we will transition to discussing considerations around logistics and production more generally.

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CHAPTER 3

Production and Logistics for Transformative Role-playing Games

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3.1 Introduction

When running analog role-playing games, you are also, in effect, becoming event planners. For a transformative game to work its magic, your players need to trust the design, the setting, and the situation. Issues of *logistics* can be jarring at best, and catastrophic at worst, e.g., problems with transportation, accommodation, set-up, and technical failures. To avoid these issues, we recommend carefully planning and tracking your production and logistics work when possible. This chapter is intended as a support for these processes.

In this chapter, we will consider the wide range of considerations that go into producing a transformative role-playing game at scale. While many of the topics here may pertain more to long-form larps rather than other types of game, we recommend reading carefully anyway and deciding what is directly relevant to your projects. Furthermore, while we focus primarily on in-person events, you can find some considerations around working with technology later in the chapter.

We have structured this chapter to follow a traditional project lifecycle. It begins with the tasks necessary to start working on running your game, then moves onto the design tasks and other activities that need to happen before your game. We will then consider those tasks that might happen once you arrive onsite. Finally, we will discuss tasks that happen after the game is done. While this organization is chronological, note that some activities run throughout the entire project. For example, you will create a budget during the initiation phase, but you will not close the budget until the last invoice has been paid, which is likely to happen after the game is packed away.

In these next sections, we will cover the **Initiation** stage: when you are starting the planning for your project.

3.2 Organizational teams

a) Organizational structure, leadership, and management

Leadership is a role or a quality that involves influencing people to enthusiastically and willingly follow a vision or a direction. *Management* is a set of processes and methodologies that enable those people to work efficiently and effectively. In hierarchical terms, leaders are in charge of deciding what needs to be done, while managers are in charge of delivering it. In many game projects, the leaders are also managers, but the skillsets are different.

While some teams are run like a corporation (Harviainen 2013), not all are hierarchical; some prefer a consensus-driven approach to decision making, or a democratic (committee-based) structure. Martine Svanevik (2009) argues that it is possible to collectively create larps “with a flat power structure, where the traditional role of organizer is non-existent.” Harviainen (2013, 119) mentions that while such structures can be beneficial, “because the larp lacks a definitive authority, it also lacks a directive source who is able to settle disputes, define undeniable in-game truths, and so forth.” Authority can be important, so be transparent with how your team will function so everyone understands their responsibilities. In this section, we will assume a distinction between leadership and levels of management that you can choose to dismantle for your own project.

An overlap also exists between the organising team and the design team in as much as the people who come up with the idea for the game are also the same people who produce and run the game. However, this is not always the case. If you consider most tabletop RPGs or even larps like *Gothic* (2024; Brind et al. 2024), *Just a Little Lovin’* (2011–; Groth, Grasmø, and Edland eds. 2021), or *On the Styx* (2019–2022), they can be organized by people who are not the original designers because a larpscript exists (Stark, Nilsen, and Lindahl 2013). Many shorter scripts and even some long ones are available on the archive Alexandria.dk.

The core skills of a leader or a leadership team are to be able to enthuse others and provide a coherent vision for the game: What is the game about? What are the themes and intentions of the piece? It does not necessarily mean being “in charge,” nor does it mean that you have all of the answers; deferring to the expertise and experience of others is in itself a leadership quality. Ultimately, however, the leaders are accountable for the success of the game. We recommend a form of soft leadership, with more frequent delegation than in other fields. There are many reasons for this. First of all, implementation is a collective effort and rarely will an organizer, however committed, be able to have a comprehensive view of all aspects of the larp, so you have to trust what other working groups are doing. Secondly, but no less importantly, larp teams are often made up of volunteers who do not receive a salary. It is therefore necessary for the environment to be more relaxed and flexible than the working world in which these

people usually operate. Friendly treatment, recognition of their work, and a healthy environment are the best rewards for a team of volunteers, who will thus be more motivated to return or create new events.

For more tips on managing projects, see Bailly (2022).

b) Other Implementation team roles

In many teams, one person will end up taking on more than one of these responsibilities. Ideally, everyone should be aware of the main themes of the game and the design philosophy. Remember to devote time and effort to effective communication between the various groups, so that everyone functions as part of the same project and can act in a way that ensures their work is consistent with the type of experience you want to provide to participants. Also, note that the roles listed here may be filled by one or more persons depending on the size, type of event, and the resources available. In general, it is more effective to assign fewer persons to supervisory roles and more persons to the actual production of materials, but this is not a general rule. Each team is formed according to the inclinations, objectives, political agenda, and social group that make up the team.

i) Project Roles

Depending on the scope, your project may need several roles filled by team members. Examples include:

- **Project manager:** Responsible for tracking and reporting on the project and helping to keep it on time, and on budget.
- **Producer:** Responsible for maintaining an overview of all aspects related to production and delegating tasks.
- **Accountant:** Handles and tracks the financial transactions.
- **Physical logistics specialist:** Makes sure that everything that needs to get to and from the location arrives/departs on time; is correctly and safely set up; and packed away.
- **Scenographer:** Responsible for designing the physical atmosphere, such as lighting, sound, set pieces, and props.
- **Communication specialist:** Looks after the dissemination of information to potential and actual players and crew.
- **Safety specialist:** Is responsible for implementing structures to support the physical and emotional safety of all participants.
- **Accessibility specialist:** Specialises in all aspects of accessibility before and during an event.
- **Cultural consultant / sensitivity reader:** Reads and advises on matters pertaining to culture and identity to ensure fair, inclusive, and appropriate content.
- **Diversity, equity, and inclusion specialist:** Works to ensure that the event is inclusive and welcoming to all people whenever possible.

- **Education specialist:** Where the transformative game has educational content, advises and consults on education best practice and process.
- **Therapeutic specialist:** Advises and consults on therapeutic content, best practice, and process.
- **Workshop designer:** Designs and writes scripts for workshops that deliver concise content in a timely fashion and across different levels of experience.
- **Documentation lead:** Is responsible for photographs, videos, and other documentation of the game.
- **Worldbuilder:** Is accountable for the creation, documentation, and description of the Storyworld for the game.
- **Narrative designer:** Is in charge of the plot and narrative development.
- **Character writer:** Is accountable for the creation of characters and relations for the game and/or the process by which characters are created.
- **Sound designer:** Creates the soundscape for the larp by writing or commissioning new pieces, compiling existing tracks, and/or recruiting DJs or other performers.
- **Graphic designer:** Designs the website, logos, fliers, and any other visual materials needed for the game.

ii) Run-time Roles

- **Game runner(s):** Are responsible for the actual running of the event.
- **Non-player characters (NPCs) and support characters:** Play the non-player characters.
- **Onsite crew:** These are the amazing people who will perform the job of what in cinema is called the “runner”: performing all those tasks that do not fall within the roles listed so far. In many cases, they may be people who have taken part in previous runs as players and who return with the advantage of already knowing the event. Including onsite crew members broadens the base of people involved in an event, expanding the community and acting as a gateway to start organising larps.
- **Facilitators:** The facilitator’s role in runtime is to ensure the game and workshops begin with clear framing, flow through responsive play, and land in reflection that participants can use.
- **Safety team:** Are responsible for the emotional and physical safety at the event. We recommend choosing safety team members that are particularly empathetic and strong communicators, ideally with some experience handling crisis situations.
- **Medics:** Are responsible for handling medical emergencies, e.g., first aid, dispensing medication, or calling the ambulance if needed. You can sometimes deputize members of the players base as additional medics, but make sure you have at least one person with this skillset on your team.

- **Mental health professional or paraprofessional:** For emotionally intense games, a licensed professional able to handle states of overwhelm or acute crisis, as well as less pressing support for the players.
- **Educator:** Akin to the education specialist. Delivers the educational content.
- **Documentarian:** Document the game in some way for future use, e.g., a photographer, researcher, or journalist. We recommend making your participants aware of and introducing these individuals to the group before play. If you have ways to opt-out of documentation, make those clear to players ahead of time.

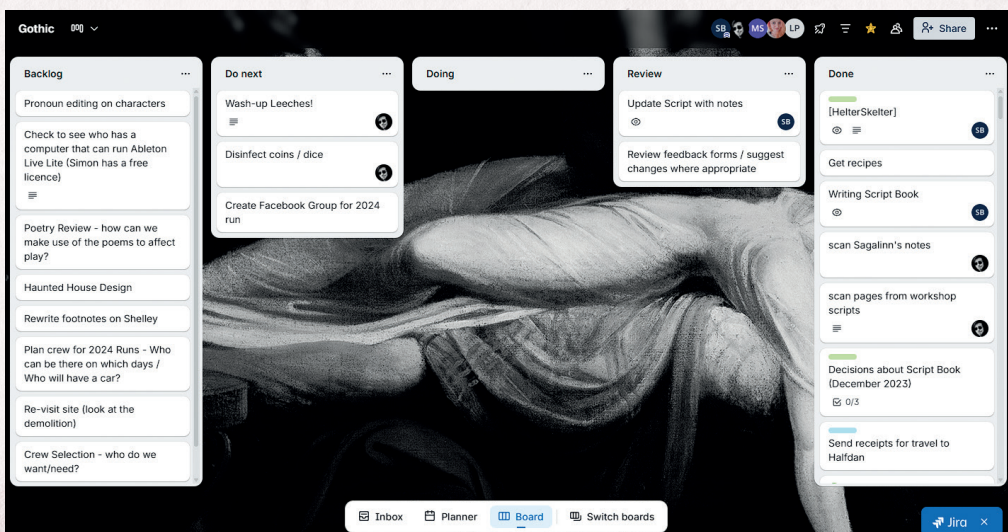
While some roles can be filled by multiple people, we recommend making project roles clear so that everyone understands their respective responsibilities to avoid the infinite hours model of organizing in which everyone is responsible for all tasks (Pettersen 2021, 218).

3.3 Project management

Project management is a process of supervising the work of a team so that everything that needs to get done is done, on time, and within the constraints of the project, which are often financial. The project manager is not necessarily “in charge” nor accountable for the creative quality of the work; their focus is on keeping the event on track and managing the details. If at any point they think the project is not going to be ready on time, they need to communicate this.

In larp production, the project manager is often -- but not always -- the producer. However, for larger projects and teams, this is not always the case. There are a number of project management methodologies and online tools to support these methods, although a brief survey of larp makers in May 2025 suggested that most people were simply using a shared document – like Google Docs/Sheets – to track what needed to be done and by when, with a small group of people suggesting tools like Miro, Jira, Trello, and Coda (see Figure 1 for an example from *Gothic* (2023).

Fig 1: Trello board for project management of *Gothic*, courtesy of Avalon Larp Studio.



At its most basic, project management involves having a list of what needs to be done and by when, what is in progress, and what is completed or blocked. It can also include detailed estimations, timelines, and dependencies, but the approach depends on the scale of the game, number of participants, and experience of project managers.

Project management also overlaps with some elements of run-time facilitation. In long-form larps, often events need to take place at a specific time, or workshops need to run to a tight schedule so that the game can start at the allotted hour. Project management skills are useful for planning and implementing the runtime as well as the overall design.

Table 1: Production spreadsheet from Act 3 of *Midwinter* (Svanevik et al. 2020), showing key planned events, courtesy of Avalon Larp Studio.

Saturday		
Time	What	Person responsible
10:00	Workshop - structure of the day, warm-up exercise	MS
10:45	Act 3 - Crisis	-
11:00	Workshift 1 - provide toy materials	HJ + crew
11:45	Prep coffee for social time	SB
12:00	Social time (coffee)	-
12:40	Pick up lunch	Reindeer Guard
13:00	Family time (and lunch)	-
14:00	Tidy up from lunch	All
14:00	Workshift 2 - provide toy materials	HJ + crew
14:45	Prep tea for social time	SB
15:00	Family time (and tea)	-
15:45	Tidy up from tea	SB
16:00	Social time	-
16:50	Christmas Tree	-
16:55	Act 4 - Climax	-
17:00	Workshift 3- provide toy materials	HJ
18:00	Social Time	-
19:00	Workshift 4 - provide toy materials?	HJ
19:40	Pick up dinner	Reindeer Guard
20:00	Family Time (Dinner)	-
20:30	Prep Christmas Tree decorating	MS / SB
21:00	Decorating the Christmas Tree	MS / SB
21:15	Act 5 - Denouement	-
21:50	Meeting at The Christmas Tree	-
22:00	Larp Ends	-
22:30	Everyone off site	-

In the next sections, we will share several considerations you should make **Before the Game** when implementing your project.

3.4 Setting

In the early stages of implementation, it helps to think about the setting of the game as this will inform many aspects of the project, particularly around location and aesthetics. In this section we will consider the genre of the game and the process of worldbuilding.

a) Genre

Genre is an important consideration as players tend to bring assumptions based upon previous associations and experiences. These assumptions can work in your favor, for example, using fairytale creatures that are familiar to children in a larp intervention. However, they can also bring with them challenges, such as stereotypes or misaligned interpretations of the genre. For example, the term “fantasy” can refer to games that range from silly, to epic, to gritty, to a highly political thriller; a player assuming the tone of the game is more like *Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1991) will likely have difficulties calibrating with a player imagining the game is like *Game of Thrones* (1996). When working with genre, giving pop cultural examples as touchstones ahead of the game can be helpful, although do not assume your players are familiar with these references. What you might consider common knowledge within your subculture may be completely unfamiliar to some players.

Thus, even with such touchstones, you should be transparent with players about what kind of tone and which themes you are most interested in playing. A light-hearted *Star Trek* episode focusing on everyday life aboard the ship is far different from a Borg episode featuring torture of a beloved cast member, so simply using *Star Trek* as a reference may not be enough to set the proper tone. Without such guidelines, in applied situations, you run the risk of derailing the playstyle away from the specific transformative goals you are aiming to incentivize. Also consider which themes are most appropriate for certain populations’ contexts. For more information, see Chapter 2 of this textbook.

While these reminders are important during the design phase, they can especially emerge in implementation. As role-playing games are spontaneous, co-creative, and improvisational, emergent play is inherent to the experience (Bowman 2018; Torner 2018). You may need to course correct the game as an organizer or bring in a run-time facilitator who can narratively direct the players in the preferred direction. Failing to do so may cause at least a lack of narrative cohesion or uneven play experiences and at worst, safety concerns due to reactions to sensitive emergent content.

b) Worldbuilding

The structure of a worldbuilding team depends on the scale of the larp you are running and the complexity of the world you want to build. For a campaign fantasy larp, you may need to do a lot of writing; producing an entire setting from scratch may need a large team to support that work: writers, editors, and proofreaders. Some projects introduce the idea of team leaders who are responsible for sections of the worldbuilding. *College of Wizardry* (2014-) did this for their Student Handbook (Skjønsgjell et al. 2015), which was a five hundred page diegetic guide to the new storyworld. Seventy-two contributors worked to define the world and its history in a way that still allowed a collaborative “Yes, and...” approach to play. However, five hundred pages contains a lot of information and it might not help a transformative game if you expect your players to assimilate all of that information before the game. Be clear with your participants what information is essential and what is meant for mainly aesthetic purposes. As with everything else, intensive worldbuilding is a design choice. The larp *Conscience* was set in a near future world with realistic androids and artificial intelligence. The world document was 650 words long and it detailed the playable aspects of the world and society and important “historical” events that were relevant to the character’s backstories. It also provided a framework for players to generate their own stories. For a smaller game, or one that is closer to the world we live in, a much smaller team or even an individual can describe the information that players need to play the game.

i) Historical Setting

This approach is also useful for a game with a historical setting. For a tabletop adventure set in 1986, it might be enough to reference the Cold War, the AIDS crisis, and a general lack of mobile phones.

ii) Existing IP

If permitted, you may also want to set your game within an existing setting, for example a tabletop game using the *World of Darkness* storyworld, which has a rich history and a society that is well documented and understood by many. However we urge caution when it comes to using someone else’s intellectual property (IP) without permission. Even if your intentions are good, this is an area where we suggest that seeking forgiveness after the fact could be expensive and stressful. Major media corporations often have a lot more resources for legal battles than gamerunners do.

iii) Shared worldbuilding

Another option that works well for smaller games is to do worldbuilding collectively in a workshop. Let the players decide where and when the larp takes place, calibrate the culture (Nielsen 2014; Nielsen and Bulterund Strand 2019), create some news headlines for things that have happened there recently, and establish any antagonists.

3.5 Other essential aspects of the game design

Which aspects of the game design are essential to enact? As discussed in Chapter 2, map the game design to your transformational goals and to use this as a basis for prioritising their relative importance. You should not be in a position where everything is crucial; the more moving parts there are to a design, the greater the chance of a part of the impact not landing for the players. Consider the the following:

a) Relations

Is transformation achieved directly through the relations between the characters? For example, is some form of redemption or reconciliation key to your design? Do players need to help each other reach their transformative goals through play? If so, make this necessity transparent in your design.

b) Plots

Is transformation achieved through catharsis or the resolution of some plot or problem? Is there one central storyline, or several stories? Is the narrative linear, or rather a web of narrative threads? When it comes to a transformative game, sometimes the plot is not meant to be a “narrative” discovery, but rather a context that serves the main focus of the larp and its goals.

Sometimes the organizers prepare the storyline, but also players can create their own or transform, or even overturn, the main plot through emergent play (Bowman 2018; Torner 2018) or hacking the game to suit their own preferences (Svanevik and Brind 2020). A common example is when oppressive systems in larps are overruled by spontaneous democratic organizing based on the sensibilities of the players, not the characters, e.g., the *larp democracy* phenomenon (Fatland 2006; Hugaas 2019). Consider if your game will fall apart with emergent play and if so, communicate with your players what can and cannot be changed.

c) Outcome

Does everything come together at the end of the game? Is the final scene meant to be the point at which your goals are met?

In a transformative larp, the outcome is not so much about “victory” or not even “fun,” but what participants take home with them in terms of experience, reflection, personal, or social growth. The experience aims to be formative, able to give participants new perspectives or tools about negotiation, conflict management, emotional awareness and so on. Some aspects can be also cathartic on a more intimate level.

d) Contrary elements

Of those aspects that are critical according to your transformative goals, why and how are they critical? You should be able to articulate and explain this to yourself and others. There may be ideas, scenes, or concepts that feel important – and they probably are – but sometimes this feeling is subjective and the things you are focusing on are less important to the overall design and outcomes.

If not, do these elements run counter to your transformative goals? If so, how will you mitigate this? This is another fundamental aspect of design that needs to be decided early in the implementation. Spending time understanding what is not key to the experience and what actually may run counter to it is a key artifact of the piece, particularly for a long form or larger game. Consider making a risk assessment not only for safety (Sinking Ship Creations 2020; Losilla 2024), but also for the larp content itself, listing all of the things that might go wrong, how likely that is to happen, what the impact would be, and how it could be mitigated.

e) Transparency

How transparent is the game in terms of these critical points, i.e., how much agency do players think they have?

Some non-transparent games enjoy miscommunicating the level of agency players have; they talk about the illusion of agency or promise one thing but deliver another (Torner 2013). In a sphere that prioritizes honesty we are unsure of the value of doing this in a transformational game unless the goals are explicitly connected to detecting deception or problem solving in ambiguous situations. It is better to set expectations and manage the limits of agency, e.g., “Your characters will have significant agency in this game. However, we reserve the right to course correct or use a *deus ex machina* intervention if the piece strays too far from its intended path.”

f) Structure

How might the degree of structure affect certain populations? For example, while many neurodiverse players prefer structure, this is not universally true. Whichever way you design, structure will need to be clearly signposted and – where necessary – facilitated. If your design expects players to turn up for a ritual at 10pm, you may need a process for reminding them shortly beforehand. In locations with many possible play spaces, finding players to remind them may be untenable, so have another plan.

Even if plot-related scenes are optional, keep in mind that some players experience *fear or missing out* (FOMO) or feelings of rejection when they miss key group scenes or important plot points. You cannot always mitigate these reactions, but having a clear structure with a robust system for reminders can help. Keep in mind FOMO can also happen in tabletop RPGs, even when every player is technically witnessing the same events. Facilitators should try to distribute plots or special scenes amongst the players equally whenever possible to avoid perceptions of favoritism. We will discuss facilitation in more depth in Chapter 4.

3.6 Interaction design

In this section we will discuss the processes of interaction design. As this is an important aspect of role-playing – the ways that characters interact with one another, with organizers, or with NPCs. We suggest thinking about this early; however, we acknowledge that during the iteration process, sometimes ideas you will have early in the process will be discarded in favour of new ones. In the following sections, we will consider some of the implementation choices related to interaction.

a) Interacting with each other

How will players interface with the others during the game? For a tabletop game, the interactions between players, antagonists, and NPCs are sometimes directly curated by the facilitator or the game system. In a larp, however, the design should aim to create opportunities and invitations for interaction between characters. These opportunities are seeded in a number of different places: primarily the characters and their relationships, but also the planned activities, spatial, and social design of the game.

b) Player agency

To what degree can player choices impact the game during runtime, i.e., what is their degree of agency? This design question should be answered very early in the implementation process. Some games are very open-ended. There is no set story ending, and no expectation of success. In a fantasy game where the player characters can be defeated, you are creating a situation where character death is possible or even probable. In other games, even when these tragic outcomes are possible, players have a degree of control around when they will happen and/or the opportunity to opt-out of them, e.g., in consent-based games (Brown 2016; Bowman 2017). Still other games have a fixed ending that cannot be changed, some others have multiple choice options. The tension between authorial control and players' desire for agency can be designed away by making clear ahead of time the extent to which their characters have freedom to make change within the fiction.

Again, consider how the degree of player agency relates to your transformative goals. If you are aiming to help them improve their feelings of perceived competence or self-efficacy (Bandura 1982; Ryan and Deci 2017), a high degree of agency will be important. If your goals focus on raising awareness and empathy about social issues related to oppression, then removing agency (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018) and/or having a fixed ending is a better option (Aarebrot and Nielsen 2012).

c) Group size

As discussed in Chapter 2, the size of the group matters, especially in terms of how much your design relies on runtime facilitation. Is a specific ratio of organizers to participants necessary for your transformative goals and the tasks you have assigned?

Can one teacher run a larp for 35 students, or do you need four additional facilitators to work with the students in smaller groups? Is there an expectation of supervision or emotional care? How large a safety team do you think you will need, based on the intensity of the planned activities?

When working with experienced role-players, you may be able to expect they will be able to play optimally based on *herd competence* (Lundqvist 2015) and sufficient instruction in the preparatory game materials, such as character relations or goals on the character sheet. However, you cannot assume new players will know how to engage without sufficient scaffolding and modeling from a guide. Furthermore, even experienced players struggle to engage sometimes, so having more organizers present is helpful.

d) Factions

Do the characters have specific factions or core groups with whom they will mainly play?

As we discussed in Chapter 4 of *TRGD* the Three Affiliations Model (Raaum et al. 2000, 2017; Fatland 2010b) allows for characters to have three core groups with whom they can interact. Constructing these affiliations in a way that gives a strong alibi for interaction and designs opportunities for characters to talk is important. If you have a group of characters working together in the kitchen, it might be more efficient for each of them to have their own work station and do separate jobs, but you have better interaction if they are all peeling potatoes together. Similarly, a religious commune where the initiates remain silent seems appropriate, but encouraging them to talk to one another – even just in whispers – tells your players that it is okay to interact. This is one of the places where narrative design and interaction design may clash. Privilege playability over fidelity to authenticity (Nielsen and Andresen 2013).

e) Calibration

Calibration and negotiation belong to all aspects of interaction design and are perhaps the most important thing to workshop and to make time for. Calibration and negotiation can be taught. Using exercises like the No Game can help inexperienced players learn to say no. In the No Game, you take turns in asking another player for something and they say “no” or “no thank you.” The purpose of this exercise is to normalise saying no, and to get used to being told no. *The Three Minute Game* (School of Consent 2015), developed by Harry Faddis and popularized by Betty Martin (2015), is also a useful way to build trust and teach the basics of calibration and negotiation. For example, Avalon Larp Studio adapted *The Three Minute Game* for the larp *Gothic* to help to build trust between players for physical interaction, e.g., of a romantic or sexual nature. Players alternate between asking/answering the questions: “How would you like me to touch you for two minutes?” and “How would you like to touch me for two minutes?” with an opportunity for negotiation and calibration.

Getting players to feel safe and brave enough to talk freely and honestly with one another takes time and effort. Be gentle with them and give them space. For small ensemble groups, calibration can occur within the whole group between all players, one at a time. If you know the players involved, starting with the more experienced ones first can help to set the level of honesty for the rest of the group. Ideally, this calibration comes at the end of a set of workshops that have already built trust and comfort between the group of players.

Always bear in mind that calibration becomes more complicated and time-consuming as the number of players increases. Large-scale larps have to manage many relationships and find space and time for calibration to be carried out before the event, on location. Due to the large numbers involved and other player responsibilities, it will always be difficult to try to carry out these activities online before the event. Many organizers therefore carry out these activities a few hours before the larp so that all participants are present and focused. It is always complicated to supervise a negotiation between two or more players, due to its intimate nature. For this reason, it is always best to train staff as well as possible beforehand.

f) Character relations calibration

How will players plan, workshop, and/or calibrate character relations before, during, and even after the game? In many cases, characters may have known one another for long periods of time – even years or more – and you need to allow your players a chance to talk about this dynamic: how well or poorly their characters get along and what the norms of behaviour are in each of their groups. Making time in workshops for relations discussions is probably the most efficient method of calibration; however, it has been successfully done over online meetings, phone calls, and instant messages. You can prepare self-guided questions on worksheets to facilitate the discussion.

Lines workshops are also useful here, in which players arrange themselves in a line in the room according to their perceived status. In particular, status lines allow players to identify where they think their character belongs within a group in terms of importance, wealth, intelligence, belonging, etc. For example, in *The Deadline* (Bowman et al. 2022, 2024), players enact members of an interdisciplinary research group experiencing conflicts around revisions on a grant application. In this scenario, perceived status is quite important to dynamics between the characters, so the designers included a line workshop. Players move along an imaginary line in the room with one side representing “strongly agree” and the other “strongly disagree” to the following questions:

- Do you believe your perceived status in the group is high?
- How enthusiastic were you about this project when it kicked off?
- How enthusiastic are you about this project right now?

The facilitator can then ask questions the player answers as their character, e.g., “For example, “Dr. Jones, I see that you feel you have a high status in this group. What is it that makes you feel that?” (Bowman et al. 2024). Players can also briefly chat with the participant next to them about why they think that place in the line. Such information is important not only to help the player get into character, but also to establish relationship dynamics quickly in the group.

g) Character collaboration

Are characters expected to collaborate? Or are the relationships more neutral or open to interpretation?

In some groups or factions, it is clear that the characters are supposed to be working together, but in others there is more room for interpretation. For example, in a school setting, just being in the same class as another character does not necessarily mean you are friends. You could be rivals, frenemies, actively dislike one another, or be ex-partners -- bitter and destructive or looking for reconciliation. Guide your players depending on the group with the sorts of questions and options they have for in-game collaboration. We can replace the whole sentence with something like ‘there is a tendency for players to create relationships that are “comfortable” rather than “dramatic,” i.e., *anodyne* relationships, particularly when players are tired from extensive workshopping. While such relations might be fine for some goals, they may not be ideal, for example, if your goals center upon conflict management (Cahn and Abigail 2014), resolution, or transformation (Lederach 2014).

h) Adversarial relations

Related to this point, are adversarial relationships built into the game with other players and/or NPCs?

Adversity and drama are at the heart of many role-playing stories and are often highly engaging, but they are not always required, nor always constructive. Drama is a subjective need. Some players derive energy from conflict; others shrink from it and find that even third-party conflict adversely affects their play and, by extension, transformative process. Note that conflict is not always visible, as in the case of heightened drama, but instead might remain under the surface. Similarly, adversarial relations do not always involve a direct conflict.

You may wish to move conflict from *character vs. character* (CvC, sometimes called PvP), to *character vs. environment* (CvE, sometimes called PvE), so that it only exists between players and NPCs or other external pressures in the game world. This practice allows conflict to be scheduled and to happen in controlled spaces. For example, at *The Quota* (Brind et al. 2018; Brind 2020) about refugees seeking asylum, homophobic interactions were very much an opt-in activity, and they took place in 1:1 interview rooms between PCs and NPCs. For participants who did not want to engage with the theme, they were not going to see or overhear it.

If adversarial, again, do these relationships contribute to your transformative goals? Conflict for conflict's sake probably does not contribute directly, but facing adversity and overcoming or reconciling it might. Ask yourself if there is an alternative to adversarial relationships and to what extent they are necessary to the game you want to make.

For more information about conflict, see Chapter 5 and Chapter 6 of *TRGD*.

i) Group interactions

How and when will players interact in a group? Examples include eating, rituals, speeches, and parties. For each of the groups, plan and roughly schedule the times and spaces for interaction. Decide where and when these groups should be together and confirm there is enough space for interaction. Is the location crowded and noisy? A meal time may seem to be a good time and space for people to talk, but if they are spending half of the time queuing for food, and the rest of it in a space where it is too loud to hear properly then it may not work as planned. On the other hand, mealtime interactions can be designed as well, such as in the practice of *dinner warfare*, in which the organizers use arranged seating as a way to increase drama, encouraging players to intensify conflicts during food scenes (Wind 2024).

Also consider issues related to navigating the site. If you have a group of characters who are secretly meeting in the woods to rehearse a play, consider how long it takes to get to the woods and how easy it will be to find the location. Is rehearsing the play the most important activity? Or is the play simply a pretext for interaction, which can just as easily happen while walking there?

Are group interactions highly structured, loosely structured, or up to the players to navigate? You may be comfortable just letting the players sort the structure out for themselves. A loose structure allows groups and subgroups to form and is usually more comfortable and relaxed for players, as they do not feel they need to be checking the time and working out where they need to be next. However, as mentioned previously, lack of structure risks some players being left out or isolated.

j) Physicality

Are characters expected to physically interact with each other, e.g., combat, intimacy, sexuality, physical restraint?

Whilst most of what we think about when designing for interaction in embodied games is conversation, other forms of interaction may be important to your vision. If you have a combat system -- physical or otherwise -- or rules for intimate, sexual, or other physical contact, these need to be designed, communicated, and a clear baseline demonstrated ideally during workshops. As many of these types of interaction intersect with the safety rules for the game, it is essential that everyone has the same understanding of how they work or do not work.

What are the guidelines or rules around physicality? Putting the rules for physical interactions into your pre-game materials is a useful baseline, but you cannot safely assume that everyone has read or assimilated this information. They still need to be written, and ideally published before you invite players into the space, but you will need to review them with everyone in the room during workshops. Players should understand the type of game they are signing up to play and have enough information to make an informed decision about what actions they are and are not comfortable with (Koljonen 2016). Therefore, making this design choice early is important.

How will you workshop physicality? Practicing these techniques seems particularly important where they are thematically relevant to the game, but actually they should be workshopped in any game where there is a possibility they might be used. Even a player who does not want to play on physical interactions should understand how they can be used in the game and will ideally have tried them in the controlled environment of a workshop. This practice can be used as a refresher for any *escalation* or *de-escalation mechanics* you may have introduced (see Chapter 5 of *TRGD*). Get people to try out simple scenes with multiple partners.

3.7 Character writing

In this section, we will consider the process of writing characters for games. The following processes are generic for larp or tabletop games and apply equally to player and NPCs.

In some cases players will create their own characters either before the game or during workshops. We will consider these in a separate section later in this chapter.

a) Pre-written Characters

If your game features characters that are written for the players or requires NPCs, then you will need to allow enough time to ensure character writing is done well before the game. Whilst an experienced game runner can create NPCs on the fly – particularly in a tabletop setting – it is better to have these ideas fleshed out before the game when possible.

Out of a survey of character creation processes in 2024–2025, perhaps the most frequently repeated recommendation is to design the characters before writing them (Brind, 2025, 417). This generally means sketching out only a few sentences for each character—covering their basic function, purpose, and relationships—rather than producing detailed biographies at the outset. This light-touch approach prevents duplication of character concepts and helps maintain balance across networks of relationships. For instance, Not Only Larp used this technique when designing *I'Inconscience* (2025).

If your game needs more than a handful of characters, you may need to recruit and manage writers. If you are creating at scale, a management structure should be in place to ensure that characters are written on time and to the appropriate

standard. Designing and writing characters for a large-scale game is a collaborative and structured process, and several best practices emerge from the experience of writing teams. While some designers continue to write entirely alone—even for large productions—most recommend a ratio of 5-10 characters per writer. One effective strategy for scaling is to divide a large larp into smaller, semi-autonomous sections, each supported by its own team of writers. A cast of 160 characters, for example, can be reframed as 4 groups of 40, allowing the design task to function as a series of more manageable projects.

Several methodologies for group-based design exist. A popular approach is to design the *group first*, beginning with its shared identity before developing individual members. A single group concept can yield multiple characters that share coherence while retaining variety. Many teams recommend collective brainstorming sessions: spending a day generating mind maps; drafting factions, plots, and relationships; and sketching personalities and themes. These connections can be formalised through whiteboards with relationship lines or similar visualisations. For the 2019 version of *Odysseus*, writers used a “dating site” model where a writer could signal that a particular character required a specific kind of connection.

Before prose writing begins, teams stress the importance of equipping writers with a clear framework. This framework often takes the form of a *writer’s guide*, which provides information about the game’s overall design, storyworld, premise, and mood, as well as the game’s central themes. Such guides also specify the expected length of character sheets, the number of relationships required, and the milestones and deadlines of the writing and editing process. Example characters and templates further ensure stylistic consistency. For more information on this topic, see Brind (2025).

Finally, some designers have been experimenting with generating larp content through the use of generative artificial intelligence (gen AI) (see e.g., Torrebejano Osorio 2023). While such a practice can quicken the writing process, the materials are often drawn illegally from the labor of human writers who did not give their consent for its adaptation (Suominen 2025, 33-34) and/or replace the labor of experienced RPG artists whose work has enriched their communities for years (Ihalainen and Gyldenstrøm 2026). Furthermore, such characters often lack the depth and thoughtfulness present in characters written by experienced humans, and may feature stereotypes, biases, or other problematic content. The widespread use of AI also causes enormously negative impacts to the environment. Finally, as role-playing games are at their core a co-creative medium, by not allowing humans to write the characters, you are depriving them from getting the credit, experience, fulfillment, and sometimes even financial compensation associated with being part of a writing team. Therefore, we strongly recommend reconsidering this approach if you have the network, resources, and time to create human-written characters. The same recommendations apply if you plan to include artwork in your character sheets or other game documents.

b) Writer's Guide

Here are some recommendations for sections that should be included in a Writer's Guide:

- **Thank you and introduction:** Writing projects often involve tight deadlines and creative emotions. Having a welcoming tone and saying thank you become even more important in these spaces than in everyday life. When you are working with a volunteer team, particularly if they are working for free or for little money, genuine gratitude is fundamental. Similarly, always credit your writers prominently in the finalized materials.
- **Sample characters:** Some writers find it much easier to produce high quality characters or content if they have an example to look at. Sharing a few high quality sample characters written for the game world sets a benchmark for length, style and content.
- **Deadlines for Initial Design:** Make clear what the deadlines and end date is for the initial design process. Include milestones for sketching out the characters, their relationships, and their plots.
- **Deadlines for Writing:** After the initial design phase is when the more extensive writing starts. What are the due dates for writing and when do the characters need to be finished? Set dates and expectations.
- **Schedule for meetings:** If you plan to have catch-up meetings or calls with the writing team, try to make it clear when, at what time, and how often.
- **Types of characters (groups):** If there are different types of characters, groups, or factions, here is where you give these details. For example, at a magic school, there may be teachers, juniors, sophomores, and seniors, each with a slightly different function and experience.
- **Link to the world document:** If there are any specific worldbuilding materials that the writers should be aware of before they start their work, link to it from the writer's guide.
- **Any backstory or plots not in the world document:** Similarly, include any additional plots or backstories that should be woven into the characters. If writers are empowered to create their own plots, create a shared document for this purpose so they can add details that enable other writers to hook in to their ideas.
- **Overview of the character sheets:** Include details for the required sections and how long they should be. To compliment the example characters, explain what each section of the sheet is for and give an approximate word count for each section.
- **Writing process (step-by-step):** Explain how you will design, write, and edit characters. Give an explanation for how to create relationships between characters, particularly those written by other writers.
- **Important notes:** Rules and guidelines notwithstanding, reiterate things that really need to be done or information that must be included.

While these instructions may seem extensive, clear expectations can help address potential misalignment or misunderstanding later in the process.

c) Player-created characters and characters created in workshops

For the larp, *Lumen* (2025), we asked players to co-create their characters in workshops just before the game. For this transformative leisure larp, we wanted participants to play *close to home*, meaning characters quite similar to themselves and/or based upon aspects of their own lives. This practice meant we wanted them to be responsible for the creation and deciding which elements they felt safe enough to include.

This workshop makes use of a set of archetypes (Pearson 2015) -- derived from Jung (1976) -- that we used as the foundation for character creation. There are twelve archetype families, and each of these have a number of alternative approaches to the archetype from which players can choose. With reference to their chosen transformational journey, we ask players to select two archetypes: 1) one that represents where they are now, i.e., their starting point as a person, and 2) the one that represents where they want to be. We follow this process up with a series of questions, discussions, and exercises that encourage the rapid co-creation of *close to home* characters.

Keep in mind some players need more *alibi* (Montola 2010; Deterding 2018) than others, meaning they need more fictional points of reference for their character. One practice used in the larp *Epiphany* (Bowman, Murdock, and Roycroft 2017; Bowman 2023) is to invite players to choose three close to home and three far from home characteristics to help provide additional alibi if needed.

i) Co-creative relation design with players

Most -- but not all -- role-playing games involve interaction with others. In character co-creation sessions, we can also help players design and refine relationships between these characters. These can be done in person during a workshop, via a questionnaire, or on social media.

ii) Character co-creation forms

These are forms where you ask players to write a little about their character and the sorts of relationships they would find useful in the game. You can guide them with potential types of relationships, but should not force types of relationships on them. For example if you had a question that simply asked, "What sort of negative relation would suit your character?" This is forcing an answer that may not be appropriate. It would be better to ask, "Would your character benefit from a less supportive or challenging relationship? If so, what sort of relationship did you have in mind?" With these forms, you then mix and match needs and requests and see if you can join up different characters in interesting and creative ways. When player character

relations are not available, you can consider writing NPC characters to fill the gaps. However, if the goal is for players to interact mainly with each other, avoid having NPCs play too active of a role in the game itself.

iii) Character relation requests

Some larps advise players to get in touch with each other before the event. Using social media, players can ask the group for different types of relations, using the platform to connect to other players and co-create relations directly. The aim is to create relationships that will then develop in the game, increase the sense of community, and discuss any boundaries and safety issues. The most recent trend is to set up a Discord server dedicated to the event. If you include this possibility, we recommend specifying whether these pre-game activities are mandatory or optional.

The downside of this approach is that some participants have less time to spend on this sort of activity and some players may be unsuccessful in their attempt to find others to form relations with them. It may be more easy for some players to establish relations than others; while larp communities tend to be more inclusive than more general populations, many larp players experience marginalization related to gender (Saitta and Svegaard 2019), sexuality (Paisley 2015; Stenros and Sihvonon 2019), age (Petersen 2024), weight (Kessock 2019), race/ethnicity (Kemper 2019) or other aspects of appearance (Kessock 2016; van der Heij 2019). Relying on players to create their own relations without a structured process will likely lead to feelings of exclusion. Make sure that even those who did not have time before the game can find a way to catch up, perhaps in the workshops before the start of the larp.

iv) Relation building, defining, and calibration workshops

If there is sufficient time in your workshop schedule, you can organize multiple rounds of conversation between small groups and individuals to clarify relations. Examples questions include:

- How do your two characters know one another?
- What sort of relationship dynamic works for both of you as players?
- What do each of you – as players – need from the other?
- What types of play would you prefer each other avoid?

For example, if players are expected to play out a rivalry, maybe the players agree to play the dynamic with less animosity and more like frenemies. Similarly, if players are cast in a dysfunctional romantic relationship, they can decide aspects about this dynamic they would like to emphasize, e.g., occasional affectionate squeezes on the shoulder as a form of familiarity and reassurance. They can also detail aspects they might want to avoid, such as screaming matches.

d) Editing characters

Editorial practices in character writing processes also vary. Some teams appoint a separate editor or coordinator to check consistency, while others adopt a model in which all writers collectively review and cross-check one another's work, as in *Gothic* (2023–2024). In some cases, lead writers reserve the right to make changes across all character sheets.

What unites these practices is the principle that no individual writer “owns” a character: characters are communal artifacts within a collaborative design process. While this practice enhances efficiency, it also raises questions about authorship and copyright. To manage such collective labor, teams emphasise the importance of regular meetings, co-writing sessions, and feedback exchanges. The COVID-19 lockdowns accelerated collective familiarity with online collaboration, making such distributed processes more viable.

During the writing phase itself, teams employ different structures. Some follow a waterfall model in which writers are assigned specific characters, then pass their work through successive rounds of editing and release. Others adopt a more dialogic approach, maintaining an active conversation between character writers, plot writers, and even players in the case of co-created characters. This integration is particularly productive, ensuring that characters remain meaningfully embedded within plots, and that plots emerge organically from character relationships. Although this chapter cannot fully address the dynamics between character-driven and plot-driven traditions, merging recommendations from both enriches the design.

Technical tools also play a role. Some teams employ boilerplate text to maintain consistency across multiple sheets. For instance, scripts can automate mail merges, allowing spreadsheets to populate standardised content into each character document—a method reportedly used in *1942* (Raaum et al. 2000, 2017; Fatland 2010b).

Finally, proofreading is repeatedly identified as indispensable. Proofreaders attend not only to language and sensitivity, but also to continuity and consistency. Effective proofreading entails cross-checking relationships, verifying interconnections, and identifying subtle failure modes that may otherwise go unnoticed. When carried out rigorously, this process safeguards both the internal coherence of the fiction and the fairness of the player experience.

For character creation we suggest looking at the failure modes checklist (Brind 2025, 443–477) to identify those characters that may have structural weaknesses after the design process.

e) Cultural consultation/sensitivity reading

When you are designing a larp that pertains to or makes use of a culture that is not your own we recommend finding a way to include people who do come from that culture (Kessock 2014a; Kangas 2017; Mendez Hodes 2020), e.g., a cultural consultant

or other members of the writing staff. Similarly, if writing about a background different from your own, especially one that is marginalized, we recommend including individuals who have that lived experience (Kemper 2018; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021), e.g., a sensitivity reader or other organizers on your team. Importantly, you should not expect people to work for free in this space. In order of priority:

1. Include people from the culture you are using and/or from marginalized identities in your creative team.
2. Pay for sensitivity readers and cultural consultants to review your work.
3. If for some reason you are unable to follow these guidelines, you might consider whether it is essential to the game to make use of experiences outside of your own background.

3.8 Educational content

In terms of educational content, your team may require adding a specialist on a specific topic. That educator may inform your game design and implementation before run-time, but may also present educational material, e.g., in workshops or contextualization sessions after the larp. If your main team does not have teaching specialties, you may need to include someone experienced in didactics, especially if you are pitching your game to stakeholders as being an educational intervention. While the skillsets of gamerunners and educators sometimes overlap, people with experience in didactics often understand the needs of target groups in important ways or have specific techniques for classroom management that are useful to deploy in games as well.

For more information on educational role-playing design, see Chapter 2 of *TRGD*. To learn more about implementation and facilitation of educational games, see Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 of this book respectively.

3.9 Safety and support

You should always carefully consider safety when designing for transformative impacts, as we have discussed before. Your safety team should ideally be separate from other roles, especially logistics; the skillset and bandwidth required for holding space for others emotionally may not be available to team members busy with other logistical tasks (Berthold 2024).

Some guiding questions and recommendations:

1. **Safety team members:** How many safety team members will be available? When will they be available? What times are off-hours? We recommend having at least one available during waking hours. Make sure to show the players the safety team members during the workshop and ideally have a sash or badge to indicate their role.

2. **Contacting the safety team:** Where will players find safety team members? Will players have access to their phone number or a way to instant message them? Is there a walkie talkie in the safety room they can use to alert the team? Are the safety team members embedded in the game as NPCs?
3. **Locating the safety room:** Where is the safety room? Have players been shown its location pre-game? Is it far away from the main action? Is it quiet enough? Ideally, your safety room is only used for that purpose and not as a social or organizing space.

Similarly, integrating a mental health professional or paraprofessional is necessary for therapeutic work and highly recommended for all transformative games when possible. This individual can be embedded, having an in-game and off-game support role, but should be able to step off-game to help at any time. We also recommend having trained individuals present for emotionally sensitive scenes or as debrief facilitators (see Chapter 4).

However, having an on-call mental health professional, whether by phone or on location, can be expensive and potentially cost-prohibitive. If you are connected to an institution like a university, you may have access to such resources when running games on campus. At minimum, we recommend having all safety team members trained in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) if possible.

We will discuss safety implementation in more detail in Chapter 5.

a) Expectations of support

When it comes to the degree of player support at your event, the most important thing to manage is expectations. By this we mean that the actual level of support should be on par with what players are led to expect from what you communicated to them. We understand that you might want to support players as much as possible, even beyond what you objectively might be able to do. In our experience, it is much better to lower your level of support than to be unable to support them in a time of need.

Player support should be addressed as early as possible in your design process. Critically consider what support you are able to provide, and what support other parts of your design can accommodate from the beginning. There are different ways to go about this, and the following short list of questions are meant to provide a low level starting point for you to be able to consider player support throughout your design process.

- What can players expect in terms of support throughout the process?
- Does support start before after the actual play time?
- If so, when does it start? At sign up? At casting?
- Does support extend to after the actual play time?
- If so, when does it end? 1 month? 2 months?

- Do you have a dedicated support team? How do you communicate this to players?
- How will players be instructed to support one another before, during, and after play?
- Are the support structures part of the diegetic experience or not?
- How do you communicate the expected level of player support?
- Can people opt-out of supporting other players? We do not recommend this practice as a general rule in transformative play, but in crisis situations, it is most appropriate to alert the safety team.
- What safety mechanics and/or techniques will you include?
- How will facilitators support players before, during, and after play?
- Are there parts of the design that provide specific challenges to player support? If so, how can they be mitigated?
- If relevant, which additional responsible parties can support learning and emotional well-being, i.e., teachers, counselors, etc.?

For a deeper dive into considerations around player safety and support, see Chapter 5 of this book and chapter 5 of *TRGD*.

3.10 Location logistics

In this section, we discuss the tasks associated with finding the right location for your game, as well as what you will need to have in place in order to run the game in that space.

a) Identifying, finding, and securing the right location

One of the first considerations in the process of moving from a design into implementation is understanding what kind of location your intervention needs. When designing for a leisure transformational game, you will likely need to borrow a space, use your own space, or rent a location. Examples include convention spaces, living rooms, or more thematic locations such as castles. Educational games may take place in established cultural spaces like museums, classrooms, community centers, or summer camps. Therapeutic games may need an additional location to the smaller, more intimate counselor's room, such as a group therapy room, or even a forest (Bartenstein 2022).

If you want to create a liberated atmosphere for players to explore, a party larp may be a viable option (Pettersson 2025). To have a more luxurious experience in a realistic setting, you may choose to run a blockbuster larp, e.g., in a fancy castle. Alternatively, you might want to run an urban larp that takes place in multiple locations around a city (Pettersson 2025). Each of these settings require unique considerations (Pettersson

2025). You may also need separate spaces for workshops, game play, and debrief depending on the design and location, so plan each phase accordingly.

In contrast with more static forms of role-playing, such as tabletop, some larps rely much more on the physical attributes of a location. Finding the objectively right location for a larp is a significant challenge. Like tabletop players, you should ask yourself the question: how do you want to approach the scenario, and what works best for your players? These questions are offset by other factors: the costs associated with the location, its proximity to transport hubs, the accessibility of the site, and whether it has accommodation. Even when you find the objectively perfect location – the one that has everything you want, for a price you can afford – there is always a risk that this may fall through. Some high-profile international larps have found and then lost venues that would be considered perfect, e.g., *Conscience* (2018) at Fort Bravo in Spain, and *Inside Hamlet* (2015, 2017, 2018) at Elsinore Castle in Denmark. Losses such as these are hard to mitigate, but something as an organizer you should be aware of and prepared for.

If necessary, you can improvise with limited tools at hand and rely on the “theater of the mind.” For example, long-form black box larps with relatively bare locations do exist. However, many role-players prefer a more evocative set dressing, e.g., supported by detailed elements such as props, miniature figurines, or historic buildings. More detail often equals more costs involved.

Keep in mind that a location can potentially heavily impact and inform the behavior of players. For example, playing a servant in a large castle in Poland might mean a considerable amount of walking and trying to find specific spaces in addition to whatever physical labor tasks are required, e.g., in *Fairweather Manor* (2015; Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016). While such feats may help inform players about physical disparities between the classes in the past, they make exploring the interpersonal dimensions of such relations more difficult and time constrained.

See the larp location as your tabletop: will you opt for a “blank” canvas space with limited set dressing or does more detail benefit the larp?

i) Location wishlist

To help with your location search, start with a wishlist. What are you looking for in a location? Use this opportunity to record everything you want without any constraints. For example for the larp *B Movie* (Wonderlarp and Avalon Larp Studio, upcoming), the wishlist looked like this:

B-Movie Location Wish List

B Movie is a larp set in Hollywood in the 1950s. Whilst we can do many things with scenography, the best locations will require less work to remove 21st century stuff. There are two narrative layers to the larp: The Storyworld - 1950s Hollywood, and the B-World - which is where the movie takes place. The nature of this will depend on the location. For example if we had a castle, the movie would more likely be horror, if we had caves, more likely sci-fi etc.

Must Have

- Electricity
- Running Water
- Affordable accommodation for around 25-30 players and 10-15 crew (35-45 in total)
- Transport links to an international airport (or within 4-5 hours coach journey)
- A few Indoor spaces that can be used as sound stages, studio offices, off-game/safety rooms
- Exclusive Use

Should Have

- Catering
- Many Indoor spaces that can be used as sound stages, studio offices
- Outdoor space including woodland
- Parking
- Playable accommodation spaces so that players don't need to go off-game to sleep etc.

Could Have

- Secret underground tunnels (or a dark basement we can use)
- Rooms that can be made to look like secret laboratories, alien spaceships
- A bar /nightclub (unless we run our own)
- A dinner with a jukebox

Would be nice to have

- Spa
- Internet access
- A Movie Studio / Backlot with a 1950s style motel and dinner right next door
- A crypt
- Caves
- A castle that looks like it might belong to a dangerous scientist
- A 1950s town

When making your wishlist for venues, consider the following questions:

- What activities does your game include and what affordances does the location have to support them?
- Are there spaces you need for specific scenes, rituals, and other types of experiences?
- How many spaces do you need to run your game?
- What off-game spaces do you need? Examples include:
 - Off-game / Break space
 - Organizer room
 - NPC bunker
 - Safety room
- Are there spaces big enough for the whole group?
- Does each smaller faction or group have their own space?
- Is there a black box or meta room where players can create specific scenes together?
- Will players play indoors, outdoors, or both?

You should also evaluate how the atmosphere might contribute to your transformational goals. For example, if the goal is to help people feel empowered and the setting is a magic school, a cool castle will likely provide more ambiance and alibi to *pretend to believe* (Pohjola 2004) they have such powers.

You should also assess: Does anything about the atmosphere contradict your transformative goals? If so, how will you mitigate this issue? For example, the larp is taking place in an office building where people are working normal jobs out in the hallways, perhaps players might feel less magical, more mundane, or inhibited from, for example, raising their voice to cast a spell, which may work against the setting.

On the other hand, you could focus on the contrast between the magical and the mundane in such a location, for example if wizards have to cast spells more secretly. In other words, you do not need a magical-looking castle to play a compelling game. Environments with a 360 degree illusion of realism are not necessarily more immersive (Koljonen 2007). Ultimately, you should find ways to work with both the strengths and constraints of your location.

b) Price

One of the most critical questions to ask is: what is required financially and legally to secure the location you want for your game? Is it affordable? The perfect historical location that charges €1200 per hour to corporate clients is probably not an affordable venue for a 12-player game that runs for two days. As we discuss in Chapter 2, if you do find the ideal location, keep in mind you may have to work with a liaison or authorities to get access to a specific space. Museums, for example, often have specific rules and oversight.

Also, consider any aspects related to physical safety that may be costly, such as making a space more accessible by renting a go-cart and ramps to assist players with limited mobility. Choosing a site that is both accessible for your target group and affordable is likely a better plan.

Finally, always consider the physical safety of your participants and perform a risk assessment for running games in those spaces (Sinking Ship Creations 2020; Losilla 2024); the risks associated with a known, controlled space like a classroom are quite different from an adventure in the woods.

c) Sensitivity around sites

Some sites are distinct places with historical, social, or spiritual significance. It may not be appropriate to run a game there even though the location seems thematically appropriate. If you are unsure about running a game at such a site, this section will offer you some tips and things to consider. The keyword is *communication*; particularly with those who have ownership of the site or have strong historical ties to the place.

When in doubt, consider the following three points:

1. Research the site's history and consider potential risks. Consult with on-site experts and local communities;
2. Avoid using real tragedies and/or marginalized histories tied to the site;
3. When possible, use symbolic or fictional alternatives in your storytelling that respect the theme and setting, without appropriating the place itself.

• Example 1:

You want to run a larp about dark magic in a church.

Possible approach: Do research on the site. Is the church still serving a religious purpose or not? If yes, contact the caretakers of the building and seek permission. Consider whether the tone of your game respects the site's ongoing religious function. Will such a ritual potentially offend players, interrupting their transformative purposes?

• Example 2:

You want to run a post-apocalyptic larp at a decommissioned factory.

Possible approach: Verify with local authorities if the building's construction is still safe to enter and adheres to current-day structural integrity standards. Ask yourself if the building is accessible and suitable for a larp that spans over several days?

d) Locating a site

How can you find the right site? There are several ways to search for a location, and they are quite different from one another. We do not believe that one is better than another. You can therefore use whichever you prefer and which best suits your degree

of commitment and aesthetic style. Furthermore, these methods are not exclusive; they can easily be combined.

Here are some examples:

- **Going around randomly by car** may seem strange, but it can work, especially if you explore the area near where you live. It also adds a sense of fun and discovery to the whole experience and can be done easily several times, so you can better organize the details and note any issues with the venue. The downsides are that it is time-consuming, costly, and there is no guarantee that your exploration will be successful.
- **Use the internet:** This is the quickest and cheapest way. Many organizers rely on this method. In this case, after choosing a suitable location, you will still need to make one or more visits to the site to see how much of the space can actually be used and in what way. In this case, we recommend keeping a list of possible locations for future use.
- **Ask others:** You can ask other organizers, friends and anyone else who might be informed for advice and, ideally, addresses of gaming spaces. Another useful source is the larp community. If you ask them on relevant social media channels, they will likely be happy to help you.

e) Location scouting

Location scouting is the process of visiting one or more potential sites where you might want to run your game. These should be places that seem affordable; offer most -- or ideally all -- of the facilities on your wishlist; and be places where you have a good vibe from speaking to the owner or their representatives. Location scouting is your opportunity to get a sense of the space, ask questions, and to inform the location owners about the importance and value of what these games can do, ideally generating shared enthusiasm for your project.

Sometimes, your scouting adventure will be the first time that the owners have come across the idea of transformative play, role-playing games, or sometimes even the idea of adults playing. You have an opportunity to build bridges. Additionally, a friendly, professional, and enthusiastic attitude can sometimes lead to significant discounts on venue rental costs.

We recommend spending some time in a proposed location. Stay long enough to understand what the venue is like during daylight and in the darker hours, getting a sense of what is possible. For outside spaces, campsites, and woodland areas, pay particular attention to ambient sounds. A near perfect location that is only a few kilometres from a motor racing circuit or airport, for example may not be as perfect as you first thought. Similarly, the idyllic campsite you found may suddenly become less private if a public walking trail runs alongside it.

f) Evaluation criteria

Some locations may be cheap or convenient to acquire, but lack ambiance or have disadvantaged attractions. RPGs are run in a variety of different settings, each with their own affordances and drawbacks.

i) Privacy

One of the most important criteria is privacy. Here are examples of spaces that range from private to public:

- **Closed locations:** Exclusive, open only to the players of this game, conference, or festival. In many cases, closed locations are best for role-playing to avoid situations where onlookers interrupt with questions or otherwise distract from play.
- **Semi-open locations:** Some locations are mostly private for the play space, but open to the public in other areas, e.g., film sets, camp buildings next to public parks with walking trails, and some museum spaces. Players also may feel judged if onlookers are present. Consider especially if you are asking players to perform actions in public spaces that might alarm onlookers, such as violence, heated altercations, or consider bigoted reactions to overt displays of sexuality from passers-by.
- **Public locations:** Some locations are fully public, such as events at public monuments or squares or any number of other places. *Pervasive games* are played out in public and sometimes incentivize in-character interactions with people who are unaware a game is being played. While such play may seem harmless, ethical considerations arise, especially when playing with sensitive themes. People may feel manipulated or betrayed, or unexpected behaviors might happen. However, if your public behaviors are relatively harmless or normative, the play may not be obvious to onlookers. Consider the potential interactions with members of the public as a part of any risk assessment and consider how to mitigate these risks.
- **Game events:** In-between locations that are game-friendly, but not exactly private are game events, such as festivals, conferences, game jams, and conventions. Such spaces are great for meeting like-minded role-players, and are often spaces that feel safe for attendees in terms of dressing in costume or acting unusually. However, they do not afford the same level of privacy as a closed location. Pervasive gaming within a game event setting is usually considered less ethically concerning, although transparency is always recommended.

Remember that privacy can often help your players feel less inhibited surrendering into the experience. Regular interruptions by non-larpers can have the opposite effect, especially if they stop and stare or ask questions, even if politely. In some cases, your activities might be occurring too close to a neighbor or even echo in the surrounding

countryside, which could lead to noise complaints. In such situations, we recommend getting permission from local public servants and authorities, letting them know what sorts of activities might occur there, and reassuring them you are only playing. For louder activities, whenever possible, choose locations that are remote enough not to disturb anyone and secure the entire location for your group.

ii) Additional criteria

As we will cover in more depth in the next section on Site Logistics, to ensure that you can design, deliver, and manage any location-specific logistics, at the bare minimum the site needs to be able to support the Four Ss:

- Sustenance
- Sleeping
- Sanitation
- Survivability

Can you ensure your participants and crew can eat and drink safely? Do they have somewhere safe and warm to sleep? Does your location have sanitary places to attend to their basic biological needs? Have you ensured that the environment offers no immediate risks to health and well-being? Any site visit needs to take these implicit questions into consideration before moving forward.

g) Deposits and contracts

When you have found the perfect site, you need to book it for the dates of your game. In some cases, this process will require nothing more than an agreement. However, many locations will want a deposit to secure the dates, or ask that you sign a contract to make a booking. The contract is one of the biggest risks of making larger long-form games as you may be asked to make a payment before you have any funds from potential players.

Look carefully at any contract and see if there is a break clause; if you have to cancel, how much money will you still need to pay? How confident are you that the game will get sufficient funding to run?

The advantage of contracts and deposits is that you have a binding agreement with the location. They are less likely to offer the location to someone else, doublebook it, or forget the agreement if it is in writing. You also have legal recourse if such situations occur.

The other financial concern at this point is event insurance. You cannot usually get insurance without a contract in place. We recommend sorting out insurance after you have received the funding, but before you spend any money beyond the site deposit. Insurance offers some protection if a participant is injured on site or damages happen to the location itself.

h) Site Logistics

Depending on the location and your game you may need to spend some time designing the logistics of the event. Whilst a small tabletop RPG or larp could be played in a cafe or in someone's house, when you make a game at scale, you will need to look at planning and providing for the needs of your players.

Logistical challenges are present in every space. Games that require very little costuming, props, or special locations are more portable and easier to run in a mixture of spaces, e.g., classrooms full of desks, the activity rooms in a prison, a hotel conference room. Games with more elaborate scenography and location-based modules add challenges such as transportation, and accessibility (Dalstål 2013).

In the following sections, we return to the Four Ss and will consider each one in turn.

i) Sustenance

Is there drinking water? This seems such an obvious question, but it is not safe to assume that every location has safe water to drink. If not, you need to consider whether the location is suitable, whether you can provide sufficient drinking water for everyone, or whether it is reasonable to expect participants to bring their own. Similarly, if they cannot drink the water, they also may not be able to bathe in it or brush their teeth with it. In emergencies, you may need to purchase baby wipes and hand sanitizer for each person.

How and when will participants eat? Players, staff, volunteers, and organizers need access to food. For an event running in a city centre location and with suitable breaks it might be possible to let them find food for themselves, but this needs to be planned and communicated ahead of time. You may also need to build in extra time in case the restaurants are slow.

Consider meal times as a part of your schedule for your game. Understand when people need to eat and how long they need to eat those meals. If you have players from different countries, consider their different timezones. For example, pushing back a dinner time for a larp running in the UK to 9pm would make for a late meal, but for players coming in from Finland, the two hour time difference would make it closer to 11pm for them.

Participants need to have a place to eat; sufficient plates, cups, bowls, and cutlery, unless you asked players to bring their own; and somewhere to wash-up. For example *The Last Song* (Justesen et al. 2022) was a Viking-era larp where players brought their own bowls, plates, knives, spoons, but the organizers provided 21st century sinks and hot water to wash-up afterwards.

Try, if possible, to ensure organizers and staff eat at the same time as players. If you do not, then your meal times may be interrupted by game-related issues.

ii) Food prep

Who is responsible for providing and preparing food? Catering for a large number of people is a skill. You need to ensure that your catering team is able to deliver food on schedule. They also need to be able to understand diets, allergies, and intolerances, preparing and labeling food safely. Accidentally using an ingredient containing gluten for a dish served to someone with coeliac could result in hospitalisation. Caterers should make sure the labels for food are written in the language spoken by everyone at the game. Depending on the country, you might not be allowed to use volunteers in the kitchen unless they have specific food preparation certificates or training.

Feeding large numbers of people in a timely manner is also a skill. As an example, imagine you have two hundred players queuing for food and one person serving that food. Assuming that each person takes about twenty seconds to be given their food, select condiments, and grab silverware, it will take over ninety minutes for the person at the back of the queue to get their food. This means that you need to leave at least two hours for each meal. Consider assigning shifts to participants in such situations to avoid long wait times.

Your location might not have a kitchen or any space where food can be prepared. In a Viking-age larp, participants might be able to prepare a delicious stew over an open fire. For *Midwinter* (Svanevik et al. 2020), which took place in a factory space without a kitchen, the organizers made a deal with a local hotel to provide diegetically authentic, but also hot and delicious, meals, which were delivered to the venue twice each day.

You also need to ensure that everyone has access to drinking water. If the site does not have this you need to clearly signal it to everyone, to ensure that they bring their own and/or to provide it yourself. *The Quota* (Brind et al. 2018; Brind 2020) took place in a disused prison in a location where the main water was not safe to drink. The organizers found a supplier that could provide 500 litres of water, which was delivered on a truck on the day of the event. Depending on the location, you may also want to think about providing hot drinks.

Sometimes you might not be able to provide food. It could be that the location does not have a kitchen, or you do not have the staff, or sometimes simply that the dietary needs of some or all of your players are too complicated. Asking people to bring their own food is an acceptable choice but you need to communicate it clearly, particularly if there are no shops nearby, places to get food away from the location, or cool storage for refrigerated items.

If you opt not to provide food and drink, ensure that you have taken care of your own needs and those of your volunteers. If there is a kitchen space, make it clear whether players are allowed to use it. Similarly if there are no cooking facilities, ensure people know. Consider also that some players may forget to bring food or be unaware that they are responsible for their own sustenance.

For more on food, see also diegetic food design later in this chapter.

iii) Sleeping

Where will players sleep? Some games run for longer than one day, or take place in locations where participants need to travel to get to and from the game. If so, one of the logistical questions centres around where the players -- and indeed the organizers and volunteer crew -- will sleep. The location could be a campsite with places to pitch tents or sleeping cabins, or it could be a hostel or hotel with private rooms. In some cases, there may be accommodation nearby and participants are invited to make their own arrangements for sleeping, but if not, this remains a consideration. In some games, sleep deprivation is a part of the design and participants are invited to find sleep where they can. This would seem an unusual choice for a transformative game, unless skills in survivalism are core to the learning.

Are there enough beds? Everyone needs somewhere to sleep. Whilst some longer larps have organized sleeping in shifts, in most cases people will prefer to have their own sleeping space, to share spaces with people that they know, or to have sleeping spaces for specific genders or combinations of gender.

Is sleeping off-game or in-game? This is an important choice to make. You may choose to allow players to designate whether their rooms are in-game or off-game, or to make it clear to everyone if and how and when an area is a playable space.

Can players expect to have uninterrupted sleep? Designing the hours of silence where sleep is encouraged, but some games make use of all 24 hours of play time with events happening late at night or early in the morning. Consider the benefits of this versus the effects of lack of sleep. A tired player may look after their own needs, may not be able to commit fully to the play experience, or may be more prone to get sick. Games that privilege players who are able to deal with less sleep are not terribly inclusive of members of disabled and neurodiverse communities.

How will you adapt to sleeping needs, if at all? Whilst some people can sleep anywhere, others have accessibility requirements around access to electricity – for example to power a CPAP machine, silence, or darkness to enable them to sleep at all. Others require privacy. This means that simply counting the number of beds is not enough to ensure that you can accommodate everyone. Assume some players may need a private room.

Will you provide bed linens and blankets or are players expected to bring them? Some locations, such as hotels, provide these items as a matter of course; others do not. If you ask players to bring their own, some will forget. Bed sizes are not necessarily standard, so you will need to check and confirm the size well in advance of the event to share with players. Sleeping bags can be more helpful in these situations.

Does the sleeping location have air conditioning or heating? Can players control the temperature in their space? This is particularly significant when temperatures at your location are very hot or very cold. As a local, you may be used to a temperature that an international participant is not so readily able to handle. Sleeping at 25°C

(77°F) without air conditioning may be relatively comfortable for someone from Southern Europe, but could be considerably harder for someone from Northern Europe; conversely sleeping in an unheated cabin at 5°C (41°F) may not be pleasant for someone unused to colder conditions.

iv) Sanitation

Whilst perhaps the least glamorous part of event design, thinking about the most basic needs of the human body is important. At scale, it can be an expensive challenge to make sure that everyone has an appropriate space for sanitary needs. Some guiding questions:

- Do players have access to bathrooms? If so, do they have running water?
- Do they have hot water? If so, for how long?
- Is there electricity and/or lighting in the bathroom?
- Who is responsible for cleaning and restocking the bathrooms?
- What happens if there is a sanitation blockage?
- Do players have individual or shared washing facilities? Showers or bathtubs?
- How will you ensure all genders have access to bathrooms? Are bathrooms divided by gender? If so, can you relabel them to be inclusive of all genders?
- For how long and often can players take showers? Are there water restrictions?
- Do players need to bring their own towels, soap, toilet paper, and other toiletries or do you/the location provide these?
- Can your game design handle people needing to wait in line to use the bathroom? If so for how long?

It is possible that not every site you visit will have functional bathrooms. Even when there are bathrooms on site you need to consider how many participants there are, and how long they will be onsite. Whilst we do not recommend allowing alcohol during transformative games, if present, alcohol tends to increase the number of toilets needed at a given time.

If you find yourself in a position of needing to rent portable toilets, you will need to include them in your budget. If you rent toilets, you should also think carefully about:

1. **The location(s):** Toilets need to be in accessible, yet ideally discreet areas. If possible, they should be well-lit and signposted.
2. **Their maintenance:** You will need to arrange for regular cleaning of toilet facilities throughout the event to maintain hygiene and comfort. This practice also reduces the chances of something getting broken, blocked up, or overflowing. Bins may need to be emptied and returned.

3. **Accessibility:** Consider any access needs your participants may have. We recommend renting a mixture of standard and accessible toilets.
4. **Storage:** Consider amenities such as hand sanitizing stations and mirrors. Have somewhere close by and dry to store cleaning materials and supplies like toilet paper and hand soap.

v) Survivability

Will players face extreme weather during the event? This question can be difficult to answer because of the variations in what we might think of as extremes of weather even before the effects of climate change. Review previous years' weather for the site location and monitor the forecasts in the weeks running up to the event, particularly if running your game outdoors and/or camping.

Advise your players to bring multiple layers just in case, especially if they are planning to wear clothing that might overheat them or leave their skin exposed to the elements. You may wish to advise them to bring heating blankets, sunscreen, lip balm, or other items to help them in difficult weather conditions.

1) Rain

For games that take place outside, rain can be a significant factor. Even with proper wet weather clothing, people will often shelter inside tents, buildings, or under trees rather than playing outside. This may cut down on the interactions that involve moving beyond one's local circle. If no common places for players to congregate are available, then this tendency is even more likely; for example, at a camping event with tents, groups of players are more likely to stay and role-play inside their own group shelter. In extreme cases, players may pack-up and go home.

If you are fortunate and planned for only some events to take place outdoors, you should have a contingency event that can be run instead. On the whole, rain is hard to mitigate, and it can lead to something even more insidious.

Beyond rain is its effect on the ground, including mud, lack of drainage, and impeded access. Depending on the climate and the drainage of the site, it does not take a lot of rain before the soil can get churned up, leading to mud. Mud is difficult to walk in and sometimes dangerous underfoot. In addition, the high likelihood of tracking mud into indoor parts of the venue can lead to subsequent cleaning challenges. Areas that get a lot of footfall can become almost unpassable on foot, or for emergency vehicles. On sites with very poor drainage, tent pegs can float out of the ground, causing the collapse of tents.

Cars driving in and out of parking in fields can lead to vehicles getting stuck and needing to be towed out. This is a problem of scale. Tens of players might generate a bit of mud, but hundreds or thousands can lead to a site quickly becoming unusable. If you are running an event at scale in a season and climate where this amount of mud is possible, you may need to budget for things like woodchips, artificial walkways, or professional expertise and equipment to rescue stuck vehicles.

2) Sun

Whereas mud and rain can be unpleasant and uncomfortable, extremes of sun can be dangerous or even life threatening. As much as you may remind participants to wear sunscreen and stay hydrated, some will not. If there is little or no shelter from the sun this can lead to sunburn, heat exhaustion, or worse. People wearing heavy costumes or armour are also more susceptible to the effects of hot weather.

On the matter of shelter, remember that shade does not necessarily equate to protection from UV, particularly in tents that may give the illusion of being in the shade whilst simultaneously offering no respite from the sun's rays. For staff working in tents, consider providing them with fans.

In France in 2023, the afternoon temperature during a 4-days high fantasy larp in August peaked at 44°C (111°F). Here the organizers paused the game from 12:00 to 17:00 each day and ensured a constant supply of water and showers to help people stay cool.

Preparation and education are important here. Role-playing games have been played outside in high temperatures, such as larps have been run successfully in the Sahara Desert (*Sahara Expedition*, Chaos League, 2020-2025). Consider shelter, water, hats, lip balm, and sunscreen.

Very dry weather increases the risk of fires. You need to ensure that you understand fire regulations, that these have been effectively communicated to your players, and that you have a process in place to deal with emergencies. A camp site needs fire breaks between tents. If you have a rule of no fires for cooking then someone needs to monitor that the rule is not being broken.

3) Wind

Even if the temperatures seem mild, wind can increase the intensity of weather in the following ways:

- **Windchill:** Air can feel colder when exposed to the wind, as the air in motion accelerates the rate of heat transfer from the body to the surrounding atmosphere. When the temperature is low, being out in the wind makes it feel colder.
- **Breeze:** Conversely when the weather is hot, a breeze can make it feel colder, increasing the possibility of sunburn, dehydration, and heatstroke.
- **Extreme wind:** Temporary structures, particularly tents, are susceptible to strong winds. If you are using a site with tents, ensure that you check and tighten the guy ropes. In the case of extreme winds, it may not be safe to run an event at all.

4) Snow and ice

Larps have been run in the snow and in the cold. If people have the correct clothing and equipment, then snow can be a beautiful backdrop for powerful scenes. However, risks should be taken into account: that people will fall on ice; that toilets, water pipes, or gas canisters will freeze; or that someone will not have suitable clothing. For international games, you cannot assume that all your players understand how to dress for the cold or even have a shared agreement of what constitutes cold conditions.

As with extremes of heat, preparation and education are important. Larps have been successfully run in the snow in January in European countries. Even in the UK, a weekend game with camping dealt with low temperatures of -12°C (10.4°F). Consider shelter, water, hats, gloves, thermal layers, and wool.

Will you provide shelter from the weather? In what ways? Are there heated spaces sufficient for all participants?

5) Nature

If you are running an event outside you also need to be aware of the local flora and fauna.

Are there likely to be insects, if so how dangerous are they? Are there poisonous snakes? Bears? Ticks? Midges? Hornets? Particularly for international events, you should not assume that players coming in from other countries understand how to deal with local wildlife.

Are any of the local plants toxic? Is there poison ivy? Giant hogweed? Poisonous mushrooms? Not every participant will necessarily be aware of these, what they look like, or what to do if they come into contact with something dangerous.

i) Site specific design

This section is possibly most relevant for larps. Whether you are inside one or more buildings or outside in nature, you should design and plan the locations and movement of your players, sometimes called *spatial* or *environmental design* (Ebbehøj, Hertel, and Trier-Knudsen 2019). Sometimes, you may want them to travel from place to place. Setting the camps of opposing factions apart from one another makes the journey between them significant or dangerous *diegetically*, i.e., within the fiction. Conversely, if you want a sense of community, having the place where people live and work physically close to one another means they are likely to remain inside that zone.

We recommend having a hub for social interaction. Placing this towards the physical centre of your site often makes sense. At *The Quota* (Brind et al. 2018; Brind 2020), this space was the Recreation Room, which contained a table, chairs, and a limited amount of scenography and props. Examples included some children's colouring books without coloured pens; a set of pamphlets and fliers collected from tourist information centres in Wales; a handful of books; and some board games. These choices told a story about the detention centre, its budget, and its intentions.

The board games were the Cardiff edition of *Monopoly* and a Welsh version of *Scrabble*. The *Scrabble* set was missing the board. This was not a deliberate decision, although arguably the inclusion of Welsh tiles would have made the game almost unplayable for most participants.

There was also a spatial element to this design choice. The original design specification had located this space on the ground floor of the building to ensure wheelchair access. When this ceased to be a requirement – the day that the game started – the room was relocated to a larger space on the upstairs floor. Functionally, this space was also the location for the hot drink making facilities: a large water boiler; some institutional tea and instant coffee; packets of sugar and milk; and plastic cups.

Having a map of the location is useful for design and planning. If you are using buildings, a floorplan enables hypothetical design to take place. If you need different activities to happen in different locations, for example, working out where they will take place on the plan will give you an idea of the viability of your activity design (see Figure 2).

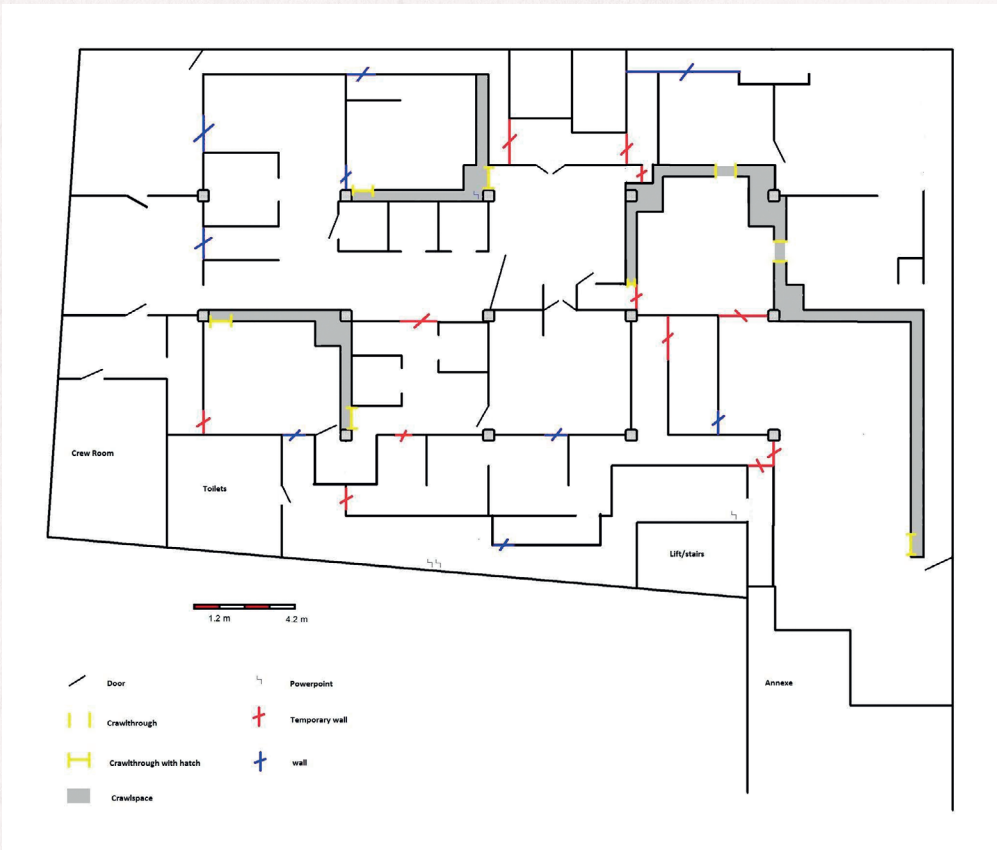


Figure 2. Spatial design plan for *Midwinter* (Svanevik et al. 2020) showing walls, doors, power locations etc.

j) Movement

You also need to give consideration to the differences between players and their characters in how they want and need to move. This aspect of design covers everything from ensuring a wheelchair user has access to a bathroom, to the places where people will queue for food or sit to eat. You also need to consider whether you are going to workshop the way that characters might move. For example, does your game feature dancing? How and where will you teach and practice the steps?

k) Combat locations and safety

Some games involve physical interactions in the form of combat e.g., a larp with foam boffer or replica weapons. In these cases, you need to consider which locations are safe enough for characters to fight. Specific to logistics and spatial design you can consider the lighting, ground, and terrain. A location that seems relatively safe to use for this sort of play during the day may become extremely dangerous at night due to lack of light. If you combine low light with nearby water or steep slopes, a path by a lake could become an extremely high risk location after sunset.

If you are using a camp site or another location with tents, consider some sort of rope or barrier to keep participants away from tent pegs; tripping can be very dangerous. The same is true for indoor locations with furniture, woodland, or even flat grassy fields that may have hidden rabbit holes or other trip hazards.

If you are using dark locations, ruins, airsoft sites, or caves, consider rough ground, rocks, and exposed brickwork. The style of physical interaction between players of airsoft and people fighting with melee weapons is different, e.g., their propensity to fall. Consider also *pinch points*; a dozen people defending a doorway can make for interesting play, but fallen characters blocking that doorway can lead to accidental injuries.

If your game uses simulated or replica firearms, ensure that the local laws of the country permit them and that you understand the rules for transporting and storing prop guns. Avoid situations in which you have unplanned interactions from law enforcement because of a misunderstanding with a passerby.

At every point of the process ask yourself the questions:

- What could go wrong here?
- Can we mitigate it?

Simulated larp combat is never risk-free. Whether boffer, larp, blunt, or simulated, weapons are never completely “safe,” nor are *slow fighting* or *lightest touch* combat systems. As an organizer, if you decide to include combat in your game, considering these risks as a part of your implementation is important. Whilst you must rely on your participants to adhere to the safety rules, mitigating the risks and defining those rules is your responsibility.

We consider additional considerations related to physical safety in Chapter 5.

l) Communication technology logistics

If you are operating across a large site you need to consider communications. You may be able to use existing mobile phone networks or even wifi to communicate, or you may want to use two-way radios or walkie talkies. In both cases you will need to be aware of places where there are no comms, and of the necessity to keep batteries charged. If you are using radios, ensure people are trained how to use them and that they keep their ear-pieces in and their radios on.

Some buildings are unfriendly to communications. Thick stone walls, or metal interior structures can block mobile and radio communications. You can plan for this by identifying these dead spots and agreeing upon protocols for crew members who will spend a lot of time there. For example, when an NPC is in the library, and we know there are no radio communications available there, we ask them to step out onto the balcony every twenty minutes and secretly check their messages. This practice will not help if something comes up that requires that person urgently, but otherwise we have a degree of confidence that they will receive a notification shortly.

m) Sound design

Sound design is a professional skill which requires training and experience. The questions and advice we offer in this short section are no substitute for having that experience and knowledge. We recommend reading “The Fundamentals of Sound Design for Larp” by Tolvanen and Melakoski (2019) for more information.

You will need to source music and any sounds that you use. Whilst there are freely available sound effects online, you may want to avoid using copyrighted music without a specific license, particularly if your game has a commercial aspect to it. If you are asking players to attend, then you might want to consider investigating some of the copyright free music libraries. Getting a licence to use some short pieces of thematically appropriate music remains relatively inexpensive.

How will you include music, atmospheric sound, or other noises? Playing sounds -- including music, sound effects, and ambient backgrounds -- requires amplification and speakers. Whilst a bluetooth speaker might work in a single room, it does not fill a whole building. Larger rooms and spaces require bigger speakers and more amplification. A single soundscape across multiple rooms and floors requires cables and multiple outputs. You will need to consider whether your budget stretches to hiring or renting such equipment and whether you have the expertise to set it up properly and safely.

Check your sound and your sound levels before the game starts. Ensure there is no distortion, that the sound is not too loud, and that any cables are securely taped down or laid in a way that does not constitute a trip hazard. Keep in mind that the sound in an empty room will be very different in a room full of people and something that seemed loud enough may be barely audible. Bring spare cables, adapters, and plugs.

If you are playing sounds from a computer that is plugged into the main speakers, consider packing a ground loop isolator; this is a device that can reduce or remove the low humming sounds that sometimes come out of laptops. Ideally you will have tested your sound and system before you get to the site.

Sound can be used in different ways to support a transformational game:

- **As transitional scenes:** For example you can play a piece of music to signify the start and end of the game. Sound is both a clear indicator to the players that the experience has started/finished, but also has an emotional impact akin to being in a film.
- **During run-time ambiently:** An ambient soundscape can add a lot to the experience of the play, from suitable effects to support a tabletop game, to the sound of a thunderstorm raging outside of a haunted house.
- **In specific scenes:** Being able to trigger sound effects or musical cues at the exact right moment can be very powerful. Imagine a crash of thunder at the exact moment the knight errant asks for a sign from the heavens? In order to do this though you will need to have a method of playing the sound at the right time and a way of seeing and hearing what is going on in play.

Can you adapt your sound design to accommodate players with sound sensitivities or disabilities? Some participants may struggle with volume or certain ambient frequencies due to neurodiversity or a disability. Let your players know they can come to you if the soundscape is too loud or if they have sensory issues. If you are able, obtain suitable hardware or software that enables you to remove or reduce specific frequencies. Tools like Ableton Live are useful here.

Is sound critical to your design or for communicating your game content? Sometimes sounds are just a nice-to-have feature. Consider the cost of the equipment and any technical challenges against the value that sound and music bring to your game. For an academic discussion on sound in larp, see Lambe and Nunes (2026).

n) Lighting and lighting design

If your playing space has little or no natural light, or if it can be made darker with blinds or curtains or careful preparation, then we recommend considering lighting as a part of your design. Again, lighting design is a professional skill, but there are some things that can be done relatively easily and cheaply.

Things to consider are that some lights, particularly older theatrical lights, give off a lot of heat and so need to be positioned in places where they are not going to burn players or start a fire. Fortunately, modern LED lighting is much cooler. If you opt for battery powered lighting such as candles or lanterns, ensure that you have a way of charging them and that someone is assigned to do this job every day.

How will you include atmospheric lights, strobe, or other forms of light? Do you have sufficient money in your budget to rent or purchase lighting? Do you have a method of transporting it? Professional quality lighting tends to come in flight cases, so you may need to think about renting a van or trailer. Is there enough power and/or enough power sockets? Do you have a way of rigging lights? Do you have a way of controlling the lights? Do you have time to set them all up? Much like with sound, many lights require cables for power and/or for control.

Many lighting effects work better with a haze or smoke, but using smoke or haze machines will set off smoke detectors, and may even set off a fire alarm or notify the fire brigade.

Can you adapt your lights to accommodate players with sound sensitivities or disabilities? Low light situations can particularly affect players with a visual impairment. Strobe lights can trigger epileptic fits in some people. Lasers can damage people's eyes and are particularly dangerous to younger children. We recommend you do not rely on any of these. If you are going to run a game that features low lights or dark areas, you should signpost this clearly to potential players.

Is light critical to your design or communicating game content? As with a sound rig, lighting can be expensive; sometimes it brings less to the event than you might have hoped.

For more information about lighting in black box larps, see Rasmus Teilmann (2018a, 2018b).

o) Scenography

Scenography is the combination of technology and physical objects / material stagecraft in order to create and produce a sense of place as a part of a performance. We use it to describe a mixture of location design, set design, props, and special effects.

With the rise in popularity of *immersive events*, it is easy to understand the value of detailed scenography to help set the scene for a transformative game, e.g., through spectacle (Pettersson 2025). From making the play area of a tabletop game seem to be a part of its storyworld, to creating a fully functional representation of a starship, scenography can give your players a physical sensation of being in a place. However, scenography is not an essential part of the implementation; many games -- even larger ones -- work in a black box space (Pettersson 2025), or in another location with minimal or no scenography.

Will you include scenography? Or is the space neutral or bare? As a designer you may have a vision for a space. This vision may well have affected your choice of location already, but for some games, the play is going to happen mainly inside the imagination of the players. Sometimes scenography does make a strong difference. The larp *Gothic* was run in a 19th century manor house in Denmark, complete with dark corridors and a

spooky attic, but the playtest was run in an open meeting hall with daylight coming in through the windows, and chairs and tables set out to represent rooms and furniture.

The decision around whether you include scenography will be informed by its importance to the vision, and your budget of both time and money. As a part of this decision, you need to consider transport and storage. For example, your vision for the game might absolutely require a vintage dentist's chair, but it is going to cost €1000 and weigh 200kg. How are you going to get it to and from the site? Where are you going to put it after the game?

How long do you have the location for? Is there time to rig complex scenography before the game starts? Is there time to take it down? The larp *Do Androids Dream?* (Sandqvist et al. 2017) in Gothenburg rented a warehouse space and had time to build a complex set out of scaffolding, rig lighting, and even make it rain indoors. This could not have been done without time for building and decommissioning.

The atmosphere of a game can be affected by the physical space. At one end of the scale, playing an intensely transformational game in a school building may adversely affect the players because children's pictures on the walls could break their immersion, or bring up challenging memories. At the other end, playing a larp about refugees in an actual disused prison with barbed wire fences and sleeping in prison cells may be too oppressive for some participants and may cause unintended trauma.

If you include scenography, should players interact with it? Some scenography is representational and there to provide the sense of a space, e.g., putting a medical-style screen into a room with a desk and chairs, along with a small tray on wheels with medical equipment on it. Add a chart, a stethoscope, and a box of latex-free gloves, a white coat, and a sign on the door that says "Doctor's Office" and you have used scenography to represent a space. If your game requires working technology -- such as a hackable computer network, actual CCTV, a kitchen that allows the preparation of food, or responsive terminals on the bridge of a starship -- then the scenography also needs to be functional. Remember that anything that you put into the play area becomes a part of the game. If you place a strange obelisk with runes on it in the middle of the woods, expect your players to find it and interact with it; looking for meaning or function.

We recommend asking yourself: is important scenography accessible to all players? Might anything in the scenography present difficulties for people with limited mobility or other disabilities? If so, can you mitigate this risk in some way, e.g., offering different ways to engage or other activities? Putting important scenography in places where not all players can see or interact with it is problematic. If you build the hut of the Seer in the middle of the woods at the end of a muddy track, your players with limited mobility may not be able to get there to see it. If your magical plant that grows in the darkness can only be reached by crawling through a darkened maze, then someone with a visual restriction will not be able to find it. These are design choices. We will cover accessibility in more depth later in this chapter.

For more information about how scenography relates to plots and facilitation, see Chapter 4 of this book.

i) Scenography as narrative design

Scenography contributes to the narrative but can also be a part of the story itself. A painting on the wall of a house, a strange sundial, or the mosaic pattern on a basement floor might inspire the narrative design of the game in unexpected ways. Every surface is designable, but sometimes you can fold layers of design in interesting ways. The downside of designing for site-specific scenography is that the game becomes less transportable, but the upside exposes the hidden magic of these sorts of games and can be a part of the joy of design.

For an example of scenography that also functions as narrative design, at *Midwinter* (Svanevik et al. 2020), new labels were created for the hot drinks to replace the packaging on the commercial brands (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: Milk Carton label for *Midwinter* (Svanevik et al. 2020).

For more on this topic, see the section on Props in this chapter.

3.11 Tech design

You may choose to integrate advanced technology in your larp. While a thorough examination is beyond the scope of this book, our Erasmus+ EDGE Tech Toolkit (Suominen 2025) explores current and future technologies that can be used in transformative games. The Toolkit includes considerations for such technologies as:

- 3D modeling
- 3D scanning: Laser scanning and photogrammetry
- 3D character development (virtual clones)
- 3D printing for costumes, equipment, and props
- Mobile and computer applications
- NFC / RFID technology
- Audio technology
- Communication technology

- Extended reality
- GPS / Real-time location tracking
- Microcontrollers for tech enhancement
- Game engines
- AI and machine learning

You can access the link to the Tech Toolkit [here](#).

For some examples of uses of technology in larp implementation, see Dalstål (2014),

3.12 Sensory design

a) Food / taste

As Göthberg and Sandquist (2017, 240) note, taste and smell have the power to trigger memories and emotional responses. Whilst we discuss food under sustenance above, it can also be used as a tool to support your game. Examples range from diegetically-appropriate snacks on a gaming table for a RPG, to serving Christmas Dinner for every meal (*Midwinter*, Svanevik et al. 2020), to more complex food and meal choices.

For example, for the larp *The Quota* (Brind et al. 2018; Brind 2020), food was diegetic. Participants were fed in-game from a kitchen within the prison complex; they ate with plastic cutlery at tables in the dining room of their cell block. Whilst the larp catered for a number of dietary requirements, including vegan, gluten intolerant, and specific food allergies, the meals were designed to sustain life, but were heavy on the carbohydrates -- in order to make participants feel slightly sluggish and tired -- and deliberately cheap. On the Friday night of the event, participants had been in the jail for just over 24 hours. They had eaten their evening meal: a vegetable stew which was nourishing, but deliberately underseasoned.

Shortly after 8pm, the security guards at the jail received their meal: a large order of take-away fish and chips. The security guards were played by members of the event crew (NPCs). They were instructed to eat the fish and chips inside the detention centre, in full view of the inmates. The smell of the deep-fried food permeating the building led to many of the inmates going outside, even though it was cold and dark, to avoid having to watch and smell the food being eaten. Most of the people playing the guards either gave away their food to inmates or — if they were playing guards without compassion — left food so that it could be taken (Brind 2020, 14-15).

As described earlier, another example is *dinner warfare*, a design technique intended to make shared eating scenes more dramatically interesting (Wind 2024). In dinner warfare, the organizers use seating charts to place characters next to each other or far

away for maximum drama. Food during these scenes can be buffet style, but can leave more time for role-playing if delivered by servers.

For an example of an approach to food design, see also Elleby and Bønnelycke (2023, 208-241), who discuss their approach and also provide menus. If your food is diegetic, it needs to be tested through cooking and tasting in advance. Recipes need to be available that anyone can follow, in case members of your primary catering team are unavailable.

Finally, we note that some designers have made scarcity of food a part of their design, e.g., telling players not to bring their own food or snacks, and then making the players go hungry. If you plan to make in-game food difficult or impossible to find, we strongly recommend you provide an off-game alternative. Hungry people are not good larpers nor are they safe larpers. Lack of suitable food can also lead to health concerns, for example for diabetics.

With food design in a larp, one must also consider the cultural implications. Are you including food that some, but not all participants can eat? Will political, religious, or ethical beliefs be taken into account? How do the organizers intend to manage any leftovers from meals and how will they try to avoid waste? In the case of events with many participants, one must also try to limit the impact on the ecosystem. For example, several international larps are moving towards more sustainable and cruelty-free foods.

b) Smell

It is said that, in Western Europe, if you wish to sell property, the smell of baked bread and Freshly brewed coffee evokes a positive reaction in most buyers, including those who do not drink coffee. There is no doubt that smells can be used in immersive settings; indeed during the 1980s, Disney Imagineering used them extensively in their work.

Various scents are available that can be used to enhance the role-play experience with various delivery methods, such as smoke machines, oils, scent blocks, aerosols, diffusers, and sprays. They range from quite pleasant scents that evoke a memory of winter holidays, to deeply unpleasant odours designed to provoke fear of disgust. You could offer players the earthy tones of a damp cave or the smoggy street of a 19th century city.

However, some scents cause allergic reactions or respiratory issues, and some scent products are irritants. Ehrich et al. (2023) offer a guide to how to carry out your own risk assessment for use of scents in games.

c) Touch

Some games are quite tactile by design, particularly those that are wordless or played blindfolded, such as several larps designed by Nina Runa Essendrop (2018). Some of these experiences have used objects with specific textures that blindfolded players discover in play; others rely on participants finding one another in the play space and maintaining some sort of contact throughout the game. Larps in particular may have elements of touch because of the embodied nature of the form. Consider how best to signpost the degree and type of touches to your players, workshoping if required. If possible, consider alternative options for engagement based on players' willingness to touch or be touched, and any sensory issues or restrictions from neurodiverse players.

If touching objects is a part of the game design, also think about how best to sanitise them and whether they are culturally or religiously appropriate for all potential players.

3.13 Communication

How will organizers communicate with players and vice versa throughout the process? At this time of writing in August 2025, Facebook and Discord remain the prevalent social media platforms for organising and discussing role-playing games. Bluesky is also gaining traction. None of these platforms are ideal, and we recognise that the face of social media does change. Online communities grow, fragment, evolve, and die, from the mailing lists of the '80s, to the newsgroups of the '90s, from LiveJournal to Facebook. We do not know what comes next, but there is a need for spaces where role-players can communicate. In this section, we will talk in general terms about how to use online spaces to communicate with and to build transformative communities.

a) Recruitment

How will you promote this game and recruit players? In this section, we will discuss ways of promoting a game and recruiting potential players from a general adult population. Note that running games for minors is likely a separate process. See chapters 2 for more information.

i) Website

Websites are less useful for promotion than they used to be, but they stand as important repositories of information and a destination for potential players.

Here is the information that we think people look for on a website. Some of it would come under the category of marketing copy -- words and images designed to persuade players to sign up for your game. Much of it under the category of information: things they need to know in order to make a decision about whether this is a game they want to play, should play, and are able to play (Koljonen 2020):

- **Home page:** The classic landing page for a website with a logo and a small amount of marketing copy. This page has more of a marketing function than anything else. Depending on the amount of information you have, you can actually put most of what follows onto a single page. This practice is often better for Search Engine Optimisation (SEO), but can make it harder to find information, particularly when you have a lot of detail. When you open for sign-up, this is where you have the link to the sign-up page or ticket purchase site.
- **Experience:** This section helps players to understand the nature of the game that you are advertising. It contains information designed to help them decide whether they *want* to play the game.
- **Need-to-know:** A summary of the most important aspects of the game.
- **Is this game for me?:** A simple list of the themes of the game and the expectations the organizers have of the players. If your game deals with difficult themes or has an element of physicality it is worth highlighting these here. Some potential players will read this information and decide that the game is not for them. This is okay. For a larp, this section should also answer the question, “What will I be doing with my body?” so that players understand the physical requirements and experience of the piece.
- **Characters:** In this section, give an overview of the characters or types of characters that are available to play.
- **The story:** This section could feature the backstory of the larp or an overview of the expected trajectory of the story during the game
- **Playstyle:** What are the rules of engagement for participants in this game? How physical/emotional will it be? Is it collaborative or competitive? (One may assume the former for transformative games, but you should be clear to help potential players make an informed decision about whether to sign up).
- **Historical and cultural setting:** If relevant, give an overview of the setting of the game. Do not assume cultural or historical understanding for international players.
- **Metatechniques:** Give an overview of any safety techniques and metatechniques. This section signals to experienced players that you have an understanding of the form, and offers new players a glimpse of how these situations can be handled.
- **Practical:** The set of information that enables a potential player to decide whether they *can* play the game. This remains distinct from a desire to play it.
- **Accessibility:** Add any considerations related to accessibility, including topics covered in the section on accessibility design in this chapter and Chapter 5 of *TRGD*.

- **Key information:** Any additional information they should know.
- **Dates / location:** When and where will the game be held? If you are advertising internationally, make sure you have sufficient information to enable players from other countries to identify the location. If you are opening / closing sign-up on specific dates, list them here too.
- **Cost:** If you are charging for people to play, how much is it? On what schedule must the payments be made? Are there discounted/subsidized places for underprivileged participants? Can you offer any spots for players to attend for free if they volunteer to help with organizing before or during runtime?
- **Food:** If there will be food included, give some details here, including the dietary restrictions for which you can cater. Is the food vegan? Should players bring their own? Is there a refrigerator available for storage? Are tea and coffee available?
- **Number of players:** Makes it easier for participants to understand the size of the game.
- **Accommodation:** If players will be staying on site, what sort of accommodation is available? Is it camping? A hotel? Dormitories? Shared beds?
- **Schedule:** If available, the schedule gives potential players more detail about start and end times, how long they will be playing for, and how long they will be sleeping for. It is particularly important for players travelling a long distance to understand when workshops will start and when debriefs will finish so that they can plan their journey.
- **Further reading:** At this point, we hope that our potential players are very keen to sign up to the game. This section is where we give them the details.
- **Sign-up and casting:** What is the process for signing up? When will tickets be available? Is it first come first served? Is there a lottery? How will casting be managed? Is there an application? Will you include a flagging process (see Chapters 2 and 5)?
- **Location and travel:** Whilst we have already given a location for the game, here we give a specific address and some advice for how to get there. If the location is remote, will you be providing a transport option like a coach from a major town or airport?
- **Costume:** What level of costuming is expected? If you can provide a mood board or a costume guide here that is useful, but these can come later in the process. What costume should the players bring and what costuming items will be provided, if any? Is there a cost to order these items?
- **Packing list:** What should the players bring?

For a tabletop game, comfortable clothes of their own choosing, unless you are suggesting costumes. For a black box larp, comfortable dark-coloured or black clothing. For a Nordic or American freeform game, usually no specific costume is required. For a larp, it depends on the setting, duration, location, and season. If costuming is required, we recommend specifying that it is a larp and not a 100% accurate historical re-enactment. This reassurance will ease the pressure on players and allow for a greater number of participants.

For a tabletop game, players might want to bring their own pens, paper, dice, drinks, and snacks. For a larp, we recommend letting players know they can bring their own props and specify if there are things that you need them to bring or if there are things they should not bring. Players tend to be enthusiastic and it is better to manage their expectations than to rely on common sense. Furthermore, we recommend specifying in the guide and preparatory materials what is mandatory to bring and what is recommended but not necessary.

Some example text from *The Last Song* (Justesen et al. 2022) follows:

Feel free to bring small props, coins, beads, etc. to trade. It is important to bring a wooden bowl, in game eating implements, and a cup or tankard. Please do not bring glass bottles or real weapons to the site.

- **Aesthetic:** What aesthetic is required for the genre? If you are going for a high immersion game you may need to spell out the specifics of what you are requesting. It may be obvious to you that modern drink cans and plastic bottles have no place in your 18th century tale of courtly intrigue, but spelling it out gives players a chance to think things through and hopefully come more prepared.

Is your experience intended to be historically accurate down to the year, approximately set in an “era,” *coolthentic*,³ or does it not matter? Tell your players and make it very clear which one you expect. Sometimes, friction can arise between players who have hand-sewn an outfit and those who have put a belt around an oversized shirt. You can resolve this in advance with clarity of aesthetic design.

- **Crafting:** Do players need to do crafting before or during the game? Many players, particularly larpers, enjoy crafting props, writing material, and making costumes. This is a time consuming process. If you are expecting participants to craft, then you need to signpost the expectations early.
- **Policies:** There are a number of things that you need to think about and publish so that players can make an informed decision about whether to sign up. What happens if you have to cancel the game? What if they need to pull out of the larp? A suggested list of policies include:

³ A portmanteau word borrowed from the UK Larp tradition which values a costume that looks good and right over and above it being hand sewn from hand-dyed fabric.

- Cancellation, refund, and insurance policy
 - Diversity, equity, and inclusion policy
 - Safety policy
 - Covid-19 policy
 - Privacy policy
 - Photography / video policy
- **About:** This section gives a bit of information about who the organizers are, provides methods for getting in touch with them, and credits people involved in or contributing to the design and implementation of the game.
 - **The team:** Who are the people designing and implementing the game? What is their experience? What other games have they made?
 - **Credits:** A lot of games are made by volunteers or by non-profit organizations. Some techniques that are used come from other places. Crediting people for their work, acknowledging people for their ideas, and listing everyone who helped out on a game is best practice.
 - **Contact:** A contact form, email address, postal address, and/or links to social media are useful here.

ii) Social media

Furthering the point we made about the changing face of social media, whatever platforms or methods are being used by players, you will need to create and curate a presence on them. This practice helps you build a following in that space for marketing and advertising purposes. This involves effort before you want to start promoting your event. Remember that each social media channel has specific demographics associated with it.

Social media platforms are designed for advertising and the users are the product. If you want to make use of the platform as intended, you will need to create a very targeted advertising campaign and be prepared to pay for clicks. We hope for some replacement in the future that will allow communities to be created for the sake of building communities rather than for generating revenue.

iii) Promotion through journalism

If your event is newsworthy, you may be able to generate interest, copy, or screen time by creating a mailing list of relevant journalists and sending them press releases about your events. Having a friendly journalist helps here. Whilst we have little evidence of people choosing to come to games because of newspaper articles, it generates a wider discussion about opportunities for transformation through play, e.g., this article on *The Quota* (Brind et al. 2018; Brind 2020) in *The Guardian* (Reith-Banks 2018).

iv) Mailing lists

Before Facebook, before the Web, even before newsgroups, there were mailing lists: a place where an individual could sign up for a regular newsletter about a specific subject. (Indeed, before moving online you could do this with stamps and letters).

A return to this form has occurred in recent years with many more organizations and event organizers curating a monthly or occasional email to a group of folks who have opted in to receive information.

v) Crowdfunding

Crowdfunding is still a very popular way of generating capital for games projects and has

been used for larps as well as tabletop RPGs, American freeform games, and board games. Many resources already exist offering advice on how to run successful crowdsourcing campaigns.

vi) Player contact

How will players contact you before, during, and after the game session(s)? How often will you be available for contact? Think about how you will make yourself available for questions and player support. Email is ubiquitous, but many younger players also expect Discord, Telegram, or other social media platforms. There is an overhead associated with monitoring all of these. If you have personal socials you may want to make it clear that you do not answer questions pertaining to your game through those. You may also wish to state estimated response times and limits to where and when you can be contacted.

vii) Player's Handbook

Pulling together all of the relevant information from the website, plus details of characters and more about the game into a designed package in the form of a Player's Handbook makes it easier for players to download and keep everything they might need in one place. A PDF is readable on a phone and a screen and allows for interesting layout choices.

If your budget stretches to it, a printed copy of the Player's Handbook is a useful resource and a beautiful memento of a game.

b) Contacting the players

How often will you contact your players? Tell your players how often you expect to contact them and when to expect an update. Whilst some material may go to social media, important information about payments, casting, and character sheets should also go directly to players. We suggest 3-4 letters to players sent via email with a notification on Discord/social media to say they have been sent. The number of emails that end up in spam folders or undelivered is significant.

c) Player contact with one another

Will you have an online space for players to interact? This is an important and difficult decision. Many players enjoy the idea of online role-play both as a means of building their characters and relationships and as a space to continue the story between games. Others use the space to talk about the off-game elements of the event. However, having an online space privileges those who have time to interact within it and risks creating a two-tier experience: one for players who have interacted a lot online, and another for those who are coming into the space cold.

Who will moderate this space? What are its rules? We recommend designing and curating your online spaces. Unless you have a small number of players who are personally known to you, players may join from many cultures and walks of life. The way they may deal with one another and expect to be dealt with may vary wildly and (potentially) destructively. Some people write in a way that seems abrupt or even rude, but that is not their intent. (There are also people whose intention is to be disruptive or difficult). Consider laying out the rules for engagement clearly and up front, then ask people to read and agree to these rules.

You may need the ability to moderate, or even prioritise active moderation. This means that a person or a team of people read and monitor the online space who are ready to step in, stop conversations, delete messages, or even remove people from the space. This is a challenging task. Moderators often have to deal with angry people who can be rude and aggressive, expecting an immediate response. Having a back channel for moderators and organizers to communicate in real time can help here. Sometimes decisions need to be made by people with a management / overall responsibility.

Are players expected to interact beforehand? Or is this optional? If you need players to interact in an online space prior to the game you should make this expectation very clear up front. The investment of time can be significant and not every participant has an equal amount of free time. A single parent working two jobs may struggle to spend time every day keeping up with online conversations, particularly on platforms such as Discord, and making it mandatory might not be tenable for them. Again, making online interaction optional may also end up generating a two-tier experience where players who did have the time to interact know more about the game, have already formed relationships, etc.

Are players allowed to pre-plan relations, scenes, and other activities? If so, will other players be at a disadvantage if they are not able to participate? Consider this carefully. This choice is particularly risky when you allow players to create their own relationships or to pre-plan scenes in the game. At the same time, having players invested in the game in advance increases engagement, intensity, and reduces the propensity to drop out.

3.14 Casting

Casting refers to the process by which organizers assign specific characters, roles, or functions to players, or a process by which players select and negotiate for specific roles between them. The latter approach can work well with small groups who have a degree of trust and maturity, but it also risks privileging assertive / aggressive / direct players when it comes to allocating roles.

Conceptually, some characters seem more attractive than others. Playing the dashing captain home from the war, or the Commander of the starship seems immediately more interesting than the scullery maid, or the person who works in the docking bay. With good character design, this should not be the case, but we must accept that – given a free choice – some roles would have more sign-ups than others. In this example, the high status roles are also likely to have in-game functions that require the player to be able to perform.

Casting, therefore, is an art form that requires judgement, thought, and even-handedness lest we are seen to always give the best roles to the same people or to our friends. We suggest a blind casting that is based on what players ask for during sign up. Supplementary questions about the sort of experience they are looking for on a form can help the decision making process. If you opt for a transparent process, casting against type can often generate super interesting play. If you are not sure, check with the player:

We are considering you for the role of the commander. This will involve making rapid decisions under pressure and direct conflict with members of the council. If you were cast into this place would you be excited by / comfortable with it?

a) Flagging / addressing playstyle incompatibilities

One of the biggest challenges of playing with people you have not interacted with before is understanding and addressing differences in playstyle. Some people are incompatible with one another, such as an emotionally-driven internal immersionist paired with a loud, play-to-win player with a tendency to drop character and make off-game jokes. As facilitators and GMs, we need to be very aware of these potential friction points and work to mitigate them.

These issues are best identified and addressed early. Talking about play preferences and agreeing a baseline of interaction can be a useful workshop session either in person, or facilitated online.

We discuss flagging in more detail in Chapters 2 and 5.

b) Redundancy and robustness

How do you deal with people dropping out? If the organizer joins in, will they still be effective? Your game will have dropouts. People get sick, real life gets in the way, or sometimes folks just forget. If you are lucky, you will get a few days or weeks' notice of someone's intention not to attend, but this is not always the case.

Sometimes you may find your game has seats at the table, or roles unfilled. This can be designed around to a certain extent by building redundancy into the characters, but occasionally, gaps will significantly impact the game as a whole, e.g., *“We have no commander for the starship!”* or the experience of one character and their player, e.g., *“I am sorry, Romeo, but Juliet can’t make it!”* Having a short list of understudies who live nearby can help.

In some cases you may need to have a member of the organizer crew step in and play. Consider how this practice affects the overall running of the game. Taking someone off the kitchen crew and getting them to play will certainly save the play experience, but will make getting the food to table on time significantly harder. In this case it is better to have someone in the runtime crew already prepared for this possible task. Or even consider offering the spot to players for free, hoping someone will take it.

3.15 Documentation

Documentation is the term used to describe records of a game taken before, during, and after. Your design notes, drafts of characters, copies of social media campaigns all count as documentation. Any field notes you take during the game, and any feedback or data collected afterwards also fall into this category. The most common use of the term, however, refers to photographs (and to a lesser extent video) taken during the game, mainly by an out-of-game photographer provided by the organizers.

As much of this documentation has personal information in it that pertains directly to individuals who can be identified, you need to be aware of any local laws that govern the storage and handling of personal data. In Europe, this law is currently GDPR. It is beyond the remit of this book to offer guidance here as we are not lawyers or legal advisers.

How will you obtain consent for processing personal information? In any sign-up form where you ask a player or potential player for their personal information include an opt-in statement that gives you their consent to store that information. Link also to your privacy policy.

How will you obtain consent for documentation? We recommend having a specific documentation consent policy, which could be an actual consent / release form, or you can go for tacit consent by making it a part of your policies / terms and conditions.

If players will be getting copies of these images for their own use, what are the limits?

If you tell people they can use pictures of themselves on their own social media, they should not be using photos of co-players for other purposes. How will you ensure the privacy of someone who opts out of their photos being used when they appear in the background of someone else’s portrait? The suggested solution to this appears in the policy below: there is a period where images are available only to players and you ask that they not be shared. At the end of that week, any player who opts out of images has their photos removed. After that period, players may use the images in a personal capacity.

In what contexts or publication venues will documentation be used? Be specific. Particularly with images, people want to know what you are going to do with the photos/video. Their willingness to let you use it for academic purposes or to put on your own social media will tend to be different from if you intend to sell the images or use them for marketing purposes. Be honest about your intentions and make sure that players understand before they sign up what any images might be used for.

a) Sample photo policy

Here is an example template Photo Policy that you can share with your players:

There will be some photography/videography during the course of <event>. This will be restricted to a session of “portrait painting” during <time> // The photographers/camera crew will be there “in-character” // The photographers will not be there in-character, but will try to photograph the action without being seen.

If you do not wish to be photographed, please inform the photographers // By signing up to the larp, you agree to be photographed during the game.

After the game is completed, the images will be made available to participants only. You will have a week to request that any photograph with you in it is deleted, or cropped/edited to remove you. We ask that you do not share any photos until this week is up, and everyone has had a chance to review and confirm they consent for their images to be used. After the week is done, please ask permission of co-players before tagging images of them.

If you don’t ask for your photo to be taken down, we will assume you are okay with us using any media for marketing or publishing purposes. Some media may be used in an academic context. You have the right to withdraw assent at any time; this means that even though you were okay with a photograph immediately after the event, if you change your mind about it in the future, you can ask to have it deleted. We will remove it from our own servers and archives, and will not use it in any further marketing or publishing.

3.16 Aesthetics Implementation

a) Costumes

Will you provide costumes? Providing costumes is a tricky undertaking as you need to be able to provide for all shapes and sizes. Unless you have access to a significant store of clothing, it is often better to let players sort out their own costuming. However, there are some things like cloaks, sashes, tabards, or robes that can fit many differently-shaped humans. These need to be planned, purchased, cut, and assembled. Think about whether the players will need clothing layers if you provide costumes. This will depend

a lot on the season and location. For a multi-day outdoor larp in the winter, yes. For a one evening tabletop game in an air conditioned venue, maybe. Additional advice on costuming can be found at Grove (2020) and Grove and Örtberg (2025).

b) Props

The design, manufacture, transportation, and storage of props are a part of scenography implementation. In this section we will talk about the type of props that are specific to the game that either you will provide or you will ask the players to bring.

What props will you provide? If there are props that are core to the design of the game then you should provide them, or at the very least have them available for players to borrow. In the black box larp *Faerie* (Justesen 2023), there are some magical items that are important to the story, for example a light that always shows the character the way to their heart's desire; the organizer provides a LED candlestick in a holder to the players at the start of the larp.

For a large game, you might want to consider name badges for your players and their characters, possibly with indicators of their group or faction. For a larp that involves scientific experimentation or medicine, you may wish to provide a set of laboratory or medical equipment.

You should similarly have props available to your volunteers and NPCs. For larps, you will always need bags, baskets, and boxes for people to move objects around.

How will the props you provide connect with your transformative goals? Think about why you are including each prop. Does it map to a particular part of your design, e.g., perhaps an item to be given away or destroyed as a part of a redemptive ritual? Or a letter to be opened when the character is ready? Not every prop has to have a transformational purpose, but if you introduce one with this intention, we recommend applying the Darklord Test (Brind 2019, 119) to identify where it might go wrong and be used to overpower others.

If your props run counter to your goals, how will you address this? There is no single answer to this question; it depends on the goals in question or the prop. For example, the scented candle that you selected to bring everyone together does not work as expected. Having selected a comforting smell and tested it with friends and family, in the gaming environment, people react differently. Rather than coming together, instead some people leave the room, which has a potential impact on an important upcoming scene.

As soon as you identify the problem, you need to take action. The first is to extinguish and remove the candle; ideally to air out the room a little, whilst also taking care not to make it too cold. If you are able to replace it with another smell, or neutralise it in some way then you can. Ideally you need to do this without interrupting play, but sometimes it is better to break the immersion to course correct than to stay hands-off. In every instance, you need to know there is an issue, plan how you are going to resolve the immediate issue, and then look at amelioration.

Sometimes the issue could be down to someone misunderstanding or misusing a prop. We suggest gentle intervention here, particularly in a transformative setting. Words like “blame” and “fault” are less useful while a game is in place. Focus on the fix.

c) Other tools

For a tabletop game, have spare dice, pens, pencils, papers, and the ability to print and reprint character sheets. Players will forget things, which can slow down the game. For larps, you may want to use laminated cards, ribbons, or stickers to provide meta information about props.

3.17 Guiding player preparation

Many players think they need to arrive on site with minimal preparation and will be able to play easily. Players often have busy lives and do not have the big picture view of the implementation design like you do. Therefore, you should clearly communicate with players what is needed for preparation ahead of time.

a) Logistics-related preparation

What do players need to bring with them in terms of bedding, toiletries, etc.? Depending on your location and the agreement you have with them, players may need to bring some essentials with them. A hotel may provide towels and bedding, but some other locations may require players to bring sheets, pillow cases, or towels. You need to tell them what they need to bring, including the size of the bedding. You also need to be prepared for a percentage of them to forget anyway. In most cases, it is worth sending out an “essentials packing list” to players and crew to try to reduce the instances of things forgotten. For a larger or longer game, it is worth having a selection of toiletries available for people to use.

b) Game-related preparation

What do players need to do to prepare before the game? Here are some recommendations for instructions you may wish to provide for them.

i) Reading the character sheets

If the game uses pre-written character sheets, then players need to read and digest these before the game. If there is any pre-game work, such as talking to close relations, you should remind them about this well before the game. If the game uses characters generated by the players, again it is worth checking in with them and asking to see/review the characters in advance of the game so they can be revised if required. For a tabletop game, you need to decide if the characters are created in advance or during Session 0.

ii) Read the setting information

It helps if players have a broad understanding of the storyworld and setting, particularly for a long-form larp. Reading up on the storyworld, asking questions, and potentially getting involved in pre-play are all a part of the assimilation of setting information.

iii) Read and learn the rules

Some players read the rules of the game in advance. Others do not. For a tabletop game, this issue might be less of a problem, but for a large larp, it can waste a lot of time during workshops. Consider distributing a set of “rules you must know” in advance of the game, not just as written material, but also as audio.

iv) Acquire and pack key props

Remind players to prepare and pack any key props that they need to bring, e.g., latex weapons to a boffer larp, or wands to a magic school.

v) Prepare and pack costumes and luggage

Remind players to test wear and pack costumes just before the larp. Let players know where they can leave their out-of-game luggage, whether the location will be secure or not, and whether it will be accessible during the game. If you are providing costuming, make sure they know if the sizes are standardized or if you are custom-making them to order (Jelínková 2026).

c) Transformation-related preparation

If your players need to practice specific skills or use content during a game, you should send materials ahead of time whenever possible. Even if you plan to hold workshops covering the materials, assume players will need more time in order to prepare. Should they consider ahead of time what transformative goals they want to achieve with the game? Should they journal on the topic? Should they read an academic article or familiarize themselves with historical information? Make clear these expectations and you will help reduce cognitive load for your players.

Importantly, even if you ask players to prepare beforehand, some will either miss the information, not have time for preparations, or forget key items or tasks. You should consider backup plans for these sorts of situations. Are some preparations optional rather than necessary? If so, we recommend signposting this fact in your communication. If players have not considered transformative goals, will you provide a list to choose from? We cannot mitigate all risks, so consider what factors you can address and what factors will have to be a gamble.

3.18 Workshop Design

The purpose of the workshops are to introduce your participants to the intentions of the game in terms of desired impacts, themes, and structure. At this scale you also need to let them know about the logistics of the game site; the safety structures; where they will eat and sleep, etc. This is also your opportunity to explain the game world and their characters, and possibly for strangers in the real world to build the relations between their characters. You may also have key skills or activities you want them to use in play and introduce exercises to teach and practice these skills. After the game, we recommend at least one de-roling activity and a debrief. All of these workshops, exercises, activities, and briefings need to be carefully designed. We discuss the key elements of workshop design in Chapters 2 and 4 of *TRGD* and workshop implementation in this book in Chapters 2 and 4.

a) Scripts

We recommend having printed scripts for your workshops that explain exactly what the facilitator needs to say along with the details of the workshop or briefing. These scripts should include anything that they need to bring to the workshop, and any tasks they need to complete. This is because you do not always know who will be running the session. You might intend that you are the person running it, and start from the assumption that you do not need detailed notes; however, if you are sick, for example, and have lost your voice, someone else needs to be able to step in.

b) Practice

Unless it is a playtest, ideally, facilitators will not be running a workshop for the first time. At the very least, having a readthrough of the script to make sure they understand it is a good idea.

c) Time

As a part of the practice session, you can also get a better idea of the time it takes to run a workshop or complete a briefing session. Designing a series of workshops, with breaks, in the time available between players arriving on site and the start of the larp is a complex art. Understanding what can be done in 45 minutes takes some time and practice to get right.

3.19 Budgets

Now that we have examined all the details of logistics and production, we will consider the overall budget. Some games can be expensive to make, and operating at scale comes with a financial risk which you can mitigate by understanding what an event is likely to cost to produce. If you understand these risks, and you have planned for the unexpected, you can then work out how much funding you need to be able to run the event. This funding will come either from participants, their legal guardians, or other authorities.

Start by looking at the known costs and some estimated costs you can put into a spreadsheet. In the example in Table 2, we are planning the budget for an event for 25 players and a volunteer crew of 10. The numbers in the unit cost column are a mixture of quoted prices where we know what something is going to cost, or estimated prices, where we set ourselves a budget for spending. We also recommend adding a contingency or “safety margin” of 10-15% to cover the unexpected.

Table 2: Sample larp budget from Avalon Larp Studio.

	Unit Cost	Units	Total
Venue (Including VAT)	€2,000.00	1	€2,000.00
Food per player	€50.00	25	€1,250.00
Scenography, props, costume, FX	€500.00	1	€500.00
Food for crew	€100.00	10	€1,000.00
Insurance (quoted)	€250.00	1	€250.00
Heating & power (included in rent)	€0.00	0	€0.00
Stationery, printing, office materials	€50.00	1	€50.00
Travel	€100.00	1	€100.00
First aid kit	€15.00	1	€15.00
Van hire	€100.00	1	€100.00
Sound system hire	€75.00	1	€75.00
Subtotal of Costs			€5,340.00
Safety margin (15%)			€801.00
Total Cost			€6,141.00

To run this event without losing money, the organizers would need to secure funding of around €6,100.

With twenty-five people taking part, this would mean a cost per participant of around €250. In order to reduce the costs, one could reduce the food budget, such as not allowing quite so generous an amount for food for the volunteer crew; reduce the scenography budget; etc. Playing with these numbers enables you to develop a sensible working budget, increase the number of players, or reduce a ticket price so that you can understand the maximum amount of funds available. It is better to do this with a spreadsheet before you have spent any money.

Even for a game where your only costs are the rental of a room and hot drinks, it is useful to understand in advance how much it will cost to organize; particularly as a volunteer, you should not be paying out of pocket.

If you are operating internationally, ensure that you understand the rules around tax. In the example above, we show VAT, which is a goods and sales tax. It is slightly different from a sales tax in the USA and it is applied differently depending on which country you are operating in and – in some cases – dependent upon the country where the event is taking place. You also need to consider currency fluctuations if you are charging for tickets in one currency but paying for locations and suppliers in another.

Once you have set a budget, you need to keep to it. In the example above, if your scenography budget is €500 then you need to stay within that constraint. The temptation to move money from one area to another is always there, but it is good practice not to do this unless you are absolutely certain that the other expense is covered.

Keep in mind that the more expensive your event, the less accessible it may become for your target population. While

Next, we will transition to talking about what happens **During the Game** when implementing.

3.20 Onsite logistics

In this section we will discuss the process of arrival and set up of a site prior to running an event.

a) Preparations

What preparations do you and any other facilitators need to make before play can begin? As soon as you arrive on site, check all the spaces you have planned to use. Confirm everything is as it should be. Anything out of order becomes a task that goes on the production plan. Take pictures or videos of how things were set up when you arrived as a reference for how they are supposed to look when you leave. Check electricity, water, toilets and internet connection as a preliminary task. Fix these as a first step if something is not working. It is also good practice to immediately establish an *operational base*: a room or other space available to the runtime crew that can serve as a meeting point for printing materials and sorting information. If the event venue is outdoors or in a location without internet connectivity, it is good practice to download all materials to your local computer or print them out beforehand.

i) Hosting and managing volunteers

Make sure to take time to welcome your volunteers and introduce them to one another. Provide two spaces for volunteers: one where they can go for tasks and a separate space to relax and take a break. Being a good host is one of the most important duties of organizers. Being greeted by someone who cares and wants you to have a great experience is genuinely the best way to start an event (Petterson 2024). It is therefore useful to make a clear division in the responsibilities of the organizer team: who is being a calm host, and who is dealing with problems?

ii) Materials

There are things that event runners regularly find that they need, such as printouts, pens, dice, tape, scissors, badges, and other implements. Depending on the scale of the game you may find that you need copies of handouts or a working printer on site. You will probably need paper and pens and other stationery. Masking tape, Sharpies, bluetack, and duct tape are generally useful. We suggest a basic set of stationery; scissors and/or craft knives; more pens than you think you will need, a good stapler, and if you are bringing printers, then spare ink or toner cartridges.

Prepare organizer and player badges ahead of time as much as possible.

iii) Power

If you are going to have an organizer office space, take some time to think about power supplies. Extension cords and four-way plugs are useful, but you need to make sure they are not a trip hazard. International adapter plugs, fans, and lights may also come in handy. In addition, bring boxes for the various items and materials. If you are running events regularly, you may end up with boxes or crates of useful things to bring. Keep a list of these supplies both for budgeting purposes (see below) and so that you know when to buy more.

iv) Cleanup

How will cleanup occur? Will you clean, players, cleaning staff, or a mixture? Planning the clean up at the end of an event makes the task easier and quicker, particularly if everyone understands the area they are responsible for and what “done” looks like. Depending on the location and your agreement with the location, cleanup can mean anything from checking for dropped litter, down to a complete clean of the location top-to-bottom. Ensure you have sufficient cleaning materials, brooms, mops, and trash bags. Set up places for recycling or sorting recycling depending on your country.

We suggest including the “ten minute tidy” which involves asking your participants before the game to give ten minutes of their time at the end of it to help with some of the cleaning and tidying tasks. Consider a hundred players, each contributing ten minutes to the clean-up process. That gives you over sixteen hours of cleaning effort. If you are going to ask this, make sure to sign-post it in advance and make sure to have someone skilled available to manage it, who can assign tasks, etc.

You can use the video that you took when you arrived on site to ensure that every room and part of the location is exactly as it was when you arrived.

v) Set build

If you have work to do to get anything built or constructed, put someone in charge of that part of the process. Ideally you will already know how long it is going to take and will have plenty of time.

vi) Tech setup

The same is true for any sound and lights that need to be rigged. Whilst the Tech and Set teams often need to work in the same spaces, it is better to have different people assigned to each task.

vii) Soundcheck

Once the set is done, and the tech set-up complete, if you are using sound and lights as a part of your production, test them. Do this on location, with the real sound effects, music, or soundscape. Ensure that everything works, that the sound is clear and crisp, and neither too loud nor too quiet in all key locations. Whilst you may want to do this before players arrive, in practice, it is usually one of the last parts of the set-up because it takes time to get everything ready.

b) Runtime: The clock is running

In this section we will consider what activities need to happen from the moment when your timeline says 'we start now' until the end of the larp and debriefs. You should have a plan that will tell you when something is due to start and when it is due to finish. It is very easy to go over time, particularly if you have someone who is inexperienced at running workshops, or if you have participants who are prone to running late. All you can do is your very best to keep to time.

i) Running workshops

Workshops are a fundamental part of your pre-game and you cannot afford to cut them. However, if they run over time you risk reducing time for costuming and/or play of the game. Encourage participants and facilitators to be on time and ensure that everyone has a clock, watch, or a phone that tells the current time. See Chapters 2 and 4 for more information on facilitating workshops.

ii) Starting the game

If you are able to start the game within 15 minutes of the allotted hour then you are off to a good start. Ideally, you start exactly on time. If it runs much over the 15 minutes, you may need to look at your proposed timeline and consider if something needs to be moved or trimmed.

iii) Game-running

The process of actually running the game depends on many factors. If you have a timeline for when events need to happen, try to make sure that they are ready to go, and that they start on time. If they are starting to slip, make micro-adjustments, cut things if you have to, and make sure everyone knows about the changes. Trust your design! Hold regular meetings with your volunteers. Make sure they are okay! Talk about any tasks that need doing, or changes that need to be made. Say thank you. Say it a lot.

iv) Downtime

If there is a downtime, act break, or sleeping break, make sure that everyone takes the break as a break -- including you.

There are some tasks that need to be done on a daily basis. Any battery-powered devices should be recharged overnight. Any washing-up that needs to be done should be done. Make sure any trash is removed and recycled/thrown away.

v) Ending the game

The game usually has an agreed end time. If everything is resolved prior to that time, it is okay to end the game early, but keep in mind some players will be pacing their personal storylines according to the previous schedule and be frustrated.

vi) Handling surprises and mistakes

How do you respond *when* it goes wrong? No plot survives first contact with the players and it is equally rare for a long-form game to run without a problem. Small things might not work, or sometimes a player will have an issue that needs to be resolved. Your job is always to facilitate transformative play in a safe way, to look after your volunteers, your participants, and yourself.

Take a breath. Ideally, discuss the issue and any possible solutions with co-organizers or trusted volunteers, or with players if you must. During runtime, prioritise solutions over trying to understand what went wrong or who was to blame. A review of the causes of a problem comes later.

If the issue relates to safety, please see Chapter 5.

c) Aftermath

When the game is done there are still some key tasks that need to be completed before your work is done.

i) Tidying

Make an initial tidy up of the play area to remove anything that needs to be washed or thrown away. Collect your props in one place and player objects in another. This can be done as a part of a “ten minute tidy” where you ask everyone to contribute ten minutes of their time right at the end of the game. If you have sufficient participants, it is possible to get many hours of work done very quickly.

ii) Debriefing

This needs to be on your timeline because it will require one or more spaces, and members of the team to facilitate the debrief.

iii) Takedown / pack up

Everything that was set up now needs to be taken down and packed away. If there are props or costumes that need to be cleaned, these should be kept separate. Technical gear goes back into flight cases, particularly if it was rented. You should try to put everything back exactly as it was when you arrived. The pictures or videos you took upon arrival are useful here so you can ensure that it looks like you have never been to the site.

iv) Cleaning

Even if cleaning was explicitly included in your rental agreement, it is best practice to leave a location looking clean: washing-up done, floors swept, beds stripped, etc. Leave energy for this task.

v) Handing back the location

When everything is out of the location and you have had a final look around to ensure every room looks good, only then is it time to pack-up, hand back the keys, and head home.

In this final section, we will discuss recommendations for implementation **After the Game**, an important topic too often overlooked, since we tend to focus on the details of run-time itself.

3.21 Post-game emotional safety

In this section, we will discuss important considerations related to the mental well-being of you and your participants. While we sometimes put other logistical concerns at the forefront, when ending a game, lack of proper attention to emotional safety can lead to feelings of alienation, dysregulation, or burnout.

a) Self-care

Look after yourself. Plan some downtime after running an event, particularly if it has been a voluntary undertaking. Event organizers and particularly game runners often find themselves working far harder than they would expect of anyone else. Make sure you are leaving yourself time to rest and recover. Unwinding after the game with sleep, hydration, and perhaps comfort foods is important.

You may experience a post-event drop (Bowman and Torner 2014; Nilsen 2015), sometimes called depression. After an intense event, players and organizers alike may feel deflated, self-conscious, sad, exhausted, or any number of other emotions perceived as negative. Another way to think about drop is that if the game experience and community surrounding it lead to feelings of *expansion*, then drop refers to feelings of *contraction* afterward (Hugaas and Bowman 2019). Organizers in particular are prone to drop, as they may push themselves to extremes during implementation spending energy and/or physical exertion. Organizers commonly have trouble sleeping before and during the game.

Drops are not uncommon, but you should still take them seriously. You have delivered something which is hopefully powerful, beautiful, and important, but you may also feel disconnected from it, particularly if you did not directly participate. These feelings are legitimate. When you have rested, it is useful to have a debrief with your co-organizers or friends.

Make no important decisions the week after running an event. Be kind to yourself and allow others to be kind to you.

b) Week of stories

We are all humans. Organizers are often exhausted after an event, and receiving feedback, particularly negative feedback, immediately after the event has finished can be difficult and destructive, even when that feedback is intended to be constructive. The Week of Stories is a request from organizers to players to hold off on public analysis, critique, or criticism of the larp for a period: usually seven days. This approach creates a space for players to reflect on their experiences without these memories being affected by the judgement of others, gives the organizers time to rest and recover, and encourages a focus on sharing and documenting what actually took place at the larp, i.e., the Story. Phrases like the following would be allowed during a Week of Stories:

“I loved that scene where your character ...”

“I found it incredibly powerful when ...”

On the other hand, phrases like these ones would come after the Week of Stories

“I think the organizers should have ...”

“The workshop did not work for me because ...”

For more on emotional safety, read Chapter 5 of *TRGD* and Chapter 5 of this textbook.

3.22 Feedback

When your event is complete, we recommend asking both players and collaborators for feedback, including crew, volunteers etc. Feedback in this context is information about reactions to your game, which is used as a basis for improvement. In this section, we will discuss various methods of requesting feedback and what to do with the data.

a) Surveys

A survey is a quick way of getting specific, usually anonymized feedback about your event (Montero 2021; Waern 2019). Using tools like Google Forms you can put together a set of questions and ask your players to score or answer. Unless your game has hundreds of players, you may not get particularly large sample sizes, but it is still possible to infer some useful information as long as you do not expect statistical significance.

Surveys tend to be structured, questions are typically closed-ended, and answer choices are fixed. With that in mind, we suggest you include a limited number of short-answer open-ended questions to help clarify why people responded the way they did to a closed-ended question.

b) Informal talks after the larp

Although emotions may cloud the player's judgement immediately after the event, this does not mean that they are not a valid element of evaluation. Emotional feedback and personal data works best when delivered by face-to-face interaction. Do not forget that some of the ideas and impressions that are very vivid immediately after an event may disappear days later when filling out a survey. Emotional and immediate feedback is useful when contextualised.

c) Open-answer questions

Alternatively, you could simply put out a set of open-answer questions where participants can tell you what they think about a broad range of topics. It is useful to guide your participants with questions like, "What did you enjoy most about the experience? Were there any aspects of the game that did not work for you?" Avoid general requests such as, "Give feedback here." Be aware of the tendency to receive negative feedback more often than positive feedback using this method, particularly if the form is anonymous. In addition, because sample sizes are likely to be even smaller than with a survey, and because the questions are less structured, the results will be more subjective.

d) Discord / Facebook

Participants often post on social media about their experiences. Sometimes they will create their own threads to communicate with their co-players, to discuss cool scenes or moments and to continue sharing the experience.

Occasionally they will raise issues, or want to talk about things that did not work so well for them. They may forget that the organizers / designers are reading, they may tag you in their posts, or they may not. If these posts are public, you can read them. If written immediately after the event, they will give you a snapshot of the participant experience. If they come later then they will likely be more integrated and reflective. Either way, remember that this sort of feedback is subjective or intersubjective. (See also the Week of Stories from before).

e) Emails

Encourage participants to email you their thoughts, copies of feedback, or reviews they give elsewhere. Sometimes you will not see things people have posted on social media, or possibly they are locked down to Friends Only status.

Sometimes emails will require an immediate and considered response, e.g., if something went wrong during the game. If you do offer email as a means of communication, then make sure you are monitoring that email.

f) Responding to and evaluating feedback

You do not have to respond to all of the feedback you get, although an acknowledgement / thanks is always welcome. However, some feedback invites or even needs a response. We suggest the following: if you receive a complaint or feedback that requires a response, try to avoid an emotional / immediate reply. Drafting a response and sharing it with co-organizers for comment is a good idea. This is particularly important if you are replying to something on social media.

Where possible, ensure you have rested before replying; if you can wait until after the Week of Stories that would be better.

The same is true when it comes to the evaluation of feedback. This is best done with some distance between you and the game. Constructive criticism is extremely valuable as a way of improving your design, processes, and the games you make, but it is easy to misconstrue it as destructive without that distance.

3.23 Summary

This chapter discussed myriad considerations when scaling up your game, especially when running larps, tabletop, or freeform games in special locations. Having a knowledge of the range of considerations can help you decide how far up you feel comfortable scaling and evaluate any limitations you may have. In the next chapter, we will discuss facilitation strategies in more depth.

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CHAPTER 4

Theory and Practice in Facilitating Transformative Role-playing Games

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4.1 Introduction

As we discussed briefly in previous chapters, facilitation is a special role within the overall category of organizers. While this chapter will cover suggestions for specific implementation situations, we recommend reading all the sections, as much of the advice is applicable in other contexts.

Facilitation can take many forms in role-playing games. A *storyteller* helps mediate the rules of the game and the narrative of the world. Storytellers may engage heavily, ranging from high control, representing the entire world and all characters within it, to a low control hands-off approach, with availability only for narrative or rules clarifications. As we will discuss later, many terms for this role exist, but we use *storyteller* to emphasize narrative responsibilities compared to other forms of facilitation.

A *non-player character* (NPC) is a character who serves a certain function in the game and thus has somewhat limited agency (Stenros 2013), e.g., a moderator in a debate or a zombie enemy. Alternatively, a *supporting character* tends to be more developed and aims to support player-characters (PCs) in their experience (Fido-Fairfax 2024).

Other types of facilitation include *high responsibility player-characters* who are full players, but are expected to run events or facilitate play for others. *In-game safety team members* play characters within the fiction able to provide emotional support or guide players off-game as needed for psychological safety reasons (Bowman et al. 2017; Atwater and Rowland 2018).

Finally, but most importantly in transformative role-playing games, the *workshop* and/or *debrief leader* facilitates the framing of the game. A workshop leader may run pre-game warm-ups, trust-building exercises, character creation exercises, and other activities, whereas a debrief leader helps players process their experience after play through guided structured, semi-structured, or structured discussions. In tabletop, a Session 0 often serves some or all of these purposes. Finally, *off-game safety team*

members assist players who are upset or overwhelmed (Brown 2017; Berthold 2024), whether engaging in crisis management or trying to help strategize narrative, social, or personal strategies to help the player re-engage in the activity.

Role-playing games can be run in many locations. Each location has its own specifics regarding facilitation requirements and opportunities. As examples, a tabletop role-playing game can occur at a home, a community center, or a therapist's office. Some larps occur on-site in a realistic location, e.g., a castle, a field, a campsite, or a boardroom. Other larps are played in more neutral locations, requiring players to imagine the location, e.g., a hotel conference room becoming a spaceship, or a classroom becoming a mountaintop. Some larps and freeform games are played in abstract, neutral spaces enhanced by lights and sound, such as black box theatres. Urban larps are often played in multiple locations across a city (Pettersson 2025). Online games often require special software and internet connection to play.

Therefore, a thorough understanding of the affordances (Gibson 2014; Lampo 2015) offered by different types of environments is necessary when considering facilitation strategies. Some practices that work in a physical room may be more challenging to arrange in video conferencing software, for example organic role-playing scenes in which several people are talking at once. Others might be easier, for example, passing private notes to the facilitator through direct messages without the other players noticing.

The length, location, player count, and requirements of the narrative design also have an impact on how many facilitators are needed, if any. The context also matters; educational and therapeutic contexts often need more intensive on- and off-game facilitation than leisure ones, i.e., have a higher *ratio* of facilitators to players.

Thus, any given game will differ in terms of facilitation needed, as well as the required facilitation skills, e.g., whether storytelling skills are adequate, or a facilitator also needs pedagogical training. If a facilitator lacks the requisite training, additional facilitators may need to be recruited, e.g., a paraprofessional in mental health as extra support for an emotionally heavy game; a mental health professional responsible for handling the processing around therapeutic goals while the storyteller runs the narrative; or a school class' regular teacher.

This chapter will expand upon these aspects in more detail, with a strong emphasis on styles of facilitation helpful for transformative role-playing games.

a) Types of facilitation

Facilitation norms differ between play cultures, but also have different considerations depending on the format.

For traditional tabletop RPGs, the facilitator is a strong and even critical presence in the game, responsible for running the story, everything within the world, and rules adjudications. In such situations, the facilitator is both helper and adversary, especially

if they are running combat scenes for player-characters to fight against NPCs. In indie role-playing games, this role may still be intact, such as in *Powered by the Apocalypse* games like *Apocalypse World* (Baker and Baker 2010), but be instructed to focus on ways to emphasize the story over rules, or help the players co-create interesting narrative moments rather than winning or losing an interaction (Boss, Vaghi, and Morningstar 2012). Other games such as *Dream Askew* (Alder 2014) are *GM-less*, meaning that narrative power is distributed among the players and they are, essentially, co-facilitating for each other (Stein 2021; Bisogno 2022). However, one person who knows the rules may act as an unofficial facilitator in onboarding players to the game. Additionally, research has shown that expert players at the table help onboard new players, as can viewing materials about the game online ahead of time (Giordano 2022).

Larps vary widely in terms of numbers of players, spaces in which they are played, and number of facilitators needed (if any). In many traditional larps, the facilitator plays a similar role as in tabletop, but is not the primary point of interaction; the other player-characters are the focus of play. On the other hand, if a facilitator is playing an NPC who holds important plot information, is an adversary to be defeated, or represents a specific quest, the game is incentivizing players to interact with that person in some way, with or without each other. In other larps, the facilitator is there mainly to provide direction or hints on how to proceed, or not visible at all, so it depends strongly on the game.

Nordic and American freeform games vary in terms of structure and interaction with the facilitator. Some are run in real-time, meaning the whole larp is one long scene. The facilitator may offer suggestions or come in as an NPC, but is not playing a strong role in directing play. In other freeform games, the facilitator is exceptionally active, starting and cutting scenes in a direct manner, as well as interrupting play for certain meta-techniques, to fast forward or backward scenes, ask players to replay the same scene, etc (Stark 2014a, 2014b; Torner 2019).

You should strongly consider the necessity of facilitator intervention in the play experience. If you write a facilitator-heavy game but have limited organizing staff, you may not be able to run it for the group size you originally envisioned. Similarly, if your transformative goals require facilitator intervention, they will need to be present during play, e.g., to practice specific therapeutic techniques under direction. For more information about ratios between organizers and players, see Chapter 2.

b) Narrative-related roles

i) Game master, referee, or storyteller

The term *game master* (GM) is fairly ubiquitous, referring to someone who has “mastered” the game. However, from our perspective, this term has cultural and gendered implications that render it inappropriate for use in the 21st century. Other terms -- like referee or storyteller -- are increasingly used to describe an individual or a

team of individuals who facilitate the diegetic action of the game, interpret rules where appropriate, and sometimes direct action by guiding players or NPCs. We have also seen terms like dungeon master, steward, janitor, caretaker, consultants, and story lead used, so the term may vary depending on your play culture. In this textbook, we will use the term storyteller to indicate this type of facilitator's direct impact on the narrative.

Whilst at a tabletop game, the storyteller sits on one side of the table, in larps, some storytellers sit in the organizer room, or a special location where they can direct narrative operations, others may be in the play area either diegetically or not. For example in some UK larps, referees wear high visibility clothes so they can be easily spotted and identified by players.

How an individual understands the position of storyteller and takes action accordingly derives largely from the design of the game and the norms of the play culture. In some larps, it is a matter of active *direction*, in which the storyteller makes specific events happen at designated times (Westerling and Hultman 2019). In other cases, the storytelling function is more a matter of supervising the game, intervening only when players stray too far from the intentions of the game or for logistical reasons.

ii) Non-player characters (NPC)

A *non-player character* (NPC) is a common feature of tabletop role-playing games where the gamemaster plays all of the characters not under the direct control of the players. For larps, NPCs are useful as plot devices, as functionaries of the game whose agency is curtailed by the organizers. They can be used to make a specific event happen at a specific time or in a predetermined way, or as “short term” characters who may only be present for a part of the larp. Some NPCs have no backstory, whereas others have stories that are highly complex. They may become long-standing fixtures of a game world, entering play when needed or playing consistently, such as an NPC monarch in a political game.

NPCs are a design feature which exists at the service of the larp, and whose existence and experience is secondary to those of the player characters. Notably, this notion has been challenged by scholars critical of this treatment of NPCs (Stenros 2013), especially as recipients of violent action (Torner 2015) or embodiments of the monstrous (Mitchell 2013, 2016). As Jaakko Stenros (2017) explains, “Non-player characters, even when inhabited by players, are less than human. They are props and toys for the player characters to do as they please.” That being said, the responsibilities of NPCs vary greatly from organization to organization.

iii) Supporting characters

Fido-Fairfax (2024) makes the distinction that a game can benefit from the presence of an upgraded NPC, perhaps ones with more complex personalities and agendas than many of such characters have. These characters are still embedded on behalf of the storytellers, but they have a bit more freedom. Where NPCs mostly serve the story,

supporting characters serve the player experience, e.g., bringing out the internal struggles in the player-characters (PCs), or drawing them deeper into the story: not for the story's sake, but for the characters'. Their interactions with the player-characters are paramount to their personal agendas.

Supporting characters are often used as a litmus paper for how the game is going and what aspects need to be tweaked during runtime. Those roles could be taken by players returning for the second time, for example, or whose character has died. Sometimes supporting characters are directed to involve participants who have ended up on the sidelines.

Note that the term supporting character is quite new in the discourse. Many communities still use NPC as the more common term.

iv) High responsibility player-characters

In some instances, the game needs something to happen and the organizers can make this action the responsibility of a player-character. For example, at the start of *Gothic* (Brind et al. 2023), Lord Byron's player is told, "Begin the larp by counting slowly from thirteen to one hundred and then lead the hunt in a game of Hide and Seek ..."

Other examples could be:

- "Make sure everyone goes to dinner at 8."
- "Make sure the enemy is allowed in the camp for the negotiation."
- "Your character must turn up for the wedding to the princess."

In some cases, these responsibilities also focus on what the player should avoid doing. For example:

- "Teach your magic class in a way that creates opportunities for further play, but never solve problems for the students" (see e.g., Koljonen 2016b).

These roles are sometimes known as *instructed* or *directed player-characters*. Other than these instructions, these characters have complete agency freedom. Note that in larger games, an entire group may bear these responsibilities rather than one character.

In some cases, you might want to brief the players to make sure something happens, rather than expect the characters to do the work here, especially if your plot hinges on it.

v) In-game safety team members

It can be very useful to have one or more safety members in play (Bowman et al. 2017). That way they are able to observe, to check-in on characters without necessarily breaking immersion, and can act as a litmus test for the larp. An example of this was The Chaplain at *The Quota* (2018). The role was played by one of the primary organising crew and he spent the larp in character and inside the detention centre living with the detainees. He played the role of The Chaplain, who was there to provide

spiritual support to the characters. He had an off-game function as the primary point of contact for players who had a problem. They could ask to speak to the Chaplain in private and they could close the door and go off-game. His primary function was to look after those players who were isolated, or who needed to speak to a safety team member. The in-game safety team members can bring someone to the off-game safety room when required.

Keep in mind that including such characters can have drawbacks. For example, if an NPC has been playing a role connected to a plot or otherwise bad experience that a participant is undergoing, then they may be reluctant to seek off-game help from that person. Such situations can blur the distinction between in-game and off-game in a way that may get in the way of providing the best support.

To return to the previous example, while the Chaplain in *The Quota* was being kind and sympathetic, by the nature of his role and of the larp setting, he was frustratingly unable to help with any in-game problems that the characters. Such instances can cause bleed-out, in which players may feel less trusting of the safety person due to in-game factors, and therefore less willing to approach them.

As a result of such critiques, some researcher-practitioners have developed a framework for ethical in-game safety team members based, in part, on professional counselling guidelines (Atwater and Rowland 2018).

c) Framing-related roles

Some facilitators are responsible for the framing, rather than the run-time game facilitation.

i) Workshop facilitator

Workshop facilitators are responsible for running one or more specific workshops, e.g., warm-ups, character creation, safety, etc. They may or may not be facilitators in other areas of the game. We will explore this role in more depth later in this chapter.

ii) Debrief facilitator

Debrief facilitators manage the debriefing of the game, which may be structured, semi-structured, or unstructured (see Chapter 2 of *TRGD* and this book). The facilitator may guide the process or be an integral part within it. See the section on debriefing later in this chapter for more information.

iii) Safety team member

Finally, having an off-game safety team member who understands the game can help with facilitation. Often, players come to the safety team not because they are in emotional crisis per se, but because they are overwhelmed by the content or unsure what direction to go with their character. What they need most is for an understanding person to listen, or even a quiet place to sit for a moment and regroup. They may also

want advice. If the safety team member has no knowledge of the game content, they might struggle with this type of task, in which case, asking another organizer for advice may be most appropriate. Either way, the primary goal in these situations is to help the player reengage with their character and the game rather than to spend prolonged periods of time processing emotional reactions.

If the player is in crisis, then your Internal Procedures document becomes important (see Chapter 5). Play may not be possible for them after that point. Your safety team members should work to develop their skillset to be able to discern the difference between crisis states versus relatively minor experiences of overwhelm or frustration.

d) Types of facilitation responsibilities

Academic study of runtime narrative facilitation has been emerging in the literature. In his study of tabletop RPG facilitators, Steven Dashiell (2022) applies Pierre Bourdieu's (1980) concept of *habitus* to refer to the ways in which storytellers will adopt specific habits of behavior and dispositions relevant to the social context from which they arise. Such habits are often influenced by norms within their overarching culture, play subculture, and/or ideas within the role-playing game discourses with which they are familiar (see Chapter 6 of *TRGD*).

However, while advice to storytellers is sometimes directly provided by experts, e.g., at conventions and conferences (Mandall 2013; Chatterjee et al. 2017; Johns et al. 2022), Dashiell explains that such habits are often learned implicitly, stating, "Habitus does not need to be explicitly taught through other actors, but it is most assuredly 'caught' implicitly via the socialization process" (2022, 5). Usually, such learning happens by watching others who have run the game, whether for the players directly, e.g., one's older sister running a *Shadowrun* (1989) campaign, or indirectly, e.g., watching facilitation on an Actual Play show such as *Critical Role* (Geek & Sundry, 2015-2018; Critical Role Productions, 2018-).

Dashiell (2022) identifies certain responsibilities of traditional tabletop facilitators, which we paraphrase as:

- **Supervisor:** Orchestrating the game, including providing direction, indicating the appropriateness of certain actions, and guiding players in the right direction;
- **Time manager:** Managing time based on emergent play in order to make the game convenient and enjoyable for players;
- **Conflict resolver:** Acting as a referee who has the final say when issues arise during gameplay, whether through the rules or own fiat (Dashiell 2022, 6-7).

Dashiell (2022) further describes several types of styles representing how the facilitator views their responsibility in the game and fiction:

- **Collaborator:** Taking control and guiding player-characters through the story through various means as a collaborative supervisor, avoiding forcing player-characters through one's personal fantasy (citing Fine 1983, 80);
- **Storyteller / Narrator:** Exerting agency over the story in a limited fashion, constrained by the narrative, players, and game rules;
- **Divinity:** Managing, bestowing, and limiting the affordances of the players and their subsequent agency to act in-game (Dashiell 2022, 7-9).

Similarly, work by William J. White, Nicholas LaLone, and Nicolas Mizer (2022) analyzes the ways in which facilitators in traditional tabletop RPGs are described in various fan discourse sites over time, identifying the following types:

- **Fan:** Facilitating moments of “playing to find out” by listening to the players, rather than following one's own plan;
- **Challenger:** Driving player-characters actions toward conflict or fateful choices;
- **Grown-up:** Setting scenes, refereeing, and developing the ongoing narrative fairly and engagingly;
- **Demiurge:** Preparing and presenting an elaborate world and scenario for player-characters to explore, including adversaries and challenges (White, LaLone, and Mizer (2022, 52-54).

However, facilitation may look very different depending on the game style. For example, in GM-less tabletop RPGs such as *Dream Askew* (Alder 2014), responsibility for these roles is distributed amongst the players (Stein 2021; Bisogno 2022). The players enact both their player-character, parts of the world, e.g., the Society Intact or Psychic Maelstrom, as well as key NPCs they invent within them. However, GM-less games still require at least one person to familiarize themselves with the rules, even if that person does not wield the same amount of authority as present in traditional games.

Furthermore, some games have little-to-no storytelling from facilitators, such as in larps where player-character action makes up the totality of the events that occur in an unmediated fashion. From a transformative game perspective, such games would still require off-game facilitators for safety and framing purposes.

In short, make sure to carefully consider how you view your role as a facilitator. We recommend aligning this view with the needs of your population and the specific game, then clearly communicating to your players aspects of their style that are relevant to their relative degree of agency.

4.2 Facilitation as a skill

Regardless of style, role-playing game facilitation is a skill that requires practice over time to develop. Some facilitators may begin the process having learned existing complementary skills, for example in theatre, pedagogy, therapeutic training, camp

counseling. Others may be new to leading groups completely. Regardless of previous training, facilitators should expect a learning curve when working with emergent narratives and spontaneous role-playing. For example, facilitators in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) have to develop the capacity to navigate the rules, the story, the actions of each player-character, and the subsequent responses by non player-characters in their heads at the same time. Adding teaching moments or therapeutic strategies on top of such tasks might cause cognitive overload for facilitators. To address these challenges, in some cases, additional facilitators are brought in with specific responsibilities, e.g., in a therapeutic tabletop role-playing game, sometimes one person handles the fiction, while the other handles the emotional processing.

Facilitation in transformative role-play links design intention to lived experience. The facilitator's role is to convert a written scenario, game concept, or co-created shared world into a supportive, purposeful arc that begins with clear framing, flows through responsive play, and lands in reflection that participants can use. This craft rests on three pillars:

1. **Ludic competence:** Ability to understand how systems and playstyles behave at the table or in the field;
2. **Interpersonal sensitivity:** Ability to read energy, tone, and boundaries; and
3. **Contextual awareness:** Ability to adapt and respond to what this group in this place needs right now.

Such skills are not easy to learn or to teach, but as with most skills requiring mastery. Instead of the old adage “practice makes perfect,” we believe that “practice makes competent.” Regardless of your level of skill or the complexity of the tasks required, be patient with yourself as you develop these capacities. Just like in role-playing itself, you may need to play the role of a competent facilitator for a while in these situations while your skillset develops.

The remainder of this section will mention a few skills we recommend developing as a facilitator.

a) Being a good host

At minimum, facilitators should aim to be a good host, ensuring that players have their basic needs met and attempting to help them feel safe enough to lower their vigilance and take chances. Facilitation is a job that involves paying attention to even the smallest details. A good host asks participants how they are feeling and adopts a positive and proactive attitude. They are friendly without being intrusive.

Ultimately, they must be able to read the room. They must know how to adapt their tone of voice, body language, and posture to the situation and the participants. Furthermore, they should present as relaxed and confident a demeanor as possible, even if they are anxious internally. Humans tend to unconsciously *attune* to one

another, meaning they will immediately sync up with you as their guide (Siegel 2007; Gottman 2011); they can sense if their leader is unsure of their capabilities, which may cause them to feel anxious as well (Pettersson 2024). In other cases, such as mandatory settings, they may resist attunement, and read your anxiety as weakness, becoming disruptive to test boundaries. Similarly, try to be as organized as possible when they arrive. If you are distracted, they will likely distract themselves as well, or feel increasingly awkward.

On the other hand, a good facilitator has strategies for reestablishing attunement and attention to the task at hand, which we will explore in later sections. Such practices may be verbal, like using an elevated calm or excited voice to focus the activity, or nonverbal, such as eye contact, purposeful movements, and a relaxed body posture. Reassuring the players that the only way to fail is not to engage at all can be effective, even if, in reality, your scenario may fail in a number of ways if players go rogue. The important part is helping them feel safe enough to engage.

We will discuss attunement and synchrony in more detail in Chapter 6.

b) Facilitation and power

Recent research emphasizes how facilitators -- and to some degree, other players -- can help meet deeper psychological needs of players provided they provide: compelling versus un compelling game worlds; character engagement vs. disengagement, supporting vs. restricting player agency, fair vs. unfair adjudication, and social cohesion vs. conflict (McLaren, Oades, and Derry 2026).

Accordingly, it is critical to accept the fact that facilitators are in a position of power over participants. Being a good host means not abusing that power, e.g., by enforcing non-consensual scenes on players, taking control of their character, railroading them into certain plot trajectories. In other words, avoid situations in which you are using your power to remove their agency without clear negotiation. For example, if playing a horror game in which players know at some point their character may get “taken over” by the facilitator, the loss of agency might be experienced as exciting. In other situations, that outcome without transparency might feel violating (Bowman 2013; Torner 2013; Dashiell 2022; Femia 2025). Similarly, forcing player-characters to follow a pre-established story with a fixed outcome may be considered *railroading* and overly limiting in some play cultures, whereas in others, perhaps *fate play* is more normative, with fixed moments that are known beforehand by the players (Fatland 2000, 2014).

Whatever the norms of the group, responsible facilitators understand they usually are in a higher power position than their players during the game itself. In some cases, the social dynamics are very different off-game and the facilitator does not perceive themselves to be the high-power person, e.g., running a larp for one’s boss, being from a historically marginalized background. However, during the game, players must trust the facilitator to guide them through a process that may feel scary or anxiety-inducing. This dynamic is especially strong in long-running campaigns in which players invest in

one character over several sessions, or emotionally intense scenarios in which players are expected to engage vulnerably.

Power is not inherently bad and is part of most, if not all, social interactions in some way. When we think about power, we usually think of abuse, for example exerting *power over* others in inappropriate or harmful ways (Hunjan and Keophilavong 2010). Neglect can also be an issue related to power, i.e., if someone has the power to meet someone's needs but makes themselves unavailable. Favoritism is another common issue with regard to power: the perception that some people are receiving benefits the others are not. Unwanted flirting or sexual advances can also lead to a climate of abuse. All of these situations can happen in role-playing game facilitation, whether in-game or off-game, and sometimes can be brushed off due to the process being “just a game,” in the same way players may engage in in-game bullying and feel protected by the alibi of the game. Such dynamics can lead to social conflict, toxicity, and even irreparable schisms within the gaming group (Bowman 2013).

Notably, power over can be a pleasurable and mutually consensual activity, e.g., in the *Dungeons & Dragons* OSR community, which often features high-risk in-game scenarios that are commonly lethal to characters and strong storyteller control. However, such dynamics should be negotiated and calibrated as needed throughout the process. If a group decides to play in a *hardcore* style (Bowman 2017), then such negotiations may be more implicit and explicitly negotiated, but the risk is higher. Without a sufficient perception of psychological safety, such play might negatively impact the participants, which as we have discussed before is necessary to establish and maintain in transformative play (see Chapter 5 *TRGD*).

We recommend facilitators practice other types of power in addition to consensual power over. *Power with* involves acting together with participants to create a satisfying outcome (Follett 1940; Pansardi and Bindi 2021), e.g., offering suggestions of what characters might do in a scenario, reminding them of information they had before to solve a mystery, creating scenes that help them practice skills in self-advocacy. *Power to* involves a high-power person acting on behalf of a lower-power person (Pansardi and Bindi 2021). For example, a mental health professional facilitator might use a safety mechanic like the X-Card (Stavropoulos 2013) to remove content that they know another player is uncomfortable enacting, especially if that person may find it socially risky to self-advocate. On the other hand, in some cases, such self-advocacy may be a stated goal, in which case the facilitator may use their power to create narrative situations in which that skill can be practiced. In this case, the facilitator is using *power-to* to create conditions for *power within* to emerge in the player: an experience of personal empowerment (see e.g., Cazeneuve 2021). Power-to can also be important in off-game situations, e.g., advocating for specific members of the group to people in positions of influence, using institutional connections to get a location in which players will feel more comfortable. Similarly, the development of power within (Hunjan and Keophilavong 2010) can transfer off-game given the right conditions and integration practices.

Power in gaming communities is especially complex when considering intersectional identities. A transgendered woman of color running a game might not feel like her authority carries as much weight as a White cis-man's might, especially if consistently challenged by players, e.g., through game-splaining or rules lawyering, in which players attempt to assert their superiority based on their knowledge of the game (Dashiell 2017, 2020; Hilman, Hirst, Flanagan, and Leonard 2025; Tremblay 2025). Ultimately, it is critically important that facilitators reflect on their power and how their actions might be perceived by their players, as well as ways in which they could use support from players to bolster their authority in service of empowerment for everyone involved. For more on power, see Chapter 6 of *TRGD* and Hammer, Beltrán, Walton, and Turkington (2018).

c) Driving the narrative

Facilitator-heavy games often require storytellers to drive the narrative through various tactics, including creating story arcs, signposting for players what actions to take next, providing or enacting NPCs to enhance the experience. Many techniques can be used for this purpose. As mentioned before, some games follow a fixed story in which little or nothing will change (*railroad*), some have specific predefined moments (*fateplay*; Fatland 2000, 2013), and others that involve a series of events that are only triggered if the participants set them in motion. There are also countless middle grounds, such as multiple endings or more or less elaborate narrative branches in which the players' agency is not entirely free but not entirely controlled either. Whatever the style, the storyteller should be transparent with players about what sort of experience to expect, ideally when they sign up (Koljonen 2016a).

d) Negotiating rules

Depending on the game, facilitators may also need to help players negotiate the rules, for example, what is possible in this storyworld or the game mechanics involved. Often, rules in larps are used to reproduce situations that would not be possible or desirable to perform in practice, e.g., *representational mechanics*. In the case of tabletop role-playing games, through narration, it is possible to describe situations that defy, for example, the laws of physics. For example, *Mage: the Ascension* (Wieck et al. 1993) has complex representational mechanics not only for ways that mages can counter the rules of "consensus reality," e.g., using telekinesis to fly or creating fireballs with one's mind, but also for the mechanisms behind such feats, e.g., how powerful one's magical potency is, how reality reacts to such visible breaches, etc. Similarly, larps may feature suitable rules or meta-techniques. The latter should be explained in the preparatory materials and, where possible, tested in pre-event workshops.

Notably, some games with representational mechanics do not require a facilitator to negotiate rules, e.g., wizard school larps such as *College of Wizardry* (2014-) that rely on consent-based play in which players decide how a spell affects their character. Other games focus on a What You See Is What You Get (WYSIWYG) aesthetic, such

as many games in the Nordic larp and adjacent traditions, which requires players to physically perform the actions of their characters without representational mechanics (Wieslander 2004). In such situations, the facilitator does not need to negotiate rules during runtime, but likely will still need to workshop these techniques before the game. An example is running a workshop for players to learn how to engage in physical combat more safely or with less force.

e) Maintaining engagement

A core responsibility is maintaining engagement. Role-playing can be mentally and emotionally taxing, so providing conditions for keeping players focused is important. An example is having clear briefings. If players know who their characters are and what they want, they will find it easier to get into the game. Also, it is important for facilitators to pace the game, alternating intense moments with breaks, because continuous tension can burn out players' energy. The engagement can sometimes be stronger when rooted in the emotional involvement and related to the event's core themes, although sometimes moments of intense catharsis can happen when both player and character are exhausted, e.g., *bleed-out* (Montola 2010; Leonard and Thurman 2018; Hugaas 2019).

f) Pivoting and responding to emergence

As role-playing is spontaneous co-creation, sometimes, storytellers need to pivot and respond to emergent play in particular ways; it is impossible to predict reliably how players will react in any given design. A common phrase among facilitators in role-playing game communities is, "No plot survives contact with the players." For example, emergent play may create a *domino effect* (Bowman 2018) in which a piece of fiction introduced by the players or an unforeseen action taken by the players can derail the intended direction for the story (Torner 2018). On the other hand, games that are heavily plotted with limited chances for players to contribute can sometimes lead to conflicts between facilitators and players (Bowman 2013).

Therefore, facilitators should assess the needs of the scenario in terms of the degree of structure and its tolerance for emergent play. Some educational scenarios, for example, may need to remain highly structured in order to ensure learning objectives are achieved or all players are exposed to certain learning content. Responding to emergence is part of the beauty but also the challenge of role-playing: a skill that facilitators will likely need to practice throughout their life.

g) Establishing and maintaining psychological safety

Finally, facilitators should develop the ability to establish and maintain an adequate perception of safety, including feelings of inclusion. While this task is not always easy, it is required for players to continue to engage in a satisfying way. Recent research has demonstrated a correlation between good facilitation, psychological safety, group

cohesion, and creativity (Lasley and Ruiz Ezquerro 2026), with clarity and support indicated as important components. Alternatively, another study analyzes accounts of “nightmare” facilitation horror stories, e.g., featuring non-consensual play dynamics (Femia 2026).

A basic strategy for establishing safety is discussing safety during the pre-game workshop or Session 0, e.g., presenting players with the *Consent in Gaming* checklist (Reynolds and Germain 2019). Some examples include reminders that RPGs can sometimes be surprisingly intense; the introduction and modeling of safety mechanics; instructions for what to do if a player is feeling overwhelmed; and assurances that players can opt-out at any time. Some games also feature trust-building exercises before the game, but be aware that practices that might engender trust for some players might lead others to become more vigilant, e.g., workshops with hugging or prolonged eye contact. Certain practices may also be difficult for participants to perform, e.g., due to aspects of neurodiversity. For example, some players might enjoy a warm-up exercise in which their characters are expected to walk around and mingle with other characters, whereas for others, such a loose structure might provoke anxiety. Therefore, facilitators should carefully consider the needs of their target group and recognize that sometimes conflicting needs may be present within the same group (Stavropoulos 2022).

Safety is also important to maintain or reestablish if a rupture has occurred. Players may experience an emotional activation that makes engagement suddenly difficult (Brown 2014); experience off-game offense at a comment made or at a stereotypical character portrayal (Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021); or simply be tired, hungry, or otherwise overwhelmed. Under such conditions, one’s perception of safety may become diminished. Safety mechanics can help in this situation, as can calibration, e.g., players discussing how play might be adjusted.

Sometimes, these situations can be addressed quickly in the moment and safety can be reestablished, whereas other times, more lengthy interventions are needed. Facilitators should consider strategies ahead of time to adapt to changing situations and create conditions for players to be able to engage again, e.g., breaking the game to host impromptu small or large group calibration sessions (see e.g., at *Immerton*, Brown et al. 2018). Assigning support responsibilities to another facilitator who is not responsible for the game fiction is often a helpful strategy.

Ultimately, while safety is challenging, even discussing safety or letting players know care is available may help players perceive themselves to be safer (Pedersen 2015). However, these resources must remain available throughout play; it is not enough to simply call the game a “safer space,” and players may feel betrayed if care was not provided when promised. Therefore, the maintenance of safety throughout the process is an important component of facilitation, one that is not often discussed in traditional advice to organizers, but is becoming more prevalent (see e.g., Spencer 2025, 2026).

Related to this topic, facilitators should set expectations about what they will and will not provide in terms of support during play and communicate these boundaries clearly, as we will explore in more depth in the section below on interactions with players.

We will discuss psychological safety in more depth in Chapter 5.

h) Steering play toward transformative impacts

When considering larps as a transformational container (Baird and Bowman 2022), another important aspect of facilitation is helping guide play toward the intended goals, e.g., the development of specific prosocial skills. In this case, make sure the organizers are all on the same page. Transformative role-playing is a specific style that focuses on catalyzing processes of change in the participants. While leisure games can also be transformative, many facilitators from leisure games are not accustomed to, for example, considering learning objectives throughout their implementation practices.

When it comes to organising a transformative larp, the organizer's communication skills are crucial at every stage of the process. Even before the game begins, it is important to establish a relationship based on clarity and transparency (Torner 2013): participants need to know exactly what the objectives of the experience are, what sensitive issues will be addressed, what safety rules will be applied, and how the logistics will work (Koljonen 2016a). This does not just mean providing information, but doing so in accessible and inclusive language, avoiding overly technical jargon or references that may create distance. Listening is also very important at this initial stage: gathering any doubts, fears or needs that players may have, and showing willingness and openness. Trust can arise from a reassuring, professional and attentive tone that communicates that everyone will be welcomed and supported.

During the larp, communication takes on a different, more subtle, and calibrated character. The organizer or facilitator must be able to read the playing field: observe verbal and non-verbal cues, picking up on tensions, energy, and the needs of the group. When they intervene, they should consider doing so with restraint, but with the necessary readiness to re-establish boundaries or safety if something requires it. This is where active empathy comes into play: recognising participants' emotions and validating them without judgement, offering immediate and constructive feedback that can help keep the experience fluid and engaging. At the same time, the facilitator must maintain a position of narrative neutrality: their voice does not judge or take sides, but helps to clearly distinguish what belongs to the game world from what concerns the safety framework.

After the larp has ended, it is time for the delicate debriefing and follow-up. Here, the priority is to provide a space for deep listening, where participants can speak without feeling interrupted or belittled. The organizer must acknowledge and normalise the emotions that have emerged, making it clear that any reaction is legitimate. The closing should be positive and focused on synthesis, helping to

transform the experience into learning and awareness, and linking what has been experienced to the objectives of the larp. It is equally important to maintain continuity, offering channels of contact even after the event for those who wish to further process what they have experienced.

In all these stages, we find certain cross-cutting communication skills that make all the difference:

- **Active listening**, consisting of paraphrasing, asking clarifying questions and showing signs of presence;
- **Conscious management of silence**, which allows space to be given without the rush to fill it;
- **Empathy**, which comes across as much through words as through tone of voice, posture and gaze;
- **The use of inclusive language** that respects differences and is careful not to reproduce stereotypes;
- **The ability to mirror and guide**, i.e. the sensitivity to tune in to the group and then steer it in the desired direction; and
- **Clarity and the ability to set boundaries** without ambiguity, and being ready to intervene firmly if someone oversteps them.

All of these strategies also require good communication skills.

i) Inclusive facilitation

Role-playing communities have developed specific techniques that facilitators can use in order to promote engagement or enhance the narrative in an inclusive manner. For example, players have different learning preferences. As Olivia Fischer (2022) explains, you may wish to send information you will cover in the workshop in advance, such as in videos or written text so players can study it ahead of time at their own pace. She recommends using simple language and presenting your material in an organized manner, as well as allowing them to practice key mechanics multiple times in the workshop rather than just once. Fischer (2022) also recommends using the same safety mechanics from game to game whenever possible to make them more accessible rather than inventing new ones for each game.

Furthermore, some players may feel less able to engage than others, e.g., due to differences in social status (Algayres 2019a), social anxiety (Algayres 2019b) shyness, or previous experiences of marginalization, such as internalized oppression (see e.g., Kemper 2018). While facilitators cannot solve the social dynamics of underlying privilege and marginalization in broader society, they can utilize specific practices that aim for greater inclusion. For example, the *monologuing* meta-technique allows for players to express briefly their character's inner thoughts in a scene (Boss and Holter 2013); the characters cannot hear these thoughts, but the players and facilitators can,

which can help them *steer play* (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015) in dramatically interesting directions after the monologue completes. A facilitator may pause the scene and use this technique to provide alibi for quieter players to express themselves, or empower the players to use it themselves, e.g., in more hands-off facilitation scenarios.

4.3 Facilitation in applied contexts

In this section, we will introduce general considerations for facilitation in different applied contexts, specifically in therapeutic, educational, organizational, and community-focused interventions. We expand with more concrete advice for educational, therapeutic, and train-the-trainer role-playing later in this chapter.

a) Therapeutic facilitation

Therapeutic facilitation involves mental health professionals or paraprofessionals running role-playing games as part of a more extensive therapeutic process. Professionals in this case might be psychotherapists, counselors, coaches, psychodramatists, social workers, etc. Paraprofessionals might be psychologists or crisis managers without clinical training. Alternatively, they could be RPG facilitators who are not mental health practitioners but are working toward mental health goals. In the latter cases, they should likely work in concert with a trained mental health professional, otherwise the practice is more accurately described as transformative leisure.

Furthermore, therapeutic facilitation involves a client relationship with the practitioner, usually one that is contractually bound. In practical terms, this relationship means high expectations of emotional care over a prolonged period of time, which could be a certain fixed number of sessions or continuous sessions without a set end date.

Such emotional care is not always possible during the game itself, especially if facilitation requires other cognitive resources such as storytelling and rules adjudication. For this reason, the responsibilities of the game facilitator are sometimes separate from therapeutic processing. For example, a game facilitator might run a session focused on social skill development or building friendships, then a mental health professional processes with the group or 1:1 with individual clients in a separate session. That person can then give feedback to the game facilitator on how to proceed in the next session.

Alternatively, two mental health professionals may run a game together; one can then focus on telling an engaging story based on themes relevant to the therapeutic goals and responding to character actions, while the other is tracking the skills practiced by the clients or their emotional responses to the experience. The latter professional might interrupt play, for example to process the emotional content at the table. Unlike in leisure spaces, such interruptions are often considered acceptable rather than frustrating for players, as they all understand they are engaging in a therapeutic process first and foremost.

Important to this process is a shared understanding of therapeutic goals and themes explored between client and facilitator. Facilitators need to be made aware of any potential sensitivities or behavioral tendencies of the client and be skilled enough to work with or around these aspects during play. When playing with sensitive content, facilitators need to be able to modulate intensity or completely back away from certain content if the client is showing signs of overwhelm, activation, or trigger. While sometimes, the client may be able to navigate these states in play in a productive and even transformative way, crossing the line of “too much” can also mean a potentially dysregulating or humiliating experience for the client. For example, while role-play can be a form of *exposure therapy*, e.g., to help a client work through their fear of being outside through outdoor-related play (Cohen 2023), or arachnophobia by including spider-related content, clients must consent to this process and the facilitator must be able to adjust in real-time to the client’s needs. Therapeutic facilitation requires a high level of attunement and empathy for others.

Similarly, facilitators may want to avoid certain content completely if it might cause the client to feel overly exposed based on their past experiences or psychological difficulties. It might be tempting for a facilitator to introduce metaphorical content related to the client’s challenges, such as a surprise encounter with giant spiders, but doing so without transparency and consent might result in a loss of trust, or a breakdown in the process completely.

Some key concepts relevant to facilitation skills in therapeutic interventions are:

- **Therapeutic climate:** The container fostered by the facilitator should follow basic principles in e.g., person-centred therapy, such as empathy, unconditional positive regard for clients, and authenticity rather than manipulation or duplicity.
- **Communication skills:** As mentioned earlier, facilitators should cultivate the ability to communicate in a way that puts clients at ease, e.g., techniques such as the use of “I-statements” to focus on one’s own feelings and thoughts rather than judging the actions or assuming intentions from others (Ohio Commission on Dispute Resolution and Conflict Management 2000). Such techniques are sometimes called *nonverbal communication* (NVC; Rosenberg 2015).
- **Active and reflective listening:** *Active listening* involves making clear to the other person that one is fully engaged and responsive to their actions, e.g., eye contact, nodding, making affirmative sounds with one’s voice. *Reflective listening* involves asking follow-up questions that *mirror* what the person has said and prompt further reflection, e.g., “I heard you say you felt anxious during that scene. Could you tell us more about what prompted your anxiety?” Note that some of these techniques, such as eye contact, might cause specific clients discomfort, so adjust according to the needs of your clientele.

- **Counseling skills:** Other skills specific to the counseling profession are also important here, including reflection of feelings, focusing, summarizing, cultural competences, nonverbal communication, self-monitoring, etc.
- **Group processes and dynamics:** Understanding how to work within a group is also important, as groups have their own growth trajectory and dynamics. See Chapter 3 of *TRGD* for more information.
- **Specific techniques according to modality or approach:** Mental health professionals are often trained in a particular modality, such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or Internal Family Systems (IFS), which has specific techniques associated with it. These techniques can be employed, e.g., during the game, such as running players through a script to practice communicating about their feelings, or after the game, e.g., in 1:1 sessions, practicing what they would have said to the person if they could try again. Techniques can also be embedded in the game content itself in a more symbolic or narrative way (see e.g., Bartenstein 2022).

Note that many of these skills can be useful for any facilitator to learn regardless of context and are not only accessible through therapeutic training.

For more on considerations regarding running therapeutic role-playing games, see Chapter 2 and later sections in this chapter.

b) Educational facilitation

When facilitating educational games, facilitation starts before the event itself: you need to provide players with enough information beforehand and give them time to prepare, especially if subject matter will be revisited during the game (Mochocki 2013). Equally important is workshops before the game starts to discuss rules and safety mechanics, even if the information has been shared previously. During the runtime, facilitators have a demanding role: keeping the group engaged, monitoring safety needs, but also gently steering the game towards the learning objectives if necessary. At times, you may need to improvise and adapt to the group, so it is highly recommended that you are strongly familiar with the game and educational materials. Educational facilitation in role-play contexts focuses on designing learning environments that align clear pedagogical outcomes with engaging, experiential structures. Therefore, the debrief should focus on consolidating the knowledge and connecting the in-game experience with the educational goal(s).

The primary challenge in these settings often stems from institutional constraints rather than from learners themselves. Schools and educational programs are bound by expectations of curricular alignment, assessment, and measurable progress. Within such frameworks, play can easily be dismissed as a distraction or an unproductive deviation from instruction. For this reason, the facilitator must learn how to translate the role-play experience into the language of education (Westborg 2026b). When proposing an activity to educational authorities or colleagues, it is essential to specify

what learners will gain at four levels: the content knowledge addressed; the practices and behaviors rehearsed; the overarching skills developed through play; and the values embedded in the design. This framing brings transparency to the process and situates play not as an alternative to learning, but as a legitimate method to achieve it.

Within the classroom or other learning environments, scale becomes a practical concern. As discussed in Chapter 2, role-play, especially tabletop or small group freeform scenarios, can require a high facilitator-to-student ratio. To maintain engagement without overextending resources, it is advisable to plan for distributed facilitation, either amongst your colleagues or the players themselves. Selected participants can be assigned supporting roles, functioning as peer storytellers or co-facilitators. This strategy not only sustains the dynamics of play but also converts facilitation itself into a learning opportunity, reinforcing agency, leadership, and collaborative responsibility.

Another crucial dimension of educational role-play is evaluation of the process. Assessing whether learning has occurred requires more than grading participation. Facilitators can embed incremental challenges within the scenario to trace progression in cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions. Succeeding in situations of increased difficulty, complex collaboration, or ethical dilemmas can serve as markers of growth.

Observation and systematic recording of interactions can provide further evidence of development, although keep in mind that taking such notes may inhibit players if sufficient trust is not built first. With observation, the facilitator's attention to decision-making, communication patterns, and problem-solving behaviors becomes the form of formative assessment. Furthermore, the debrief must explicitly connect the experience to curricular content, guiding students to articulate what they learned and how it applies to other contexts. Reflection through discussion allows learners to co-construct meaning rather than being told what the lesson was. Post-game journaling can also be effective, especially for learners who feel less comfortable speaking in group settings.

As discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, time management remains a recurrent limitation. Workshopping, play, and debriefing must all fit within predefined sessions. While it may be tempting to shorten reflection to accommodate the game play, doing so undermines learning transfer. The most effective designs treat workshopping and debriefing as part of the pedagogical arc, not as appendices to it.

Age and developmental stages also shape facilitation choices. With children aged 6-12, absorption into fiction and imagination is often easier than for adults, yet self-regulation and sustained attention are still developing. Younger people also tend to struggle to maintain immersion into a character. Turn-taking systems can help maintain inclusion and support social growth.

As learners approach adolescence, engagement often depends on agency: the sense that their choices matter. One strategy is to provide role-playing experiences at this stage that allow for decision-making that visibly alters the narrative, reinforcing

autonomy and accountability. Identity exploration is also central: adolescents are still developing their sense of self (Erikson 1968) and frequently experiment with aspects of self in characters. Respecting and validating these explorations can be crucial for psychological safety and trust. At the same time, facilitators should anticipate exploratory or transgressive behaviors around taboo topics such as sexuality, violence, and power. Clear boundaries, established safety tools, and cultural sensitivity can help negotiate these moments, ideally without shaming or censoring curiosity. Alternatively, you may want to establish boundaries before the game around sensitive topics if they are not appropriate in the setting, e.g., through an X-card (Stavropoulos 2013) or a line (Edwards 2003).

Working with young adults and more mature people can be both easier and more complex. When participants approach the activity with openness, learning tends to unfold naturally through collective reflection. However, disengagement is common in formal settings where participation feels imposed or is indeed mandatory. In such cases, offering alternative roles outside the main action can help preserve inclusion in the group activity. For example, you could assign reluctant players with observer roles and provide them with ethnographic observation sheets, allowing them to analyze group dynamics, keeping them connected to the learning process without forcing a sense of performance. Often, these observers later choose to join the play once they feel psychologically safe. You may also offer them alternative educational assignments away from the play if their presence will be too disruptive.

Educational role-play succeeds when its structure makes learning visible and participatory at every level: in content, in behaviors practiced, in skills demonstrated, and in values explored. The facilitator's role is to weave these layers together into a coherent cycle of experience and reflection.

i) Teaching skills and facilitation

Teachers are usually fairly skilled at facilitation. Some struggle more depending on their teaching style. If a teacher is used to having students' main focus on them, it is harder to let go of control. Status can also become an obstacle; if a teacher is accustomed to running a strictly hierarchical classroom, then it can be complicated all of a sudden to step down and even out the level of power. Here, it is important to show how alibi such as shifting power roles can help with learning.

Teachers can often be in a storyteller position themselves, attempting to run games on their own. However, some teachers feel they lack the skillset or confidence and may bring in a third party to run the game. In these situations, we recommend that the teachers still participate and do not stay on the sidelines, as observation by the teacher can make the student feel self-conscious and judged. To help ease teachers with the change in hierarchy, it also can be helpful to ask them to play an NPC that is somewhat high status, but focused on a specific task, ostensibly diverting their attention from the students. Another way for teachers to be able to use their facilitation skills is to let them play the other extreme -- someone who needs help and cannot solve anything -- and then have the participants solve the problem for them.

For additional considerations regarding educational role-playing game facilitation, see Chapter 2 and later sections in this chapter.

c) Organizational facilitation

Sometimes, the intervention is focused less on individual goals and more on group dynamics, as is the case when facilitating for specific organizations, e.g., corporations, governmental offices, or other workplaces. When role-play is introduced in organizational contexts, the most decisive factor is not necessarily the sophistication of the design, but rather the atmosphere created around it. Many participants attend these sessions not by choice but by institutional mandate, carrying a certain resistance, skepticism, or fatigue from conventional training. The term *team building exercise* might have a bad connotation of forced awkward activities with colleagues. This reality makes the facilitator's first task psychological rather than logistical: to build trust and transform a mandatory activity into a meaningful experience. The key lies in creating a situation that feels safe enough to experiment, yet substantial enough to matter.

Two cases developed by one of the authors of this chapter, Felipe García-Soriano, serve as examples of how role-playing can be structured to generate meaningful learning within organizational environments. In some cases, small groups of 4-8 participants are reframed as a collective unit -- a "team of adventurers" -- who must navigate a fictional environment that symbolically reflects their organizational reality. By embedding real tensions such as communication failures, gaps in empathy, or leadership dilemmas into narrative quests, participants engage with issues they recognize without the defensive posture that a direct critique might trigger in corporate environments. Fictional distance functions as a protective layer that enables authenticity. Within the game world, hierarchy loosens, and participants can express more genuine behaviors that reveal how coordination and trust can actually occur in their daily work.

In other contexts, the environment of play is intentionally designed to feel more realistic and immediate, e.g., by confronting teams with crisis situations, uncertainty, or limited resources. Instead of offering safety through metaphor, these interventions use structured stress to expose habitual responses under pressure. The goal is not to replicate the workplace literally, but to simulate the systemic dynamics between its units, e.g., fragmented communication, competing goals, and/or the tension between individual autonomy and collective responsibility. These high-pressure scenarios surface behavioral patterns that usually remain invisible in ordinary meetings, such as hesitation, dominance, withdrawal, or improvisation; these moments then become shared material for reflection after the game.

In both approaches, the reflective phase determines the depth of learning. Debrief facilitators guide the group through a process of reconstructing meaning together rather than evaluating their performance. The conversation focuses on what was experienced, such as moments of clarity, disconnection, or alignment. Specific questions help participants articulate their insights in their own words, such as

“When did we act as a team?” or “What made us hesitate?” The objective is to convert emotional experience into understanding, which is in turn transformed into collective awareness. Without the reflection process, play remains more like entertainment. On the other hand, without play, reflection often lacks the emotional resonance and relatability that anchors learning.

Several practical recommendations have emerged from these experiences. First, avoid replicating the workplace too closely. Excess realism tends to provoke anxiety or strategic behavior rather than experimentation. Similar to classroom dynamics, replicating existing hierarchies might inhibit lower power participants in the organization. In some cases, you may wish to group people who are not involved in the same direct organizational structure to further loosen these dynamics.

Second, do not model overacting and theatricality, as these tendencies might dilute the focus on interaction and systems thinking. Third, maintain clarity about purpose: participants must know that their performance is not being tested, but rather you are inviting them to explore. Finally, as with all other forms of transformative play, never skip the debriefing phase, even under time pressure. The value of experiential learning depends on reflection after the experience that connects symbolic events to clear takeaways and concrete practices moving forward.

When facilitated with care, organizational role-play can become a rehearsal for complexity. It allows participants to experience coordination, decision-making, and ethical tension as lived processes rather than abstract competencies. The temporary world of play thus becomes a mirror: one that reflects how an organization learns, adapts, and sustains itself when the rules are uncertain and the outcome is still unfolding.

For examples of role-playing games designed or adapted for organizational purposes such as leadership, see Branc (2018); Lasley (2020); Mercer, Harris, and Swab (2021); Jensen (2021); Hartyándi and van Bilsen (2024); and van Bilsen and van Barlingen (2025).

d) Community-focused facilitation

Community-based facilitation also focuses on interactions within a group, with the emphasis on creating shared meaning and long-term engagement among diverse stakeholders. While issues with logistics can occur, the main challenge is relational. Community projects often begin in contexts marked by distance, distrust, or uneven commitment among participants. Some attend out of personal interest, others because their institution requires a presence, and others still to defend or promote an ideological position. In such circumstances, the first goal is not immediate collaboration but the construction of a minimal sense of common purpose. Without a clear shared objective, even the most creative participatory method collapses into parallel monologues.

The facilitator's task is to create a temporary space where participants can imagine themselves as part of a collective project. Establishing this shared purpose requires two foundations: clarity and inclusion. Clarity ensures that everyone understands the goal to be pursued together, while inclusion ensures that every participant, regardless of background or agenda, can see themselves reflected in the process. Inclusive mechanisms can help reduce the distance between sectors that rarely collaborate on equal terms, such as civil society groups, public administrations, and private actors. Examples include open framing sessions, co-designed characters, or flexible participation rules.

When designing role-play experiences for community building purposes, we recommend considering diversity not as a problem to solve but as material to work with. Participants may include older adults who view play as childish, highly politicized individuals who attempt to steer the activity toward their agenda, and representatives of institutions more concerned with image than participation. Rather than confronting these differences directly, effective facilitation transforms them into a creative tension within the fictional frame. The game experience can then become a rehearsal for collaboration under disagreement.

One approach that has proven effective for García-Soriano is to use speculative or dystopian future scenarios that require collective decision-making. Placing participants in an imagined community facing a shared threat encourages them to act together in the game world before they are asked to collaborate in reality. Examples include a resource crisis, environmental collapse, or social fragmentation. Once trust and community bonds begin to emerge within the fiction, the roles can gradually blend with real stakeholder identities. At this stage, participants are often invited to co-design representative characters that symbolize sectors of their community rather than specific individuals. Through these roles, they can articulate shared interests and tensions from a position of creative distance. The process culminates in a collective task, such as developing a joint project or proposal for an issue they all recognize as relevant, but still within the safety of a fictional setting.

This approach avoids direct confrontation while still allowing structural conflicts and power asymmetries to surface. It also transforms abstract ideals into lived decisions, such as sustainability, inclusion, and participation. Through their characters, participants negotiate, make compromises, and recognize their mutual dependencies through play, often with greater honesty than they would in formal dialogue off-game.

When running community-based games, do not expect immediate consensus. The aim is not agreement but contact. We recommend not attempting to eliminate conflict, and instead structuring it so that it becomes productive. Avoid treating dissent as failure, and instead view it as evidence that participants are invested enough to care. The facilitator must hold the tension between openness and direction, allowing co-creation without losing sight of the collective goal.

Ultimately, role-play for community building works best when it positions fiction as a neutral ground for collaboration. Role-playing games allow people who normally meet through institutional roles or opposing worldviews to act together, take risks, and imagine possibilities beyond the limits of their current realities. In that shared imaginative space, commitment begins to shift from symbolic participation to genuine co-ownership of the community they are building.

For more on co-creating with participants, see Chapter 2 and 3.

e) Knowing when to outsource or refer

In some cases, you may not have the competencies needed to process an experience with a student or client. For example, if you are a trained tabletop facilitator and have only basic crisis management training, you will likely not be able to help a client process complex trauma for extended periods of time. It also might be unethical for you to try without sufficient training as a mental health professional. In this case, you might work closely with a client's existing therapist to make sure your work is a proper adjunctive treatment. Similarly, as another example, if you are hired to run an educational larp on concepts in physics, you may have the subject matter knowledge to address these topics in a basic manner through play, but may not be able to explain complex concepts to students with any measure of specificity or accuracy.

Knowing when to outsource certain parts of the transformative process or refer participants to a professional with the relevant skillset can be important. Similarly, we recommend clearly communicating your limitations with your group regarding what support you can and cannot offer.

4.4 Facilitation phases and guidelines

a) Workshops

Workshop facilitators are responsible for running the preparatory workshops, which can have many purposes. The term workshop can be used to refer to a singular exercise, or the sum total of all workshops before a game (Hernø 2025). Workshop facilitators may also be responsible for designing these activities ahead of time. If the game is intended to be published, they are usually the ones taking notes for iteration that should be incorporated in the next run of the game and/or the published instructions.

We recommend that workshops be made mandatory to take part in the game, as they help onboard the players and sometimes are crucial for character development, relationships, and group cohesion. Indeed, Fischer (2022) describes workshops as critical to learning in edu-larps, identifying four categories of *prerequisites* that might be necessary for successful play. As in education, when a certain course is a prerequisite to take a more advanced one, we can consider workshops to contain prerequisite learning for playing the game. We have generalized Fischer's (2022) categories as:

- **Emotional prerequisites:** Workshops that help your players start the larp in a good emotional space, e.g., feeling safe and brave.
- **Game flow prerequisites:** Techniques, mechanics, and other tools to help players manage their way through your game, e.g., calibration tools, techniques to help them *steer* toward optimal play (see e.g., Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015; Pohjola 2015);
- **Portrayal prerequisites:** Workshops that help players bring your world and the characters within it to life, e.g., to portray their own character well or support others in their portrayal;
- **Kick-off prerequisites:** Exercises that help players get into character (Fischer 2022).

For example, if players miss a workshop, they may not know how to use a key mechanic or may misunderstand a safety technique when used in play. Similarly, if you have multiple workshop facilitators, we recommend training them on the script ahead of time to help ensure instructions are given similarly in each group.

Mo Holkar (2015) describes several workshop activities according to their purposes. This section is largely based on his framework.

i) Briefing and group formation exercises

Chronologically speaking, the first exercises in the block should focus on the player experience, e.g., off-game information *briefings* and group formation exercises. The functional categories for player-focused workshops include:

- **Location tour:** Showing players the site, making sure they know where to find key places, such as the organizer and safety rooms. The tour can happen whenever works best in your schedule, but we recommend before or after the intensive workshop activities.
- **Introduction:** Welcoming players, giving brief information about the game, and introducing them to one another.
- **Transformative goals:** Explicitly stating them aloud in language appropriately adjusted for the target group. Workshops bring participants in direct or indirect contact with your transformative goals, which helps shape the intentionality of the game. Embed them in your script and make them transparent so everyone is on the same page on what they should emphasize during play.
- **Workshop-related information:** Providing an agenda for the workshops, including practicalities, the structure, and the purpose of the activities.
- **Setting community norms:** Establishing “how we do things here” in terms of acceptable, encouraged, and discouraged interactions. It can be done as a group or established by the organizers. If you are low on time, we recommend establishing these norms for them.

- **Warmups:** Energizing the players in low-stakes ways, encouraging them to lower their vigilance and become more present in the moment.
- **Group:** If relevant, helping the players become accustomed to physical contact and build trust with other players.

Importantly, not everyone experiences greater trust from workshops, especially ones that focus on vulnerable sharing, intimacy, or touch. While touching exercises such as hugging workshops or holding hands can sometimes help players feel more trusting and relaxed, for other players, such exercises can provoke intense anxiety, alarm, fear of germs, or even trauma triggers from upsetting past experiences. Therefore, if your larp encourages or requires touch or other forms of intimacy, you should tell the players ahead of signup so they can set expectations accordingly (Koljonen 2016a). Similarly, if touch is not a strong feature of the play experience, having a touch-based physicality workshop may not be necessary and may even work against your goals. Depending on the context, it also may not be appropriate, e.g., in certain professional, therapeutic, or educational contexts.

If physical touch would benefit your goals, a useful strategy is letting the group decide the level of comfort with physical touch. You can ask them to close their eyes, then announce the baseline of touch, with progressively more intimate types, e.g., shaking hands, squeezing arms, hugging, cuddling, kissing, etc. Players can raise their hands for the level with which they are comfortable. If one person does not raise their hand for a specific type of touch, stop, then ask them all to lower their hands. Then, ask them to open their eyes and announce the last level of agreement as the baseline for the game. Remind them they can still calibrate.

On the other hand, if you were to ask those questions with eyes open, players might feel peer pressured to raise their hand and self-conscious when lowering it, worried about exclusion. We emphasize this example to demonstrate how important skillful negotiation is in helping establish trust in the group, especially in the initial activities of the game.

ii) Mechanics, meta techniques, and safety exercises

Holkar (2015) divides mechanics or meta-technique focused workshops into multiple distinct workshop activities, which is highly recommended. We recommend dividing these workshops under the following:

- **Game mechanics:** The rules and/or system of the game, techniques, and meta-techniques not connected to safety should have their own sections. You may also wish to workshop social conventions important to the group. If relevant, you also may add a section instructing players on how to play upon sensitive topics responsibly or avoid them altogether, e.g., violence, racism, etc.
- **Safety:** Safety should be its own workshop and ideally focused on embodied practice of any techniques rather than briefings only. If you have a Code of Conduct, you should mention the basics here.

You should think carefully about when to introduce safety information. If you run this workshop too early in a long workshop, it may be harder for players to remember the information. Some larps choose to run safety workshops close to the end of the workshop block for this reason, e.g., after any character-related activities. However, if your previous workshops run late, make sure you have plenty of time to run the safety workshop, even if you have to cut time from other exercises. In our view, safety should never appear to be an afterthought to your staff of your players.

iii) Character and relation exercises

In Holkar's (2015) model, exercises intended to focus on the characters come next in the workshop, as they help players slowly transition into the headspace of their character. The sequence of them depends strongly on the design of the larp, but some general categories include:

- **Character creation:** Players may create the entire character in this workshop, or flesh out their pre-written character in more detail through activities. If specific rules are connected to these characters, those can be explored here. Similarly, this workshop can help players prepare for actions their players will take during play. When possible, we recommend allowing players the opportunity to think and respond as their character to ease them into the game, e.g., through the Hot Seat exercise, when their character answers questions from "the universe," provided by you or their co-players.
- **Character relations:** These workshops help players build relations with others, rehearse these relations through acting specific dynamics out, and/or help them fill out backstory scenes.

iv) Calibration exercises

After relations are established, we recommend calibration exercises, which can include:

- **Game-focused calibration:** This form of calibration helps players build a mutual understanding of the game world, learning what is possible, impossible, and encouraged, as well as other key information.

For example, if your wizard larp focuses on going to class, finding a date for the ball, and other typical youth-related activities, but will not focus on acquiring dark magic or summoning evil spirits, you should strongly communicate that. Otherwise, players will likely take the game in many unanticipated directions through emergent play, which can disrupt the coherence of the experience (Bowman 2017; Torner 2018) and sometimes even lead to safety issues. Do not assume your players know how to play your game in the way you imagine it; each participant arrives with their own assumptions, projections, and past experiences that inform their actions and what they imagine the game to be.

- **Relationship-focused calibration:** This form of calibration allows time for co-players to discuss physical and emotional boundaries, request desired play, indicate undesirable play, and/or enact preparatory scenes (Holkar 2021). This type of calibration can happen between two players, e.g., discussing how a married couple handles conflict; or in small groups, e.g., discussing how a dysfunctional family dynamic should play out during the game.

Preparatory scenes can be highly helpful to give players a sense of their character dynamics before the larp through embodied play, for example in backstory scenes.

In some cases, each character will have several different relations, but you will not have time for them to calibrate for each one. Choose the most important relations, e.g., prioritizing romantic or sexual partners, family members, best friends, or enemies.

v) En-roling exercises

En-roling refers to a process of slowly getting into the character and immersing into the fiction. It can happen immediately in some cases, or be slow and methodical, e.g., spending time putting on costuming and makeup while listening to one's character's custom playlist the participant curated. Either way, we recommend having a method to guide players into the experience, such as:

- **Take-off:** Easing the players into game, e.g., through a group meditation or ritual. (Holkar 2015).

Keep in mind that even with en-roling, the first moments and even hours of a role-playing game can feel awkward, especially if the players are expected to engage in immediate social interactions. You may wish to also have strategies to help them en-role after the game starts, such as embodying or involving an NPC who can help bring them into the narrative.

vi) Additional considerations when running workshops

While all of these activities might be aspirational and, indeed, a facilitator might receive a script with many of them, they may need to decide on the fly what is most critical to run. For example, if the script calls for 10 minutes of embodied practice of a mechanic and time is running out, the facilitator needs to make a decision about how crucial that embodied practice will be to prepare players for the game. In this case, a quick demo of the mechanic with a volunteer in front of the group might suffice.

Furthermore, sometimes facilitators go “off-book” when giving workshops. This tendency can take many forms: abandoning parts of the script; not reading the exact carefully-chosen words, or worse saying incorrect instructions; giving extensive information about a concept; adding new activities that were not previously included; and forgetting to workshop key mechanics. This tendency is especially common when the facilitator did not write the script or they were not properly onboarded onto why all the sections are important. In some cases, hacking the script might be necessary,

but ideally your workshop design is well-aligned with the needs of your game, in which case facilitators should strongly resist this urge.

Along these lines, we recommend that one person who is strongly familiar with the script run the workshop with all players in the same room if possible, potentially with helpers to answer questions from smaller groups. That way, all players receive the same information. For example, you can use a microphone if your group is big.

In short, your workshop facilitators not only have the job of onboarding players to the game, but also setting the tone for the whole event. We recommend making sure your facilitators are skilled at communication, time management, and other front-facing people skills. They should practice the script, or at the very least have you demonstrate it or read it aloud beforehand so they feel more confident delivering it themselves. Remember some people learn better aurally and visually, so watching you demo it can be helpful.

Finally, when running educational games, the workshop helps build the alibi (Montola 2010; Deterding 2018), which can be especially important in mandatory situations with strongly established social hierarchies. Workshops can create a bit of healthy group pressure when encouraging new people to play. For example, if your game uses costumes and some participants are hesitant to choose one, let them wait a bit; when others start trying on the costume in the workshop, they may end up wanting to use them after all.

b) Run-time

As mentioned above, during runtime, your game may have one or many facilitators depending on the structure of the game, the needs of the narrative, the rules, etc. As an absolute minimum, your game should have a designated facilitator that is responsible for player safety during the game: an organizer whose sole task is to make sure that the game runs in a way that maintains and strengthens the designed safety measures. This facilitator should be somewhat independent of the rest of the game runners, and have the power to override and overrule any and all parts of the game design if it is deemed necessary in order to keep the players and the organizers safe. In larger games, this responsibility is shared by a safety team consisting of more than one safety person, usually with one or more coordinators (Brown 2017). This practice allows the team to also take care of each other's need for safety. Also, having a team from diverse backgrounds can help players find someone they can most trust, especially with sensitive issues related to that background.

If the location allows for it, there should also be a designated physical space for safety. This space should be separate from other organizer spaces and be under the direct care of the safety person or team. In this space, harsh or intense sensory impressions should be kept to a minimum, meaning that it should be fairly quiet, warm, softly lit, and comfortable. Creating a warm and inviting atmosphere can be crucial for supporting players who need to process and decompress.

If your game has a high level of complexity, either in relation to plot, character relations, world knowledge, or similar, it can also be wise to have facilitators that support players in navigating their play and help them figure out what their characters can do within the game. Such facilitation can also help solve misunderstandings and make sure to promote play that supports the larger vision and story arcs of the game.

Run-time facilitation in educational settings often can be more chaotic than in ordinary classrooms. This process requires a great deal of trust on the part of the facilitator to let go of control and flow with what the players do. Even if you have a fairly fixed notion of what the game should be, sometimes it can be good to remain open to letting the students change the direction of the game, as long as your learning objectives are still attainable. To enhance focus on the targeted learning, you can use meta-techniques and reflective pauses. Depending on the number and the age of your players and the type of the game you are implementing, if possible, have at least one in-game and one off-game facilitator; a controlled environment or location; and attention to both physical and emotional safety.

c) Debrief and integration

Whether debriefs should be mandatory or voluntary at leisure games is an ongoing conversation within and between different larp scenes and traditions. We advise that you consider how your game might affect the players on an emotional and psychological level, and make your decision accordingly. The default for our model is mandatory debriefing, but players can opt-out or pass if they do not feel like sharing at that moment or need to remove themselves from the activity. Depending on your context, you may not be able to allow them to leave the room, so find other ways to allow them to opt-out (see Chapter 2).

The debrief and integration practices should be designed specifically and intentionally for the game you are running. You should carefully consider these elements as parts that support the overall design vision. You might have experienced something that worked really well at a game you attended, but that does not mean that it will work at your game. We would argue that at least part of the reason why some players dislike debriefs is because they have experienced some that were more afterthoughts than well-considered components that support the whole game experience. They may also have experienced debriefs that were far too long, badly facilitated, or where players engaged with each other directly in an accusatory manner, which negatively impacted their view of the practice in general.

When running a debrief, the facilitator should make sure everyone receives the same information, either by handing out questions or having one singular voice asking the questions, e.g., on a microphone. If running a structured debrief, the facilitator should make clear the guidelines for engagement and enforce them if necessary. Some recommendations include:

- Everyone has **roughly the same amount of time to talk**, e.g., 3-5 minutes. You do not need to be exact about this guideline, but rather feel into the needs of the group at a given moment, avoiding letting some players monopolize the time;
- **No cross-talk** between group members, as the debrief is not a conversation;
- **No accusatory language** toward other players or **attributing their characters' actions to them** personally;
- **Focus on their own experience**, rather than describing the experiences of others;
- **Focus on sharing in a serious manner** rather than telling a humorous story; and
- **Cut to the emotional chase of the story**, trying to avoid telling too many extra details.

In large groups, one recommended way to run the debrief is to assign or ask for a volunteer for a player who will serve as group leader to each smaller group who is responsible for keeping time, including during their own sharing. The main debrief facilitator will read each question aloud in turn. The group leaders can raise their hand and let the main facilitator know when the group is done, then encourage the group to converse quietly until the next question is announced. Alternatively, you can hand them a script to run for the group themselves, in which case the script should have clear instructions and facilitators should check to make sure they understand all information. Reminders of time should be gentle rather than abrupt, as sometimes people will be sharing vulnerable things.

In terms of group size, consider smaller groups if you have several questions to cover, e.g., emotional, intellectual, and educational debrief questions (see Chapter 2 of *TRGD* and this book). Groups of 3-4 are usually best; adding more people can make players feel more inhibited, and they will have less time to share. On the other hand, if your emphasis is on learning objectives, e.g., in a classroom environment, it might be more helpful if everyone hears the same content. You can vary up the group size in the debrief, having smaller groups to process more personal things, then bringing a larger group together to discuss, e.g., educational takeaways.

Finally, your debrief does not necessarily need to be exceptionally long. Targeted, incisive questions that guide players to the intended topics are much better than long, unfocused debriefs. If needed, you can then encourage them to continue processing after the structured debrief e.g., with assigned debrief buddies. You may also choose to make yourself or someone on your team available for processing after the debrief, but make clear any boundaries on your time or channels of communication.

In transformative play, you should also consider facilitating some integration practices or at least providing players with examples moving forward (see Chapter 2 for examples). Integration practices also make time for additional optional debriefing and

reflection opportunities that do not require your direct intervention. See Chapter 2 for examples of concrete integration practices you can provide for players. Finally, sharing insights like, “It’s normal after a game to have strong feelings, no feelings at all, or a different interpretation of the game events than your co-players,” and providing popular sources can help tremendously for players experiencing bleed (Bowman 2015), or post-larp blues/depression (Nilsen 2015; Bowman and Torner 2014).

4.5 Facilitation recommendations for specific settings and/or populations

In this section, we will provide brief recommendations for facilitation strategies when working with specific settings or populations. Keep in mind that each of these categories could make up an entire book itself, and sometimes do, e.g., in therapeutic manuals (Shanun 2013; Connell 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023; Hand 2023).

a) Transformative leisure

In the next sections, we will explore facilitation considerations in specific transformative leisure settings in which transformative interventions can be run with the right preparation and contacts. In Chapter 2, we mentioned recommendations for working with stakeholders that can help you gain access to specific populations. These sections will help you run these interventions once your foot is in the proverbial door.

i) Festivals, conventions, and game jams

Facilitating a game at a festival, convention, or game jam means operating in a context different from that of a dedicated one-shot event that you have planned yourself (see e.g., Lukka 2022). Here, time is more limited, participants are more diverse, and some of them are more likely to be experiencing larp for the first time. As in other settings, the facilitator’s task begins with a welcome: it is necessary to immediately create a warm and inclusive atmosphere that puts everyone at ease. A smile, a simple introduction, and perhaps a little icebreaker can help to ease tensions. Immediately afterwards, it is essential to contextualise the experience clearly and quickly, explaining what kind of game is about to take place, what its themes are, how long it will last, and what the limits are. There is no time for long workshops, so the information must be concise and understandable to everyone. Similarly, it is important to introduce safety tools in a simple way, reminding everyone that the game is always voluntary and that anyone can stop at any time, i.e., The Door is Always Open.

During runtime, the facilitator becomes the point of reference that holds the group together. In a chaotic or distracting environment, such as a conference room with several tabletop RPG sessions running at the same time, your voice and presence must help players maintain concentration. Time management is crucial: you need to know how to set the pace, signal moments of transition, and guide the players towards the conclusion without rushing but without going over time. All this takes place while

maintaining a constant balance between immersion and logistics, because especially in festival spaces without privacy and a closed door, there is often noise, people passing by, and other distractions. You may even have to field questions from curious onlookers unfamiliar with role-playing. It is the facilitator who “holds the circle,” protecting the group experience.

Thus, the facilitator must embody several qualities: the ability to summarise; to explain the setting and rules in a short time; and modulate energy and intensity of the group. Being a facilitator at a festival ultimately means embodying three roles at once: the hospitality of a host, the precision of an organizer, and the presence of a playmate. Also, keep in mind that your players may be experiencing overstimulation and insufficient sleep or nutrition, as is unfortunately common in such spaces. Keep these factors in mind when considering the emotional and physical safety needs of your participants.

Finally, if running a game jam, your role is not to facilitate a pre-designed game experience, but rather the process of designing a game itself. Ultimately, the goal of such an exercise should be to get participants excited by the process of co-creation. A measure of success should not be for participants to have a high-quality or fully completed game prototype, but for them to gain confidence in their design work. Similarly to convention games, many people at game jams are designing for the first time. Even if well-intentioned, excessive critique or unrealistic expectations can cause participants to leave feeling deflated and insecure about their capabilities. Thus, we recommend viewing your role as a well-informed cheerleader rather than drill sergeant.

ii) Work with children and youth

To facilitate games for children and youth as informal learning is often quite different from running them at a convention or festival, as the main purpose often is not to “have fun,” but to promote educational and group development. Role-playing games becomes a teaching method and a tool to stimulate transferable skills of cooperation and active citizenship. To do this, the facilitator must first define a clear structure: explain to the young audience that the game is an active learning experience that will put them in situations to experiment with new perspectives. For this reason, it is important to introduce safety structures and boundaries built on trust and cooperation.

Running a game in this context is a very delicate task. During the game, the facilitator must act with care and educational sensitivity, reading group dynamics and avoiding discomfort or exclusion. Your task is to accompany young people in experiencing the game and its benefits, which involves maintaining a balance between playful aspects and educational goals.

As with other groups, the debriefing phase is crucial in youth work. This is where the game truly transforms into learning. Finally, continuity is essential in these cases. Larp should not be an isolated event, but part of a journey. It can introduce a theme that can be also explored in other languages to ensure the cohesion of the group that will continue to work together. For this reason, the facilitator must ensure a bridge is made between the gaming experience and the overall educational project.

iii) Larp camps

Larp camps can be excellent places for players to develop both socioemotional and practical physical skills. These camps range in length, e.g., 1 week, 2 months, or several sessions throughout the year. They sometimes focus on physical boffer combat, but may also emphasize other activities like scavenger hunts and quests, as well as ecological education or the development of survival skills in the wilderness.

Facilitators at larp camps may or may not have any background in role-playing. They are often teenagers or young adults who have participated in the camp when they were younger. Facilitator to player ratio is important to consider in larp camps, especially if physical activities require supervision, e.g., to avoid injury or getting lost in the woods.

Interestingly, the skills learned facilitating larp camps can be transferred to professional skillsets, especially with the burgeoning professionalization of tabletop role-playing game facilitation. For example, professional facilitator Brennan Lee Mulligan started out at the Wayfinder larp camp (The Wayfinder Experience 2017). Recently, Mulligan sold out Madison Square Garden running *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974; Weaver 2025), and replaced Matt Mercer in 2025 as facilitator for *Critical Role* (Geek & Sundry, 2015-2018; Critical Role Productions, 2018-; Brennan Lee Mulligan 2025).

For examples, see e.g., Fein (2015), Schwartz (2018), Faros (2018), Hoge (2013), Callina, Colbert, and Gray (2018), the latter being a mixture of both leisure transformational and therapeutic role-playing.

iv) Activism and politics

Facilitation for activism and political aims is also delicate. Here, the game is not only used to tell a story, but also becomes a space for critical reflection on power, social conflicts, collective rights, and responsibilities (Johansson et al. 2026). Therefore, the role of the facilitator is not only to guide participants in their immersion into the narrative, but also to maintain a perception of safety so that people can explore complex dynamics without feeling exposed or manipulated. Political games often move on uneven ground that combines reality and history with fantasy. For example, in a larp, the players often have the freedom of movement and rewriting of narratives, so how can we ever reconcile this practice with the accuracy of historical facts? From this perspective, role-playing games are better understood as platforms for exploring heritage, rather than history in the strict sense (Mochocki 2012, 2021).

Before starting, players need to know that they are entering an experience that deals with political or social issues, which may stir up strong emotions and stimulate personal reflection. It is also important to contextualise the experience: anchor the fiction in dynamics that resonate with reality so that participants understand the value of playing with historical facts or political themes.

In a political larp, emotions can become intense, e.g., anger, frustration, enthusiasm, or feelings of powerlessness. The facilitator's task is not to suppress them, but to ensure that they are expressed constructively, without degenerating into out-of-game conflicts related to players' beliefs or of antagonistic experiences within the game leading to unmanaged bleed-out that feels negative (Bowman 2013).

After a political or historical larp, participants need to digest what they have experienced. It is useful to give players some historical context and facts, as a bridge between fiction and reality. Facilitating a larp on activism and politics ultimately means creating a space that feels safe enough to simulate real conflicts, offering participants tools to question the status quo, discuss, and imagine possibilities for a future. For more on conflict in games, see Chapters 5 and 6 of *TRGD*.

v) Spiritual direction, guidance, and companionship

RPGs can be facilitated in order to assist with *spiritual direction*, e.g., exploring one's life purpose (Cohen 2023). If facilitators have a particular spiritual orientation or follow a specific religion, they should be aware of their participants' views on these topics. Integration of content specific to those beliefs might be normative to a group who already follows that religion's principles or believes its dogma, but might alienate the players, e.g., if they sense the game is being used to promote a specific faith or branch of a religion. As Menachem Cohen (2023), a self-proclaimed "punk rock rabbi" who uses tabletop role-playing games when working with LGBTQIA+ and/or unhoused youth, explains:

I am here to walk alongside people of all faiths or no faith as they ask the big questions of life: "Who am I? Why am I here? How do I manifest who I am? Is there a God and, if so, how do I relate to it? How do I know right and wrong?" (Cohen 2023, 56)

Ideally, the game is a space for players to learn more about their identities; their life's purpose; their moral and ethical character; and/or their spiritual beliefs in an open, exploratory way. Furthermore, facilitation for spiritual direction requires a deceptively simple skillset; as Cohen explains, "Spiritual directors do not have to be experts in anything but being present." They should empty themselves of an agenda, "ready to be what the seeker needs at that moment" (Cohen 2023, 57). In this case, the skill of deep presence is a method for witnessing and honoring the journey of another person without feeling the need to intervene. When players end up at a crossroads, whether off-game or through their characters' story, the spiritual guide's role is not to tell them which direction to take, but rather to illuminate the various paths available to them. For this reason, Cohen (2023) explains that the term spiritual direction is sometimes better understood as guidance or companionship.

The goal of such work is empowering others to deeply explore themselves, their choices, and their path in life, cultivating greater agency to have influence over their own trajectory based on a stronger sense of purpose. Importantly, not everyone believes they have a purpose in life, nor that they need one. If you encounter this belief in spiritual direction sessions, perhaps help the client instead find a greater sense of self-understanding, meaning in life, or alignment between their values and actions.

For more on exploring spirituality through play, see Chapter 6 of *TRGD* and Chapter 2 of this book.

vi) Prisons or rehabilitation centers

Facilitators working with individuals who are incarcerated or mandated to attend rehabilitation centers have special concerns. They should make sure to have clearance from any stakeholders within the administration of the facility, ideally with full transparency about the content of the game and actions that the characters might take as part of the fiction (see Chapter 2 for more details). They should avoid placing their participants in a position where they may behave out of accordance with the rules of the institution, e.g., enacting violence, even in a humorous or playful manner, or using banned items such as pencils or dice. You might also consider the type of content you wish to play. For example, if someone is recovering from addiction, perhaps you should avoid surprising them with plots that have to do with mind control, intoxication, or similar psychological states, unless you agree with the participant and the administration to work with this content as part of the transformative process.

Though challenging to implement, games run in these contexts have the potential to be profoundly meaningful, providing feelings of hope, agency, and connection. They can provide participants with opportunities to develop morally and ethically, including skills of critical thinking and decision making. If players struggle with developing a positive self-image due to past actions, role-playing games can help them transform their identities as well as their connections with others within the group and outside of it.

b) Therapeutic

When considering best practices for therapeutic facilitation, considering the purpose of the activity becomes important.

i) Personal development

Some clients may be looking for personal development in some way outside of the context of acute symptoms. Perhaps they want to explore meaning in their lives, improve their relationship dynamics with others, or increase their feelings of self-confidence. While these topics might be challenging for clients, the risk is lower than in other forms of therapeutic processing, and therefore likely may require less extensive framing.

For example, a facilitator might create a weekend workshop with a personal development group that is bookended by one 1:1 session each for onboarding and debriefing. The client-clinician relationship for such an intervention is in place and additional care is provided, but the relative length of the therapeutic process is shorter. That being said, such sessions can dig up trauma and other repressed content that might be challenging to process for the facilitator, the client, and the group alike. You should have a backup plan if such situations become acute, such as the opportunity for additional 1:1 sessions or referral to a specialist. Even if your intention was to have a less intensive therapeutic process, the psyche can reveal surprising contents at a moment's notice that must be meaningfully and skillfully addressed.

ii) Social skills

Other clients primarily seek therapy for help in improving their relationships and communication with other people. Therapeutic games are often run as a method to practice prosocial skills, e.g., turn-taking, emotion regulation, communication, teamwork, and/or building friendships. Importantly, the therapeutic goals of such interventions must be developed with clients; the intervention should not be treated as a space to “fix” someone who is socially “broken,” but rather to help someone get their needs for connection with others met in healthy, mutually fulfilling ways.

Again, while such skills can be challenging and strong feelings emerge, the therapeutic container is less focused on extensive processing. For example, facilitators might provide short check-ins and debriefs with the emphasis being on play itself, sometimes with short processing breaks during play and sometimes not.

However, such sessions are not without the potential for emotional activation, overwhelm, or trigger. For example, if a client has intense social anxiety or has experienced bullying due to their communication patterns, strong emotions can rise to the surface. Again, knowing when to add additional support in the framing can help, as can knowing when to refer the client to someone else, ideally a mental health professional with whom they already have a therapeutic relationship.

iii) Therapeutic processing

Finally, some clients are seeking help with deeper therapeutic processing, e.g., working with trauma, grief, or acute mental health challenges such as depression, then the framing should be more robust. Group selection is especially important, as interactions with certain group members might intensify symptoms or enable unhealthy coping behaviors. In some cases having facilitators step in as other player-characters in the group might be advantageous, giving you more control over the social dynamics. More extensive 1:1 or group processing between sessions is likely necessary and should be built into the process from the start.

In some cases, group therapy and/or role-playing games may be high risk or contraindicated, in which case you should avoid including the client in the intervention altogether either temporarily or permanently. See Chapter 2 of *TRGD* for risks related to lack of training on the part of the facilitator, delusional tendencies, incompatibility of group members, confidentiality, and privacy.

c) Educational

In this section, we will expand upon considerations when implementing for educational purposes.

i) Informal, nonformal, and formal learning

As briefly mentioned in Chapter 2, *informal learning* can occur in any type of game you facilitate; it is spontaneous learning that happens naturally even in everyday life (Baird 2022; Westborg 2023). For example, a game played over several days in the mountains may lead to players naturally picking up camping skills. However, in our model, transformative leisure games are still designed and implemented with explicit transformative goals in mind. In such games, your framing structure might be a bit looser. For example, if a facilitator would like to explore what people have learned in informal learning, they can offer a less formal debrief check-in circle at the end of the game and have a conversation with the players.

Non-formal learning, on the other hand, can be found in different structures, for example museums, youth centers, extracurricular activities, organizational learning, and development programs. Examples include an edu-larp that aims to equip youth workers with skills to help them prevent burnout or an extracurricular language class that uses *D&D* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) as a tool to practise new vocabulary. These games can be one-shot experiences or a series that unfolds over time.

In longer formats, e.g., a weekly *D&D* campaign in a language center, players meet regularly with the same facilitator. Here, the role of the facilitator is quite different: rules and safety are discussed in the beginning, possibly in a dedicated Session 0, and then re-addressed whenever necessary. The facilitator needs to have the skills to create a warm, fun, safe, and consistent environment that inspires players to return to the group again and again. As this is a recurring event, the facilitator will inevitably become the person of reference, much like a teacher in a classroom. You will need to be ready to deal with the dynamics of the group and remain observant. Flexibility is also necessary, as absences might occur or people might drop out suddenly. Similar to therapeutic role-playing, you might need to have milestones in mind or even scheduled, where longer reflection sessions with the group will occur, e.g., breaks between sessions.

In non-formal learning, participants often have signed-up voluntarily, meaning they have an interest and are open to the experience (Baird 2022; Westborg 2023). The voluntary nature of such exercises is helpful for the facilitator, as the goal is harnessing the existing energy and aiming it in the right direction rather than creating the energy from scratch.

Formal learning occurs in structured environments following a pre-planned curriculum that leads to official qualifications, certifications, and/or degrees (Geneuss 2021; Baird 2022; Cullinan and Genova 2023; Westborg 2023). As a result, facilitating a game in such an environment requires some extra steps. If the facilitator is the main

educator of the group, things are a bit simpler: you already know the students and are the person of reference, so the trust does not need to be built from scratch. You are aware of the schedule, the curriculum, and the learning objectives, so you can pre-plan the activity beforehand. You are likely familiar with the logistics that need to be taken into account, e.g., who to talk to for approval, available space, available time, and consent / assent forms.

You can build upon or temporarily alter pre-existing rules and boundaries that exist by establishing specific rules and safety mechanics for the specific game. Alternatively, you can build the safety mechanics you plan to use in the game into the general rules of the classroom, e.g., using Pause when needing to ask for clarification; using the X-Card to request a discussion topic be removed if possible (Stavropoulos 2014), or using the Lookdown mechanic with a hand over one's eyes if they need to leave the room and do not want to draw attention to themselves (Koljonen 2016c, developed with Trine Lise Lindahl).

In formal education, remember to take into account time restrictions, e.g., mandatory breaks that might interrupt the flow of the game; possible distractions and interruptions, e.g., other students entering the game area; and unpredicted absences. We recommend building some flexibility regarding the number of players and facilitators your scenario requires, especially if you plan to run it for different groups. Adjustments on the fly might require quick thinking, like assigning some students high responsibility player-character status to help keep the structure intact, as described previously.

If you are an external collaborator coming into an educational institution to facilitate a game, the requirements are a bit more complicated. You need to figure out many of the things that other educators already know, such as schedules and the content covered already. In this case, as discussed in Chapter 2, we highly recommend directly collaborating with educators embedded in the institution and actively involving them in the implementation process. They can provide insight not only regarding logistics, but also typical behaviours and dynamics in the classroom.

Ideally, the educator can either receive a character like everyone else or an NPC. Having an idle observer in a power position over the students can break the immersion, cause stress to the players, and even derail the game completely. If they mainly want to observe, give them a light, or *thin*, character. In this case, a thin character does not have a complex backstory or personality, but rather focuses on a specific in-game activity such as time keeping or handling one small part of the structure. As discussed above, they could also play an authority in-game; the educator is already the authority figure in the class, so you can use that to benefit the game (see also Drama in Education, e.g., Heathcote 2010; Mochocki 2013). On the other hand, be aware that if the teacher holds too much authority in the game, it might inhibit the players from being active or taking risks due to the power differential. Worst case scenario, the educator can be involved without having an in-game role, e.g., being responsible for addressing safety concerns.

Crucially, the educator may be responsible for running additional debriefs or connecting the game content to other curricular materials in future class sessions. Make sure to give them clear instructions for how to help the students process the material, such as a debrief script. Assume they may not be able to debrief at all and plan accordingly, making sure the students have enough time to process immediately afterward.

In formal learning, participation is usually partially or entirely mandatory. For this reason, as a facilitator, emphasize activities that help the participants feel safe and steer them toward intended game play. Often, they have no prior experience and will not know how to play this scenario without guidance. A player who is unsure what to do or feels uncomfortable may drop out-of-character, which can encourage others to break character. This issue can be handled in different ways; if the player mostly feels insecure and unsure, you can reply in-game while role-playing your character quite heavily to help pull them back into game through interimmersion (Pohjola 2024). If they feel unsafe, then it is better to pull them aside and talk to them off-game, even if doing so disrupts the role-play. Have some back-up instructions ready to keep the other players engaged in case such situations occur.

For examples of educational larp implementation practices from the STARS method in Germany, see Geneuss (2021, 2022). If you want to begin facilitating RPGs for educational purposes, *Roll for Learning: 51 Micro Tabletop Role-Playing Games to Use in the Classroom* (Zamboni, Farber, and Merchant 2024) is an excellent anthology specifically designed to play in learning environments for different potential age groups.

ii) Primary and secondary schools

Younger children often find it harder to focus, but easier to play. In general, when working with this target group, you can let the students be the experts while the teachers and other adults are the ones needing help. As with other forms of educational play, for younger children, we strongly suggest having an option to opt-out even if mandatory. If not, they might disrupt the game for the others due as their self-regulation skills are still developing. As examples, you could offer them an alternative assignment such as drawing in the corner or playing another game by themselves. In some situations, you may be able to have them join another class, but you should develop a good working relationship with the other teacher in these instances.

Also, clearly establish a way to be able to talk to students off-game. You can use this technique for giving relevant information about the game, such as asking if they want to participate in a certain pre-planned scene, or to communicate with students who are behaving disruptively.

However, if the group has a lot of energy, participants might take anything you throw at them and run with it, meaning you end up running out of things to do with them. It can be good to have extra activities planned and try to aim the players towards playing with each other instead of coming to you to get quests or tasks. Examples of additional tasks include:

- **Tasks involving active movement**, e.g., collecting a certain number of items and bringing them back;
- **Intellectual tasks**, e.g., solving puzzles; or
- **Socially-focused role-playing tasks**, e.g., making a friend from another in-game group or finding out about the latest gossip.

iii) Higher education

Higher educational environments have specific constraints to consider in facilitation. Unlike with children, older students and inexperienced players often struggle initially to be playful, which can be helped sometimes with a stronger alibi. Since class time is even more scarce than primary and secondary school settings, activities should be closely connected to the learning objectives of the course, especially if testing will later occur on the material.

On the other hand, these players are likely able to engage with complex content. Therefore, scenarios exploring such content from multiple dimensions is more possible than with younger age groups. As an example, *Reacting to the Past* games can be found in over 350 college and university classrooms across the US (Bledsoe and Richardson 2022), as well as high school classrooms around the world (Reacting Consortium n.d.).

Additionally, while perspective taking and empathy can be powerful learning tools, be aware that in some situations, students might object to feeling forced to empathize with certain roles, e.g., participating in debates about emancipation during the Civil War (Belkin 2022). Furthermore, while such scenarios can help students understand the complexity of political situations in particular historical or fictional situations, they might also make room for stereotypical, culturally appropriative, or otherwise problematic behavior (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). Some students might object completely to the practice of role-playing marginalizations the student does not share (see e.g., Raja 2020). Such outcomes can make diverse participants feel less safe in the classroom, which can interrupt the learning process or even lead to them no longer returning. If you are hired by the institution, you may even face disciplinary actions and negative media coverage in such cases.

If you choose to include sensitive content, since you likely will have limited class time, make sure you make plenty of space to process properly and have sufficient debrief facilitation available. In general, remember that large classes with a lower ratio of facilitators to players are inherently riskier in terms of safety, but the scale of impact might make such risk acceptable depending on the type of game. We recommend making such sessions optional and offer alternative assignments, e.g., reading a book that provides a first-person account on the topic.

While not emerging from the leisure tradition of RPGs, we recommend reading more about *Reacting to the Past* games as one of the most successful examples of widespread implementation of educational role-playing (see e.g., Carnes 2011, 2018; Watson and Hagood 2018; Hoke and Risk 2026), including their game design handbook (Proctor 2011).

d) Train the trainer

Finally, a great way to spread transformative play is to train other facilitators as your primary target group, sometimes called *train-the-trainer* interventions. In many ways, portions of this textbook can be understood as train-the-trainer guidelines.

When teaching educators how to facilitate a role-playing game, you usually have a strong starting point. Experienced educators are used to managing groups and running activities. They likely know how to ask good questions to help students reflect. However, less experienced educators may still be developing their skillset, so adjust your training accordingly. Additionally, teachers are often overworked and role-playing games can require extra effort than more traditional classroom activities. We recommend providing them a strong argument for why the effort is worth it (see e.g., Richardson, Bledsoe, and Manning 2023).

Role-playing games tend to redistribute power from the educator to the players to greater or lesser degrees (Westborg 2026a). Some educators find this process of power redistribution difficult. You can alleviate some of this anxiety by teaching strategies to create a strong alibi for the game itself that makes clear the distinction between in-game and off-game roles. Similarly, by making a clear transition from in-game to off-game, educators may find it easier to act in different ways from their established classroom persona.

Importantly, emphasize to teachers that they should maintain the focus on letting the participants explore on their own. Encourage them to release expectations about how the scenario “should” go. Emphasize to them that ideally, their scenario is not about getting the “right” answer, but rather about experiencing the content together in a low-stakes environment. Furthermore, if success is possible in the scenario, encourage them to reassure their students that they are able to take risks, will not face consequences for failure; and that failure can be a great learning opportunity as well. If they need to test student performance for a grade, advise them to use a different activity. For an example of training using American freeform with arts educators, see Cox (2015; 106).

Role-playing is also an excellent way to practice therapeutic skills. Future therapists and coaches often have demo sessions in which they engage with a mock client. Adding gaming elements can make such exercises more engaging, and can also work to build facilitation skills with therapeutic RPGs. Examples include trainings developed by RPG Therapeutics (n.d.), the Bodhana Group (TBG n.d.), and Geek Therapeutics (n.d.), and Game to Grow (STAR Institute 2025).

4.6 Facilitation logistics

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, an important part of planning any game is considering the logistics of your facilitators. Some games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974) are facilitator-driven, meaning they require a strong, active facilitator for most, if not all scenes. Other games have hands-off facilitation, e.g., in a slice-of-life larp attempting to maintain a 360 degree illusion without interference or negotiation from organizers.

Remember that adding a facilitator to the equation adds an element of power imbalance. Consider whether or not your game's goals require hands-on facilitation. Do your goals involve training specific skills only the facilitator knows? Or will allowing the players to role-play freely just as easily meet your goals, for example in practicing social cohesion?

Another important dimension is the concept of *plot*, which extends beyond narrative to become a sort of currency in many RPG traditions. In this case, plot refers to narrative elements generated by the design team to engage players, such as secret lore, clues to mysteries, special quests, insider knowledge about the game world, etc. Facilitators often hold plot, and therefore interacting with them can mean gaining an advantage or favor that other players do not have. Similarly, in many RPG traditions, the facilitator resolves conflicts, usually through some sort of mechanics or their own fiat.

Even in games where interactions with facilitators do not affect the story in any way, the perception of the facilitator as the person who holds the secrets, the power, and/or the status is often present in the minds of players and can dramatically affect game dynamics. For this reason, consider having strong guardrails around yourself if running a game alone, or around your co-facilitators in terms of actions they should and should not take when improvising with players. If they serve a specific function, remind them to stick to that function unless approved by the organizing team to stray.

The following subsection will ask some key questions you should consider when creating your implementation plan (see Chapter 1).

a) Interaction with facilitators

- **Will facilitators interact with the players throughout the game, e.g., run-time storytelling?**

Sometimes the facilitators are characters in the game (*diegetic*) who play a role in order to support the players. On other occasions they may be semi-diegetic: in costume, but merely functionaries who will occasionally step in to perform an action or to offer guidance. In other situations, they may be non-diegetic: present but should be ignored by characters and only spoken to by players.

- **How will players interact with the facilitators during the game?**

During the game your players may want or need to interact with the facilitators. This interaction could involve coming to an off-game / organizer room to ask a question, or there could be diegetic or non-diegetic storytellers in play. You need to plan for and explain how, where, and for what purposes players can approach facilitators.

- **How will facilitators provide support during play?**

For example, will they be available to answer questions? Is their primary role to adjudicate in-game conflicts? Some larger larps have in-game referees whose job it is to ensure fair play, particularly in character vs. character conflicts (CvC, sometimes called PvP), and/or to explain complex rules around magic and rituals. They tend to stay in the background as semi-diegetic or non-diegetic figures, wandering around the play area, or requestable by players for specific events.

Alternatively, will they not be physically present, or in a completely different room and hands-off? This choice is very much a matter of personal preference. Some organizers like to have characters and to be present in the fiction, sometimes even taking an active role. Others prefer to remain in an off-game space, ready to step in and perform whatever functions are needed. However, the presence or absence of a facilitator can dramatically affect interpersonal dynamics, so consider this choice carefully. You might consider giving players instructions for how to interact with facilitators during play if you want to discourage imbalanced power dynamics.

If not immediately present, will they be available via text or phone? For larger games, or for events that run for longer periods of time, having contact details for organizers can be useful. Usually, contact is reserved for emergencies, but is sometimes also available for queries that are urgent enough to affect play. Assuming there is mobile phone coverage, a good practice is to offer a cell phone number for a facilitator to be contacted if they are not immediately available.

Related to this point: How can players locate/contact safety team members? You should have a safety team person available and on call during game hours. Sometimes they may be eating, in the bathroom, or helping another player. Giving a cell phone number or a walkie talkie means they can be contacted in a hurry if needed. Also it can seem trivial but remember: once you give a contact number to the players, remember to check it often. Communicate with your players if you will be unavailable during certain hours, e.g., sleeping times. We discuss safety teams in more depth in Chapter 5.

b) Interaction with the game's environment, narrative, and challenges

In some cases, facilitation is not direct communication with players, but rather creating opportunities for them to engage with elements of the game world during run-time or even between sessions. Sometimes, these interactions need to be overseen by a facilitator in order to ensure the game proceeds as planned. Some guiding questions:

- **How will the players interact with the game world and/or environment?**

For a game that has locations, props, and scenography, you need to consider the interfaces between players and the physical storyworld. For a game that has plot, you need to consider the interface between player and fiction, which sometimes occurs through direct storytelling, but other times is seeded throughout the game, e.g., through clues. Remember that your players may interpret clues coming from the facilitator even if not intended. While this may seem harmless, unfortunately such misunderstandings can derail the entire game. You may wish to make clear what is and is not an actual plot or clue, e.g., with a meta technique or visual signal. Alternatively, you can explain in workshops if certain facilitators carry no key plots, instructing the players to treat them like any other character.

- **Are they expected to solve puzzles or plots?**

Some games are built around puzzles or dilemmas. As a part of the design, you need to think about to what extent will players need to “solve” the game? If this activity is a part of the design, how much of the play time will players be spending on it and how will this time spent affect your transformative goals?

Puzzles are subjective. Something that you consider to be difficult as a designer could end up being trivial to one of your players. Conversely the puzzle box you put into play that you are expecting to be opened in ten minutes could be abandoned as impossible and still closed in Act 3, which can stall the plot. Similarly, important plot information sometimes fails to get into play. It is forgotten, communicated to a character who is disinterested, or worse, hoarded by a character as currency or tucked away for future use. In some cases, the facilitator will need to enter the game and move the plot along if it stalls. In other cases, a puzzle or plot may end up being a distraction from other forms of interactions, so use these tools wisely.

Remember also that plot is often viewed as a form of currency. If you include a puzzle or plot that only a few people can interact with, others may feel excluded. Similarly, a one-person puzzle game that takes hours to play will likely take that player away from interaction with others for a significant amount of time. These situations can be especially problematic if the other players cannot move the story forward until a few people have finished the puzzle. Consider whether or not such a plot is necessary for your game.

- **Are players expected to hoard and/or deliver information for the game to run smoothly?**

In some cases, hoarding plot may be desirable. For example, in a game about knowledge and power, you should expect players to hoard information and trade secrets. Therefore if you want any plot points to be common knowledge, then you will need a method for broadcasting them. Some games have a rule that says, “If you are told a secret, you should pass it on to at least two other characters.” These techniques

are fun, but they also tend to be forgotten in play. Furthermore, if you as a facilitator tell characters not to tell anyone a secret, do not assume the players will then spread that information; they may think they are betraying your design by telling anyone. *Spilling secrets* is actually a player skill that can sometimes feel counterintuitive. (See Chapter 6 for more information on player skills).

Thus, a careful explanation to players if they should be either sharing or hoarding secrets is important. If sharing secrets, it is also worth having an NPC or a character whose job it is to assimilate and communicate knowledge. If the game is stalling, you may wish to come in as a facilitator and spread secrets yourself to activate a specific plot. If you absolutely need some piece of information to get into the game, consider multiple routes by which it can get into play: at least two, ideally more.

- **Should the players interact with the scenography or leave it alone?**

This point may seem strange, but considering the amount of player agency role-playing can offer, giving explicit instructions regarding how to interact with the environment can be important.

Some scenography is just aesthetic and should remain in the background, but other times it is fundamental to the game and should not be touched, or should remain secret until a specific time.

For example, you may have a key to unlocking a certain plot such as: “If the players search the undergrowth beneath the strange monolith they will find the runes that they need to open the gate.” If you want your players to make those sorts of searches, tell them in the game documents and the briefings, or spread this information as a facilitator during the game. As another example, if you do not want them wasting time spending hours searching the woods for more items because they have all been found, also tell them. We recommend giving players some broad direction about where to spend their energy.

- **Are special clues buried somewhere? If so, how will you tell players how/where to find these?**

Treasure hunt types of puzzles can be very interesting, but having some clues, mechanism, or guidance will reduce the amount of time players waste on a thankless task and give you some control about when they find the important information. For example, having players call the in-game Ministry and come away with a promise that an NPC with a metal detector is on the way to help search is likely more interesting for them than them digging in the sand on a beach for three hours.

- **Are these clues critical to the plot or to having a good experience? If so, consider if they are needed for your transformative goals.**

As we have mentioned before, this is the fundamental question about complex plots, riddles, plots, and puzzles when it comes to transformative games: in what ways are they *core* to the design? In some cases they can be central, for example, as a way for

players to put things they have learned to the test. If students in a math class need to practice solving equations, then creating puzzles based on equations to achieve success in the game makes sense.

However, if these elements are not at the heart of the transformative element of your design, you should consider whether they would be better used in a game that was intended solely for leisure. The right question to ask while designing is: what is the function of this component in the game? Is the component a game engine that will lead to something else that is not another piece of the narrative? Will this process spark reflection or incentivize players to come together and share emotions and ideas? If not, you may want to save the component for a less intentional design.

4.7 Technological considerations

Running transformative role-playing games through online technologies can be an accessible alternative to in-person play. For example, players who are geographically isolated, financially constrained, or have limited mobility may prefer to role-play through Zoom or Discord. Suffice it to say, you will need to familiarize yourself with these technologies if you plan to facilitate using them to avoid awkwardness, confusion, and frustration. Alternatively, the more seamless you can make the experience for players, the less they will notice the technological medium.

Each technology has affordances and drawbacks. For example, breakout rooms in Zoom have the advantage of creating instant privacy for scenes, but make it difficult for other people -- including you -- to monitor what is happening, join the discussion, overhear the conversation, or approach a character to briefly whisper in their ear, which are often far smoother when playing in the physical world. Of course, tech issues also can make play difficult, e.g., if someone's video or audio is not working, or if they are experiencing service interruptions, e.g., an internet or power outage. Finally, while accessible in some ways, running games with these technologies players may face other accessibility challenges. Some of these challenges can be addressed, such as turning on autocaptioning in Zoom for people with difficulties with auditory processing (for examples, see e.g., Marsh and Dixon).

We share some brief considerations here for the use of virtual reality (VR) for larp. However, for a more thorough investigation of advanced technology and larp, see our Erasmus+ EDGE Tech Toolkit (Suominen 2025).

a) Facilitating with advanced technology

With any advanced technology, it is more likely than not that unforeseen technical problems will occur. Without fail, these problems will take time to solve. Make sure to test all your equipment before a game session and build time buffers into your schedule for any tech-related hiccups.

b) Facilitation through advanced technology

Immersive and social VR affords players the opportunity to experience embodied and spatially situated play. In a VR larp, the player uses their own body to play the character, much as in an analog larp. VR larp is a different feeling to puppeting a version of your character as a 3D representation on a 2D screen, like players do in most graphical role-playing games played on a computer. VR larp is also different from using your own face on a 2D screen in a Zoom larp. Therefore, it is important to factor in extra time to make sure that all players in VR become familiar with the medium. We recommend having a separate session to familiarize players with speaking and moving in VR space. Take time to learn and agree upon how to compensate for what gets lost in translation in terms of touch and eye contact, e.g., with vocal assurance and body language. For more information about VR larp design and implementation, see Lipsyc (2024a, 2024b), Rydberg (2024), and Green (2026).

4.8 Core competencies for role-playing facilitation

This final section looks toward the future of role-play facilitation. In this section, Garcia integrates direct facilitation experience in Erasmus+ Youth Exchanges and Training Courses for youth workers, including non-formal education, experiential learning cycles, structured reflection, and intercultural group facilitation. Garcia then synthesizes core academic literature that treat facilitation as a professional practice in simulation and game-based learning contexts (INACSL Standards Committee 2016; SALTO-YOUTH 2018; de Wijse-van Heeswijk 2021; van Laere, Lindblom, and de Wijse-van Heeswijk 2021).

This synthesis further integrates insights from the Erasmus+ European Training Strategy (ETS; n.d.) and the LifeComp framework for Personal, Social, and Learning to Lean Key Competence (European Commission 2025). Both frameworks define competence as the integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that can be observed and developed over time.

Applying this logic to role-playing games suggests a path for facilitators to grow from intuitive practice toward deliberate, evidence-based design, which is needed not only for quality design work, but also to help our field gain recognition and to study its impacts. What follows is not a formal model, but a reflection emerging from European educational work that imagines what competent facilitation might look like in the coming years.

Facilitation can be viewed as a full learning cycle composed of four core areas. The first, *framing and intent*, defines why the experience exists and how participants are invited into it. Clear framing aligns the game's purpose, tone, and structure with learning goals while ensuring that people can safely choose how to engage.

Second is *play orchestration*, which covers the small, ongoing actions that make play flow, for example balancing pressure vs. rest, spotlight on players vs. silence, and rules vs. improvisation.

The third, *safety and calibration*, aims for participants to retain agency and perceive the community as emotional support, e.g., consent tools, visible boundaries, and options to pause or exit without stigma.

Finally, *reflection and transfer* turn play into learning by guiding participants from what happened to what changed and how that change applies beyond the game.

Across all areas, two transversal dimensions enrich this vision. *Intercultural competence* supports facilitators in adapting tone, language, and norms across different cultural contexts. *Recognition of learning* ensures that experiences are documented in a way that can be validated in education or training systems without interrupting the flow of play.

Together, these perspectives point toward a future where facilitation is recognized as a professional field grounded in observable practice and shared ethical standards. This model is not meant to prescribe specific rules, but rather to invite facilitators to see themselves as learners too, who are continuously refining how they create safer and more meaningful transformative experiences through play.

4.9 Conclusion

Facilitation can have strong implications on the experience of the players. On a basic level, facilitators tend to be responsible for the smooth run-time, including timing, pacing, and other logistical matters. If a facilitator fails to establish and maintain a perception of safety, players may feel exposed or even betrayed (see e.g., Spencer 2025, 2026). Power struggles may emerge, especially if the players' perceive their expected agency within the scenario is reduced due to heavy-handedness from the facilitator (Bowman 2013), or if the facilitator is not authoritative enough, e.g., in rules disputes that threaten to derail a game (Dashiell 2017; Hilman, Hirst, Flanagan, and Leonard 2025; Tremblay 2025). Facilitators may introduce content that players find objectionable, stereotypical, triggering, or otherwise problematic. Alternatively, they may fail to address the situation adequately if other players introduce such content or transgress boundaries in ways that cause harm. Failure to address such challenges may cause ruptures in the community or the activity itself to break down. Our next chapter will discuss such challenges with regard to psychological safety.

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CHAPTER 5

Cultivating Safer Transformational Communities

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5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, we will deepen into the specifics of running transformative role-playing games in terms of both physical and psychological safety. We strongly recommend reviewing Chapter 5 in *Transformative Role-playing Game Design* (2024) before reading this chapter, which lays the foundations for psychological and inclusion practices during the design phase, as well as implementation before, during, and after play. We discuss different philosophies of safety in role-playing game design, as well as ways in which to structure safety teams, integrate safety mechanics, and include sensitive content responsibly.

This chapter will expand upon these concepts and discuss some logistical considerations when implementing for various target groups and contexts. We will also discuss matters of physical safety, which become increasingly important as you scale up your design. While we make a distinction between physical and psychological safety, in practice they are often connected. For our purposes, *physical safety* refers to attending to the physical needs of the body, such as warmth, food, sleep, and protection. *Psychological safety* refers to needs related to mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Safety design and implementation involves making plans for effectively and compassionately responding to situations in which players no longer feel safe or experience psychological harm.

Importantly, this chapter should be considered the beginning of a conversation around safety you should have with your team -- or with yourself, if implementing alone -- rather than the final answer. Safety culture is ever evolving as we learn more about the needs of the human psyche more generally, as well as more specifically as it manifests in unique individual contexts. Members of each organizing team will likely have their own preferences and even philosophies about safety. Whatever strategies you choose to implement, we recommend all organizers at least being on the same page and understanding the planned process in case of a crisis, including who will receive information, who has the responsibility to take action, and what range of actions might be taken. This process is important not only to provide solidarity among team members, but also to avoid fracturing among an already stressed organizing group and make sure safety guides are enforced consistently.

5.2 What is a safer transformational community?

When running transformative games, we are creating conditions within which players can grow and thrive. Those conditions have as much to do with the community surrounding play as the game itself -- sometimes more. From this perspective, community design can be understood as a form of social engineering for good (Stark 2014a), in which we consciously cultivate healthier communities (Leonard 2018) with better conflict transformation skills (Murphy 2018) to improve experiences of trust and connection (Wood 2021). Such communities can be cultivated in international or local settings (for suggestions for the latter, see Høyer 2026). While such notions may seem idyllic and may not always match people's experience in RPG communities (Bowman 2013), we still think working toward these ideals can be central to the transformational process. Therefore, we understand such work as requiring tending and fostering to help maintain and deepen feelings of psychological safety (Stavropoulos 2022).

As discussed in length in *TRGD*, a role-playing space -- or any space -- can never be entirely "safe." Safety is a perception that varies from person to person; some participants feel more safe with extensive codes of conduct, safety mechanics, and emotional processing, whereas others may experience heightened vigilance and feel less safe taking risks. Furthermore, at any point, a person may experience a physical safety issue, such as consuming food containing allergens or getting hit too hard by a foam sword, or a psychological safety issue, such as emotional activation or triggering based on emergent role-play. Thus, we aim toward *safer spaces of acceptable risk*, acknowledging that people need to perceive themselves as safe enough to feel brave and play, but that risks are always present and some risks are acceptable to take (see e.g., Rikard and Villarreal 2023).

Thus, risks should always be assessed, mitigated, and addressed whenever possible (Sinking Ship 2020; Losilla 2024; Roda Martínez 2025), acknowledging that some risks are not possible to address ahead of time or impossible to address at all. Factors to consider during risk assessment processes include the *severity* of harm an incident related to the risk could cause your participants, and the *likelihood* the incident will occur (Sinking Ship 2020; Losilla 2024). From this process, you can determine which risks are worth taking. Alternatively, your risk assessment may reveal that other risks are not worth taking or that your implementation plan is untenable in its current form. Establishing these things early in the process is better than finding out the hard way onsite during the implementation of your game.

While safety needs to be considered for all role-playing games, transformational spaces hold particular risks. Change is not always experienced as pleasant or comfortable. It often involves confronting aspects of ourselves and others that we may have been avoiding, rejecting, or disowning, e.g., unconscious parts of the personal or collective *shadow* (Beltrán 2013; Bowman 2024). Change involves moving from one state to another, including emerging from states of relative stasis, which can be destabilizing, acknowledging ways in which we have held ourselves back, e.g.,

limiting beliefs (Bowman and Hugaas 2021), or have been restricted or oppressed by existing social structures (Baird 2021; Kemper 2017, 2018a, 2020; Tanenbaum 2022). Thus, change involves confronting resistance, including our own identities resisting transformation (Illeris 2009). This psychological resistance may even have a physiological component, e.g., wanting to remain in states of homeostasis or return to them as soon as possible.

Furthermore, if the group conditions do not provide sufficient *containment* for these messy processes to occur, the experience of unsupported change can be harmful to participants, e.g., if they feel their needs for support are not met by the facilitators and the group. Again, while safety cannot be assured for all participants under any conditions, we can implement these games in ways that support processes of transformation and reinforce well-being. While transformation can and often does happen in spaces that are not held as *transformational containers* (Bowman and Hugaas 2021, following Bion 2013 and Winnicott 1960), we consider it a matter not only of practical importance but also an ethical obligation to aim towards building such spaces for participants.

Such spaces are important not only to support the play process, but are also powerful in their own rights as environments in which people feel socially supported in validating expressing themselves more authentically than is often possible in daily life, e.g., as transformational communities (Bowman and Baird 2022). As we have discussed in Chapter 2, many of the populations who can benefit from transformative play are psychologically and/or physically vulnerable, and some may never have felt safe expressing themselves deeply before in groups. Transformational spaces often allow for processing of deeply personal content, especially in debriefing, as well as setting intentions for transformative goals that require integration after play. People who have engaged in transformative play with one another have a shared context that is by its nature unique, as every game session and group is different, and we ourselves are different as we evolve through time. Therefore, we aim toward the cultivation of secure containment around play that facilitates support structures and even friendships that begin before play and persist long after play has concluded.

Importantly, such containers need not be and cannot be perfect; players need to experience them as *secure enough* (Winnicott 1960), meaning that they will not feel completely dropped by the community and will experience sufficient support if a rupture occurs. However, organizers need to acknowledge when support needs exceed the capabilities of the container and have strategies for directing players to additional support when necessary, e.g., to caretakers, mental health professionals, or others who can provide more extensive assistance. Thus, designing a risk-aware transformational container also means understanding its limits and planning for contingencies outside of it. Furthermore, many leisure and even educational spaces either do not consider these potential issues or think they are outside the purview of their responsibility; thus, any work on your part to create a web of support for players and organizers will likely be helpful and appreciated.

Ultimately, cultivating a transformational community inherently means asserting that people are more important than games (Brown 2016b; Koljonen 2020), which is shorthand to mean that we will do our best to care for one another if a rupture in the container occurs (see also Baker 2006).

5.3 Physical risks in implementation

This chapter will focus primarily on psychological risks, but examples of physical risks are discussed throughout the book, especially in Chapter 4 and sprinkled throughout this chapter.

It is important to understand that your own physical capacity and comfort is not necessarily equal to all your players (Kessock 2018). For example, if you are running a workshop, be mindful that not everybody is capable of sitting on the floor, not even for a few minutes. Even in relatively less physical play, because all players have bodies, organizers need to consider many facets of their physical experience. For example, players in tabletop games likely need a place to sit, place their items, and an environment ideally free from interruptions, distractions, or potential danger. If the game is longer than an hour, they will likely need access to food and drinks, whether you provide it for them or they bring it themselves. If playing outdoors, they may need sunscreen, bug spray, skin covering, warm clothes, sturdy shoes, or various other considerations. If they have serious allergies, they may need access to an epipen or antihistamine medications. If physical combat, climbing, walking, running, or other forms of physical play are involved, players could potentially trip or injure one another.

In case of any kind of physical play, we encourage you to have participants perform a proper warmup before the game starts with focus on dynamic movements and stretching. Dynamic physical warmups can significantly reduce the risk of injury and if physical combat is present, regardless of whether the combat is character vs. character (CvC, sometimes called PvP) or character vs. environment (CvE or PvE). For warmups, the players should play some cooperative games such as:

- *Ninja*: A game played in pairs where players take turn trying to step on each others shadow
- *Bow Battle* aka *Tails*: A game played either in pairs or a group where each participant has a ribbon attached to their back / waist. The objective is to snatch the opposing player's ribbon while protecting your own. Helps with hand-eye coordination, balance, strength, speed calibration, and keeping distance as well as movement in space with opposition.

Such games help your players get ready for physical combat and avoid injuries as well as injuring others.

If weapons are part of the game, allowing players to familiarize themselves with these before the game is recommended. They will gain a sense of their weight, speed, and what the weapons can do, even if only on a basic level. This process will go a long way towards improving the game experience. As they do this, we recommend explaining safety guidelines to them.

Note that some players may not be able to access parts of a specific venue at all, or it may be quite dangerous for them to do so, e.g., if the stairs are uneven or unsteady (Kessock 2017). If a serious injury occurs, depending on your location's legal context, you may be held liable for their injuries, especially if no one can provide First Aid or drive your player to the hospital.

In other words, the more physical factors you include in your implementation plan, the more complications you should plan to potentially arise as part of your risk assessment.

5.4 Psychological risks in implementation

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 of *TRGD*, examples of risk can include emotional flooding, when a participant is cognitively incapable of processing further information due to psychological overwhelm (Leonard and Thurman 2018); dysregulation, when a participant's psychological well-being falls out of balance, which can lead to distress or difficulties effectively interacting with others; activation and/or triggering, when a situation activates a survival response in a person, e.g., fighting, flight, freezing, or fawning (Brown 2014); or harm.

Other issues can arise related to conflict within the group (Bowman 2013), e.g., schisms in role-playing communities, issues arising from intimate and/or romantic relationships; creative agenda disputes, i.e., when participants have different styles of play they most enjoy; power struggles between players and facilitators; underprocessed bleed-in and bleed-out; insufficient inclusion and/or accessibility; crisis states; and sensitive content.

While such issues can emerge in any type of game, including games played with no intention of encouraging players to leave their comfort zone (Bowman and Hugaas 2025), the more you add confounding factors, the more you expose your participants to risk. Some factors to consider include:

1. Time spent in-game
2. Number of play sessions
3. Emotional intensity of play
4. Sensitivity of content
5. Competitive in-game dynamics
6. Physical demands of the play experience
7. Time spent processing the experience

A one-hour nano-game may not seem high-risk in this situation, but if you add emotional intensity and sensitive content, then offer no debriefing afterward, your risk increases. If your game is highly physically demanding, including many stressful combat situations and sleep deprivation, you are pushing the body out of homeostasis, which can increase the intensity and potential to experience bleed-out (Leonard and

Thurman 2018; Hugaas 2025). If your campaign game has many sessions of competitive play without processing the emotions arising off-game as a group, you may be increasing the risk of off-game conflicts erupting (Bowman 2013).

Assessing and attempting to mitigate these risks might be overwhelming, but we believe the transformative power of role-playing can make the risks worth taking. For example, you can still invite strong emotions exhausting your players in a combat larp with sleep deprivation, while also clearly signaling how they can meet their own needs or providing spaces of support, e.g., options for off-game sleeping, including offsite if needed, a safety room attended by a team member, and options to debrief after the game experience, including in the days or weeks following the event. Similarly, in-game competition is possible to play responsibly if the players establish and maintain trust through off-game calibration. Thus, our intention is not to discourage you from taking risks, but rather planning for situations in which risks might occur and finding ways to ameliorate them to reestablish feelings of safety.

a) Post-game emotional reactions

A simple way to help cultivate a safer transformational container around play is to raise awareness and normalize emotional responses not only during, but especially after play. Many players may come from social, cultural, or subcultural contexts in which naming, expressing, and discussing emotions are discouraged. While the game may provide sufficient alibi to express emotion as their character, they may feel confused by or ashamed of their feelings off-game. Such inhibitions can be addressed by creating a container in which discussing feelings is part of the process; experiencing strong emotions is encouraged; and continuing to have strong post-game emotional reactions is normalized.

Practically speaking, you can cultivate such an environment before, during, and after play. Before play, you can post trigger warnings (Brown 2014), content advisories, ingredients lists, or parameters (Wood 2022) on the website, on social media, and/or in email communication to players. You can also host workshops or Session 0s in which you agree upon content. You can avoid situations of secrecy and promote transparency of design and implementation (Torner 2013b), and coach any facilitators to maintain these principles as well. For example, if you tell your players they will only experience jump scares or combat in certain parts of the campsite through *zoning* (Bowman 2017); you are allowing them to opt-in to their level of surprise and physical intensity. You are also signaling that other kinds of play are valid; that players are not “missing out” if they avoid pushing beyond their own boundaries. Finally, you can emphasize that everyone involved is responsible for helping one another and working with sensitive content in an ethical manner (Kessock 2014b).

We also recommend reminding them that role-playing games can be surprisingly emotional and how to receive support if needed directly before the game, such as in a safety workshop, and also after the game before they leave the site. Posting links of popular articles that aim to help players understand these reactions can also be helpful,

e.g., bleed (Bowman 2015; Mersmann et al. 2018) or post-larp depression (sometimes called blues) (Bowman and Torner 2014). Keep in mind such reactions can also happen in convention, festival, or conference settings, even with relatively low amounts of actual role-play (Nilsen 2015), a phenomenon known as *drop*. If we consider that experiencing connection with like-minded others within a community is already an *expansive* experience, then add the emotional intensity of role-playing, then we should expect the reaction of *contraction* to possibly occur. Contraction is not a failing or weakness of the individual in question, but rather a natural process as we attempt to return back to homeostasis (Hugaas 2025). In fact, contraction can often show us the places within ourselves that need further transformative processing or healing, which can be a gift in the long-term, even if painful in the short-term (Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

Also important to acknowledge to your players before and after the game is that a lack of strong emotions is also normal. In communities that privilege strong experiences and process them after play, failing to have powerful emotional reactions after the game can feel alienating to players (Pedersen 2017). While we strongly recommend holding a debrief of some sort in transformative play, you can also structure your debrief questions to be applicable to many types of experiences, including not only questions about powerful emotions, but also questions more geared toward intellectual engagement. We discuss the emotional, intellectual, and educational processing in more detail in Chapters 2 of *TRGD* and Chapters 1 and 2 of this textbook.

Intense emotions can also arise during play if the participant does not feel the game is going well for them, e.g., due to a lack of agency, rejection, disappointment, or the ending (Dahlberg 2015). Games often invite a level of involvement that can feel like much has been invested without reciprocation. Such emotions can intensify to the point the player might never try role-playing again. While such conclusions should be accepted by organizers, often the player needs reassurance, support, and/or a way to reconnect with the group. Safety team members should be prepared for these reactions and have strategies in mind for providing care under such circumstances.

b) Abuse and neglect

While up until this point we have been discussing situations in which all parties in the role-playing are operating with good faith, unfortunately sometimes harmful behaviors can occur. We should not assume these behaviors happen more often in role-playing communities than in the world at large; indeed, some participants may have the experience of never before feeling as safe as they do within their role-play group. However, role-playing does involve decreasing our psychological vigilance enough to be able to surrender into the role-playing experience, meaning that we place ourselves in psychologically and sometimes physically vulnerable states when playing. Unfortunately, this vulnerability means that when harm occurs in such communities, it can sometimes be even more painful than in the outside world when vigilance is often higher.

Importantly, while intentional predation can occur, usually only a small fraction of players -- if any -- within a community have the conscious and express intention to prey upon others. When such predation occurs, it can be shocking, especially when predatory behaviors are associated with otherwise accepted or even beloved members of the community, including community leaders. Some players will refuse to acknowledge such members are capable of this behavior, making it risky for the harmed players to come forward and share their story. Others will make excuses for this behavior, minimizing its harm, e.g., the commonly used *missing stair* metaphor (see e.g., Brown 2017), in which people tell newcomers to “avoid the missing stair” in a staircase rather than addressing the rupture in containment directly. Others still will refuse to believe that any harm happens in their community. All of these reactions are defense mechanisms that attempt to avoid the psychological disruption of reconciling what group members thought to be true. In a way, these members are attempting to maintain their own psychological safety, which can often feel compromised when trust has been betrayed, even toward someone else. Unfortunately, these mechanisms often mean that lower status members or newcomers to a community are sometimes less likely to have their experiences taken seriously. We will discuss ways to address harassment later in this chapter.

In most cases, harm is not fully conscious or intentional, which does not mean it does not impact the person in question. As mentioned before, emotionally intense play often means us stepping out of our comfort zone and behaving in ways as our characters that we would normally never do. It also means that we are in a more vulnerable state, so actions can impact us more strongly. From this perspective, impact is actually desirable -- we want games to impact us, especially in transformative ways, and sometimes that means playing with aspects of human behavior that we might otherwise condemn or reject (Beltrán 2013; Bowman 2024). For example, we might scream at someone or insult them in-game, and unintentionally trigger them. These things should be considered relatively normal and hopefully addressed through proper safety structures (see later in this chapter for examples).

However, when players habitually use play to enact such behaviors on other player’s characters, including emotional, physical, or sexual abuse, especially without obtaining off-game consent or calibration, such play can feel violating for the player (Femia 2025). For example, in a horror game, perhaps it “makes sense” within the genre for a facilitator to narrate a scene of sexual violence toward a character, but without consent practices, the player may feel disempowered and harm may occur. (Importantly, harm can also occur even if enthusiastic consent is obtained, but we do not classify such harm as abuse). Abusive behaviors in-game can sometimes spillover into off-game dynamics, such as members of an in-group within a game bullying lower status members off-game as well, or players deceiving each other off-game to gain the trust of their co-players and preserve their in-game secrets. Whether these behaviors are a form of unconscious bleed (Bowman 2013) or a more conscious act is less important than acknowledging that they can cause harm and addressing that harm as a community.

Another form of harm that is often less visible is psychological and/or physical neglect. Neglect involves failing to meet the needs of other people in ways that constitute gross incompetence or irresponsibility. Of course, not everyone's needs can be met all the time; that is part of the human condition. However, wilfully disregarding the needs of others, especially in a dismissive and repetitive fashion, can be understood to constitute neglect. An example might be playing an intense romance with a co-player involving physical intimacy, then refusing to talk to them after the game to process feelings. Such things happen in daily life in the dating world, but they are even more confusing when a fictional relationship is perceived as "not real" or dissolves after the game is over without aftercare (Friedner 2020; Norwood and Villarreal 2026).

Furthermore, due to the power differentials, organizers have a strong responsibility to try to meet their players' basic needs, especially needs for sustenance and other aspects of physical safety. The need for communication is also quite important. Sometimes, this communication can be delegated, especially in larger teams. For example, if you are great at working with logistical planning but have difficulties reliably responding to emails, we recommend delegating that responsibility to organizers who are willing to be consistently responsive, such as safety team members. Again, experiencing a breach of trust while in a vulnerable state can cause harm and the perception of safety must be not only established, but also maintained and/or reestablished if a rupture occurs.

At the same time, as mentioned before, for situations in which a player's needs exceed the capabilities of the organizers, we recommend learning ways to set gentle boundaries and direct their request toward parties that can provide care. For example, a player's need for communication should not override an organizer's need for sleep unless the situation is an emergency, in which case contingencies should be in place to help address the issue, e.g., alerting the medic team, on-call mental health professional, crisis hotline, ambulance, or in extreme cases, the police.

For accounts of problematic behavior from organizers, see Ballou (2020), Harder (2021), and Pohjola (2021).

i) Engaging with police

Sometimes, the organizers may have no choice but to call the police, such as in the case of physical assault leading to serious injury. Furthermore, in some jurisdictions, failing to call the police about a potentially-criminal incident may itself be a criminal act. Finally, if you or any of your staff feel endangered, e.g., by physically aggressive posturing, calling the police for backup may be a wise decision.

However, note that we strongly recommend avoiding calling the police in most other situations; unless a crime has been committed and the participant in question agrees to answer questions, police intervention may do more harm than good. Keep in mind many players from vulnerable backgrounds may feel highly uncomfortable with police officers and not perceive such authorities as allies, e.g., due to sexism, racism, homophobia, classism, ableism, or other forms of past discrimination. Engaging with

the police or the legal system can sometimes cause retraumatization and prolong experiences of harm, and many situations can be handled within the community without involving external authorities.

c) Community toxicity and dysfunctional group dynamics

More insidious issues that can cause problems within role-playing communities are toxicity and other forms of dysfunctional group dynamics (see e.g., Anderson and Nielsen 2018; Boccamazzo 2023). While such behaviors are unfortunately common in human social groups as a whole, they are especially challenging in role-playing groups that otherwise meet people's needs for self-expression, creativity, and social connection.

Toxicity refers to situations in which the overall persistent state of the community is one of excessive criticism and polarization between factions or individuals within the group. Of course, sometimes critique is necessary and even beneficial for a group to grow, but excessive criticism can lead others to feel unappreciated, rejected, or even bullied. When a norm is established in the group of excessive rules lawyering (Dashiell 2017, 2020), criticism, gossiping, or other forms of fracturing and factionalizing, those behaviors become the default mode of engagement for some players and cause others to want to disengage from the community entirely.

Communities can become challenged by other forms of dysfunctional group dynamics as well. While dynamics such as the Drama Triangle may be rewarding to play in-game, in which characters embody a disempowered web shifting between Persecuter, Rescuer, and Victim (Karpman 2014), such dynamics within off-game communities can quickly exacerbate conflicts. If the group has *hierarchical status and power structures*, many players will likely feel disenfranchised, and may even feel uncomfortable advocating for themselves, e.g., with safety mechanics (see e.g., Algayres 2019b). In other words, you can have structures in place for players to communicate their needs, but if they do not feel safe doing so or feel their needs will be ignored in favor of higher status players, that can cause major problems.

Such power structures can also bleed-out from in-game social dynamics, for example people holding positions in the court in a fantasy game also being treated as high-status off-game. Indeed, sometimes these positions actually require a certain degree of responsibility, e.g., holding up the structure of the game by running important scenes, being involved in the governance outside of the game (see e.g., Budai and Hammock 2014). Players are sometimes only considered for such positions if they have already established themselves as strong role-players, have excellent costuming, fighting, or leadership skills, or are otherwise known by the organizers. Such power structures may be off-game, for example organizers and their friends often have higher social status than newcomers to a community. These issues can be exacerbated if organizers are thought to be showing favoritism toward some players over others, e.g., by providing them with exciting side-plots over others, or if organizers choose to date players, especially if they are much younger, e.g., *grooming* (Harder 2021).

Importantly, power and status are not inherently bad things. Indeed, they are inherent to social structures, and failing to understand them or acknowledge their influence can often lead to these problems, e.g., assuming everyone is considered equal and feels included, simply because you hold those values and assert them to your players. Power dynamics are often present that are completely outside of our control due to off-game societal oppression, such as racism. For example, an off-hand racist comment made by a character in a historical game might make a person of color wonder if they are actually accepted as part of the group off-game or may raise alarm bells of harassment. Humans are highly attuned to their placement within a social group and can be sensitive in situations in which they fear ostracization, even if the people with status have no intention of being exclusionary.

Other forms of dysfunctional dynamics can arise in any community but are especially complex with the added layers of role-playing. For example, online communication is often challenging in many social situations, but can be even more difficult when adding online role-playing; potential confusion between in-game and off-game behaviors; lack of off-game calibration; or “ghosting” in a discussion. Even the time commitment required for online engagement before a larp can cause stress for players who have more responsibilities. Furthermore, online discussions about the game often require moderation or may become toxic and inflammatory, so consider how much online engagement you wish to encourage or discourage.

Interpersonal relationships of many kinds can become complex, for example experiencing bleed-in of one’s aggression toward one’s sibling affecting their in-game social dynamics as characters. As mentioned before, sexually or romantically intimate relationships can affect groups in general, but are especially complicated in role-playing communities (Bowman 2013). Some players may not want to play romance or sexuality outside of their off-game relationships or experience jealousy bleeding-in to the game and out into off-game dynamics. Unexpected *limerence* can occur, in which a player experiences feelings for a co-player after role-playing a relationship with them, which can cause emotional or relational complications off-game (Harder 2018). Furthermore, breakups can disrupt the community, e.g., an in-game couple in a campaign play who are central to the cohesion of the group breaking up off-game; co-organizers having a messy divorce and the players feeling pressured to take sides.

Furthermore, casting practices regarding gender and sexuality can be quite complex and sometimes unintentionally exclusionary (Oinonen 2025). As examples, casting players who are asexual or aromantic being to enact characters who engage in sexual and/or romantic behaviors can cause issues (Wood and D 2021), as can only offering heteronormative relationship roles (Paisley 2015) or cis-gendered characters when players have queer identities (Strenros and Sihvonen 2019; England 2021). While designing gender-neutral characters can help, in practice some queer folks may feel that their identity and history are not considered, erased, or otherwise not possible to express (Saitta and Svegaard 2019). Furthermore, if a member of the group misgenders someone or is dismissive of their sexual identities in-game, such an experience can feel painful and marginalizing. Lack of calibration and/or agreements about what behaviors are permissible in-game can often exacerbate these issues.

Importantly, playing romance and sexuality can be incredibly powerful and even transformative for some players; thus, you may want to include such content, e.g., when working with a queer target group or as a part of a sex education intervention (Grasmo 2025). However, in other cases, such play may distract from your transformative goals or be inappropriate for the target group, e.g., with adolescents learning problem solving skills in an educational environment. Also, playing dysfunctional relationship dynamics within games can often provide important insights about off-game patterns of behavior for players, especially when de-roling and emotional processing is emphasized (Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2022).

On the other hand, placing content aside, RPG communities can be transformative for players from queer backgrounds if their practices are inclusive (Greywood 2026). Additionally, feeling safe enough to explore or express one's queerness through a game can embolden players to feel safer doing so in other contexts (Baird 2021; Baird and Bowman 2022; Femia 2023; Sottile 2024).

d) Bleedhunting, cultures of hardcore, and emotional flooding

Along these lines, we must acknowledge that while emotional intensity holds risk, it is precisely that risk that is appealing to some players. For example, the thrill of combat, taking calculated risks, and potential to lose one's character may fuel interest in playing tabletop games like in OSR *Dungeons & Dragons* groups, or participating in battle larps in which permanent character death is possible. Sometimes, players seek out objectively physically or psychologically challenging experiences in order to experience strong emotions, such as in the Nordic larp movement and adjacent communities, which experiences that Markus Montola dubbed *Type 2 fun*: not fun in the moment, but rewarding in hindsight (Nordic Larp Wiki 2023; Hoekendijk 2026). While such larps often have activist intentions or are meant to promote prosocial democratic ideals off-game, the in-game experience is often one of oppression, violence, or other forms of suffering (Johansson et al. 2026; Waern et al. 2026). Some players seek out these experiences precisely due to the strong bleed that can affect them not only during but immediately after the game, which has been termed *bleedhunting* (Nilsen 2012). An example of seeking out oppression in-game is a phenomenon dubbed the *torture queue* by Juhana Pettersson (2023), in which players steer their characters toward scenes with villains, sometimes literally wait in line to be oppressed in-game.

As a result, some communities valorize high intensity experiences with few safety structures surrounding them, which has been termed the *cult of hardcore* (see e.g., Bowman 2017), although is more precisely described as a culture rather than a cult. If safety culture emphasizes that players are more important than games, a culture of hardcore prioritizes intensely emotional play experiences over open discussions of consent and calibration; often, players within such groups assert that consent discussions or safety mechanics interfere with their immersion into the game. In these cases, radical individual expression is considered of primary importance. In other cases, the emphasis may be on maintaining the aesthetic consistency of the game in terms of structure, genre, message, or theme.

While such games can be organized responsibly, they can also lead to a form of peer pressure. A common statement within such groups is that players who experience psychological difficulties in such environments should either manage it themselves or leave the community. While sometimes it may be true that a player is not a good fit for a specific game experience, such assertions can be an aggressive form of boundary policing, similar to hazing, i.e., if a player wants to be part of the group, they must be able to handle extreme experiences without complaint.

While hardcore experiences can be transformative, our model emphasizes off-game safety as critical to preserving the transformational container, ideally for all players, not just some. However, you should be aware that some of your players may come from a hardcore play culture or may be resistant to safety structures. Be prepared to defend the values of your organization, whatever they are. We recommend practicing responses to criticisms one way or another; while we want to avoid completely shutting down any legitimate critiques, we find it most helpful to be able to explain the rationale behind specific safety mechanics, structures, or philosophies.

Importantly, significant risks are involved when a person experiences emotional flooding, i.e., when their executive functioning becomes temporarily impaired during overwhelming emotional experiences (Gottman 1993). While this state can be desirable and pleasurable for some players, it can also lead to situations in which players are not able to fully advocate for themselves, making consent practices challenging. While some designs allow for such *red zone* play, e.g., having minimal safety mechanics during play and strong trust-building practices before play, we recommend a more measured approach (Bowman et al. 2024b). When people experience emotional flooding, their bodies may unconsciously respond to the fictional situation as if it was a real threat. They may *freeze*, unable to say no or even check-in with themselves to see if they consent to such actions. Alternatively, they may *flee* and find a place to isolate. They may *fight*, becoming physically or emotionally aggressive outside of the bounds of the game. Most insidiously perhaps, they can *fawn*, behaving in an accommodating way in order to appease the person in question.

Freezing and fawning are particularly difficult to distinguish from fully consensual situations. Some safety systems require the participant to actively self-advocate, such as saying a specific safety mechanic or even noticing when a boundary has been crossed, which is not always possible in a freeze state. In such systems, if a person does not state their boundaries, they are assumed to be passively consenting to whatever is happening. For this reason, other safety systems place responsibility on each player to check in with one another when enacting sensitive content or if any ambiguities arise regarding consent. Fawning is especially difficult to discern from enthusiastic consent, especially if the behaviors look similar. One way to consider the difference is that with enthusiastic consent, a player feels empowered and able to openly ask for what they want or positively reinforce behavior they want to encourage. Alternatively, fawning is a coping strategy arising from a place of disempowerment meant to disarm potential threats from others through reassuring or flattering behaviors. Similarly, a player

having a fight or flight response during a game could be mistaken for good role-play in certain contexts. Thus, we suggest a trauma-informed perspective when considering your safety implementation practices.

Notably, some players enjoy playing in high intensity situations in which such mechanisms are activated. For example, in a horror game, experiencing one's survival instincts kick in might be thrilling precisely because of the bleed effect from character to player. Some people find such experiences transformative, especially if experienced in a trusting environment. Regardless of the genre, our definition of a safer transformational container focuses less on pushing people into brink play and more on staying within one's growth edge rather than exceeding it (see Chapter 5 in *TRGD* for more on zones of safety, challenge, and risk).

e) Burnout, overinvolvement, and problematic gaming

Another risk that can sometimes emerge in any community in which players feel highly devoted is burnout. Burnout occurs when a person pushes past their capacity for engagement repeatedly, which can commonly happen in creative, expressive, or community-centered activities. In a state of burnout, a person may have emotional or even cognitive or physical difficulties performing certain tasks they used to complete with more ease. Burnout is sometimes paired with physical exhaustion, depression symptoms, extreme angst, or anxiety around performing such tasks.

Burnout can happen for organizers (Holkar 2022; Bailly 2023; Friman 2024), but also for participants. When we experience *harmonious passion*, we are able to engage in the activity in a way that is conducive to our psychological well-being (Vallerand and Houlfort 2003). Unfortunately, sometimes *obsessive passion* can emerge, in which we continue to engage in the activity even when our capacities are depleted, which can have long-term effects (Lavigne, Forest, and Crevier-Braud 2011). Furthermore, when tied to activities we usually enjoy that are strongly connected to our identities, and/or performed in communities important to us, we may not realize when we slip over into obsessive passion.

Other factors described in this chapter can contribute to burnout; such as difficulties with online communication; interpersonal strife, unmanaged bleed; experiences of betrayal or lack of trust; feelings of exclusion; issues of harassment; and/or extended bouts of community toxicity. The added emotional weight of these experiences can overwhelm the mind, making engagement more arduous and costly. Such situations are rife for resentments to form and calcify, as well as for people to overgive in a desire to “fix” the situation, i.e., performing the disempowered role of the Rescuer in the Drama Triangle (Karpman 2014).

While *overinvolvement* (Fine 1983) in any social group or activity can lead to psychological challenges, we also refrain from using the term addiction as it has a specific meaning in terms of physiological symptoms. Role-players sometimes exhibit behaviors associated with *problematic gaming* (Griffiths et al. 2015); although

perhaps more common in video games that incentivize continuous play, problematic gaming refers to engagement that interferes with one's life in ways that cause them psychological distress or interfere with their daily responsibilities. While what counts as problematic gaming is up for debate, in general, we do not recommend organizing games that incentivize consistent participation without clearly established periods of de-roling, de-briefing, and returning to daily life. Some organizers of campaigns, for example, forbid role-playing between game sessions. Similarly, the purpose of a transformative game should focus on the impacts on life outside of the game. While the game itself is a powerful experience, a transformative process should emphasize integration practices after the game session (Bowman et al 2024a).

Consider how many game sessions are truly needed to achieve gains in your players' transformative goals. If continued socialization and creativity are your goals, one approach would be to offer a transition period in which you close the container of your specific game, perhaps giving a participant the chance to facilitate, then encourage your group to create and run games on their own with one another based on the same principles.

f) Legal risks

Each context also has legal risks to consider (see e.g., Karlsson 2016). If you are running an event in a rented location, you may need to purchase event insurance. Depending on the country, you could be liable for any injuries that occur during the event. In the United States, for example, some people create a small for-profit Limited Liability Company (LLC) that can absorb costs from lawsuits, but you may still be held liable if criminal neglect is established by the court. You might also be liable for anything illegal that happens, including under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Murdock 2018). Consent issues are not only an ethical issue within your community, but potentially a legal one too; having sex with an intoxicated person or someone under the age of consent may have legal consequences in that country, so we recommend educating yourself, your safety team, and your players about the local law, ideally in a Code of Conduct. You may decide that permitting alcohol and other substances is more trouble than it is worth, as the more inebriated they are, the less easy players may find it to emotionally regulate and read signals from others that their behavior is crossing a line. For more information about the risks involved with alcohol at role-playing events, see Holkar (2017).

Other legal issues sometimes arise, such as the police investigating due to what they perceive to be strange behavior or loud noises. This can happen, for example, when playing outside in a public park. Make sure you have at least one point person who has the job to explain calmly what you are doing to the police. We do not advise having your players do this, especially if they are immersed into their characters and/or inebriated. Ideally, you can reassure the police the play is just a theatrical performance or simulation and they will understand without further investigation (Minor 2014). Similarly, you may get questions from other authorities, e.g., school administrators, if they have not been properly onboarded (see Chapter 2).

Related to this: thoroughly consider issues of noise when deciding on a location for your game, as such interruptions or threats from neighbors may be more trouble than the site is worth. Similarly, if you are playing in a public or semi-public space, expect to have onlookers try to interact with your group. They may ask players to explain what they are doing or, worse, may see unusual behaviors as an invitation and attempt to participate or act aggressively in a way that feels unsafe and/or non-consensual. Again, you may want to give an organizer the responsibility to explain what is happening.

Furthermore, in role-playing scenes, onlookers might misinterpret our playful behavior toward one another involving escalated conflicts as threatening, which could lead to police being called, or, in serious cases, criminal charges issued against organizers or players. Carefully consider what behaviors you are encouraging if you are asking your players to enact their characters in public space, e.g., brandishing weapons onlookers might mistake as real. Make sure you are prepared to provide reassurance that everyone is safe and consenting. Thus, we strongly recommend playing in fully private spaces whenever possible.

5.5 Safety in specific contexts

As we will discuss throughout this chapter, safety practices will likely need to shift depending on your implementation plan, your target group, the logistics of your location, and other relevant aspects of your context. Here we make some general comments about safety considerations in our three forms of transformative role-playing games: transformative leisure, therapeutic, and educational.

a) Transformative leisure

Transformative leisure games in some ways have the most lenient requirements. One need not be a trained mental health professional nor educator. Players have less overall expectations of care and continued support throughout their transformative experience, although notably, expectations will vary from player to player, with some expecting more scaffolding and support than others. While some role-playing communities have developed loose ethical guidelines or safety recommendations, these recommendations are not codified into expected professional practice (cf. Atwater and Rowland 2018). Thus, ostensibly, such organizing should incur less time commitment from you or adherence to strict regulations.

However, these ambiguities can sometimes work as a disadvantage for leisure organizing. Organizers may struggle to set boundaries with themselves between work and leisure time (Pettersson 2021). Players may be unsure what expectations of care they should have after an emotionally charged experience. Set clear boundaries with yourself and your players about what the container will and will not contain. Make sure players understand the difference between a transformative leisure experience and a therapeutic container. Direct them to therapeutic or crisis management resources if necessary.

b) Therapeutic

On this note, as a reminder, therapeutic role-playing games are facilitated by or work in collaboration with mental health professionals or paraprofessionals. As discussed in *TRGD*, other risks are important to note when working with groups with mental health challenges. These include:

- Having a lack of training in working with a specific target group;
- Working with players with delusional tendencies;
- Having difficulties maintaining confidentiality and privacy within the group; and
- Including group members with incompatible personalities or mental health challenges.

Importantly, neither emotional flooding nor burnout is related to the moral panic of “losing touch with reality” exemplified in films like *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), in which the main character becomes so overinvolved (Fine 1983) in role-playing he cannot distinguish fact from fiction. While our emotions can overwhelm our executive function and our body can respond to events as if they are real, we still understand the difference between the social reality outside of play and the fictional parts of the game.

This point is important when discussing role-playing, as such beliefs from outsiders have resulted in stigma historically, especially in the United States (Stark 2012; Laycock 2015), but also in other countries like Sweden (Müller 2011). If a person demonstrates inability to distinguish fiction from reality, they are in a state of psychosis called delusional tendencies that requires immediate psychological care. Early research claimed that role-playing games were not recommended for such clients as they can supposedly reinforce delusional tendencies (Blackmon 1994). However, more recent research demonstrates the potential of therapeutic role-playing combined with digital representations to help schizophrenic clients who hear malignant voices self-advocate while the therapist role-plays the voice (Leff et al. 2013; Craig et al. 2018; Kleeman 2024). That being said, role-playing games may be inadvisable for clients with recent traumatic experiences, acute psychological distress, certain conditions, and/or significant cognitive impairment; clients who are actively suicidal or violent; or who have acute psychotic symptoms (Ezhumalai et al. 2018; Novotney 2019).

c) Educational

As discussed in Chapter 2 and in *TRGD*, educational role-playing games can take place in informal, nonformal, and formal contexts. Just as with therapeutic settings, these spaces often have specific expectations: the teacher is meant to guide students through an educational experience. Formal education usually takes place in a classroom setting or another space codified as educational and may even have legal and financial agreements attached to it, e.g., a teacher agrees to instruct a group of students for a certain amount of money, resulting in some sort of educational

credential. Nonformal education is usually a bit looser in terms of commitment, such as experiences in museums, community centers, afterschool programs, or other spaces. Informal learning experiences can happen in leisure environments as well, but have specific educational goals attached to them, e.g., learning a craft or exploring a historical period.

In our model, educational role-playing games require a specific type of framing that emphasizes the learning objectives of a curriculum, whether state-mandated or developed by the instructor. Generally, this means participants should receive information before and/or after the game about the educational content and the game activities should tie directly to these goals. However, in many cases, it also means that teachers have a legal responsibility to provide care for students and monitor them, especially when working with minors. It can also mean that teachers have an ethical responsibility to consider what content is appropriate for students at what age and developmental level. They may be held accountable for their choices from administrators or parents. Therefore, informed consent is incredibly important when possible, detailing the planned activities for these stakeholders and explaining any content ahead of time when possible. It may be legally necessary, for example, for parents to sign a consent form and students to sign a similar assent form. When conducting research, you will likely need to seek ethical approval to work with minors (see Chapter 7). While this may feel restrictive, it can forestall potential problems down the road and provide some accountability for your practice.

d) Other contexts

i) Pervasive play

Role-playing games are often held in private, contained spaces, in part to avoid disruptions from onlookers, but also because risks can increase when playing out in the world, i.e., *pervasive play*. First, ethically speaking, people in the external world do not know you are role-playing, so unless you disclose this fact to them, you are effectively deceiving them (Montola, Stenros, and Waern 2009). They may be compelled to help your character -- or harm them, more worryingly -- based on a faulty premise. Second, your behavior might be concerning to them, e.g., getting into a heated argument in a public space or threatening violence.

Deeply consider whether or not pervasive play is appropriate to your game setting and what potential harm could come to your participants, external people, or yourself if something goes wrong. Consider what alibi (Deterding 2018) you are providing your players with the game's affordances provided by the setting (Gibson 2015; Lampo 2015). For example, students role-playing experts at an art gallery in *Mantles in the Museum* (Cox and Lewis n.d.; Cox and Lewis 2023; Cox 2025) are unlikely to be highly disruptive, since discussing art is what people normally do in those spaces. However, if you make one of the characters an alcoholic who has been sleeping with another character's wife and characters end up in a drunken fistfight, you have seeded elements

that may end up in a police visit. Consider what authorities you need permission from and proactively discuss your project with those individuals, for example the museum's manager.

ii) Travel and remote locations

Another consideration is the risks involved with traveling to and from your event. While of course we cannot be responsible for all aspects of our participant's lives, consider what responsibilities you may have in terms of travel. Is your site difficult to visit without your help? Will you help coordinate travel to the site, and if so, what are the associated costs? Is there a possibility an emergency might happen while on site and a player needs to be taken to the hospital or fly back home? Do you have a vehicle and driver available to facilitate this? If a player ends up stranded somewhere on the way to your event, what will you do? When working with underage people, for example on the way to larp at a field trip site, what permissions and insurance do you need to take them there and play on that site?

Will they be out in the wilderness with no phone signal and, if so, what will you do if they need medical assistance? Is the terrain easy to navigate or potentially dangerous? Where is the closest hospital? Consider what you might do if a natural disaster occurs, which have become increasingly common in recent years. While your options might be limited, planning for contingencies is wise.

5.6 Safer play

Implementation of safer play is already discussed in length in Chapter 5 in *TRGD*, including the many strategies that exist for setting the container before, during, and after the game that aim to establish a perception of safety among your player base. Such practices help establish mutual consent and serve as a form of scaffolding for transformative experiences (Haarman 2026). The following section will aim to deepen this discussion with a focus on details about implementation rather than reiterating what we have said before, so please refer to that chapter before reading further here.

a) Safety team logistics and responsibilities

As mentioned in *TRGD*, we highly recommend having a safety team for your game. We recognize that, in many cases, the game can only have one facilitator for practical reasons. In such games, in which the facilitator is also the organizer, one person has the responsibility not only of maintaining the structure of the game, but also tending to the emotional needs of the players. Note that game facilitation is often quite different from emotional care and may be difficult to shift between. If a player is overwhelmed or in crisis, either that player's needs will go unmet because the facilitator is focused on the game, or the game tends to break down to assist the player.

In the first case, the player may leave the space, which in some cases is helpful, but in other cases may be risky, e.g., if outside the game is crowded public space and the person has nowhere private to be. For this reason, we recommend having a safety

team member available either on call or in-person to provide support. You may be able to rely on existing resources for this support, e.g., mental health professionals in your same clinic, safety team members at a convention willing to be available, or school counselors. Furthermore, when possible (i.e., not in highly mandatory situations), we recommend using The Door is Always Open technique, which assures players they may opt-out and leave the room for any reason, but also requests they check in with the organizer later if possible to give an update on the player's status. In some cases, such as elevated states of anger, it may be preferable for the player to leave the space until they feel calm enough to engage.

In the second case, depending on the agreements of the game, the facilitator may be able to help the player process their character's feelings in-game, e.g., when the character is experiencing something emotionally overwhelming the player. In other cases, switching to off-game processing is preferable. If the group container supports such processing, it might be a beneficial experience for everyone involved, as the group can help provide support. However, in some cases, the facilitator may need to bring the player somewhere private. We recommend giving the other players something to do in-game when possible, e.g., keep role-playing, plan tactics. Alternatively, you can allow them to engage in emotional processing while you leave about their experiences so far.

However, if having more than one safety team member is possible, we highly recommend it. For example, therapeutic tabletop facilitators will sometimes have one facilitator focused on running the game, with another present for emotional processing. Note that not everyone present needs to be a mental health professional in this case if working in tandem with external mental health professionals, for example, who will provide emotional care later. However, we do recommend that safety team members have basic training, e.g., in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA). You can also guide your team through crisis management role-playing scenarios related to role-playing game-related situations in preparation for events (Steele, Hart, Stavropoulos, and Bowman 2016). In other situations, several mental health professionals may be helping one or two clients at a time.

In larger games such as larps, we recommend having a separate safety team from organizers with logistical and facilitation duties. Running larps can be quite stressful and involve many logistical details during run-time. Ideally, the safety team is not responsible for such details and instead focuses entirely on holding space for players who need support. If you have in-game safety team members, e.g., facilitators who have a character and are known in-game and off-game to be support staff, make sure these players are not highly involved in the plot of the game or necessary for key scenes (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017; Atwater and Rowland 2018).

Such facilitators can sometimes help the player process their emotional reactions through the character to keep them involved in the game, e.g., in cases of confusion, overwhelm, bleed, or anxiety about game-related matters. In other cases, the facilitator may choose or be asked to take the player off-game to discuss, which we recommend doing in a quiet, ideally empty room, such as space designated explicitly as a safety

room. Notably, in many cases, players simply need a little downtime, support, and help strategizing how to reenter the game in a fulfilling way. However, in more serious situations of acute crisis or harassment, safety team members should be trained in how to respond, e.g., through clear guidelines for steps to take (and not to take) detailed in an Internal Procedures document (see e.g., Living Games 2018b). We will discuss these situations in more depth later in this section.

Also, at least one safety team member should be on staff off-game during the official waking hours of the game. This member may wait in the safety room, or be somewhere else easy for players to find, as waiting can feel isolating and safety work can sometimes be a solitary and alienating experience already (see e.g., Berthold 2024). One strategy is to leave a walkie talkie or phone number in the safety room, then direct players to alert the safety team member if they are somewhere else on site. Additionally, the safety room should be shown to players during the initial tour of the site along with explicit instructions on how to contact team members in case of a crisis.

Having more than one off-game safety team member can not only provide camaraderie, but also can help with specific situations, e.g., if the team member has a conflict of interest in a specific situation or does not feel able to engage for their own well-being. Also, in high intensity games, more than one player may need care at the same time. In some cases, organizers will also keep on retainer an neutral external safety team member, i.e., a mental health professional or mediator uninvolved with the community and therefore not prone to conflicts of interest. Safety team members can also have different roles, e.g., having distinct personnel for handling safety reports/safeguarding, emotional well-being/welfare, accessibility needs, and illness or trauma responses (Fraser 2026).

Whenever possible, your safety team should include people from diverse backgrounds, considering factors such as culture, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, neurodiversity, language, and other factors. While this principle is not always viable to implement, remember that people within your play group may not feel comfortable approaching the safety team if they do not think their perspective will be taken seriously. Including team members especially from marginalized backgrounds can be helpful, which can include abuse, neglect, and/or trauma survivors, e.g., adults who had Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE). The flipside of this practice is that such members have their own sensitivities that could get activated in these situations and may often take on responsibilities of emotional care due to a feeling of concern for others based on their own experience. Make sure you are considering how to care for the safety team as well, including shifts in which members are off-duty, as well as procedures for how to handle a specific situation in which one member cannot be involved in the decision making due to a conflict of interest or emotional overwhelm.

Along these lines, safety is not only the purview of the safety team or the organizers. In transformative play especially, players should also feel some responsibility of caring for each other to the best of their abilities. As in situations where a safety team member may need additional external support in a psychological

emergency, e.g., from a crisis line, players also need to gauge how much care they can provide before guiding their co-player to a safety team member. In spaces where everyone takes responsibility for one another, many situations can deescalate rather quickly, e.g., if someone feels overwhelmed and another player can take them briefly off-game and/or offer a hug.

Also, while safety team members may in some cases need to mediate disputes between players, be clear about what kinds of situations you will handle versus are outside of your purview. For example, you might decide to make clear that interpersonal disputes that do not include clear Code of Conduct violations are beyond the scope of your responsibility. Some players may think a safety team member is a mental health professional available to have impromptu sessions and process deeply personal content. In therapeutic games, a safety team member may indeed also have counseling experience, but they are there in this case primarily for crisis management, not in-depth counseling.

Also, safety team members are usually not also responsible for medical emergencies. We recommend calling these folks “medics” or making a distinction between physical safety and emotional safety team members.

For an example of large-scale safety team implementation in the German larp *Drachenfest* (*Drachenfest ug Haftungsbeschränkt 2002 -*), see Weber, Donker, and Heinrich (2020).

b) Codes of Conduct and Internal Procedures documents

As discussed in *TRGD*, a Code of Conduct refers to a document that states expectations of participants for proper behavior and explicitly states what improper behavior looks like. In extreme cases, improper behavior is usually qualified as harassment, physical, sexual, or emotional violence. Harassment is usually detailed to include specific situations, such as racism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, ageism, and others (see e.g., Living Games 2018a). It can also include sexual encounters with an inebriated person, stalking, taking unwanted photographs, or other behaviors. Some Codes of Conduct also include Guidelines for Encouraged Behavior, i.e., what constitutes behaving well, not just improper behavior.

Importantly, a Code of Conduct should detail the actions an organizing team might take if they receive a report of improper behavior. A Code of Conduct is not only useless if not enforced, but can cause players to feel ultimately less safe at your game. The Code will usually have an email address for the safety team, who receives such reports. Ideally, you will list all the people who will have access to these reports and a statement. While we agree in general with the “believe the victim” ethos, we recommend avoiding blanket statements like “We have a 0 tolerance policy” and instead taking each report on a case-by-case basis, as the response is unfortunately rarely clear cut. Rather we recommend providing a range of actions you might take, such as: watching the situation; issuing a warning to the participant; asking the

participant to avoid being in the same space as another person; asking the participant not to drink or make sexual advances at the event; removing the person from the event temporarily or permanently; banning them from future events; or notifying the authorities. Many people are anxious about Codes of Conduct because they assume the worst possible outcome will occur. A safety team has a responsibility to make sure any actions taken a) do not do harm to the person issuing the report, insofar as that is possible; and b) are reasonable based on the nature of the situation in question.

However, you should assess what your legal capabilities to enforce such a Code are in your given situation. Running events in established public organizations, for example, may mean you are constricted by their legal rules and cannot actually promise to remove someone from an event. In such cases, your organizing team may not have the authority to make the decision and rather the report should be handed to a specific person in the university hierarchy. Sadly, in many cases, these organizations are limited in terms of their ability to enforce such policies, or the time constraints make a swift decision impossible, e.g., if a committee needs to meet within the university to discuss, which could take weeks or months. On the other hand, if you are running a private event, in some countries, you have the ability to remove a person for any reason and do not actually need the Code of Conduct at all (although we recommend following one whenever possible). In other countries, people cannot be removed even from private events, so make sure to check the local laws when drafting your Code of Conduct.

Similarly, avoid making promises you may not be able to keep regarding confidentiality. While we recommend confidentiality when possible, in practice it is often difficult to maintain in more serious situations. For example, some people making a report want no action taken because they fear retaliation, but in the case of a serious crime, action may need to be taken regardless. Also, it often does not protect community members moving forward if only one person knows about the report; in some cases, you may want to warn organizers within your game or in other games. We discuss this issue in more detail in the next section.

In terms of run-time procedures, we recommend creating an Internal Procedures document for safety teams, but also even if you plan to run an event by yourself. In crisis situations, it can be challenging to remember what to do (and what not to do). An Internal Procedures document details what members of the team should do if someone makes a report, including who should (and should not) be notified, who makes a decision, how to appropriately provide care for the person reporting, including recommendations for what to say (and what not say). The Living Games Internal Procedures document (2018b) also gives guidelines for how to hold one's body, i.e., non-verbal communication, as well as what procedures to follow if the situation exceeds the level of care the safety team can provide, such as referring the individual to a crisis line or counseling services in the area. It should have a list of important emergency numbers for specific situations. We recommend making sure the safety team has this document with them at all times during run-time or know where to find it easily, e.g., a printed copy in the safety room or downloaded directly to their phone. This practice is especially important if your site has weak Internet service or you have limited access to electricity, such as in the case of outdoor games.

c) Vetting, intake, and flagging

For transformative games especially, we recommend having some sort of vetting process for your players. In some cases, you may have no choice, such as being assigned a specific classroom of students who are all required to take part in that activity. Indeed, in this case, your job may very well be to keep them in the room in some way, whether they are engaged in the role-play or not. However, in many cases, organizers can make clear choices about who to include and exclude. Sadly, while in an ideal world, all games will be suitable for all players and inclusion rather than exclusion should be our default goal, dynamics can be strongly affected if the players chosen are not a good fit for the group for various reasons.

Mental health professionals often have an intake process, in which they discuss with potential clients why they are seeking assistance, what challenges they are facing, and what therapeutic goals they are seeking to accomplish. During this process, the mental health professional assesses the client's current state of well-being, as well as if they are likely a good fit to work with the client themselves. Planning group therapeutic interventions like tabletop role-playing game groups makes this process more complex, as the mental health professional must also assess whether or not the clients have complimentary needs and diagnoses. For example, including a player with a narcissistic personality disorder into a therapeutic group focused on teamwork and empathy might be a good learning experience, but their behavior might also derail the goals of the game. Similarly, placing a client with a recent history of enacting violence on others in the same group with a domestic abuse survivor may not be the right fit. Indeed, the more sensitive the situation in terms of trauma or symptoms, the more care should be taken in vetting for group fit.

In some cases, during the intake process or after one or more sessions, the mental health professional may decide the specific client is not suitable for group work at that stage in their process (or ever). In cases like these, the mental health professional may be required ethically and legally to provide a final one-on-one session with the client, which can be used to help process the situation and explain why removal occurred with an emphasis on the client's well-being.

In many cases, the vetting takes place by an external party, e.g., a prison warden selecting participants for a role-playing game intervention based on good behavior or a school superintendent selecting special needs students for the group. In these cases, the facilitators should mention to these authorities any behavior issues during the game that they cannot handle as a group and are causes for alarm, e.g., violent, sexually harassing, or other highly disruptive behaviors.

While mental health professionals have some of the most strict requirements in terms of providing emotional care for clients and avoiding placing them in harmful dynamics, these principles can also be used in other situations. When running non-formal educational interventions, some organizations require an application process including both written and verbal interview components. In such situations, the

selection process may focus not only on safety aspects, but also more minor issues, such as the applicant's experience level, qualifications, or level of competency in the language(s) used during play.

Another strategy now common in role-playing game communities is *flagging*, although organizers sometimes disagree on the most ethical way to implement it (cf., Brown and Teerilahti 2024; Wood and Holkar 2024). Flagging is a process in which the organizers send potential attendees a list with all potential participants and ask for flags from the player group. These flags specify whether a person is a safety risk, whether a person cannot play if that player attends, or whether they would simply prefer not to play with that person. While any organizer can send out a flagging list, we recommend the safety team be trained in how to handle flagging sensitively and handle communication with participants about the flags. When possible, sensitive information should be kept contained based on your Code of Conduct, e.g., the entire player group or organizing team does not need to know a flagging process happened, unless the issue, for example, involved a convicted crime.

Ideally, the person who flags should have some assurances that the information will only be revealed to certain team members. However, if you cannot assure that, make it clear in your Code of Conduct, e.g., “While our general policy is to keep information confidential between safety team members, please be advised that in serious situations, we may need to contact the authorities or share information with other organizers.” In serious cases, information may need to be shared between organizers in different groups, e.g., if a player has been banned for harassment, but is likely to sign up for a game run by another organization. However, keep in mind that sharing such information, especially on a list that is shared with multiple people, can have legal risks, e.g., of defamation suits if the person flagged feels substantially harmed.

We discuss specific strategies for flagging in *TRGD*, as well as some of the concerns around the process, as debates are ongoing about specific flagging practices and their potential to cause harm to participants, e.g., if someone is flagged simply because they are disliked or awkward to role-play with, leading to exclusion. Our recommendation for flagging is to be as specific as possible about what each flag is intended to communicate, e.g., if someone can be a bit rude, they are probably not a red-flag safety risk, in which case a yellow-flag indicating the player would prefer not to play closely with them would be more appropriate.

We also recommend not having a blanket policy on flagging, meaning “if someone gets a red flag, they don't get into the game, no questions asked.” Instead, flagging should initiate a conversation with the player who raised the flag, asking for clarification as delicately as possible. It may be the case that the red flag was issued for behavior that does not actually constitute a violation of the Code of Conduct, e.g., cheating on one's partner, stealing from a game organization, or “ghosting” someone after a sexual encounter. Also asking what the player is actually wanting to happen, rather than assuming. In some cases, they may not want you to take any action at all, but are asking for an accommodation, e.g., can we find a way for me to avoid this

person. Depending on your logistical situation, the answer may unfortunately be no. If you have a 10 person game in one room, it may be impossible to keep two players separated. Letting the player know this ahead of time allows them the option of opting out in less serious situations, e.g., a recent breakup making being in the same room with the person painful. However, serious red flag situations will likely trigger your harassment process as described in your Internal Procedures, e.g., initiating a safety report on the incident(s) in question.

We recommend allowing flagging at all stages of the process, not just when the participant list is announced. A common strategy is to have an email address that only safety team members can access where players can send in concerns or reports of Code of Conduct violations before, during, or after the game. If you are not available during run-time to check email, give participants onsite a way to contact the safety team, as described in the previous section.

Importantly, you need to decide as an organization if you are willing to take action on incidents that did not happen under your purview, e.g., at your event, on your social media groups. If a player stalks another player outside of a gaming context, do you have a responsibility to evaluate whether they are a good fit for your larp? Some organizers believe such situations fall outside of their purview. However, we recommend an approach that seriously evaluates a) whether this behavior shows a pattern with multiple similar events; b) the severity of the behavior, even if it happened only once; and c) whether or not the behavior could happen at your event/affect the players in question.

Another important decision is how you will communicate a flag to the flagged person. Do they simply not get a space in the game? Do you tell them why they were flagged? Do you communicate with them over email, a video call, or in person? Each of these approaches has pros and cons. Remember that you also open yourself and others to potential harassment if you engage too directly with the details of the situation. A cleaner solution may simply be to not offer the player a space, or to simply say you think they may not be a good fit for the group for other reasons. The latter approach will likely provoke additional questions that you should be prepared to answer honestly while protecting the confidentiality of the involved parties as much as possible.

Finally, keep in mind that your role as an organizer is not to be a detective and determine all the facts of a situation, nor are you a judge and jury to decide if the person is legally guilty. Your job is to keep the players at your job as safe as possible, which sometimes means making hard calls without clarity on the truth of the situation. We recommend considering who the most vulnerable people in your game who have not caused harm are and what their needs might be when making these difficult decisions. While many of us are highly empathetic and believe in inclusion and rehabilitation for individuals who transgress, such rehabilitation is often outside the scope of the community's responsibility and may actually place members at risk if unsuccessful. Worse, you may be unintentionally signalling to your players that the needs of someone who has transgressed another's players boundaries is more

important than the needs of the person who was harmed or other vulnerable members of the community. Remember there are many ways to provide care to people that are less risky, i.e., choosing to independently help the person who transgressed outside of the context of the game. However, keep in mind your own boundaries and the limits on your own energy as well. We will discuss this latter point in more detail in the section on organizer safety.

d) Safety work and harm

We have spent a good deal of space discussing vetting, intake, and flagging, because this topic is one of the most important to consider as an organizer concerned with safety. Unfortunately, any decision you make may cause harm to one or more parties. If you fail to respond to a potential safety concern and someone is subsequently harmed in connection to your event, you will likely be held responsible. Your players may feel betrayed, which will no doubt not only run counter to your transformative goals, but also threatens the integrity of your container moving forward. Such situations can sometimes be escalated, e.g., players declaring public boycotts of your events or factions taking sides publicly on social media.

Sadly, such situations can also occur if you do take action and members of the group do not agree with your decision, often based on limited or incorrect information, or on strong loyalties to the accused. In such circumstances, in order to protect the accuser, you usually should not counter or correct inaccurate assertions, nor provide clarifying details, especially if you have sworn confidentiality when receiving the report. Such work can often feel like a lose-lose situation, with the safety team blamed for behaviors they did not initiate, but are somehow expected to adjudicate, often with limited facts or contradictory accounts. We wish all events were free of harassment and harm, but unfortunately, these situations must be addressed for responsible organizing. We wish we had easy answers for you, but hopefully this section has given you some food for thought in how you might design your safety implementation procedures.

We will discuss anti-harassment movements and responses to serious violations later in this chapter.

5.7 Pre-game communication and workshops

As discussed in *TRGD* and in other places in this textbook, considering pre-game communication is an essential part of your implementation strategy, especially when considering safety. Players should know what they can expect from the play experience and what will be expected of them (Koljonen 2016a). Such communication can happen informally, but we recommend having a centralized location where all information can be found, such as a cloud drive or a published website.

This information should include several factors from a safety perspective:

- a) **Game structure:** Are there safety workshops and debriefs that the players should attend? Are they required as part of the experience or optional?
- b) **Safety mechanics:** Which safety mechanics, if any, will your game use? Provide these ahead of time so players can familiarize themselves with them. For a list of examples, see Chapter 5 of *TRGD*.
- c) **Calibration:** How will players calibrate with one another? Are they expected to contact the co-players ahead of time and negotiate boundaries? Will time be provided in the workshop to calibrate? Are they expected to calibrate during run-time as well, e.g., through discreet off-game conversations?
- d) **Limits:** What topics or themes are not part of this game? How can players negotiate limits on content, if at all, before or during the game?
- e) **Trigger warnings, content advisories, ingredients lists, or other parameters:** Are certain sensitive themes embedded in the design or likely to arise? What sorts of physical actions will be required of players? You should find a way to communicate these from the outset. Provide a list using the term of your choice of themes they will likely not be able to avoid if they play this game, allowing them to opt-in or opt-out accordingly.
- f) **Session 0 or other gatherings:** Will you provide a pre-game planning event such as a Session 0 in which people can negotiate content or calibrate boundaries? Will players fill out the *Consent in Gaming* (Reynolds and Germain 2019) checklist or a similar tool with one another, indicating content they do and do not want in the game? If you provide a live info session, will you record it to make sure people who cannot attend can catch up?
- g) **Pre-play:** Are players encouraged to communicate, discuss backstory, and make plans for their character relations before the game? Are they encouraged to engage in pre-game role-play? Or should they avoid such play? Will you moderate or otherwise adjudicate such play, e.g., if you have conflict resolution mechanics in your game? If so, you may be permitting a practice that you lack the time to enforce. Remember that while pre-play can be exciting, some players have more time for it than others, and it can lead to bleed occurring even before the actual event (see e.g., Svanevik and Brind 2016). If you have very specific activities planned, you may want to discourage pre-play, as players may arrive at the game with an unrealistic expectation about the game experience or hack your game to take it in an undesirable direction.

5.8 During the game

Many safety and calibration tools exist, as we discuss at length in *TRGD*. Please refer to Chapter 5 for details. Here, we will discuss some of the factors to consider when choosing safety tools based on your implementation plan. Many designers adopt safety techniques they have read about or experienced elsewhere or design new ones without testing them. Understanding the general principle behind the technique is important, e.g., is it meant to be able to communicate non-verbally if someone is too triggered to talk? Is it meant to discreetly signal to others without breaking the silence in a nonverbal game or interrupting conversation?

Here, we offer some considerations based upon the purpose of safety and calibration techniques that you can then apply to specific tools based on your implementation plan and the constraints of your location. Central to all of these practices is that self care (Dalstål 2016) and community care are of primary importance.

a) Opting-out

Is it possible to opt-out of your game? If so, to what degree? Can a participant simply watch, can they leave, or should they engage in an alternative activity? Be careful about assuring participants can opt-out in situations that are mandatory. Furthermore, consider how opting-out will affect the game design and other player's experience. If opting-out is possible, but will dramatically negatively impact others, the player may feel pressured to continue regardless.

For example, in *dyadic play* (Bowman 2024; Wind 2025), the majority of the play experience is tied to a specific co-player, even when playing in an ensemble. The structure of the game often depends upon that dyadic principle. Therefore, opting-out of dyadic play will actually be quite disruptive. Consider backup plans in situations like this. Do you have another member of the organizing team who can step in and fill this role? Can you restructure the relations on the fly, e.g., asking one of the dyads to become a triad? If a player has a lot of in-game responsibility, such as running major rituals, classes, or other scenes, how will you replace them or restructure the game if they opt-out? Can anyone step into those roles or do they require a specific skillset to make the game run smoothly?

In short, just as role-playing requires a sort of mental flexibility, so does redesigning on the fly, so considering these contingencies ahead of time is wise.

b) Removing content

Can players remove content during the game or in the workshops? If so, how will you ensure all participants know that content is removed? Or will the content only be removed for the people in the immediate vicinity? This issue is especially problematic in larger games. For example, if your in-game workshop involves removing slips of paper with sensitive content on them, like domestic violence, but not everyone

has seen the slip was removed, they may accidentally bring in that content through emergent play. In some cases, removing content may not be possible, in which case, those themes should be clear at signup and reiterated during workshops. For example, if nudity and/or overt sexuality is an important component to the game, such things should be stated clearly up front.

Again, we recommend providing players options for what to do if they feel overwhelmed by content in the moment, such as leaving a scene, tapping out of a physical encounter (Koljonen 2016b), or approaching a safety team member. Another approach is to allow players the option to “fade to back” or “veil” the scene instead of playing the content out explicitly (Edwards 2003). Additionally, consider how contained the theme is. If the content is only part of one character’s backstory out of one hundred players and will be unlikely to get played out, you can indicate to players that the content is present but limited in this way. You can also make sure not to cast players in characters connected to that backstory. This practice is far more challenging in smaller games like tabletop.

What happens if content is removed that someone feels is strongly important to their experience to play? This situation can be tricky. One option is to have zones (Bowman 2018), in which certain types of play are permitted to occur but are not visible to the rest of the players, e.g., a tabletop facilitator bringing a player into a side room for a scene or players taking each other to a meta room or black box to play the content after obtaining consent.

c) Verbal, nonverbal, and physical signals

Many safety mechanics require signaling to other players in a special way, indicating that off-game, the player is making a request or answering a query (see Chapter 5 of *TRGD*). If these signals are verbal, make sure your environment is conducive to clear verbal communication. If you are playing in a loud party atmosphere with a DJ, a role-played conversation may be difficult enough without being able to parse a verbal signal. Similarly, if your game requires nonverbal methods of communication, like eye contact, the ability to see the movements of one’s body, or tapping-out such signals might be challenging in chaotic environments such as a night-time combat scene in the woods or when the person is restrained (Koljonen 2020). Physical signals such as colored ribbons or stickers on someone’s badge might be difficult to discern, e.g., for someone with low sight or color-blindness. While it is difficult to fully account for every situation, consider a backup plan, such as permitting players to initiate an off-game discussion or using a combination of verbal and non-verbal signals. Finally, if a player has the option to use a safeword or gesture of some sort, e.g., to pause or cut the game, make sure you clarify to the group whether the entire group must cut or the players in the immediate surroundings. Some signals might be important for cutting the game entirely, such as “Medic!” with a fist up in a medical emergency, whereas a small group cutting a scene may not require everyone to stop play.

d) Safety and calibration discussions during play

Some games forbid off-game discussions during the run-time of a game, i.e., always remaining “in-character.” While this playstyle is valid, we believe off-game discussions safety and calibration during play can be quite important. Our boundaries may change from the beginning of the game to the end. An in-game dynamic may not be working for us and may need adjusting for the game to run more smoothly. A specific behavior may be triggering. We may change our minds about how we would like to advance the narrative. Being able to discuss these things discretely with co-players can sometimes make the difference between a positive and negative play experience. On the extreme end, failing to calibrate can sometimes mean boundary violations, players feeling pressured to ignore their own boundaries, and/or experiences of harassment. Thus, learning how to discuss consent with co-players is paramount and organizers can create structures to teach these skills (Mutsaers 2019; Kok and Mutsaers 2026).

From a practical perspective, how can players best have off-game discussions in the space you have selected for the event? If running a tabletop game at a convention, perhaps you instruct them to pass notes to each other. If all players are engaged in a scene with all players in a single room, perhaps you indicate that whispering in each other’s ear is an off-game calibration signal. If you have multiple rooms and leaving for a side conversation will not interrupt an important group scene, you can direct players to find a quiet place to calibrate.

e) Safety rooms

For many games, we recommend having a safety room where players can go off-game to decompress from noise or overstimulation. In some situations, you may not have this option, for example, when playing in a classroom setting where students are not permitted to roam the halls unintended, or when you have only one small room to run a tabletop game.

However, if you have the possibility to feature a safety room, you should consider several factors. Is the room easily accessible from the play space or isolated? Have the players been shown where the safety room is? Is the safety room being used for other purposes, e.g., prop storage, off-game player chatter, or logistics planning? If so, we do not recommend calling it a safety room but instead calling it an off-game room or logistics room. While some players might feel better after spending some time in the logistics room, others might need more privacy or less stimulation, e.g., it might be uncomfortable to cry in front of the organizing team.

Does your safety room have harsh, bright or soft, diffuse lighting? Is there comfortable furniture, pillows, and/or blankets to rest on? Are the textures cold, rough, soft, or warm? You may consider adding some quiet immersive activities, such as headphones with soothing music or the option to choose one’s own music, coloring books, or journaling supplies.

Sometimes, the safety room may have multiple people in it, such as a safety team member helping a player process their experience and someone else in the room quietly coloring. This practice should be fine if everyone in the room feels comfortable with it, so check in. However, if you are receiving a report about a breach of the Code of Conduct, you should ask the reporter whether they want total privacy or not. Many will not feel comfortable disclosing details when others are present. Others may be hesitant but go along with others being there, so use your best judgment about the right course of action to best assist and protect the player.

In practice, the vast amount of players who come to the safety room likely are overwhelmed or confused about where to take the direction of their play. While these emotional responses can be intense in their own right, we distinguish them from safety reports or acute crisis situations. Therefore, you might consider having another space if possible, such as the off-game logistics room or a separate *consultation room*, signaling to players these responses are normal and having specific staff assigned to them.

5.9 After the game

In *TRGD*, we discuss several post-game practices to help players transition back to life and process their experience. Again, here we will discuss the general principles behind these practices from a safety perspective, as well as considerations when implementing them in your specific game circumstance.

a) De-roling

When players are engaged in their character, they are experiencing the alibi of play (Deterding 2018). They may have performed actions as their character that they find embarrassing, confusing, or even repugnant. They may fear the judgment of others and, indeed, others may be judging them, especially if they are confused whether or not in-game aggression was meant to be harmful out-of-game (Bowman 2013). They may have a hard time emotionally when transitioning from the game world to daily life for various reasons, such as challenging life circumstances to which they must return.

De-roling is a ritualized practice that allows participants to signal to the group (and to themselves) they are shifting psychologically from one state to another (Setola 2026). For some people, this shift might be immediate, especially if they are skilled at compartmentalizing feelings and experiences. For others, it may take days or even weeks to fully de-role. The ritual is not a signal that de-roling is complete, but rather initiates the process, indicating also that we should now consider the actions performed and things said as originating from the player, not the character. Small ritual actions can help with this process, such as shifting one's tone of voice, removing one's character badge or clothing and placing it in the circle, or putting on one's daily glasses.

Players can verbalize the shift, such as going around the circle saying, "I was Hathor, I am now Linda," and/or re-framing their perspective to the third person by saying "Hathor did X..." rather than "I did X..." Similarly, players can switch to referring

to the actions of other players during the game as attributed to their character, e.g., instead of “when you yelled at me...” saying “when your character yelled at my character”; instead of “I hated you so much,” saying “my character hated yours so much.” However, speaking in the third person can be challenging for some players if they have not fully de-rolled or if they experience their memories vividly from a first-person perspective. It also takes cognitive effort that might be challenging if the players are tired or emotionally overwhelmed.

You may also ask players to go around the circle sharing one thing about their character they wish to leave behind, and one they wish to keep, a common practice in role-playing circles. However, in transformative play in which the goal is to integrate some of the experience or the insights gained into daily life, this practice is also highly potent as a longer debrief, so consider where you might want to place it.

Some de-rolling practices involve interacting as players directly after the game, especially with other players with whom the person played closely. For example, one practice is to list three things that are different about the character and their player. While this practice is helpful for de-rolling and reinforcing alibi, if it is the only interaction players have with each other after an intense play experience, it may not leave space for important off-game conversations. Again, since we are working with transformative play, a hard shift compartmentalizing character to player may actually interfere with the process, with alibi becoming more of a hindrance than an aid (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). Consider practices that might make the process more gradual or gentle, easing the player out of the character rather than taking it away quickly.

b) Debriefing

When players are leaving a game experience, they often feel compelled to *narrativize*, speaking about their experience as a linear narrative and a memory. While this process can be helpful both as a form of de-rolling and also, paradoxically, as a form of nostalgia for a time now past, it can shift the tone to humorous or excited storytelling, which can skip over the deeper and more vulnerable parts of the processing needed for integration. In other words, it serves as a method of distancing oneself from the events and the character, while also reframing the narrative into an amusing anecdote. It can also feel highly alienating for players who are not yet ready to distance themselves or need to process more complicated emotions. Such narrativizing is often unmoderated, meaning the players who feel most comfortable engaging often storytell more readily.

Before narrativizing can take hold, we strongly recommend debriefing. As discussed in depth in TRGD, debriefing can take many forms, including *structured*, *semi-structured*, and *unstructured*. It can also be verbal or embodied in some way, both of which can be helpful; in this chapter, we focus on verbal debriefing. Because we recommend working with specific emotional, intellectual, and/or educational processing questions tied to specific learning objectives, we recommend a structured

debrief. In this format, each player is given the same amount of time to speak on a topic without interruption, conversation, or crosstalk from others. This practice is especially important for individuals who are feeling confused, overwhelmed, sad, or angry to have space to express these more complicated emotions. It also makes space for players who are shy or more introverted to express themselves without having to compete for conversation space. Importantly, debriefs should focus on the player's individual experience, rather than accusations or blame toward other players for actions their characters took.

Debriefs can take place in small, medium, or large groups. By "large group," we refer here to debriefs that occur with the whole play group, which may not be feasible in many implementation situations, or may take too much time. One helpful practice is having a mixture of small or medium group debriefs with more personal questions focused on personal experience and emotional processing, then bringing everyone back to the large group for more intellectual or educational processing. In this way, the debriefing makes space for the more emotional content to be processed first, clearing the way for intellectualization gradually.

You may choose to break the players into small groups based upon their closest co-players, or randomize these groups. Debriefing with the participants one played closest with has the advantage of many shared points of reference and, possibly, established trust and intimacy. On the other hand, if the player needs to process something upsetting or confusing that happened between these close relations, they may feel less inhibited when discussing with randomized players. Similarly, one recommended practice is to assign *debrief buddies* after a long-form larp who are expected to check in on each other in the coming days or weeks, especially in games with intense or sensitive content. Having a debrief buddy who is familiar with the game, but was not part of the character's inner circle, might be highly beneficial as a more objective sounding board.

Sometimes, logistics require that debriefs be shorter, but we do not recommend removing them completely, as that can often interrupt the transformative process. From our perspective, if your game lacks time for an immediate debrief with all players, you should likely redesign your implementation plan. For example, some long-form games remain in-character until the very last minute, then cleanup happens and players are expected to leave the site. In other cases, the game breaks late in the evening, and players are asked to choose between the optional debrief and the afterparty, potentially missing the opportunity to interact with people they played close with if they choose the debrief. Other models allow for a late-night afterparty when the game ends, then provide a debrief in the morning. In each of these cases, the design is encouraging a hard shift out of the character and back into one's daily social persona, whether to focus on logistics or socializing.

Importantly, not all players feel comfortable or ready to debrief directly after a game. As with all activities, ideally you can allow players to opt-out in these cases, with the overall expectation that debriefing is a necessary part of the game experience.

However, logistically consider how this might be possible. If the player cannot leave the room, can they do an activity such as journaling, drawing, or listening to headphones in the same room but away from the group? If they leave the space, are they expected to check back in with the facilitator later? Can they sit in the debriefing circle and listen, but pass when asked to speak? Sometimes, just being in the space can be helpful and feel inclusive, even for players unready to share.

Similarly, consider what the best approach is to conducting the debrief. A common strategy is to hand out a debriefing script to other organizers or players who volunteer to lead the process with their group. Another common practice is to break up into separate rooms. Unfortunately, unless all facilitators are briefed and trained in debriefing, they may go off-script, not moderate effectively, or focus overly on sharing their own experience. For large games, we recommend choosing the debrief leaders carefully, emphasizing leaders with skills in emotional intelligence, empathy, and holding space for others.

Another useful practice when running smaller groups in a large room is to have only one debrief facilitator who keeps time and announces each question with a microphone if necessary. This facilitator either assigns small group facilitators from the organizing team or takes one volunteer from each group responsible for maintaining the structure. The small group facilitator raises their hand to indicate their group is done. When all groups are done or time runs out for that round of questions, the facilitator moves on. If a group finishes early, they are permitted to talk quietly among themselves but should avoid narrativizing too heavily to maintain the serious tone.

You will also need to consider which practices are best for your specific target group. For example, young children will likely have a difficult time staying still and talking for long amounts of time. In this case, you might consider designing a mixture of embodied and verbal debrief, such as making a physical action while saying a short phrase describing their experience. You will also need to consider time constraints. Structured debriefs longer than an hour may cause players to lose focus or get antsy. One option is to allow players to leave after the first forty-five minutes, but hold space for others who want to debrief longer. Alternatively, you can set up additional debriefs in the days and even weeks following the event for players who might need it, or ask one or more players to volunteer to run the debrief without you present if they are willing to do so.

c) Post-game processing and integration

In Chapter 2 of *TRGD*, we discuss several examples of practices to help integrate the game experience after play, arranged in the following overall categories: creative expression, emotional processing, returning to daily life, interpersonal processing, and community building (Bowman and Hugaas 2019). Here, we will focus more on why a variety of practices might be necessary.

Individual needs vary in terms of alone time, conversation, sleep, and connection within the community. While our model values verbal processing through formalized debriefing practices, especially when aiming for specific transformative goals, we understand that individuals prefer processing in different ways after a game. Some may need to discuss all the events that happened with one another for days. Others may need to journal or compose their experience or epilogue in a creative writing exercise. Some may need to paint, draw, design games, or engage in other creative outputs. Others simply want to be around other people from the game, connect with community members outside of the game, or touch base with the role-playing community as a whole, whether online or in person. Some analyze the game design, write documentation pieces, or compose academic work based on the experience. Others need to reconnect with the life they had before the game, grounding back into familiar patterns of daily routines. Some may need to engage in another immersive activity, like watch several episodes of a television show, go to the gym to work out, or sleep for many hours. In some cases, relationship dynamics might need to be renegotiated, for example if a player discovered something important about their gender or sexuality during play or developed feelings for a co-player outside of their relationship.

All of these practices could be considered part of the transformative process if the focus remains on one's transformative goals, whether those established by the game design or goals they have for themselves. In other words, players should seek to distill important insights, consider next steps, and take action on goals. From our perspective, transformation is both a prolonged and sustained state of change, but also can involve short- and long-term processes of change that require effort to keep going (Bowman et al. 2024a). For example, if someone makes a work of art based on their journey and hangs it in their house, they have turned something ephemeral and temporary into a lasting piece of material reality called *ephemera* (Kemper 2017, 2020; Cox 2018), ideally one that is infused with the insights they took away from the game. Whenever they walk by, they have the potential to recall and reflect upon where they are now in their transformative journey.

Finally, as mentioned before, some players may have little emotional reaction at all, easily returning back to work or school without a sense of disruption. However, we do recommend that even in these cases, the players attempt to identify ways to distill meaning from the experience. If they cannot, they can focus on their transformative goals and what some helpful next steps might be, regardless of the game experience they had.

d) Availability and communication with players

You can also foster a transformational container surrounding your event by carefully considering how you represent yourself in the community and the types of interactions you have with its members. One important factor you should include in your implementation plan is the degree of access the players will have to you. If you are a single facilitator, you will likely need to do most organizing tasks unless volunteers

offer to help. You will be expected to have a considerable amount of *face time* with your participants, which is not always possible when you have many other tasks to complete. Erving Goffman (1955) describes *positive face*, a stance we adopt toward others that invites interaction. He contrasts positive face with *autonomous face*, which is usually present when we are hard at work at a consuming task (as described in Cahn and Abigail 2014). We switch between these two stances throughout any given work day, especially if we work with people, and organizing events is no different. Considering organizing and even playing role-playing games can involve labor (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016; Torner 2019), be careful not to overload yourself with too many tasks if you need to also be present for your players. If you are embroiled in duties requiring autonomous face, you may be unable to provide the positive face needed to reassure your players and help them feel safe; indeed, they may interpret your behavior as not having time for them or caring about their needs.

This principle is not only important to help players meet basic social needs within a group of inclusion and support, but especially critical when considering safety. Having a separate safety team who is not responsible for run-time logistics makes it more likely that a distressed player will have the team member's undivided attention. Similarly, having a separate effective and available communication team can help players feel welcome at your event and alleviate any anxieties they may have related to props, costumes, travel, social cohesion, or other factors. Massi Hannula (2015) reminds organizers to “remember” the player, presenting clear and thorough communication on the website that anticipates player questions before they arrive. Such communication should especially highlight any accessibility or dietary concerns that the organizers can or cannot accommodate (Butzen 2024a, 2024b; Livesey-Stephens and Gundersen 2024).

In location-based larps with months of build-up, these anxieties can be especially high. Even for experienced players, role-playing means stepping into the unknown on a fundamental level, and many people within these communities report having intense social anxiety (see e.g., Algayres 2019a). While successful experiences in role-playing can help alleviate this anxiety especially over time (see e.g., Varrette 2023), you should anticipate that players will experience high sensitivity before, during, and after the event. Some may even experience anxiety attacks or social phobias. One way that you can help is by trying to be as calm as possible yourself, which can help them feel safer and regulate their nervous system, e.g., making sure everything is in place when your players arrive (Pettersson 2025). On the other hand, authors of this chapter have had personal experience with being too overloaded with logistical tasks as organizers and players feeling less safe as a result of interactions that feel abrupt, which unfortunately can prompt feelings of insignificance or rejection for players who are in a vulnerable state.

Your approach to communication in online spaces is also important to consider. Failing to answer emails in a reasonable amount of time can be perceived as ghosting or neglect. If you have rules around communication, such as “only over email rather than social media,” make those clear. In games that require interaction with facilitators

between sessions, e.g., to handle game mechanics or narrative factors, we recommend setting clear boundaries around when and how this facilitation. Players can become highly emotionally invested in the game, especially if competitive elements are present (Bowman 2013). In ongoing campaigns, for example, perhaps players can send in one “downtime” action between sessions, but are not allowed to chat with facilitators. This practice may sound harsh, but setting clear boundaries with players can often help them feel more safe, because they know where the container begins and ends.

If you will have online spaces where players can communicate between sessions, make sure you have a moderation policy in place. If you do not plan to moderate, make that clear to participants so they understand their own responsibility to self-moderate. We still recommend monitoring these spaces and being receptive to any comments about escalated conflicts or inappropriate behaviors. If you want the ability to take action on safety concerns in online spaces, make that clear to your players in your Code of Conduct.

For more insights into safety practices in games, see Brown (2016a), Koljonen (2020), and Wind (2026).

5.10 Safer community container setting

a) Capacity building for players, designers, and organizers

Role-playing is often an intensely social activity that requires communication on at least two levels: between players and between characters. As we have discussed, it often incentivizes actions and risk-taking that we would normally not do in daily life, including socially transgressive behaviors (Deterding 2018; Stenros and Bowman 2024). Many people who join role-playing games are still working on their prosocial interaction and emotion regulation skills. All of us in our own way are still developing skills in diversity, equity, and inclusion and that work never ends. For more on diversity, equity, and inclusion in RPGs, see Burton, Trammell, and Jones (2024).

Consent culture is a relatively new development in many societies (see e.g., Brown 2016a, 2017a). While social codes may have been present in the past that indicated consent or lack of consent, many of us are still learning how to have constructive and open discussions about consent, including within the role-playing game discourse (see e.g., the articles in Haarman et al. eds. 2026). Similarly, many people are unaware or still learning best practices for trauma-informed. Due to all of these factors, the risk of interactions pushing boundaries, upsetting players, or even causing harm is relatively high.

On the other hand, because players and organizers are becoming more aware of these risks and developing more tools for communicating, role-playing communities can paradoxically feel safer than other social environments for many players, hence their potential as transformational containers. One way to continue to make the container more robust is to provide *capacity building* resources for players, designers,

and organizers. These resources can take the form of written information, such as blog posts, popular articles, or academic papers from community members about ways to improve safety and inclusion within communities. You can also consider ways to encourage people to participate in training, whether provided by you or other authoritative sources, e.g., Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training for crisis management. You can develop and encourage others in your community to develop supportive communication methods, such as those employed by mental health professionals (Diakolambrianou 2021). Examples include nonviolent communication (Rosenberg 2015), social justice mediation (Social Justice Mediation Institute n.d.), and other conflict transformation skills (Taraghi, Bowman, and Khosrospour 2022; Schreiber, Hugaas, and Bowman 2025). An important facet of such communication is cultural sensitivity, which can be challenging in intercultural environments, but also in smaller groups with players from different backgrounds and life circumstances, especially groups that have status discrepancies or players who have experienced varying degrees of marginalization. Resources to support developing skills in cultural sensitivity are recommended, including hiring external cultural consultants and sensitivity readers (see e.g., Kemper 2018; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021; see e.g., Mendez Hodes 2019).

b) Organizer safety

While we have focused almost entirely on care for players in this chapter, organizer safety has become an important topic of discussion in recent years (Lindve 2019;. As discussed earlier with harmonious vs. obsessive passion (Vallerand and Houliort 2003; Lavigne, Forest, and Crevier-Braud 2011), organizers may throw themselves completely into a project, spending exorbitant amounts of time on details that have relatively low impact on players. If a project is not managed efficiently, organizers may struggle to limit themselves to one aspect of the project or have difficulty distinguishing their time as work or play, i.e., the *infinite hours* model of organizing larps (Pettersson 2015). Some organizers may fail to delegate to other organizers, placing a tremendous amount of pressure on themselves to make the project succeed, and potentially putting their health at risk (see e.g., Deutsch 2025).

With such a level of commitment combined with exhaustion, it can be challenging or even debilitating for some organizers to receive negative feedback. For this reason, many larp organizations, for example, request that players refrain from sending them feedback for at least a week until they have recovered from the event, and instead focus on sharing personal stories about their experience, e.g., the Week of Stories. As we discussed before, narrativizing the play experience can be highly pleasurable and help players remember the positive things about the event, as they too may feel emotionally and physically exhausted directly afterward. However, some players feel this process is silencing and that sharing critiques is important especially when the memories are fresh (B. 2024). One compromise is to send out a feedback form right away in which players can discuss their experience, but state clearly that organizers will not read it for another week or so (Montero 2021). Feedback forms also do not hold the same

expectations of a direct response in the same way an email or social media post does. Another option could be to have players email, but avoid opening and replying until enough time has passed for recovery.

However, as mentioned above, when occasional critiques turn into consistent criticism, gossip becomes common, or other issues occur within groups that can increase toxicity, organizers are often placed in a tough position (see e.g., Stark 2014b, 2019). They may feel they cannot make public statements without inflaming the situation no matter how compassionately they phrase their comments or apologies. Such situations can lead to feelings of deep grief, shame, and resentment, which can compound with the exhaustion of overwork, leading to burnout (Holkar 2022; Bailly 2023; Friman 2024) or other mental health challenges.

When addressing safety in your implementation plan, make sure to consider some of the following strategies:

- a) **Redundancies:** Build redundancy if possible into your organizing team making sure another person is able to fill a role if necessary.
- b) **Delegation:** If some organizers tend to take on excessive amounts of responsibility, find ways to help them delegate less critical or difficult tasks to other team members. Make sure their unique capabilities are used most optimally in the project.
- c) **Reduce complexity:** Some creators tend to overdesign, especially when they get excited by ideas or plots. Similarly, larp implementation teams may overdesign the logistical elements, such as sets, props, special effects, or other features. Tabletop facilitators may overthink scenarios, preparing for every possible outcome rather than trusting in improvisation. While this creativity can be fun and fulfilling, it can also lead to increased complexity, which can become burdensome and even impossible to implement effectively. Again, return back to your transformative goals. Which aspects of this complexity can be reduced and still focus on your aims?
- d) **Boundaries:** Establish boundaries with your players and design team. For example, you can inform others when you will be available and unavailable throughout the week. You can limit communication to specific channels, such as email, Slack, or Discord, then mute notifications until you are able to engage again.
- e) **Emotional support structures:** Consider ways to build emotional support structures into the team. Just as players may need debrief buddies, it might be a good idea to distribute organizer care responsibilities to certain members of the group. Some organizers may need someone else to answer messages for a while, whereas others may need to process their feelings, and others still may need to co-work over Zoom to make sure they meet deadlines for putting together the budget. Learning how to identify, communicate, and make requests about one's needs is an important life skill, and especially important for emotionally intense practices like designing and implementing role-playing games.

c) Facilitator and NPC safety

You should also carefully consider the ways in which the alibi of play might cause harm or discomfort for facilitators. Non-player characters (Stenros 2013) and supporting characters (Fido-Fairfax 2024) can sometimes be viewed as not “as real” or as “fully human” as player-characters when viewing interactions through a game lens. On the mild end, they can be viewed as plot-delivery vehicles, i.e., to pump for information, or resources to be used, i.e., to throw in front of danger first as a shield to protect the player-characters. In more serious situations, especially in games featuring combat, sexual coercion, and other forms of aggression, their physical and emotional safety may be at risk. Such situations can often be highly arousing on an emotional level that may make it more difficult for players to use clear judgment in the moment, e.g., players experiencing a surge of adrenaline and hitting too hard with a boffer sword; making sexualized threats without negotiating consent first. Such risks are also present on the facilitator end, especially when the power dynamics are highly imbalanced in the group.

You are responsible for setting the safety norms of the group. If your game allows for physical combat, you can provide workshops on how to engage in combat in lower-risk ways, e.g., escalating slowly and cinematically; using the lightest touch with boffer weapons. You can provide norms for how to communicate with one another, whether nonverbally, verbally, or both, if a boundary is transgressed. If you are aiming for a more hardcore playstyle, make that very clear ahead of time to set expectations appropriately (Koljonen 2016a). You may need to remind your players during workshops to be especially careful with non-player character safety and set clear boundaries for what is and is not acceptable. You should also carefully consider facilitator safety after the game. If facilitators were responsible for running scenes with sensitive content, we recommend making sure they are able to debrief as well, e.g., engaging in villainous, sociopathic, violent, or otherwise antisocial behavior. Such debriefs can take place among the organizing team alongside the player debrief at a different time from it, but are often better to keep separate. Without such debriefs, facilitators may be left with troubling feelings or cognitive dissonance around behaviors they were expected to enact as a service to the game.

d) Anti-harassment movements

Over the past two decades, anti-harassment movements have become more widespread, especially with the advent of social media. Such movements often feature personal accounts of physical, emotional, and/or sexual violence, e.g., the #MeToo movement. In some cases, these accounts are only intended to ask for support from community members; in others, the accuser will reveal the name of the accused, a person who allegedly violated either the accuser themselves or a third party. The term “allegedly” is often used in situations in which no legal ruling has been made proving the harassment occurred in the eyes of the law. In reality, the vast majority of violations never go reported and many fail to provide enough evidence to support a legal decision

in favor of the accused, as their testimony is often not enough. Furthermore, when engaging with police and lawmakers, survivors are sometimes subjected to humiliating and/or retraumatizing experiences, having to reveal themselves emotionally to public scrutiny and sometimes physically to doctors. If the case is not proven legally, they may be sued for defamation of character, especially if the accusation has the potential to harm the accused's professional reputation. Defamation cases can be emotionally and financially devastating for survivors, often compromising their own ability to be successful in the world afterward.

While false accusations certainly occur, they are highly uncommon; some statistics assert that false accusations make up less than 10% of cases (Weiser 2017). While this statistic includes accusations when evidence has been fabricated and proven false, indicating malicious intent, it can also include situations deemed “unfounded,” such as the accused believing they were assaulted, but a lack of forensic evidence being found to support the account beyond reasonable doubt. While any percentage of false accusations is unacceptable, particularly involving malicious intent, the vast majority of the time, accusers are telling the truth from their perspective. Often, survivors are not believed, especially if they are from marginalized backgrounds and accusing someone of high social status and privilege. Even if their account is believed, the details of their personal experience may become matters of semi-public or public debate, as community members deliberate on whether the described behavior actually constitutes a violation. While sometimes financial gain or custody battles may be at stake, in many cases the risk involved in coming forward with an accusation is exceptionally high. For this reason, the common default in consent-based communities is to “believe the victim,” as members often do not have enough information to make a conclusive assessment of the situation. Informal *whisper networks* are often developed, in which community members share names and accounts with one another without an official legal accusation.

Even in situations that never involve the legal system, the risk of social ostracization is high for both the accuser and the accused in such situations, which can be emotionally debilitating. Humans have a deeply ingrained need to receive support and acceptance from our community. Humiliation, rejection, public publishment, or ostracization can cause great harm not only to the individuals involved, but also to the entire community, especially when such matters become public and members feel compelled to take sides. When these situations happen in public debates, for example, retraumatization of survivors of other violations within the community can occur, e.g., when watching previously trusted members of the community make excuses for the accused, disbelieve the victim, or minimize their experience. For example, in situations of statutory rape or other forms of grooming, in which older and more established members of the community engage in romantic or sexual behavior toward younger and/or more vulnerable members (Edman 2015; Harder 2021), opinions may be divided among members whether or not such behavior constitutes a violation, especially in communities that encourage sex positivity. On the other hand, when community members realize a trusted person is capable of causing great harm, especially if the

harm is deemed intentional, it can cause a crisis of trust and intense grief for each individual in their own lives, as is often apparent on social media when a beloved figure in popular culture is accused. Sadly, when violations happen, they can be traumatic not only for the people involved in the incident, but also everyone around them.

Unfortunately, such dynamics are often present in role-playing game communities and are not entirely avoidable when implementing role-playing games. Anti-harassment movements have also occurred within role-playing communities (see e.g., Nilsdotter 2014; Brown 2016; Algayres 2018). Safety violations are receiving greater attention in livestreaming role-playing, e.g., when *Far Verona*'s Adam Koebel as a facilitator narratively described a scene involving sexual assault toward a player-character without negotiating consent or introducing safety mechanics (Hall 2020). If you are lucky, you will never have to deal with a safety violation of this nature, e.g., if you have the same group of players over a long period of time who have established and maintained trustworthy conduct. Even in such optimal conditions, responsible organizing involves making a risk assessment and a plan for such situations, planning *as if they will occur* rather than assuming they probably will not. Unfortunately, people with predatory tendencies are often drawn to relatively permissive social spaces such as alternative and playful communities because transgressive behavior may be more tolerated. Planning how to handle such situations ahead of time can not only help your participants feel more safe, but hopefully will alleviate some of your own fear. As mentioned above, typical plans include safety teams, Codes of Conduct, and Internal Procedures documents.

While a thorough analysis of approaches to handling violations is beyond the scope of this chapter, importantly, different philosophies exist with regard to how the community should orient itself toward the accused (see e.g., Cazeneuve 2020). Some organizing teams absolve themselves of all responsibility for handling violations between players, an approach we do not recommend. Such inaction not only can lead to further violations due to lack of consequences, but also can backfire within the community, leading members to distrust you or require some sort of public apology or accountability for perceived neglect. In extreme cases, the community may split or dissolve into *schisms* (Bowman 2013) over such inaction.

Some communities simply forgive the person and ask them not to engage in the behavior again, which unfortunately can often lead to further transgressions in this community or others (Brown 2017b), e.g., if the individual in question is not skilled at consent practices or has predatory intentions. On the other end of the spectrum, some teams have a *zero tolerance policy*, in which any accusation immediately results in removal of the accused from the event and/or community. Such approaches are often indelicate and do not take into account the nuances of interpersonal dynamics, which is why we advocate for a *case-by-case* approach and a range of possible consequences rather than baseline ostracization.

Some communities engage in *restorative justice* and/or *reformatory justice* approaches, which vary in terms of format. Generally, these formats focus on ways to rehabilitate and reintegrate the accused into the community, e.g., through dialogue with the harmed person (Restorative Justice Council 2016); accountability procedures; and/or requiring the person attend therapy or anger management classes. A similar approach is *transformative justice*, in which moves beyond the interpersonal to understand and address the root causes of harm in the community, such as systemic injustice (S. 2020).

Such practices are usually easier with relatively minor violations, e.g., young people hitting too hard with boffer swords out of anger (see e.g., Dineen 2025). In more serious cases, while sometimes successful, such approaches can often decenter the experience of the survivor in question, as well as the legitimate concerns of others in the community who no longer feel safe. Therefore, any justice process needs to be survivor-centered and cannot involve pressure on the survivor to go along with the process, i.e., the survivor should proactively ask for such a procedure. Otherwise, these processes might lead to retraumatization, especially if the survivor's account of the incident is scrutinized, minimized, or dismissed by others in a public forum. Sadly, such behaviors can also cause secondary traumatization; when community members witness someone else's experience being diminished, it can trigger painful intrusive memories of such dismissive reactions from others in one's own history.

Whatever philosophy you adopt, you should make it clear to your participants in some way, e.g., through the procedures listed in your Code of Conduct. Allow them to opt-in to greater or lesser risk. Make clear to them what you will do with a harassment report regarding who will have access and the degree of confidentiality you can realistically promise. If you choose to take action, we recommend asking the person providing the report what they want to happen (or not happen). They may not want you to ban the person, for example, or even approach them. In serious cases, you may not be able to grant their wish, but try to be as collaborative as possible and make sure they are aware of the potential responses and your limits. Also, you and/or your safety team should familiarize themselves with the many resources available regarding these procedures developed within other intentional communities. You are not alone in figuring out how to handle these difficult situations.

Importantly, you should also reflect on your own power within a situation, as well as the relative power your organizing team has over players. Such reflection can help you avoid unintentionally misusing that power while handling incidents. This process can be quite challenging especially for organizers who have experienced harassment and/or marginalization in their own lives; they may not be able to perceive themselves as actually having power and influence, while their players might perceive this power differential more keenly. Furthermore, such reflection can be uncomfortable, especially if it leads to reconsidering past actions through the lens of an uneven power dynamic that the organizer perceived as negligible at the time.

Importantly, power is not a bad thing. Power over can be experienced as pleasurable and even transformative in consensual situations. Unfortunately, the situations we are describing involve exerting power over others without their consent. Such incidents can occur within games, e.g., portraying characters who transgress the boundaries of others (Bowman 2025) and failing to calibrate correctly, or off-game, e.g., maligning one's character without reason, bullying, shaming, or otherwise ostracizing community members, e.g., for not engaging in the game “correctly” (Bowman 2013). Ideally, your community also fosters other forms of power: the *power to* advocate on behalf of other members of the community (Pansardi and Bindi 2021); shared *power with* (Follett 1940) and between participants; and cultivating *power within* (Hunjan and Keophilavong 2010), often called agency or empowerment when discussing role-playing games.

5.11 Conflicts and implementing RPGs

As explored in Chapter 5 and 6 of *TRGD*, conflicts are often present not only in the content of role-playing games, but also within the community itself. We recommend reading both chapters to better understand how conflicts emerge in both design and implementation situations. Here, we will briefly highlight some key issues that can arise and discuss how implementation teams sometimes address them.

a) Class and capitalism

All of us labor within a capitalist system. Some of us have greater access to financial resources and time than others. Technically imagination is free, and thus role-playing games can be a relatively inexpensive form of engagement, e.g., running a weekend larp at a reasonably priced location (Dalstål 2026) or a tabletop game in one's home over the weekend. Many game resources are available online for free, while others may require a relatively minor cost compared with other forms of entertainment.

However, role-playing games can become cost- and time-prohibitive to many players under certain conditions (Torner 2013a). Games that span several days, weeks, or months, even with breaks in between, can be impossible for players to attend due to work and care responsibilities. Conventions, festivals, and conferences can be excellent places for players to try out games with relatively low preparation or time-commitment, but can often involve costly travel and accommodation. Similarly, while many larp organizers aim to make their events as inexpensive as possible, only seek to break even and sometimes even operate at a loss, material costs still exist in terms of props, costumes, scenography, travel, food, and securing the location. *Blockbuster larps* often have special locations that are desirable also as tourist destinations (Fatland and Montola 2015). These games are often inexpensive relative to a regular vacation, with meals and lodging wrapped into the overall price, yet the price can often be exorbitant for people from lower-income communities (Ford 2020) or countries, and lead to commodification of an otherwise co-creative grassroots activity (Seregina 2019; 2022).

Games with *pay-to-win* structures allow players to pay extra money for more experience points, higher status characters, special plots, better accommodations, or other benefits. Such payment can also be in the form of time commitment and some players have greater access to spare time than others. In campaigns of this nature, veteran players who have invested more money and time are often afforded greater status in the community. While such structures are not necessarily inherently problematic, these games often further disadvantage players who are already hampered by their financial circumstances and can reinforce feelings of social stigma, low status, and shame when players compare their in-game accomplishments or capabilities with one another. *Fear of missing out* (FOMO) and desire to experience belonging can sometimes motivate financially disadvantaged players to invest more time and money into a costly game than their budget allows. If you are aiming for empowerment as a goal, such structures can subvert your intentions.

Various approaches exist to address these disparities. Some organizers offer scholarships or subsidized tickets for students or other individuals with financial needs, offsetting the cost when more resourced players pay for higher cost tickets. Sometimes people who volunteer for the event have their costs waived, but effectively become members of the organizing team at that point, as they are expected to perform additional labor. Additionally, organizers can help facilitate carpooling or less expensive shared travel options like renting a bus. Other groups keep a “larp closet,” allowing members of the community to borrow costuming and props throughout the year. Some organizations even provide full costuming to all players as part of the ticket cost. Other organizers offer multiple types of events, giving community members both higher and lower cost options.

When implementing transformative games, the issue of cost is paramount to consider, especially when working with marginalized populations with fewer resources. You will likely need to be proactive in recruiting these populations, as they may not already have access to role-playing communities due to these factors. You will likely need to absorb many costs yourself or find external funding. Some aspects of your implementation plan may need revision. For example, you may have access to an incredible location, but if your participants have no way to get there, your plan is untenable. Similarly, if you have a 4 hour game, but your participants can only play for an hour, e.g., due to work or care responsibilities, then you will need to revise your plan to adjust to their constraints.

b) Marginalized backgrounds and access needs

Access issues are also important to consider with regard to players from marginalized backgrounds, e.g., due to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, class, religion, spirituality, age, physical ability, neurodiversity, trauma, social status, appearance, and others. Many of us experience different constellations of these intersectional factors, which affect our experiences of belonging in various situations. As an example, a White queer player from an economically advantaged background

may feel comfortable navigating a scene about political machinations; however, the same player might feel deeply uncomfortable in a cis-heteronormative romance or sexuality plot (see e.g., Paisley 2015; Wood and D 2021; Neko 2016). We each bring our unique perspectives to games, which enrich them, but also can make social dynamics challenging, especially when working with sensitive content or designs that do not consider how intersectional factors might affect game play.

While recruitment of participants from marginalized backgrounds can help diversify your player base, If the majority of your players are from privileged backgrounds, players who experience marginalization may not be certain they are truly welcome at your event (see e.g., George 2014; Kemper 2025). They may not attend even if you signal values of inclusion in your public-facing materials. If they do attend, they may experience *microaggressions* from other players, such as in-game or off-game “jokes,” inappropriate questions, or exoticising or demeaning comments about their background. Such reactions may not be intentional, but instead reflect internalized norms from society that are exclusionary, e.g., toward trans people (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019).

Furthermore, game content or character enactments may minimize, erase, or represent their background stereotypically (Holkar 2016; Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020); appropriate their culture in a harmful way (Kessock 2014a; Mendez Hodes 2020); or reproduce colonial structures that have historically caused harm to their ancestors (Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020; Kemper 2020). As example, designers, facilitators, and players may:

- Adopt an accent from another culture in a way that offends people, especially if intended to be “amusing”;
- Wear sacred garments from other cultures that are inappropriate for someone outside of that spiritual tradition to wear;
- Adopt or ascribe to others cultural stereotypes that have been used to oppress people from that culture, e.g., “thieves, lazy, greedy, unintelligent, predatory, evil”;
- Reduce the character to one stereotypical facet of their culture without nuance or complexity; or
- Play out stereotypical storylines that reduce the experience of people from that group to one narrative trajectory, e.g., the tragic queer character.

Unfortunately, when we have limited information about another group, we can often rely on this information to draw upon our characterization as designers, but also facilitators and players. The more research and guidance we receive from knowledgeable people such as paid cultural consultants, the more likely we will represent characters with greater nuance and psychological complexity. For guidelines on how to represent people from other backgrounds responsibly, see James Mendez Hodes’ Representation Tier List (Mendez Hodes 2022), also featured in Chapter 6 of TRGD.

Other access issues include compulsory scenes; group scenes that involve nudity, for example, may feel liberating for some players (Edman and Greip 2024), but may trigger fears around safety and make play no longer possible, e.g., for trans players (Saitta and Svegaard 2019). Other costuming concerns can arise, for example, if your larp provides costumes that are not flexible enough to accommodate people with diverse body shapes.

Such experiences may feel like a *fun tax* players have to pay in order to get access to play (Holkar 2016) and they may feel like they need to develop skills in *steering for survival* in order to navigate these dynamics (Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020). They may feel excluded if cliques from the privileged group do not explicitly invite them to activities, even if they are onboarded to the event. In other words, passive forms of inclusion are often not enough to help players feel safe to be vulnerable and trust one another.

Physical access needs may arise, e.g., for people with limited sight or mobility. Additionally, players may have conflicting access needs (Stavropoulos 2022). For example, one player from an oppressed racial or ethnic background may want to play on similar experiences of racism throughout the larp that they experience in daily life, whereas another person from the same background may want to avoid that content completely. One player with anxiety might feel more relaxed with music playing during a game, whereas another may not be able to interact at all due to the background noise. In your implementation plan, you will likely have situations in which not everyone can be accommodated. You will need to make tough decisions and communicate them clearly, some of which may end up happening at the event itself if you fail to plan for it.

However, you may be able to find solutions that are workable for everyone in the situation with some compromises, e.g., only having music in certain areas of the play space. Additionally, in some lucky circumstances, you may find solutions tailored toward one accessibility need that end up being better for everyone, such as greater transparency about the structure and time table of the game (Dolk, Haldén, Isen, Peregrin 2021) or choosing an accessible venue that ends up being physically safer for everyone to navigate and easier for the caterers to access.

Some materials exist providing advice for specific populations. For example, Lea Elias Isen (2019) and Elina Gouliou have translated a document originally in Danish from the Bifrost organization offering advice on making larps more accessible for autistic participants. Suggestions include:

1. “Offer detailed information before, during, and after the event. Many autistic people are challenged by situations that differ from their routine ...
2. Avoid harsh and/or flashing lights ...
3. Offer an option to visit the location before the larp starts ...
4. Offer a room with few stimuli ...
5. Allow support persons to attend for free ...

6. Accommodate dietary needs . . .
7. Be welcoming towards stimming . . .
8. Avoid irony and metaphors . . .
9. Offer alternative ways of communication . . . [and]
10. Be open to feedback.” (Isen 2019)

However, some recommendations may differ depending on the context. For example, Elizabeth Fein’s (2015; 2018) research on a larp camp for autistic youth discusses the importance of metaphor in helping participants express important aspects of their individual experience when structured with clear rules, so these principles may be contextually dependent. Given the range of needs for neurodiverse players, we recommend asking your players what adjustments will make your game more accessible to them. Try to design options that will allow your players to avoid parts of the game or opt-out of scenes that are likely to lead to sensory overload.

Finally, issues arising from language barriers can make games less accessible in global contexts, so attention to translation is also important to this discourse (Evans 2020).

c) Research, team diversity, and consultation

Unfortunately, these dynamics are highly complicated and no easy fixes exist in games or in life for greater inclusion. Covering each circumstance in depth is beyond the scope of what we can provide here. However, in the references for both books, we have included many sources that will hopefully guide you into deeper consideration of factors that can foster greater inclusion and make your games more accessible, e.g., when running online analog RPGs (Marsh and Dixon 2021), or considering invisible disabilities (Kim, Cook, and Foxworthy 2018).

Additionally, when working with specific populations, we highly encourage you to review recent and credible research on the needs of your group, including resources that have been developed by or in collaboration with members of that group, i.e., the common phrase, “Nothing for us or about us without us.” As with safety teams, whenever possible, involve members on your organizing team from as many diverse backgrounds as possible to help flag potential issues before they arise. On the other hand, you should avoid placing marginalized players or organizers in a position to provide labor in educating others based on their background without compensation (Eddy, Samantha 2020). If the necessary backgrounds are not reflected in your team, hire cultural consultants, sensitivity readers, and accessibility specialists whenever possible (Kemper 2018b; Saitta and Svegaard 2019; Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021). You do not have to figure everything out on your own, but also you should feel some responsibility for educating yourself, which might include setting aside some budget. You can also find other ways to give back to the community you are representing (see e.g., Hymes and Seyalioglu 2018).

Importantly, remember that marginalized people are not a monolith (Kemper, Holkar, Kim, Skjønfsjell Lakou, Jones, and Cheung 2018; Erlandsson et al. 2022). None of us can speak for everyone else from the same or similar backgrounds. Similarly, just because we may have experienced oppression or stigma in one area of our lives does not mean we fully understand the experiences of people with different marginalizations. Their sociocultural conditions were likely distinct and their needs may be quite different as well.

5.12 Summary

This chapter discussed many of the risks inherent to implementing role-playing games in general and in transformational containers in particular. These risks include matters related to physical and psychological safety, as well as inclusion and accessibility. Where possible, we point toward approaches that can help address these risks, while acknowledging that extensive discussion of such approaches is beyond the scope of this textbook. Importantly, not all risks can be mitigated, hence deciding among your team what the degrees of acceptable risk will be.

We recognize that viewing these risks in such a condensed format can feel overwhelming. None of us are perfect as humans, nor can we solve the world's problems, as much as we would like to do so. We will make mistakes as organizers. The important thing is to be open to learning, adapting, and growing in service of cultivating safer, more exclusive transformational containers.

Our next chapter will transition to talking more theoretically about the player experience while role-playing so you can better understand what might motivate your players and how they might engage with your game on a deeper level. We will also discuss skills that players can develop to optimize their experience. This information is also important for facilitators, who are, after all, often players in their own right.

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CHAPTER 6

Theory and Practice in Playing for Transformation

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6.1 Introduction

We often talk about the importance of design and implementation to the player experience, but often in a hypothetical way, i.e., what we *think* players will experience when we design. This chapter asks deeper questions based on theoretical, praxis-based, and evidence-based work drawn from substantive play experiences. What comprises a role-playing experience? What do we know about player psychology and motivation? What skills do players need to engage effectively in games? What skills are helpful when playing for transformation? How can players effectively steer toward transformative goals?

This chapter is geared not only at designers and organizers, but as players as well. While some designers and organizers prefer those roles to playing itself, we think understanding how play actually works is critical to these processes. Furthermore, as we discussed in Chapter 6, many organizers play narrative roles in the fiction of the game, so they experience play on a phenomenological level themselves and/or observe it up close.

Importantly, this chapter will present a variety of different theories, principles, and practices, which may align with your understanding of the play experience or contradict it. The goal here is not to posit one theory or framework as superior to others, but rather to offer you options for how to play based upon your transformative goals, as well as interpretive frameworks to better understand what is happening inside and outside the magic circle for your players. As with many of the suggestions in this book, you can take what works best for you and leave the rest, but having a passing familiarity with these concepts will help you better engage with various communities related to transformative role-playing games.

For more on the experience of play, see *What Do We Do When We Play?* (Saitta, Koljonen, Särkijärvi, Grove, Männistö, and Makkonen eds. 2020).

This chapter begins with exploring theories related to the phenomenon of play, especially with relation to personal, interpersonal, and social development. We then transition to providing more practical recommendations for developing skills in transformative play.

a) Facilitator as player

One important aspect of the role-playing process to acknowledge is that run-time facilitators who work with narrative are often players themselves. In other words, they co-create fiction with the player base, even if the function or their play is more structured, limited, or targeted. In some cases, facilitators are responsible for playing every other character in the fictional universe other than the player-characters, which often requires a tremendous amount of creativity, adaptability, and planning, e.g., in traditional tabletop games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*. In other cases, the facilitator may play a specific non player-character (NPC) or supporting character (Fido-Fairfax 2024), in order to help guide play, as discussed in Chapter 4.

While NPCs are sometimes considered disposable in games, they may have surprisingly complex personalities and backstories, and arguably should often be considered characters in their own right (Stenros 2013b) rather than “empty bodies” to destroy (Torner 2015), deceive, or otherwise manipulate as fictional tools. As such, just as players often get attached to their characters, so too may a facilitator experience an emotional connection to their NPC, especially if played for a long period of time. In games that feature physical play such as violence, facilitators playing NPCs need to be vigilant and safety-aware, as players may swarm them as “enemies” or hit them harder than intended in the heat of the moment.

In some games, the facilitator does not play at all, but may be asked to help the players construct a fulfilling narrative arc for themselves, which requires imagination. Additionally, character writers can be said to mentally play a role to a degree when constructing the character sheets and relations, especially if the game is pre-written by the organizers. Therefore, the concepts described in this chapter should also be considered by run-time facilitators, especially if they engage in fiction, but also for off-game organizers like safety team members, in order to understand the processes participants might be undergoing during play.

b) How real are role-playing games?

Whenever the questions around how these experiences can affect and even transform players have been raised, the first question has tended to be “How real are role-playing games?” (see e.g., Hartyándi 2025). Taken at face value, it is quite easy to answer: games happen, ergo games are real. Yet, the question’s intention is rather to ask how “real” are the experiences we have in play to our sensory systems and our brains, especially in physically embodied larps. This question is less clear cut and easy to answer, but many theorists indicate that larps are “true,” meaning that our experiences in play affect and influence us just as experiences outside of play do, yet they are also simultaneously “not real” (Koljonen, qtd. in Brind 2021). In other words, they are experienced as both “real” and “fictional” by the brain at the same time (Lankoski and Järvelä 2012; Järvelä 2019; Leonard and Thurman 2018).

c) Subjective diegesis

One of the most important insights when considering play dynamics, and indeed even defining role-playing games at all, is that each player has their own version of the game in their mind at any given time. Markus Montola (2003) coined the term *subjective diegesis* to describe this phenomenon, meaning that the world of the game is not only filtered through our own subjective perceptions. Indeed, the narrative of a game is not fully understandable without understanding the individual stories of each player-character. A designer can try to describe the plot or storyworld of a larp in broad strokes, but any such narrative will often fall apart when individual play accounts are taken into account. This factor should be considered one of the most potent aspects of role-playing games, as players have powerful firsthand accounts of the narrative relevant to their own unique subjectivity. Awareness of this fact is especially important when considering transformative play; as we have discussed before, while we may set specific transformative goals for any given game, the participants explore through play their own unique needs (Adams 2013; Blackstock 2016; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Walsh and Linehan 2024), desires (Pettersson 2021), goals, challenges, and beliefs.

As we will explore throughout this chapter, players in the same game often have entirely different elements that motivate them, and even distinct lenses through which they interpret the game. For example, one player may be highly engaged in deep role-playing around religious themes, whereas another player in the same larp may be focused upon acquiring resources through mechanical means. Technically, they play the same larp, but the two participants are having vastly different experiences before, during, and afterward. This insight is fascinating especially when considering play spaces as microcosms for human experience and interaction in general; if each of us is moving through life interpreting reality in our own unique way, what is the “true” reality, if such a thing can be said to exist? Such questions move beyond the brute facts of physical reality, extending to the constructed nature of our social world (Montola 2012), and deepen into the individual psychological factors that make up each of our identities and worldviews. Thus, role-playing games are truly fascinating spaces for examining the components of identity and belief, as well as for becoming aware of which aspects are fixed and experimenting with the components that are pliable, changeable, and able to be transformed.

d) Emergence

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, on a more practical level, subjective diegesis is important to understand for people on implementation teams. Just as the common adage states, “No plot survives contact with the players” due to emergent play (Torner 2018a; Bowman 2017), so too is each player unique in terms of the way they experience your game. While such an awareness may feel overwhelming, we invite you to consider it an interesting puzzle to solve: Can you design experiences that appeal to multiple player motivations? Or should your design cater to players who tend to experience games in similar ways? Furthermore, this awareness can be liberating: you do not need to create the “perfect” game, as everyone will end up having their own subjective experience anyway.

That experience is a product of players' own choices, their co-creation with others, and emergent narratives that seem to take on a life of their own. Thus, play is what happens when design, facilitation, participant volition, and collaborative play converge. As discussed in Chapter 2, from a transformational perspective, rather than perceiving emergence as a problem to be addressed, you can also view it as the unique and beautiful part of role-playing as a method. After all, if we wanted to create static storylines under strict authorial control, we would write books or make movies. Instead, we create spaces for players to stimulate their imaginations, projecting and embodying these imaginings together through a mutually negotiated, unfolding narrative -- or, more precisely, cluster of narratives.

Understanding how this process might work phenomenologically and practically is the subject of the rest of this chapter, while acknowledging that consciousness, on some level, will always remain highly mysterious and possibly even unknowable through our subjective human perception. We do not always understand what motivates ourselves, much less others, or what themes might emerge that we need to work through during play. In this way, play can be seen as an instrument on the unconscious, revealing to us what we are actually thinking, feeling, or needing through symbolic structures, narratives, and actions.

In the next section, we will explore theories within role-playing game theory that attempt to answer the question of what motivates players within games. We will also explore the types of immersion and how they affect the play experience. Finally, we will explore the role of alibi, as both a gateway to the deeper aspects of self that can transform, but how alibi sometimes can be a hindrance to that very transformation.

6.2 Player motivations, creative agendas, immersion, and alibi

Motivation is closely tied to the *creative agendas* (Edwards 2001) preferences players have, e.g.

the types of in-game actions they prefer to take, the styles of design they most enjoy, and their conceptualization of what a fulfilling game experience should contain. We will also explore the types of labor that participants sometimes perform within role-playing games, including actions that are necessary for the game to proceed as planned.

a) Motivation theories in psychology and beyond

The RPG motivation theories we will explore are on the whole inductive, meaning they arise from analyzing the play experience itself or have been influenced by the reflections of other members of the community.

However, the study of motivation itself is not only of central importance to the field of psychology, but also has implications in other disciplines. Motivation can be studied from many angles depending on one's theoretical worldview through which they interpret behavior, e.g., their *epistemology*. Depending on epistemology, researchers in

psychology and beyond interpret the answer to the overall question differently: why do humans behave the way they do? Potential answers include:

- Evolutionary adaptation (Buss 2019);
- Attempts to get their basic human needs met (Maslow 1954; Glasser 1998);
- The unconscious war between internalized norms and unconscious drives or desires (Freud 1990; 2013);
- Deeply symbolic structures arising from their personal and/or unconscious (Jung 1976);
- Conditioned responses to certain stimuli in the environment, such as positive and negative reinforcement (Watson 1913; Skinner 1938);
- Cognitive structures, genes, hormones, and neurotransmitters in the brain (Sarmiento Rivera, and Gouveia 2021);
- Patterns emerging from early childhood experiences (Freud 1990; Bowlby 1983);
- Impacts of trauma (Simmen-Janevska, Brandstätter, and Maercker 2012);
- The way their brain constructs knowledge and its developmental stage (Piaget 1977);
- Socially constructed roles, expectations, and identities (Stets and Serpe 2013);
- Affiliations with specific groups through ritual activities that serve a social function (Durkheim 1964); or
- Inequitable structural factors that influence their decision making processes, e.g., capitalism (Marx 1992), patriarchy (Friedan 2013), and/or colonialism (Adams, Osei-Tutu, and Affram 2020).

Such approaches often seek to determine whether behavior is a result of inherent factors, e.g., nature, or our environment, e.g., nurture. Our approach is to be inclusive of various epistemologies rather than favoring one over another. Each of these explanatory models can provide one dimension to understanding human behavior that may be more or less helpful depending on your needs at the moment. Consider these theories and others presented in this chapter, as tools in your toolbelt you can choose to activate when necessary and put away when not.

See Chapter 3 of *TRGD* for more information on psychological theories as they pertain to role-playing games.

b) Intrinsic motivation and self-determination

From the perspective of transformative role-playing game design, we like to work with the concept in educational psychology of *intrinsic motivation*, especially in its most empowering form, *self-determination*. Ryan and Deci (2017) favor an *organismic* epistemology that approaches “psychological growth, integrity, and wellness as a life

science” in which humans “have evolved to be inherently curious, physically active, and deeply social beings” (4). They explain that *intrinsic motivation* arises from within the person due to their own volition to “take interest in, deeply learn about, and gain mastery [of]. . . both their inner and outer worlds” (Ryan and Deci 2017, 4). Play and games are often cited as examples of intrinsic motivation as activities that are undertaken for their own sake (see e.g., the literature review in Stenros 2014; Stenros 2021). Alternatively, *extrinsic motivation* refers to actions taken due to an external consequence “such as an external reward or social approval, avoidance of punishment, or the attainment of a valued outcome” (Ryan and Deci 2017, 14), e.g., doing well in an exam to get a good grade and avoid external punishment.

As Deci et al. (1994) explain, some extrinsic regulations or values are *introjected* (citing Perls et al. 1973) into our consciousness, becoming processes we accept but do not identify as our own. An introjected process is an often unconscious pressure we place upon ourselves, becoming “an inner control -- a rule for action that is enforced by sanctions such as threats of guilt or promises of self-approval” (Deci et al. 1994, 121). As Ryan and Deci (2017) explain: “In introjection, the person is motivated by guilt, shame, contingent self-esteem, and fear of disapproval . . . and other approval, self-aggrandizement, and ego enhancements” (14-15). More desirable is the process of *integration*, which Deci et al. (1994) describe as “internalization in which the person identifies with the value of an activity and accepts full responsibility for doing it” because the process of behavioral regulation is integrated with one’s identity, or sense of self (121). Note that this definition of integration differs somewhat from ours, which can also -- and ideally will -- extend to intrinsically motivated behaviors.

When self-determined, people engage in activities that are motivated by internal and external factors to fulfill certain basic human needs, which for Ryan and Deci (2017) identify as:

- **Autonomy:** Self-regulating one’s actions and experiences in ways that feel integrated, congruent, and volitional. Actions are “self-endorsed, or congruent with one’s authentic interests and values” (Ryan and Deci 2017, 11);
- **Competence:** Having *effectance* (White 1959), or a causal effect and mastery over objects and events in one’s environment (APA Dictionary 2018). Actions taken reflect one’s ability “to operate effectively within their important life contexts” (Ryan and Deci 2017, 11); and
- **Relatedness:** Feeling social connection, care, belonging, and significance in relationship to others and integral to organizations. Actions demonstrating relatedness include giving, contributing, and showing benevolence (Ryan and Deci 2017, 11).

For other theories of human needs, especially as they pertain to conflict, see Chapter 6 of *TRGD*.

c) Motivation in role-playing games

All three of these needs connect to the affordances of role-playing games: player-characters often have autonomous agency to initiate meaningful actions within the game world. In many cases, players can experience competence, whether through the abilities of their characters, or through their own ability to navigate the world and/or manipulate the rules. As role-playing is usually a social activity performed in groups, player-characters often experience relatedness due to their in-game affiliations with other characters or factions, as well as their off-game connections with co-players and sense of belonging in the group.

As such, we are particularly interested in the ways in which role-playing games can benefit players' intrinsic motivation and self-determination, which has been demonstrated in plenty of anecdotal evidence, including many of our own experience. A few empirical studies exist so far that show gains in motivation, e.g., in leisure tabletop RPGs (Walsh and Linehan 2024) and edu-larp (see e.g., Gjedde 2014; Bowman and Standiford 2015; Algayres 2018; Brom et al. 2019; Hixson, West, and Eike 2024). A popular science study on leisure larp in Australia also focused on self-determination (Barta 2025).

As motivation is so important to the player experience, you should carefully consider whether designing an open-world sandbox style game or a tightly structured game with strong limitations. Assessing what drives motivation in your player group will help you onboard them into the process or construct your play group accordingly.

Therefore, we will explore player motivation theories that have arisen from digital and analog role-playing game communities and researchers embedded within them. These theories seek to categorize the types of actions certain players find most motivating in a role-playing experience. While no person belongs solely to any of these categories, and while many of these categorization systems have fallen out of use, it is worth noting the development of motivational theory and the kinds of activities observed within it. Our goal here is not to prioritize one model or another, although some models have influenced our own theorizing more than others. Instead, we want to illustrate that one should not make assumptions; players sometimes have very different definitions from one another of what “role-playing” means, and the kinds of activities that motivate them during play likewise differ.

Rather than defining these categories for you, we recommend glancing at Tables 1-3 and looking for patterns, as well as any discrepancies between them. If you are curious about details of one or more models, we recommend reading the original theories cited in the text. Note that terms like “immersion” may mean different things depending on the theorist. We will discuss our own model for immersion later in this section. For now, while players may be more or less motivated by things, the categories of immersion themselves are meant to describe neutral phenomenological states of directed attention (Lankoski and Järvelä 2012) toward certain parts of the game experience (Bowman 2024b).

i) Player motivation theories in multiplayer digital RPGs

While player motivation theories in digital and analog role-playing game communities developed sporadically alongside one another between the 1980s and early 2010s, the conceptualizations for digital RPGs are arguably better known based on their popularity. Digital RPGs such as Multi-user Dungeons (MUDs) and Massively Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (MMORPGs) found a foothold in academia far sooner and studies about them were more numerous than about analog RPGs, in part due to greater access to funding (Torner 2018). While online role-playing games are quite different from many analog RPGs due to limitations in affordances based on the pre-coded system, physical representations, and lack of norms surrounding intensive role-playing, the categories are still useful to consider and overlaps are certainly present with analog play.

Table 1: Player motivation theories in digital RPGs (1996-present).

Motivation Theory	RPG Format	Categories	
Player Types (Bartle 1996)	Multi-user Dungeons (Digital, MUDs)	• Killers • Achievers	• Socializers • Explorers
Motivations of Play (Yee 2006)	Massive Multiplayer Online Role-playing Games (Digital, MMORPGs)	• Achievement ◦ Advancement ◦ Mechanics ◦ Competition • Social ◦ Socializing ◦ Relationships ◦ Teamwork	• Immersion ◦ Discovery ◦ Role-Play ◦ Customization
The Science of Gamer Motivation (Yee and Ducheneaut 2025)	MMORPGs (Digital)	• Action (“Boom!”) ◦ Destruction ◦ Excitement • Social (“Let’s Play Together”) ◦ Competition ◦ Community • Mastery (“Let Me Think”) ◦ Challenge ◦ Strategy	• Achievement (“I Want More”) ◦ Completion ◦ Power • Immersion (“Once Upon a Time”) ◦ Fantasy ◦ Story • Creativity (“What If?”) ◦ Design ◦ Discovery

As you may notice, improvisational role-playing does not feature heavily in these categories, with more of an emphasis on prosocial and antisocial behavior within the game world, as well as curiosity-based exploration and achievement. Several of the skills are individual in nature, which is understandable since goals in digital games are often able to be achieved alone, even on a shared server.

ii) Creative agendas in tabletop role-playing games

While similar types were developed in traditional and indie tabletop player types, the categories focus more heavily on role-playing and storytelling. Notable, the indie tabletop communities surrounding `rec.games.frp.advocacy` (aka RGFA) and later the Forge often encouraged online discussions analyzing various designs according to creative agendas (White 2016), eventually solidifying under Ron Edwards’ (2001) version into gamism, narrativism (previously dramatism), and simulationism. From this perspective, designers have creative agendas, but so do players around the table; appealing to those agendas in some way could sometimes be challenging, but was deemed necessary (White, Boss, and Harviainen 2012).

Table 2: Player motivation theories in tabletop RPGs (1980-2001).

Motivation Theory	RPG Format	Categories
Player Types (Laws 2002; derived from Blacow 1980; Costikyan 1984)	Tabletop (Traditional, Indie)	• The Power Gamer • The Butt-Kicker • The Tactician • The Specialist • The Method Actor • The Storyteller • The Casual Gamer
Threefold Model (Kim et al. 1997; Kim 2003; derived from community discussions 1995-1998)	Tabletop (Indie, Forge)	• Gamism • Dramatism • Simulationism
Big Model, or GNS Theory, (Edwards 2001)	Tabletop (Indie, Forge)	• Gamism • Narrativism • Simulationism

iii) Player motivations in larp

Larp theorists developed more complex lists than tabletop, likely because larger larps offer more sandbox-style play and therefore could appeal to many different creative agendas in players. Notably, based on earlier work by Pohjola (2003; 2004) and community discussions, Petter Bøckman (2003) adapted the concept of simulationism to fit the Nordic larp style, using a term called *immersionism*. This motivation focuses on the experience of being deeply in character and responding according to that perspective, rather than the more environmentally-focused simulationism, which focuses more on recreating the game world accurately. Additionally, Harviainen’s (2003) model classifies the player types according to types of immersion -- character, reality, and narrative -- similarly to theories in digital games more broadly (see e.g.. Björk and Holopainen 2004; Ermi and Mäyrä 2005).

For a description of the development of RPG theorizing, see Torner (2024).

Table 3: Player motivation theories in larp (2003-2012).

Motivation Theory	RPG Format	Categories
Three-Way Model (Bøckman 2003)	Larp (Nordic)	• Gamism • Dramatism • Immersionism
Multi-tier Game Immersion Theory (Harviainen 2003)	Larp (Nordic)	Levels of immersion: • Character immersion (C+) • Reality immersion (R+) • Narrative immersion (N+) Player types: • Powergamer (C- R- N-) • Actor-player (C- R- N+) • Simulator (C- R+ N+) • Extension-player (C+ R+ N+) • Fundament player (C+ R+ N-) • Escapist (C+ R- N-) • Explorer (C- R+ N-) • Tale-teller (C+ R- N+)

Motivation Theory	RPG Format	Categories	
Player Motives (McDiarmid 2011)	Larp (American boffer)	• Audience • Catharsis • Comprehension • Competition • Crafting • Education • Embodiment • Exercise	• Exploration • Exhibition • Fellowship • Flow • Leadership • Protagonist • Spectacle • Versatility
Motivations of German Players for Larping (Bienia 2012; data driven, participants could choose multiple categories, n=over 250)	Larp (German)	• Fellowship: 251 • Embodiment: 215 • Flow: 203 • Catharsis:141 • Crafting: 141 • Spectacle: 139 • Audience: 115 • Exercise: 109 • Exploration: 92 • Exhibition: 92 • Posing: 79 • Comprehension: 67 • Education: 66 • Support: 44 • Humor: 44 • Transgression: 38	• Protagonist: 32 • Improve yourself: 21 • Create: 18 • Leadership: 17 • Competition: 17 • Frustration: 11 • Immerse: 10 • No hero: 5 • Versatility: 4 • Antagonist: 3 • Destruction: 3 • Robin of Sherwood: 3 • Cause and Effect: 2 • Abscondence: 1 • Blaspheme: 1

Recent research by Xiong, Wen, and Zheng (2023) has adapted existing concepts from Bartle’s (1996) Player Taxonomy and GNS theory (Kim et al. 1997; Edwards 2001) to *jubensha* games, which were developed in China based upon UK murder mysteries. These games are sometimes more tabletop-like and sometimes more similar to larps. The authors arrive at new categories based upon the styles of play common in these larps, which often emphasize social deduction

Table 4: Player motivation in *jubensha* (Xiong, Wen, and Zheng 2023). Descriptions from the original article.

Player Type	Motivation / Behavior
The Professor	Playing to win, expecting a serious outcome from the game, and enjoying the immersion into the narratives.
The Braggart	Playing to win, expecting a serious outcome from the game, and enjoying the interaction with other players.
The Conqueror	Playing to win, expecting relaxation from the game, and enjoying the interaction with other players.
The Detective	Playing to win, expecting relaxation from the game, and enjoying the immersion of the narrative.
The Actor	Playing for fun, expecting a serious outcome from the game, and enjoying the immersion of the narrative.
The Politician	Playing for fun, expecting a serious outcome from the game, and enjoying the interaction with other players.
The Socializer	Playing for fun, expecting to get relaxed from the game, and enjoying the interaction with other players.
The Viewer	Playing for fun, expecting to get relaxed from the game, and enjoying the immersion of the narrative.

d) Types of immersion

While our model of transformative game design does not speak directly to player motivation, following Calleja (2011), we do consider six categories of immersion: a state of attention that occurs during the game (Lankoski and Järvelä 2012). Thus, while these types of immersion are derived from motivation theories, they are more phenomenological in nature, and therefore more precisely focusing less on what preferences the player has and more on what their attention is directed at performing at any given moment. That being said, one can extrapolate that a game designed with an emphasis on various types of immersion will likely also motivate players who enjoy those states, while demotivating others who prefer different states.

As discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 of *TRGD*, the states of immersion are (Bowman 2024b):

1. **Immersion into activity:** Engaging in repetition of a specific activity, likely inviting players in a flow state (Csíkszentmihályi 1990), e.g., crafting, cooking, rolling dice, rock-paper-scissors, hitting combatants with boffer swords, counting damage or hit points, etc. This type of play may be highly engaging for players who enjoy physical, kinesthetic play.
2. **Immersion into game:** Participants focus on their character's achievements, such as solving puzzles, acquiring wealth, or achieving high status politically, and "winning" when possible; similar to gamism (Kim et al. 1997; Edwards 2001). This type of play can engage players who enjoy competition, systems thinking, or social maneuvering.

3. **Immersion into environment:** Exploration of the environment of a game world, sometimes with an emphasis on accuracy of representation or believability; similar to simulationism in Forge theory (Edwards 2001). Immersion into environment can be helpful for players who have difficulty feeling immersed without props, costumes, or special locations, or for players who fantasize about e.g., attending an “actual” wizard school.
4. **Immersion into narrative:** Finding and following a story; called narrativism in Forge theory (Edwards 2001). Narrative can be highly engaging for players who are easily absorbed into fiction (Rivers et al. 2016), especially if they draw meaning from stories to make sense of their own lives or the experiences of others.
5. **Immersion into character:** Focusing on the subjectivity of the character, e.g., the thoughts and feelings of the fictive persona being embodied Pohjola (2003, 2004; Bøckman 2003). This type of immersion is helpful for players who want to be present in the moment and highly recommended when working with transforming player identity (see later in this chapter).
6. **Immersion into community:** Emphasizing in- and off-game social activities and interactions (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2003). Many players enjoy this element, especially in longer-term transformational communities. This type of immersion is helpful for players developing prosocial and community building skills.

Later in this chapter, we will expand upon implementation strategies and activities that might incentivize these states of immersion if desired in transformative play. For connections between immersion and similar states described in other disciplines, see Chapter 7.

e) Immersion and dissociation

Deepening particularly into immersion into character, psychologist Lauri Lukka (2014) describes the immersive state as a form of dissociation (see also Bowman 2010, 2015b). Our daily lives require us to control our behavior by inhibiting our ability to act upon inner emotions, thoughts, and urges. Lukka (2014) explains that we experience both player and character as a form of *dual consciousness* (Stenros 2013a; called the *double state* in Andreassen 2003). This dual state creates space for powerful affective experiences to occur, as well as moments of profound reflection, similar to the process of *aesthetic doubling* in drama education (Østern and Heikkinen 2001) or *aesthetic distance* in drama therapy (Landy 1983). Thus, the character never fully “takes over,” but rather we move along a continuum between states of deeper immersion into character and weaker immersion, with greater awareness of both selves (Brown and Cairns 2004; Lukka 2014, 86-87).

However, Lukka (2014) theorizes that “having achieved a certain level of immersion, there is no longer as much need to consciously inhibit urges, as there is less to inhibit.

Our every day personality has momentarily been dissociated from the personality of the character” (86). Such observations have profound implications for transformative play. The *alibi* of the character is not only an excuse for inappropriate behavior to avoid embarrassment (Deterding 2018), a metaphor, or a defense mechanism (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). It can be considered a shift in consciousness that allows us to express aspects of our inner world and/or personality characteristics that would normally be taboo or inappropriate, potentially revealing more authentic aspects of self (Winnicott 1960; Baird and Bowman 2022). However, this alibi is more robust and protective sometimes than others, both within our own minds, but also in the perception of others (Munier 2021).

Lukka (2014) emphasizes the role of debriefing in helping to transition out of this dissociated state, particularly with reference to learning:

Learning is strongly state and context bound. Dissociation hinders learning unless the experiences of the character are turned to learning experiences of the player. The debriefing after the game breaks the achieved dissociation, helps the player return to their own personality, reinforces learning and generates distance to the character by strengthening the player’s real personality. (Lukka 2014, 87)

Indeed, as we discussed in Chapter 3 of *TRGD*, strong role-playing experiences can cause cognitive dissonance, especially if intense bleed is experienced afterward (Montola 2010) and can even feel destabilizing or dysregulating (Bowman 2013). However, the process of transformative learning is often destabilizing (Illeris 2004; 2013), requiring a shift in our worldview to accommodate new information that may contradict previous understanding (Illeris 2009). Debriefing is one tool that can help us return to psychological homeostasis (Hugaas 2025), while also integrating the learning into the player’s own context, promoting knowledge transfer (Westborg 2022; Woolfolk 2010; Illeris 2015).

In a later section of this chapter, we will discuss bleed, homeostasis, and how players can role-play to explore dissociative identity work.

f) Alibi as a gateway and hindrance

Alibi can serve as a gateway, allowing us to try things and behave in ways within the game that might otherwise result in social consequences if we were to try it out in our real lives. In this way, the alibi of playing a character can help us be more bold in exploring aspects of ourselves that are either un- or underexplored, without the looming fear of social consequence. When coupled with conscious integration practices, the experiences from the game can then help us overcome unnecessary and often self-imposed limitations that we experience in our daily lives.

In short, when we experience that an aspect of identity that we “try on” as our character in a game feels more authentic to us than what we are showing in our real lives, we can use the positive game experience to change our sense of self outside of the game too.

However, just as alibi can be beneficial for transformative effects, it can also act as a hindrance (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Hartyándi, van Bilsen, and van Barlingen 2026). By this we mean that it can provide players with distance and plausible deniability, e.g., “It was not me, It was my character.” By pushing the actions and experiences of the character away from themselves in this way, the player can actively avoid processing and integrating the experiences of the character. From this we can understand that in order for alibi to become a useful tool for transformation, we need to be able to accept the discomfort that can follow from examining the actions of our characters as extensions of parts of ourselves.

6.3 Identity transformation through role-play

In the following sections, we will explore how role-playing games can provide powerful tools for players to change how they see themselves, the beliefs that they hold about themselves, and who they believe themselves to be. Or in other words, players can use their role-playing experiences to transform their self-concept, also called *identity*.

a) The complexity of identity

Identity is a complex idea. We can understand *the self* as a cognitive and social construct, with fields such as social psychology and psychology presenting numerous different theoretical approaches to understanding it (see e.g., Freud 1922; Erikson 1950; Jung 1976; Burke and Stets 2009; Stets and Serpe 2013; Jhangiani, Tarry, and Stangor 2022). A central notion in most of these theories is the understanding that identity is not something fixed and singular, but rather something that is more fluid, and may be dependent on context.

This principle leads us to the understanding that within us we have a multiplicity of identities or aspects thereof that together combine into what we can recognize as our own *sense of self* (James 1890). This sense of self is then deeply connected, even instrumental to how we enact our identities within different social settings and frames (Goffman 1959, 1986).

When we understand identity as contextual, fluid, and made up of a multitude of different aspects, we can also begin to understand how role-playing games can become powerful tools for identity exploration and transformation.

b) The 9 types of characters

Despite this multiplicity, when we role-play, we perceive a difference between our own identity and the character's, and we toggle in between the two to greater and lesser degrees throughout the game. We believe this process increases the possibility for us to experience identity transformation as a result of play. Of course, all experiences hold the potential for transformation, as we can undergo small transformations of our identities every day. However, characters and fictional settings can give us strong experiences of reconfigured identity that are rare in daily life (Hugaas 2019), and open space for personal reflection and redesign of selfhood.

The relationship between a player and their character can be sorted into 9 main categories (Bowman 2010; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023):

1. **The Doppelganger Self:** When the player and their character are nearly, but not fully identical.
2. **The Augmented Self:** When the player and their character are nearly identical or share many similarities, but the character also has an addition or augment that is important in shaping their identity.
3. **The Devoid Self:** When the player and character are nearly identical or share many similarities, but the character has an important aspect removed that is important in shaping their identity.
4. **The Fragmented Self:** When a facet of the player's personality, life, or interests is magnified in order to become a central part also of the character's identity. It is worth noting that a lot of RPG characters are based on one or more fragments or parts of the player. This process can happen consciously or unconsciously.
5. **The Repressed, or Regressive Self:** When the character presents as reminiscent of a regression into an earlier stage of development, consciousness, and/or an animalistic state, e.g., the player's child self.
6. **The Idealized Self:** When the character is someone that the player deeply admires or wishes they could be more like.
7. **The Oppositional Self:** When the character is someone that the player has created in opposition to their own self-concept, for example by embodying traits that the player finds abhorrent or by amplifying unwanted parts of their shadow self.
8. **The Taboo Self:** When the character engages in behaviors that both the player and/or society deem as taboo or transgressive. These aspects could be things the player does not want to identify with themselves, or aspects that are important to their identity but suppressed due to social norms.
9. **The Experimental Self:** When the character is an experiment that the player creates in order to explore a certain personality type, character concept, costume style, aspect of performance, or similar., in order to find answers to the question of "I wonder what would happen if..." (Bowman 2010)

Consider characters you have played before. Do you notice any of these patterns in your own experience? Having a sense of the relationship between player and character can help you better understand how you -- or your players -- relate to these parts of self. Do they think of these parts with fondness or disgust? Do they wish they could be more like their character or want to distance themselves from the character's personality traits and behaviors?

c) Empowerment through character enactment

Playing a character in a game can be an empowering experience in the moment, as they may have agency you feel you lack in your own life. However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the real magic of role-playing games becomes clear when we integrate those experiences into our real lives, increasing our sense of empowerment as well as agency in our day-to-day lives.

One way in which characters can help increase our empowerment and agency in our real lives is through the creation of an *alterego*. By this we mean a character that you embody in the real world in certain situations. This practice might sound a little strange, but it may be more familiar than you might realize. Consider for example Elton John, Sasha Fierce, and Lady Gaga. They are *alteregos* created by the people who embody them: Reginald Kenneth Dwight and Stefani Germanotta. By embodying these alteregos, these artists have been able to do things that, as themselves, they might never have been able to accomplish (Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

A less daunting approach might be what is called *aspecting*, a term which has historically been used to describe the act of embodying or performing aspects of a divine entity's characteristics (for an RPG example, see Brucato 2013). As role-players we can do the same thing, by substituting the divine entities with characters we have played. For example, if you struggle with remaining calm in stressful situations, you can consider a character you have played that was always calm under fire, and bring that aspect of them into yourself when you are faced with a potentially stressful situation in your real life, e.g., a job interview.

i) The Proteus effect and Batman effect

One of the ways in which the empowerment potential of taking on a role has been observed and described can be found in the *Proteus effect* (Yee and Bailenson 2007). The Greek sea god Proteus was known as a shapechanger, and the effect describes how the changing physical attributes of virtual character representations in MMORPGs can affect how the players of these change behavior in online social situations. Research has shown how playing more conventionally attractive avatars led to players showing greater confidence in in-game interpersonal situations. Additionally, playing taller avatars was shown to lead to players being more confident and assertive in in-game negotiations (Yee and Bailenson 2007).

Similarly, research has shown how children who take on a third-person perspective show greater resilience in challenging task completion than children who engage with the task in first-person (White et al. 2017). While this phenomenon is interesting in itself, the same research showed that children who took on the roles of powerful superhero alteregos surpassed both of the other two groups significantly in persistence. From this, the *Batman effect* was coined, clearly showing how taking on a character can lead to significant benefits and changes in confidence when taking on challenging tasks (White et al. 2017). The practice of using alteregos in this way is not uncommon in edu-larps, although practitioners might not be aware that they are leveraging an effect named after the dark knight of Gotham.

ii) Power within

All instances of power use can be generally divided into four different categories: power over, power with, power to, and power within. Power over is where a hierarchical structure allows someone to dictate rules for others because the structure gives them the power to do so. *Power with* is a way for a group of people to wield power collectively (Follett 1940), most often recognised in democratic rights, e.g., the power to vote and the power to organize. *Power to* is unstructured power that individuals can wield together as a result of status or things like familial or structural privilege (Pansardi and Bindi 2021). An example could be a successful artist using their platform to bring attention to marginalized communities. *Power within* comes from finding agency and capabilities within ourselves, and using those to wield power (Starhawk 1997; Hunjan and Keophilavong 2010).

While role-playing games are good at modelling all four types of power, power within is potentially the most potent for experiences of empowerment that the player can later integrate into their real lives (Cazeneuve 2021). The sheer number of anecdotes from players discovering that they had unknown capacities within them through play is a testament to how role-playing has the potency to unlock power within.

iii) Internal locus of control

When talking about agency, it can be helpful to understand the concept of *locus of control* (Rotter 1966). In short, people who have a mostly *external* locus of control tend to believe that they have little to no influence on what happens to them and their life. People who have a mostly *internal* locus of control tend to think that they have a high degree of influence on the events in their lives, how they play out, and what the results of them are.

In role-playing games, we are often given the opportunity to play characters with a higher degree of agency and power than what most of us are able to experience in our real lives. In addition, the practice of role-playing itself affords us an in-built narrative power over our characters and their environment. In this way, players who tend to lean towards an external locus of control in their real lives can get to experience and practice what it feels like to shift into an internal locus of control while playing their character. The feeling of empowerment that will often follow such experiences can bleed over into our real lives, nudging us towards adopting a more internal locus of control as a result (Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

iv) Narrative therapy and narrative identity

As discussed in more depth in Chapters 3 and 6 of *TRGD*, role-playing stories can be used as a means to examine one's own life, whether on one's own, or through therapeutic processing, e.g., narrative therapy. Through this process, we can examine our personal stories and the meaning around them, with the intention to explore them, understand them, and ultimately challenge them through alternative healthier stories (White 2007; Bowman et al. 2024b). We can also transform our identities through

narrative, finding redemptive arcs for our life stories (McAdams 2001) by comparing them with the stories of our characters, either as aspirational or cautionary tales. By working intentionally with role-playing narratives, we can transform our own identities, life stories, or future potential, *restorying* our lives in empowering ways (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Tanenbaum 2022).

v) Wyrding the self

Jonaya Kemper (2020) argues that one can use role-playing games to *wyrd the self*: actively shaping their identities into what the participant would like them to be moving forward. By employing the use of *navigational play* (Kemper 2018a), players from marginalized backgrounds can consciously *steer* (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015) their game experience towards experiences of liberation: scenes, interactions, narratives, and similar that can potentially allow for greater degrees of empowerment. Kemper (2020) describes how preparing for and processing these scenes through practices such as journaling can help players integrate the experience into their real lives after the game. We will explore this concept in more depth in the next section on bleed.

d) Bleed and identity development

The term known as *bleed* was first coined by Emily Care Boss referring to analog role-playing games (2007). However, the phenomenon itself is likely core to human experience when transitioning between different social frames, such as spillover between work vs. play (Homann 2020), and/or social roles, especially when pretense or dissimulation is involved (Hartyándi 2025). For our purposes, bleed describes the phenomenon in which aspects spill over from player to character and vice versa (Hugaas 2024). Over time, several different types of bleed have been suggested and theorized. The central ones are (as described in Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2022):

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. Emotional bleed is the most commonly noticed type, as role-playing games tend to provoke strong emotions that can last after the event is over.
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. With procedural bleed, our transformations can become more physically embodied and thereby reinforced.
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. For instance, political and

religious identities can bleed between player and character, and vice versa (Hugaas 2019). If we consider how central our beliefs and self-concepts are to our self-concepts, memetic bleed can become a way for us to transform our identity by experimenting with different worldviews.

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 a personality trait of greater confidence for the player. Ego bleed can be helpful for players when reimagining their self-concepts.
5. **Emancipatory Bleed:** Where players from marginalized backgrounds experience liberation from that marginalization through their characters (Kemper 2017, 2020), e.g., overthrowing an oppressive structure in play leading to players processing aspects of real life oppression in their own lives. As discussed above, emancipatory bleed can be a powerful component to wyrding the self. When players are aware of this process, they can choose to steer towards liberatory experiences in a conscious way. Another example is facing one's own internalized oppression and making a more empowered choice for their character (Kemper 2018a).
6. **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 (Bowman 2013; Harder 2018) after an intense role-playing experience. Role-playing games can be used to improve existing relationships, such as feuding siblings learning to work together through play (Bowman 2010). It can also be a catalyst for new bonds to form between strangers, e.g., in-game camaraderie or intimacy carrying over to off-game dynamics.
7. **Identity Bleed:** A more extensive form of bleed in which one or more complexes, self-schemas, and similar identity constructs bleed between player and character (Hugaas 2024). Identity bleed as a complex process can involve one or more of the other forms of bleed in concert with one another. Whereas ego bleed positions itself in a Jungian context, identity bleed connects more broadly to several theories of identity formation, transformation, and fluidity from both psychology and social psychology. Central to identity bleed is the understanding of the sense of self as containing a multitude of identities.

Although some players claim not to experience bleed at all (Hansen and Hugaas 2017; Pedersen 2017), we believe that bleed is happening all the time. In these instances, the intensity of their bleed experience is not great enough to surpass their *bleed perception threshold* (Hugaas 2024). While players can experience transformative effects without being aware of bleed at all, when they are aware and able to recognize when it happens, it can be used as a tool for processing and integrating play experiences.

While the field is still developing concrete empirical data on best practices for playing with the intention to either maximize or minimize bleed, different suggestions exist in the field. These suggestions arise mainly from anecdotes from players, theoretical suggestions from scholars (Bowman 2015a; Kemper 2020) and practitioners (van Bilsen and van Barlingen 2025), and principles from different schools of design thought, e.g., jeepform (Jeepen 2007) and Nordic larp (Anderson and Meland 2020).

Notably, one recent article by Maxime Scholte Albers and Jan de Wit (2025) established a method for quantitatively measuring bleed and comparing it with the player's relative similarity in personality with their character. The authors found correlations between similar personalities and greater bleed-in than bleed-out. Characters representing desired traits correlated with both bleed-in and bleed-out, while dissimilar characters correlated more with bleed-out than playing a similar character. More research is needed to fully understand the complex relationships between bleed and identity.

For connections between these theories and *Dungeons & Dragons* specifically, see Hugaas and Bowman (2026).

e) Changes in mosaics of configurations

As discussed in Chapter 3 of *TRGD*, in person-centered therapy, the self is composed of 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 (Diakolambrianou et al. 2024).

When these configurations are in internal conflict, it can cause psychological distress for the person (Rogers 1959; Mearns and Thorne 2000a, 2000b; Diakolambrianou 2021). The person can be understood to be in an incongruent state due to this distress. In person-centered therapy, the therapist is in a state of congruency in relationship with the client, and exhibits authenticity and unconditional positive regard and empathy for the client. This process, in turn, helps them develop positive self-regard, self-compassion, and authentic expression, developing greater congruence between their configurations (Rogers 1957). The goal is to help these configurations come in alignment with the client's *actualizing tendency*: the tendency of an organism to survive, evolve, and thrive towards its full potential. This process of actualization is best understood as a journey rather than a destination.

These processes can occur in encounter groups (Rogers 1970; Schmid 2017) guided by a trained mental health professional, and thus can be adapted to align with RPG interventions. However, the core principles are also possible for participants to develop within themselves through play experiences, e.g., through playing or interacting with characters that have similar configurations and developing unconditional positive regard and compassion for them. Similarly, group members can exhibit such behaviors toward each other. Such processes can then be used as stepping stones to building those same structures of support within the self.

f) Developing, amplifying, and healing parts of self

Returning to the psychodynamic theory, in some modalities, consciousness is understood as composed of parts in dynamic tension with one another rather than a unified whole. While a thorough exploration of these theories is beyond the scope of this section, we aim to highlight not only how different “personalities” are possible to access and embody rather quickly in role-playing games. Such a practice is rife with transformative potential in working with these parts individually and in relationship with one another.

i) Psychoanalysis and psychodynamic theory

As discussed in Chapter 3 of *TRGD*, in psychoanalytic theory, our sense of self, or *ego identity*, is not an isolated entity, nor is it the entirety of our conscious and unconscious subjectivity. Instead, our consciousness is made up of parts, many of which are completely hidden from our ego identity. While we may perceive our subjective reality as unified, in this theory, not only are these parts sometimes shifting in and out of prominence and awareness within our experience, but they operate in a dynamic relationship with one another. Psychodynamic theories often posit experiences of dysfunction as a lack of awareness about, alignment between, and harmony among these inner parts. Thus, the goal of psychoanalytic practice is often to bring these parts into awareness, acknowledging and accepting them, and finding ways to encourage them to coexist and cooperate interdependently (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023).

While a thorough explanation of each of the following counselling models is beyond the scope of this chapter, we present them here not only for practitioners in therapeutic work to consider, but also for players of all kinds to better understand. By working with these parts through role-playing, practitioners can guide players through experiences of profound transformation. Conversely, awareness of these parts is also important when determining what kind of work you do not feel qualified to conduct with your participants, or if you might want to bring additional expertise onto your team to address. At minimum, such an awareness can help us understand how the different types of characters (Bowman 2010) may reveal important aspects of the players’ consciousness that should be treated with respect.

ii) The tripartite self, personal, and collective unconscious

While the concept of a divided consciousness emerged in earlier theorizations, e.g., by William James (1890) and Pierre Janet (1899), it was popularized by Sigmund Freud and his colleague Carl Jung (1976).

Freud (1990) believed that the psyche was tripartite in nature, made up of three main parts: the *ego*, the *id*, and the *superego*. The ego is our conscious self who we identify as “I” when speaking, whereas the unconscious is composed of the *id* and *superego*, who are in dynamic tension with one another for dominance over the ego. As Freud was influenced by the ideas of Charles Darwin (1995), both can be seen as representing survival needs. The *id* represents wild and unruly drives of sexuality (creation, *libido*, or *eros*), aggression, and death (destruction, or *thanatos*) -- not only ending the lives of

others, but also a morbid fascination with our own death. The superego represents the survival drive for social integration. Originally called the *censor*, the superego polices and regulates the impulses of the id to maintain social standing based on internalized social norms, also called *mores*, through a process of repression into the unconscious. This process of repression leads to discontent for the ego identity

Unfortunately (or fortunately) for us, Freud posited that such repression was necessary for civilization to persist (1990). As repression cannot suppress all of this psychic energy, these urges and desires manifest instead through neurotic behaviors that cause discomfort for the individual, but allow them to integrate more or less cohesively into society depending on the person. Such content often manifests as dreams, leading Freud (2010) to study the symbolism within them as keys to the individual psyche.

Civilizations also develop practices through which the sublimated id can find expression, such as storytelling, myth, and other cultural and artistic practices: elements that are highly relevant to role-playing games. From this perspective, we need not wonder why so many games feature violence (see e.g., Albom 2021), power fantasies (see e.g., Nephew 2006), death (Hugaas 2023), and/or erotic content (see e.g., Grasmø and Stenros 2022). While such content can be culturally reinforced or promulgated, it also represents the deeper repressed content finding expression in a more culturally sanctioned way, although debates about censoring such content still occur in Western societies. Indeed, the expression of such drives in the relatively safer space of play can be interpreted as highly therapeutic compared with enacting such transgressive behavior in daily life, and thus be viewed as *technologies of the self* (Foucault 1988; Spencer 2023).

iii) Archetypes, myth, ritual, active imagination, and individuation

Jung (1976) expanded upon these theories to include a greater acceptance of meanings beyond sexuality, aggression, and death. For Jung, libido represents one's willpower as a whole, rather than only one's desire for sexual gratification; in role-playing games, we may consider our enhanced agency as our libido finding greater expression. From this perspective, players are indeed understandable as engines of desire (Pettersson 2021), and agency in games is understandable as will-focused libido. While for Jung (1976), some symbols emerge from the personal unconscious, drawing from Plato's concept of the *ideal forms*, he viewed the content of dreams and myths as also often containing age-old *archetypes* that resonate cross-culturally, even if their emphasized aspects shift from culture to culture.

The early development of comparative religion was based upon the notion that myths served an important function in society, and thus mythic content could be deciphered through systemic means. For Jung (1976), this process involved identifying key archetypes, which he believed were present within a joint *collective unconscious*, and tracing how different cultures interpret and express them, with the understanding that no archetype can ever be fully expressed or understood in its complexity. While comparative religion has evolved in anthropology to focus more specifically on cultural difference and diversity, archetypes continue to be powerful tools for storytelling, whether culturally specific or universal in nature.

In societies that face a crisis in collective meaning and shared mythic narratives, role-playing games are understandable as powerful mediums for mythic embodiment (Beltrán 2012, 2021; Larsen 1990; Bastarrachea Magnani 2023). As discussed in Chapter 6 of *TRGD*, Jung's concepts have been applied to understanding the myth-making practices of players before, during, and after the game (Page 2014). Jung's theories have also been systematized by Carol S. Pearson (2015) into 12 main archetypes that are commonly used in role-playing game design, including by the authors of this book in the design of the larp *Lumen* (2025). These archetypes vary in terms of their expression, but for our purposes are essentialized as: the Magician, Hero, Lover, Jester, Everyperson, Caregiver, Ruler, Creator, Innocent, Sage, Explorer, and Outlaw (for more general applications to RPGs, see Beltrán 2021). In *Lumen*, the players are asked to choose variants of one of the archetypes to express two aspects they want to explore: the first archetype refers to their past journey leading up to this point, and the second represents where they would like their journey to go. These archetypes were placed on cards with reflective questions that were available for review during play as physical artifacts and through the *LumenAR* app. See Figures 1 and 2 for examples.



Figure 1: Archetypes in the individual player screen in the *LumenAR* app developed by Turku University of Applied Sciences.

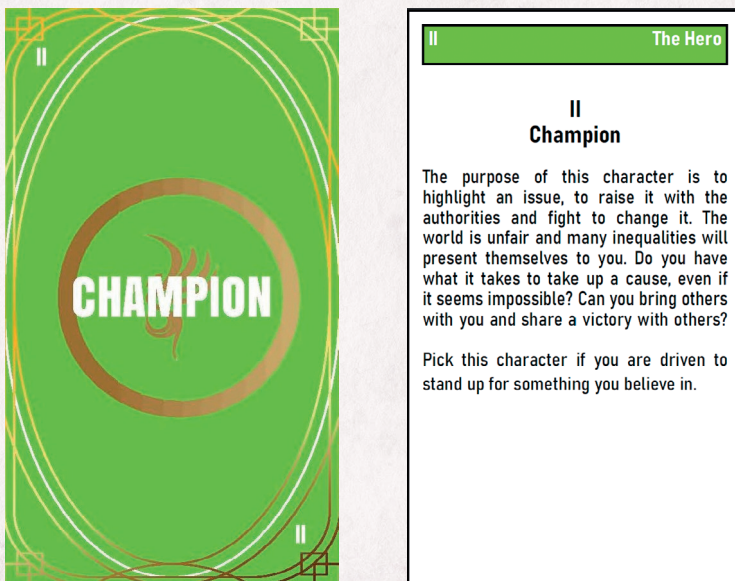
A player-driven example of working with archetypal content occurred in the personal development larp *Epiphany* (Bowman, Murdock, and Roycroft 2017; Bowman 2023), which was based loosely on *White Wolf's Mage: the Ascension* (Wieck et al. 1993). Through emergent play, at the climax of the larp, a Mentor, which was a high-responsible player-character, created a labyrinth made of face-down tarot cards for the other initiates at a spiritual retreat to navigate (Kim, Nuncio, and Wong 2018). Characters each chose a tarot card, which were collaboratively interpreted as representing their journey. Tarot can be a powerful tool not only for generating stories (Sullivan, Eladhari, and Cook 2018) and bringing archetypal content into play, but

also for helping players to explore their own psyches without a need for a facilitator (Durmus and Topcuoglu 2023). Additionally, tarot scenes can help direct the narrative in interesting ways, even if players do not believe in the cards' divinatory power (Nøglebæk 2021; Mutsaers and Berg 2022) and can also be used in integration practices (Teteau-Surel 2021). Like the 12 archetypes, they are also often used in design work to augment character creation (see e.g., Groth, Grasmø, and Edland 2021).

At minimum, working with archetypes can help reenchant the world through a process of *ironic imagination* (Saler 2012); we know a story is fictional, yet we find it highly motivating and participate in it enthusiastically. However, interacting with archetypal material can also be highly transformational. Jung (1976) describes the self-concept before such interactions as the ego, which then interfaces with the archetype in some meaningful way through a process of *active imagination*, which involves exploring symbolic content within one's psyche. If the person successfully undergoes a process of *individuation*, this interaction with archetypal material will help their ego evolve into a more realized *self*. However, the person should not confuse their own ego with the archetype, which can lead to *ego inflation*.

This process is deeply relevant to the identity transformation process; many players begin their role-playing journey enacting characters based on archetypes, such as the different classes and species in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974). Instead of witnessing such archetypes as through passive media such as a movie, the player negotiates the desires of their personal unconscious, their conscious intention, specific cultural references, and the game's archetypal content while embodying their character, who develops over time in relation to their off-game ego identity (Bowman 2010). This development process is often likened to Joseph Campbell's (1973) *hero's journey*, both narratively and psychologically (see e.g., Walters 2021; Bowman 2024a).

Figure 2: Example of a Hero archetype card from *Lumen* (2015) with the speciality of Champion. Cards developed by Avalon Larp Studio. Graphic design by Turku University of Applied Sciences.



The interrelational nature of these processes during role-playing is important to emphasize. Miguel Angel Bastarrachea Magnani (2025) has further theorized the *RPG self*, which refers to how these processes combine during the role-playing process as composed of three parts:

1. The **collective unconscious** that makes archetypal engagement possible;
2. The **personal Self**, which supports the everyday personality; and
3. An **interpersonal Self** that feeds from the content of all the participants of an RPG session.

In this formulation, the co-creative interpersonal interchange is foregrounded as contributing to the constitution of the self during play. Similarly, Bowman (2017) has theorized that *active imagination* that takes place during play is a group process, not simply an individual one. Interestingly, experiments with group-based active imagination have taken place to stimulate innovation in product-focused project teams (Jonasson and Ingason 2017) and in multicultural leadership team development (Mayer and Oosthuizen 2019).

Similarly, Beltrán (2012) discusses how liminal ritual experiences can help processes of active imagination. According to Turner (1995), ritual functions as a way to create greater *communitas*, or group cohesion, and thus have similar effects in RPGs (Bowman 2010, 2015c). Furthermore, for Durkheim (1964), such experiences can lead to *collective effervescence*, which Bastarrachea Magnani (2023) describes as “the fervor that arises in the ritual action that excites the participants toward ecstasy and unites them” (60). For this reason, be aware that the play experience of ritual can be profound and intense, not just the game itself, but also rituals within rituals (see e.g., Bowman 2015c). It also involves not only multiple layers of self in terms of the player and the character, but also any roles needed for the ritual itself, plus any archetypal content. Methods exist for players to actively participate in the ritual (Murphy 2023), and even co-create their own rituals in the moment (Fatland 2015; Vejdemo and Garperian 2018), which can aid the active imagination process and make the ritual feel more alive and relevant for each participant.

These concepts help explain why role-playing experiences are so powerful and can be transformative not only for the individual, but for the group experiencing them.

iv) Shadow work

While some players may explore a heroic storyline or seek to portray an idealized aspect of themselves, others may explore oppositional or taboo content through play (Bowman 2010). In Jungian terms, such content is understandable as emerging from either the *personal* or *collective shadow* (Jung 1976). Similar to the id but more extensive, the shadow represents aspects of the player’s they seek to hide, disown, shame, or otherwise disavow, e.g., one’s anger issues becoming core to their character concept (Causo and Quinlan 2021), or aspects of humanity as a whole that are abhorrent, e.g., war, oppression, abuse, or neglect.

Bowman (2025) has established 5 common ways in which the shadow is explored through role-playing games:

1. Experiencing loss, violation, and/or trauma;
2. Exerting power over others;
3. Portraying undesirable personality traits, which may be undesirable to the player or to society at large;
4. Expressing mental health challenges; and
5. Exploring dysfunctional or maladaptive social dynamics.

Such themes are common in role-playing games, e.g., in gothicpunk or horror role-playing games such as in the World of Darkness (Spencer 2023), or in social realism games based on real world political issues such as in Nordic larp and adjacent communities (Stenros and Montola eds. 2010; Johansson et al. 2026). Such content can be attractive to players because it produces highly intense, emotional experiences (Nilsen 2012), which can lead to catharsis and realizations about unconscious parts of the self or humanity. However, as with all transformative play but especially when working with the shadow, we recommend undergoing a processing phase called *shadow work* (Beltrán 2021; Bowman 2025). Otherwise, long-term play with the shadow can sometimes bleed-out into off-game dynamics and negatively impact group dynamics and interpersonal relationships (Beltrán 2013; Bowman 2013). Alternatively, such play can cause cognitive dissonance in participants when their behavior in the game does not align with their self-concept off-game (Montola 2010). The goal of shadow work is not to conquer, destroy, or further suppress these shadow parts, but rather to come into harmonious relationship with them in order to feel more psychologically balanced, aligned, and integrated.

Since the advent of Freudian and Jungian theory, several related concepts and counselling practices have developed that explore the psychodynamic nature of consciousness. As in these earlier theories, these parts may not be aware of each other's existence, but exist in relationship to one another; thus, therapy is a process of improving those relationships in order to enhance psychological well-being, self-compassion, and self-understanding. From this perspective, even some of the more random creative parts that emerge during role-playing may have a deep significance that can be explored, or even serve an important purpose for the player that can be uncovered. At minimum, if consciousness can be said to express itself in symbolic language, learning how to decode the associations of that language can help players make meaning of their psychology, which can be even more powerful if embodied through role-playing games.

v) Internal Family Systems (IFS)

Internal Family Systems (IFS) is a modality that considers constellations of parts within one's greater consciousness. IFS "views every human being as a system of protective and wounded inner parts guided by a core Self" (IFS Institute 2025).

One goal of IFS is to help manage inner and outer conflicts (Riskin 2013). Through therapeutic processing, these parts can be identified, named, and described, allowing them to become more conscious for the client. Unlike a system like the tripartite self, the psyche may contain thousands of parts in Internal Family Systems. IFS has been noted in the literature as relevant to the role-playing game experience (Burns 2014; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023).

For example, a common theme in role-playing games is to personify aspects of consciousness such as emotions as an “inner committee,” see e.g., in *Group Date* (Williamson 2014), *The Grey Zone* (Sandquist 2017), and *How to Be Ava White* (Wei 2017). Such play can help participants externalize internal parts of themselves and understand how they relate to one another, as well as give expression to emotions, thoughts, or desires that are usually suppressed.

vi) Subpersonalities, possible selves, and transpersonal work

Other conceptualizations work directly with parts of the self with archetypal contents and/or social roles, e.g., *subpersonalities* (Assagioli 1965). While parts are often underdeveloped or fragmentary, subpersonalities are more complex and akin to ego identities, meaning that within us, we can identify, come into contact with, and embody various sub-egos. As with parts, these more complex subpersonalities can be brought into dialogue through role-playing (Burns 2014). Working with younger versions of the self, like one’s Inner Child (Bradshaw 1990), can help bring healing, comfort, or even joy. Alternatively, some work involves imagining *possible selves*: versions of the self that they would like to become, are afraid they will become, might become under certain circumstances, etc. Working with possible selves that one can imagine becoming if certain conditions were met can help address behavior in the present that would be helpful to change (Dunkel, Curtis, and Kerpelman 2006).

Transpersonal psychology works specifically with more transcendent aspects of consciousness, e.g., in psychosynthesis (Firman and Gila 2002). They may represent one’s own Higher Self, holding greater wisdom not usually available to the person in daily life. Subpersonalities can also represent archetypal or transpersonal entities, e.g., representations of the divine (Firman and Gila 2002). This theory can help explain how players are able to embody characters that are far wiser, more knowledgeable, or godlike. In some games, another person enacts a supernatural part of the character’s transpersonal consciousness, e.g., the angel in and devil on their shoulder in *Under My Skin* (Boss 2009); their animal soul in *Daemon* (Wind 2021; Wind 2025) their magical avatar in *Epiphany* (Bowman, Murdock, and Roycroft 2017; Kim, Nuncio, and Wong 2018; Bowman 2023). Such transpersonal work can help players explore expanded dimensions of their own consciousness, as well as their relationship with their spirituality (Lombard 2017), sense of life purpose, and/or personal mythos.

vii) Dissociative identity work

Finally, some psyches are fragmented in such a way that several partial or whole personalities exist within them. Unlike parts, which are usually limited in nature, *alternate identities*, or *alts*, are a form of dissociation in which the psyche splits into

multiple consciousnesses, some of which may be more active or in control than others at any given time (Schnall and Steinberg 2000). Dissociative identity is often understood as a survival mechanism resulting from trauma, with common patterns such as some combination of the Good Parent, the Bad Parent, the Self-Destructive, the Protector, the Child, the Integrator, etc. Many people may have mild dissociative qualities including the ability to inhabit alternate identities (Schnall and Steinberg 2000), hence the ability to co-create and represent someone other than ourselves.

Indeed, long-running role-playing characters, whether played over several days, or intermittently for months or years, often take on a “life of their own” for players, making different choices, having unique needs, and having their own nexus of interpersonal relationships and responsibilities within the game world (Bowman 2010). Such emergence should not be considered a form of psychosis or of clinical concern unless the player is experiencing extended distress or lack of collaboration between their internal selves.

Furthermore, the separation between fiction and reality is still psychologically intact, even if personality and archetypal contents spill over as in ego bleed (Beltran 2012) and in more sophisticated identity bleed complexes (Hugaas 2024). While this separation does not discount the meaningfulness of the identities expressed within role-playing games, nor their importance to the player’s psychological landscape, it does afford the player some protection from ego confusion (Erikson 1950). That being said, acknowledging that our characters may actually be distinct personalities within us can be powerfully transformative. Through role-playing, these personalities can communicate important information for our personal development and express needs that should be met, especially if these aspects do not usually have space to assert themselves in our daily lives.

6.4 Spiritual development

As discussed in Chapter 6 of TRGD and Chapter 2 of this book, role-playing games can also be spaces for spiritual development. By spiritual, we refer to developing an internally-focused personal relationship with one’s higher self, and/or with the divine, universe, nature, or other forces that transcend human experience. While sometimes spirituality overlaps with established religions, it need not; our emphasis here is not on religious dogma or external social expectations tied to religious practice. Spiritual development involves developing, in part, an experience of power-within, as described earlier, and role-playing games can be places for experimentation (Cazeneuve 2021). Spiritual play can involve “approaching the sacred” through various practices within a fictional setting (Ward and Liddle 2026), whether including real world religions or designed ones (see also Laycock 2015; Donahue-Martens and Simonson 2025).

For those readers who struggle to understand spiritual concepts or feel resistant to anything connected to spirituality or religion, we recommend considering the following sections as inspirational material or metaphoric language rather than fact.

a) Purpose and life path

Spirituality need not be tied to belief in deities, the supernatural, magic, or other transcendent forces. For some people, finding purpose and a clear direction for their life path is enough for a meaningful existence. This purpose may be internal, such as cultivating inner peace through meditation, or it could be external, such as feeling called to heal others through one's profession.

Some practitioners use role-playing as a vehicle for spiritual direction, guiding players through processes of self-exploration through the narrative and characters (see e.g., Cohen 2001). However, purpose and life path can be explored more organically or as a player-driven process as well. As such, role-playing is not only a space for players to explore identities, including professional ones, but also to discover what purpose in life might feel most aligned for them.

Importantly, not everyone has, wants, or needs a purpose or spiritually-guided life path. However, a lack of meaningful direction can lead to existential angst and/or an external locus of control that is experienced as disempowering, e.g., the world is happening to someone rather than them being an empowered agent within it. Therefore, role-playing games can provide an important playground for self-discovery of this kind.

On the other hand, such generalizations may be more relevant to individuals raised in a Western cultural context, as in some cultures, an external locus of control is an important value (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 2020). Therefore, exploring spiritual direction may look quite different depending on the environment and the social dynamics within it.

b) Psychomagic

As explored in Chapter 6 of *TRGD* and Chapter 2 of this book, players can also use role-playing as a place to develop *psychomagic*, a form of psychotherapy created by Alejandro Jodorowsky (2010; 2015). Psychomagic utilizes the powers of dreams, art, and theater to empower people to heal personal and generational wounds, including through symbolic and/or ritualistic acts aimed to heal the unconscious mind, i.e., *poetic acts*. In role-playing games, players can create their own rituals, for example, or even develop their own mythos, using play as a platform to explore and perform symbolic language that is personally meaningful to them. Such acts can lead to powerful forms of processing and can even mark important transitions in life, decided through play (see e.g., Davis et al. 2020).

c) Larp magic, presence, attunement, and synchronicity

When deeply immersed in role-playing, we become highly attentive to the activity and to one another. We operate under a limited perceptual framework that allows us to focus intently on play for long periods of time. In some cases, we can enter into a state of deep *presence* (Brown 2010), in which our daily worries about our own past and

our future fall away, e.g., the unresolved pain from a past breakup, the three hundred emails we still have yet to answer, our unpaid bills, or future illness. These worries are replaced by the concerns of our fictional life: concerns that can range from frivolous to deadly serious. While these characters can be complex -- and may be experiencing far worse circumstances than we are off-game -- they are nowhere near as complex psychologically as our off-game identities, as they do not carry the same amount of experience and associations.

While the external reality does not cease to exist, we can enter a state in which we are highly attentive to one another through a psychological process called *attunement* (Siegel 2007; Gottman 2011; APA Dictionary 2018). Attunement can involve mirroring the reactions of another person or responding verbally or non-verbally to the things they do to demonstrate empathy, also called *interactional synchrony* (APA Dictionary 2023), or more colloquially, “synching with one another.” Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel (2007) describes the psychological benefits of attunement:

This focus on the mind of another person harnesses neural circuitry that enables two people to “feel felt” by each other. This state is crucial if people in relationships are to feel vibrant and alive, understood, and at peace. Research has shown that such attuned relationships promote resilience and longevity. (Siegel 2007, cited in APA PsychNet n.d.)

Interestingly, even when characters are antagonistic with one another in-game, the players can feel attuned to one another off-game, producing interactional synchrony even when performing insensitive or harmful acts through play. Attunement can happen quite quickly, even among strangers, and many of the intimacy-related or trust-building workshops we have mentioned in this book are meant to create it. Elge Larsson (2003) describes three aspects that can lead to a form of mystical “enlightenment” when experienced in a larp: 1) exploration outside of the normal social parameters; 2) egolessness, setting aside our daily identity and observing ourselves; and 3) trust with co-players.

Within this state, we can observe *larp magic*, a term that refers to serendipitous or “coincidental” occurrences in which the story or interactions come together in meaningful ways. Larp magic can be understood as a form of *synchronicity* (Jung 1976; Surprise 2012), in which we become intuitively aware of and attuned to the ways in which everything is connected in the universe. Examples include:

- The exact person entering the room when you need them for a scene;
- A character giving you a piece of information critical for your play at the exact right time; and
- Pulling the perfect tarot card (Rosengarten 2000) at the exact moment needed to guide another person’s story.

Colloquially speaking, both larp magic and magic circle (Salen and Zimmerman 2024) are meant to be metaphoric terms, used practically (Rönnåsen 2022), and

sometimes even ironically. However, if we consider deep presence, attunement, and synchronicity as key functions of deeply immersive role-playing, the co-creation that occurs during role-playing games is not just fictional, but also has real power and consequence. While we often dismiss this work as simply play, escapism, or entertainment and therefore not “real,” we still have the embodied experience of something powerful, whether uncanny, profound, or empowering. This experience can feel like a more intense version of reality, i.e., *hyperreality*. In some cases, such experiences can also feel more novel, meaningful, and significant than our mundane daily routines.

d) Manifestation

Related to these concepts and the experience of power-within is the concept of *manifestation* (see e.g., Aurnyn 2020). Manifestation refers to focused intention on the individual's part paired with meaningful action leading to desired outcomes in the world. Whether or not a person believes that such effects are infused with metaphysical energy or simply cause and effect is less consequential than the development of internal locus of control and self-efficacy (Bandura 1997), e.g., the belief that one's actions have an impact in the world and one is capable of making change for themselves and others. Through our collective and individual will, we can consider co-creation as a form of playful manifestation: as players, characters, and groups, we set goals, work toward them in this highly attentive and focused state, and make these goals happen. Related to this practice is cultivating the skill of focusing our thoughts and efforts on our actual *circle of influence*, i.e., things within their power to affect, versus fixating on our *circle of concern*, i.e., things outside of our control (Covey 2020).

Some role-playing games have the benefit of providing contexts in which the characters believe in such things, or the world around the character reacts to otherwise impossible actions, e.g., in wizard school larps. Thus, the player can have the experience of empowerment through the character, even when still learning to experience it within themselves (Cazeneuve 2021). Such experiences can lead to major life decisions or changes in life course after the game, which can lead to positive transformation. The awareness that at least some aspects of one's situation might be able to be changed through one's own focused intention can increase feelings of agency in daily life as well. However, in other cases, it might be wise to advise players of intense games not to make major life decisions for several weeks until the person has recalibrated to their daily life, i.e., achieved a state of homeostasis (Hugaas 2025, see also below).

Also, we acknowledge that some players have more agency in life to change their situation than others, e.g., participants with marginalized identities, less social mobility, and minimal influence. Still, the experience of power-within can be deeply important for healing, can remind players that even small choices can be empowering, and that they are capable of making such choices for themselves. Powerful choices might include:

- Taking actions to positively transform a conflict, even if they were unsuccessful;
- Stating our feelings or needs;
- Surviving dangerous circumstances;
- Removing ourselves from danger;
- Telling others our story;
- Seeking out practices to care for and empower ourselves;
- Learning how to self-advocate and set healthy boundaries;
- Learning how to trust again and open up to others who feel safe; and
- Learning how to see ourselves as worthy of love and respect.

Such processes are sometimes easier to try in role-playing situations than in daily life, meaning players can use games as rehearsal spaces for meaningful, intentional action.

e) Meditation and mindfulness

Finally, in some situations, players can practice mindfulness (Siegel 2007) and/or meditation through role-playing games, especially in applied settings. In some cases, therapists will use moments within the fictional scenario as times to cultivate presence (Brown 2010), to focus on breathing, or to learn specific meditation techniques; players can also employ such techniques themselves in stressful in-game situations. Some players will also play characters who are spiritually developed and teach such practices to others. Doing so can help players find faith, clarity, or inner peace within themselves, or at least to have experiential memory of how such a thing could be possible.

6.5 Interpersonal transformation

Thus far, we have focused mainly on dynamics occurring within a player's psyche or that are expressed outwardly through play, i.e., identity work. As role-playing games are most often social activities, the interpersonal dynamics are equally interesting and important, especially when considering practicing skills in communication and relationships, or transforming social systems. This section will briefly highlight theories in counselling and related to interpersonal development.

a) Systemic constellation work

Similar to Internal Family Systems (IFS), Bert Hellinger's (Hellinger Institute 2025) systemic constellations work uses processes of externalization and embodiment to illustrate dynamics within social systems, e.g., families, work place, friend groups. While IFS examines systems of interaction within a person's psyche, systemic constellation work focuses on representing unconscious dynamics between groups of people. While a thorough exploration is beyond the scope of this textbook, briefly speaking, a common example is a Family Constellation exercise in which a person

directs other participants who represent their relatives to move as living statues throughout the room. These placements represent their perception of the interpersonal dynamics, e.g., how different members of the family react when a parent yells or where the attention of each member of the family is with relation to the person.

Such embodied experiences hold similar transformative potential to meaningful larp experiences (Burns 2014). In fact, such a practice can be highly interesting within workshops and larp sessions themselves. Systemic constellations has been used as a method for spontaneously co-creating characters among the play group in *improv larp design*, which relies heavily on the community to design the game together in a short amount of time (Wehrli and van Bilsen 2025). It can also be used emergently during play as a means to process in-game feelings and relationship dynamics with the right framing. From a transformation perspective, while such exercises might be focused on fictional relationships, they can also provide insight into tendencies the player might experience or witness in interpersonal interactions off-game.

b) Transactional analysis

As discussed in more detail in *TRGD*, in transactional analysis theory, people play psychological “games” with one another in daily interaction in order to get attention, called *transactions* (Berne 1996). In these “games,” people unconsciously embody certain personality patterns. Examples include the Parent-Adult-Child pattern, in which people shift between ego states throughout the day based on their interactions, with variants such as the nurturing or criticizing Parent; the rebellious or good Child; or the responsible Adult. Similarly, the Drama Triangle involves the triad of the Persecutor-Rescuer-Victim (Karpman 2007). Working with these “game” dynamics can help players learn how to get their needs met in healthier ways, such as the Empowerment Triangle, which shifts these roles to the more empowered Challenger-Coach-Creator (Emerald 2016).

Such concepts help us understand how we might easily slip into certain dynamics through play experiences. We may recreate dysfunctional dynamics from childhood through our interactions as our characters. We may develop a savior complex, become a villain, or desire to be rescued. Such dynamics are also baked into many common narratives in popular culture and fairy tales, meaning they are also often embedded in the structure of role-playing games or develop within them through emergent play, e.g., heroic play in *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), or oppressor play in *Vampire: the Masquerade* (1991).

Another theory arising from transactional analysis is the Process Communication model (Kahler 1982). While the other theories tend to focus on interpersonal dynamics, Process Communication identifies six tendencies within each of us that unconsciously guide our behavior in teams, most recently called: the Promotor, the Harmonizer, the Rebel, the Persister, the Thinker, and the Imaginer. Learning these elements within ourselves and others can help us balance our dynamics and adapt to what is needed in the group, rather than remaining embroiled in conflicts (PCM Oceania 2016).

By exploring these dynamics through play, we can gain a better understanding of our tendencies in relationships outside of games.

c) Attachment styles

As explored in Chapter 3 of *TRGD*, another helpful theory is attachment styles. Originally developed by Mary Ainsworth and S.M. Bell's (1970) initial work, and John Bowlby's (1983) follow-up research, attachment theory examines tendencies in interpersonal relationships based upon patterns developed in childhood with caregivers. The 5 forms of adult attachment are: (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.

While these styles are clearly interesting to explore from a design perspective, they often also emerge organically through player interaction. A player may unconsciously or consciously exhibit behavior within an in-game relationship that reflects their most common attachment pattern. Alternatively, players can explore attachment styles less known to them through play, whether to better understand others or to practice healthier attachment themselves.

Attachment styles might also impact the way players react to one another off-game after intense fictional relationships, e.g., one player feeling abandoned or needing reassurance after play, perceiving the other player as “ghosting” them. After all, role-playing involves states of vulnerability, trust, and intense emotional exchange, just as forms of off-game intimacy. Players may feel tender and raw after a game or experience relationship bleed-out (Bowman 2013, 2015; Harder 2018), unsure how to interpret the interpersonal dynamic or whether or not the relationship with their co-player has blossomed or changed. In leisure games, methods for navigating such dynamics are not well-established.

d) Character ensembles and complexes

Returning to depth psychology, Whitney “Strix” Beltrán (2021) has discussed relationship design in RPGs through the perspective of mixing and matching specific *complexes* with one another such that they can exist in dynamic tension and inspire

catharsis in the player. Complexes are unconscious structures within the psyche within which personal associations get attached to archetypal contents, e.g., if one's father was punishing, that behavior then being attached to the concept of The Father. For Beltrán (2021), complexes are “the silent motivator that pushes [characters] to interact with the world in a certain way.” While humans are “a bag of complexes,” she recommends giving characters one defining complex, from which she recommends deriving with a *drive*, a goal toward which their unconscious and/or conscious mind is pushing them, e.g., wanting world peace due to war trauma. These drives can be adaptive, e.g., prosocial drives, or maladaptive. She also recommends giving all characters a *shine*: a good thing about them we love, even if they are a villain.

As players, we can identify these aspects about a character and work with complexes through play even if we did not personally write them or the provided character is psychologically shallow. Beltrán (2021) believes we can engineer these moments in ways that drive personal or group catharsis so we can observe and process it. For her, sitting with these characters afterwards is an important part of the process, i.e., developing high intimacy with the *ensemble character*, i.e., characters in dynamic relationship with one another. As designers and organizers, we have more control over these moments if pre-designed, e.g., through NPCs, or designed characters. Key to the process is the ensemble cast reacting to the drive-related behavior of the player-character in ways according to their archetypal complexes, which reflects “the breadth of the human experience reflecting back at you,” e.g., the warrior in a *D&D* party supporting a violent action, which the healer being horrified by it. Facilitators should create ritual space for players to sit with these outcomes, including any damage that occurs, and process them (Beltrán 2021, 37:00-58:30).

When players write their own backstories, they tend to also include significant NPC, who are likely loaded with important complexes relevant to the player's own psyche. One option is for facilitators to find ways to embody these characters and steer towards moments of catharsis for the player-characters through dramatic scenes. Pre-designed relations can represent aspects of each other's shadow, which are embodied by the other player and projected outward through their character's behavior (Hartung 2026). Whether these scenes end positively or negatively for the characters, they can produce not only deeply emotional play experiences, but also valuable contents for processing that can be worked with after the game through reflection. Such processes help us with our own integration within our psyches, as well as improving the social fabric of our relationships with others, whether in the player base or outside of it.

In transformative games, we recommend providing scaffolding for such conversations, such as community support, debriefing exercises specifically focused on processing the relationship dynamics, and interpersonally-focused integration practices. Typical debriefing exercises may not provide the privacy needed for such conversations to occur otherwise, e.g., sharing in larger groups. At the very least, normalizing these dynamics is important, e.g., through announcements after the game that confusing feelings are normal; suggestions to process with co-players and take each other's emotions seriously; and emphasizing self-care and aftercare (Friedner

2020; Norwood and Villarreal 2026) practices. On the other hand, boundaries may also be necessary to provide, e.g., before and after the game, reminding people what was explored here is fictional in nature and any further contact should be negotiated.

6.6 Social transformation

In addition to personal transformation, role-playing games can be designed and implemented to foster social transformation (see e.g., Usman, Leonard, and Hilman 2026). While the latter is admittedly more challenging, especially at scale, below are some examples of theories and practices related to transformative play.

a) Moral and ethical development

Role-playing games can be excellent testing grounds for developing complex problem solving skills, especially with regard to moral reasoning (Wright et al. 2020) and ethical development (Hollander 2021). Here, morality refers to one's beliefs about appropriate prosocial conduct, whereas ethics demonstrates such beliefs in practice. For example, a player could explore morality in *Dungeons & Dragons* by playing a lawful good alignment, meaning their character believes in following the law in service of helping other people or being a good community member. Through play, they could explore various situations that test or otherwise nuance their moral standpoint. They can discuss ethical ramifications of certain actions with the group (Hollander 2021) or deliberate on the various options (Haarman 2023). Games can help players develop their own critical ethical thinking (Simkins 2010; Schrier 2021), as well as their skills at democratic decision making. Regardless of whether or not their character thinks morally or believes ethically ultimately, such outcomes help hone these skills and may help develop an internal locus of control, as mentioned before, around taking action in situations involving ethical quandaries.

b) Democratic skill development

Role-playing can sometimes impact our worldview in terms of political values and beliefs; indeed, many political larp designs are predicated on that principle (Johansson et al. 2026). By the late 1960s, researchers had established what they called the *role-playing effect*, which was said to have occurred “when greater attitude change is manifest by role-playing subjects than by controls exposed to similar information” (Elms 1967). In other words, participants were more likely to change their attitude toward a particular view or topic when role-playing than in other experimental conditions, e.g., through taking on an opposing political view.

Thus, role-playing has a profound potential to help raise awareness on political issues with which participants might not otherwise engage, as well as practice skills relevant to democratic engagement. For example, the Horizon Europe project Larpocracy (2025-2027; Larpocracy 2020) explores the use of role-playing games to increase skills in democratic deliberation, a process by which a diverse group of participants share opinions and listen to each other (Bowman et al. 2026). Such deliberative events have been shown to decrease political polarization (Dryzek et al.

2019) and increase feelings of group identification amongst the deliberation group (Hartz-Karp et al. 2010; Felicetti et al. 2012; Knobloch and Gastil 2015). The project has developed the larp *The Assembly* (Bowman et al. 2025) with the aim of “practicing articulating a position on an issue and listening deeply to the positions of others, even in situations of strong disagreement” (1).

Such designs emphasize the importance of the activity being practiced by the players, not just the themes. Many larps designed for political aims focus on replicating oppressive dynamics to build empathy and raise awareness (Johansson et al. 2026). The play experience in such cases likely involves either oppressing others or being oppressed. While valuable, from a transformative perspective, the in-game experience likely does not train democratic skills as such, although off-game reflections certainly can. Practicing a democratic activity, such as having an embodied experience of engaging respectfully in a political conversation or changing one’s mind, allows players the opportunity to develop their skillset through the game, as well as explore any difficulties that arise in such interactions in practice.

Similarly, players can more consciously choose character types and in-game dynamics that help them foster the prosocial skills they most want to develop, or change the direction of their play through steering, i.e., “making in-character decisions based on off-game reasons” (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015).

c) Transforming sociopolitical dynamics

Finally, players can learn to transform social dynamics and political systems through play (Hartyándi 2026 in press). Role-playing games allow players to engage with complex structures that are often daunting in daily life by creating a manageable microcosm within which player-characters can operate. By engaging with such systems in-game, players can feel more empowered to act outside of games, e.g., by participating in politics themselves (see e.g., Giæver 2012; Josefsson 2019) or organizing as activists (Levin 2023a, 2023b). Thus, we believe games have the potential to help cultivate in players the following (Bowman et al. 2026):

- **Internal efficacy:** An individual’s perception of competence regarding their ability to understand and effectively participate in political activities (Craig, Niemi, and Silver, 1990; Morrell 2005); and
- **External efficacy:** An individual’s “perceptions of the responsiveness of the political system to their demands (Morell 2005).

As discussed in Chapter 3 of *TRGD*, a related cousin activity to role-playing games is sociodrama (Hartyándi 2020, 2025), developed by Jacob L. Moreno, in which participants reenact situations of social conflict and explore intergroup dynamics of oppression present within the group (Hickling 1989; Leveton 2010; Giacomucci 2017). 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). For more on the connection between Moreno’s role theory and role-playing games, see (Hartyándi 2026).

Similarly, Theatre of the Oppressed developed by Augusto Boal (1993), sometimes called Forum Theatre, brings together members of a community to discuss key issues within their group, which actors then enact. Players can help direct these actors toward exploring issues of inequity, while also making suggestions that can shift the group to experiences of greater empowerment, particularly for marginalized participants, e.g., proposing and debating laws through theatrical play, which resulted in several enacted bills (Boal 1999). Such activities are directly relevant to role-playing games (Iuama 2022) and can help augment existing design practices. For example, McKenzie, Zawilski, and Beirne (2026) explore how a *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure was intentionally designed to provoke *conscientization*, a critical awakening theorized by Paulo Freire (2005) in his adaptation of Boal's work for educational contexts.

From a play perspective, experiences of sociopolitical transformation within games can help increase feelings of emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017, 2020), which can then be integrated in ways that help empower marginalized participants off-game and increase internal locus of control. The very act of play itself can be considered a form of conflict transformation for marginalized groups (Englund 2013), and such skills can be developed intentionally through role-playing (Heath 2022; Taraghi, Bowman, and Khosrospour 2022; Schreiber, Hugaas, and Bowman 2026). Similarly, playful experiences can be a form of resistance in themselves for oppressed populations (Ghorbanpour 2022; Svanelind 2017), and resistance activities can be practiced during play (Trenti 2016; Pöllänen and Arjoranta 2021), as can the cultivation of tolerance for difference, e.g., for religious diversity (Yamamoto 2021).

However, social change on a large scale can be quite challenging, especially when facing systems that reinforce inequities to benefit some members, but disadvantage others. As discussed above, we recommend players consider where in their life they can cultivate practices of power-within, where they may have the influence to have the *power to* make change on behalf of others, and with how they may be able to share *power with* others to enact change together.

For more perspectives on political games, see Kangas (2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2017), Pettersson (2015), Lehto (2016), Rantanen (2016), Turkington (2016), Pohjola (2016), and other articles within the *Larp Politics* book (Kangas, Lopenen, and Särkijärvi, eds. 2016).

6.7 Playing to win, lose, and lift in transformative play

In the next section, we will explore different orientations to other player-characters during play in terms of conflict, competition, and cooperation. We explore these topics in more depth in Chapter 5 and 6 of *TRGD*.

a) Conflict in role-playing games

Conflict has been part of popular leisure role-playing games since the very beginning (Baker 2003–2004). There is a general agreement among theorists that *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) evolved from wargaming (Peterson 2012; Trammell 2015), making not

only conflict, but most often also *violent* conflict an integral part of the role-playing experience. While many contemporary indie designers have taken a clear stand in rejecting the need for violence as part of their games, they still seem to agree that conflict is necessary in order to create good and engaging play (Hugaas and Bowman 2024). The idea is that games that reject violence for more prosocial play would become boring to players without the dynamic tension that follows from built-in conflict (cf. Alder 2022; Baker 2024). Some play advice centers upon ways to prolong interpersonal conflict among characters and avoid resolving it to sustain intensified drama (Linder et al. 2026).

b) Competition vs. collaboration

When in-game conflict is between characters, it is most often called player vs. player (PvP), a videogame term that literally means “player vs. player.” We find it more helpful to use character vs. character (CvC) when talking about role-playing games. This way, we avoid the ambiguity that could arise from confusion around whether people are acting as themselves -- the player -- or their character.

When in-game conflict is between the characters and the environment of the game, e.g., NPCs or the plot, it is most often referred to as PvE. Once again we recommend using the more role-playing adapted *character vs. environment* (CvE). Another way of distinguishing between these is to say that games that mostly contain CvC type play favor a competitive playstyle, while those who mostly contain CvE type play favor a collaborative playstyle.

i) Healthy competition, fair play, and being a good sport

“Healthy competition begins where a desire to win at all costs ends,” is a saying we find helpful. In principle, nothing is wrong with a goal-oriented playstyle and a desire to win regardless of whether it is in a CvE or CvC setting. Competition can manifest itself in many ways, all of which can be positive if a proper mindset and etiquette are established and followed.

The first step to achieving a healthy competitive environment is to let go of ego and desire to control; acceptance of loss is mandatory as well. Being a good winner means being a good “loser.” Losing should be considered an opportunity for growth and self-improvement -- a more powerful one than winning could ever be. Winning will only tell you what you already excel at and what you already know you do correctly; a loss is a treasure trove of information just waiting to be explored.

The second is to become a challenge for others, not an obstacle. While the first step focuses on our own mentality and what we gain ourselves, the second one focuses on what we can do for others. This principle arises most often when there is a great disparity in skill between the players and is most visible in combat games or intellectual games. The difference between a challenge and an obstacle is in fairness during the challenge, but also in what happens after it. A person who is an obstacle will often gloat, brag, and in general, the focus will become on them winning. A person that serves as a challenge will help others overcome them; give tips and tricks on how to handle a situation next time; and generally praise and inspire the desire to get better in others.

The third step is realizing that competition is a cycle and that “true” victory does not exist; if it did, the game would forever end. If you follow steps 1 and 2 then you will find yourself in the eternal ebb and flow of learning. If you improve yourself, you will become a challenge. If you improve others, eventually they will overcome you and then they will be a challenge. Ideally, this process should continue, eventually leading to a community of highly skilled individuals who are willing to share their knowledge. Thus, they create an environment of healthy competition, but also one that is welcoming to beginners and wants to elevate them.

On the topic of fair play, most people assume it has to do with behaving in a certain way according to the rules of the game. However, the rules are not the whole of it, just one aspect. Fair play is following the rules, but also adjusting to the people with whom we are playing to create a truly fair experience; which goes hand in hand with healthy competition.

Imagine that you are a champion Chess player and that you just invited one of your friends to try Chess for the first time. Now the skill gap here is obviously so great that there is no chance for the beginner to win, but how they experience the game will determine if they feel the game was fair or not. As a champion player, you could obviously win the game in such a way and at such speed that your friend would not understand how you won. They would most likely walk away from the game feeling ashamed, less capable, or lose the willingness to try the game again altogether.

How do you make the game fair then? Again, most people assume that in order to equalize the game, the champion could forfeit some of their pieces, such as rooks, knights, queen, which is usually done in Chess. While that can be a good practice in some game pedagogy, an unfortunate side effect is now the other person knows that they have lost not just due to a skill gap, but also despite being given a clear advantage. Such a practice may deepen the damage done to the self-esteem of the beginner, and be perceived as “flexing” the prowess of the champion.

Instead, try remembering what it was like to be at a less skilled level, emulate that, and in doing so create a fair experience for a beginner. Now this practice does not mean making mistakes or blunders on purpose, but that you do not use higher forms of strategy, such as planning the game ten moves in advance, but rather plan one or two ahead and follow the most basic rules of the game. That way the level of the game is as close to fair as possible. It provides the opportunity for the beginner to immerse themselves, feel challenged in a positive way, and provides a learning opportunity as well as a possibility of fostering a further interest in the hobby.

Being a good sport is as simple as learning to enjoy and play the game for the sake of it. Winning and losing stops mattering if at the core, the experience is rewarding or transformative itself. Congratulating your opponent when they defeat you comes easy, as well as staying humble and respectful in victory. This attitude will allow you to become more inclusive, respond better to all types of game situations, be more cooperative, and develop a “Yes and...” mentality in games.

c) Playing to win, lose, and lift

In traditional role-playing games, we are often *playing to win*, meaning as players doing our best to make sure that our characters achieve their goals. When we consider this together with CvE, it manifests as the players wanting their band of adventurers to beat the evildoers and save the kingdom at the end of the day. When we are playing games with elements of CvC though, playing to win means that we as players are also trying to make it so that the characters whose goals oppose the goals of our own character end up losing. Games with heavy elements of CvC can lead to animosity between the players of the opposing characters, and over time this might lead to toxicity in their community (Bowman 2013, see also Chapter 5 of this book).

In the Nordic larp tradition, *playing to lose* was an early way to formulate a specific type of collaborative play that the designers within the tradition wanted to promote (Nordic Larp Wiki 2025). The term is clearly juxtaposed against the idea of playing to win, but it can also be confusing, especially if you are not familiar with the Nordic larp tradition. Playing to lose can read as self-defeating, as putting yourself up as a sacrificial lamb, or that misery and loss are the only possible valid stories to play. The central idea, though, is that by allowing our characters to “lose”, or in other words; not achieve what they want to achieve, we create more space wherein we can collaboratively create interesting stories and narratives for our characters as a collective.

Based on this ambiguity, *playing to lift* (Vejdemo 2018; Rönnåsen 2022) has gained traction as a term that better describes the collaborative playstyle of the Nordic larp tradition. Playing to lift focuses on uplifting the traits the others are trying to portray through their characters.

All three of these styles of play can be important to a transformative experience, but be aware that whatever playstyle you adopt may affect the dynamics of social group in important ways, e.g., unmitigated competition leading to conflict within the community (Bowman 2013), or people feeling pressured to play exceedingly intense experiences of suffering.

6.8 Play as labor

Making a larp happen can, and often will, require a significant amount of labor. From writing down the very first words in a design document, to cleaning up the location afterwards, any larp is full of tasks that require labor to complete. For designers, organizers, and volunteers this labor is often both evident and structured, but at many, if not all, events there is also a considerable amount of less visible labor that is being done by the players.

It might feel natural to make a strict distinction between “fun” and “work,” even considering them as mutually exclusive opposites. Considering that at least leisure larpers engage in the activity because it is fun, would then lead to the understanding

that a larp event is a place for fun and play, not work and labor. Whereas this might be true for some players, the staggering amount of labor being done by players as a whole speaks to a more nuanced understanding. Labor being “fun” might not be every player’s motivation, but seeing as it is being done by so many, one can imagine that players can find it meaningful, purposeful, interesting, and/or rewarding in some way. If they didn’t, how would the work get done?

Then, what does player labor in larp look like? In short, it can be everything from actual chores that need doing, such as making and serving food, doing the dishes, cleaning, and collecting firewood, via labor demanding responsibilities to create play for other players, to performative “labor” that is connected to the specific responsibilities of the character. For example, embodying NPCs to battle is a form of physical and even emotional labor (Mitchell 2016).

Jones, Koulu, Torner (2016) provide a helpful classification:

- **First-order labor:** Labor done to meet basic needs, such as cooking, cleaning the bathrooms, and safety
- **Second-order labor:** Labor that involves real life skills and doing a real job, but which is otherwise not required to survive. For instance teaching, playing music, dancing, and DJ-ing. Some players might even use larps as a playful space to experiment with and hone their out of game professional skills (Homann 2020)
- **Third-order labor:** Labor that only serves a diegetic purpose. “Pretend” work, such as digging a ditch, marching in step, sending a telegram. (Jones, Koulu, Torner 2016, 129)

The examples listed in the second-order type labor are all labor that are visible to the other players. If another player is playing a professor and teaches a class, everyone can see the labor happening in the moment, and some might also appreciate the labor done in preparation before the larp.

What is more challenging to identify, is all sorts of labor that is primarily connected to the player, not the character. By this *invisible labor* (Crain, Poster, and Cherry 2016), we mean all the work that the player is doing to create and maintain a positive atmosphere of play and to create engagement for other players. Examples include organizing complex rituals behind the scenes so they can run smoothly or making realistic looking props to give to other players, helping them feel more immersed.

The most recognized example might be *emotional labor* (Hochschild 1983), which in relation to larp is the work of managing one’s own emotions and the emotions of others in order to create and maintain a functional space for play (Jones, Koulu, Torner 2016, 130-132; Koulu 2020). In extension, in transformative games, emotional labor can also be required to maintain the transformational container. Other examples of invisible labor are all the little things that “good” players do in order to create play for others, e.g. the player of a political leader making sure that initiative and plot is distributed across the players as much as possible; shining the spotlight on other players; helping

them stay in character through *inter-immersion* (Pohjola 2003), and holding space for their moments of transformation;

Play as labor can be a controversial idea. When we recognize that players are actively doing labor that is necessary for the game, as well as adding significant value, we might understand how a larp can be strongly dependent on the commodification of its participants labor (Seregina 2019, 2020, 2014) in order to both attract players for future runs and enhance the experience of the players at the current one. Where designers and runners are not making profits on the game, this might be a non-issue, but there are numerous designers that have and are currently trying to make larp a viable income stream. In addition, content creators and larp “influencers” might wish to take advantage of this commodification, something that has already led to instances of friction with players who do not wish to have their efforts monetized by others. Similarly, challenges may arise when trying to keep a group together to run a successful actual play, such as shifting from a more horizontal, collaborative organizational structure to a vertical one concerned with productivity (Sottile 2025) If you plan to monetize your larp in any way, these are considerations that you will need to make. We advise communicating your choices as early and clearly as possible.

In the last parts of the chapter, we transition from applied theories to offering more practical advice for developing your skills as a player.

6.9 Preparatory activities

Players can prepare for games ahead of time in ways that can make transformation more possible. The following sections give some recommendations.

a) Transformative goals

As always, players should consider any transformative goals they have for themselves. These goals may or may not be aligned with the more general goals of the game. For example, you could be joining a game about teamwork, but actually wanting to explore greater self-confidence in advocating for your own needs in a group. However, if your goals run counter to the aims of the game, you may wish to refine them so that your actions still align with the overall experience of the game.

b) Character sheets

As discussed in previous chapters, characters are sometimes written by the organizers (van der Heij 2019). As a player in a game that has pre-written character sheets, particularly a transformative game, it is important to set aside some time to properly read and assimilate the character. Similarly, in games where you create your character, you should deeply consider the choices you make. Whilst some games have no preparatory work, for those that do, you risk adversely affecting your experience and the experience of others if you neglect this or rush it. We suggest treating character writing and/or reading as an act of self-care, finding a quiet calm time without interruptions to read and understand the information presented.

If you have questions or concerns about your character, it is far easier to raise them with the organizers weeks or months before rather than hours before a game. For example, if you have concerns about your psychological well-being if cast in a domestic violence plot, if you do not notify the organizers, that may not be able to recast you or alter your character sheet due to other built-in relations in the game. Issues unreported are issues that cannot be resolved. Questions left unasked are unlikely to be answered. You are not being a bother; you are being an active participant with an interest in getting the most out of the game and helping others do the same. It may help to talk through the character with other people to fully understand who this person is, and who they can be.

c) Costuming and props

Wearing costumes can help augment transformative experiences by making the character more real and more deeply embodying certain ways of being, e.g., a different social class (Ford 2021). For a game that requires costuming and/or props, consider the aesthetic design of the game. What level of authenticity have the organizers requested? What is your budget in terms of both money and time? Are you able to create something yourself? Will you rent or purchase something? Or are you able to costume this character from thrift stores or even out of your own wardrobe? Does the game provide costumes for you, and if so, are they generic sizes or custom made for you (see e.g., Jelínková 2026)?

For historical games, and particularly for femme-presenting characters, quite a lot of work may be required if you want to go for maximum authenticity of silhouette and style.

Also consider when and where the game is taking place, e.g., the season; whether play will be indoors or outdoors; the duration; the social class of the character. When possible, plan something in advance rather than stress about it at the last minute. Similarly, some advance planning and collection of props makes the run up to the game less stressful. However, we acknowledge that for some people, larps may always feel panicked until the beginning of the game no matter how much they prepared.

d) Backstory writing and pre-game role-playing

For some characters, you will have the option to create your own or co-create shared backstories. This practice can be particularly powerful as a technique for creating memories that your character can rely on during the game. Putting some time into writing moments of joy, grief, trauma, or adventure can help the game come to life. Whilst many role-players are good at improvising a story in the moment, recalling something rather than improvising it often seems more authentic and may be easier for you as a player. This process can also be powerful if the story is shared, i.e., through play-by-post (Zalka 2019) or chat-based role-playing. The back-and-forth play between two or more characters can transcend a “Yes, and...” exercise and create moments of immediate catharsis before the events of the game actually transpire.

If you have specific themes that you want to explore through play, you have the opportunity to seed them through backstory writing. However, the same guidelines of consent and calibration apply, especially when steering toward content that requires deep processing.

Similar to collaborative backstory writing, another method for co-creating stories is to engage in some role-playing prior to the start of the game. Whether done online, in-person, or via shared writing, this live creative exercise can generate moments of unexpected narrative and opportunities for play.

In the larp *Redemption*, for example, two players co-created the story of where and when they met, playing out a scene via a shared text document over the course of two weeks. When asked by his in-game wife at dinner, “How did you meet Princess Olga?” the Grand Duke was able to say that he caught her stealing his horse, a story that Olga was able to corroborate when questioned about it later. Such moments can help the characters feel more realistic and the plot more coherent, which can help some players more deeply immerse into the narrative.

Importantly, pre-game role-playing can create episodes of drama and issues that need to be resolved during the game. This technique should be used with caution and remain timebound, as months of challenging role-play without a way of relieving the tension can be difficult for players (see e.g., Svanevik and Brind 2016).

e) Pre-game relations building

Some games ask players to create their character’s relationships with other characters. This approach reduces the workload on writers and acknowledges that some players gel better with others. By moving some or all of this responsibility onto the players, the relationships that are formed are more likely to be played upon.

Workable character relations can mean the difference between an engaging experience and a disappointing one. If a game allows or even requires pre-game relation building, we recommend that you do find some time to get involved (Ashby 2017; Svanevik and Brind 2016). The amount of relations is not a competition; it is far better to have a handful of interesting relations that can be enacted in the game than thirty that do not have any playable depth. If you are unable to create relations before the game, either because of time constraints or challenges in the process, talk to the organizers early. Acknowledging something is not working as intended will likely improve your experience.

However, keep in mind it can be difficult to assess chemistry with other players before meeting online over video conferencing or in-person. By chemistry, we do not mean only romantic or sexual chemistry, although sometimes these factors can affect play (Nøglebæk 2023). Chemistry can be more generally understood as playstyle alignment, the ability to easily attune to one another, and drop into *inter-immersive states* (Pohjola 2003). Lack of chemistry is unfortunately not something that can be controlled, but you can plan ahead in case it happens, e.g., by asking your co-player

for calibration check-ins to make the situation more workable. You can also build chemistry (Gottman Connect Staff 2022), for example by engaging in exercises that increase attunement and intimacy (see e.g., Hernø 2024).

Finally, we advise you to avoid making decisions about play based mainly on the other person's appearance (van der Heij 2021; Petersen 2024), romantic, or sexual chemistry, as that practice can be exclusionary and hurtful for your co-players, especially if their experience has been designed around interactions with your character. Instead, find ways to play the relation that can work for both of you, e.g., through regular communication (Nøglebæk 2023). Similarly, find active, rather than passive ways of playing antagonistic relationships. If another player has been cast as a villain, your tendency may be to want to avoid them during the whole game, or to expect them to antagonize you or chase you. Playing character relations involve creating interesting scenes for one another, not expecting someone else to provide an experience for us.

f) Safety and consent considerations and negotiations

Depending on the nature of the game you are playing you will need to have negotiations with co-players on matters of safety and consent. While these negotiations should be scaffolded and supported by the organizers, in practice, these structures may not be present. Regardless of whether or not such scaffolding exists, we recommend that you talk to co-players directly about their levels of comfort, desires, and limits. This practice is particularly relevant in situations where there is an age or power imbalance between you and one or more co-players. Indeed, you may want to avoid certain situations altogether that may prove problematic, e.g., heavily physical role-play when playing a romantic relationship with someone far younger than you.

Where possible, we recommend having these conversations in person, onsite just before the game starts. You can also plan in advance, but you should confirm that nothing has changed just before the game. Having these conversations in a group is useful to set a baseline for that group, but we should also acknowledge that there are also 1:1 preferences. We suggest that conversations pertaining to intimacy take place in a relatively public setting and with enough time to explore the details of where someone's comfort level actually is. Sadly, there are some people who seek to manipulate others, while others give answers that they think the other person wants to hear at the expense of their own limits.

Keep in mind that newer players may not know their limits to start, in which case you can model limit-setting by explaining your own and asking questions respectfully about specific actions. "I'm up for anything" may mean "I'm experienced and can handle many situations"; "I'm inexperienced and think I can handle anything"; or "I want to fit into the group, so I won't state my boundaries," among other things. In terms of sensitive content, if you think that the other party is not being honest or able to set boundaries for themselves, you may want to calibrate to avoid that content altogether with them. If a boundary is crossed during play leading to acute stress for you or your co-players, we recommend alerting members of the safety team.

6.10 Working with steering

As discussed earlier, steering refers to changing one's direction of play or adjusting one's actions based on off-game reasons (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015). While this term is considered neutral, in many role-playing communities, such behavior used to be considered *metagaming*: a form of cheating. In more gamist or narrativist groups, using off-game information to try to “win” or to spoil the story is considered taboo. In others, violating the fidelity of the character's authentic thoughts and actions, i.e., “breaking character” or “breaking immersion” is considered the more serious issue. Similarly, some groups consider it a violation of the social contract when a person “breaks someone else's immersion,” e.g., by bringing off-game information or communication into the game, which can disrupt the activity.

While in some cases, these issues do occur in role-playing games, it became clear to theorists over time that metagaming not only was negatively charged, but covered too few situations. In truth, we often slip in- and out-of-character, having to filter out excess information we are receiving from the environment and the people around us, or translate it into the in-game experience (Harviainen 2012). Montola, Stenros, and Saitta (2015) describe over 20 types of situations in which players may need to steer, from instances as mundane as needing to eat, sleep, or get warm, to more complex issues such as mitigating damage caused by an incompetent or disruptive player. They organize these reasons into 6 overall categories of steering (for more details, see Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015):

1. **Practical:** Physical needs, looking for someone, documentation, logistics, physical safety;
2. **Smooth play:** Coherence, legibility, game mastering / fateplay, retrospective rationalization, post-hoc player vetting, theme;
3. **Aesthetic Ideals:** Narrativism / dramatism, gamism, immersionism, bleed, 360° illusion, play to lose;
4. **Personal Experience:** Boredom, staying in-game, relevance, overcoming disabling design, avoiding the same-old, attraction, player status, shame;
5. **Ethical and unethical:** Consent, trust, inclusiveness, harassment, revenge. (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015)

Ideally, you can steer in ways that minimize disruptions, but in some cases, such as in issues of consent, breaking immersion may be necessary. Keeping the flow of the game going while assessing the degree to which everyone feels safe and content with the direction of play can be a difficult headspace to navigate.

a) Navigational play

From a transformative play perspective, steering can be used deliberately, both by facilitators and players, when aiming toward transformative impacts. For example, Jonaya Kemper (2020) coined the term *navigational play* in which players adopt “a self-exploratory, liberatory play style, that allows [them] to feel free of or investigate

a particular marginalization.” She describes two components to aid in this process: *steering for liberation* and *reflective writing*. Through this process, the game and the character are vehicles through which liberation might be achieved; thus, steering is recommended in order to aim play in that direction, e.g., supported by pauses for metareflective moments (Levin 2020).

b) Emergence and the domino effect

As discussed in other chapters, emergent play can take the story into surprising or unexpected directions (Torner 2018b). While on one hand, we should be open to new content emerging, especially if it leads to potentially transformative moments, in some cases, the entire game might become derailed through the *domino effect* (Bowman 2017), in which emergent content disrupts the intended direction of play to the detriment of the experience of others. For example, if someone decides their character should die in the middle of a celebration, and that celebration is important to the narrative, the celebration may fall apart completely due to shock and grief.

In such cases, steering might be necessary, e.g., a player steering their character to take control of the narrative, redirect it, or ignore it; or a facilitator embodying an NPC who intervenes *deus ex machina* style. When such course corrections through play are not possible, sometimes breaking the game to calibrate is needed. Such moments are awkward and sometimes frustrating, but they may be necessary to steer toward your chosen goals or keep the activity on track.

c) Playing ball as a metaphor for directing plot

As described earlier, players sometimes have different motivations, which can create complications when trying to play together. Some players are heavily motivated by pursuing plots, especially those initiated by facilitators. Others want to avoid such plots at all costs because they interrupt more personal scenes. By understanding what types of plots you and others want to explore, you can steer towards your own trajectory and also help others reach the experience they desire. During runtime, this skill is called *reading the game*. If you are good at reading the game, it also becomes easier for you to direct play.

Nordblom and Westborg (2017) use an analogy for reading the game that considers it a team sport. Each plot point is a ball that is used during play. The ball gets passed between the players, which then creates a story. By seeing a ball, you become aware of someone else’s plot point, their character’s need, or other information that connects to another player’s story or main arc. Nordblom and Westborg (2017) describe the following interactions in their analogy:

- **Catching a ball:** To see another player’s initiative and choose to act on it.
- **Passing on a ball:** To create a new step in the story by involving someone else in it; or passing on the plot, information, or task along to someone else, e.g., by spilling secrets or otherwise spreading knowledge about, solving, or further complicating parts of your plot.

- **Multiplying a ball:** The same as passing the ball, but involving more than one other player.
- **Picking up a placed, dropped, or idle ball:** To find information or an opportunity and bring it into the game. Also maybe picking up another player's initiative that no one else saw.
- **Passing on several balls:** To have many or even too many plots and to pass them along to several players.
- **Creating a new ball:** To create and introduce a new plot based on nothing or very little.
- **Placing a ball:** To place plot content physically in a specific space or context rather than aiming it at a specific player.
- **The idle ball:** To stop or kill a plot by not sharing information or artifacts that are relevant for others, but not using them yourself. You might think you are using them by just keeping them, i.e., *plot hoarding*. This practice might create fun internal play for you, but in reality it can stop the overall story from proceeding.
- **Dropping a ball:** Similar to the idle ball, but more active. You have said that you will bring the story onwards but do not, e.g., speaking up during the game, or promising someone off-game to do something for them or help with their story and when the moment arrives, failing to do so.
- **Smashing a ball in the face:** When you draw someone into a story or scene without giving them any possibility of opting-out.

We can imagine balls as having specific colours representing different themes in the story, such as romance, friendship, or oppression. These often match with the motivations of players. During a game, many balls of different colors will be passed between characters. By being able to read the game, you can more easily interact with the metaphoric balls in the color of your preference, and pass along balls of other colors to players who would prefer to interact with that theme. This becomes a way to steer the game.

This analogy also helps when thinking about play distribution. Ideally, organizers want all players to have about the same amount of time with plots, and preferably with balls in colors that they like. In reality, very often, plot balls tend to move up in a hierarchy, meaning high-status characters can end up having excessive plot, while other players find themselves not having anything to do. This means that if you are playing a high-status character, you will need to spend more time passing balls along; lower-status characters often do not have the same in-game mandate to create new balls and are more dependent on getting balls passed on to them. This type of steering helps create and distribute agency and responsibility among the players more evenly, making the co-creation process more balanced.

In some cases, you will not be working with plot in the case of information or a special task, but rather attention itself (van der Heij 2025). For example, if your character becomes hysterical in the middle of a scene, other players likely will need to take care of you or respond to you in another way. This action might be rewarding for them, for example if a psychologist character is idle with nothing to do, but it may also disrupt ongoing scenes for that player that might be more rewarding.

Reading the game also involves monitoring how your own energy and playstyle impacts others, and modifying according to the needs of the group. For example, you may be a charismatic, dramatic player, but interrupting a marriage feast without good reason might be unnecessarily attention-drawing or in poor taste. Such an action might make sense for your character, e.g., if they are the monarch of the realm, but might not be helpful for the other players. Alternatively, you can draw attention through subtle and/or nonverbal actions that do not require dialogue, e.g., the monarch visibly brooding in the corner, refusing food brought to them.

Remember that immersion is attention, and attention is precious. Immersion also requires energy. Role-playing is not theatre acting. You are not always doing someone a favor by creating play for them; in fact, you may be depleting the resources they have. If you need to take the spotlight, remember to then shine it upon someone else to keep attention and energy flowing throughout the player-character base. Alternatively, you may need to learn how to take the spotlight for yourself, which is also a skill you can practice.

Such skills can sometimes also correspond with transformative goals. Sharing spotlight can correspond with learning how to emotionally self-regulate or practice impulse control. Grabbing the spotlight can correspond with learning how to persuade others or self-advocate. Passing the spotlight back and forth with others is great for practicing skills in teambuilding and group creativity.

6.11 Working with immersion

You can prepare ahead of time when you know you will be working with different types of immersion. Sometimes, pre-game actions are necessary to perform so that the individual and group experience remains coherent and potent.

In other cases, you may need to steer toward specific types of immersion based on your transformative goals, especially in games with many different types of available affordances. This practice is especially important if the skills being trained or desired goals are complex or difficult for the player to achieve; unconsciously, they may seek to distract themselves with easier or more stimulating in-game situations.

Some types of immersion also might actively work against each other, for example, working with more cognitive tasks related to immersing into the game can make it harder to focus on being in-character (Westborg 2026). Below are some examples of working with specific types of immersion.

a) Immersion into activity

If a game's transformative goals emphasize a particular activity, as a player, you may need to practice it ahead of time. For example, if the goals have to do with physical fitness or skilled boffer fighting, you may need to prepare by attending fighter practices with other players between games. If you need to learn how to simulate flying a spaceship, you may need to attend a workshop beforehand to learn how the mechanics work. If you are expected to craft during the game as a central activity, you may need to steer your character's attention away from the dramatic argument happening in the hallway and focus on the task at hand. If players are unable to do so, another character, such as a facilitator NPC, may need to intervene to remind them. As a player, you can also help the other player-characters stay on task.

b) Immersion into game

Similarly, when players are intended to engage in tactics, complex puzzle solving, or other game-related goals, practicing those skills ahead of time or memorizing rules may be helpful, e.g., through workshop activities or lessons. Not only will practice likely increase your actual competence, it will likely also increase your perceived competence at the task (see e.g., Bowman and Standiford 2015). Furthermore, if many stimuli are present, they may distract you from the task. e.g., in a fast-paced larp, trying to plan tactics when other kinds of interactions or pressures are present, such as enemies coming to attack. Preparatory activities, as well as steering, can help you get back on track. For example, you might yell to other player-characters, "I know you can hear the monsters screaming outside, but we still need to plan the battle!"

c) Immersion into environment

This type of immersion often requires a considerable amount of preparation, especially for larps. Larps that aim toward a 360 degree aesthetic (Koljonen 2007) are especially time consuming, requiring costumes, props, and setting pieces that make the environment feel authentic. Research may also be required, e.g., in order to be able to realistically converse on historical topics or aspects of the story world's lore. Practical items from the modern day may need to be rethought, disguised, or left behind completely to adhere to the setting requirements.

While many role-playing games are more flexible about such details, for some players, it can be difficult to immerse without these elements, for example, needing to wear a specific costume in order to have enough alibi to get into character. Similarly, players may need to steer away from elements in the environment that distract them from their immersion into the environment, e.g., the off-game park ranger who is required to be on site at the scout camp where the in-game zombie apocalypse is happening.

d) Immersion into narrative

Some transformative goals may require immersing into the narrative. For example, in narrative therapy, the primary vehicle for exploring the therapeutic goals is the story co-created by the players and reconstructed later in a more linear fashion through narrativizing and analysis. If the narrative of the game is weak, for example, if it lacks clear decision points, is incoherent, or lacks a strong motivation for why characters would engage with the story at all, the player may not experience the key story beats that will help them make sense of the experience later.

Some players feel frustrated if they are not able to experience a narrative arc of some sort. While handling frustration, disappointment, or lack of control may be worthy goals in themselves, lack of narrative dynamism may risk the player becoming disengaged or resistant to the activity. For example, waiting for hours in the cold for the epic climax of the larp only to have the plot called off due to poor facilitator planning might distract from desired goals, especially if the players are slipping off-game.

However, players can learn how to steer toward narrative beats or resolutions. If you are struggling with this as a player, you may be able to ask for assistance from in-game or off-game facilitators or other players. Safety team members and other organizers commonly help with such frustrations, e.g., a player feeling shut out of plot points, being overwhelmed by indecision with too many scenes occurring at once, or feeling insignificant to the larger story.

e) Immersion into character

Players may need conscious steering in order to immerse into their character. They may feel self-conscious or unskilled at performance, putting pressure on themselves to role-play “correctly.” Role-playing involves imagining the consciousness of a character and immersing into a fictional reality, which may be correlated with advanced skills in establishing and maintaining the *theory of mind* of another person (Goldstein and Winner 2011). Such a process requires cognitive resources; the player must uphold their own identity and the character at once through meta-awareness, then interpret the fiction through the character’s lens. If the situation is not stimulating or otherwise engaging, the player may slip out-of-character, e.g., to think about all the tasks they need to accomplish at work next week, which might distract from the goals. This issue can often happen in long combat scenes, especially ones that require mechanics and turn-taking: an example of immersion into the game interfering with immersion into the character. Players can develop strategies for staying in character, such as singing a specific song or recalling a special memory that brings them back to the character. They can also develop the skill of inter-immersion (Pohjola 2004), learning how to draw other players’ attention more deeply into their character and the fiction.

f) Immersion into community

Immersion into community often requires pre-game preparation to establish trust among players, detail aspects of the group's dynamic together, and calibrate. Such preparation can happen in players' own time, e.g., before the game on social media or instant messenger. Organizers can also arrange group activities through video conferencing or physical meetups, such as Session 0s, character creation sessions, or workshops.

As a player, you may struggle to remember the names of others in a game. Some activities can help, such as the Name Game workshop, in which players say their character's name, make a pose related to the character's personality, and everyone repeats the name. Nametags, faction colors, and other helpful costume identifiers can make forming a social group easier. Pre-game preparatory scenes can also help establish the interpersonal dynamics of the group, e.g., through flashbacks (Holkar 2021). Some players create spreadsheets before the game so they can keep track of the key social dynamics and character names.

If your transformative goals center upon in-game social activities, such as practicing teamwork or community building, then activities that incentivize solo behavior, such as solving a difficult one-person puzzle on a screen, will likely derail that process. In such an example, you might either ignore such elements or find ways to make the puzzle meaningfully interactive, e.g., communicating parts of the puzzle to the team to ask for assistance. Community building might require positive face time, meaning interactions with others that aid in social cohesion by meaning adopting a demeanor that invites interaction, is responsive, and present to the needs of others. A positive face can be disrupted when engaging in an activity that requires concentration, i.e., autonomous face (Goffman 1959; Cahn and Abigail 2014), such as crafting, boffer fighting, or trying to solve a puzzle. Too many competing activities might make positive face difficult, so as a player, you might need to steer play to focus on social activities, e.g., saying to another player-character, "I know you have a lot of work to do to solve the crisis, but can we spend a little time together as a family instead?"

6.12 Working with bleed

a) Playing to maximize bleed

As discussed previously, bleed might not always be noticeable, e.g., if it does not exceed the player's bleed perception threshold (Hugaas 2024). Therefore, maximizing the potential for bleed experiences to occur might be a question of lowering the threshold in some way, increasing the intensity of the bleed, or most likely a combination of the two.

Some suggestions on how to maximize the potential for bleed experiences to occur, include the following:

- Playing characters that are *close to home* (Jeepen 2007);
- Weakening alibi by playing stories that are close to home (Clapper 2016; Greywood 2025);
- Playing characters for a long period of time, or engaging in extensive pre-event play (Svanevik and Brind 2016);
- Creating bleed-focused characters through specific practices (Anderson and Meland 2020);
- Lowering identity defenses through alibi (Hugaas 2024);
- Depriving players of physiological needs, such as food and sleep (Leonard and Thurman 2018);
- Bypassing identity defense through strong emotional play (Bowman et al. 2024); and/or
- Creating transformational containers with lowered alibi (Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

Through the lens of the bleed perception threshold, when a player weakens alibi by playing stories that are close to home, they likely increase the intensity of their bleed experience. Similarly, depriving yourself of meeting your physiological needs can be understood as an example of lowering the threshold (Hugaas 2024). As a player, you can benefit from understanding both types of strategies if you wish to maximize your chance of experiencing bleed.

b) Playing to minimize bleed

Minimizing the potential for bleed experiences to occur would likely involve raising the threshold, lowering the intensity of the bleed, or most likely, a combination of the two.

Some design suggestions on how to minimize the potential for bleed experiences to occur are:

- Increasing knowledge and awareness of bleed (Hugaas 2024);
- Playing characters that are *far from home*;
- Lowering emotional engagement through greater alibi (Bowman 2015a);
- Taking care of your players physiological needs (Leonard and Thurman 2018).

One would think that playing to minimize bleed involves the opposite strategies to playing to maximize it, but the situation is a bit more complicated than that. For example, the concept of alibi affords us both a freedom to explore while simultaneously offering us a way out from engaging with strong emotions. Which effect you experience may be a direct result of the intention with which you engage in the first place, or it may have to do with your unique psychological template. Learning what strategies work best for your desired impact is part of the process of growing as a player.

c) Processing bleed

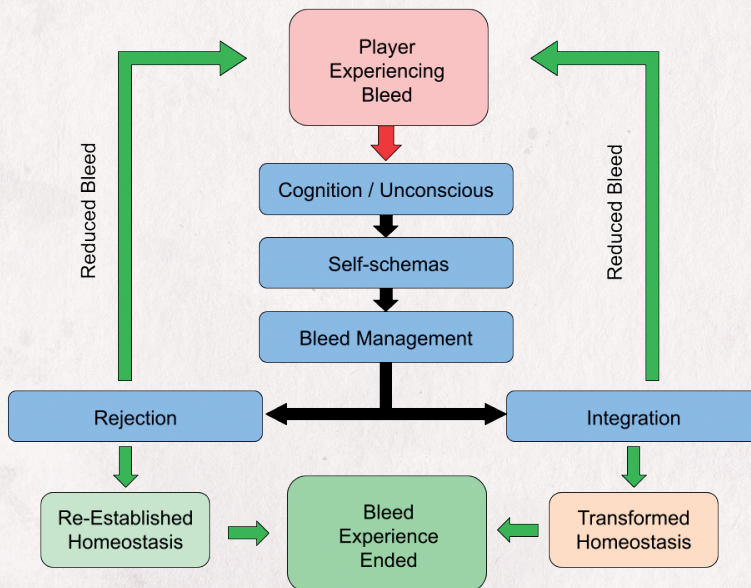
As bleed remains an under-researched phenomena, tips for processing bleed often arise from best practice suggestions based on personal experience. These suggestions can be sorted into 4 different categories:

- Physiological needs, such as getting enough sleep and hydrating (Nilsen 2015);
- Emotional processing (Bowman and Hugaas 2019);
- Intellectual analysis; and
- Interpersonal relations (e.g., Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

Hugaas' (2025) model of bleed as a homeostasis recovery process provides a theoretical framework with which to help us organize these suggestions. In biology, the term homeostasis (Cannon 1932) is used to describe a state of steady internal physiological conditions within an organism (Betts et al. 2022). Easily recognizable examples include body temperature and fluid balance. Maintaining homeostasis directly influences how an organism functions and interacts with the world, and as such it is a crucial part of its ability to survive. An outside influence that pushes an organism out of homeostasis is known as a *stimulus* in biology, and a *stressor* in psychology (Hugaas 2025).

The model postulates that bleed is experienced as an uncomfortable imbalance, because it is a state in which the player is outside of both physiological and psychological homeostasis (see Figure 1).

Figure 3: Bleed Experience as a Homeostasis Process Cycle (Hugaas 2025)



In this model, bleed experiences have the potential to show us possibilities in ourselves and in our lives that were below consciousness before. Bleed does this by presenting us with ideas about ourselves that do not immediately fit our self-schemas (Piaget 1972; Palmquist 1993) and challenging us to critically examine which of the two -- the ideas or the existing schema -- feels most authentic. When we decide on the existing schemas, processing bleed becomes a question of returning to a re-established homeostasis. If we decide to adopt the new ideas about ourselves, processing bleed becomes a question of creating a transformed homeostasis to which we can return (Hugaas 2025). In a real life situation, this choice is probably not going to be binary, but rather of a mixture of the two paths.

The important takeaway for practical implementation is that while implementing, you need to consider how your debrief and integration practices can best support your players with regards to potential bleed experiences after the game. As a player, you should consider the conditions that might best foster your openness for transformation, e.g., a trusting relationship with co-players, or having taken care of matters at home before the event. Make sure you build into your schedule plenty of time to process the experience after the game itself, with integration practices that are most helpful to you. For example, maybe creating visual art is a helpful activity for you, but socializing too quickly afterwards might interrupt the transformative process.

6.13 Working with interpersonal relationship dynamics

As mentioned earlier, role-playing games are rife with opportunities for interpersonal relationship skill training, as well as exploring less functional dynamics. Players and facilitators can consciously steer play toward specific types of dynamics that are relevant to the player's transformative goals. Other dynamics might distract from your goals, so carefully considering elements to explore might be important.

Furthermore, as a designer, you should think about who you want the players interacting with the most. If your goal is to have them work closely with one another, then playing an important NPC that one player trusts more than the rest of the group might run counter to your goals. If you have a specific script you want them to try, such as an "I-Statement," then you may want to be active as an NPC facilitator in the scene so you can guide them and give them feedback.

As a player, you may want to steer away from certain kinds of dynamics, e.g., if you might get triggered or distracted from your intentions. On the other hand, you may choose to intentionally play dynamics that are challenging as a way to process experiences in your life or better understand the perspectives of others. Furthermore, you can choose either to dial up or down certain kinds of interpersonal dynamics through calibration, e.g., rivalries, antagonisms, romances, etc.

Here are a few considerations for common dynamics in role-playing narratives.

a) Family and friends

Family and friend dynamics are extremely common in role-playing games. Players may enact each other's family members during the game. Alternatively, characters may have important family members in their backstory that inform how they play. For example, a character with the backstory, "My mother was the only person who ever loved me, and now she is gone" might experience difficulties feeling comfortable being vulnerable with other characters.

Friendship dynamics can lead to shared collective feeling amongst characters, but also feelings of envy or jealousy if the character perceives themselves as less popular than others in the group. If your transformative goals center upon exploring such feelings, then extensive friend and family connections might be important for you to pursue. In some cases, forming and exploring friendships with other players in-game is the purpose of the exercise. In this case, be aware that you may become distracted by other activities if they cannot be done together with your character's companions, e.g., solving a single-person puzzle.

b) Enemies and rivals

Common characters in role-playing narratives are enemies, such as villains, and rivals, e.g., potential suitors for one's love interest. Such characters can be motivating for players to pursue specific storylines, for example if the evil wizard must be stopped to save the village from ruin.

However, if your transformative goals focus upon actions that require less urgency, for example practicing mindfulness or sharing feelings with one another through vulnerable communication, you may have difficulty focusing due to an impending crisis or a distracting rival.

c) Romantic and sexual partners

Romance and sexuality are two of the most motivating and potent human experiences -- sometimes to the detriment of other considerations. For example, if your story involves your character's lover having been kidnapped, you may have difficulty caring about side quests or discussions with other players. At the same time, such a plot might help you find determination within yourself you did not know you had through the character, so again, it depends on your goals.

In-game flirting or sexual encounters can also be highly motivating for some players, while being completely uninteresting or even uncomfortable to others, e.g., if there is a significant age gap between the players, or if they identify as asexual or aromantic (Wood and 2021). On the other hand, practicing flirting or consent negotiations in the relatively safe container of a role-playing group might be important to some player's psychosocial development in the cultivation of intimacy (Erikson 1950). Furthermore, discussing sexuality in and of itself may be a goal for your game, especially with players who may not be able to communicate about their romantic or

sexual orientation outside of the group. Consider what is most appropriate for your target audience and your transformative goals when including this sort of content or steering toward it as a player.

6.14 Working with group dynamics

Humans have a tendency to place great emphasis upon and shape their identities around group membership, likely due to the necessity of group belonging for survival. This tendency also means that whatever group we form becomes the *in-group*, which we necessarily define as separate from the *out-group* (Tajfel 1974; Tajfel and Turner 1979). The out-group may be composed of individuals who are not accepted by or interested in joining the in-group, or who form their own group with its norms, becoming another in-group. Depending on our social roles, throughout the day, we may shift from one in-group/out-group dynamic to another, i.e., member of a family, employee at a job, member of a social class, etc. Unfortunately, this tendency to form in-groups and out-groups is also at the core of many disparities, stratifications, and demonization of the Other within societies and between them.

Most role-playing games deal with group dynamics on some level (Leonard and Arango 2013, 2016; Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023). Thus, almost certainly, are also exploring in-groups and out-groups in some way. A challenge in designing, implementing, and playing these games is figuring out how to explore these themes without making players from marginalized backgrounds feel excluded (Holkar 2016; Saitta, Kemper, and Koljonen 2020) and/or replicating harmful dynamics outside of games, for example:

- Reinforcing mythical norms (Garcia 2017; Kemper 2020);
- Issues of status disparity within the community (Algayres 2019);
- Masculine power fantasies (Nephew 2006);
- Sexism (Trammell 2014; Woodworth 2014; Eriksen 2015; Dashiell 2020; Stang and Trammell 2020; Stang 2021);
- Racism (George 2014; Kemper 2018b; Skjønshjell 2018; Baker 2022; Dashiell 2022, 2024; Eddy, Samantha 2023; Trammell 2023; Yessler and Bethany Craig 2024);
- Colonialism (Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020);
- Ageism (Petersen 2024);
- Queerphobia (Koski 2016; Saitta and Svegaard 2019; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019); and other issues.

On the other hand, role-playing games allow us to co-create reality and examine these systems in greater depth (Kangas, Lopenen, and Särkijärvi, eds. 2016; Leśniewska 2026), aided by the power of metareflection (Levin 2020, 2023a, 2023b). Ideally, we can use them also to practice new ways of being and organizing, even when forming various configurations of groups.

For more on these topics, see Chapters 3, 5, and 6 in *TRGD*.

a) Group dynamics in RPGs

As discussed in Chapters 4 and 6 in *TRGD*, groups can be organized in various ways in role-playing games. The stereotypical starting scenario of a tabletop role-playing game campaign is often something akin to individual strangers meeting at a tavern, who then sign up for a shared quest and gradually evolve into a (dys)functioning adventuring party. Alternatively, groups can be predetermined, e.g., through character relations, factions, or other types of affiliations.

Groups can take on many shapes, sizes, backgrounds, and dynamics. What often holds these groups together, despite their possible differences, is a bond based on a common goal. Role-playing games can offer an *affinity space* (Gee 2017): an environment in which players are drawn together by a shared motivation, regardless of their different in- and/or off-game backgrounds. From a player perspective, this space may feel familiar, for example if you belong to multiple subcultures. Alternatively, you may have an experience of greater group connection than ever before due to the shared activities you experience as characters, but also as players co-creating together. The intensity of this kind of bond should not be underestimated. It can also inspire feelings of great loss, betrayal, or alienation if the container does not feel supportive.

i) In-game group dynamics

For practical reasons, traditional tabletop RPGs focus on small-group dynamics. Generally, the force is centripetal, i.e., it pushes towards the centre. In traditional games, a session recounts a fragment of the story of a group of friends, colleagues, or people brought together by fate or necessity. They often move together and act for a common purpose. In larps, this concept is less common. The character may belong to groups, but these groups may be fluid or overlapping. The character may belong to a family group, a group of friends, and perhaps have colleagues at work. They may choose to move fluidly from one group to another.

This greater mobility must be taken into account by organizers. Players may follow a narrative arc that is first personal and then collective. It is therefore necessary to ask oneself often, during the design phase, what a particular character might choose to do given the available affordances. Since many larps lack a highly directive storyteller, player-characters may move where they prefer, such as where they find enjoyment or narrative meaning.

We must therefore imagine how to create these dynamics. We can certainly start by working on the most immediate external bonds. The first of these is undoubtedly a sense of belonging. If a player feels an affinity with a group, they will tend to spend more time with them and therefore share efforts and actions. This phenomenon can also affect off-game dynamics, creating stronger relationships after the event has ended.

From an organizer's perspective, one way to affect group dynamics during the game is to set milestones to check how and if the dynamics are developing. However, having these guidelines should not lead to directing players where we want them to go, unless

necessitated by the game design. An important aspect of group dynamics is that they reveal themselves gradually and ideally organically.

On the other hand, participating effectively within a group also involves skill on the part of players. If the character serves a particular function for the group, such as ritual leader, if they do not host the ritual, then the group may suffer. Such leadership can mean expending energy to keep the group feeling alive and model for others what group involvement should look like (Hoekendijk 2025), a form of labor, as described previously. Therefore, it is important for players to understand how their energy -- or lack thereof -- impacts the group dynamics. For example, players may consider distributing in-game duties amongst other player-characters to create a greater sense of shared responsibility.

ii) Off-game group dynamics

Larp is a subculture that moves according to niches and sub-niches that share values and practices. Organizers should always keep their participants in mind and also have some ideas about who might arrive independently of affiliation with the subculture.

The repercussions of the game often extend beyond the game itself. In some cases, the repercussions are more social and interpersonal. For example, a player who has created a particularly intense scene may receive credit and appreciation outside the game. In this way, they may develop social capital (Algayres 2019a) that will accompany them in future games and in the wider circle of their co-players (Page 2014). In the case of campaign games, narrative arcs could last for several years, and potentially impact the daily life of the player and the circles they frequent. It is not uncommon for “successful” players in ongoing games to take on leadership roles even outside of run time and/or to keep their character’s name as a persistent nickname outside of the larp.

It is the organizers’ responsibility to ensure that the environment remains accessible and not detrimentally impacted by imbalanced power dynamics. Among the various techniques that could be used are giving younger players important decisions within the game (Høyer 2024); rotating high-status characters after a certain period of time; and/or alternating within the community so that organizers become players and vice versa. In the case of one-shot sessions, it may be advisable to avoid assigning the same players the usual roles of responsibility or power and instead allow less experienced players to play such characters.

Players also have a responsibility to address issues with power imbalances within the group. High-status players can confer status onto others in various ways both off-game and on-game. Status need not be considered a finite resource, nor should responsibilities within the community. Established players can also make an effort to be inclusive for newcomers and/or players from marginalized backgrounds. If we can co-create new realities through role-playing, we can also find ways to co-create the communities surrounding them to be more equitable.

b) Small-scale community dynamics

Games can also feature small-scale community dynamics, e.g., representing members within a village, political court, or school. Players can practice systems thinking on a smaller scale by observing how dynamics work within these groups -- including dysfunctional dynamics and more democratic ones.

Examples of interesting small-scale community dynamics to explore through games include:

- Activist or political groups;
- Workplace dynamics and hierarchies; and
- Neighborhood dynamics.

When considering games as a tool for social change, exploring small-scale community dynamics can help players see how each person has a role to play in a functional society, as well as the kind of impact individuals can have within such groups. This process can feel easier to handle and less daunting than larger-scale scenarios.

c) Large-scale community dynamics

In larger-scale community dynamics, players often represent individuals within a much larger system. For example, in games about political maneuvering, their character actions will likely affect more people than those present for the game, e.g., hundreds, thousands, or even millions of people. Such abstraction can be a drawback in terms of empathy for common people, but it can also help players understand complex sociopolitical systems on a more practical level, as well as why certain decisions are made.

i) Inter-group dynamics

With large-scale community dynamics, it is possible to have multiple groups interrelating to each other. In a small village, you may have one blacksmith, for example, but in a larger city, you might have an entire guild. That guild may be involved in larger-scale plots, e.g., being challenged and/or supported by other guilds within the city; involved in creating magical items for a world-saving quest; or organizing a union to petition the government for better conditions, leading to wider-scale political change within the system.

ii) Factions

As mentioned earlier, larps can provide affinity spaces, bringing people together with a common goal or motivation regardless of their individual backgrounds.

Many social science scholars draw comparisons between group behavior and the study of tribalism. Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) wrote extensively about tribes and tribal behaviors; academics still draw inspiration from these influential works to this date.

The contemporary field of study that builds on that foundation, is *neo-tribalism*. It refers to the foundational origins of tribalistic behavior and patterns that originate from the earliest non-centralized tribal societies, while also acknowledging the plurality of these traditions, and their modern adaptations in younger societies and complex structured civilizations. A tribe can be characterized as a social cohesive group based on shared ancestry, culture, and territory, while a faction is a smaller, organized group within a larger society.

It is important to note that, in the context of Durkheim's time, scholars used certain terms and concepts that are currently considered appropriative or insensitive. However, since these terms are deeply ingrained in the literature, and creating new terms that refer to the same idea can possibly cause confusions and misunderstandings in research, it is sometimes hard to let go of them before proper agreements have been made within the scholarly field itself.

Nonetheless, *neo-factionalism* in lieu of neo-tribalism, would be a more respectful, appropriate, and wider encompassing term in the larp setting; especially considering the variety of player backgrounds. Similarly, what Durkheim (1912) referred to as a *totem*, could be instead seen as a *motivating symbol*. Such a symbol is a common motivation, quest, or goal that represents the driving force of the faction. Sometimes it can represent a binding force that triggers the worship-like behavior of factions, embodied by a symbol: e.g., a relic, a family crest, a flag, an ancient sword, a sacred book, etc.

As a game facilitator, keep the urgency of that motivating symbol in mind when developing plots. You can divert from the main shared motivation – through side-quests, for example -- to give players room to improvise and interact with other characters, or aspects of the story and environment. However, introducing too many of these encounters and scenarios can distract the group from the main symbol and risk diluting its meaning. For example, if your game is about exploring the concept of duty within a faction of knights, you can leverage the symbols associated with that faction throughout game play, e.g., as an icon on their tabards reminding them of their responsibilities. Similarly, as a player, you can have a ring with the symbol that you decide to wear or contemplate taking off during the larp to demonstrate feeling torn.

iii) National and international dynamics

Anthropologist E.E. Evans-Pritchard's (1940) *segmentary lineage theory* offers a useful lens to understand alliance and conflict settings within national and international game settings. In his theory, originally developed to describe the political organization of the Nuer in East Africa, he described how groups may compete *internally*, but unite against *external* threats.

This principle also applies in larp events where characters shift between local and national loyalties. National banners, colors, and shared ideas function as lineage markers.

Example scenario: A large-scale larp with two medieval kingdom factions, each with several smaller regions. While there can be conflicts and tensions between and within the regions, when one kingdom engages in conflict with the other, regions tend to come together to defend their kingdom.

iv) Interspecies

Finally, games can also explore interspecies dynamics. For example, players can role-play as non-humans or other aspects of the environment. Such dynamics can be helpful for exploring the *more than human*, and developing empathy for the planet and creatures outside of humanity.

6.15 Sharing play experiences

Players can share their experiences with each other in a variety of ways. Common ones include writing stories from their character's perspective or making social media posts about the game, tagging their co-players to join the discussion. They can also create documentation pieces, e.g., to share on online magazines such as Nordiclarp.org.

Players can also submit feedback forms to organizers to explain any issues that have arisen. They can also make more public *reviews* (B. 2024). A review is different from a documentation piece in that it offers an assessment of the game through the player's perspective. A review can take many forms, ranging from a straightforward description of the event to an account of the emotional journey experienced by the participant. Occasionally, reviews are written from a character's perspective or are based on diegetic material. However, all these various forms share one common element: they center around the subjective experience of the writer. The style may be rational, emotional, or descriptive, but it will be rooted in the writer's personal experience. There are several examples of reviews on Nordiclarp.org. Reviews are particularly interesting for potential players of a specific larp.

A *critique* is a thorough analysis that focuses on one or more aspects of a specific larp. Typically, a critique presents the author's opinion; however, in this instance, the personal perspective must be grounded in facts that the writer can explain credibly. A critique is not primarily intended to assist individuals in deciding whether or not to participate in this game, but rather to evaluate it as an aesthetic output (Stark 2017). A critique generally offers historical context and stylistic analysis of a particular larp. Critiques are not necessarily negative, but in general there are more "technical" aspects of that. Critiques are particularly interesting for researchers and people that want to know about the history and aesthetic trends of larp. *Criticism* on the other hand tends to pass value judgment on the work (Stark 2017).

Finally, players often share play accounts with others as a means to process significant aspects of their experience, analyze the design, or describe a specific phenomenon. Examples include:

- Developing an artistic skill through play (D 2015);
- Exploring spirituality and/or philosophy (Kim, Nuncio, and Wong 2018);
- Unpacking internalized oppression and liberatory steering (Kemper 2018a);
- Reflecting on processing trauma due to marginalization through play (Turner 2022a; 2022b, 2022c);
- Steering to deepen immersion into character (Pohjola 2015);
- Dissecting one's identity after play (AbdulKarim 2013);
- Analyzing other play cultures (Aronsson and Pihl 2015; Pihl 2016);
- Design and/or implementation analyses from a player perspective (Koljonen 2004, 2008);
- Theory emerging from play (Pettersson 2017)
- Personal associations and visceral play experiences (Pettersson 2021; Pettersson 2023);
- Reflections on gender identity in play experiences and communities (Kriel 2013; Foxworthy et al. 2018; Englund 2021);
- Reflections on sexuality in play experiences (Paisley 2015; Biswas 2019);
- Capturing player reactions directly after the experience (Nordic Larp 2011).

From this perspective, such accounts give players, designers, and researchers valuable information that analysis from an organizer's perspective cannot offer. Similar accounts from cousin forms such as simulation can also help illuminate the role-play experience (McCabe 2013), including similarities, and differences between the forms. We will discuss more about researching play experiences in Chapter 7.

6.16 Technology and player skills

Technology can sometimes stand in the way of the player's experience. It is important to make sure all players have the time and support they need to use their tools. Since tech development moves at a fast pace, you can never be sure that old skills still apply. If the latest update or gadget does not suit your player base then it is usually better to revert to an older version. Players are more important than tech.

Playtesting in different tech modalities can give you useful information on what sort of tech is best suited to tell the story you are looking to tell. Similarly, as players, you can experiment with different tech to determine which ones are most suited for your preferred style of play.

Different technologies come with different affordances and it can be a lot to consider every aspect of every designable surface. However, if you make a basic categorization based on the player experience on how they experience -- seeing, being, and being seen -- you have a good head start (Morgan 2024).

6.17 Summary

This chapter has explored several theoretical and practical aspects of the phenomenology of the play experience. Our emphasis has been on understanding how to play for transformation, and thus takes the perspective of designer, organizer, and player at times. Understanding these three perspectives can give us a more complete picture of the kinds of experiences we seek, whether as facilitators or participants. For the final chapter of this textbook, we will explore aspects of research, including playtesting and other ways to gather information about participant experiences.

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CHAPTER 7

Playtesting and Researching Role-playing Game Implementation

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7.1 Introduction

As we cover more generally in Chapter 7 of *Transformative Role-Playing Game Design* (2024), researching these games often takes two different main forms:

1. Researching the design, playtesting, iteration, and analysis of transformative role-playing games based on a theoretical framework; or
2. Researching the impacts of transformative game design on players.

With these in mind, this chapter aims at teaching you how to answer the following overall questions:

- a) Can role-playing games help achieve a desired transformative goal? If so, what processes can help optimize transformative analog role-playing games to help achieve this goal?
- b) What impacts do analog role-playing games designed and facilitated for transformative goals have on designers, facilitators, and players?

While reading this chapter, you might discover how many of the parts we cover are things you already do in your work as a game designer. One of our aims is to help you understand how you can leverage these already existing parts of your design process to gain insights that can be valuable to you as a designer in the future.

a) Playtesting and implementation as forms of research

As game designers, we often want to finish our games, and run them and/or get them in the hands of players as soon as possible. In addition, the process of creating a game is often challenging. Several rounds of playtesting and implementation often end up consuming more time and energy than we first expected. So why should you consider adding research as another element to this already demanding creation process?

The short answer is: studying the creative process itself can yield insights that studying only the finished product and the players' reactions to it cannot. These insights can then be used to improve the quality and efficiency of your future creative processes, possibly even offering innovation to the design field moving forward.

Getting involved in research can be an intimidating proposal, especially if your object of research is your own creative work. Yet, many of the common ways in which we playtest and implement our games can often lend themselves very well to parallel research processes, as they already contain many similar parts. For example, when we prepare for a playtest, we usually decide on one or several questions we wish to have answered during feedback. This practice is very similar to formulating a research question at the beginning of a research process, which also can inform the kinds of questions you can ask participants.

Therefore, consider your playtesting and implementation as parts of a larger research process. The insights gathered through observations done during the test, and feedback collected from the players afterwards can be analyzed and used to answer the questions asked, leading to new *iterations* of the game, or parts of it. An iteration is a new version of the game that is made based on your own design tweaks and/or collected feedback.

i) Feedback and iteration as practitioners vs as researchers

As a game designer, you might already have different ways in which you gather feedback and iterate your games. Anything from casual conversations with other designers to taking notes during playtests can provide valuable insights that make your game better. One of the key things to develop and formalize if you wish to add research to your process are the ways in which you collect, analyze, and integrate the collected data.

In short, document everything you do that is consequential to your iterations. This could mean making feedback sessions into survey forms or recording your entire playtest and feedback session. You might want to keep a design journal in which you write down how you consider and change parts of your game between iterations. Such a journal can be highly organized, with specific dates, lists of changes, and the rationale behind them. To start, your process may be more chaotic, like gathering emails between co-designers or keeping track of random notes taken during playtesting. The important thing is to focus on the most essential aspects of the design to analyze later, making your design process transparent for yourself and other researchers.

As an example, for the larp *The Quota* (2018), Simon Brind's design journal process involved detailed note taking in meetings, including documenting ideas that were not developed or later rejected; a decision log; and an autoethnography. He also used a strict version control procedure on all the artifacts, using Google Docs version history feature. This process led to the archetypes design that we eventually adapted for *Lumen* (see Chapter 6). For *The Assembly* (Bowman et al. 2025), the design is still in process. Email discussions and notes from meetings are archived in a folder accessible to everyone on the team through the cloud. These discussions include inputs about

specific aspects of the design that could better reach our intended goals, characters that might need editing for a smoother play experience, exchanges with sensitivity readers, summarized feedback from participants, and structural iterations for the heavily-facilitated scenario. They also include a list of decisions made and new versions of the script uploaded for analysis later.

Good documentation will not only make it easier to answer your research questions, but also over time make you better at designing with intent and efficiency. However, documentation can be time-consuming, so find a process that is reasonable enough for you to follow and works best for you. Ideally, documenting your process will begin to feel like a necessary component of your method and a worthwhile process in itself rather than a chore, as it encourages you to reflect on the choices you are making and why you are making them.

Keep in mind that not all feedback from playtests should be integrated into the iterated design. Playtesters do not always know the full reasoning behind your design, and thus their solutions may cause other components to no longer work.

ii) Research through Design

Research through Design (RtD) (Zimmerman and Forlizzi 2014; Coulton and Hook 2017) is an established and developed method meant to research the design process itself. RtD involves posing a research question that one attempts to answer *through design*, meaning that the question must be formulated in a way that makes this possible. Large questions are likely beyond the scope of RtD, like “are games good for fostering empathy?” Instead, we recommend focusing your question on something you can answer through your design, playtest, and iteration process alone, such as, “How does an analog role-playing game designed to foster empathy impact participant reflections on the challenges that other people face, if at all?”

Applying RtD as a method involves creating prototypes and playtesting them to test the theoretical framework that informed your design. The prototypes might be anything from just testing a single game mechanic or specific part of your game, or a complete version in its entirety. See Chapter 7 in *TRGD* for more information about applying this method to transformative role-playing game design.

b) Researching during implementation

The following section describes common methods for researching during the implementation of a game. Keep in mind that these methods are not mutually exclusive; for example, participant-observation is often paired with autoethnography, duoethnography, or participant interviews. Deciding early which approach you will take will help you have a clear and manageable plan for your research, as well as identify which methods are most suitable for answering your research questions. Remember that including more methods and gathering more data do not necessarily make your research better, especially if the data gathered through various methods is incoherent or too complex for you to have time to analyze.

i) Observation

A proven and long-standing research method in the social sciences is the observation of players, participants, or members of a culture, e.g., in psychology and anthropology. Observation can be an effective way for researchers and game designers to analyze patterns, behaviors, and experiences. Distancing yourself from an unfolding situation, such as a larp scenario, can offer valuable insights for your game design process. For instance, assessing the reactions of players on gameplay changes can help designers fine-tune or adjust elements in future iterations. As a researcher, you can focus on specific elements that stand out to you, such as commonly used tactics and mechanics, individual player behaviors, etc. On the other hand, a distanced observation is also an opportunity to zoom out and look at the bigger picture over time, e.g., from pre-game to post-game player wellness.

For *The Assembly* (Bowman et al. 2025), a larp involving democratic deliberation, the research team developed the Democratic Civic Values Checklist (Feng et al. in development), a heavily structured tool based on a previous survey by Jennstål, Uba, and Öberg (2021). This checklist allowed researchers to track each participant's behavior on a micro level, watching for deliberative behaviors, such as verbal opinion stating, agreeing or disagreeing with others; verbal and nonverbal indications of respectful listening behavior; and non-deliberative and/or disrespectful behavior. The checklist also went through several iterations based on the needs of the project and testing, e.g., experimenting with close analysis of every participant for a short period of time vs. observing each participant independently for the entire length of the scenario, including off-game behavior.

Examples of data sets you could research through observation:

- Play sessions in which you are present, e.g., using observational checklists (see e.g., Varrette et al. 2023; Adams 2013);
- Play sessions recorded by you with proper consent and data storage procedures, e.g., sessions run by you, or run with the knowledge you will review the recording later for research purposes (Lasley 2020); and
- Play sessions recorded by someone else, e.g., Actual Play sessions available online (Jones ed. 2021; Pop 2026), or sessions made available by another researcher in a legal manner, e.g., through public datasets.

A distanced observation has the advantage of not interfering too heavily with player processes. However, the presence of an observer can impact player choices, so keep your notetaking and other activities as discrete as possible. The limitation of strictly observing from a distance is a sense of disconnection and passiveness that only offers a limited view of the phenomenon observed, with limited insight e.g., into the player experiences and their motivations, unless discussed in the debrief. Simply put: you are not right in the middle of the action and will risk missing out on intricacies and details.

Another factor to take into account, and one of the main critiques of this method, is accusations of *armchair anthropology*; without being deeply embedded in the culture and activities, processes and culture are interpreted from the observer's own vantage point, which can lead to researcher biases. To use examples from *The Assembly*, listening behaviors are different cross-culturally; interruptions may be interpreted as rude to one observer and a sign of high engagement to another. Similarly, observing factors such as *gaze*, meaning turning their body toward the speaker and/or looking at them intently, may not necessarily indicate open listening behaviors; some neurodiverse participants may struggle with eye contact, but still be deeply listening, whereas others may gaze at the participant in non-deliberative ways, such as with a disgusted look on their face. Therefore, it is important to note that these instruments are not bias-free, nor are they necessarily always neutral and objective.

ii) Participant-observation

In the early twentieth century, to combat homogeneous datasets and the colonial undertones of armchair anthropology, researchers shifted to a more proactive method of observation called *participant-observation*. As the name suggests, participant-observation offers a more comprehensive view for the researcher, as the method combines participation and observation of a culture, a group of people, and their practices. For our purposes, this process would look like embedding oneself as a participant in a game and/or studying the subculture surrounding it.

An *ethnography* is the qualitative research product of participant-observation. This research method involves the in-depth study of particular participants, groups, cultures, or phenomena. Ethnography is not to be confused with *ethnology*: the comparative study of various research subjects, based on multiple ethnographies. Participant-observation ethnographies are commonly used in role-playing game studies (see e.g., Fine 1983; Bowman 2010, 2013; Cover 2010; Mizer 2019; White 2020b), including through an anthropological lens (Cazeneuve 2022; Esposito and Giovannucci 2024).

The degree of embeddedness varies widely; some participant-observers take a rather passive role in the community, others engage only for short windows of time and avoid making friendships (Fine 1983), whereas others are full-fledged members of the community in question. The degree of embeddedness can often have an influence on the degree of trust participants have. For example, if larpers see you as a researcher only with a thin character, they may be less likely to invite you to the super-secret ritual in the woods than if your character is deeply involved in ongoing storylines.

While participant-observation is widely regarded as one of the foundational methods of modern social-cultural anthropology, it does not come without any risks. By participating, there is a chance that the researcher's presence might affect the behavior of those being studied. Additionally, this method is more intensive than a distanced observation and raises several ethical issues you should consider as you take on the role of both a researcher and participant. For example, your behavior might unconsciously drive play in a certain direction based on your research goals. Also,

if your co-players are not aware you are studying the game, they may feel betrayed and/or reveal things to you they would not do otherwise. For this latter reason, it is sometimes best either not include detailed accounts of specific players' behavior without informing them, or even better, obtain consent, e.g., sending the passages to them ahead of time for approval before publishing.

Can participant-observation be applied to a game to understand a *culture* more generally? The method is useful because it enables immersion in the social and emotional dynamics of play while also observing it. Cazeneuve (2022) argues that immersion allows you to grasp the meaning of cultural practices and enact them. Kangas (2015) makes a case for *experimental anthropology*; you can apply anthropological research methods such as participant-observation to a group of larpers exploring a culture outside of their own within a game setting. For example, in the larp *KoiKoi* (Raaum, Fatland, and Edland 2014; Fatland and Edland 2015) hunters and gatherers show the fictional workings of a remote group of hunter-gatherers, which could potentially help a researcher better understand about the general patterns of such cultures.

However, Kangas (2015; 2017) stresses that we must be careful not to assume such experiments are representative of a specific culture as a whole, nor of the lived experiences of people within it, especially when working with existing cultures. For example, players' portrayals and design features of the game may be informed by preconceived notions and stereotypes (Leonard, Janjetivic, and Usman 2021). Thus, participant-observation can be a great method for playtesting, but not necessarily for accurate cultural research based on representations from a game, unless you want to specifically research the RPG community and the game itself as its own invented culture. For example, *KoiKoi* (Raaum, Fatland, and Edland 2014; Fatland and Edland 2015) is not an accurate representation of any actual indigenous group of people.

To understand a specific culture, Kangas (2015) argues that you have to "go there and live with the people." As an example, anthropologist Victor Turner (1995) studied ritual while living with the Ndembu people of Zambia, rather than simply reading first-hand accounts from other field researchers. Even embedded ethnographers bring their own biases and misunderstandings to cultural practices, which is important also for you to understand if you wish to study role-playing communities as a relative outsider. The more deeply embedded, the more likely you are to understand the various symbols, stories, jargon, and even jokes that weave the subculture together.

iii) Auto and duoethnography

An *autoethnography* combines the aspects of an autobiography and participant-observation with ethnography to create a more personal descriptive account of experiences within a culture, process, group of people, or phenomena. Similar to a diary entry, researchers write about their experiences in a descriptive manner, not only from the perspective of a player, but also a researcher, i.e., including some degree of analysis. It tends to offer a more in-depth account of events from the researcher's perspective and does not shy away from adopting an affective emotional tone and/or personally revealing information.

While autoethnographic entries are often more vivid and detailed, they hold a higher risk of being considered biased compared to other ethnographic methods. In the case of an autoethnography, while the researcher may be studying a specific subculture or game, their object of study is most centrally themselves, meaning their work will be limited by their unique subjective experience. While some researchers consider this a liability of the method, it can also be interpreted as a great strength. For example, if the researcher comes from a marginalized background (see e.g., Kemper 2020; Baird 2021; Tannenbaum 2022), their unique perspective can offer deep insights into experiences not often represented or misrepresented in mainstream research. Thus, autoethnography can also serve a political purpose.

A *duoethnography* is a collaborative form of ethnography involving two researchers and their personal ethnographic accounts (see e.g., Toft and Harrer 2020). If autoethnography is more of a monologue, duoethnography is more of a dialogue between researchers; thus, duoethnographic passages within a study can often have a more informal conversational tone and/or use first names. Comparing and juxtaposing your ethnography with that of a peer can potentially provide insightful new data. Just as in autoethnography, the researchers themselves are the primary object of study, i.e., their interactions as facilitators, designers, and/or players of a game (see e.g., Bowman, Lukka, and Baird 2026).

iv) Effects studies

One of the most important types of research in this field are effects studies. Effects studies assess the impacts of transformative role-playing games quantitatively and/or qualitatively. Some of the few early studies on therapeutic role-playing games, for example Blackmon (1994), focused on the negative effects of these games, e.g., for schizophrenic clients. However, since that point, not only are effects studies growing rapidly, but they also overwhelmingly focus on the positive impacts of these games on cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills, e.g., benefits research.

Interestingly, while examples of applied research are also increasing, such as in therapeutic interventions (see e.g., Henrich and Worthington 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Brasil Araujo 2022; Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024), many of the studies emerging focus on the incidental -- or accidental -- transformative impacts e.g., mental health benefits for people who play *Dungeons & Dragons* (Causo and Quinlan 2021; Walsh and Linehan 2024). See Chapter 2 for a more extensive list of *D&D* benefits research.

While such studies are important to support our methods as legitimate, try to avoid focusing only on the positive impacts if you are creating an effects study. Even if criticism or drawbacks of the approach are minimal in your dataset, for a balanced approach, aim to include these points in your research. You can nuance these points by considering what factors led to them, e.g., issues within a play group, specific problematic content, lack of coherency within the game design, or insufficient safety practices.

Furthermore, the field still needs to establish common methods for assessing the impacts of these games. As demonstrated in the extensive list later in this chapter, while we have a large range of potential benefits and several exploratory studies, we do not yet have common instruments used throughout these studies for measuring these impacts. This issue makes the studies not easily comparable, nor replicable or reproducible, which form the foundations of solid empirical research.

One approach might be to take an existing study, use as similar a methodology as possible, and try to replicate the results, as is common in other disciplines. For example, if you want to study intrinsic motivation / self-determination as discussed in Chapter 6, you might try replicating the methods from earlier studies which used specific qualitative (McLaren, Oades, and Deery 2026) or quantitative measures, e.g., Bowman and Standiford (2015), Algayres (2018), Hixson, West, and Eike (2024). While variations will always exist, for example having different populations or research settings, such studies not only make the results more easily accepted in the scientific community, but also form recommendations for how to research these effects in future studies. See the section below for a comprehensive list of studies.

v) Professional manuals

Finally, one approach to research is to create professional manuals for use in the field based upon best practices, including this current textbook. (For other examples, see DiveIn Consortium 2021; Connell 2023; Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023; Otani 2024). Usually, these manuals are tied to specific therapeutic or educational paradigms and should be grounded in existing research. Manuals can be extremely important when trying to expand the field, as professionals will not need to learn how to design or facilitate solely from trial and error. These best practices can also be important when considering the health and safety of your participants, as learning from the experience of others can sometimes help foresee and address possible risks in the future.

vi) Documentation pieces

While manuals give extensive advice, you can still share best practices in a less formalized structure or length, e.g., through documentation pieces (see e.g., Jensen 2021; Bartenstein 2022). Such pieces can be published in other popular or academic spaces, and ideally are accessible to multiple audiences. While documentation can sometimes feel arduous after the design and implementation of a game, unfortunately it is one of the only ways a game can become intelligible outside of the original experience and relevant to readers not present at the game. Furthermore, the process of documentation itself can be considered an act of integration, as it requires reflection (Cox 2018, 2021; Kemper 2020).

Research-based documentation can be written by designers and organizers, but is also quite informative from a player perspective (see e.g., Kemper 2017), particularly since players often notice or are present for aspects of the game the organizers miss. Player-written documentation also gives us a tremendous amount of insight into the phenomenology of play (see Chapter 6 for more details).

Note that documentation pieces are often most useful when grounded in theory and/or referencing other sources within the discourse, e.g., many of the articles on Nordiclarp.org. Design, implementation, and play do not happen in a vacuum, but are often in conversation with previous games, principles, and experiences. On the other hand, the more granular the writer gets about the specific experience, the more likely they are to lose an audience unfamiliar with the game. Many players write up their play accounts using extensive details about specific scenes, characters, and/or blow-by-blow accounts of mechanics used, e.g., in a specific battle in *D&D*. Unfortunately, while these details may be important to you, too much specificity does not always translate to an external audience and may lose their interest; less detail is often far more effective.

On this note, consider how much of your personal experience you truly want to reveal to an academic and/or professional audience. Excessive personal details can be read as informal and unprofessional, which is also a balancing act when writing auto and duoethnographic accounts.

Usually, an external audience wants to know takeaways from the experience based on personal and/or professional reflection. Assume your audience members will never play the game themselves. Try to answer one or more of the following questions:

- How was the design of this game inspired by previous work?
- What theories or game design principles can help understand this game or play experience?
- What did the player learn about themselves through the play experience?
- What design and implementation insights can readers take away that might help inform their own practice moving forward?

In other words, why should they care about this particular game or documentation piece? Just as attention is limited in games, our attention is increasingly limited in contemporary society. Immediately indicate the importance of your documentation at the very beginning, without overstating it.

Finally, you can research documentation pieces themselves, including them as primary sources, similar to methods in historical studies. However, keep in mind that such research runs the risk of sounding like the “telephone game,” in which a message loses its intended meaning the more times it gets passed along. If you were not present for a particular game and want to study player or designer accounts, make sure to quote these other sources accurately and try to avoid interpreting intentions into the words that are not clearly visible in the text. Best case scenario: interview people directly from the game, although the advice of quoting accurately also applies to interpreting interview data.

When possible, we strongly recommend sharing your documentation pieces with relevant parties before publication, e.g., the designers, organizers, players, editors, or even third-party readers to make sure the text is understandable and accurate for people who were not present. If you are integrating the experiences or photo documentation of specific players, we recommend gaining consent from those

participants, especially when sharing vulnerable or sensitive material. Some people are more open about their play activities than others. Stories or photos taken out of context may be misconstrued or misunderstood, e.g., by someone's boss. When possible, use character names instead of players unless you have their consent to do otherwise. Furthermore, avoid writing extensive descriptions that assume the other person's perspective. When in doubt, ask.

7.2 Academia and analog role-playing games

Research on analog role-playing games should always include other sources in the field. Otherwise it will be considered a *vacuum study*, i.e., a study in which the researchers claim no other work has been done. While sometimes key sources are not easy to find through traditional searches or indexes, we strongly recommend taking note of the References page in articles and books such as this one, which can give you guidance on who you should be citing. Remember that with a few exceptions, recent sources likely did not invent the terminology of the field, nor were they the first to examine that particular phenomenon of design or play. Carefully read the sources cited by recent authors -- and then read the sources those sources cite to follow the lineage of a concept.

Good scholarship involves doing due diligence as an author. To put it bluntly: if you do not cite the lineage of a term, readers embedded in the field may form a negative opinion of the quality of your work. A field is made up of people, not just ideas; you should aim to know who the key people and works are related to your topic. Similarly, analog role-playing games have relatively few designers, many of whom know each other. Assume your audience members know personally the people you are neglecting to cite. This is the foundation of good scholarly practice, particularly when writing a background section or literature review (see Chapter 7 of *TRGD*). These practices are also important if you want to become more involved in the wider design and play communities you are studying.

On this note, if you are using generative AI, never assume AI is citing or summarizing work correctly. At this time of writing, AI often makes up sources completely, inventing fictional citations that look plausible but are not real. Imagine how a peer reviewer might react when trying to make sense of your Reference list and seeing parts of their name combined with names from others in the field attached to made-up articles. AI also randomly assigns sources tied to specific information that it predicts to be true; upon closer inspection, if you trace the concept back to the source, you will often find it does not exist in the original text. Finally, in many cases, AI does not cite sources at all, even though its contents are often made up of materials written by human authors without attribution.

While we acknowledge that AI can be useful to help with language skills, its use is fraught. Attempting to publish a paper with false sources is cause for charges of academic dishonesty, i.e., plagiarism. Such a practice could result in rejections from journals, retractions of your work from publications, or -- worse -- academic dismissal

and/or removal of your degrees. Please trust your own voice and conduct your own research. While time consuming, researching for yourself helps you tremendously in developing your critical thinking skills and being able to adequately assess your own capabilities.

a) Analog RPGs in game studies

Analog role-playing game studies has been relatively marginal to game studies in general, and certainly within older disciplines (Harviainen 2017). Many reasons for this exist, including the lack of financial incentives for promoting analog role-playing games, e.g., through funding bodies or industry connections (Torner 2022). Early game scholarship was not always willing to even classify these experiences as games, in part due to the relatively loose rule structure compared to video games (Juul 2003). Furthermore, the fields game studies, game design, and game development more broadly are often marginalized within academia, with few specialists available embedded in more established traditions, and even fewer dedicated departments able to help shepherd new work in these fields. While some supervisors might be passingly familiar with video games or have played them before, many people in academia have never played an analog role-playing game. For this reason, scholars within this field often struggle to find supervisors, academic editors, and peer reviewers who understand their work.

Furthermore, analog role-playing games have sometimes been viewed with suspicion or scorn, e.g., by people who spread moral panics (Stark 2012; Laycock 2015) or are concerned with mental health risks (Blackmon 1994). While similar concerns have also been leveled at video games, games such as tabletop RPGs and larp that have an extra performative element, may include costuming, and sometimes more noticeably display alibi-driven transgressive behavior (Deterding 2018; Stenros and Bowman 2024), e.g., violence (Albom 2021; Dashiell 2026a) or other taboo character actions (Bowman 2025). At minimum, analog role-playing is sometimes viewed as amateurish, silly, and/or more escapist than other forms of art (Bowman 2010), which from our perspective is a profound misunderstanding of the complex and fascinating elements of the practice.

On the other hand, some concerns about mental health with relation to role-playing games have merit and are worth studying, such as experiences of bleed and social conflict that players consider negative (Bowman 2013) and larp-related stress (Korhonen, Nykänen, and Partanen 2020). In short, we believe any such studies should be conducted by people embedded in the field rather than observers or casual researchers, as the phenomenological experience of role-playing is complex.

For all of these reasons, people submitting research on these games to official review bodies such as dissertation, grant, or publication committees may face stigma or outright rejection of the concepts. One of our goals in creating these textbooks and the curricular materials surrounding them is to consolidate the hard-earned knowledge of people within this field and provide a roadmap for researchers to find others interested

in these topics. To our knowledge, our Master's in Transformative Game Design at Uppsala University is the first university degree devoted to analog role-playing games, which we hope will change in the future. More commonly available, but still growing, are trainings in educational role-playing, e.g., through Erasmus+ projects (ROCKET 2024), or therapeutic interventions, e.g., through RPG Therapeutics (n.d.), the Bodhana Group (TBG n.d.), and Geek Therapeutics (n.d.), and Game to Grow (STAR Institute 2025) and others.

Other important attempts to consolidate knowledge include academic publications like the:

- *International Journal of Role-playing* (2008-);
- *JARPS: Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies* (2019-);
- *Journal of Roleplaying Studies and STEAM* (2022-); and
- *Analog Game Studies* (2014-);
- *The academic sections of the Wyrd Con Companion Books* (2012-2015);
- *Simulation & Gaming*, if the paper fits the journal's format.

Important popular publications include the:

- Knutepunkt books associated with the annual Nordic larp conference (Nordic Larp Wiki 2022);
- Nordiclarp.org (Axner 2013);
- *The journalistic sections of the Wyrd Con Companion Books* (2010-2015);
- *Game Wrap* books associated with the Intercon convention / Nelco conference in the U.S. (2016, 2017, 2019; Game Wrap n.d.)

Key texts in our field that we strongly recommend reading include *Larp Design* (Koljonen et al. eds. 2019) and *The Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Studies* (Zagal and Deterding eds. 2024), which provide important roadmaps for exploring key concepts from practical and academic perspectives. The *Handbook* in particular provides a model for ways to ground your work in specific disciplines, as many people within this field must publish under disciplinary domains that are only tangentially related, e.g., media studies, theatre, artistic research, human-computer interaction, information studies, performance studies, sociology, psychology, or literary studies. In many situations, you will likely know more about the topic than anyone involved in the publication process. Extensive citation helps, as does requesting external reviewers that are embedded within the field. We hope these textbooks serve as a resource for you, and also recommend consulting other scholars who have worked to document our field, see e.g., Stenros and Montola eds. (2010); Harviainen (2014, 2016, 2017); Särkijärvi and Torner (2021); Iuama, Iuama and Falcão 2022; and Stenros and Fine (2022).

b) RPG studies and leisure communities

Because of this relatively isolated development of the research field, much of our theoretical work has developed from the ground up, meaning arises from practice-first approaches rather than pure theory isolated from embodied experience. While parallel developments have occurred in practices such as Drama in Education, psychodrama, play therapy, simulation, gamification, game-based learning, serious games, and other clusters of practice, we ground our own work in knowledge arising from the leisure communities connected to analog role-playing games and applied practice emerging from it. That being said, these fields have much to learn from one another, and thorough examination of how they connect and differ is highly useful (see e.g., Mochocki 2013; Burns 2014; Pitkänen 2015; Harviainen 2017; Hartyándi 2020, 2025).

What is particularly interesting and worth exploring in more depth is how terms emerging from the analog role-playing game discourse such as immersion are comparable to terms used within other contexts (Bowman 2024), such as in narratology (Murray 1997). Similar states are often described by with other names, e.g.,

- *Narrative transportation* in media studies (Gerrig 1993; Bowman 2024);
- *Imaginative involvement* (Hilgard 1970) and *empathic involvement* (Wickramasekera II and Szlyk 2003) in media studies (Rivers et al. 2016);
- *Immersion* in narratology (Murray 1997; Bowman 2024);
- *Embodied cognition* in neuroscience (Grafton 2009; Lankoski and Järvelä 2012; Leonard and Thurman 2018);
- *Arousal* in psychology (Robbins 1997; Juvrud 2026),
- *Absorption* in psychology (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974; Rivers et al. 2016; Juvrud, Bowman, and Hugaas 2024);
- *Dissociation* in psychology (Schnall and Maxine Steinberg 2000; Bowman 2010, 2015; Lukka 2014),
- *Engagement* (Brockmyer 2009; Calleja 2011; Bowman 2024);
- *Flow* (Csíkszentmihályi 1975) and *group flow* (Walker 2010) in psychology (Bowman 2024);
- *Engrossment* in social psychology (Goffman 1961; Fine 1983);
- *Presence* (Lombard and Ditton 1997; Bowman and Standiford 2016; Harviainen 2016) in media studies; and
- *Fidelity* (Anderson and Nelson 2015; Standiford 2014; Harviainen 2022) in simulation, among others.

In order to make such comparisons, one must first deeply understand the phenomenon from the perspective of role-playing a character while co-creating a shared fiction with other people for a bounded period of time. Then, terms like bleed, immersion, alibi, the magic circle, and other common phrases can be compared to other similar states with more accuracy. Chapter 3 in *TRGD* for more details.

On a purely practical level, sometimes reviewers and supervisors will expect this sort of engagement with other fields. If you integrate concepts such as these, we recommend standing your ground whenever possible to start with the terms in our field rather than replacing them with others that do not fully describe the phenomenon in question. Also remember that no term or theoretical concept fully explains a phenomenon, as words can never accurately describe a state of being. We are aiming for close approximations that are intelligible across disciplines, centering our work in our own theories and practices whenever possible. Remember that while interdisciplinary work such as this can be daunting, it can also be hugely beneficial for all fields in question. You can even use role-playing games to develop your own skills at interdisciplinary and collaboration (for five scenarios, see Bowman and Westborg eds. 2024).

7.3 Study design

While a complete exploration of strategies for designing a study are beyond the scope of this chapter, we aim to provide you with some terminology and possible directions that will help you ground your work in existing practice. Just as you consciously design games and implementation plans, you should also take care to consciously design the research practices through which you will investigate them. If you leave the research parts for the last minute, your data gathering and analysis methods may not be robust enough to be considered academic research. Furthermore, since you are working with people, you will need to meet expectations regarding ethics in *human subjects* research. For more information on human subjects, see Chapter 7 of *TRGD* and later in this chapter.

At its most basic, study design and the academic writing surrounding it require making the intuitive visible, making the abstract tangible, and making processes clearly intelligible. Remember, this process is helpful not only for your readers, but also for you, in determining how you know what you know, as well as what you cannot know because of the limitations of your study. A solid plan and description means other researchers are more likely to respect your process and find your results persuasive, which may even lead to attempts to replicate your results in future studies.

a) Methodology

Methodology is the discussion about how to do your research (Mäyrä 2015). If you want to figure out if your players learn a specific thing from your game, you can do this in many ways. Maybe you send a post-game survey asking players if they thought they learned something. You can have in-depth interviews with just a few players. You can send psychometric surveys before and after to see if change has occurred over time with regard to a specific skill. You could follow up with another assessment a number of months later to see if lasting change occurred. Which method should you pick and why? These decisions make up your methodology.

What you then end up using in practice is your method. Methodology is important because it explains to the readers why you chose to do your research in this specific way. It also helps you ensure that you pick methods that best answer your research question, rather than just methods that seem easy or familiar but will not actually answer your question.

To make the methodology immediately actionable for practitioners, we recommend structuring each study with a five-part backbone that ties design choices to data and iteration. Create one matrix per research question, then use it to align playtests, instruments, and analysis.

1. **Initial situation.** Describe the problem, context, constraints, and stakeholders that shape the game's intended transformation. State any assumptions that could bias design or data collection.
2. **Objective.** Formulate a specific and observable objective that you can test within your playtest window. If working with quantitative assessment, you may wish to pair one process indicator and one outcome indicator with a baseline, a target, and a data source.
3. **Method.** Justify the study design you will use to answer the research question. Explain why this choice fits your objective better than plausible alternatives, and how it will handle threats to *validity* in the setting where the game runs, meaning how well it assesses what you wish to discover.
4. **Activities.** Map the concrete steps you will take during implementation. These might include, for example: playtest sessions, observational checklists, stimulated recall interviews, short pre-post questionnaires, and structured debriefs that surface design-relevant evidence.
5. **Resources.** Specify roles, time, materials, permissions, and data management needs. Include who is responsible, who contributes, who is consulted, and who is informed, so decisions during iteration are timely and transparent.

b) Considerations for specific data sets

i) Texts

We tend to think about texts mostly as the documents we create in order to inform our players about the game. Common examples from larps include character sheets, world design documents, group documents, and even full larp scripts. But from a research point of view, any and all texts created as part of designing the game are considered. This means that things like website text, social media posts, forum threads, meeting notes, and similar things are also important. We can also extend this list to texts that have inspired the game content and design, such as other games, game design theory, and even academic texts. Basically, anything that has a written form and has any connection to the game design process can be seen as an object of study for the research process.

Examples of texts:

- Game Design Document (GDD)
- World design documents
- Workshop and debrief scripts
- Character sheets
- Group documents
- Diegetic documents
- Larp scripts
- Emails
- Websites, including brief descriptions of the game, e.g., *larp abstracts* (Grasmo and Stenros 2022)
- Promotional material
- Blog posts
- Newspaper and magazine articles
- Social media posts
- Forum threads
- Meeting agendas and notes
- Design note diaries
- Feedback surveys
- Empirical studies
- Documentation pieces
- Theory pieces
- Practical manuals
- Textbooks
- Reviews / critiques
- Post-play accounts and related narrativizing

Keep in mind that the term “text” can also apply to other formats, such as visual or sonic media, especially in disciplines like media studies.

ii) Methods for working with existing texts

Various methods exist for working with existing texts: data not acquired directly from human subjects in a study, but material that is already available for analysis.

Texts can be grouped together to form a *meta-text* of sorts, which synthesize academic work into a condensed form. Depending on the texts and the analytical approach taken, these meta-texts are called different things. Examples include:

- **Literature reviews:** When academic and/or popular sources on a topic are synthesized and analyzed for general themes, e.g., in edu-larp (Bowman 2014) or therapeutic tabletop role-playing games (Henrich and Worthington 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Brasil Araujo 2022; Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024). Literature reviews are also helpful in identifying sources you may want to consult later. Keep in mind that literature reviews are not necessarily comprehensive; many sources may have been missed due to indexing issues or lack of rigor. Make sure to keep the date of a literature review in mind and, when possible, search for more recent sources.
- **Surveys:** Some books on role-playing games aim to explain the history of the field in various ways, usually illustrating key games and historical trends that were important throughout its development (see e.g., Schick 1991; Peterson 2012). These surveys are important in understanding design and play trends, but can sometimes erase the contributions of lesser known or marginalized creators. Surveys can also sometimes lack the critical lens for problematic content in these games. (For a good counter-example, see Horvath 2023).
- **Rhetorical analyses:** These sources analyze the rhetoric present in a text or series of texts, often including interpretations of themes based on the implicit and explicit *arguments* or *claims* being made in the text. For example, Albom (2021) discusses the rhetoric of violence in *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition (Mearls and Crawford 2014). The author demonstrates that while a wide range of actions are possible within play, the rules most commonly feature violent acts, which makes an implicit claim that violence is the main way to resolve conflicts in the game. Other rhetorical analyses compare the rhetorical *moves* made by different parties, e.g., influential members of various tabletop and larp communities (White 2015; 2016a; 2020).
- **Discourse analyses:** These studies also look at the ways in which a topic is handled in a specific discourse, meaning scholarly and/or popular *conversation*, usually of published texts, but not always. *Critical discourse analysis* focuses specifically on power, e.g., examining how different interests are served or harmed by certain themes within a given public or semi-public conversation, such as themes of sexism within early *Dungeons & Dragons* books and fanzines (Stang and Trammell 2020; Trammell and Crenshaw 2020) or how some traditional tabletop players reject the progressive values embedded into newer editions (Dashiell 2026b). Westborg (2026) offers another approach, examining interview data that reveals how educators must justify their work with role-playing games to external stakeholders.

Alternatively, you may be interpreting one or a handful of artistic texts quite carefully.

- **Close reading / textual analysis:** These terms are usually applied to interpreting works of literature, but can also be applied to analyzing game content (Jara and Torner 2024). For example, if you analyze passages from a published game through an interpretive lens, e.g., in terms of metaphor, you can be said to do a close reading of the game. You could also analyze the narrative unfolding a particular game session in such a manner. You would usually be focusing on the symbolic or story-based content, not other cues occurring in the space, such as rules debates (cf. Dashiell 2017, 2022)

These methods tend to be qualitative in nature, meaning the authors are using their interpretive lens to review textual evidence and make meaning from it.

Such texts can be analyzed from a quantitative, or more numerical perspective. Some examples:

- **Content analyses:** These studies count the number of times certain words or images arise in a data set and statistically analyze these counts, e.g., the number of people of color represented in images in *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* (Long 2015, 2016); or the number of actions focused on violence vs. non-violence (Albom 2021).
- **Sentiment and emotion analysis:** *Sentiment analysis* numerically evaluates the sentiments expressed in a particular dataset, e.g., positive, neutral, or negative. *Emotion analysis* focuses on specific emotions featured in the data set, adding more specificity.

Note that some studies about textual information are *mixed method*, meaning they include both quantitative and qualitative approaches (see e.g., Albom 2021).

iii) Human subjects

If your study works with people directly, you are involving human subjects in some way. Because of that, your study will incur greater risk than, say, analyzing a dataset of existing texts. Please see the section on Ethics later in this chapter and in Chapter 7 of *TRGD* for critical considerations on this topic.

iv) Source credibility

When analyzing information from various texts, you should carefully consider the credibility of your source for the type of information you are seeking. A practical manual from a licensed counselor is probably more grounded in theory and experience than a blog post from someone musing about how RPGs might be useful in therapy, even if they include links to other sources. Direct experience from player accounts or academic researchers studying role-playing in the field tells us more about the role-playing experience e.g., for autistic people (Fein 2015; 2018; Visuri 2024), than theoretical assertions made by experts who have never role-played before. However, such accounts are not generalizable in the same way a survey with 1000 respondents might be.

We live in a time in which anyone can publish and disseminate material at lightning speed, regardless of the veracity or credibility of the information. While this ability levels the playing field for people to share their experience and can be a great source of research data, it also means we have to be even more careful in honing our discernment. This issue is especially pressing with the rise of generative AI, not only in terms of the authenticity of the authorship of role-playing games, but also in the assertions made by AIs claiming to cite a specific source or summarize a concept.

When trying to find highly credible materials, e.g., on the effects of role-playing games, we strongly urge you to find peer-reviewed scholarly sources. Even editorial review only is still better than no vetting at all. Ideally, you will find several peer-reviewed articles on the same topic, so you can familiarize yourself with the *scholarly conversation* surrounding that concept, not just follow the framework offered by the first source you find.

Remember that just because an article claims to be peer-reviewed by experts, the information within it is not necessarily true, but it is definitely more credible than many other sources. If you notice an academic source is published quite quickly from submission to public availability, you may have reason to suspect the peer-review process has been cut short or compromised completely. Learning to scan for that kind of information is also important. If a journal claims to have short turnaround times for publication, that could be considered a red flag, i.e., signs of *predatory* practices. Note there are websites that can help you view the rankings of journals, such as The Norwegian Register (Norwegian Directorate 2025), the Finnish JUFO Portal (n.d.), Google Scholar (2025), SCOPUS (SCImago 2025), and others.

c) Researching different populations

No research is pure and uninfluenced by the environment in which it takes place. Many results are specific to certain populations at specific times, settings, and facilitation conditions. Therefore, you should mention in your research any factors that may have impacted your study. Examples include:

- The **research conditions** under which your work was conducted, including the physical space, any external aspects relevant, and the manner of data collection;
- The **social contexts** within which the research took place and how those factors may have influenced the participants or the data;
- The participants' **level of familiarity with role-playing games** and the communities surrounding them;
- The degree to which the research was **mandatory or voluntary** for participants;
- **Bias considerations**, including any biases you may have, or those of your participants;
- **Sample sizes**, considering how large a sample you will need to be able to make generalizations, both within qualitative and quantitative research.

Acknowledging such considerations in your research, including noting any limitations you may have had, will help improve the credibility of your work. No study is perfectly objective, nor should it appear to be.

d) Studying play sessions

When studying play sessions, you should consider the following questions:

- Is the session publicly available, like a streaming video on YouTube, or is it private or restricted in some way?
- Are the participants aware a researcher is present? If not present, are they aware a study is being conducted about their play?
- Are you as a researcher a player, facilitator, or observer? Are players aware of your status as a researcher?

As mentioned before, you can study play sessions through several methods, including observational checklists, in which you detail specific behaviors, and stimulated recall, in which you replay sections of the play experience for participants and ask them interview questions about those moments.

e) Qualitative interview data

When working with qualitative interview data, the vast majority of the time, you will be pseudoanonymizing data. This means that your participants expect you to keep their identities as secret as possible.

However, in some cases, you may wish to ask for consent to use their real name in the research, for example when interviewing experts in the field such as designers or other scholars. In this case, one option is to have a checkbox on the consent form that allows them to opt-in to using their name in publications. You should still check passages with them when possible, as not everything they say in an interview is meant for public consumption. Be judicious in these situations especially and protect your participants.

i) Summarizing, paraphrasing, and quantifying

When working with qualitative interview data, you can use three methods:

- Summarize the passage in your own words;
- Paraphrasing what a participant said using mainly their words;
- Quoting them directly using quotation marks.

In each of these cases, you should cite any information that did not come from your own head, including your interviews.

When working with quotes, if you have modified the text in anyway, you should clearly mark where you have made changes:

- Include ellipses when you delete text, e.g., ...; and
- Mark any text you have removed and substituted with different words with brackets [];

Decide whether or not to include pauses in speech, filler words like ums, or bracketed nonverbal communication. Adding these contents can be more precise and even expected, e.g., in sociolinguistics, but that can also make the text difficult for the reader and may cause them not to read deeply. Consider whether they are truly necessary.

You should resist the urge to include long block quotes in the text unless absolutely necessary to demonstrate your point. We recommend not including block quotes unless the exact wording is important, and in many cases it will be best to trim excess phrases from the quote with the strategies mentioned earlier. Never drop a quote in your paper without introducing the speaker beforehand, e.g., “As Freud (1990) says...” Summarize what the participants should take away from any quotes you include directly after their inclusion rather than thinking the quotes “speak for themselves.” Do not assume the audience is interpreting the same content as you are from your quotes.

Remember that including many perspectives can strengthen your work, whether from your research into other texts, your scholarly sources, or your interviews. However, including many shifts in tone and style can prove confusing for your reader. Have a good reason to motivate the inclusion of a quote.

Finally, avoid putting words into participants’ mouths or heavily interpreting their words. Let the participants speak for themselves and present their words fairly and accurately, even when summarizing and paraphrasing. Even if you know something more about the situation they are describing, unless they have given you consent to share it, you may think twice about including it. Focus on what they have decided to give you rather than trying to extract something more or twist their words to meet the needs of your research.

f) Psychometric surveys

On the quantitative side of things, you may wish to include psychometric surveys that assess a participant’s skills or values along a particular dimension. These surveys are often self-reported, which means you are always dealing on some level with participant bias and not an objective assessment of their abilities. Additionally, the participants may feel pressured due to the research context to tell you what you want to hear, either because they want to help you or because you are in a power position over them. Such things can be important to note in your limitations if you have special concerns these outcomes may have occurred. Furthermore, surveys themselves are not completely neutral instruments; the kinds of questions that are asked often reveal the biases and assumptions of the original designer.

That being said, psychometric surveys can be excellent ways to try to track progress over time or to get a sense of how your players perceive themselves along your desired dimensions, so long as you understand their limitations.

7.4 Research through design in action

a) Exploratory

Research through design is considered exploratory. This means, it is often limited in scope, as such experiments usually do not have large-scale testing following them. Therefore, you will need to be modest about the kinds of claims you are making and construct your research question accordingly, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

b) How to construct a research question

When starting a research study, the primary objective of investigation is not to validate personal beliefs, but rather to subject hypotheses to rigorous scrutiny. In research, your goal is not to prove yourself right; it's to try to prove yourself wrong. This concept, known as *falsifiability*, was introduced by the philosopher Karl Popper (2005). Instead of looking to find corroborating evidence, data that agrees with your theory ("my theory is that all swans are white"), you should look for the "black swan." This means first thinking about and identifying what specific piece of evidence would make your hypothesis impossible to maintain. In this way, your goal should be to test the limits of your theory rather than simply gathering evidence that agrees with it.

Thus, the goal is not to confirm personal beliefs about the transformative power of role-playing, for example, but to test whether they hold up against real evidence. Research questions should be built to challenge assumptions, not to decorate results with stories after the fact. A clear question names what might change, how the game is expected to work, what effect can be observed, what will serve as the comparison, and over what period any change is likely to appear. In simple terms, a good study asks: if we do this specific thing, will it make a measurable difference for this group of people, and how will we know?

The best research questions are those that could, in principle, prove the idea wrong as easily as right, e.g., assessing the claim's falsifiability. Indeed, technically scientists are always and only trying to test if a statement has no effect or no difference. What makes a statement or theory "scientific" is not that it can be verified, e.g., *logical positivism*, but that it can be tested and potentially proven false. Chapter 7 of *TRGD* gives a detailed account of constructing research questions based on design work.

To make a question testable, limit it to one main result and a few secondary ones, and decide beforehand what will count as evidence for the idea, against it, or if the results are inconclusive. Also, think about alternative explanations and plan how to track them. This approach keeps the focus on learning from data rather than fitting

the data to a story. A practical way to write it is: “In this setting, does this change improve this outcome for this group, mainly through this process, compared with this alternative, within this period of time?” Such planning connects the question directly to design and analysis, helping ensure that findings remain credible even in complex, real-world environments.

c) Distinguishing causal and correlational aims in study design

In experimental research, the inclusion of a control or comparison group serves to isolate the effects of some kind of intervention. A control group, for example, allows the research to determine whether observed changes in outcomes are *caused* by the intervention itself, or might instead reflect other influences. Such other influences can be factors such as prior experiences, test-retest effects, and other confounding variables. When the research question is *causal*, that is, when the aim is to establish that a particular game, activity, or design feature *produces* an effect, such as learning, then a control or comparison group is essential. A control or comparison group provides counterfactual information. What would have happened if the participants had *not* experienced the intervention? Without this benchmark, a researcher cannot confidently attribute an observed effect to the game itself.

However, not all research questions are causal in nature. Another kind of study design is one that explores *within-group variation*. That is, how differences among individuals exposed to the same experiences, such as a game, relate to differences in their outcomes, such as enjoyment. In such correlational or predictive research designs, every participant receives the same treatment or engages with the same tasks. The focus is not on a comparison, but rather on identifying which characteristics -- such as personality, motivation, or engagement -- are associated with the outcomes of interest. In this design, the absence of a control or comparison group is not a methodological flaw; it is a reflection of the study’s purpose. Here, the variability of the sample is of critical interest. This interest lies *within* the group, not *between* different conditions. A strength of this kind of design is that it reveals how individual differences contribute to different outcomes, such as learning processes, under a shared set of conditions, complementing rather than replacing causal effects.

This distinction between causal and correlational aims is crucial, and sometimes misunderstood by those less experienced with quantitative research. It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that the absence of a control group inherently weakens a study, even when the research question concerns patterns of association, rather than causal inference.

c) AB testing

A/B testing is a simple way to compare two versions of an activity or design to see which one works better. Participants are randomly divided into two groups, and each group experiences a version that differs in only one element, such as a rule change or a facilitation style. This practice helps identify whether any improvement truly comes

from that change rather than other factors. In role-playing or learning settings, the groups might be different classes, sessions, or tables. Before starting, it is important to decide what will be measured, how many people will participate, and how success will be judged. Afterward, the results are compared using, for example, simple averages or percentages to see if one version performed better, and results are reported with clear information about uncertainty. Researchers must also check that only the intended element changed and avoid common mistakes like mixing information between groups or checking results too early, which can give false impressions.

d) Control groups

Control groups are used to show what would have happened without the new idea or intervention. One group continues as usual while another group experiences the change. This comparison isolates the effect of the new method from other influences. When random assignment is not possible, groups can be made more similar by matching participants with similar characteristics or comparing how each group changes over time. It is also important to record what happens during the sessions to understand why differences appear. Researchers should explain to participants how groups are chosen and make sure any discovered benefits are eventually offered to everyone involved.

e) Longitudinal vs. cross-sectional design

Longitudinal designs involve measuring the same participants at two or more time points, allowing researchers to observe changes over time. *Cross-sectional designs*, in contrast, collect data from different participants at a single point in time to compare groups or variables.

Cross-sectional studies measure effects immediately after one activity and are useful for quick tests of what works in the moment. Longitudinal studies, by contrast, follow participants across several sessions or weeks to see if results appear, grow, or fade with time. These designs are essential when studying real learning or behavioral change, which often take longer to stabilize. Typical approaches include comparing results before and after the activity, repeating the same test several times, or running rotating groups that overlap in time. To ensure fair comparisons, the same questions, tools, and scoring rules should be used each time. Choosing between a short or long schedule depends on the type of change being studied and the time realistically available.

Whether the group has the same or different participants is an important design difference between these two approaches. For example, testing a larp at 3 different time points over 6 months would not be longitudinal if they were not the same participants at each session.

7.5 Best practices in implementing playtests

a) Why playtest?

As a game designer, you are tackling a second-order design problem because you are never directly designing the behaviour of your players. Instead, you are designing the rules of the system, which then, hopefully, will lead to certain behaviours from the players (Westborg 2023a). Because games are emergent, it is not always possible to predict how the rules will play out. Theory may differ from practice, meaning that what we think will happen when the game is played is not what actually happens. Through playtesting, we gain a better understanding of what might happen, and we can align our expectations with reality. Another reason for playtesting is to overcome designer biases. By testing your game or part of it, hopefully, you will gain new, less biased perspectives.

b) When do you playtest?

You want to playtest as soon as possible. You do not have to wait until the full design is done; start testing parts of the design early on to be able to work iteratively and make changes along the way.

c) What are you testing?

Make sure you know what you are testing. Be as specific as possible. Are you testing the balance of the game? The text of the characters? If the players have enough agency? Do not test for things you already know are working. That will not give you any new information (Fullerton 2018; Westborg 2023a).

d) How do you test?

Always test for one thing at a time. Then you can make one change and test again. If you make many changes at once, then you also introduce many new sources of error, and you cannot tell which problem stems from which change.

When playtesting, the most important thing you can do is to listen to your playtesters. If they react in a certain way when playing your game, it is up to you to figure out why. Do not defend your game. If one or more playtesters have a problem, other players will likely have the same problem. Find where the problem stems from. Relevant to consider is that many playtesters are not designers themselves, which means they often are good at identifying symptoms but seldom their causes or the best solutions (Westborg 2023a).

Some playtests might include you asking a lot of questions along the way, about how players were reasoning in a certain situation or what they are feeling at a certain moment. In these situations, it can be very effective to ask the players to think out loud. In other playtests, you might be very quiet instead, and just observe to see what happens, and then ask questions afterwards.

When you are asking questions as part of your playtest, try to approach the process as coaching. The players are the ones who know the answers, not the coach; the coach's job is to help them find the answers through well-structured questions. Work with open questions that start with What, Why, When, How, Where, and Who. Be a bit careful with the "why," since, depending on how it is used, it might lead players to feel blamed. Use a lot of follow-up questions to get deeper.

For early tests, you can use friends or family, but make sure you also get to test on your target audience.

e) Failure is interesting

After a playtest, you might feel disheartened if something fails or does not work as planned. But remember, failing was the point! Failure gives you information and helps you get better at design. It also helps you refine your scenario, if you plan to move forward with it.

f) Making changes

Once you have finished your playtest, it is time to make changes. Here are some recommendations for how to move on to the next stage (Westborg 2023a):

- Prioritize the changes that are most critical for your design;
- Keep notes of all your changes and handle each version separately;
- Have follow-up tests;
- Ensure the trends go in the right direction;
- Ask yourself: Is the system wrong, or the players' expectations? Which one of these needs adjustment? Design to make such adjustments;
- Be bold. Overshooting means new types of feedback and bounding the issue, i.e., narrowing it down; and
- Fail faster. The sooner you can experience failure, the quicker you can adjust.

7.6 Best practices as playtesters

As playtesters, consider that the first and foremost thing to remember is that you are there to help them test their game; you are not the one being tested. Try to relax during the process. What you are testing is probably not the finished or even the full version of the game, but the designers chose to test this for a reason. Trust that they know what they are trying to discover.

When playtesting a game, you should let the designer know about your experience level. It is not your job to figure out what the game means or attempt to solve design problems. To help the designers, start by listening to what they are asking you and respond accordingly. Explain how you thought during the process or how you expected something to work. Let them know *what* you felt, *when* you felt a certain way, and *why*.

Did your feelings change over time? Mention what you feel you are lacking from the game experience, but try not to get hung up on this lack. In short:

- Don't be nice; be kind.
- You are kind by sharing your experience honestly; pleasantries are often not honest.
- Help the designers fail faster;
- Express and motivate your frustrations and enjoyments; and
- Give details of what happened and when during the process rather than speaking vaguely or overly generalizing. (Westborg, 2023b)

7.7 Examples of other practice-based research methods

For our purposes, practice-based research emphasizes the creation of an artifact as a response to solving a specific problem. It is a method that has been applied in such diverse fields as medicine and engineering, and shares many similarities with Research through Design when applied to design and art practice. Where Research through Design focuses on a process of design, practice-based research can be performed on any sort of practice, regardless if there is a design product at the end of it (Skains 2018).

a) Participatory action research

Participatory action research treats designers, facilitators, and participants as co-researchers. Collectively, all participants iteratively diagnose, plan, act, observe, and reflect to change the game and/or its context as needed. Unlike Research through Design, which answers a design-posed research question by producing and interrogating artifacts, participatory action research foregrounds stakeholder agency, redistribution of power, and negotiated problem framing. In order to assess the validity of the process, it focuses on desired change plus any transferable insights that might emerge.

In analog role-playing games, participatory action research offers a lens that treats sessions as situated interventions inside living communities, where consent practices, safety tools, rule negotiations, and debriefs operate as both ethical safeguards and collaborative measurement points that steer the next cycle. Typical cycles include:

- Co-defining the civic or educational objectives with participants;
- Co-designing play;
- Piloting the scenario, e.g., with structured observation and brief surveys;
- Checking the interpretations of participants in post-game debriefs; and
- Deciding together what to alter in rules, facilitation, or organizational arrangements.

This method is especially suited for capacity building, inclusion, and organizational learning. It documents how roles, leadership, and norms evolve across cycles rather than only testing a fixed prototype.

b) Arts-based research

The term arts-based research (ABR) was first coined in 1993 by Elliot Eisner as a way to talk about educational research that also contained creative work (Coemans and Hannes 2017). It has later been discussed as research meant to enhance perception of human activities, and as being defined by the presence of art (Barone and Eisner 2012). Contemporary arts-based research can be difficult to further define with a high level of specificity, as it can be extended to encompass all forms of research that employs the creation of art pieces in its method in one way or another. Arts-based research can further be divided into three main approaches:

- Research *on* art, i.e., reflective interpretation of art pieces;
- Research *for* art, i.e., examination and iteration of art practices to improve them; and
- Research *through* art, i.e., using art as tools for reflection and expression. (Cox 2016, 2025)

Note that in Sweden and other countries, *artistic research* is considered a separate path than more traditional forms of research-based knowledge production. Artistic research often has its own theories, methodologies, and language to describe the process of inquiry that might differ from approaches, e.g., in the humanities and social sciences, even if creative work is still central to the process.

Similar to arts-based research, we can further nuance design research based on what the function of design is within the research. Instead of us thinking of Research through Design and others as separate from one another, we can consider them instead different orientations to thinking about design work.

c) Research on / about Design

Research on Design -- also called Research about Design -- is interested in the process of designing and designers' work behaviors. The emphasis is on design thinking and the methods that enable it (Buchanan 2007). The artifacts created are less important than the process itself.

d) Research for Design

Research for Design focuses on inquiries that enable a design to be successful (Downton 2003; Frankel and Rancine 2010; Tieben 2015). The goal is to improve the end-result design itself, not to explore a theoretical question, even if taking data from the participants about their experience. Much of the research emerging from the industry is interested in this sort of information, i.e., how to optimize the design.

7.8 Ethics

How you engage with human subjects during the research process makes a major difference in terms of ethical research practice. Three key things are important to evaluate in terms of risk:

- **Personal data:** Are you gathering personal information that will identify the person?
- **Sensitive data:** Are you gathering sensitive information that could lead to risks for the participants, such as gender/sexuality, health, or political beliefs?
- **Personal sensitive data:** Do you have both types of information in the same data set?

The answers to these questions make a big difference in terms of the ethical procedures you need to follow, as well as data storage.

a) Ethical review and approval

In order to conduct research with human subjects, you may need to apply for *ethical review*. Ethical review does not ensure your research process is ethical; that is your responsibility. Instead, ethical review evaluates your research methods and types of data gathering and assesses the degree of risk involved. If the review board deems the research plan sound, including any ways to mitigate risks you have detailed, it will issue you an *ethical approval*. This approval will often have clear instructions for how to obtain consent and/or assent from participants, informing them of any risks and giving them clear procedures to follow if harmed. Without an ethical approval, you may be unable to publish your results and may even be subject to legal consequences if you proceed with your study.

While we will detail some general principles for ethical practices, note that norms regarding ethical procedures are different from country to country and even among institutions in the same country. Make sure you check with your university, school administration, clinical board, or other important authorities for proper ethical procedure in your context.

If you are doing Research through Design, you are playing your game with people and receiving their feedback, e.g., on mechanics of facilitation. However, if you do not gather personal or sensitive data about your participants and do not record the session in any way, your study will likely be deemed low risk. Similarly, if you are running an educational intervention and only assessing statistics on student performance in the activity, your study may fall into an *exempt* or *minimal review* status, meaning you either do not need to gain ethical approval at all, or your procedures will be minimum, e.g., only having the participants sign a consent form.

If you are giving participants a psychometric survey or interviewing them more deeply about their experience, you are likely falling into mandatory ethical review territory. You will be gathering data that might identify them and possibly stigmatize them in some way if their identity is connected to specific comments, e.g., about non-normative sexualities, neurodiversity, or political views, among others. In these cases, you almost certainly need ethical approval if you plan to publish the data. This approval usually covers a certain time period, meaning data can only be gathered within a certain period, data must be stored for a certain length of time, etc.

Note that some countries have more strict rules around ethical approval, such as in the United States, which almost always requires ethical review when working with human subjects. In Sweden, where this textbook is published, currently Bachelor's and Master's students do not require ethical approval if they only publish their independent student thesis work through the university portal, in our case DiVA. However, both Ph.D. students and students working within an established research project must follow the guidelines required of the researcher in charge. The lead researcher on the project will need to have obtained ethical approval before data collection can begin, and the approval must cover data gathering and analysis for everyone within the project, not just specific people.

Ethical approval usually requires you to adapt a standardized form with the details of your project, which includes information on how to contact you or your supervisor, the name of the review authority that granted the approval, and the ethical review number. Usually, participants must sign a consent form with this information if they are above the legal age of majority; if they are below that age, their legal guardian signs the consent form and they sign an assent form, as they are not technically old enough to consent.

This information may feel overly bureaucratic and time consuming, but if you consider our chapter on safety, we recommend instead viewing it as a way to empower your participants to have more power over their own information, as well as a pathway to accountability if harm is done.

For more on research ethics principles when working with human subjects, see Chapter 7 of *TRGD*.

b) Data recording and storage considerations

Lately, much of the time-consuming part of ethical approval involves a *data management plan*, which may be a separate related process or integrated within the review process. Data management refers to how the data you gather will be stored, for how long, where, and who will have access to it. Especially with rules around GDPR and other privacy concerns, data management has become a critical issue in recent years, so must be considered carefully.

Unfortunately, the digital landscape is changing rapidly and recommended procedures a year ago may have now changed or become less certain. For example,

some institutions will not let you store sensitive data within transcripts or audio-visual recordings on a cloud service, which can make collaborating with other researchers challenging, especially outside of your organization. You may be asked to:

- Encrypt your data and upload it to a specific server;
- Pseudonymize the data so identifying details are less present or obscured; and/or
- Create codes for the data, where identifying information is called something else in the data set and the keys detailing these codes are stored in a separate secure location.

What can be even more challenging is different rules contradicting one another, e.g., being required to share your data set as an Open resource, but also trying to protect the anonymity of your participants as per your ethical approval. When in doubt, always discuss your data management plan with the authority responsible for it, such as a data security officer, research officer, and/or IT professional at your institution.

c) Ethics working with qualitative data

While these procedures may seem excessive, consider that your participants are trusting you with aspects of their lives that may feel quite vulnerable to share. Think of yourself as a guardian for your participants and a translator of their experience to the world. In some cases, this role means you consider carefully how the audience might perceive their words, what is most important to share for your study, and what might be better to keep private. Your most important role as a researcher is not to uncover “the truth,” but rather to conduct your research humanely and ethically, which sometimes means being careful about what you reveal. As mentioned before, double checking any transcripts or passages you plan to publish with your participants can often be a helpful process.

d) Pre-registering a study

Pre-registration is the practice of publicly recording a study’s research questions, hypotheses, methods, and planned analyses before data collection begins. This process increases transparency and helps distinguish *confirmatory* analyses, those that test predictions made in advance, from *exploratory* analyses that arise after examining the data. By committing to a plan beforehand, researchers reduce the risk of practices such as p-hacking or selective reporting, which can inflate false-positive findings.

Preregistration does not limit scientific creativity; rather, it strengthens the credibility of results by making the research process more open and reproducible. For readers, it provides a clear record of what was planned versus what was discovered post hoc, allowing for more accurate interpretation of the evidence. Preregistration is most commonly practiced in fields that rely heavily on quantitative, hypothesis-driven research such as psychology and other social sciences, where researchers test predefined predictions using statistical analyses. Nonetheless, it is a good practice that can be applied across any research field.

In practice, preregistering a study involves completing a short form on an open, timestamped registry such as the Open Science Framework (OSF), AsPredicted.org, or a discipline-specific repository. Researchers typically outline the study's objectives, hypotheses, sample characteristics, planned sample size, variables to be measured, and the statistical analyses they plan to use. Once submitted, the preregistration is stored publicly or under embargo until publication.

Importantly, preregistration is not intended to constrain research if adjustments become necessary. Any deviations from the original plan can simply be reported transparently in the final paper. For example, you may add an additional measure because pilot testing showed some interesting new directions to explore, or remove measures due to feasibility or access to participants. Following this process helps ensure that data analysis decisions are not influenced by the observed results, promoting integrity and reproducibility across studies.

e) Ethics in online research on social media

You should also consider carefully how you engage in online research. Historically speaking, anything publicly published online was considered fair game for researchers, and in some ways may still be, legally speaking. In other words, researchers were able to use such data without consent as a matter of public record.

However, just as you have a responsibility toward participants you interview, you should also consider your responsibility toward participants you have not met and who have not consented to use their data in this way. For example, if you are reading a public forum and players are sharing vulnerability about their experiences playing a game based on the queer experience, reproducing these posts and including identifying details could increase the potential for harm to occur. In such cases, you may wish to obscure such details, still indicating where the original post was located in your citations to show due diligence. Alternatively, you can choose to summarize in a more anonymous way rather than providing quotes.

You should especially be careful with private, secret, or friend-restricted social media feeds. Just because a person posted on their Facebook Wall and they have thousands of friends does not mean the post is public. Similarly, private groups often have rules of confidentiality. The person may not have posted such things if they believed they would be viewed by members outside a select group. If you want to gather research in such spaces, we recommend asking for consent from the group, ideally even putting a note in the group description or pinning an announcement that states what the research is for and the period within which you will be collecting data. Similarly, you can make a private group specifically for research purposes, which players can join, thus opting-in to the research.

f) Risk assessment

Just like in running games, part of the research process when working with human subjects is assessing risk. Here are some factors to consider.

i) Transparency

Do your participants know what they are signing up to experience? When possible, be as transparent as possible about your process. You do not need to explain your research in great depth, but they should have a general idea of what is expected of them.

You should avoid any secrecy in your research design unless it is strictly necessary to answer your research question. Any sort of tricks or surprises could lead participants to feel betrayed or even harmed.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to give fully informed consent for role-playing games themselves due to the uncertainty arising from emergent play. You simply cannot control all the factors, including the behavior of other players, so you cannot ensure you can provide all content in advance. You can do your best to predict what sorts of content may emerge, e.g., through content advisories. You can also disclose what sorts of discomfort the participant might experience.

At the same time, you do not need to overstate the risks of your project unless they are significant. For example, if running a role-playing game for seasoned role-players, you may wish to disclose that the game is designed for transformative purposes and therefore may have an impact on them or activate discomfort, but you are likely not running an experience terribly different from ones they have willingly undertaken in the past. You may instead wish to focus on aspects that are less familiar, such as the data you will be taking and how it will be stored.

ii) Harm reduction

As discussed in Chapter 5 of *TRGD* and this book, we acknowledge that harm is possible within these games and within the research process. As you are planning your research and putting together your consent form, think of ways you can reduce harm. For example, do you really need that super-secret plot twist or that violent scene? How will you respond meaningfully if harm occurs? Luckily, since you have access to this book, you can address safety concerns more readily than many researchers. We have developed structures, mechanics, and support systems that can help. Plan ahead of time and be clear with participants what options they have for psychological safety before, during, and after your data collection. Provide a thorough consent form, identifying yourself, your superior, and your ethical approval body and assigned number if available. Make clear they can opt-out at any time -- and mean it. No project is worth inflicting harm that can be avoided with proper consent procedures.

iii) Working with specific populations

You may have special considerations when working with specific populations, e.g., children, incarcerated people, older adults. This work may require more rigorous ethical review, for example, and stringent procedures. You may need to work with stakeholders to be able to conduct the research at all, who serve as gatekeepers, as discussed in Chapter 2. Finding a way to build collaborations with such stakeholders can help ease the process for you and your participants. Failing to do so could lead to resistance and even legal trouble, so again, do your due diligence.

iv) Photography/video consent forms

You will need to detail in your consent form what types of data will be taken. For example, if you will be videotaping the session, let your participants know. Such data will likely need to be kept private and securely stored, shared only within your research team.

However, if you plan to use photography and video in publications, whether for research or promotional purposes, you need a separate form that will permit them to consent to such practices. This will likely not be possible if you promised them anonymity in your consent form. Another option is to blur their faces, modulate their recorded voices, or obscure any other identifying features, but such practices are not failsafes.

7.9 Data analysis

Once you have gathered your data, you then need to have a practice through which you analyze it.

a) Qualitative coding practices

i) Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is an umbrella term for a number of different approaches that aim at first identifying patterns and themes in a data set, and then analyzing and interpreting them (see e.g., Braun and Clarke 2006). Since these approaches tend to be closely related, research projects that apply this method will most likely employ several or a mix of inductive, deductive, and reflexive approaches. In other words, sometimes you will allow the data to “speak” to you, with key themes emerging, and make general observations from those specific instances, i.e., inductive research. Sometimes you will hunt for certain themes based upon a hypothesis you establish from the beginning, e.g., deductive research. Other times, the themes will emerge from you after engaging with the data based on your individual subjectivity, e.g., reflexive research.

Types of thematic analysis include:

- **Coding Reliability Thematic Analysis:** This type of analysis most often employs a predetermined coding framework and puts particular emphasis on replicability in the coding process. It does so by having several people code the same data with the goal of achieving a high degree of agreement between the coders. Statistical tests are often employed to determine this level of agreement between the coders and in extension the reliability of the coding. This approach can be useful when you have a research question that requires highly structured and reliable coding.
- **Reflexive Thematic Analysis:** This type of analysis emphasizes that the researcher's subjectivity, theoretical assumptions, and interpretative frameworks will always influence how they code and interpret themes. It does not rely on an existing code framework, but the coders develop their codebook as they work through the data set. Differences in coding between researchers is used to explore different understandings of the data, rather than to try to reach consensus. This approach can be useful if your research question is of an exploratory nature or if you wish to provide a multitude of potential interpretations rooted in the researchers' subjectivity.
- **Codebook Thematic Analysis:** This type of analysis can be understood as a mix of the two previous ones. Somewhat similar to reflexive analysis, the coding framework is created specifically for the dataset. However, where in the former the categories are created as a result of coding, codebook analysis will create a coding framework based on the researchers' initial contact with the data set. The codebook is then employed in a similar fashion as one would in a coding reliability approach. This way the researcher will try to combine the flexibility of a codebook created from the data set with the reliability of a rigid coding process. This approach can be useful when your research aim is to describe the dataset as comprehensively as possible.

ii) Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Phenomenological analysis puts emphasis on understanding a phenomenon from the perspective of the individual that experiences it. The basic principle is that researchers have to analyze the data without letting their own pre-conceived ideas and theoretical frameworks influence the process. This principle also extends to *interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)*, although this latter method also incorporates hermeneutic principles that postulate that any understanding of understanding experience must also necessarily include interpretation. In fact, an IPA process can be seen as containing a double hermeneutic approach, as researchers interpret the accounts of participants who are themselves interpreting their own experiences. IPA can be a particularly useful methodology for you, if you try to examine topics and experiences which have high degrees of complexity, are ambiguous in one way or another, and/or contain strong emotional components.

iii) Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a method that is specifically intended to create new theory from the analyzed data sets, rather than try to impose existing theories onto them. In this method, data collection and analysis can happen in parallel, allowing the analysis to inform what data will be collected next in the project. Grounded theory can be useful if you are conducting research in a field where there is little or no existing theory to apply, or you find that existing theories do not cover or explain your specific research target sufficiently.

However, as we have warned before, analog role-playing game studies often have existing research based on the topics you are exploring. Some people rely on grounded theory as an approach because they are not aware of existing studies, or do not wish to impose a hypothesis. However, we often have hypotheses going into a research process, and grounded theory requires a large amount of rigor when done correctly, carefully documenting new insights and adjusting each research procedure accordingly. Grounded theory does not mean having no plan or assuming the field is wide open without due diligence in research. For that reason, consider whether or not you do have specific questions you are exploring from the start, and if you do, use another method, like thematic analysis.

iv) Qualitative content analysis

Content analysis is a systemic method to organize and interpret large amounts of textual or visual data. As content analysis can be both qualitative and quantitative, it is often considered a mixed method. For the sake of this book we will make a clear distinction: Where quantitative content analysis, as described later, concerns itself with the how many times specific words or codes appear in the data, *qualitative content analysis* concerns itself with the meaning behind the words and the context in which they appear.

Based on how strongly existing framework and theory influence the research questions, a qualitative content analysis process can be either *deductive* or *inductive*.

- A *deductive analysis* applies an existing coding framework to the data set. This approach can be useful if you are trying to confirm a previously established model or theoretical work or apply it to a new context.
- An *inductive analysis* establishes its own coding framework by creating categories as a result of a close reading process at the beginning of the analysis. This approach can be useful if you are conducting an exploratory study or you are working in a part of the field where there is little to no prior research available.

b) Quantitative analysis practice

When working with quantitative data, rigorous research practices are needed. This section will introduce key factors.

i) Working with statistics

Quantitative analysis in role-playing studies offers a powerful lens for understanding player behavior, engagement, and experience by translating complex phenomena into numerical data that can be systematically examined. This practice is not about replacing qualitative insight but about complementing it with objective, replicable, and statistically verifiable findings.

Put simply, quantitative analysis is the process of analyzing numerical data to measure differences between groups, assess relationships between variables, and test hypotheses in a scientifically rigorous way. In role-playing studies, this could involve analyzing survey responses to measure player satisfaction, counting behavioral frequencies to understand choices in a session, or using experimental data to compare the effects of different game mechanics. The goal is to produce objective, empirical data that can be measured, expressed numerically, and analyzed using statistical methods.

Quantitative analysis begins with a clear research question and a *testable* hypothesis. Once data is collected, the analysis typically proceeds through two main branches of statistics: *descriptive* and *inferential*.

The first step in any quantitative analysis is to summarize and describe the characteristics of the data sample. *Descriptive statistics* do not make inferences about a wider population, but instead provide a clear picture of the data collected. Some key descriptive measures include describing the “center” of the data, such as the mean (average), median (midpoint), and mode (most frequent value), and describing the spread of the data, such as the standard deviation, which indicates how close data points are to the mean.

Where descriptive statistics describe a sample, *inferential statistics* are used to make predictions or inferences about a larger population from which the sample was drawn. These methods are used to test hypotheses and determine if the observed patterns in the data are statistically significant or simply due to chance.

Common inferential tests include t-tests and ANOVA. These are used to compare the mean scores of two or more groups. For example, a researcher could use an ANOVA to compare self-reported immersion scores from players in three different role-playing game systems. Correlation is another type of inferential test, which is used to examine the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two continuous variables. For instance, a researcher might test for a correlation between the hours a player spends preparing for a larp and their post-game satisfaction score. Regression is used to predict an outcome variable from one or more predictor variables. A regression model could for instance be built to determine if a player’s performance in a strategic game can be predicted by their experience level and the amount of time they spend analyzing the game board.

Quantitative analysis begins with the methodology of the study, and the validity of the analysis will depend on methodological rigor. Researchers must ensure they have adequate sample sizes to achieve sufficient statistical power to detect real effects. It is also critical to choose the appropriate statistical test based on the research question and the type of data collected, e.g., its level of measurement and distribution. Finally, statistical significance should not be confused with practical significance. A statistically significant finding is meaningless without being interpreted within the rich context of the role-playing activity itself.

ii) Quantifying qualitative data

Quantifying qualitative data is a methodological bridge that allows researchers to identify patterns, test hypotheses, and systematically link subjective player experiences to objective measures. This process converts non-numerical data, such as interview transcripts, open-ended survey responses, or ethnographic field notes, into a numerical format that can be statistically analyzed. The first, and most pivotal step, is qualitative coding. The researcher meticulously reads through the textual data, identifies discrete segments relevant to the research question, and assigns a descriptive label, or *code*. For example, in analyzing player debrief interviews, a researcher might create codes like rules negotiation, character conflict, or strategic planning. The researcher can then go from codes to counting. In a *content analysis*, a researcher will quantify the frequency of the codes or categories. This can reveal patterns in what participants discuss most, for instance. In a *thematic analysis*, the researcher can identify and interpret patterns of meaning, i.e., themes, within the data. While more interpretive, the resulting themes can still be quantified.

The process of quantifying qualitative data must be conducted with systematic rigor to be valid. Best practices include developing a clear codebook and ensuring inter-rater reliability by having multiple coders analyze a portion of the data and check for agreement. The primary risk in quantifying textual data is decontextualization. A frequency count does not reveal the nature or nuance of the coded concept. Therefore, quantification should not be an endpoint. Its strength lies in identifying broad patterns that can then be explored and illustrated with qualitative examples from which the counts were collected from.

iii) Quantitative content analysis

Quantitative content analysis is a method that involves a systematic objective analysis of large sets of usually qualitative data. The aim of this analysis is to quantify the datasets so that it is easier to identify patterns and trends that can then be used to pose meaningful research questions.

The two main types of quantitative content analysis are *manifest* analysis and *latent* analysis. Manifest analysis involves looking at the surface level content of the data, such as for instance the number of times a specific word or phrase is used.

Latent analysis, on the other hand, tries to identify what lies under the surface content, for instance trying to see what values, emotions, attitudes, or convictions are communicated through the text.

In regards to role-playing, one could use quantitative content analysis to see how often certain phrases or words were used by players in a certain game or system and compare these to similar data from other games. Alternatively, one could look at how different groups or different character classes in the same game might differ in their word choices. If one finds such differences, this insight might for instance be used to better understand how different games, groups, and/or classes might influence how people play them, or how they might attract different players.

iv) Emotion analysis

Emotion is at the heart of role-playing and can help drive the experience, but it is notoriously difficult to measure. Emotion analysis, in the context of quantitative analysis, is the process of measuring and understanding human emotions based on physical and behavioral cues. This can involve analyzing text, speech, visual data, or physiological signals to identify specific emotions like joy, anger, or fear.

In research, emotion is often structured around two core dimensions: *arousal*, i.e., the intensity of the feeling; and *valence*, i.e., whether the feeling is positive or negative (Russell and Barrett 1999). Different methods can be used to capture these dimensions of emotion. Arousal is the level of physiological activation. It can be measured objectively using psychophysiological tools, such as heart rate monitors or eye-trackers (Juvrud 2026). For example, Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) measures changes in skin conductivity related to sweat gland activity, providing a sensitive indicator of emotional intensity. A sudden narrative twist in a tabletop role-playing game might produce a sharp peak in a player's GSR data, quantifying their in-the-moment reaction.

While arousal measures intensity, other methods are needed to infer the type and valence of an emotion. Facial emotion analyses, such as facial coding (Ekman and Friesen 1978) or EMG, use algorithms to analyze a video feed of a participant's face, mapping muscle movements to basic emotional expressions like joy, anger, or sadness. Similarly, vocal emotion analysis can analyze an audio recording for features like pitch and tempo to infer the speaker's emotional state.

A challenge unique to role-playing research is untangling the emotions of the player from the emotions of the character they are portraying. A player might exhibit a facial expression of anger because they are skillfully acting, while they, the player, feel calm. Researchers cannot take behavioral emotion data at face value. This ambiguity is a rich area for investigation, as the discrepancy between a player's internal physiological state, e.g., a calm GSR signal, and their external emotional performance, e.g., a facial analysis reading of "anger," can itself be a meaningful measure of role-playing.

c) Mixed methods

Role-playing is a complex, multi-layered human phenomenon, and to study such a dynamic activity, any single methodological approach is inherently limited. Therefore, combining multiple methods can strengthen a research study. *Mixed methods* research, specifically, is a paradigm that intentionally integrates quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a more holistic, robust, and nuanced understanding. The core rationale for a mixed methods approach is the interdependence of objective measurement and subjective context. A quantitative data point, such as a spike in a player's heart rate, is scientifically meaningless without the qualitative context of what was happening in the game to cause it. Conversely, a qualitative claim from an interview is strengthened when corroborated by quantitative data. The goals of this integration are *triangulation* (confirming findings), *complementarity* (providing a fuller picture), and *development* (using one method to inform the other).

Many ways exist to approach a mixed method research design, and a few ways that are particularly well-suited for role-playing research. In *convergent parallel design*, quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently but analyzed independently. The results are then merged at the interpretation stage to see if they converge, complement, or contradict one another. *Explanatory sequential design* is a two-phase design that begins with the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The results of this first phase then inform the design of a second, qualitative phase, which is used to explain or provide context for the initial quantitative findings. Conversely, *exploratory sequential design* begins first with a qualitative phase to explore a phenomenon, and the findings are then used to build a theory or a new quantitative instrument for a second, quantitative phase. This is ideal for under-researched topics.

The central challenge of mixed methods research is the successful integration of different data types. This must be a deliberate process, not an afterthought. Techniques include side-by-side comparison in a report, data transformation, e.g., quantifying qualitative codes, and creating joint displays, e.g., a single table or matrix, to visualize the integrated data from both streams. While demanding, a well-executed mixed methods study provides a depth of understanding that a single-method approach cannot match, making it an invaluable tool for the complex field of role-playing research.

d) Triangulation

In regards to research methods, *triangulation* refers to the practice of using several different methods, sources, theories, and researchers to study the same phenomenon, in order to increase the validity, reliability, and credibility of the results. In addition, it can reduce bias, improve research rigor, and provide additional insights that singular approaches fail to achieve.

When we use different sources or data sets to study the same phenomenon, it is called *data triangulation*. If we apply a mix of different methods, it is called *methodological triangulation*. When several different researchers or investigators analyze the same data, it is called *investigator triangulation*. If we apply different theoretical frameworks or perspectives to study the same phenomenon, it is called *theoretical triangulation*. And finally, when we study the same phenomenon in different settings and environments, it is called *environmental triangulation*.

7.10 Positionality, reflexivity, and bias

In research on analog role-playing games, *positionality* names how our identities, roles, and interests as designer-researchers shape what we notice, record, and claim. *Reflexivity* is the continuous and explicit examination of those influences, not to erase them but to render them accountable and useful for interpretation. Following situated knowledge perspectives, we foreground that all observations are partial, located, and mediated by power relations in the field and at the table (Haraway 1988). Note that simply stating one's social identities in a positionality statement is not considered thorough practice and may even be seen as performative (Sibbald et al. 2025). One should also connect these life experiences to the way one views the subject matter at hand and the act of research itself as a whole.

A reflexive stance requires declaring insider or outsider status; mapping role transitions across design, facilitation, and analysis; and documenting how stakes and values inform design choices and coding decisions. Some examples include a reflexivity log for each iteration, peer debriefs that challenge preferred explanations, checking inferences with participants in post-game debriefs when ethically appropriate, and an audit trail that links raw traces to claims about change and mechanism. This approach aligns with reflexive sociology's call to objectify the researcher's position within the knowledge production process, treating bias as a phenomenon to analyze rather than a flaw to hide (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Credibility and trustworthiness then rest on transparency, triangulation, and negotiated meaning with participants, not on an unattainable neutrality (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

7.11 Empirical research on the effects of role-playing games

In this section, we reproduce the list of effects studies and their associated positive effects from Chapter 7 of *TRGD*, adding many sources that have been published since the last book was released.

i) Cognitive domain

- **Perceived competence / self-efficacy / successful / capable / agency** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Davis and Johns 2020; Atanasio 2020; Daniau 2016; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Merrick, Li, and Miller 2024), including **leadership self-efficacy** (García-Soriano, Faret Moreno, and González Cohens 2026);
- **Engagement** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Varrette et al. 2022; Slaughter and Orth 2023; Cullinan 2024; Riser et al. 2024; Breen and Woodin 2025);
- **Motivation / self-determination** (Gjedde 2013, 2014; Bowman and Standiford 2015; Algayres 2018; Hixson, West, and Eike 2024; Walsh and Linehan 2024; McLaren, Oades, and Deery 2026);
- **Creativity / creative thinking** (Kallam 1984; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Chung 2011; Meriläinen 2012; Gjedde 2013; Hazlett et al. 2024; Kilmer et al. 2024) and **creative expression** (Walsh and Linehan 2024);
- **Imagination / imaginative potential** (Karwowski and Soszynski 2008; Meriläinen 2012; Dyson et al. 2015);
- **Critical thinking** (Daniau 2016; Riser et al. 2024; Tsiaras and Neofotistos 2026);
- **Decision making skills** (Daniau 2016; Varrette et al. 2022; Riser et al. 2024);
- **Complex problem solving** (Kallam 1984; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Bowman 2010; Dyson et al. 2015; Daniau 2016; Atanasio 2020; Varrette et al. 2020) including **collaboratively** (Slaughter and Orth 2023; Kilmer et al. 2024);
- **Practice with challenging scenarios** (Kilmer et al. 2024; Riser et al. 2024);
- **Experiencing theory in practice** (Riser et al. 2024);
- **Compare the story with real life situations** (Riser et al. 2024);
- **Finding meaning** (DeRenard and Kline 1990; Atanasio 2020);
- **Exploring character arcs different from one's own life story/challenges** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);
- **Self-reflection** (Blackstock 2016); and
- **Moral development** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020).
- **Subject matter revision** (Mochocki 2014)
- **Perspective taking** (Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016; Kilmer et al. 2024);
- **Working with subject matter in game** (Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016);
- **Complex reflection about self** (Pitt et al. 2023);
- **Complex reflection about teamwork/ group dynamics** (Pitt et al. 2023);
- **Social predictions resulting from embodied feedback and mistakes** (Visuri 2024)
- **Developing a broader range of learner personas** (Cole, Maragliano, and Werning 2020);

ii) Affective domain

- **Agency / empowerment** (Daniau 2016; Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022);
- **Autonomy** (Visuri 2024)
- **Empathy** (Daniau 2016; Rivers et al. 2016; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021; Zhang, Xu, and Li 2025);
- **Identity development / exploration / experimentation** (Blackmon 1994; Bowman 2010; Meriläinen 2012; Blackstock 2016; Davis and Johns 2020; Baird 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Ball 2022; Walsh and Linehan 2024; Sottile 2024; Rosenblad et al. 2025);
- **Gender exploration/expression** (Baird 2021; Sottile 2024);

- **Identity reconstruction through character** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);
- **Stress / pressure relief** (Blackstock 2016);
- **Enhanced Quality of Life (QoL)** (Katō 2019);
- **Personal development** (Daniau 2016);
- **Emotional regulation** (Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Atanasio 2020; Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Processing trauma** (Causo and Quinlan 2021; Lehto 2024) and **trauma recovery** (Rosenblad et al. 2025);
- **Accessing grief and/or processing grief on a deeper level** (Bowman, Lukka, and Baird 2026);
- **Coping / adaptive skills** (Atanasio 2020; Causo and Quinlan 2021) and adaptability (García-Soriano, Faret Moreno, and González Cohens 2026);
- **Emotional resilience** (Brave 2026);
- **Expressing personal challenges** (Daniau 2016);
- **Working through difficulties** (Ball 2022) **without having to talk about them** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Gutierrez 2017; Walsh and Linehan 2024);
- **Engaging in shadow work** (Blackstock 2016; Walsh and Linehan 2024; Bowman in press for 2025);
- **Emotional growth** (Rosenblad 2026);
- **Game as metaphors for internal struggles** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);
- **Rewriting one's own life story through character arc / restorying** (Tanenbaum 2022; Atherton, Hathaway, Visuri, and Cross 2024);
- **Self-esteem** (Hughes 1988; Merrick, Li, and Miller 2024);
- **Sense of accomplishment** (Zayas and Lewis 1986);
- **Joy of learning** (Gjedde 2014);
- **Feelings of belonging** (Sargent 2014);
- **Fulfilling needs** (Adams 2013; Blackstock 2016; Varrette et al. 2022) including **social needs** (Adams 2013; Causo and Quinlan 2021);
- **Self-confidence** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Walsh and Linehan 2024) including **confidence/coping when making mistakes** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);
- **Self-expression** (Slaughter and Orth 2023; Kilmer et al. 2024);
- **Social confidence** (Blackstock 2016);
- **Lowering of perceived social stakes** (Cullinan 2024);
- **Feeling safe and brave enough to push own boundaries** (Visuri 2024)
- **Transfer of traits or skills from character to player** (Blackstock 2016; Daniau 2016; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Katō 2019; Hazlett et al. 2024);

iii) Behavioral domain

- **Prosocial behaviors / social skills** (Meriläinen 2012; Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Sargent 2014; Helbig 2019; Katō 2019; Atanasio 2020; Davis and Johns 2020; Varrette et al. 2022; Bartenstein 2022a, 2022b, 2024; Slaughter and Orth 2023; Rosenblad et al. 2025; García-Soriano, Faret Moreno, and González Cohens 2026);
- **Practicing social skills without serious repercussions for mistakes** (Pitt et al. 2023);
- **Freedom as stress relief** (Blackstock 2026; Walsh and Linehan 2024) **from social mores / to explore relationships** (Blackstock 2016; Katō 2019);
- **Improved social interactions/relations with others** (Blackmon 1994; Blackstock 2016);
- **Group consensus building** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);
- **Balancing self-interests with community responsibility** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);

- **Social connections / connectedness** (Kilmer et al. 2024; Hazlett et al. 2024) including **new connections** (Cullinan 2024);
- **Connecting despite differences** (Katō 2019);
- **Debate / persuasion** (Daniau 2016);
- **Public speaking** (Hazlett et al. 2024);
- **Conflict management / resolution / transformation** (Atanasio 2020; Carter 2011; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Pitt et al. 2023);
- **Practicing democratic skills** (Adams 2013);
- **Collaboration** (Gjedde 2014; Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016; Hazlett et al. 2024; Tsiaras and Neofotistos 2026);
- **Social confidence** (Visuri 2024) including in **boundary setting** (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022);
- **Confrontation, i.e., standing up to a bully** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021) or **authority** (Varrette et al. 2022);
- **Self-advocacy** (Enfield 2007; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);
- **Assertiveness** (Zhang, Xu, and Li 2025);
- **Group development** (Daniau 2016);
- **Camaraderie / group cohesion / connectedness** (Zayas and Lewis 1986; Shanun 2011; Katō 2019; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Battles, Curland, and Cruitt 2025);
- **Friendship development** (Adams 2013; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Katō 2019; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);
- **Development of affinity groups as described by Gee (2017)** (Cullinan 2024);
- **Development of social support networks** (Atanasio 2020; Walsh and Linehan 2024; Kozlov and O'Connor 2025; Kroplewski, Łoś, and Pawlicki 2025);
- **Teambuilding** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Daniau 2016);
- **Cooperation** (Enfield 2007; Davis and Johns 2020; Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);
- **Improved communication skills** (Enfield 2007; Daniau 2016; Katō 2019; Slaughter and Orth 2023);
- **Social emotional learning (SEL)** (Ruff 2021), **skills** (Faret Moreno, and González Cohens 2026), and **competence** (Zhang, Xu, and Li 2025);
- **Decreased impulsivity** (Enfield 2007); and
- **Making active changes afterward** (Lehto 2024).

Note that some of these studies report quantitative and qualitative data in a systematic way, whereas others are more generalized case studies, assertions based on work in the field, or autoethnographies. Systemic assessment of impacts is important for the field moving forward. Importantly, we also need research on potential negative impacts and best practices to avoid these drawbacks in the future to balance the literature.

7.12 Researching existing RPG communities

a) How to research communities

Forum discussions, convention reports, and other sources, can be a useful starting point or foundation when writing about RPG communities. Documenting your findings about an RPG community is a meticulous and time-consuming endeavor. Just like the sources from these communities themselves, your documentation is also a partial reflection of these communities. Many RPG communities exist in both

online and offline spaces, each with distinct norms that cannot be captured through documentation alone. Respectful documentations of these communities and their creative and artistic expressions is essential in order to maintain a safe and positive relationship between you as a researcher and the players. We recommend obtaining explicit consent to present findings outside of their original context. Cox (2018) suggests that one way to avoid stereotyping and mitigate generalizations, is by putting players front and center in your analysis.

RPG communities have both positive and negative cultural associations and connotations. Shaped by popular mass media coverage, tabletop RPG communities revolving around *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), were associated with the morally deviant practices during the Satanic Panic and a “nerdy” male-dominant subculture, leading to a stigmatized public image in the 1980s (BBC 2014). Sensationalist depictions like these not only simplify, but also misrepresent the diversity and complexity of RPG communities. Additionally, this framing misrepresented the social and creative elements of RPG communities.

After the turn of the millennial, especially during the COVID pandemic, the coverage of RPG communities has seen a notable shift to a more positive depiction. Changes include increased online play (e.g., Roll20); streaming Actual Play shows, e.g., *Critical Role* (Geek & Sundry, 2015-2018; Critical Role Productions, 2018-); and podcasters and RPG influencers, e.g., Ginny Di, from a broader range of demographic representations. These changes have contributed to framing RPG communities as inclusive, community-driven spaces for social connection, creativity and representation. Experiencing such communities can be incidentally transformative, even if the viewers do not play themselves (Lasley 2021).

Despite this shift, you have to be aware that these are still partial depictions of role-playing communities. Some RPG groups may still show hesitation to engage with your research and be closed off to an invasion of their gaming space. This caution of RPG communities may be a result from the aforementioned misrepresentations and stereotyping in media coverage. Community members may worry that academic or media interest could position their identities as caricatures. Understanding this point of view is essential for you as a researcher, if you seek to study these communities.

To mitigate these risks, researchers have to prioritize the following three things:

- **Transparency** about the research process;
- **Reciprocity** by compensating or showing gratitude; and
- **Consent** recorded either verbally or written.

Trust is key, and in order to build that, you have to respect the terms of the RPG community you are working with. It is a nice gesture if you consult with your informants first, before publishing your research documentation about them.

Therefore, you should carefully consider this fact when approaching role-playing groups for research. Make sure that your work is not contributing to these stereotypes.

If you have critiques of the practice, make sure you frame these critiques fairly and are not dismissive or derogatory. Avoid positioning some games as better than others just because you prefer their design -- or even if your participants have a preference. Keep in mind that all games have their own benefits and drawbacks, and even games with problematic content may be deeply important and meaningful for your participants. Your goal is not to prove any game or playstyle is superior to another, but ideally instead to demonstrate how games can improve.

Here are examples of popular and academic sources written about RPG communities around the world, whether as an embedded member or a visitor:

- American larp (Vanek 2011),
- Nordic larp (Montola and Stenros 2013; Cazeneuve 2020),
- Belarusian larp (Kot 2011),
- Russia larp (Semenov 2010),
- Larp in the Arab world (Anderson, Kharroub, Levin, and Rabah 2015),
- Nordic-inspired larp in Switzerland (B. 2013),
- Hungarian larp (Turi and Hartyándi 2023),
- Malaysian larp (Wang and Bates 2026),
- Chinese *jubensha* (Xiong, Wen, and Hartyándi 2022),
- Spanish tabletop (Mizer 2013),
- Filipino tabletop (Hermann 2026),
- Greek tabletop with American games (Nikolaidou 2015),
- Nordic freeform in Canada (Hellström and Hellström 2014).

7.13 Using tech in RPG research

Technology in role-playing research can be defined here as the application of digital tools, platforms, and measurement instruments to facilitate, create, or analyze the cognitive, emotional, and social dynamics of role-playing experiences. Role-playing research distinguishes itself from the broader discipline of game studies by maintaining a specific focus on the unique affordances of role-play. While participant observation and interviews remain vital to exploring play, the field is increasingly integrating technology to facilitate, create, and analyze the cognitive, emotional, and social dynamics of role-playing experiences. This shift is driven by the recognition that any single instrument captures only a fraction of the available information. A mixed-methods approach, combining traditional inquiry with objective, real-time data, is essential.

a) Technology as a facilitator

Technology can be used as tools that augment traditional role-play, such as virtual tabletops, or even the use of tablets, phones, or digital audio and music. Virtual tabletops, for example, provide a shared digital space with tools such as interactive maps, digital character sheets, integrated dice rollers, and communication channels, often used in conjunction with platforms like *Discord*, which is yet another example of a digital tool as a facilitator.

b) Technology as the medium

In some forms of role-play, technology is not just a facilitator but the very medium in which the experience occurs. Virtual reality (VR), for example, allows researchers to experimentally manipulate or explore player choices in avatar characteristics, to study their effects on a player's identity, empathy, and social interactions (Zhang and Juvrud 2024). However, embodiment and presence are co-constitutive; a player's embodied avatar shapes their perception of the world, and the world shapes the possibilities for embodied action. Therefore, research in VR must consider the dynamic interplay between the embodied self and the perceived world.

c) Technology as an instrument

Most relevant to this chapter is technology as an instrument, or the use of devices to measure and analyze player states and behaviors. Technology can be used as a direct instrument for measurement, providing objective, real-time insights into the cognitive and emotional processes of players. Eye-tracking, for example, is a technology that provides a window into a participant's visual attention, which is a strong correlate of cognitive processing (Juvrud 2026). By measuring metrics like fixations, saccades, and dwell time, researchers can analyze social dynamics, e.g., who players look at during negotiations; engagement with game materials, e.g., maps, character sheets; and decision-making processes. While it provides precise, objective data, the equipment can be expensive and does not reveal what a person is consciously thinking. Other examples of technologies as instruments include heart rate monitors and galvanic skin response (GSR), tools that measure physiological arousal. Each one of these tools comes with their own learning curves, limitations, and demands; they should not be used without careful consideration of the research question.

The true strength of these instruments is unlocked when they are combined. For example, a GSR peak (high arousal) can be interpreted more accurately when synchronized with facial analysis data indicating "joy" and eye-tracking data showing the player was looking at a treasure chest. Even better, adding qualitative assessments such as interviews and surveys, can further expand the depth of an analysis. This triangulation of data streams overcomes the weaknesses of individual measures and enhances the validity of research findings.

For more on using advanced technology with role-playing games, including for research purposes, see the Erasmus+ EDGE Tech Toolkit (Suominen 2025).

d) Considerations when working with tech

When doing tech facilitated research you can harvest other kinds of documentation and data, depending on what tech you choose to work with. In VR for instance, all or any players' points of view can be streamed and heatmaps of player's movements in a certain space can be collected, to mention only a few examples. Many fascinating statistics can be created from tech.

This contrast with doing qualitative interviews is easily confused with quantitative certainty. Tracking eye movement and counting the seconds one player looks at another is not necessarily proof of interest; they might be lost in thought or experiencing lag. Just because tech can provide numbers does not necessarily make it useful from a research point of view. It is important to consider carefully what sort of tech best supports your research question. What sort of data and data analysis will not just satisfy the explorers' sense of neophilia, i.e., enthusiasm for new tech, but provide meaningful answers to the questions proposed?

To explore VR role-playing, see the VR Roleplay Repo (n.d.).

7.13 Summary

We close this implementation guide with considerations when doing rigorous research, whether Research through Design or other forms of data gathering, analysis, and writing. We hope these two textbooks can serve as companions for you throughout the design, implementation, and research process. Ideally, this work will increase your curiosity about the field of transformative role-playing game design and your desire to contribute to the discourse around applied practice in one or more of its many forms.

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Bios

Angie Bandhoesingh (Antzela-Sita Bandhoesingh) is an educator and larp designer with extensive experience in non-formal education. She has an educator's degree from the Literature, Philosophy and Psychology department of the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens and has worked as a private tutor, a child animator, and a non-formal education facilitator since 2010. She has experience in youth work across multiple projects, including several in Erasmus+. Angie is a co-founder of the Dragons' Nest nonprofit organization (formerly RPG4Kids), is the company manager, and is the educational content supervisor for extracurricular school activities for children aged 5-12. She also co-founded the LARPiFiers non-profit organization, where she is an edu-larp designer and organizer, including having co-designed the grant-funded edu-larp Superhero Union. A larper since late 2015, she has been an organizer of local larps from 2016-2019. She has been exploring arts and crafts as a way of personal expression and informal learning activities. Her interest in non-formal education stems from a desire to transform formal education into a children-friendly, student-centric environment.

Sarah Lynne Bowman is a scholar, game designer, and event organizer. She received her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin in Radio-Television-Film and her Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Dallas in Arts and Humanities. Bowman has taught in the Humanities, English, and Communication. Currently, she is an Associate Professor in Game Design at Uppsala University Campus Gotland. She formerly served as Coordinator for the Peace & Conflict Studies program at Austin Community College, where she teaches Humanities. Bowman is a founding member of the Transformative Play Initiative, who research analog role-playing games as vehicles for personal and social change. She co-edited *The Wyrd Con Companion Book* (2012-2015) and currently edits for the *International Journal of Role-Playing* and *Nordiclarp.org*. Bowman has co-organized several conferences, including *Living Games* (2014, 2016, 2018), *Role-playing and Simulation and Education* (2016, 2018), and the *Transformative Play Initiative Seminar* (2022). More information at sarahlynnebowman.com.

Simon Brind is a larp writer and academic from London, England. He received his Bachelor's degree in English Literature from University College London, has a Master's degree in Software Engineering from the University of Westminster, and a second Master's in Creative Writing from Middlesex University. He completed his Ph.D. in 2023 at the Digital Cultures Research Centre at the University of the West of England. His thesis, *Combat Narratology: Strategies for the Resolution of Narrative Crisis in Participatory Fiction*, is available from the Digital Cultures Research Centre, (UWE), Bristol. His research looks at emergent narrative structures in participatory fiction and the tension between authorial and participant agency. He has been a larper since 1983, a larpwright since 1986, and is a founding member of Avalon Larp Studio. He has worked on some of the largest and longest running larp systems in the UK as well as projects across Europe and North America.

Elektra Diakolambrianou (Ilektra Diakolamprianou) is a licensed psychologist and psychotherapist, a certified adult educator, and a larp designer. She has a B.Sc. in Psychology from Panteion University, a Pg.Dip. in Person-Centred counselling from the University of Strathclyde, a Prof.Cert. in Art, Drama and Play Therapy from Edexcel, and is a European Certificate of Psychotherapy holder. Currently she is pursuing a M.A. in Creative Writing offered by the Hellenic Open University. A certified trainer of communication skills by Gordon Training International and member of the trainers' pool of the Greek National Agency for Erasmus+ Youth 2014-2020, Elektra has had continuing education in cinematherapy, music therapy, bibliotherapy, therapeutic writing, gamification methods, game-based education, restorative justice, and social psychology. Since 2012, she has been working as a psychotherapist working with socially vulnerable groups, including: unaccompanied minors, refugees, immigrants, NEETs, unemployed people, former prisoners, and women. Since 2013, she has been an academic staff member at the Institution for counselling and Psychological Studies in Athens. Her academic work emphasizes the potential of larp as a medium for personal development and psychotherapy. She is also a co-founder of the LARPifiers. Elektra has experience in working as an emotional safety person in games and projects, as well as in curating larp designs for emotional safety.

Alessandro Giovannucci is an award-winning game designer and theorist working in the field of larp and immersive experience. He co-founded the larp collective Chaos League in 1992 and wrote the manifesto "Southern Way – New Italian Larp." His work focuses on political and social topics, experienced through the participatory nature of larp. He has worked on different formats and styles of games, going from small ones (First They Came) to some of the bigger and most successful international larps (Sahara Expedition, Miskatonic University). Very active in the field of online larp, he designed games and organized several online festivals in the last years including the International Larp Festival. Alessandro is also regularly invited to host talks, larp design workshops and seminars all over Europe and their games are hosted in some of the most important festivals. Has already participated, both as a partner and leader, in European funded projects related to larp, civil rights and education. Alessandro is also a music teacher at the University of Teramo and University of Chieti, researching the relationship between materialism and storytelling in the arts.

Felipe García-Soriano is a sociologist from the University of Chile and a PhD candidate in Economy, Business and Society at the University of Alicante. He works primarily as a consultant and designer of non-formal learning experiences, with a focus on organizational development, civic engagement, and systems thinking through tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) and participatory methodologies.

Kjell Hedgard Hugaas is a Northern Norwegian game designer, organizer, writer, theorist, and trained actor. In particular, he is engaged within the Nordic larp tradition, where he has been active for a bit over two decades. For the last few years, he has explored the transformative potential of games, and has proposed specific intentional game design practices that facilitate transformative effects. As well as being a founding member of the Transformative Play Initiative, Hugaas has theorized how ideas impact players through the processes of memetic bleed, procedural bleed, and identity bleed.

His work on bleed has so far culminated in his 2022 Master's thesis in Game Design at Uppsala University, and he is planning to expand on this theoretical work in the future. In 2023, he completed a second thesis for UU on the impacts of larp on participants' attitudes and anxieties around death. He works as a project assistant on EDGE, the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership ROCKET, and the Horizon Europe Larpocracy project through LARPiFiers. Hugaas is the co-founder and CEO of the game studio and research company Evocative Games AB, where he currently works as a consultant, researcher, narrative designer, and writer, including for the Erasmus+ Dystolarp project.

Joshua Juvrud has a Ph.D. in Developmental Psychology and is an Associate Professor at Uppsala University. As a research psychologist, his work has focused on the ways that novel techniques in research (eye-tracking, pupil dilation, virtual reality) can be used to assess how children and adults perceive and interpret people, emotions, and actions. Josh focuses this research in two fields. In developmental psychology at the Child and Babylab in Uppsala, he seeks to understand how children learn about their world through social cognitive processes, such as play. In games research at the Games & Society Lab at the Department of Game Design in Visby, Gotland, his work examines the psychology of people, their actions, and emotions in game development, player engagement, learning, and immersion to understand better how different game players (with different personalities, traits, and experiences) interact with various game mechanisms and are, in turn, affected by game experiences.

Halfdan Keller Justesen is an event manager and larp producer based in Copenhagen, Denmark. He has made larps with Avalon Larp Studio since 2017, and been a board member since 2018. In 2019, he completed a MSc in Engineering with specialisation in Sustainable Design from Aalborg University, Copenhagen. Halfdan has larped as long as he can remember. Since 2016, he has volunteered at more than 30 international larp events, where had a designing and leading role in five of those productions, and he slings a mean pizza. Since 2021 he has been one of the organizers behind Blackbox Copenhagen, and in 2023 he became a board member of Gnist. His current design interests are in runtime activities, modularity in character design, and how to include players as participants in the design of their own experience during the workshop process.

Josephine Rydberg is a Ph.D. candidate at Stockholm University of the Arts (SKH). The research project Dramaturgy for Participatory Practices is explored using examples from larp and social VR. Her focus is on designing play for avatars and finding best practices for adapting larp designs to a virtual environment. Rydberg has held a position as a crossmedia developer for the County Council of Gävleborg (Region Gävleborg) since 2014, and has developed a number of innovative projects mixing storytelling and new technology. Current projects include: VR & World Heritage, Games Culture, and the Storytech conference. Rydberg has been a larper since the early '90s and was one of the founding members of Gothenberg's first larp society. She holds an M.A. in Film & Theatre from the University of Sheffield and M.A.s in film production from the University of Gothenburg (Filmhögskolan, Göteborgs Universitet) and Stockholm Academy of the Arts (Dramatiska Institutet).

Nikola Sekulić is a career athlete, martial artist, stuntman, HEMA scholar, and instructor, as well as a larp and game designer. Throughout his athletic career he has achieved numerous medals and recognitions through various sports such as Judo, Gymnastics, Parkour, HEMA, etc. He specializes in biomechanics, kinesiology, kinetics, locomotion and sports psychology. He has worked in several Erasmus+ projects and is a member of the LARPiFiers non-profit organization. Sekulić has been a larper since 2016 and has attended a great number of larps as well as helping establish, edit, and run several game settings and rulesets throughout Balkan larp communities. He likes to focus on bodily self expression, body positivity, self-improvement, nurture, and growth through body movement. He hopes to spread positive athletic values in a friendly way to others through nonformal education.

Guus van Tilborg is a Ph.D. student at Groningen University. Originally from the Netherlands, he recently graduated with a Master's degree in Game Design from Uppsala University Campus Gotland. Guus received an M.A. in History (American Studies), an M.S. in Social-Cultural Anthropology at the University of Amsterdam, and a Bachelor's degree in Anthropology at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Besides his academic pursuits, Guus has been actively teaching in various settings, ranging from language tutoring college students to teaching immigrants civics and history. Throughout his career, the central theme has been "belongingness" and how to make people feel welcomed and accepted: a theme that also happens to be his main research interest. Guus is a volunteer with Erasmus+ EDGE.

Josefin Westborg is one of the world's leading designers in edu-larps. She has a background in game design and pedagogy and is one of the founders of Lajvbyrån (previously LajvVerkstaden Väst). Josefin has worked as a research assistant and teacher at Uppsala University's Department of Game Design where she was a founding member of the Transformative Play Initiative with focus on analog role-playing games. Westborg co-designed curriculum for Uppsala's Master's in Transformative Game Design and has worked as a teacher in its introductory courses, upon which EDGE is based. She has also been a teacher in game design at both Chalmers University of Technology and the University of Gothenburg. She recently published an article for the International Journal of Role-playing entitled "The Educational Role-Playing Game Design Matrix: Mapping Design Components onto Types of Education." In addition to EDGE, she also works as a project assistant in the Erasmus+ Cooperation Partnership ROCKET. Throughout her career Josefin has met thousands of students of all ages, and run and designed larps for them. She is passionate about designing for interaction, storytelling and learning. When she is not involved with games you will probably find her at the dance studio doing ballroom dance.

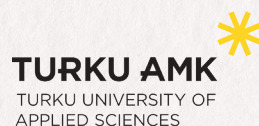
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