

CHAPTER 6

Theory and Practice in Playing for Transformation

Sarah Lynne Bowman ❖ Kjell Hedgard Hugaas
Guus Quinten van Tilborg ❖ Simon Brind
Alessandro Giovannucci ❖ Nikola Sekulić
Josephine Rydberg

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.

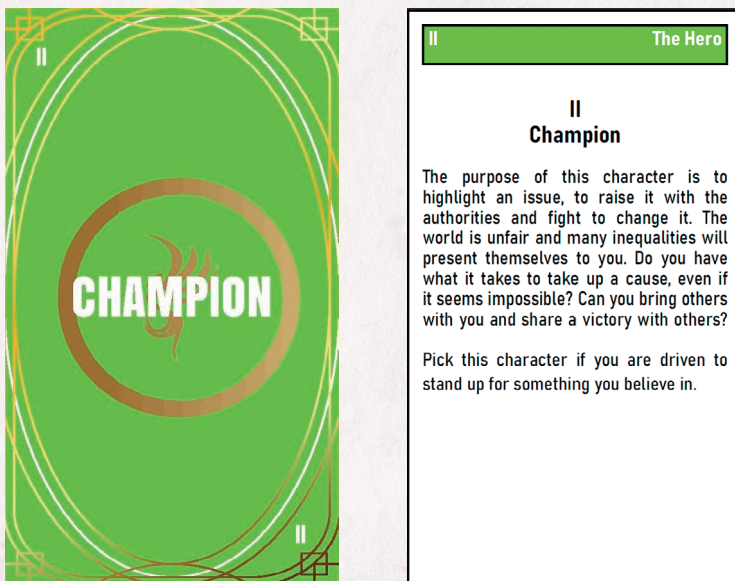
A player-driven example of working with archetypal content occurred in the personal development larp *Epiphany* (Bowman, Murdock, and Roycroft 2017; Bowman 2023), which was based loosely on *White Wolf's Mage: the Ascension* (Wieck et al. 1993). Through emergent play, at the climax of the larp, a Mentor, 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; Svanellind 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

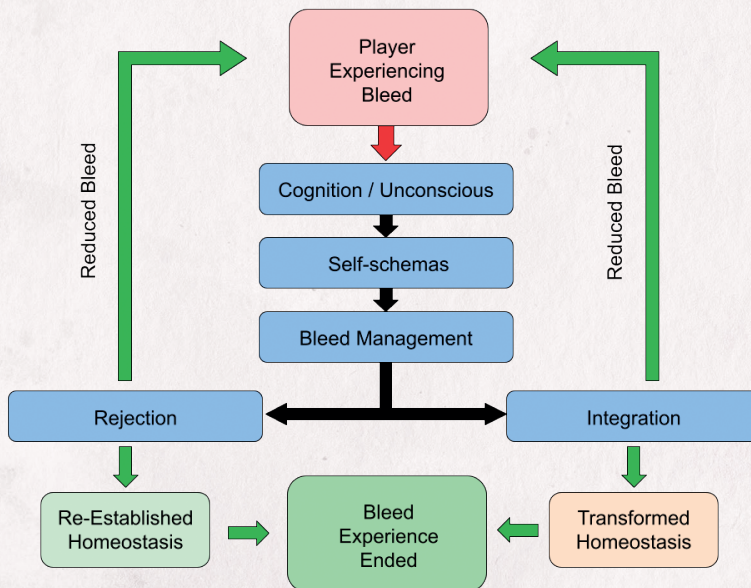
As bleed remains an under-researched phenomena, tips for processing bleed often arise from best practice suggestions based on personal experience. These suggestions can be sorted into 4 different categories:

- 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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