

CHAPTER 1

The Basics of Implementing Transformative Role-playing Games

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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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