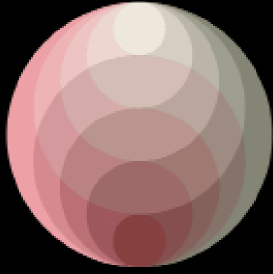

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ROLE-PLAYING

A peer reviewed journal on analog role-playing games
and adjacent phenomena

ISSUE 18

Editorial

This issue of the International Journal of Role-playing is based on the proceedings of the first Role-Play in Games Conference hosted in Tampere, Finland, April 9th and 10th 2025, by the Games As Art Center and Tampere University Game Research Lab.

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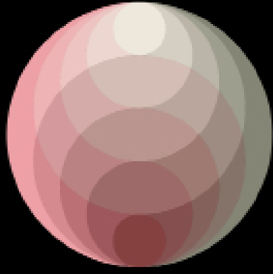

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Losing and Finding Oneself: Duo- and Autoethnographic Study of 'Character' in the larp Superrealism

This text uses mutiple ethnographic methodologies to bring designer intent and player experience into discourse. It argues that a variety of design choices in larp may construct a meaningful and transformative experience for its players.

Sarah Lynne Bowman,
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The Dynamic Loop Model: A Systemic-Cybernetic Meta-Theoretical Framework for Understanding Tabletop Role-Playing Games

This article introduces the Dynamic Loop Model for analyzing and understanding trpgs, based on cybernetics, Stafford Beer's Viable System Model and Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory.

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How is Learning in Edu-larp as a Method Described and Seen by Practitioners?

This work analyzes expert interviews to unpack the what, how, and why edu-larp is used as a tool for learning.

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The Role of the Cosmographer

This piece argues that role-playing games represent a historical development of the human capacity for imagining other worlds. It frames rpgs as cosmographic technology, synthesizing the ironic imaginations of speculative fiction with oracular simulations of dice, randomness, and probabilities from wargaming.

Nicholas Mizer **139-150**

Editorial

Special Issue on Foundational Approaches and the Role-Play in Games Conference

Welcome to Issue 18 of the International Journal of Role-Playing. This issue of the International Journal of Role-playing is based on the proceedings of the first Role-Play in Games Conference hosted in Tampere, Finland, April 9th and 10th 2025, by the Games As Art Center and Tampere University Game Research Lab. This conference brought together interdisciplinary scholars and experts around foundational questions and approaches to role-playing around the world. This conference was run under the guiding principles of pluralist game studies (Masek 2025): Intentionally bringing together scholars from a wide variety of disciplines, cultural backgrounds, academic credentials, into a singular yet diverse community of practice. The conference included a peer review process where scholars knew each other's identities as they gave each other critical feedback. An editorial team provided further support in ensuring academic credibility and rigor.

In introducing the resulting works, we begin by framing the call these authors responded to. This conference opened a space for scholars to come together to discuss four elemental foundations for role-playing in games: Cultural, Historical, Theoretical, and Critical.

Culturally, role-playing in games has a notable Western focus in past literature. We invited research works that target alternative cultural histories, foundations and works that incorporate or fill in theories of role-playing. We invited analyses of role-playing focusing on diverse aspects of games and players, including the social roles, structure and activities of player communities, and the political economy of role-playing games.

Historically, RPGs are sometimes described as having a monolithic history where fantasy literature and wargaming came together to create a fantasy combat game genre typified by titles such as Chainmail and Advanced Dungeons & Dragons (Tresca 2014). However, several elements of role-playing in games, including interactive theater, role "taking" in psychological drama, historical re-enactments, costume parties, and imagination play, have long histories of documentations and as a part of human society. We invited alternative historical trajectories for role-playing in games for the field.

Theoretically, we invited greater work on the why and how role-playing in games manifests. We invited foundational approaches to role-playing, whether psychological, sociological or game design oriented.

Critically, we invited papers that challenge norms of what "role-playing" in games is at all. Possible lenses included foundational theories that should face greater scrutiny, or "edge-case" scenarios of role-playing in games that are widespread and deserve discussion such as queer theory and role-playing, sports philosophy, professional wrestling/performative role-play, dark role-play, technologically enhanced role-play, serious role-play and pervasive role-play.

The resulting proceedings admirably responded to these calls and include ten works that expand the current base of knowledge in role-playing game studies in a variety of ways. They analyze a wide form and presentation of role-playing from live action role-playing games (larp), to tabletop role-playing games (TRPG), educational larp (edu-larp), to peripheral phenomena, such as actual plays and metaplots across game publications. As RPG studies expands, it is valuable for all of us as a community of scholars to continually push

the boundaries and foundations of what, how, and why we study the fascinating and playful phenomenon of role-playing.

Culturally and historically, the special issue studies a diversity of backgrounds in traditions of role-playing game makers around the world. Adrian Hermann's (2026) "Another Kind of Future/Past: Decolonial and Asiafuturist Imagination in the Philippines from the 19th Century to the Contemporary Tabletop Role-Playing Games of #rpgsea" explores four recent tabletop role-playing games from the Philippines arguing they expand a rich tradition of 19th-century speculative writers in the region with a decolonial and anticolonial vision of a future-past. Pengze Zheng's (2026) "What are Studio Games: Using the GFI Model to Investigate Chinese Jubensha" explores, unpacks and presents two expert interviews on the popular commercial studio model of larp in China. His work unpacks how these specialized studios, akin to immersive theater and escape rooms, provide services, customized props, themed environments, and professional game masters to craft a unique business model and type of role-playing experience. Finally, Mátyás Hartyándi's (2026) "From 'Playing a Role' to 'Role-Playing Games': The Genealogy and History of the Term 'Role-Playing'" takes a genealogical approach to map the meanings of "role-playing" across nine historical and disciplinary contexts. He argues that from 18th-century German literature to developmental psychology and Cold War simulations, the ideas that underpin contemporary hobbyist role-playing have never been monolithic but rather are layered, interdisciplinary and hybrid.

In this way, we see how a cultural and historical investigation of role-playing in games also invites discussion of disciplinary thinking and core theoretical approaches one can apply to these myriad phenomena. Several texts in the collection focus upon theoretical investigations of a form of role-playing that adds contextual and critical value for expanding our field of study. Steven Dashiell's (2026) "Hack, Slash, Heal, Repeat: Theorizing the Concept of the Murderhobo in *Dungeons & Dragons*" introduces and fleshes out the playstyle "murderhobo", which is widely known in the gaming world, with a clear definition for game studies. In a similar way, Jukka Särkijärvi's "On the Metaplot: A Look at Transmedial Storytelling in Tabletop Role-Playing Games" theoretically expands on the concept of "metaplot", an ongoing story inside of the gameworld created and released by a game publisher. He argues this is a unique phenomenon to role-playing games and represents a core tension between role-playing's interest in creative agency for players and the economic realities of game publication.

In addition to valuable forms of role-playing, certain texts use case studies to frame critical insights on the potentials and limitations of collective storytelling. Sarah Lynne Bowman's, Lauri Lukka's and Josephine Baird's (2026) "Losing and Finding Oneself: Duo- and Autoethnographic Study of 'Character' in the larp Superrealism" uses multiple ethnographic methods to bring designer intent and player experience into discourse. It argues that a variety of design choices in larp may construct a meaningful and transformative experience for its players. Șerban Mark Pop's (2026) "How Do You Want To Do This?: Us, Role-Playing Games, and The End of the World", uses a case study of Critical Role to analyze the persistent foundations of capitalist realism even in a collective storytelling medium.

Finally, authors bring in disciplinary frameworks, and theoretical approaches to defining and investing role-playing in games. Felipe García-Soriano's and Daniel González Cohens' (2026) "The Dynamic Loop Model: A Systemic-Cybernetic Meta-Theoretical Framework for Understanding Tabletop Role-Playing Games" introduces the Dynamic Loop Model for analyzing and understanding TRPGs. It introduces cybernetics, Stafford Beer's Viable System Model and Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory, to reframe player and game interactions as a self-regulating system. Josefin Westborg's (2026) "How is Learning in Edu-larp as a Method Described and Seen by Practitioners?" analyzes expert interviews

to unpack the what, how, and why edu-larp is used as a tool for learning. Finally, Nicholas Mizer's (2026) "The Role of the Cosmographer" argues that role-playing games represent a historical development of the human capacity for imagining other worlds. He frames RPGs as cosmographic technology, synthesizing the ironic imaginations of speculative fiction with oracular simulations of dice, randomness, and probabilities from wargaming.

In conclusion, this special issue offers future scholars an expansion of the foundations of role-playing game studies. It offers valuable context and novel argumentation on the cultural, historical, theoretical, and critical foundations that define our shared community of practice.

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Another Kind of Future/Past: Decolonial and Asiafuturist Imagination in the Philippines from the 19th Century to the Contemporary Tabletop Role-Playing Games of #rpgsea

Abstract: This article explores recent tabletop role-playing games from the Philippines (*The Islands of Sina Una, Gubat Banwa, Karanduun, BALIKBAYAAN,* and *ON THE BONES OF BATALA*) in the context of historical writings from the 19th century by Pedro Paterno and Isabelo de los Reyes. I argue that these 21st century Filipino games are important contributions to an alternative cultural history of role-playing and are embedded in a larger tradition of speculative writing that engages with colonial violence and proposed alternative decolonial and anticolonial visions of the future-past.

Keywords: Philippines, Filipino games, cultural history, decolonialism, Asiafuturism, #rpgsea

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the following, I explore recent tabletop role-playing games from the Philippines in the context of historical writings from the 19th century. I propose that looking at these Filipino games, which are part of the role-playing scene that has gathered under the hashtag #rpgsea[1], can be interpreted as contributions to an *alternative cultural history of role-playing and imaginative play*, which the Role-Play in Games conference has suggested we need to pay increased attention to. In this way, the Filipino games I discuss might be understood as being embedded in a larger tradition of utopian and speculative writing, even if they have until now not been discussed as such, nor have been interpreted from this perspective. I hope this short article can thus contribute to a broader discussion about how current tabletop role-playing games from all over the world relate to both theoretical debates on role-playing in various local gaming communities (see Peterson 2020; Torner 2024; Wee 2024) and to diverse regional traditions of fantastical and speculative storytelling (Oziewicz 2017; Gui 2025).

The first part of what I am going to discuss is very familiar to most scholars in Philippine studies, but probably not well-known to anyone not familiar with the history of the Philippines: the work of two important intellectual figures in 19th and early 20th century Filipino history, Pedro A. Paterno and Isabelo de los Reyes. I will briefly discuss their writings, proposing a new interpretation of their texts as an imaginative writing of a fictive Filipino past. This is supposed to serve as a historical context for the other material I want to discuss, which is probably unknown to most academics working on the Philippines today, but that some scholars of role-playing games might already be familiar with: recent tabletop role-playing games published by Filipino designers on itch.io (and some in print). In analyzing these games, I will attempt to establish a connection between the famous 19th century writers' imaginations and the 21st century visions of the future and the past presented by the role-playing game designers.

By exploring these two very different forms of texts from the late 19th and the early 21st century in the Philippines anew and considering them as speculative historical and

[1] See https://across-rpgsea.com/ where momatoes, designer of games like *ARC: Doom Tabletop RPG* (2021) and *The Magus* (2021) has curated a selection of games from of the South-east Asian RPG scene.

Asiafuturist writings that "make the past an imaginative resource in and for the present" want to draw attention to their visions of utopian and dystopian futures as examples of "critical dystopia" that represent a "dynamic tension" beyond the "utopic/dystopic" (Moynagh and Cornum 2020, 13). In this way, their versions of (pre-)colonial pasts and decolonial futures can be analyzed as elements of alternative cultural histories of role-playing and imaginative play and as contributions to a decolonization of speculative and utopian fiction. At the same time, in regard to role-playing games, their efforts can be understood as being embedded in current debates about diversity and representation in games and about the best strategies on how to realize "RPGs … immense potential for diversity" (Burton et al. 2024, 465).

In my present contribution to this, I am particularly interested in how, in the 19th but also in the 21st century "religion" served and still serves as a main vehicle of signifying both colonial domination as well as utopian potentials for alternative visions. I argue that the material I discuss here on the one hand clearly reflects its embeddedness in the modern and global discourse of religion (Hermann 2024), while it at the same time attempts to subvert and re-figure the fundamental parameters of this global discourse to carve out an anti- and decolonial space. In this sense, we might ask: Can we interpret contemporary examples of Filipino tabletop role-playing games as visions of "migrant futures" (as conceptualized by Bahng 2018) and as "BIPOC futurisms" (to use a concept proposed by Mitchell and Chaudhury 2020)?

2. WRITING IMAGINATIVE PASTS IN THE PHILIPPINES IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY

Firstly, I want to draw attention to some 19th century Filipino scholarship and historical writings, briefly introducing two historical figures and their work that – as I argue – could be interpreted as a form of imaginative and speculative fiction (for a useful exploration of the broader context of these two figures see Mojares 2006a and Thomas 2012).

Pedro A. Paterno who lived from 1858 to 1911, was a Filipino politician, novelist, and poet. In 1885, he published *Ninay*, the first novel by a native Filipino. Having supported the Spanish side before the Philippine Revolution that began in 1896, in 1899, he managed to become president of the 'Malolos Congress' (the constituent assembly of the First Philippine Republic), and during the American colonial government served in the First Philippine Assembly. He is a controversial figure, as he is often regarded as a 'traitor' and the quintessential elitist 'turncoat' in the context of the Philippine revolution (Reyes 2006).

In the late 19th century, however, Paterno also wrote and published books like *La antigua civilización Tagalog* (in 1887) – *The Ancient Tagalog Civilization* (see Rath 2016) – and *El cristianismo en la antigua civilización tagalog* (in 1892) – *Christianity in the Ancient Tagalog Civilization* –, both of which attempted a reconstruction of a pre-colonial Tagalog 'high civilization' and argued that even before the Spaniards arrived in the early sixteenth century, the ancient Tagalogs had been "Spaniards at heart" (Schumacher 1991, 107, see Morrow 2009) and had practiced the religion of "Tagalism" (*Tagalismo*) or "Bathalism" (*Bathalismo*). The latter name Paterno derives from Bathala, the pre-Hispanic Tagalog divinity (Thomas 2012, 76). Historian Megan Thomas describes this in her analysis of Paterno's writings as follows:

> Arguing that pre-Hispanic Tagalog religion was neither animist, "spiritist," nor pantheist, he wrote that Bathalism was a religion on par with Catholicism, equally inspired by truth. He proved this by finding in Bathalism institutions, concepts, and

> figures that paralleled those of Catholicism, including the Catholic idea of God (Bathala) but also equivalents for Catholic saints, priests, cathedrals, heaven, hell, bishops, confession, friar orders, and even for the virgin mother. (Thomas 2012, 77)

Paterno also argued that other great civilizations had been associated with this Tagalog culture, placing the Tagalogs at the center of a universal history in which large pre-Hispanic exchanges between China, India, Egypt, Persia, and the Philippines had been taking place. In this sense, he describes the ancient Tagalog civilization as an important part world history (Thomas 2012).

Contrary to most perspectives at the time (and even today), which interpret Paterno's works mostly as flawed attempts at writing history (Reyes 2006, 89–90), I suggest that we could interpret *La antigua civilización Tagalog* less as an attempt at historical writing, but rather as a playful exploration of an imaginative vision of an alternative past that would allow Filipinos to denounce Catholicism and claim for themselves an ancient civilization on par with European history. In a certain way, this form of writing could then be compared with similar arguments put forth by indigenous writers for example in South America, as in the famous Peruvian *El primer nueva crónica y buen gobierno* from 1615 by Felipe Guamán Poma de Ayala, which uses a similar rhetorical strategy (see Adorno 2000).

I quickly want to mention a second writer from the late 19th and early 20th century in the Philippines. *Isabelo de los Reyes*, who lived from 1864 to 1938, was a folklorist, journalist, labor activist, and religious leader. Born in Vigan in Northern Luzon, he wrote for and edited numerous periodicals throughout his life. After being exiled to Spain in 1897, he returned to the Philippines in 1901, became very active in politics and was essential in 1902 in the proclamation of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente, a Rome-independent, anti-colonial Catholic movement (see Hermann 2021).

In his book *El folk-lore filipino* published in 1889, a "youthful masterwork" as Benedict Anderson (2005, 12) has called it, he was engaged in an "emancipatory project" (Mojares 2006a, 353), establishing parallels and comparisons between Filipino folk-lore and, among others, Nordic, Greek, and Egyptian mythology, as well as the beliefs of ancient and contemporary peoples from various continents, including what he calls the "Hottentots", "Guaranos" (of Paraguay), "Californians", "Romans", "Iroquois", and "Chinese" (see Thomas 2012, 119). In addition, he argues that superstitious 'backward' beliefs might have been introduced to the Philippines by the Spanish (Mojares 2006). All of this, as Filipino historian Resil B. Mojares has shown (2006a, 354), contributes to a "de-exorcization" and "de-primitivization" of de los Reyes' 19th century Filipino present, in which he also attempts to overcome a fundamental distinction at work in the Philippines:

> Folklore – comparative folklore – enabled him [de los Reyes] to bridge the deepest chasm in colonial society, which lay not between colonized and colonizers – they all lived in the lowlands, they were all Catholics, and they dealt with one another all the time. It was the abyss between all of these people and those whom we would today call "tribal minorities": […] men, women and children facing a future of – possibly violent – assimilation, even extermination. (Anderson 2005, 17)

In the introduction to *El folk-lore* this perspective is apparent, as de los Reyes even describes himself as "hermano de los selváticos, aetas, igorrotes y tinguianes" (brother of the forest

peoples, the Aeta, the Igorots and the Tinguians) (de los Reyes 1889, 19; see Anderson 2005, 17).

In 1909, in the same vein as Paterno, de los Reyes published a book under the title *La religión antigua de los Filipinos* (The ancient religion of the Filipinos), comparing various religions with his idea of pre-colonial Philippines religion, surveying the religions of ethnic groups in the Philippines, and arguing for a pre-Hispanic monotheism (see Mojares 2006a, 320–322).

While both Paterno and de los Reyes are of course well known to scholars of Philippine history, their writings have often been dismissed and ridiculed, and only recently have been reconsidered as important contributions (Reyes 2006, Bolata and Santiago 2025). Already their contemporaries in the late 19th century were (perhaps understandably) very critical of their work. The later national hero of the Philippines, José Rizal, in a letter to his friend, the German scholar Ferdinand Blumentritt, described himself at a loss of words when reading Paterno's writings on Bathala, which he could only comment on with a 'loopy line' (see Morrow 2009). Others called Paterno a plagiarist, an impostor, and a buffoon (see Mojares 2006a, 15).

However, if we are interested in alternative cultural histories of imaginative play[2], maybe a different form of interpretation becomes possible, one that is a bit more charitable (and more playful) towards our understanding of the respective projects of these Filipino intellectuals in the last decades of the 19th century. *What if we understand them not as attempts to provide a rigorous and factual history of the Philippines but rather as attempts, in the midst of the cruelty of the colonial situation, to envision a different past, enabling another and different future?*

In writing their different pasts, I argue, Pedro Paterno and de los Reyes were imagining a utopian, decolonial future, and were providing resources for an imagining of anti-colonial resistance and subversion.

I want now to turn to a possibly surprising parallel between what I see as the playful work being done in the texts of Paterno and de los Reyes and the work performed by contemporary Filipino writers in a similar vein, but in a quite different aesthetic medium: the design of tabletop role-playing games.

3. THE 21ST CENTURY SPECULATIVE FICTION OF #RPGSEA: A CONTRIBUTION TO AN ALTERNATIVE CULTURAL HISTORY OF ROLE-PLAY?

From a certain perspective, the contemporary diverse 21st century landscape of tabletop role-playing games is a late result of a now over fifty-year history that began the 1970s when *Dungeons & Dragons*, first published in 1974, basically invented a new form of play (Peterson 2024). Bringing together the traditions of wargaming and fantasy literature with the idea of players embodying an individual character that experiences a variety of adventures, a new aesthetic (and artistic) medium took form (Peterson 2012, xvii; see Feige 2020)

Over the last 10 years, tabletop role-playing games have once more seen an expansive mainstream success, fueled by the release of the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 2014, but equally by the emergence of a broad and diverse scene of independent game designers

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[2] The concept of "imaginative play" serves both as a critical term for the Bonn Lab for Analog Games and Imaginative Play which I am directing in Bonn and as a lens to engage with forms of analog play that involve forms of "pretend play" and in particular of "pre-tensive shared reality" (Kapitany et al. 2022). For a more detailed description see Hermann 2025, 189–191.

(White 2020; Berge 2021; Bisogno 2022). Most attention, however, is still paid to designers from North America and Europe, overlooking the ways in which (independent) tabletop role-playing game design scenes have established themselves in other parts of the world.

One of the reasons that make tabletop role-playing games a particularly attractive medium for game designers in more marginalized situations, as for example in the Philippines, is that such games are often distributed as PDF booklets or books on digital platforms like itch.io, and thus the cost of both production and distribution is very low, as all that is needed to participate in semi-professional tabletop role-playing game design is a computer with layout software like In-Design or Affinity Publisher. It is not surprising therefore, that the last 10 years have also seen a rise to more prominence of, for example, Southeast Asian game designers, who have rallied under the hashtag #rpgsea. In addition to these economic reasons for the emerging game design scenes in (Southeast) Asian countries (as well as in Latin America, where hashtags like #rpglatam have been coined) there is also social connection and community building facilitated through events like Session Zero Online (in January 2021) and a resulting vibrant playtesting community on Discord, contributing to various regional scenes.

This has highlighted games that develop unique and original approaches, engage with larger trends in the indie tabletop role-playing game design space, but also often negotiate questions of how to (or not) incorporate cultural elements of different Southeast Asian contexts into the settings and game mechanics. While many of the #rpgsea tabletop role-playing games do not understand themselves as specifically "Southeast Asian", a number of them do contain direct references to local and regional cultural material and can be analyzed in regard to how they created specific "cultural languages of role-playing" (e.g. Ilieva 2023). In particular, some of the games explicitly draw on e.g. Filipino religion, folklore, myth, and legend to make innovative contributions to the often-limited mythological repertoire of many European and North American tabletop role-playing games.

Shortly discussing five such examples below, I want to argue that contemporary game designers in the Philippines are both continuing and re-working the 19th century tradition of imaginative and speculative writing I presented above, engaging with the (colonial) past and envisioning other futures. In this continuation and re-working, an alternative cultural history of imaginative play and (tabletop) role-play emerges that could serve as a complementary (or even corrective) perspective to existing histories of tabletop role-playing games. In addition, I particularly want to highlight the role that religion plays in these examples.

The first game (or game supplement) is *The Islands of Sina Una*, published by Hit Points Press in 2021. "Sina Una" means "those who came first". This is a campaign setting book for the fifth edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, designed by a team of Filipinos in the diaspora (mostly in the USA) and in the Philippines themselves. It tries to bring a semi-fictional world inspired by Filipino mythology and culture to fantasy role-playing. The authors describe their endeavor as follows:

> *The Islands of Sina Una* […] pulls from the precolonial mythology and culture of the Philippines. […] Filipino mythology is largely forgotten, with much of it passed down solely through oral tradition and subsequently lost to colonization. For the team behind this book, *The Islands of Sina Una* serves as a way to rediscover and reforge that missing link to the past – to connect with our ancestors and share their stories with generations to come. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 8)

As is common with such supplements, *Sina Una* provides the players with new options to create characters that they will direct through island adventures. These characters are described as follows:

> Your character is tied to both the people around them and the spirits of the world they travel […]. Some of this is extrapolated from real-life historical accounts […]. At the end of it all, though, *The Islands of Sina Una* is a fictional fantasy setting, and seeing your own identity in the characters you play is a cathartic and important part of the book's goals. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 17)

Reading the book, it quickly becomes apparent that religion is central to the stories that the authors expect to be played and experienced in this fictional version of the pre-colonial Philippines. Under the heading "Spirits and Religion", the book describes "Animism", "Souls, Death, and the Afterlife", and the "Gods of the Islands" (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 19–45). "Bathala" for example, the Tagalog deity that Pedro Paterno was writing about in the 19th century, is described as follows: "Bathala is the creator of all things and god of the sky. Though he holds great power, he is respected, rather than feared." (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 23)

In this sense, I argue, *Sina Una* can be seen as being embedded in the same tradition of reimagining the Philippine past that Paterno and de los Reyes contributed to establishing. In a similar way, the authors of *Sina Una* use the past as a resource for telling stories that focus on cultural identity, belonging, and an appropriation of the past for shaping a decolonial future.

Sina Una also provides new options for *Dungeons & Dragons* character classes. All classes from the *Player's Handbook* are provided with new subclass options like the Barbarian's "Path of the Black River", the Monk's "Way of Kaluluwa", or the Sorcerer's "Diwata Bloodline". The book also introduces two a fully new and original classes, called the "Babaylan" and the "Headhunter". The Babaylan is described as follows:

> Babaylan are mediums, channeling the power and wisdom of the spirits through offerings and communion. Accompanied by a patron spirit companion known as an abayan, babaylan serve as leaders, protectors, and healers for their communities. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 164).

In this sense, *Sina Una* establishes an imagined version of pre-colonial Filipino religion in game terms. Recognizable throughout the book are the resonances of the descriptions for example in de los Reyes 19th century works, who describes the "Babailan" as "cunning and very clever" priestesses (*astutas y muy listas*; de los Reyes 1889, 163).

Equally, the Headhunters are described as

> trained to commune with the spirits of their ancestors, and it is via this connection that they hone their martial skill. Through rites and omens, they receive knowledge of those to pursue; from those that they send to the afterlife, they learn ways to hone their tools of combat. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 170)

These mystical fighters also resonate with the pre-colonial past imagined and described by Paterno and de los Reyes. For the designers and writers of *Sina Una*, the additional game

options they provide are closely connected with their vision of pre-colonial religion (and magic). They write:

> Spirits are also the source of magic in the islands. […] [C]lerics and the shamanistic babaylan […] commune withpowerful spirits directly, who in return for offerings grant these individuals access to fearsome divine magic. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 8–9).

In line with this description, the cleric subclass of the "Volcano Domain" is presented as follows:

> Standing high above the land for all to see, the volcano casts a large and reaching shadow. […] Its lava can birth new land. To see only its destruction is to be ruled by fear, and to see only its domain over growth, is naive. Clerics of the volcano domain are ruled by neither, and channel the raw force that the volcano commands in either form it takes. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 179)

Equally, the Babaylan class already mentioned above, popularly called "Philippine shamans", are described as "intermediaries between the spirit realm and the mortal world" (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 165). Their power is presented as follows:

> Most babaylan begin their training as an apprentice, shadowing an elder babaylan to learn the rituals and practice of the role. Once this training has been completed, the individual is conferred a personal spirit guide known as an abayan. […] It is through this bond with their abayan that babaylan can channel magic, drawing energy from both nature and ancestral spirits and manifesting it in spectacular feats of healing, divination, and even divine combat. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 165)

Considering all these descriptions, it can be recognized that one central way in which the pre-colonial past is (re)imagined in *Sina Una* is through a focus on religious themes, together with explorations of magic and ritual. In this way, a certain vision of a pre-colonial Philippines becomes fictionalized in the setting of *Sina Una* and is thus prepared as additional material for tabletop role-playing and for the creation of future-oriented narratives of the past that the players using this material are supposed to create.

There are many more details regarding the role of religion and Filipino mythology in *Sina Una* that could be discussed. But the creators of the project also provide additional context for the way in which the project is invested in the creators' own negotiations of identity. In the Foreword, the creation of *The Islands of Sina Una* is not only recounted by the project's co-director as a transformative experience. He also writes:

> In all my life, I have always referred to myself as anything but just Filipino. I was Filipino-American. I was Filipino-Chinese. […] But working on this book, and learning about my culture, I have since stopped. I am Filipino. With no shame, with no second guessing. This is what Sina Una has done for me. (Versprille and Mendenhall 2019, 5)

For him, the creation of a pre-colonial, utopian, and fantastic version of the Philippines provides a space in which one can not only read about the past but also experience it through play, and thus create memories of a fantastical past which never was. This can lead to the creation of utopian stories that, at least according to the authors of this game book, can have an identity-affirming and cathartic effect.

A second tabletop-roleplaying game set in a world inspired by "Precolonial Philippine/ Southeast Asian Life and Society" (Saveedra 2024, 632), *Gubat Banwa*, is much less peaceful. In the First (Legacy) edition, version 1.61 (the game has been released in many different versions and states of completion), it describes itself as a "tactical combat and war drama Tabletop Roleplaying Game of warrior-braves surviving in a war-torn land inspired by Precolonial Philippines" (Saavedra 2024, 636). Its author, Joaquin Kyle Saavedra (tagamantra.itch.io), is a Filipino writer of speculative fiction novels and tabletop role-playing games in both Filipino and English. In his work, he draws upon Filipino Folklore, Legends, Culture, History, and Myth, turning them into gameable materials.

The game is set in the archipelago of the "Sword Isles" (Saveedra 2024, 42) and in an earlier version described itself as an "unapologetic Heroic Fantasy game that rises and is based on pre-colonial Philippine sensibility, mythology, and history" (version 1.3, Saveedra 2023, 46–47). Again, in much of this fictionalized setting, echoes of the 19th century tradition of Paterno and de los Reyes can be felt and can sometimes be explicitly recognized. For example, in the chapter on the "Faiths of the Sword Isles", he describes one aspect as follows:

> ANITO
> The most prevalent religion amongst the isles, so embedded it is into daily life that it is hardly considered a religion, and thought of more as a way of life. Anito translates to worship. Anito is the faith in the inherent divinity of nature. (Saveedra 2023, 695).

Compare this with a quote from the above-mentioned book by de los Reyes, *La religión antigua de los Filipinos*, in which the "anitos" play a central role: "The true foundation of Filipino Religion, as with that of all Malays, is the cult of the souls of ancestors, called *Anitos* […]" (*El verdadero fondo de la Religión filipina, como el de la de todos los malayos, es el culto de las almas de los antepasados, que llamaban* Anitos […]; de los Reyes 1909, 39).

What is on display here, as in *Sina Una*, is an imagination of pre-colonial Filipino religion, that Paterno and de los Reyes, among others, significantly shaped in the late 19th and early 20th century, and that current tabletop role-playing game designers are continuing to make use of. These understandings (and innovative re-interpretations) of the tradition of Philippines speculative writing I am trying to identify here have to be traced if one wants to identify some constitutive elements of a continuing project decolonial speculation that could provide a contribution to an alternative cultural history of role-play.

At the same time, Saavedra, the designer of *Gubat Banwa*, has been constantly struggling with, reworking, and redescribing the ways in which the game relates to its inspirations and the past. Describing it as "Inspired By Southeast Asia", he claims that

> Gubat Banwa is a fantasy setting, but it seeks to re-evaluate and revamp what "Fantasy" means. It starts its foundations and assumptions upon Southeast Asian folklore and experience, instead of any fantasy literature or pop-fantasy crafted by many Western Fantasy conventions. If you wish to play Gubat Banwa, you must center Southeast

> Asia. Old Fantasy conventions might be found here, but only because of the inherent similarities of Southeast Asian stories with other stories. It is important to remember that Gubat Banwa is not Southeast Asia. It is inspired by it, and in turn uplifts it, but it is not it. This is an important dichotomy. (Saavedra 2024, 647)

This section towards the end of the book is preceded by instructions to the players at the beginning of the text:

> Let's get two very important things clear: *this game centers us* and *this game's setting is not Southeast Asia.*
>
> This game is explicitly written with us in mind, us being Filipinos and other Southeast Asian people. Thus, it centers us. The "default" is a broad-nosed, five foot tall, genderless brown person. (Or better yet, remove the notion of a default.) It centers our experiences, our ideals. Our traditions, our weird cakes, our weird smells. It's about us. You are welcome to play our roles: that is what an RPG is, after all. *But be respectful, because even we respect ourselves.* Treat us like people. This game is about us.
>
> Secondly, this game is *not Southeast Asia*. It is not *just Precolonial Philippines*. It is its own fantasy setting. *It is a Fantasy intensely inspired by the refulgent and diluvial cultures and stories of Southeast Asia.*
>
> It is a *mythic reconstruction of a grand Southeast Asia of Hindu-Buddhist Empires, Islam Sultanates,* and *indigenous kingdoms and communities.* A work of pure love for something that has been torn away from us. I am Pilipinhon, which means much of the writing is influenced by Philippines, but much of my research into Precolonial Philippines has been the *joyful eradication of the "Filipino" identity* to find a more whole and complete view of *Southeast Asia*, where our differences don't divide us but unite, where the *waters don't separate but connect.* (Saavedra 2024, 6; emphasis in the original).

Reading through the various iterations of *Gubat Banwa*, the ways the author constantly wrestles with the challenge of how to imagine another kind of future-past become apparent. In stressing that the game is a "Fantasy" that is inspired by Southeast Asia, but "*is not Southeast Asia*", he references similar forms of identity negotiations as the designers involved in *Sina Una*, but at the same time highlights that for him, the main point is reflecting on a "*joyful eradication of the "Filipino" identity*", which allows for a recovery of a view of Southeast Asia and the Philippines before the emergence of modern national identities (see Mojares 2006b; 2009).

The same author and designer, Saavedra, has also published the game *Karanduun: Make God Bleed*. In its currently available version (2.2, published online in 2021), it is described in the book's PDF as follows:

> Karanduun is a modern Filipino Epic RPG about worthless heroes dismantling God, whatever cycle of oppression that must be. […] The prevailing tone of Karanduun is struggling against oppression while having the strength and abilities of a to-be epic hero, a modern twist on the ancient Filipino Epic. […] Karanduun's own setting, SANSINUKOB, the Center of All Creation, [is] in the middle of the Neverending

> Ocean, wherein an infinite number of other universes float. In the midst of this, there is no hope, for Bathala is dead. As the first few sprouts of heavenly flowers choke abandoned glass towers, little gods dance upon the shadows cast by acid light, and disenfranchised people begin to hope for a sword against the veil. (Saavedra 2021, 5)

After establishing this theme of oppression, resistance, and the death of God, the background history of the game setting is explained as follows:

> In the Isle of the Pearlescent Archipelago, those men […] bringing with them their Tortured God, colonized the northern isles in the name of *DYOSVETA, the Abusive Father*. The first of the Trinity. The people of the Archipelago toiled for 500 years, but they looked to BATALA for reassurance. A hundred years later, the Easterners rebelled, with the ancient Karanduun *Wielder of Gods* and the *Great Supremo of the Brotherhood*, they overthrew the *Captain-Generalcy of San Lazaranya* and called themselves the great *Republic of Lazaranyas*.
>
> Of course, that didn't last long until the imperialist *Gunmetal Republic*, with their huge machines of war and spirit-driven mecha, conquered the isles. […] For 250 grueling and cruel years, we were subjected to the torture under the second of the Trinity, *YEZU, the Idiot Son*.
>
> Eventually, the undead Ghost Chrysanthemum Empire of Kikuyurei launched their own invasion against us, led by *SHINSEINA YUREI, the Holiest Ghost*. The third of the Holy Trinity. […]
>
> This was when they killed BATALA. […] [T]hey launched an attack against BATALANGMAYKAPAL, creator of the universe, and killed Them. […]
> The Pearlescent Archipelago toiled under joint Holy Trinity rule for fifty years […] With that done […] they forged ahead […].
>
> In their absence, they installed a puppet kingdom […]. But the people upon the Throne are corrupt, and answer directly to the Holy Trinity.
>
> […] Only a few things can be seen as good things in this history: there are rebels against the puppet kaharian who fight for the good of their people […].
> Additionally, those rebels have friends with the Jambaran Sultanate, who through help from some ancient primordial deity, has managed to stave off the attacks of god. Thus was the islands of the Southwest given the name: The Unconquered Isles. (Saavedra 2021, 13; emphasis in the original)

Once again, this description takes up many elements of the tradition in which Paterno and de los Reyes wrote in the late 19th century, and once more features "Bathala" (or "BATALA"). However, this time, the setting is not pre-colonial, but rather post-colonial. Those familiar with the history of the Philippines will easily recognize in this description the successive waves of colonization by Spain, the US, and Japan over the last 500 years, as well as the southern predominantly Muslim island of Mindanao, here described as successfully withstanding colonial rule.

In his reimagination of Philippine history as role-playing game setting material, Saavedra draws on the tradition I have indicated, but he radically transforms the colonial history into a parodistic and subversive take on the terrible effects of colonial rule. It is the tabletop role-playing game as a biting social commentary, a decolonial project that effectively ascribes cruelty and stupidity to the Christian conquerors, while accusing the post-colonial (Filipino) governments as corrupt.

In *Karanduun*, players take on the roles of, as the book calls it "*worthless heroes that resist against the worthless and broken rule of corrupt lords*" (Saavedra 2021, 7; emphasis in the original). In this sense, and there is much more in the over 170 pages of the book, *Karanduun* creates a fantastical, utopian, as well as dystopian space in which the colonial history of the Philippines provides the inspiration for a fictional game world, in which players take on the roles of anti-colonial heroes struggling to survive.

I want to only quickly mention two other examples. Firstly, the game *BALIKBAYAAN: Returning Home* by Rae Nedjadi, in which player take on the role of mythological "elementals" – "beings made of the strange stuff between magic and nature, reality and fantasy, hope and fear" – in a cyberpunk future (Nedjadi 2019, 2). Nedjadi writes:

> Bring your dystopic post-Cyberpunk fantasies to life, revel in supernatural Filipino folklore, and dance along the threads between magic and technology. (Nedjadi 2019, back cover).

The future the game describes is decidedly post-colonial, as the elementals played were formerly enslaved by colonial masters who harnessed their power to conquer the stars and build colonies on other worlds. Now some of the elementals who had been bound to machines have returned to a destroyed earth.

The character types – the different elementals – are based on elements of Filipino mythology and folklore, like for example the "Tikbalang", described as providing "high-risk manual labor", formerly being put to work as "bodyguards, laborers, muscle, protection" or the deadly "Aswang", used as "trackers, hunters, assassins, and infiltrators" (Nedjadi 2019, 17, 19). Both of these once again take up elements of popular Filipino folklore already made popular in 19th century writings.

Another game, by Ar-Em Bañas, is *ON THE BONES OF BATALA*, "a folk- horror tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) inspired by the pre- and colonial histories, cultures, and folklore of the Tagalog region in the Philippines" (Bañas 2025, 12). Its setting is described as the "Rotting Isles of the Bones of BATALA" (Bañas 2025, 12), where the player characters' "ancestors built settlements upon the corpse of BATALA" (Bañas 2025, 105).

In a similar way to *Karanduun*, colonial history provides the background for an fantastical reimagination of the past and the cruelty of colonial violence, where during the cataclysmic event known as "the Arrival", "God-Giants […] wrested power from BATALA" HIMSELF" (Bañas 2025, 25). The player characters are described as "descend[ing] from survivors of the Arrival, your very existence a defiance against the realm that seeks to destroy you" (Bañas 2025, 26).

As with some of the other games discussed here, the text of *ON THE BONES OF BATALA* contains reflections on the way that designing the game has impacted the designer and is related to their understanding of both the violent colonial past and possible decolonial futures:

> [T]his game is an expression of my grief as I researched about colonial violence, trauma, and its manifestations in my family tree, the Tagalog region, and across the Philippine archipelago.
>
> I share this grief with you with open hands, in the hope that we could sit together and mourn what we have lost. It is my hope that just as Kamatayan and the Katauhan venture through SANDAIGDIGAN in search of truth and liberation, we too can find the strength to pick up the pieces. Together, may we find a semblance of relief and solidarity in these Rotting Isles. (Bañas 2025, 11)

Once more, *ON THE BONES OF BATALA*, just like *The Islands of Sina Una*, *Gubat Banwa*, *Karanduun*, and *BALIKBAYAAN*, through game design engages in reflections on colonial violence and the formations of modern Southeast Asian and Filipino identities.

4. CONCLUSION

The short analyses of the material presented have allowed me to try to make the argument, I hope, that there is a line to be drawn from the 19th century writings of Filipino intellectuals like Paterno and de los Reyes, which I reframe as instances of speculative fiction – or even of imaginative play –, to the tabletop role-playing games designed and produced by 21st century Filipino game designers.

Through this investigation, what becomes visible is that if we are interested in writing *alternative cultural histories of role-playing games and imaginative play*, we need to not only analyze current games, but also explore the local literary and cultural traditions they draw upon. What becomes visible then, as I have argued, is that games like some of those currently gathered around the #rpgsea hashtag, can be understood as embedded in longer traditions of speculative fiction, of imaginations of another kind of future-past.

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What are Studio Games: Using the GFI model to Investigate Chinese *Jubensha*

Abstract: This paper examines *jubensha*, the localized adaptation of live-action role-playing (*larp*) in China, focusing on its artistic representation and interpretation. Since the 1990s, China's digital game industry has grown rapidly, while the analog game sector developed more slowly and received little attention before the 2010s. This trend shifted with the rise of the immersive role-playing genre, *jubensha*, in the late 2010s. *Jubensha* represents a distinctive Chinese adaptation of larp: this format is originally adapted from immersive experiences, such as escape room, in which specialized studios charge fees to provide organizational services, customized props, and immersive, themed environments. Moreover, a jubensha studio uses professionally crafted narrative scripts to enhance immersion, enforces strict gameplay rules to ensure logical coherence, and employs game masters to guide the experience.

Following Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020), the *Goal-Feedback-Interpretation model* (GFI) offers a critical framework for analyzing narrative design in games, complementing the MDA model. This paper applies the GFI model to analyze *jubensha* studios in China, examining game design elements alongside artistic representation and interpretation. Evidence is drawn from existing literature, the researcher's gaming experience, and two expert interviews with *jubensha* studio owners, Yodi Zhu and Shuting Peng, from Luoyang, China. Conducted via WeChat, these interviews provided insider perspectives on industry development and key operational data through neutrally phrased questions. This study positions *jubensha* as a significant case in the analog game industry and seeks to answer: What is a *jubensha* studio, and how does it function? Can the studio structure enhance players' narrative gaming experience?

Keywords: *Jubensha*, *Jubensha* studio, Chinese studio games

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, China's analog game industry has developed more slowly than its digital counterpart. For many Chinese, "analog games" traditionally refer to classic board games such as Go and Mahjong, or imported card games like Poker, which primarily appeal to middle-aged demographics. Although some young people engage in card games inspired by Japanese anime, most gravitate toward digital games in internet cafés. Consequently, analog games only took 2.1% share of the Chinese game market before the 2010s (Hu and Ma 2019). This trend shifted dramatically with the rise of the immersive role-playing genre jubensha in the late 2010s, reflecting how analog games have become central to the social lives of Chinese youth.

Live-action role-playing (larp) involves players acting out fictional scenarios in real time through costumes and collaborative storytelling (Harviainen et al. 2018). Jubensha represents a distinctive Chinese adaptation of larp. It employs professionally crafted narrative scripts to enhance immersion, follows strict gameplay rules to ensure narrative coherence, and features a professional staff to guide the experience. This format has popularized a novel business model in which specialized studios charge fees to provide organizational services, customized props, and immersive themed environments. This paper defines this format as studio games. Jubensha studios incorporate scripted dialogue, professionally designed rooms, and trained staff, distinguishing them from larp's improvisational nature and self-sourced equipment and clothing. Furthermore, jubensha's industrial scale has earned it widespread popularity within mainstream Chinese society. Similar service-based play experiences exist internationally, such as haunted houses and escape rooms; however, jubensha has attracted far greater attention in China. In 2021, jubensha received praise from official Chinese government media, signaling the growing importance of analog games in China's gaming industry and culture (Zhao 2021).

As Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020) note, the Goal–Feedback–Interpretation (GFI) framework is essential for analyzing narrative design in games and complements the Mechanics–Dynamics–Aesthetics (MDA) framework. This paper examines the current state of jubensha studios in China, applying the GFI model to provide an in-depth analysis of game design elements and their artistic representation and interpretation. Evidence is drawn from existing literature, the researcher's gaming experience, and interviews with two jubensha studio owners, Yodi Zhu and Shuting Peng, from Luoyang, China, who offer insider perspectives on industry development and operational data. Conducted via WeChat, these interviews included neutrally phrased questions to elicit data. This study positions jubensha as a significant case in the analog game industry and seeks to answer: What is a jubensha studio, and how does it function? Can the studio structure enhance players' narrative gaming experience?

2. BACKGROUND

Research on jubensha is closely connected to broader discussions of role-playing games and narrative play. Game studies scholarship has long debated the relationship between games and storytelling, questioning whether games can "tell stories" in a conventional narrative sense (Juul 2001). Later frameworks emphasize that games generate meaning through systems and player interaction. The MDA framework proposed by Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek (2004) is particularly influential in this regard, offering a structured way to analyze how mechanics and dynamics lead to specific aesthetic experiences. This framework has since been widely adopted in game design and research (Sellers 2018). However, this framework focused primarily on game mechanics and paid less attention to narrative design. Fortunately, the Goal-Feedback-Interpretation (GFI) model offers a precise framework for understanding narrative design in games, serving as the main analysis approach of this paper (Cardona-Rivera et al. 2020).

Immersion and presence are recurring themes in role-playing and narrative play literature. Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) are often understood as a foundational form of collaborative narrative play. Scholars describe TTRPGs as systems that rely on shared imagination, improvisation, and character embodiment to construct fictional worlds collectively (Carbonell, 2016; Mizer, 2019). Definitions of TTRPGs stress the importance of player agency, social interaction, and negotiated meaning (Smith 2015). Besides, rather than being produced solely through narrative coherence, immersion is understood as emerging from the interaction between space, rules, performance, and social dynamics (Haahr 2018). Klintö (2024) further argues that players often perceive narrative implicitly, assembling story meaning through participation rather than explicit narration. Murder mystery games (MMG) also form an important historical reference. Xiong et al. (2023) thinks jubensha is a localized and updated version of MMGs. Though this definition is not accurate because murder is only a script genre of jubensha, jubensha is influenced and inspired by MMG and larp, as jubensha's gameplay consists largely of discussion, immersion, and interpretive performance.

From this perspective, jubensha can be understood as a hybrid form that combines role-playing game systems with theatrical performance. Performance theory can provide useful perspectives for understanding jubensha gameplay experience, e.g. Fischer-Lichte (2008)'s theory of performance emphasizes transformation through bodily co-presence and mutual feedback between participants, and larp scholars similarly frame role-play as a liminal activity in which players oscillate between fictional roles and real social identities (Becker

2016; Harviainen et al. 2018). Players are not only problem-solvers but also performers who actively negotiate character identity, emotional expression, and narrative.

The development of jubensha cannot be separated from China's broader game market and cultural environment. Research on game localization demonstrates how global game forms are adapted to align with local cultural values, regulatory requirements, and player preferences (Dong & Mangiron 2018). Studies of traditional Chinese games, such as mahjong, and various forms of local chess and board games (Wang et al. 2021; Popova 2021; Heinz 2021), illustrate the long-standing social and cultural functions of analog games in Chinese society.

In recent years, jubensha has attracted increasing scholarly attention as a uniquely Chinese development within the global landscape of role-playing and narrative games. Liu (2023) explores its cultural value as a distinctive adaptation of larp, and Wen (2021) identifies the factors driving its popularity among Chinese youth. Perera (2024) offers a reflexive perspective by analyzing the interplay between drama and role-playing within jubensha experiences. Zhang et al. (2024) conceptualize immersive jubensha as a "dramatized game" rather than a "gamified drama," arguing—through an analysis of actor, audience, story, and stage elements—that its evolution from murder mystery gameplay to an immersive theatrical form reveals a distinctive Chinese path of ludic and performative convergence. Liang et al. (2025) conduct a detailed investigation to clarify the definitional and structural characteristics of jubensha games. Collectively, these studies demonstrate the significance and growing influence of jubensha within contemporary Chinese game culture. However, existing research has primarily focused on the design and player experience aspects of jubensha while overlooking the commercial studio system that sustains and popularizes it. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how the jubensha studio structure functions as a commercial and cultural mechanism that enhances player experience and supports the broader development of China's analog game culture.

3. DEFINITION AND DEVELOPMENT

Jubensha is a script-based game that incorporates extensive role-playing and narrative elements (Liang et al. 2025). It draws inspiration from live-action role-playing (larp) as a form of gameplay representation but includes significant localization and cultural adaptation. Jubensha itself is relatively easy to organize; it can serve as a simple party game played at home, with scripts available online. Thus, jubensha does not refer to a single specific game. In this paper I approach jubensha as a game format, comparable to poker, which includes variants such as Texas Hold 'em. Similarly, the variety of jubensha games depends on the script being used.

Jubensha games served by studios, however, differ from the general jubensha game format. This paper introduces the term "studio games" to refer to role-play-focused games hosted by studio teams for commercial purposes. Specifically, the term refers to a commercial structure that provides a designed environment and professional services for tabletop or puzzle-based games, thereby enhancing participants' gameplay experience. In later sections, "jubensha" refers to the overall game format—ranging from simple, home-based gameplay to more elaborate studio experiences—while a "jubensha studio" denotes the commercial entity, referring to an organization that sells jubensha-based services to customers. Before the emergence of jubensha studios, haunted houses and escape rooms had already demonstrated early prototypes of this structure in China, while Werewolf Kill further popularized the model and became a key development in Chinese gaming culture.

Figure 1. Jubensha Studio.

Haunted houses are a common type of studio game, typically located in amusement parks. Players navigate a meticulously designed horror environment on a suspenseful, frightening journey. Their primary goal is to evoke fear by bringing imagined horrors, ghosts, and monsters to life (Yang 2013). Commercially, haunted houses rely on elaborately designed spaces, with staff using props, traps, costumes, and sometimes dressing as ghosts to simulate horror scenarios. However, they face limitations: narrative design is minimal, focusing on jump scares and eerie environments rather than storytelling. The static nature of their spatial design also makes renovations costly and infrequent, reducing replayability and audience engagement.

Escape rooms are another common studio game. Like haunted houses, they use themed physical spaces, but players solve puzzles to achieve escape. Participants are isolated from the outside world and must uncover clues to progress through the story. Narrative design is central, as puzzles are embedded in the storyline. Escape rooms appeal to a broader audience and align more closely with the social dynamics of party games, yet reliance on environmental narrative remains a key limitation. As research shows: "Participants underlined ongoing development needs because they aimed to differentiate their escape rooms by creating diverse themes and special events that change regularly" (Ye et al. 2025, 2280).

Werewolf Kill, a nationwide localized adaptation of The Werewolves of Miller's Hollow (des Pallières and Marly 1986) in China, is a social deduction party game where players use logic and conversation to identify hidden werewolves. Unlike haunted houses and escape rooms, it requires minimal physical space, as the core mechanic is social interaction. However, it demands large groups—typically at least ten participants, including a judge—which makes organization challenging. To address this, some studios are set up to sell service like providing private rooms, trained judges, and merging smaller groups into full games. Additional services, such as food and beverages, enhance the experience and business model. This studio system exploded rapidly, for example, a high-end studio, JYClub in Shanghai earned a million RMB on opening day alone through live streaming promotion (jennyteo 2017). Nevertheless, Werewolf Kill requires strong analytical and communication skills, and its core gameplay remains largely unchanged, limiting player retention. For example, Yodi's

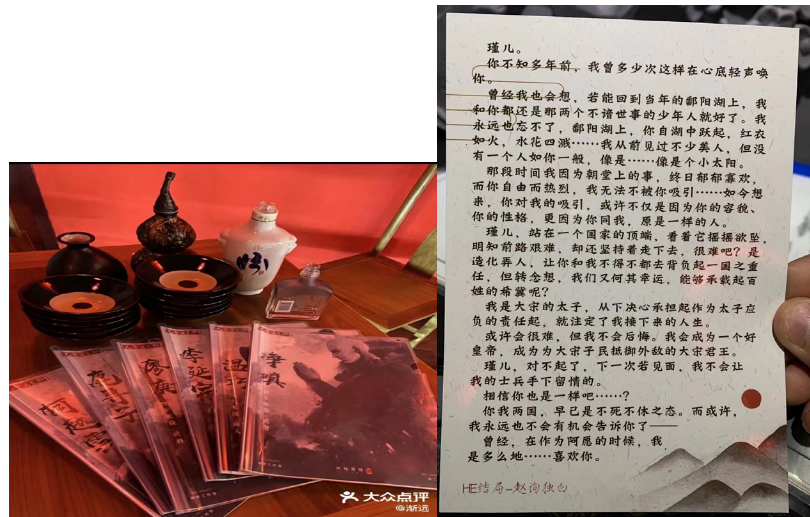
(personal communication, May 2024) jubensha studio originally began as a Werewolf Kill studio before transitioning to jubensha after that game's popularity declined. Unlike previous studio games, Werewolf Kill studios sold services rather than physical spaces. This service-oriented model offered critical insight for later jubensha studios, suggesting that marketing game experiences boosting services rather than tangible games could open new market opportunities.

The term "jubensha" is a direct Chinese translation meaning "Script Kill." The word "Script" refers to the game's narrative core, while "Kill" denotes murder, as most scripts feature murder-centered plots (Liang et al. 2025). The "script" serves as the backbone of a round of the jubensha game, which presents roles, plots, dialogues, and potential endings. It has multiple pages, and different roles will get a specific script for their perspectives that contains the plot information and a guide for acting. Additionally, this title likely functions as a commercial strategy designed to resonate with Werewolf Kill, helping players immediately recognize jubensha as a narrative-driven party game. As previously mentioned, jubensha refers to a game format, whereas a jubensha studio represents a commercial model that uses jubensha as its foundation. Jubensha studios combine elements from haunted houses and escape rooms—such as themed rooms and props—with the social interaction and narrative emphasis of Werewolf Kill, alongside larp's performative style. Jubensha closely resembles larp in its narrative representation, incorporating costumes, dramatic play, and interpretative storytelling. However, interviews with Yodi and Shuting (personal communication, May 2024) indicate that while jubensha borrows certain aspects from larp, key differences exist. Unlike some larp traditions that emphasize character progression, using systems such as levels, health points, and mana mechanics, jubensha prioritizes dialogue and the use of props to advance the story (Shuting and Yodi, personal communication, May 2024). Shuting and Yodi's statement is not accurate: While some larp traditions employ game mechanics such as levels or health points, many—especially chamber, freeform, or blockbuster larps—focus instead on collaborative storytelling and emotional performance. In contrast, jubensha relies on a fixed script and a deductive structure: players do not create new core narratives but collectively reconstruct a predesigned script through performance and reasoning.

Jubensha scripts are more structured, professionally designed, and guided by staff, while larp scripts prioritize improvisation, player freedom, and minimal physical infrastructure (Liang et al. 2025). Studio jubensha can be seen as a commercially packaged, "rigorous scripted larp", optimized for consistent narrative delivery and studio-based play. While jubensha emphasizes immersive, scripted, and physically realized narratives, tabletop role-playing games rely on imagination, dice mechanics, and improvisation. They give players more freedom to change story outcomes, whereas jubensha scripts balance structured storytelling with role immersion, guided by trained staff. Furthermore, larp often draws on traditional tabletop role-playing themes, such as medieval fantasy settings (Harviainen et al. 2018), which may be less appealing to Chinese players due to cultural differences. While jubensha has evolved into a large-scale commercial industry, larp has not achieved comparable commercialization , but it is a fact that jubensha is influenced by tabletop role-playing games and larps (Xiong et al. 2023).

A defining feature of all studio games is their reliance on physical space and human labor. Most are situated in malls or amusement parks, where players purchase tickets to participate. Jubensha studios adopt a similar model but differ fundamentally in their focus: rather than relying on fixed puzzles, they emphasize dramatic live-action performance, in which players assume immersive character roles. In terms of content, jubensha experientially aligns more closely with games such as larp and Werewolf Kill, emphasizing social interaction

and emergent narrative creation. This convergence of role-playing, dialogue-driven gameplay, and service-based business strategy has allowed jubensha to overcome many of the structural limitations that constrain other studio games.



瑾儿。

你不知多年前，我曾多少次这样在心底轻声唤你。

曾经我也会想，若能回到当年的鄱阳湖上，我和你都还是那两个不谙世事的少年人就好了。我永远也忘不了，鄱阳湖上，你自湖中跃起，红衣如火，水花四溅……我从前见过不少美人，但没有一个人如你一般，像是……像是个小太阳。

那段时间我因为朝堂上的事，终日郁郁寡欢，而你自由而热烈，我无法不被你吸引……如今想来，你对我的吸引，或许不仅是因为你的容貌、你的性格，更因为你同我，原是一样的人。

瑾儿，站在一个国家的顶端，看着它摇摇欲坠，明知前路艰难，却还坚持着走下去，很难吧？是造化弄人，让你和我不得不都去背负起一国之重任，但转念想，我们又何其幸运，能够承载起百姓的希冀呢？

我是大宋的太子，从下决心承担起作为太子应负的责任起，就注定了我接下来的人生。

或许会很难，但我不会后悔。我会成为一个好皇帝，成为为大宋子民抵御外敌的大宋君王。

瑾儿，对不起了，下一次若见面，我不会让我的士兵手下留情的。

相信你也是一样吧……？

你我两国，早已是不死不休之态。而或许，我永远也不会有机会告诉你了——

曾经，在作为阿愿的时候，我是多么地……喜欢你。

HE结局–赵询独白

Figures 2 & 3. Commercialized jubensha Scripts in a jubensha studio. Each script has a specific role name marked.

4. HOW DOES A JUBENSHA STUDIO FUNCTION?

As official medias report, jubensha studios have become a major phenomenon in Chinese social interaction (Liu and Bi 2020; Zhao 2021). The first core component driving this popularity is game content, which relies on scripts and environmental design. While jubensha draws features from other studio games and larps, it offers greater flexibility and thematic freedom. Thousands of different scripts prevent monotony and enhance replayability of the game format so that players can enjoy different stories by changing scripts. Script classification remains inconsistent: Liang et al. (2025) list three types—Detective-Focused, Affective-Focused, and Social-Focused—whereas interviewees identify four: Murder, Immersion, Horror, and Fun.

Murder scripts cover diverse themes, such as ancient China or Sherlock Holmes, and resemble Murder Mystery Games (MMG), requiring players to solve puzzles to identify a hidden murderer (Fang 2023). Liu (2023) considers murder the core of jubensha. Immersive scripts emphasize storytelling and character-driven conflicts—family, workplace, or relationship disputes—that require players to resolve them and produce a reasonable ending. Horror scripts combine haunted-house and escape-room elements, using narrative design and performance to create a chilling atmosphere, often in abandoned hospitals or haunted schools. Players solve puzzles while navigating fear-inducing scenarios, with horror content disclosed beforehand for sensitive participants (Perera 2024). Fun scripts prioritize humor and entertainment, involving cooperative storytelling through lighthearted scenarios like treasure hunts or adventures, providing relaxation without murder, conflict, or horror. The confusion caused by classification reflects flexible boundaries between types. Scripts often combine elements, with one as the core and others integrated to enhance complexity and appeal. For example, a murder script may include horror narratives to heighten tension, and an immersion script may incorporate fun elements for relief. This flexibility expands the definition of jubensha and addresses replayability challenges common in studio games. Mixed

scripts mitigate monotony, extend appeal, and reduce resource waste, though classification remains subjective.

The second core component of a jubensha studio is providing customers with a suitable play space. Given the wide range of script styles and topics, studios must create immersive physical environments tailored to the chosen themes. A typical jubensha studio features themed rooms, costumes, and props, along with well-crafted narratives for players to role-play. Players are assigned specific roles with scripts, collaboratively creating a role-play drama. Liang et al. (2025) mentioned the interaction between jubensha players and their environment multiple times. Yodi (personal communication, May 2024) stated:

> We offer at least 20 uniquely themed suites, such as traditional Chinese family settings, abandoned hospitals, and Japanese inns. These spaces are not static; studio owners frequently analyze customer preferences and adjust suites based on trending script topics. Each suite typically comprises multiple rooms with specific purposes. The preparation room is where players read scripts, practice, select costumes, and dress as their characters. The evidence room serves as the setting for searching for objects or clues relevant to gameplay, such as crime scene evidence in murder scripts. The gaming room is the primary play area where players interact and act out the story. For popular or rare scripts, studios may provide audience seating for spectators.

Perera (2024) agrees that room design is crucial to enhancing the player experience in jubensha. Fernández-Vara (2011) argues that environmental storytelling enhances immersive experiences. Room design in jubensha studios exemplifies this concept, bringing narrative elements to life and transforming abstract imagination into tangible experiences. Additionally, rooms are not limited to a single script; suites can serve multiple scripts with similar themes. For instance, a traditional Chinese family suite can be used for narratives about historical family life or horror stories involving ancient ghosts. The rooms not only serve as suggestive environment but also sometimes are used for gameplay, as players need to use objects in the room to progress story. Pepera (2024) describes a round of gameplay where she was locked in a room and needed use objects to hide and escape from people. This dynamic use demonstrates how the meaning of objects and environments adapts to changing storylines, reshaped by players' perceptions, while also reducing the cost of redecoration.

The third core component of jubensha studios is the service provided by professional staff. According to the interviews, owners serve as founders and managers, overseeing daily operations. Makeup artists assist players in embodying their characters, aligning appearances with both personal preferences and script requirements (Shuting, personal communication, May 2024). Dungeon Masters (DMs) are the cornerstone of jubensha studios, though the term may confuse. As Andrew Smith (2015) defines, "Game Master" refers to the host who leads the narrative, while "Dungeon Master" denotes explicitly the GM in Dungeons & Dragons. Interestingly, jubensha players and studios show little concern about terminology— "host," "GM," and "DM" are used interchangeably. Liang et al. (2025) also note this ambiguity. In this paper, "GM" will be used.

Figures 4 & 5. Room decoration.

Yodi (personal communication, May 2024) emphasizes that a GM's performance and problem-solving skills significantly influence gameplay quality. She states that their role extends beyond guiding players; they also participate as non-player characters. GMs manage the narrative flow and bear additional responsibilities, such as acting and adapting to unforeseen developments. Besides, they monitor gameplay, guide players in following the narrative, and subtly steer the storyline back on track when deviations occur. As Haahr (2018, 34) states, "the act of re-composing the narrative becomes not only an intellectual but also a physical act". A skilled GM must deliver an engaging experience while seamlessly resolving issues, serving as the interpreter of the script's narrative design and re-composer of the story during gameplay. By embodying characters, they help players understand and advance the storyline. GMs can also modify gameplay or scripts on the spot, provided the adjustments maintain narrative coherence and player engagement. This role bridges the gap between players and jubensha scripts, enhancing the gaming experience and distinguishing studio play from home play.

Jubensha studios and GMs are also responsible for selecting quality scripts. Shuting (personal communication, May 2024) explained that studios often collaborate to host script trading exhibitions, where owners seek engaging and marketable scripts. Script authors also participate, showcasing their work to potential buyers. The scripts price may vary; boxed scripts are cheapest and usually sold nationwide, while city scripts and unique scripts are expensive because owners can buyout them for specific cities or studios. After purchasing scripts, studios must adapt them for local use. This pre-sales adaptation is recognized as necessary in general game design. Liu (2023) points out that role-playing is a practice of cultural heritage, while Dong and Mangiron (2018) note that localization is often required to align with regional sensitivities. For instance, in China, a script about the War of Resistance against Japanese Aggression might be inappropriate in Nanjing due to the historical context of

the Nanjing Massacre. Such modifications ensure scripts respect local sentiments and preserve immersion. Therefore, GMs must thoroughly understand scripts before gameplay, reading, analyzing, and rehearsing every dialogue and scene to deliver a convincing performance.

Figures 6. A player responded to a GM's question.

During jubensha gameplay, scripts outline players' actions, dialogues, and expressions, requiring adherence to preserve narrative immersion. Each role's script includes detailed narrative descriptions and dialogue. Unless otherwise restricted, players may act according to their interpretation. Thus, strict adherence applies only to fixed narrative elements, while players retain freedom within the storyline. Players encounter challenges, dilemmas, and choices that directly influence narrative progression. The GM's role is to balance players' self-directed actions with the preset narrative direction, correcting deviations when necessary. This explains why GMs are considered the core of jubensha studios—they are trained to maintain a smooth and coherent gameplay experience.

5. STUDIO GAMES, JUBENSHA AND GFI MODEL

The Design-Dynamics-Experience framework used by Liang et al. (2025) for analyzing jubensha is an upgraded version of the Mechanic-Dynamic-Aesthetic framework (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek 2004). While their work provided a close look at jubensha games, this framework focused primarily on game mechanics and paid less attention to narrative design. The Goal-Feedback-Interpretation (GFI) model, first proposed by Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020), offers a precise framework for understanding narrative design in games and is considered a valuable complement to the MDA framewor. Ganeli et al. (2021) argue that the GFI model extends MDA by bridging gaps in narrative design. Multiple scholars treat it as a core model for game narrative analysis (Atmaja et al. 2024; Klintö 2024). This paper uses the GFI model to examine whether jubensha studios reinforce the narrative design of jubensha games and enhance players' overall gameplay experience.

Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020) define goals as conditions players are expected to meet to succeed, distinguishing between ultimate goals (end conditions) and imperative goals (actionable milestones). These goals can be observed in all studio games. For example, in a

haunted house, the ultimate goal is to find the exit, and the imperative goal is to avoid ghosts. In an escape room, players' ultimate goal is to escape, with imperative goals to solve puzzles. In Werewolf Kill, players must survive until the end, and their imperative goals involve convincing or deceiving other players. While these studio games are commercially successful, the connection between ultimate and imperative goals may be fragmented. Players lost in haunted houses or escape rooms require staff intervention, which abruptly alienates game narrative content. In Werewolf Kill, low-skill players struggle to achieve imperative goals, as no facilitator intervenes to improve their experience. Unlike these games, jubensha studios employ GMs to guide, smooth, and correct the achievement of goals.

Jubensha studios effectively integrates ultimate and imperative goals to enhance gameplay. When players receive roles and scripts, their ultimate goal is to represent the narrative and achieve story objectives. In a murder script, players may need to hide or uncover the truth, with multiple possible endings based on their actions, such as finding the murderer, the murderer escaping, or discovering the murderer without sufficient evidence. Because jubensha players collectively reconstruct a predesigned script through performance and reasoning, personal connection to the players or interpersonal knowledge cannot violate its fixed script and a deductive structure. Most players are not professional actors and may struggle to accurately portray roles, and home-based GMs lack the skills to maintain narrative coherence. Thus, there is not much space left for the advantage of home-based gameplay. jubensha scripts break ultimate goals into actionable, imperative goals that align with the story's progression, while professional studio GMs help ensure smooth execution and fix plot holes. By following instructions and performing scenes as described, players achieve smaller goals that collectively fulfill the ultimate goal, ensuring a structured, engaging, and accessible experience.

Sellers (2017) emphasizes the importance of the feedback loop in game design strategy. Similarly, Fischer-Lichte (2008, 8) describes feedback in performance theory: "As a self-organizing system, as opposed to an autonomously created work of art, it continually receives and integrates … newly emerging, unplanned, and unpredictable elements from both sides of the loop." In games, feedback is integrated with dynamics: the system reacts to player input through mechanics, and dynamics communicate responses back to players. Player actions provide designers with feedback to refine narrative design and create a responsive, evolving experience.

In jubensha, GMs provide real-time feedback on player progress (Perera 2024). Shuting (personal communication, May 2024) gave an example: if a player portraying an emperor announces a bad policy instead of the intended good one, the GM will notice and address the deviation, either by persuading the player to align with the script or adjusting the narrative to accommodate the choice. GMs manage immediate feedback and guide players through the story, maintaining engagement. Players' decisions—such as selecting murder methods or missing evidence—can influence narrative outcomes. This feedback loop, while common in digital games with multiple endings, is represented in jubensha through live dramatic interaction.

Yodi (personal communication, May 2024) claims that jubensha studios offer a novel application of Sellers' loop by making feedback multidirectional. She thinks GMs and studios are not the original scriptwriters but act as intermediaries during gameplay, which breaks the barrier between players and designers, making feedback a critical communication tool among players, GMs, and studios. Besides, studios also gather long-term feedback after gameplay to refine scripts and improve GM training, ensuring iterative improvement of the gaming experience. However, though these new feedback loops can improve players' gameplay experience, Yodi's claim is not accurate because it is a key element of all RPG game

mastering. Jubensha studios only expand its directions, such as a new one among studio, GM, and players, instead of a novel application.

Interpretation is a core concept in jubensha, placing players in the role of deriving meaning from the narrative. According to Cardona-Rivera et al. (2020, 5), “Interpretation is both: (a) the situated process of deriving meaning from enaction, and (b) the outcome of that process.” At home, balancing fixed narrative design and player agency is challenging, and scripts can be misinterpreted, potentially derailing the story. Jubensha studios and their GMs effectively address this limitation: In each scene, for principal roles, scripts provide detailed dialogue, while for minor roles, second-person narration allows player interpretation under GMs’ supervision. Together, the structured environment and professional guidance ensure a more coherent and immersive experience than home-based play. Players interpret storylines through their characters and personal cognition. For example, if a script instructs a player to laugh loudly but does not specify the detail, the player may decide how to express the laughter. Yodi (personal communication, May 2024) admits GMs are trained to maintain balance, enabling agency while preserving narrative coherence.

Multiple endings exist in digital RPGs but differ fundamentally from jubensha. Juul (2001) once noted, “There is an inherent conflict between the now of the interaction and the past or ‘prior’ of the narrative. You can’t have narration and interactivity at the same time; there is no such thing as a continuously interactive story” (sec. Conclusion, para. 1). Juul’s argument is not accurate both in the context of digital games and jubensha. Digital RPGs often feature preprogrammed outcomes, such as Detroit: Become Human (Quantic Dream 2018), which presents over 40 predetermined endings before released. However, MMORPGs with big rpg guilds keep producing interactive stories between players. Besides, jubensha emphasizes continuous interaction and emergent storytelling, transforming players into active participants within the narrative. By allowing unexpected narratives while guiding roles and facilitating engagement, studios maintain a balance between subjective interpretation and overarching narrative, enhancing the player experience. Studios interpretation is refined further when assisting players in role identity, including cross-gender role-playing, and provide appropriate costumes and makeup (Perera 2024). This inclusive approach fosters gender equality, breaking traditional limitations, and supporting immersive gameplay. Players focus on embodying roles rather than themselves, presenting a valuable case for research on player identity.

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Figure 7. Dressed players in a jubensha studio

6. CONCLUSION

Jubensha studios integrate game content, environmental design, and professional staff to create a distinctive analog gaming experience. Carefully crafted scripts and flexible narrative structures provide players with meaningful interpretive space, while immersive environments transform studios into experiential stages that blur the line between play and performance. Professional staff, particularly GMs, sustain narrative flow and social engagement by mediating between individual player agency and collective storytelling. These elements address the weaknesses of home-based jubensha—such as inconsistent feedback and unstable narrative control—while elevating the format into a common, commercialized cultural experience that redefines analog gaming in contemporary China. From the perspective of the GFI model, jubensha studios reinforce the goal–feedback–interpretation loop, ensuring coherence between gameplay objectives and narrative progression, and enhancing the overall player experience. However, as a commercial facility in public, jubensha studios are more controlled by the Chinese government than jubensha in a home setting because script contents, gameplay process, and service should not violate policies. For example, though underage jubensha players are free to play any script at home at any time, studios are not allowed to serve them during weekdays, and served script are strictly limited (Cheng 2023). Thus, jubensha in a home setting still has advantages over the studios in some ways.

The rise of jubensha studios reflects the evolution of Chinese studio games, building on haunted houses, escape rooms, and Werewolf Kill while leveraging market gaps through strong localization, social alignment, and a commercialized studio model. Beyond its domestic success, jubensha studios offer both scholarly and practical insights: academically, it provides a rich case for studying narrative design, role immersion, and the intersection of performance and play; practically, it demonstrates the global potential of studio games as immersive, narrative-driven analog experiences. By combining scripted storytelling, environmental immersion, and professional facilitation, jubensha studios show how studio-based games can transform social play, inspire new entertainment industries, and expand understanding of analog games worldwide.

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From “Playing a Role” to “Role-Playing Games”: The Genealogy and History of the Term “Role-Playing”

Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive semantic genealogy of the term “role-playing,” tracing its multifaceted evolution from theatrical origins to its current association with leisure activities, especially role-playing games (RPGs). Rather than offering yet another contested definition, it maps the shifting meanings of “role-playing” across nine historical and disciplinary contexts from dissimulation and child development theories to psychodramatic therapy, educational simulations, and eventually hobby RPGs. By examining textual sources from 18th-century German literature to 20th-century social science and gaming culture, the study demonstrates how “role-playing” has variously denoted acting, influencing, social conformity, improvisational learning, and structured gameplay.

Of particular relevance to role-playing game studies is the article’s nuanced account of how “role-playing game” as a term emerged not in hobbyist circles, but in developmental psychology and Cold War simulations, long before the advent of Dungeons & Dragons (1974). It highlights how character-focused gameplay practices evolved from psychological theory and strategic war games, eventually culminating in the narrative and performative forms that define RPGs today. The study further emphasizes the hybrid nature of RPGs, where character embodiment, improvisation, and rule-based structure coexist in a uniquely ludic space.

This genealogical approach offers a critical contribution to RPG studies by decentering the *D&D*-centric narrative and showing that the term “role-playing” has never been monolithic. Instead, it is a layered, historically contingent construct that continues to evolve. The article’s interdisciplinary breadth makes it valuable for scholars of game studies, theater, psychology, education, and cultural history alike.

Keywords: role-playing, genealogy, cultural history, definition, meaning, interdisciplinarity

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1. INTRODUCTION

Separating the concept of role-playing from other forms of pretense has always been difficult. As explicitly stated in a comprehensive literature review five years ago, *“terms such as simulations, games, and role-play are often used inconsistently, interchangeably, and without clear conceptual definitions.”* (Hallinger & Wang 2020, p. 12).

Instead of attempting yet another definition of role-playing, this study clarifies how the term has historically been used and understood and how the different shades of meaning of “role-playing” have evolved. By examining the earliest occurrences of the term, this research aims to trace its evolution to role-playing games (RPGs). While past and present language usage does not necessarily dictate the future vocabulary, it can link various term uses and map the conceptual maze, assuming we view meanings as social constructs (Liebrucks 2001).

2. MEANING: ‘PLAYING A ROLE’ AS AN ACTING TASK

The word “rôle” is of French origin, initially referring to the scroll (Latin *rotula*, English *roll*) that contained an actor’s lines and written instructions for a theatrical performance. Over time, it acquired its figurative meaning of *role*. Since actors perform their roles on stage, the phrase “to play a role” is undoubtedly ancient, as documented in the works of Diderot, Goethe, and Schiller.

The etymology of “theater,” or *teatrum*, traces back to the Greek word *theaomai*, meaning “to behold.” The actor’s stage performance is fundamentally intended for the audience. This idea is also reflected in the approach of the renowned drama educators Gavin Bolton and Dorothy Heathcote (1999). They argue that too much emphasis is placed on the physical

and behavioral manifestations of role-playing, whereas its primary function lies in creating meaning for reflective thinking.

While our attitude toward theater is often shaped by the traditional institution of the bourgeois illusion theater, it is worth noting that drama and theater studies have significantly expanded the scope of *teatrum*—and, by extension, role-playing (Alter, 1981). These fields often consider their boundary areas, like various forms of role-playing, as part of drama or theater.

3. MEANING: 'PLAYING A ROLE' AS INFLUENCING

The figurative, abstract meaning of "playing a role" as synonymous with *having a function or impact* frequently appears in late 18th-century German texts (e.g., Werthes, 1791) and is similarly common in English. This meaning, of course, has no connection to the kind of role-playing discussed in this article. Still, it illustrates that the term had already moved beyond the theatrical world by the 18th century to become a general-purpose expression. Moreover, the frequency of this phrase severely complicates the identification of relevant documents and early academic articles about role-playing.

4. MEANING: 'ROLE-PLAYING' AS DISSIMULATION

The phrase "playing a role" (*eine Rolle spielen*) also took on a dissimulative meaning in German, referring to behavior intended to conceal genuine motivations, from polite deception to outright deceit (Corsini et al., 1961). In Justus Möser's *Patriotische Phantasien* (1776), a married couple pretends to be charming hosts for unexpected guests. Their polite pretense not only delights their visitors but also transforms their own moods, offering an early example of dissimulation's emotional effects.

The reversed phrase *Rollenspielen* also first appeared in German in a dissimulative context. In a *Münchhausen* story (Immermann, 1839), a deceitful character gradually "identified with the role through continuous role-playing" (*ein fortwährendes Rollespielen mit der Rolle identificirt*, p. 229), highlighting the psychological effects of assuming false identities. This marks a pivotal moment in the genealogy of *role-playing*, emphasizing its deeper psychological impact (Hartyándi, 2025).

These examples show that "role-playing" entered the German language by at least the 19th century in the context of dissimulation, one of the fundamental meanings of role-playing recognized in *Roleplay in Business and Industry* (Corsini, 1961).

5. MEANING: 'ROLE-PLAYING' AS IMITATIVE LEARNING BEHAVIOR IN CHILDREN

The earliest known occurrence of "role-playing" in English, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), dates to 1901. The German philosopher-psychologist Karl Groos extensively explored the evolutionary function of play. In the English translation of his 1899 book *Die Spiele der Menschen* (*The Play of Man*), the following sentence appears: *"There is hardly any limit to the rôle playing of civilized children"* (Groos 1901, p. 306).

In the related sections on imitative play, Groos discusses how children not only look up to their parents and immediate family members as role models but also enthusiastically mimic the professions and behaviors of others. According to Groos, these attempts shape their

"predispositions and antipathies," which later influence their life choices. In this context, the quoted sentence suggests that various human behaviors and patterns significantly impact children.

It is worth noting that in the original German text, Groos used the term *Rollengebiet* (literally, "role domain") rather than *Rollenspiel* (literally, "roleplay"). The translator, Elizabeth L. Baldwin, rendered it "rôle playing" in English. This suggests that the term for children's role-playing may not have been well established in German then. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that in its earliest known English usage, the term "role-playing" referred to children imitating others' behavior patterns and learning societal norms.

This early source aligns with later, classic developmental psychology theories (e.g., Vygotsky, 1967; Piaget, 2013). Imitation and practice are crucial play components even among primates (Millar, 1968). In humans, free play in childhood evolves from symbolic play to role-taking and rule-based play, culminating in complex pretend play forms that combine these elements (Deterding, 2016). Such activities enhance children's adaptability (Kapitany et al., 2020).

6. MEANING: 'ROLE-PLAYING' AS (UNCONSCIOUSLY) ADOPTING AND FULFILLING SOCIAL ROLES, IN LINE WITH SOCIAL NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS

This meaning is related to the concept discussed in the Groos translation. In Anglo-American sociology, "role-playing" describes characteristics and expected behaviors associated with social roles. For instance, Walter Coutu's 1951 article provides examples of a mother "role-playing" with her child, which includes "protecting the child, feeding it, dressing it, training it, loving it, etc." (Coutu, 1951, p. 180). In this sense, role-playing is not pretense, but rather conformity to a pattern, stereotype, or "behavioral shell" (Popitz, 1967). Coutu states: "In role-playing one does not pretend anything. A policeman arresting a person is [...] performing or playing a role expected of one holding the position of public protector" (Coutu, 1951, p. 181).

In this sociological context, the term "play" is very abstract, seemingly unrelated to actual play, making it similar to the second meaning. However, the interplay of social roles does involve a particular sense of "play," as illustrated by two parallel thoughts.

The first comes from Jacob Moreno, who famously said, "Man is a role-player" (Moreno, 1943, p. 438; Moreno, 1949, p. 354). The term *Rollenspieler* ("roleplayer") appeared in Moreno's works as early as 1924. However, his seminal work *Who Shall Survive?* (1934) does not yet use "roleplay" and even refers to the concept of "role" in its archaic form, *rôle*. Moreno began elaborating on the English term "roleplay" in a footnote to a 1943 article on sociodrama. According to Moreno, much of life occurs between the structured "role-taking" (or "role enactment" in his later terminology) and entirely spontaneous behavior, which he referred to as "role creation" (Moreno, 1943; Moreno, 1949; Zeintlinger-Hochreiter, 1996). Everyday life allows and even demands that we shape our social roles to some extent, and this freedom provides the framework for role-playing. Moreno was probably the first to emphasize the (partially) spontaneous nature of "social role-playing" rather than its rigid constraints.

A statement from Kurt Lewin best illustrates the playful interaction between social roles. According to Lewin, the atmosphere or mood experienced within different groups "can be conceived of as a pattern of role playing" (Lewin, 1943, p. 561). In other words, the collective roles "played" by individuals within a group determine its atmosphere and character. But how should we interpret this isolated statement?

In his study of leadership styles, Lewin concluded that it is insufficient for a leader to change their style—from autocratic to democratic. He stated: "Neither the autocratic nor the democratic leader can play his role without the followers being ready to play their role accordingly" (Lewin, 1943, p. 561).

In other words, leaders can only establish democratic frameworks if their followers are genuinely open to the values of democracy and willing to follow them democratically. This suggests that various social roles do not exist in isolation; instead, they presuppose and may evoke each other. As Karoline Erika Zeintlinger, a prominent theorist of Moreno's psychodrama, have noted, social situations are created by roles and appropriate counter-roles (Zeintlinger-Hochreiter, 1996).

In this sense, the interplay of social roles represents a form of "role-playing" that only implicitly appears among the various OED definitions but extends far beyond the individual shaping of a social role. It emphasizes the reciprocal nature of roles: roles are co-constructed through interaction, and their dynamics shape the structure and essence of social situations.

7. MEANING: 'ROLE-PLAYING' AS IMPROVISED ROLE ENACTMENT IN SPECIFIC SITUATIONS, OFTEN AS PART OF EDUCATIONAL OR PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC METHODS

This interpretation of role-playing aligns with the fourth meaning but shifts from instinctive childhood learning to a consciously applied developmental intervention aimed at children or adults. This role-playing form diverges sharply from traditional acting (as in the 1st meaning. As early as his Vienna years, Jacob L. Moreno distinguished between actors playing "legitimate" roles, and the spontaneous roleplay he was interested in (Moreno, 1924).

Role-playing as a developmental method has long been a staple not only in medicine (Moreno, 1959) and education (Bolton & Heathcote, 1999) but also in leadership development programs, corporate training, and human resource development (Lippitt, 1943; Corsini et al., 1961; Craig, 1979; Hartyándi & van Bilsen, 2024).

Ronald Lippitt, a colleague of Kurt Lewin, wrote as early as 1943 about how role-playing could address classic challenges in leadership development:

> One of the most effective techniques the writer has discovered for satisfying these criteria is the utilization of several variations of the role-playing or psychodramatic situation which Moreno has developed most fully in the areas of individual diagnosis and therapy in psychiatric cases. (Lippitt, 1943, p. 287)

Similarly, organizational development pioneer Chris Argyris, in an early article, noted: "Management and union officials have both found it extremely useful to role-play their points before presenting them in final bargaining sessions" (Argyris, 1951, p. 7). Another OED-identified source echoes this meaning: "Students role-play some of the situations they will meet on the job" (Argyle, 1964, p. 133).

In this sense, role-playing becomes a practice-oriented, experimental, and preparatory form of learning. As Kapitany et al. (2022, p. 8) put it, "play in fictive context x benefits action in real context y." This practice builds on the interplay of earlier meanings: social action patterns (5th meaning) learned through imitation since childhood (4th meaning). Given the variability in the examples and social situations available to children, individuals develop different levels of competence in enacting specific roles.

Moreno's radical personality theory posited that the psychological self is the sum of an individual's role patterns. Later theories questioned identity's fixed, stable nature (Diakolambrianou & Bowman, 2023), with some even explaining dissociative identity disorder through similar logic (Watkins & Watkins, 1988; Sel, 1997). Moreno argued that role patterns interact to form "role clusters" that move together. For instance, the "woman" role closely interacts with and influences the roles of "daughter," "wife," and "mother," creating ripple effects within the role system. He theorized that the cumulative impact of all previously "played" roles creates the self (Moreno, 1962).

An individual's "role inventory" consists of all the roles they have ever played, while their "role repertoire" or "role matrix" represents the roles they can activate at a given moment (Moreno, 1959). This repertoire can be expanded in childhood and adulthood through appropriate actions, models, and social interactions. Developmental roleplay in a fictional situation or "surplus reality" (von Ameln, 2013) enhances real-life role-playing capabilities.

The "Barbara Effect" is a notable example from Moreno's early psychodrama experiments. Barbara, a member of Moreno's Vienna *Stegreiftheater* (Theater of Spontaneity), often played the roles of modest and virtuous women on stage. However, her husband, George, complained about her radically different behavior at home. Moreno assigned her angry and aggressive roles, which Barbara performed brilliantly on stage. Concurrently, her behavior at home became noticeably gentler. Moreno concluded that experiencing suppressed traits through fictional roleplay could expand a restricted role repertoire. This insight laid the groundwork for Moreno's psychodrama methodology and recently has been applied to treat schizophrenia through avatar therapy (Ward et al., 2020).

8. MEANING: 'ROLE-PLAYING GAME' AS A DEVELOPMENTAL COMPETITION

Historical sources, including the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), reveal that the term "role-playing game" did not first appear in the context of hobby games. Its earliest identified use was about developmental role-playing as described in the 6th meaning.

In Helen Irene Driver's 1954 article *Role-playing: A Counseling Technique*, the author explores the uses of role-playing techniques developed by Jacob L. Moreno. Driver concludes that Moreno's role-playing method, as used in psychodramatic group psychotherapy, is particularly effective in four areas:

1. Raising provocative questions for discussion.
2. Clarifying, emphasizing, or applying a discussed topic.
3. Teaching empathy, social skills, and improving self-esteem.
4. Assisting individuals in processing personal problems.

In one example titled *The Professor and the Dissatisfied Student*, participants acted out a conversation between a professor and a student unhappy with their grade. A central technique employed in this exercise was role reversal, where participants switched roles during the dialogue. This approach aimed to enhance empathy by helping participants experience the other party's perspective, fostering mutual understanding and the search for constructive solutions. In this scenario, however, participants turned the role reversal into a competitive challenge: "The rules of this role-playing game included reversing roles at any time in the conversation the leader dictated" (Driver, 1954, p. 115).

Three pairs of participants competed to achieve the best results in the negotiation through role reversals. Here, developmental role-playing was a structured, competitive game resembling certain improvisational theater exercises, aligning with Roger Caillois' (1961) *agon* (competitive play) concept in his game classification. At this stage, the term "role-playing game" was not yet used to denote a fixed activity type. Instead, it referred to the structured competitive nature of Moreno's roleplay exercises.

Another tradition that used the term "role-playing game" before the advent of *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) emerged from business and industrial simulations, indirectly influenced by German war games. During the Cold War, the development of simulation games aimed to explore scenarios and outcomes, particularly in political and military crises (Peterson, 2012).

One notable example is the "role-playing crisis-playing games" Herbert Goldhamer and others at the RAND Corporation described (Guetzkow et al., 1963). These games, often lasting several days, placed participants in the roles of decision-makers or diplomats from real or fictional nations. Players navigated coalition-building or nuclear conflict scenarios, with referees interpreting their commands and introducing randomness to simulate real-world unpredictability (Peterson, 2012). Unlike psychodramatic games, these simulations were governed not by dramatic processes but by referees who aimed to simulate the unpredictability of the real world while maintaining fairness.

This lineage traces back to the German *Kriegsspiel* developed by Baron Georg von Reisswitz in 1824. Reisswitz's war game involved participants sending written orders to referees, who compared them against predetermined rules and, when needed, resolved outcomes using dice to simulate battlefield uncertainty. In time, critiques led to the *Free Kriegsspiel* formula, where players interacted directly with experienced referees, enabling faster and more realistic gameplay. This evolution influenced later strategy games like *Strategos* (1880) in the U.S. and provided the foundation for incorporating role-playing into simulation games.

As these military and political strategy games evolved, role-playing became integral, particularly in simulating negotiations or decision-making processes. For instance, a 1970 issue of the British *Peace News* magazine observed: "During a strategy game, a situation may arise which is so interesting that the group may want to roleplay it" (*Peace News*, 1970, pp. 3-4).

Here, role-playing added depth to the game by encouraging participants to behave and interact as if they genuinely held the roles of generals or diplomats. Initially, role-playing in these contexts served educational and developmental purposes, allowing participants to practice decision-making and adapt to the complexities of real-world scenarios. However, as strategy games moved beyond educational applications, they lost their strictly developmental focus, paving the way for role-playing to become a recreational activity. This transition leads us to the following meaning of role-playing.

9. MEANING: 'ROLE-PLAYING GAME' AS A HOBBY GAME CATEGORY

For much of the 20th century, "role-playing" primarily referred to socio-psychological concepts in English, German, and French, with associations only shifting toward recreational activities due to the rise of RPG hobby games. On a global scale, 1974 serves as a symbolic turning point—it marks both the nominal "birth" of tabletop RPGs in the form of *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) and the death of Jacob L. Moreno. Since then, the term has become less associated with socio-psychological phenomena or developmental methods and more with leisure activities, such as hobby RPGs or sexual role-playing.

Coming back to D&D, its original 1974 release did not initially describe itself as a "role-playing game." Instead, its subtitles referred to it as:

> Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures. (Gygax & Arneson, 1974)

Within the game text, the term "role" appeared only once, and it was about selecting a character class. D&D's precursor, the miniature wargame *Chainmail* (1971), featured small units battling on a modeled terrain. Early editions of D&D envisioned a medium-sized party of mercenaries, hirelings, and followers embarking on expeditions to seek treasure, often in the wilderness or dungeon settings. Over time, especially with the influence of the *D&D Basic Set* (1981), this concept evolved into the idealized four-player party of specialists working together to overcome challenges like exploration, investigation, or holy quests.

This transformation progressively distanced D&D from its origins in miniature wargaming, narrowing its focus to cooperative storytelling among a handful of key characters. Notably, D&D was never purely a strategy game. From its inception, it was just as inspired by fantasy literature—then part of the sci-fi genre—and players' desire to emulate such stories as seen in early games like *Live Ring* (1973).

For some time, this hybrid game form lacked a universally accepted name. Suggestions included:

- "Ego involvement" (Mark Swanson, 1976)
- "Conversation game" (*Classic Traveller*, 1977)
- "Role assumption game" or "rolegame" (David A. Feldt, *Legacy*, 1978)
- "Adventure game," popular until the rise of computer-based RPGs (Peterson, 2022).

As Peterson (2012, 2022) discusses in detail, the term "role-playing," whether used as a label or adverb, was applied in fanzine reviews to describe the style of strategic games, including *En Garde!* (1975) and *Madame Guillotine* (1976). Interestingly, Gary Gygax, the primary creator of D&D, was initially opposed to applying it to D&D-type games (Gygax 1975). He emphasized that the appeal of his game lay in its challenges and problem-solving, rather than in role-playing as imagining oneself as a superhuman character. Despite his reservations, the term began to spread, aided by competitors like *Tunnels & Trolls* (1975), which used "role-playing" in its marketing. This also led TSR, D&D's publisher, to adopt the term. For example, *Metamorphosis Alpha* (1976) described itself as a "role-playing game," and the 1977 *Basic D&D* set, edited by Eric Holmes, referred to itself as a "role-playing adventure game." In 1978, Gygax himself described D&D as originating "the concept of paper and pencil fantasy role-playing game." (Gygax, 1978: 15). By the 1980s, "fantasy role-playing" (FRP) had given way to the abbreviation RPG as the recognized term for the hobby game category (Peterson, 2022).

The category diversified, spawning new formats, like larp (Live Action Role-Playing) that originated from physical enactments of tabletop RPG scenarios, and CRPGs (Computer role-playing Games) that emerged as adaptations of tabletop mechanics to digital platforms (Zagal & Deterding, 2018). CRPGs dominate contemporary popular culture to the extent that the abbreviation RPG often evokes video games rather than tabletop experiences. Today, probably more people associate the concept of tabletop role-playing games with the term 'D&D' than with 'RPG', similarly to other cases of genericization like the cases of Thermos and Elevator, when a popular trademark became synonymous with its category.

Hobby RPGs like D&D provide frameworks or affordances (Dashiell, 2021) that facilitate role-playing in various ways. These games encourage:

- Playing social roles or classes (e.g., warrior, dwarf etc.).
- Taking roles within the player's team (e.g. being a 'caller').
- Acting, improvisation, and collaborative problem-solving.
- Character-driven, immersive gameplay—often a divisive feature among players (Peterson, 2022).

Thus, the hobby RPG blends multiple aspects of role-playing, from strategic cooperation to theatrical improvisation, carving out a unique category that continues to evolve and diversify today.

10. MEANING: 'ROLE-PLAYING' AS CHARACTER PLAY

While the English language distinguishes between "play" and "game" at the lexical level, some languages, like French or Hungarian, make no such differentiation, blurring the difference between general role-playing and various forms of RPGs. Surprisingly, Hungary's first officially published tabletop RPG, *Harc és Varázslat* (Fight and Magic, 1991), defined itself as a "personality game" (*személyiségjáték*). This was not due to a lack of familiarity with the term *RPG*, but the authors deliberately sought a different word, partly because they wanted to avoid the accusations of satanism that were rife at the time, and partly because they felt that role-playing meant different things to different people, and that the personality development aspect of their activity was important to them (Szeltner, 2025).

In most hobby RPGs, players create individualized personalities—*characters*—distinct from their own (Harviainen, 2011). Players of various games have likely always ascribed personalities to game pieces to explain outcomes, but more structured experiments with character-level gameplay began in the 1960s. Joe Morschauser (1966) suggested tracking soldiers' names, ages, and biographies, allowing for unique attributes that could evolve between battles. In *Fight in the Skies* (1968), players controlled a single pilot, treating the character as either an extension of their own personality or as an independent persona, making decisions based on its hypothetical preferences (Carr, 1970). Don Featherstone (1969) noted that such character-focused gameplay introduced unexpected empathy into tabletop wargaming, as players avoided decisions that would lead to excessive sacrifices.

The trend extended to Europe, where *Western Gunfight* (1970) had players assume unique individuals with distinct goals and quantified skills rather than anonymous figures. These developments influenced games like *Braunstein* (1969), where achieving success without violence became possible. By the mid-1970s, RPGs began prioritizing detailed character portrayal over traditional strategic considerations like optimal decision-making and winning. Players increasingly embraced a style of play characterized by:

- Being "in character": Speaking in the first-person voice as their character.
- Character voice: Using a distinct tone or accent for their character.
- Adhering to limits: Acting within the character's defined statistics and constraints, even at the cost of control.
- Letting the character "play itself": A term popularized by *Chivalry & Sorcery* (1977).

RPG creators shifted their focus from simulating battles to modeling human nature (Peterson, 2022). Although they did not reach the depth of psychodrama (6th meaning), this shift fundamentally altered how rules were approached. Players needed to understand the rules to adhere to their characters' numerical attributes. Early editions of *D&D* offered limited player input in character creation, with attributes rolled by the Game Master. In contrast, by 1977, games like *Superhero '44* and *Melee* allowed players greater autonomy in assigning character traits.

Character-focused role-playing resembles socio-psychological developmental role-playing (6th meaning), but in its origin, it lacked external objectives like learning, therapy, or personal growth. Instead, playing personalities in RPGs emerged as an autotelic (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997), self-contained, inherently rewarding activity akin to recreational sports.

In this meaning, role-playing is no longer a function of a more complex game (as in the 8th meaning). The relationship between "roleplay" and "game" is inverted: rules are designed to facilitate the act of character portrayal. This "gamification" of personality creation highlights the centrality of role-playing in RPGs.

11. CONCLUSION

As we have seen, the terms *"playing a role," "role-playing,"* and *"role-playing game"* have several related but distinct meanings. Confusing these terms, whether by mixing them up, treating them as umbrella categories, or using them as synonyms, can lead to significant misunderstandings (Hartyándi, 2024).

However, it is important to note that the nine meanings presented here are somewhat arbitrary, based on currently available sources. The semantic genealogy of "role-playing" is summarized in **Figure 1**, noting that while the word's etymology is certain, its shifting meanings, particularly the earliest dates, may be revised as new sources and uses are discovered.

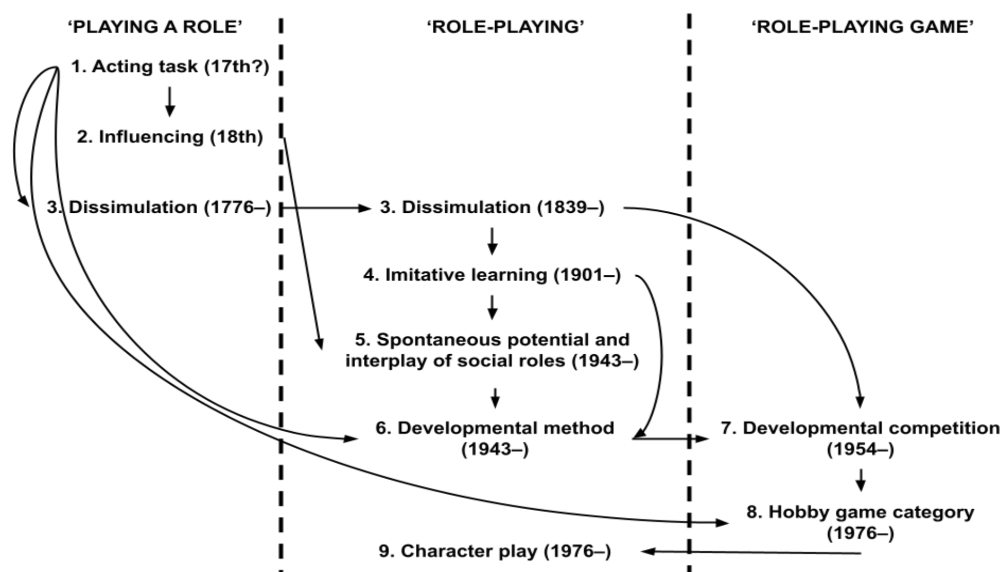

Figure 1: The Genealogy of 'Role-Playing' (Source: Author)

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Mátyás Hartyándi is an educator, psychodramatist, and PhD in leadership development methodologies. His research focuses on the history, theory, and application of various pretensive methods, including multiple forms of role-playing, applied drama, and gaming simulations, with the aim of bridging and integrating their differences. He lectures in human resource development at Eötvös Loránd University. As a leadership trainer and change management consultant at Grow Group Hungary, his professional experience includes work with local NGOs and multinational companies.

Hack, Slash, Heal, Repeat: Theorizing the Concept of the Murderhobo in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Abstract: This paper works to flesh out the concept of the murderhobo particularly in the tabletop game Dungeons & Dragons. As a term known in the gaming world, the murderhobo has not been fully or clearly defined in game studies, though it could prove a useful topic in terms of game culture and player behavior. This paper seeks to provide an examination of the concept through a practice theory lens and relates how it could be seen in a multitude of ways in the gaming space. This investigation lays the groundwork for more purposeful discussion of the topic and its tie to game culture.

Keywords: trpg, narrative, murderhobo, playstyle, practice theory

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1. INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), there has been the playing out of a tenuous contrast between the hero and the villain. As TRPGs have worked under the hero's journey, there has been a need for the villain to have a veritable army, surrounded by a faceless cast. To get to the penultimate battle, there is a need for the hero and their companions to cut a swath through these enemies, in order to achieve some level of glory. Thereby, TRPG player characters have been motivated by the goal and not the means to get there, meaning the player characters probably slaughtered multiple nonplayer characters (NPC) to get to the goal, and could wander aimlessly to find "trouble." These stories have come to be known by several terms, such as hack and slash and murderhobo, but generally speak to tabletop gaming that does not focus on the narrative or larger stories but glorify combat.

In this paper, I flesh out the concept of the "murderhobo" style of play in tabletop games, particularly in the framework of the game *Dungeons & Dragons*. While it characterizes a term that has been used in role-playing gaming, I provide a firm definition and characterization for the phenomenon and spark a discussion to its value in the gaming world. Further, I discuss how some tabletop gamers have moved away from murderhobo, but also how some players and playstyles still prize and emulate the style of play. While the murderhobo does not appear to open the door for expansive narrative games or deep emotional role-play, the nostalgia of the high-stakes, "us versus everyone" game still delights and attracts gamers in various ways.

2. METHOD AND FRAMEWORK

This paper operates from two fairly solid spaces- that there is a term known in the gaming world as 'murderhobo' and that term is colloquially understood but has not been fully fleshed out. This manuscript attempts to provide a starting point for the consideration of the idea of the murderhobo, focusing particularly on elements of the gaming system *Dungeons & Dragons* more than any other. While there is reason to critique the choice of *Dungeons & Dragons* versus other systems, the widespread presence of the game – in both popular culture and scholarship, allows for this theoretical explanation to be grounded in a body of knowledge that will allow for this foundational approach to, at the very least, move a discussion within the broader game field. The hope is, from this starting point, there can be affirmation, critique, or rethinking that allows for a more robust discussion of the concept of the murderhobo.

Following Bourdieu (1977), I read murderhobo as a practice at the intersection of habitus (players' learned dispositions), field (the TTRPG table and its subcultural norms), and forms of capital; at the table, rules mastery often functions as linguistic/symbolic capital that shapes who speaks, how disputes are arbitrated, and whose preferences structure play. To that end, murderhobo is looked at as a set of configured practices, a practice being what Pierre Bourdieu saw as an accepted way of doing something and serves as a collection of concrete action, a way of doing something (Bourdieu 1977). Murderhobo is then seen as a practice in gaming and would speak to the agency of the player in the eschewing of expected components of behavior. There is an ethical thread in this argument that closely aligns to expectations of "good" behavior; while this might seem at times presumptuous or filled with judgment, it goes under the premise of a Judeo-Christian ideal that practices that seem to lack compassion are "bad." *Dungeons & Dragons* is clearly a game that initially set its morality in "stark and absolute terms," so the examination of the practice occurring here conforms to that lens (Laycock 2015, 55).

3. GAMES, KILLING, AND THE ROVING ADVENTURER IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

While it is true that a common element of games is competition, it is also a common theme for games to involve an adversarial relationship. The moral concept of "good" versus "evil" makes for an attractive draw for many players, as they see their characters aims and goals as ultimately on the side of right, ultimately coloring the actions of the opposition as morally questionable. Games have long benefited from the value in what is deemed a virtuous goal, and players who not only want to "win" but further what is perceived as "right." As Hollander (2021) notes, it involves a circumstance where "a cosmic struggle is presupposed, where good and evil are personified, easily distinguished, and locked in a combat in which mortal heroes– whether or not they are religiously motivated– must participate" (320).

The foundational joy that emerges from play that highlights concepts like the murderhobo emergence from the hero's journey (Campbell 1973). Williams (2019) explains what the journey is:

> A hero, male or female, young or old, rich or poor, encounters a change in circumstance leading to a significant life problem. Sometimes the change is intentional, and the Hero is motivated to attempt and endure the process of change. Other times, the change is unwanted, leaving the Hero shocked, anxious, and in grief. Regardless of intention, the changed circumstances create a significant life problem: A situation where the Hero's existing knowledge and skills are no longer efficacious. (524)

In short, the journey is about challenge and growth, and that it only comes through conquering what is perceived as fantastic circumstances, both within (internally) and without (externally). The path to the end goal is supposed to be challenging, in order to highlight the uniqueness of the hero, else everyone would be able to accomplish the feat. When set as an external challenge, the journey normally occurs facing some Other that is either immense or numerous, and it stands in the way of whatever might be the goal (or the final step before the goal). In more action-based stories, this requirement of the story is not as necessary, but the framework of the idea, that through practice one can become a hero, becomes central to a certain ideal surrounding fantasy gaming. Beyond that ideal, all other elements of the journal, including others in the story, become optional.

There can then be an expendable subset of characters in any game, and this is evident in most gaming systems. Early TRPGs clearly made the distinction between player characters (PCs) that were controlled by human players and non-player characters (NPCs) that were controlled by the game master or Dungeon Master. Or as Kosciesza (2023) notes, NPCs are "any game agents who are not controlled by players and emphasize that NPCs often have both narrative and gameplay functions" (192). There has been a perception of non-player characters not being very well-developed, and serving as either background characters, living "window dressing" to give some depth to the scene, or purposeful to the plot (e.g., delivering key information, someone who needs to be saved, etc.). Daviault (2012) sees this as NPCs "being a part of the landscape and just as important as the richness of the environments" (442). With antagonistic NPCs, beyond the main enemy, there is a larger sense of these characters being unimportant; games have often represented multiple characters with a single set of gaming statistics, demonstrating how general these NPCs are. As such, it is not beyond the realm of belief that characters see little value in these characters that lack depth and feel their in-game deaths have little impact on the overall point of the broader game, as their purpose is to augment the experience of the player (Kosciesza 2023). This allows for the player to engage in behaviors that would be seen as "problematically intoxicating" and antisocial, but in still within the spirit of them being a hero (Bowman 2024, 163).

Because of this, "killing" takes on a different meaning, that does not necessarily align with general norms. If an NPC is seen as antagonistic or threatening, extinguishing its life is not perceived as unjustified or unprovoked "killing" or "murder." Warpefelt (2016) notes how in the case of adversaries, many of these individuals in games are in some way "faceless" or nondescript – without names or backgrounds that any players could recognize. Players can depersonalize their efforts as right because of the aims and goals on one level. However, there is additional justification because of the devaluation of NPCs as some sort of stock characters, who are both easily replaceable and of less value (Stenros 2013). While this relationship by its very nature does not set up players to be on a killing spree, it reinforces the depersonalization of the NPC, and how it serves a function, which allows it to be dehumanized, in order to make it a potential valueless target for the player. Even given this depersonalization of the NPC, players will still refer to their actions as "killing," meaning they acknowledge the act. This type of play and mindset creates the perfect space for the murderhobo.

4. THE MURDERHOBO CONCEPT

The murderhobo is a concept in games where the characters are understood "as killers for loot and experience, without a permanent base of operations, as…. Monsters exist for the purpose of being killed by travelling heroes and deserve their death by being in general evil and aggressive" (Harviainen, Granvik, and Korkeila 2025). The idea emphasizes, in part, the imagery of the hobo – an individual subject to homelessness (or defiantly not putting down roots) and indefinite wandering in search of something. Players do not need to be concerned with the cause and effect of their entry into the adventure – their role is to defeat monsters and to receive some form of capital for their efforts. The murderhobo has "no regrets or particular insight into their own behavior" (Hutchings and Giardino 2016, 13). Essentializing the murderhobo campaign (a game session with this mindset) allows players to ignore the motivations and drives of the story antagonist, and to disregard the potential emotional toll efforts have (Bowman 2024).

While often discussed in the context of gaming, there is no official definition of what constitutes a murderhobo campaign. To summarize an analysis of the style, I present three components for a foundational definition of a murderhobo campaign, based on a sense of practice.

> **Adventure first.** A common idea that speaks to the murderhobo theme shows an appreciation for the idea of adventure over all else. The character, via the player, hears the "call to adventure" that brings them into a particular circumstance (Campbell 1973). In this sense, players appreciate the fact that their characters are adventurers and not heroes, which in many ways is a nuanced difference. For sure, adventurers can become heroes, or commit heroic acts, but this is not a requirement of the character. As Gillespie and Crouse (2012) state, original player characters are presented as "tomb robbers and dungeon explorers, not high fantasy heroes" (448). In the murderhobo campaign, comic book style heroism is not required. If the goal is to retrieve a certain item, then the characters venture off into the dungeon and do so (Hollander 2021). Moreover, in these styles of games, the resolution (village saved, person rescued) is often engaged in the table as something of a rushed afterthought compared to the length and excitement of battle. This diminishes the importance of the return in the hero's journey.
>
> **Death is an inevitability.** This idea reinforces death as a distinct possibility for anyone in the game – the players, the enemies, or civilians. Adventuring is a deadly business. The Dungeon Master should not, then, be a force to try and preserve the character and prevent them from experiencing death. From the perspective of a murderhobo campaign, this should not be the case, and this is indicative of a game master watering down a game for the sake of players. A miscalculation or thoughtless mistake could be the death of any enemy, any noncombatant, or any player character.
>
> **Fighting for fighting's sake.** This theme harkens back to the DNA of the game, remembering *Dungeons & Dragons* as a wargame. As such, fighting should be a key part of gameplay, and a central focus of any game session. This notion highlights the importance of combat and relate directly to "battles" and "fights" as something that should be revered. Combat can be a "hack and slash," or a style of play in which battle and combat is the primary function and any other actions (such as diplomacy or puzzle solving) are secondary. This view allows for the alignment of "us" versus "them," and any enemies are seen as simply antagonistic sources of gold, treasure, and experience points. Enemies become cannon fodder. Imprinting them with racial or gender tropes humanizes them and makes it more difficult to justify what Dungeons & Dragons has historically referred to as a "wandering monster," a random enemy that is placed in the players' path to be killed (or avoided) for experience and gold (Svelch 2023, 47; Trammell 2018).

As Gillespie and Crouse (2012) note, old school gaming is typified by the dungeon crawl which "requires fighting monsters, avoiding traps, and collecting treasure" (455). The murderhobo extends this belief, exemplifying these actions without any consideration of consequence. However, by doing so, the player becomes not an adventurer, but a remorseless killer.

The idea of individuals being impacted by characters that they play, and that impact manifesting itself, at least temporarily, in their day-to-day circumstances is commonly known

in the role-playing world as bleed (Montola 2010). While much of the research on bleed looks at emotional impacts of action, there has long been a concern of a correlation between particularly violent gaming and violent acts (Chen, Mao, and Liu 2023). However, most research affirms that bleed effects are temporary, and not indicative of long-term behavior change (Hugaas 2024). Research has shown any causal link between tabletop gaming and real-world violence. Because of the prevalence of the unproven claim, that violent murderhobo behavior would start to turn players into homicidal, amoral killers, TSR (the company that initially released the game *Dungeons & Dragons*) made certain to downplay adventuring and reinforce heroism in its 2nd edition, in response to the Satanic Panic (Laycock 2016). This trend to read player characters in post-3rd edition *Dungeons & Dragons* modules as heroes rather than adventurers increased in the subsequent editions. A more heroic, and less murderhobo infused, game makes it more difficult for players "to engage in mere emotional tourism or exploitation of the subject matter of the game," as their actions have distinct consequences (Hutchings and Giardino 2016 ,13). Does removing muderhobo elements can take away from the "hack and slash" potential of a game, which some players still enjoy? Players will sometimes argue against, for example, a more cerebral game session with puzzles or a session focused on diplomacy, questioning if these circumstances can be seen as "fun."

5. PUSHBACK TO THE MURDERHOBO CONCEPT

Prior to recent developments in tabletop gaming, murderhobo campaigns could flourish. As Albom (2021) notes, TRPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* saw "sensation-seeking [as] a motivator through an absence of consequences; a lack of clear ramifications facilitates players to choose actions that violate conventional norms with impunity" (20). Contemporary TRPGs do not wholly support a murderhobo approach to gaming as in the past. For example, in many *Dungeons & Dragons* games since the 3rd edition, pre-designed modules have addressed the consequences of PC actions, such as modules which at the end note that unnecessary killing might lead to vengeance from another character, creating a new, dangerous story for the future. Even killing that needs to occur in order to advance the plot has consequences, and newer game developments clearly speak about what these outcomes might be (e.g., saving someone from a monster, but the victim seeing the killer brings out antisocial tendencies in them). This is a generic observation about post-3e adventure design; detailing specific instances is beyond this article's scope. Wanton killing, with PCs that do not choose other means (such as diplomacy or subterfuge) could lead to the players being recognized as violent murderers, bullies, or enemies. The broad idea of the hero justified by their ends and not their means is no longer what is commonly seen.

These literary constructions would discourage any murderhobo like tendencies, forcing players to be aware of how their actions have long-term consequences. In theory, this is not too far off what was initially intended. *Dungeons & Dragons*, for instance, is well immersed in Christian moral rhetoric, though methods could be medieval (Johnson 2020). One can point to the moral structure of the original alignment system (good, neutral, evil), or a game "packed as it is with angelic and demonic powers, who oversee the (justly rewarded/punished) souls of the departed" as clear examples of this (Hollander 2021, 319). Moreover, there has been greater push in contemporary TRPGs for the importance of narrative, and the value of a full, articulated story (Yessler & Crag 2024). With depth of story is more meaningful interaction either pinned on NPCs by the Dungeon Master or the players. Narrative encouragement provides contour to the creation of campaigns, meaning NPCs are not just faceless quest givers and enemies. The deeper narrative take has made for moral considerations of tabletop games, and how behaviors, particularly antisocial behaviors, should be considered (Hollander 2021).

6. NOSTALGIA AS MURDERHOBO DEFENSE

Recently there has been a rise in appreciation for the murderhobo, particularly in various TRPG subcultures. Of note is the Old School Renaissance, or OSR, which is a cadre of tabletop gamers who revere the "old ways" of playing this style of games, particularly *Dungeons & Dragons* (Mizer 2019). They were borne out of shifts that occurred in the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, upset over what they perceive as an attempt to "rule-ify" everything (Maliszewski 2009). Some of this dislike of shifts resulted in the creation of brand-new game systems. For instance, Pathfinder (operating on the heavily *D&D* influenced d20 model) was in many ways a copy of the system of the 3rd edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, due to the loud disdain many had for the 4th edition (Dashiell 2026; White et al 2024). While some of these adherents loudly defame what they see as a game system going "woke," the vast majority of those who are aligned with OSR simply have a nostalgic relationship to the game (Dashiell 2026).

Much of the connection between older interpretations of games, such as murderhobo campaigns, and older players falls under what Proctor (2017) refers to as totemic nostalgia. In this concept, members of a fandom community pin their attachment to the fandom with memories, experiences, and structures that speak to earlier connections of games. Individuals tend to visualize their early experiences through a hazy comfortable lens and cherish those moments. They link those positive historical connections to their deeper connection to the game. The murderhobo unites these ideas, seeing past depictions of adventure (separated from heroism) as nostalgic, but also cementing the notion of "only a game" by contrasting the lack of post-game ramifications highlighted in older interpretations of game systems. Thereby, circumstances like murderhobo campaigns, which might be ethically problematic, are seen through a gauze of early play and initial instruction. As such, the experience becomes familiar and a key part of the game for those players. Players are then encouraged by "the liminality of similar first play experiences" and would express dismay if those were not possible (Gillespie and Crouse 2012, 465).

What must be considered, particularly when looking at potentially problematic topics, is the complicated nature of nostalgia. Klopper (2016) notes how nostalgia is a "lying memory in the face of empirical circumstance," meaning the unclear connections with partial considerations might not mesh with the actual truths of the experience. For instance, it is very possible that many early players did not enjoy murderhobo play at all, which can prove to be action oriented, fast and unforgiving, particularly for newer players. Further, gamers are likely to forget their overall newness to the system, and how the linguistic and symbolic capital of various discourses excluded them from certain conversations at the table (due to their naivete) but combat circumstances did not have the same effect (Dashiell 2017). In short, the notion of "murderhobo is better" could be linked to the newness of the experience, and how it clouds the inability of the moment, while focusing on what individuals can do with a roll of a die. In many ways this reinforces the agentic imagination of players, "the active ability of social actors to shape their identities through immersive imagination" that brings them back to their initial love of the game (Fuist 2012, 114).

7. CONSCIENCE, KILLING, AND GAMING ENJOYMENT

If one is involved in a murderhobo campaign, it is required that you dehumanize all the NPCs who you encounter during the gameplay. To "save some" introduces an ethical code into the game, something more nuanced than the "good" and "evil" binary mentioned before. That

creates additional conversation and consideration which might add unnecessary discourse to the game. The "hack and slash" is only possible if you do not see the antagonists as parts of communities who have their own drives and motivations. An adherent to the fringe OSR would see this as simply playing the game in a fast-paced and fun way, whereas outside the game this behavior would be seen as antisocial. As discussed before, a main reason Dungeons & Dragons migrated away from the murderhobo type of campaigns is due to the Satanic Panic, which fueled an idea of a dangerous magic circle– those who kill in the game could become killers. But there is an attachment to the wanton abandonment from consequence that is apparent in murderhobo gaming, which is seen in a host of digital games (Bartel 2022; Hull et al 2014).

The murderhobo concept Is Inherently violent, and with Its mention comes the promise of blood, aggression, and very little empathy. The murderhobo speaks to players not necessarily being heroic, just adventure seeking. This might encourage a gritty reality which requires violence, while expecting little empathy. As such, the value associated with the murderhobo is also one that implies an appreciation of the components of the murderhobo, which tend to be read as masculine. This could speak to the male preserve effect that is embedded in the game system, where the hero's journey foregrounds qualities and characteristics that have been traditionally coded as masculine (Dashiell 2020). But there has been a notable shift in table culture, and more evidence that players are far more invested in narrative elements of tabletop gaming than in early years of play (Lorenz, Hagitte & Brandt 2022, 2; Salthouse 2025). As Cover (2014) notes, some contemporary players "may be more interested in progressing the storyline, while other may want to explore territory, and others may be primarily interested in developing their characters" (122).What this means is that some games may have little to no battle at all, based on the social and narrative contract determined by the GM and the players. This could note an absence of murderhobo style campaigns in general, dependent on the wishes of those who play.

And that is a significant point, as some players may wish to have a combat-oriented game for any number of reasons. And this does not mean that these game sessions are "easier" or less involving forms of discourse that are part of the game (Cover 2014; Hendricks 2006). Even battle-heavy games are open to long discussions about rules disputes and correcting inexperience (gamesplaining), meaning the murderhobo campaign cannot be essentialized as a speedy affair with dice rolls and cheers for success (Dashiell 2017). At the end of the day, tabletop games are interactive spaces, and the collective worldbuilding might differ in many ways in a muderhobo campaign, but it still meets the criteria of a tabletop game.

8. CONCLUSION: SO GOETH THE MURDERHOBO?

Gary Gygax, one of the creators of Dungeons & Dragons, is quoted as saying that part of the great appeal of the game is that ordinary people can "become super powerful and affect everything," which definitely aligns with the general thought of the murderhobo (Kushner 2003). A lot of early gaming set about portraying the notion of good and evil, marking the antisocial elements through their clear motives or their species, with the idea of "evil races" (Strzelczyk 2022). This allowed the early player to see the world in black and white and easily come into a gaming situation with a known objective, allowing everything else to be collateral damage (or collateral gain). The murderhobo allows for the powerful character to interface with the world and be a threat to evil and a symbol for good. With the components of adventure first, death as inevitable, and fighting for fighting's sake, the player could have his character easily barrel into a town and dispatch anyone within their site with a "it's them or us" mindset. This was defined as enjoyable in the past by many gamers.

The modern gamer is often much more driven by the story, and wants to see the development of their character, and the narrative that connects them to the gaming world. Part of this will involve building relationships, and self-exploration through interaction. This can only be done with a more hands-on approach with NPCs that was the norm in the early years of tabletop gaming, and it requires contact with others, not allowing for a "swing first and ask questions later" approach. Some contemporary gamers might have personal issues with a murderhobo approach to gaming and might struggle to find purpose in a scenario where the time and energy put into a character is because of the expectation of them living, and not the inevitability of death for that character. There is a drive in *Dungeons & Dragons* towards meaningful death being "pivotal," according to Sidhu and Carter (2021), something that rampant murderhobo actions can muddy.

This paper serves to provide more context on what the murderhobo concept is and situate the concept in tabletop gaming, particularly *Dungeons & Dragons.* It is important to note that the concept is far more widespread than *Dungeons & Dragons.* Beyond OSR adherents who still might enjoy murderhobo campaigns, some popular digital games, like Diablo 3, operate under a muderhobo principle (Harviainen, Granvik, and Korkeila 2025). Thus, the murderhobo concept is a configured practice the gaming world, and it could see a resurgence. Situating and providing contour to the concept should prove beneficial to further research on gameplay, motivation, and gaming style.

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On the Metaplot: A Look at Transmedial Storytelling in Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Abstract: The vast phenomenon of the metaplot in role-playing games dates to the late 1970s and had its golden age in the enormous game lines of the 1990s such as *Vampire: The Masquerade*, as well as the edition shifts of *Dungeons & Dragons*. The metaplot, the ongoing story of the gameworld that is created and released by the game publisher, exists in tension with the player agency that is the core focus of tabletop role-playing games and therefore often unpopular, yet publishers persisted in creating it. Metaplot is intrinsically tied to the market logics of manufacturing role-playing game lines that sustain gaming companies, who must publish books to maintain a cashflow even at the risk of alienating customers. This paper presents a history of the phenomenon, a tentative taxonomy of metaplot elements, and a call for further research.

Keywords: *Dungeons & Dragons*, game production studies, metaplot, role-playing games, storytelling, *Shadowrun*, transmedia

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the medium of tabletop role-playing games, there exists a nearly unique way of storytelling, in some ways transmedial, but largely literary. This is the *metaplot*. The phenomenon originates in the 1980s, had its height in the 1990s and still persists in some game lines today. It is intrinsically entangled with the commercial reality of role-playing game publishing, and it has been hated and loved ever since the first Dragonlance novel hit the bestseller lists in 1984.

Curtis D. Carbonell defines metaplot as “the timeline of major events within the universe” of the role-playing game (Carbonell 2019). This is somewhat inaccurate, however, as that definition encompasses also the history of a gameworld. As used in this article, the metaplot is the part of that history that occurs during the gameworld’s publishing life, the continuing story of the world as it is told through sourcebooks, adventure modules, and prose fiction. From an artistic point of view, it is intended to create the illusion of a living world, where events occur and life goes on beyond the contents of a single game group’s campaign. This storytelling method differs from more familiar forms of serial storytelling such as a novel series, an ongoing comic book, television shows or professional wrestling in that those position the consumer as a viewer or reader, while the role-playing game by contrast is about accommodating the consumer’s own creative agency. Role-playing game rulebooks often begin with an explanation of what a role-playing game is, and such an explanation invariably contains a message that can be paraphrased as “you will not be told a story; you will tell your own story” (Wieck et al. 1993; Dowdell et al. 2020, 6). In a role-playing game, the creative agency of the players is central to the medium (Fine 1983, 6). The metaplot, a story handed down from up above by the game’s publisher, is always in danger of contradicting that creative agency.

The existence of metaplot is also intrinsically tied to tabletop role-playing games’ existence as commercial products. Game publishers need to create and sell products in order to remain viable commercial entities and maintain a steady cashflow. However, to actually play a role-playing game, a player typically needs just one rulebook and some people to play with. The author Ben Riggs calls this “the RPG consumption problem”. Once the consumer has purchased the necessary product, they never actually need to buy another product ever

again (Riggs 2022, 100). Perhaps because of this, the tabletop role-playing game as an art form has proven very resistant to large-scale commercial exploitation, as evinced by the struggles of the market leader Wizards of the Coast, who in early 2025 laid off the development team of their virtual tabletop *Sigil* only weeks after launching the software that had cost them an estimated 20 to 30 million U.S. dollars (Carter 2025).

The commercial model of the tabletop role-playing game line, still dominant today, is one or more core rulebooks which supply the ruleset proper for the game, upon which is built an edifice of supplementary rulebooks, adventure modules, and campaign setting sourcebooks (see e.g. Riggs 2022). Popular game lines may run for hundreds of titles. One way to fill out these books has been to describe the passage of time in the gameworld and present new events in adventure modules for the player characters to resolve. Changes between editions have been another popular moment to advance metaplot even in gameworlds that have otherwise avoided it.

2. HISTORY OF THE METAPLOT

The first role-playing game to introduce metaplot was the science-fiction game *Traveller*. Its publisher, Game Designers' Workshop (GDW), published a magazine for the game, *Journal of the Travellers' Aid Society*, which in 1979 started a feature named "Traveller News Service", which told of events unfolding in the game's universe, including kicking off the Fifth Frontier War in 1981, which then affected the *Traveller* game line over the next year (Appelcline 2024, 42–44). According to game historian Shannon Appelcline, however, it was followed by no imitators (Appelcline 2014b, 160–61).

Though Appelcline identifies White Wolf's World of Darkness games in the 1990s as the real breakthrough of metaplots, I am forced to disagree. The 1984 Dragonlance product line for TSR's *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* had a very strong metaplot and it is an early example of such a plot being told transmedially in both adventure modules and novels. The famous Dragonlance adventure series was a twelve-title epic whose story was also told in the novel trilogy Dragonlance Chronicles by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman (Appelcline 2014b, 60). The Dragonlance series is identified by Benjamin J. Robertson as a new way of creating adventuring modules. Prior to Dragonlance, adventuring modules for *D&D* and *AD&D* were not created with a coherent overall narrative in mind, being standalone works that a Dungeon Master could string together into a campaign and create their own overarching story. However,

> [b]y contrast, the Dragonlance modules had to be played in a specific order and were designed to produce a specific (if still *somewhat* variable) narrative. A group might abandon the narrative at any time, of course, but to continue playing Dragonlance participants need to buy specific updates at regular intervals. The franchise also requires these participants to adapt to a new environment and set of mechanics, mechanics which are now subordinated to the story the modules are trying to tell. For example, while Dragonlance allows players to use their own characters (created with the general *AD&D* rules) in its setting, the modules explicitly encourage players to use the pre-generated characters who would come to populate the novels […] (Robertson 2017, 135)

Critically, the Dragonlance novels and adventures changed the world irrevocably in major ways, such as by returning priestly magic to the world and ending one of the elven kingdoms. However, the product line started with the adventure series that wrought these changes and inadvertently sidestepped the common problem with metaplots – as they change the world, they risk making older game materials obsolete in various ways, which tends to anger the consumer base. GDW felt this in the late 1980s with their *MegaTraveller* metaplot that broke apart the galactic empire, which was such an extreme change that it alienated many players (Appelcline 2014c, 371).

In the year 1989, TSR released a new edition of *AD&D*. The second edition did not include the character classes of the monk[1] and the assassin, and changed certain other things in the rules. *AD&D*, like most role-playing games of the era, was designed as a ruleset to simulate a world and its physical functions. Such a design necessarily implies certain things about the world of the game, and the gameworld must therefore be congruent with those implications. The disappearance of these character classes[2], the designers felt, had to be justified in the gameworlds. In the World of Greyhawk, this was handled in the adventure module *Fate of Istus*, which saw all the monks of the world transported to the continent of Kara-Tur (Findley et al. 1989, 119), a kind of fantasy Asia described in another game supplement (Pondsmith et al. 1988). In TSR's flagship campaign setting for the game, Forgotten Realms, the changes were told in the Avatar Trilogy, three novels with accompanying tie-in adventure modules – *Shadowdale*, *Tantras*, and *Waterdeep*[3]. The novels clearly take primacy over the game products in this instance, and the adventure modules are widely regarded as railroads, where the players' characters are little more than audience to the novel protagonists' activities (Appelcline 2014d). In these novels, the gods of the Forgotten Realms were cast down by the overgod Ao and made mortal. Among other events, the gods of death and strife, Myrkul and Bane, enacted a ritual to kill all the assassins of the world to weaken the god of murder Bhaal, thus explaining why the character class no longer existed in the game's new edition. Carbonell terms this the *godswar mechanism*, "a narrative justification for design changes, and the presentation of a host of new books that must be bought" (Carbonell 2019, 107).

Tangentially, the best-selling Forgotten Realms novels at the time were R.A. Salvatore's books about Drizzt Do'Urden, a good-aligned drow elf. Their antagonist was an assassin named Artemis Entreri. Salvatore was told by the publisher that he would have to kill Entreri, as all assassins of the world died. Salvatore famously responded "He's not an assassin. He's a fighter-thief who takes money to kill people" (Tan 2011). This was accepted and the character has since featured in some 18 further books, surviving three further edition changes with their accompanying cataclysms. This illustrates another dimension of creative tensions in metaplot work, the clashing interests of the creators themselves. R.A. Salvatore is a novelist, not a game designer, and his creative agenda is to write an entertaining story, not produce a gameworld. The perceived necessities of the gameworld's development sometimes clash with that agenda,

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[1] The "monk" in this case is in the sense of a martial artist as popularised by Hong Kong cinema, not the monastic devotee that *AD&D's* European pseudo-medieval milieu might be expected to imply. (Peterson 2025, 218–19)

[2] They were reintroduced to the game at the tail end of the second edition's life in *The Scarlet Brotherhood* sourcebook (Reynolds 1999).

[3] The novels were written by the authors Scott Ciencin and Troy Denning and attributed to a collective pseudonym Richard Awlinson. Later reprints credit the authors by their real names. The three adventure modules were written by Ed Greenwood but saw significant edits to bring them in line with the story of the novels, which Greenwood did not have access to due to production schedules. (Appelcline 2014d)

and such contrivances arise from the clashes. It is also notable that the first two novels of Salvatore's trilogy had exceeded 1,5 million sold copies – he was outselling the game itself, which must have been a factor in negotiating such creative impasses (Riggs 2022, 90).

Entering the 1990s, metaplot became *de rigeur* in role-playing games and major game lines all had their own. Most famous for its metaplot was the World of Darkness family of games published then by White Wolf. The family eventually grew to nine different games, all set in the same darker, bleaker version of our real world. The most prominent of the game lines were *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991), *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* (1992), and *Mage: The Ascension* (1993). The game lines ran from 1991 until 2004[4], concluding with the eight-book Time of Judgment series that ended the story of each of the games with a variety of apocalyptic scenarios. In those thirteen years, they saw an aggressive release schedule from the beginning. It is difficult to arrive at a conclusive, exact number because of the sheer mass of products that came out during the period, but the role-playing game and prose fiction titles released exceed 500. From the beginning, they also told a continuous story of the gameworld, placing the players' characters in the thick of it in adventure modules. The early storyline of *Vampire: The Masquerade* centred on the vampire politics of Chicago and featured such events as a war with werewolves that saw the Prince of the city killed. This happened in *Under a Blood Red Moon* (Brown 1993), a crossover adventure module that presented the events so they could be played in either *Vampire: The Masquerade* or *Werewolf: The Apocalypse*, and was printed with the trade dress of the latter. Though the front cover proclaims it as "The War of Chicago for *Werewolf: The Apocalypse* & *Vampire: The Masquerade*", its visual elements are of *Werewolf*, which had been out for less than a year. It was released simultaneously with the *Vampire* sourcebook *Chicago by Night Second Edition* (Greenberg and Crow 1993), which updated the former *Chicago by Night* (Rein•Hagen et al. 1991) to the postwar era, including the deaths of prominent characters like Prince Lodin and the ensuing power struggle.

Another noteworthy World of Darkness publication was *Vampire's* Clan Novel Saga, first released from 1999 to 2000, a series of 13 novels about a war between two sects of vampires for the control of the East Coast of the United States. Each novel focused on the vampires of a different vampire clan, and their events took place more or less simultaneously, some even describing the same situations from the perspectives of different characters. The series was later re-released in a four-book omnibus edition where the chapters of the books had been rearranged in a strictly chronological order. In the first volume, the prologues end on page 122 (Wieck et al. 2003).

Other peculiar ways of doing metaplot in the 1990s were innovated by Alderac Entertainment Group (AEG) in their games, the samurai fantasy *Legend of the Five Rings* (L5R) and the swashbuckling game *7th Sea*. The latter initially presented a fantasy world based on Renaissance Europe, and the focus of the game was on swashbuckling adventure, sailing the high seas, and duelling (Wick and Wilson 1999). However, it was then revealed that the magic used by the world's sorcerers was tearing holes in reality and threatening to unleash cosmic

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[4] They were initially replaced with "the new World of Darkness", which was a reimagining of the franchise and did not use metaplot. The old World of Darkness games made a comeback in 2011 when *Vampire: The Masquerade 20th Anniversary Edition* (V20) was crowdfunded. The new World of Darkness was rebranded as Chronicles of Darkness in 2015 when Paradox Interactive, having just purchased White Wolf from the Icelandic computer game company CCP, announced they were going to bring back the old World of Darkness (Carbonell 2019, 132). Though V20 was quite light on metaplot, it concluded with *Beckett's Jyhad Diary*, a 559-page book describing the metaplot from 2004 up to 2015 (Alexander et al. 2017).

horrors in a very Lovecraftian vein (Wilson 2001, 18)[5]. This was seen as a severe breach in the tone of the game and was unpopular with the player base. In this instance, the metaplot development revealed that a major element of the game was actually in an entirely different genre from what it had been sold as. AEG sometimes did engage in such tricks, perhaps most famously in the L5R book *The Merchant's Guide to Rokugan* (Vaux 1999), whose paratexts, cover, and introduction present it as a deliberately boring text on the economics of the gameworld's feudal fantasy Japan, until three pages into the introduction the author drops the façade and announces the book's actual topic, a secret society intent on toppling the empire.

In *Legend of the Five Rings*, power over the metaplot of the game lines was handed over to players, but not players of the role-playing game. The events of the Clan War (1995-1997) were determined by the outcomes of official tournaments of the *Legend of the Five Rings Collectible Card Game*, culminating in the finals, the Second Day of Thunder. Game designer Matthew Colville described it as "The Greatest Story in Gaming" and emphasized its emergent and participatory storytelling. The tournament players could steer the gameworld's storyline by their victories and defeats as well as their actions in the finals. There were surprise defections. A player might concede a game to manipulate another player of their favoured clan into a better position in the tournament bracket. The outcome of the final game was so surprising that the lead narrator John Wick, who had prepared sealed envelopes for the story of each clan's victory and burned them unopened as each clan was eliminated, burned even the ones he had left and narrated the outcome of the Day of Thunder off the cuff (Colville 2017). On *Salon.com*, the journalist Robert Rossney characterized it as "a new type of oral storytelling" (Rossney 1999). A fictionalized version of the story of the card game tournament itself was used as the basis of the movie *The Gamers III: Hands of Fate* (Vancil 2013). However, these sweeping changes into the world, some of which were quite strange absent the context where they arose, were then introduced to the role-playing game, whose players possibly had no knowledge of where they were coming from, and many felt alienated by them. However, the testimonials of Colville and Rossney speak of significant investment into the game, a fandom. Some role-playing games have managed to encourage the formation of this kind of investment, most of them being characterized by strong metaplot.

Entering the 2000s, strong metaplots became less common. When Wizards of the Coast released the third edition of *D&D*[6] in 2000, Forgotten Realms was updated to the new ruleset in a far less overt manner, though changes did occur, such as the return of Shade, a flying city that had been in exile in the Plane of Shadow for a thousand years, to become a new political power (Greenwood et al. 2001, 280), or the villainous Red Wizards' turn into mercantile outreach to project soft power and act as a cover for their espionage activities (*ibid*, 278). This type of metaplot writing did not invalidate previously published supplements quite so extensively. While certainly older descriptions of cities in the world did not contain Red Wizard enclaves, choosing whether to insert one or not is simple for a Dungeon Master. Locations that were destroyed, such as the town of Tilverton (*ibid*, 113), were ones about which little had been previously published.

[5] Mere two years between the two books feels slight, but fast and aggressive production schedules were typical of the role-playing game industry from the early 1990s up to the early 2010s. The first edition of *7th Sea* is of comparatively modest size at only 28 titles, but they were all released during the three-year period of 1999-2001. *7th Sea* received a new edition named *Swashbuckling Adventures* in 2002 and a crowdfunded second edition in 2016 from John Wick Presents that bankrupted the company and led to a buyout by Chaosium to fulfil the crowdfunding campaign (Bunge 2018; O'Brien 2019).

[6] Continuing from *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons Second Edition*. The edition numbering of *D&D* is a recondite art, and the numbering used is the convention and has little to do with the actual number of discrete editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Before *D&D's* fourth edition came out, the final Forgotten Realms book published in the third-edition era was *The Grand History of the Realms*, a book originally compiled as an online document by the fan Brian R. James (James and Greenwood 2007). It compiled the full timeline of the Forgotten Realms from the countless[7] game supplements, novels, video games, and comic books that been set in the world, both the in-setting history as well as the metaplot that had advanced the timeline by only fifteen years since the first version of the campaign setting was released in 1987. According to Carbonell, it "is important because it represents how a shared, imaginary universe becomes realized through the combination of analog/digital tools made available to the public" (Carbonell 2019, 104).

When in 2008, the fourth edition of the game came out, the timeline of Forgotten Realms was advanced a full century. The designers also introduced the device of the Spellplague, a worldwide magical cataclysm (Cordell et al. 2008, 40). Even the old world maps were no longer useable with the redrawn coastlines and sunken nations. Appelcline characterizes the fourth-edition Forgotten Realms sourcebooks as "some of Wizards' worst-received supplements ever" and lays the fault for this specifically on its incompatibility, bordering on hostile, with the older versions of the setting (Appelcline 2014c, 190). When the fifth edition of *D&D* was released in 2014, the timeline was advanced yet further but the sweeping changes of the Spellplague were undone in what was called the Sundering and described in an eponymous series of novels by different authors, including R.A. Salvatore. As per Carbonell, it was "needed to return FR to its pre-Spellplague state. Such complexities are often beyond the interest of many players, but those who choose to unravel them face a historiography and an archive-building challenge of great magnitude" (Carbonell 2019, 107).

In the third-edition era, Wizards of the Coast did run another experiment in player-driven metaplot, the Living Greyhawk organized play campaign. In the campaign, managed by the marketing arm Role Playing Games Association (RPGA), the gameworld of Greyhawk was divided up between the player communities of different locations in the real world to develop and publish adventures for. The campaign ran from 2000 to 2008, the length of the third edition's publication, and produced in excess of 2,000 titles of adventure modules that are these days largely unavailable (Särkijärvi 2024). Giving such a free hand with their intellectual property to groups of unpaid and unvetted fan writers with little supervision would be probably unthinkable today.

A final example of a metaplot executed in the 2010s and 2020s shall be Paizo Publishing's *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game*. Paizo was founded as a magazine publisher and in 2008 when circumstances[8] forced them to pivot into role-playing game publishing, they leveraged that expertise and started a series of monthly adventure modules[9], initially for *D&D's* third edition and starting in 2009 for their own *Pathfinder RPG*. Every six modules formed a complete campaign that would take the party of player characters from level one to level twenty, where the base game's character levels were capped. These were branded Adventure Paths, and one could buy a subscription. In the metaplot of *Pathfinder's* world, Golarion, the time advanced at a 1:1 pace with the real world. Books published in 2009 were set in the year 4709 (Baker et al. 2007, 203) and so forth. Unusually for the time, when most game publishers were toning down their publishing schedules, *Pathfinder* saw multiple releases each month. However, their novel line, Pathfinder Tales, did not tell stories that made great changes to the world. Those

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7 Carbonell says "over one hundred" (Carbonell 2019, 103), but the number is at least double that.

8 See (Appelcline 2014a, 221) for details.

9 At the time of writing, volume #216 has just shipped to subscribers.

happened exclusively in the Adventure Paths, and were thus the players' to make. Throughout the first edition of *Pathfinder*, 2008-2019, there were virtually no major changes to the setting that did not come from the Adventure Paths. Those changes were rarely referenced and when they were, they were in ways that enabled rather than constricted the players' options. Instead of destroying cities, the Rise of the Runelords Adventure Path opened up a newly discovered ruined city far in the high mountains (Hitchcock et al. 2011, 55). Only in the game's second edition in 2019 were all of the changes compiled into a new version of the primary campaign setting book (DePass et al. 2019). More recently, however, Paizo Publishing has also worked with classical metaplot in the godswar vein, where the god of war died and wrought changes upon the world (Case et al. 2024). Even that event was also presented in an adventure module for the players to experience (Hoskins 2024).

In 2025, Paizo Publishing is one of the last lions of metaplot writing, and neither the current editions of *D&D* nor the World of Darkness games have it. Other current game lines that still have metaplot include *Shadowrun*, *BattleTech*, and *Legend of the Five Rings*, but the sweeping epics of yesteryear are over and the trend has long been away from telling stories through sourcebooks. The reasons can be speculated. One likely factor is the change of the publishing landscape itself. As described by William J. White, the turn of the millennium saw a series of new developments in the field. These include such myriad things as the simplification of online payment systems, which in turn facilitated PDF storefronts. Digital printing technologies made smaller print runs viable and the advent of consumer-friendly layout software significantly lowered the threshold of publishing a role-playing game product (White 2020, 225). In the heyday of the metaplot, the 1990s, the commercial model for a tabletop role-playing game line was "the supplement treadmill": one or more core rulebooks which supply the ruleset proper for the game, upon which is built an edifice of supplementary rulebooks, adventure modules, and campaign setting sourcebooks (see e.g. Riggs 2022). Related to this is also the appearance of games that are described as "anti-canon", seen as more accessible to players, without the perceived requirement of reading a great deal of worldbuilding or to keep up to date with new advancements (see e.g. Rejec 2019)

3. FRAMEWORK AND TERMINOLOGY

Based on the above, we can discern broad trends in how metaplot has been executed and work towards a framework to discuss it. This conceptualisation approaches the metaplot through its relationship to the gameworld and the players – taken on its own, it is literature and can be studied as such. The most obvious element is how *intrusive* it is. This is about how much the progressive metaplot invalidates previous game supplements and the sheer scale of its effects in the gameworld. The Spellplague and Forgotten Realms's transition to the fourth edition of *D&D* is a prime example of a highly intrusive metaplot event – practically nothing of the older materials was compatible with the setting's new version. Likewise, the Clan War of *L5R* was very intrusive, in that the Emperor was murdered, his dynasty ended, one of the Great Clans was outlawed, and the naga, snake people, introduced to the setting. The opposite to this is *subtle* metaplot, which advances the timeline but keeps changes small and maintains backwards compatibility. An example of this would be the transition of Forgotten Realms to *D&D's* third edition.

Closely related to this is how much a metaplot event is *removing* from the gameworld as opposed to *adding* to it. *WG06 Fate of Istus* removed all of the monks from the World of Greyhawk, taking away this character option from the players. In the fantasy space opera game *Starfinder*, the planet Aucturn was revealed to be an egg of a god, which hatched (Jarzabski 2024), removing the planet as a location in the gameworld. Conversely, the Clan War added the naga into *L5R* as a character option, and in the fifth edition of *Vampire: The Masquerade*, vampires of Clan Lasombra were introduced to the Camarilla sect as a player option (Anderson et al. 2018). Often adding something is involved in removing something else – the fourth-edition Forgotten Realms added the new continent of Abeir, but it replaced the older continent of Maztica (Cordell et al. 2008, 200).

How the metaplot is told matters a great deal for how it is received. If it is told through adventure modules, something that the players can experience at their game table, it may be better-received than if it is handed down from up above. It is then either *participatory* or *imposed* – though instances like the Avatar Trilogy have the novels imposing a certain canonical outcome to the story, regardless of what transpires in the game table when playing the associated adventures. The same is true of the Dragonlance series of novels and modules, though the Avatar Trilogy is not fondly remembered while the Dragonlance series are classics[10]. Until *War of the Immortals*, the metaplot of *Pathfinder* exclusively advanced through the Adventure Paths, which generally enjoy a measure of appreciation in the community – certainly they have remained financially viable as a monthly product since 2007.

A final, minor variable is whether the metaplot is *publisher-driven* or, in a rare few instances, *player-driven*. Such instances are the tournaments of Clan War, the fan-produced Living Greyhawk campaign, as well as the early role-playing game *Torg*, where players could respond to feedback forms in published adventure modules and thus affect the direction of the metaplot. Likewise, the organized play campaigns Pathfinder Society and Starfinder Society ask game masters to report the results of certain scenarios at the tables they run, which then determines their canonical outcome.

4. DISCUSSION

There is little to no existing literature on metaplot to draw from. Academic role-playing game studies have overlooked the topic and even game design guides by and from practitioners do not address it. Titles such as *The Grand History of the Realms* are rare and tend to be compilations of diegetic events in the gameworld aimed at the general consumer instead of documentation of how the metaplot was told. This article is a tentative opening to looking at how it works, how and why it has been done, and how it could be done better.

The phenomenon is an interesting one because it is nearly unique[11] to tabletop role-playing games, and exists at a point of tension between the creative agency of player groups

[10] The RPGGeek website's listing has the Avatar adventures rated 5.4 and 4.6, while the most recent Dragonlance reprints, *Dragons of Autumn*, *Dragons of Winter*, and *Dragons of Spring* all have scores of over 7. The scale runs from 1 to 10.

[11] The *Legend of the Five Rings* card game being an obvious example outside of role-playing games. Certainly, fictional universes like that of the miniatures wargame *Warhammer 40,000* advance their timelines, but without the role-playing component, its impact on the playing of the game itself – apart from the introduction of new armies and units – is debatable. Likewise, MMOs such as *World of Warcraft* and *Matrix Online* have advanced their storylines in various ways, but there the players have little option to reject the changes in their own play without spinning up a private server.

and the economic realities of the game publishers. A study of metaplot as a topic should take into account not only its form as transmedia storytelling but also the manner of its production[12]. It is also a necessary topic of study. It was a dominant form of role-playing game storytelling throughout the 1990s into the early 2000s, and it is unique to the medium of the role-playing game[13]. It was also a major element of several games regarded as classics, *Vampire: The Masquerade* perhaps the foremost among them.

It therefore feels apparent that metaplot can be a driver of player investment in the product and important to building a fandom for the gameworld. A devout fandom that feels they share ownership of a cultural product is not, of course, always desirable, but the role-playing game industry is financially precarious, and establishing a set of best practices for building a metaplot without inviting fan backlash would be in the interests of the industry itself as well as academia.

It must be admitted that metaplot is not an easy topic of research. While the lack of existing research to scaffold one's work on can feel even liberating, the material fact remains that metaplot is also storytelling at a large scale and even the comparatively modest first edition of *7th Sea* comprises 28 published titles, or in excess of 3,400 pages[14]. A full reckoning of *Vampire: The Masquerade* publications in the years 1991 through 2003 would involve nearly 200 game books, prose fiction titles, and graphic novels. Any study of the topic is by necessity work-intensive for the sheer amount of reading involved. While access to materials has become simpler in the era of PDF storefronts[15], it too may be a significant financial consideration. While its vastness makes research difficult, it also demands it.

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12 For more on game production studies, see Sotamaa and Švelch 2021.

13 This article has ignored larp, but campaign larps such as those run under the Camarilla organization for World of Darkness had something like metaplot. Harviainen et al. 2024 (102) briefly mentions the term in conjunction with campaign larps in the United Kingdom.

14 A single PDF file containing the entirety of the first edition was distributed to backers of the *7th Sea Second Edition* Kickstarter campaign. It is 3,479 pages long.

15 Even the older editions of most major games whose copyright and distribution rights status is clear and belong to a single legal entity are available as PDFs. Works based on various media licenses such as Marvel comics or the old *Middle-earth Role Playing*, as a rule, are not, but they mainly do not engage in metaplot storytelling. The complications of dealing with licensors are another aspect of role-playing game production studies.

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Losing and Finding Oneself: Duo- and Autoethnographic Study of "Character" in the Larp *Superrealism*

Abstract: This article investigates the relationship between player, character, and game experience through a case study of *Superrealism* (Lukka 2022), a non-verbal, music-driven live-action role-playing game (larp). First, the work presents a brief overview of role-playing game studies theories that investigate the nature of the self-concepts of players and characters. Through duoethnography and autoethnography, the authors then share their personal accounts of the game: Lukka, from his perspective as a designer and a facilitator, and Bowman and Baird, from their experiences as players. Lukka's account reveals how the non-verbal, music-driven, allegorical narrative and vague characters encourage highly personal interpretations emerging from players projecting themselves to the game. Baird's account provides an example of one such experience, where she was able to surface and process experiences of repressed queer grief that might have otherwise remained unconscious. Whereas Lukka found the characters to be a rather minor part of the design, Baird's and Bowman's accounts reveal how the characters, even if vaguely described, acted as a touchstone for the game experience. Their character concepts emerged from personal history and belongings, narrative instructions, and the use of character sheets as a prop. Together, these accounts illuminate how larps can evoke personal, meaningful, and potentially transformative experiences by creating safe interpersonal spaces, where evocative music, non-verbal play, narrative, and characters allow for the processing of intimate personal content. The article also demonstrates how this process continues in later sense-making after the larp.

Keywords: Duoethnography, Autoethnography, Character, Game Experience

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1. INTRODUCTION: PLAYER, CHARACTER, AND IDENTITY

"Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream…
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily…
Life is but a dream."
-- Eliphalet Oram Lyte (1881)

One of the main precepts in most definitions of role-playing games is that players enact characters within a fictional world. For example, the working definition two of the authors have been using is "co-creative experiences in which participants immerse into fictional characters and realities for a bounded period of time and improvise through spontaneous, emergent playfulness" (qtd. in Bowman et al. 2024). The character and fiction create an *alibi* that can help players feel more safe enacting unusual or questionable actions (Montola 2010; Deterding 2018). From this perspective, character refers to an identity that is different from the player's self-concept, whether in subtle or radically different ways. Also central to the precept is this character enactment transpires in an agreed-upon fictional world that is upheld and co-created by the players. This fiction may be pre-established by canonical books, larp scripts, player instructions, or other documents that guide the facilitator and players toward building and maintaining a negotiated *pretensive shared reality* (Kapitany, Hampejs, and Goldstein 2022).

However, recent work in role-playing theory calls into question some of the facets of these central precepts—or at least complicates them. Theories in psychology and practices in counseling assert that one's self-concept (or multiple self-concepts) may not be stable, unified, or singular. Diakolambrianou and Bowman (2023) asset four different approaches to understanding identity synthesized from these perspectives:

1) Identity as a social construct defined by our roles and classifications;
2) Identity as narrative, comprised of the stories we and others tell about ourselves;
3) Identity as psychodynamic, made up of parts in dynamic interaction with one another; and
4) Identity as a mosaic, in which different parts are configured and reassembled based on environmental pressures.

Alternatively, from a cognitive psychology perspective, the player's identity cannot be measurably discerned from the character's identity; as the two share the same body, brain, and physiological responses (Lankoski and Järvelä 2012; Järvelä 2018). That being said, the phenomenological experience of "being someone else" is still a fundamental component of role-playing: a form of *mentalization* in which the player are able to conceptualize *"one's own and others' mental states,"* permitting one *"to affect and alter how one perceives, interprets and reacts to one's surroundings"* (Lukka 2013). Mentalization allows players to immerse into their character's perspective and imaginings, which become the interpretive lens through which they temporarily view the world. This process likely includes adopting a *theory of mind* for another character and inhabiting it, which can be likened to a dissociative (Bowman 2010; Lukka 2014), or otherwise altered state.

Related to this question of locating the character is the concept of bleed, in which psychological contents spillover from player to character and vice versa (Bowman 2013). Such components can be emotional (Montola 2010; Waern 2010), physical (Hugaas 2019), ideological (Hugaas 2019), or contents of one's personality, or ego, itself (Beltrán 2012). Bleed effects can lead to experiences of emancipation, especially for players who experience marginalized social identities in daily life and can challenge those limitations or counter oppressive systems within RPGs (Kemper 2017, 2020). When multiple forms of bleed interweave in a player's consciousness, their identity itself can become altered (Hugaas 2024), a process that can be undertaken consciously; for example, a player can intentionally aim to use role-playing characters as methods of *wyrding the self* (Kemper 2022), transforming their self-concept. Such theories highlight the constructed nature of both the self-concept and the character-concept; indeed, bleed may always be happening on some level, but only perceptible at a certain threshold (Hugaas 2024).

Alongside the development of these theories, and sometimes informed by them, RPG designers have been experimenting with the idea of character, fiction, and indeed this notion of a shared pretensive reality. If role-players are each inhabiting and projecting a subjective diegesis (Montola 2003; 2012), in which their version of the narrative is what defines the experience, an RPG cannot be fully understood by only reading the game texts or even the facilitator's instructions. Instead, all experiences within the fiction should be considered as "the game," even if they vary wildly from each other.

This phenomenon becomes more obvious and fascinating in the case of non-verbal abstract games, which have grown in popularity in recent years, particularly within the black box and Nordic and American freeform scenes. The designer most known for exploring movement, abstraction, and non-verbal communication in larp is Nina Runa Essendrop (2018),

who is known for creating highly symbolic and profound experiences, often through the use of music, as well as limitations on physical movement and modes of interaction. Another particularly fascinating larp of this type is *Before and After Silence* (Hossmann and Holter 2013), which highlights subjective diegesis in an extreme sense. Players are given strips of paper with phrases like the following as their sole character sheet:

> You and the others are memories from each others' lives. As you look at them, they come alive as you come alive when they look at you . . .
>
> You and the others are children unable to speak because of the cruelty you have experienced. One of the other children you trust. Another you distrust. Try to act the same towards both of them. (Hossmann and Holter 2013)

Then, they interact for an hour non-verbally, each interpreting the story through these markedly different lenses. Such designs require co-creation to occur on a more intuitive level, relying upon attunement, interpretation, and adaptation with others without the benefits (and constraints) of verbal direction or clear social frames. Emergence is always present in larp narratives (Torner 2018), but especially potent in experimental games such as these. This makes these non-verbal, abstract larps a fruitful context for studying the relationship between player and character, and specifically how the game experience allows for an experience that is transformative for the player. However, this dynamic needs to be investigated from both game design and player perspective, which this case study aims to provide through duo- and autoethnograpic accounts.

2. METHODS

2.1. Study aim and overview

This article investigates the relationship between player, character, and game experience through a case study of Lauri Lukka's *Superrealism: A Music-driven Embodied Role-playing Experience of Losing and Finding Oneself* (Lukka 2022), which was specifically designed to explore conceptual and experiential questions around the nature of the character in RPGs through abstract play. Lukka and Sarah Lynne Bowman will employ duoethnography (Sawyer and Norris 2012), which transpired as a video conferencing conversation in early 2025 in which they compared Lauri's design/research intentions with how Sarah experienced the larp as a player/researcher. This work will be augmented by Josephine Baird's autoethnographic (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) account of her own experience playing the larp, which highlights her own unique subjectivity. These methods aim to highlight the phenomenological nature of play through the distinct roles required in role-playing games, that is designer, facilitator, and player. They also emphasize how the interpretation of such games varies from player to player, while being influenced by the game design. Hereafter, we will toggle between last and first names in the paper to emphasize our unique subjectivities in this work as researchers and players.

2.2. The Evolution of Superrealism

Lauri described how *Superrealism* evolved from experiments in which he and co-designer Otso Saariluoma challenged the centrality of facilitator in guiding the experience. In many chamber larps and freeform games, the facilitator plays an active part in guiding the direction of play

(see e.g., Stark 2012), making the experience highly dependent on facilitator influence. Lukka and Saariluoma explored the degree to which they could supplant the facilitator through pre-recorded instructions and musical guidance in the larp *Club TPOW* (2016) that was set in New Year's Eve party (see Figure 1). However, it took six years until these early concepts matured into the *Superrealism* (2022), a name that nods to the 20th century Surrealist art movement that strived to express the unconscious.

Figure 1. Title image for *Club TPOW* (2016).

Superrealism focused on instructions and music as the primary drivers of the emotional journey, with a playlist intended to guide players through a specific trajectory moving from neutral, to deep diving, to heights, to deep diving, to neutral again. This dramatic trajectory was inspired, for instance, by the concept of the narrative arc and Gabrielle Roth's 5Rhythms (2025), a variant of ecstatic dance in which the music and short verbal instructions guide the dancers' journey and often shape the ways in which their bodies move. *Superrealism* adapts this notion to 19 scenes each of which are played non-verbally after a brief narrative read by the facilitator. Within the scenes, the game themes are reinforced with props, e.g., rocks, egg shakers, and blindfolds. The initial character sheet was highly simplified, including only a painting of a figure, a name, and three provocative words to further encourage players' psychological projection (Freud 1995). The game setting is described in the introduction of the scenario thusly:

> *In a remote country house, you hesitate. The esoteric new-age self-development seminar is about to begin. Promptly, the escalating ceremony leaves your ego behind. Together, you look for the mystical Mountain across curious, associative, symbolic, and synesthetic planes. Do the participants ever meet the Blackbird? Do they find the present?* (Lukka 2022)

Indeed, the "you" in this description shifts in terms of character throughout the larp, from these initial seeds. In the workshop, players are asked to walk around the room and choose an intentionally vague character sheet which is their starting point in the game. During the game, the players are subsequently guided to pray to these initial characters, only to then see them disappear. The players are then asked to adopt other characters in an ambiguous manner; at various points, they are dwarven slaves working in the Mountain overseen by an evil overlord; life partners of advanced age experiencing end of life; and birds soaring above the Mountain. Later, the initial character reappears and the character sheet is furiously ripped apart (Figures 2–4).

Lauri has run the larp six times and has noticed several interesting things. First, while the instructions are often ambiguous, the players often appear to engage in roughly similar activities from run to run. However, these similar external behaviors appear to mask a more complex internal journey that remains unseen during the non-verbal game. Also, while the narrative is intentionally vague, from his perspective, it has a poignant journey, but Lukka has observed that the players often prioritize their own internal sense-making over the themes in the narrative.

These observations sparked the interest in Lukka and Bowman to explore these concepts in depth in this paper, where we decided to investigate these questions:

1) What comprises the "character" in *Superrealism*?
2) To what degree does the larp feature a coherent narrative journey for players?
3) Can this kind of a non-verbal game catalyze personal transformations in its players? If so, how?

2.3. Duo- and autoethnography

The research questions were explored through excerpts from the duoethnographic conversation between Sarah and Lauri, as well as Josephine's autoethnographic account of playing the larp. While these questions guide the work, this study remains exploratory in nature, meaning remaining in the inquiry rather than arriving at definitive answers. Furthermore, this data was collected in 2025, over two years after the play experiences described here. From that perspective, the accounts are considered memories and interpretations rather than phenomenologically accurate representations of experience in the game (Lukka et al. 2024); yet, nonetheless, this time has also allowed for sense-making on the experience itself. For Josephine, the game experience allowed for personal transformation connected to queerness and grieving, whereas for Sarah, the experience became more philosophical, encouraging her to reflect more deeply on the nature of self-concepts and how environmentally contextual they are in life and in larp.

Auto- and duo- ethnographic methods interrogate the researchers' own experience(s) as the source of data to answer research questions that might be especially difficult to answer otherwise; perhaps by nature of the marginalised subject(ivity) of study and/or the precarity of seeking out such data otherwise (Allan and Percy 2005; Holman Jones and Harris 2018). As such, auto- and duo- ethnographic methodologies are particularly attractive to Feminist and

Queer theorists who note that the method highlights that all knowledge is partial (Adams 2024) and as such a rigorous consideration of one's own experience accounts for the social positioning of said knowledge (Ettorre 2016), makes especially visible potential biases of the author (McArthur 2019), and can alleviate some of the problems that can occur in trying to interpret the meaning and intentionality of others' testimony in interview, survey, or observational methods (Crawley 2012). In games research, auto- and duo- ethnography can be useful to counteract such issues of examining "retroactive third person" accounts of play (Väkevä, Mekler, and Lindqvist 2024). But more than that, duo-ethnographies specifically allow for the consideration of the positionality (Ahmed 2006) of the researchers' experience in relation to each other, demonstrating the plurality of play experience whilst allowing for the complex consideration of common themes between them (Del Negro, Formenti, and Luraschi 2019, Gao and Sai 2024).

In terms of reflexivity, all three authors research transformative role-playing game design in various ways and focus. All work with primarily qualitative data. Originally in the U.S. and now living in Sweden, Sarah is primarily an interdisciplinary researcher in the humanities and social sciences who conducts participant-observation research with interview data. Originally from the UK among other countries, now also living in Sweden, Josephine's work arises from a social psychology and gender studies approach to studying games. She particularly emphasizes the importance of auto- and duoethnography as methods to highlight and amplify the experiences of queer experiences that are often marginalized or suppressed. Lauri is a clinical psychologist from Finland who primarily researches the therapeutic potential of game-based digital therapeutics for mental disorders (Lukka 2024). All three are members of the Nordic larp community, as well as associated groups such as Nordic freeform communities, e.g., at the Stockholm Scenario Festival where *Superealism* was run. Among them, in the past, they have researched the phenomenon of role-playing from a variety of facets, including immersion, identity, and gender.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Lauri and Sarah's Duoethnography

In the next section, Lauri and Sarah will discuss the design philosophy behind the larp, as well as Sarah's experience as a point of contrast. Sarah played an male character named Lamia (see Figure 2), whose keywords were Seduced, Unapologizing, and Feet. She chose the character because she and Josephine had been running a larp called *Euphoria* (Baird, Bowman, and Thejls 2022) that weekend at the festival, which was about gender expression/exploration, but in her facilitator role, she had not been exploring masculinity. Her embodiment of Lamia ended up being quite privileged and empowered, stomping his feet, but also easily seduced by the gaze of others and fixating on them.

* * *

Lauri: *Superrealism* is like going into the depths and having different emotional experiences. Designing it, I started with both the music and writing the script. And the script starts with the players, and the characters, arriving into this self-improvement seminar in a secluded location, and then the game master only has this playlist. They press play. The game begins. The Game-master gives some instructions that are pre-written. And then the game flows from there.

And I had the feeling that there is something very substantial here, and I've now run it six times, I think. And while I'm quite highly critical of my work, but, I think this is one of the highlights of the games I have ever written in terms of its novelty and its ability to create something that is very unique in the field of these jeepform/chamber larp games. And now I would like to briefly describe the journey that this game creates.

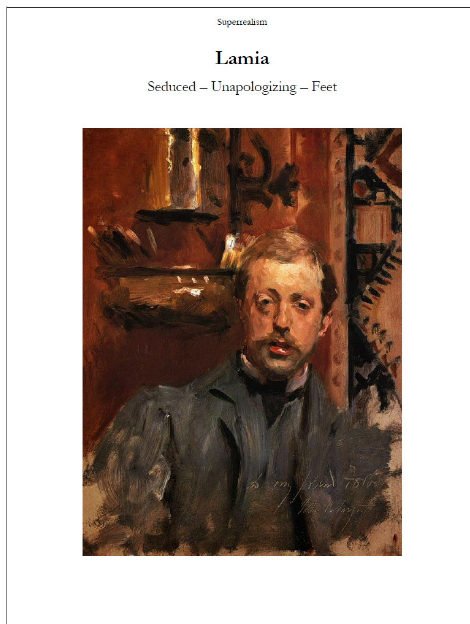

Figure 2. Lamia's character sheet in *Superrealism.*

First, I'll start with a question of: is there a character? My aim for this game was also to question—this is a bit of a conceptual question: is there a character in role-playing games? Is it needed? And my argument is that: it's not necessary. We can just play, and now I am associating to contact improvisation, for instance, that can be an alternative immersive state that doesn't require a fictive environment. But if you create such an environment, it should spontaneously lead to some sort of role-playing game. So playing is the social process, not the fictive reality or the narrative itself. The narrative in *Superrealism* is, I could say, light. Or maybe a more precise way to say it is: it has themes, but it's open for interpretation.

In the first runs, some of the players were asking me, "Who am I?" And I started thinking, "Okay, well maybe this has to *appear* to be a role-playing game." So how do you appear to be a role-playing game? You give the player a character. I think that this is a minor detail from the perspective of design, but it's a detail that has a lot of power in defining what this is and defines this as a role-playing game. So I created characters. Actually, that was one of the last things I did. I chose free license old pictures, paintings, and added names that were enigmatic. And then I added three words to describe each chapter. For instance, one character is described as Kassandra that is characterized by compulsion, cleanliness, and poison. Or we have Aella, who is characterized by impatience, stimulants, and greed. So these characters were an important part in showing the players that experience is in the genre of role-playing games.

Superrealism consists of players enacting, without words, 20 scenes. And these scenes are paced with music. In the game, there are three important things that the players need to do when they create scenes: 1) You listen to others in the group, so you act together. You co-

create together. It's a group activity. 2) You interpret the game master's instructions. That is the pre-written narrative that is given between the scenes. And 3) You adapt to the music. So music is a key component; you should adapt. And through these three instructions, you create the game (see Figure 3).

But what this leads to is really interesting: an emerging narrative. First of all, I would say that there is a surprising similarity between the games. That the players do more or less the same things in different groups because the music and the instructions guide them. But, what appears to be, from the outside, a similar activity, there's considerable variance in the experience of the players. And this is, I think, really interesting because the game is played without any words. People are very free to interpret what occurs in the game.

And also the game is filled with allegories: it has a Mountain that you work toward. It's never explained what the Mountain is. Then you change positions, characters. There are dark themes, it's not very explained why the players are going anywhere, why they are doing the things they do. So this means that the players are free to interpret it together as a team. And even though you act as a team, you still end up with quite a bit of different interpretations. I think that is fascinating.

Figure 3. Image from a run of *Superrealism* from the designer's and facilitator's perspective. The facilitator controlled the music, lighting, and gave the participants instructions, which the participants then collectively enacted. August 2024.

And maybe as a final note, I would say that this also makes the game very powerful because it's implicit. It's not verbal. So you are more in touch with your feelings, emotions, on a level that is not available in games where there's a more verbal component. And this emotional level is emphasized through the music and the narrative, which means that this is a very, very deep experience for some of the players. I would say, using a word you use, it's transformative even. And whereas for others this is more of an interesting contact-improvisation-like-experience—

something occurs and I'm in the present moment enjoying it, but it is not that transformative. So there's a bit of a range. But that's my first thoughts on *Superrealism*.
Sarah: I have so many questions, but the first that I would like to ask is: you've written before about what you called mentalization, and that being a facet of immersion if I'm remembering correctly. This way that we create mental constructs in our mind, and that allows us to engage with the fiction, if that's a good enough summary. And so I'm curious what you think is being mentalized during the game, and that might very well vary for different people. But, as a designer, what components have you placed there that then become part of the interpretive framework?

Lauri: Yeah. What I'm thinking out loud now, is based mostly on—I try to create after the game a space where you [the players] are asked the questions: what do you think? How did you experience it? What do you think now? And I'm relying on what players tell me. And I think this would be a really interesting opportunity for interviewing every player and then contrasting these experiences. And then this could be contrasted with the videotaping of the game where they acted more or less the same things.

Okay. That said, there are three things that shape the experience. First are the metaphors and the pacing of the verbal narrative. I think the verbal narrative is meaningful to me. But practically no one from the six games I've run, no one has said anything like, "Whoa, I really enjoyed the story" or something along those lines. At most, some say that, "Well, I didn't even notice that there is something going on." This is really interesting to me—that essentially the verbal elements, they are not even secondary to the experience.

That's said, there is emotional power in the verbal instructions that the gamemaster gives. There's the Mountain to be pursued. There are themes of sadness, losing each other, anger, fear, these types of emotions. And this brings into the second part, which is the emotional tone in the music. Much of the game is based on the music itself, and that is something that kind of surpasses the verbal level, let's say the song "Nyepi" by Olafur Arnalds that is really touching. Well, then how is that very touching and lingering and evoking? It's so much harder to put in words, but it really talks directly to the player on the emotional level. And then there is the social setting where the players kind of reinforce each other. So, you kind of imitate emotions that exist in the group. When the group is feeling cheery and curious, you play around, then people kind of reinforce these feelings. And then when there's sadness, then that becomes reinforced in that group as well. So there's kind of layers to what is being processed in the game or being reacted to.

Sarah: That's really interesting. For me, the narrative, at least the parts that I caught, were very important for me. They were like touchstones. So one thing that we haven't mentioned is, I believe the characters start as sort of part of the spiritual cult, if I'm remembering correctly, or they're doing some sort of ritual? And that shaped for me a lot of my play because I was wearing a crystal around my neck. And so I was using this crystal as a prop, but also as sort of like almost like a magical foci (see Figure 4).

And then also [later] we were touching the rocks and we were in the ground and, you know, we were the hunted, and then we were the hunters at some point, basically? There was this distinct shift in perspective that kept happening, and they were really important, the verbal cues that you were giving. And I could be, you know, misremembering them because it felt very much like an altered state… But I recall having this very intimate, blindfolded interaction with a spouse or something like that? And then shifting to being like in an Orcish war party or something like that? So I don't know if any of that's really what happened, but

those parts were really important to my experience. And fascinating for me, because you have this sort of ambiguous character that you can project into.

Figure 4. Image from a run of *Superrealism*. The initial characters are attached to the wall (scene 3), making an altar. In the following scenes, these characters are left behind and the players adopt other characters.

I also remember tearing up who we were, which is super fascinating, like to do very early on in the larp, like we had the sheets and then we ripped them to shreds. So it's almost like a way on a meta level, of signaling to the players: this doesn't actually matter. Or does it? Really creating that tension. So there's this ambiguity, but there were also these hooks. And then for my friend who played… Josephine, she had a very clear linear narrative experience. And then I talked to [someone else]. And he was like, "I never have any kind of narrative experience when I play this." So it was really fascinating to me immediately that we had three roughly very different experiences.

So I definitely agree that interviews, like doing a run of it and then doing interviews, would be absolutely fascinating because I think we both share an interest in the phenomenology of play and what's actually happening in the minds of players as they're engaging. Because we know that there are these different creative agendas and all of that, but we also know there are different states of immersion, like some people can go deeply into bleed and others are very distanced from their character or think of their character more as a prop. So, this kind of goes into even a more basic primal phenomenological experience that I think other larps such as Nina Runa Essendrop's larps also steer towards. And that is really fascinating because then you don't have these constructs of very clear character and very clear narrative to fall back on when trying to figure out what to do. You have to rely mainly on instinct, I think, and also nonverbal interaction with others. Anyway, that's a lot of jumbled thoughts, but I'm curious what you think about all that.

Lauri: Yeah. I'm following you. I'll maybe clarify the narrative. For me, as a writer and game master, the verbal cues create a coherent narrative from the start. But for others, only some may see the whole. Some are just [saying], "Well, I'm just listening to the music and the group." And the third person might be [saying], "Well, I'm focusing on this aspect, this and this." This is also due to intentionally designing these metaphors in the game, which is, for instance, the characters: the characters are first given, then they are used as a prop to introduce yourself. Then, they are attached to a wall. Then they are being prayed to, then they somehow vanish from the game. The next time you meet them, you need to tear them apart. So what does this mean? Who is the character? Is the character the character? Is it a representation of something else? What do you project there? And that is the space I wanted to create, that the lack of clarity creates opportunities for projection and internal work to occur (see Figure 5).

3.2. Josephine's Authoethnography

We now transition to a concrete example of the form of projection (Freud 1995) Lauri is mentioning by focusing on Josephine's experience.

Figure 5. Post-larp picture of *Superrealism.* The picture exhibits traces of the emotional journey where the participants ripped their character sheets (scene 14) and unbound themselves from blindfolds (scene 18).

* * *

Josephine: *Superrealism* gave me a chance to do something that I couldn't quite describe I needed before I did it. And I still find it hard to put words to it. I suppose it is because the thing that I found myself embodying during that larp was an experience of grief that is recorded and communicated so rarely in wider society and even in the queer communities and relationships I have been in, namely the grief for the loss of a queer partner in a world in which queer relationships are erased and discounted.

Grief as a concept defies concise textual description in most any circumstance. As does any emotional condition. Nonetheless we record it and consider it and classify it (see e.g., Kubler-Ross and Kessler 2014). But for queer communities, we often find queer experiences are not included. Our relationships, and our selves by definition, aren't valid, so how can our grief be considered as such?

Growing up, I had no examples of queer relationships, nor the grief of losing them. I had many examples of straight ones however, from an early age and throughout my life. In popular culture of all kinds, the expression of grief and loss of the straight relationship is codified, so much so that there are rituals I am aware of, processes that have become common knowledge and parlance, and even an understanding of the unwritten rules of how heterosexual grief should and can be conveyed.

But I don't know how to do that as a queer person, who may have to hide the nature of that relationship and therefore the grief associated with it. Even within queer communities, I haven't found a conversation about it to be common. As if we are sometimes almost too afraid to consider it. Or for some of us, I know, there are those who, due to life expectancy in hostile social environments, assumed they would never get so far in life as to grieve that way. Or others still who have found they have had to grieve so often that they no longer want to talk about it. And what would you say anyway? How could one prepare for such a feeling when all the messages you receive are about grief in the most normative settings?

I didn't expect to find such an opportunity in *Superrealism*. At the beginning of the larp, I chose an image (named Aoide, Figure 6) primarily for the keywords which reflected something I recognized. A combination of personal features but also the word "dissociation" which stood out to me. A defense mechanism I am very well aware of in the queer communities I have been in.

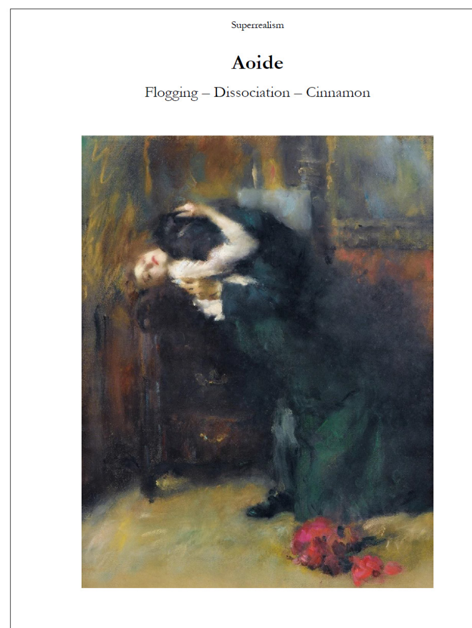

Figure 6. Aoide's character sheet in *Superrealism.*

As I considered what I wanted to explore as part of the larp, I found I gravitated to a character I had recently written for a creative writing project: a woman whose partner of many years

had just passed away, living in a circumstance where her relationship was neither recognized nor understood by wider society.

As the larp began, with its focus on travel and going through depths and heights of emotion and experience, I found myself falling into my character's grief. Her sense of loss but also of voicelessness. That she couldn't reach out to anyone. The other participants in the larp made that feeling all the clearer as they moved around collectively, but in their own space and narratives, only coming into contact briefly and with no other direct communication. A crowd around the character I was embodying but no one who would comprehend what she might even say if she could.

The sensation was profound and devastating. The surreal soundtrack and abstract movement provided an opportunity to inhabit that which I could not name without having to try to put the feeling into words. As the larp continued and the emotive quality of the soundscape and instructions changed, I found I was processing my character's experience more and more without conceptual thought. Simply trying to feel what she was feeling and what journey such an emotion might take.

Would she ever stop feeling bereft? Would there ever be release from grief that could not be communicated with words to others? But even these questions are just an attempt to put into words the embodiment of the experience of them. Because I didn't "think" these questions, nor did I have answers. I merely "felt" the implication of them.

As the larp concluded, I still didn't have a cohesive or conscious "thought" of what I had experienced. But I did have a "feeling." A feeling that I had gone through something that I feared and could not name. But that I had also come out the other side of it. I had been able to "practice" something that I had no conscious sense I needed nor wanted to consider before I did.

I have no idea whether or not this pertains to any grief I or anyone I know might face in the future. But it has provided me the chance to reflect on something that is often wordless. Something that I am clearly thinking about on some level, having written the character, and then chose to embody her in this moment in free-fall role-playing expression.

My work, my research, very much falls into what is possible to explore as part of role-playing experiences. But in that research, I find I have to define what it is I am considering before engaging with the role-playing experience. In this case, I find that I am considering what transformation might be possible emotionally after such a role-playing experience.

Sarah: Would you say this was an emancipatory bleed experience?

Josephine: Perhaps so. Yes, I think so. It certainly has made me consider something and brought me clarity and a greater sense of, I hesitate to say comfort, but maybe familiarity with a topic I might not have touched in the same way otherwise. I am glad I found the words. I honestly think I might not have found the words if I tried to describe my experience closer to the time of the larp. But this is absolutely what I processed at the time without textual language.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This duo- and autoethnograpic study explored the relationship between player, their character, and game experience in the context of a non-verbal, music-driven larp, *Superrealism*. The study reveals how the designer's approach to creating the game emphasized the music-driven narrative journey with embodied expression, where the initial characters were only one late

addition to the whole. However, the players' accounts provided by Sarah and Josephine revealed that these initial characters significantly contributed to the game experience by providing a starting point and alibi (Montola 2010; Deterding 2018) for processing the unfolding narrative. However, the players did not only experience the game as characters, but also as themselves—as intended by the design and observed by Lukka, and illustrated specifically by Josephine's autoethnographic account. This player projection was intentionally reinforced by many game elements: the initial characters were vague and open for interpretation, the narrative was symbolic and invited the players to change characters, the game was music-driven evoking emotions, and the player interactions were non-verbal and embodied. Combined, these elements encouraged a form of bleed (Bowman 2013), where the player projected their own interpretive framework to the game. We encourage further empirical work to explore the variance in the player experiences and how the game elements contributed to them.

Methodologically, this study exhibited how designers' and players' perspectives can be explored through duoethnography and autoethnography to illuminate different facets of role-playing games. As a designer, Lauri described the design intentions, process, and elements for *Superrealism*, as well as his experience of running and observing the game from the outside. However, his account was limited in its ability to describe the players' internal journey. In contrast, Sarah's and Josephine's unique autoethnographies illuminated the game from the players' viewpoint: the personal context from which they interpreted the game, how they experienced it, how they later made sense of it, processing emotions emerging from the game, including this analysis two years after. However, their perspectives were influenced by attentional biases highlighting some design factors while neglecting others, which contributed to a highly personal account, not necessarily reflecting the game design as a whole. Thus, this study provides novel insights on how to bridge between the designer and player perspectives in the study of games.

Notably, as these experiences took place over two years ago, a certain degree of narrativization and post-larp revision of facts necessarily has taken place. This tendency could be considered the "post-larp lie" (Waern 2013), but it can also reflect a more crystallized perspective to the game after some time has passed. These *secondary revisions* are similar to the process Freud (2010) describes when a dreamer awakens. Many occurrences within this dream-like state have likely slipped into the unconscious, allowing a more linear narrativized experience to emerge, as in Josephine's account. Such revisions are just as important to analyze as the dream itself, because they make manifest what is otherwise latent in the unconscious mind (2010). However, Sarah's account makes clear how difficult constructing a cogent secondary revision can be when enacting larps based on surreal, abstract content and/or non-verbal interactions. In the case of *Superrealism*: does the story provide a linear-enough structure to do so? Does the genre itself defy such neat narrative categorizations, as role-playing narratives in general do (Giovannucci 2022), and abstract narratives even more so? Such questions are worth exploring in future work.

This study contributes to the study of the complex relationship between the player and the character, and informs the design and facilitation of intense and potentially transformative games in which metaphors enable player projection and emotional processing. However, the authors emphasize that such experiences need to be balanced with comprehensive pre-game workshopping creating psychological safety and establishing informed consent, while considering the potential for emerging, unpredictable experiences, which can also trigger unprocessed trauma. Thus, while running and playing *Superrealism* is rather uncomplicated, it is intended only for consenting and well-informed adults, and to be run only by experienced facilitators, and the game appears unsuitable for unfacilitated runs.

To conclude, this case study of *Superrealism* exhibits how metaphors, music, and non-verbal play can create emerging experiences facilitated by the psychological safety created by the alibi of the initial character and reinforced by group dynamics. This safety may allow some players to access and explore implicit experiences, emotions, and memories, which they can later explicitly make sense of through mentalization. Thus, abstract live-action role-playing games, such as *Superrealism,* can be a platform for personal transformation. We recommend further design work exploring abstract transformative play more intentionally.

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"How Do You Want To Do This?":
Us, Role-Playing Games, and The End of the World

Abstract: As role-playing games become popularized through the advent of role-playing game actual plays, we must better seek to understand their implications both in terms of the relationships they build and the narratives they propagate. More specifically, the paper uses *Critical Role*, one of the most prominent actual play series, as a case study for both the parasocial relationship between audience and livestreams as emerging media, as well as the assertion that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism. This study examines how high fantasy narratives consistently rely on apocalyptic events to create stakes, particularly those in tabletop roleplaying games. By analyzing *Critical Role*'s storytelling, parasocial dynamics, and capitalist-realist conventions, this paper argues that the specter of capitalist realism persists even in a medium defined by collective storytelling. The paper uses *Critical Role*'s show Exandria Unlimited: Calamity, which ostensibly critiques power and corruption but ultimately reinforces capitalist logic, arguing ultimately that despite its progressive ethos, *Critical Role* inadvertently perpetuates capitalist ideology through its storytelling structures, audience engagement, and economic model. It highlights how role-playing games, even in their most communal and imaginative form, remain constrained by the ideological frameworks of the real world.

Keywords: *Critical Role*, role-playing game actual plays, role-playing game livestreams, Mark Fisher, capitalist realism, depictions of the apocalypse

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1. INTRODUCTION

As Hitchens and Drachen point out, though narrative has long been seen as recognized as critical in many facets of the human experience, its role within gaming has long been debated (2009). Modern narratology is poorly suited for the dynamism of role-playing games, which they suggest is devoid of a passive audience (2009, 54). Cover also suggested conventional narrative and linguistic parameters are ill-suited to analyze role-playing games due to their participative nature, similar in setup to ergodic literature (2010, 21), requiring an altogether new vocabulary. Cover's explanation of tabletop narrative is based on Fine (1983), dividing the role playing game experience between narrative, gameplay and social frames, each with specific rules and developments. Cover's work portrays the way the player-as-audience might interact with the text of a role-playing game.

During the 2010s, "actual plays" became popular — where the player-as-audience is no longer the only one perceiving the story unfold, but rather functions as a narrative vessel. This phenomenon brought role-playing games into the mainstream.

"Actual play" means broadcasted recordings or livestreams of gaming groups playing a particular tabletop role-playing game (Torner 2021, 30). Actual play does not adhere to the usual parameters of a role-playing game's interactive narrative, devoid of outside influence. Actual plays reposition role-playing games as a product with an emphasis on performativity, a turn which might encourage its re-integration into discourse analysis following a critical theory framework.

1.1 Media Analysis of Actual Plays

Before the advent of actual plays, discourse analysis of any tabletop role-playing game story or play group using critical theory would have been impossible — with each group's story being

deeply subjective and far too limited in scope to provide any applicable information on what problems critical theory could address. But actual plays have transitioned into conventional media, garnering audiences large enough for worldwide tours (Espinosa 2021). What once was a strictly autotelic narrative has now become a media product, with certain products proving more popular than others. One cannot analyze the narrative of role-playing games without also including an analysis of its extradiegetic context, i.e. the social frame. When examining the social frame of actual plays, considering actual plays are primarily distributed through digital markets such as Twitch or Youtube, the issue of parasociality naturally arises, as Torner points out (2021, 29).

1.2 The Mutations of Actual Play

Through the lens of the actual play, notions of audience and narrative are altered. Audience includes passive viewers of the material, as well as an active, participative audience-player hybrid, creating its own understanding and personalized experience (Hitchens and Drachen 2009). Narrative is also divided, balanced between improvisation and Western narrative structure following a linear, easy-to-follow plot. Deaths are often narratively unsatisfactory (Cover 2010, 35). Both player and game master must weigh the importance of play-as-game and play-as-product. When the death of a crowd favorite can deter viewers and put the creator's livelihood at stake, that death is much less likely, regardless of ludo-narrative setup.

These two mutations become interesting when used to explain the appeal and structure of particular actual plays. The ways in which they garner, entertain, and maintain their passive audience, as well as the ways in which they construct their narratives, all ultimately point us toward the capitalist ideologies hidden behind both actual plays, and our societies as a whole.

2. *CRITICAL ROLE*

No show is as relevant to the analysis of actual plays as *Critical Role*. The most successful actual play show to date (Hope 2021, 57), *Critical Role* began in 2015 on Twitch as a Geek & Sundry production. Over time, the show grew in both scale and production values, leading the team to depart Geek & Sundry and establish Critical Role as a stand-alone company. Today, the Critical Role Twitch channel has streamed over 3,300 hours of content to more than 1.3 million followers, ranking it among the top 600 channels on Twitch (Twitchtracker 2025). A leaked 2021 document revealed that Critical Role topped subscription payouts on Twitch for 2020, earning over $9.6 million (Espinosa, 2021) — no longer just "a bunch of nerdy-ass voice actors, who sit around around and playing Dungeons & Dragons" (Mercer 2025).

Critical Role is both a *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax 1974) live-play broadcast starring by well-known voice actors, as well as an LA-based production company specializing in high production-value online broadcasts of tabletop role-playing games, with separate entities focusing on both boardgame creation (Darrington Press) and charitable funding (Critical Role Foundation) that also fall under the Critical Role umbrella. Notably, *Critical Role* serves as an interesting case study also, in part, for the ways in which the game stimulates parasociality, as well as the peculiar gestual anticapitalism present in many of their stories, fitting in perfectly with a Fisher-centric deconstruction.

2.1 Critical Role's Parasociality

The first point of great importance in establishing *Critical Role*'s parasocial dominance over its audience resides within the partially misleading definition Matthew Mercer imparts at the start of each episode. By portraying itself as an approachable group of "nerdy" friends, not as the multi-million-dollar enterprise it has become, *Critical Role* plays into the parasociality that has by now become custom to livestreaming, the "one-and-a-half-sided parasocial relationship" (Kowert and Daniel 2021).

This relationship is characteristic of interactive storytelling. The players are as much a part of an audience as the passive viewers. This dual nature is a mix of traditional media-related parasocial relationships (Turner 1993, Giles 2002) and modern-day fandom culture.

The actors switch between the three frames of tabletop role-playing: the narrative frame, the gameplay frame and the social frame (Hope 2021, 56-72). Through professional yet simplistic staging, *Critical Role* captures the look and feel of an ordinary game, while the cast elevates both narrative and relatability. Seamless transitions between frames are pivotal to *Critical Role*'s relationship with its audience, in a similar vein to Brechtian theatre, Hope suggests.

2.2 The Parasocial Dyad

Though the frames function independently of one another, it is together that they engage audiences. Critical Role's main appeal is its "parasocial dyad", a parasocial relationship between fictional character and cast member giving the viewer a sense of relatability and belonging. Not only can one relate to the power fantasy of each independent character, but also to the ordinary-looking people experiencing the story alongside them, akin to audience members. The show is both a work of art in-and-of-itself and a commentary on said work. This feeling is only enhanced by the cast's constant partaking in the livestream's live chat, even after the show has switched to a pre-recorded model. In earlier episodes, the cast would even receive food ordered by viewers (Hope 2021, 63).

The narrative frame, as a consistent, long-form, purely imaginative and communal piece of work, heightens its relatability. Every episode of Critical Role is roughly 4 hours in runtime, with each of the three seasons running for over 100 episodes, meaning over 400 hours of character development. Since prolonged exposure to a piece of media has long been shown to increase parasociality (Green et al 2008), the audience becomes heavily invested.

This slow pacing allows for detailed and relatable character building, which, with the absence of a script or traditional production elements, allows for natural changes, better matching the audience's desired outcomes. The potential for retroactive continuity is much higher than in a show with an ordinary production schedule. Lastly, since the medium is inherently built for collaborative storytelling, the fandom is encouraged to participate via their home games or even in-universe streaming, strengthening the connection.

Players are encouraged to narrate their characters' actions and describe their thought process, which, in turn, allows the cast to better establish or justify certain actions and establish familiarity. Rapport is built for both cast members and characters. Unlike in conventional media, such as TV or movies, where the line between a character and an actor is rarely blurred, granting the actor very little time to establish themselves, *D&D*'s extended duration provides enough time for both without shifts that might alter the familiarity towards one or the other.

As an example of the parasocial dyad, consider the relationship viewers make with Travis Willingham and his character Cerrit. Throughout the story of Calamity, Cerrit splits time between mystery solving and being a father figure for his young son. At the story's climax, Cerrit heroically defies death and fulfils the oath made to his son to return to him. The emotional effect and relatability of Cerrit's story is evident, further enhanced by Travis Willingham's public role as a father — he and fellow *Critical Role* member Laura Bailey announced Laura's pregnancy live, on air (Bailey 2018). Thus the first prong of the relationship (audience-character) and the second prong (audience-player) are stimulated by the emotional relatability of fatherhood through the narrative and social frame. The two separate frames carry meaning from one to another, in a perfect example of immersion bleed (Bowman 2015).

There are, however, instances where, even though character and player are not in synchronicity, the parasocial relationship is strengthened still. In the climactic finale of *Critical Role*'s first campaign, Scanlan Shorthalt, the party's bard, played by Sam Riegel, successfully prevents the villain's teleportation, marking a significant shift towards the party in the tides of battle — a gameplay frame success. Yet, in the social frame, Sam had used Scanlan's most powerful magic, rendering him unable to enact a plan to save another player character, Vax'ildan (Liam O'Brien), causing him to tearfully apologize. Thus, as one frame can be cause for cheer, another stirs reactions through the display of friendship between actors.

As united as fans might find themselves in the face of this spectacle, even to the point of attributing it to personal growth (Lasley 2022), one must consider that while the group of actors are participating in a game they enjoy, that does not undermine the economic aspects, often hidden in plain sight to support the parasocial paradigm. *Critical Role* has long since shifted from a play group broadcasting their games by happenstance and has become an enterprise. This often forgotten distinction becomes especially jarring once *Critical Role*'s minimal reliance on sponsors or ad revenue (Svelch 2022) indicates voluntary audience subscriptions as Critical Role's main source of income.

3. CONTENT & CONTEXT

The context of actual plays borders on the avantgarde; they stumbled on marketability by chance, not careful market manipulation, as declared even by *Critical Role*'s creators (Spangler 2021).

Critical Role is freed from the limiting factors one might encounter in television or cinema. When designing their setting, narrative beats or fight scenes, TTRPG creators are only limited by their imaginations, providing near infinite possibilities for developing story (Hergenrader 2022). Since its departure from Geek & Sundry, *Critical Role* has been the exclusive producer of their show, unhindered by outside executives that could argue for a change in the show's direction.

In the absence of studio regulation and budgetary restrictions, the are limited only by the creators' vision. Such limitations might serve as indicators of broader socio-political values.

Reflecting on modern culture, including everything from music to narrative forms, Fisher (2009) points out the capitalist mindset embedded in everyday life, naming it capitalist realism. This does not require active propaganda or censorship, but functions through a soft closure of the imagination, in which alternative systems, structures, or futures appear unthinkable or naive. Within narrative media, this reproduces capitalist values (competition,

individualism, private property, corporate power) even when stories outwardly appear critical of them.

Critical Role's productions, though liberated from economic censorship or institutional oversight, often replicate the very ideological baseline that other media forms are structurally compelled to uphold, remaining within the same horizon of capitalist realism that haunts contemporary fiction (Fisher 2009, 2).

3.1 Exandria Unlimited: Calamity

In this section I examine capitalist realism in the *Exandria Unlimited: Calamity* mini-series (Critical Role, 2022). *Calamity is* a prequel to *Critical Role*'s main campaign, set at the close of the Age of Arcanum, a period of unmatched progress heralded by mageocratic city-states, apocalyptically ended by corruption and godly influence.

Calamity's is a self-contained and thematically coherent actual play, with under twenty hours of content. Its disaster movie theme positions it as a potent carrier of the ideological signs of its time (Keane 2006, 16). Disaster movies showcase a society's main anxiety and desire to rethink the world (Keane 2006, 59).

Calamity centers on the Ring of Brass, a collection of mages and government officials which have integrated themselves into the fabric of the flying city-state Avalir, wherefrom the world-shaping event known as the Calamity is said to have begun.

Avalir is loosely defined other than its hierarchy, at the top of which sit the Septarion, a collection of seven archmages of unmatched power, directly supported by the Ring of Gold, their apprentices. Though a longer deconstruction of Avalir's power structure is made difficult by the fragmented worldbuilding available to an ordinary audience member, its similarities to modern-day, oligarchy-led late-capitalist structures are flagrant. The only stark difference is partial replacement of economic capital with magical capital. Monetary gains are not abandoned altogether, serving as an integral part of *Calamity*'s final episodes.

3.1.1 The Ring of Brass

Calamity's protagonists are the Ring of Brass:Architect Arcane Laerryn Coramar-Seelie (Aabria Iyengar); Zerxus Ilerez, First Knight of Avalir (Luis Carazo); Patia Por'co, The Keeper of Scrolls (Marisha Ray); Loquatius Seelie (Sam Riegel); Cerrit Agrupnin, Guardian of the Seventh (Travis Willingham) and Guildmaster Nydas Okiro (Lou Wilson). It is implied the six party members have known each other a long time, forming deep interpersonal connections.

Each member is also part of Avalir's capitalist mageocracy, as shown by introductory vignettes. Most are shown in the middle of Avalir's processes, such asLaerryn in charge of the city's infrastructure and energy source, and Patia Por'co shown preparing to host a party at her Pallazzo on the eve of the unforeseen apocalypse. From urbanism, to finance, to intelligence, the Ring of Brass is deeply rooted into every facet of Avalir's society and power structures, partaking also in its corruption.

3.1.2 The Apocalypse of Calamity

Warned of an imminent apocalypse, the Brass Ring tries to understand "The Tree of Names. This single ecological presence within the floating city is related to several visions regarding

the incoming end. It is revealed that the tree is a vein through which the city pays the "Drashari Tithe", 25% of its annual magical intake, to the planet, to keep it healthy and constrain the Primordial Lords, the source of all natural disasters. Shorting the tithe has weakened the tree's magic. Frustrated to learn that the tree is limiting her magic, Laerryn destroys it completely.

The Tree stands for ecological and climate awareness in the face of late-stage capitalism, maintaining planetary health and requiring the reinvestment of capital. Laerryn's destruction of the Tree represents the capital's abandonment of sustainability for endless growth and profit. The technological breakthrough that demands the severing of the Tithe is a form of "growth fetish" (Fisher 2009, 18).

The allegory is problematic because the characters, acting within and benefitting from the system, are unaware of the system's role within ecological collapse. In this narrative, a small group is to blame for the eco-disaster.

In this way, *Calamity*'s decaying tree is a sudden tragedy, not the predictable result of systemic neglect. It is not the endgame of late-stage capitalism, but an aberration created by corrupt individuals.

3.1.3 Corruption & Capital

Performers' characters are openly corrupt: nepotism, sidestepping regulation, and bribery.. "Far from being isolated, contingent problems, these are all the effects of a single systemic cause: Capital." (Fisher 2009, 77). Social, financial and magical capital all passes through the Ring of Brass. Despite being dominated by capital, each performer finishes by removing themselves from the cycle of oppression in favor of building a new, post-capital existence.

As an example, Patia, heir to generational wealth and magical power, controls information both herself and the city in an effort to maintain orderIt is implied she has altered the memory of those around her (Mulligan 2022b). When she remembers her grandfather arguing in favour of the dreamer, not the dream, she abandons her legacy, handing the source of her magical power to a working-class family.

As each character sacrifices something essential, their acts of corruption are cleansed away. Individual failure is blamed, not the capitalist system.

3.1.4 Divine Will

When Laerryn destroys the Tree, *Calamity*'s twist is revealed. Her ambition was manipulated by "Betrayer Gods", vengeful deities who hate humanity. One such god hidden in the tree will starts the apocalypse. The Ring of Brass responds by trying to stave off ecological disaster.

Rather than interrogating the underlying logic that led to the destruction: the exploitation and the unchecked pursuit of innovation, the narrative pivots toward salvation through the mechanisms that caused the collapse. Once a symbol of ecological betrayal and technocratic hubris, Laerryn's creation becomes the tool of salvation, removing the threat of ecological collapse, despite its obligations to land and people. The issue is not that progress came at the cost of everything, but that the progress wasn't reached without human error ay. Laerryn's creation wasn't inherently antisocial and detrimental to human society, as much as it was a thwarted success.

This final act is "gestural anti-capitalism": a critique of the system that never escapes its criticism (Fisher 2009, 13). It is an illusion – signifying collapse and guilt, but placing that guilt

on the individual, reasserting the absence of an alternative. It is not that the magical-industrial complex was flawed, but that it was misused. The utopia of Avalir is still true, as shown in Nydas' dying moments:his "dream was real" (Wilson 2022). *Calamity* is capitalist realism: the only viable future is one where we innovate our way out of catastrophe without addressing its structural causes, hoping innovation alone will be enough to sustain a problematic system.

4. CONCLUSION

Calamity appears initially as a successful deconstruction of capitalism. Yet, on closer examination, *Calamity* is another product of capitalist realism. This is not to say *Critical Role* consciously defends the status quo. Even the most imaginative of narrative forms cannot escape the limits of a system that frames freedom in individual, rather than systemic, terms.

How is it that even a medium so open-ended, so reliant on communal imagination and collaborative worldbuilding, still reproduces hierarchies, upholds state structures, and imagines apocalyptic futures more readily than transformative ones? If the scope of possible worlds in a role-playing game is endless, why return to the same political and economic assumptions? Both the cultural positions of its players and the narrative grammar of role-playing games are factors. In creating a system where violence is an integral mechanic (Albom 2021) and enemies are faceless (Warpefelt 2016), the destruction of those adversaries is justified. Without mechanical foundations for reform and discussion, the only conflict resolution is combat. Similarly, a system where the player is encouraged to wander into an enemy's territory, destroy said enemy, then acquire gold and is unlikely to afford criticism of capitalism. Though they may not be powerful forms of protest in-and-of-themselves, it is possible actual plays, be they centered on the apocalypse or not, function as an emerging and potent direction for the broader discourse analysis of role-playing games.

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The Dynamic Loop Model: A Systemic-Cybernetic Meta-Theoretical Framework for Understanding Tabletop Role-Playing Games

Abstract: Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs) function as dynamic, adaptive systems integrating narrative creation, collaborative decision-making, and mechanical resolution. Despite their growing relevance in entertainment, education, and social engagement, current Game Studies often lack a systemic approach to understanding TRPGs. This paper introduces the Dynamic Loop Model (DLM), a cybernetic framework that draws from Stafford Beer's Viable System Model (VSM) and Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory to analyze TRPGs as self-regulating systems. By incorporating concepts such as autopoiesis, feedback loops, and reflexivity, the DLM offers a structured lens to examine the interactions between game rules, narrative structures, and player agency. The model highlights how TRPGs maintain internal coherence while adapting to emergent player behaviors and external influences. Additionally, this research explores the implications of the DLM for game design, emphasizing its applicability in enhancing engagement, adaptability, and systemic complexity in TRPGs. By bridging theoretical and practical perspectives, this study contributes to the academic discourse on TRPGs while providing actionable insights for designers and scholars interested in systemic approaches to games.

Keywords: Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TRPGs), Game Studies, Cybernetics, Viable System Model (VSM), Social Systems Theory, Autopoiesis, Reflexivity, Feedback Loops

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tabletop role-playing games (Tabletop RPGs) are collaborative systems in which players enact fictional roles and co-create an evolving world under a rule framework. In *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) (Crawford et al. 2014), a Game Master (GM) guides fantasy heroes through dungeons; in *Apocalypse World* (Baker and Baker 2010), rules prompt post-apocalyptic drama; in experimental titles like *Bad Sex: The Roleplaying Game* (Pettersson 2020), players improvise awkward or comic scenes from prompts. Across cases, play emerges from decisions mediated by mechanics (dice, statistics, procedures). Unlike contests with win conditions, Tabletop RPGs aim to weave a shared narrative through improvised storytelling, strategic procedures, and social interaction around a (physical or virtual) table.

Tabletop RPGs are widely used beyond leisure as tools for education, therapy, and community building, yet scholarship around them remains fragmented. While studies often isolate narrative, psychology, or culture, TRPG play is multidimensional: rules, story, and social interaction co-produce the experience in real time. A systemic account is missing. We need to ask how rule frameworks shape—and are reshaped by—creative choices moment to moment, and how player behavior feeds back into the unfolding fiction.

This paper proposes the Dynamic Loop Model (DLM), a cybernetic framework that treats TRPG sessions as self-regulating systems of communication and feedback. The model views play as a network of coupled subsystems (players' cognition, narrative events, mechanics) that together form an autopoietic process—one that reproduces its own structure through play. Unlike team sports or contests with fixed paths to victory, Tabletop RPGs are open-ended co-creations: goals and even rules may shift by consensus. Sustaining play requires a continual balance between creative freedom and constraint; the DLM is designed to describe that balancing act.

TRPG play also varies culturally and over time. Groups develop styles and "house rules"; playstyles differ radically (e.g., GURPS's tactical combat versus the freeform ethos of Nordic larp); dynamics change across scenes, sessions, and campaigns. A robust model should be effective at describing casual one-shots, years-long campaigns, and even live-action art events, irrespective of aesthetic judgment—whether "good," "boring," or even sustained by misunderstandings. We therefore frame the internal logic of Tabletop RPGs as keeping their own operations going.

Prior work spans sociological, psychological, narrative, and design perspectives. Constructionist approaches (Stenros and Montola 2024) treat games as socially constructed activities with their own internal reality. Indigenous theories such as the GNS model (Edwards 2001a; White 2020) classify creative agendas, such as common debates around the primacy of story or rigorous mechanics during play (Torner 2024). These accounts are insightful but often separate narrative from mechanics or evaluate them normatively.

Systems-theoretical analyses remain comparatively rare. Markus Montola (2004) cast larp as a chaotic system—sensitive yet patterned. Bo Kampann Walther (2003) approached games as social systems of communication. Christian Mehrstam (2022) applied Niklas Luhmann's theory to TRPG organization, showing how players reference genre conventions and rules in a double-layered communication. A shared conclusion is that TRPG play is a social system coupled to a game system whose rules function as a "code" for deciding what happens next—a premise central to our approach.

Building on these foundations, the DLM is explicitly meta-theoretical. Following Niklas Luhmann's "supertheoretical" ambitions (1995, 4–5), it offers a high-level structure for situating existing findings rather than competing with them, providing a common language that connects narrative analysis, psychology, culture, and design.

The model can accommodate Simon Brind's (2022) "combat narratology" by showing how combat procedures pressure narrative updates within the loop and, alongside work on bleed, identify which elements of the play situation shape specific decisions. It aligns with simulation-and-gaming design principles that see games as complex system models (Klabbers 2008) and with recent transformative RPG design aimed at personal and social change (Bowman et al. 2024).

Our aim is a holistic yet tractable account of Tabletop RPGs as living systems—fun and engaging, but also analytically rich windows into collective meaning-making.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study follows Jaakkola's (2020) conceptual research design—specifically Theory Adaptation and Model Building—to revise and extend existing theory for Tabletop RPGs. We adapt Niklas Luhmann's Social Systems Theory and Stafford Beer's Viable System Model (VSM), grounded in a Game Studies problematization, to explain dynamic interactions between game systems and players.

2.1 Theory Adaptation

Our core method is theory adaptation: we integrate complementary frameworks to address gaps in how Game Studies treats emergent, systemic TRPG dynamics (Jaakkola 2020). In our case, we have chosen to review Stafford Beer's cybernetic approach as expressed in his Viable System Model (VSM) and Niklas Luhmann's Social System Theory.

Cybernetics is the study of control and communication in systems, focusing on how stability and adaptability emerge through feedback (Wiener 1948). Stafford Beer developed the Viable System Model (VSM) to apply cybernetic principles to organizational contexts (Beer 1979; 1984). A viable system, in Beer's terms, is one that can self-regulate, learn, and adapt without losing its core identity. Meanwhile, Luhmann proposed a theory for social systems that is based on communication over action, and that similarly to Beer, describes systems as autopoietic, or self-producing. He described his theory as "radically anti-humanistic, radically anti-regional, and radically constructivist" (2012, 12) because it focuses on the organization of operations and the specific context in which they are maintained, rejecting essentialist or ontological claims (Luhmann 1995, 20–23).

2.2 Model Building

Model building complements adaptation by specifying a conceptual architecture that maps how TRPG elements interact in a dynamic system (Jaakkola 2020). Therefore, we will produce a reading of TRPG play through the lens of these two theoretical perspectives, which will then lead us to developing a model that describes its own operations in a systemic-cybernetic manner.

2.3 Methodological Steps

a. **Problematization:** Identify gaps in Game Studies literature regarding the emergent and systemic properties of Tabletop RPGs.
b. **Theory Adaptation:** Integrate Luhmann's Social Systems Theory and Beer's Viable System Model to examine Tabletop RPGs as adaptive, self-regulating systems.
c. **Model Construction:** Develop a systemic model illustrating how TRPG components interact through feedback mechanisms to maintain viability.
d. **Theoretical and Practical Implications:** Use the developed model to provide actionable insights for TRPG designers, focusing on optimizing player engagement and systemic adaptability.

3. PROBLEMATIZATION: GAME STUDIES AND TABLETOP RPGS

Game studies is multidisciplinary, drawing from humanities, social sciences, and design (Mäyrä 2008). For Tabletop RPGs, this plurality is intensified by para-academic production (Torner 2024), yielding a rich yet fragmented literature (Deterding and Zagal 2024). Humanities work treats Tabletop RPGs via ritual theory and textual production (Hoover et al. 2024; Jara and Torner 2024); social science studies examine shared meaning-making and interpersonal development (Williams et al. 2024; Bowman and Lieberoth 2024); design research analyzes emergent play and negotiated rules (Björk and Zagal 2024; Torner 2024). These strands rarely converge in a shared conceptual frame.

Bridging attempts include Stenros and Montola's constructionist ludology (2024), grounded in Searle's (1995) social constructionism, which models games as institutions whose rules both enable and constrain action. However, the term "system" in TRPG research is still used mostly in a colloquial, mechanical sense—either as procedures (Harviainen et al. 2024) or as transformations of fiction (White et al. 2019)—rather than its formal meaning.

Nevertheless, systems-theoretical uses exist. Markus Montola (2004) characterizes larp as a chaotic system—unpredictable yet patterned (cf. Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

Christian Mehrstam (2022) offers a Luhmannian account of TRPG organization, showing how play emulates genre through simultaneous reference to conventions and rules; Bo Kampmann Walther (2003) similarly treats games as social systems of communication. Despite disagreements, both converge on a key point: TRPG play is a social system coupled to a game system whose rules function as the code that actualizes events. This affords methodological leverage for accessing play's recursive operations while attending to constitutive elements—a view echoed in calls for systems-based approaches to gameplay (Ermi and Mäyrä 2005; Malaby 2007; Giddings and Kennedy 2008).

Foundational TRPG theories each supply a distinct lens. The Threefold Model (in Torner 2024) posits Drama/Simulation/Game as core priorities. GNS Theory frames agendas as Gamism, Narrativism, Simulationism within layered structures (Edwards 2001a). GEN Theory distinguishes suprastructural intentions from infrastructural mechanics (Powell 2001). Color Theory treats design values as composable "primary colors" (Niñoles 2003). Channel Theory models modular mediation (Hols 2003). The Wunderkammer-Gesamtkunstwerk model situates Tabletop RPGs as holistic artworks (Konzack 2015). The Turku School emphasizes immersive embodiment (Pohjola 2003), and the Meilahti School defines role-play as interaction within a shared diegetic frame (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2010). While influential, these models often isolate intentions, mechanics, aesthetics, or immersion, leaving blind spots around dynamic interaction, adaptation under emergent conditions, and the maintenance of the game's ongoing viability as a social system. No meta-theoretical framework yet integrates these systemic perspectives while accounting for cultural, temporal, and structural variability.

The Dynamic Loop Model addresses this gap by unifying narrative, mechanical, social, and experiential processes within a systemic, autopoietic account of Tabletop RPGs. It bridges disciplinary silos and surfaces interdependencies that prior approaches often leave implicit.

4. TABLETOP RPGS AS DYNAMIC, SELF-REGULATING SYSTEMS

Our model locates TRPG play within cybernetics and social systems theory (Beer 1979; 1984; 1985; Luhmann 1995; 2012). Applied here, these principles reveal Tabletop RPGs as interlocking feedback loops—players, rules, expectations, and fiction—jointly selecting which events become actual (Ashby 1956; Beer 1979). TRPG play is autopoietic: from an initial ruleset and premise, each session generates situations, developments, and even house rules that fuel further play (Maturana and Varela 1987; Luhmann 1995). This circularity—action → event → new situation → action—is what the Dynamic Loop Model (DLM) maps (Beer 1979; 1984).

We therefore treat TRPG play as a social system: oriented to viability and meaning-making, autopoietic, and operationally closed. A system is a functional organization—an arrangement of elements and operations, not a fixed purpose (Beer 1979; 1984; Luhmann 1995). So long as the organization is sustained, its composition is contingent (Luhmann 1995, 25); hence "GM-less" games can still be recognized as Tabletop RPGs because their operations resemble GM-led play.

What are those operations? In Luhmann's account, social systems operate through communication—utterances that change a system's state (1995). In Tabletop RPGs, a claim that contrasts with the current scene ("I enter through the window") alters the situation, whereas repeating known facts does not. When rulebooks call TRPG play "a conversation" they recognize it as a temporal series of event-selecting communications.

Ashby calls the asymmetry between innumerable possibilities and limited selections complexity (1956; Luhmann 1995, 24). Systems reduce complexity by narrowing options (Beer 1979; Luhmann 1995), establishing expectations for play, specific rulesets, group etiquette,

and others. Tabletop RPGs do so explicitly in Session Zero—aligning genre, themes, and touchstones to set boundaries (White et al. 2024). Yet because "anything can be attempted" (Peterson 2012), off-genre moves (e.g., a ray gun in fantasy) can still be proposed, putting the system under strain: can this instance of play process the input?

This is the question of viability—the capacity to absorb variety, adapt, and continue (Beer 1979). Failure to incorporate relevant inputs risks collapse (e.g., a GM who blocks player impact drives attrition). Viability is sustained via meaning: linking the actual and the plausible to chart possible communicative paths (Luhmann 1995; Baraldi et al. 2021). If the group deems a ray gun sensible to the ongoing story, the element is integrated, expanding what can meaningfully be chosen. In this sense, past events can be generalized into memories, elements of the plot, or even rules (Luhmann 2012), and then re-incorporated into play as needed.

Accordingly, TRPG play seeks to prolong itself by adapting through new networks of meaning; engagement and coherence hinge on balancing structure and surprise. Rules and established fiction supply structure; player choices and chance supply novelty (Beer 1985). Fully scripted play ceases to be interactive; fully random activity ceases to be a recognizable game (Ashby 1956; Beer 1979; 1984).

Feedback loops drive this balance (Beer 1979). A move like "I persuade the king" triggers social uptake, mechanical handling (a roll/skill), and a narrative update, which players then use to adjust next actions—a reflexive cycle (Luhmann 1995, 443). Loops are nested (recursion): scenes within missions within campaigns, with lower-level outcomes updating higher-level states and vice versa—precisely the cross-scale coupling the DLM will diagram.

Tabletop RPGs also combine operational closure with cognitive openness. Closure means only communicated, rule-/fiction-appropriate acts "count," preserving identity through constraints. The GM mediates this closure, translating contributions into the game's code—invoking procedures or disallowing actions that violate established reality (Hammer 2007). Simultaneously, cognitive openness denotes receptivity to unforeseen inputs (Beer 1984): human adjudication accommodates novel ideas (e.g., befriend the dragon; solve conflict with a performance), which helps explain cultural and group variability.

Viability thus requires an equilibrium: excessive closure yields railroading; excessive openness yields incoherence. A viable TRPG absorbs player-generated variety without breaking (Beer 1984). In sum, TRPG play is self-organizing (players/GM co-produce evolving structures) and adaptive (responses to ideas, dice, disruptions adjust system state), sustained by multi-scale feedback while maintaining a stable identity (genre, rules) that can evolve.
With this foundation, the DLM formalizes components, boundaries (inside/outside), and the operation of a single loop from input to updated state.

5. THE DYNAMIC LOOP MODEL

The DLM is a theoretical tool for examining how Tabletop RPGs select "what happens next". A system reduces complexity by delimiting what may be considered when actualizing an event. The DLM integrates player motives, social expectations, game goals and rules, and environmental inputs to answer two questions: how is the next event determined, and what options are available to select?

5.1 Establishing Boundaries

For operations to proceed, complexity is first reduced by defining which utterances count as play. We set two contextual dimensions: Setting and Narrative.

Setting is the boundary of plausibility: genre, the fictional world, governing logics, and possible interactions. Events during play are expected to fall within this scope. For example, in a post-apocalyptic TRPG, the setting defines constraints such as resource scarcity, fragmented social structures, and technological decay, while in a fantasy TRPG, elements such as the presence of magic or fantastical creatures may be taken as a given, but other aspects such as technological progress may be open to discussion. In both of these cases, locales such as mountains, underground passages, oceans or cities are plausible, while holding adventures in outer space would be more unlikely.

Narrative is the time-ordered sequence of events. Options must cohere with established pasts and anticipated futures and may reuse available elements. For example, in the post-apocalyptic TRPG, the narrative will include the specific moment and situation in which the inciting apocalypse happened, while in the fantasy TRPG the histories of kingdoms and empires will be relevant. In both of these games, it could be possible to situate play in the ancient past, or even allude and modify them from the "present", such as establishing relevant details of past incidents through characters' backstories.

Both dimensions evolve as new information is accepted or old information altered. Proposals aligned with established play are more likely to be admitted. Within Setting and Narrative, participants can access different elements that help narrow selection.

5.2 Selecting in the DLM: Scene, Character, and Resource

Setting and Narrative provide context; almost any action may be proposed, but reductions make some choices more likely. As an example, let us consider the following situation: a group of players is playing a TRPG where the Setting is loosely defined as medieval fantasy, and the Narrative so far has established that their characters were tasked to go on a quest to find an ancient artifact in a forest temple. The acting player narrows the scope by selecting a Scene, a Character, and a Resource, which may or may not happen in this order.

A Scene is a specific intersection of Setting and Narrative framing the action—features of t
he location and the events that led to this specific moment. For example, let us suppose the GM begins the loop by establishing a specific Scene: the edge of a dark forest, with tales of an ancient temple hidden within. The GM further defines the Scene by indicating elements such as a meandering trail into the forest or how moonlight does not seem to go too far into the grove. This Scene provides not just a backdrop, but sets up challenges and decision points such as deciding whether or not to venture into the dark. In response, a player may say that their Character would have bought torches back in the town market—this brief indication is, effectively, the player temporarily selecting a prior Scene to justify actions in the current one.

A Character (be it a player- or non-player Character, or even a collective actor) focalizes agency. Selecting one further constrains plausible actions via abilities, qualities, and relationships. Let us say that the Character that bought the torches is a ranger experienced in traversing the wilderness. They are joined by two other characters: a valiant knight, who is familiar with the area, and a mage, who is scholarly in the arcane and in ancient ruins, but who rarely ventures out of their tower. Usually, each one of these Characters would be governed by different Players, such as in games where combat situations function similar to a turn-based wargame such as *D&D*. However, say that the Player controlling the knight jokes

about the mage being spooked by the forest's darkness and thus dropping their spellbook: this statement, if not opposed by any other participant, may very well be seamlessly incorporated into play, establishing the mage as a Character liable to be scared. Here we see that, in the correct circumstances, any Player may select any Character to establish an action.

A Resource is a supporting element anchored in either Character or Scene—abilities, items, knowledge, terrain, relationships—used conventionally or inventively. For example, suppose the group of Characters choose to enter the dark forest, with the ranger leading while holding a lit torch. Eventually, the GM describes, they reach the edge of what appears to be a large pit, too dark to see the bottom of. The warrior suggests that they could explore the pit, and that since they are sturdy, they could go in and climb down first in case they run into possible dangers—this would be using their own Resource in a known manner. However, the mage comes up with a different idea: they know a spell that allows them to instantly know the location of an object by writing down a sigil on it, so they propose to pick up a stone, write the sigil on it, and throw it down the pit, so they can instantly know how deep it is—hence, the mage uses their own Resource in an unexpected way. The ranger agrees with the idea, and even suggests to use a small flare they were carrying instead of a stone, so that the light it emits allows them to use it later as a guide for descending if need be, or in other words, the ranger uses a Resource that is not their own as part of their action.

We model Scene–Character–Resource because they are concrete, observable selections driving recursive reduction:

"In (Scene), (Character) does (Action) with (Resource)."

Theme, mood, tone, and similar descriptors are meta-level qualities that shape boundaries and interpretations but are not direct selection points.

5.3 Incoming Variety: Mechanical Resolution in the DLM

After selection, the table checks the proposal against the expectations for play. If it aligns with its own terms, it is integrated into it and a new action is called; if its alignment is uncertain, a Mechanical Resolution may be invoked: these are algorithmic procedures with specified inputs and outputs that externalize part of decision-making but require contextual interpretation to re-enter play.

Suppose, then, that the GM replies to the proposed action by stating that there is a chance that the mage will not be able to detect the presence of the thrown item. As such, they ask the Player to make use of a method to determine whether the action works as intended or not, which would be their Spellcasting skill. This consists of throwing a 10-sided die and adding the number that represents their proficiency at casting spells to the result. The GM adds that a result of 8 or higher will mean that they get their way.

Once the Mechanical Resolution method offers an output, let us say a total of 9, the Players now interpret the result in the terms defined by the game rule. Since the target result was an 8 or higher, according to the agreed method, the proposed action succeeds, and this establishes the conditions upon which the system's state is to be updated.

5.4 Outcomes, System Updates and Standby for New Actions

As a result, one run of the Dynamic Loop looks like this: select Scene → select Character → choose Resource → state "In (Scene), (Character) does (Action) with (Resource)". If the

routine expectations do not allow the event to integrate into play, then resolve mechanically, and the result defines the update.

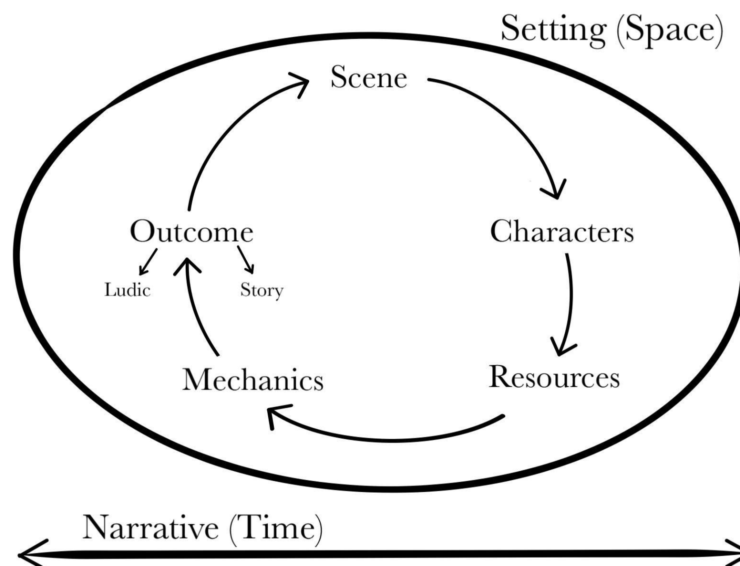
Following our example, the die roll indicates that the mage will be successful in precisely pinpointing the location of the enchanted flare down the pit, which prompts the GM to now update the current Scene as a new event: the flare now falls down and tumbles down a slope, but the mage knows that it is no more than a couple meters downwards. Thanks to the light, they now know that the pit is more similar to a cave opening, and they manage to see the entrance to the ruins they were looking for. However, the GM continues, this also made something down the hole screech, and they can see some figures moving in the dark. This is now the new state of the system, and the players are prompted to select a new action to continue play.

To make the Dynamic Loop Model (DLM) concrete, the following two mini-walkthroughs sketch how the same abstract loop plays out in different rules frameworks.

In *D&D 5e* (Crawford et al. 2014) the loop is: Setting/Narrative → select Scene–Character–Resource → pick Mechanic → Resolution → update. The distinctive feature is that the selection can be fragmented across the player's turn: you can decide scene elements (grid distances, positioning), then character options (attack type, feat), then resources (which weapon, which slot), and only then lock a mechanic (attack roll, shove, grapple, save). The result is numeric and must be translated back into fiction; resources act as hard affordances that gate eligibility, but intention and procedure can be chosen stepwise, even with table suggestions, and only cohere at the moment of the roll and its fictional update.

In a Powered by the Apocalypse game like *Dungeon World* (Latorra & Koebel, 2012), the loop is the same schema, but the selection must be integrated: the player's declaration needs to present a coherent Scene–Character–Resource bundle that already points to a specific move's trigger ("close in and drive the close-tag sword through the ogre's guard"). Because the trigger ties fiction to mechanic, the mechanic is effectively auto-selected when the S–C–R intersection is right; resolution returns categorized consequences that immediately update fiction and resources (spend hold, apply +1 forward). Less procedural shopping, more alignment upfront: the intention, the affordance, and the rule must arrive together, which tightens coupling and increases moment-to-moment cognitive integration.

Figure 1: The Dynamic Loop Model (Own Elaboration).



6. THE SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK BEHIND THE DLM

The Dynamic Loop Model, as stated above, is meant to be a theoretical tool that closely analyzes the process of complexity reduction that players make during a TRPG play session. As such, it assists in describing the available choices for each given moment during play, and how each successive decision narrows down the possibilities for action until one becomes actualized in play. However, we have been describing those available elements in vague terms so far, and this is because the DLM is nested in the intersection of several different systems that interact with each other. We will now address this by offering a description of the systemic-cybernetic framework that informs it, which is composed of four inter-locking systems: the Play System, the Game System, and the Psychic System along with the Biosystem.

6.1 The Play System

Tabletop RPGs play operates as a social system—the Play System—where participants' utterances update the shared state; only what is uttered belongs to the operation of play. Which utterances count? Three scenarios clarify this.

First, a system distinguishes inside from outside: what it can process becomes part of the system; what it cannot, is its environment (Luhmann 1995, 16–17). "Pass me the chips" is outside and does not alter play.

Second, even utterances within play may "not fit" the fiction (e.g., a laser gun in high fantasy) or the group's aims (e.g., topics others find uncomfortable). Although "anything can be attempted" (Peterson 2012), the scope of "anything" is bounded by local culture, genre expectations, rule knowledge, and prior events. Systemically, this network of plausible actions is meaning production (Luhmann 1995, 59–61; Baraldi et al. 2021, 137–39).

Third, selection is further tuned by expectations—contextual adjustments to meaning that define what we expect of others and what we expect they expect of us (Luhmann 1995, 96). Typical expectations include a GM describing and adjudicating and players acting in character with some consistency; these reduce complexity at each decision.

Beyond expectations, systems refine boundaries via a code—a binary distinction—and programs—decision rules that apply the code (Luhmann 1995, 317; 1996, 143–44; 2000, 194–96). In law, the code is legal/illegal and statutes are programs. For the Play System, the code must admit utterances that sustain play and exclude those that do not. We propose three main sources that supply expectations and programs: "socio-cultural rules," i.e., condensed prior communications such as etiquette and good practices (Luhmann 2012, 37–38; Baraldi et al. 2021, 71–74; Stenros and Montola 2024); "genres of fiction," i.e., tropes and structures that guide plausibility (Mehrstam 2022); and "formal rules," i.e., rulebooks, mechanics, and house rules (Stenros and Montola 2024).

We further propose the code of playfulness (see Masek and Stenros 2021; cf. Mehrstam 2022) with the binary engagement-aligned/not engagement-aligned: the operative question for any utterance is "Does this keep play, as defined here, going?" Utterances that prioritize continuing operations are admitted to future selections.

This recursive, autopoietic view accommodates diverse forms and qualities of TRPG play. It includes groups that clearly communicate aims and regularly re-validate expectations, as well as groups where a GM's vision overrides others and the game is dull yet uncontested. So long as the next utterance is included, makes sufficient sense within the established framing, and no participant or element effectively vetoes it, play proceeds (Luhmann 1995; Baraldi et al. 2021).

6.2 The Game System

Not all utterances can be integrated merely because they sustain engagement; some require Mechanical Resolution (dice, resources, etc.). At that moment, the Play System's event irritates—i.e., triggers—another social system: the Game System.

The Game System parses those events through its own code, "rule-alignment" (rules-aligned/non-rules-aligned). Unlike the Play System's recursive code, it relies on Formal Rules as programs—instructions that refine the code and yield determinate outputs.

In turn, the Game System irritates the Play System: mechanical outputs are interpreted back into fiction, updating state only when they align with both systems' codes—rules and engagement. This mediates a cognitive opening between systems, shifting from static rules to dynamic processes (Luhmann 1995).

Because selections are contingent, a negative code outcome does not erase possibilities; it invites reflexivity. Via second-order observation, the Play System can re-evaluate what is actualized and redefine boundaries (Luhmann 1995, 443; 1996). This affords flexibility to reinterpret—or even discard—Formal, Social, or Internal rules when they conflict with emergent needs, making play a negotiated balance between designed intent and emergent practice.

6.3 But Where Are the Players? Psychic Systems and Biosystems

A common objection is that the model foregrounds systemic operations while sidelining players and GM–player distinctions. Here we treat participants (assumed human) as additional systems interacting with the Play and Game Systems.

Following Luhmann (1995), a human participant interpenetrates two non-social systems: the Biosystem (biological/physiological substrate) and the Psychic System (conscious mind). This is not Cartesian dualism but an operational distinction: one processes biochemical regulation, the other processes meaning. Collapsing them would reduce thought to biochemistry (or vice versa), obscuring different kinds of operations.

Although one might model a single bio-psychic unit, such integration hides distinctions the DLM needs. Luhmann (1995; 2012) keeps them separate because each reduces a different complexity and couples to social systems through distinct channels. Keeping the split lets us track, for example, a physiological change without communication, or an unspoken plan that never enters play—crucial for seeing when each system contributes (or fails to) to the loop.

Interpenetration means mutual observation: each system conditions the other's possibility and influences it at points of irritation. Where one observes and translates the other into its own operations, a structural coupling occurs (Luhmann 1996, 58–60; 2012, 54–60).

Both Biosystem and Psychic System are structurally coupled to the Play System. In a horror TRPG, the monster's reveal irritates both: fear responses arise and escape plans form. For the plan to affect play, the Psychic System must translate thought into communication by irritating the Biosystem to produce speech; only then does it enter the Play System.

The Psychic System also internalizes characters as Internal Rules—self-imposed constraints such as traits, motives, and goals (Stenros and Montola 2024). It likewise attends to Genre of Fiction, Formal Rules, and Socio/Cultural Rules, using them to reduce option complexity and judge what counts as "in-character."

6.4 The Systemic-Cybernetic Framework for TRPG play

How the diagram works:

1. **Center of gravity — PS:** The Play System (PS) is the hub. Only communicated utterances enter PS. PS observes FR, GF, and S/CR to decide what "makes sense" next.

2. **Players as systems — PsyS and BS:** The Psychic System (PsyS) and Biosystem (BS) interpenetrate (dotted). PsyS observes PS and S/CR and turns thoughts into utterances by "irritating" BS (speaking, acting). BS affects PsyS (arousal, fatigue) but does not enter play unless PsyS communicates it.

3. **Rules as procedures — GS and FR:** When PS needs a mechanical decision, it irritates the Game System (GS). GS observes Formal Rules (FR) as programs (instructions) and returns an outcome. PS then interprets that outcome into fiction if it fits both engagement and rules.

4. **Characters as self-constraints — IR:** Characters (IR) are the players' Internal Rules—traits, goals, bonds—that PS observes when deciding actions. IR condense over time from both PS and GS outcomes (dashed from PS/GS to IR): play and mechanics gradually redefine who the characters are and what they can do.

5. **Culture and fiction — S/CR and GF:** Social/Cultural Rules (S/CR) condense from prior PS operations (table etiquette, safety norms, house customs) and are observed by PS and PsyS to guide moment-to-moment choices. Genres of Fiction (GF) are observed by PS to shape plausibility and style.

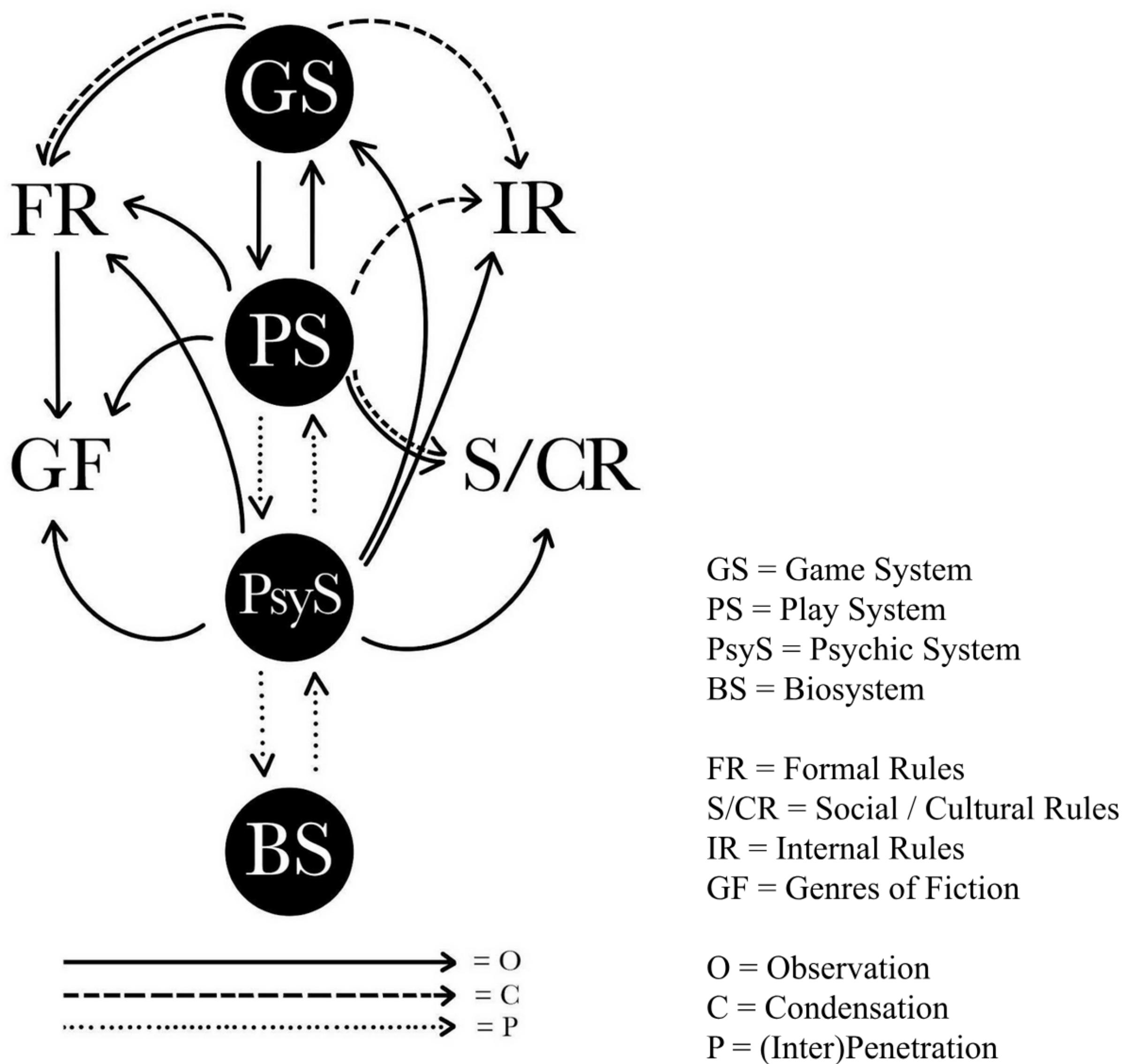
6. **Memory and evolution — Condensations:** Dashed lines show where past operations get recorded for future use: PS → S/CR (customs), PS/GS → IR (character development), GS → FR (rule formalization).

Reading a single loop:

a) PsyS forms an intention; via BS it becomes an utterance that enters PS.
b) PS checks plausibility by observing GF, S/CR, IR, and FR.
c) If needed, PS irritates GS; GS applies FR and returns a result.
d) PS updates the fiction; IR and S/CR may condense changes for future play.

In short, PS is the live conversation; GS is the mechanical decision engine; PsyS/BS are the human substrate that turns thoughts into utterances; FR, S/CR, IR, and GF are the knowledge stores that PS consults and continually updates. Some elements are not connected (e.g., IR and S/CR) because they are mediated via PS/GS, thus avoiding double-counting non-communicated states.

Figure 2: Interactions Between the Play System and Game System (Own Elaboration)



7. THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

With the Dynamic Loop Model and the systemic-cybernetic framework established, we outline three contributions. First, the model fills the need for a meta-theoretical lens that integrates siloed TRPG scholarship. Second, it advances a radical social-constructionist view of TRPG play. Third, it offers a framework that supports practical applications of Tabletop RPGs beyond entertainment.

7.1 A Meta-Theoretical Approach to TRPG Play

As a meta-theory, the DLM plus our systemic account addresses the field's fragmentation by providing a shared frame that situates diverse objects of study (Deterding and Zagal 2024). It supplies common language to relate adjacent theories of player action—Steering (Montola et al. 2015), Stance (Edwards 2001b), and work on character–player identity (Bowman 2010).

Within the DLM, these specify how participants prioritize complexity reduction and which element of the systemic-cybernetic framework anchors a decision: a Pawn stance tends to foreground Formal Rules and the Game/Play coupling, whereas exploring a Taboo Self consults the broader environment before translating choices into play.

The model also incorporates TRPG production into play's operation. Because the effective ruleset is contingent and multi-sourced, designing a ruleset sets expectations for future communication; creating or reading one is an utterance that reduces systemic complexity, completing a communication loop even without immediate play. By similar logic, watching actual-play streams counts as observing operations while remaining engaged on their terms.

Finally, framing play as recursive systemic operations aligns with the Maps and Loops approach in larp (Saitta et al. 2020): though interested in different domains of reduction, it is largely compatible. This opens space for further systemic models across role-playing forms, helping bridge currently fragmented lines of research.

7.2 A Radical Social Constructionist Proposal for TRPG Play

Systems are operationally closed: they remain autopoietic only by processing their own kind of information; other inputs affect them only via translation. Thus a thought must be verbalized to enter play, and a die roll must be interpreted to bear consequences. The controversial implication is that people are not part of the Play System (Luhmann 1995, 210–13). This does not deny players' influence, but rejects reducing play to mental models: TRPG play arises from multiple coupled systems and is not organizationally dependent on any specific actor.

Following Luhmann (1990; 1995, 20–23; 2012, 12; see also Baraldi et al. 2021, 100), our stance is "radical social constructionist": play is irreducible to human action, so nonhuman or absent actors may participate so long as operations continue. "Player" is a role defined in context; any actor producing the expected utterances can fill it. Hence solo campaigns, a large language model acting as GM, or leaving instructions so others run one's character while one steps away are analyzable as TRPG play on the same terms.

This implies much of TRPG play exists outside minds as a temporalized record of conversation, paralleling larp's distinction between designed, played, and remembered (Stenros and MacDonald 2020). Systemically, these map to Play System expectations, operations, and later reconstructions. Consequently, the DLM and systemic-cybernetic framework treat internal motives and emotions only insofar as they shape selections—a limitation that invites methodological development for empirical use.

7.3 Facilitating Practical Applications for TRPG Play

A key advantage of a systemic-cybernetic lens is reach beyond play. Many social systems—education, law, economy, public/private organizations—also reduce complexity through communication and seek viability. Our model therefore clarifies why TRPG-based interventions can work in non-play domains and how to design and document them more precisely.

Systemic interconnectivity fosters resilience and adaptability (Chalmers 2013); Tabletop RPGs can mirror real-world complexity by embedding interconnected subsystems, enriching immersion. A systemic-cybernetic approach informs game-based innovation in teacher education (Boysen et al. 2023), disaster preparedness (Evans et al. 2023), organizational development (Espejo and Reyes 2011; García-Soriano et al. 2023), psychological therapy (Kilmer et al. 2024), and community building (Bennett 2023).

These directions are already recognized by designers (Björk and Zagal 2024) and academic/para-academic thinkers (Torner 2024), and macro-level design models exist (Stenros and Hakkarainen 2010; White 2020). Our contribution is a clearer big-picture model of simultaneous elements in TRPG play, reducing reliance on tacit know-how and making design practice more accessible to newcomers.

8. CONCLUSION

The Dynamic Loop Model (DLM) advances understanding of Tabletop Role-Playing Games as complex, autopoietic systems. Drawing on cybernetic principles from the Viable System Model and Social Systems Theory, it unifies mechanics, narrative, social practices, and player agency under a single lens. Tabletop RPGs balance structure and variety through recursive feedback, enabling emergent complexity while preserving coherence and addressing a meta-theoretical gap in TRPG studies.

At its core, the DLM frames Tabletop RPGs as adaptive processes rather than static rule sets. Multi-level feedback sustains engagement and viability, allowing games to evolve with unpredictable inputs and embody reflexivity and self-regulation. This perspective clarifies the medium's transformative potential—as entertainment and as a vehicle for connection and exploration.

Practically, the DLM offers designers actionable guidance: harmonize player-driven content with structured procedures so emergent narratives flourish without destabilizing the system. Building feedback loops into mechanics and encouraging reflexive design supports more engaging, inclusive, and adaptable experiences across diverse audiences.

Beyond design, the DLM highlights non-ludic applications. Understanding Tabletop RPGs as adaptive systems supports uses in education, therapy, and organizational training. Their recursive loops can model real-world complexity, foster systems thinking, collaboration, and resilience, and simulate consequential decision-making in safe, demanding settings.

Future work should test the DLM empirically across domains: explain long-term campaign dynamics, assess relevance to digital role-playing, and inform serious games, training simulations, and organizational tools—both to validate the model and expand its utility. Interdisciplinary collaboration among sociology, education, psychology, and organizational studies can refine the framework for increasingly complex interactive systems.

Overall, the DLM positions Tabletop RPGs as bounded yet flexible platforms that navigate complexity, reduce uncertainty, and enable collective meaning-making. By integrating theoretical innovation with practical utility, it reframes Tabletop RPGs as dynamic, resilient systems bridging entertainment, education, and social transformation—credible tools for addressing the complexities of contemporary life.

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AI USE DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

This article made limited use of artificial intelligence tools. Specifically, ChatGPT was used to support the translation of selected concepts from Spanish to English, as well as to assist in the drafting and refinement of certain sentences. The use of this tool was strictly limited to linguistic support. All conceptual development, theoretical framing, argumentation, and final revisions were carried out by the authors. The authors take full responsibility for the content of the manuscript. No external AI tools were used for data analysis, interpretation, or generation of original academic contributions.

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How is Learning in Edu-Larp as a Method Described and Seen by Practitioners?

Abstract: This study explores how experienced practitioners of educational live-action role-playing (edu-larp) describe and understand the method as a tool for learning. While previous research has emphasized design, theory, and student experiences, this paper centres practitioner perspectives, aiming to highlight their discourse on the educational value of edu-larp. Using semi-structured interviews with ten practitioners from diverse international backgrounds, the author applies critical discourse analysis to identify themes in how learning is perceived to occur through edu-larp. The themes are organized into three main categories: what is learned, how learning occurs, and why the method is used. By analysing the themes in order of size, the core themes are specified. These include motivation, power distribution, playfulness, and social competencies. The themes are also explored in related research, which turned out to strengthen the position of the core themes. Through the strong emphasis on the "why" of using the method, the discourse illustrates a climate where practitioners need to justify the use of the method to external stakeholders. Finally, the findings are related to the wider educational discourse, where they tend to align with constructivist educational theory. This work contributes to the field by amplifying practitioner voices and situating edu-larp within broader pedagogical frameworks.

Keywords: Edu-larp, Learning, Teaching, Role-playing, Practitioner Interviews

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1. INTRODUCTION

Educational live action role-playing games (edu-larp) are becoming an increasingly accepted and used teaching method. The method is used in many different areas, such as science teaching (McSharry and Jones 2000), German literature (Torner 2016), and conflict transformation (Taraghi et al. 2022). There are schools and organisations that specialize in working with the method, such as the Danish boarding school Efterskolen Epos (2024), the Swedish company LajvVerkstaden (n.d.), and the American organisation Reacting to the Past (n.d.). In higher education, we find national courses (Stockholms Universitet, n.d.) and international programs such as the Master's program in Transformative Game Design (Uppsala University, n.d.) that you can take to learn more about how to work with the method. But *why* is the method used? There is research on edu-larp as a method (Bowman 2014, Transformative Play n.d.), but the main areas are focused on the students participating in the games, how to design a game, experiences from running a game, or more overarching theoretical work. There isn't much published when it comes to the voices of practitioners who regularly use the method. For historical documentation, there needs to be a variety of voices being heard, not just scholars. This paper is a step towards giving space for the voices of practitioners and showcasing the discourse among them.

This paper is based on the work in the author's Master's Thesis (Westborg 2024). The first part, including 'Method' and 'Categories and Themes', presents some of the key findings from the thesis in a condensed form. It shows how experienced practitioners describe the method, what they think you can learn through it, how you can learn through it, and why they use it. The second part of this paper, from 'Main Themes' forward, then goes further than the thesis by exploring the size of each theme to find the main themes. To determine if these main themes are also evident in other data, relevant research is then analysed to see if the

themes are represented there as well. Through this, we can gain an understanding of what is considered important in the practitioners' discourse of edu-larp as a method for teaching and learning. Finally, the main themes also say something about where edu-larp as a method fits in the wider educational discourse.

2. METHOD

Here a condensed version of the method is presented. For a detailed explanation, going deeper into ontology, epistemology, methodology, critical discourse analysis, sampling, transcribing, data analysis, pseudonymisation, ethics, and full transcriptions, see Westborg (2024).

This paper has not undergone ethical review, as it is not required for this type of paper in Sweden. All participants were asked and have agreed to have the transcriptions published as part of the thesis, and for me to publish papers that build on that material (Etikprövningsmyndigheten n.d).

Ten experienced practitioners were interviewed in hour-long semi-structured interviews. Ten hour-long interviews are a large number for a critical discourse analysis, but this was chosen to make sure saturation would be reached. The interviews were held online over Zoom in English. All interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were analyzed using critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 2003), creating themes based on the participants' ideas about learning in relation to edu-larp.

The participants come from six different countries in North America, Middle and Eastern Europe, and the Nordics. All participants were experienced in using edu-larp as a method, with half of them having over 15 years of experience with the method and the least experienced having worked professionally with the method for 8 years. The participants have different main target audiences spanning from 6 to 40 year olds. Six of the ten primarily work with edu-larp within formal educational settings, two in non-formal educational settings, and two with both.

The participants were asked the following questions:

Your relation to edu-larp
- What is edu-larp for you?
- What is the difference between edu-larp and leisure larps for you?
- How do you use edu-larp in your setting? What do you do in your practice?

Edu-larp and learning
- What are the students learning through edu-larp?
- How does the student learn through edu-larp?
- Where does the student learn through edu-larp?
- For whom does the student learn through edu-larp?
- For what are they learning? Why is it important?
- What do you think is important for learning to happen? Not just in edu-larp.

Edu-larp as a method
- What do you find are the pros and cons of using edu-larp from a learning perspective?
- Have you used other methods in your teaching? Which methods? What are the differences? Why?

- Is there anything that you find hard to teach using edu-larp?
- Have you run into any resistance in working with these methods from others?

In the interviews, the participants highlighted that edu-larp is one of many methods that can be used for learning. They acknowledge that students learn in different ways and that there is no one-size-fits-all tool. The participants employ various methods, with edu-larp being a primary tool for some and a more occasional one for others.

3. CATEGORIES AND THEMES

In this part, the themes and the categories they can be placed in will be described. Both the themes and the categories were inductively derived.

The themes that were found fit into three different categories: what you can learn from edu-larp (What), how you learn through edu-larp (How), and what the benefits of the method are (Why). The three categories are not entirely separate; they will overlap to some extent. For example, the theme 'motivation' can fit both in 'why' you should use an edu-larp; because it helps motivate the students, but it can also fit into 'how' the students are learning; because they are motivated. In these cases, I have sorted them where I found most of the presented ideas within the theme fit best. Each theme will be showcased by a number of quotes from the participants. The reason for using so many quotes is to illustrate examples of what each theme encompasses, but more importantly, to let the practitioners' own voices be heard and not just hide their words under overarching themes created by a scholar. All participants have been pseudonymised.

3.1 What

There are four main themes that participants bring up as things you can learn through edu-larp: Personal development, Empathy, Content, and Social competencies.

3.1.1 Personal development

Personal development is about how you grow, improve, and understand yourself better.

> A wise man once said, 'by playing many different roles I learn about *me*, I learn about who *I* am'. And when they are offered this playful arena, to experiment with different behaviours, they are learning a *lot* about themselves. They are learning a *lot* about how to behave in life, different kinds of strategies. (Interview with Valdemar. 2023)

> And then of course it, it could be a good feel of own competences. So to see what are my core competences, and how do I behave in social situations, and how would I behave if I would be in different positions, or if I have different roles, or if I have different understanding of myself. So to help people to become more powerful in their own, eh, being. (Interview with Ludwig. 2023)

3.1.2 Social Competencies

Social competencies are focused on social skills and understanding and interacting with social systems. There is a considerable overlap between this theme and the previous one (Personal

development) since the participants often mention them together. This overlap is not surprising since it is hard to develop socially without any personal development. Social competencies are described in two ways. The first is about skills in interacting with others.

> Can we work together, for example, about some common cause? I learn to analyse *your* position in a social situation, and my own position, and can we bring it together? There's something *there* that happens. You learn to, actually be *around* other people and be social. (Interview with Frederik 2023)

> So it's both those soft social skills about taking turns, about working together, about talking, about listening. (Interview with Lina 2023)

The second way Social competencies are described is about social positions and social systems.

> So they're good for sort of showing how systems function, and what it's like to be a part of a system of some kind. (Interview with Tarjei 2023)

> I think it's a good way to experience some kind of social phenomena, which could be like the use of force, or structural social situations, which could be some kind of group dynamic stuff. (Interview with Ludwig 2023)

3.1.3 Empathy

The third theme is Empathy. Empathy is here seen as the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. One could argue that Empathy should go into one of the previous themes. It can be seen as an individual skill that can be practiced and thereby go into Personal development. On the other hand, you have empathy for somebody *else*, and since empathy is always related to another person, it could also be seen as going into the theme of Social competencies. Since it is a bit in between the other themes, empathy thereby got to be a theme of its own. Empathy is mentioned both in relation to other people in general and in relation to character:

> And it's a lot about empathy. Because you have to have some kind of empathy to imagine being somebody else. And learning empathy and, and also you're learning to use empathy to understand other people. (Interview with Aksel 2023)

> The two places where there's a really significant difference (Note: in learning) sometimes, one is what their level of empathy is for historical figures. People who… Using traditional instruction, they often suffer from the arrogance of the present, and they look at these historical actors and they're like, 'Well, what a bunch of idiots. Why did they do this? It's so obviously a dumb thing to do'. And then they play the game and they do exactly the same thing. And they're like, 'Ahh, ohh, you know, I get it now'. Or they do something that's even worse for them. And they say, 'Oh, well, you know, maybe I underestimated them'. But also, when people play roles that have political positions, or cultural positions, that are deeply at odds with those that the student holds, I think that sometimes those are the most powerful learning experiences. Because the students are able to go, the

> students are able to recognize that that person isn't evil, or stupid, but that they came to their position for reasons that seemed reasonable to them, in the historical context that they were occupying. I think that's a really, really powerful set of learning. To be able to have empathy with someone that you not only don't admire, but kind of despise, is to be able to think about why they did the things that they did. So that's one. (Interview with Bill 2023)

3.1.4 Content

The fourth theme is 'content'. This theme is focused on subject-based knowledge, cognitive-related learning, and what the participants talk about as 'hard skills'.

> But it's also the hard skills (Note: that you can learn), like talking English, or doing math, or um. (Interview with Lina 2023)

> … they learned something in the week about, the East German Week, they learned something about *chuckle* justice. And communist regimes. And I mean, they learn both sides. Because they can also become very good socialist citizens, and with like limited freedom in many ways, but they have just worked their way up to the top of the party rank system. And not everyone can be up there, but then they can get everything, they get access to party meetings, they can take decisions, and stuff like that. So in the East German thing, they, again, they learned something about the historical setting and how it, with the mild pressure of being in that setting, they learned something about how it must have been to be a human in that setting. (Interview with Frederik 2023)

> We notice that the more cognitive learning goals we included, in maths for example, or in natural science, social science, whatever, the more fact-based learning goals we included, the more difficult it was for the kids, and the teachers, to take on and interpret their characters. There seem to be like a block, blocking situation, that when you work with your brain and focus. (Interview with Leni 2023)

3.2 How

In relation to how you learn through edu-larps, we find the following themes: Cooperation, New perspectives, Reflection, Individual processes, Embodiment, and Exploring/Doing.

3.2.1 Cooperation

This theme includes working together, learning from each other, exploring subjects together, and interaction.

> It's simply because that in the edu-larp they are allowed to talk to each other. I know that in regular class you can give the class a task, and you can make the kids form groups, and they can work together in these groups. But in the edu-larp we always work very socially with the problems and the difficulties that they need to learn. So they cooperate, and they learn a lot about themselves in this cooperation with others. 'What am I good at? Ohh, I'm pretty good at pragmatic thinking and solving riddles or questions so I can

> participate with that'. Other kids learn that, 'I, I'm actually pretty good at leadership, so I can like kind of like lead the group and ask the right question and get us on track'. So a lot of their learning take place within these bubbles of cooperation within the groups when they are presented with the tasks. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

> But then the students also have their voice heard, so we can get them. Our job is also to help facilitate the students have that discussions between themselves. (Interview with Aksel 2023)

3.2.2 New perspectives

This theme is about getting new perspectives from other players or from playing a character, but also about how the method is suitable for working with complex content that includes many different viewpoints.

> Having that discussion about how we witnessed things differently, and how we see things differently, and how we bring ourselves into the act of observing something. (Interview with Tarjei 2023)

> And that (Note: being in character) in turn leads to a new perspective on something. (Interview with Leni 2023)

> I think for edu-larp, I tend to lean into that when it's a part of the course that I've never figured out how to teach it effectively using other methods. *chuckle* And those are usually moments where there are a lot of different perspectives and they're all pulling in different directions. And these tend to be the games that I've written, are things that I've tried all kinds of different ways to teach and in the end I'm like, 'Well, I guess I have to have a game, to teach this thing'. (Interview with Bill 2023)

3.2.3 Reflection

Reflection is mentioned as something that is a vital part for learning to happen.

> Because some of the benefits of role-playing is not exactly the experience, it is the reflection on the experience. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

> And then the third place is the reflection. I think that probably at least half of the learning happens on those reflection days. (Interview with Bill 2023)

> During the larp itself, it's usually very intense and lots of things happen at the same time, but in the debrief, when you have time to listen to other people, to other players perspectives, and when you have to put words to your own experiences and feelings, that is when you actually can see whether there has been a progress or a new perspective added that accumulates to your portfolio of competencies and skills. (Interview with Leni 2023)

3.2.4 Individual processes

Individual processes as a theme highlight how learning is personal and that every player gets a unique experience, which is how they learn.

> And even that way, they might experience something totally different. Because you know, they will each have a very personal point of view, and those point of views will differ from each other because they are role-playing. So they have different roles and different points of view. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

> I think personally, for me, the strength in role-play is that you get to be on the inside. And it's personal, you get to experience it (Interview with Tarjei 2023)

4.2.5 Embodiment

The participants also talk about learning as something that can be experienced in the body.

> But I think it's mostly about gaining an embodied experience about something, about the topic, and about other people and about yourself. (Interview with Tarjei 2023)

> There are a lot of things that are important that aren't like immediate, and immediately present, but I think one of the strengths of larps is that you can give a personal experience, and once you have some personal experience, it's something you have done with your body that's related to this thing that you're going to learn about, then it's much easier to hold the attention, and focus on the bigger picture stuff that's going to be learnt. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

3.2.6 Exploring/Doing

This theme is about exploring and doing, making choices, and taking action.

> And also, it's exploratory, so you are not receiving something and accepting it, but using it, trying to apply it and experimenting with it. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

> Putting the students in a situation where they have to make choices, and they have to act, and they have to, you know, do something. (Interview with Aksel 2023)"

> But everything would be like, 'ah OK, this is very rational', and you think about this and you discuss about this, but it's very like more thinking and not making. And sometimes, I guess, it's better for your learning experience to be in a situation where you not only think about things but also do things. (Interview with Ludwig 2023)

> When edu-larp is able to make a playful arena for the students, for the participant. Where they are allowed to engage in different behaviours and they can investigate themselves. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

3.3 Why

There are five main themes that participants bring up as to why you should use edu-larp, the strength of the method: Playfulness, Power distribution, Brave space, Emotions, and Motivation.

3.3.1 Motivation

Motivation is mentioned by more or less all the participants as a reason to use edu-larp. It is often described in relation to edu-larp as a game, to winning, or to being fun.

> The best thing about the edu-larp is that the kids are, first and foremost, motivated to do stuff. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

> Yeah, I think that you're sort of learning for the game in a way. But every game also is basically just a, I mean, at root any game is a tool for teaching. So I think that the more you learn, the better you're able to play the game. So for students that are competitive, they're playing to win? I guess? But they're winning as them, but they're also winning as their role? (Interview with Bill 2023)

> So I just introduce a game *in* the classroom, that is even closer to the students so that they can like, 'Ok!', the motivational force is right here. That is where the game is, that is where I can have fun, or get the excitement of throwing a dice, or so. (Interview with Frederik 2023)

> So the question we need to ask ourselves as teachers, is how can we motivate our kids? How can we make them think that learning is fun? Because if the kids are not motivated, they won't learn a lot. We have to make, we have to make sure that learning is fun, and engaging, and that they want to do it. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

3.3.2 Playfulness

In this theme, we find mentions concerning play and how larp is a place for play but also mentions immersion and imagination.

> So we look into the question of what do our young people learn from playful behaviour? There's a lot of studies about that, a lot of science. And young people learn a *lot* about, they learn a lot *in* playful behaviour, by *engaging* in playful behaviour. And that is to me, why edu-larp is magical for these young kids. That's why we do it as a school. That's why we believe in. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

> So I guess I would say those are the three things to have, engaging ideas, curiosity and open mindedness. And when you've got those three things, I mean to me, the natural thing to do is you start playing. And an edu-larp is a, is a slightly structured environment for that play, rather than just a kind of a sandbox. Because I think a sandbox can be, teaches some things, but I think that playing in a sandbox is a lot harder than playing

> in a larp, because larp gives you some help in terms of how do I play? Because playing with ideas is, in an educational context, is pretty alien to most students. (Interview with Bill 2023)

> We often take worlds that is interesting to the kids, like a lot of these kids are interested in the steampunk world or vampires. The last edu-larp was about the vampires in New York. And, and they really love these worlds. And they get so much into it. And they get so into their characters. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

> Yeah, I remember, for example, there was a girl, age 12 maybe?. And she was like, 'Ohh. During the edu-larp it was like being 10 again. Playing on the break between classes, but for a *very* long time', and you can hear in her voice that she was longing for the age of 10. Which were just two years ago. But she was longing for the time where you can, on your break, play pretend with your friends. And now she got the opportunity to do it again. And she longed for it. That is, for the older children, or for adults, to be able to go back to that, to that imagination. (Interview with Lina 2023)

3.3.3 Power distribution

Here, we find ideas about how the participants see that power should be more distributed in a classroom, how this happens in edu-larp with agency as an essential component, and what this means for educators.

> Being, I think the English expression is on par? So that you don't have a hierarchical learning situation, but everybody needs to feel that he or she is accepted as an individual in that very situation, and also that everybody is kind of an expert, for something. And edu-larp is a very good tool to introduce that, *especially* if the educator takes part in it. (Interview with Leni 2023)

> And the players could decide, 'Well, I could do something else'. So that feeling of *agency* is very important as well, for the students. As well as, again, having agency over the text. Being able to say, 'Oh I could, I could make this decision differently'. And as with the papal election, the students could just make this decision the same, but now they know now the reasons *why*. Now they know Borgia was elected, not because he was a good Pope, but because he was a political solution to various constituencies in Italy in 1492. (Interview with Steve 2023)

> But during the game session, the students have drawn up the agenda, the students are running the protocol. There's a lot of power that, as a faculty member, you're ceding to the students by doing that. In my experience, that's actually one of the biggest reasons why faculty don't do edu-larp, they fear a loss of control, not for sort of egotistical reasons, but they're like, 'the class might not do the things that I think it needs to do'. Which is true. *chuckle* (Interview with Bill 2023)

3.3.4 Brave space

Edu-larp is talked about as something that can create a safe setting where you can explore new roles, relationships, and actions. It is a space where you can dare to be brave and where it is ok to fail because failing is part of the learning process.

> And that is where edu-larp is a big contribution to society. Because we let them explore. In a safe setting. (Interview with Lina 2023)

> And I think that trying things out in sort of a fictional environment can be a way to, in a more safe sense, find your own path and figure out what kind of thing that you want to do. (Interview with Aksel 2023)

> To feel safe is it's very hard sometimes when we do the edu-larps. Especially among, for example, teenagers, or adults. Their comfort zone may not include edu-larp. And I have to, in a very short amount of time, help them. (Interview with Lina 2023)

3.3.5 Emotions

In this theme, the participants talk about how edu-larp works with emotions and why they are important for learning.

> Because maybe, if you compare to normal days, or normal education, the design is to motivate you, absolutely. Like a way to motivate you to learn. But in edu-larp we also, uh, open up to, to *feel* something. To feel your.. We have a very strong ethics larp, about the, Name of larp 1, about the justice, and unjustice, for farmers in the medieval time. And you can see the children like shaking from anger because they are being treated unfairly. And it's not an off-game unfairness, they get to have food for the lunch, just as everybody else. But the fact that when there's a duel they automatically lose and the person who is having this lawsuit is obviously not listening to the farmers and treating them unfairly. And this builds up in their body so much. So the design is also to, to make them feel. And then they can express. (Interview with Lina 2023)

> The other one is because the intellectual learning is being intermeshed with emotion, long-term recall seems to be a lot better. When I run into a student, who played one game ten years ago in one of my classes, and start talking to them about the game, they remember it. And they remember it because of their emotional engagement in the game, as much as, or more, than their intellectual engagement. And it's interesting because I sort of have questions that I ask these students when I bump into them. They don't just have emotional memories of the game, they like *remember,* intellectually, what the game was about. Emotions just sort of meshes that into their long-term memory in a way that a purely intellectual exercise doesn't seem to do it. (Interview with Bill 2023)

4. MAIN THEMES

The 15 themes can be ordered based on size. The size of each theme was created by looking at in how many instances the theme was mentioned, how much was said about it, and by how many participants. Each part where a theme was discussed was cut out and added to a document (how much was said). Between each part a gap was added (how many instances), then the number of pages the total theme covered was added to the number of participants who had mentioned it to get the size. The themes are presented in the categories and illustrated using circles (all figures from Westborg 2024). The larger a circle is, the larger the theme. The overlapping of circles is not relevant to this paper, but it illustrates how the themes interact with each other.

Figure 1. What

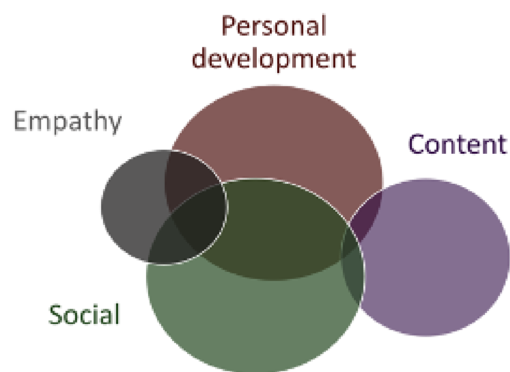


Figure 2. How

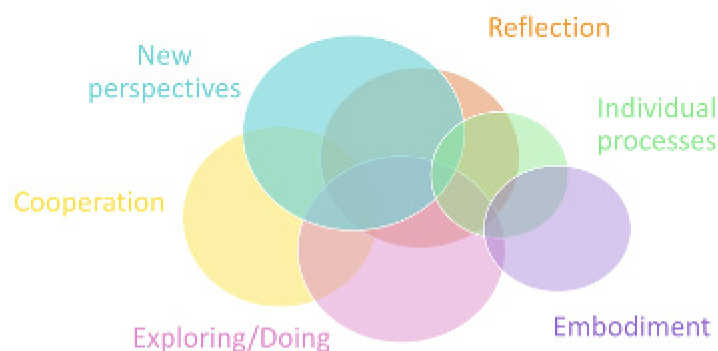
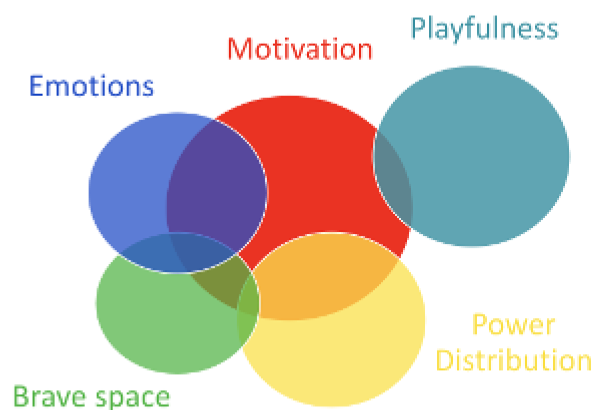


Figure 3. Why



Mentions of a theme can be both positive or negative in relation to the theme. For example, when talking about content learning and what you can learn, we see a positive comment from Lina:

> But it's also the hard skills (Note: that you can learn), like talking English, or doing math, or um. (Interview with Lina 2023)

While Valdemar offers some resistance to that:

> Edu-larp can sometimes be not so strong, or good, a method to learn pure academics and some very specific skills, like punctuation and grammar in Native language, or very specific skills for mathematics. (Interview with Valdemar 2023)

However, both of these quotes illustrate the theme and are therefore included in the count. The size of the theme therefore says something about how much space this theme gets in the discourse around edu-larp as a method, not about how good something is. The areas where more negative mentions can be seen are: in relation to Content about how it is not as good for teaching some types of content; a few mentions in relation to Motivation where it is highlighted that not everyone gets motivated by edu-larps; Power distribution has one mention about how uncertainty can be intimidating for some people; and in Emotions it is touched upon that it can be used not only for good. There are also a few negative mentions in each theme that are then mitigated by other themes (Westborg forthcoming). The most common theme that mitigates negative mentions in the other themes is Reflection through the use of a debrief. For example, the debrief (Reflection) can be used to mitigate wrong takeaways by individuals (Individual processes).

When sorting the themes from largest to smallest (See Table 1), some themes were close to the next theme, while some had more of a gap to the next theme. This is illustrated in the table by having gaps left between themes in the list.

When looking at the table, we have a large group that is pretty close to each other in place 5-11 while the top and bottom four stand out a bit more. The main theme in the discourse is Motivation, which the participants found to be highly important to learning, and some of them mentioned that this is something they find more challenging in other teaching methods. The themes also show us that educators believe in a more flat hierarchy in the classroom, where

power is more evenly distributed between students and between educators and students, and where students have agency. The third largest theme is Playfulness. Playfulness can be seen as related to Power distribution in that, in a playful space, the rules from the ordinary context don't apply in the same way. However, playfulness is also mentioned as something that is important and has value on its own. Last of the main themes, we find Social competencies, with the participants highlighting how the method can be used to learn how to work together with others and understand social systems, which is described as something positive and meaningful.

5. DISCUSSION

In this section, the results will be compared to other research, analyzed in relation to category, and be placed in the wider educational discourse.

5.1 Other research

To gain a broader understanding of the discourse of practitioners beyond the interview data, additional research was sought out to determine if there was any alignment between the findings.

To find related research, a search was done for previous studies or texts that focus on practitioners' voices. I did not find a lot. The two most relevant sources were Cullinan (2024) and Harder (2007). Cullinan has conducted a study similar to this one, but with a focus on specifically middle and high school educators who use tabletop role-playing games instead of edu-larps in their teaching. Harder is a teacher herself and shares her own experience of working with edu-larp as a method.

Both of these texts were analyzed to find mentions of the themes. Since these are edited texts written with a maximum length in mind and not raw data, analyzing them for size as exactly as done in the data set from the thesis will produce an incorrect representation. Instead, a simpler approach was used, simply separating between whether the theme was missing, clearly present, or present but only mentioned briefly or shallowly. Through this, insight can be gained about what themes are clearly represented and more common and how this relates to the findings from the data in the thesis. In Table 1, the mentions are marked in two columns named by the authors. If a mention was present, it is marked with an x; if a mark is within parentheses, the theme was touched upon or mentioned only briefly or shallowly.

In the table find that all themes are present in at least one of the two texts and that six out of the 15 themes are present in both Cullinan's (2024) and Harder's (2007) texts: the four main themes, the 5th largest theme (New perspective), and Reflection (place 8-10). The fact that the top five are present in both texts strengthens their position as important in the practitioner discourse. Reflection stands out since it was mentioned by both Harder and Cullinan, even if it is not one of the main themes or at the top. Harder mentions Reflection as something she missed out on when running an edu-larp, which had negative consequences on the learning, and that if she could redo it, she would have made sure to have a constant dialogue with the students (p 231). She thereby highlights reflection as guided by the teacher but does not mention reflection between the students. Cullinan, on the other hand, mentions reflection in a quote about how there is an opportunity for reflection in role-playing games since they occur over time (p 133), but doesn't go deeper into it than that. 'Reflection' comes up in both texts, which shows that it is an important part of the discourse, but I was still

surprised that it didn't get more space or was given more weight since even if 'Reflection' was not one of the main themes in the thesis data, the participants still positioned it as vital since that is where they see the main part of the learning taking place. In Cullinan's case, the text was already a distilled version of the original data, so there might be more mentions that she didn't highlight; however, it doesn't seem to have been a central part, as it didn't receive much attention.

Table 1. Main Themes Size and Other Research

Size (Largest to smallest)	Themes	Category	Cullinan	Harder
1	Motivation	Why	x	x
2	Power distribution	Why	(x)	(x)
3	Playfulness	Why	(x)	(x)
4	Social competencies	What	x	x
5	New perspective	How	(x)	x
6	Emotions	Why	x	
7	Exploring/ doing	How	x	
8-10	Content	What		x
8-10	Reflection	How	(x)	(x)
8-10	Personal	What		x
11	Cooperation	How	x	
12	Brave space	Why	x	
13	Embodiment	How		x
14	Individual process	How	x	
15	Empathy	What		x

5.2 The importance of 'Why'.

Upon closer examination of the categories and their main themes, an interesting pattern emerges: out of the four main themes, the top three all relate to the 'Why' category. What could make the Why so important? One part is probably that educators spend time thinking about why they use a specific method to try to help students learn, but if that was the only thing, then How should also be present high up in the list since how you learn through a method is relevant to why you pick it. Perhaps the importance of 'Why' rather illustrates the need to motivate your choice to others. This also came up in the interviews when asked if the participants had run into any resistance. Kolos described it like this:

> Ohh yes, yes, all the time. But I think, basically, resistance was the standard or the norm, I think. People did not really understand why is it good, at all *chuckle*, to do this type of stuff. And I'm talking about the majority of people, so minority always thought that it's totally ok. (Interview with Kolos 2023)

And for some teachers, it is not only about having others understand what you do, there can be more dire consequences if you can't motivate your choice of method. Steve talked about how it can be harder when working in pre-higher education:

> And this was very much hit home by the educators who are at the 2022 [Name of international conference], right? Who presented pretty much a verbatim, you know, they're learning objectives, which again, translate into specifically US American educational objectives, but that's what's important to them, right? And they communicated that very clearly. What's important is the power for them to justify this role-play to their bosses. So that they don't get fired or troubled. (Interview with Steve 2023)

This might stem from that play, not only in role-playing games, is often seen as frivolous and only for entertainment (Deterding 2014, 2017; Euteneuer 2019). However, role-playing games get an extra layer since they are connected to playing make-believe as children, and larps, with their embodiment aspect, even more so (Westborg forthcoming). Many educators are not free to use any method of their choice but need approval to bring in a new method. This means justifying the method's use to superiors and demonstrating its alignment with the curriculum and learning objectives to achieve institutional accountability.

When using a new method comes with the risk of being fired, it becomes very high stakes and being able to motivate 'Why' you want to use it becomes essential. Even if the stakes can differ between schools, regions, and countries, the need to validate your choice of method to external parties underscores the importance of 'Why'.

5.3 Relation to educational discourses

The main themes (Motivation, Power distribution, Playfulness, and Social competencies) also say something about where edu-larp as a method fits in the wider educational discourse.

The two highest-ranked themes, motivation and power distribution, paint a picture of starting out from the students' perspective, giving them more power to affect their learning and helping them get motivated. The teachers are helping and guiding the students in a flatter type of hierarchy. This very well matches a constructivist discourse about learning, where knowledge is positioned as individually constructed. For example, constructivist-inspired pedagogy often includes the following features (Linderoth 2016, 21, author's translation):

- Working with themes rather than individual subjects. Since individuals do not create meaning through separate subjects, the teaching shouldn't be organised that way either. By working with themes, you can work with many different subjects at the same time.

- The teacher should adapt to the student's activity instead of the student adapting to the teacher's instruction. The teacher is seen more as a guide or a coach.

- The students' individual inner motivation should be the starting point, and the teacher should try to adapt the teaching so that this can happen.
- Because it is individualised and students are seen as different, they should also be given a lot of freedom to choose what to focus on and how to learn.

- The main goal of teaching is to help the students with self-realisation.

The last point in the list also matches with the fourth main theme, 'Social competencies'. Social competencies in general have become more common in the school debate, especially concerning pro-social behavior, mental health, and school as a compensatory actor (Prieur et al 2016). The concept of social competencies, as a term, builds on an individualistic view, aligning well with a constructivist discourse, even though the social aspect also can be seen as a more social constructivist idea. Examples of constructivist ideas can be seen not just in the main themes but also in both Cullinan's (2024) and Harder's (2007) texts. Cullinan, for example, has differentiation of work as one of their findings (p 133), and Harder even mentions the term constructivist theory (p 234).

The main theme of 'Playfulness' is tricky since play and playfulness in the field of education are primarily researched in relation to young children's development and not in relation to adults (Tanis 2012, p. iii) and therefore are not very prevalent in the general educational discourse about learning for adults. This has begun to change in recent times, but so far the discourse is very scattered, drawing upon various ideas about learning from distinct schools of thought such as constructivism and social constructivism (Heidari-Shahreza 2025; Jørgensen, Hovgaard, Schrøder and Skovbjerg 2023). The presence of Playfulness in the discourse could be an influence from the business tech world, where a discourse around play has evolved over the last 20 years, with companies like Google utilising playfulness in the workspace as an employee benefit (Vyas et al. 2008).

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary

When examining how practitioners describe edu-larp as a method, the main themes identified are Motivation, Power Distribution, Playfulness, and Social Competencies. In this discourse, the practitioners talk about how the purpose of school extends beyond providing education; it should also be engaging, help create good citizens, and enable students to get to know themselves and evolve as individuals. This discourse also portrays a world where it is essential for practitioners to be able to validate their choice of method. When situating the discourse of edu-larp within the broader educational discourse, it becomes evident that it, in many ways, builds upon constructivist theories. This work contributes to the field by amplifying practitioner voices and situating edu-larp within broader pedagogical frameworks.

6.2 Limitations

Since this study has used an interpretative approach, the findings say something about how the world can be understood at this moment, not how it is. Discourse theory does not claim objectivity, but builds rigour and validity through the use of a reflexive approach (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000). Conducting detailed language analyses can be challenging when many of the interviewees and the interviewer are not native speakers; the range of vocabulary will affect what words will be chosen, and also the grammatical composition will be influenced by this factor. By looking at the overarching ideas and the relationship to the social structures, many of these problems with language analysis were bypassed. There are, of course, other ideas about learning within the edu-larp community that have not come up in the interviews. Other participants would probably also present other ideas. That they have not come up does not mean they are irrelevant or not part of the discourse, but I argue that these ideas are not among the main focuses of the discourse, since they should then have been present also here.

6.3 Future Research

For future research, it would be interesting to examine what other discourses and trends from the more general current social climate have impacted this discourse and, additionally, to explore the differences between the discourse among practitioners and theorists. Looking even further ahead, it would be fascinating to conduct another analysis of how practitioners talk about edu-larp in about 15 years' time. A comparison could then be made to see if, and how, the discourse had changed, both in itself and in relation to the broader educational discourse and the prevailing social climate.

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The Role of the Cosmographer

Abstract: This article suggests that the most distinctive element of role-playing games is not that they allow players to take on the role of fictional characters but that they represent a historically significant development of humanity's capacity for imagining other worlds. It describes this development as an innovation in cosmographic technology, or interlocking procedures and techniques that enhance our ability to imagine and explore worlds. In other words, the most essential role that a player takes on in a role-playing game is that of cosmographer, or explorer of multiversal possibility. The novel cosmographic development represented by the first RPGs came from a synthesis of two imaginative technologies: the ironic imagination of early speculative fiction and the oracular simulations of wargaming. RPGs draw on technologies for simulating space and time, but most importantly they draw on the oracular technology of using probabilities and dice to propel games into cosmographic territory that the human players could not have imagined unaided. Through the synthesis of these elements RPGs enhance human imaginative capacities offering players the ability to take on the role of cosmographers utilizing powerful technologies to access vast and unexplored swathes of possible worlds.

Keywords: Cosmographer, TRPG, Cosmagraphic Technology, Oracular Simulation

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1. INTRODUCTION

The 2025 Role-Play in Games Conference called on participants to think about the foundations of role-playing in a game, breaking that down by historical, cultural, theoretical, and critical angles. This included "alternative historical trajectories of other critical lines, events or ideas that came together to form role-playing in games as we know it" (Games As Art Center 2025). In this essay I put forward the notion that role-play, in the traditionally understood sense of taking on the role of a fictional character, is neither the most distinctive nor the most important element of role-playing games. Instead, I argue that tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) represent a historically significant development of humanity's capacity for imagining other worlds. I describe this development as an innovation in *cosmographic technology*, or interlocking procedures and techniques that enhance our ability to imagine and explore worlds. In other words, I contend that the most essential role that a player takes on in a role-playing game is that of cosmographer, or explorer of multiversal possibility.

In the first section of the essay I will contextualize my use of the term "cosmography," positioning it in relationship to other uses of the term, Curtis Carbonell's (2019) concept of "realized worlds," and Chloe Germaine's (2025) eco-weird description of "co-worlding" with games. I position cosmography as exploration of a spatialized field of possibility, drawing on Mark JP Wolf's (2012) model of imagined worlds, and considering the limits of our imagination as a horizon which we can expand. In the second section I argue for a definition of games as a cosmographic technology that harnesses play's exploration of the possible, and present role-playing games as a particularly powerful development of that technology. Having developed a model for conceptualizing TRPGs as cosmographic technology, I offer a brief retelling of their origins in that light, describing the particular developments that led to the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* as a synthesis of different streams of cosmographic innovations. In the conclusion of the essay I suggest that this conceptualization of TRPGs provides a fruitful model for understanding their potential as tools for radical social change.

1.1 Cosmography

I describe the exploration of possible worlds as cosmography, a term used in various enough ways that it deserves clarification here. I do not intend to invoke the cosmography of Astrophysics, concerned with matter distribution in the empirically observable universe. Neither am I using the term as a synonym for cosmology, in the sense of a philosophical model of reality like Plato's *Timaeus*. My meaning is closer to Peter Heylyn's 1652 *Cosmography*, in which he describes a fusion of history and geography that promises "universal Comprehension of Naturall and Civill story," in the sense that Heylyn the cosmographer sought to document not just *gaia* but *cosmos* (quoted in Gagné 2021, 39). My aims are both humbler and wider than Heylyn's. Humbler, in that I do not expect any cosmographer to approach "universal Comprehension" of the *cosmos;* this is necessarily so, in that my wider conception of *cosmos* includes not only the actual world but all possible worlds. I might specify *multiversal* cosmography, but wherever and however possible worlds can be said to exist, they must exist in that totality which we can only call the *universe.* In most respects my meaning is closest to that developed by Renaud Gagné (2021), who defines cosmography as "the composition of possible worlds that coexist on a stage of conflicts and alternatives" (2021, 27). Gagné is concerned with the poetics of worlding and conducts a "slow reading" of how Greek cosmographers from Pindar forward composed possible worlds that intersect through the nexus of the land of Hyperborea.

Within role-playing game studies, Curtis Carbonell (2019) has developed a similar approach that describes "realized worlds" as a central feature of "the modern fantastic," a reworking of Michael Saler's (2012) argument that the 20th century's "ironic imagination" gave rise to a new kind of "virtual world." Carbonell centers space as a key concept for understanding TRPGs and describes how the modern fantastic's "geographies of imagination" (Anderson 1991; Said 1997) "combine the imaginary with the real (Carbonell 2019, 24). "Realized" also emphasizes that ironic engagement with worlds involves a *process* of realization, allowing for a powerful synthesis with Deleuze's concept of the virtual as that which "emerges out of 'actual' material life as the 'real'" (2016, 26). The resulting picture is of TRPGs as key tools in the modern fantastic's "inflection of modernity, in which lived spaces oscillate between the real and the imaginary" (Carbonell 2019, 9).

While my cosmographic model does not contradict Carbonell's, it approaches role-playing games from a different disciplinary angle, which produces a different inflection and set of affordances. Like Gagné, Carbonell approaches his subject from the angle of literature, conceptualizing TRPGs as, first and foremost, "literary gametexts" (2019, 3). This emphasis on poetics and composition is where my angle of entry into the subject differs from Gagné and Carbonell. Without denying the validity of this approach, I come to TRPGs from the perspective of anthropology and folklore, considering them first as a kind of verbal performance. While written text clearly forms a key piece of a form sometimes called "pencil and paper" games, I will argue the role-playing game emerges as a set of practices which are only later codified in the formulation of a gametext. This difference leads my conception of cosmography to emphasize the discovery and exploration, rather than the composition, of worlds. A cosmographer is not so much a worldbuilder as a world-hopper.

Although she doesn't use the term cosmography, Chloe Germaine's eco-weird description of "tabletop gameplay as a mode of co-worlding" resonates strongly with my conception of the cosmographic, especially when she speaks of TRPGs' "potential to bring forth as-yet unrealized possibilities from the virtual into the actual" (2025, 182). In drawing on Deleuze's concept of the virtual, Germaine differs from Gagné in one important matter: the ontological question of if and how these worlds exist. Whereas Gagné denies the existence

of Hyperborea outside of the discourses that construct it, like Carbonell Germaine draws on Deleuze's concept of virtuality. Even more than Carbonell, Germaine emphatically asserts with Deleuze that the "virtual is 'fully real,' a realm of reality in which all objects partially exist, and from which actual objects, relations, and situations arise" (Germaine 2025, 185). The difference is more than a philosophical quibble and had real implications for our conception of RPGs.

Emphasizing, as Gagné does, the non-existence of imagined worlds pairs with his emphasis on rhetoric, the individual artist, and cosmography as the *composing* of worlds. Allowing for the existence of imagined worlds opens up new and fruitful ways of thinking and acting with RPGs. As Germaine says, "Games do not simply straddle the real and the imagined, paltry half-and-half things; they provide a passage between the virtual and the actual (2025, 185). Her use of the term "passage" here points towards one important shift: the virtual reality of other worlds raises the question of where these worlds exist, guiding us towards a fruitful spatial model for cosmography. Where Gagné's cosmography is primarily a matter of composing worlds, the cosmographer of virtual worlds explores and discovers worlds rather than composing or creating them. More than a shift in metaphor or image, this spatialized, virtual cosmography has real implications for the ethical and political capacities of TRPGs. Germaine draws attention to the ethical dimension of this difference, noting that connecting the virtual and the actual "allows for thinking through the futural dimension of games. The virtual in games comprises possible forms that do not exist but that could give rise to new, transformed conditions of reality" (2025, 186). I have explored role-playing games' cosmographic potential to catalyze real-world changes elsewhere (Mizer 2025), but like Germaine I argue that they can serve as assistive technology for exploring and realizing better worlds.

1.2 The Atomic Model of Possibility

In seeking to understand how games connect the virtual and actual, I have adapted a model developed by Mark JP Wolf in *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012). While Wolf uses the model to explain his concept of secondary worlds as a distinct category of robustly described imagined worlds, I find the relationship between the possible and the imagined more fruitful in the context of cosmography. I describe this as an atomic model of the cosmos.

Here I should note that while I find Germaine's invocation of Deleuzean virtuality both compelling and useful, this atomic model works even if it is methodological and conceptual rather than ontological. That is, my primary intent here is to develop a useful way of thinking about other worlds, not to fully defend claims about the existence, non-existence, or virtual existence of other worlds.

That said, the model begins with "Prime Reality," the world where if I stub my toe I feel the pain as a mandatory and direct experience. This world forms the nucleus, as central and defined and ultimately unknowable in the atom as in our experience. The set of all possible worlds surrounds our world like an electron cloud surrounding the nucleus of the real. In this spatialization of possibility, "near" worlds are more similar to our own and "far" worlds are dissimilar. One world over, my shirt is green instead of blue. Further out, the walls of my office are lined with semi-intelligent vines that serve me coffee when I need a break from writing. Between the borders of Prime Reality and the sum total of all possible worlds, the sphere of imagined worlds continues to expand just as it has ever since humans (or, more likely, pre-human hominids) first developed the capacity to imagine worlds different from our own. Here we find Gilgamesh, Izanagi and Izanami, Tolkien's Arda, Gygax's Oerth, and every dream a human has ever had.

1.3 Imaginative Horizons

Presumably, the farthest reaches of possibility space extend beyond human comprehension or ability to imagine. Much closer to the actual, however, lie important regions of the possible that we cannot *currently* imagine. Just as each of us has an outer limit to how far away we can see, just as there is an upper limit to how fast a human can currently move, there exists an *imaginative horizon*, beyond which it is difficult or impossible to effectively imagine. While it might have been theoretically possible for a Haudenosaunee living in the 13th century to imagine the world of N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series, practically speaking that world existed beyond the imaginative horizon of anyone alive until quite recently.

This cosmographic limitation applies beyond our ability to imagine "fictional worlds." When we say that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism, we are referring to our imaginative horizon. As Ursula K. Le Guin, a masterful cosmographer in her own right, said in her 2014 acceptance speech for the Distinguished Contribution to American Letters Award, "We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings." In response to this "capitalist realism," (Fisher 2022) Le Guin calls for those "who can see alternatives to how we live now … realists of a larger reality" (2014). Our challenges in imagining alternative worlds, the shape of our imaginative horizon, are not just natural states, but are in part the result of ideological power structures. The Marxist aesthetics approach of Jennifer Ponce de Léon and Gabriel Rockhill, which they call a "compositional model of ideology," describes capitalism as "a multidimensional world-making mechanism" that "strives to impose its definition of reality as the only one possible, while seeking to destroy, discredit, or render inapprehensible all other worlds and possibilities of world-making" (2020, 2-3). Effective imagination, imagination that can help humans find better ways of being, depends on understanding, utilizing, and advancing cosmographic technologies that can overcome the ideologically sedimented barriers that limit our imaginative horizons. Role-playing games are among such technologies.

2. COSMOGRAPHIC TECHNOLOGY

My use of "technology" here does not refer to video games, or even to particularly material human innovations. The common description of game rules as "mechanics" imply a general understanding of the interlocking systems of play as a kind of technology. Carbonell argues that "an engineering ethos invigorates the mechanics of realized worlds," and describes the "modern fantastic" as combining the technocratic and literary modes (2019, 6). Germaine builds on this by describing role-playing games as operating in three modalities, one of which is as "ludic technologies … that generate potential." (Germaine 2021, 129). Similarly, Ryan, Dixon, and MacCallum-Stewart describe games of emergent narrative as "*narrative machines*—mechanical systems that create narrative experiences" (2020, 179). This more-than-material understanding of technology follows similar usage in some meditative traditions, such as Antonio de Nicolás's (1986) analysis of Ignatian spiritual practice as a technological system. De Nicolás defines a primary technology as "the habituation in the ordering and repetition of certain mental acts and languages to extend the human sensorium as far as the technology is able to reach' (1986, xxi). This approach is consonant with Heidegger's definition of technology as a "mode of revealing" in which he points out the root term *Technē* refers not only to material crafts but to "the arts of the mind" (1977, 13). This understanding of technology synthesizes the aesthetic and the material. Ponce de León and Rockhill describe aesthetics as "the collective composition of a shared sensorium" while affirming that this composition is achieved through material sociohistorical practices (2020, 2).

Although we might call these practices techniques, "cosmographic technology" has the benefit of drawing connections to media theorist Marshall McLuhan's (2003) concept of technologies as enhancement of human capacities. The telescope serves as an extension of our ability to detect energy in the spectrum of visible light, a capacity we call "sight." The hammer serves as an extension of our ability to move objects in space, a capacity we call "strength." Similarly, cosmographic technologies enhance our capacity to explore the possible. In the following section I will argue that this capacity is best described as "play."

2.1 Games as Cosmographic Technology

Classical definitions of play are, as Aaron Trammell (2023) points out, fraught along many lines. Against saccharine, hegemonic portrayals of play as purely liberatory and uplifting, Trammell calls for a reparative understanding of play that "is as painful as it is pleasurable, as individual as it is universal, and as mandatory as it is voluntary" (2023, 8). Jaakko Stenros argues that the distinction between the *activity* of play and the *attitude* of playfulness helps to account for the existence of mandatory and painful play, and describes the "core of play that most conceptualizations agree on" as "playful play" (2015, 93). Surrounding this core are many types of play that might be excluded in some definitions, but that Stenros includes, such as describing bullying (or, to Trammell's point, torture) as one-sided social play. This definition of play includes "all activity done for its own sake" intentionally affording a "wide conceptualization of play" that "lets us explore and discover, see connections and juxtapositions, and improvise and play with the theory of play" (2015, 78-79). In this spirit, I submit a working definition of play that considers play not only a "fundamental condition in human and animal life," but as a fundamental feature of the cosmos: play is autotelic exploration of possibility.

This definition synthesizes Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) emphasis on the autotelic nature of play (i.e., play as that which is done for its own end), the idea that exploration and play might be coterminous (Weisler and McCall 1976) and Sutton-Smith's concept of adaptive variability (1997). Whereas Sutton-Smith's biological definition can identify the evolutionary benefits *of* play, my definition would include evolution *as* play in that the process explores the full range of biological possibility. In other words, I do not conceptualize play as an activity so much as a force or phenomenon, a pneumatic tendency of reality to expand outwards into possibility space. This tendency is not dissimilar from what Teilhard de Chardin describes as "the law of complexification" (2008, 48)

When explaining this concept to my students, I draw two lines on the board. The first line is straight, the second line curves and bends across the chalkboard. When I ask my students which line is more playful, they inevitably choose the curvy line (unless, of course, they are offering a playful response). This is anecdotal evidence of course, but it connects to other definitions of play developed outside the central play studies canon. Germaine, for example, claims that "all play is movement forward and backward," (2025, 191) and draws on Hans Georg Gadamer's portrayal of play "as an impersonal agency," even denying the necessity of a playing subject (Gadamer 1994, 106). A notion of play as movement is compatible with my concept of exploration of possibility. Conceived this way, play is a force or energy expanding outward into possibility space, some territories of which are full of oppression and others liberation. Play is essential to the human way of being in the world, but play is bigger than humanity. Huizinga begins *Homo Ludens* (1950) by reminding us that animals did not wait for humans to teach them play. Anthropologist David Graeber (2014), using a definition similar to my own, of play as autotelic exercise of "an entity's most complex powers or capacities,"

even speculates about the play of electrons. Like sight, like strength, play is a capacity that humans use in particular ways but that is not unique to humanity.

If we are looking for the distinctively human use of play, we find games. Games harness, structure, and direct play's exploration of possibility, like a water wheel redirecting the energy of a river. Games are technologies of play that allow us to perceive further into the possible than other living things seem to. In other words, games are cosmographic technologies that we use to navigate through possibility space.

Our use of cosmographic technologies is distinctive to our way of being in the world, leading to Marx's famous observation that the difference between the worst human architect and the best bee is that the human "raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality" (1887). The architect looks out from prime reality and sees a range of possible worlds that include variants of the structure they might build. To refine and focus their vision, they might use any number of cosmographic technologies. Language itself is a cosmographic technology, a structured play of symbols, that the architect can use to connect others to imagined worlds that include the new building. Language is the foundational technology for nearly all expansion of our imaginative range. In Tolkien's words, "When we can take green from grass, blue from heaven, and red from blood, we have already an enchanter's power—upon one plane; and the desire to wield that power in the world external to our minds awakes." (2008, 41). Fictional narrative is a development of the language technology, one that allows us to playfully assemble counterfactuals and create linkages between them. We could describe any number of human cultural patterns in this way, but these examples suffice to contextualize my claim that role-playing games are particularly powerful and significant developments of cosmographic technology.

2.2 Role-Playing Games as Cosmographic Technology

It may seem odd to argue that the most distinctive feature of "role-playing" games has little to do with "role-playing," and my reference to the "role" of the cosmographer in the title to this essay is admittedly a dodge. However, in many ways it is an historical accident that emergent tradition of "Midwestern folk art of the 1970s" (Lawrie and Phipps 2019, 12) came to be called "role-playing games." It is possible that this has led us to overemphasize characters and roles in our understanding of these games. A comparable accident occurred in the history of video games when games that emphasized exploration and puzzle were called "adventure" games, largely because the first major example of the genre was called *Colossal Cave Adventure* (Reed et al. 2020). The subject matter of an adventure game does not need to be particularly adventurous, nor does a narrative of adventure make a first-person shooter an adventure game. Similarly, "role-playing" is not necessarily the most distinctive feature of "role-playing games" simply because it is in the title.

The term "role-playing" entered English in 1925 when Jakob Moreno brought his *Rollenspiel* group psychotherapy techniques to the United States (Peterson 2012, 373). Its first application to hobby gaming, in 1973, referred to specific *Diplomacy*-influenced games simulating "hypothetical crisis problems" (Peterson 2012, 457). Dave Arneson and the Twin Cities gamers do not seem to have described their Blackmoor games as "role-playing", and when Arneson and Gygax collaborated in systematizing Blackmoor into the little brown books of 1974 *Dungeons & Dragons*, they used the famously awkward subtitle "Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames Campaigns Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures." The term "role-playing game" only came to be used in something like its current meaning when developers of other games, such as *Tunnels & Trolls*, needed a term to signal similarity to, but legal distinction from, *Dungeons & Dragons* (Peterson 2012, 556).

Taking on the role of a fictional character is certainly an important aspect of RPGs, but it is hardly a unique feature. Humans have taken on the role of fictional characters for at least as long as theater has existed. Even within the sphere of games, players did not wait for the development of RPGs to take on roles in wargames, improvisational theater games, and any number of other games. Neither is taking on a character role a deciding criterion for inclusion in the fuzzy set (if not the strict definition) of RPGs. In *The Quiet Year* (Alder 2019), for example, players collaboratively imagine a small community of survivors but do not take on the role of any individual characters within the community. True, we might more accurately call *The Quiet Year* a worldbuilding game than a role-playing game, but in everyday language most people are unlikely to pause at the misnomer.

More important than the complicated Venn diagrams of role-taking and various games, it is fairly clear that early role-playing games offered little new assistance or techniques for developing more immersive role-taking or stronger connections between the player and the fictional character. This paucity of role-playing technology in early RPGs is precisely what drove players in the 1990s towards more character-immersive games like *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Bowman 2010). To understand the key innovation of "role-playing games" for the history of games, we must look away from roles and towards cosmography.

3. THE MIDWESTERN SYNTHESIS

The novel cosmographic development represented by the first RPGs came from a synthesis of two imaginative technologies: the ironic imagination of early speculative fiction and the oracular simulations of wargaming. The "ironic imagination" is Michael Saler's term for a fundamental shift in approaches to imagination and worldbuilding which emerged in the speculative fiction of the early 20th century (Saler 2012). The other half of the synthesis comes from wargames' use of the oracular technology of probabilities and dice to propel players into cosmographic territory that they could not have imagined unaided. Through the synthesis of these elements RPGs enhance human imaginative capacities, offering players the ability to take on the role of cosmographers utilizing powerful technologies to access vast and unexplored swathes of possible worlds. Because these two threads of ironic imagination and oracular simulation came together through the experimentation of Midwestern wargamers who were fans of pulp literature, and because it is more fun to have catchy titles for ideas than not, I call this development The Midwestern Synthesis.

3.1 Oracular Simulation

The importance of wargaming for the development of role-playing games is well-established, and Peterson (2012) offers a particularly detailed tracing of rules and mechanics from the *Taktisches Kriegs-Spiel* cabinet that George Leopold von Reisswitz presented to the king of Prussia in 1812. It is easy to pass over the leap in cosmographic technology, however, because it has so fundamentally shaped ways of interacting with other worlds as to become almost invisible. Simply describing this innovation as simulation, as when Peterson describes "the game of the Reisswitz family" the first game "worthy to be deemed a simulation" (2016,10) is to shorthand the innovation so much as to obscure its components. Specifically, *Kriegsspiel* handled space, time, and probability such that it offered access to more fully realized worlds than perhaps any preceding cosmographic technology.

These changes are easier to see if we contrast *Kriegsspiel* with chess and the similar chaturanga-derived games that immediately preceded Reisswitz's innovation. In chess, of course, it would be a category error to ask the scale of representation. A chess board is sixty-

four square units of abstraction. Once Reisswitz departs from this and indicates that the scale is 1:2373 and specifies how far an infantry unit can move in a turn, then suddenly not only space but time leap into existence within the world accessed through the game.

Similarly, in chess there is never any question of what will happen when a black pawn moves into the space occupied by a white knight. In *Kriegsspiel*, an interaction between military units can lead to a number of possible worlds, depending on the roll of the dice. By introducing the probabilistically oracular dice and combat results table, Reisswitz adapts a powerful piece of technology to the imaginative enterprise of simulation, expanding the cosmographic technology of any given *Kriegsspiel* far beyond chess's already quite large possibility space. Even further, the fact that a *Kriegsspiel* scenario can begin in any number of possible world states, compared to the singular origin point of a chess game, means that the wargame provides access to a near-limitless cosmographic territory. Of course, in every one of those worlds, generals lead men to kill each other on the battlefield for the sake of empire. Imagining worlds outside the cosmographic regions of warfare would take very different technology.

3.2 Ironic Imagination

In a middle way between Germaine and Gagné, Michael Saler describes a sort of methodological relativism towards the status of other worlds that emerged over the course of the 20th century. This technology, which Saler calls the ironic imagination, involves "the willing activation of pretense" to act "as-if" imagined worlds are "real" without fully committing to such a stance (2012, 28). This, Saler says, offered "delight without delusion" (2012, 57) to readers of the genre fiction that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century. This approach allowed them to access worlds even beyond those described by the stories they read. The Baker Street Irregulars, for example, playfully imagined themselves in a world where Sherlock Holmes was a real detective and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was only Watson's literary agent (Saler 2012, 104).

The ironic imagination allows a cosmographer to leverage what Wolf calls "world gestalten" (2012, 52), using gaps in a world's description to fill in details and imagine even further into possibility space. Tolkien's maps of Middle-earth, for example, include places not described in *The Lord of the Rings*, inviting readers to speculate about them and thereby explore any number of worlds adjacent to Tolkien's "canonical" world. Treating the world as if it is real aids in this effort; if we think that Arda only exists in Tolkien's mind, we might speculate about what he will publish about it, but are less likely to speculate about details that Tolkien does not provide. Saler points to the importance of pulp authors like Robert E. Howard, H.P. Lovecraft, and Clark Ashton Smith in the development of this imaginative tradition. These very same authors were influential on Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, and the broader hobby gaming community out of which *Dungeons & Dragons* and role-playing games as we know them emerged.

3.3 From Strategos to Blackmoor

The oracular cosmographic tradition of Reisswitzian Kriegsspiel came to the Twin Cities wargaming scene through David Wesely's adaptation of Totten's *Strategos* into *Strategos N* (Peterson 2016). This quickly led to the development of more free-form games that explored cosmographic territory far outside of the referees' intent when players like Dave Arneson brought the ironic imagination to those campaigns. They began taking seriously the existence of villages placed on the battle map as more than obstacles to navigate units around, straining

the rules of the game by doing things like sending messengers to the villagers or using deconstructed structures to build bridges across rivers (Morgan and Graves 2019).

This cosmography of the ironic imagination led to Wesely's development of the *Braunstein* games, in which players took on the roles of those villagers directly rather than interacting with them through the wargame lens. The resulting expanse of cosmographic territory opened up through this technology led the first game far out of Wesely's control, leading him to what could be described as a kind of cosmographic agoraphobia. In the second *Braunstein* he tightened control of the cosmographic exploration so greatly that the players complained that the magic of the first experience had vanished (Morgan and Graves 2019). Notably, the change was not in how immersively the players inhabited the roles of the characters but in how freely they were able to exercise their role as cosmographers of the possibility space that Wesely had sketched out for them.

Braunstein's cosmographic range was still limited by a few factors: first, both the *Strategos N* and the *Braunstein* games were in "realistic" rather than "fantastic" settings, not fully integrating the ironic imagination's capacity for removing the tether to the actual. Second, although Wesely embraced the asymmetric goals and conflicts of n-player games, the possibility space was largely shaped by conflict between players. The possibility space being explored was the possibility space of the conflict, not primarily the possibility space of the imagined world. Finally, it was limited by Wesely's limited utilization of oracular methods, limiting the imaginative range to what he and the players considered most probable rather than launching them outward into unknown, improbable territory and asking them to make sense of it.

The synthesis of the ironic imagination and oracular cosmography came to the point of exothermic fusion in Dave Arneson's *Blackmoor* games. Arneson approached the oracular wargaming technology of *Chainmail* with a fully ironic imagination, leading his players into distant and unknown cosmographic territory where anything could be around the next corner and the players had no idea what world they were in. The exploration of conflict space was augmented with exploration of the ironically imagined world, and the more richly oracular approach drawn from *Chainmail* allowed for exploring cosmographic territory that neither the player nor the referee could have previously imagined.

In short, this fusion of imaginative technologies allowed for wider-ranging, more collaborative, more intersubjective cosmographic exploration than had ever been accessible. Here was a set of imaginative tools that could be easily operated by almost anyone, with no particular literary or artistic training necessary, a framework offering the promise of near-limitless exploration of possible worlds.

4. CONCLUSION

Like any technology, like play itself, cosmographic exploration of worlds is not inherently liberatory. If TRPGs have the potential to help us discover and realize worlds that reveal new possibilities and ways of becoming, they can also be used to foreclose those same possibilities. Conceptualizing TRPGs as cosmographic technology does not solve the problem of how to use them to bring a better world into being. Indeed, that is only partly necessary; as Raúl Zibechi points out, this new world already exists, "built by indigenous people, peasants, and urban poor on conquered lands, woven into the base of new social relations between human beings." The task at hand, he argues, is to help defend this "series of multiple realities, nascent and fragile" (2012, 20). To the extent that effective praxis succeeds through structuring the exploration of possibility, we might even consider cultural revolution as occurring through a series of cosmographic games showing "that another possible world is actual" (Ponce de

León and Rockhill 2020, 16). Again, calling games cosmographic technology or calling radical worldbuilding a kind of game does not do this work for us, but it does suggest important areas to shore up and provides a framework for understanding how TRPGs relate to that work.

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