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

ISSUE 19

Editorial: TPI Seminar 2025: Games, Conflict, and Education

This issue of the International Journal of Role-playing is based on the proceedings of the Transformative Play Initiative (TPI) ROCKET seminar on “Games, Conflict, and Education” in Visby, Sweden, June 12th and 13th 2025.

Kjell Hedgard Hugaas,
Sarah Lynne Bowman,
and Josefin Westborg **i-vii**

Asteria and Neurodiversity in Role-Playing Games: Inclusion or Tokenism? Ex- amining Community Conflicts Over Autism Representation

This article examines how representations of autism in games can polarize gaming communities. It explores inclusion of neurodiverse characters can foster meaningful representation or constitute tokenism and virtue signaling.

Kevin Rebecchi **1-16**

Masculinity at the Table: Un- tangling the Male Preserve in Indie and Mainstream Gaming

This article looks at how the differences in values and practices between mainstream RPGs and indie games allow indie games to serve as a space away from the male preserve, and can provide players with a stronger sense of real-world agency.

Irene Hilman, Alula Hirst,
Wescott (Scooter) Flanagan, and
Diana J. Leonard **17-35**

From Digital to Analog: Disco Elysium’s Conflict Trans- formation Mechanisms for Edu- cational Larp

This article looks at the narrative and mechanical elements of the role-playing video game *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019). It looks at the “character sheet” and internal monologue as tools for self-reflection, and it discusses the character arc of the NPC Cuno in particular.

Minyue Wu **36-51**

Transformative Play for Building Resilience to Misin- formation

This article explores how *transformative play* can be used to build resilience against misinformation. Through the educational escape room – *The Euphorigen Investigation* – it shows how this type of gameplay can foster critical reflection, emotional engagement, and epistemic growth.

Lars Konzack and
Chris Coward **52-62**

Press Start for Heritage: Representing University Sports Rivalries in EA Sports College Football 25

Focussing on the video game *EA Sports College Football 25*, this article illustrates how universities can be compelling places for worldbuilding in games, by arguing that university heritage is both inherently conflictual and deployable as a tool for conflict.

Guus van Tilborg and
Peter Groote **63-75**



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Aesthetic Conflict in the Musical Role-Playing Game Runic Soundscapes

This article examines the concept of aesthetic conflict, both in relation to role-playing and improvised music. It focusses on the musical role-playing game-piece *Runic Soundscapes* and how aesthetic conflict can be a valuable lens for role-playing game designers.

Tom Blancarte 76-84

Bleed as Intrapersonal Conflict: Understanding Bleed Management and Resilience as Parts of a Homeostasis Recovery Process

This article explores how the instability and imbalance that are associated with bleed experiences can be explained with the theory of physiological and psychological homeostasis.

Kjell Hedgard Hugaas 85-92

Let's Do It Together!: Why Participatory Design and Co-Creation Are Promising Approaches for Designing an Edu-Larp

This article looks at benefits of participatory design approaches when designing edu-larps, including the quality of the edu-larp, the empowerment of students and working towards societal transformation.

Olivia Fischer 93-102

Larp with Erasmus: A Quantitative Study of Live Action Role-play Projects Funded by EUs Erasmus+ Program Between 2014-2022

This article presents and analyzes a database of 111 larp related projects that have received funding from Erasmus+ between 2014-2022. It showcases how the EU gives substantial funding to larp related project.

Karin Johansson and Mafalda Morganti 103-121

Editorial

Transformative Play Initiative Seminar 2025: Games, Conflict, and Education

Welcome to Issue 19 of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. While publication took some time from the 1st (2008) and the 2nd (2011) issue of the IJRP, since 2011, the journal has published on average one issue every 1-2 years. The fact that Issue 19 is the third published in 2026 alone serves as a concrete example of how the field of role-playing game studies is currently in the middle of a significant expansion.

In June 2025, The Transformative Play Initiative (TPI) at Uppsala University's Department of Game Design hosted a two-day seminar on Games, Conflict, and Education in Visby, Sweden. Here, we will present information originally disseminated in the Call for Papers, discuss the peer review process, and present the articles in this issue.

The event was co-organized with members of Uppsala's Political Science and Peace & Conflict Studies departments, and was partially funded by the Erasmus+ ROCKET project, a Cooperation Partnership between Göttingen, Uppsala, and Groningen University in the ENLIGHT network on the use of conflict transformation through role-playing in critical virtual exchange for diversity, equity, and inclusion in EU universities. Members of each of these organizations contributed to providing feedback on the programming committee.

The event was coordinated alongside the Department of Game Design's annual Gotland Game Conference (GGC), in which students present their games to the public and are evaluated by a panel of jury members. This year, some conference presenters and attendees also served in a jury capacity at GGC. The seminar also received generous financial and practical support from the Uppsala Forum on Democracy, Peace and Justice, and from Region Gotland. We are very grateful for the support from all these parties, and it is safe to say that we could not have run the seminar in the way we did without their generosity and contributions.

During the seminar, educators, researchers, and design practitioners were invited to present work related to conflicts within games, their associated communities, and/or game-based learning environments. While conflict in games has historically been associated with violence and using force to achieve your goals both in mainstream digital (Schott 2016) and analog games (Torner 2015; Albom 2021), the TPI seminar invited participants to come up with novel approaches with which to approach the issue, and imagine how conflict in games can be used to facilitate conflict transformation (Lederach 2014), support peaceful resolutions, and promote greater diversity, equity, and inclusion. Participants were therefore encouraged to submit work on games that contain elements of practicing prosocial skills, and ways to cultivate positive peace (Galtung 1969) and support processes of justice. Presenters were also given the option to submit an academic article for consideration in this special issue, under the condition that they would engage in an open peer review process with other authors in advance of the conference.

At the end of the editorial feedback and peer-review processes, the 9 conference papers published in this issue remained. Our contributors represent a wide range in terms of stage of academic career, from undergraduates to senior lecturers, representing 10 different nationalities, 3 continents, and 9 different academic institutions. We believe that the accepted

papers represent different contemporary trends within role-playing game studies, showcasing how the field is expanding and developing in width, depth, and degrees of interdisciplinarity. Accordingly, we will organize the rest of this editorial according to the panel themes within which these articles were presented at the seminar.

Games, Privilege, and Marginalization

The ways in which privilege and marginalization manifest and are addressed in, by, and in relation to role-playing games is a subject that has received increased attention in the discourse in the last few years. Examples include inclusion, e.g., of people from marginalized racial and ethnic backgrounds (see e.g., George 2014; Kemper 2018 for popular sources) and representation of such groups within game contents (see e.g., Long 2015; Mendez Hodes 2019a, 2019b; Burton, Trammell, and Jones 2024 for academic sources). Researchers have published similar work about other forms of marginalization, e.g., connected to representation of gender (Stang 2021) and disability (Henry 2025).

Similarly, work is increasing regarding the effects of role-playing games on neurodiverse participants such as autistic players, including in leisure play (Atherton et al. 2024), larp camps (Fein 2015), social skills education (Helbig 2019; Katō 2019; Visuri 2024), and therapeutic settings (Connell, Kilmer, and Kilmer 2020; Davis and Johns 2020). Such outcomes indicate the importance of establishing inclusive role-playing spaces for participants on the autism spectrum.

In this issue, Kevin Rebecchi's (2026) "*Asteria and Neurodiversity in Role-Playing Games: Inclusion or Tokenism? Examining Community Conflicts Over Autism Representation*" explores how players perceive representations of autism in fantasy settings. By analyzing the discussion that followed the introduction of the autistic character Asteria in *Dungeons & Dragons*, Rebecchi shows how competing and conflicting interests can add substantial levels of complexity around processes to integrate neurodiversity in games.

In their article "Masculinity at the Table: Untangling the Male Preserve in Indie and Mainstream Gaming," Irene Hilman, Alula Hirst, Scooter Flanagan, and Diana Leonard (2026) address how the increasing popularity of tabletop role-playing games and resulting shifts in the demographic makeup of the player base has led to a stronger questioning of historically *male preserve* (Dashiell 2020) related values and practices in mainstream games. In their work, the authors hypothesize that indie games can function as spaces that provide a more diverse and inclusive alternative to the male preserve, and that players can develop a stronger sense of real-world agency through playing in these spaces. The presented analysis of qualitative interviews in the study also suggests that players are building resistance to the dominant culture of the male preserve through play.

Conflict, Resistance, and Resilience

Bridging the gap between digital and analog RPGs, Minyue Wu's (2026) article "From Digital to Analog: *Disco Elysium's* Conflict Transformation Mechanisms for Educational Larps" explores how the agency created by the narrative and mechanical elements from the critically acclaimed video game *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019) compares to agency provided to players of live-action role-playing games (larps). Wu argues that while *Disco Elysium's* design can provide players with opportunities to thoughtfully navigate relationships, enhance their contextual analysis competence, and invite critical self-reflection, the structures of a digital

game can not provide the same level of agency as larps. However, the author suggests that applying digital role-playing mechanisms in educational analog contexts may be similarly beneficial.

Taking a similar step in a different direction in the article “Transformative Play for Building Resilience to Misinformation,” Lars Konzack and Chris Coward (2026) examine how the educational escape room *The Euphorigen Investigation* (Cho et al. 2023) helped players build resilience against misinformation. Their paper explores how one can foster critical reflection and emotional engagement through immersive, narrative-driven gameplay, shifting perspectives, enhancing the critical media engagement skills of the participants and supporting the development of more inclusive and adaptive ways of knowing.

Politics, Heritage, and Games

Moving on to digital games that simulate real-world sports, Guus van Tilborg and Peter Groote’s (2026) article “Press Start for Heritage: Representing University Sports Rivalries in *EA Sports College Football 25*” focuses on how the best-selling sports video game *College Football 25* leveraged participatory fan culture, team rivalries, interactivity, and real-world heritage in order to achieve its success. The article explores how the game manages to effectively preserve and promote digital heritage and strengthen real-world place attachment (Tuan 1977) by creating a strong and immersive connection to the players’ existing and lived heritage experience.

Game Aesthetics and Conflict

An additional example of the strong interdisciplinarity of our field can be found in Tom Blancarte’s (2026) article, “Aesthetic Conflict in the Musical Role-Playing Game *Runic Soundscapes*.” In this article, Blancarte presents his game *Runic Soundspaces*, explores the ludological aspects of improvised music, and analyses the aesthetic conflicts (Yu 2022) that come up in play. The article further suggests how designers of more traditional role-playing games could incorporate aesthetic conflict in their designs.

Play and the Human Condition

In the theory article, “Bleed as Intrapersonal Conflict: Understanding Bleed Management and Resilience as Parts of a Homeostasis Recovery Process,” Kjell Hedgard Hugaas (2026) connects the concept of *homeostasis* (Cannon 1932) from biology and psychology to the role-playing game studies-specific concept of *bleed* (Boss 2007; Montola 2010; Lankoski and Järvelä 2012; Bowman 2013; Leonard and Thurman 2018; Hugaas 2024). The article explores how the different parts of the homeostatic model have counterparts in role-playing bleed theory, making an argument for how bleed management skills and integration practices can be explained, as well as how this process relates to personal transformation.

Educational RPGs and Participation

Olivia Fisher’s (2026) article “Let’s Do It Together! Why Participatory Design and Co-Creation are Promising Approaches for Designing an Edu-larp” examines the benefits that contemporary participatory design practices (e.g., Bratteteig and Wagner 2016) can offer edu-larp designers. The article presents examples of design processes with participatory elements, exploring student empowerment, social transformation, and design quality.

Focusing on participation in a broader sense, Karin Johansson and Mafalda Morganti's (2026) article "Larp with Erasmus: A Quantitative Study of Live Action Roleplay Projects Funded by EU's Erasmus+ Program Between 2014-2022," presents a quantitative analysis of 111 larp related projects that have received monetary funding from the EU Erasmus' program between 2014-2022. The article shows how the EU has provided substantial funding to larp related projects in 22 different member states, offering insights to larp organisations and larp researchers into how and which larp projects are financed through the EU funding system.

In conclusion, this issue of the *IJRP* showcases how role-playing game studies is a highly varied and substantially interdisciplinary field that seems to be perpetually expanding into novel areas. We strongly feel that it is in this open-minded culture of genuine curious exploration that we find the core strength of our field. As editors, we are deeply grateful for being given the opportunity to connect with the high quality work of the authors of this issue, and we trust you will find many aspects that can challenge, inform, and inspire your own work.

-- Kjell Hedgard Hugaas, Sarah Lynne Bowman, and Josefin Westborg
June 6, 2026

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Asteria and Neurodiversity in Role-Playing Games: Inclusion or Tokenism? Examining Community Conflicts Over Autism Representation

Abstract: The introduction of Asteria, an explicitly autistic character in *Dungeons & Dragons*, has ignited widespread discussions about representation, authenticity, and corporate motivations in tabletop role-playing games. This study examines the polarized reception of Asteria within online gaming communities, analyzing debates over whether her inclusion fosters meaningful representation or constitutes tokenism and virtue signaling. Using Natural Language Processing techniques, sentiment analysis, and thematic classification, this research explores how players perceive autistic representation in fantasy settings and whether Asteria's explicit labeling enhances or constrains creative freedom.

The findings reveal a spectrum of reactions, from strong support for representation to concerns over commercial exploitation and the risk of reducing autism to a narrative device. Moreover, the study considers broader implications for the depiction of alterity in speculative fiction, particularly in worlds where magic and supernatural elements may problematize or reshape understanding of neurodiversity. By situating Asteria within ongoing debates about inclusivity in gaming culture, this research contributes to discussions on the evolving role of representation in interactive storytelling. The study ultimately highlights the complexities of integrating neurodiversity into fantasy narratives while balancing corporate, community, and creative interests.

Keywords: neurodiversity, representation, role-playing games, inclusion, tokenism, *Dungeons & Dragons*, virtue signalling, autism

Kevin Rebecchi

University of Liège, Liège Game Lab, Belgium
kevin.rebecchi@uliege.be

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 *Dungeons & Dragons*

Dungeons & Dragons (*D&D*) is a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) that has shaped the fantasy genre and gaming culture since its initial release in 1974. Designed by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, *D&D* is characterized by its improvisational storytelling, cooperative gameplay, and flexible role-playing mechanics, allowing players to create unique characters and embark on narrative-driven adventures within a fantasy setting. Unlike traditional board games, *D&D* is played with an open-ended structure where a Dungeon Master (DM) orchestrates the game world, guiding players through quests, interactions, and challenges using dice rolls to determine success or failure. The game is set in various high-fantasy universes, most notably the *Forgotten Realms*, a setting filled with intricate lore, deities, and legendary figures that players can interact with or embody.

Since its inception, *D&D* has undergone multiple revisions, each refining its mechanics, expanding its lore, and adapting to evolving gaming cultures. The first edition (*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons AD&D* 1977-1989) formalized the ruleset, introducing distinct character classes, alignments, and combat mechanics. The second edition (1989-2000) expanded on narrative depth,

world-building, and campaign settings such as Ravenloft and Planescape. The third (2000) and 3.5 editions (2003) marked a shift towards a more flexible and tactical system, emphasizing character customization and balanced gameplay mechanics. The fourth edition (2008) introduced a more structured combat system, heavily influenced by video game design, but faced criticism for reducing the fluidity of role-playing. The current fifth edition (*D&D 5e*, released in 2014) sought to return to the game's storytelling roots, simplifying mechanics while maintaining strategic depth. It has become the most commercially successful edition to date, embraced by both veteran players and newcomers, partly due to its accessibility, the rise of actual play, web series and movies, and the expansion of diverse character options.

Within the framework of *D&D 5e*, Wizards of the Coast has progressively expanded character diversity, both in terms of narrative inclusivity and mechanical representation. The release of the latest sourcebook, *The Book of Many Things* (Wizards of the Coast 2023), introduced Asteria, a character who is explicitly identified as autistic. Created by Makenzie De Armas, a game designer who is herself autistic, Asteria represents one of the first officially neuroatypical characters in *D&D's* history. Asteria's inclusion marks a significant step in Wizards of the Coast's ongoing efforts toward greater representation of autistic people within its game worlds. Unlike previous characters who may have exhibited traits associated with neurodiversity or autism but were never officially labeled as such, Asteria's characterization explicitly integrates autism as a recognized and intentional element of her identity. This move reflects broader trends in (autism) media representation (Dean and Nordahl-Hansen 2021; Jones et al. 2023; Mittmann et al. 2023), where autistic characters are increasingly given narrative depth beyond stereotypes.

The introduction of an explicitly autistic character has sparked widespread discussions among *D&D* communities, gaming forums, and broader social media platforms. Within *D&D*-focused spaces, reactions range from enthusiastic support, particularly from players who appreciate the representation, to skepticism or criticism, with some arguing that autism and neurodiversity were always an implicit part of role-playing freedom and did not require official validation (see quotes in section 3.3 of this article).

1.2 Authentic representation vs. creative freedom in fictional characters

One of the central debates surrounding Asteria's inclusion concerns the balance between accuracy in representation and artistic freedom. While some argue that explicit identification of neurodiversity in characters enhances visibility and fosters understanding, others contend that such realism can impose restrictive expectations on character development (see Rebecchi and Vial 2025 for an overview of discussions on psychiatric, mental health, and neurodivergence representations). Shaw (2015) describes this dilemma as the *tyranny of realism*, wherein excessive demands for authenticity in media may curtail the creative possibilities of storytelling. In his study of *Assassin's Creed III*, he demonstrates how audiences' expectations for historical accuracy influence and sometimes limit the diversity of perspectives presented within a game world. At the same time, representation is not solely about fidelity to reality. Noury (2023) explores how artistic expression extends beyond strict realism, enabling layered and interpretative narratives that capture the complexity of identities without confining them to rigid frameworks. Simond (2023) similarly advocates for a broader understanding of representation in video games, emphasizing that portrayals should not be bound by medical definitions or therapeutic purposes but instead engage with imaginative and metaphorical storytelling. Beach (2001) supports this view, arguing that successful representation involves a careful balance between analytical precision and emotional resonance, allowing audiences to connect with characters on multiple levels.

In role-playing games like *D&D*, the fluidity of character creation allows players to shape identities in ways that reflect their own experiences. This aligns with Hugaas's (2024) discussion of *bleed*, a phenomenon where elements of a player's real-life identity and emotions influence their character, and vice versa. Montola (2012) explains that this dynamic interplay enables role-playing to serve as a tool for self-exploration. In such a case, making explicit labels like Asteria's autism is both valuable and, for some, unnecessary. The question remains whether direct representation enhances inclusivity or if it risks simplifying the diverse ways in which players engage with neurodiversity in gaming spaces. (See Bowman 2024 for a discussion on how analog role-playing game narratives can foster active, mythical, and ironic imagination, enabling players to reshape their narrative identity into more empowering structures of belief and life plans).

1.3 Tokenism, virtue signaling, and corporate intentions

Critics of Asteria's introduction frequently argue that her inclusion is more a marketing tactic than a sincere attempt at representation. It is also interesting to note that several years ago, *D&D* was accused of racism and Satanism (Ferguson 2022; Waldron 2005). Trammell (2018) examines how media can sometimes use diversity initiatives to reinforce stereotypes rather than dismantle them, particularly when representation appears to be driven by corporate image concerns rather than genuine storytelling needs. Leonard (2006) emphasizes that representation in games must be understood within its broader sociocultural context; when inclusivity efforts seem performative or commercially motivated, they may be met with skepticism or resistance from audiences. Garcia (2017) further underlines the importance of studying representations and their sociocultural effects beyond the game world.

Tabletop role-playing games, despite their reputation for fostering creativity, can thus unintentionally reinforce dominant power structures. In the case of Asteria, some players feel that autism has always been implicitly present in *D&D*'s character-building freedom, making an explicitly labeled autistic character seem more like a public relations move than a necessary addition. When approached thoughtfully, a character like Asteria has the potential to add meaningful depth to *D&D*'s world without feeling like a corporate checkbox. Schiappa (2008) critiques the overemphasis on "representational correctness," advocating instead for an understanding of media representations based on their broader cultural and social impact. The key challenge remains ensuring that diversity efforts are woven into worldbuilding and storytelling rather than being presented as isolated gestures of inclusivity. Furthermore, some scholars also argued that making diversity visible could lead to either a kind of surveillance or even more regulation (Halberstam 2018; Fischer 2019).

1.4 Objectives of the article

This work seeks to explore the reception of Asteria on social media, analyzing discussions within *D&D* communities and broader gaming audiences. Specifically, it examines how people feel with the character's representation, whether the inclusion is perceived as positive or negative, and how discussions about autism and role-playing intersect with contemporary debates on inclusion in gaming. By analyzing user-generated comments on Facebook groups and pages, this study aims to contribute to a broader understanding of how autism representation in tabletop role-playing games is received, debated, and contested in digital spaces.

2. METHODS

This article employs a Natural Language Processing (NLP) approach combined with sentiment analysis and topic modeling to analyze user-generated content discussing the representation of autism in *Asteria*. The dataset consists of comments extracted from Facebook groups dedicated to *Dungeons & Dragons* and video game news pages such as Polygon, where users reacted to the portrayal of an explicitly autistic character. The methodological framework includes six key stages: data collection and preparation, data cleaning, exploratory data analysis, sentiment analysis, thematic classification, and visualization. This work was conducted using Python (version 3.9), and key NLP and machine learning libraries included pandas (version 1.3.3), scikit-learn (version 0.24.2), TextBlob (version 0.15.3), and Gensim (version 4.1.2). All analyses were performed in a Jupyter Notebook environment to facilitate iterative processing and visualization.

The dataset comprises 648 user comments extracted from (the only) four publications found about *Asteria* on the biggest *D&D* Facebook groups. All the publications only share in a fairly neutral way a link or information about the creation of the character of *Asteria*. It's also important to note that all of the threads were about announcing the character's creation and were made before the book's actual release. Therefore, the reactions analyzed in this article only relate to the fact that there is a new autistic character, not the actual description of the character. Comments were collected manually and formatted into a structured CSV file. Each entry includes the Facebook post ID (ranging from FB01 to FB04), a unique comment identifier, a parent comment ID to track reply structures, the number of reactions, and the comment's textual content. To ensure ethical compliance, all comments were anonymized, removing any user-identifying information. As this study analyses publicly available social media content, usernames have been withheld throughout to protect participant privacy, in line with established internet research ethics practice (Franzke et al. 2020).

The dataset was imported into Python using pandas, where it underwent preprocessing before analysis.

To ensure textual uniformity and remove noise, a preprocessing pipeline was implemented using NLTK (Natural Language Toolkit, version 3.6.5), spaCy (version 3.1.3), and regex (re module, version 2.2.1). The first step involved eliminating missing values by filtering out empty or irrelevant comments. Standardization was then applied by converting all text to lowercase to maintain consistency across the dataset. The next step removed stopwords, defined as function words such as "the," "and," and "is," which do not contribute to the semantic meaning of a sentence. This was performed using NLTK's predefined English stopword list. To further refine the dataset, punctuation, emojis, and URLs were stripped from the text using regular expressions. Finally, lemmatization was applied using spaCy's `en_core_web_sm` model, which performs morphological analysis to unify word variations (e.g., "running" to "run"). These cleaning processes ensured that the dataset was optimized for further NLP-based analysis, free of irrelevant textual noise, and prepared for tokenization.

Before conducting sentiment and thematic analysis, an initial exploratory data analysis (EDA) was performed to assess the dataset's structure. Several key descriptive statistics were computed, including the total number of comments per post, the ratio of replies to main comments, and the distribution of reactions. The average length of comments, measured in character count, was also examined to determine whether longer comments contained more nuanced discussions. A word frequency analysis was conducted using TF-IDF (Term Frequency-Inverse Document Frequency) to identify the most dominant terms in the dataset. A word cloud visualization, generated using the WordCloud library (version 1.8.1), provided a visual representation (see Figure 1) of the most frequently occurring words, revealing dominant discussion themes before topic modeling was

conducted.

To assess the polarity of user discussions, sentiment analysis was performed using TextBlob (version 0.15.3), a rule-based lexicon approach that assigns a polarity score ranging from -1 (negative) to +1 (positive), with 0 representing neutral sentiment (see Figure 2). Several optimizations were applied to enhance sentiment classification. First, negation handling was implemented to ensure that phrases such as “not good” were correctly classified as negative, addressing one of TextBlob’s common limitations. Also, a customized lexicon of gaming and *D&D*-specific sentiment terms was incorporated to improve accuracy, ensuring that words specific to role-playing games were correctly interpreted in context. A histogram was generated to visualize the distribution of sentiment scores across all comments, revealing the proportion of positive, neutral, and negative reactions. To explore potential disparities in sentiment across different discussions, a comparative sentiment analysis was conducted between the four Facebook threads, showing whether specific threads triggered a higher concentration of negative responses (see Figure 3).

To identify the main themes present in user discussions, Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) was applied for unsupervised topic modeling using Gensim (version 4.1.2). LDA is a probabilistic generative model that assumes each document — in this case, each comment — contains a mixture of topics, with words probabilistically associated with different themes. To optimize the LDA model, the text corpus was first vectorized using TF-IDF, incorporating bigram and trigram detection to capture multi-word phrases relevant to the discussions. The optimal number of topics, denoted as k , was determined empirically through perplexity score minimization and coherence score maximization, computed via Gensim’s CoherenceModel function. A grid search was conducted to fine-tune LDA hyperparameters, specifically alpha (document-topic density) and eta (topic-word density), ensuring better topic separation. Upon convergence, the LDA model identified five dominant themes, which were manually reviewed and categorized into discussions on (1) support for representation and inclusion, (2) historical precedents of autistic characters in *D&D*, (3) criticism of tokenism and virtue signaling, (4) freedom in role-playing and character creation, and (5) the medical perception of autism within the game world.

To present the findings in a clear and interpretable manner, multiple visualization techniques were employed using Matplotlib (version 3.4.3) and Seaborn (version 0.11.2). Bar charts were created to illustrate the proportion of positive, neutral, and negative comments per post, highlighting differences in audience reception. Histograms displaying sentiment score distributions provided a more detailed understanding of the polarity variations across comments. Heatmaps were generated to visually map thematic categories against sentiment polarity, revealing which topics triggered stronger reactions (see Figure 4).

3. RESULTS

The results are organized into four subsections: exploratory data analysis, sentiment analysis, thematic classification, and comparative analysis of post-specific engagement trends.

3.1 Exploratory data analysis

A preliminary exploration of the dataset revealed key structural characteristics of the discussion. Among the 648 collected comments, 370 (57.1%) were original comments, while 278 (42.9%) were replies. The distribution of comments across the four analyzed threads was highly uneven, with FB04 accounting for 81.17% of the total dataset, followed by FB01 (9.56%), FB02 (5.86%), and FB03 (3.39%). The average length of comments was 143.1 characters, with significant variation between short (the shortest is two characters), reactionary statements and longer, argument-driven

responses (the longest is 2970 characters).

The engagement levels, measured in terms of reactions (emojis), indicated that FB04 received the highest volume of interactions, aligning with its greater share of total comments. This suggests that the controversial nature of the discussion surrounding Asteria may have intensified user participation on this particular post. A word frequency analysis identified key recurring terms, including “autistic,” “character,” “people,” “autism,” and “play” reflecting the core themes of the debate. A word cloud visualization (Figure 1) further illustrated that terms related to inclusion and diversity appeared alongside words expressing skepticism toward the necessity of explicit representation.

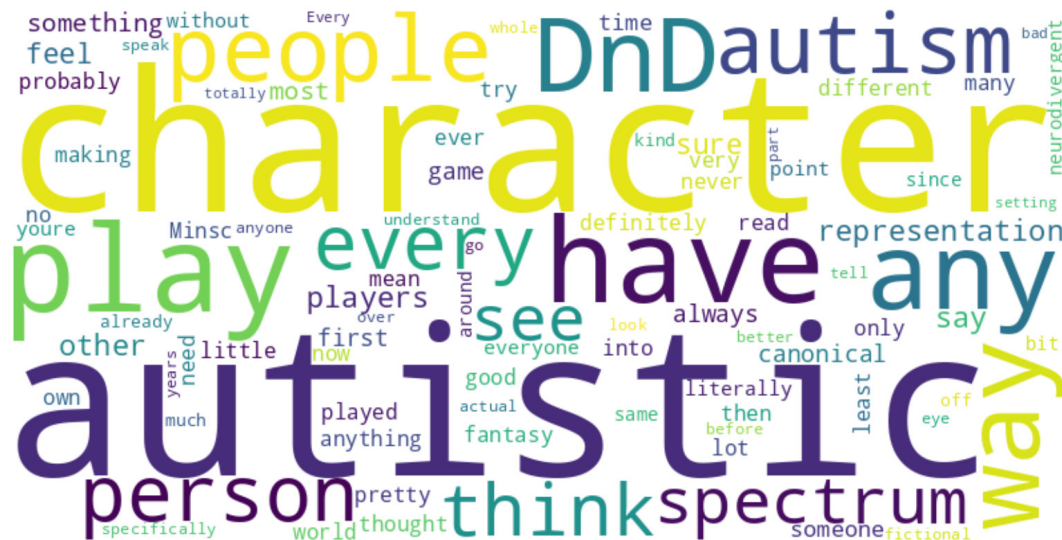


Figure 1. Word cloud visualization of the Facebook comments

3.2 Sentiment Analysis

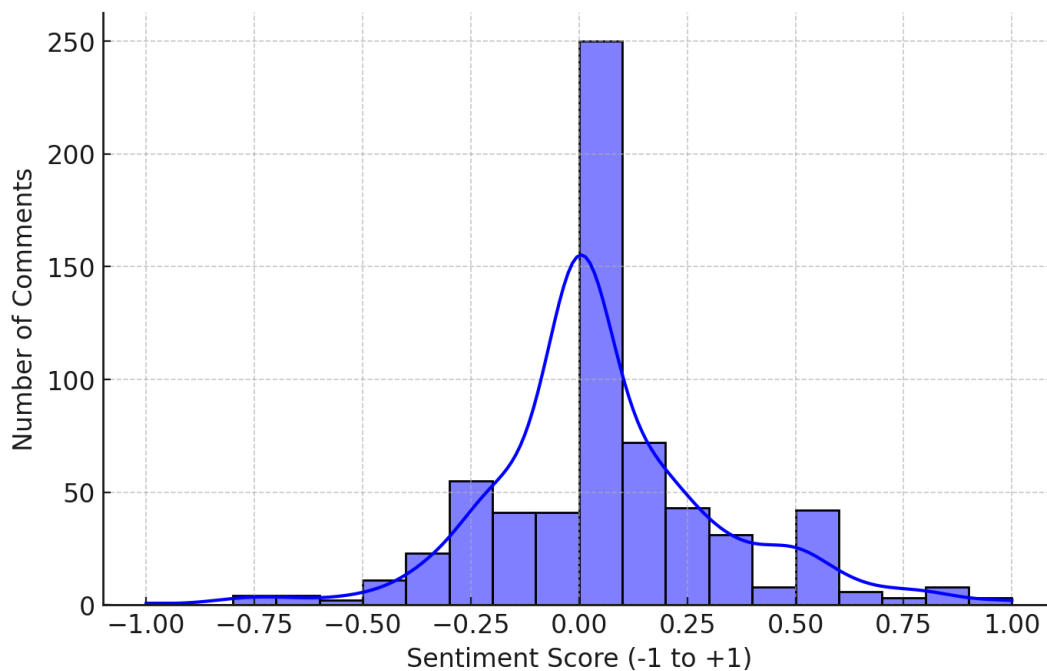


Figure 2. Sentiment scores of the Facebook comments

The sentiment analysis provided insights into the polarity of user-generated content. The overall distribution of sentiment scores revealed that 44.4% of comments were classified as positive, 27.5% as neutral, and 28.1% as negative. The sentiment polarity histogram demonstrated a distribution with a stronger positive tendency, while a notable proportion of negative and neutral comments still contributed to a diverse range of perspectives. While discussions showed some level of polarization, the overall sentiment skewed more positively than initially expected (Figure 2).

A closer examination of sentiment trends across individual threads showed notable discrepancies (Figure 3). FB02 exhibited the highest concentration of negative sentiment, with 42.1% of its comments classified as negative, followed by FB01 (32.8%) and FB04 (27.3%), while FB03 had the lowest proportion of negative sentiment (23.7%). Conversely, FB02 also had the highest proportion of positive sentiment (52.6%), indicating that discussions in this post were highly polarized. FB01 and FB04 both showed a strong presence of positive sentiment (46.9% and 44.4%, respectively), while FB03 had a more balanced distribution, with a significant proportion of neutral sentiment (39.5%). This suggests that discussions in FB03 were less polarized, with a mix of factual statements, clarifications, and more moderate engagement regarding Asteria's characterization within the *D&D* universe.

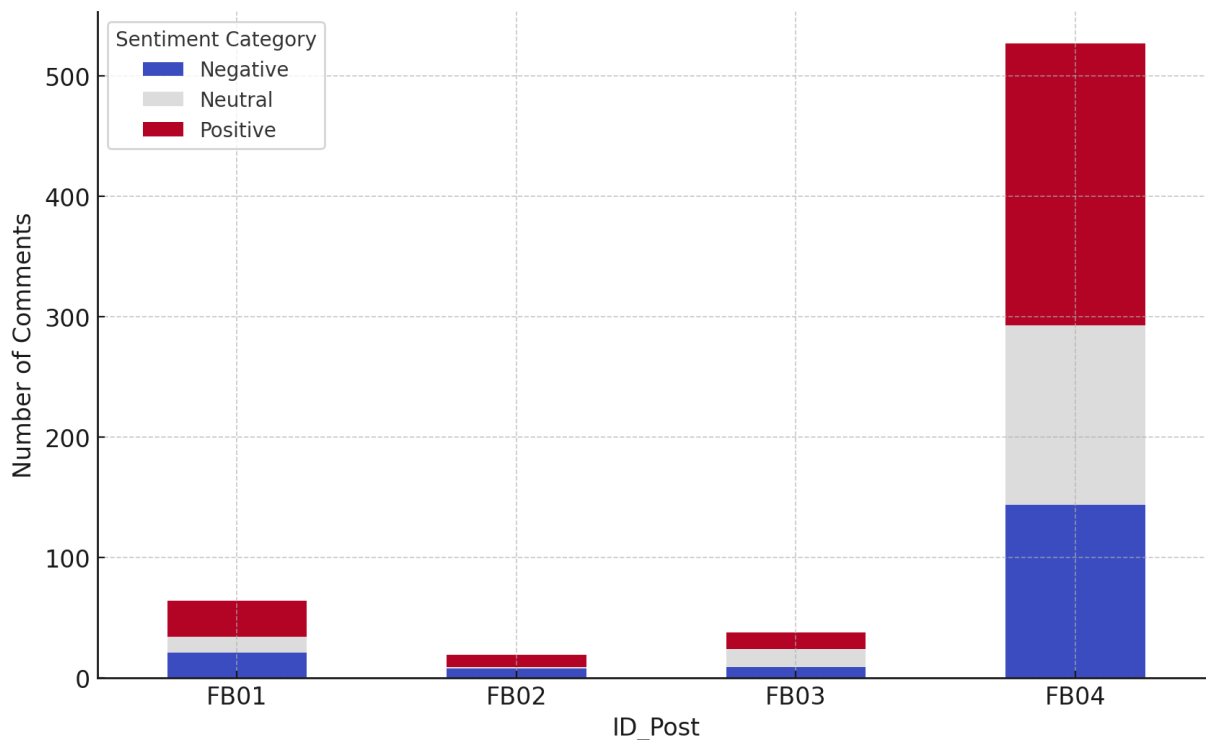


Figure 3. Sentiment category by Facebook post

Further qualitative inspection of negative comments revealed common concerns, particularly centered around the perception that explicit representation of autism was unnecessary or motivated by wrong reasons rather than authentic character development. Some examples follow:

Dnd and forced diversity yuck (Anonymous commenter, FB03, 2023)

They profit on everyone else! Your turn! Honestly it's gross but what do you expect from Hasbro ? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Is this a joke? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Probably thousands of autistic players over the years and I doubt any of them ever said “I wish there was an autistic character so that I feel represented”. It’s not a big deal, but this is more about WOTC needing some good press than anything about inclusion (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

DND is satire at this point. So glad I stopped playing (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

oh for christ sakes, Anything past 3rd edition TSR is pointless this new stuff just absolutely sucks (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

In contrast, positive sentiment comments frequently emphasized the importance of explicit representation and its impact on autistic players. For instance:

the good news is this character was designed by an autistic designer to represent her interactions (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Finally, a character D&D fans can relate to (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

There are ppl here, who are on the spectrum, who like this. To me, that’s a win (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

good. Representation matters (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

official representation means a lot more! (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Just what the realms needed. Some canon autism (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

These contrasting perspectives highlight a clear ideological divide in how different segments of the audience perceive the inclusion of an explicitly autistic character in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

3.3 Thematic classification of comments

The first dominant theme was Support for Representation and Inclusion, with discussions emphasizing the importance of acknowledging autistic characters explicitly. Comments in this category often expressed appreciation for Asteria’s characterization as a meaningful step toward inclusion in *D&D*. For example:

I really think it depends on the person’s point of view who is looking at it. I know a lot of people who are also on the spectrum who would be very happy to be represented. As for myself, I do see it as unnecessary given how vast the world of DnD is and the fact that, by nature, the game allows you to be whoever you want. I don’t necessarily think that it’s harmful or tokenizing to have a character be canonically on the spectrum themselves. It really depends on how said character is portrayed. If done respectfully, I think that it has the opportunity to make a lot of people very happy and to portray autism in a better light. But it is a delicate matter, considering how broad the spectrum itself is (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Thankfully it sounds less like it was done specifically for virtue clout, and more like it was a natural consequence of the writer putting some of her own experience into her characters (as one always does). The article headline does come off pretty gross though (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Question for the ones saying “virtual signaling much!” This is D&D, you do realize it’s completely up to the player how neurodivergent their PC is right? Some people like to have a little bit of themselves in their character and that’s fine (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

this one was written by an actually autistic person, for once (Anonymous commenter, FB01, 2023)

I read this and am so excited! #ActuallyAutistic (Anonymous commenter, FB01, 2023)

The second theme involved Historical Precedents of Autistic Characters, with many users referencing existing characters such as Minsc and Volo, arguing that autistic traits have long existed within the game without requiring explicit labeling. For instance:

Finally, representation for 90% of players of the hobby (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Volo is definitely on the spectrum lmao (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Is Prince Baerovus Obarskyr of Cormyr a joke to you!? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

I would argue that most D&D characters are on the spectrum. Every Paladin ever, for example. Edit: I just read she’s a Paladin. (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

so a wizard? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

That’s not true people been calling my characters that for years (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

You can’t convince me The Gutbuster Brigade wasn’t all on the Spectrum (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

The third theme centered around Criticisms of Tokenism and Virtue Signaling, reflecting the concerns of users who believed that Asteria’s characterization was more about corporate image than meaningful storytelling. According to the Cambridge Dictionary (2015), *tokenism* refers to:

something a person or organization does that seems to support or help a group of people who are treated unfairly in society, such as giving a member of that group an important or public position, but which is not meant to make changes that would help that group of people in a lasting way. (Cambridge Dictionary 2015)

and *virtue signaling* refers to:

an attempt to show other people that you are a good person, for example by expressing opinions that will be acceptable to them, especially on social media. (Cambridge Dictionary 2020)

D&D players thus applied these concepts — originally from the corporate world — to the new *D&D* book:

A Virtual Signal brighter than the Sun (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

this kinda already feels like Tokenism (Anonymous commenter, FB02, 2023)

strange, for some people it only counts if it was announced in before a figure would be/have a special condition. Kinda prove the virtue signalling issue (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Talk about virtue signaling!!! (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

I'm autistic. Stop pity making characters with health conditions just for inclusion. It's DND. Literally every conceivable character is playable. I've played a disabled deaf/mute wizard who couldn't cast spells needing speech (wouldn't recommend it). This is just virtue signalling for extra sales and positive reviews. Like JK Rowling coming out years later that Dumbledore was Gay. Or that bloke in a dress representing bud light (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

As an autist I hate this kind of performative virtue signaling to mark a box on some diversity checklist (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

So virtuous (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Virtue signal much? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

The fourth theme focused on Freedom in Role-playing and Character Creation, with players asserting that they have always been able to create neuroatypical characters without requiring an official label:

Isn't DnD like the whole point is that anyone can make anything canon? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Pretty sure all of us who play DnD are on the spectrum somewhere lol (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Canonically ? My character is not canon ?? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Every DND party is autistic, why dafug a normal person would go bang a dragon? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

I mean, aren't all D&D players autistic? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

The fifth theme explored the Medical Perception of Autism within the Fantasy Setting, with some users questioning whether Asteria's autism would be treated as a condition that could be "cured" through magical means. This discussion raised concerns about how disability and neurodiversity are conceptualized within the *Dungeons & Dragons*. For example:

They have vaccines in D&D? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

They have vaccines in Forgotten Realms? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Here I thought magic cures everything? Including autism? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

so what happens the first time someone casts Restoration or Heal ? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

Do they have modern metal [sic] health related diagnosis in D&D? (Anonymous commenter, FB04, 2023)

3.4 Comparative analysis of post-specific engagement trends

The final component of the analysis involved a comparative examination of sentiment and thematic trends across the four Facebook threads (Figure 4). FB04 emerged as the most polarized discussion, with the highest number of both positive and negative comments. This suggests that FB04 functioned as the primary locus for debate, potentially due to the framing of the post or the visibility of the discussion within the broader *D&D* community.

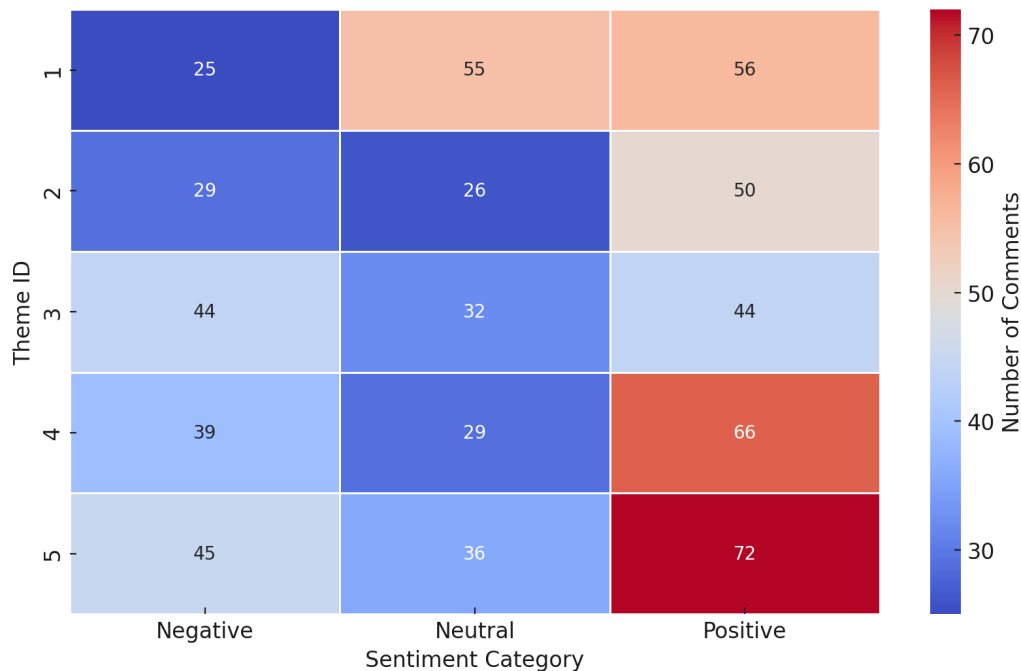


Figure 4. Correlation between themes: 1. Support for Representation and Inclusion; 2. Historical Precedents of Autistic Characters; 3. Criticisms of Tokenism and Virtue Signaling; 4. Freedom in Role-playing and Character Creation; 5. Medical Perception of Autism within the Fantasy Setting; and sentiment categories.

Furthermore, a comparison of engagement metrics indicated that negative comments received 18% more reactions on average than positive comments, suggesting that critiques of Asteria's representation were more likely to provoke further discussion and engagement. Moreover, threads that presented Asteria's inclusion as a simple fact rather than as an ideological debate tended to attract less polarized discussions. FB03, for example, framed the announcement in a neutral manner and received a significantly lower proportion of negative sentiment compared to FB04. This may suggest that the context and framing of the initial post plays a crucial role in shaping audience reception and engagement patterns. Finally, an analysis of sentiment polarity across these themes indicated logically that themes related to inclusion and representation had significantly higher positive sentiment scores, while themes discussing tokenism and the medicalization of autism were more likely to elicit negative sentiment.

4. DISCUSSION

The introduction of Asteria as an explicitly autistic character in *D&D* raises critical questions not only about representation but also about the intentions behind such inclusivity efforts and the broader implications for worldbuilding in fantasy settings. While some players welcome this inclusion as a meaningful step toward broader neuroatypical representation, others critique it as tokenism or virtue signaling rather than a genuine attempt to foster inclusivity. These debates highlight broader tensions within media and gaming communities concerning the balance between authentic representation and creative storytelling, the role of corporate strategies in shaping diversity initiatives, and more specifically the way autism and neurodiversity are conceptualized — as a disability or a difference — within speculative fiction worlds.

The portrayal of autism in fantasy settings like *D&D* raises questions about whether neurodiversity is framed as a fundamental aspect of identity (see Davies et al. 2024 for a systematic review of autistic identity, and Rebecchi 2025a for a discussion about debates between social autism and neurobiological autism) or as a condition to be altered or “cured” (see Barnes & McCabe 2011; Baron-Cohen 2009; Bölte 2014 for discussions about curing autism). Some players have expressed concern that, within a world where magic can heal physical ailments, autism might be treated as something fixable rather than an intrinsic part of a character's being. This reflects a broader issue in fantasy worlds, where disabilities and neurodiversity are sometimes depicted in ways that reinforce problematic medicalized perspectives (see for example Nordahl-Hansen et al. 2018 for a discussion on how films and television series tend to portray autistic characters in a stereotypical fashion).

Mainstream games often focus on topics like mental health, mental illness, madness, violence, and psychiatry, reinforcing the idea that autism and neurodiversity is something to be fixed or feared (Anderson 2020; Buday et al. 2022; Dunlap 2018). A study by Ferrari et al. (2019) reviewed 100 games and found out that 97% of them portrayed mental “illness” in a negative and misleading way, often associating it with violence, fear, and madness. However, Cassese et al. (2023) notes that counternarratives can challenge dominant perspectives and create new worlds and points of view. Asteria's presence in *D&D* has the potential to challenge conventional tropes about neurodiversity, provided that her autism is treated as an inherent aspect of her character rather than as a disability and a trait subject to magical alteration or brain damage. This broadens into more anthropological discussions about questions of cognitive alterity and otherness (see Sevinç 2010; Staszak 2020; Van Pelt 2000 for discussions about the outlines and definitions of these concepts), rather than what is normal vs. abnormal or healthy vs. pathological (Foucault 2013; Frances 2013; Szasz 1973). Indeed, there is growing academic discussion about moving beyond

autism spectrum disorder as the sole explanatory label for autism and shifting toward concepts rooted in evolutionary, cognitive psychology, and biology (see Rebecchi 2025b for a synthesis of these discussions).

5. CONCLUSION

The introduction of Asteria as an explicitly autistic character in *Dungeons & Dragons* serves as a microcosm of larger debates on representation, authenticity, and corporate motivations in media. While her inclusion marks a step toward greater visibility for neurotypical players, it also raises fundamental questions about the nature of representation in role-playing games: should inclusivity be explicitly defined, or should it remain open-ended, allowing players to craft their own interpretations?

This study has highlighted the polarized reception of Asteria, demonstrating how representation in tabletop games is deeply entwined with broader cultural and commercial dynamics. On one hand, Asteria offers a meaningful counter-narrative to the historical erasure of autism in mainstream fantasy. On the other, concerns about tokenism and corporate virtue signaling reflect a growing skepticism toward the commodification of diversity in gaming industries.

Looking ahead, future research could explore how autism and neurodiversity are represented beyond character creation, examining game mechanics, narrative structures, and player agency in shaping inclusive worlds. Moreover, comparative analyses with other forms of media, such as movies, video games or literature, could provide a deeper understanding of how autism and neurodiversity are conceptualized and received across different storytelling mediums. Ultimately, Asteria's portrayal invites a broader discussion about the evolving role of fantasy as both an escape and a space for self-representation. Rather than offering a final answer, her presence in *Dungeons & Dragons* underscores the ongoing tension between structured inclusivity and the boundless creative freedom that defines role-playing games, especially in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

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Kevin Rebecchi is a researcher and lecturer with PhDs in Education and Psychology. He researches alterity and otherness (autism, neurodiversity, cognitive diversity), creativity, media, video games, and inclusive and alternative education.

Masculinity at the Table: Untangling the Male Preserve in Indie and Mainstream Gaming

Abstract: With the rise in popularity of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) comes a larger and much more diverse population of gamers being exposed to the misogyny and sexism prevalent in mainstream gaming systems, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), through a *male preserve*. These values and practices can create unpleasant experiences for players of marginalized communities. We hypothesize that the differences in values and practices between mainstream and indie games allow indie games to serve as a space away from the male preserve in particular, which is characterized by a numeric overrepresentation of straight, White men, and a value system that benefits masculinity over femininity. We further hypothesize that through the process of bleed-out, players can gain a stronger sense of real-world agency when challenging discriminatory behavior. We investigated these hypotheses through semi-structured interviews with tabletop RPG players ($n = 9$), asking them about their experiences with tabletop RPGs and associated gaming communities. Qualitative analysis revealed themes of violence, racism, rebellion, and confidence, and suggests that players are interacting with narratives, characters, and game mechanics in order to form resistance to aspects of the male preserve that they find unappealing.

Keywords: gender, male preserve, tabletop role-playing games, mainstream vs. indie games, fantasy racism

Irene Hilman

Lewis & Clark College, Oregon, USA
irene.hilman@outlook.com

Alula Hirst

Lewis & Clark College, Oregon, USA
exciting.abbey73@gmail.com

Wescott (Scooter) Flanagan

Lewis & Clark College, Oregon, USA
wescottflanagan@gmail.com

Diana J. Leonard

Lewis & Clark College, Oregon, USA
dleonard@lclark.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

Tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) are becoming increasingly popular among the general population, and this growth can reinvigorate the genre while also exposing some of its concerning themes. *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) is regarded as the foremost modern-day tabletop RPG (Yessler and Craig 2024, 3). In a snapshot of 2021, *D&D* represented 54% of all campaigns being run on the online role-play platform Roll20, while the second-leading game, *Call of Cthulhu*, only made up 12% of all campaigns (roll20app 2021). Clearly, the tabletop RPGs market is top-heavy, with *D&D* far overperforming any other tabletop RPGs (sometimes called TTRPGs). While other titles are popular, their target audiences are much smaller than the *D&D* player base. Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, we will be classifying *D&D* as *mainstream*, and all other tabletop RPGs as *indie* given their comparatively small market share.

The smaller scale of indie tabletop RPGs can be beneficial, however. Games catering to a smaller player base can represent specialized themes, stories, and values within their systems. Often created and funded by the gaming communities themselves, indie games need not cater to the broad public, and thus have the unique opportunity to provide a safe space for those who

experience marginalization in mainstream gaming (Usman et al. 2026). Indeed, indie spaces often serve as a refuge for individuals working in creative genres (e.g., music, film, digital games) seeking to go beyond dominant modes of creativity (Freeman and McNeese 2019). The present work explores dynamics in indie and mainstream games using interview-based research methodology that allows for the discovery and description of complex themes.

Tabletop RPG players have often been stereotyped as White, straight, and cisgender men, and because of this prototype of the *gamer nerd*, tabletop RPG spaces serve as a male preserve (Dashiell 2020). The male preserve, coined by Dunning (1986), describes a space numerically overrepresented by men where masculine norms and values are dominant and often divergent from conventional social norms (Dashiell 2020, 28). In these spaces, traits that are associated with masculinity, such as aggressiveness, are valued over traits associated with femininity, such as compassion (Eagly et al. 2020). While the male preserve characterizes various spaces, with research often directed towards sports (Dunning 1986), it is expressed somewhat uniquely within gaming communities in part because stereotypes of geeks and nerds can be seen as antithetical to masculinity (Dashiell 2020, 28). Dashiell labels this phenomenon as *nerd masculinity*, in which elements of masculine discourse, such as dominance and male superiority, are employed with an emphasis on intellectual ability rather than other hegemonic masculine traits (Dashiell 2020). This “masculine power fantasy” (Carlson 2020, 39) is unwelcoming and exclusionary to anyone outside the intended audience, creating a power imbalance favoring White, heterosexual cis-men (Dunning 1986, 80). As explored later in this article, mainstream gaming creators have claimed these imbalances in their game structures are necessary for preserving historical realism (Carlson 2020).

Behaviors such as sexism and homophobia are perpetuated and left unchallenged in male preserve spaces (Dashiell 2020; Allen 2024), creating “an echo chamber of normalized misogyny and racism” (Carlson 2020, 39). This normative context has the effect of making the gaming space hostile towards minority players. By role-playing characters that successfully challenge in-game oppressive systems, however, players can gain momentum to stand up to real-world systems of oppression (Kawitzky 2021). According to Usman et al. (2026) this process may be similar to drama therapy, which invites individuals to practice resolving conflicts in a safe context before attempting to play out these strategies in the real world (Lim, Carollo, Chen, and Esposito, 2021).

Characters’ emotions, thoughts, and actions can manifest out-of-game through *bleed-out*, a concept originally explored by Boss (2007) and Montola (2010, see also Bowman 2013, 25; Hugaas 2024). This gives players the opportunity to gain a sense of agency, or a feeling of control over their actions and their consequences (Moore 2016) through gameplay. This experience is also referred to as emancipatory bleed, in which players can gain real-world confidence and agency through bleed-out (Kemper 2017). In Kemper’s autoethnographic work, she explores the transformative possibilities of role-playing such that players can benefit from the liberation and confidence that their characters gained in-game through intentional steering during play and post-game self-reflection. This could in turn foster player engagement in protesting real-world injustice (Usman et al. 2026), which may take the form of challenging the male preserve within gaming spaces. In mainstream gaming culture, however, speaking out against discriminatory behavior is often met with negative repercussions (Braithwaite 2000; see also Dodd et al. 2001). Therefore, such transformation is limited within mainstream tabletop RPGs, and we argue that indie tabletop RPGs serve a vital function in this regard.

The pervasive role of the male preserve in mainstream tabletop RPGs goes all the way back to their origins. The tabletop role-playing game genre took inspiration from wargames designed predominantly by men, whose design choices assumed that players would likewise be White, heterosexual men (Allen 2024). Previous research has noted consistent themes of racism and

sexism that began with early systems and continue to exist today (Trammell 2014; Stenros and Sihoven 2015; Stang and Trammell 2015; Garcia 2017; Trammell and Crenshaw 2020). Hegemonic ideologies are deeply rooted within the systems themselves, making it difficult to avoid them in play (Yessler and Craig 2024). Further, marginalized players and designers have been pushed out of mainstream game spaces through hostility, reduced mechanical and narrative play possibilities, victimization, villainization, and violence both in- and out-of-game by the systems themselves and those who use those systems (Berge 2021; Berge 2023). These players have sought refuge in indie tabletop RPGs, even as mainstream game companies make efforts to remedy these issues, to varying degrees of effectiveness and with mixed success (see Carter 2020; Eric 2021; Cote and Saidel 2024).

Indie games fundamentally offer a safe playspace for players and designers to create alternatives to mainstream philosophies and mechanics (Latorre 2016). Designed by and marketed towards specific audiences, indie games allow players the freedom to explore their ideas with practices and conversations that protect the psychological safety of the players (Bowman and Hugaas 2025) without the vestiges of the male preserve (Berge 2021; 2023). These options and safety practices provide more creative control over characters and narratives than is allowed by mainstream tabletop RPGs. One way these differences materialize is in safety mechanics, or guidelines built into systems designed to protect players' psychological safety (Reinbold 2021), which also foster community values of safety by forefronting consent in gameplay (Bowman and Hugaas 2025). While indie games often outline these mechanics in their rulebooks, the most recent core rulebook for *D&D* released did not include any explicit mention of safety mechanics (Wizards of the Coast 2024). Further, the dice-dependent mechanics, specifically in regards to seduction in gameplay, centers the male gaze and positions sexual interactions as comparable to combat encounters in which consent can be won or lost on the basis of a dice roll (Trammell and Crenshaw 2020, 16-17). This is but one example of how mainstream designers are constrained by inherited mechanics and storytelling conventions.

In addition to the creative opportunities afforded by indie tabletop RPGs, their varied playstyles can also offer alternative forms of conflict resolution to the combat-focused mechanics of *D&D*, circumventing the dominance and violence inherent in the male preserve. For example, the tabletop RPG *Masks* (Conway 2017) replaces physical damage from conflicts with Conditions, such as Angry or Scared, which allow players to role-play their emotional aftermath (as cited in Berge 2021, 185-186). Similarly, tabletop RPGs that provide tools of resistance to oppressive social institutions within the game world directly confront the male preserve. The tabletop RPG *Dream Askew* (Alder 2018), for example, explores existential threats to queer communities within its games by setting up a hostile post-apocalyptic world where players collectively protect their communities (as cited in Kawitzky 2021, 133-134).

Given the structures of indie games that allow for values of non-traditional gamers to be represented in-game, we propose that they serve as refuge from the male preserve. We further hypothesize that through the process of bleed-out, players can gain a stronger sense of real-world agency needed to stand up to discriminatory behavior by playing characters that resist systems of oppression in-game. Both as a cause and consequence of these dynamics, an emphasis on masculine norms and values, homogeneous representations, and unchecked misogyny and racism will be more prevalent in mainstream games (i.e., *D&D*) compared to indie games. We investigated these hypotheses through semi-structured interviews with university students who are currently playing tabletop RPGs by asking them about their experiences with tabletop RPGs and associated gaming communities. Through this study, we seek to form a better understanding of the male preserve within tabletop RPG spaces, to explore how players respond to pervasive marginalization in these communities, and to investigate the role of bleed-out in shaping player interactions.

2. METHODS

This study was approved by the Lewis & Clark Institutional Review Board (IRB approval #2025-01).

2.1 Participants

9 participants were randomly selected from a pool of 33 respondents to a screening survey. Survey recruitment was posted around campus, sent to all academic departments, and distributed through the Lewis & Clark Gaming Society. Eligible participants were Lewis & Clark students ages 18 and older that self-reported they had played a tabletop RPG 2 or more times in the last 3 years. Two respondents were excluded from the pool for not meeting these criteria. Demographic information was collected at the time of interview via a Google form. All participants were between 18-22 years of age ($M = 19.67$). Gender and sexuality were reported by open text response (see Table 1). While nearly all ($n = 8$) participants identified as queer, this was an unintended result of convenience sampling. Eight participants identified as White or Caucasian and one identified as mixed race (Hispanic or Latino and White or Caucasian). 1 participant indicated they had attended a presentation where information regarding the theoretical basis of the study was presented at an on-campus research symposium, potentially exposing them to related literature and the purpose of the study before participating in the interview.

Table 1. Self-reported gender identities by participants. Response order is presented in alphabetical order to protect participant anonymity.

	Free Text Response	Number of Responses
Gender	Cisgender female	4
	Cisgender male	1
	Female	1
	Nonbinary	2
	Nonbinary/transmasculine	1
Sexuality	Asexual	1
	Bisexual	3
	Demisexual	1
	Homosexual	1
	Queer	1
	Queer, asexual	1
	Prefer not to answer	1

2.2 Measures and Procedures

In-person, 90-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted. Interview questions addressed their experiences with tabletop RPGs, their own communities, and larger tabletop RPG communities. The full list of questions can be seen in Appendix A. Interviews were transcribed using Zoom's audio transcription. Preliminary analysis was conducted using an incorporated data- and theory-driven manual. Further analyses were conducted using team-based coding involving iterative-inductive and theory-based methods.

2.3 Coding and reliability

For preliminary analysis, each interview was reviewed and analyzed by two coders. Agreements between the coders were used to assess themes, revealing themes of violence, fantasy racism, recusance, rebellion, creativity, freedom, confidence, and agency. These themes were used to organize final coding results.

Substantive coding used team-based coding methods proposed by Cascio et al. (2019). This method involves open and axial codes through iterative-inductive methods, followed by theory-based thematic analysis and organization. Each round of coding was conducted by independent coders and followed by team discussion to form agreements on coding decisions. Twice, codes were collapsed based on similarity and subsequent independent coding used the condensed codebook. Coders discussed coding decisions until consensus was reached. The final codebook, including only codes that were used during analysis, is included in Appendix B. The process was conducted using Taguette, an open-source qualitative coding resource.

Reported results include themes identified during preliminary analysis and data from substantive coding.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Violence as Value

Almost all participants ($n = 7$) discussed the emphasis on violence in the tabletop RPGs they have played. Themes were described as militaristic by players in roles of both game master (GM) and player character. Participants noted violence in *D&D* ($n = 4$) more than in indie games ($n = 2$) and nonviolence in *D&D* ($n = 2$) less than in indie games ($n = 6$). Some players ($n = 2$) expressed feeling that combat in tabletop RPGs is important to them and that some indie games — specifically *Masks* (Conway 2017) and *Root* (Wehrle and Ferrin 2018) — did not provide a strong enough system for them to explore this aspect of gaming, while others ($n = 3$) reported a heavy focus on violence and an emphasis on *power building* (designing characters to be as strong as possible) were unappealing features of tabletop RPGs.

This emphasis on violence in tabletop RPGs is a characteristic of the male preserve as it demonstrates a value system that benefits brute force over other forms of conflict resolution, an imbalance which reifies patriarchal distributions of power (Dunning 1986). Nonviolent methods of conflict resolution serve as a form of resistance against hegemonic masculinity and the male preserve (Berge 2021). Our data suggest that indie tabletop RPG players appreciate the freedom to break away from the constrained narrative possibilities of mainstream games.

3.2 Community

Responses regarding representation in the community were fairly consistent, with interviewees noting ample representation of queerness ($n = 9$) and neurodivergence ($n = 6$), and a lack of representation of people of color ($n = 7$). When asked what identities they associate with the tabletop RPG community at large, one participant responded they associated queerness with gaming because of their personal experiences, but that larger communities, like the *D&D* subreddit, are predominantly comprising heterosexual White men. While players seem able to find queer communities with which to engage, racial diversity appears to be limited. However, these results may be attributed to the sample context, as 69% of the student population at Lewis & Clark is White (“Data USA: Lewis & Clark College” 2022).

Another consistent theme across interviews was maintaining a safe community at the table ($n = 8$). Players discussed the ability to be vulnerable for emotional in-game events, the establishment of safety agreements before playing, and guidelines for kind and collaborative behaviors. These safe spaces also allow for players to challenge the male preserve without fear of backlash.

3.3 Fantasy Racism

Multiple participants reported forms of fantasy racism, which include villainization, victimization, and negative stereotypes of non-normative characters (Berge 2023), in both mainstream ($n = 3$) and indie games ($n = 3$). One player noted one of the reasons her family stopped playing *D&D* was discomfort with “speciesism that was . . . kind of racist.” Two players described their experiences with interpersonal conflict concerning discrimination against certain groups. One stated, “We’re all fantasy racist against the [French] cats, basically.”

The simulation of fantasy racism (Berge 2023, 7) permeates through game systems and into the fantasy world without player consent (Yessler and Craig 2024, 4) and thus reinforces the male preserve within these spaces. The intertwined systems of power are best studied holistically. Indeed, Crenshaw (1989) underscores the harmful consequences of examining marginalization through frameworks that fail to consider the nexus of systems of oppression. Thus it is important to recognize the role of racism within the male preserve as described by Dashiell (2020, 27-28). For some of our participants, normalized racism allows for problematic ideologies inherent to the male preserve to be practiced in indie and mainstream spaces alike. However, for others, fantasy racism pushes them to seek alternatives within the indie gaming genre.

3.4 Recusance and Rebellion

A prevalent theme across the interviews ($n = 8$) was *recusance*, which characterizes actions or characters in-game that relate to anarchy, illegality, or moral ambiguity. Tabletop RPGs commonly use dystopian settings as a framework for play in which players are empowered to foment revolution against delegitimized, oppressive institutions (Kawitzky 2021, 132; see also Levitas 2008). Indeed, many participants mentioned rebellion ($n = 6$) when asked about common themes or forms of conflict in campaigns.

These results suggest that players feel a desire to engage in recusant and rebellious play against the hegemonic structures that have oppressed them in real life. This in-game resistance can reflect and provide relief from real-world oppressive institutions through play (Kawitzky 2021; Usman et al. 2026). Players and game masters may be drawn to rebellion and anarchy in games as a way to engage with and directly challenge fictional stand-ins for these institutions. Participants reported that engaging in resistant play relieved emotional tension from real-world struggles and restrictions ($n = 5$). It is therefore possible that through emancipatory bleed, this emotional relief could influence real-world action both within and outside the tabletop RPG community.

3.5 Freedom and creativity

Participants who played tabletop RPGs as characters and GMs appreciated the creative freedom of storytelling, character creation, and worldbuilding present in both indie and mainstream games ($n = 6$). One player noted experiencing more narrative freedom in indie games than in *D&D*, saying, “I think there are a lot of positives to games that are not *D&D* because they allow for more creativity.” Out of seven GMs, four reported preferring to use original worlds and narratives rather than the ones provided by game publishers. Thus, our participants actively transform both *D&D* and indie games to explore narrative possibilities on their own terms.

3.6 Confidence and Agency

All ($n = 9$) participants reported feeling they gained confidence through playing their characters or being a GM. One player said she learned to be more self-assured through playing characters and telling stories as a GM. This player expressed that the process of creating characters and narratives requires her to be more assertive. She stated, “I think that really translated a lot into my my [sic] real life, my personal life, being able to ask for what I need better, being able to talk to my players and my friends more broadly in a more assertive way.” Other players reported being able to work through self-hatred and being “more able to sort of take up space.” This aligns with our hypothesis that confidence and agency can be cultivated by playing tabletop RPGs through bleed-out.

Standing up to racist and sexist remarks is crucial to challenging the male preserve but is often met with social consequences (Dodd et al. 2002). Bleed-out from certain forms of role-play might help players cultivate a sense of agency to overcome this tension (Kemper 2017; Usman et al. 2026). Our results suggest players are experiencing a form of emancipatory bleed, thus forming confidence through the games they play. As many of our participants belong to marginalized groups, it is possible that their role-play experiences could help prepare them to stand up to real world discrimination.

4. LIMITATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Tabletop RPGs have risen in popularity, with many people turning to games for fun and escapist play. However, mainstream gaming has a long history of racism, sexism, and homophobia, fostering a male preserve in many gaming communities. This creates a hostile environment for players with marginalized identities, but research investigating resistance to this status quo is limited. We hypothesized that indie games offer a unique opportunity to challenge the male preserve. Results from the interviews demonstrate players report greater emphasis on masculinity in mainstream than indie games. However, the characteristics of indie, that is, being created by players with an emphasis on freedom and creativity, are important to players regardless of the system. We further hypothesized players would gain a sense of agency through the process of bleed-out. Results from our interviews support this conclusion, with many reporting gaining confidence and assertiveness through gameplay.

One limitation of our research is that our participants largely do not interact with mainstream tabletop RPG communities. Research regarding how players with marginalized identities interact with the larger community is limited (Braithwaite 2000; Allen 2024), and should be explored in future research. Further, our sample was mostly White, queer, young adults from a single college, which limits the generalizability of these data. Additionally, we did not use the term “male preserve” during interviews to examine how players reported their experiences without being explicitly prompted to think about their experiences of marginalization and/or privilege in tabletop RPGs. Future research should ask players about the male preserve directly to form a better understanding of players’ experiences.

The original title of the paper was “Masculinity at the Table: Indie TTRPGs as *Refuge* From the Male Preserve in Mainstream TTRPGs” (emphasis added). This implies a passive interaction between player and game, with the game providing a space away from the male preserve regardless of engagement with the system. Through interviews with players of both mainstream and indie games, it is clear that creating space away from the male preserve is not passive at all; it is an evocative interaction between players and game mechanics to form resistance against the aspects of the male preserve that players find unappealing.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Interview Question

1. Experience: Can you tell me a little bit about your experience with tabletop role-playing games?
 - a. What games have you played/are you currently playing?
 - i. What made you choose these particular games?
 1. In games you've chosen not to play, what aspects are unappealing?
 - a. What games have you not played but are interested in playing?
 - i. What is appealing about them?
 - ii. [if just played D&D] - What do you like about the game? What do you not like?
 1. What has drawn you to D&D?
 - iii. [if just played games other than D&D] - What do you like about the game(s)? What do you not like?
 1. What has drawn you to these games? What do you find appealing about them?
 - iv. [if played both] -
 1. What do you like about the game(s)? What do you not like?
 2. What game(s) do you like most? Why?
 3. What differences have you observed between D&D and non-D&D games?
 - a. Differences in the community?
 - b. Differences in mechanics?
 - c. Differences in conflict resolution?
 - d. Differences in themes?
 - b. What is your usual role in these games (e.g. game master, character player, etc.)?
 - i. [if player] - What types of characters have you played?
 1. What do you feel you have in common with your characters?
 2. What characteristics do your characters have that you wish you had/had more or less of?
 - a. Tell me more about _____.
 - b. What characteristics and behaviors do you feel you have adopted from the characters you've played?
 3. What types of interpersonal conflicts do your characters experience?
 4. What types of internal conflicts do your characters experience?
 5. What do you feel have you learned through playing your character?
 6. What themes are common in your campaigns?
 7. What are the central forms of conflict you experience in-game?
 - a. What is the role of the players within the conflict and the storyline?
 - i. What do you like about these tropes? What do you not like?
 - ii. What is your typical role in these tropes?

- ii. [if game master] - What types of campaigns have you run?
 - 1. Do you prefer to run campaigns with already established worlds and/or narratives or create your own?
 - a. Why do you prefer this over the other?
 - i. What leads you to creating your own stories rather than using the pre-established narratives?
 - b. [if using pre-established worlds/narratives] Can you tell me a little bit more about the worlds and/or narratives you use?
 - c. [if creating their own worlds/narratives] Can you tell me a little bit more about the worlds and/or narratives you create?
 - i. Can you tell me more about your experience with using pre-established systems to tell original stories?
 - 2. What themes are common in your campaigns?
 - 3. What are the central forms of conflict you use in your game?
 - a. What is the role of the players within the conflict and the storyline?
 - i. Why are you drawn to these particular tropes?
 - b. What is your usual role within the conflict and the storyline?
 - 4. What do you feel you have learned from running campaign(s)?
 - a. What characteristics and behaviors do you feel you have adopted from the campaigns you've run?
2. Community:
 - a. What is your typical role within the gaming communities you are a part of?
 - b. When you think about tabletop role-playing gaming communities in general, what do you typically think of?
 - i. What behaviors are common or expected?
 - ii. What behaviors are deemed appropriate?
 - iii. How do these behaviors differ from what is accepted or expected in a larger social context?
 - iv. What identities do you associate most strongly with tabletop role-playing?
 - 1. Gender? Race? Sexuality?
 - 2. What identities do you feel are less commonly represented within tabletop role-playing?
 - c. When you think about your own tabletop role-playing gaming community, what do you typically think of?
 - i. What behaviors are common or expected?
 - ii. What behaviors are deemed appropriate?
 - iii. How do these norms and behaviors differ from what is accepted in a larger social context?
 - iv. What identities are represented within your own gaming community, both current and in the past?
 - 1. [if current and past are different] How so? Why do you think that is?
 - v. Have you experienced conflict within your community?
 - 1. What types of conflict have you experienced in your community?
 - 2. How has your community handled these conflicts?

Appendix B: Coding Manual

Code	Definition
Experience with TTRPGs	
Prefer Mainstream	Participant reports preferring <i>D&D</i> games over indie games. <i>Example:</i> When asked which system they like most, one participant stated, “D&D because numbers.”
Prefer Indie	Participant reports preferring indie games over <i>D&D</i> games. <i>Example:</i> “I like the magic side of it so that depending on whether I want magic, I’d go to D&D but like mechanics wise, I think I prefer <i>Root</i> .”
Indie Games Played	Participant reports having experience playing an indie game. <i>Example:</i> “I was in a role-playing club and we played <i>Monster of the Week</i> .”
Mainstream Played	Participant reports having experience playing <i>D&D</i> . <i>Example:</i> “I’ve played mainly D&D.”
Started Playing TTRPGs with Mainstream	Participant reports that the first TTRPG they played was <i>D&D</i> . <i>Example:</i> “My first experience was just with my family of four like in middle school; I think we started our pre-made D&D campaign.”
Bleed	
Character Similar to Player	Player reports sharing traits, experiences, or feelings with character. Also includes players creating characters that resemble themselves in some way. <i>Example:</i> “I’m always [playing] someone who is very nice. Because I feel that way about myself.”
Identity Exploration	Explicitly playing characters that embody traits that are not as apparent in the real world, represent identities that are not visible in popular culture, and explore characteristics/identities that are often othered (Kawitzky 2021, 131). <i>Example:</i> Participant described having themes of faith exploration, what it meant to belong to certain groups with certain stereotypes, and the internal struggles of value systems and self-concepts.
Bleed-Out: Confidence and Agency	Player reports experience of gaining confidence from playing their character through bleed-out (Bowman 2013, 25; Leonard and Thurman 2018). Includes increases and/or improvements in improvising, ability to take up more social space, self-advocacy, extraversion, building self-image, and self-improvement. <i>Example:</i> “[I’ve gotten] a little bit more confident and outspoken than I am in general. Which is something that I think I’ve gotten better at through playing these characters.”
Emotional Relief	Player reports the ability to release emotions in-game, particularly in ways they desire to in the real world (Carlson 2020, 42). Includes explicit mentions of <i>catharsis</i> . <i>Example:</i> “Lowkey [playing these stories is] kind of cathartic. So I feel like there’s a lot of like political things and it can kind of feel like oh my gosh like nothing’s happening and so it kind of feels like nice to be able to do something at least in a game.”
Escapism	Player reports TTRPGs being a break or escape from reality (Warmelink, Harteveld and Mayer 2009). <i>Example:</i> “I see role-playing as... a way to have fun outside... like severed from the world.”

Code	Definition
Accessibility	“Accessibility” refers to comprehensibility of rules, availability of game information, approachability of community, ease of making and starting a game, or cost. Differentiation between references to indie games or D&D and accessible or not accessible.
D&D Accessible	<i>Example:</i> “I guess it’s just widespread popularity yeah because everyone knows [D&D] that it’s so easy to get into it.”
D&D Not Accessible	<i>Example:</i> “D&D especially is a little intimidating to get into because there’s so much like resources you have to go through.”

Indie Accessible	<i>Example:</i> “I think a lot of the other games are trying to be more accessible. Like you don’t need to know all the rules. You can just sort of go.”
Indie Not Accessible	<i>Example:</i> “Mostly it’s that front cost. I have a whole list of RPGs that I would love to do, love to try someday... also physical, like not necessarily even time and effort costs physical costs like Warhammer. I can’t afford that. College student.”
Complexity of Games	“Complicated” refers to high levels of difficulty of learning or playing a game, highly complex rule sets, or having to keep track of many things at a time during the game. Also includes mentions of math-forward mechanics (i.e., “number-crunchy” games). Differentiation between references to indie games, D&D, or TTRPGs in general, and whether the player likes, dislikes, or does not report an opinion about this characteristic of the game.
D&D is Complicated (Neutral)	<i>Example:</i> “Learning the mechanics of D&D can be very difficult for some people.”
D&D is Complicated (Dislike)	<i>Example:</i> “I wasn’t as into the whole like really nitty gritty like numbers [of D&D] and like having to figure out like a thousand different little mini rules as much.”
D&D is Complicated (Like)	<i>Example:</i> “I like the more complicated- you’re juggling a lot of rules and a lot of world and everything that’s going on at the same time, rather than the very simple, I like it more structured.”
Indie is Complicated (Like)	<i>Example:</i> One participant expressed liking an indie game because it was more complicated than D&D.
Simplicity of Games	“Simple” refers to low levels of difficulty of learning or playing a game or uncomplicated rule sets. Differentiation between references to indie games, D&D, or TTRPGs in general, and whether the player likes, dislikes, or does not report an opinion about this characteristic of the game.
Indie is Simple (Like)	<i>Example:</i> One participant said they preferred an indie game over D&D because “it’s not as complicated.”
TTRPG as Social Avenue	Relating to TTRPGs as a social function (Winardy, Septiana, Pranawati 2024). Includes mentions of social bonds, social outlet, community, and connection. <i>Example:</i> “I really like how much of an opportunity [D&D] has given me to be social.”

Code	Definition
System and Mechanics	
Dislike for Min-maxing	Refers to an extreme form of power building in which players place the minimum number of points into skills seen as undesirable while placing the maximum number of points into skills seen as desirable (Stark 2012). <i>Example:</i> “I think games that are like dungeon crawl just kill things and like it’s all min-maxing, getting as strong as you can just fighting things.”
Power Building	Characters are designed to be as mechanically powerful as possible (Berge 2023, 9). <i>Example:</i> “I think games that are like dungeon crawl just kill things and like it’s all min-maxing, getting as strong as you can just fighting things.”
D&D as Broad	Refers to observations of D&D catering to a large audience and D&D being all-encompassing in terms of themes, conflict resolution, or worlds, as well as observations of the game creators trying to make the system all-encompassing but falling short. <i>Example:</i> “So with like <i>Blades in the Dark</i> , for example, it’s built to be a heist game. And D&D is just very general and it doesn’t really allow you to do that very well.”
Creative Freedom	Player reports liking the versatility, flexibility, and adaptability of a gaming system. Includes mentions of liking the storytelling freedom within game, and a lack of rigidity in one’s ability to choose the direction of the game and narrative.
Appreciate Creative Freedom of D&D	<i>Example:</i> “[D&D is] versatile, more or less to an extent. And it allows me to basically do what I want with the world and with the game. Within reason.”
Appreciate Creative Freedom of Indie	<i>Example:</i> “I think there are a lot of positives to games that aren’t D&D because they allow for more creativity.”

TTRPG as Creative Outlet	Participant reports that TTRPGs provide space for writing stories, creating new characters for pleasure, storytelling, and other creative endeavors. <i>Example:</i> “One thing I do just kind of for fun on my own time it’s like going through and building a <i>Dungeons and Dragons</i> character sheet based on like I don’t know, like randomly deciding a class of race.”
Prefer Original Worlds/ Narratives	Player reports preferring to use original worlds and/or narratives rather than ones provided by game creators. <i>Example:</i> “Making the story and making up your world and making all of your little guys for your players to interact with is the fun part. If I was just saying, and here’s what happens in the story, that’s not fun for me.”
Prefer Pre-Established Worlds/ Narratives	Player reports preferring to use worlds and/or narratives provided by game creators rather than original creations. <i>Example:</i> “It’s easier [to] start out with an already established world.”
Homebrew Adaptations to D&D	Player reports making adjustments to D&D and/or using original narratives and/or worlds with the D&D system. <i>Example:</i> “I really like <i>Dungeons and Dragons 5e</i> because... I feel like it’s a well-developed system that you can adapt to lots of different types of stories. So there’s plenty of success homebrewing very rules in it [<i>sic</i>]”
Player Agency	Refers to reports of creative choices made by players, player-led campaigns, players of characters contributing to game-play decisions. Specifically in reference to players of characters rather than GMs. <i>Example:</i> “I really do like games which it’s not necessarily about like the game structure itself, but ones that encourage like character building and your relationship with your party and like character-driven plot things.”

Code	Definition
Violent Conflict Resolution	Violence is used to solve conflicts by non-player characters, and the expectation of the player characters is to engage in violence (Berge 2021).
Violence as Conflict Resolution - Indie	<i>Example:</i> “I’m just a fox in an adventuring party and we are going to go kill someone today.” (Made in reference to a <i>Root</i> campaign)
Violence as Conflict Resolution - D&D	<i>Example:</i> “D&D has an XP leveling system. It is designed for you to be fighting and killing things and if you want to do something that isn’t about fighting and killing things. It’s just not, the game just isn’t designed for that and you can make it work but it’s not that’s not what it’s meant to do.”
Nonviolent Conflict Resolution	Using nonviolent means of conflict resolution, demonstrating a belief that “defeated” is not the same as “killed” (prioritizing character story over domination; Berge 2021, 190).
Nonviolent Conflict Resolution - Indie	<i>Example:</i> “There is like <i>Blades in the Dark</i> . Everything is built around going and doing heists... most characters are not built for combat at all.”
Nonviolent Conflict Resolution - D&D	<i>Example:</i> One player noted the use of puzzles as a way of progressing the story in a D&D campaign.
	Refers to explicit reports of preferences regarding violent or nonviolent means of conflict resolution.
Like Violence in Game	<i>Example:</i> “Seeing them get to do some gratuitous violence against people that deserve it is always I forget the exact word, but fun to see.”
Dislike Violence in Game	<i>Example:</i> “This combat is like not the main focus. And it’s usually more deadly. We’ve had one player die twice. It’s just like less combat? Almost. Which is nice.”
Balance of Violence and Nonviolence	Player reports decisions surrounding when to use violent versus nonviolent means of conflict resolution. <i>Example:</i> “Generally, trying to figure out if we want to fight the thing or not is a lot of the thing.”
Fantasy Racism	
Fantasy Racism	A world that is perpetuated by those peoples and tropes that are considered “normalized” within fantasy, consisting of white, male, cisgender characters, exploitation and victimization of non-normative characters (Trammell 2014; Carlson 2020; Berge 2023). <i>Example:</i> “Same thing with the guy who hated snake people and I was a snake person.”

Fantasy Racism - D&D	Fantasy racism specifically observed in D&D (see <i>Fantasy Racism</i> for definition). <i>Example</i> : “I think my family pulled out [of playing D&D because] there is a lot of like weird racism with our speciesism that was like kind of racist like with like like [<i>sic</i>] terminology towards characters.”
Fantasy Racism - Indie	Fantasy racism specifically observed in indie games (see <i>Fantasy Racism</i> for definition). <i>Example</i> : “We’re all fantasy racist against the cats, basically.” (In reference to a <i>Root</i> campaign.)

Code	Definition
Community Experiences	
Political Conflicts in Gaming Community	Observations of conflicts arising in the gaming community between players surrounding political beliefs or ideology. <i>Example</i> : One participant mentioned experiencing conflict within their gaming community related to differing opinions related to abortion.
Conflict-based Group Schism	Conflicts that lead to communities splitting into subgroups (Bowman 2013, 8), including games ending completely (9). <i>Example</i> : “The campaign just kind of ended.” “I don’t speak to that person anymore.”
Conflict Surrounding Loyalty to Rules	Conflict arising because one or more (but not all) members of the group feel that rules, success, problem-solving, and “winning the scenario” are the most important aspects of the game (Bowman 2013, 13). Also refers to disputes over strict adherence to game mechanics or rules (Dashiehl 2020, 31). <i>Example</i> : “There’s been a little bit of [conflict with] like how strict to the rules we are going to be.”
Collaborative and Cooperative Behaviors	Participant reports observations or experiences in- or out-of-game of players working together towards a common goal, making game decisions as a group, or teamwork. (See Freeman and McNeese (2019) for deeper exploration of collaboration in indie game design.) <i>Example</i> : “I like the group storytelling aspect of [TTRPGs].”
Competitive Behaviors	Participant reports observations or experiences in- or out-of-game of players engaging in power struggle, social hierarchies, rivalries, or aggressiveness. See Bowman (2013) for deeper exploration of competition in gaming communities. <i>Example</i> : “So here’s like, it’s better to work as a team... even though my family is very competitive.”
Safe Community at the Table	Observations of respectful, kind, and supportive behaviors out-of-game. Includes forming community agreements to maintain safe practices, using safety tools or mechanics, and intolerance for disrespectful, unkind, or unsupportive behaviors. <i>Example</i> : “I’ve just seen a lot of like being friendly and welcoming [in the community].”
Community Agreements	Explicit mention of forming community agreements via paper or online or having an organized conversation about comfort and concerns. <i>Example</i> : “Following that first incident in high school, we spent an entire session discussing how to handle this better in the future. We handmade a consent sheet together.”
Male Preserve in Communities	Refers to observations or behaviors related to the male preserve out-of-game. Dashiehl’s (2020) definition of the male preserve in TTRPG communities is characterized by a numeric overrepresentation of men; valuing of traits associated with masculinity (See Eagly et al. 2019) and nerd (See Dashiehl 2020); discrimination of marginalized identities; and a power imbalance that favors White, heterosexual, cisgender men (Dunning 1986, 80). <i>Example</i> : One player said that their group did not engage in rules lawyering but noted that it’s likely more common in larger TTRPG communities.
Hooliganism	Acting in crude, lewd, inappropriate, or offensive ways that would be unacceptable or condemned in more socially-conscious spaces (Dashiehl 2020). Includes offensive goofiness, narrative hijacking, game attention hijacking, and offensive humor directed at specific people. Could be either in- or out-of-game. <i>Example</i> : “The necromancer probably she can be kind of abrasive and a little mean. So interpersonal in sort of perhaps making a joke at someone else’s expense and them not appreciating it.”

Humor at the Table	Players observing or participating in behaviors intended to be funny out-of-game. <i>Example:</i> “I think you go into the campaign with the expectation that you’re going to be a lot sillier...things are going to be a little nonsensical.”
Code	Description
In-Game Themes	
Recusance	Refers to in-game characters engaging in anarchy or illegality. Also includes mentions of characters questioning morals or engaging in morally questionable behaviors (according to player). <i>Example:</i> “[...] but you’re not necessarily within the law in any way unless you want to be, I guess.”
Themes of Rebellion	Observations of narrative or world themes related to revolution, uprising, or group dissent. <i>Example:</i> “The first one I played has some resistance going on against like an evil empire or something.”
Themes of Morals	Observations of narrative or world themes relating to ethics, justice, right versus wrong, or moral principles. <i>Example:</i> When asked what kinds of interpersonal conflicts their characters experience, one player said, “Generally, it’s like morals, if that makes sense. I always play very moral characters who want to do the right thing and the good, like the good right thing.”
Themes of Religion	Observations of narrative or world themes related to religion, cults, or crises of faith. <i>Example:</i> “Cults is a big thing. And generally... everything always has to do with some sort of religion or belief system.”
Themes of Humor	Observations of narrative or world themes related to comic relief, banter between characters, or satire. Campaigns described as funny, full of jokes, or amusing. <i>Example:</i> “Generally, I try to make [my characters] funny in different ways. I definitely make a lot of jokes. Especially when DMing.”
Themes of Politics	Observations of narrative or world themes related to political conflict, colloquial bureaucracy, or government. <i>Example:</i> “[There’s] usually like some sort of political power struggle.”
Themes of Queerness	Observations of narrative or world themes related to sexuality or gender outside of the male/female binary including (but not limited to) those identifying as queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, transgender, or nonbinary. <i>Example:</i> “I’ve been playing a lot of like nonbinary anarchists, basically.”
Themes of Colonialism	Observations of narrative or world themes related to colonialism, or one group exerting cultural, political, social, and economic dominance over another group or settlement. <i>Example:</i> “I think the military industrialization complex kind of shows up a lot and also like colonialism and its effects.”
Themes of Invasion	Observations of narrative or world themes related to forced entrance or infiltration over a group or settlement. <i>Example:</i> “The longest-running game that I had was focused around like an... otherworldly invader who’s sort of coming in and sort of devouring the gods.”
Themes of Oppression	Observations of narrative or world themes related to corruption, domination, tyranny, or dictatorship from institutionalized powers. <i>Example:</i> “The first one I played has [<i>sic</i>] some resistance going on against like an evil empire or something.”
Themes of Family	Observations of narrative or world themes related to familial relationships or conflicts. <i>Example:</i> “A common theme throughout all of my characters are like familiar familiar um conflicts [<i>sic</i>].”
Themes of Environment	Observations of narrative or world themes related to ecological awareness, protection, or conflict. <i>Example:</i> One participant reported liking the environmental themes of their TTRPG, <i>Wild Sea</i> .

Code	Description
Representation	
Representation of Neurodivergence	Refers to explicit mention of neurodivergence present in gaming community. <i>Example:</i> “We’re all nerds. It’s a lot of like queer neurodivergent nerds.”
Lack of Representation of Athletes	Refers to explicit mention of people identifying as athletes in gaming community. <i>Example:</i> “As far as I know, I’m the only athlete I’ve ever played with.”
Racial Representation	Refers to explicit mention of racial identities present in gaming community.
Lack of Representation of People of Color	<i>Example:</i> “I don’t see a lot of people of color represented.”
Representation of People of Color	<i>Example:</i> “Fairly evenly... fairly representatively represented and there was a lot of like East Asian and Indian kids there so it was, it was a decent... there’s a decent diversity there as well.”
Sexuality Representation	Refers to explicit mention of sexual identities present in gaming community.
Lack of Representation of Queerness	<i>Example:</i> When asked what identities are represented in her community, one player responded, “yeah, I guess straight.”
Representation of Queerness	<i>Example:</i> “Everyone’s gay. Everyone’s gay.”

Note: This manual only includes codes that were used in the final process of coding and that were applicable to the data. Certain codes, such as contrasting codes, are not presented in this manual if they were not assigned to any quotes in the transcripts.

Irene Hilman is a Lewis & Clark graduate with a B.A. in psychology, and a focus in gender studies. She started working in Dr. Diana J. Leonard's social psychology research lab in 2023, which sparked her interest in the intersection of psychology and role-playing games. She was a student researcher in the Cascadia 9.0 lab in 2024, where she explored the influence of serious video games on self-efficacy and agency related to disaster preparedness. Hilman's areas of academic interest are queer experiences, group social dynamics, and the transformative power of play.

Alula Hirst is a Lewis & Clark undergraduate student with a B.A. in psychology. She focuses her research on queer and trans* rights, experiences, and stories alongside women's history. They have organized and presented in the Lewis & Clark Gender Studies Symposium as well as her capstone research paper published in the student journal *Synergia: The Journal of Gender Thought and Expression*. They have been in Dr. Diana J. Leonard's research lab since 2024, researching gender and social norms and roles in tabletop role-playing games and how they impact the play experience and narrative.

Wescott (Scooter) Flanagan is a Lewis & Clark graduate with a B.A. in psychology. Flanagan is a games enthusiast, playing and designing tabletop boards, miniatures, and role-playing games, and held the role of Lewis & Clark Gaming Society president for two years. He was a researcher in the Cascadia 9.0 lab, which studied serious video games as mediators of self-efficacy and agency in disaster preparedness. Flanagan joined Dr. Diana J. Leonard's social psychology lab in the fall of 2024, researching gender and social norms in tabletop role-playing game communities.

Diana J. Leonard is Associate Professor of Psychology at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. While working on her PhD in Psychology at UC Santa Barbara (2012, focus: intergroup emotions), she joined the Southern California larp community, where she later served as a storyteller and community manager. These experiences piqued Dr. Leonard's interest in the Psychological processes and impacts of larp and TTRPG. Blending practice with scholarship, Dr. Leonard applies social psychology theory and methodology to study role-playing games while also implementing roleplay techniques in the classroom to teach about social identity and intergroup relations.

From Digital to Analog: Disco Elysium's Conflict Transformation Mechanisms for Educational Larps

Abstract: This paper examines the narrative and mechanical elements of the role-playing video game *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019) through the lens of conflict transformation theory (Lederach 2003). Using a qualitative analysis of player-generated paratexts from Reddit communities alongside relevant game excerpts, the study explores two key elements. First, it explores the “character sheet” and internal monologue mechanism as a tool for self-reflection and personal conflict transformation. Second, it discusses the character arc of Cuno as a model for interpersonal conflict transformation. Findings suggest that *Disco Elysium's* skill system, narrative structure, and character design provide players with opportunities to thoughtfully navigate relationships, enhancing their competence in contextual analysis and critical self-reflection. While the game offers meaningful narrative-dramatic agency, its predefined structure limits flexible and individualized player intervention in conflict resolution, highlighting a contrast with the *transformational containers* of live action role-playing games (larps) (Bowman and Baird 2022). Therefore, this study underscores the importance of larp, where participants exercise greater agency, and psychological effects such as bleed, providing recommendations for translating digital role-playing mechanisms into educational analog contexts for fostering active engagement with conflict dynamics.

Keywords: conflict transformation, game mechanics, player reflection, *Disco Elysium*

Minyue Wu

University of Göttingen, Germany

minyue.wu@uni-goettingen.de

1. INTRODUCTION

Research has shown various transformational effects of role-playing games (RPGs) (Barab, Gresalfi and Ingram-Goble 2010), including community building, social skill training, identity exploration, and knowledge acquisition (Barab et al. 2007; Daniau 2016; Kampf 2016; Bowman et al. 2025a). This study focuses especially on conflict transformation, drawing on Lederach's theory (2003).

Lederach (2003, 14) reframes conflict as a “life-giving opportunity” for growth. Bowman et al. (2025b, 49f) feature it at both individual and structural levels: Conflict transformation can reshape self-perception, interpersonal dynamics, and worldviews; foster harmony in communication; and influence broader cultural structures to promote awareness, peace, and justice. These capacities extend beyond psychosocial life skills, defined by the WHO as “a person's ability to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (WHO 1997, 1).

Research on transformational RPGs has so far focused largely on analog formats, especially live action role-playing (larp) (Winardy and Septiana 2023; Bowman et al. 2025a, 22). By contrast, the potential of digital format remains underexplored, despite extensive evidence for the educational value of gamification and game-based learning in fostering effectiveness, motivation, and engagement (Gee 2003; Arci 2008; Hartt, Hosseini, and Mostafapour 2020; Chen & Wu 2021; Sun, Kangas, and Ruokamo 2023). Drawing on Wittgenstein's concept of *family resemblances* (1953) to bridge analog and digital formats, this study addresses this research gap by examining the conflict transformation potential of the video game *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM 2019) and investigating how its mechanisms can inform the design of analog educational formats.

Disco Elysium is a single-player computer RPG acclaimed for its narrative depth and player agency, as analyzed by Bodi and Thon (2020) and Banfi (2024). Its scholarly relevance is further evidenced by studies highlighting its historical symbolism and sociolinguistic dimensions (Castro and Kiersey 2025; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen and Hejná 2022). Beyond academic interest, the game has been adapted into larp and tabletop formats, which also points to its potential for educational applications, e.g., the larp *97 Poets of Revachol* (Rolling 2025).

Set in the fictional war-torn city of Revachol, the game follows protagonist Harry Du Bois—an amnesiac, alcoholic, and drug-addicted detective—as he investigates a murder in Martinaise alongside Lieutenant Kim Kitsuragi, his deuteragonist partner from the Revachol Citizens Militia, the city’s police force. As the case unfolds, Harry reconstructs his lost identity while confronting personal demons, political tensions, and philosophical dilemmas through deep conversations with diverse non-playable characters (NPCs) representing different struggles, ideological, and social perspectives.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

Lederach (2003) identifies four dimensions of constructive change: “the personal, relational, structural and cultural dimensions” (26). This study focuses on the first two dimensions, in line with research on the development of social competencies through RPGs (Bowman and Standiford 2015; Pallavicini et al. 2020). The personal dimension concerns self-esteem, well-being, emotional stability, and individual capacity, while the relational dimension highlights communication, dependence, power dynamics, and emotional impact (Lederach 2003, 27). Prior scholarship shows how analog RPGs can advance both dimensions: Englund’s (2014) ethnographic study in Ramallah demonstrates how larp fosters personal growth, moral imagination, and rehabilitation, while broader research links larp to creativity, identity exploration, community support, and social skill development (Baird 2023; Volkmann 2024). For Lederach (2003, 30–33), such transformation depends on dialogue, requiring both communicative exchange and individual willingness, and extends beyond immediate issues to the broader social contexts of conflict.

Video games offer a parallel but distinct arena for dialogue and reflection through non-linear “adaptive storytelling” (Adams 2010; Utsch et al. 2020). By granting narrative-dramatic agency, games deepen immersion and engagement, allowing players to influence plotlines through meaningful choices (Murray 2001; Thon 2007; Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2009; Cole 2018; Emmersberger 2023). These interactions occur within the “magic circle” (Huizinga 1949), where game rules temporarily replace those of daily life, enabling players to apply real-world knowledge (Linser, Lindstad, and Vold 2008; Salen and Zimmerman 2003). Within this frame, players learn fictional histories, form attitudes toward characters, and build emotional ties with avatars. Research has further emphasized the transformative potential of such experiences; Barab et al. (2009) demonstrate that immersive, interactive storytelling encourages reflection on underlying social values, thereby fostering personal transformation. Similarly, Melcer et al. (2020) show that choice-based interactive story games can effectively support learning, particularly in cultivating research skills and reasoning abilities.

Engagement with these dynamics fosters reflective play, shaped by player preferences and personality (Rapp and Gerrig 2006; de Lima, Feijó, and Furtado 2020). Through mechanics and characters, games promote intellectual exploration and perspective-taking (Gandhi, Miller, and Cooper 2022; Miller et al. 2024), functioning as “active self-monitoring” (Perkins and Salomon 1992, 7) that supports transfer of learning. Within Lederach’s framework, this corresponds to

the personal dimension—as players reflect on emotions, values, and decision-making—and the relational dimension, as they explore interactions, power dynamics, and conflict resolution.

Yet single-player video games remain constrained by developer frameworks, which limit narrative-dramatic agency (Adams 2010). Analog formats such as larp, by contrast, grant players greater freedom to co-create characters, relationships, and narratives within a group setting. Off-game interactions, especially debriefing, further enhance opportunities for reflection (Bowman and Baird 2022). This flexibility allows for a deeper exploration of conflict transformation, reinforced by phenomena such as the *bleed* effect—the spillover of emotions between player and character (Montola 2010)—and the *Batman effect*, where adopting an alter ego enhances perseverance and self-control (White et al. 2017).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGIES

As Lederach (2003, 21) notes, “people must have access and voice in decisions that affect their lives.” In larp, players can directly influence interactions and relationships, with a debriefing phase designed to facilitate guided reflection (Bowman et al. 2025b). Video games, by contrast, often shift reflection on conflict and relationships outside the game’s magic circle—into reviews, commentaries, or community discussions. Social media platforms thus serve as collaborative spaces where players share perspectives, theorize about narratives, and explore alternative outcomes, reflecting gaming culture’s participatory nature (Burwell and Miller 2016; Mukherjee 2016; Švelch 2020). Such interpretative posts, viewed as paratexts under expanded frameworks (Aarseth 1997; Consalvo 2017), provide valuable insights into players’ perceptions and reflections, making them central to this study.

In the first stage, posts from the *Disco Elysium* Reddit community were searched separately using the keywords “reviews,” “changes,” “transformation,” “conflict,” and “reflection.” The analysis included thematic discussions of specific scenes or character development, while excluding simple sentiment expressions. Following an initial review, and informed by the researcher’s own gameplay experience, the character sheet mechanism was selected as the first focal point, as it exposes players to the protagonist Harry Du Bois’s internal conflicts and his relationships ($n = 17$).

In addition, this study analyzes the arc of Cuno, a troubled character frequently discussed by players in relation to Harry’s personal conflict transformation. Posts debating Cuno’s role and the significance of his ending ($n = 26$) were selected as representative examples of relational conflict transformation. These posts were interpreted through the lens of conflict transformation theory, with anonymized findings presented in the following sections alongside relevant game passages.

4. THE CHARACTER SHEET AS A MECHANISM FOR INTERNAL CONFLICT AND SELF-REFLECTION

The character sheet is a core mechanism in *Disco Elysium* that, as theorized by Bodi and Thon (2020), enhances player agency by introducing flexibility within the otherwise predetermined storyline. It consists of four core attributes—Intellect, Psyche, Physique, and Motorics—each subdivided into six skills. Players configure their avatar by allocating experience points across these skills, which directly shape the outcomes of conversational skill checks and thus determine what information becomes available. This system of character building facilitates distinct playstyles and individualizes role-playing experiences (Bodi and Thon 2020; Peterson 2013, 366), enriching the narrative and directly engaging players with the process of conflict transformation.



Figure 1: Overview of skills

Unlike traditional RPGs, the character sheet in *Disco Elysium* serves a dual function. While it acts as a primary interface for shaping a character's abilities and enhancing playability (Hermann and Reininghaus 2021, 33), it is also a fundamental narrative device. In this unique system, individual skills manifest directly as internal dialogue during conversations, providing players with a real-time, unfiltered insight into protagonist Harry Du Bois's perceptions, emotions, and reactions to events and the environment, sometimes presenting conflicting perspectives. This mechanism deepens players' understanding of the game world by offering additional context from an internal viewpoint.

For instance, the skill Empathy provides insights into thoughts, feelings, and motivations, fostering an understanding of character relationships and tensions. This skill aids in conflict transformation by helping players navigate complex interpersonal dynamics (see Figure 4 for an example). As demonstrated in the following comment, empathy is considered one of the most valuable skills for deeper understanding:

Empathy. It seemed like it was the skill most useful for understanding people and making them happy. I quickly discovered it was far from the only skill good at that, but it certainly was the kindest about it. Lord knows Harry and the downtrodden folks of Martinaise needed some compassion in their lives. It might not have been the most "practical" skill, but for some of the characters, it made the hard times a little easier to get through, and that was good enough for me. (Anonymized Reddit post, "What Skill")

In certain situations, players are prompted to choose responses to Harry's inner monologues, which dramatize his internal conflicts, including addiction, low self-esteem, and insecurity. Early in the game, for instance, Harry encounters addictive substances such as drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol. The following screenshot illustrates one such moment: a dialogue triggered by the skill Electrochemistry when Harry sees a cigarette. Here, three response options allow players to shape Harry's characterization, effectively staging a conversation between Harry and this facet of his personality.

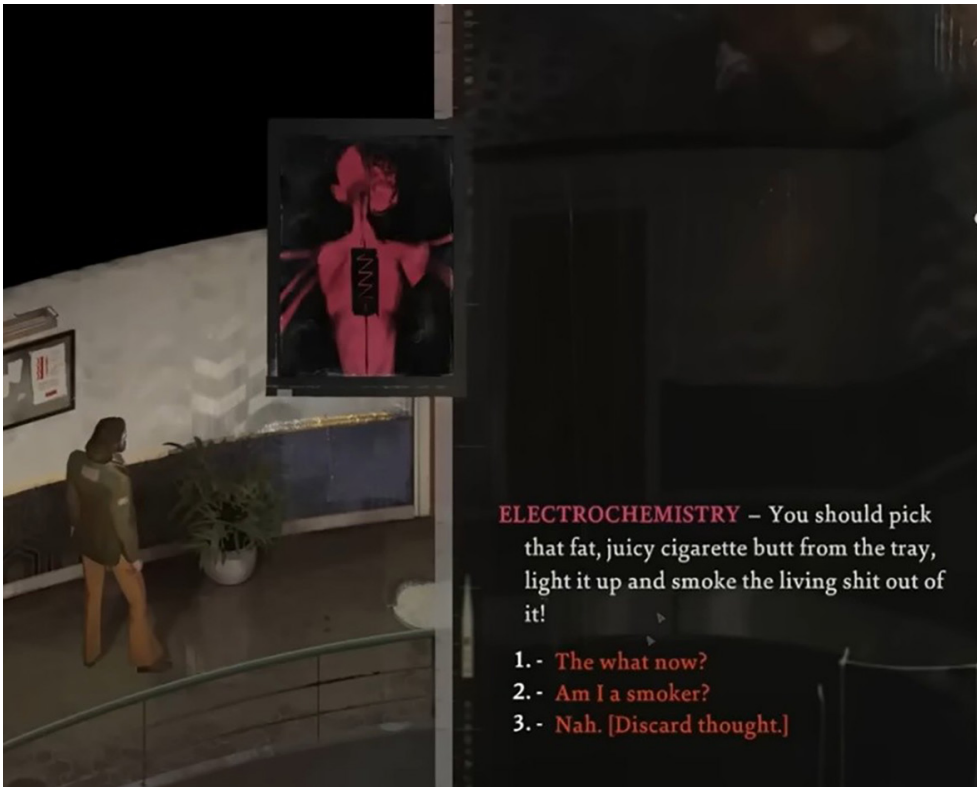


Figure 2: Dialogue with the Electrochemistry Skill on Addictive Substances (Cigarettes)

By engaging with Harry's inner dialogue, players develop a more comprehensive understanding of his character, his internal struggles, and suffering, fostering immersion and facilitating their engagement with conflict transformation. The accumulation of information through these thoughts enables players to contextualize conflicts, aligning with Lederach's (2003) concept of conflict transformation. One player, reflecting on this aspect from a second-person perspective, described their experience as follows:

You're just engulfed by the pain, the ghost of your past, but it doesn't mean you want that pain to spread to others. On the contrary - all that suffering has the potential to shape you into an empathetic human being, provided you won't be consumed by flames. Where's Harry going with it? One can never be sure, but I am hopeful. The makings of a new beginning are there. (Anonymized Reddit post, "Cuno is the Most")

In *Disco Elysium*, however, when players encounter addictive substances, they can only choose whether to consume them, with no opportunities to help Harry overcome his addiction. Since these substances influence character development within the skill system, the game lacks mechanisms for positive change or recovery as part of its narrative progression. In contrast, an educational larp scenario could offer more freedom and flexibility, enabling players to reflect on and take constructive action toward change.

Interestingly, not every thought or skill leads to a constructive outcome (for instance, the monologue with Electrochemistry in Figure 2). Some skills may encourage self-destructive behaviors or amusing interactions, reinforcing dramaticity and a sense of authenticity in the player's perception of the protagonist's struggles. The character sheet thus simulates inner thought processes that can reveal conflicting or controversial perspectives, underscoring the complexity of

inner conflict and decision-making while intensifying both the magic circle and the bleed effect.

For educational purposes, this mechanism is comparable to the “inner team” consulting method developed by German psychologist Friedemann Schulz von Thun (1999), which conceptualizes personality as a dialogue among multiple internal “voices.” In this framework, an internal leader coordinates competing perspectives to enable self-clarification and coherent decision-making.

The following screenshots (Figure 3) illustrate such an internal debate: Harry’s consideration of whether to hand drugs over to Cuno, while other characters Cunoesse and Kim Kitsuragi are present. Cunoese is Cuno’s companion, characterized by aggressive behavior and manipulative tendencies.

Here, skill Inland Empire and Suggestion urge him to comply, whereas Esprit de Corps advises against it, presenting an alternative vision of the future. This inner struggle encourages players to reflect on Harry’s relationships and to weigh the potential for transformation in their decisions.

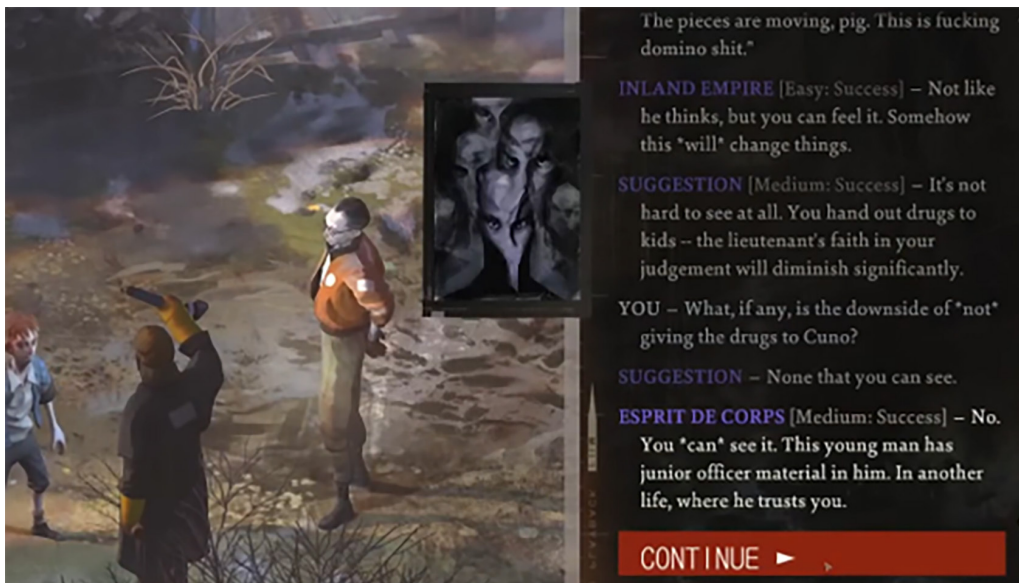
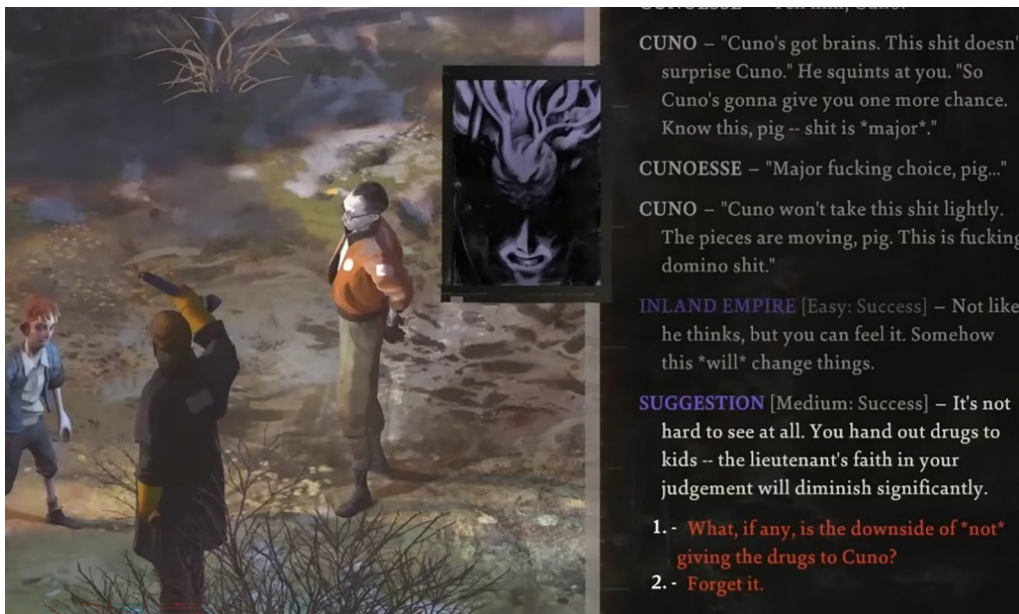


Figure 3: One example of controversial dialogue.

Discussions within the player community on Reddit highlight the significance of the character sheet and thought system, underscoring their impact. One player remarked that the mechanism helped them understand their own internal conflicts better, a sentiment echoed by others:

I suffer from anxiety and often struggle to be mindful of my own emotions, so being able to “characterize” them is helpful. The DE archetypes help me apply a name to my feelings, compartmentalize them, and put them in dialogue. I’ve found myself asking “what would volition say” more than once.

One of the benefits of great works of fiction is that they help us expand our understanding of our own and others inner lives. DE definitely worked that way for me. It’s a testament to the skill of the people who made it. (Anonymized Reddit post, “De helped me,” September 28, 2025)

5. RELATIONAL TRANSFORMATION: THE CASE OF CUNO

Another mechanism for relational transformation is character arc design. Through the bleed effect, which means deep emotional engagement with the story and immersion into a character (Montola 2010), players may experience processes of transformation.

Cuno presents the possibility of transformation within *Disco Elysium* and character development can engage players in reflecting on relationships. The following quote illustrates one such interpretation, where a player highlights Cuno’s importance and his reflective relationship with Harry:

I’ve seen and heard it discussed before that the real perpetrator of the murder is important as it sort of symbolizes what Harry could become if he doesn’t get himself together. The perp is old and tired and worn out from holding grudges for decades, lost in his own self pity and clinging to self destruction. We only hope that Harry can make healthy decisions and change his life before this happens.

Which is why I think Cuno is so important...

If the perp could be Harry when he’s older, Cuno could be Harry when he’s YOUNGER. (Anonymized Reddit post, “What Skill”)

Therefore, engaging with the Cuno’s arc can facilitate players in reflecting on conflict transformation.

By the game’s conclusion, players can recruit Cuno as Harry’s partner if Kim Kitsuragi is hospitalized. Cuno assists Harry in completing the investigation. During the final debriefing, he promises to behave and is recruited as junior officer training material. This transformation is evident at the end of the game, when Cuno promises to get sober and behave more prosocially, as illustrated by a player’s reflection:

There is definitely a psychological aspect to him referring to himself in the third person and you can realize this through a dialogue skill check, but if you have the ending with him he straight up explains that he’s going to be a little off because he’s sobering up and getting clean. You learn that [he’s] only 12 years old, which is honestly heartbreaking, but you have the opportunity to recruit him to join the RCM by convincing Jean that he really is a good kid who just needs an opportunity to become a better person. That dialogue gets Cuno to a point

where he is begging Jean to let you take him in, and he promises very scared and sadly that he will never curse or be rude again should you allow him to join the RCM because it means that much to him. (Anonymized Reddit post, "Why Does Cuno")

Cuno's growth aligns with the goal of conflict transformation. His change occurs late in the game, prompting some players to imagine his continued development beyond the game's ending, reinforcing themes of personal growth and conflict resolution:

However, there's something that gives so much hope about the future in bringing Cuno along with you: a street kid who hated not only you, but possibly everyone else now trusts you enough to become your partner and help the community. (Anonymized Reddit post, "I Prefer")

From this perspective, where Cuno can potentially "help the community," his conflict transformation extends beyond personal struggles to broader relational contexts, even reaching the structural level, as a member of the police force.

Upon first meeting Cuno, most players are shocked by his crude language and aggressive behavior. As the story unfolds, they have the opportunity to visit his home and meet his father, revealing his troubled family background and his connection to Cunonese. This reveals Cuno's true characteristics—intelligent, observant, and highly aware of his surroundings.

To understand Cuno's situation and foster his transformation, empathy is the most crucial skill—both within the game system and for the players. Technically, the skill Empathy provides cues that help players analyze Cuno's unusual behavior and recognize his toxic relationship with Cunonese, as shown in the screenshots in Figure 4.

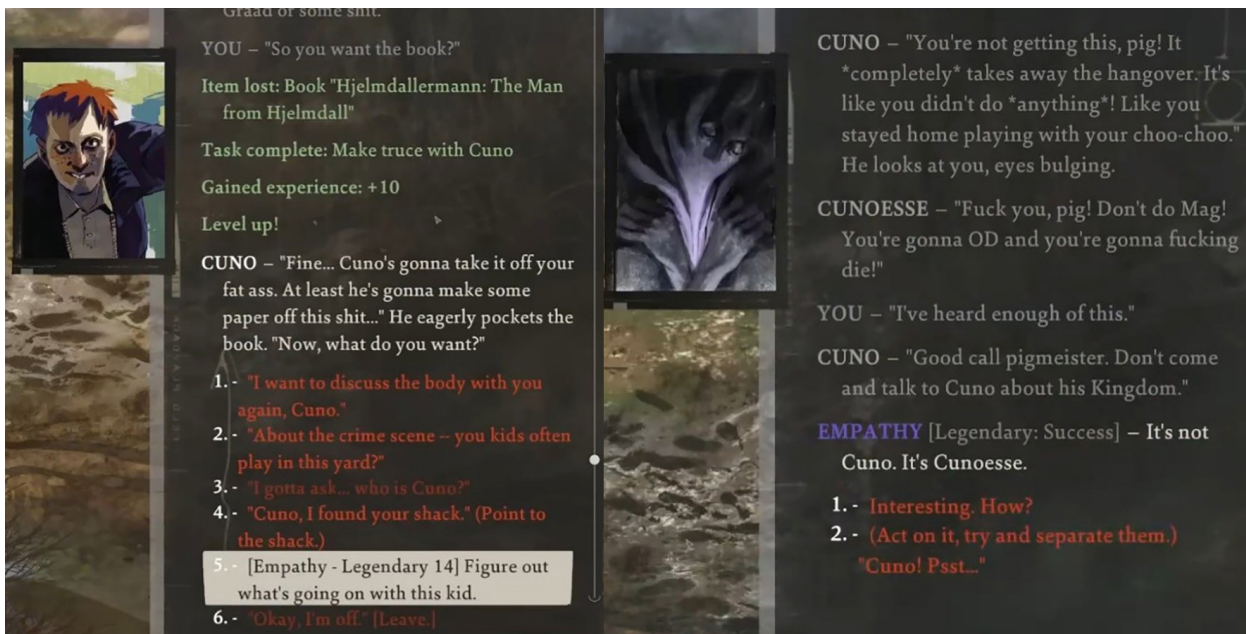


Figure 4: Skill Empathy Revealing Cuno's True Characteristics

Additionally, players must demonstrate a willingness to be empathetic, acknowledge his potential for change, and recognize the transformative effect this has on Harry, as illustrated in the post below:

I prefer the Cuno ending not just because he needs saving. but because it's a great representation of Harry redeeming himself. If this kid who's been doing almost nothing but throw the worst kinds of insults at him from the moment they meet can muster up the will to stand up for him and help out, then you know he's truly earned it. (Anonymous Reddit post, "What is the Best Worst")

Narration in *Disco Elysium* facilitates players to reflect on their attitudes towards Cuno and make positive changes. Early in the game, Harry has the option to punch Cuno if a skill check is passed. In response to this action, the game allows players, in further dialogues, to apologize to Cuno. This encourages players to make positive changes in the relationships and enhances empathy and communication skills on the side of players, as in the dialogue options seen in the following screenshots (Figure 5):

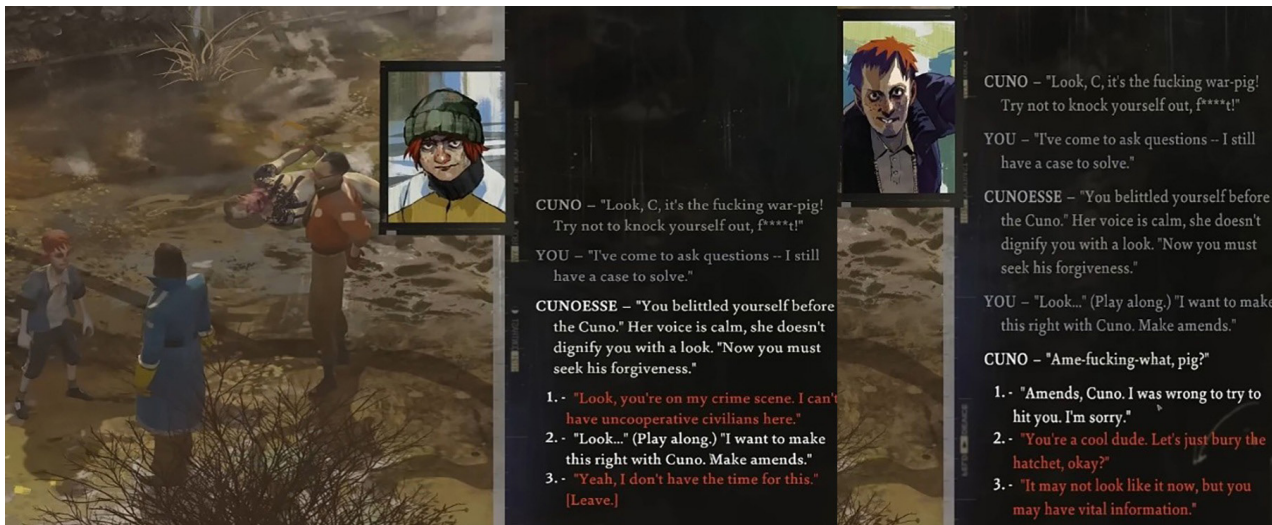


Figure 5: Dialogue Options for Apologizing to Cuno

Analyzing Cuno's transformation provides valuable insights into designing educational RPGs. It highlights the importance of allowing players sufficient time for progression and incorporating narrative cues that encourage exploration of character histories, meaningful decision-making, and the development of skills for constructive change.

6. DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

This article examined the potential of *Disco Elysium* to facilitate personal and relational conflict transformation by analyzing two key game mechanisms, providing players with greater narrative-dramatic agency in video games, and deepening emotional engagement: the character sheet and the transformational arc of the character Cuno. These game mechanics can be adapted for larp to facilitate structured self-reflection, foster a bleed effect, and support processes of personal growth (Brown 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2019; Hugaas 2024).

The transferability of these findings is a critical concern, as reflections articulated by players in online forums cannot be assumed to result in substantive behavioral change in real-world contexts. This underscores the necessity of meaningful pedagogical design and targeted intervention to ensure the effectiveness of game-based learning.

As Lederach (2014) argues, transformation unfolds through a series of processes. For learning outcomes to extend beyond the magic circle of the game and into real-world conflict situations, they require conscious abstraction and repeated practice (Perkins & Salomon 1992; Barrett and Ceci 44

2002). Furthermore, Plass, Homer, and Kinzer (2010, 11ff) point out that scaffolding and relevant feedback, dynamic assessment, information design, and interaction design are fundamental cognitive components of playful learning in a digital environment, underscoring the need for pedagogical structuring.

Analog RPGs, particularly larp, can provide such conditions by integrating guided reflection and embodied practice that support transfer. Previous research highlights larps as effective *transformational containers* (Baird, Bowman, and Hugaas 2022), enabling participants to reflect on their identities, relationships, and beliefs (Bowman and Baird 2022), while developing personal skills, social competencies, and creativity—especially through structured phases such as debriefing or other after-play activities (Tychsen et al. 2006; Daniau 2016).

While prior research has largely treated character sheets as a functional device for sustaining gameplay (Hermann and Reininghaus 2021, 32), its potential for educational purposes remains under-examined (Martinoll 2022; Sotirov et al. 2023) and can be addressed in further studies. For example, in the design of the character sheet, an analogy to the psychological tool the “inner team method,” according to Schulz von Thun (1999) can be applied to players to articulate and process internal conflicts, eventually promoting the Batman effect for personal growth. A potential larp adaptation could focus on inner reflection by incorporating internal voices as playable roles, enriching participants’ understanding of their character’s psyche, enhancing the bleed effect.

Furthermore, community discussions surrounding Cuno’s transformation highlight how affective skills (e.g., empathy), contextual understanding (e.g., history and dilemmas), and narrative-dramatic agency work together to enable constructive change. This aligns with Lederach’s theory of conflict transformation, which emphasizes that conflicts are “life-giving opportunities” (2003, 14) for growth.

In addition to those two adaptable game mechanics, the following 3 design principles can tentatively be identified as potentially informing the design of educational larp:

1. Characters should be intentionally designed with the potential for growth and transformation, and players should be given opportunities to explore this potential;
2. Interactions should recur with dynamic consequences, thereby fostering deeper reflection and creating opportunities for change; and
3. Players require sufficient time and agency to develop their own perspectives on their characters, supported by structured reflection aligned with the learning goals (e.g., conflict transformation).

Empirical research is needed to test how the design principles proposed here can be practically implemented in larp settings.

While this study focused on personal and relational transformation, *Disco Elysium* also presents significant potential for engaging with political ideologies and societal tensions. Future research could investigate these political and historical dimensions to further understand the game’s full educational potential.

7. CONCLUSION

Using *Disco Elysium* as a case study, the research analyzes gamer-generated content with relevant

game excerpts to identify two key game mechanisms that promote reflection on conflict. The findings indicate that these mechanics can be adapted to foster deep personal engagement and encourage players to consider constructive change beyond the magic circle of the game. However, the study notes that achieving a high transferability of learning to real-world behavior requires pedagogical designs and guided practice. It proposes that larp could offer a promising environment to adapt these mechanics for educational purposes in a guided and embodied format. Furthermore, attempts at those translations can help bridge the existing research gap between educational RPG formats.

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Minyue Wu, M.A., is a Ph.D. candidate and research assistant at the University of Göttingen’s Department of Intercultural German Studies. Her dissertation explores scientific culture in higher education amidst the rise of artificial intelligence, with a primary focus on discourse analysis. Her broader research interests encompass technology-enhanced multilingualism development and game-based learning. Her work seeks to understand how emerging technologies can be integrated into higher education while maintaining a critical, human-centered perspective on scientific practices, pedagogy, and communication.

Transformative Play for Building Resilience to Misinformation

Abstract: This study explores how *transformative play*, a form of experiential learning where players engage with and reshape a fictional world, can be used to build resilience against misinformation. Through the design of an educational escape room – *The Euphorigen Investigation* – the research demonstrates how immersive, narrative-driven gameplay fosters critical reflection, emotional engagement, and epistemic growth. Transformative play positions participants in meaningful roles within complex, uncertain scenarios, prompting them to confront their assumptions, biases, and vulnerabilities. As players navigate puzzles involving misleading data, deepfakes, and manipulated media, they experience the disorientation of being misled; an emotional turning point that catalyzes self-awareness and critical thinking. The game’s design encourages collaborative sensemaking and peer dialogue, aligning with theories of transformative learning that emphasize context, reflection, and identity transformation. Findings indicate that such gameplay experiences can shift perspectives, enhance critical media engagement, and support the development of more inclusive and adaptive ways of knowing.

Keywords: Transformative play, misinformation, escape rooms, experiential learning

Lars Konzack

University of Copenhagen, Denmark
konzack@hum.ku.dk

Chris Coward

University of Washington
ccoward@uw.edu

1. INTRODUCTION

The digital landscape today is marked by an overwhelming presence of misinformation and disinformation. These trends present profound challenges to the functioning of democracies, where citizens’ informed judgment is essential (Rubin 2022). The spread of unreliable content on social media has damaged public confidence, blurring the line between what is true and what is false and producing an unstable information ecosystem. While traditional pedagogical interventions around misinformation have often emphasized didactic, skills-based approaches to media literacy (Dumitru et al. 2022; Kozyreva et al. 2024), game-based approaches, including transformative play, highlight the potential of experiential, affective, and contextually embedded learning processes (Glas et al. 2023; Kiili et al. 2024). This study explores how transformative play, through the design of educational escape rooms simulating social media dynamics, can cultivate critical awareness and epistemic resilience in navigating conflicts between truth, influence, and platform incentives in an era of algorithmic persuasion and synthetic simulacra.

2. THE CHALLENGE OF MISINFORMATION IN DEMOCRATIC SOCIETIES

The rapid spread of misinformation and disinformation on social media has created a complex and conflict-ridden digital landscape, challenging public trust, democratic engagement, and ethical information sharing (DiMaggio 2023, Shapovalova 2024). Its influence has been visible in high-profile cases such as Brexit, the anti-vaccine movement, and the election of Donald Trump on two occasions (Lewandowsky 2024; Starbird et al. 2023). These episodes illustrate how Western democracies become increasingly vulnerable when the foundation of an informed citizenry can no longer be taken for granted (Kippin 2024; Blaive 2025).

But what is meant by misinformation and disinformation? Misinformation refers to misleading information, meaning information that is false and spread without necessarily having the intention to cause harm, in contrast with disinformation, which is deliberately intended to mislead (Armitage and Vaccari 2021). Misinformation and disinformation are not new phenomena, but they have gained greater and more serious significance in the digital age. This is partly because it has become easier to create misleading content and partly because false information can be shared more easily, for example, on social media (Shu and Liu 2022). Additionally, there is a risk that new large language models (LLMs) may hallucinate and spread misinformation (Hao et al. 2024). Specifically, LLMs may create simulacra, where artificial intelligence, using synthetic data, presents a copy without an original (Poster 1990, Cunningham 2024). As Mark Poster asserts, “To Copy an Original means, in the mode of information, to create simulacra” (Poster 1990, 10).

While there is broad consensus that misinformation constitutes a significant problem in the digital age, particularly with the advent of artificial intelligence, which further necessitates critical engagement with the issue (Yan et al. 2025), there is less agreement on how to equip citizens with the knowledge and skills to navigate these complex information environments. But perhaps the issue is not solely about identifying the “correct” knowledge. Equally important is learning how to engage with new information, not with dismissive cynicism, but with healthy skepticism and the ability to navigate and assess the media landscape. This involves developing an understanding of when skepticism is warranted and when it is necessary to engage in deeper exploration through such processes as infrastructural meaning making, “a power-sensitive, material-discursive understanding of how people, sources, and content converge and are shaped in practices that are part of infrastructural arrangements” (Haider and Sundin 2022, 65).

The reasons people form beliefs in faulty information are multifaceted and given to various explanations, including:

- Cognitive deficits: The lack of critical thinking and particular skills such as information search and evaluation (Pennycook and Rand 2019; Lewandowsky et al. 2012).
- Psychological vulnerabilities: The influence of confirmation bias, motivated reasoning, continued influence effect, and other cognitive vulnerabilities (Ecker et al. 2022; Lewandowsky et al. 2012).
- Social influences: The influence of people’s multifaceted affiliations with various groups, both geographic and online, which exert social pressures that shape what types of information is shared and trusted (Aghajari et al. 2023).
- Epistemic conflicts: When disagreements arise around fundamental ways of knowing, including what counts as valuable knowledge (Barzilai and Chinn 2022).

The first explanation— cognitive deficits —is the domain of traditional media and information literacy. Curiously, even most misinformation games adopt this orientation despite the affordances of games to address these other factors (Wedlake et al. 2024).

This is where transformative play may play a role, as this form of learning game can challenge the way we approach media literacy. Transformative play has the potential to help individuals to recognize their vulnerabilities, identify the techniques being used to manipulate belief, and create situations where players need to confront and negotiate differing worldviews.

For example, to confront the reality of having been duped, however disorienting, is an essential practice for navigating today’s complex and misleading media environment (Levine 2020; Rubin 2022). This recognition can build critical self-awareness, prompting individuals to reassess information sources and credibility. By acknowledging their own susceptibility, they strengthen

resilience against manipulation and turn the experience of being duped into a valuable lesson for better decision-making.

Nevertheless, the degree to which transformative play can successfully address the psychological, social, and epistemic challenges is not entirely evident. Thus, this paper seeks to explore: How can transformative play be utilized as a tool to foster epistemic resilience to misinformation in democratic societies?

3. TRANSFORMATIVE PLAY AND LEARNING

Transformative play originally emerges from the context of digital games, wherein the game itself is designed to undergo a conceptual transformation (Barab et al. 2010). As the game environment transforms, so does the player. By engaging with and shaping the evolving game, the player's understanding, identity, and relationship to the content are reshaped. This occurs by situating the player in a meaningful context that makes the content personally significant. Through this engagement, the player is afforded the opportunity to influence and transform the game world. It is evident that this conceptual framework may be applied to other types of games beyond the digital format, provided that similar opportunities for exploratory and productive engagement are present (Bowman and Baird 2022).

Within this framework, learning is understood as situated and context-dependent, insofar as the learner is assigned an active role within a scenario that necessitates the application of disciplinary concepts and methods (Savin-Baden and Major 2004). By engaging with and resolving complex, context-specific tasks and problems within the fictional environment, the participant not only develops an understanding of the academic content but also undergoes a transformation in their self-perception, coming to view themselves as agentic subjects capable of applying knowledge in a productive manner (Squire 2005; Smith et al. 2018; Alfaiz et al. 2019).

Transformative play concerns processes of learning and is therefore particularly relevant to consider in relation to Jack Mezirow's concept of transformative learning (Mezirow 1978). According to Mezirow, the process begins with a situation that generates a sense of uncertainty or questioning. This situation creates an opportunity for self-reflection and critical assessment of one's existing assumptions. It may also involve recognizing that others face similar difficulties, which can contribute to a shared understanding. Such recognition can lead to the exploration of alternative actions and potentially new roles. In order to implement these changes, it is necessary to develop the relevant skills and competencies (Mezirow 2006):

Transformative learning is defined as the process by which we transform problematic frames of reference (mindsets, habits of mind, meaning perspectives) – sets of assumption and expectation – to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective and emotionally able to change. (Mezirow 2006, 26)

While Jack Mezirow is more focused on psychological personal development, some of his ideas may function in transformative play as well. Both theoretical frameworks concern themselves with the reconfiguration of an individual's worldview through a reflexive process wherein the subject contemplates their own understanding and positionality. Central to both is an acknowledgment of the salience of the socio-cultural milieu in shaping processes of learning and development. Consequently, active engagement and participatory involvement are deemed essential within the given situational or educational context. Each approach posits that such transformative processes may culminate in a heightened sense of competence and personal empowerment (Schugurensky 2002).

The distinction lies in the fact that the two emerge from disparate epistemological orientations: transformative play is rooted in the context of gameplay experiences, whereas transformative learning originates within the domain of adult educational praxis. Both emphasize the need to reflect on one's learning and frameworks, fostering cognitive and personal growth through introspection.

4. ESCAPE ROOMS AS AN EDUCATIONAL APPROACH TO MISINFORMATION

Escape rooms are interactive, team-based games in which a group of players work together to solve puzzles and other challenges to achieve a particular goal in a limited amount of time (Makri et al. 2021; Veldkamp, et al. 2020). Escape rooms emerged in Japan in 2007 as a form of entertainment where gameplay takes place inside elaborately themed physical spaces tied to a story. Their popularity spread around the world and over time other formats emerged: boxed tabletop games, print-and-play packets, browser-based games, VR experiences, and more.

While commercial interests drove the global boom, escape rooms have increasingly been adopted as tools for education. A systematic study of escape rooms for learning found that in addition to providing an enjoyable experience, these games contributed to increased student engagement and motivation, as well as the development of soft skills such as teamwork, creativity, decision-making, leadership, communication, and critical thinking (Fotaris and Mastoras 2019). The study also acknowledged that escape rooms present certain challenges, notably that they often require time-consuming instructional design. Furthermore, it highlighted the need to align game content closely with learning objectives to avoid reducing the activity to superficial entertainment. Escape rooms can also serve as cost-effective instructional strategies that do not necessarily rely on expensive digital solutions or require complex programming. The primary objective is to develop learning tools that are effective in practice (Brown et al. 2019).

This literature reveals the potential of escape rooms not merely as playful diversions but as carefully crafted spaces for cultivating resilience against misinformation. The challenge for educators and designers is to move beyond simple puzzles and create experiences that echo the tangled realities of our information landscapes (complex, contested, and often ambiguous) without reducing them to confusion, triviality, or simplistic true/false dichotomies. For learners, the opportunity lies in rehearsing the arts of skepticism, verification, and shared meaning-making within an immersive, low-stakes environment where missteps become moments of insight. When narrative design and pedagogical intent are held in balance, escape rooms can nurture not only sharper critical faculties but also the collective habits of democratic dialogue, offering a tool of value to students, adults, and communities alike.

5. THE MISINFORMATION ESCAPE ROOM INTERVENTION

Against this backdrop, a research team led by the second author at the University of Washington has been developing misinformation escape rooms as an educational game for fostering resilience to misinformation.¹

The initial motivations and design considerations that informed the development of the team's first game — *The Euphorigen Investigation* — came from interviews with librarians and educators (Young et al. 2019), a review of the misinformation literature, and an assessment of

¹ Project website located at www.lokisloop.org.

prominent game-based interventions. From this scan we determined that an escape room offered the appropriate design affordances for addressing misinformation, in particular the capacity to develop:

- Experiential environments (e.g., for players to directly experience the emotions or consequences of being fooled);
- Contextually relevant narratives (to enhance engagement value and, presumably, learning outcomes); and
- Social and collaborative game-play (to foster peer learning and collective sensemaking).

The Euphorigen Investigation was released in 2021 as an online game to meet a demand for virtual library programming during the Covid lockdown era (Cho et al. 2023), with a packet version for in-person play made available the following year.

The narrative revolves around a brain-boosting supplement (Euphorigen) and the plans of the government to add it to the public water supply. Players assume the role of an investigator who must track down evidence to determine whether the supplement is safe or not. The first three puzzles involve misleading headlines, manipulated charts, and deepfake social media profiles.

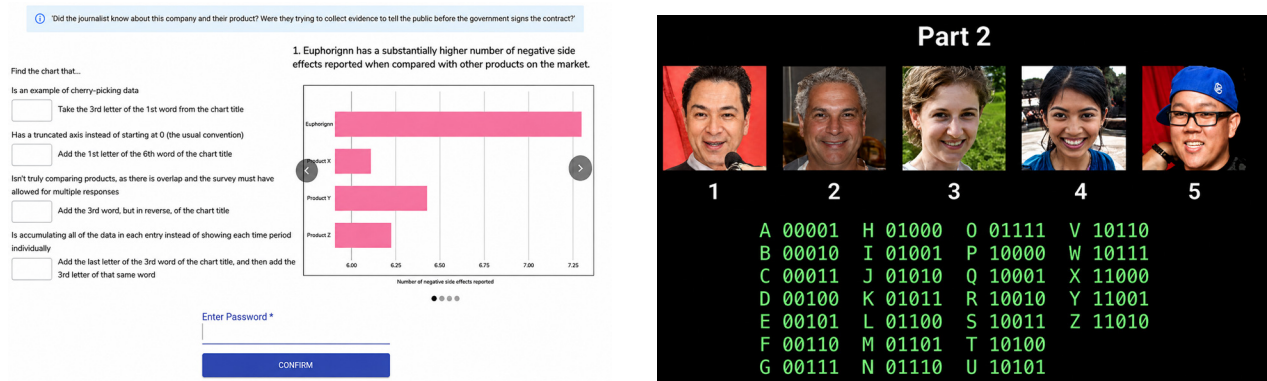


Figure 1: Screenshots of game puzzles: misleading charts and AI-generated images

Correct answers to these puzzles reveal the password to access a video that has been recorded by a prominent scientist who has the definitive evidence about Euphorigen. Players watch the video in which the scientist states that Euphorigen has failed trials and should not be added to the water supply. Players then share the video to get the word out, convinced that they have won the game. But then a message appears indicating that the video was a deepfake, and that in the real video the scientist concludes that the product is a real innovation. This plot twist is the critical learning point as players now realize that they have been fooled and misinterpreting earlier evidence. In the final sequence of the game, players must track how far the deepfake video has spread and share the authentic video to undo the damage.

The game concludes with a 15-minute debrief where the game host (e.g., librarian, teacher) facilitates a group discussion about what transpired in the game, their reactions, and sharing of personal experiences and strategies with misinformation. Game literature suggests that the opportunity to reflect on an experience and the real-life implications is when most learning occurs (Lederman 1992; Schwägele et al. 2021). For instance, in the game players do not have the option to not share the deepfake video, prompting discussion during the debrief of how much agency one has on social media when the platforms incentive sharing, liking, and other forms of engagement.

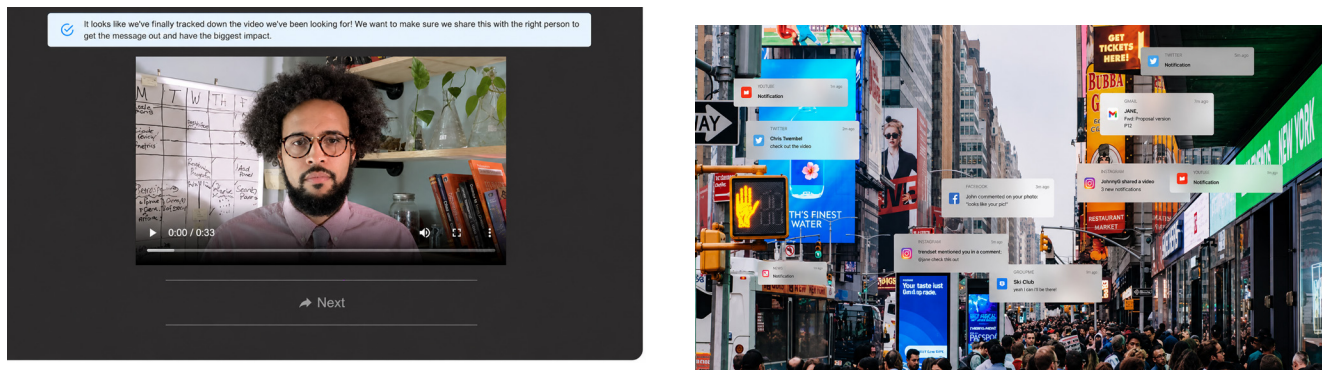


Figure 2: Screenshots of deepfake video, and video going viral when shared with the public.

6. UNDERSTANDING *THE EUPHORIGEN INVESTIGATION* THROUGH A TRANSFORMATIVE PLAY LENS

Following interpretive traditions in qualitative inquiry (Walsham 1995), we next employ a theory-driven interpretive analysis, applying the framework of transformative play (Barab et al. 2010) and transformative learning (Mezirow 2006) to analyze *The Euphorigen Investigation*. This analysis is motivated by and draws on the first author's familiarity with transformative play and transformative learning theory. In applying this lens to the intervention we hope to illuminate the potential of such games for ongoing design efforts around confronting misinformation.

In *The Euphorigen Investigation*, players start with a sense of *uncertainty* and *questioning* of whether the brain-boosting supplement should be added to the water supply. This fictional setting has real world parallels (i.e., utilities routinely add fluoride or cleaning agents to the water), thereby creating a relatable and *meaningful context*. Throughout the game, players encounter *complex, context-specific tasks and problems* in the form of puzzles that simulate misinformation tactics.

Players play an *active role* by applying *disciplinary concepts and methods* to decipher these tactics, and the collaborative format of the game allows players to recognize how *others face similar difficulties* since everyone experiences the game's climax when they inadvertently share the deepfake video. The most significant *transformation in their self-perception* occurs through the realization that they are vulnerable to believing misinformation. This is a critical learning point since the third person effect posits that people tend to believe that others are more susceptible to media messages than themselves.

Transformative play theory places heavy emphasis on the learning environment as *situated and context-dependent*. Since releasing *The Euphorigen Investigation*, we have engaged in several co-design projects to develop escape room games for particular communities (e.g., popular music fandom, breast cancer patients) and cultural settings (e.g. Czechia, Turkey, Ghana). In one experimental study employing narrative transportation and identification theory that compared two of our escape rooms, we found that context significantly affected the game experience (Devasia et al. 2025).

Transformative play and learning theory is also evident in the debrief component of the escape room. The debrief allows for self-reflection and opportunities to engage in collective sensemaking through sharing of IRL experiences and perspectives.

This interpretive analysis has aimed to demonstrate how misinformation resilience can be advanced through the intersection of transformative play, transformative learning, and contextually grounded design. While much existing research on media literacy emphasizes individual cognitive

skills, this study extends the conversation by showing how narrative-driven, collaborative games create embodied experiences of vulnerability and recognition, thereby addressing psychological tendencies such as third-person effect and fostering deeper critical awareness. Moreover, by incorporating co-design with specific communities, the project advances understanding of how cultural context shapes both engagement and efficacy, contributing not only to educational game design scholarship but also to broader debates on how to build media literacies that are situated, participatory, and socially meaningful. In doing so, it positions escape rooms as more than instructional novelties as they become testbeds for theorizing how people learn to navigate, resist, and reimagine the infrastructures of misinformation.

7. CONCLUSION

To feel duped, to realize that you have been misled despite your best intentions, is a jarring but necessary emotional reckoning in today's disinformation-saturated world. It is precisely this visceral experience that transformative play, through carefully crafted escape rooms, seeks to elicit and leverage as a catalyst for critical reflection and epistemic growth. Interventions like *The Euphorigen Investigation* illustrate how an educational game can move beyond checklist-style fact-checking strategies by creating environments where players encounter their own vulnerabilities, collaborate amid uncertainty, and begin to develop a greater sense of agency. Rather than treating misinformation as a problem of individual ignorance, this game recasts it as a collective, structural challenge—one that must be met with curiosity, humility, and an unflinching willingness to question one's assumptions. In the battle for democratic integrity, cultivating resilient thinkers who can hold space for complexity may be our most potent defense.

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Lars Konzack (b. 1969) is Associate Professor of Information Studies at the Department of Communication, University of Copenhagen. He holds an MA in Information Science and a PhD in educational games from Aarhus University and is a co-founder of the Danish Academy of Digital, Interactive Entertainment (DADIU). His research covers gamification, ludology, generative AI, digital culture, and imaginary worlds in media, with publications on computer games, role-playing, and geek culture, including LEGO, Viking reenactment, and Tolkien's Middle-earth. He led the AGAVE project on gamified industrial production, funded by Innovation Fund Denmark, and authored *Gamification and Industry 4.0: Gamified Smart Manufacturing*.

Chris Coward is a Senior Principal Research Scientist and Affiliate Associate Professor at the University of Washington Information School. His research examines how people navigate complex information environments, with a particular focus on designing approaches that build capacities and foster individual and community agency. Recent work includes the creation of escape rooms and other play-based experiences informed by sociocultural approaches to information, media, and civic literacy. Chris works closely with communities around the world to co-design, implement, and study programs in culturally diverse contexts, frequently partnering with public libraries as key sites of learning and community-based action.

Press Start for Heritage: Representing University Sports Rivalries in EA Sports College Football 25

Abstract: Does university heritage appeal to gamers? The commercial success of *EA Sports College Football 25* suggests it does. After an 11-year hiatus, NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) college football returned to video game consoles and became the best-selling sports video game in the United States.

This article illustrates how universities can be compelling places for worldbuilding in games, by arguing that university heritage is both inherently conflictual and deployable as a tool for conflict. The video game *College Football 25* portrays real-world contemporary university heritage through its representation of sports and rivalries with other schools. *College Football 25*'s success and popularity lie in the framing of selective authenticity, with near-hyperrealistic portrayal of game-day pageantry that fosters a sense of place and celebrates a positive representation of heritage from the 134 American universities included. This conflict-driven heritage shapes university place identity and aligns with common game design principles in which conflict resolution is central to play. The implementation of role-play mechanics in *College Football 25* invites fans, (former) students, and gamers, to enact and experience university sports heritage in different interactive ways from the perspectives of athletes and coaches.

By applying a close reading analysis to *College Football 25* and focusing on its conflict design choices, we argue that interactive digital media, especially with elements of role-play, can effectively preserve and promote conflict heritage, with implied allusions for transformative play to affect players in their out-of-game neo-tribal expressions relating to these universities.

Keywords: conflict, heritage, video games, role-play, universities

Guus van Tilborg

University of Groningen, the Netherlands
g.q.van.tilborg@rug.nl

Peter Groot

University of Groningen, the Netherlands
p.d.groote@rug.nl

1. INTRODUCTION

In this study, we analyze how (university) heritage can be a source of conflict in video games that incorporate role-play mechanics. First, we argue that universities and their heritage make for a valuable place in game worldbuilding. Second, we show that incorporating role-play mechanics in a university heritage-centered video game can help preserve and promote selective authentic representations of a university. In doing so, university heritage in video games invites players to enact and experience these representations in a variety of ways through different perspectives. Third, we consider how these in-game university heritage representations, expressed through design choices such as procedural rhetorics and diegetic elements, may affect players through bleed, transformative potential, and neo-tribal expressions of attachment and allegiance to the university as a place.

By applying a close reading methodology, we discuss in which ways the game design of *EA Sports College Football 25* (EA Sports 2024), selectively represents and uses university heritage to evoke conflict. Specifically, rivalries between institutions are a vivid case of the duality of university sports heritage; while a shared heritage with another institution is celebrated, it is also used to generate conflict.

2. UNIVERSITIES IN VIDEO GAMES

2.1 The university as a place

Universities are more than places of learning; they are cultural anchor institutions that preserve and promote heritage for society through traditions, rituals, and identities (Ashley and Durham 2021). Although such heritage has increasingly been studied in a post-colonial context (e.g., Wilder 2013), it is generally portrayed in a positive manner (e.g., Bulotaite 2003).

Smith (2006) argues that heritage has an important role when it comes to place-making. A place is more than just a physical or virtual space; it is a space infused with cultural meaning (Tuan 1977). People assign meaning to spaces, transforming them into places through their experiences, identities, and emotions. The place identity of universities is heavily shaped by their heritage, in which conflict, such as sports rivalries, may take up a solid part (Counted 2016). People form emotional ties to places through feelings of satisfaction and familiarity. It strengthens their bond with places they value. In Tuan's (1977) words, "The city or land is viewed as mother, and it nourishes; place is an archive of fond memories and splendid achievements that inspire the present." Universities may definitely function as such, exemplified by their allegorical indication as *alma mater* ("nourishing mother").

Champion (2016) argues that there is a shortage of research integrating theory and practice on how best to augment or invoke the user experience of place via digital media, including games. However, Plunkett (2011) is more optimistic, suggesting that some games evoke such a strong sense of place that players even form emotional connections to digital environments. These environments become meaningful to players through familiarity and engagement. In that regard, virtual replications of universities may have that very same effect, evoking memories with a potentially similar intensity.

2.2 Categories of university representations in video games

The most common portrayals of university heritage in mainstream video games can be grouped in three broad categories. The first is fantasy and magic universities, as mystical places that teach players the arts of wielding magic to create, prevent, or resolve conflict, such as *Skyrim's* College of Winterhold (Bethesda Game Studios 2011). The second is historical and imperial universities, as real-world prestigious places of influence and power, such as the "world wonder" Oxford University in *Sid Meier's Civilization VII* (Firaxis Games 2025). The third is contemporary universities, which form the most fluid group as a place for conflict, spanning from post-apocalyptic survival at the University of Eastern Colorado in *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog 2013) to the struggles of everyday student life at the *Sims 4's* University of Britechester (Maxis 2019).

The first two categories frame universities as exclusive places shrouded in mystique and power. Less common in mainstream games, the third category possibly offers greater creative flexibility for game designers by detaching the universities from their ancient and fantastical tropes.

2.3 University sports heritage and conflict

University sports are widely represented in fashion, movies, television, and video games, offering mass consumable opportunities for neo-tribalist expression and inviting worship-like behavior by the fans (Serazio 2012; Tarver 2017). In university sports contexts, rivalries with other schools become central to institutional heritage. While heritage is often approached by its UNESCO (2009)

definition of both material and immaterial expressions of culture, a more critical definition would describe heritage as “contemporary uses of the past for political, cultural, or economic gains” (Graham et al. 2000). As such, it is an instrument that is used for a wide range of objectives, almost always with an inherent notion of conflict: it is an ever-ongoing process of (re)production of one narrative (“us” and our heritage) against another (“them” who are not entitled ownership of our heritage). It is framed as an idea that is not necessarily about memorizing the past, but more about our relationship with the present and the future (Harrison 2012). Heritage is shaped to meet our current needs and is ultimately a product of contemporary selection (Logan 2007; Smith 2006), leading to an inherent bias. This leads to conflict, as some stories are omitted, affecting constructed identities and narratives (Smith 2006; Graham et al. 2004). Therefore, heritage is often used as a powerful instrument in (geopolitical) conflicts.

2.4 Conflict and role-playing game design

The dynamic relationship between places and their heritage fuels conflict (Smith 2006); therefore, video games taking place in a university setting can inform conflict game design approaches, where narrative and mechanics emphasize resolution (Baker 2003–2004; Schott 2016). These conflictual drifts can be channeled in the *magic circle*: a regulated game space away from the rules and norms of everyday life (Freud and Strachey 1961; Huizinga 1949). Hall (2016) suggests that (role-)play engages in selective authenticity, shaping the uses and presentation of heritage to a dissonant “on demand” experience.

Heritage is a personal experience, as interpretations differ from person to person (Graham et al. 2000). This connects to Mochocki’s (2021) perspective on role-play and reenactment as forms of lived heritage experienced in the present by the player. He argues that almost all forms of role-play are informed by heritage. Role-play allows players to assume the role of an in-game character rather than their own identity. Bowman and Hugaas (2021) describe role-play as a three-staged process: players legitimize their in-game character behavior through *alibi* (Deterding 2018), resolve cognitive dissonance through off-game role-distancing, and conform to mainstream social norms after role-play.

These mechanics challenge players to immerse themselves in a heritage setting and can evoke different intensities and types of immersion, depending on the circumstances and role assumed (Bowman 2018). Strong immersion can help in realizing the transformative potential of a game: the out-of-game effects on a player’s identity or views, caused by playing a game. This often goes together with *bleed*, when the identities of players and in-game characters spill over to one another (Bowman et al. 2025). Nonetheless, as Hugaas (2024) argues: “Bleed is not always experienced as transformational or even pleasant.” Bleed and transformative play can both be a positive and negative experience for players.

Diegetic design elements contribute to the transformative potential of games by existing within the fictional world itself; these are things that characters can hear, see, experience, etc. On the other hand, non-diegetic elements operate outside of the game world and are only visible to the player, yet still shape their interpretation and engagement. On a deeper mechanical level, game design choices through procedural rhetorics (Bogost 2007) can convey messages to players through their rules and processes rather than through words or images.

3. METHODS

3.1 Case study selection

College Football 25 (CFB25) was chosen because it foregrounds university conflict heritage in the relatively uncommon category of “contemporary” real-world university representations in video games. Its design centers around heritage-as-conflict, especially institutional rivalries between schools.

The game became the best-selling sports game of all time in the U.S. (Wilson 2024), proving that a heritage-centered game is commercially viable and interesting for a large audience. Though other sports games have included heritage representations, none emphasize them as much as *CFB25*. Outside the U.S. market, *CFB25*'s performance was weaker, likely due to cultural differences in sports preferences and lack of personal connections to American universities.

3.2 Close reading

This study employs close reading: a qualitative method rooted in literary studies, but increasingly used in game studies. It offers interpretative depth by analyzing design and storytelling through concrete examples such as gameplay mechanics (Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum 2011).

Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011) suggest that researchers alternate between two perspectives during the close reading analysis: as a “naïve” participant, immersed in play, and as a “reserved” participant, to maintain a critical distance from the material. The first author applied these two lenses through repeated play sessions, note-taking, and loose thematic interpretation. During analysis, extra attention was given to procedural rhetorics, diegetic elements, and neo-tribalist dynamics.

The aim of the close reading analysis is not to summarize or review the game, but to interpret how it represents university heritage. Special attention is given to the game's relation between conflict and role-play. Three guiding questions give structure to the analysis:

- How does the game's design frame heritage through conflict and rivalry?
- How do role-playing elements allow players to enact this heritage?
- What potential (real-life) effects might these design choices have on players?

3.3 Limitations and positionality

While close reading offers in-depth qualitative insights, it is interpretive and shaped by the researcher's perspective. As a former University of Minnesota student, the first author's connection with U.S. college football and this university may have influenced interpretations. To overcome or at least mitigate any potential bias, the first author conducted the close reading whereas the second author reviewed the findings for reliability, comprehensiveness, and relevance. We apply the pronoun “I” for the first author specifically and “we” for the team of both first and second author. Consequently, this paper uses both I and we. Also, I analyzed multiple schools from both naïve and interpretive perspectives.

The scope of the analysis is limited to in-game analysis. Although transformative potential, bleed, and participatory fan culture are considered, they cannot yet be directly measured (Jenkins 2006; Hugaas 2024; Bowman et al. 2025). Furthermore, this study is a snapshot of *CFB25* at the time of analysis. Since it is a live-service game, subsequent updates and future installments may potentially alter its design and heritage representations.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Implied neo-tribalism

Starting up the game shows a unifying picture of college sports (Figure 1). However, after this screen, the game presents a first situation of conflict: to select one favorite university team, essentially Othering the remaining 133 as non-favorite teams. The player cannot continue, nor engage in gameplay, before this choice is made. Selecting the Minnesota Golden Gophers, for example, caused a complete overhaul of the in-game menus: maroon-and-gold-soaked visuals filled with school logos, mottos, pennants, and a mascot took over the screen (Figure 2). Though it seems like a simple non-diegetic presentation to decorate menus with school talismans, the deeper meaning of this design choice and presentation reinforces neo-tribalist framings of loyalty and identity (Serazio 2012; Tarver 2017). Players can change their favorite team and menu presentation as an option hidden and not actively advocated in the game settings.



Figure 1: Title screen of *EA Sports College Football 25*, showing college athletes from various schools leaving the tunnel together on their way towards the field filled with anticipating fans.

Across all 134 carefully recreated in-game representations of university stadiums, the game-day diegetic elements of rivalry are prominently shown, such as crowd hand signs, trophy celebrations, cheer routines, and taunting mascots (Figure 3). Just like that pennant on the menu screen, in-game mascots can recall personal memories of a university, as Tuan (1977) would suggest. Seeing Minnesota's Goldy Gopher perform his signature "headspin" evoked my personal memories of encounters with him at the university campus.

From a procedural rhetorics lens (Bogost 2007), victory remains the central goal of (university) sports, but "rivalry" derby matches raise the stakes. Beyond athletics, these matches emphasize institutional pride and heritage, which are embodied in trophies, prestige, and lasting impacts on university sports legacies. By building progression and rewards around these achievements in its game design, *CFB25* communicates that conflict heritage is foundational to the meaning of college football. The game procedurally persuades players that maintaining traditions and defeating historical opponents is just as important as athletic performance. It is especially emphasized in 67

match-specific non-diegetic rivalry elements, such as rivalry video packages and commentary, framing the athletes as modern-day gladiators that inherit this conflict legacy:

“. . . a rivalry like this is what makes college football great! Yeah, the tradition and the history . . . but right here, right now there's great intensity. This is why these guys came to these schools: to play in games like this!" -- Chris Fowler, sports broadcaster for ESPN, featured in *EA Sports College Football 25*.



Figure 2: One of the 134 available personalized menus in CFB25, with this one being for the Minnesota Golden Gophers.



Figure 3: A collage of match day rituals – team presentation, cheerleaders, marching bands, and mascots – all contributing to the place identity of the university.

4.2 Role-play and enacting heritage

College Football offers two role-play paths: athlete or coach. Both roles position players as active agents of in-game heritage enactment, which offers a different perspective than typical spectating matches. Per role-playing game standards, players have the option to customize their characters, hone skills, and choose backstories (Figure 4).

The “Stadium Pulse”-mechanic (Figure 5) amplifies immersion, with a seemingly innocent meter in the user interface indicating the intensity of the crowd. The meter’s values coincide with the amount of gamepad vibrations and the volume of crowd roars that affect on-field performance by the athlete-character and, potentially, player emotions out-of-game. The Wear and Tear mechanic (Figure 6) acts in a similar way by directly impacting individual athletes, showing their injuries in real time. Coaches might consider different strategies by choosing either to substitute worn-out athletes, or to push their athletes to go the extra mile and risk serious injuries.



Figure 4: College Football 25 gives players plenty of role-play freedom in terms of character customization, skill tree paths, and narrative background. Shown here is the student athlete editor.



Figure 5: Stadium Pulse indicates the intensity of the crowd, which directly impacts your athlete’s performance.



Figure 6: Wear and Tear aims to portray the risks of engaging in continuous physical conflict on the field, presenting coaches with dilemmas on whether to pull a player off the field.

From both the athlete and coach roles, players have direct control on the trajectory of their university sports team, as opposed to the real-world performance of a team. They can do so through their in-game performance on the field, or off the field through choices in the game's menus. For coaches, these choices revolve around managing scholarships, resources, and the well-being of athletes. Athletes have limited ways to spend their energy; they can engage in dialogue branching options, though limited, while coaches cannot. Athletes make decisions through their smartphone (Figure 7). Dialogue choices can have real consequences, as student life must be balanced with athletic life.

The number of wins or losses determines the in-game heritage course, such as trophy wins. The role-play choices have consequences on how players take part in the university's heritage, leaving an in-game legacy either offline against computer-controlled opponents, or against other fans through online modes and leaderboards. Both the athletes and coaches can deliberately choose to actively engage in sports conflict and aim for success, which possibly leads to a transfer to a better sports program or a promotion to head coach.

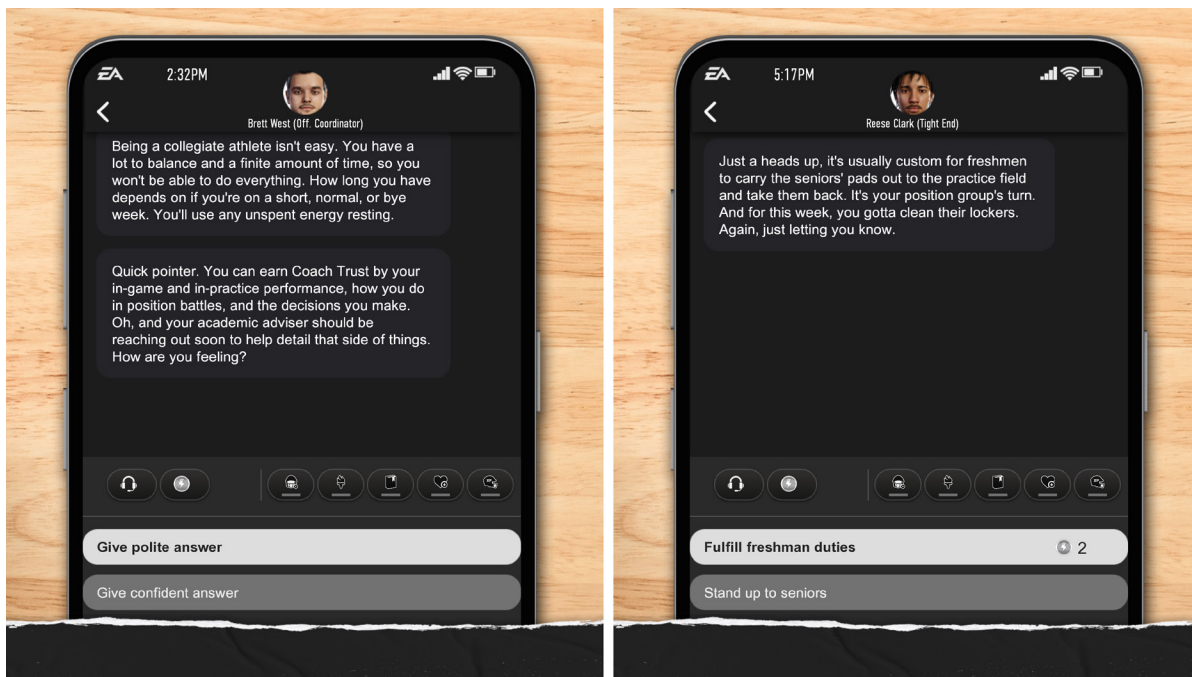


Figure 7: Though *College Football 25* includes role-play elements such as dialogue branching, all conversations with other in-game characters is limited to texting on a smartphone. Academic-athletic life balancing and locker room antics are portrayed as harsh reality on this athlete's phone.

4.3 Selective heritage representations

Overall, the in-game observations show that *CFB25* is an idealized depiction of university sports heritage, which makes the game on its own conflictual. Licensing partners — the NCAA, conferences, and universities — prioritize a celebratory image of university heritage over uncomfortable truths such as the long-term health consequences of student athletes, which are not included in the heavily marketed Wear and Tear system. This selectivity contrasts the developer's claims of true authenticity, which was highlighted in the Sights and Sounds Deep Dive trailer, in anticipation of the game's launch, stating, "We designed *College Football 25* with a philosophy that every team is somebody's favorite. So, to create a truly authentic and immersive game day experience, we gave a little love to every single school in the game" (@EASportsCollege 2025).

The keywords here are *favorite* and *truly authentic*. Heritage scholars would be critical of suggesting authenticity here (Graham et al. 2000; Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996; Smith 2006). The game's version of authenticity commodifies heritage, prioritizing marketability over critical engagement, and illustrates how heritage representations, even in a consumable merchandized form like this blockbuster video game, perpetuate the repression of other narratives due to conflicting interests.

The roster of playable university teams further highlights this selective representation. Only 134 schools appear, leaving thousands unrepresented. Whether this is due to licensing or technical limitations remains unclear, though the game includes a community-driven Download Center, which enables players to engage in participatory fan culture (Jenkins 2006), allowing players to share missing or fictional universities with other players online.

5. CONCLUSION

Close reading showed that *College Football 25* is not simply a product that statically represents university heritage, but a platform to celebrate and encourage a personal experience of university 71

heritage through emotional and sensory engagement (Tuan 1977). This celebration is essentially selective based on the game's design choices. By prioritizing the positive and marketable depictions of university sports heritage, this blockbuster entertainment product primarily mobilizes it as an economic resource (Graham et al. 2004; Smith 2006). The game misses out on opportunities to act as a critical and inclusive platform for heritage education, engagement, and comprehensive place identity formation and representation. However, questions can be asked whether a more serious game design approach would benefit the appeal and commercial success of the game for the parties involved, such as publishers, universities, and casual sports fans.

The study's scope is limited to in-game representations, excluding out-of-game effects such as bleed and transformative play (Hugaas 2024; Bowman et al. 2025). Future research would have to examine whether interacting with university-themed games have (long-term) out-of-game impacts on players, such as stronger place attachment (Tuan 1977) or increased identification with the neo-tribe of the university and its sports team (Serazio 2012; Tarver 2017). Nonetheless, the findings of the close reading suggest that *College Football 25*, through its role-play mechanics, design choices, and rivalry focus, actively encourages neo-tribalist behavior. The weight of rivalries and presentation of conflict in its many shapes can, potentially, affect the emotional state of the player. Especially when engaging with other players (online).

The role-play framing in the game makes players interact with heritage as if they are an active, contributing part of the heritage of universities, albeit a virtual representation. Outside role-play, the study shows that conflict is presented in different ways. For example, the partial inclusion of schools might make some players feel left out, while also encouraging participatory fan culture through its Download Center (Jenkins 2006).

The game's procedural rhetorics elevate rivalry heritage's impact by rewarding wins and punishing losses against historic rivaling schools; it persuades players that institutional conflict and heritage form the foundation of university sports. The heritage trajectories relating to the in-game behaviors of players, shows how in-game heritage enactment through role-play can possibly help players gain a better understanding of university sports heritage (Bogost 2007).

Ultimately, the study highlights the dual role of universities in games: as places for conflict enactment and as places for intriguing worldbuilding. Despite being underexplored in both scholarship and public debate, universities as a place in games can be interesting to both game designers and university administrators, e.g., as a gamified recruitment and marketing tool for prospective students or as a virtual repository of heritage for alumni. While *College Football 25* cannot be considered a comprehensive or critical representation of American university heritage, its (pop-)cultural and commercial impact is undeniable, opening pathways for further discussion and research on these themes.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Guus van Tilborg contributed to writing the original draft, methodology, investigation, data curation, conceptualization, revisions, and editing.

Peter Groote contributed to revising, editing, and supervision.

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Guus van Tilborg is a PhD student at the Cultural Geography Department of the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. His research focuses on university heritage and the place attachment of students.

Peter Groote is associate professor at the Faculty of Spatial Sciences at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. His research interests include cultural heritage.

Aesthetic Conflict in the Musical Role-Playing Game Runic Soundscapes

Abstract: This essay discusses the concept of aesthetic conflict in the musical role-playing game-piece *Runic Soundscapes*. A general discussion of the concept of aesthetic conflict and its significance in avoiding larger cultural conflicts through the active resistance to creating aesthetically uniform idiocultures (Fine 1983) is followed by a general overview of aesthetic conflict in the fields of role-playing games and in improvised music. The field of improvised music and its ludological aspects are summarized for those unfamiliar with the field, and the advantages of studying aesthetic conflict in purely aesthetic musical situations are addressed. A brief description of the rules of Runic Soundscapes leads to an analysis of the specific aesthetic conflicts it presents. Finally, the essay concludes by encouraging role-playing game designers to incorporate aesthetic conflict to prevent the development of closed, inflexible idiocultures.

Keywords: aesthetic conflict, agent-author, role-playing games, idiocultures, game-pieces, collaborative creativity, musical improvisation,

Tom Blancarte

Danish National Academy of Music in Esbjerg and Odense

tblancarte@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Social conflicts (Bowman 2013) are inherent in all socially constructed games (Montola 2012) but are not necessarily negative aspects of play (Montola 2011). This paper introduces Jiaxuan Yu's concept of *aesthetic conflict* (Yu 2022), a subset of social conflict, to the field of role-playing game studies, and continues with a discussion of how aesthetic conflict is experienced and designed for in the role-playing game for improvising musicians, *Runic Soundscapes*. The paper introduces the term *agent-author*, combining Latourian agents (things that can influence their environments) with Jessica Hammer's taxonomy of primary, secondary, and tertiary authors (game designer, module designer, game master, player). This term can be contrasted with typical Latourian agents, which influence their environments, but about which actor-network theory is agnostic about their capacity to consciously determine their creative actions. Focusing solely on sonic behaviors of author-agents and their implementation in musical identity construction, the game provides an ideal lens for studying aesthetic conflict, as its non-diegetic aspects lack semantic content, avoiding confusion that can occur in semantically-based conflicts, where sources of conflict can lie elsewhere than in aesthetics.

2. AESTHETIC CONFLICT

Not to be confused with Meltzer's psychoanalytic concept (Meltzer and Williams 1988), *aesthetic conflict* occurs when people with differing aesthetic stances are tasked with a collaborative creative project (Yu 2022).

Yu argues that aesthetic conflict requires a postmodern, multicultural experience; without exposure to multiple cultures, participants may only perceive and accept a singular aesthetic framework (Yu 2022). In this way, aesthetics in Yu's definition are assumed to be culturally

determined, and conflicts occur when people from different cultures work together. As most individuals have multiple cultural identities, this prerequisite is redundant, and we can safely state that aesthetic conflicts can occur in *any* creative project, even when just one person is involved. Furthermore, Yu's concept of aesthetic conflict invites us to consider agent-authors involved in collaborative creative projects to be representatives of various cultures, with this representation manifesting through their respective aesthetic values.

Moving beyond Yu's concept, aesthetics can be examined in relation to broader cultural conflicts. Aesthetic markers help individuals form distinct social groups, ultimately creating new cultures (O'Neill 2002; Folkestad 2002). In this way, cultural conflicts on larger scales are often enabled by aesthetic conformity. This essay seeks to demonstrate that a focus on aesthetic conflict in the controlled environment of role-playing games allows for the opportunity to *expose* (Stenros and Montola 2010) the aesthetic/cultural assumptions of the participants, thereby avoiding broader cultural conflicts in the future.

3. AESTHETIC CONFLICT IN ROLE-PLAYING GAMES

From the outset, it is important to clarify that aesthetic conflict in role-playing games is distinct from diegetic narrative conflicts, and is found rather in the exogenous goals (Montola 2008) of the agent-authors. Role-playing games function as spaces for cultural interaction (Ilieva 2023), fostering aesthetic conflict at meta-levels where agent-authors introduce their unique aesthetics, generating potential tensions. There is a tendency in current role-playing game practice to avoid any non-diegetic conflict, in particular to use tools such as Session 0s to ensure that aesthetic conflicts are avoided in game play. For example, it is frequently assumed that everyone should be in agreement about the genre of story to be explored (horror, adventure, etc.) at the beginning of play. In this way, players and designers of role-playing games, by delineating and prescribing aesthetics of the role-playing games, create their own aesthetically bound cultures based around a particular game and/or playing group. Gary Alan Fine, in his study of role-playing games in the 80's, termed these small cultures *idiocultures* (Fine 1983).

Jessica Hammer has explored how the agency of the various authors (designers of rules and modules, game masters, players, and audiences) in role-playing game activity interact with each other (Hammer 2007), leading to the creation of what Stricklin (2021) refers to as a *convergence culture*, but their arguments are primarily couched in a positive, collaborative sense. Again, potential aesthetic conflicts are ignored in these considerations in favor of the search for an idealistic environment of mutual affirmation.

This essay argues that there are benefits to focused invitation to aesthetic conflict, and that by actively engaging in aesthetic conflict between all agent-authors of role-playing games, we make these cultures of convergence more resilient and capable of adaptability.

It is important to note that identifying aesthetic conflict in role-playing games can be a complicated process, as aesthetic values can be easily confused with other cultural values of more semantic character. It is therefore useful to study aesthetic conflict in musical settings, where semantic elements are not present, thereby better illuminating the aesthetic conflicts therein.

4. AESTHETIC CONFLICT IN IMPROVISED MUSIC

Improvised music refers to a set of practices coming out of intersections between jazz and modern art practices in the 1950's in North America and Europe, whereby musical artists spontaneously create musical works in collaboration with each other, typically drawing from a set of vocabularies of sounds that have been practiced in advance. Today, so-called "free improvisation" is a genre

unto itself, with its own thriving subculture, with labels, festivals, and educational institutions around the globe.

While role-playing games often aim to mitigate aesthetic conflict, improvised music embraces it through divergent, individualistic approaches to artistic creation (Fadnes 2015). This, however, is not the case for all practitioners of improvised music, as the practices of many improvisers seek to avoid discussions of the music so that awareness of these conflicts never reaches the surface level of consciousness (Banerji 2023).

As a non-semantic semiotic practice, musical free improvisation can be viewed more clearly through an aesthetic lens than other language-based artistic practices, where semantic, seemingly objective content often takes center-stage over aesthetic aspects. Despite its lack of semantic content, Georgina Born (2017) argues that free improvisation often serves as a platform for mediating broader cultural issues. Born places these issues across four planes of social mediation, with the first or lowest plane containing the “microsocialities of musical interaction.” It is here where the sounds made by improvisers can act as signifiers of culture and the potential for aesthetic conflict is high. For example, in African-American jazz improvisers, “sonic symbolism is often constructed with a view toward social instrumentality” (Lewis 2002). The musicians use their musical identities as avatars of culture (Meadows 2008) to interact with one another. In this way, both performers and potential audiences are engaged in “ethical encounters” (Warren 2014) with one another through these sonic avatars.

It is important to note that aesthetic conflict in musical improvisation is distinguished from performative conflict (Walker 2010). Different from the diegetic conflict of role-playing games, performative conflict is a way of demonstrating to an audience that several musicians are in some form of conflict with one another, for example in the so-called “cutting contests” in jazz improvisation.

5. RUNIC SOUNDSCAPES: A ROLE-PLAYING GAME FOR IMPROVISING MUSICIANS

5.1. Overview

Musics from a wide swath of global cultures possess ludological elements (Mosely 2016), perhaps best exemplified by John Zorn’s game-pieces (Zorn 2017). Improvised music itself possesses clear ludological agential aspects, as musical improvisers navigate their decision-making using a menu of options from their vocabulary (Fadnes 2015; Wilson and MacDonald 2016). Though the history of musical games is beyond the scope of this paper, it is sufficient to note that *Runic Soundscapes* is not unique for being a musical game, but for being the first musical *role-playing* game.

Runic Soundscapes was created at the intersection of compositional ideas of Zorn’s game-pieces (Schyff 2013), notational and agential techniques of composer Anthony Braxton, in particular his *Ghost Trance* and *Falling River Musics* (Dicker 2016), and role-playing game-design techniques. The game was designed primarily to challenge the essentialist notions of musical identity of musical improvisers,¹ with a secondary purpose of affording an opportunity for musicians to have *first-person audience* experiences (Stenros and Montola 2010). It is worth noting that the notion of first person audience has a corollary in improvised music, with Anthony Braxton privileging the experiences of performers through his designation of audiences as “friendly experiencers” (Lock 1989).

¹ For researchers challenging essentialism in music, see Eidsheim (2018) and Hood (1960).

5.2 Rules Summary

Players create musical identities based on material and behavioral elements. Unlike traditional tabletop RPGs, they must physically embody and enact these elements. In this way, the game asks players to “Do what you can do,” in contrast to the typical larp dictum of “do what you can represent.” This means that the game is intended to be played by more advanced musicians who have the ability to embody multiple musical identities. The players’ purposes in creating their alternate identities can be mapped to Bowman’s 9 identity alterations (Bowman 2010). They must also choose from a list of eight classes (called “currents” in game terms) which give the players access to unique abilities which are not normally afforded in typical musical improvisational practice.

After constructing their identities, players interact with a gamemaster (a Rune Sage in game terms) who enacts various environmental aspects — including other musical identities and notation provided by the module designer — and instructs the other players through cards, hand signs, or sand timers. While graphic notation designed for improvisers is not unique, the navigation of the notation in *Runic Soundscapes* is unique in that it is designed to allow multiple interpretations according to unique musical identities in a more often than not asynchronous manner, and with specific rules for navigation. For example, a certain type of notation might mean that they have to play in a particularly creative manner or even refrain from playing while they mentally navigate the notation.

In addition to this, players encounter various special bits of notation that have particular effects. Some are enacted by the game master, while others give certain abilities, in particular the 13 runes which give certain effects according to their class. Most effects affect either the materiality of sound aspects of their identities or the behavior of their identities. Many effects are regulated with the use of sand timers, with each player having three sand timers of different time lengths (30 seconds, 1 minute, and 2 minutes) for particular effects.

6. TYPES OF AESTHETIC CONFLICT IN *RUNIC SOUNDSCAPES*

All musical improvisation affords opportunities for aesthetic conflict, but the rules of *Runic Soundscapes*, by encouraging players to explore *alter biographies* as musical avatars (Calleja 2011), giving the players *alibi* (Deterding 2018) for engaging in conflict rather than avoiding it. Just as importantly, the reduction of the content of musical free improvisation to a non-semantic level allows us to focus on aesthetic elements, and thus makes *Runic Soundscapes* an ideal prism through which to study aesthetic conflict in role-playing games.

Through informal debriefs (Montola 2011) and personal reflections conducted during the playtesting and development stages over two years, seven types of aesthetic conflict were identified in *Runic Soundscapes*. To clearly see where these conflicts occur, we can use actor-network theory (Latour 2005) to identify the various human and non-human agents involved in the creative process that comprise *Runic Soundscapes*. The human agents, which also happen to be the authors named by Jessica Hammer (Hammer 2007) are game designer, module designer, players, audience, while the non-human agents are the rules, scores, and instruments. We can then proceed to place the various types of aesthetic conflict along nodes of interaction between the various non-human agents and the human agent-authors in the network.

Building on the broader discussion of aesthetic conflict, we can categorize its manifestations in *Runic Soundscapes* as follows:

- 1) **Aesthetic Conflict of Identity:** Here, the aesthetic conflict tends to be internal, in particular when musicians harbor essentialist concepts of identity. This type of conflict is often combined with one of the other types of conflicts, meaning that there is the potential for a wide variety of aesthetic conflict even in solo play. *Runic Soundscapes* asks players to take on alternate identities to their “own,” inviting them to play contrary to the manner of play that their aesthetics would typically suggest. (For more on the types of alternate identities that role-players can take on, see Bowman 2010).
- 2) **Aesthetic Conflict of Interaction:** Musicians come from musical cultures with norms of interaction (e.g., jazz): some specified (one musician should be soloing while the others support), and some more general (it should “feel” like there is communication). When musicians have different aesthetic backgrounds for rules of interaction, conflict occurs. The rules of *Runic Soundscapes* can make this explicit, as many of the special abilities players may use invite them to interact (or avoid interaction) in particular ways. (For potential improvisational behaviors in role-playing games in general, see Fatland 2006).
- 3) **Aesthetic Conflict of Materiality of Sound:** Musical cultures are most often built around the materiality of sounds, that is, by the instruments and the sounds they make. This can be general (electronic instruments lack the “soul” of acoustic instruments) or specific (any sounds not made on gamelan percussion instruments are not “music”). By performing elements of a musical culture on instruments not native to this culture, musicians invite aesthetic conflict, either within themselves or with others.
- 4) **Aesthetic Conflict of Interpretation:** This conflict deals with notation and interpretation, but also with interpretation of rules. Some players may have a “loose” interpretation aesthetic, while others may be more strict in their interpretation. As the scores in *Runic Soundscapes* are graphic,² they invite a variety of choices for interpretation, as graphic scores “can become a site for asserting affinities with, or articulating fealty to, a received tradition” (Lewis 2006). It is often here that aesthetic conflicts between the various agent-authors (rules designer, module designer, game master, players) take place.
- 5) **Aesthetic Conflict of Ineptitude/Virtuosity:** Some players may have an aesthetic where they expect high competence or virtuosity on their instruments, while others may enjoy the feeling of ineptitude when playing an instrument a player has not mastered (Hegarty 2010). In *Runic Soundscapes*, players may choose to play in a virtuosic manner they do not typically feel permitted to, or they may attempt to play things beyond their technical ability (either on their primary instrument or on a secondary instrument), thus affording this type of aesthetic conflict. In more typical tabletop RPGs, this type of aesthetic conflict might relate to questions of voice acting. In larp, it may relate to the quality of costumes or other props.
- 6) **Aesthetic Conflict of Complexity/Simplicity:** One of the more common aesthetics for musicians revolves around density of information, with some musicians favoring “simplicity” and “clarity,” and others preferring the sense of vertigo that comes with density of information that is not immediately comprehensible. In *Runic Soundscapes*, this can occur at the level of alternate identity creation, where they may choose to role-play with an avatar that makes use of the opposing aesthetic, or it may occur at the level of the ensemble sound, as clashing aesthetics may result in a complex sound.
- 7) **Aesthetic Conflict of Form (Endings):** While many tabletop RPGs have rules encouraging players to remain together in the same diegetic space, practical concerns of coordination mean that in *Runic Soundscapes*, players may navigate the notation separately. This creates

² Even when traditional notation is used in a *Runic Soundscapes* score, the player may choose to use the material as graphic information rather than specifically encoded information, according to how they choose to role-play their avatar.

a design problem for how to coordinate endings, something more easily accomplished in semantically narrative tabletop RPGs. The solution in *Runic Soundscapes* is to allow individual players to exit the notation at their own pace, signaling their action by a simple wave. This design issue highlights the thorny issue of negotiations of form in tabletop RPGs in general, which likely exists as an unexamined source of aesthetic conflict in much tabletop RPG practice.

While the first 5 conflict types are easily visible in a visualization of the actor network of *Runic Soundscapes* (see figures), the final 2 relate to larger conglomerates not easily visualized. It is important to note that this taxonomy of aesthetic conflict categories is particular to *Runic Soundscapes*; other role-playing games will see conflicts converge around other aesthetic categories. Future research can perhaps lead to a fuller taxonomy of aesthetic conflict types.

7. CONCLUSION

Avoiding aesthetic conflict can lead game designers to foster cultures of conformity, which may later clash on a larger scale. By designing to encourage aesthetic conflict, we allow game agent-authors to “evaluate their aesthetics and the corresponding conflicts [thereby building] more concrete understandings of these abstract aesthetics to both make sense of and address the aesthetics in the interactions” (Yu 2022). The unique aspects of musical free improvisation affords the study of these aesthetic conflicts without the need to differentiate between other types of cultural conflict, and the musical role-playing game *Runic Soundscapes* points to some categories of aesthetic conflict that can be studied in other more typical role-playing games. This essay hopes to encourage designers of role-playing games to focus anew on the pure aesthetics of their games in the search for opportunities for incorporating aesthetic conflicts into their games, albeit with the appropriate safety tools (Bowman et al. 2025). While it might seem on the surface to be quite contradictory, we can use aesthetic conflict in our game designs to responsibly build more resilient cultures that can avoid more consequential conflicts on larger scales later on.

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Tom Blancarte is an experimental musician, artistic researcher, and educator based in Denmark. An integral part of the experimental music scene in New York City for over a decade, he has toured throughout North America, Europe, and Japan with a variety of ensembles, and has appeared on over 40 albums both as a sideman and as a leader. In both his research and musical practice, Blancarte's focuses are free improvisation, musical translation, and game design in music. He is a lecturer in artistic research at the Danish National Academy of Music in Esbjerg and Odense, and is also a part-time lecturer at Aalborg University.

Bleed as Intrapersonal Conflict: Understanding Bleed Management and Resilience as Parts of a Homeostasis Recovery Process

Abstract: This paper will make an argument for how the instability and imbalance that are associated with bleed experiences can be explained with the theory of physiological and psychological homeostasis. It will cover how the different parts of the established homeostatic model have logical counterparts in role-playing bleed theory, with particular emphasis on bleed management skills and integration practices. Through showing how bleed can be viewed as a form of intrapersonal conflict, the paper aims to further the existing theoretical framework around the concept with an additional aim of supporting the development of robust tools for measuring the impacts of bleed in the future.

Keywords: bleed, homeostasis, psychology, physiology, role-playing games

Kjell Hedgard Hugaas

Uppsala University Campus Gotland, Sweden
kjell@evocativegames.eu

1. THE CONCEPT OF HOMEOSTASIS

In biology, the term *homeostasis* (Cannon 1932) is used to describe a state of steady internal physiological conditions within an organism (Betts et al. 2022). Easily recognizable examples include body temperature and fluid balance. Maintaining homeostasis directly influences how an organism functions and interacts with the world, and as such it is a crucial part of its ability to survive. An outside influence that pushes an organism out of homeostasis is known as a *stimulus* in biology and a *stressor* in psychology.

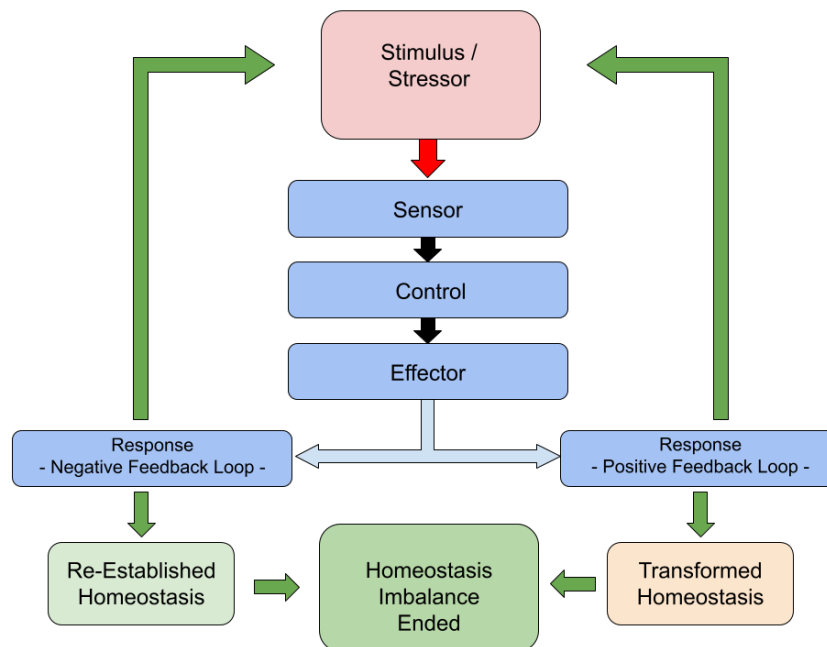


Figure 1: A Simple Homeostasis Process Cycle by the author based on Betts et al. (2022).

Psychological balance is dependent on physiological homeostasis, but the relationship between them is also dynamic, and we can measure direct physiological effects on the body when we are exposed to psychological stressors (Betts et al. 2022). Similarly, physiological imbalances also influence our psychological well-being. A well-known and relatable example is how we might become more irritable if we are hungry or suffering from a lack of sleep.

2. NEGATIVE AND POSITIVE FEEDBACK LOOPS

When the organism chooses a response that aims to counterbalance the stressor, it is called a *negative feedback loop*. An example can be our body responding to too high body temperature (stressor), with activating sweat glands (effector) in order to lose more body heat (response). A positive feedback loop happens when the organism chooses to intensify the push away from homeostasis, rather than reverse it. This happens when there is a definite end goal that can only be achieved when the organism is not in homeostasis. A good example here is childbirth, where a child can only be born if the mother's body is outside of homeostasis.

3. THE CONCEPT OF BLEED

The role-playing game concept of *bleed* (Boss 2007; Leonard and Thurman 2018; Hugaas 2024) describes the spillover between player and character. This spillover can among other things take the form of emotional states, physical states, mental states, physicality, values, and opinions and other cognitive concepts. When this spillover goes in the direction from player to character we call it *bleed-in*, and when it goes from character to player, we call it *bleed-out*. This paper is mostly concerned with bleed-out, but the suggested theoretical approach works well in both directions.

Over the years several specific types of bleed have been suggested, some of which can be considered basic building blocks or *bleed components* that together can create more elaborate *bleed complexes* (Hugaas 2024).

Bleed components:

- *Emotional bleed* (Montola 2010; Bowman 2015), where emotional states spill over;
- *Procedural bleed* (Hugaas 2019), where physical abilities, perceptual experience, motor skills, traits, habits, and other bodily states spill over; and
- *Memetic bleed* (Hugaas 2019), where ideas, thoughts, opinions, convictions, ideologies and similar cognitive constructs spill over.

Bleed complexes:

- *Relationship bleed*, where aspects of relationships spill over. *Romantic bleed* (Harder 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2021) is the most studied;
- *Ego bleed* (Beltrán 2012), where fragments of archetypal qualities and personality traits spill over;
- *Identity bleed* (Hugaas 2024), where aspects of our sense of self and our multiplicities of identities spill over; and
- *Emancipatory bleed* (Kemper 2017), where players from marginalized backgrounds experience liberation from that marginalization through their characters and/or play experiences.

As indicated by this list, bleed is a complicated phenomenon that can manifest in a number of different and distinct ways. If we look at the complexes, we can make the argument that all of

them are related to different aspects of the player's sense of self. As bleed-out is often reported to cause a heightened sense of confusion and discomfort, a bleed experience also has a lot in common with how different states of identity confusion are experienced (e.g., Erikson 1950; Marcia 1966).

4. THE BLEED PERCEPTION THRESHOLD

As bleed is a subjectively experienced and reported phenomenon, it can be difficult to study. In addition, whether players will report experiencing bleed will also be strongly dependent on whether they are aware of the concept altogether; how their play culture and communities accept and support them; and how comfortable they are to share something that might be deeply personal. Furthermore, whether bleed is experienced to a degree where it is noticeable at all is also something that will affect both the availability and the quality of collectable data.



Figure 2: An example of the bleed perception threshold (Hugaas 2024)

The concept of *the bleed perception threshold* (Hugaas 2024) posits that bleed is a role-playing induced and role-playing specific process of identity formation and creation that will always be part of any role-playing experience; it is only when bleed manifests with enough intensity to be noticeable to the player that it is registered and reported. This idea is built on the general agreement in various identity theories from psychology and social psychology that the sense of self is constantly shifting, adapting, evolving, changing and forming as we go through life (e.g., Stryker 1968, Piaget 1972; Jung 1976; Stets and Serpe 2013; Jhangiani et al. 2022).

5. BLEED AS INTRAPERSONAL CONFLICT

If we consider the reported discomfort and imbalance players experience through the lens of homeostasis, we can think about bleed as a form of intrapersonal conflict that pushes the player out of psychological homeostasis. In other words, forces within the players themselves create the discomfort, and that this will continue until the conflict is transformed or managed in a way that brings the player back into psychological homeostasis. In other words, when a player finds that their sense of self does not align with the experienced self in connection with a role-playing experience, the following identity confusion manifests as a bleed experience that constitutes an intrapersonal conflict within the player.

6. BLEED EXPERIENCES AS A HOMEOSTASIS PROCESS CYCLE

When we reimagine the simple homeostasis process cycle described in Figure 1 as a bleed experience homeostasis process, we find that each part has a well fitting corresponding part from bleed theory.

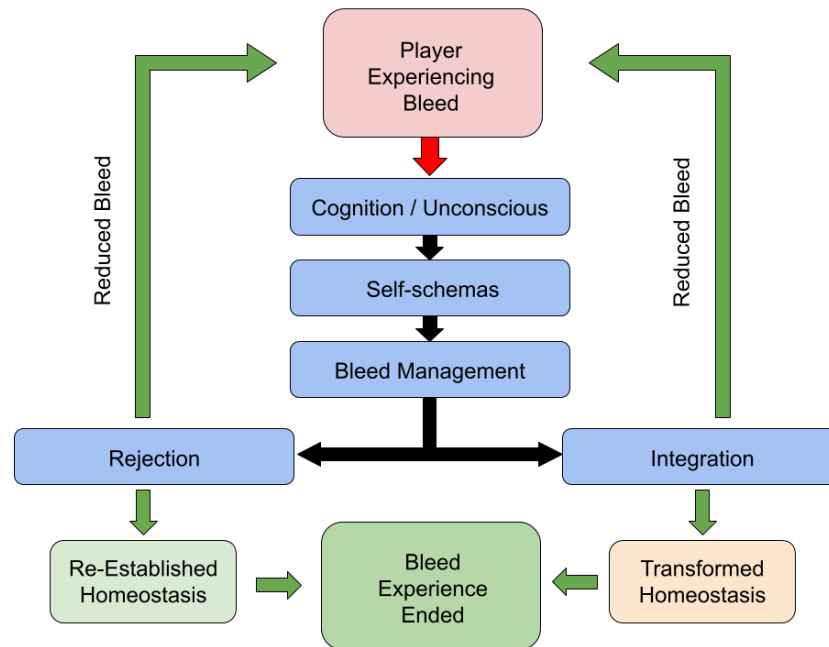


Figure 3: Bleed Experience as a Homeostasis Process Cycle

Based on whether the bleed perception threshold has been surpassed or not the *sensor* will be either cognitive or unconscious. The theory of the threshold states that players are experiencing bleed even when they are not aware of it, which has its counterpart in homeostasis process theory, as responses to stressors might be implemented without the individual even being aware of them. For example, one of the reasons internal bleeding can be so dangerous is because the body tries to remain in homeostasis by reacting to the falling blood pressure by emptying blood reservoirs and increasing heart rate (Schiller et. al. 2017), effectively masking the problem from the individual until it might be too late to address. Similarly, the identity formation process that follows bleed from a role-playing experience might go completely unnoticed by the player themselves.

Furthermore, the *control* will take the form of self-schemas (Piaget 1972; Palmquist 1993), which are constantly altering and developing structures in our minds where we store complex beliefs and knowledge about ourselves. Our understanding of the person we are, our self-concept, can be gathered from the sum of these numerous self-schemas. If a control against the self-schemas reveal to the player that their current experience of themselves is too far removed from their established self-concept, bleed management will be implemented as an *effector*.

Returning to the mentioned bleed-in and bleed-out differences, we can posit that whereas the following theories around feedback loops in theory are applicable to both types, the social implications for the player from a strong bleed-out experience are potentially much greater than a bleed-in one could ever be. In short, if a character changes because a player's sense of self imposes itself strongly on it, then the character is played a little differently than was intended, while if the opposite happens, the player's entire sense of self might be affected.

7. NEGATIVE FEEDBACK LOOP: REJECTION AND RETURN TO HOMEOSTASIS

When the response to the bleed experience is to try to counter-balance it, the responding bleed management will try to reject the new experience of self in favor of the already established sense of self and try to return to the original state of homeostasis. In regards to role-playing, this process could for example include a player whose character held different religious/spiritual/political beliefs than themselves, actively reinforcing their pre-game held convictions after the game. The player's existing sense of self imposes itself with more force, pulling them closer towards the original psychological homeostasis.

There are many complex psychological processes that can push a player towards a negative feedback loop. As an example, psychological identity defence mechanisms (Freud 1946) can help explain this push. In short, these mechanisms exist to make sure that the individual is functional and can perform actions that are necessary to keep themselves alive. In prehistoric times, these might have been more acutely related to physical tasks and needs, but even in contemporary times it is important for the individual to know themselves and how people expect them to behave in order to be an accepted member of their community.

8. POSITIVE FEEDBACK LOOP: INTEGRATION AND A NEW HOMEOSTASIS

When the response to the bleed experience is to try to integrate it, the responding bleed management will try to create a new state of homeostasis that includes both parts from the original sense of self and the new experienced self. In this sense, the process of integration (Bowman and Hugaas 2019) can be seen as a way for the player to recreate or reinvent their own sense of self in order for it to feel more aligned with the experienced self from the role-playing experience. When the player's psyche accepts this integration, a new state of homeostasis is created. With regards to the mentioned example of the player whose character held different beliefs than themselves, an example of a positive feedback loop could be the player exploring these different beliefs further with curiosity post-game, and ending up adopting parts or all of them.

While integration is a process that might happen whether the player is aware of it or not, especially if the bleed experience is below the bleed perception threshold, there are numerous suggested practices that support integration after role-playing games. Bowman and Hugaas (2019) suggest the following main categories of integration practices:

- Creative expression
- Intellectual analysis
- Emotional processing
- Returning to daily life
- Interpersonal processing
- Community building

The practices themselves can help the process of integrating role-playing experiences, but the cognitive awareness of such things being possible and the permission granted from one's community to alter one's sense of self are crucial components as well.

9. BLEED MANAGEMENT AS A SERIES OF FEEDBACK LOOPS

As pictured in Figure 3, a feedback loop can either lead to reduced bleed or towards the bleed experience ending. In other words, this is not a binary where one ends up in either a singular negative or a singular positive feedback loop. Thus, any bleed experience might not only contain a number of loops, but these loops can be both negative and positive and also that they can happen

simultaneously. In sum, this means that a player can be managing bleed through both rejecting and integrating parts of the new experienced self at the same time. In fact, considering how identity formation can be understood as a foundational never-ending process (e.g. Stryker 1968; Piaget 1972; Jung 1976; Stets and Serpe 2013; Jhangiani et al. 2022), it can be hard to imagine a bleed experience that exclusively follows negative feedback loops, suggesting that it is not possible to have such an experience without one's psychological homeostasis and sense of self shifting to some degree.

10. RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE: IMPROVED BLEED MANAGEMENT

Recovering from imbalance and re-establishing psychological homeostasis has been shown to increase the ability to recover faster and with less effort from future episodes of imbalance by directly affecting physiological processes related to the activation of resilience mechanisms (Hermans et al. 2025). In other words, successfully recovering from episodes of imbalance back to a state of psychological homeostasis can change how the body itself reacts to similar experiences in the future and build resilience towards these, e.g., developing skills in emotion regulation (Leonard and Thurman 2018).

11. CONCLUSION

Bleed theory has developed significantly over the last 20 years, but we are lacking a theoretical framework to explain why bleed is experienced the way it is, as well as how to connect it to the formation of a sense of self in the player. Looking at it through the lens of the theory of physiological and psychological homeostasis offers new ways of thinking about bleed, which can support the development of tools to measure it in the future.

Connecting this process to role-playing and bleed theory, potential future directions of this research can explore how resilience supports might affect bleed, e.g., do more experienced players experience lower amounts of bleed? Are they better equipped to handle bleed-related interruptions in homeostasis when they occur than when they were younger and less experienced? In a related way, successfully navigating such experiences can also explain anecdotal claims about having greater resilience in real life adversity as a result of having gone through similar occurrences in role-playing settings (e.g., Hugaas 2023)

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Kjell Hedgard Hugaas is a Northern Norwegian game designer, organizer, writer, theorist, and trained actor. He has theorized how ideas impact players through the processes of memetic bleed, procedural bleed, and identity bleed, culminating in his 2022 Master's thesis in Game Design at Uppsala University. In 2023, he completed a second thesis for UU on the impacts of larp on participants' attitudes and anxieties around death. In addition to independent projects and consultancy work, he worked as a project assistant at Uppsala University in connection with their Erasmus+ EDGE and ROCKET projects. He also works for LARPifiers in Horizon Europe's Larpocracy project and is CEO of the game studio and research company Evocative Games AB, where he works as a project manager on the Erasmus+ project Dystolarp.

Let's Do It Together! Why Participatory Design and Co-Creation Are Promising Approaches for Designing an Edu-Larp

Abstract: After a brief introduction to contemporary participatory design, this article looks at benefits of participatory design approaches when designing edu-larps. Potential advantages include the quality of the edu-larp, the empowerment of students and working towards societal transformation. Two examples for (edu-)larp design processes with participatory elements are illustrated. Entry points for students in a participatory design process within the framework of transformative larp design are suggested, for example, during world-building or character design.

Keywords: participatory design, edu-larp, societal transformation, co-creation, diversity

Olivia Fischer

University College of Teacher Education Vienna & Technical University Vienna
olivia.fischer@phwien.ac.at

1. INTRODUCTION

Designing edu-larps is a challenging task because an edu-larp needs to combine educational aspects with considerations of larp design. There are many examples where this is either done by the combined effort of educational experts or teachers and larp designers, for instance the STARS edu-larp project which developed edu-larps on German language teaching (Geneuss 2019, 2021). Other examples include larp designers who also have a background in education and *vice versa*, for example Mochocki (2013) who designed edu-larps to consolidate curricular knowledge in the subject of history.

If we want to create better edu-larps, we need to get better at aspects of game design and/or at educational and instructional design. However, besides these two options for improvement, there is also another one: participatory design. When it comes to design thinking and human-centered design processes, participatory design is considered a helpful approach used in fields like game design (e.g., Zhang and Wang 2023) or urban studies (e.g., Mees 2018). Participatory design means directly involving the target audience in the design process at various stages: not only bringing in the target audience in the end for a final test and feedback but also having the target audience participate in the design thinking process. Concerning edu-larps this means involving two groups of people: the teachers who will use the edu-larps in their classes, and, of course, the students. The second group will be the focus of this article.

According to participatory design scholars Bratteteig and Wagner (2016), participatory design practices focus on collaborative decision-making, involving negotiation, argumentation, and shared evaluation, while also fostering empowerment of the prospective target group in design processes. When reading Bratteteig and Wagner's description of participatory design from the perspective of a teacher, "empowerment of the prospective target group" immediately strikes the eye. Empowerment in relation to subject matter is an important aspect of education. So, could it be the case that participatory design practices could not only help create better edu-larps, but also that the participatory design process could offer an educational opportunity in itself?

In the following sections, I will give a very brief introduction to participatory design and then look at the advantages of using a participatory design approach when designing edu-larps. I will discuss the quality of the final product, the edu-larp, I will examine how students can benefit from taking part in the design process, and I will briefly consider societal change. I will also present two examples of (edu-)larp design processes with participatory elements carried out in Austria in 2018. I chose these two examples because I was one of the designers of both projects, so I have documentation on both participatory design processes. Despite a thorough literature review, I was not able to find any literature or documentation on other (edu-)larps designed through participatory design approaches. As a last point, I will suggest entry points for students in a participatory design process of an edu-larp.

2. CONTEMPORARY PARTICIPATORY DESIGN IN A NUTSHELL

Participatory design has a long history in fields like architecture, urban planning, software development, and various technical fields. Nowadays, few people want to risk developing a product which is unattractive or useless to the intended end users. It therefore makes sense to move away from an approach where all decisions are left in the hands of a designer who might not know about all wishes and needs of the end users, and towards one which includes the end users or target audience in the design process, in order to collaborate on the outcome.

Since its first steps, participatory design has come a long way; attention has been brought to power dynamics, emancipation, a shared vision of the future and much more. Participatory design scholars Smith et al. (2025, 5) identify four agendas of contemporary participatory design:

- *Diversifying* to embrace a multiplicity of contexts, actors, knowledges, and lifeworlds;
- *Politicising* agendas of power, agency, and participation in design and technology;
- *Relationality* for interconnections of researchers, participants, actors, and collectives; and
- *Transforming* through grounding participatory practices for sustainable futures at multiple scales.

Following one or all of these four agendas seems beneficial when it comes to designing edu-larps. We will look into these agendas in relation to edu-larp design in more detail in the following sections.

2.1 *Diversifying, or All lifeworlds count!*

Larp designers and larp theorists like Holkar (2016) and Kemper (2018) call for considering real world prejudices, stereotypes, and discrimination when designing larps so as not to perpetuate harmful societal norms. Bowman et al. (2025b) follow Holkar's and Kemper's call to design intersectionally and in an inclusive way, and suggest in their chapter on transformative larp design to include marginalised groups as consultants when working on culture design in a larp.

In this aspect, what is beneficial for larp design is even more beneficial when designing larps for educational purposes. Intersectional considerations cannot be left out when planning educational activities (Carter and Vavrus, 2018). No matter when or where an edu-larp's fiction is set, no matter who the characters are and how their relationships with each other are designed, societal norms will come into play through the fiction itself and also through the players participating in the edu-larp. This is especially true for conflicts, which are a common ingredient of larps and edu-larps. As Bowman et al. (2024b) argue, "conflicts embedded in role-playing games often reflect issues embedded in human cultures." Hence it is crucial to be aware of marginalized perspectives when designing an edu-larp.

Working on diminishing prejudices and discrimination or at least fostering awareness for intersectional discrimination in our societies should always be a common goal in education, no matter which subject is taught, which competence practiced, or which edu-larp played. Edu-larp scholars such as Bowman (2014), Hammer et al. (2018), Westborg (2024), see a huge potential in edu-larp when it comes to the development of social skills and personal development. Working on these properly means including intersectional considerations in an edu-larp design. Even the United Nations see working on harmful societal norms as a necessary goal for a sustainable and peaceful future of mankind. One of their sustainable development goals, SDG 10, is to eradicate inequalities and discrimination; another is to achieve gender equality, SDG 5 (United Nations 2025).

To really work on the UN's sustainable development goals 5 and 10, hence on eradicating harmful societal norms, not only do the perspectives of adults in marginalized and discriminated-against groups need to be included in a design process, but we also need to include first-hand experiences and genuine perspectives of the children or teenagers who are going to play the edu-larp. Game-based learning scholar Masters (2024) suggests in their plea for frugal education that including the target audience in the design process can be a catalyst for creativity when it comes to designing new education practices. Leaving out the voices and ideas of players could lead to missing important points in an edu-larp. Designers need to work together with players and meet them on eye level to be able to tackle the challenges of transforming society. Let me illustrate with an exemplary marginalized group.

Larp theorist Baird (2021) discusses larps that allow trans self-expression, exploration, and embodiment. She concludes that, despite thorough review, she has not found one larp that is intentionally designed for these purposes. Baird asks several questions that should be brought to attention when designing such a larp, giving a good example of the necessity to include marginalized perspectives. These questions might be written down now but to truly work on offering a safe and meaningful space for trans self-expression, exploration, and embodiment within an edu-larp, a participatory design approach involving trans people seems indispensable. Feelings, questions, thoughts, worries, etc., of a specific marginalized group, like trans-people, might vary depending on other demographic aspects, depending on what is currently happening in the world, or depending on different personal experiences. Although there might be common ground as well, all these different perspectives are valid and can be important when designing an edu-larp which aims to offer the chance of a transformational experience.

2.2 Politicising, or Empower the players!

As mentioned before, some first steps into participation have already been made in the field of larp design, where some larp designers and theorists, like Bowman et al. (2025b), have called for having marginalized groups as consultants or even having people of marginalized groups take over the design of some characters who represent their marginalized group in the larp (Saitta and Sveegard 2019).

Also, in the field of education, ideas of participation have been brought to attention. Chemi and Krogh (2017) argue that co-creation in educational processes can foster student engagement and involvement; hence co-creation can have an impact on learning outcomes. Arnt (2020), an advocate for agile didactics, calls for student agency in the design of university courses. Dirndler, Smith, and Iversen (2020) focus on computer science education and argue that participatory design in education might foster young learners' computational empowerment. Weixelbraun et al. (2024) recommend empowering students by applying participatory design processes to educational settings. All of these suggestions have one thing in common – they mean a shift in

power. If we apply this to edu-larps, it means that students should be involved in making decisions about which stories are told. Of course edu-larp designers and learning experts have intended learning outcomes or a didactical design in mind when designing an edu-larp, but we also need to listen to students and learn what stories they want to tell, which experiences they want to make. Furthermore, including students in a participatory design process is likely to have other positive effects besides empowerment. According to a 2024 meta-analysis of 25 peer-reviewed studies, integrating design-thinking processes in education shows a positive effect on students' learning engagement and creative thinking (Yu 2024).

If we follow a participatory design approach for edu-larps, we have two options: 1) we include "exemplary" people with similar demographic characteristics as the intended player group in our design process; or, 2) we design together with the very players who are going to play the edu-larp. According to the previously quoted research in education and participatory design/design-thinking, we might be able to empower students and with that maybe even enhance learning, if we follow option 2.

2.3 Relationality, or Examples of participatory (edu-)larp design

Concerning design practices, participatory design scholars Smith et al. (2025) call for ethical and caring engagements, for working across political and cultural domains as well as across human lifeworlds. This can be a somewhat tough step to take for edu-larp and larp designers who often want to convey their own view of the world, or of a theme, and follow their idea of what participants in a larp should experience.

Nevertheless, there have even been some larps where larp design has been taken into the realms of participatory design, for example the Austrian larp *Amazona Megista* (Gleeson, Fischer, Neubauer and Petrovic for 1000 Atmosphären 2018). In the design process of *Amazona Megista*, future players were included at several stages; they were, for example, asked in surveys which stories, characters, and character relationships they would want to play according to an overall theme (feminism), and the rough outline of a setting (a tournament in a low-fantasy Amazon culture). Ideas and perspectives were gathered in closed and open questions in an online survey among all future players of the larp. All the players knew at the time of the survey was that, in the fiction of the larp, three Amazon tribes meet to determine the future leader of all Amazonas, the "Amazona Megista" (meaning "the greatest Amazon" in the style of Ancient Greek) and that it was going to be a fully transparent larp. At a later point in the participatory design process, online design workshops were carried out with the future players of each tribe to design the in-game history and culture of each tribe. Between the participatory phases of the design process, the team of larp designers interweaved the ideas of the different participants and developed them further. At several stages, future participants had the opportunity to give feedback on the larp design in progress.

An example of participatory elements in the design of an edu-larp is *Das Andere Österreich* (*The Other Austria*) by Fischer and Gleeson for 1000 Atmosphären (2018) in cooperation with a class of Akademisches Gymnasium Graz (a high school in Austria) and their German teacher. The goal for *The Other Austria* was to revise a part of the curriculum, the topic of democracy, and also to work on teambuilding with the 14- to 15-year-old students. A rough outline for a story was designed by the design team: the students were going to play teenagers in a fascist regime who had been taken to a re-education facility because they had shown rebellious and anti-fascist behaviour. During the larp, they would have to escape the facility and record and send a message to the public, to encourage an uprising.

After drafting the outline of the story the lead designer worked in a participatory design workshop with all students on the setting and the characters of the larp. Students decided that they

would want to play in an alternate-reality version of today's Austria, led by a fascist. They designed the fascist regime according to their understanding of fascism and anti-democratic principles. This design process of the fascist regime led to the whole class actively discussing aspects of democracy and fascism, including questions to their teacher, thereby deepening understanding and applying learning content. For example, several groups of students made the suggestion that there should be no separation of powers and that the fascist leader would hold the power over legislative, executive, and judicial branches of government. Other ideas included that schools would also teach their own version of history, that there was no freedom of the press, and much more. While designing the fascist regime, the students naturally also revised democratic values and how a democratic government works, key elements of their curriculum concerning political education. At a later point, each student was also able to design their own character in this story, working on the character's back story, traits, and goals. The design team took the documented ideas and tried to connect them, building further details of the plot on them.

In both cases – *Amazona Megista* and *Das Andere Österreich* – it worked well to have future players participating in creating aspects of the fictional world of the larp: setting, parts of the narrative, cultures, characters. However, it has to be noted that the participatory approach led to needing extra time for the whole (edu-)larp design process.

2.4 Transformation, or How to create an edu-larp together with future players

An edu-larp might be designed within an approach of bespoke design, as described by larp theorist and designer Koljonen (2019), whereby a (edu-)larp is tailored to specific themes, narratives, or participant groups. Another approach could be following Bowman et al.'s (2024a) step-by-step recommendations for designing larps with transformative goals.

I will suggest some entry points for student participation in the design of an edu-larp within Bowman et al.'s (2024a) framework of transformative nanogame design. I skip aspects of edu-larp design where more time and labour would be needed to follow a participatory approach. For example, aspects like the design of pre-game workshops, mechanics, or safety might require teaching first-time or inexperienced larpers basic larp design and hence seem too much of an effort for a participatory approach to edu-larp design.

The following entry points are aspects of larp-design where future players could participate in the form of short workshops, discussions, or brainstorming, by filling in surveys or by other techniques of participatory design:

1) Identifying transformative impact: This is the first step in Bowman et al.'s (2024a) design process and they recommend communicating the desired impact to future players. Within a participatory design approach, this communication could be turned into negotiation of desired impacts with the future players. This negotiation might take place within a very strictly defined thematic space, but it could also be something like an open brainstorming for a very broad theme like feminism, democracy, the use of formal language, or data security.

2) Narrative design: Bowman et al. (2024a) define the purpose of narrative design as “to enable a story to emerge that is told collectively and meaningfully by all participants” (156). This might work even better if a design team knows what kind of stories are on the minds of future players. If these stories are not intended by the design team, then knowing them helps to find design strategies to avoid these stories emerging during the runtime of the edu-larp. If these are desirable stories in the eyes of the design team, then they might be the starting point for further narrative development. If future players bring in too many stories,

pulling the game in different directions, the design team might need to guide the future players through a consensus-finding process, or they might mix in methods of collaborative creative practice to reach a common focus. This might take some time and will probably also involve the design team being part of this negotiation and sense-making process, so being prepared to set aside some time for this is recommended.

3) Worldbuilding: While Bowman et al. (2024a) describe how to approach worldbuilding in a design team, they also suggest that the process of worldbuilding can be a collective effort where players have their share in creation of the storyworld. I want to emphasize the participatory approach in worldbuilding, as it might help non-larpers step-by-step to familiarize themselves with the storyworld they are going to play in, thereby helping to prevent feeling overwhelmed by information.

4) “Cool” and “pivotal” scenes: Future players might have their own idea of what a “cool” or “pivotal” scene means for them. A design team who listens to these ideas and who communicates that the players will be able to play some of these scenes during the edu-larp (if it is possible within the design) might help with motivating hesitant players and might also help empower future players by valuing their perspective.

5) Character design, relationship design, group design and culture design: As Bowman et al. (2024a) describe, there are design traditions with no participation when it comes to character design, up to traditions where players do the character design on their own. Even if a design team decides to prewrite all characters for their edu-larp (which will very often make sense), there is still room for participation by listening to future players’ ideas on who they would want to play in a given setting, or when it comes to a given theme. Another option could be making the characters customisable. The same is true for relationship design, group design, and culture design. Participatory design of an edu-larp does not mean that all these — character, relationship, group, and culture design — need to be done together with players. It is still the decision of the design team where it makes sense to bring in players to participate.

All the above are parts of edu-larp design where it seems feasible to bring in future players for participation, even if they have never larped or role-played before. For creating participatory design workshops, it is a good idea to look at methods of design-thinking. Especially for participants who have neither larped nor designed before, it might be helpful to offer a variety of participatory design methods and tools, for example: telling, making, and enacting as described by participatory design scholars Brandt et al. (2013). Participatory design scholars Scheepers et al. (2018) also recommend a balance between pre-defined structures and creative freedom when it comes to participatory design workshops.

Other entry points for participation are bringing in future players for feedback on various design aspects, or having them playtest certain aspects with the option to try out variations that they come up with.

3. DISCUSSION

We have looked at several reasons why it is beneficial to follow a participatory design approach for designing edu-larps – from empowerment of students to improving the impact of an edu-larp. Yet sometimes, less participation might be suitable for a specific project. On the other hand, it might

also be helpful to steer away from common patterns of participatory design processes, since lately scholars have called for new concepts and tools for participatory design processes in order to avoid inhibiting the creativity of the participants (Formosa 2024; Hsueh 2024), and to explore new ways to include the target population in the design process on eye level.

For now, before starting a participatory design process, a design team should decide for which aspects they want or need input from future players, and where they are willing to share the power and responsibility of designing. Future research on participatory design or co-design of edu-larps should look into which aspects of the design process need more guidance from designers and which need less when it comes to creating the best possible edu-larp, combined with maximizing the empowerment of the target population. Thinking of the positive effects of using design thinking processes in a learning environment in formal education (Yu 2024), there might be the chance that participatory design / co-design of edu-larps could be used as a means of education itself, which opens up numerous new research questions. What could students learn from taking part in the design process of an edu-larp? How can we design the participatory design process of an edu-larp to maximize learning?

4. CONCLUSION

So far, there is hardly any research on how to approach participatory design / co-design processes of edu-larps, yet the literature and examples presented in this article suggest that a huge potential lies in inviting the target audience / future players into the design process of an edu-larp, empowerment being only one aspect of it. What can be said without a doubt is that whether the future players of an edu-larp might be young people or adults who play an edu-larp as a part of some formal or informal education, it is always worth listening to which stories they want to tell.

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Olivia Fischer is an Austrian larp designer and researcher in larp, edu-larp, education and HCI. She currently works at Pädagogische Hochschule Wien and is about to complete a Ph.D. at TU Wien. Her current research focus is exploring the co-design of edu-larps as a means to foster empowerment and future skills (creativity, cooperation, communication and critical thinking) in education and design thinking processes. She has been designing larps since 2001, including edu-larps in cooperation with schools and universities. Her larps have been played in Austria and other countries, among them a co-design with Anna Emilie Groth for the Oslo Architecture Triennale 2019.

Larp with Erasmus: A Quantitative Study of Live Action Roleplay Projects Funded by EUs Erasmus+ Program Between 2014-2022

Abstract: As live action role-play (larp) has grown in popularity and is being implemented in a wide range of domains, it has also started getting attention from policy makers. During the last decade, the EU has funded many larp-related projects, in particular through its Erasmus+ program. Erasmus+ is an important channel for EU policymaking with sought impacts on cultural enhancement and the fostering of an EU identity.

This quantitative study presents and analyzes a database of 111 larp related projects that have received funding from Erasmus+ between 2014-2022. The results show that 5,770,000 euros in funding were granted in total, with a moderate positive trend over time. Project coordinators originated from 22 different EU countries, and the funding distribution is uneven, with Poland, Estonia and Denmark being among countries receiving the most grants. While some projects focus on developing larp as a practice, the vast majority (89.9%) use larp as a tool to pursue other policy values, with some of the most common being tolerance, migration, democracy, and employability.

This study showcases how the EU gives substantial funding to larp related projects through Erasmus+. The study is relevant as funding and policy making affects the larp community, and also points towards how the larp community, through these projects, also affect the EU on a policy making level. This study can help inform both larp organisations and larp researchers by providing the first quantitative analysis of larp funding and projects financed through the EU.

Keywords: live action role-playing, larp, quantitative study, Erasmus+, European Union

Karin Johansson

Uppsala University, Sweden
karin.b.johansson@im.uu.se

Mafalda Morganti

Chaos League, Italy
mafaldamorganti@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Since its emergence in the 1980s, live action role-playing (larp) has grown to an international phenomenon. Larp, having been mostly a leisure activity, is now also utilized for many different purposes in a wide range of domains such as education, therapy, and politics (Johansson et al. 2024). With its growth, larp has also started to get attention from policy makers, for instance within the European Union (EU), which during the last decade has funded many larp-related projects, on a wide range of topics such as sustainable development (European Commission 2021), democracy (European Commission 2020), and improved math education (European Commission 2019a). One important EU funding programme is Erasmus+, focused on supporting education, training, youth and sport.

Such project funding provides opportunity to develop larp practices and collaborations, as well as means to reach beyond the larp community, where larp can have an impact for instance within education or on a policy level. The projects also add up to rather substantial funding from the EU, making it relevant to analyse how those funding opportunities have changed over the years, as well as track trends in which countries and topics get more or less funding. This paper aims to analyse larp-related projects funded by Erasmus+ through a quantitative study, compiling and analysing a dataset of Erasmus+ funded larp related projects between 2014-2022. The study contains descriptive statistics and statistical analysis of the data material.

This study will provide insights into larp-related Erasmus+ projects. Despite the amounts of projects granted, these projects have not, to the author's knowledge, been studied from a research perspective with quantitative methods before. This knowledge can be of interest for larp organizations, for larp researchers, and for other stakeholders engaging with larp and policy making. It can also be generative for future studies on larp-related projects in the European Union.

2. BACKGROUND

Larp is a hobby, subculture, media, and artform. During the last decades larp has also started to be utilized for different purposes, such as education, therapy, to enhance democracy, and as a research tool among many other areas of use (Johansson et al. 2024) From having been a rather obscure grassroots movement, there seem to be a growing interest in the potential of larp from policymakers and agencies, on national levels but also in the EU. This became especially apparent when the EU in 2024 granted a major Horizon Europe project named Larpocracy, with the focus on Larp and democratic deliberation (Larpocracy, n.d.; Uppsala University 2024).

But that project was not funded in a vacuum, and many of the participating partners had previously collaborated in different smaller EU projects. During the last decade or so, the EU has funded many larp-related projects, for instance through the Erasmus+ program. The first Erasmus+ started in 2014, with a new iteration of the programme launched in 2021, planned to run until 2027. Erasmus+ has a budget of 26.2 billion euros, making it a big impact funding programme.

Erasmus+ is driven by clear values in terms of policy-making, focusing on social inclusion, the green transition, digital transitions, and promoting young people's participation in democratic life (Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture 2021). Erasmus+ has different calls within specific focus areas including for instance Partnership for Cooperation and exchanges of practices, Strategic Partnerships for youth, youth mobility, and Partnerships for Creativity. There are specific targeted calls towards youth, adult education, and higher education. The focus is on collaboration and normally a project consists of a consortium including partners from several different EU countries. Partners can be non-governmental organisations or schools. It is also possible to participate in Erasmus as an individual, for instance for teacher or student exchanges. Some types of funded projects can also include non-EU countries ("How to Take Part - Erasmus+" 2025).

There are multiple reasons why the EU is taking an interest in funding larps. Since the EU treaty in 1992, an important policy has been to actively support cultural projects and encouraging citizen participation has been a central consideration (Barnett 2001). Larps become relevant through their engagement with multiple stakeholders including the participants (Osmond 2023) and their potential for supporting deliberation and democratic skill building (Rantanen 2016). Another reason for the Erasmus+ funding of larp projects could be their potential as educational tools (Bowman 2014; Lacanienta 2022). Governmental institutions formulate and pursue public policy values (Stewart 2009), as Erasmus+ is an important channel for EU policymaking, with sought impacts on cultural enhancement and the fostering of an EU identity (Jacobone and Moro 2015). Whether and how larps are funded by Erasmus+ reflect how the larp community can have an impact on an EU level, for instance as a policy making tool. It also reflects how EU policies impact the larping community, though for instance encouraging certain types of larp designs and topics through their calls.

3. METHOD

This is a quantitative methods paper, with a statistical analysis run on a dataset of larp projects funded by Erasmus+ (see Appendix 1).

The database was created by author Mafalda Morganti, as part of her work at the larp ¹⁰⁴

organization Chaos League. The database aims at covering all the funded larp-related Erasmus+ projects, but since it cannot be ruled out that some projects might have been missed in the data gathering, the 111 larp related projects in the database will be treated as a sample of the population of all funded larp-related Erasmus projects between the years 2014 to 2022.

Information about the projects was gathered in an Excel document. The authors gathered, coded, and cleaned the data for the database by removing an outlier data point and structuring the database to be able to run the analysis. All the data is from publicly available project information gathered online from official EU sites and from publicly available larp project homepages. From an ethical perspective, this study does not contain any major concerns and no sensitive personal data has been utilized.

The data was cleaned, and then the program Jamovi (2024) was utilized to get descriptive statistics and run statistical analysis on the data (Jamovi 2024; R Core Team 2024). Analysis includes a chi-square test of independence and a regression analysis (Triola 2014).

4. ABOUT THE DATA AND DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

The data material consists of 111 larp related Erasmus projects, from 2014-2022. One of the projects is listed as having gotten 0 euro funding; this data point was removed from the sample due to being an outlier, which left 110 projects.

In total, over all the years, 5,770,103 euros in funding have been granted to the larp-related projects included in the data material. Table 1 shows some basic descriptive statistics for the data material.

Table 1. Basic descriptive statistics for the grant sizes.

	EU Grant in Euro
N	110
Missing	1
Mean	52 455
Median	28 060
Standard Deviation	63 755
Minimum	8 675
Maximum	390 785

The mean is much higher than the median, suggesting that the data is right skewed. This could be due to the fact that a few projects get comparatively very large grants. There is also a big difference between the smallest grant size of only 8,675 Euros, and the largest grant of 390,785 Euros.

5. STATISTICS SPLIT BY COUNTRY

This section examines how the projects that have received funding are distributed between different EU countries. All projects contain partners from several different countries, as this is one of the requirements for Erasmus+. Each project has one coordinating partner. The variable studied

here is coordinating a partner's country. The coordinating project partner is typically the one who handles most of the funding, driving the project and its goals most clearly. The official Eurostat country codes are used (Eurostat n.d.).

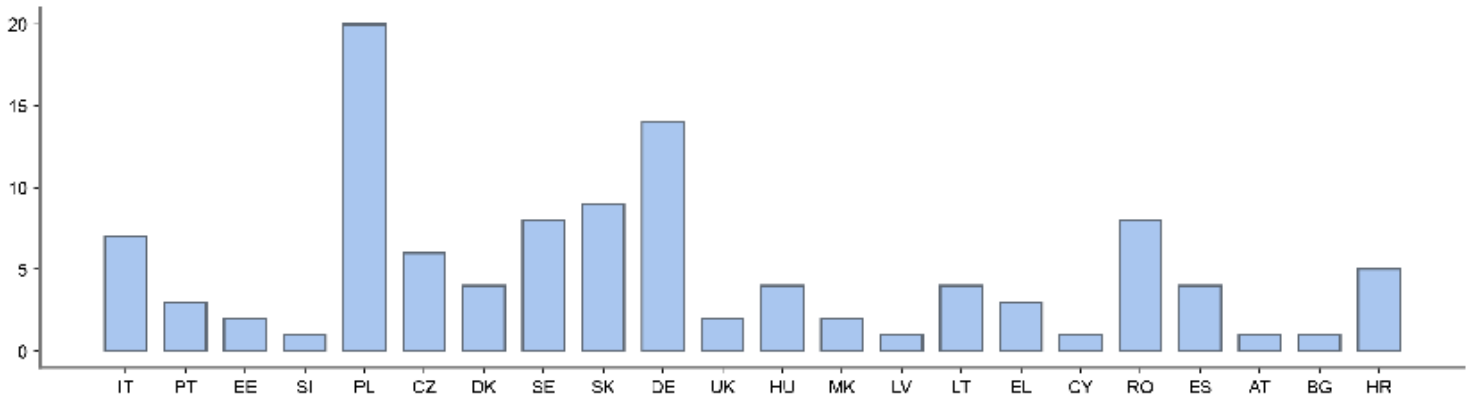


Figure 1. Diagram showing coordinator's country on the X axis, and number of approved Erasmus+ projects on the Y axis.

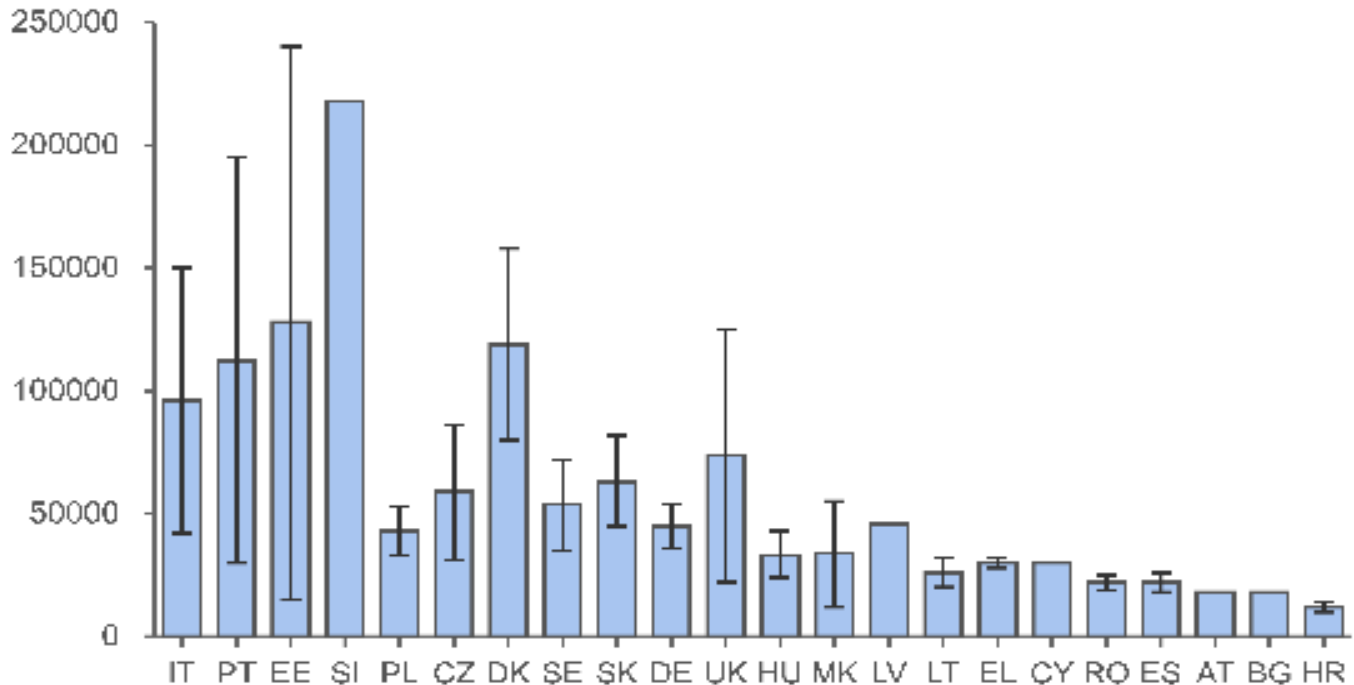


Figure 2. Diagram showing coordinator's country on the X axis, and sum in euros received for different Erasmus+ larp projects on the Y axis.

Coordinating partners from 22 different countries have received grants, meaning that a majority (82%) of the total 27 European Union countries, are represented. There are clear differences between how many projects and the total grant amounts that have been allocated to different countries, as shown in Figures 1, 2, and 3. Comparing the two diagrams in Figures 1 and 2, it seems some countries get more projects, but smaller ones, while other countries get fewer projects, with larger sums granted for each. As can be seen in Figure 2, coordinating organisations from Estonia have a big spread between small sum and larger sum projects, while there has only once been one Slovenian coordinated project, but for a large grant sum. Romania has gotten relatively many, but very small-sized grants. Poland is the country that has gotten most projects funded in the grant period, followed by Denmark, Romania, and Italy.

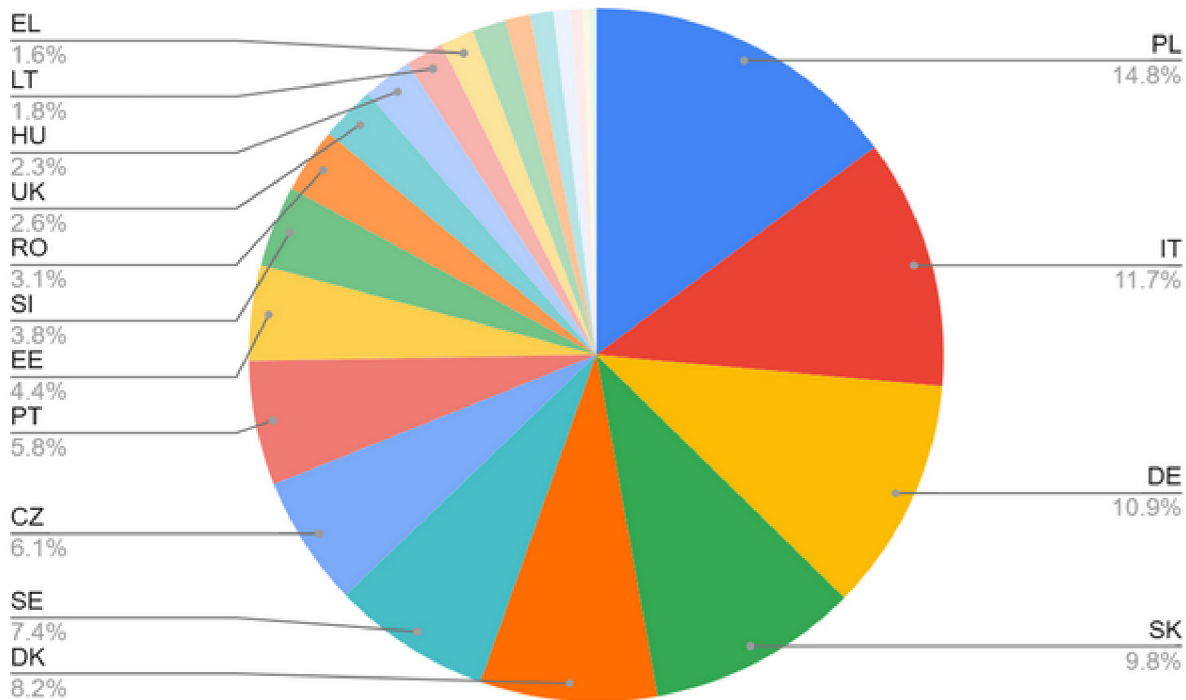


Figure 3. Pie chart showing total distribution of Erasmus+ funding to larp projects to projects with different coordinator's countries.

To verify what the descriptive statistics imply, a chi-square test was conducted to test if some countries have significantly received more grants from Erasmus+. The significance level is 5%.

Null hypothesis (H_0): Projects are evenly distributed between countries.

Alternative hypothesis (H_1): Projects are not evenly distributed between countries.

Table 2. χ^2 test for distribution. Proportions of coordinating countries for the Erasmus+ projects.

χ^2	df	p
92.8	21	<.001

With a p-value that is less than 0.001, indicating less than 5%, the null hypothesis can be rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis: that projects are not evenly distributed between countries.

6. GRANT SIZES PER YEAR AND CHANGE OVER TIME IN FUNDING

This section looks into how the total sum of grant sizes have changed over time. Figure 4 shows the total amount of grants given to the projects from Erasmus+ split per year, and visualizes how grant size has varied over the years, with an upward facing trend up until 2022, which contains a significant drop in grant sizes.

6.1 Changes in grant sizes of Erasmus+ larp projects between 2014-2022

To verify the trend over time suggested by the descriptive statistics, a regression analysis was conducted. For the testing, data on grant sums per project were the dependent variable, and project

funding year was the independent variable.

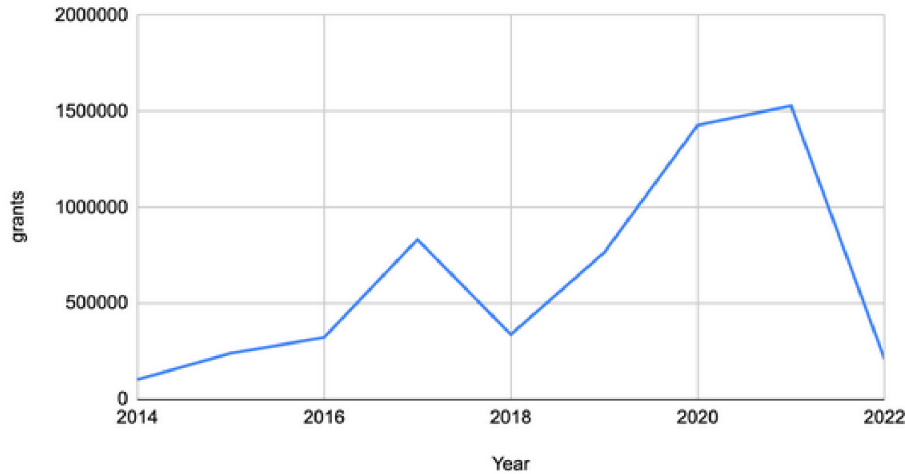


Figure 4. Diagram showing total approved grants per year for Erasmus+ larp related projects.

Null hypothesis (H₀): There is no change over time in the sums of funding from Erasmus+ to larp related projects

Alternative hypothesis (H₁): The sums of funding from Erasmus+ to larp related projects has increased between 2014-2022.

Table 3: Model fit

Model	R	R ²
1	0.435	0.189

Note: Models estimated using sample size of N = 110

Table 4: Linear regression for grant size per year. **Model Coefficients - EU grants in euros**

Predictor	Estimate	Std.-error	t	p
Point of Intersection*	117668	16543	7.11	<.001
Funding year:				
2019-2021	-69834	22271	-3,14	0.002
2020-2021	-55567	20696	-2.68	0.008
2017-2021	-62164	22602	-2.75	0.007
2015-2021	-83358	27962	-2.98	0.004
2022-2021	-87525	27962	-3.13	0.002
2018-2021	-89498	23877	-3.75	<.001
2016-2021	-90802	23877	-3.8	<.001
2014-2021	-97137	31388	-3.09	0.003

*Represents reference level

As can be seen in Table 2, the R value is 0.435. This value is between 0.3 and 0.5, suggesting that the variables show a moderate positive correlation, meaning that grant sizes have been increasing over the time period.

2014 is the starting year for the Erasmus+ program, so larp projects have gotten funding since the start, with an increase in project funding over the years. Note that the grant sizes are in euros, not adjusted for inflation, something that could be a possible explanatory factor for the positive trend. The last year in the dataset, 2022, deviated from the positive trend, with a significant drop in grants, potentially because the data material does not cover all the projects of that year, but there could potentially be other explanations. Examples include after effects of the COVID-19 pandemic affecting the possibility for larp projects, or Erasmus+ distributing less total grants that year. For future studies, the data material could be updated looking for more 2022 projects, as well as projects since 2023.

7. PUBLIC POLICY VALUES FOR THE PROJECTS

Erasmus+, through different projects funded, aims at pursuing different public policy values. For this section, policy value concepts were identified in the project descriptions on the official Erasmus+ website, and each project was coded with one main public policy value that the project pursued. The coding was done by the authors, in the form of a bottom-up thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2012). Note that most projects pursued several different values, and use different exact words to describe those. Some projects only contained information in other languages than English, meaning that a translation was needed. Despite those methodological challenges, this section is included in the paper, to convey an idea of what type of projects that have been funded. This is without any intention of capturing all the nuances of the projects, but rather meant to provide a brief quantitative overview in relation to what types of public policy aims the different Erasmus+ funded larp related projects pursue.

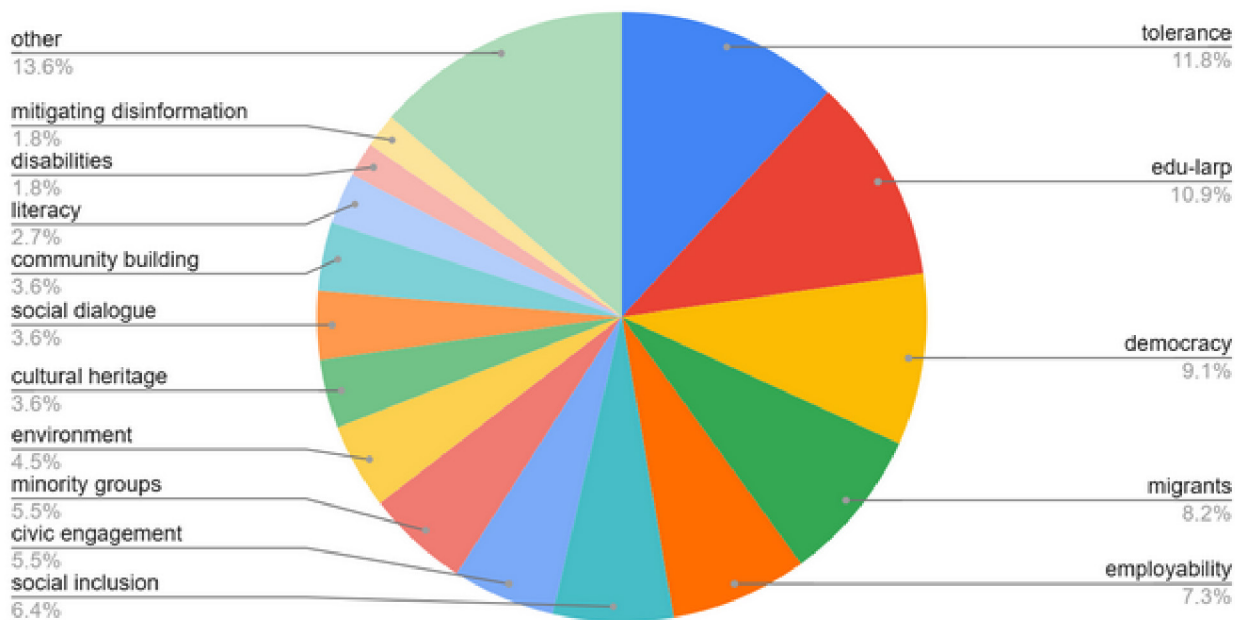


Figure 4. Pie chart of public policy values for the different Erasmus+ projects.

The *Edu-larp* category represents projects that mainly focus on spreading and developing larp and larp practices, thus pursuing larp in itself as a format, rather than focusing on larp as a tool to pursue other policy values. The remaining 89.9% of the projects utilize larp as a tool to pursue other values.

The most common value is *Tolerance*. *Migrants* refers to projects that specifically engage directly with migrants and refugee issues. *Minority groups* features projects targeted towards for instance Romani population or other minority groups within Europe. *Employability* is about helping people to get into the job market, or hone skills directly related to increasing chances of getting employed. *Literacy* features projects aimed at increasing reading and literacy skills. *Social dialogue* features projects specifically aimed at debating, and practicing voicing and sharing opinions.

The *Other* section contains all projects that were the only project pursuing that specific identified policy value, or projects engaging with more specific skills rather than policy values. The *Other* section included for instance projects aimed at math skill learning, political arts, playfulness, storytelling, LGBTQIA+ rights, and gender equality.

8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The overall positive trend in funding could suggest that there is an increasing interest from EU to fund larp projects, but it could also be related to larp organizations and other larp fundraisers getting stronger and better at applying for funding of larp-related projects. It can also be that larp, with its element of co-creation, culture, and its potential as an educational tool, fits well for Erasmus+ goals and aims, something that could be analysed in future studies.

The database can be utilized for future studies such as if there are organisations that have received funding for more than one project within the scope of the study. Also more detailed studies could be carried out, such as the thematic distribution per year and if grant money is evenly distributed between categories. Data analysis could also be made of the funded larp projects split to what Erasmus+ programme priorities they map towards. Putting the database in the appendix opens up for these types of future studies.

It would also be interesting to investigate why some countries receive more funding than others. This could be done by qualitative follow-up studies. For instance, it can be partly due to EU policy encouraging Eastern European countries to apply for Erasmus+ projects (European Commission 2019b). It could also be affected by how strong the local larp scenes and communities are, and what impact that might have for how many EU larp projects are granted. Further, professional and semi-professional larp companies and organisations reaching outside the larp community itself potentially play an important role as fundraisers. Different larp traditions might also have an effect, such as how the Nordic larp tradition often contains larps that are designed with political themes, and exploring values such as democracy (Kangas, Loponen, and Särkijärvi eds. 2016; Johansson et al. 2026) and other topics that fit well for EU projects. Future studies could also be done investigating how Erasmus+ funding reflects how the larp community does have an impact on an EU level, as well as more concrete examples of how EU policies impact the larping community.

To gain more insight, for future quantitative studies, the data material could be compared with for instance other cultural expressions getting Erasmus+ funding and compared to total Erasmus+ funding. It could be of interest to know more about the success rate and the number of applications compared to the number of actually funded projects. From a qualitative perspective, the dataset contains a rich plethora of projects and values within them, as well as links to published larps and larp-related material from each of the projects. Hopefully this study, by bringing this database together in a comprehensive manner, can open up for future research on Erasmus+ larp related projects. It can also potentially be helpful for larp practitioners to find and understand other larp projects.

This study provides the first quantitative analysis of larp funding and projects financed through the EU to our knowledge, with insights that can inform future research. The study shows that larps are getting substantial, and increasing, funding from the EU through Erasmus+. 111 larp

related projects, all including transnational design teams, spanning over a decade is a significant amount. More than 5.5 million euros have seeped into different larp-related organizations through those projects, making it a sort of cultural policy industry. This creates specific dynamics affecting European larp practices. The EU must be considered a stakeholder in the larps arranged through its programs, impacting topics and design choices. These types of funding affect the larp communities and practices, where the grassroots movement meets the multinational institution. The EU as a policy making institution, through these grants, affects the larp community in many different ways, but through the projects the larp community also becomes part of the policy making. This study, and its database of Erasmus+ projects, can help inform both larp organisations and larp researchers in future work.

9. AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Karin Johansson was lead on cleaning and analysing the data, and on writing the text. Mafalda Moganti was lead on putting together the database, and contributed to proofreading and feedback.

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: The Database

Database of larp related projects that have received funding from Erasmus+, between 2014-2022. Data material gathered by author Mafalda Morganti, as part of her work at the larp organization Chaos League.

Project Title	Funding Year	Main Policy Value (coded from abstracts)	Coord. Country	Participating Countries	EU Grant in Euros	Erasmus Project Link
PROTECT – PROMoting Transformative and Environmental Competences using Technology	2021	environment	IT	IT, ES, SI, RO	390.785	Link here.
MATH-DIGGER - MATHematics DiGital Escape Rooms	2021	math skill training	PT	PT, AT, HU, TR, IE, EL	275.573	Link here.
GreenEduLARP - Green Actions in School using Educational Live-Action Role-Playing (EduLARP)	2021	environment	EE	EE, EL, SE, PL	240.020	Link here.
Improving “Problem solving in technology-rich environments” skill of low-skilled adults with gamification, serious games and LARP	2019	literacy	SI	SI, LT, CZ, IE, ES	218.533	Link here.
Reading is my Passion and New Fashion	2020	literacy	PL	PL, IT, LV, RO, ES, EL	196.550	Link here.
DemoPLAYER	2020	democracy	CZ	CZ, SK	191.516	Link here.
"In the shoes of refugees" - Creating opportunities for young Europeans to learn about forced migration through online simulation of refugee journeys and routes.	2021	migrants	DK	DK, SE, EL, TR	189.300	Link here.

Larpers of the World	2017	civic participation	DK	DK, DE, FI, PS, NO, PL, SE, BY, RU	182.137	Link here.
COMBATING SOCIAL MEDIA DISINFORMATION AMONG YOUTH THROUGH LIVE ACTION ROLE PLAY	2021	mitigating disinformation	SE	SE, ES, RO, DE	177.776	Link here.
Role for a Change	2020	community building	IT	IT, PT, DE, MK, EL, CZ	172.748	Link here.
Deeper into LarXperience	2020	tolerance	SK	SK, CZ	166.918	Link here.
If I were in your shoes. The transformational power of good practice educational LARPing	2020	tolerance	DE	DE, IT, SI, SE	136.758	Link here.
LARxPerience	2017	tolerance	SK	SK, EE, CZ	131.482	Link here.
Knights of the Round Table	2019	civic engagement	UK	UK, LV, LT, EL, RO, ES, CZ	124.770	Link here.
Boosting Roma Youth Employment	2017	minority groups	SK	SK, BG, IT, RO, ES, HU	97.686	Link here.
Portal Project - transition of LARP to the field of adult education	2020	tolerance	PL	PL, HU, HR, EL, BG	89.530	Link here.
DiveIN - developing eduLARP methodology to prevent violent radicalization of young people	2019	tolerance	PL	PL, SE, DE, EL	85.226	Link here.
Circular Maring World - Modeling sustainable development in the times of climate crisis	2020	Environment	PL	PL, EL, DE	81.196	Link here.
Terne thaj bukjarne - Young and hardworking!	2017	minority groups	DE	DE, MK, RO, HU, BG, TR, FR, IT	77.002	Link here.
Culture on a broomstick	2015	creativity	DK	DK, PL	63.755	Link here.
Game on!	2020	civic engagement	PL	PL, EL, ES, MK, CZ	62.996	Link here.

Portal Convention about Roleplaying in Adult Education	2022	community building	HU	HU, HR, PL	60.000	Link here.
Women Empowerment	2021	gender equality	PL	PL, SI, IT	60.000	Link here.
Work ReAct	2015	employability	CZ	CZ, DE, MK, RO, EL, HU, EE, PT, BG, PL, NL, IT	58.412	Link here.
On The Way To Edinu – Understanding Intercultural Societies In Europe	2018	migrants	DE	DE, RO, IT, CY, EE, EL, PL, SE	56.787	Link here.
LARP - Fantasy and adventure in Swedish nature #3	2017	civic Engagement	SE	SE, EE, IT, NL, EL, AT, HU, DE, PT, UK, PL, RO, ES	56.757	Link here.
Youth Employment Action!	2016	employability	MK	MK, IT, DE, ES, HU, CZ, FR, TR, BG, RO	54.979	Link here.
Life Education Theatre	2018	civic engagement	PL	PL, SK	52.587	Link here.
Games 4 life	2017	gaming	SK	SK, DE, EL, CZ, ES, PT, RO, IT, BG	48.795	Link here.
Werewolves VS. Aware Wolves	2020	social inclusion	LV	LV, EL, RO, IT, DE, ES, CZ	46.173	Link here.
ON THE WAY TO EDINU 2.0 – BUILDING COMUNITY OF VALUES	2019	migrants	DE	DE, CY, PL, HR, SI, RO, EL, SE, MT	44.528	Link here.
LARP - Fantasy and adventure in Swedish nature	2016	social inclusion	SE	SE, IT, AT, EE, UK, EL	44.170	Link here.
Compos Mentis - inclusion and mental well-being in youth projects	2020	Social inclusion	PL	PL, CY, HU, GE, CZ, BA, HR, PT, EL, SE	43.289	Link here.
INspiring YOU(th) - PeaceBuilding	2017	peace building	PT	PT, BA, CY, PS, TR, GE, IT, IL	42.434	Link here.
LARP - Fantasy and adventure in Swedish nature nr 2	2016	social inclusion	SE	SE, DE, EL, RO, IT, SI, NL, EE	40.912	Link here.

EDULARP – INTERACTIVE METHODS OF PROMOTING EUROPEAN VAULUES	2018	edu-larp	DE	DE, EE, SE, IT, PL, EL, CY, RO	40.826	Link here.
EduLARP - Fantasy and adventure in Swedish nature #4b	2019	social inclusion	SE	SE, HU, EL, SI, PL, FR, EE, IT	40.770	Link here.
The beauty in YOUth – the beauty in Europe. Extended edition 2.0	2018	democracy	DE	DE, PL, LT, RO, HU, EL, FR, ES	40.173	Link here.
EduLARP	2022	LGBTQIA+	SK	SK, TR, ES, RS, CZ, RO, AM, PT, EL	40.132	Link here.
You-Hiker	2021	mitigating disinformation	LT	LT, EL, UA, GE, BY, IT	40.045	Link here.
Engaged Art – An Excursion	2015	political art	DK	DK, IT, DE	39.833	Link here.
“Migration Is Natural, Borders Are Not”	2017	Migrants	DE	DE, CZ, PL, ES, RO	39.479	Link here.
Speak Up With Your Stories!	2020	tolerance	DE	DE, NL, UA, TR, RU, HR, PS	35.371	Link here.
Play it out	2018	employability	CZ	CZ, IT, LV, SK, PT, HU, MT, EE	34.805	Link here.
SHOOT: Stop HOoliganism Today	2019	tolerance	EL	EL, TR, IT, RS, BG, LT, HR	34.400	Link here.
Settling of Rohan	2017	migrants	LT	LT, LV, HU	31.171	Link here.
"Mayday Menschlichkeit" - Letzer Ausweg: Flucht: Europa zwischen Menschenrechten und Isolation	2017	migration	DE	DE, CZ, PL, LT, SI, AT, HR, ES	30.184	Link here.
It's all about the game!	2019	tolerance	CY	CY, LT, HR, RS, IT, PL, EL	30.076	Link here.
Fiume Crisis Project - An Edularp Development Project for Adult Education	2021	cultural heritage	HU	HU, HR, IT	30.000	Link here.
Educational LARP development & networking	2021	edu-larp	SE	SE, PL, SI	30.000	Link here.
Push Up Sports and Arts Balkan	2021	cultural heritage	EL	EL, BG, AL, HR, MK, BA	29.784	Link here.

Tolerance-the path to inclusion	2019	minority groups	RO	RO, MK, IT, ES, PL, EL	29.512	Link here.
60 Jahre Römische Verträge - Europa ausgeträumt?: Zwischen erfolgreichem Friedensprojekt und Anti-Europapopulismus	2016	democracy	DE	DE, PL, LT, HU, ES, EE	29.164	Link here.
Flucht und Migration: Angekommen und angenommen in Europa?	2016	migrants	DE	DE, PL, UA	28.538	Link here.
We stand for tolerance	2019	minority groups	RO	RO, MK, HU, IT, LT	28.116	Link here.
A new Path	2019	migrants	IT	IT, ES, EL, TN, LB, LT, MT, JO	28.004	Link here.
Amaro Kher: Romany Youth and other minorities, human rights and empowerment against racism	2020	minority groups	ES	ES, CY, HR, DE, SK, FI, LV	27.240	Link here.
THEATER TOOLS FOR DRAMATIC SITUATIONS - how to deal with intercultural conflicts and inclusion of migrants	2019	migrants	RO	RO, LV, MK, HR, CY, LT, CZ, BG, EE, ES, IT, FR, NL, PL, SK, EL, TR	27.157	Link here.
Way to live	2015	edu-larp	SK	SK, CZ	26.625	Link here.
One Future, One Hope: Intercambio juvenil contra la radicalización, a través del deporte y la salud.	2022	tolerance	ES	ES, DE, FI, RO, PT, BE	26.417	Link here.
Symposium	2017	civic engagement	EL	EL, IT, CZ, HR, ES, LV, LT, BG	26.195	Link here.
Design your experience - LARP	2016	tolerance	CZ	CZ, SK	25.326	Link here.
Game building	2021	community building	SK	SK, MT, GE, LT, LV	25.297	Link here.

Into The Wild – Generation “Next” experiencing the (EU) ropean Dimensions	2014	democracy	DE	DE, PL, HU, IT, CZ, SK, SE	25.168	Link here.
The Art of Play - Das Spiel. Der Ernst. Die Gesellschaft	2018	playfulness	DE	DE, SK, FR, PL, CZ	24.996	Link here.
I feel I defend 2.0	2022	tolerance	ES	ES, IT, PL, FR, EE, TR, RO, SI, RS, LV	24.816	Link here.
We know to tolerate	2020	minority groups	RO	RO, ES, MK, HU, BG	24.795	Link here.
IMPROVISE, ADAPT, OVERCOME - Using Edu-larp for developing personal resilience.	2020	community building	SE	SE, SI, EL, PL, DE	24.625	Link here.
Foo Skillers	2022	soft skills	IT	IT, HR, RO, PL, EL, SK	24.186	Link here.
#Yesterday.Europe. Today	2021	cultural heritage	IT	IT, PT, RO, EL, SE	24.121	Link here.
Gamification	2014	democracy	UK	UK, HR, MK, IT, EL, SI, TR	23.212	Link here.
You(th) are Creating an Inclusive World!	2014	tolerance	CZ	CZ, PT, RO, TR, HU, PL, ES, SK, IT	21.172	Link here.
Level Up Your Leadership	2020	leadership	HU	HU, EL, PT, CY, ES, LV, DK, HR, MK, IT	20.990	Link here.
Gate Of Dreams	2017	edu-larp	PL	PL, HU, SK, RO, CZ, CY	20.702	Link here.
Imagination has no barriers	2017	disabilities	HU	HU, PT, RO, IT, PL, BG	20.660	Link here.
USING EDULARP METHODOLOGY FOR CIVIC EDUCATION IN EUROPEAN CONTEXT - TRAINING FOR TRAINERS	2019	edu-larp	DE	DE, MT, RO, PL, SE, CY, HR, SI, EL	20.531	Link here.
RolePlay Your Way Towards Understanding	2019	edu-larp	CZ	CZ, LT, IT, TR, PL, EL, PT, BG	20.520	Link here.
Youth on Board!	2016	diversity	PL	PL, DE, PT, SK, IT, CZ, RO	20.064	Link here.

Think Epic Dreams - Your Story Starts Now!	2015	employability	RO	RO, BA, ES, MK, HU, CZ, TR	19.975	Link here.
Youth: empower? Challenge? Dialogue?	2015	employability	AT	AT, AM, EL, PS	19.734	Link here.
PAO CultRural experiment	2016	rural development	RO	RO, IT, NL, HU, CZ, ES, MK	19.628	Link here.
EuropeLIVE	2016	democracy	PL	PL, IT, LT, ES, PT, RO, DE	19.298	Link here.
Ефективност на обучението в смесена и онлайн среда.	2022	edu-larp	BG	BG	19.215	Link here.
LARP it up	2020	social inclusion	PL	PL, SK, LT	18.155	Link here.
Close Up 2, Culture Since Rome	2016	cultural heritage	PT	PT, EE, PL, NL, HU, RO	17.900	Link here.
"Creative teaching and training methods to combat early school leaving and better pupils' motivation"	2018	mitigate early school leaving	RO	RO, NL	17.885	Link here.
Play the life - live the game	2014	edu-larp	SK	SK, CZ	17.160	Link here.
"GET YOUR HORIZONS EXPANDED!" – LIFE ACTION PLANNING ROLE GAME STEREOTYPES & CRITICAL THINKING	2018	tolerance	IT	IT, BG, LV, CY, DE, SK, PL, CZ	17.105	Link here.
EC(h)O	2021	Environment	HR	HR, ES, RO, BG	16.978	Link here.
Dungeons and Librarians: the Quest for Gamified Reading Promotion in Youth	2020	literacy	LT	LT, LV, BG, EE	16.347	Link here.
P.L.A.Y. Play, learn, act more effectively with and for Young people	2022	edu-larp	IT	IT, EL, CY, BG, ES, RO, PT	16.231	Link here.
Let's play life	2014	democracy	PL	PL, RO, SI, EL, BG, TR, SK, HR	15.943	Link here.

LARP: Realsete pädevuste arendamine väljamõeldud maailmades	2017	edu-larp	EE	EE, LT	15.900	Link here.
HIKE: (Un)Essentials	2018	edu-larp	LT	LT, LV, BY, GE, UK, RS, EL, AM	14.800	Link here.
Jump over taboo	2020	social dialogue	PL	PL, IT, SI, RO, EL, EE	13.524	Link here.
Game Lab	2020	soft skills	HR	HR, CZ, ES, RO, IT	13.440	Link here.
Talk Talk	2018	social dialogue	PL	PL, CZ, LV, HU	13.432	Link here.
GaMYTHication	2020	storytelling	PL	PL, NO, TR, EL, IT	13.244	Link here.
Learn from past, build the future!	2019	social dialogue	HR	HR, HU, PL, RO, SI, ES	12.830	Link here.
"End of the EU - the game"	2016	democracy	PL	PL, SK, TR, LT, IT	12.803	Link here.
Larp adventure	2018	edu-larp	SK	SK, DK, EE, CZ	12.745	Link here.
EduLARP - Fantasy and adventure in Swedish nature #5	2020	environment	SE	SE, EL, SI, PL, DE	12.400	Link here.
The Intercultural Journey!	2017	employability	MK	MK, RO, DE, ES, LT, IT	11.965	Link here.
iFeel - iDefend	2018	democracy	ES	ES, IT, MK, RO, PL, LV	11.890	Link here.
Let's play together	2015	disabilities	PL	PL, IT, BG, ES	11.833	Link here.
Boost Your Future	2019	employability	PL	PL, ES, MK	11.682	Link here.
Boost Your Future 2.0	2020	employability	PL	PL, IT, ES	10.555	Link here.
Europe for you	2020	democracy	HR	HR, ES, RO	9.950	Link here.
Let's Be Game Changers!	2016	social inclusion	RO	RO, HU, ES, CZ, CY, PL, EE	9.603	Link here.
MEDIART - Visual art & new media	2019	social dialogue	HR	HR, EL, PL, ES	8.675	Link here.
YE - Larp4Life	2016	cultural understanding	NO	NO, PS, DE, LB	0	Link here.

Karin Johansson is finalizing her PhD in Human-Computer Interaction at Uppsala University, and her studies include how to design cultural experiences as policymaking. She is a live-action role-player and has co-authored several academic publications on larp in recent years. She is also active in the Larpocracy project, which focuses on larp and democracy. Johansson has a background as a teacher and runs a design company that creates playful educational experiences, such as larps, interactive exhibitions, and games.

Mafalda Morganti has been designing, running and assisting projects related to youth work, adult education, and training, both at local and international level since 2010. She holds a specific expertise in coordinating Strategic Partnerships projects and designing both formal and nonformal educational activities, which she does also on behalf of the Italian collective Chaos League since 2021. Morganti works as a freelance trainer with a wide range of organisations, from small, grassroots level NGOs or informal groups, up to well established international organisations, public bodies such as National Agencies for Youth, and local government agencies. Her main areas of expertise as a trainer are communication, community building, group dynamics, self-directed learning, and personal development, mainly through methods such as storytelling, improv theatre, and edu-larp.