

CHAPTER 7

Playtesting and Researching Role-playing Game Implementation

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7.1 Introduction

As we cover more generally in Chapter 7 of *Transformative Role-Playing Game Design* (2024), researching these games often takes two different main forms:

1. Researching the design, playtesting, iteration, and analysis of transformative role-playing games based on a theoretical framework; or
2. Researching the impacts of transformative game design on players.

With these in mind, this chapter aims at teaching you how to answer the following overall questions:

- a) Can role-playing games help achieve a desired transformative goal? If so, what processes can help optimize transformative analog role-playing games to help achieve this goal?
- b) What impacts do analog role-playing games designed and facilitated for transformative goals have on designers, facilitators, and players?

While reading this chapter, you might discover how many of the parts we cover are things you already do in your work as a game designer. One of our aims is to help you understand how you can leverage these already existing parts of your design process to gain insights that can be valuable to you as a designer in the future.

a) Playtesting and implementation as forms of research

As game designers, we often want to finish our games, and run them and/or get them in the hands of players as soon as possible. In addition, the process of creating a game is often challenging. Several rounds of playtesting and implementation often end up consuming more time and energy than we first expected. So why should you consider adding research as another element to this already demanding creation process?

The short answer is: studying the creative process itself can yield insights that studying only the finished product and the players' reactions to it cannot. These insights can then be used to improve the quality and efficiency of your future creative processes, possibly even offering innovation to the design field moving forward.

Getting involved in research can be an intimidating proposal, especially if your object of research is your own creative work. Yet, many of the common ways in which we playtest and implement our games can often lend themselves very well to parallel research processes, as they already contain many similar parts. For example, when we prepare for a playtest, we usually decide on one or several questions we wish to have answered during feedback. This practice is very similar to formulating a research question at the beginning of a research process, which also can inform the kinds of questions you can ask participants.

Therefore, consider your playtesting and implementation as parts of a larger research process. The insights gathered through observations done during the test, and feedback collected from the players afterwards can be analyzed and used to answer the questions asked, leading to new *iterations* of the game, or parts of it. An iteration is a new version of the game that is made based on your own design tweaks and/or collected feedback.

i) Feedback and iteration as practitioners vs as researchers

As a game designer, you might already have different ways in which you gather feedback and iterate your games. Anything from casual conversations with other designers to taking notes during playtests can provide valuable insights that make your game better. One of the key things to develop and formalize if you wish to add research to your process are the ways in which you collect, analyze, and integrate the collected data.

In short, document everything you do that is consequential to your iterations. This could mean making feedback sessions into survey forms or recording your entire playtest and feedback session. You might want to keep a design journal in which you write down how you consider and change parts of your game between iterations. Such a journal can be highly organized, with specific dates, lists of changes, and the rationale behind them. To start, your process may be more chaotic, like gathering emails between co-designers or keeping track of random notes taken during playtesting. The important thing is to focus on the most essential aspects of the design to analyze later, making your design process transparent for yourself and other researchers.

As an example, for the larp *The Quota* (2018), Simon Brind's design journal process involved detailed note taking in meetings, including documenting ideas that were not developed or later rejected; a decision log; and an autoethnography. He also used a strict version control procedure on all the artifacts, using Google Docs version history feature. This process led to the archetypes design that we eventually adapted for *Lumen* (see Chapter 6). For *The Assembly* (Bowman et al. 2025), the design is still in process. Email discussions and notes from meetings are archived in a folder accessible to everyone on the team through the cloud. These discussions include inputs about

specific aspects of the design that could better reach our intended goals, characters that might need editing for a smoother play experience, exchanges with sensitivity readers, summarized feedback from participants, and structural iterations for the heavily-facilitated scenario. They also include a list of decisions made and new versions of the script uploaded for analysis later.

Good documentation will not only make it easier to answer your research questions, but also over time make you better at designing with intent and efficiency. However, documentation can be time-consuming, so find a process that is reasonable enough for you to follow and works best for you. Ideally, documenting your process will begin to feel like a necessary component of your method and a worthwhile process in itself rather than a chore, as it encourages you to reflect on the choices you are making and why you are making them.

Keep in mind that not all feedback from playtests should be integrated into the iterated design. Playtesters do not always know the full reasoning behind your design, and thus their solutions may cause other components to no longer work.

ii) Research through Design

Research through Design (RtD) (Zimmerman and Forlizzi 2014; Coulton and Hook 2017) is an established and developed method meant to research the design process itself. RtD involves posing a research question that one attempts to answer *through design*, meaning that the question must be formulated in a way that makes this possible. Large questions are likely beyond the scope of RtD, like “are games good for fostering empathy?” Instead, we recommend focusing your question on something you can answer through your design, playtest, and iteration process alone, such as, “How does an analog role-playing game designed to foster empathy impact participant reflections on the challenges that other people face, if at all?”

Applying RtD as a method involves creating prototypes and playtesting them to test the theoretical framework that informed your design. The prototypes might be anything from just testing a single game mechanic or specific part of your game, or a complete version in its entirety. See Chapter 7 in *TRGD* for more information about applying this method to transformative role-playing game design.

b) Researching during implementation

The following section describes common methods for researching during the implementation of a game. Keep in mind that these methods are not mutually exclusive; for example, participant-observation is often paired with autoethnography, duoethnography, or participant interviews. Deciding early which approach you will take will help you have a clear and manageable plan for your research, as well as identify which methods are most suitable for answering your research questions. Remember that including more methods and gathering more data do not necessarily make your research better, especially if the data gathered through various methods is incoherent or too complex for you to have time to analyze.

i) Observation

A proven and long-standing research method in the social sciences is the observation of players, participants, or members of a culture, e.g., in psychology and anthropology. Observation can be an effective way for researchers and game designers to analyze patterns, behaviors, and experiences. Distancing yourself from an unfolding situation, such as a larp scenario, can offer valuable insights for your game design process. For instance, assessing the reactions of players on gameplay changes can help designers fine-tune or adjust elements in future iterations. As a researcher, you can focus on specific elements that stand out to you, such as commonly used tactics and mechanics, individual player behaviors, etc. On the other hand, a distanced observation is also an opportunity to zoom out and look at the bigger picture over time, e.g., from pre-game to post-game player wellness.

For *The Assembly* (Bowman et al. 2025), a larp involving democratic deliberation, the research team developed the Democratic Civic Values Checklist (Feng et al. in development), a heavily structured tool based on a previous survey by Jennstål, Uba, and Öberg (2021). This checklist allowed researchers to track each participant's behavior on a micro level, watching for deliberative behaviors, such as verbal opinion stating, agreeing or disagreeing with others; verbal and nonverbal indications of respectful listening behavior; and non-deliberative and/or disrespectful behavior. The checklist also went through several iterations based on the needs of the project and testing, e.g., experimenting with close analysis of every participant for a short period of time vs. observing each participant independently for the entire length of the scenario, including off-game behavior.

Examples of data sets you could research through observation:

- Play sessions in which you are present, e.g., using observational checklists (see e.g., Varrette et al. 2023; Adams 2013);
- Play sessions recorded by you with proper consent and data storage procedures, e.g., sessions run by you, or run with the knowledge you will review the recording later for research purposes (Lasley 2020); and
- Play sessions recorded by someone else, e.g., Actual Play sessions available online (Jones ed. 2021; Pop 2026), or sessions made available by another researcher in a legal manner, e.g., through public datasets.

A distanced observation has the advantage of not interfering too heavily with player processes. However, the presence of an observer can impact player choices, so keep your notetaking and other activities as discrete as possible. The limitation of strictly observing from a distance is a sense of disconnection and passiveness that only offers a limited view of the phenomenon observed, with limited insight e.g., into the player experiences and their motivations, unless discussed in the debrief. Simply put: you are not right in the middle of the action and will risk missing out on intricacies and details.

Another factor to take into account, and one of the main critiques of this method, is accusations of *armchair anthropology*; without being deeply embedded in the culture and activities, processes and culture are interpreted from the observer's own vantage point, which can lead to researcher biases. To use examples from *The Assembly*, listening behaviors are different cross-culturally; interruptions may be interpreted as rude to one observer and a sign of high engagement to another. Similarly, observing factors such as *gaze*, meaning turning their body toward the speaker and/or looking at them intently, may not necessarily indicate open listening behaviors; some neurodiverse participants may struggle with eye contact, but still be deeply listening, whereas others may gaze at the participant in non-deliberative ways, such as with a disgusted look on their face. Therefore, it is important to note that these instruments are not bias-free, nor are they necessarily always neutral and objective.

ii) Participant-observation

In the early twentieth century, to combat homogeneous datasets and the colonial undertones of armchair anthropology, researchers shifted to a more proactive method of observation called *participant-observation*. As the name suggests, participant-observation offers a more comprehensive view for the researcher, as the method combines participation and observation of a culture, a group of people, and their practices. For our purposes, this process would look like embedding oneself as a participant in a game and/or studying the subculture surrounding it.

An *ethnography* is the qualitative research product of participant-observation. This research method involves the in-depth study of particular participants, groups, cultures, or phenomena. Ethnography is not to be confused with *ethnology*: the comparative study of various research subjects, based on multiple ethnographies. Participant-observation ethnographies are commonly used in role-playing game studies (see e.g., Fine 1983; Bowman 2010, 2013; Cover 2010; Mizer 2019; White 2020b), including through an anthropological lens (Cazeneuve 2022; Esposito and Giovannucci 2024).

The degree of embeddedness varies widely; some participant-observers take a rather passive role in the community, others engage only for short windows of time and avoid making friendships (Fine 1983), whereas others are full-fledged members of the community in question. The degree of embeddedness can often have an influence on the degree of trust participants have. For example, if larpers see you as a researcher only with a thin character, they may be less likely to invite you to the super-secret ritual in the woods than if your character is deeply involved in ongoing storylines.

While participant-observation is widely regarded as one of the foundational methods of modern social-cultural anthropology, it does not come without any risks. By participating, there is a chance that the researcher's presence might affect the behavior of those being studied. Additionally, this method is more intensive than a distanced observation and raises several ethical issues you should consider as you take on the role of both a researcher and participant. For example, your behavior might unconsciously drive play in a certain direction based on your research goals. Also,

if your co-players are not aware you are studying the game, they may feel betrayed and/or reveal things to you they would not do otherwise. For this latter reason, it is sometimes best either not include detailed accounts of specific players' behavior without informing them, or even better, obtain consent, e.g., sending the passages to them ahead of time for approval before publishing.

Can participant-observation be applied to a game to understand a *culture* more generally? The method is useful because it enables immersion in the social and emotional dynamics of play while also observing it. Cazeneuve (2022) argues that immersion allows you to grasp the meaning of cultural practices and enact them. Kangas (2015) makes a case for *experimental anthropology*; you can apply anthropological research methods such as participant-observation to a group of larpers exploring a culture outside of their own within a game setting. For example, in the larp *KoiKoi* (Raaum, Fatland, and Edland 2014; Fatland and Edland 2015) hunters and gatherers show the fictional workings of a remote group of hunter-gatherers, which could potentially help a researcher better understand about the general patterns of such cultures.

However, Kangas (2015; 2017) stresses that we must be careful not to assume such experiments are representative of a specific culture as a whole, nor of the lived experiences of people within it, especially when working with existing cultures. For example, players' portrayals and design features of the game may be informed by preconceived notions and stereotypes (Leonard, Janjetivic, and Usman 2021). Thus, participant-observation can be a great method for playtesting, but not necessarily for accurate cultural research based on representations from a game, unless you want to specifically research the RPG community and the game itself as its own invented culture. For example, *KoiKoi* (Raaum, Fatland, and Edland 2014; Fatland and Edland 2015) is not an accurate representation of any actual indigenous group of people.

To understand a specific culture, Kangas (2015) argues that you have to "go there and live with the people." As an example, anthropologist Victor Turner (1995) studied ritual while living with the Ndembu people of Zambia, rather than simply reading first-hand accounts from other field researchers. Even embedded ethnographers bring their own biases and misunderstandings to cultural practices, which is important also for you to understand if you wish to study role-playing communities as a relative outsider. The more deeply embedded, the more likely you are to understand the various symbols, stories, jargon, and even jokes that weave the subculture together.

iii) Auto and duoethnography

An *autoethnography* combines the aspects of an autobiography and participant-observation with ethnography to create a more personal descriptive account of experiences within a culture, process, group of people, or phenomena. Similar to a diary entry, researchers write about their experiences in a descriptive manner, not only from the perspective of a player, but also a researcher, i.e., including some degree of analysis. It tends to offer a more in-depth account of events from the researcher's perspective and does not shy away from adopting an affective emotional tone and/or personally revealing information.

While autoethnographic entries are often more vivid and detailed, they hold a higher risk of being considered biased compared to other ethnographic methods. In the case of an autoethnography, while the researcher may be studying a specific subculture or game, their object of study is most centrally themselves, meaning their work will be limited by their unique subjective experience. While some researchers consider this a liability of the method, it can also be interpreted as a great strength. For example, if the researcher comes from a marginalized background (see e.g., Kemper 2020; Baird 2021; Tannenbaum 2022), their unique perspective can offer deep insights into experiences not often represented or misrepresented in mainstream research. Thus, autoethnography can also serve a political purpose.

A *duoethnography* is a collaborative form of ethnography involving two researchers and their personal ethnographic accounts (see e.g., Toft and Harrer 2020). If autoethnography is more of a monologue, duoethnography is more of a dialogue between researchers; thus, duoethnographic passages within a study can often have a more informal conversational tone and/or use first names. Comparing and juxtaposing your ethnography with that of a peer can potentially provide insightful new data. Just as in autoethnography, the researchers themselves are the primary object of study, i.e., their interactions as facilitators, designers, and/or players of a game (see e.g., Bowman, Lukka, and Baird 2026).

iv) Effects studies

One of the most important types of research in this field are effects studies. Effects studies assess the impacts of transformative role-playing games quantitatively and/or qualitatively. Some of the few early studies on therapeutic role-playing games, for example Blackmon (1994), focused on the negative effects of these games, e.g., for schizophrenic clients. However, since that point, not only are effects studies growing rapidly, but they also overwhelmingly focus on the positive impacts of these games on cognitive, affective, and behavioral skills, e.g., benefits research.

Interestingly, while examples of applied research are also increasing, such as in therapeutic interventions (see e.g., Henrich and Worthington 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Brasil Araujo 2022; Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024), many of the studies emerging focus on the incidental -- or accidental -- transformative impacts e.g., mental health benefits for people who play *Dungeons & Dragons* (Causo and Quinlan 2021; Walsh and Linehan 2024). See Chapter 2 for a more extensive list of *D&D* benefits research.

While such studies are important to support our methods as legitimate, try to avoid focusing only on the positive impacts if you are creating an effects study. Even if criticism or drawbacks of the approach are minimal in your dataset, for a balanced approach, aim to include these points in your research. You can nuance these points by considering what factors led to them, e.g., issues within a play group, specific problematic content, lack of coherency within the game design, or insufficient safety practices.

Furthermore, the field still needs to establish common methods for assessing the impacts of these games. As demonstrated in the extensive list later in this chapter, while we have a large range of potential benefits and several exploratory studies, we do not yet have common instruments used throughout these studies for measuring these impacts. This issue makes the studies not easily comparable, nor replicable or reproducible, which form the foundations of solid empirical research.

One approach might be to take an existing study, use as similar a methodology as possible, and try to replicate the results, as is common in other disciplines. For example, if you want to study intrinsic motivation / self-determination as discussed in Chapter 6, you might try replicating the methods from earlier studies which used specific qualitative (McLaren, Oades, and Deery 2026) or quantitative measures, e.g., Bowman and Standiford (2015), Algayres (2018), Hixson, West, and Eike (2024). While variations will always exist, for example having different populations or research settings, such studies not only make the results more easily accepted in the scientific community, but also form recommendations for how to research these effects in future studies. See the section below for a comprehensive list of studies.

v) Professional manuals

Finally, one approach to research is to create professional manuals for use in the field based upon best practices, including this current textbook. (For other examples, see DiveIn Consortium 2021; Connell 2023; Hand 2023; Kilmer et al. 2023; Otani 2024). Usually, these manuals are tied to specific therapeutic or educational paradigms and should be grounded in existing research. Manuals can be extremely important when trying to expand the field, as professionals will not need to learn how to design or facilitate solely from trial and error. These best practices can also be important when considering the health and safety of your participants, as learning from the experience of others can sometimes help foresee and address possible risks in the future.

vi) Documentation pieces

While manuals give extensive advice, you can still share best practices in a less formalized structure or length, e.g., through documentation pieces (see e.g., Jensen 2021; Bartenstein 2022). Such pieces can be published in other popular or academic spaces, and ideally are accessible to multiple audiences. While documentation can sometimes feel arduous after the design and implementation of a game, unfortunately it is one of the only ways a game can become intelligible outside of the original experience and relevant to readers not present at the game. Furthermore, the process of documentation itself can be considered an act of integration, as it requires reflection (Cox 2018, 2021; Kemper 2020).

Research-based documentation can be written by designers and organizers, but is also quite informative from a player perspective (see e.g., Kemper 2017), particularly since players often notice or are present for aspects of the game the organizers miss. Player-written documentation also gives us a tremendous amount of insight into the phenomenology of play (see Chapter 6 for more details).

Note that documentation pieces are often most useful when grounded in theory and/or referencing other sources within the discourse, e.g., many of the articles on Nordiclarp.org. Design, implementation, and play do not happen in a vacuum, but are often in conversation with previous games, principles, and experiences. On the other hand, the more granular the writer gets about the specific experience, the more likely they are to lose an audience unfamiliar with the game. Many players write up their play accounts using extensive details about specific scenes, characters, and/or blow-by-blow accounts of mechanics used, e.g., in a specific battle in *D&D*. Unfortunately, while these details may be important to you, too much specificity does not always translate to an external audience and may lose their interest; less detail is often far more effective.

On this note, consider how much of your personal experience you truly want to reveal to an academic and/or professional audience. Excessive personal details can be read as informal and unprofessional, which is also a balancing act when writing auto and duoethnographic accounts.

Usually, an external audience wants to know takeaways from the experience based on personal and/or professional reflection. Assume your audience members will never play the game themselves. Try to answer one or more of the following questions:

- How was the design of this game inspired by previous work?
- What theories or game design principles can help understand this game or play experience?
- What did the player learn about themselves through the play experience?
- What design and implementation insights can readers take away that might help inform their own practice moving forward?

In other words, why should they care about this particular game or documentation piece? Just as attention is limited in games, our attention is increasingly limited in contemporary society. Immediately indicate the importance of your documentation at the very beginning, without overstating it.

Finally, you can research documentation pieces themselves, including them as primary sources, similar to methods in historical studies. However, keep in mind that such research runs the risk of sounding like the “telephone game,” in which a message loses its intended meaning the more times it gets passed along. If you were not present for a particular game and want to study player or designer accounts, make sure to quote these other sources accurately and try to avoid interpreting intentions into the words that are not clearly visible in the text. Best case scenario: interview people directly from the game, although the advice of quoting accurately also applies to interpreting interview data.

When possible, we strongly recommend sharing your documentation pieces with relevant parties before publication, e.g., the designers, organizers, players, editors, or even third-party readers to make sure the text is understandable and accurate for people who were not present. If you are integrating the experiences or photo documentation of specific players, we recommend gaining consent from those

participants, especially when sharing vulnerable or sensitive material. Some people are more open about their play activities than others. Stories or photos taken out of context may be misconstrued or misunderstood, e.g., by someone's boss. When possible, use character names instead of players unless you have their consent to do otherwise. Furthermore, avoid writing extensive descriptions that assume the other person's perspective. When in doubt, ask.

7.2 Academia and analog role-playing games

Research on analog role-playing games should always include other sources in the field. Otherwise it will be considered a *vacuum study*, i.e., a study in which the researchers claim no other work has been done. While sometimes key sources are not easy to find through traditional searches or indexes, we strongly recommend taking note of the References page in articles and books such as this one, which can give you guidance on who you should be citing. Remember that with a few exceptions, recent sources likely did not invent the terminology of the field, nor were they the first to examine that particular phenomenon of design or play. Carefully read the sources cited by recent authors -- and then read the sources those sources cite to follow the lineage of a concept.

Good scholarship involves doing due diligence as an author. To put it bluntly: if you do not cite the lineage of a term, readers embedded in the field may form a negative opinion of the quality of your work. A field is made up of people, not just ideas; you should aim to know who the key people and works are related to your topic. Similarly, analog role-playing games have relatively few designers, many of whom know each other. Assume your audience members know personally the people you are neglecting to cite. This is the foundation of good scholarly practice, particularly when writing a background section or literature review (see Chapter 7 of *TRGD*). These practices are also important if you want to become more involved in the wider design and play communities you are studying.

On this note, if you are using generative AI, never assume AI is citing or summarizing work correctly. At this time of writing, AI often makes up sources completely, inventing fictional citations that look plausible but are not real. Imagine how a peer reviewer might react when trying to make sense of your Reference list and seeing parts of their name combined with names from others in the field attached to made-up articles. AI also randomly assigns sources tied to specific information that it predicts to be true; upon closer inspection, if you trace the concept back to the source, you will often find it does not exist in the original text. Finally, in many cases, AI does not cite sources at all, even though its contents are often made up of materials written by human authors without attribution.

While we acknowledge that AI can be useful to help with language skills, its use is fraught. Attempting to publish a paper with false sources is cause for charges of academic dishonesty, i.e., plagiarism. Such a practice could result in rejections from journals, retractions of your work from publications, or -- worse -- academic dismissal

and/or removal of your degrees. Please trust your own voice and conduct your own research. While time consuming, researching for yourself helps you tremendously in developing your critical thinking skills and being able to adequately assess your own capabilities.

a) Analog RPGs in game studies

Analog role-playing game studies has been relatively marginal to game studies in general, and certainly within older disciplines (Harviainen 2017). Many reasons for this exist, including the lack of financial incentives for promoting analog role-playing games, e.g., through funding bodies or industry connections (Torner 2022). Early game scholarship was not always willing to even classify these experiences as games, in part due to the relatively loose rule structure compared to video games (Juul 2003). Furthermore, the fields game studies, game design, and game development more broadly are often marginalized within academia, with few specialists available embedded in more established traditions, and even fewer dedicated departments able to help shepherd new work in these fields. While some supervisors might be passingly familiar with video games or have played them before, many people in academia have never played an analog role-playing game. For this reason, scholars within this field often struggle to find supervisors, academic editors, and peer reviewers who understand their work.

Furthermore, analog role-playing games have sometimes been viewed with suspicion or scorn, e.g., by people who spread moral panics (Stark 2012; Laycock 2015) or are concerned with mental health risks (Blackmon 1994). While similar concerns have also been leveled at video games, games such as tabletop RPGs and larp that have an extra performative element, may include costuming, and sometimes more noticeably display alibi-driven transgressive behavior (Deterding 2018; Stenros and Bowman 2024), e.g., violence (Albom 2021; Dashiell 2026a) or other taboo character actions (Bowman 2025). At minimum, analog role-playing is sometimes viewed as amateurish, silly, and/or more escapist than other forms of art (Bowman 2010), which from our perspective is a profound misunderstanding of the complex and fascinating elements of the practice.

On the other hand, some concerns about mental health with relation to role-playing games have merit and are worth studying, such as experiences of bleed and social conflict that players consider negative (Bowman 2013) and larp-related stress (Korhonen, Nykänen, and Partanen 2020). In short, we believe any such studies should be conducted by people embedded in the field rather than observers or casual researchers, as the phenomenological experience of role-playing is complex.

For all of these reasons, people submitting research on these games to official review bodies such as dissertation, grant, or publication committees may face stigma or outright rejection of the concepts. One of our goals in creating these textbooks and the curricular materials surrounding them is to consolidate the hard-earned knowledge of people within this field and provide a roadmap for researchers to find others interested

in these topics. To our knowledge, our Master's in Transformative Game Design at Uppsala University is the first university degree devoted to analog role-playing games, which we hope will change in the future. More commonly available, but still growing, are trainings in educational role-playing, e.g., through Erasmus+ projects (ROCKET 2024), or therapeutic interventions, e.g., through RPG Therapeutics (n.d.), the Bodhana Group (TBG n.d.), and Geek Therapeutics (n.d.), and Game to Grow (STAR Institute 2025) and others.

Other important attempts to consolidate knowledge include academic publications like the:

- *International Journal of Role-playing* (2008-);
- *JARPS: Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies* (2019-);
- *Journal of Roleplaying Studies and STEAM* (2022-); and
- *Analog Game Studies* (2014-);
- *The academic sections of the Wyrd Con Companion Books* (2012-2015);
- *Simulation & Gaming*, if the paper fits the journal's format.

Important popular publications include the:

- Knutepunkt books associated with the annual Nordic larp conference (Nordic Larp Wiki 2022);
- Nordiclarp.org (Axner 2013);
- *The journalistic sections of the Wyrd Con Companion Books* (2010-2015);
- *Game Wrap* books associated with the Intercon convention / Nelco conference in the U.S. (2016, 2017, 2019; Game Wrap n.d.)

Key texts in our field that we strongly recommend reading include *Larp Design* (Koljonen et al. eds. 2019) and *The Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Studies* (Zagal and Deterding eds. 2024), which provide important roadmaps for exploring key concepts from practical and academic perspectives. The *Handbook* in particular provides a model for ways to ground your work in specific disciplines, as many people within this field must publish under disciplinary domains that are only tangentially related, e.g., media studies, theatre, artistic research, human-computer interaction, information studies, performance studies, sociology, psychology, or literary studies. In many situations, you will likely know more about the topic than anyone involved in the publication process. Extensive citation helps, as does requesting external reviewers that are embedded within the field. We hope these textbooks serve as a resource for you, and also recommend consulting other scholars who have worked to document our field, see e.g., Stenros and Montola eds. (2010); Harviainen (2014, 2016, 2017); Särkijärvi and Torner (2021); Iuama, Iuama and Falcão 2022; and Stenros and Fine (2022).

b) RPG studies and leisure communities

Because of this relatively isolated development of the research field, much of our theoretical work has developed from the ground up, meaning arises from practice-first approaches rather than pure theory isolated from embodied experience. While parallel developments have occurred in practices such as Drama in Education, psychodrama, play therapy, simulation, gamification, game-based learning, serious games, and other clusters of practice, we ground our own work in knowledge arising from the leisure communities connected to analog role-playing games and applied practice emerging from it. That being said, these fields have much to learn from one another, and thorough examination of how they connect and differ is highly useful (see e.g., Mochocki 2013; Burns 2014; Pitkänen 2015; Harviainen 2017; Hartyándi 2020, 2025).

What is particularly interesting and worth exploring in more depth is how terms emerging from the analog role-playing game discourse such as immersion are comparable to terms used within other contexts (Bowman 2024), such as in narratology (Murray 1997). Similar states are often described by with other names, e.g.,

- *Narrative transportation* in media studies (Gerrig 1993; Bowman 2024);
- *Imaginative involvement* (Hilgard 1970) and *empathic involvement* (Wickramasekera II and Szlyk 2003) in media studies (Rivers et al. 2016);
- *Immersion* in narratology (Murray 1997; Bowman 2024);
- *Embodied cognition* in neuroscience (Grafton 2009; Lankoski and Järvelä 2012; Leonard and Thurman 2018);
- *Arousal* in psychology (Robbins 1997; Juvrud 2026),
- *Absorption* in psychology (Tellegen and Atkinson 1974; Rivers et al. 2016; Juvrud, Bowman, and Hugaas 2024);
- *Dissociation* in psychology (Schnall and Maxine Steinberg 2000; Bowman 2010, 2015; Lukka 2014),
- *Engagement* (Brockmyer 2009; Calleja 2011; Bowman 2024);
- *Flow* (Csíkszentmihályi 1975) and *group flow* (Walker 2010) in psychology (Bowman 2024);
- *Engrossment* in social psychology (Goffman 1961; Fine 1983);
- *Presence* (Lombard and Ditton 1997; Bowman and Standiford 2016; Harviainen 2016) in media studies; and
- *Fidelity* (Anderson and Nelson 2015; Standiford 2014; Harviainen 2022) in simulation, among others.

In order to make such comparisons, one must first deeply understand the phenomenon from the perspective of role-playing a character while co-creating a shared fiction with other people for a bounded period of time. Then, terms like bleed, immersion, alibi, the magic circle, and other common phrases can be compared to other similar states with more accuracy. Chapter 3 in *TRGD* for more details.

On a purely practical level, sometimes reviewers and supervisors will expect this sort of engagement with other fields. If you integrate concepts such as these, we recommend standing your ground whenever possible to start with the terms in our field rather than replacing them with others that do not fully describe the phenomenon in question. Also remember that no term or theoretical concept fully explains a phenomenon, as words can never accurately describe a state of being. We are aiming for close approximations that are intelligible across disciplines, centering our work in our own theories and practices whenever possible. Remember that while interdisciplinary work such as this can be daunting, it can also be hugely beneficial for all fields in question. You can even use role-playing games to develop your own skills at interdisciplinary and collaboration (for five scenarios, see Bowman and Westborg eds. 2024).

7.3 Study design

While a complete exploration of strategies for designing a study are beyond the scope of this chapter, we aim to provide you with some terminology and possible directions that will help you ground your work in existing practice. Just as you consciously design games and implementation plans, you should also take care to consciously design the research practices through which you will investigate them. If you leave the research parts for the last minute, your data gathering and analysis methods may not be robust enough to be considered academic research. Furthermore, since you are working with people, you will need to meet expectations regarding ethics in *human subjects* research. For more information on human subjects, see Chapter 7 of *TRGD* and later in this chapter.

At its most basic, study design and the academic writing surrounding it require making the intuitive visible, making the abstract tangible, and making processes clearly intelligible. Remember, this process is helpful not only for your readers, but also for you, in determining how you know what you know, as well as what you cannot know because of the limitations of your study. A solid plan and description means other researchers are more likely to respect your process and find your results persuasive, which may even lead to attempts to replicate your results in future studies.

a) Methodology

Methodology is the discussion about how to do your research (Mäyrä 2015). If you want to figure out if your players learn a specific thing from your game, you can do this in many ways. Maybe you send a post-game survey asking players if they thought they learned something. You can have in-depth interviews with just a few players. You can send psychometric surveys before and after to see if change has occurred over time with regard to a specific skill. You could follow up with another assessment a number of months later to see if lasting change occurred. Which method should you pick and why? These decisions make up your methodology.

What you then end up using in practice is your method. Methodology is important because it explains to the readers why you chose to do your research in this specific way. It also helps you ensure that you pick methods that best answer your research question, rather than just methods that seem easy or familiar but will not actually answer your question.

To make the methodology immediately actionable for practitioners, we recommend structuring each study with a five-part backbone that ties design choices to data and iteration. Create one matrix per research question, then use it to align playtests, instruments, and analysis.

1. **Initial situation.** Describe the problem, context, constraints, and stakeholders that shape the game's intended transformation. State any assumptions that could bias design or data collection.
2. **Objective.** Formulate a specific and observable objective that you can test within your playtest window. If working with quantitative assessment, you may wish to pair one process indicator and one outcome indicator with a baseline, a target, and a data source.
3. **Method.** Justify the study design you will use to answer the research question. Explain why this choice fits your objective better than plausible alternatives, and how it will handle threats to *validity* in the setting where the game runs, meaning how well it assesses what you wish to discover.
4. **Activities.** Map the concrete steps you will take during implementation. These might include, for example: playtest sessions, observational checklists, stimulated recall interviews, short pre-post questionnaires, and structured debriefs that surface design-relevant evidence.
5. **Resources.** Specify roles, time, materials, permissions, and data management needs. Include who is responsible, who contributes, who is consulted, and who is informed, so decisions during iteration are timely and transparent.

b) Considerations for specific data sets

i) Texts

We tend to think about texts mostly as the documents we create in order to inform our players about the game. Common examples from larps include character sheets, world design documents, group documents, and even full larp scripts. But from a research point of view, any and all texts created as part of designing the game are considered. This means that things like website text, social media posts, forum threads, meeting notes, and similar things are also important. We can also extend this list to texts that have inspired the game content and design, such as other games, game design theory, and even academic texts. Basically, anything that has a written form and has any connection to the game design process can be seen as an object of study for the research process.

Examples of texts:

- Game Design Document (GDD)
- World design documents
- Workshop and debrief scripts
- Character sheets
- Group documents
- Diegetic documents
- Larp scripts
- Emails
- Websites, including brief descriptions of the game, e.g., *larp abstracts* (Grasmo and Stenros 2022)
- Promotional material
- Blog posts
- Newspaper and magazine articles
- Social media posts
- Forum threads
- Meeting agendas and notes
- Design note diaries
- Feedback surveys
- Empirical studies
- Documentation pieces
- Theory pieces
- Practical manuals
- Textbooks
- Reviews / critiques
- Post-play accounts and related narrativizing

Keep in mind that the term “text” can also apply to other formats, such as visual or sonic media, especially in disciplines like media studies.

ii) Methods for working with existing texts

Various methods exist for working with existing texts: data not acquired directly from human subjects in a study, but material that is already available for analysis.

Texts can be grouped together to form a *meta-text* of sorts, which synthesize academic work into a condensed form. Depending on the texts and the analytical approach taken, these meta-texts are called different things. Examples include:

- **Literature reviews:** When academic and/or popular sources on a topic are synthesized and analyzed for general themes, e.g., in edu-larp (Bowman 2014) or therapeutic tabletop role-playing games (Henrich and Worthington 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Brasil Araujo 2022; Yuliawati, Wardhani, and Ng 2024). Literature reviews are also helpful in identifying sources you may want to consult later. Keep in mind that literature reviews are not necessarily comprehensive; many sources may have been missed due to indexing issues or lack of rigor. Make sure to keep the date of a literature review in mind and, when possible, search for more recent sources.
- **Surveys:** Some books on role-playing games aim to explain the history of the field in various ways, usually illustrating key games and historical trends that were important throughout its development (see e.g., Schick 1991; Peterson 2012). These surveys are important in understanding design and play trends, but can sometimes erase the contributions of lesser known or marginalized creators. Surveys can also sometimes lack the critical lens for problematic content in these games. (For a good counter-example, see Horvath 2023).
- **Rhetorical analyses:** These sources analyze the rhetoric present in a text or series of texts, often including interpretations of themes based on the implicit and explicit *arguments* or *claims* being made in the text. For example, Albom (2021) discusses the rhetoric of violence in *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition (Mearls and Crawford 2014). The author demonstrates that while a wide range of actions are possible within play, the rules most commonly feature violent acts, which makes an implicit claim that violence is the main way to resolve conflicts in the game. Other rhetorical analyses compare the rhetorical *moves* made by different parties, e.g., influential members of various tabletop and larp communities (White 2015; 2016a; 2020).
- **Discourse analyses:** These studies also look at the ways in which a topic is handled in a specific discourse, meaning scholarly and/or popular *conversation*, usually of published texts, but not always. *Critical discourse analysis* focuses specifically on power, e.g., examining how different interests are served or harmed by certain themes within a given public or semi-public conversation, such as themes of sexism within early *Dungeons & Dragons* books and fanzines (Stang and Trammell 2020; Trammell and Crenshaw 2020) or how some traditional tabletop players reject the progressive values embedded into newer editions (Dashiell 2026b). Westborg (2026) offers another approach, examining interview data that reveals how educators must justify their work with role-playing games to external stakeholders.

Alternatively, you may be interpreting one or a handful of artistic texts quite carefully.

- **Close reading / textual analysis:** These terms are usually applied to interpreting works of literature, but can also be applied to analyzing game content (Jara and Torner 2024). For example, if you analyze passages from a published game through an interpretive lens, e.g., in terms of metaphor, you can be said to do a close reading of the game. You could also analyze the narrative unfolding a particular game session in such a manner. You would usually be focusing on the symbolic or story-based content, not other cues occurring in the space, such as rules debates (cf. Dashiell 2017, 2022)

These methods tend to be qualitative in nature, meaning the authors are using their interpretive lens to review textual evidence and make meaning from it.

Such texts can be analyzed from a quantitative, or more numerical perspective. Some examples:

- **Content analyses:** These studies count the number of times certain words or images arise in a data set and statistically analyze these counts, e.g., the number of people of color represented in images in *Dungeons & Dragons Player's Handbook* (Long 2015, 2016); or the number of actions focused on violence vs. non-violence (Albom 2021).
- **Sentiment and emotion analysis:** *Sentiment analysis* numerically evaluates the sentiments expressed in a particular dataset, e.g., positive, neutral, or negative. *Emotion analysis* focuses on specific emotions featured in the data set, adding more specificity.

Note that some studies about textual information are *mixed method*, meaning they include both quantitative and qualitative approaches (see e.g., Albom 2021).

iii) Human subjects

If your study works with people directly, you are involving human subjects in some way. Because of that, your study will incur greater risk than, say, analyzing a dataset of existing texts. Please see the section on Ethics later in this chapter and in Chapter 7 of *TRGD* for critical considerations on this topic.

iv) Source credibility

When analyzing information from various texts, you should carefully consider the credibility of your source for the type of information you are seeking. A practical manual from a licensed counselor is probably more grounded in theory and experience than a blog post from someone musing about how RPGs might be useful in therapy, even if they include links to other sources. Direct experience from player accounts or academic researchers studying role-playing in the field tells us more about the role-playing experience e.g., for autistic people (Fein 2015; 2018; Visuri 2024), than theoretical assertions made by experts who have never role-played before. However, such accounts are not generalizable in the same way a survey with 1000 respondents might be.

We live in a time in which anyone can publish and disseminate material at lightning speed, regardless of the veracity or credibility of the information. While this ability levels the playing field for people to share their experience and can be a great source of research data, it also means we have to be even more careful in honing our discernment. This issue is especially pressing with the rise of generative AI, not only in terms of the authenticity of the authorship of role-playing games, but also in the assertions made by AIs claiming to cite a specific source or summarize a concept.

When trying to find highly credible materials, e.g., on the effects of role-playing games, we strongly urge you to find peer-reviewed scholarly sources. Even editorial review only is still better than no vetting at all. Ideally, you will find several peer-reviewed articles on the same topic, so you can familiarize yourself with the *scholarly conversation* surrounding that concept, not just follow the framework offered by the first source you find.

Remember that just because an article claims to be peer-reviewed by experts, the information within it is not necessarily true, but it is definitely more credible than many other sources. If you notice an academic source is published quite quickly from submission to public availability, you may have reason to suspect the peer-review process has been cut short or compromised completely. Learning to scan for that kind of information is also important. If a journal claims to have short turnaround times for publication, that could be considered a red flag, i.e., signs of *predatory* practices. Note there are websites that can help you view the rankings of journals, such as The Norwegian Register (Norwegian Directorate 2025), the Finnish JUFO Portal (n.d.), Google Scholar (2025), SCOPUS (SCImago 2025), and others.

c) Researching different populations

No research is pure and uninfluenced by the environment in which it takes place. Many results are specific to certain populations at specific times, settings, and facilitation conditions. Therefore, you should mention in your research any factors that may have impacted your study. Examples include:

- The **research conditions** under which your work was conducted, including the physical space, any external aspects relevant, and the manner of data collection;
- The **social contexts** within which the research took place and how those factors may have influenced the participants or the data;
- The participants' **level of familiarity with role-playing games** and the communities surrounding them;
- The degree to which the research was **mandatory or voluntary** for participants;
- **Bias considerations**, including any biases you may have, or those of your participants;
- **Sample sizes**, considering how large a sample you will need to be able to make generalizations, both within qualitative and quantitative research.

Acknowledging such considerations in your research, including noting any limitations you may have had, will help improve the credibility of your work. No study is perfectly objective, nor should it appear to be.

d) Studying play sessions

When studying play sessions, you should consider the following questions:

- Is the session publicly available, like a streaming video on YouTube, or is it private or restricted in some way?
- Are the participants aware a researcher is present? If not present, are they aware a study is being conducted about their play?
- Are you as a researcher a player, facilitator, or observer? Are players aware of your status as a researcher?

As mentioned before, you can study play sessions through several methods, including observational checklists, in which you detail specific behaviors, and stimulated recall, in which you replay sections of the play experience for participants and ask them interview questions about those moments.

e) Qualitative interview data

When working with qualitative interview data, the vast majority of the time, you will be pseudoanonymizing data. This means that your participants expect you to keep their identities as secret as possible.

However, in some cases, you may wish to ask for consent to use their real name in the research, for example when interviewing experts in the field such as designers or other scholars. In this case, one option is to have a checkbox on the consent form that allows them to opt-in to using their name in publications. You should still check passages with them when possible, as not everything they say in an interview is meant for public consumption. Be judicious in these situations especially and protect your participants.

i) Summarizing, paraphrasing, and quantifying

When working with qualitative interview data, you can use three methods:

- Summarize the passage in your own words;
- Paraphrasing what a participant said using mainly their words;
- Quoting them directly using quotation marks.

In each of these cases, you should cite any information that did not come from your own head, including your interviews.

When working with quotes, if you have modified the text in anyway, you should clearly mark where you have made changes:

- Include ellipses when you delete text, e.g., ...; and
- Mark any text you have removed and substituted with different words with brackets [];

Decide whether or not to include pauses in speech, filler words like ums, or bracketed nonverbal communication. Adding these contents can be more precise and even expected, e.g., in sociolinguistics, but that can also make the text difficult for the reader and may cause them not to read deeply. Consider whether they are truly necessary.

You should resist the urge to include long block quotes in the text unless absolutely necessary to demonstrate your point. We recommend not including block quotes unless the exact wording is important, and in many cases it will be best to trim excess phrases from the quote with the strategies mentioned earlier. Never drop a quote in your paper without introducing the speaker beforehand, e.g., “As Freud (1990) says...” Summarize what the participants should take away from any quotes you include directly after their inclusion rather than thinking the quotes “speak for themselves.” Do not assume the audience is interpreting the same content as you are from your quotes.

Remember that including many perspectives can strengthen your work, whether from your research into other texts, your scholarly sources, or your interviews. However, including many shifts in tone and style can prove confusing for your reader. Have a good reason to motivate the inclusion of a quote.

Finally, avoid putting words into participants’ mouths or heavily interpreting their words. Let the participants speak for themselves and present their words fairly and accurately, even when summarizing and paraphrasing. Even if you know something more about the situation they are describing, unless they have given you consent to share it, you may think twice about including it. Focus on what they have decided to give you rather than trying to extract something more or twist their words to meet the needs of your research.

f) Psychometric surveys

On the quantitative side of things, you may wish to include psychometric surveys that assess a participant’s skills or values along a particular dimension. These surveys are often self-reported, which means you are always dealing on some level with participant bias and not an objective assessment of their abilities. Additionally, the participants may feel pressured due to the research context to tell you what you want to hear, either because they want to help you or because you are in a power position over them. Such things can be important to note in your limitations if you have special concerns these outcomes may have occurred. Furthermore, surveys themselves are not completely neutral instruments; the kinds of questions that are asked often reveal the biases and assumptions of the original designer.

That being said, psychometric surveys can be excellent ways to try to track progress over time or to get a sense of how your players perceive themselves along your desired dimensions, so long as you understand their limitations.

7.4 Research through design in action

a) Exploratory

Research through design is considered exploratory. This means, it is often limited in scope, as such experiments usually do not have large-scale testing following them. Therefore, you will need to be modest about the kinds of claims you are making and construct your research question accordingly, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

b) How to construct a research question

When starting a research study, the primary objective of investigation is not to validate personal beliefs, but rather to subject hypotheses to rigorous scrutiny. In research, your goal is not to prove yourself right; it's to try to prove yourself wrong. This concept, known as *falsifiability*, was introduced by the philosopher Karl Popper (2005). Instead of looking to find corroborating evidence, data that agrees with your theory ("my theory is that all swans are white"), you should look for the "black swan." This means first thinking about and identifying what specific piece of evidence would make your hypothesis impossible to maintain. In this way, your goal should be to test the limits of your theory rather than simply gathering evidence that agrees with it.

Thus, the goal is not to confirm personal beliefs about the transformative power of role-playing, for example, but to test whether they hold up against real evidence. Research questions should be built to challenge assumptions, not to decorate results with stories after the fact. A clear question names what might change, how the game is expected to work, what effect can be observed, what will serve as the comparison, and over what period any change is likely to appear. In simple terms, a good study asks: if we do this specific thing, will it make a measurable difference for this group of people, and how will we know?

The best research questions are those that could, in principle, prove the idea wrong as easily as right, e.g., assessing the claim's falsifiability. Indeed, technically scientists are always and only trying to test if a statement has no effect or no difference. What makes a statement or theory "scientific" is not that it can be verified, e.g., *logical positivism*, but that it can be tested and potentially proven false. Chapter 7 of *TRGD* gives a detailed account of constructing research questions based on design work.

To make a question testable, limit it to one main result and a few secondary ones, and decide beforehand what will count as evidence for the idea, against it, or if the results are inconclusive. Also, think about alternative explanations and plan how to track them. This approach keeps the focus on learning from data rather than fitting

the data to a story. A practical way to write it is: “In this setting, does this change improve this outcome for this group, mainly through this process, compared with this alternative, within this period of time?” Such planning connects the question directly to design and analysis, helping ensure that findings remain credible even in complex, real-world environments.

c) Distinguishing causal and correlational aims in study design

In experimental research, the inclusion of a control or comparison group serves to isolate the effects of some kind of intervention. A control group, for example, allows the research to determine whether observed changes in outcomes are *caused* by the intervention itself, or might instead reflect other influences. Such other influences can be factors such as prior experiences, test-retest effects, and other confounding variables. When the research question is *causal*, that is, when the aim is to establish that a particular game, activity, or design feature *produces* an effect, such as learning, then a control or comparison group is essential. A control or comparison group provides counterfactual information. What would have happened if the participants had *not* experienced the intervention? Without this benchmark, a researcher cannot confidently attribute an observed effect to the game itself.

However, not all research questions are causal in nature. Another kind of study design is one that explores *within-group variation*. That is, how differences among individuals exposed to the same experiences, such as a game, relate to differences in their outcomes, such as enjoyment. In such correlational or predictive research designs, every participant receives the same treatment or engages with the same tasks. The focus is not on a comparison, but rather on identifying which characteristics -- such as personality, motivation, or engagement -- are associated with the outcomes of interest. In this design, the absence of a control or comparison group is not a methodological flaw; it is a reflection of the study's purpose. Here, the variability of the sample is of critical interest. This interest lies *within* the group, not *between* different conditions. A strength of this kind of design is that it reveals how individual differences contribute to different outcomes, such as learning processes, under a shared set of conditions, complementing rather than replacing causal effects.

This distinction between causal and correlational aims is crucial, and sometimes misunderstood by those less experienced with quantitative research. It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that the absence of a control group inherently weakens a study, even when the research question concerns patterns of association, rather than causal inference.

c) AB testing

A/B testing is a simple way to compare two versions of an activity or design to see which one works better. Participants are randomly divided into two groups, and each group experiences a version that differs in only one element, such as a rule change or a facilitation style. This practice helps identify whether any improvement truly comes

from that change rather than other factors. In role-playing or learning settings, the groups might be different classes, sessions, or tables. Before starting, it is important to decide what will be measured, how many people will participate, and how success will be judged. Afterward, the results are compared using, for example, simple averages or percentages to see if one version performed better, and results are reported with clear information about uncertainty. Researchers must also check that only the intended element changed and avoid common mistakes like mixing information between groups or checking results too early, which can give false impressions.

d) Control groups

Control groups are used to show what would have happened without the new idea or intervention. One group continues as usual while another group experiences the change. This comparison isolates the effect of the new method from other influences. When random assignment is not possible, groups can be made more similar by matching participants with similar characteristics or comparing how each group changes over time. It is also important to record what happens during the sessions to understand why differences appear. Researchers should explain to participants how groups are chosen and make sure any discovered benefits are eventually offered to everyone involved.

e) Longitudinal vs. cross-sectional design

Longitudinal designs involve measuring the same participants at two or more time points, allowing researchers to observe changes over time. *Cross-sectional designs*, in contrast, collect data from different participants at a single point in time to compare groups or variables.

Cross-sectional studies measure effects immediately after one activity and are useful for quick tests of what works in the moment. Longitudinal studies, by contrast, follow participants across several sessions or weeks to see if results appear, grow, or fade with time. These designs are essential when studying real learning or behavioral change, which often take longer to stabilize. Typical approaches include comparing results before and after the activity, repeating the same test several times, or running rotating groups that overlap in time. To ensure fair comparisons, the same questions, tools, and scoring rules should be used each time. Choosing between a short or long schedule depends on the type of change being studied and the time realistically available.

Whether the group has the same or different participants is an important design difference between these two approaches. For example, testing a larp at 3 different time points over 6 months would not be longitudinal if they were not the same participants at each session.

7.5 Best practices in implementing playtests

a) Why playtest?

As a game designer, you are tackling a second-order design problem because you are never directly designing the behaviour of your players. Instead, you are designing the rules of the system, which then, hopefully, will lead to certain behaviours from the players (Westborg 2023a). Because games are emergent, it is not always possible to predict how the rules will play out. Theory may differ from practice, meaning that what we think will happen when the game is played is not what actually happens. Through playtesting, we gain a better understanding of what might happen, and we can align our expectations with reality. Another reason for playtesting is to overcome designer biases. By testing your game or part of it, hopefully, you will gain new, less biased perspectives.

b) When do you playtest?

You want to playtest as soon as possible. You do not have to wait until the full design is done; start testing parts of the design early on to be able to work iteratively and make changes along the way.

c) What are you testing?

Make sure you know what you are testing. Be as specific as possible. Are you testing the balance of the game? The text of the characters? If the players have enough agency? Do not test for things you already know are working. That will not give you any new information (Fullerton 2018; Westborg 2023a).

d) How do you test?

Always test for one thing at a time. Then you can make one change and test again. If you make many changes at once, then you also introduce many new sources of error, and you cannot tell which problem stems from which change.

When playtesting, the most important thing you can do is to listen to your playtesters. If they react in a certain way when playing your game, it is up to you to figure out why. Do not defend your game. If one or more playtesters have a problem, other players will likely have the same problem. Find where the problem stems from. Relevant to consider is that many playtesters are not designers themselves, which means they often are good at identifying symptoms but seldom their causes or the best solutions (Westborg 2023a).

Some playtests might include you asking a lot of questions along the way, about how players were reasoning in a certain situation or what they are feeling at a certain moment. In these situations, it can be very effective to ask the players to think out loud. In other playtests, you might be very quiet instead, and just observe to see what happens, and then ask questions afterwards.

When you are asking questions as part of your playtest, try to approach the process as coaching. The players are the ones who know the answers, not the coach; the coach's job is to help them find the answers through well-structured questions. Work with open questions that start with What, Why, When, How, Where, and Who. Be a bit careful with the "why," since, depending on how it is used, it might lead players to feel blamed. Use a lot of follow-up questions to get deeper.

For early tests, you can use friends or family, but make sure you also get to test on your target audience.

e) Failure is interesting

After a playtest, you might feel disheartened if something fails or does not work as planned. But remember, failing was the point! Failure gives you information and helps you get better at design. It also helps you refine your scenario, if you plan to move forward with it.

f) Making changes

Once you have finished your playtest, it is time to make changes. Here are some recommendations for how to move on to the next stage (Westborg 2023a):

- Prioritize the changes that are most critical for your design;
- Keep notes of all your changes and handle each version separately;
- Have follow-up tests;
- Ensure the trends go in the right direction;
- Ask yourself: Is the system wrong, or the players' expectations? Which one of these needs adjustment? Design to make such adjustments;
- Be bold. Overshooting means new types of feedback and bounding the issue, i.e., narrowing it down; and
- Fail faster. The sooner you can experience failure, the quicker you can adjust.

7.6 Best practices as playtesters

As playtesters, consider that the first and foremost thing to remember is that you are there to help them test their game; you are not the one being tested. Try to relax during the process. What you are testing is probably not the finished or even the full version of the game, but the designers chose to test this for a reason. Trust that they know what they are trying to discover.

When playtesting a game, you should let the designer know about your experience level. It is not your job to figure out what the game means or attempt to solve design problems. To help the designers, start by listening to what they are asking you and respond accordingly. Explain how you thought during the process or how you expected something to work. Let them know *what* you felt, *when* you felt a certain way, and *why*.

Did your feelings change over time? Mention what you feel you are lacking from the game experience, but try not to get hung up on this lack. In short:

- Don't be nice; be kind.
- You are kind by sharing your experience honestly; pleasantries are often not honest.
- Help the designers fail faster;
- Express and motivate your frustrations and enjoyments; and
- Give details of what happened and when during the process rather than speaking vaguely or overly generalizing. (Westborg, 2023b)

7.7 Examples of other practice-based research methods

For our purposes, practice-based research emphasizes the creation of an artifact as a response to solving a specific problem. It is a method that has been applied in such diverse fields as medicine and engineering, and shares many similarities with Research through Design when applied to design and art practice. Where Research through Design focuses on a process of design, practice-based research can be performed on any sort of practice, regardless if there is a design product at the end of it (Skains 2018).

a) Participatory action research

Participatory action research treats designers, facilitators, and participants as co-researchers. Collectively, all participants iteratively diagnose, plan, act, observe, and reflect to change the game and/or its context as needed. Unlike Research through Design, which answers a design-posed research question by producing and interrogating artifacts, participatory action research foregrounds stakeholder agency, redistribution of power, and negotiated problem framing. In order to assess the validity of the process, it focuses on desired change plus any transferable insights that might emerge.

In analog role-playing games, participatory action research offers a lens that treats sessions as situated interventions inside living communities, where consent practices, safety tools, rule negotiations, and debriefs operate as both ethical safeguards and collaborative measurement points that steer the next cycle. Typical cycles include:

- Co-defining the civic or educational objectives with participants;
- Co-designing play;
- Piloting the scenario, e.g., with structured observation and brief surveys;
- Checking the interpretations of participants in post-game debriefs; and
- Deciding together what to alter in rules, facilitation, or organizational arrangements.

This method is especially suited for capacity building, inclusion, and organizational learning. It documents how roles, leadership, and norms evolve across cycles rather than only testing a fixed prototype.

b) Arts-based research

The term arts-based research (ABR) was first coined in 1993 by Elliot Eisner as a way to talk about educational research that also contained creative work (Coemans and Hannes 2017). It has later been discussed as research meant to enhance perception of human activities, and as being defined by the presence of art (Barone and Eisner 2012). Contemporary arts-based research can be difficult to further define with a high level of specificity, as it can be extended to encompass all forms of research that employs the creation of art pieces in its method in one way or another. Arts-based research can further be divided into three main approaches:

- Research *on* art, i.e., reflective interpretation of art pieces;
- Research *for* art, i.e., examination and iteration of art practices to improve them; and
- Research *through* art, i.e., using art as tools for reflection and expression. (Cox 2016, 2025)

Note that in Sweden and other countries, *artistic research* is considered a separate path than more traditional forms of research-based knowledge production. Artistic research often has its own theories, methodologies, and language to describe the process of inquiry that might differ from approaches, e.g., in the humanities and social sciences, even if creative work is still central to the process.

Similar to arts-based research, we can further nuance design research based on what the function of design is within the research. Instead of us thinking of Research through Design and others as separate from one another, we can consider them instead different orientations to thinking about design work.

c) Research on / about Design

Research on Design -- also called Research about Design -- is interested in the process of designing and designers' work behaviors. The emphasis is on design thinking and the methods that enable it (Buchanan 2007). The artifacts created are less important than the process itself.

d) Research for Design

Research for Design focuses on inquiries that enable a design to be successful (Downton 2003; Frankel and Rancine 2010; Tieben 2015). The goal is to improve the end-result design itself, not to explore a theoretical question, even if taking data from the participants about their experience. Much of the research emerging from the industry is interested in this sort of information, i.e., how to optimize the design.

7.8 Ethics

How you engage with human subjects during the research process makes a major difference in terms of ethical research practice. Three key things are important to evaluate in terms of risk:

- **Personal data:** Are you gathering personal information that will identify the person?
- **Sensitive data:** Are you gathering sensitive information that could lead to risks for the participants, such as gender/sexuality, health, or political beliefs?
- **Personal sensitive data:** Do you have both types of information in the same data set?

The answers to these questions make a big difference in terms of the ethical procedures you need to follow, as well as data storage.

a) Ethical review and approval

In order to conduct research with human subjects, you may need to apply for *ethical review*. Ethical review does not ensure your research process is ethical; that is your responsibility. Instead, ethical review evaluates your research methods and types of data gathering and assesses the degree of risk involved. If the review board deems the research plan sound, including any ways to mitigate risks you have detailed, it will issue you an *ethical approval*. This approval will often have clear instructions for how to obtain consent and/or assent from participants, informing them of any risks and giving them clear procedures to follow if harmed. Without an ethical approval, you may be unable to publish your results and may even be subject to legal consequences if you proceed with your study.

While we will detail some general principles for ethical practices, note that norms regarding ethical procedures are different from country to country and even among institutions in the same country. Make sure you check with your university, school administration, clinical board, or other important authorities for proper ethical procedure in your context.

If you are doing Research through Design, you are playing your game with people and receiving their feedback, e.g., on mechanics of facilitation. However, if you do not gather personal or sensitive data about your participants and do not record the session in any way, your study will likely be deemed low risk. Similarly, if you are running an educational intervention and only assessing statistics on student performance in the activity, your study may fall into an *exempt* or *minimal review* status, meaning you either do not need to gain ethical approval at all, or your procedures will be minimum, e.g., only having the participants sign a consent form.

If you are giving participants a psychometric survey or interviewing them more deeply about their experience, you are likely falling into mandatory ethical review territory. You will be gathering data that might identify them and possibly stigmatize them in some way if their identity is connected to specific comments, e.g., about non-normative sexualities, neurodiversity, or political views, among others. In these cases, you almost certainly need ethical approval if you plan to publish the data. This approval usually covers a certain time period, meaning data can only be gathered within a certain period, data must be stored for a certain length of time, etc.

Note that some countries have more strict rules around ethical approval, such as in the United States, which almost always requires ethical review when working with human subjects. In Sweden, where this textbook is published, currently Bachelor's and Master's students do not require ethical approval if they only publish their independent student thesis work through the university portal, in our case DiVA. However, both Ph.D. students and students working within an established research project must follow the guidelines required of the researcher in charge. The lead researcher on the project will need to have obtained ethical approval before data collection can begin, and the approval must cover data gathering and analysis for everyone within the project, not just specific people.

Ethical approval usually requires you to adapt a standardized form with the details of your project, which includes information on how to contact you or your supervisor, the name of the review authority that granted the approval, and the ethical review number. Usually, participants must sign a consent form with this information if they are above the legal age of majority; if they are below that age, their legal guardian signs the consent form and they sign an assent form, as they are not technically old enough to consent.

This information may feel overly bureaucratic and time consuming, but if you consider our chapter on safety, we recommend instead viewing it as a way to empower your participants to have more power over their own information, as well as a pathway to accountability if harm is done.

For more on research ethics principles when working with human subjects, see Chapter 7 of *TRGD*.

b) Data recording and storage considerations

Lately, much of the time-consuming part of ethical approval involves a *data management plan*, which may be a separate related process or integrated within the review process. Data management refers to how the data you gather will be stored, for how long, where, and who will have access to it. Especially with rules around GDPR and other privacy concerns, data management has become a critical issue in recent years, so must be considered carefully.

Unfortunately, the digital landscape is changing rapidly and recommended procedures a year ago may have now changed or become less certain. For example,

some institutions will not let you store sensitive data within transcripts or audio-visual recordings on a cloud service, which can make collaborating with other researchers challenging, especially outside of your organization. You may be asked to:

- Encrypt your data and upload it to a specific server;
- Pseudonymize the data so identifying details are less present or obscured; and/or
- Create codes for the data, where identifying information is called something else in the data set and the keys detailing these codes are stored in a separate secure location.

What can be even more challenging is different rules contradicting one another, e.g., being required to share your data set as an Open resource, but also trying to protect the anonymity of your participants as per your ethical approval. When in doubt, always discuss your data management plan with the authority responsible for it, such as a data security officer, research officer, and/or IT professional at your institution.

c) Ethics working with qualitative data

While these procedures may seem excessive, consider that your participants are trusting you with aspects of their lives that may feel quite vulnerable to share. Think of yourself as a guardian for your participants and a translator of their experience to the world. In some cases, this role means you consider carefully how the audience might perceive their words, what is most important to share for your study, and what might be better to keep private. Your most important role as a researcher is not to uncover “the truth,” but rather to conduct your research humanely and ethically, which sometimes means being careful about what you reveal. As mentioned before, double checking any transcripts or passages you plan to publish with your participants can often be a helpful process.

d) Pre-registering a study

Pre-registration is the practice of publicly recording a study’s research questions, hypotheses, methods, and planned analyses before data collection begins. This process increases transparency and helps distinguish *confirmatory* analyses, those that test predictions made in advance, from *exploratory* analyses that arise after examining the data. By committing to a plan beforehand, researchers reduce the risk of practices such as p-hacking or selective reporting, which can inflate false-positive findings.

Preregistration does not limit scientific creativity; rather, it strengthens the credibility of results by making the research process more open and reproducible. For readers, it provides a clear record of what was planned versus what was discovered post hoc, allowing for more accurate interpretation of the evidence. Preregistration is most commonly practiced in fields that rely heavily on quantitative, hypothesis-driven research such as psychology and other social sciences, where researchers test predefined predictions using statistical analyses. Nonetheless, it is a good practice that can be applied across any research field.

In practice, preregistering a study involves completing a short form on an open, timestamped registry such as the Open Science Framework (OSF), AsPredicted.org, or a discipline-specific repository. Researchers typically outline the study's objectives, hypotheses, sample characteristics, planned sample size, variables to be measured, and the statistical analyses they plan to use. Once submitted, the preregistration is stored publicly or under embargo until publication.

Importantly, preregistration is not intended to constrain research if adjustments become necessary. Any deviations from the original plan can simply be reported transparently in the final paper. For example, you may add an additional measure because pilot testing showed some interesting new directions to explore, or remove measures due to feasibility or access to participants. Following this process helps ensure that data analysis decisions are not influenced by the observed results, promoting integrity and reproducibility across studies.

e) Ethics in online research on social media

You should also consider carefully how you engage in online research. Historically speaking, anything publicly published online was considered fair game for researchers, and in some ways may still be, legally speaking. In other words, researchers were able to use such data without consent as a matter of public record.

However, just as you have a responsibility toward participants you interview, you should also consider your responsibility toward participants you have not met and who have not consented to use their data in this way. For example, if you are reading a public forum and players are sharing vulnerability about their experiences playing a game based on the queer experience, reproducing these posts and including identifying details could increase the potential for harm to occur. In such cases, you may wish to obscure such details, still indicating where the original post was located in your citations to show due diligence. Alternatively, you can choose to summarize in a more anonymous way rather than providing quotes.

You should especially be careful with private, secret, or friend-restricted social media feeds. Just because a person posted on their Facebook Wall and they have thousands of friends does not mean the post is public. Similarly, private groups often have rules of confidentiality. The person may not have posted such things if they believed they would be viewed by members outside a select group. If you want to gather research in such spaces, we recommend asking for consent from the group, ideally even putting a note in the group description or pinning an announcement that states what the research is for and the period within which you will be collecting data. Similarly, you can make a private group specifically for research purposes, which players can join, thus opting-in to the research.

f) Risk assessment

Just like in running games, part of the research process when working with human subjects is assessing risk. Here are some factors to consider.

i) Transparency

Do your participants know what they are signing up to experience? When possible, be as transparent as possible about your process. You do not need to explain your research in great depth, but they should have a general idea of what is expected of them.

You should avoid any secrecy in your research design unless it is strictly necessary to answer your research question. Any sort of tricks or surprises could lead participants to feel betrayed or even harmed.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to give fully informed consent for role-playing games themselves due to the uncertainty arising from emergent play. You simply cannot control all the factors, including the behavior of other players, so you cannot ensure you can provide all content in advance. You can do your best to predict what sorts of content may emerge, e.g., through content advisories. You can also disclose what sorts of discomfort the participant might experience.

At the same time, you do not need to overstate the risks of your project unless they are significant. For example, if running a role-playing game for seasoned role-players, you may wish to disclose that the game is designed for transformative purposes and therefore may have an impact on them or activate discomfort, but you are likely not running an experience terribly different from ones they have willingly undertaken in the past. You may instead wish to focus on aspects that are less familiar, such as the data you will be taking and how it will be stored.

ii) Harm reduction

As discussed in Chapter 5 of *TRGD* and this book, we acknowledge that harm is possible within these games and within the research process. As you are planning your research and putting together your consent form, think of ways you can reduce harm. For example, do you really need that super-secret plot twist or that violent scene? How will you respond meaningfully if harm occurs? Luckily, since you have access to this book, you can address safety concerns more readily than many researchers. We have developed structures, mechanics, and support systems that can help. Plan ahead of time and be clear with participants what options they have for psychological safety before, during, and after your data collection. Provide a thorough consent form, identifying yourself, your superior, and your ethical approval body and assigned number if available. Make clear they can opt-out at any time -- and mean it. No project is worth inflicting harm that can be avoided with proper consent procedures.

iii) Working with specific populations

You may have special considerations when working with specific populations, e.g., children, incarcerated people, older adults. This work may require more rigorous ethical review, for example, and stringent procedures. You may need to work with stakeholders to be able to conduct the research at all, who serve as gatekeepers, as discussed in Chapter 2. Finding a way to build collaborations with such stakeholders can help ease the process for you and your participants. Failing to do so could lead to resistance and even legal trouble, so again, do your due diligence.

iv) Photography/video consent forms

You will need to detail in your consent form what types of data will be taken. For example, if you will be videotaping the session, let your participants know. Such data will likely need to be kept private and securely stored, shared only within your research team.

However, if you plan to use photography and video in publications, whether for research or promotional purposes, you need a separate form that will permit them to consent to such practices. This will likely not be possible if you promised them anonymity in your consent form. Another option is to blur their faces, modulate their recorded voices, or obscure any other identifying features, but such practices are not failsafes.

7.9 Data analysis

Once you have gathered your data, you then need to have a practice through which you analyze it.

a) Qualitative coding practices

i) Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is an umbrella term for a number of different approaches that aim at first identifying patterns and themes in a data set, and then analyzing and interpreting them (see e.g., Braun and Clarke 2006). Since these approaches tend to be closely related, research projects that apply this method will most likely employ several or a mix of inductive, deductive, and reflexive approaches. In other words, sometimes you will allow the data to “speak” to you, with key themes emerging, and make general observations from those specific instances, i.e., inductive research. Sometimes you will hunt for certain themes based upon a hypothesis you establish from the beginning, e.g., deductive research. Other times, the themes will emerge from you after engaging with the data based on your individual subjectivity, e.g., reflexive research.

Types of thematic analysis include:

- **Coding Reliability Thematic Analysis:** This type of analysis most often employs a predetermined coding framework and puts particular emphasis on replicability in the coding process. It does so by having several people code the same data with the goal of achieving a high degree of agreement between the coders. Statistical tests are often employed to determine this level of agreement between the coders and in extension the reliability of the coding. This approach can be useful when you have a research question that requires highly structured and reliable coding.
- **Reflexive Thematic Analysis:** This type of analysis emphasizes that the researcher's subjectivity, theoretical assumptions, and interpretative frameworks will always influence how they code and interpret themes. It does not rely on an existing code framework, but the coders develop their codebook as they work through the data set. Differences in coding between researchers is used to explore different understandings of the data, rather than to try to reach consensus. This approach can be useful if your research question is of an exploratory nature or if you wish to provide a multitude of potential interpretations rooted in the researchers' subjectivity.
- **Codebook Thematic Analysis:** This type of analysis can be understood as a mix of the two previous ones. Somewhat similar to reflexive analysis, the coding framework is created specifically for the dataset. However, where in the former the categories are created as a result of coding, codebook analysis will create a coding framework based on the researchers' initial contact with the data set. The codebook is then employed in a similar fashion as one would in a coding reliability approach. This way the researcher will try to combine the flexibility of a codebook created from the data set with the reliability of a rigid coding process. This approach can be useful when your research aim is to describe the dataset as comprehensively as possible.

ii) Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA)

Phenomenological analysis puts emphasis on understanding a phenomenon from the perspective of the individual that experiences it. The basic principle is that researchers have to analyze the data without letting their own pre-conceived ideas and theoretical frameworks influence the process. This principle also extends to *interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA)*, although this latter method also incorporates hermeneutic principles that postulate that any understanding of understanding experience must also necessarily include interpretation. In fact, an IPA process can be seen as containing a double hermeneutic approach, as researchers interpret the accounts of participants who are themselves interpreting their own experiences. IPA can be a particularly useful methodology for you, if you try to examine topics and experiences which have high degrees of complexity, are ambiguous in one way or another, and/or contain strong emotional components.

iii) Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a method that is specifically intended to create new theory from the analyzed data sets, rather than try to impose existing theories onto them. In this method, data collection and analysis can happen in parallel, allowing the analysis to inform what data will be collected next in the project. Grounded theory can be useful if you are conducting research in a field where there is little or no existing theory to apply, or you find that existing theories do not cover or explain your specific research target sufficiently.

However, as we have warned before, analog role-playing game studies often have existing research based on the topics you are exploring. Some people rely on grounded theory as an approach because they are not aware of existing studies, or do not wish to impose a hypothesis. However, we often have hypotheses going into a research process, and grounded theory requires a large amount of rigor when done correctly, carefully documenting new insights and adjusting each research procedure accordingly. Grounded theory does not mean having no plan or assuming the field is wide open without due diligence in research. For that reason, consider whether or not you do have specific questions you are exploring from the start, and if you do, use another method, like thematic analysis.

iv) Qualitative content analysis

Content analysis is a systemic method to organize and interpret large amounts of textual or visual data. As content analysis can be both qualitative and quantitative, it is often considered a mixed method. For the sake of this book we will make a clear distinction: Where quantitative content analysis, as described later, concerns itself with the how many times specific words or codes appear in the data, *qualitative content analysis* concerns itself with the meaning behind the words and the context in which they appear.

Based on how strongly existing framework and theory influence the research questions, a qualitative content analysis process can be either *deductive* or *inductive*.

- A *deductive analysis* applies an existing coding framework to the data set. This approach can be useful if you are trying to confirm a previously established model or theoretical work or apply it to a new context.
- An *inductive analysis* establishes its own coding framework by creating categories as a result of a close reading process at the beginning of the analysis. This approach can be useful if you are conducting an exploratory study or you are working in a part of the field where there is little to no prior research available.

b) Quantitative analysis practice

When working with quantitative data, rigorous research practices are needed. This section will introduce key factors.

i) Working with statistics

Quantitative analysis in role-playing studies offers a powerful lens for understanding player behavior, engagement, and experience by translating complex phenomena into numerical data that can be systematically examined. This practice is not about replacing qualitative insight but about complementing it with objective, replicable, and statistically verifiable findings.

Put simply, quantitative analysis is the process of analyzing numerical data to measure differences between groups, assess relationships between variables, and test hypotheses in a scientifically rigorous way. In role-playing studies, this could involve analyzing survey responses to measure player satisfaction, counting behavioral frequencies to understand choices in a session, or using experimental data to compare the effects of different game mechanics. The goal is to produce objective, empirical data that can be measured, expressed numerically, and analyzed using statistical methods.

Quantitative analysis begins with a clear research question and a *testable* hypothesis. Once data is collected, the analysis typically proceeds through two main branches of statistics: *descriptive* and *inferential*.

The first step in any quantitative analysis is to summarize and describe the characteristics of the data sample. *Descriptive statistics* do not make inferences about a wider population, but instead provide a clear picture of the data collected. Some key descriptive measures include describing the “center” of the data, such as the mean (average), median (midpoint), and mode (most frequent value), and describing the spread of the data, such as the standard deviation, which indicates how close data points are to the mean.

Where descriptive statistics describe a sample, *inferential statistics* are used to make predictions or inferences about a larger population from which the sample was drawn. These methods are used to test hypotheses and determine if the observed patterns in the data are statistically significant or simply due to chance.

Common inferential tests include t-tests and ANOVA. These are used to compare the mean scores of two or more groups. For example, a researcher could use an ANOVA to compare self-reported immersion scores from players in three different role-playing game systems. Correlation is another type of inferential test, which is used to examine the strength and direction of a linear relationship between two continuous variables. For instance, a researcher might test for a correlation between the hours a player spends preparing for a larp and their post-game satisfaction score. Regression is used to predict an outcome variable from one or more predictor variables. A regression model could for instance be built to determine if a player’s performance in a strategic game can be predicted by their experience level and the amount of time they spend analyzing the game board.

Quantitative analysis begins with the methodology of the study, and the validity of the analysis will depend on methodological rigor. Researchers must ensure they have adequate sample sizes to achieve sufficient statistical power to detect real effects. It is also critical to choose the appropriate statistical test based on the research question and the type of data collected, e.g., its level of measurement and distribution. Finally, statistical significance should not be confused with practical significance. A statistically significant finding is meaningless without being interpreted within the rich context of the role-playing activity itself.

ii) Quantifying qualitative data

Quantifying qualitative data is a methodological bridge that allows researchers to identify patterns, test hypotheses, and systematically link subjective player experiences to objective measures. This process converts non-numerical data, such as interview transcripts, open-ended survey responses, or ethnographic field notes, into a numerical format that can be statistically analyzed. The first, and most pivotal step, is qualitative coding. The researcher meticulously reads through the textual data, identifies discrete segments relevant to the research question, and assigns a descriptive label, or *code*. For example, in analyzing player debrief interviews, a researcher might create codes like rules negotiation, character conflict, or strategic planning. The researcher can then go from codes to counting. In a *content analysis*, a researcher will quantify the frequency of the codes or categories. This can reveal patterns in what participants discuss most, for instance. In a *thematic analysis*, the researcher can identify and interpret patterns of meaning, i.e., themes, within the data. While more interpretive, the resulting themes can still be quantified.

The process of quantifying qualitative data must be conducted with systematic rigor to be valid. Best practices include developing a clear codebook and ensuring inter-rater reliability by having multiple coders analyze a portion of the data and check for agreement. The primary risk in quantifying textual data is decontextualization. A frequency count does not reveal the nature or nuance of the coded concept. Therefore, quantification should not be an endpoint. Its strength lies in identifying broad patterns that can then be explored and illustrated with qualitative examples from which the counts were collected from.

iii) Quantitative content analysis

Quantitative content analysis is a method that involves a systematic objective analysis of large sets of usually qualitative data. The aim of this analysis is to quantify the datasets so that it is easier to identify patterns and trends that can then be used to pose meaningful research questions.

The two main types of quantitative content analysis are *manifest* analysis and *latent* analysis. Manifest analysis involves looking at the surface level content of the data, such as for instance the number of times a specific word or phrase is used.

Latent analysis, on the other hand, tries to identify what lies under the surface content, for instance trying to see what values, emotions, attitudes, or convictions are communicated through the text.

In regards to role-playing, one could use quantitative content analysis to see how often certain phrases or words were used by players in a certain game or system and compare these to similar data from other games. Alternatively, one could look at how different groups or different character classes in the same game might differ in their word choices. If one finds such differences, this insight might for instance be used to better understand how different games, groups, and/or classes might influence how people play them, or how they might attract different players.

iv) Emotion analysis

Emotion is at the heart of role-playing and can help drive the experience, but it is notoriously difficult to measure. Emotion analysis, in the context of quantitative analysis, is the process of measuring and understanding human emotions based on physical and behavioral cues. This can involve analyzing text, speech, visual data, or physiological signals to identify specific emotions like joy, anger, or fear.

In research, emotion is often structured around two core dimensions: *arousal*, i.e., the intensity of the feeling; and *valence*, i.e., whether the feeling is positive or negative (Russell and Barrett 1999). Different methods can be used to capture these dimensions of emotion. Arousal is the level of physiological activation. It can be measured objectively using psychophysiological tools, such as heart rate monitors or eye-trackers (Juvrud 2026). For example, Galvanic Skin Response (GSR) measures changes in skin conductivity related to sweat gland activity, providing a sensitive indicator of emotional intensity. A sudden narrative twist in a tabletop role-playing game might produce a sharp peak in a player's GSR data, quantifying their in-the-moment reaction.

While arousal measures intensity, other methods are needed to infer the type and valence of an emotion. Facial emotion analyses, such as facial coding (Ekman and Friesen 1978) or EMG, use algorithms to analyze a video feed of a participant's face, mapping muscle movements to basic emotional expressions like joy, anger, or sadness. Similarly, vocal emotion analysis can analyze an audio recording for features like pitch and tempo to infer the speaker's emotional state.

A challenge unique to role-playing research is untangling the emotions of the player from the emotions of the character they are portraying. A player might exhibit a facial expression of anger because they are skillfully acting, while they, the player, feel calm. Researchers cannot take behavioral emotion data at face value. This ambiguity is a rich area for investigation, as the discrepancy between a player's internal physiological state, e.g., a calm GSR signal, and their external emotional performance, e.g., a facial analysis reading of "anger," can itself be a meaningful measure of role-playing.

c) Mixed methods

Role-playing is a complex, multi-layered human phenomenon, and to study such a dynamic activity, any single methodological approach is inherently limited. Therefore, combining multiple methods can strengthen a research study. *Mixed methods* research, specifically, is a paradigm that intentionally integrates quantitative and qualitative data to achieve a more holistic, robust, and nuanced understanding. The core rationale for a mixed methods approach is the interdependence of objective measurement and subjective context. A quantitative data point, such as a spike in a player's heart rate, is scientifically meaningless without the qualitative context of what was happening in the game to cause it. Conversely, a qualitative claim from an interview is strengthened when corroborated by quantitative data. The goals of this integration are *triangulation* (confirming findings), *complementarity* (providing a fuller picture), and *development* (using one method to inform the other).

Many ways exist to approach a mixed method research design, and a few ways that are particularly well-suited for role-playing research. In *convergent parallel design*, quantitative and qualitative data are collected concurrently but analyzed independently. The results are then merged at the interpretation stage to see if they converge, complement, or contradict one another. *Explanatory sequential design* is a two-phase design that begins with the collection and analysis of quantitative data. The results of this first phase then inform the design of a second, qualitative phase, which is used to explain or provide context for the initial quantitative findings. Conversely, *exploratory sequential design* begins first with a qualitative phase to explore a phenomenon, and the findings are then used to build a theory or a new quantitative instrument for a second, quantitative phase. This is ideal for under-researched topics.

The central challenge of mixed methods research is the successful integration of different data types. This must be a deliberate process, not an afterthought. Techniques include side-by-side comparison in a report, data transformation, e.g., quantifying qualitative codes, and creating joint displays, e.g., a single table or matrix, to visualize the integrated data from both streams. While demanding, a well-executed mixed methods study provides a depth of understanding that a single-method approach cannot match, making it an invaluable tool for the complex field of role-playing research.

d) Triangulation

In regards to research methods, *triangulation* refers to the practice of using several different methods, sources, theories, and researchers to study the same phenomenon, in order to increase the validity, reliability, and credibility of the results. In addition, it can reduce bias, improve research rigor, and provide additional insights that singular approaches fail to achieve.

When we use different sources or data sets to study the same phenomenon, it is called *data triangulation*. If we apply a mix of different methods, it is called *methodological triangulation*. When several different researchers or investigators analyze the same data, it is called *investigator triangulation*. If we apply different theoretical frameworks or perspectives to study the same phenomenon, it is called *theoretical triangulation*. And finally, when we study the same phenomenon in different settings and environments, it is called *environmental triangulation*.

7.10 Positionality, reflexivity, and bias

In research on analog role-playing games, *positionality* names how our identities, roles, and interests as designer-researchers shape what we notice, record, and claim. *Reflexivity* is the continuous and explicit examination of those influences, not to erase them but to render them accountable and useful for interpretation. Following situated knowledge perspectives, we foreground that all observations are partial, located, and mediated by power relations in the field and at the table (Haraway 1988). Note that simply stating one's social identities in a positionality statement is not considered thorough practice and may even be seen as performative (Sibbald et al. 2025). One should also connect these life experiences to the way one views the subject matter at hand and the act of research itself as a whole.

A reflexive stance requires declaring insider or outsider status; mapping role transitions across design, facilitation, and analysis; and documenting how stakes and values inform design choices and coding decisions. Some examples include a reflexivity log for each iteration, peer debriefs that challenge preferred explanations, checking inferences with participants in post-game debriefs when ethically appropriate, and an audit trail that links raw traces to claims about change and mechanism. This approach aligns with reflexive sociology's call to objectify the researcher's position within the knowledge production process, treating bias as a phenomenon to analyze rather than a flaw to hide (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Credibility and trustworthiness then rest on transparency, triangulation, and negotiated meaning with participants, not on an unattainable neutrality (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

7.11 Empirical research on the effects of role-playing games

In this section, we reproduce the list of effects studies and their associated positive effects from Chapter 7 of *TRGD*, adding many sources that have been published since the last book was released.

i) Cognitive domain

- **Perceived competence / self-efficacy / successful / capable / agency** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Davis and Johns 2020; Atanasio 2020; Daniau 2016; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Merrick, Li, and Miller 2024), including **leadership self-efficacy** (García-Soriano, Faret Moreno, and González Cohens 2026);
- **Engagement** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Varrette et al. 2022; Slaughter and Orth 2023; Cullinan 2024; Riser et al. 2024; Breen and Woodin 2025);
- **Motivation / self-determination** (Gjedde 2013, 2014; Bowman and Standiford 2015; Algayres 2018; Hixson, West, and Eike 2024; Walsh and Linehan 2024; McLaren, Oades, and Deery 2026);
- **Creativity / creative thinking** (Kallam 1984; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Chung 2011; Meriläinen 2012; Gjedde 2013; Hazlett et al. 2024; Kilmer et al. 2024) and **creative expression** (Walsh and Linehan 2024);
- **Imagination / imaginative potential** (Karwowski and Soszynski 2008; Meriläinen 2012; Dyson et al. 2015);
- **Critical thinking** (Daniau 2016; Riser et al. 2024; Tsiaras and Neofotistos 2026);
- **Decision making skills** (Daniau 2016; Varrette et al. 2022; Riser et al. 2024);
- **Complex problem solving** (Kallam 1984; Zayas and Lewis 1986; Bowman 2010; Dyson et al. 2015; Daniau 2016; Atanasio 2020; Varrette et al. 2020) including **collaboratively** (Slaughter and Orth 2023; Kilmer et al. 2024);
- **Practice with challenging scenarios** (Kilmer et al. 2024; Riser et al. 2024);
- **Experiencing theory in practice** (Riser et al. 2024);
- **Compare the story with real life situations** (Riser et al. 2024);
- **Finding meaning** (DeRenard and Kline 1990; Atanasio 2020);
- **Exploring character arcs different from one's own life story/challenges** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);
- **Self-reflection** (Blackstock 2016); and
- **Moral development** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020).
- **Subject matter revision** (Mochocki 2014)
- **Perspective taking** (Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016; Kilmer et al. 2024);
- **Working with subject matter in game** (Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016);
- **Complex reflection about self** (Pitt et al. 2023);
- **Complex reflection about teamwork/ group dynamics** (Pitt et al. 2023);
- **Social predictions resulting from embodied feedback and mistakes** (Visuri 2024)
- **Developing a broader range of learner personas** (Cole, Maragliano, and Werning 2020);

ii) Affective domain

- **Agency / empowerment** (Daniau 2016; Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022);
- **Autonomy** (Visuri 2024)
- **Empathy** (Daniau 2016; Rivers et al. 2016; Bagès, Hoareau, and Guerrien 2021; Zhang, Xu, and Li 2025);
- **Identity development / exploration / experimentation** (Blackmon 1994; Bowman 2010; Meriläinen 2012; Blackstock 2016; Davis and Johns 2020; Baird 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Ball 2022; Walsh and Linehan 2024; Sottile 2024; Rosenblad et al. 2025);
- **Gender exploration/expression** (Baird 2021; Sottile 2024);

- **Identity reconstruction through character** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);
- **Stress / pressure relief** (Blackstock 2016);
- **Enhanced Quality of Life (QoL)** (Katō 2019);
- **Personal development** (Daniau 2016);
- **Emotional regulation** (Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Atanasio 2020; Causo and Quinlan 2021)
- **Processing trauma** (Causo and Quinlan 2021; Lehto 2024) and **trauma recovery** (Rosenblad et al. 2025);
- **Accessing grief and/or processing grief on a deeper level** (Bowman, Lukka, and Baird 2026);
- **Coping / adaptive skills** (Atanasio 2020; Causo and Quinlan 2021) and adaptability (García-Soriano, Faret Moreno, and González Cohens 2026);
- **Emotional resilience** (Brave 2026);
- **Expressing personal challenges** (Daniau 2016);
- **Working through difficulties** (Ball 2022) **without having to talk about them** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Gutierrez 2017; Walsh and Linehan 2024);
- **Engaging in shadow work** (Blackstock 2016; Walsh and Linehan 2024; Bowman in press for 2025);
- **Emotional growth** (Rosenblad 2026);
- **Game as metaphors for internal struggles** (Causo and Quinlan 2021);
- **Rewriting one's own life story through character arc / restorying** (Tanenbaum 2022; Atherton, Hathaway, Visuri, and Cross 2024);
- **Self-esteem** (Hughes 1988; Merrick, Li, and Miller 2024);
- **Sense of accomplishment** (Zayas and Lewis 1986);
- **Joy of learning** (Gjedde 2014);
- **Feelings of belonging** (Sargent 2014);
- **Fulfilling needs** (Adams 2013; Blackstock 2016; Varrette et al. 2022) including **social needs** (Adams 2013; Causo and Quinlan 2021);
- **Self-confidence** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Walsh and Linehan 2024) including **confidence/coping when making mistakes** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);
- **Self-expression** (Slaughter and Orth 2023; Kilmer et al. 2024);
- **Social confidence** (Blackstock 2016);
- **Lowering of perceived social stakes** (Cullinan 2024);
- **Feeling safe and brave enough to push own boundaries** (Visuri 2024)
- **Transfer of traits or skills from character to player** (Blackstock 2016; Daniau 2016; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022; Katō 2019; Hazlett et al. 2024);

iii) Behavioral domain

- **Prosocial behaviors / social skills** (Meriläinen 2012; Rosselet and Stauffer 2013; Sargent 2014; Helbig 2019; Katō 2019; Atanasio 2020; Davis and Johns 2020; Varrette et al. 2022; Bartenstein 2022a, 2022b, 2024; Slaughter and Orth 2023; Rosenblad et al. 2025; García-Soriano, Faret Moreno, and González Cohens 2026);
- **Practicing social skills without serious repercussions for mistakes** (Pitt et al. 2023);
- **Freedom as stress relief** (Blackstock 2026; Walsh and Linehan 2024) **from social mores / to explore relationships** (Blackstock 2016; Katō 2019);
- **Improved social interactions/relations with others** (Blackmon 1994; Blackstock 2016);
- **Group consensus building** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);
- **Balancing self-interests with community responsibility** (Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);

- **Social connections / connectedness** (Kilmer et al. 2024; Hazlett et al. 2024) including **new connections** (Cullinan 2024);
- **Connecting despite differences** (Katō 2019);
- **Debate / persuasion** (Daniau 2016);
- **Public speaking** (Hazlett et al. 2024);
- **Conflict management / resolution / transformation** (Atanasio 2020; Carter 2011; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Pitt et al. 2023);
- **Practicing democratic skills** (Adams 2013);
- **Collaboration** (Gjedde 2014; Cook, Gremo, Morgan 2016; Hazlett et al. 2024; Tsiaras and Neofotistos 2026);
- **Social confidence** (Visuri 2024) including in **boundary setting** (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Varrette et al. 2022);
- **Confrontation, i.e., standing up to a bully** (Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021) or **authority** (Varrette et al. 2022);
- **Self-advocacy** (Enfield 2007; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Atanasio 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);
- **Assertiveness** (Zhang, Xu, and Li 2025);
- **Group development** (Daniau 2016);
- **Camaraderie / group cohesion / connectedness** (Zayas and Lewis 1986; Shanun 2011; Katō 2019; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Battles, Curland, and Cruitt 2025);
- **Friendship development** (Adams 2013; Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Katō 2019; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021);
- **Development of affinity groups as described by Gee (2017)** (Cullinan 2024);
- **Development of social support networks** (Atanasio 2020; Walsh and Linehan 2024; Kozlov and O'Connor 2025; Kroplewski, Łoś, and Pawlicki 2025);
- **Teambuilding** (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Daniau 2016);
- **Cooperation** (Enfield 2007; Davis and Johns 2020; Wright, Weissglass, and Casey 2020);
- **Improved communication skills** (Enfield 2007; Daniau 2016; Katō 2019; Slaughter and Orth 2023);
- **Social emotional learning (SEL)** (Ruff 2021), **skills** (Faret Moreno, and González Cohens 2026), and **competence** (Zhang, Xu, and Li 2025);
- **Decreased impulsivity** (Enfield 2007); and
- **Making active changes afterward** (Lehto 2024).

Note that some of these studies report quantitative and qualitative data in a systematic way, whereas others are more generalized case studies, assertions based on work in the field, or autoethnographies. Systemic assessment of impacts is important for the field moving forward. Importantly, we also need research on potential negative impacts and best practices to avoid these drawbacks in the future to balance the literature.

7.12 Researching existing RPG communities

a) How to research communities

Forum discussions, convention reports, and other sources, can be a useful starting point or foundation when writing about RPG communities. Documenting your findings about an RPG community is a meticulous and time-consuming endeavor. Just like the sources from these communities themselves, your documentation is also a partial reflection of these communities. Many RPG communities exist in both

online and offline spaces, each with distinct norms that cannot be captured through documentation alone. Respectful documentations of these communities and their creative and artistic expressions is essential in order to maintain a safe and positive relationship between you as a researcher and the players. We recommend obtaining explicit consent to present findings outside of their original context. Cox (2018) suggests that one way to avoid stereotyping and mitigate generalizations, is by putting players front and center in your analysis.

RPG communities have both positive and negative cultural associations and connotations. Shaped by popular mass media coverage, tabletop RPG communities revolving around *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), were associated with the morally deviant practices during the Satanic Panic and a “nerdy” male-dominant subculture, leading to a stigmatized public image in the 1980s (BBC 2014). Sensationalist depictions like these not only simplify, but also misrepresent the diversity and complexity of RPG communities. Additionally, this framing misrepresented the social and creative elements of RPG communities.

After the turn of the millennial, especially during the COVID pandemic, the coverage of RPG communities has seen a notable shift to a more positive depiction. Changes include increased online play (e.g., Roll20); streaming Actual Play shows, e.g., *Critical Role* (Geek & Sundry, 2015-2018; Critical Role Productions, 2018-); and podcasters and RPG influencers, e.g., Ginny Di, from a broader range of demographic representations. These changes have contributed to framing RPG communities as inclusive, community-driven spaces for social connection, creativity and representation. Experiencing such communities can be incidentally transformative, even if the viewers do not play themselves (Lasley 2021).

Despite this shift, you have to be aware that these are still partial depictions of role-playing communities. Some RPG groups may still show hesitation to engage with your research and be closed off to an invasion of their gaming space. This caution of RPG communities may be a result from the aforementioned misrepresentations and stereotyping in media coverage. Community members may worry that academic or media interest could position their identities as caricatures. Understanding this point of view is essential for you as a researcher, if you seek to study these communities.

To mitigate these risks, researchers have to prioritize the following three things:

- **Transparency** about the research process;
- **Reciprocity** by compensating or showing gratitude; and
- **Consent** recorded either verbally or written.

Trust is key, and in order to build that, you have to respect the terms of the RPG community you are working with. It is a nice gesture if you consult with your informants first, before publishing your research documentation about them.

Therefore, you should carefully consider this fact when approaching role-playing groups for research. Make sure that your work is not contributing to these stereotypes.

If you have critiques of the practice, make sure you frame these critiques fairly and are not dismissive or derogatory. Avoid positioning some games as better than others just because you prefer their design -- or even if your participants have a preference. Keep in mind that all games have their own benefits and drawbacks, and even games with problematic content may be deeply important and meaningful for your participants. Your goal is not to prove any game or playstyle is superior to another, but ideally instead to demonstrate how games can improve.

Here are examples of popular and academic sources written about RPG communities around the world, whether as an embedded member or a visitor:

- American larp (Vanek 2011),
- Nordic larp (Montola and Stenros 2013; Cazeneuve 2020),
- Belarusian larp (Kot 2011),
- Russia larp (Semenov 2010),
- Larp in the Arab world (Anderson, Kharroub, Levin, and Rabah 2015),
- Nordic-inspired larp in Switzerland (B. 2013),
- Hungarian larp (Turi and Hartyándi 2023),
- Malaysian larp (Wang and Bates 2026),
- Chinese *jubensha* (Xiong, Wen, and Hartyándi 2022),
- Spanish tabletop (Mizer 2013),
- Filipino tabletop (Hermann 2026),
- Greek tabletop with American games (Nikolaidou 2015),
- Nordic freeform in Canada (Hellström and Hellström 2014).

7.13 Using tech in RPG research

Technology in role-playing research can be defined here as the application of digital tools, platforms, and measurement instruments to facilitate, create, or analyze the cognitive, emotional, and social dynamics of role-playing experiences. Role-playing research distinguishes itself from the broader discipline of game studies by maintaining a specific focus on the unique affordances of role-play. While participant observation and interviews remain vital to exploring play, the field is increasingly integrating technology to facilitate, create, and analyze the cognitive, emotional, and social dynamics of role-playing experiences. This shift is driven by the recognition that any single instrument captures only a fraction of the available information. A mixed-methods approach, combining traditional inquiry with objective, real-time data, is essential.

a) Technology as a facilitator

Technology can be used as tools that augment traditional role-play, such as virtual tabletops, or even the use of tablets, phones, or digital audio and music. Virtual tabletops, for example, provide a shared digital space with tools such as interactive maps, digital character sheets, integrated dice rollers, and communication channels, often used in conjunction with platforms like *Discord*, which is yet another example of a digital tool as a facilitator.

b) Technology as the medium

In some forms of role-play, technology is not just a facilitator but the very medium in which the experience occurs. Virtual reality (VR), for example, allows researchers to experimentally manipulate or explore player choices in avatar characteristics, to study their effects on a player's identity, empathy, and social interactions (Zhang and Juvrud 2024). However, embodiment and presence are co-constitutive; a player's embodied avatar shapes their perception of the world, and the world shapes the possibilities for embodied action. Therefore, research in VR must consider the dynamic interplay between the embodied self and the perceived world.

c) Technology as an instrument

Most relevant to this chapter is technology as an instrument, or the use of devices to measure and analyze player states and behaviors. Technology can be used as a direct instrument for measurement, providing objective, real-time insights into the cognitive and emotional processes of players. Eye-tracking, for example, is a technology that provides a window into a participant's visual attention, which is a strong correlate of cognitive processing (Juvrud 2026). By measuring metrics like fixations, saccades, and dwell time, researchers can analyze social dynamics, e.g., who players look at during negotiations; engagement with game materials, e.g., maps, character sheets; and decision-making processes. While it provides precise, objective data, the equipment can be expensive and does not reveal what a person is consciously thinking. Other examples of technologies as instruments include heart rate monitors and galvanic skin response (GSR), tools that measure physiological arousal. Each one of these tools comes with their own learning curves, limitations, and demands; they should not be used without careful consideration of the research question.

The true strength of these instruments is unlocked when they are combined. For example, a GSR peak (high arousal) can be interpreted more accurately when synchronized with facial analysis data indicating "joy" and eye-tracking data showing the player was looking at a treasure chest. Even better, adding qualitative assessments such as interviews and surveys, can further expand the depth of an analysis. This triangulation of data streams overcomes the weaknesses of individual measures and enhances the validity of research findings.

For more on using advanced technology with role-playing games, including for research purposes, see the Erasmus+ EDGE Tech Toolkit (Suominen 2025).

d) Considerations when working with tech

When doing tech facilitated research you can harvest other kinds of documentation and data, depending on what tech you choose to work with. In VR for instance, all or any players' points of view can be streamed and heatmaps of player's movements in a certain space can be collected, to mention only a few examples. Many fascinating statistics can be created from tech.

This contrast with doing qualitative interviews is easily confused with quantitative certainty. Tracking eye movement and counting the seconds one player looks at another is not necessarily proof of interest; they might be lost in thought or experiencing lag. Just because tech can provide numbers does not necessarily make it useful from a research point of view. It is important to consider carefully what sort of tech best supports your research question. What sort of data and data analysis will not just satisfy the explorers' sense of neophilia, i.e., enthusiasm for new tech, but provide meaningful answers to the questions proposed?

To explore VR role-playing, see the VR Roleplay Repo (n.d.).

7.13 Summary

We close this implementation guide with considerations when doing rigorous research, whether Research through Design or other forms of data gathering, analysis, and writing. We hope these two textbooks can serve as companions for you throughout the design, implementation, and research process. Ideally, this work will increase your curiosity about the field of transformative role-playing game design and your desire to contribute to the discourse around applied practice in one or more of its many forms.

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