

Editorial

Ambitions in Applied Role-Play

Welcome to Issue 17 of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*.

22 authors. 10 articles. The statistics of this issue alone give us pause. The *IJRP* Issue 1, published 17 years ago, had 7 authors and 5 articles besides Anders Drachen's "Editorial," a tidy 5 paragraphs on the issue's origins, the universality of role-play, and the journal's explicit goal: "to facilitate and promote inter-network communication on role-playing research" (Drachen 2008, 2). In 2025, with its 17th issue in the journal's 18th year and featuring authors from all over the world, this Editorial Board maintains that we've fulfilled our mission. This time, we have authors spanning four continents from institutions in Ireland, Finland, Chile, Spain, the US, Greece, Australia, the Netherlands, and Sweden.

Role-playing game studies is not just a passing fad or subfield, but a vibrant interdisciplinary gestalt that also constitutes a core subfield of game studies. Within this issue's pages, all three primary liberal arts categories — the social sciences, the natural sciences, and the arts & humanities—are prominently featured, having been double-blind peer-reviewed by appropriate respondents. The shared object of study, role-playing in its varied forms, has enabled us to bring so many of the corners of the academy into dialogue with each other. We challenge the enthusiastic reader of this issue, in fact, to engage with at least one article in a discipline not their own. After all: somewhere amidst the whirlwind of this work, there must be a center.

Central to this issue in particular, however, is *applied role-play*: the act of using role-playing to accomplish some other goal. Role-play is not simply *autotelic*, or for its own sake, but also *telic* and *paratelic*: one can role-play to accomplish a specific goal, or even establish a specific emotional climate. In therapy, it can be used as a "simulation machine" that creates low-stakes environments in which participants can try out novel experiences or frame uncomfortable topics (Abramson 2025). In the military, role-play can incubate strategic mindsets within future leaders (Horiacheva and Ryzhykov 2024). In education, it can activate students' interests, bolster self-esteem, and permit students imaginative forms of math and literacy work (Haarman 2026; Watson 2026). Just as communication technologies such as the cassette tape, safety film stock, and the ethernet cable would eventually transform whole spheres of human activity, so now does an advanced understanding of applied role-play techniques pave a path toward embodied training in previously unimagined fields.

Also central to this issue are the *emotions* of role-players. To ask anyone to role-play is to solicit awkwardness and vulnerability. Expectations can easily run high or be misplaced, and that means plenty of opportunities for frustration and confusion. How can an immersive experience be tailored to arouse a student's curiosity (Hoke and Risk 2026)? Can games help us weather the storms of life (Brave 2026)? Is "the self" itself a site that can be explored through games (Masek et al. 2026)? Now that we have spent many decades trying to understand what role-play does and how it does it, we are in a better place to take the emotions of players seriously as core sites of meaning-making, learning, and design. This is not to say that we have a deity's eye view of the human mind through role-play, only that the medium has patterns that one can anticipate and therefore, to a limited extent, control.

Despite the usual modest goals of academic research, with its often-small sample sizes and provisional findings, this issue in particular connects the role-playing sciences into an ambitious whole greater than the sum of its parts. In fact, several of these articles introduce rigorous quantitative studies with much larger samples than has been the norm for the field, which has historically focused on subjective, first-hand experiences of participants. It starts from the first principles of

human inquiry (the liberal arts), sees role-play as a form of acquiring and disseminating knowledge, and then seeks to re-shape the emotions of participants and, in doing so, perhaps the attitudes of academia, its funding boards, and the wider world around it.

In order to accomplish this, it is notable that we have formed ever-larger groups of networked intellectuals. 19 peer reviewers, 4 editors, and worked on this issue, and 10 copyeditors followed up with revisions on the accepted articles. All 33 worked on a volunteer basis, which used to be the norm in academic writing to preserve intellectual integrity of the work, although we constantly seek funding to support the polishing and layout phases of the work, and were successful only in the latter. Just like role-playing itself, the academic editorial work required of us is community-driven and ultimately necessary to make this larger knowledge project sustainable. Furthermore, the surveys administered by the researchers in this issue have reached over a thousand aggregate participants, meaning that this work has already touched many lives.

Finally, we continue to receive a steady stream of work on the positive benefits of *Dungeons & Dragons* on both paradigmatic and psychological well being levels, which also echoes a flood of similar studies published in the last few years in other journals. These findings are both surprising and unsurprising. While they confirm previous work in the area supporting skill development and therapeutic impacts of the game, they also in some ways either fail to address or serve as a counterbalance to the more negative aspects of the game, such as its emphasis on violence (Albom 2021), its exclusionary content (Long 2016; Trammell 2016; Stang and Trammell 2020; Baker 2022), which has made their way also into larps and other games based on similar content (Martin et al. 2015; Kemper 2018; Loponen 2019). Indeed, recent work also indicates that fantasy gaming can also have positive impacts in these areas, such as empowering girls and women (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Dashiell 2020) and people of color (Walters 2021). For scholars like Trammell (2020), the very emphasis on “positive benefits” of games is steeped in colonial logic of what is considered useful and trivial play.

Our perspective is that all of these things can be true at the same time; that these games are highly complex and often contradictory environments that offer spaces that may challenge, but also reinforce damaging social norms, as is true in many subcultures. Many of us study these games precisely because we have experienced profound transformations of various kinds as a result of our engagement. Indeed, many of the authors of such studies in this issue hope to encourage similar kinds of experiences in other participants, whether in informal, nonformal, or formal learning spheres. A balanced view of these games should examine both positive and negative effects, as well as explore design and facilitation methods that can mitigate harm and foster greater inclusion.

John Dewey (1938) distinguishes between education and miseducation. From Dewey’s perspective, an individual learns from every experience, but some experiences may be miseducative if they reinforce habits that narrow future growth or distort one’s understanding of the world. Role-playing games function as powerful experiential environments, and therefore share this same ambiguity. While participants undoubtedly learn through play, what they learn may not always be reflective, inclusive, or growth-oriented. Recognizing this tension does not diminish the value of role-play as an object of research and pedagogical tool. Rather, it reminds us that the design and facilitation of role-playing experiences matter greatly.

The process of co-creative improvisation and the relative degree of agency provided by the affordances of the game can help players feel like they can make meaningful changes in the game, and sometimes this experience transfers to their beliefs about their capabilities outside of games. Work on intrinsic motivation and self-determination (Ryan and Deci 2017) has been of specific interest to RPG researchers (Algayres 2018; Hixson, West, and Eike 2024), as also echoed in McLaren, Oades, and Deery (2026) in this volume in terms of how these games have the potential to develop autonomy, relatedness, and competence regardless of the setting.

Within the issue itself, Ilias Tsiaras and Vasileios Neofotistos (2026) take on the research question of how adult educators in Greece perceive edu-larps, a form of educational role-play that is also connected

with fundamental principles of adult education. Tsiaras and Neofotistos demonstrate that our self-awareness as educators with specific toolkits and our courage to adopt ambitious edu-larp forms of instruction in our classroom are interlinked. “More informed educators,” they write, “are more likely to adopt innovative teaching methods, recognizing the multifaceted role they need to embrace to better address their trainees’ needs” (11). Educational administrators must read edu-larp activity within their curricula through the frameworks of educational excellence, rather than dismiss the techniques out of hand.

Rachel Hoke and James Risk (2026) continue in the study of edu-larping with a study of the implementation of games, including Reacting To The Past (RTTP) scenarios, in the undergraduate history classroom. RTTP has existed within educational circles for over two decades, offering a bridge between historical-simulation role-play and easily curricular integration. However, very little work has been published to date on these specific games’ impacts, either in educational or games research. Hoke and Risk surveyed their students after having participated in RTTP scenarios, discovering that the affective and cognitive engagement offered by the game scenarios offered considerable advantages over traditional lecture. At the very least, edularps such as RTTP channel our students’ attention and ensure their cultivation of substantive internal narratives regarding the topic at hand.

McLaren, Oades, and Deery (2026) see this engagement in terms of applied role-play work, namely tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) playing therapeutic functions. Through the dungeonmaster (DM) figure, *D&D* presents therapists with a powerful tool to meet the basic psychological needs of the players, something that the tabletop role-playing game medium already does *outside* of therapy. For the discipline of psychology, such foundational work by McLaren, Oades, and Deery is necessary to advance lines of inquiry between games and mental health.

Echoing this focus on mental well-being as well as our previous special issue on consent and safety in role-play, Joe Lasley and Antonio Ruiz Ezquerro (2026) examine psychological safety in TTRPGs as a multi-dimensional construct. The authors emphasize the “relational and networked” quality of leadership in modern theories of management, which also corresponds with the collaborative nature of role-playing games as media. If anyone needed an article to demonstrate that it is not an *individual* but a *collective group* that keeps a whole role-playing game session within the boundaries of safety and consent, this is the one.

Luka Brave (2026) also found high levels of empathy in tabletop role-playing groups, in that those engaged in role-play often assumed the perspectives of others and were able to abstract and analyze their own emotional states. Brave’s work illustrates the remarkable nature of TTRPGs and larps as vehicles for self-knowledge, especially in gauging one’s own feelings with respect to circumstances of trauma and/or emotional strain. The illusions of role-play scenarios can directly translate into the emotional realities of dealing with stress and other adverse mental conditions.

Brave’s work leans on the notion of bleed, or the overlap between player and character emotion, is central to the psychological work of Albers and de Wit (2026), who have operationalized bleed in a focused study on *D&D*. They have discovered that the development of a character with a personality that greatly resembles that of its player will also further facilitate bleed on all fronts. Furthermore, a character possessing traits that the player wished they themselves possessed will also increase overall bleed. A dissimilar character, in the meantime, will find their traits expressing themselves within the player, but not *vice versa*.

McKenzie, Zawilski, and Beirne (2026) deal with *D&D* bleed of a different sort: the kind of moral guidance that a commercial tabletop role-playing scenario offers its players. Their study examines *D&D* through decolonial theory, leaning on the idea that themes and messages *against* the commercial-colonial logic of a corporate game can be “smuggled” into the corporate product itself. The article covers the breadth of reception theory and the politics of revolutionary persuasion before resting its gaze on an innocuous *D&D* scenario that may have activated the conscience of many players worldwide.

In Masek, Galeote, Pomposini, and Gonzalez-Cohens (2026), the authors coin the phrase “ludic inquiry” to define their research methodology, in that certain social “facts” emerge through the ludic behaviors

within a specific game scenario. The larp that helped shape this research, *On the Other Side*, explores questions of migration and fascism. Although the relationship of simulation and role-play to social-systems modeling is quite well-established, Masek et al. demonstrate the way that games allow players to try on different social frameworks and incentive structures. Future researchers can always design a larp around their inquiries, and map the decision trees in which players tend to find themselves.

Juvrud (2026) represents the cutting edge in role-playing research, crossing between the functions of the body and the play of the mind. In “Utilizing Psychophysiological Measures in Role-playing Studies,” Juvrud analyzes the connections between decisions made in the game and measures such as eye tracking and heart rate. This pathbreaking work, despite requiring a highly controlled and stationary environment, opens up numerous possibilities for bridging between the medical sciences and the humanities, in which storytelling is both an external expression and internal physiological state.

The issue also contains an English translation of Garcia-Soriano, Moreno, and Cohens’ (2026) 2023 article “Juegos de Rol para el trabajo en equipo,” which sees role-playing as an ideal tool for fostering teamwork. What is useful here is the author’s overall outline of the process, such that the curious reader might implement it themselves. The Editorial Board of *IJRP* views this particular framework as an object of potential interest to an English-language readership as well. Furthermore, we aim to publish translations of key texts in each issue when possible, especially with reference to literature on applied role-playing games. Thus, we are working closely with the *Journal of Roleplaying Studies and STEAM*, which publishes work in Spanish and English.

It is rare for us to be able to stop, take a breath, and do an inventory of our contributions and ongoing projects. Nevertheless, such a moment has been afforded us here, and we should appreciate the sheer scale of this newer work in role-playing game studies. Signal has transcended all noise here: role-playing is not just a medium of expression, but a sophisticated tool for anyone working on the relationships between humans, or simply those relationships we have with ourselves and our inner worlds. If it is helpful to take on a persona or character to accomplish a goal, why not do it?

—Evan Torner, Sarah Lynne Bowman, Susan Haarman, and William J. White
March 9, 2026

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