

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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