

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 better 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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