International Journal of
Role-Playing

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Editorial

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1. INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 11

Academic readers are, by now, two years into the global COVID-19 pandemic, accustomed to editors opening their journals with texts articulating the many setbacks in the creation of their issue. Suffice to say: there have been challenges this year (2021) in bringing this issue into the world. Yet we can also celebrate the fact that role-playing game studies appears to be as vibrant as ever, with increasing attention paid to the form in scholarly monographs and peer-reviewed articles across a variety of disciplines.

In particular, we as editors detected in the past few years a broader shift toward "applied" RPGs: role-playing games and activities used in educational, therapeutic, spiritual, corporate, and other settings to achieve specific outcomes. Whereas in previous decades -- e.g., the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and the resultant RPG-shaming of the 1990s and 2000s -- when one could hardly get an institution of repute to take RPGs seriously, nowadays role-playing games can be integrated into virtually every sphere of human interaction and potentially receive support. For this reason, scholarly interest in studying the design and impacts of analog RPGs as vehicles for change has flourished, leading one of our editors, Sarah Lynne Bowman, to co-found the Transformative Play Initiative at the Department of Game Design at Uppsala University. For similar reasons, we devoted this year's Call for Papers to applied role-playing, and will continue to center our focus on the potential impacts of these games, while still accepting academic articles pertaining to RPGs more broadly as usual.

Accordingly, now that the world is starting to take RPGs seriously, the articles in this issue examine some of their benefits beyond play, as well as the serious limitations and constraints of these play media. *Critical Role*, *Stranger Things*, and other popular media have played an outsized role in presenting role-playing games to the world beyond our close circles. Millions more are connecting with the hobby -- almost all of them with *Dungeons & Dragons,* the game prominently featured in those media. This has forced us role-playing game scholars to (a) take those RPG media seriously (Jones 2021; Hedge and Grouling 2021) and (b) question the fundamentals of D&D-style RPGs. These fundamentals include their violence, their bio-essentialist depictions of race, and the identity tourism predominant in the hobby, in addition to their possibilities of healing or teaching others through moderated sword-and-sorcery storytelling. From this vantage point, as well as a more expansive definition of RPGs that includes forms such as Nordic larp and Story Games, our issue takes shape.

Questioning the centrality of violence in *D&D*, Sarah Albom's article, "The Killing Roll: The Prevalence of Violence in *Dungeons & Dragons*," finds a game threaded with player-characters' requirements to engage in combat and be necessarily good at it, despite the otherwise negative social effects of violence in the real world. This textual analysis of the game's 5th Edition *Player's Handbook* reveals how player-characters are encouraged by the text to escalate to violence and peaceful resolutions are neither normalized nor mechanically supported in many cases.

With regard to themes of violence and oppression, Diana J. Leonard, Jovo Janjetovic, and Maximilian Usman look at how larps can offer a space for perspective taking, empathy, and reflection

in "Playing to Experience Marginalization: Benefits and Drawbacks of 'Dark Tourism' in Larp." They explore how players can portray characters who have a marginalized identity different from their own, which can be beneficial. However, they remind us that structures of privilege figure prominently in the representation of the marginalized, showing the limits of an "empathy" framework in our RPG discussions. Thus, the authors offer best practices and recommendations with regard to engaging in this type of play respectfully.

Looking at these themes in a different light, as Joe Lasley points out in "Fantasy In Real Life: Making Meaning from Vicarious Experiences with a Tabletop Role-Playing Game Live-Play Internet Stream," *D&D* as a game of fantasy violence *also* permits the fandom of, say, *Critical Role* to explore their own identities, work through mental health challenges, and grow personally as people. How can this be? Lasley's qualitative analysis of the experiences of seven (7) "Critters" reveals the parasocial dimension of *Critical Role*, oft-framed in a negative light, as a means for fans to self-reflect, engage in meta-cognition, and experience a sense of closeness with the actors on the show as role models.

Kerttu Lehto's "Role-Playing Games and Well-Being" is a terrific companion piece to Lasley's, for she provides an exhaustive literature review of RPGs with respect to well-being and the arts. Lehto's work reminds us that psychodrama and therapy have always exerted significant pressure on role-play practices, not only in therapeutic climates but also in the entertainment sphere. This article emphasizes the need for greater integration and sharing of knowledge between these fields of study, as well as the practices surrounding them, as RPGs hold significant potential as vehicles for personal development and well-being.

Along these lines, Josephine Baird's autoethnography, "Role-playing the Self: Trans Self-Expression, Exploration, and Embodiment in (Live Action) Role-playing Games" provides further evidence that RPGs for entertainment also form a pivotal space of gender exploration for those who identify as trans and/or are in any stage of gender transition. Baird looks at the liminality and character enactment of RPGs as the core component, particularly for players who have limited outlets for other forms of gender expression and play. Baird sees tremendous potential for larps especially to provide spaces for embodiment of gender by facilitating moments for players to have socially validating experiences of gender performance, which can be crucial for well-being.

Finally, in terms of more broad applications of applied role-playing games, Katrin Geneuss offers a stand-out example of educational use of role-play in "The Use of the Role-playing Technique STARS in Formal Didactic Contexts." Geneuss examines the results of 16 live action role-playing games with a total of 53 cycles of Design-based Research (DBR) designed over the course of 5 years, which were conducted in German schools. Geneuss' rigorous work provides helpful guidelines for any and all teachers seeking to use educational role-play -- or edu-larp -- in their classrooms.

When role-play is applied, as in so many cases above, we see both its transformative potential as well as its riskier dimensions. Role-playing games bear both the legacies of war games and therapy, and are now heavily mediated within an exponentially expanded commercial entertainment sphere. From education to self-actualization, their use value is apparent, if still rife with ambiguity and larger questions. It is our belief as editors of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* that scholars in our field should continue to ask these big questions, for the broader philosophical implications and practical uses of role-play are now more urgent than ever.

-- **Evan Torner, Sarah Lynne Bowman,** and **William J. White**
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The Killing Roll: The Prevalence of Violence in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Abstract: This research project explores the prevalence of violence and its facilitation in the popular tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). Violence within the system's 5th edition core rule-book, the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b), is analysed using textual analysis with insight from previous research on common violence motivators of heroism, hatred, and sensation-seeking curiosity. Overall, the study concludes that the *D&D* system facilitates playing violence, specifically through heroic motivation based on androcentric perceptions of chivalric fantasy ideals. This study also finds that the system spotlights combat over nonviolent interactions. Future research could investigate how participant agency may affect violence in similar traditional RPG systems, and why choosing violence in a no-consequence game could reflect real-world behaviours.

Keywords: *Dungeons & Dragons*, violence, tabletop role-playing games, textual analysis, combat

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) are open fantasy worlds where, in theory, anything is possible. Players create fictional characters and then embody them within a codified virtual reality. However, I have always experienced a prevalence of violence when playing these games. This study aims to investigate how violence is facilitated by the game itself. I define role-playing games (RPGs) as games where players embody their characters, where there is communal role-play, and where the setting is open-ended with multiple paths to resolution.

Perhaps the most famous of these RPGs is *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*). First published in 1974, it would "forever alter" the gaming landscape by pioneering the structure of both TTRPGs and pop culture in general (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 4). As an analog system, *D&D* only requires a pen, paper, dice, and imagination. A small group of players sit around a table and collaboratively create a story within a world narrated by a Dungeon Master, or DM. Players verbally express their character's actions rather than physically perform them, and game mechanics (such as rolling dice) are highly visible. These mechanics result in a keen awareness of the game's fictionality. The introduction of the game's 5th edition *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) states that there are "three broad categories of activity in the game: exploration, interaction, and combat" (6). It is reasonable to expect that violence forms an intrinsic component of gameplay. Having essentially invented the genre of codified role-playing games, *D&D* is arguably one of the most popular systems existing today and "has stood as a metonym for the hobby of role-playing itself" (Torner 2015a, 160).

Like other TTRPGs, *D&D* is often perceived as a trivial and escapist hobby. However, players" apparent enjoyment of the game's unavoidable violence may be important for understanding broader social attitudes. Currently, little research exists on the prevalence of violence in RPGs. I aim to help fill this research gap by exploring whether *D&D*'s structure fosters violence. I hypothesise that this game's rules limit some narrative choices while facilitating more violent options. As Dormans (2006) describes, RPGs are "rule-based simulation "engines" that facilitate playful interaction" (par. 1). Their controlled rulesets can affect narrative (Torner 2015a, 163). RPGs are important to study because of their widespread popularity. We need to understand how the structures influence the way people play these games.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A brief history of *D&D* helps contextualise this study's focus. More in-depth histories of the game and its influence can provide additional nuance (e.g. Trammell 2018a; Witwer 2015). *D&D* emerged by melding the statistical combat methods of strategic board game communities with role-play. Published in 1974, *D&D* was the first commercially released RPG. Stang and Trammell (2019) suggest that the game's structure and themes would have been influenced by its authors" personal backgrounds as middle-aged, Christian, married, and White Americans. Also of influence was the "boys-club nature" promoted by the original publisher, Tactical Studies Rules (733). Therefore, the research used to analyse the motivators present in the system must be from relevant cultural contexts.

RPGs are distinct from other game structures in that they are socially (and sometimes physically) immersive activities. Players have the perceived freedom to choose what their characters do. Therefore, the study of violence in *D&D* rulebooks should consider play state and immersion theory. The role-playing nature of RPGs mean that they require a level of imagination to play. Players are encouraged to create characters with personalities, beliefs, and desires that may not coincide with their own ideals. By acting out these characters, players enter a "magic circle" play state separate from the rest of the world (Mortensen 2009, 60; Zook 2012). This separation allows RPGs to create spaces for cultural production (Garcia 2017, 234). It should be noted that the concept of the "magic circle" is somewhat deceptive because it implies that a game has nothing to do with reality (Mortensen 2009, 61). But this is not clearly or simply so. Since play is representational, the participants' memories and past experiences influence how they might perform their character (Whitlock, Voorhees, and Call 2012). There is an ongoing back-and-forth between play-world and real-world experiences. This nuance is important for future research into how player agency facilitates RPG character violence. Because play is out of the ordinary, it allows the user to move into a "state that follows different rules" (Mortensen 2009, 10). However, the imagined world of the RPG still requires some rules to remain intact (Costikyan 2002, 22; Mortensen 2009, 61). Torner (2014a) discusses how game rules may influence player actions by facilitating or preventing certain behaviours for their characters. The rules that structure a game often work with the "building blocks of culture," affecting the types of play produced (par. 1).

The RPG medium facilitates immersion. Stenros (2013) discusses this embodiment as part of an aesthetic of creation, not observance. Unlike other entertainment, RPGs work with a first-person audience (Montola 2012, 90; Stenros 2010, 301). Academically, immersion theory is complex and debated because it can define many different experiences (Bowman and Standiford 2016; Calleja 2011). Rather than redefining it, Bowman and Standiford (2016) established six significant categories for immersion types in RPGs: activity, game, environment, narrative, character, and community. Immersion works as a form of engagement. Players are engrossed yet aware that they are pretending (Bowman 2018, 3). Poremba (2007) discusses that these "brink games" border the double-coded line between game and reality and allow expression of traditionally taboo behaviour. Brink games also cause a "bleed" between game and reality, which can blur the line between character and participant (Montola 2010, 2). Nephew (2006) furthers this concept, explaining that there is an intertwined relationship between character and player in an RPG (120). Although some RPG texts clearly state that there is a distinction between player and character, the distinction is pointless when engaging in the performative aspect of the experience, which is the central point of the game (123). As an example, much of the *Player's Handbook* (2014b) refers to actions being undertaken by "you," as opposed to "your character." Nephew (2006) notes that in her experience of playing TTRPGs, players express the actions undertaken by their characters by using first-person pronouns. By doing this, the player identifies with their character and becomes the activity itself (123). Furthermore, the values and traits a player chooses for their character are implicitly self-reflexive (124). Players can hide behind their character persona and allow their unconscious desires

to become manifest (122). In sum, in-character choices may have out-of-character emotional backing that emerge from the player's real-world experiences and fantasies.

Violence has broad dimensions, occurs on multiple levels, and involves multiple systems. This study uses Wallace's (2003) definition of violence as both the covert violence of destructive misinformation and myth and the overt violence of physical assault. Wallace discusses violence from a multicultural approach, where attitudes, beliefs, and traditions are passed from generation to generation and culturally influence behaviours towards the "diverse and different other" (4). She notes that covert violence typically precedes and "may actually set the stage" for the manifestation of overt physical violence (8). Her small case study in the US noted that the country has a significant culture of violence, involving implicit understandings around the use of physical force, displays of power, and the spread of myth and misinformation (6). Violence against the "diverse and different other" has been institutionalised and codified in the US. Other research on Western culture has identified three covert motivators for overt violence in war, sport, and, literature: heroism, hatred, and sensation-seeking (e.g. Galinsky 1972; Kerr 2005; Stang and Trammell 2019; Trammell 2020; Trammell 2018a; Stevens 2015). To date, RPGs have not been included in this research. It is not clear if these three themes are relevant to RPGs, or to the same degree.

Heroism, the first theme, has roots in Western concepts of masculinity (Galinsky 1972; Garcia 2017; Mangan 2003; Nauright and Chandler 1996; Nephew 2006; Trammell 2018a; Stevens 2015). Connell (2005) suggests that many characteristics of masculine identity are invisible and hegemonic in our society. Trammell (2018) discursively traced the culture of masculinity across all editions of *D&D*, focusing on its connection to militarism and violence. He concluded that while current editions of *D&D* contain more inclusive vocabulary and no longer assume its players are White males, conventional masculine overtones of military and patriarchy are still prevalent in the texts (130). Looking at historical context, we can see how the imperial mentality fostered by ancient heroic characters such as Herakles influenced modern RPGs. Galinsky (1972) notes that audiences find Herakles' associations with strength and prowess powerfully appealing. Mangan and McKenzie (2003) discuss how masculinity evolved during nineteenth-century British imperialism, where violence was deployed to assert moral and physical superiority. Hunting was viewed as training for war. This link caused enemies to be viewed as "[beasts] on two legs" (109). Heroes were the civilised explorers who tackled the primitive and foreign unknown. Nephew (2006) highlights that mainstream culture viewed (and still views to some extent) *D&D* players as social misfits, foolish, and feminised (128). This could explain the male-orientated and explicitly militaristic settings of early *D&D* editions, as the designers tried to contrast perceived outlier inferiority with traditional cultural concepts of individual heroism. Galinsky (1972) discusses how individual heroes in Ancient Greece such as Herakles worked for "glory and honour," desiring eternal recognition over long life (9). Portrayed as a saviour, Herakles' violence was justified by the fact that he was freeing the world of evil monsters (24). Captain America, who helped form the modern superhero genre, appealed to American audiences through idealised masculine tropes such as courage, justice, and mercy, even within a juxtaposed context of violence (Stevens 2015, 46). Outside of stories, male heroism is celebrated in war and nation-building through memorials such as ANZAC Day or the Arc de Triomphe (Connell 2005, xvi). The culture of masculinity legitimises violence by encouraging hero tropes and promoting power fantasies where characters can chivalrously and valiantly save the day.

The second theme, hate-caused violence, is both a stand-alone motivator and an instigator for heroism violence (Baumeister and Butz 2005; Beck and Pretzer 2005; Kerr 2005, 39; Sternberg 2005). Beck and Pretzer (2005) suggest that hate can emerge from feeling wronged or mistreated. If the person thinks that their grievance is legitimate, their violence may feel justifiable (72). Baumeister and Butz (2005) echo this sentiment. They suggest that people may resort to violence when their image feels threatened or attacked. Hate can also validate heroism through individual and group categorisations

that mark "the diverse and different other" as evil (Wallace 2003, 4). Groups often define themselves by identifying (or inventing) who they are not (Baumeister and Butz 2005, 91). This distinction between the self and the other creates a boundary, allowing for overgeneralizations, stereotypes, concepts of hierarchy, and antagonising narratives (Beck and Pretzer 2005; Trammell 2018b). Stereotypes often reduce the individual diversity of the othered group into a set of defining attributes that are assumed to make up their underlying and unchanging "essence" (Trammell 2018b). The belief of superiority over othered groups builds up over time and can legitimise their subjugation (Kerr 2005). In RPGs, perceived differences are built into the use of race categories and traits. Hodes (2019a) discusses how *D&D* was strongly influenced by works such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, incorporating past prejudices and pseudoscientific theories about racial hierarchy into a quantitative system. Fluid ethnicities are turned into fixed races with inherent biological differences (Hodes 2019a, par. 22; Trammell 2018b, 444). Distinctly different characters, especially those defined by the system as innately evil or lesser than the players" own characters, are easily dehumanised and therefore more convenient to attack without emotional concern (Hodes 2019a, par. 62). Other research suggests that *D&D* draws on misogynistic concepts of control and power. Stang and Trammell (2019) researched the female monstrosity in a prominent *D&D* rulebook called the *Monster Manual*. Historically, the term monstrosity categorised and controlled those considered non-normative by the church and state. Stang and Trammell's case study of the Hag monster revealed underlying misogynistic hostility towards unregulated (and therefore dangerous) motherhood (740). Connell (2005) aptly states that "there is a dimension of masculinity in the culture of imperialism," which reflects how differences facilitate violence (xvi). The *D&D* hero is hypermasculine and xenophobic (Stang and Trammell 2019, 742). Hatred of difference and perceptions of superiority in a fantasy RPG world can help individuals reduce complicated struggles between groups to simple binaries of good opposing foreign evil (Jewett 1984, 11).

Sensation-seeking, the third theme, is a motivational behaviour caused by the desire for new information and experiences (Kerr 2005; Litman 2005; Oosterwijk 2017). Media studies reveal that people want to watch interesting information like the socially negative stimuli of a violent movie gunfight (e.g. Berlyne 1966; Hoffner and Levine 2005). As a biological characteristic, Oosterwijk (2017) suggests that the ability to adapt through experiencing socially negative information means we are more likely to survive. Since the events of *D&D* take place in the separate "magic circle," players can indulge their enjoyment of experiencing violence through a relatively harmless medium (Baumeister and Butz 2005). Kerr (2005) further suggests that people may be violent to gain the thrill of doing something taboo. Play violence, as seen through the sanctions of violence in sport, promotes fun and allows individuals to experience power within the confines of a separate environment with its own rules and norms (Kerr 2005, 42). The magic circle means players can explore powerful or negative emotions through their character without social sanction (Montola 2010). Research relevant to this study is Trammell's (2020) investigation of the relationship between torture and play, specifically in relation to minority groups. He defines torture as a "long-term form of discipline that uses coercive techniques to subjugate people" (37). Trammell argues that in all acts of play, regardless of their innocence, we are subtly disciplining people to engage in unspoken rules. He concludes that game systems based on White and colonial norms rely on excluding and ignoring the trauma of minority groups. With consideration of the concept of play violence as discussed by Kerr (2005), I further argue that game frameworks such as *D&D* deliberately juxtapose pleasure and torture. Players are facilitated to derive affective pleasure from the subjugation of the other and are motivated by sensation-seeking desire without consequence.

Violence, both covert and physical, is prevalent in media and games. In traditional Western culture, themes of masculinity, White superiority, and imperialism have influenced the creation of game systems such as *D&D*. Combat and violence are the hallmarks of the male fantasy (Nephew 2006, 132).

The ways in which players can experience a game's virtual world are shaped by its culturally informed rule systems. With this in mind, this study seeks to unpack the following questions:

1. To what extent does the structure of the chosen *D&D* rulebook facilitate violence?
2. How does the *D&D* rulebook text present violence?
3. What sanctions exist in the *D&D* rulebook for when violence occurs?

3. METHOD

This study's primary goal was to determine whether the primary *D&D* rulebook facilitates violence, and if so, how. First, I read and annotated the *D&D* 5th edition *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b). I also read the *Dungeon Master's Guide* and *Monster's Manual* of the same edition for personal contextual reference. These three texts are canonically considered to be the core rulebooks for the current *D&D* system. On its own, however, the *Player's Handbook* is the text most players read to either play or run a complete game.

In my annotation, I analysed what portion of the text addresses violence, whether implicitly or explicitly. Since the text uses descriptive words and phrases, some mentions of violence were identified through the surrounding context. I also counted phrases I deemed explicit in facilitating violence to quantify representation whenever possible. Among other words, these phrases included combat, attack, enemy, monster, weapon, damage, and foe. To balance analysis, several phrases not indicative of violence were counted: adventure, friend, love, trust, and exploration. The counting did not include the table of contents, the index, or any paratext. In cases where the text was ambiguous, I gave the book the benefit of the doubt and assumed that these passages were not referencing violence.

My deeper analysis focused on mechanics that facilitate violence, such as the combat structure. While a full analysis of *D&D* spells is beyond the scope of this project, I have given an overview. First, the 361 spells in the *Player's Handbook* were categorised by whether they aided violent activity. Then, analysis was further broken down into how violent-categorised spells facilitated violence and the percentage of spells in each category by level.

I also briefly highlighted the effects of paratextual influence within the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) by looking at the layout of the character sheet. Jara (2013) discusses that RPG paratext can frame perceptions of the game, influence expectations, and affect story production (39). Unlike novels or films, RPG textbooks are a structure from which the main narrative is constructed during gameplay. Peripheral frames in RPG textbooks can influence participants before the game begins and so shape the narrative. Therefore, determining the genre, theme, and mood indicated by a text can help us understand what expectations players have about the game and what narratives will be deemed appropriate.

After determining how many mentions of violence occurred within the text, I analysed these mentions of violence for motivators invoked. Based on my research of common motivators for violence and the historical context of *D&D* as discussed in the literature review above, I focused on themes of heroism, hatred, and sensation-seeking. A key assumption of my project was that people play *D&D* according to the pre-established rulesets that its rulebook defines, which structures and limits what behaviours players give their characters. My analysis considered that this system encourages personal immersion and communal cooperation and that players know they are engaging in events separate from the real world.

4. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

An overview of gameplay and basic vocabulary is helpful to understand *D&D*. At its core, *D&D* is a numbers game. Players create their character by choosing their "race" (species) and "class" (general profession). *D&D* has diverse demi-humans (fantasy races resembling humans) from elves to goblins. Classes are also more fantastical than real-life jobs, such as "cleric" (magical priest). A "build" is a character's overall skills and job that contribute to how the player wants their character to operate. Because *D&D* happens around a table, players verbally describe their character's actions. When an action's outcome is uncertain, participants roll a 20-sided die (known as a d20) to see if they succeed. The higher the number, the better. A character's abilities can modify the die number and affect the final outcome. Players can choose what their characters are good or bad at by assigning numbers to ability scores. For example, a player may choose for their burly fighter to have a high strength ability score or for their wizard to have high intelligence. The numbers for each ability score affect the final outcome of the relevant die roll. Dice rolls are also affected by whether a character has an advantage or disadvantage to succeed. For example, when a target cannot see a character in combat, the character is deemed more likely to hit and has advantage on attacks: they roll two dice and use the higher number. Conversely, a character with a disadvantage takes the lower number of the two dice.

The descriptive language of the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) means that overall analysis must rely on paragraph context. Quantitatively, a count and analysis of violent text revealed that less than a quarter of the material in the *Player's Handbook* is violence-based. However, violence was found to make up the majority of the text's examples, options, and descriptions. Even simple examples, such as the use of dice, have higher ratios of violent to nonviolent examples: "players roll dice to resolve whether their attacks hit or miss, or whether their adventurers can scale a cliff, roll away from the strike of a magical lightning bolt, or pull off some other dangerous task" (5). In this example, two of the three specific suggestions explicitly involve violence or conflict. Also of note is the proportion of violent classes. Of the 12 classes available in the *Player's Handbook*, three specifically mention the word "warrior" in their overview and five more have combat-based descriptions (45). Almost every class has explicitly combat-based skills (59, 61-63, 71-75, 78-81, 84-88, 91-93, 96-98, 102, 107). Bard and druid do not have explicit combat skills. However, they each have an ability (Bardic Inspiration for bards and Wild Shape for druids) whose description either uses combat structure terminology or has an explanation on how to use the ability in combat (53, 67). Both of these classes also offer specialised subclasses with explicit combat abilities (55, 69). There are no completely non-combat classes in the *Player's Handbook*. Each class description starts with three descriptive examples to inspire players with ways to play their character. Of the 36 total examples, 26 are violence-based. If a newer player only had these examples as a reference, they would be exposed to few non-combat ways to play. While the *D&D* rulebook overall does not have much violent content, the ratio of violent to nonviolent material in its examples and class options limits choice and points towards violence as a major factor in gameplay.

Further quantitative analysis was conducted by counting the instances of 18 different phrases in the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b). Of these, 13 were categorised as facilitating violence. To aid in preventing bias based on unequal analysis focus, a further five words were counted that were deemed as aiding non-violent resolution and/or relating to a non-violent activity as defined by the game. Similar phrases were included when counting each word. For example, the phrases "violence" and "violent" were counted together. Contextual investigation of the phrases "hate" and "blood" found that there were too many instances of surrounding context not implying violence to be included in this quantitative part of the study.

Table 1: Violence Phrases and their Number of Instances within the *Player's Handbook*

Attack	827	Foe	47
Damage	799	Enemy	34
Weapon	529	Fight	33
Combat	109	Violence	21
Evil	100	Harm	16
Monster	99	Slay	8
Battle	61		

Table 2: Anti-Violent Phrases and their Number of Instances within the *Player's Handbook*

Adventure	209	Friend	16
Love	36	Trust	14
Exploration	19		

Cross-comparison of the chosen phrases reveals a higher quantity of violent to nonviolent phrases. As mentioned previously, the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) states that there are "three broad categories of activity in the game: exploration, interaction, and combat" (6). Within the text, the term "combat" occurs almost six times as often as "exploration." Another cross-comparison of note is that the term "enemy" occurs twice as often as "friend." If we combine "enemy" and "foe," the two terms occur five times as often as "friend." Collectively, "damage" and "attack" have over 1,600 instances within the text. Discussing certain concepts more often, the text inadvertently places more importance on them. This influences the player's expectation of the game. The high use of terms such as "monster" or "evil" relates to Stang and Trammell's (2019) concept of *D&D* categorising the non-normative as monstrous, as well as relating to the violence motivator of hate as discussed below.

5. STRUCTURE ANALYSIS

When analysing the structure of the *D&D* system, we must keep in mind Torner's (2014a, 2014b, 2015b) three-part series about uncertainty in analog RPGs. Torner (2014a) begins his series by stating, "design matters. Few doubt it does. A game's design is an immanent force that acts on its players, so that their play might produce emergent effects" (par. 1). The border between knowledge and uncertainty is a cultural choice, and its use affects game design and outcome. Within games, Torner (2014b) touches on Costikyan's eleven sources of uncertainty. Sources such as randomness are based on pure chance. Regardless of how strong a *D&D* character is, their player could still roll a very low number on the die. Analytic complexity (player decision based on complex context) helps players skew this randomness through their ability modifiers (par. 6). In sum, a game's design facilitates and limits what and how character tools are available to players, affecting gameplay. With this in mind, the following analysis and discussion explores how *D&D*'s structure both facilitates and skews uncertainty in favour of violence.

The combat sequence is the most structured portion of *D&D*. The *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) contains a nine-page chapter just to cover its basics, with specific rules that limit how and when characters can act. As an overview: when combat begins, each player rolls a die to determine turn order, known as the initiative roll. The DM must also roll dice for the initiative of the

NPCs they control. During combat, each character can only act on their allocated turn, one at a time. Each character has access to multiple types of activities on their turn through actions, bonus actions, movement, and reactions (189-190). "Once everyone has taken a turn, the fight continues to the next round if neither side has defeated the other" (189). The text contains no advice on how to peacefully end combat. Attacking is considered "the most common action to take in combat," and always requires dice rolls to "[determine] whether the attack hits or misses" (192, 194). Other possible combat sequence actions, such as the hide or search actions, also require dice rolls to determine the outcome (192). Based on how combat can take more than one round to complete, how each character can perform multiple actions involving dice rolls on their turn, and how the alleged most common action in combat always requires dice, it is reasonable to expect that combat is when the most dice are rolled in *D&D*. Reversely, in a role-play sequence a player might only be asked to make one die roll for the entire activity. As discussed above, dice rolls are modified with ability scores, which can affect the outcome. Players may choose ability scores that beneficially modify their character's combat actions because these rolls are statistically used more often. It should be noted that for some classes, combat-benefitting ability scores may also be those considered more conventional for role-play activities, such as intelligence-based wizards or charisma-based warlocks. In sum, the amount of dice used in combat may affect what ability scores players choose during character creation so they can more favourably skew the uncertainty of random dice rolls.

The reliance on dice to drive narrative in combat sequences can also reduce violence from a morally engaging activity to something inhuman and inconsequential, which complicates the experience of death (Torner 2015a). The goal becomes eliminating opponents' hit points, turning combat into an automated grind that "removes bodies" corporeality, names, and integration into wider systems of meaning" (168). Stang and Trammell (2019) analyse how *D&D* opponents are translated into statistical tables. Appendix D of the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) contains statistical tables of common creatures and monsters encountered within the *D&D* setting. Many of these creatures' abilities use combat terminology, such as the owl's Flyby ability stating that "the owl provokes no opportunity attacks when it flies out of an enemy's reach" (308). These tables teach players that monstrosity can be coded into a simple list of numbers (Stang and Trammell 2019). By dehumanising opponents in such a way, the text allows players to perceive the creatures their characters encounter as different, lesser, and not worthy of moral consideration for violence and death (Hodes 2019a; Jewett 1984; Kerr 2005).

I argue that *D&D* combat's meticulous structure is in fact biased against a peaceful resolution. The clear segmentation between each character's turn favours action over speaking. While a character can speak during combat, they can only make "brief utterances and gestures" on their turn (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 190). The *Player's Handbook* (2014b) does not discuss a character speaking outside of their turn, limiting dynamic conversation. Outside of a character's turn, the text only mentions reactions as "an instant response to a trigger of some kind, which can occur on your turn or on someone else's" (190). The chapter on combat lists two possible reaction options: Attack of Opportunity (attack someone as they move out of reach) or dismounting a mount if it is knocked over (195, 198). Elsewhere in the text, there are 33 options for how to use reactions. Most of these have to do with attacks, such as Barbarians who take damage then being able to "use your reaction to make a melee weapon attack against that creature" (50), Only 2 of the 33 listed options can be considered not combat-based, and both have to do with reducing falling damage (79, 239). There are no rules on improvising reactions. These findings indicate that the text does not allow dynamic conversation during combat, and typically only legitimises violent actions outside of a character's turn.

Time and involvement affect combat resolution. When a combat sequence begins, the game structure includes everyone nearby regardless of previous involvement. Some players may choose for their character not to fight, but this can affect the player's experience of the game. Torner (2015a)

highlights how combat has a mechanical break in time, distancing it from the rest of the game's narrative (164). Therefore, players who do not participate in the combat cannot participate in that portion of the game. The system's extensive combat rules and "programmed inability to exit the time scale" extend how long fights in the game take in the real world (Torner 2015a, 164). While role-play scenes can occur in real-world time, combat can take much longer. Torner (2015a) further discusses time penalties in combat -- if a character misses their attack, the fight will take longer to complete. We can apply the concept of time penalties to characters who choose not to fight. A character who does not participate in combat may both cause it to be more difficult in-game and to take longer in the real world. Finally, *D&D*'s single-narrative nature affects narrative with regard to combat. Since combat is more mechanically complex than other parts of the game, it takes longer to run. Any character engaging in combat sways the narrative's direction.

Spells and magic are a major part of the *D&D* system. A full analysis is beyond the scope of this project, but a brief overview of the spell list may complement discussion on the game's facilitation of violence. For this study, all spells in The *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) have been analysed and placed into three different categories. First, directly damaging spells are those whose only result is dealing numerical damage or lowering success for opponents to succeed in violent activities. Examples are Fireball, which deals 8d6 (i.e. roll eight six-sided dice) damage to targets who fail a Dexterity Saving throw, and Bane, which negatively affects an opponent's attack rolls and saving throws[1] (241, 216). Second, combat-based spells are those that do not necessarily do numerical damage, but whose effects facilitate violence. For example, spells like Blur give an advantage only helpful in a violent scenario because it affects attack rolls (219). Meanwhile, Blade Ward's description is heavily structured for combat through the use of combat terms such as turns and rounds (218-219). Third, utility spells are those that do not give advantage in combat, or may even prevent violence. The effects of Animal Friendship, for example, end if anyone harms the target (212). Spells that could facilitate violence through combat advantage but do not have descriptions that indicate violence -- for example, Greater Invisibility (246) gives a character advantage on all attacks against creatures that rely on sight, but the spell description does not discuss this -- have been categorised as utility spells to ensure no bias through ambiguity or my personal application of the spells in gameplay. Of the 361 spells featured in the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b), 107 are directly damaging, 115 are combat-based, and 139 are utility (207-289). Overall, 62.4% of the text's spells are orientated towards violence.

By individual spell level, proportions vary. Spell level is not the same as a character's class level. To avoid confusion, this study will use ordinal numerals for spell levels and cardinal numerals for class levels. Full casters (bard, cleric, druid, sorcerer, and wizard) are classes that can cast from class level 1, have access to cantrips, and are able to cast a higher level spell every two class levels. A level 9 druid, for example, has access to 5th level spells. Half casters (paladin and ranger) can cast from class level 2 and are able to cast a higher level spell every four class levels. A level 9 ranger, for example, has access to 3rd level spells. Finally, third casters (eldritch knight and arcane trickster) are subclasses that can cast from class level 3 and are able to cast a higher level spell every six class levels. A level 9 arcane trickster rogue, for example, has access to 2nd level spells. Other nuances not covered by this study include the limited number of spells a character can cast each day and that each class only has access to a portion of the total spells available.

In sum, characters have delayed accessibility to each higher spell level, affected by class. The higher ratio of violent to nonviolent options at 1st spell level limits choice for newly created characters.

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[1] Saving throws are described as dice rolls "you are forced to make...because your character or monster is at risk of harm" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 179). While saving throws can be used in non-violent scenarios (e.g. a constitution save to not become inebriated after several drinks), saving throws are more often used as attempts to mitigate damage or other harmful effects.

With the exception of 2nd level spells, the ratio remains above the overall average of 62.4% until the 5th spell level, or a minimum of class level 9 for full casters. Based on the exponential experience required to gain each new level, a player who begins gameplay at class level 1 will have already been playing

Table 3: Categorisation of *D&D* Spells in the *Player's Handbook* by Level

	Directly damaging spells	Combat-based spells	Utility spells	Total number of spells	Percentage of violence-oriented spells to total spells
Cantrip	12	4	11	27	59.3%
Level 1	22	20	20	62	67.7%
Level 2	16	18	25	59	57.6%
Level 3	14	17	19	50	62.0%
Level 4	8	16	11	35	68.6%
Level 5	10	12	20	42	52.4%
Level 6	8	9	15	32	53.1%
Level 7	7	4	9	20	55.0%
Level 8	5	6	7	18	61.1%
Level 9	5	9	2	16	87.5%
Total	107	115	139	361	62.4%

their character for some time by the time they reach level 9 and have access to this higher (but still less than half) percentage of nonviolent spells (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 15). Also of note is the high ratio of violent options for 9th level spells. Full casters can start casting 9th level spells at class level 17, which the *Player's Handbook* refers to as the "fourth tier" (16). At this point, "characters achieve the pinnacle of their class features" (16). Only 2 of the 16 available 9th level spells are considered nonviolent. The most powerful magical spells in the game, wielded by only the most powerful characters, strongly skew towards violence.

Even utility-categorised spells may spark violence. The mechanics of certain charm spells, such as the 2nd level spell Calm Emotions or the Friends cantrip, can easily increase hostility (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 221, 244). These spells give characters advantage when persuading targets, or simply allow characters to pacify targets. However, both of these spells only have a duration of a minute, and "when the spell ends, the creature realizes that you used magic to influence its mood and becomes hostile towards you" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 244). While it is not discussed in the *Player's Handbook*, my personal experience has found that role-play situations (as opposed to combat sequences) typically are treated as happening in real time. Players only have a minute of real-world time to find a way to effectively solve the issue or to leave the scene entirely. Both of these spells are categorised by this study as utility, but neither lasts long enough to resolve issues non-violently. Based on the spells' written descriptions, using them may cause the DM to try and force a violent encounter as the target becomes even more hostile.

An overview of the character sheet gives insight into how *D&D*'s paratextual structure facilitates violence. Stat sheets are a form of paratext that frame participant input and guide interpretation (Jara 2013, 44). There are several variants of the fifth edition *D&D* character sheet currently used, which all

draw from a similar overarching format (Wizards of the Coast 2016). Numbered abilities make up the first page, qualitative characteristics and backstories are on the second, and the third page consists of spells the character can cast. My overview focuses on the first page. Along the left side are a character's ability scores and their modifiers. Scores such as Strength and Constitution are placed higher than Intelligence and Wisdom, favouring physical over mental attributes. On the page's middle column are places to write modifiers for armour class (how difficult it is to hit a character), initiative (who has benefits to attack first in combat turn order), speed, hit points, death saves, attacks and spellcasting, and equipment. With just these two columns, many non-magical (and even magical) characters would have all of the information necessary for combat. The first page's right column has several text boxes for personality traits, only large enough for a sentence, as well as a large text box for features and traits. By prominently placing the content needed for violent activities and minimising the space for personality-based information needed in role-play scenarios, the page favours knowledge needed for combat over role-play. The framing of this paratextual structural device may influence story formation and expectation of narrative towards violence by both DMs and players.

6. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

So far, our analysis shows that the text facilitates violence through its structure, descriptive examples, and available choices for creating characters. But how does the literary nature of the text motivate players to violence? My analysis of paragraph context suggests that violence is most often explicitly themed through heroism tropes, with implicit roots in hatred and encouragement of sensation-seeking due to a lack of consequences.

> Adventurers are extraordinary people, driven by a thirst for excitement into a life that others would never dare lead. They are heroes, compelled to explore the dark places of the world and take on the challenges that lesser women and men can't stand against. (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 45)

Within the text, words such as "mighty adventurer," "glory," "wealth," and "hero" promise players the fulfilment of typical hero narratives (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 16, 19, 30, 36, 45, 56, passim). Meanwhile, the military overtones within *D&D* parallel concepts of imperial heroism (Trammell 2018a). Descriptive class examples such as "his spear flashes like his eyes as he jabs again and again at a *twisted* giant, until at last his light overcomes its *hideous darkness*" [emphasis added] paint characters as good, moral heroes defeating evil foes through martial combat (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 82). The *Player's Handbook* states in its introduction that "each player creates an adventurer (also called a character)" (5). Such terminology places characters as imperial explorers of the wild unknown. In juxtaposition to the civilised and known world, places encountered in the fantastical lands explored by these adventurers are part of savage and primitive nature (Mangan and McKenzie 2003). Furthermore, the reduction of *D&D* opponents into statistics reflects narratives of dehumanisation, differentiation, and quantification, creating abject bodies and ways to control the Other (Hodes 2019b; Stang and Trammell 2019). Opponents are "reduced to that of an animal and placed outside the Christian moral order" (Stang and Trammell 2019, 731). Building on Stang and Trammell's (2019) research, I argue that the text themes opponents as monstrous animals and characters as heroes who explore and tame the unknown other.

D&D class descriptions display heroism tropes. Some descriptions draw from the traditional association of warfare violence with masculinity, such as fighters being "well acquainted with death, both meting it out and staring it defiantly in the face" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 70). Other

descriptions such as monks and paladins promote morality, saying that "monks . . . are driven by a desire to accomplish a greater mission than merely slaying monsters," or that "paladins are united by their oaths to stand against the forces of evil" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 77, 82). In a world of magic and the divine, heroic violence is legitimised and incentivised by creating a clear polarity between good and evil, demonising outsiders as villains (Beck and Pretzer 2005, 73).

The game displays clear lines between good and evil, stemming from and perpetuating stereotypes of superiority, racism, and control (Garcia 2017; Hodes 2019a, 2019b; Long 2015; Nephew 2006; Stang and Trammell 2019; Trammell 2020; Trammell 2018a; Trammell 2018b; Wallace 2003). Like the violence of Herakles and Captain America being justified through their upholding of law and goodness, I argue that the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) utilises institutionalised racism to validate violence as chivalrous and heroic. To understand this, we need a brief discussion on the racial and sexist prejudices laid against minority and non-normative bodies within *D&D*.

Long (2015) and Hodes (2019a, 2019b) suggest that *D&D* took heavy inspiration from racially-charged texts such as *Lord of the Rings* and made hateful ethnic stereotypes concrete. As Long (2015) highlights with the lack of diversity in *D&D* artwork, the *Player's Handbook* largely reinforces Whiteness and Eurocentrism as the normative within the fantasy genre (140). Amongst non-White demi-humans, negative stereotypes are rampant. Hodes (2019a) discusses how Tolkien's Orcs were based on the British imperialist perception of Mongols in the early 20th century, and later the "yellow peril" of threatening Asians (par. 18). Pseudoscience theories appeared in systems like *D&D* about "martial races" who were strong, tough, savage, and naturally inclined towards violence (par. 29). While the human race in *D&D* gains a general ability score increase for all of their abilities, other demi-humans are given distinct stats that benefit certain professions (par. 22). Traits for half-orcs within the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) include strength and constitution score increases, preferred for fighting classes (41). Their special traits include "Menacing" and "Savage Attacks," reflecting imperial ideas of the primitive Other (41). Furthermore, half-orcs are linked to evil alignments, and those "raised among Orcs and willing to live out their lives among them are usually evil" (41). Two other non-White demi-human races, tieflings and elven drow, are also described as evil. Tiefling evil is of a supernatural nature reflective of Christian illustration, as "the evil of their heritage is plainly visible in their features, and as far as most people are concerned, a tiefling could very well be a devil straight from the Nine Hells" (33). Meanwhile, drow "are a race of demon-worshiping marauders dwelling in the subterranean depths of the Underdark, emerging only on the blackest nights to pillage and slaughter the surface dwellers they despise" (24). The text discourages players from having evil characters by stating that an evil alignment is "not an ideal adventurer" and that "generally, evil alignments are for villains and monsters" (123). Yet, while "humans, dwarves, elves, and other humanoid races can choose whether to follow the paths of good or evil, law or chaos," races like Orcs are "inclined toward evil" and "even if an orc chooses a good alignment, it struggles against its innate tendencies for its entire life" (122). The concept of evil in *D&D* is revealed to be based on race, not morality. Not only are the primary non-White demi-human races specifically depicted as evil within the text, but players are encouraged not to choose them because of that evil.

We can find further undertones of imperialism by considering the cultures that the text depicts for these non-White demi-humans. The *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) states that tieflings are "lacking a homeland" or culture, instead subsisting "in small minorities found mostly in human cities or towns, often in the roughest quarters of those places" (42, 43). Both half-orcs and drow have their own communities, but these are rife with slavery, subjugation, and sexism. While drow "society is depraved and preoccupied with the favor of Lolth, their spider-goddess, who sanctions murder and the extermination of entire families as noble houses vie for position," half-orcs are created from the unification of orc and human tribes, forming "a larger horde to the terror of civilized lands

nearby" (24, 40). The text continues by stating that not all drow are hated because one "broke the mold," "rejecting his heritage," and becoming "a model for those few drow who follow in his footsteps, trying to find a life apart from the evil society of their Underdark home" (24). This implies that a character from one of these races must leave their communities behind to be considered good. Even then, based on the "innate tendencies" these races have, the text reasons that they cannot fully choose their alignment (122). Long (2015) concludes, and I agree, that non-White demi-humans are depicted in the text as less civilised, less common, and less good than Eurocentric fantasy races (141). When basing *D&D* races off real-life groups, portraying their identity as innately evil and uncivilised can negatively impact the conscious or subconscious perception of those real-life groups (Trammell 2018b). I argue that these descriptions are a form of covert violence that rationalise and legitimise racism within and outside of the game. Amongst playable options, there exists a hierarchy of civilised over uncivilised and good over evil that strongly correlates to colonial mindsets of non-White inferiority.

To discuss how the covert violence of prejudices against these demi-humans may lead to physical violence, we must go beyond Trammell's (2020) investigation of the relationship between torture and play. He suggests that play functions as a historical tool of subjugation and that the threat of torture lingers as a form of social control. The *D&D* system framework may have a disciplinary apparatus that conceals the possibility of torture within its play while exerting social and behavioural pressure on players (45). It also excludes and ignores the trauma of minority groups to create its narrative (48). Importantly, Trammell concludes that "play reduces humans to objects because play is violent" (48). By perceiving specific groups as both morally and culturally inferior, players are legitimised to objectify and enact violence upon those who require control. The nature of the magic circle means responsibility for such actions may be left with the character and not extend to their player. With this lack of responsibility in mind, I believe that that implicit torture within game systems may also be in place for players to derive affective pleasure without consequence.

The text also explicitly legitimises violence through heroism rooted in hatred of the other. It is easier for a player to feel like a hero when they are indisputably sure that their character's opponent deserves to be killed. From quantitative analysis above, we already know that the terms "monster" and "evil" collectively feature 199 times in the text. These terms create a dialogue within the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) of constructing unnamed and monotonous opponents as objectively evil (5, 7, 11, 24, 41, passim). *D&D* simplifies the real world's complexities into a fantasy dichotomy of heroes and villains that is typical of many hero stories (Stevens 2015, 28). The paladin class is the clearest example. For them, "the presence of strong evil registers on your senses like a noxious odor, and powerful good rings like heavenly music in your ears" (Wizards of the Coast 2014b, 84). Their abilities are part of a larger game structure that makes tangible the concepts of evil and good within a framework of divinity. Throughout the paladin section, the text describes the class with terms such as "blessed," "divine," "holy," "justice," "prayer," "righteousness," and "virtue" (82-88). These terms are in contrast to descriptions given of their enemies as "evil," "darkness," "forces of evil," "hideous," "noxious," or "wicked" (82-88). These terms have strong religious connotations and are reflective of conventional ideals of beauty. Similar to Stang and Trammell's (2019) discussion on how the *Monster Manual* text acts as a way to order the nonnormative outside of church regulation, so too are paladins in some ways examples of a larger tendency in *D&D* to uphold concepts of the church institution. Under this pretence, heroic violence is not just about saving the day but about producing, stabilising, and subjugating the objectified other. It is also interesting to note that 73% (or 33) of the 45 spells available to paladins are categorised as combat-based. If we use the same spell guidelines as stated above to categorise the paladin's non-spell class abilities, over half can be considered combat-based. In sum, I argue that paladins effectively show *D&D*'s facilitation of violence through the good/evil dichotomy.

While St. Jacques and Tobin (2020) suggest that the possibility of character death affects how players approach *D&D* (25), the limited out-of-character consequences for violence in the game may lead to players thinking that their characters can get away with unconventional or violent activities. In terms of physical danger, combat always has a risk of physical injury or death. As the *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) states, "the thrust of a sword, a well-placed arrow, or a blast of flame from a fireball spell all have the potential to damage, or even kill, the hardiest of creatures" (196). However, the text also quickly goes on to state, "unless it results in death, damage isn't permanent. Even death is reversible through powerful magic" (197).

It is difficult to permanently die in *D&D*, especially at higher levels of the game (St. Jaques and Tobin 2020). The *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b) implies that characters can walk away from most or all fights without any lasting injuries, which I argue complicates the risk factor when making decisions. A player knows that their character can be fully healed after doing something dangerous, so players lack the self-preserving incentive to avoid it. As Jones (2018) discusses, the ability to magically heal also plays into notions of ableism by portraying lasting disability as undesirable and magically solvable hindrances rather than permanent conditions that can be included in gameplay (par. 20). Even when in-game events occur that should cause a character to die, St. Jacques and Tobin (2020) point out that some participant groups may choose to bend or ignore the rules to prevent the death (23).

The text also lacks social or legal consequences. With descriptions such as, "the DM narrates the results of their actions," suggested outcomes of player choice throughout the *Player's Handbook* are vague or nonexistent (Wizards of the Coast 2014b,181). There are no examples that specifically mention consequences for violating conventions of violence. It is true that the DM may choose for actions in their game to have such ramifications, but there is no frame for it within the text. The lack of consequences, both social and physical, may favour sensation-seeking behaviour as players can experience activities considered dangerous or inappropriate in the real world. The *Dungeon Master's Guide* (Wizards of the Coast 2014a), another text that is designed to help the DM run a game within the system, does bring up the concept of consequence "so that the players feel like their successes and failures matter" (81). However, it features very few specific examples, and only has half a page on how to include consequences in combat (242). A lack of real-world ramifications can affect how players act. Trammell (2020) discusses that torture and appearing to enjoy another's suffering is seen as less civilised and so is societally policed and sanctioned (44). However, in games like *D&D*, players' real-world identities take a back seat to the characters they play. They can engage in and show pleasure in suffering under the pretence of being in-character.

As Torner (2015b) discusses, the use of uncertainty in RPGs is a reflection of the cultural and political periods in which they were produced (par. 1). Games work as non-threatening systems where we can experience uncertainty but still have accurate expectations about what will occur (Oosterwijk 2017; Torner 2015b, par. 4). In *D&D*, uncertainty involves both the mechanical unknown of dice outcomes and the social unknown of in-character ramifications. Above analysis has shown us that the random uncertainty of dice rolls can be somewhat overcome in violent scenes through analytic complexity. Torner (2015b) further points out how statistical tables and heavily structured combat in *D&D* projects the unknown of combat into mathematical spaces where enemies can be explored, mapped, and killed (par. 7). The lack of consequences within the *Player's Handbook* (2014b) for performing violent actions and the legitimation of violence against opponents declared evil also removes social uncertainty. Even concerns of personal injury and death are removed (197). I conclude that the *D&D* system minimises the uncertainty surrounding violence.

Looking beyond *D&D*, violence within TTRPGs has been critically commented on by metagames such as Tynes' (1996) *Power Kill*. The metagame works as a social commentary, attempting to display the conventional violence and criminality of many TTRPGs. Designed to be a role-playing

supplement to any TTRPG system, it encases the events of the TTRPG story as part of a delusional fantasy experienced by schizophrenic criminals. The DM takes on the role of a counsellor during this part of the game, putting the crimes that the players' characters performed within the fantasy world into real-world context. At the end of this metagame system description, Tynes states that "the actions taken by characters in [normal role-playing games] would almost always be completely unacceptable in the real world; it is only the shoddy trappings of genre conventions that allow RPG players to consider their stories 'heroic' or 'dramatic'" (par. 39). *Power Kill* is designed to highlight how behaviour deemed violent and illegal by current society is reframed by TTRPGs as acceptable and even encouraged.

7. LIMITATIONS

Due to this project's scope and size, I could not exhaustively cover the *D&D* system. Future research could consider whether more intensive analysis of both the *Player's Handbook* and other texts within the system may alter present findings. Furthermore, the communal nature of *D&D* makes outcomes subject to player agency. Future research should consider how players and their collective interactions affect the practical application of the text's rules.

8. CONCLUSION

From a quantitative point of view, the *D&D Player's Handbook* facilitates violence through the higher ratio of violent to nonviolent options and examples. The game's structure facilitates a single narrative where combat overshadows other parts of the game. The length and disconnect of combat, the difficulty of peaceful resolutions, the prevention of characters talking to each other, and the reduction of opponents to numbers that must be eliminated for the story to progress all direct the game towards more violent narratives. A lack of nonviolent character types means players are encouraged to create violent characters. We have seen that heroism, implicitly rooted in hatred, is a strong violence motivator built into the basic organising languages of *D&D*'s *Player's Handbook* (Wizards of the Coast 2014b). Meanwhile, sensation-seeking is a motivator through an absence of consequences; a lack of clear ramifications facilitates players to choose actions that violate conventional norms with impunity. Racism is subtly legitimated through linking minority-inspired ethnicities with "evil" creatures, which reflects concepts of covert violence. *D&D*'s structure facilitates violence through character creation, narrative expectations, and system structure. The significance of these findings is far more nuanced than can be encapsulated in this summary. Rather than being an endpoint, this article aims to act as a conversational basis for future work on the interconnected problems and opportunities this tendency towards violence poses, as well as how the convention for violence in TTRPGs like *D&D* may speak to larger aspects of society and development.

9. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Playing to Experience Marginalization: Benefits and Drawbacks of "Dark Tourism" in Larp

Abstract: Role-playing to experience marginalized lives impacts players and their communities for better and worse. Players may achieve greater empathy for marginalized people (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000; Greitemeyer and Osswald 2010) or undergo meaningful psychological change via intentional and unconscious self-exploration (Bowman 2007). However, not all of these stories have a happily ever after. This article examines the ways in which such role-play as a marginalized character can also have unintended negative consequences. We relate this larp activity to the phenomenon of dark tourism, in which privileged individuals voluntarily enter disaster zones due to a mix of motives that include voyeurism and vicarious danger exposure, carrying with them a mixed bag of intentions and outcomes. This review aims to answer the following question: What are the positive and negative outcomes of role-playing as a marginalized character? We will explore individual and collective outcomes of this type of experiential learning and make recommendations for designers and players to better achieve desired positive outcomes and limit the negative ones. Our work draws on research from games studies, experimental psychology, pedagogical studies, and the emerging literature about the motivations and consequences of tourism that seeks to touch on pain, trauma, and even death (i.e., dark tourism).

Keywords: role-playing games, larp, marginalization, privilege, identity, perspective taking, empathy, dark tourism, stereotypes

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1. INTRODUCTION

Larp has been increasingly popular in recent years; some speculate that it will eventually be fused with virtual reality technologies (BBC 2013), thus facilitating deeper immersion and access for a wider range of participants. Further, games studies research suggests that in-character dynamics can, and do, spillover into the real world relationships (Bowman 2013; Leonard and Thurman 2018). As Stenros (2010) points out, different larp designs offer different outcomes. For example, sometimes the aim might be for a player to feel like and become the character (emotional emphasis), while sometimes the objective might be just to portray the character believably with an outward emphasis. Importantly, designers may even intentionally develop immersive games in order to prompt players to take on new perspectives and identify with lived experiences other than their own (i.e., transformative play; Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum 2015). The potential benefits of immersive role-play for learning about marginalized lives is thus very promising such that by engaging with character and story, players may take on the perspective of their character and govern their interpersonal interactions from that perspective. From our vantage point in applied social psychology, this practice could further a core goal of helping individuals and institutions to thrive via practical interventions (Hodgetts and O'Doherty 2019).

In this paper, we compare this style of transformative play to the practice of dark tourism. Dark tourism is defined as the intentional seeking out of a site or place with strong associations to violence and death. An example of a dark touristic destination would be the site of a terrorist attack or the site of a natural disaster (Roberts and Stone 2014). Similarly, via larping, participants may seek to experience violence, death -- and, we add, marginalization -- vicariously through a character they portray. In this case, for a person to be marginalized means that institutional structures and systems discriminate against them and exclude or invalidate them on at least one dimension of identity (Parson 2019). Throughout this work, we invite the reader to consider whether the negative impacts on individuals and communities of engaging in play to vicariously experience such marginalizations are outweighed by the possible benefits of personal growth and prejudice reduction. We conclude with suggestions drawn from the emerging field of inclusive pedagogy which may serve to improve outcomes in this direction.

Given the basis of our work in applied social psychology, we recognize that many people who larp as a marginalized character are doing so from within their own lived experience of marginalization. That is because of the rich intersectionality of larpers' real world identities and experiences; each individual has many selves (James, 1890) -- multiple group identities, such as race, religion, gender, and sexuality as well as role identities, such as occupation or a familial role (e.g., mother), that they carry with them into every situation (Burke and Stets 2009), and how these identities combine generates unique experiences of privilege and discrimination for the larper (Crenshaw, 1989). For example, a genderqueer Latine lawyer may experience privilege and stigma in varied and specific ways due to these interlocking identities. If they choose to larp as a White, cis-male coal miner working and living in West Virginia c. 1900, they would still be engaging in dark tourism. Despite the fact that they are adopting a more privileged racial and gender identity, they are also exploring marginalization with regard to class and vocation.

This perspective that individual larpers are viewing and constructing their experiences through the lens of multiple identities overlaps with Kuhn's "self theory" (Kuhn 1964). Kuhn posits a core self which includes attributes and traits that combine with societally defined roles and their expectations, social status, and social networks to comprise individuality. However, following self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell 1987), we doubt the primacy or impermeability of a core self. Rather, when a given identity (e.g., lawyer) or compound identity (female lawyer) is made salient via cues that bring the identity to mind, a depersonalization process may occur by which the person views the world through the lens of the group rather than as a unique individual. This self-categorization shapes beliefs, emotions, and actions toward preserving and affirming the group identity (Mackie, Smith, and Ray 2008) and behaving as a typical or positive exemplar of the group or groups in question (i.e., self-stereotyping; Spears, Doosje, and Ellemers 1997). Such self-categorizations may thus influence each larper's experience of a story and of others' characterization within the larp.

Fully exploring the impact of combinations of multiple real life marginalizations on this phenomenon is outside the scope of the current work. However, by examining the motivations and outcomes of dark tourism and of larping marginalized experience, we can identify common themes, such as catharsis, empathy, and experiential learning, as well as common pitfalls, such the potential commodification of intense human emotions. We launch this investigation from our perspective as applied Social Psychologists with combined experience with storytelling and design in campaign larp, edu-larp, tabletop role-playing games, and escape rooms settings. We each belong to marginalized groups by virtue of our sexualities, genders assigned at birth, or gender nonconforming status; some of us are also racial minorities in the United States context and have experienced microaggressions in role-play communities.

Given that many communities and individuals remain targets of long-standing discrimination, exclusion, and even violence (UNDP 2010), it is valuable to investigate whether larp can decrease prejudice and increase intergroup empathy. In other words, if ever-increasing larp popularity has potential to reduce the social inequities present throughout the society, then we propose that the research community ought to develop a structural framework for how to best utilize such a prosocial application. For this endeavor, we suggest drawing on practices of inclusive pedagogy which we feel are highly relevant to larping as marginalized characters given that a common goal of this type of roleplay is to learn. However, these suggestions are merely a starting point for this work and, we hope, will become part of a much larger conversation involving scholars, participants, and practitioners.

2. WHY ENGAGE IN DARK TOURISM? APPLICATIONS TO THE THREEFOLD MODEL

According to Blom (2000), the main motivations to engage in dark tourism are to learn, to achieve emotional catharsis, and to immerse oneself in the experience of "other." However, these motivations are not independent of one another; they are overlapping categories that often mix and interact. These three motivations of classic dark tourism can also be related to the Threefold Model of role-playing, which divides player motivation in three categories: Dramatists, people who are in it to tell a story and advance plot; gamists, who want to "beat" the game they are playing by exploiting rules and learning how to best win; and simulationists, who want to feel fully immersed in the fictional world they are playing in even at the expense of storytelling or gaming (Kim 1998). That is, although dark tourists who travel to sites of suffering are not assuming identities of marginalized people, they share similar goals as larpers who seek to vicariously experience trauma and marginalization in their role-play.

The educational motivation of dark tourism focuses on the individual wanting to learn the most that they can about a certain culture and their heritage, especially its more morose parts (Light 2017). In this "heritage tourism," individuals are motivated to learn more about the history and culture of dark tourism sites like post-Katrina New Orleans; this motivation may share commonalities with those role-players referred to as "dramatists" in the Threefold Model (Kim 1998). In both categories, participants are motivated by a desire for knowledge and narrative. A dark tourist and dramatist alike might seek out stories that increasingly fall outside of the norm in order to shake up their perspective and learn something "new." For example, most people will not experience what it is like to travel across a border illegally so they may seek out that experience in the form of a dark tourist attraction that can provide the experience or by larping a character who is a refugee.

In contrast to heritage tourism's emphasis on experiential learning, tourists seeking emotional catharsis are focused on emotional fulfillment through activity (Iliev 2020). One example of this is when individuals travel to natural disaster sites to aid relief efforts, like those who traveled to Haiti in the wake of the 2010 earthquake, hoping to feel fulfilled by the act of helping others during a time of tragedy or by vicariously experiencing the full range of human emotion that occurs under extreme duress. The utility piece of this motivation for dark tourism most relates to the gamist category in the Threefold Model. In both of these cases, the individual is pursuing an end goal (e.g., to beat the in-game puzzle or to help people at a disaster site) so that they can feel a sense of achievement in overcoming a daunting challenge (Rucinska 2016). However, in the realm of dark tourism this emotional catharsis can also come from attempting to experience the emotions of those at dark tourism sites, via empathy (Blom 2000), which can be a requisite for a sense of achievement sought by gamists at larp.

Since emotional catharsis is defined as experiencing an emotional or intellectual conflict as a way to release it, it can involve empathizing with disaster survivors and may overlap with the final primary motivation of dark tourism: immersing in the experience of "other" (Blom 2000). This motivation focuses upon the shared, communal consumption of dark tourism sites or experiences (Podoshen 2013), and is most similar to the simulationist category in the Threefold Model. The tourist/larper is seeking an escape from their everyday lives while also yearning to be in community or even merged with others. This motivation can apply to tourists who want to integrate themselves into the object of consumption at a dark tourist site, this "object" can be a person, an event or even a place where a tragedy has occurred. The tourist's fascination can be with witnessing violent or dark events or with the broader context within which the dark events occur (Blom 2000). For example, the death of an individual or group of people can act as the initial motivation for collective celebration, remembrance, or mourning. Although experiential immersion has strong overlap with the desire for catharsis, it becomes distinguishable due to the tourist's commitment to the high degree of immersion and dedication to feeling as though they

are a part of another group. Bringing it back to the Threefold Model, this immersion enhances how the tourists feel like a part of the "Other" within their new environment.

Dark tourists who are motivated by a desire to immerse in the experience of "Other" may go to extreme lengths to preserve their sense of immersion, sometimes putting themselves at great risk. This is in line with the importance many larpers place on immersion in role-playing games. Although dark tourism motivations may center on immersing into community, Bowman and Standiford (2016) identify five other categories of immersion in larp: activity, game, environment, narrative, and character. However, the lines of dark tourism motivations are blurred such that the participant may also attempt to "live" the story of the dark tourism site (environment), metaphorically "lose themselves" in the act of providing aid (activity), or to slip into a version of themselves that is fundamentally removed from their typical day to day life (character). As such, dark tourism and larpers alike can undergo a journey of self-discovery and learning which is made even more meaningful due to communal experience.

3. DRAWBACKS OF DARK TOURISM IN LARP

Aside from direct benefits of aid to disaster sites, dark tourism likely confers some positive effects on individuals and communities. Researchers have found that those who engage in dark tourism have higher self-reported levels of empathy not only regarding the related community but also globally (Light 2017). In general, an increase in dark tourism worldwide has also corresponded to increased global awareness of these tragedies, which has in turn fostered renewed interest in education and aid (Rucinska 2016). However, the benefits of the aid offered are often undermined by apparent costs, such as "depleting scarce resources (like food and water), using culturally inappropriate methods, [and] violating security precautions" (van Hoving, Wallis, Docrat, and De Vries 2010, 202). Similarly, a privileged larper who chooses to dip into a marginalized identity for the course of an event may pull social resources away from marginalized larpers by drawing on limited time and energy of game runners and support staff, engage in culturally inappropriate play, or even create an unsafe game experience for themselves and others.

Dark tourism in and out of larp may commodify the experiences of those affected by tragedy, as some have said that the presence of outsiders who have paid to leer at a disaster site makes survivors feel as though their lived experiences are being exploited. Further, the consumer's attempt to experience a sanitized and controlled version of trauma can obscure the true meaning of these harmful events (Blom 2000). Similarly, larpers who are exploring a marginalized identity through role-play may show inadequate gravitas (Alyanak n.d.). Just as taking selfies at Ground Zero can fail to match the solemnity of the context, so too can larpers fail to match the gravity of the identity experience being portrayed. In this way, dark tourism aimed at increasing empathy for those affected by tragedy can in fact become a medium for the colonization of the experiences of others (Ruberg 2020).

This kind of identity tourism has been explored in depth by Nakamura (1995), who found that in online settings, players who choose to portray characters not of their race or gender are often doing so in a way that perpetuates stereotypes. Players who participate in this kind of virtual identity tourism do so to be able to live out their fantasized experience of "Other" while not having to be critical of the experiences of the minority groups they are portraying. While this research focuses on online experiences, the concepts can be carried over into larping such that players may come to a larp to play out a stereotyped fantasy and, if the moderators of the larp are not vigilant in their administration, this will lead to the above negative outcomes. One way larpers can seek to mitigate this problem is by being critical of their character choices and intentions, meaning that the players should strive to see their choices from an empathic perspective and investigate how they might affect others in the space. A more

thorough way of doing this would be if moderators or game-runners reviewed character information before the start of the event and gave feedback and revisions.

Nevertheless, dark tourists may misuse cultural products despite genuinely good intentions (Alyanak n.d.), and this could extend to its counterpart in larp. For example, a larper may seek to articulate a marginalized character's experience aided by their own research. While this is likely preferable to character choices derived entirely from stereotypes and media portrayals, problems can still arise from research driven character development. For example, in developing touchstones in the lore of a culture, the player may elect to replicate traditional clothing elements in their costume or physically represent cultural symbols on crafted props. This practice can become inappropriate if these items are considered taboo or sacred and/or carry specific cultural significance that is mishandled in a harmful way.

Although a balm to inappropriate characterization in larp could be careful research and preparation, these steps can backfire in a similar vein as when dark tourists inadvertently obstruct aid and use up much needed resources (Alyanak n.d.). For example, larp safety teams, often volunteers, may be called upon to screen the cultural appropriateness of player generated backstories before a new player enters the game. This practice uses up finite resources, however, which could instead be turned toward addressing the challenges faced by players who are underrepresented in the local larp community or marginalized in the broader social context.

Even more directly, larpers who are interested in playing a marginalized character may be encouraged by plot or safety teams to check in with peers who are connected to the marginalized experience in real life. Relating this to the Threefold Model, dramatist and simulationist players may be especially motivated to get the portrayal "right" due to their motives to tell the story well and deeply immerse themselves into their character (Kim 1998). While this practice can help filter out character choices that would be problematic before they enter play, it can be draining for marginalized group members to field such questions repeatedly. This is especially the case because such conversations may lead to microaggressions or the anticipation that microaggressions might occur. These subtly insensitive or even rude communications can demean a person's heritage or identity, and exclude, negate, or nullify their thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality (Sue et al. 2007). Larpers with marginalized identities are right to be wary of such interactions given that racial and sexual harassment does occur at larps and in role-playing communities (cf. Dashiell 2020; Trammell and Crenshaw 2020). Therefore, the common practice of peer-to-peer cultural consultation can have downsides which may be further exacerbated by the sheer number of requests that marginalized larpers may receive from across their entire larp community.

When members of underrepresented groups exist in mixed communities, we are often called upon to be experts on our own lived experience of marginalization. Although this may have the cumulative effect of improving accuracy and sensitivity of character and story, the repeated request for advice along these lines requires emotional labor (performing "correct" emotions in order to carry out a job; Hochschild 1983), which is both taxing and undervalued in larp (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016). Relatedly, activists of color who experience burnout have ironically attributed some of their strain to the racialized emotional labor required of them by their White counterparts in the movement (Gorski and Erakat 2019) and undergraduates of color have reported experiencing "ambassador fatigue" after repeatedly being called upon to explain or perform their culture for their White peers (Butay, Wong, and Burns-Glover 2011).

In addition to burnout from being the target of frequent consultation requests, larpers from underrepresented groups may also share disaster survivors' resentment of being the object of voyeurism. For this reason, van Hoving and colleagues (2010) decry dark tourism at disaster sites because it may cause communities and their leaders to subsequently get fed up and stop accepting foreign aid. This

outcome may correspond to underrepresented larpers shying away from games that center on themes of extreme marginalization or even becoming disillusioned by larp altogether. In the long run, these dynamics may even reinforce the view of larp as made by and for dominant group members, much like some universities are portrayed as commodifying diversity and treating underrepresented minorities as objects to learn from rather than full community members (Musser 2015).

Taken together, the drawbacks of dark tourism in larp can create a "chilly climate" (Steele 1997), which is when subtle identity threat cues compound to make underrepresented group members feel uncomfortable in a given context. For example, women and racial minorities in higher education often accrue enough of these tell-tale experiences to eventually leave disciplines in which they have been historically underrepresented, abandoning careers they were once passionate about (e.g., engineering, Adams, Garcia, Purdie-Vaughns, and Steele 2006). Likewise, larpers with marginalized identities may seek short term disengagement and subsequently experience long term disidentification from larp due to a build-up of discomfort from microaggressions, excessive requests for unpaid emotional labor, and seeing their marginalized experience commodified or represented inaccurately.

4. BENEFITS OF DARK TOURISM IN LARP

Given that the stakes of dark tourism in larp are so high, we now turn to a discussion of possible benefits which draws on experimental research on perspective taking. A key benefit of dark tourism is being able to relate to survivors and see the world through their eyes. This can facilitate learning, generate shared narratives and drive prejudice reduction (i.e., the mitigation of negative feelings toward another group and its members; Vescio, Sechrist, and Paolucci 2003). However, this process is prone to backfire due to the mechanism of taking another person's perspective, which is itself flawed and often shaped by bias.

Just like Stenros (2010) outlines, the internal emotional turmoil of the character, perhaps hidden and not so obvious, may be more worth examining than anything that is visible on the surface. That is, because actions are ambiguous, people evaluate each other's beliefs and intentions in order to interpret their behavior. To do so, individuals often reach for their preconceived notions of a certain group in the evaluation of their actions (Wu and Keysar 2007). Thus, initial negative expectations of a marginalized group combine with an inability to take on other perspectives to form the basis for a further increase in stereotypes (beliefs and expectations about a group and its members; Decety 2007; Batson et al. 1991). Therefore, although perspective taking and its emotional counterpart, empathy, are key benefits of dark tourism and larping as marginalized characters alike, they must be done in specific ways to reap benefits while avoiding costs.

4.1 Individual Outcomes of Larping Marginalized Experiences

When one adopts the perspective of a member of another group, they may come to see that group as less stereotypical (e.g., rate the elderly as less worrisome) and more positive (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000). These effects likely arise from increases in the perceived overlap between the self and others (Davis, Conklin, Smith, and Luce 1996). Therefore, rather than drawing on stereotypes to predict and explain the other group's behaviors, the perspective taker will relate them more readily to their own traits and motivations (Galinsky and Moskowitz 2000). In other words, larping the experience of an individual can have a benevolent effect on intergroup perceptions and evaluations. However, this process does not necessarily make judgments of other groups and their members more accurate, and can even result in less accuracy due to assumed similarity to the self. Larpers may mitigate this by portraying character and story with intentionality, drawing on research about the marginalized experience rather than assumptions rooted in their own self-concept.

The trade-off of intimacy over accuracy observed with perspective taking also emerges when larpers feel emotions as a marginalized character. This phenomenon, known as empathy, is distinguished from perspective taking due to its emphasis on overlapping emotions as contrasted with sharing thoughts and lower level perceptual experience (Batson et al. 1997).
Individual role-playing experiences within larp can promote empathy by placing a player into the role of a specific character within the game. Subsequent identity transformation gives way for the player to take on a new perspective and thus experience new emotions as the target identity (Segura et al. 2019).

Therefore, via identity transformation, larp can be used to learn and empathize with marginalized groups' points of view. However, with limited information about the true emotional experience of the target person, the larper may again fail to hit the mark on accurate emotion sharing. This outcome could be assessed using clinical measures of prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior is defined as "voluntary actions that are intended to help or benefit another individual or group of individuals" and modern studies have found that empathy has a positive correlation with prosocial behavior, therefore prosocial behavior can be measured without self-report it is ideal to use as an indirect measure of empathy (Rameson, Morelli, and Lieberman 2012). In addition to assessing prosocial outcomes from larps, designers should offer guidelines for effective role-play. These guidelines would likely need to promote adequate preparation, proper alignment of roles, structured feedback guidelines, as well as the acknowledgement of the value of social interactions for learning (Nestel and Tierney 2007).

In terms of the emotional aspect of perspective taking, role-playing is used to help people establish social bonds and support their mental and emotional well-being, all through the acquisition of new perspectives. As Stenros and Montola (2010) point out, it could be said that in larp one replaces one's own worries with the worries of the character. This is particularly beneficial because when we empathize with a marginalized individual, we may place greater value on their welfare. For example, Batson and colleagues (1997) used perspective taking instructions to strengthen the degree to which participants empathized with an individual member of a marginalized outgroup. Similarly, incorporating explicit perspective taking instructions into the larp experience has the potential to result in enhanced empathy toward marginalized group members.

Another mechanism by which role-playing as a marginalized character could produce benefits is via bleed-out, i.e., when in-character dynamics spill over into out-of-character feelings and experiences (Leonard and Thurman 2018). For example, hormones associated with trust and love might promote social bonding between different players through shared in-game experiences. If playing as a marginalized character, this trust and love might spill over into empathy for the marginalized group of one's character or their in-character intimates. This trust resulting from bleed-out might be a necessary precondition for the reduction of prejudice and stereotypes of the marginalized group (Vanman 2016).

However, what happens when a player experiences bleed-out of negative interpersonal dynamics? According to Twenge et al. (2001), neural activity triggered by negative interactions could set off defensive aggression or social withdrawal behaviors. If these behaviors happen with a person taking the role of a marginalized character, they could bleed over into out-of-game interactions and bring about negative perceptions of the entire group. For this reason, it is important for game designers to consider curtailing interpersonally antagonistic story beats that could have the effect of reinforcing prejudice and stereotyping. Additionally, larp runners should provide workshops in which participants can learn and practice safety gestures so as to achieve greater control over their emotional experiences at larp (Segura et al. 2019).

In addition to larp organizers' role in crafting more beneficial perspective taking experiences in larp, larpers can also directly take control of their own bleed during and after role-play. As Leonard and Thurman (2018) note, larpers who consistently label their experiences as solely due to the in-character dynamics of the game may be able to successfully compartmentalize their emotional experience.

However, this practice may require cognitive and emotional resources which are commonly depleted by activities involved in larp (e.g., self-presentation and choice making). If successful in labeling and separating their in-character experiences from out-of-character dynamics, larpers may be able to limit undesired bleed-out. Unfortunately, this could also dampen the impacts of the perspective taking experience and the positive outcomes that follow. For that reason, it may be best to design larp experiences aimed at learning about marginalized identities in a way that limits negative interpersonal dynamics in the first place.

Under ideal conditions, larping marginalized characters and experiences may even improve participants' ability to see the bigger picture of structural inequality. As Jones and Nisbett (1972) noted, their perspective taking manipulation reduces the actor-observer effect, which is the tendency to attribute the actions of others to their dispositions while attributing one's own actions to situational factors (Vescio, Sechrist, and Paolucci 2003). For example, an outgroup member might be judged to be intellectually inferior due to poor academic performance, whereas the same performance by an ingroup member might be explained by outside circumstances (e.g., relationship issues). Indeed, as Lukka (2014) points out, the actor-observer bias explains why external behavior is the most important way of communicating to others about the personality of the character. In other words, perspective taking reduces the double standard by which individuals judge the outgroup's behavior (as revealing inherent traits) versus their own group's actions (as circumstantial and constrained).

Finally, perspective taking in larp may be able to reduce prejudice (i.e., feelings about the group) irrespective of character stereotypicality. For example, Vescio, Sechrist, and Paolucci (2003) encouraged individuals to adopt the perspective of an African American interviewee who described some difficulties he had faced as a result of his racial identity. The participants later reported more favorable attitudes towards the outgroup that the interviewee belonged to, as compared to those who remained detached and objective listeners. This finding supports the notion that perspective taking can have a positive effect on intergroup relations via prejudice reduction. However, it is still important to avoid stories and characterizations which needlessly reinforce stereotypes about marginalized groups and their members.

As Vescio, Sechrist, and Paolucci (2003) demonstrated, participants who were shown a stereotype confirming interview later endorsed more stereotypic perceptions of the outgroup (i.e., African-Americans as athletic) than did those exposed to a stereotype disconfirming interviewee. In larping as marginalized characters, one must consider that a stereotypical portrayal has the possibility of further increasing the visibility of the marginalized group and resulting in a momentary increase in stereotyping of its members. Even positive stereotypes can be harmful as they can pigeonhole group members into only a few roles (Czopp 2008) and reinforce essentialist beliefs about groups (i.e., viewing racial categories as biological and natural; Kay, Day, Zanna, and Nussbaum 2013). For these reasons, it is likely best to design larp characters which are balanced toward disconfirming stereotypes associated with the relevant group, regardless of their positivity.

To summarize, a variety of positive and negative individual outcomes may occur when larpers take the perspective of a marginalized person. These include prejudice reduction and increased empathy for the marginalized group, which in turn could spill over into one's real-world interactions via bleed-out. As discussed above, the repeated act of perspective taking can be used to further develop empathy. All of this could result in the larper placing an increased value on the welfare of others. On the other hand, perspective taking comes with the risk of increasing the perceived stereotypicality of other groups and their members, which could even result in a momentary rise in prejudice. However, it is important to point out that perspective taking could be more or less effective for various reasons. Moderators of the effectiveness could be found in the role itself or in the person inhabiting the role.

4.2 Moderators of Individual Outcomes

The possible positive and negative perspective taking outcomes we have presented are likely to shift given the type of immersion achieved by the role-player. For example, one study by Herrera et al. (2018, Study 2), investigated the role of technological immersion in perspective taking. They did so by comparing three different types of perspective taking modalities: analog, via desktop computer, and through VR, along with a control condition where participants received fact-driven information about the houseless. Results showed that even though there was no difference in self-reported measures for any of the perspective taking conditions, a significantly higher number of participants in the VR condition signed a petition supporting affordable housing as compared to the other conditions. As observed from the aforementioned study, the modality of immersion can influence the outcomes out of the larp experience.

Designers who wish to facilitate prosocial behavioral impacts of larp may elect to use VR or at least offer visually and physically engrossing analog role-play experiences for their participants.
In addition to the impact of role-play modality, the specific role that a person plays can also moderate the impact of perspective taking. Ramirez, Eskenazi, and Coskun (2019) investigated the effectiveness of role-play for developing a more holistic perception of elderly people. They instructed undergraduate students to simulate everyday activities typically engaged in by elders. Some of the students were assigned the role of a caregiver or an observer, as distinguished from an elderly condition. The researchers found that participants in different roles experienced different levels of immersion. For example, players who had the role of caregivers appeared to have been affected less by the experience compared to other participants. As the researcher noted, this implies that a holistic perception and other types of prejudice reduction interventions might not be directly transferred to players inhabiting different roles within the same larp game.

Future research should explore the mechanism by which such different outcomes are achieved based on the roles engaged within the role-play, noting that not all identities carry equal weight for all individuals. For example, in the previously described study procedure, Ramirez, Eskenazi, and Coskun (2019) assigned a condition which imposed a role identity (caregiver) rather than a group identity (e.g., elderly; Burke and Stets 2009). Although the role of caregiver could enhance empathy for the elderly, role identities tend to be more impermanent and self-chosen than group identities, which are often bestowed via social convention (e.g., gender and race), which may help explain why this condition did not show as strong an effect as did simulating the daily activities of an elder.

Another likely moderator of the effect of perspective taking in larp is the larper's personal connection to narratives. Research shows that the extent to which an individual becomes immersed in a narrative influences its potential to subsequently affect story-related attitudes and beliefs (Busselle and Bilandzic 2009), which likely relates to bleed-out and its mechanisms. For example, Sukalla et al. (2016) showed that participants' self-reported narrative engagement was associated with psychophysiological indicators of attention and emotion. Relatedly, Jörgensen (2018) collected focus group data regarding uncomfortable experiences in video games and determined that player agency and moral complicity in the game story yielded empathic engagement for her participants, a phenomenon she calls "positive discomfort." These results support the claim that narrative engagement influences one's psychological experience and, thus, moderates the emergence of the expected larp outcomes outlined above.

In addition, it is worth considering larpers' ability to control their immersion levels as a moderator of desired larp outcomes. For example, some gamers interviewed by Jörgensen (2018) reported welcoming the relief offered by perspectival distance during intense moments of video gameplay. Similarly, as Montola (2010) explores, some larpers cite being able to control their attachment to the game consciously, thus regulating the intensity of the game. Such comments were made in regard to

the role-playing games specifically aimed at creating extremely intense experiences of tragedy, horror, and disgust. Even if in such extreme scenarios, players appear to be (at least partially) in control of their immersion and detachment from the game, we must consider the inherent ability to control one's immersion as an important moderator affecting individual larp outcomes.

However, even if desired outcomes are not achieved during the game due to conscious detachment, game creators may try to reach for such outcomes by focusing on post-play activities and briefings. In fact, the larp structure is usually not conducive to post-play activities, unless the game organizer shortens play to include such activities as part of the time allotted (Brown 2018). Due to this, the players lack the opportunity to process the experience and resolve emotional thoughts. Thus, an intentional focus on post-play reflections may limit the moderating effect of conscious detachment and increase the likelihood of desired outcomes. Furthermore, this moderating effect may be regulated by requiring the players to read up on and internalize their characters prior to the game, and then to bodily and mentally pretend to be those characters, as some of the Nordic style larps have already done (Waern, Montola, and Stenros 2009).

The extent to which the game is indistinguishable from everyday life may act as yet another moderator of the individual larp outcomes. Indeed, as Stenros et al. (2007) explain, when the game is indistinguishable from the reality, everything becomes related to the larp world. This merging effect alters the way in which the world is perceived, and the players start seeing the game where there is none. When the game is conceived as reality, the everyday personality becomes just another character. In fact, this merging of game and reality may lead to what Pohjola (2004) referred to as inter-immersion -- that is, when everything a character does enhances the believability of the game world, and everything in the game world enhances the identity of the character (in contrast to that of the player). This creates the positive feedback loop which increases the likelihood of bleed-out and the individual larp outcomes taking place in everyday life.

In order to magnify the benefits of perspective taking in larp, game designers could aim to amplify four dimensions of narrative engagement: narrative understanding, attentional focus, emotional engagement, and narrative presence. For example, narrative understanding and attentional focus may each be dampened if larpers observe that story world logic is inconsistent as this violation of realism appears to cause disruptions of the narrative experience (Busselle and Bilandzic 2008). Therefore, if game designers wish to lay a foundation for the benefits of perspective taking in larp to take hold, they should aim to introduce any inconsistencies via the narrative itself and these deviations must be made to seem plausible. Overall, the narrative engagement scale developed by Busselle and Bilandzic (2009) could be a useful tool for investigating the extent to which a larp experience is expected to engage players in the narrative.

4.3 Collective Outcomes of Larping Marginalized Experiences

We have argued that, when done with intentionality, larp experience can promote increased equity in group dynamics even on a societal level by reducing prejudice and increasing empathy for marginalized individuals and groups. Going further, larpers may learn to empathize more frequently and effectively in real life by practicing this skill in role-play. That is because an important component of empathy is the mental flexibility to adopt the perspective of another while also maintaining self-awareness (Decety 2007). In other words, routine perspective taking is a key foundation of human empathy (Batson et al. 1991), and its practice could accrue positive collective benefits.

Although larp's ability to produce these outcomes does not have much direct empirical support, a study done by Herrera et al. (2018, Study 1) investigated whether VR simulations are a more effective method of eliciting empathy as compared to the traditional perspective taking. The Inclusion of the

Other in the Self (IOS) scale data showed that over the course of eight weeks, participants in both the VR and the traditional perspective taking conditions reported feeling empathetic and connected to the houseless at similar rates. In other words, these participants selected increasingly overlapping circles to represent the relationship between themselves and the houseless as they experienced it. However, the results for attitudes toward the houseless and the dehumanization scale show that the participants who simulated houselessness in virtual reality had longer-lasting and more positive attitudes towards the houseless. This goes to show that perspective taking, whether traditional or enhanced via immersion, is an important factor in producing empathy toward the marginalized outgroup.

The consequences of increased empathy across group boundaries are many, but one example would be a reduction in racial inequality in medical care. Epidemiological evidence indicates that African Americans receive lower quality pain treatment and are denied pain medication at higher rates, as compared to European Americans, an outcome which is correlated with the magnitude of the empathy bias in the medical context (Drwecki et al. 2011) Having in mind the aforementioned, the strategies to increase empathy appear to be a priority in the medical sector equity research. As noted previously, perspective taking within larp can act as an important means of stimulating the empathy-making process. In turn, this process may result in reduced racial disparities in the medical field to the degree that medical practitioners engage in larp or experience edu-larp as part of their training.

Furthermore, studies suggest that a reliable association can develop over time between empathy and altruism (i.e., helping others without a cost-benefit analysis; Batson et al. 1991), and there is also evidence in support of a causal effect of perspective taking on altruism (Underwood and Moore 1982). If such a causal link is indeed present, larp proliferation could stimulate a new wave of altruism in adults immersing themselves into role-playing games. This altruism, along with perspective taking and empathy, could further stimulate activism against violence toward minority groups and marginalized communities.

When evaluating and proposing collective outcomes, it is important to bear in mind the cultural differences that underlie perspective taking. A cultural dimension worth examining is individualism/collectivism. As Kağıtçıbaşı (1997) explains, the main feature of collectivism is emphasis on the group such that the group serves as the source of value and that the interests of the group take precedence over those of the individual. Hofstede (1980) found that the countries of East Asia score particularly high on collectivism, in contrast to the English-speaking countries. Relating this cultural dimension back to perspective taking, Wu and Keysar (2007) concluded that the cultural patterns of collectivism focus attention on others (as opposed to the self), causing Chinese individuals to be better perspective takers on average than their American counterparts. For example, eye gaze measures demonstrate that Chinese participants are more tuned into their partner's perspective, as compared to the Americans. Wu and Keysar (2007) further note that Americans often completely failed to take the perspective of their partner, whereas Chinese participants almost never failed to do so. This suggests that culturally prepared interdependence can help individuals better interpret other people's actions.

Another collective benefit of dark tourism in larp comes directly from education about marginalized experiences as this can help bridge the gap between communities. This is because a key proponent of reconciliation is developing a shared mutually acceptable understanding of history (Staub 2008), but repeatedly recounting generational trauma could be emotionally fatiguing. For this reason, some locals in New Orleans welcomed post-Hurricane Katrina tours that wove narratives of death and loss into the traditional tourist experience of the city. Without these tours, locals likely would have had to answer questions about their recent trauma on a frequent, ad hoc basis (Bowman and Pezzulo 2010). Similarly, marginalized individuals who choose to design larps inspired by their lived experiences may opt-in to educate themselves and their larp communities on their own terms rather than continuously upon request. These larpers could then harness the healing power of revisiting and reframing trauma

that has been shown to be effective for some Indigenous elders (Aho 2014).

Furthermore, as Stenros and Montola (2010) explain, larps are great at showing alternatives -- both good and bad. This ability to construct and experience either a utopian or dystopian society may have profound effects on the players' critical thinking capacities. As critical tools, these games have immense potential. While larping, players can examine hypothetical scenarios that may make more sense than the monotonous realities they live in. Thus, larps can bring forward the awareness needed and empower players to initiate the real-life change in their societies. In this way, larp can be a potent catalyst for social change.

To summarize, there appears to be a variety of positive outcomes of playing to experience marginalization in larp as it can increase shared narratives of marginalization and perpetuate prosocial and equitable group dynamics. Furthermore, this type of larping may promote intergroup empathy more broadly, which could lower social inequities across various fields and even bring about societal increases in altruistic behavior. However, additional research investigating the cross-cultural generalizability of these collective effects is necessary.

5. DISCUSSION

Role-playing to experience marginalization and dark tourism may be rooted in similar motivations and suffer some of the same pitfalls. Without careful guidance, larp designers and participants can create harm to individuals and communities. At minimum, designers of larps should consider and clearly communicate the intended purpose of disaster tourism style larps and what safeguards will be provided, if any. Such larps could count as transgressing the boundaries of play, which is often prescribed as requiring positive emotions and trivial content (Stenros 2018). Discrepant creative agendas (i.e., what each participant wants to get out of the larp) and disagreements over play culture (e.g., themes) can become a major source of conflict among role-players (Bowman 2013). However, we are hopeful that the proposed benefits of perspective taking, enhanced empathy, and altruism can be achieved with preparation and scaffolding by larp designers and participants alike to provide greater forewarning and opt-in for participants. This will be possible if certain moderators, such as role-play modality, the inhabited role, cultural modes of perspective taking, and narrative engagement, are carefully considered.

Some additional caveats bear mentioning. First, the longevity of these effects is untested. Indeed, research on perspective taking and empathy has primarily been conducted in brief, laboratory settings. However, repeated exposure to treatments over time tend to have deeper and longer lasting impacts in general, so one could predict that repeated exposure to a character mindset in a campaign larp setting or repeatedly playing characters from the same marginalized group could have a more pervasive impact on the larper.

A second consideration is that many larpers who play marginalized characters are also deeply marginalized in real life. According to Kemper (2017), individuals who have marginalized identities can explore modes of freedom by playing for emancipatory bleed. That is, players can use their role-play experiences in order to explore the themes of oppression extant in their real lives using various methods. The practices Kemper suggests -- pre-game preparation, in-game steering, and post-game evaluations -- are likely vital tools for any larper to learn from in-game experiences and contrast them with their out-of-game experiences of marginalization and privilege.

Intentional framing of a learning experience like that suggested by Kemper (2017) is also a hallmark of the emerging field of inclusive pedagogy. Therefore, we recommend larp designers try their own version of instructional scaffolding -- support provided by instructors to students in order to aid them in mastering tasks which are at the edge of their current ability and experience (Hogan and Pressley 1997). This scaffolding may include: providing a forewarning of themes relevant to culture, power

and identity issues that will likely arise in the game; providing education about these themes before or after the game; and offering or workshopping strategies in advance regarding ways students may incorporate these themes into the collaborative story to minimize harm and support effective learning. Larp designers should consider using these tools whenever they encounter or encounter themes of marginalization in their storytelling.

In addition to scaffolding by instructors, inclusive pedagogy experts encourage students to practice and utilize meta-cognition to enhance learning. This occurs whenever students write and reflect about their learning experience before, during, and after the lesson in order to deepen their understanding of their learning (LaVaque-Manty and Evans 2013). Such practices relate most to Kemper (2017)'s suggestion of using auto-ethnography to enhance emancipatory bleed. We argue that these tools can be helpful for anyone engaging in a larp that touches on themes of marginalization. For example, larpers and designers alike should consider outlining learning outcomes for the experience they are engaging in and producing. The list of what one should/could get out of a specific larp experience may be a shared vision that is developed collaboratively or completely individualized and à la carte. Regardless, when all participants identify desired outcomes at the design stage, it will likely help designers meet those expectations during the event and help larpers steer their play toward those goals.

Finally, we centered much of this discussion on the motivations for dark tourism and, in turn, larping to experience marginalization. Indeed, Van Hoving and colleagues (2010) recommend dark tourists check their personal intentions before embarking on any journey, and so do we. It may be better for a larper to withdraw from a scene or event entirely if they discover their motivations are harmful. In addition to that, it is important for designers to evaluate their own motivations when creating larps which center on the experience of marginalization and ask themselves why they are offering the option of moving through marginalized spaces in the first place. The game creators should evaluate why the marginalization within the envisioned world takes the form it takes and delve into personal biases that might have informed the creation of the game. Indeed, as Kessock (2016) points out, these biases may influence how organizers view players that enter their space, what characters players are allowed to play, and even character interactions during play.

Proactive reflections on the creators' part before and during events are vital because they might counter subconscious networks of negative responses to people's identities and traits which are outside the norm. As Kessock (2016) elaborates, if a person who holds social capital within the group (in this case, the game creator) expresses bias against a fellow player based on their identity or characteristics, this can cause further discrimination. As these biases might subconsciously be ingrained within the game design, it is vital for the game creators to evaluate whether their choices further perpetuate inherent biases that come with gender presentation, racial acceptance, and other individual traits. The players should also be encouraged to get these questions answered in order to identify any potential issues before they arise.

Checking motivations and being transparent about them is difficult in part because, as Harviainen (2008) points out, both the practitioners and the outsiders studying larp are affected by personal bias which leaves the study of role-play in a state of chaos. This makes personal reflection even more important for all the actors involved with larp, especially with the games concerning marginalized spaces. However, because understanding and accounting for our own motives can be a difficult task, we next propose another more attainable approach: cultivating a growth mindset for learning. In this case, viewing human attributes as malleable and failure as a learning opportunity is important because this can lay the foundation for greater personal growth and make an individual more receptive to critical feedback (Dweck, Chiu, and Hong 1995).

Given the benefits of a growth mindset for learning, it is fortunate that play and playfulness align with this approach to learning. As Mortensen and Navarro-Remesal (2018) point out, play allows

us to intentionally court failure so we may seek to better understand it. That is, we propose that the acceptance of possible failure implied by conventions of gaming could alleviate much of the anxiety that often plagues intergroup contact (Plant and Devine 2003), thus paving the way for the prejudice reduction that tends to follow from direct and even imagined interactions with members of other groups (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Turner, Crisp, and Lambert 2007; Turner, Hewstone, and Voci 2007).

6. CONCLUSION

We share Tanenbaum and Tanenbaum (2015)'s view that play can be a transformative resource throughout a person's life; through play we can construct new worlds and reconsider our current perspectives. As discussed here, the individual and collective benefits of larping to experience marginalization have the ability to perpetuate more equitable group dynamics and foster shared and healing narratives about historic oppression. Routine perspective taking in larp could even foster the transfer of empathy skills to real world settings and stimulate altruism more broadly. However, larpers and designers must carefully avoid the possible drawbacks of increased stereotyping that can occur due to flawed perspective taking and subsequent harm to marginalized larpers and community trust. As discussed previously, marginalized larpers who are routinely called upon to screen new character concepts and are often expected to give feedback about portrayals of their own marginalization with grace and even-keel are engaging in draining emotional labor which, over time, could cause them to feel alienated from larp communities altogether.

The question that remains to be answered is whether dark tourism in larp is something to be encouraged and if empathy is a worthwhile goal considering the potential risks and drawbacks associated with larping as a marginalized character. Furthermore, one should ask themselves whether commodification of trauma is a reasonable side effect of this empathy-inducing phenomenon. Indeed, no discussion of benefits is adequate without the careful consideration of the costs. A "do more good than harm" mandate has ties to consequentialism, a traditional moral classification that Sageng (2018) also uses to evaluate the morality of video games. Sageng argues that killing fictional characters in games is permissible in part because the harm is make-believe; it has no real world impact. Similarly, although our foregoing discussion has primarily engaged in an instrumental consideration of dark tourism in larp, we feel that weighing costs and benefits is directly relevant to the ethical principles of beneficence and nonmaleficence in our field (American Psychological Association's Ethics Code; APA 2017).

We can find further ethical consideration of dark tourism in larp via Sageng (2018)'s application of deontological theory to video games. Specifically, as deontology centers on moral actions requiring adherence to perceived moral norms, Sageng argues that in-game racism is not permissible because "the mandate that comes from play does not have the power to outstrip respect for dignity" but rather "originates in an acknowledgement of an individual's right to take pleasure in her own self-worth" (79). We feel this claim is also supported by the ethical principle of Respect for People's Rights and Dignity, which centers on self-determination and respecting "cultural, individual, and role differences" (American Psychological Association Ethic's Code; APA 2017).

Whichever ethical framework designers, players, and larp theorists use to evaluate dark tourism in larp, we should all make these evaluations in the context of the communities and individuals our choices impact. This mandate is also consistent with the APA ethics code, which calls on practitioners to honor their responsibility to society, build trust with their communities of practice, and create fair and equitable access to their contributions (APA 2017). However, the foregoing could be especially challenging for those larps which reproduce a limited perspective due to design teams and social capital which serve to amplify White, straight, male, cis-gendered and able-bodied experiences. Ideally, therefore, we can flip the dark tourism experience in larp from a process of consumption to one of

collaborative education -- a shared learning laboratory in which marginalized larpers have control over their own narratives.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Fantasy In Real Life: Making Meaning from Vicarious Experiences with a Tabletop Role-Playing Game Live-Play Internet Stream

Abstract: This study investigated the experiences of people who claimed exposure to Critical Role, a web series featuring a group of voice actors playing a tabletop role-playing game (TRPG), impacted their lives in meaningful ways beyond entertainment. Building on previous research that documented players engaging in role-playing games, livestreaming, and role-playing game (RPG) fandom subculture, this study specifically explored the perspectives of individuals who reported a transformational impact of experiencing gaming vicariously through watching Critical Role. This paper reports a detailed narrative of one of the cases from qualitative interviews, which conveys major themes that illustrate the perspective of the individual watching. The paper compliments this detailed case description with a discussion of findings from seven in depth interviews to explore the experiences of the interviewee focused on in the context of the study sample. This study is primarily focused on the individual watchers' experience of gameplay and role-playing experiences, which they attribute to personal growth. The term parasocial gaming is introduced to characterize a part of vicarious experience associated with watching media figures playing games.

Keywords: role-playing games, tabletop, Critical Role, streaming, therapeutic, parasocial relationships

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1. INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is a powerful component of human culture that has evolved alongside technology and helped shape both individual lives and society at large. Various narrative forms have influenced how stories have been told throughout history. Some games represent a unique form of storytelling; role-playing games employ narrative as a foundation and have the potential to become communal co-creative storytelling processes across forms of media (Cover 2010; Cragoe 2016; Deterding and Zagal 2018).

New technological advances continue to shape how storytelling is impacting people. Internet media with advances in social platforms and video streaming introduce yet another context -- live streaming gameplay -- which changes the communication of games and how people share play (Taylor 2018). However, much of the research on live streaming, including that presented by Taylor (2018) and cited later in this paper, has focused on esports and/or the perspective of the broadcaster, or the community at large.

Research on online games has surged alongside technological advances (see, e.g., Castronova 2005; Steinkuehler & Williams 2006; Taylor 2006). The overwhelming majority of research dedicated to video games leaves the unique genre of tabletop role-playing games understudied, however (Conner 2013; Cover 2010). The tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) industry has also grown and adapted with the rise of the internet (White et al. 2018). Massive shifts in tabletop role-playing technologies alongside increasing appreciation for games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are eliciting new frontiers to explore the boundaries of virtual role-playing and TRPG fandom (Hedge and Grouling 2021). Cragoe (2016) called for adding a focus on tabletop and live action role-playing games as new interactive narrative forms and exploring how these social structures are shaping lives. I echo this call, alongside emerging works like Jones (2021b), and add internet-streamed tabletop role-playing games to the list of interactive narrative forms deserving our attention.

The use of online streaming technology to broadcast role-playing games for internet audiences is becoming popular alongside a rise in the popularity of tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (Jones 2021b). This new technology for sharing game stories provides an opportunity for us

to begin to explore meaningful bridges between how old and new narrative forms of storytelling impact individuals (Cragoe 2016). In preparation, we can begin by taking a closer look at how new media are being used to interact with tabletop role-playing games and being experienced by individuals. Including concepts from media studies like parasocial interaction, which is utilized in this paper, may help us gain insight about how the cultural roles of games may be manifesting in new, potentially transformative ways.

2. A NEW VERSION OF A FAMILIAR GAME

The rise in the popularity of *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D)* is potentially connected to beneficial effects of gameplay, as fans have claimed to experience transferable benefits and personal transformation from both playing and watching others. Organizations like Game to Grow, Geek Therapeutics, and Geeks Like Us are using tabletop role-playing games in therapy and training therapists to incorporate TRPGs in therapeutic practice (Bean, Daniel, and Hays 2020). Alongside the use of TRPGs for personal growth, numerous live-play *D&D* podcasts and internet video streaming shows such as *Acquisitions Inc*, *Critical Role*, *Dice Camera Action*, and *Maze Arcana* have emerged in recent years. This has added a new dimension to the *actual play*, or social interaction and communication, that produces the game experience because *D&D* is now being expressed through actual play to create the fiction of a show alongside the fiction of a game (White 2016). Actual play is becoming more and more popular, transforming into a new combination of phenomena involving TRPG play, and creating new manifestations of historical, socio-cultural, psychological, and pedagogical implications to explore (Jones 2021a).

Critical Role is a well-known *D&D* live stream (Whitten 2020), perhaps even the most popular one of its kind (Jones 2021a). *Critical Role* published its first live-recorded episode in March 2015; the 100th episode aired in June of 2017 and the show continues on a weekly basis. *Critical Role* focuses on a consistent cast playing *D&D* live for an internet audience. Each episode is around four hours in length and is recorded in a live web broadcast on a weekly basis on Twitch.tv/criticalrole. Unlike many Twitch broadcasters, *Critical Role* does not allow the audience to drive the story but does promote fan interactions within the chat and paratexts online (Friedman 2021). The cast is comprised of a group of friends who have careers as voice actors outside of *Critical Role*. Tens of thousands of viewers watch the stream live each week and the episodes, which are later published on YouTube, have hundreds of thousands of views each, with some over a million.

Fans of *Critical Role* call themselves "Critters." Throughout the rise of the show's popularity, Critters have sent gifts and written letters to the cast of the show; some have even submitted video testimonies about how they have been personally affected by *Critical Role*. These testimonies were mostly unsolicited until the producers began sharing some of these stories. The producers of *Critical Role* created a video compiling fan submissions about how impactful the show has been for them ("Why I Love" 2017). In fact, the show is exclusively focused on gameplay and spends little time directly addressing audience members' self-help related issues aside from acknowledging and sharing the gratitude sent in by Critters. Yet, the aforementioned reports surfaced in messages to the show and Comic-con panels of people feeling inspired and empowered by their relationships with the show to overcome significant personal challenges in other areas of life, including work, relationships, and personal well-being. This is not entirely surprising, given that sharing emotional vulnerability is a common aspect of many Twitch communities and illustrates a prominent affective aspect of live streaming community experiences (Taylor 2018).

Role-players can be seen as both fans and agents within a subculture based on three premises: 1) that RPG fandom is a subculture, 2) there are specific subcultures within that subculture, and 3)

that fandoms and subcultures are seen as interchangeable (MacCallum-Stewart & Trammell 2018). In the case of *Critical Role*, Critters can be considered as fans because they have their own niche formed around liking the show; participate in activities such as watching the show and chatting live on Twitch; and disseminate social and behavioral codes for playing *D&D* and watching *Critical Role* (MacCallum-Stewart & Trammell 2018). While this study is primarily focused on these reports of positive experiences, it is important to note that the larger *Critical Role* fandom is complicated with caustic reactions and maintaining a guise of positive attitudes (Jones 2021a).

Critters can even be considered to have a dual fandom experience with actual play media given the enmeshed elements of both actor and character being presented (Dandrow 2021). The actual play aspect of *Critical Role* is where individual experiences as fans in a fandom-based subculture may integrate with individual experiences, including but not limited to playing a TRPG, and potentially even with the experiences of the cast of players. There is a complex range of involvement to consider while trying to understand the experiences of Critters watching *Critical Role*. I have chosen to focus on the individual experience of the watcher in order to investigate specific reports of personal well-being associated with watching and vicariously experiencing the cast's gaming.

3. WATCHING GAMING

Orme (2021) reported the experiences of *just watchers* (JWs): individuals who watch others play video games on sites like Twitch.tv. In some cases, watching video games can be similar to spectating sport competitions, but many JWs reported a range of appeals including an appreciation for the narrative of the games and the narrative agency of the players being watched (Orme 2021). Collaborative storytelling, agency, and other narrative aspects of role-playing games are on display in *Critical Role* too. Audience members can shift among a range of roles, from typically assumed passivity toward active participation, while spectating gameplay (Downs et al 2015). This interaction may involve simply watching; focusing all attention to be immersed in the narrative; chatting back and forth with others during the broadcast; creating fan art; and taking actions in other platforms such as Twitter or fan sites. Such blurring of the lines by just watching is complicated further with *parasocial interaction*.

Parasocial interaction (PSI) is the relationship between media users and media figures (Giles 2002). Parasocial interaction connects fans' experiences to the social interaction of the players (cast) in *Critical Role*. Giles (2002) provides a theoretical framework for understanding PSI as a spectrum of social activity that can be experienced as a relationship between media users and media figures or characters. The emerging actual play environments retain a potential for relationships between storytellers and listeners who engage with communal narratives (Franklin 2021).

Critters engage in relationships across the spectrum of PSI ranging from simply being fans; to posting on Twitter; to sending letters and gifts; to meeting at conventions and even dressing as the characters in cosplay. The internet provides more and easier access for Critters to engage in interactive forms of PSI by facilitating communication to the cast and other Critters with opportunities for the cast to respond to individual fans and for fans to interact with each other on a large scale. Hamilton (2014) points out how live streaming platforms can form "third places" for fans to interact and form community. Twitch broadcasters are transforming private (potentially intimate) play into public entertainment powered by highly integrated audience involvement (Taylor 2018). The plethora of opportunities for interaction between play and watching may boost the effects of PSI for Critters, particularly when aided by the immersive potential of storytelling and role-playing. Live streaming on Twitch.tv and the use of live streamed role-playing has fundamentally changed PSI. "This critical difference has not only shifted the theoretical nature of the [parasocial relationships] but allowed for a new range of social emotional benefits for the viewer from their relationship with the persona as well as their larger community"

(Kowert and Daniel 2021, 5). Additionally, elements of live streaming experiences can now include improvisation, role-play, storytelling, and collective creativity. Through parasocial interaction and relationships, it seems possible for a Critter to have an experience that is similar to the experience one could have as a fan of any media and/or that of a JW or player.

4. PARASOCIAL GAMING

The advent of live streamed tabletop role-playing games has introduced new opportunities for people to experience these games. Watching *D&D* in this new form can be thought of as experiencing a creative form of social interaction among players. In exploring this new phenomenon, I focus my approach (which is described in detail later) on understanding the individual's sense of their experience, consciousness, and ascribing meaning to their experience informed by Patton's (2002) description of phenomenology. Thus, I aim to understand the experience of parasocial interaction from the participant's perspective.

Audience members could sometimes be said to be engaging in *parasocial gaming*, defined in this study as a gameplay-like experience in which fans have vicarious experiences similar to experiencing gameplay, but instead through parasocial means without directly playing themselves. Even JWs report feeling a sense of achievement from watching others make progress in games (Orme 2021). Twitch streamers convey an experience of gameplay, externalize internal experiences, make visceral experiences visible, and render affective meaning legible to spectators through an authentic performance of play (Taylor 2018). Audience members can sometimes be said to have a parasocial relationship, feeling deeply connected with media figures who are actual players of broadcasted gameplay and, as Taylor (2018) describes, to vicariously strive for meaningful creativity and connection. The notion of parasocial gaming here draws from previous research on tabletop role-playing games, and a synthesis of literature defining parasocial interaction (Bowman 2010; Deterding and Zagal 2018; Giles 2002).

Several elements of TRPG experiences are relevant to this study beginning with *immersion*, *bleed*, and *steering*. Immersion, the feeling of being in the game, narrative, character, activity, etcetera, is a key element of role-playing games that has been associated with a process in which players' emotions, relationships, and physical states effect the learning potential of role-playing experiences (Bowman 2010; 2013).

Bowman and Lieberoth (2018) describe an additional aspect of RPG experiences called bleed -- players experiencing elements of a game spilling over into real-life and vice versa -- as a key element of transferring role-playing experiences to other realms of life. Steering as described by Montola, Stenros, and Saitta (2015) may also be a factor as individuals choose to alter their own experience toward emotionally impacting factors with non-diegetic motivations. One form of steering can involve players with a desire to intentionally craft experiences toward therapeutic effects. A step further, some therapists add therapy interventions to role-playing game experiences (Bean, Daniel, and Hays 2020). Feeling immersed in a show and connected to a role-playing experience through parasocial interaction is theoretically associated with a range of emotional elements (Taylor 2018) of TRPG experiences that can be felt by fans. This study is primarily focused on the individual watchers' experience of gameplay and the role-playing experiences they attribute to personal growth.

The developmental impact that TRPGs sometimes have on people theoretically involves a shared imagination. Winnicott (1989) describes how individuals come to new understandings of self and reality in a semi-relaxed state of play, utilizing imagination and relatedness with others to spur development. Similarly, Vygotsky (1978) describes how individuals create imaginary situations in which social rules can be modified during role-play, enabling learning and development. In TRPGs, groups create fictional worlds and a shared imagination while engaging in social interaction and group dynamics (Lasley 2020).

In parasocial gaming, the benefits of gameplay, such as feelings of connection or the potential for personal development, that rely on social interaction and relationships may theoretically be transferred through parasocial relationships experienced by observers similar to how social interaction among players can influence individuals. Observers experiencing immersion in the narrative of a show consisting of players creating a shared imagination may vicariously experience both immersion in the game narrative and shared imagination with the cast. I am expanding on the historical concept of parasocial interaction (Giles 2002) to delineate the unique vicarious experience of Critters who associated personal benefits with observing media figures engaging in storytelling during TRPG gameplay.

5. THE USE OF ROLE-PLAYING GAMES FOR GROWTH

The Critters who love *Critical Role* are not the only people to associate tabletop role-playing games with transferable benefits to experiences that occur outside of gameplay. Researchers, too, have documented the impact of playing tabletop role-playing games on individuals' life experiences beyond the game itself (Bowman and Hugaas 2019; Bowman 2010; 2013; Daniau 2016). TRPGs have even been used in conjunction with therapeutic practice (Bean, Daniel, and Hays 2020; Blackmon 1994; Hurley 1994). Additionally, multiple perspectives on learning have been applied to TRPGs (Hammer et al. 2018), including transformative learning (Daniau 2016), and they have been used to enhance learning in higher education (Crocco, Offenholley, and Hernandez 2016). These are some sectors in which TRPGs have been used to intentionally utilize the benefits of gaming experiences for education, therapy, and personal growth.

Further examination of the impact of tabletop role-playing games on both players and observers is needed in order to thoroughly understand the benefits, some potentially transformational, of tabletop role-playing games. Furthermore, new forms of media being used to interact with tabletop role-playing games, such as live streaming internet shows, provide opportunities to explore more emergent tabletop role-playing game situations, particularly for increasing numbers of observers.

As examination of TRPG experiences continues and audiences grow, researchers and practitioners need to keep in mind a myriad of complex factors including the overall fraught nature of mass media, issues of representation in role-playing games (Trammell 2014), barriers within streaming culture faced by individuals with marginalized identities (Taylor 2018), historically racist dynamics in the culture of *D&D* (Hodes 2019), the nature of identity in role-play (Bowman 2010), and the importance of safety in transformational role-play (Bowman and Hugaas 2019). These complexities cannot be all fully addressed in any singular project but must be in our awareness for every endeavor. As studying role-play and streaming phenomena entails many entangled considerations of larger contexts, this study cannot address them all. Nonetheless, it is important for readers and watchers to know the aforementioned contexts and complexity exist and for future work to include other critical approaches to these topics. This study depends on and is framed by my commitment to remaining open and trusting the experience of the Critters as they report it. Therefore, I focused on taking the perspective of the participants in this study, given the novelty of trying to understand how they have experienced meaningful personal impact that they attribute to experiencing *Critical Role.*

The claims of Critters, successful applications by practitioners, and the apparent benefits being explored by academic research suggest there is value associated with tabletop role-playing games beyond the sheer pleasure people get from playing these games or watching others play games. As researchers continue to investigate the nature of what is being claimed as beneficial in gaming experiences, rationale for incorporating game design in educational and therapeutic settings will become more well-informed alongside the growth of transformative practices (Bowman and Hugaas 2019) such as debriefing in leisure gaming. There is a need, therefore, to continue to explore the potential impact of tabletop role-

playing games in new forms of media, how individuals make sense of the experience, and, also, to begin to associate any transformational impact that is reported to particular features of specific games. This study addresses the prerequisite need for a more complete and thorough description of what people mean when they say "benefits" or "transformation."

6. PURPOSE

I sought to understand the perspectives of individuals who attribute positive personal meaning to their experiences watching *Critical Role*. The purpose of this study was to investigate claims regarding potentially transformative outcomes credited to simply watching gameplay of a tabletop role-playing game. Specifically, this study systematically investigated seven (7) individual cases of fans who reported significant positive experience that they connected to their experience watching *Critical Role*. A second purpose was to analyze the characteristics of watching *Critical Role* related to these individuals' experiences. This included attention to elements of tabletop role-playing games and transformative learning discussed in existing literature in an effort to determine what data exists that can help us understand *Critical Role* as a new medium for experiencing tabletop role-playing games:

1. What benefits, beyond sheer enjoyment, do Critters report as being connected to their exposure to *Critical Role* and to what evidence do they attribute their claims?
2. What characteristics of tabletop role-playing games are demonstrated in an episode of *Critical Role* and to what degree are they demonstrated?
3. How do Critters relate benefits reported to the characteristics of *Critical Role* and tabletop role-playing games?

7. METHOD

A phenomenological approach to narrative inquiry (Merriam & Tisdell 2016) was selected to distill the individual experiences of Critters, specifically related to the perceived positive impact that watching *Critical Role* had on them. This approach focused on the story of a Critter's experience as a first-person account that constituted a "text," which served as data to be analyzed. As Mirriam and Tisdell explain, "Stories are how we make sense of our experiences, how we communicate with others, and through which we understand the world around us." (2016, p.33) An open, inductive approach to learning from people's stories is used here because watching TRPG live streams and in particular attributing positive impact to *Critical Role* specifically is yet unexplored. While there are other approaches and research on parasocial interaction, TRPGs, and other forms of media respectively, this research seeks first to identify the specific phenomenon being experienced by these participants who experienced it first-hand and attributed positive impact to their experience.

While I employed a systematic and responsible approach to conducting this research, my positionality shaped my ability to interpret and understand the experiences of these participants. I am a practitioner with experience facilitating both learning and development in and out of the classroom. Much of this experience has involved helping individuals through personal growth and in identity development. These skills -- notably, client centered interviewing -- enabled me to conduct interviews that guided participants to tell their stories in a way that conveys the meaning they attribute to their experience. Additionally, I am a gamer, player, and dungeon master for games of *Dungeons & Dragons 5e*. I have been a fantasy gamer since childhood but was not fully introduced to TRPGs or *D&D* until 2015. I began watching *Critical Role*, started playing at a local store, and within 6 months, initiated a campaign as the DM with a group of friends, which is now 6 years running. My experience as a gamer,

dungeon master, and Critter was essential for understanding and interviewing participants about their experiences playing the game due to significant in-group language and the need to build trust.

Interviews were conducted solely focusing on the participants' experiences and descriptions by applying motivational interviewing and appreciative inquiry techniques, in which I am extensively trained and practiced. I refrained from offering my own opinions and maintained a curious observer role with the participants during the interviews. Emerging themes and disconfirming evidence were noted while analyzing the recordings in an effort to ensure trustworthiness of my interpretations of the findings. Member checking was used to ensure these findings are conveying the story of the participant's experience according to them. The comparison of themes from individual interviews served to confirm and disconfirm my observations by incorporating multiple participant perspectives.

I employed semi-structured interviews for data collection and thematic narrative analysis to inductively form an understanding of the phenomenon from analyzing the data, anchored in my belief that participants are the best experts on their own experiences. First, semi-structured topical interviews were conducted with study participants, who were identified through the procedures described below. The participants co-constructed their story through the process of being interviewed. Then, interview recordings were systematically reviewed to identify narrative themes in and among the participants' stories. The type of thematic analysis used was one "which reports experiences, meanings, and the reality of participants" (Braun & Clarke 2006 pg.81) and discovers a plot that displays meaning among the data (Polkinghorne 1995). One interview in particular was selected for detailed narrative analysis in this paper because the participant's story conveys a wholistic meaning and is representative of the main themes from the other participants' stories; the cumulative interview data were then compared to highlight similarities and differences. Braun & Clarke (2006) describe the appropriate use of such a method

> to provide a rich thematic description of your entire data set, so that the reader gets a sense of the predominant or important themes . . . This might be a particularly useful method when you are investigating an under-researched area, or you are working with participants whose views on the topic are not known. (p. 83)

8. INTERVIEW DETAILS

8.1 Participant selection procedures

I posted an invitation to participate in this study on Twitter; the group that manages the @CrittersRPG Twitter handle assisted in sharing the invitation with followers on Twitter. CrittersRPG is a network of fans of *Critical Role.* This group was selected because this group is one of the ways Critters organize and communicate as an internet community. The invitation specifically invited individuals who claimed that watching *Critical Role* had a positive impact on them.

Seven participants responded and were interviewed. Participants varied in age from 18 to 42 with a mix of genders, including two women, four men, and one individual who identified as non-binary. Two participants were from Europe; one was from Canada, and the rest were from the United States. All the individuals expressed a deep appreciation and connection with *Critical Role,* though their personal motivations and experiences varied. Along with their appreciation for the show, they also regarded the cast and characters as role models who were, to some degree, admired by fans. All the participants had viewed all the episodes at least once, while four have re-watched the entire series at least one additional time.

8.2 Interview procedures

Interviews were conducted and recorded via Google Hangouts On Air -- with use of the private listing feature to maintain privacy -- and used a topical guide format targeting the following topics: participant background, participant's exposure to *Critical Role*, meaning of *Critical Role* to the participant, and details about personal issues mentioned. Interviews were between 40 and 60 minutes in length. The interview recordings were indexed with detailed notes identifying emergent themes following each interview.

A case was selected for deeper analysis for a few reasons. Initially, deeper analysis of this case began halfway into the data collection phase -- it was the third interview -- while I was still coordinating with some of the other study participants to conduct additional interviews. The fitness of this case for primary representation in this paper was reviewed again and confirmed following the thematic analysis of all the data and finishing the deeper narrative analysis. I reviewed notes and themes identified from analyzing all seven interviews to determine whether or not this case exhibited the major themes from all the data. The notes from the remaining six participants' interviews were used to further compare the themes in the context of this study.

8.3 Data analysis

Polkinghorne (1995) has described two quite different approaches to analyzing the sort of qualitative data generated in this study; he called these two approaches the *analysis of narrative* and *narrative analysis*. The analysis of narrative strategy entails coding the qualitative or narrative data into categories and themes and then using snippets of the narrative interview data to illustrate each category or theme. This is the most common approach to analyzing the type of data generated in this study.

Narrative analysis, on the other hand, entails discovering a plot that displays the linkage among the data as part of a storied episode of a person's life (Polkinghorne 1995). For this paper, I used Polkinghorne's (1995) narrative analysis approach, instead of the more common analysis of narrative described above, to analyze the data generated by interviewing the Critter who is the main focal point and convey deeper interconnected meaning. This type of dialogic interrogation can add robustness to ethnographic accounts of play experiences (White 2016).

Consistent with the *narrative analysis* procedures outlined by Polkinghorne (1995), I reconfigured the data generated by interviewing the Critter being focused on here (using the pseudonym Megan) into a chronological story that demonstrated how *Critical Role* influenced the person's life from their perspective. This method focused on the individual narrative of the watcher as they externalized it in an interview. Hedge (2021) explains how digital modes of experiencing TRPGs contain a multitude of affordances and components of a whole narrative phenomenon in which the act of observing social and narrative frames through technology might constitute its own experience. Thus, the individual narrative perspective of the watcher making sense of what is happening in their experience and ascribing meaning to their perception is a valuable unexplored lens from which to analyze these phenomena.

The story was originally constructed by the participant in their telling of it in pieces throughout the interview and then reconstructed by the researcher writing the narrative after reviewing the notes and interview recording many times. The participant was sent a draft of my written narrative of her story and asked to provide feedback as a form of member checking. She responded with support, stating "I think you did a fine job both understanding what we talked about and putting it down in words for others to understand as well." She also included a minor revision to the wording of one of the quotes I had noted from the interview.

8.4 Comparing analyses

The other six interviews were analyzed by watching the interview recordings and taking detailed notes that identified themes in their stories. A comparison of notes from all seven interviews was used to verify that certain themes from the selected narrative analysis are not completely unique to just one person and that there are differences in some themes between cases. This was essential for attempting to understand to what degree the experiences reported by Megan may be both consistent with other reports and unique to her experience. This also served to provide some comparisons of how aspects of *Critical Role* were perceived by different participants.

The analyses produced for both the narrative analysis and analysis of narrative rely on several distinct narratives that explain experiences of watching *Critical Role* from the perspectives of 7 Critters. These perspectives were compared to reveal a complex understanding of an unexplored phenomenon, specifically: attributing positive meaning to watching *Critical Role*.

9. FINDINGS

One individual's narrative is presented first to convey a holistic descriptive understanding of meaning in this data, while the themes from other participants' interviews are added later to indicate ways in which the individual's narrative reported here is not entirely idiosyncratic. This narrative is presented to convey an understanding of her experience including attributions and claims she believes true to her experience as was described in her individual interview.

9.1 Megan's story: Searching for safety and finding growth

Some of Megan's earliest memories involve her sitting on the floor while Dad and friends played tabletop role-playing games, though many of these memories were obscured in her mind until recently. Megan "grew up" in Seattle as a teenager after moving around a lot earlier in life due to her Dad's job opportunities. Megan began playing tabletop role-playing games as a child and around the turn of the millennium began playing Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs). A few years into playing MMORPGs, Megan had made many friends online. One would continue to be a lifelong best friend. Another became her husband and the impetus for her move to Sweden, where she has lived for over a decade at the time of this writing.

Amidst her job working with databases, taking care of her family, and having fun playing games, Megan struggled with several mental health challenges. She reported many efforts to help overcome these issues: "Through the course of the last 10 years or so . . . I have been on various medications. I have had psychologists and psychiatrists." Many of her childhood memories were lost to her and contributed to post traumatic stress in adulthood. She was on her way to recovery, a path that both prepared her for and was empowered by a new and unexpected source.

9.1.1 Finding Critical Role

A friend pestered Megan into watching *Critical Role* for the first time in January of 2016. Megan was immediately drawn to the obvious friendships between both characters and players. Megan was instantly hooked and began watching from Episode 1 to catch up on the whole story. She indicated she likes watching people be happy, friendly, and nice to each other. She noticed the strength of the cast's relationships on display when they made cultural and out-of-game references, showed they shared the same mindset, and got along well. Megan described what she saw:

They are having fun and they are being nice to each other . . . they have the same kind of mindset so they get along really well . . . they enjoy being with each other. They're not afraid to cry in front of each other. Which is also a big deal; they feel safe around the table.

As characters, they really do pour themselves into the situation and into the moment . . . depending on their friendships to be safe enough to cry and laugh and feel angry.

A few months after first watching an episode, Megan had an incredible experience. She was on the verge of drifting off to sleep while watching an episode of *Critical Role* one evening and could hear the kindhearted banter of the characters being good to each other while role-playing. She felt a warm and comforting feeling of safety in herself that mirrored the group dynamic in the episode at the time. Miraculously, she started remembering things from her childhood that had been blocked out. She remembered a similar feeling of safety being around the table with Dad and friends playing tabletop role-playing games. She remembered being on the living room floor at a very young age: "When my dad's friends were there, I was safe . . . That was the one time during the week where I felt safe . . . while my dad was being nice 'cause I didn't see that often." This was a pivotal moment for her moving forward. During the interview she stated:

> *Critical Role* helped me get past some of the worst symptoms and side-effects of having PTSD and move beyond some of those feelings of not finding safety anywhere. They've helped me recognize and realize the safety that is in my life that I was blind to before, which is amazing and huge, but nothing can cure it entirely.

Megan gave credit to *Critical Role* for helping her heal by retrieving positive memories from childhood, triggering post traumatic growth and finding strategies to deal with mental health challenges. Her psychologist even offered to prescribe her a computer since it is integral to her healing through relationships in MMORPGs and watching *Critical Role*. The feelings she got from watching people be good to each other while enjoying a game that she loved her whole life, *Dungeons & Dragons*, provided a sense of safety when she was stressed or tired. For this, she was very grateful, saying, "I'm so happy that I've gotten pieces of me fixed."

9.1.2 Enduring impact

The cast, characters, and their relationships continued to inspire her. Megan continued watching, re-watching and incorporating aspects of *Critical Role* into her life. She described it as contributing to her identity "It's who I am now . . . I'm happy with that." *Critical Role* is a model for Megan in many ways including gaming, personal growth, and relationships. She said, "They give me goals: they give me life goals, and friendship goals, relationship goals." The players felt genuine and were good people. The characters had depth, realistic flaws, and were also good at heart. Megan pointed out specifically how: ". . . they are honest and they are tolerant; they are non-judgmental." Watching them be good people, players, and characters motivated Megan to be more like them.

They were depending on their friendships to open up to each other in- and out-of-game, all while on camera. Megan hadn't had friends that were this vulnerable with each other. She wanted that in her life and around her own gaming table. Megan played a weekly tabletop role-playing game with some local friends and family. Her games were still rising toward the social dynamic in *Critical Role* since her teenage daughter was still learning about relationships. But the whole group was working with her

and learning together. Megan predicted the group would grow to be like *Critical Role*: "Eventually I can see it happening which is what we're trying for."

9.1.3 Personal growth

Megan's husband saw another clear difference at the gaming table: Megan had grown too. He noticed her gaming style become enhanced as Megan learned from seeing *Critical Role*, tried new things in her own game, and acted differently in general. Megan stated, "It's interesting to know that I am changing based on [the cast and characters of *Critical Role*]." She had more confidence and courage to take risks with her own character, which spread to other areas of life. As she put it, "I have courage now in my real life that I did not have before, and that's directly connected."

Another aspect of personal growth Megan noticed was intellectual. A couple years ago, feelings dominated Megan's thinking, but *Critical Role* helped stimulate her intellect. She saw complex levels of interaction in *Critical Role* and identified how characters and players were blending together with a deeper understanding of social dynamics. It was like watching two levels of interaction between the characters and the players simultaneously. Megan could tell they were working through personal stuff sometimes as they poured themselves into their characters, situations, and moments on camera.

9.1.4 Salient characteristics

Megan connected strongly with Liam as a player in this way. Liam was always fully present as both himself and the character he plays, Vax, without seeming like he was just performing a part. He got into his character without losing awareness of all the layers of a tabletop role-playing game (character, player, person). Megan described this as "he can get into his character without losing his awareness." This is something Megan said she was learning to do better "I can see it happening, I can see that it exists . . . maybe I can get there too." She saw from watching Liam playing Vax how it was possible to have strong feelings while still having self-control.

To Megan, the best parts of *Critical Role* stem from seeing the personalities of both characters and players, which typically happened while the group was heavily engaged in role-play, outside of combat. She described this as the ability to "get in there and access your feelings and still be connected to the present." Getting character insights, player thought patterns, and a rich story was the source of meaning for her. Megan saw the general level of tolerance, acceptance, and empathy related to gaming and the characters as the most meaningful parts of *Critical Role*. Teaching empathy is hard, Megan saw this as a good way to do it: "They have an empathy that is admirable. I think that's directly related to their gaming."

In addition to helping Megan think and feel with more complexity and inspiring her to be a better person, she also learned about relationships. Watching Ashley play the character Pike let Megan know that taking a break from friends isn't necessarily an ending but that she can come back and pick up where she left off. Ashley missed many episodes for her other work. Megan noticed Ashley returning after missing several episodes: "When she comes onto the scene and is just right back in there she's in her character, she's in there full speed, making herself [emotionally] available to her group mates the same way she did the last time." Pike was the character that made Megan feel the most comfortable in this way. Ashley playing as Pike made herself available to the group when she was there because she trusted them. Megan found this inspired her to trust the people in her life more.

Role-playing games have been a significant part of Megan's life from an early age. Her experience with *Critical Role* served as a catalyst for resolving parts of her past and stimulating growth as she looked to the future for herself, her games, her friends, and her family. She continued to watch

Critical Role; play with friends both online and around her table; and strive to be the best she can be despite life's obstacles.

9.2 Understanding Megan's story in the context of the other cases

While each of the cases in this study has its own unique qualities, the cases also display consistency. Comparing notes from all seven interviews demonstrates that Megan's story is both to some degree typical of the other research participants' experiences and also somewhat unique. There are four types of learning elements in Megan's story that, after conducting both thematic and narrative analysis, represent the participant's perceptions of attributing positive impact to the experience of watching *Critical Role*. These elements offer meaningful contributions to an inquiry about TRPG live stream experiences for these participants:

1. *Parasocial Transference.* Experiencing a personally transformative moment while watching *Critical Role* such as Megan's flood of repressed memories from childhood.
2. *Critical Reflection.* Reflecting on the show leads to noticing what makes the show/game appealing and impactful so that it can be learned and transferred to other contexts.
3. *Social Learning.* Application of concepts learned from watching the show into personal gameplay, which provides additional opportunities for learning and growth.
4. *Self Determination.* Seeing growth and impact in other areas of life, including autonomy, relatedness, and competence.

These elements were identified while reviewing this narrative analysis along with the themes that had been identified from reviewing all interview recordings. This perception of benefits was reported to be connected to the experience of watching *Critical Role* and could have involved a range of andragogical mechanisms from self-determination to social learning to parasocial transference. Additionally, many factors may contribute to the context for learning in these cases. The contextual experiences of these participants are further represented by examining the following themes, which were identified throughout the analysis, exhibiting both similarity and difference across cases.

9.2.1 Interest in fantasy games

All participants shared a common interest in fantasy and games. Participants varied in their personal experiences with role-playing games, however. Some, like Megan, had played various forms of role-playing games, both tabletop and computer versions, for most of their lives. Others started playing tabletop role-playing games around the same time they began watching *Critical Role*. One participant had never played role-playing games herself, but has watched other players on a few occasions.

Despite the differences in their past experiences, all the participants described *Critical Role* as exhibiting a unique style of story focused role-playing compared to other experiences with role-playing games they had had, a sentiment that is reiterated in Friedman (2021), who describes how an affective parasocial narrative frame is cannon in *Critical Role*. This point was strongly emphasized by Megan and suggests the narrative focused style of role-playing in *Critical Role*, as it was emphasized by these participants, may be a characteristic that they attributed to these kinds of experiences for them as observers. In addition, previous experience with role-playing games seems to have been connected to benefits that were credited to parasocial gaming but may not have been necessary for experiencing such benefits in other cases.

9.2.2 Inspiration and reflection

Regardless of participants' previous experience with tabletop role-playing games, the six other participants, like Megan, described feeling inspired by *Critical Role*. Watching the show, for example, was reported to have helped motivate all but one of the study's participants to begin playing or return to playing *Dungeons & Dragons.* Some also shared they had motivations, like Megan's, to change their own playstyles; a number of participants besides Megan, in fact, reported being inspired by the show's focus on creative role-playing and storytelling and vowed to express their creative sides and passions when playing *D&D* in the future. Layne (2021) similarly posits a potential instructional aspect of actual play videos through the display of speech, behavior, subculture, and gaming conventions to be adopted by viewers. *Critical Role* was described as having impacted participants by not only inspiring them to play a game with potential benefits, but also by modeling a way to play in which those games can become more meaningful from the perspective of the participants.

In addition, Megan was not alone in reporting being motivated to engage in transformational learning by seeing examples in *Critical Role*, reflecting, and acting differently. Critical reflection (debriefing) is a necessary factor for promoting transformational learning from tabletop role-playing game experiences (Bowman & Hugaas 2019; Daniau 2016). In this way, the show reportedly provided stimuli that served as the initial subject of reflection by participants and was a catalyst for critical reflection on participants' life experiences similar to experiential learning (Kolb 2015). Participants regarded the particular play styles exhibited in *Critical Role* as role modeling for their own critical reflection on both game and life experiences: as one participant put it, "Seeing all these dorky friends and being able to sort of imagine myself in that kind of situation with the friends I've made on the internet." Megan's narrative also demonstrated how the impact of watching *Critical Role* is thought to go beyond being motivated to play by providing opportunities for her and the other participants to learn from observations and enhance how they learned. In some cases, participants also reported reflecting on playing games directly as a result of their reflection on *Critical Role*.

9.2.3 Mental resilience

Megan's story illustrates that, while watching episodes of *Critical Role,* she both found a safe, albeit temporary escape from the world and her problems in it and developed coping skills to use when she returned to the reality that was not virtual. Other participants claimed similar experiences related to their own mental health. One participant reported depending on a safe temporary escape and developing coping skills to recover from attempted suicide and depression, stating:

> Seeing [the characters] fight to [save another character from death] was like, 'that's what I need to do. I need to keep fighting. I'm gonna get my head right and I'm gonna get myself sorted.' It's the episodes like that that remind[] me that I can do it.

Another participant mentioned how watching *Critical Role* contributed to developing resilience through social connection: "Learning how to connect to people by connecting to these characters has helped me sort of learn again how to connect to people in real life." This was one example of how participants described vicarious experiences of role-playing, a shared imagination, and social interaction that they linked to parasocial relationships and narrative immersion.

While all participants explained that *Critical Role* helped them during a difficult period in their lives, four participants reported a direct connection between *Critical Role* and helping deal with specific mental health challenges including depression and anxiety, adding to Megan's description. In the more

serious cases, participants also credited professional mental health counseling and medication with helping them, but they also noted that, even while in therapy and while taking medication, "there was still something missing." *Critical Role*, in fact, was described by several participants as providing the something that was missing and contributed to them feeling complete: "It just filled that void that was there."

9.2.4 Immersion

Not all participants suffered from depression or other emotional difficulties, but all the participants expressed some form of feeling connected to something larger than themselves. This feeling was reportedly so real for Megan that she triggered previously lost memories, which, she explained, propelled her therapeutic progress. Even those who did not utilize therapeutic care reported feeling connected to the players that they watched in the episodes of *Critical Role* as if they were part of a shared experience.

Participants identified specific players and characters with which they could personally relate, contributing to a sense of immersion. For example, Megan related specifically to Ashley (player) playing as Pike (character). Sometimes the aspects of identity that participants identified with were ones that social norms prohibited expressing, a factor which influences identity immersion in role-playing (Bowman 2010; Williams, Kennedy, & Moore 2011). For example, one participant reported this type of identity immersion being outside social norms while discussing how they felt inspired by watching *Critical Role* to incorporate gender identity into their play: "[My character] is very out there with their gender . . . Having [my character] be that way has helped me to come out to people."[1] The specific players and characters from *Critical Role* with which each participant resonated varied, but the way they described their experience of finding personal meaning in their connections with the plot, players, and characters was consistent across the seven study participants.

The plot of the show involved "real world" types of issues and character development which were reported as feeling real to participants. One participant explained how this happened for him because of his relationship with his son, having to be away (in the military) for the first few years of his son's life: "When I got to see the episode where Scanlan met his daughter Kaylie for the first time, I lost it . . . to me that was the most human, beautiful, thing . . . I could understand everything that Scanlan was feeling." All participants described deriving personal meaning from connections they made with topics in the show that represented real life issues. Most participants, including Megan, commented on how this feeling was increased when the cast was role-playing and connected it to a sense of personal meaning that they constructed about watching *Critical Role*.

10. SUMMARY

Comparing these cases helps to contextualize the meaning that participants reported in their experiences watching *Critical Role*. These findings serve one aspect of the purpose of this study: to explore the potential transformational impact of tabletop role-playing games in new forms of media -- in particular, seeking to understand the individual experiences of watchers that attribute positive impact on their well-being to watching *Critical Role*. This impact was characterized, for these participants, by both the direct impact of watching the show and how watching the show enhanced other activities. Both forms of impact are apparent in the detailed narrative analysis of Megan's experience. Understanding the perceived impacts reported in Megan's case and considering the ways in which her case was consistent with others in this study provides us an opportunity to begin identifying particular features of *Critical*

1   **Editors' note:** For similar experiences, see Josephine Baird's "Role-playing the Self: Trans Self-Expression, Exploration, and Embodiment in (Live Action) Role-playing Games" in this issue.

Role that are claimed to have contributed to impacting the participants. This serves another aspect of the purpose of this study: to begin to associate any impact that is reported with particular features of specific games. In the following discussion, I outline the characteristics of *Critical Role* that I believe, based in my expertise with adult learning, development, and role-playing games, to have contributed to the impact reported by the participants after analyzing these cases. This discussion is intended to form a subject for debate and stimulate further inquiry.

10.1 Discussion of particular features of *Critical Role* and types of impact

Three features of *Critical Role* appear to be particularly relevant to the impact reported by Megan and the other participants in this study: storytelling, role-playing, and parasocial interaction. Storytelling and role-playing are characteristics of role-playing games and Parasocial Interaction is a characteristic of relationships between media users and media figures. Together, these are all potential features of parasocial gaming.

Additionally, three main themes appear to be particularly relevant to the types of impact reported by participants: Social Connection, Identity Immersion, and Complex Interaction. Together, these themes and features of *Critical Role* illustrate that parasocial gaming is a complex set of phenomena. The following discussion relates the impact of *Critical Role* reported in this study with the features of *Critical Role* that were reportedly most relevant to these particular cases. This serves to connect the perceived benefits associated with *Critical Role*, particular features of these phenomena, and previously reported aspects of tabletop role-playing games in traditional mediums in an effort to stimulate further inquiry. These connections may apply differently (or not at all) to other individuals, games, streams, or media, begging questions for future research about how we can better understand a range of possible experiences involving parasocial interaction and gaming beyond these cases.

10.2 Social Connection

The Social Connection theme in this study refers to the relationships present and the impact that having various kinds of social connections has on individuals. Relatedness is a key component of Self-Determination Theory linked to wellness (Ryan and Deci 2017), which can be described as feeling connected to and caring for others. Being part of and emotionally engaged with a community brings a sense of belonging that is associated with psychological, social, and emotional well-being even when that sense is experienced through parasocial means (Kowert and Daniel 2021). Recent research explored how Twitch offers distraction and relatedness, finding that users going through difficult periods in life indicated that Twitch helped them cope (Wit, Kraan, and Theeuwes 2020). Social Connection reported in this study ranges from caring about others to interaction with media figures to friendships among players and how this experience was believed to affect other personal relationships.

Critical Role is, at its most basic level, a social gathering of friends playing a game. There is a social purpose in *Dungeons & Dragons* to connect socially and create meaning together (Cover 2010). The friendships between the cast of *Critical Role* were regarded as obvious to participants. These perceived friendships were highlighted by participants and were credited with providing a sense of connection that was experienced vicariously, as described in Megan's experience. Feeling like part of the process in live streamed gaming blurs the lines between parasocial and social relationships; in streaming, the effects are described more like friendship than fandom (Kowert and Daniel 2021). A feeling of social connection is important for resilience and is a natural attribute of games (McGonigal 2015). In parasocial gaming, observers may theoretically experience the social connection attributes of games, even without directly playing themselves. Megan's story of feeling the friendships in *Critical*

Role as a catalyst for her own therapy and resilience is a possible example of the impact games sometimes have through a sense of social connection, which was also recounted in the other cases in this study.

Critical Role is not just an example of a tabletop role-playing game. It is a new phenomenon presented in a new medium, set apart from traditional *Dungeons & Dragons* games by the fact that it is also a show involving media figures with some degree of celebrity fame. In some ways, this fame is a result of the popularity of *Critical Role* as much as pre-existing celebrity status from other projects. This introduces a new type of interaction to the tabletop role-playing game genre: parasocial interaction (PSI).

PSI had an impact, for the participants of this study, even in situations in which the cast did not communicate directly to individuals. This may be because fans can experience PSI similar to a typical social relationship with role models even without the experience being reciprocal (Giles 2002). Even the perceived option for reciprocity afforded in live streaming and social media fandom creates increased feelings of being "up close" and more intimate in a parasocial relationship (Kowert & Daniel 2021). This was prevalent in the way all the participants in this study described their admiration for and perceived relationships with the cast and characters in *Critical Role* as role models.

Megan, for example, described feeling like part of the social interaction in *Critical Role* and regarding certain characters or players as role models for her own gaming and life. This was in addition to Megan explaining that she felt she was part of a group of friends at some points. She reported learning from those experiences and applying what she learned to other relationships in her life. Experiencing immersive storytelling and role-playing while feeling social connection from parasocial interaction was a common trifecta of themes in the stories told by participants of this study. This could explain how the cast of *Critical Role* can have a social influence on Critters, both as individuals and as a community, combining with the functions of role-playing games to a potentially transformative extent in some cases.

10.3 Identity Immersion

The Identity Immersion theme in this study combines the functions of identity in role-playing games and becoming immersed in the experience of playing or watching. Identity is a major function of role-playing games ranging from exploration to alteration, and character evolution in potentially therapeutic ways (Bowman 2010). Role-playing itself was a major factor that participants identified to become immersed in the experience of watching *Critical Role* as the players fully committed to playing complex characters.

Online gaming has been described as a way for players to negotiate complex identities in a virtual context while simultaneously escaping or reshaping their identities in the real world, which are sometimes difficult identities for players to express and were met with social exclusion (Williams, Kennedy, & Moore 2011). The function of escapism was mentioned by participants in this study as a positive factor sometimes associated with therapeutic benefits. Feeling a sense of immersion can create emotionally resonant experiences called the *immersive ideal* by Torner and White (2012). In the case of *Critical Role*, watchers in this study reported connecting with character identities that were perceived to be thoroughly developed and related to the watchers' real-life identities, particularly if a watcher felt some level of social isolation associated with that part of their identity.

Another driving factor for experiencing immersion is communal storytelling. Shared perception of narrative is observable throughout episodes of *Critical Role,* which is generally regarded as superb storytelling in the *D&D* community (Franklin 2021). Social immersion and shared emotional responses build bonds between players and provide psychological agency to shape the game experience (Cover 2010). Games, especially TRPGs, are symbolic social constructions that can be characterized as intersubjective meaning making activities (Montola 2012). The participants in this study, described

their experience as a vicarious one in which they felt emotionally involved but knew they were not directly experiencing the game but rather were experiencing the game through watching the players.

Nonetheless, they reported feeling immersed in a shared storytelling experience. "As gameplay is necessarily symbolic, games are intersubjective phenomena whenever more than one person is involved. Every player has subjective, unique, unverifiable, unpredictable, and uncontrollable perceptions of the game state" (Montola 2010 p.303). As such, participants reported their unique perceptions of -- and personal identity within -- the game state through their subjective experience of shared storytelling. Immersing oneself in the narrative of an actual play TRPG show, including a significant cognitive load with many complex frames involved and discussed later, may also be fertile grounds for *flow* (Hope 2021). The combination of immersive storytelling and exploring identity through role-playing was linked to personal meaning reported by most participants in this study. They reported experiencing emotional responses mirroring the cast of *Critical Role* and being drawn into narratives with dramatic role-playing.

Role-playing and storytelling are two creative aspects of *Critical Role* that were heavily linked by participants to what drew them into their experiences watching the show. This is consistent with previous research on other forms of role-playing games (Bowman 2010; Cover 2010). Further research is needed in order to gain a more representative impression of *Critical Role* beyond the reports of seven Critters in this study.

10.4 Complex Interaction

The Complex Interaction theme in this study refers to the integration of multiple levels of analysis and social interactions happening within an experience. Multiple levels of interaction -- character, player, person -- add complexity to group dynamics in tabletop role-playing games (Lasley 2020) and could provide insight for some observers who vicariously experience this complexity and transfer this awareness to lived experiences as Megan has described. Experiencing and observing these kinds of complex interactions can be applied to afford individuals an opportunity to critically reflect and report complex ways of understanding the social dynamics in their own gaming experiences.

Distinct frames of experience in tabletop role-playing games -- character, player, person, human -- have been documented and linked to multiple dimensions of learning driven by the immersive potential of the experience when combined with debriefing (Bowman and Hugaas 2019; Daniau 2016). Gaming frames have been discussed in different ways by RPG scholars, such as a method for analyzing player interactions by Fine (1983). Vorobyeva (2015) classified levels of interactions in larp, which indicated that switching between in-game/in-character and off-game/out-of-character frames can enrich the gaming experience.

Players' experiences navigating frames when role-playing involve immersion, bleed, and steering, concepts that help describe the non-discrete nature of role-play experiences (Bowman 2015). Adding frames for the experience of a Critter immersed in watching gameplay being both played and performed on several levels adds tremendous complexity to understanding emotional experiences like bleed. As Kjell Hedgard Hugaas (2019) explains, "For now, we will content ourselves with saying that the act of categorizing bleed might be useful, but it is important to remember that it is just a framework imposed upon a chaotic reality." These realizations about role-play phenomena are open to possibilities for transfer and learning from game experiences that now overlap with RPG fandom in new ways.

Critical Role is rich with examples of how Cover (2010) described multiple frames existing between players as they meld storylines together. The cast of *Critical Role* are adhering to a system of game rules and social cues while occupying several roles, namely their character, a social role within their group of friends, and a performing celebrity role based on their reputation as professional actors.

Actual play streaming adds complexity to these interactional frames with the addition of a new level in a performance frame (Hope 2021). Additional frames of experience can be examined for the observers who perceived several frames of their own experience and regarded the players as celebrities. Observing the complexity of these interactions provided participants with opportunities for immediate reflection, since an observer could be less distracted by the immediate experience of playing the game while also having a vicarious experience. Megan's experience provides an example of how learning from the complex interactions involved in *Critical Role* enhanced her (and other participants') own understanding and learning from both watching *Critical Role* and playing games directly. The experience of parasocial gaming -- in particular, vicariously experiencing the integration of complex frames of experience and roles -- may provide opportunities for reflection and intellectual development.

11. LIMITATIONS, DELIMITATIONS, AND SIGNIFICANCE

This study focused on unexplored phenomena experienced by seven participants that reported claims of how watching *Critical Role* positively affected them. Live streaming TRPGs are a new and unique combination of phenomena involving fandom, media, and role-playing games. These participants' perceptions of experiencing these phenomena were investigated in an effort to deepen understanding and explore what may be possible in a new medium of tabletop role-playing games. These findings can provide insight into how new tabletop role-playing game phenomena could have an impact other than sheer entertainment, at least in some cases. While this study investigated 7 reports of positive impact attributed to watching *Critical Role*, other similar reports do exist. More research is needed to help understand the broader population of *Critters*, include TRPG live streams other than *Critical Role,* and compare positive experiences with other forms of media, which may contribute to what Fine (1983) called a *geek subculture*.

This study was exploratory and focused intensely on one individual narrative, using six others to provide some context. This was a convenience sample where participants were proactive in volunteering to participate. There is no way to know to what degree the individuals interviewed in this study may be representative of any population without further research. The decision to focus on one individual's experience favors an openness to new ways of knowing and a deeper understanding of this case over broader generalizations. Acknowledging subjectivity is also needed to avoid a false sense of objectivity in this research. In fact, working explicitly with subjectivity was essential for accessing the intersubjective meaning of experiencing gaming phenomena sought in this research. My knowledge of *Dungeons & Dragons*, understanding of TRPG research, familiarity with *Critical Role* as a fan, and professional career helping people with personal growth was necessary and enabled me to conduct this study. Without this knowledge, a researcher would be inundated with unfamiliar information and distracted from the purpose of this study. My positionality also enabled me to develop rapport with participants and enabled them to tell me their personal stories. Future research should consider addressing other perspectives and methodologies when examining these phenomena.

The significance of this study is best considered in a nontraditional sense described by Donmoyer (1990) as allowing us to vicariously experience narratives that expand our construction of knowledge. Understanding the impact *Critical Role* has in different contexts will serve as an asset. This study identified particular aspects of *Critical Role* that were especially salient influences according to participants, beginning the process of describing what people consider transferable benefits from tabletop role-playing game internet streams and how they are attributed to particular features of specific games, such as emphasizing storytelling and role-play. Through this process, the analysis of these cases presented evidence that parasocial gaming may be an unexplored new combination of phenomena and that further exploration is worth consideration.

12. DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

13. FUNDING

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Role-Playing Games and Well-Being

Abstract: Do role-playing games (RPGs) affect the player's well-being? Several studies suggest that they might have an impact, but the topic of RPGs and well-being is usually only mentioned as a side note or curiosity. A clear, coherent picture on the topic of RPGs and well-being is missing. This review article aims to provide that picture by compiling the already existing knowledge in one place. I ask the questions: What can we learn from the already existing research? How should RPGs and well-being be studied? What questions need resolving? What can be gained from studying RPGs and well-being?

RPG studies is a young academic interdisciplinary field of research, as is also the research of arts and well-being. They both are heterogeneous and related to a variety of academic traditions. They both are also dispersed, pragmatic, and until recently, scattered and lacking cohesive traditions or methodologies. Many basic ontological questions remain unsolved and the definitions of key concepts vary. They overlap in several discourses, such as the ones about (1) practices of sociodrama and replication therapy; (2) social, cultural, and digital capital; (3) leisure time research; (4) performance studies; (5) the topic of erotic role-play; (6) problematic vs. therapeutic gaming; and (7) health education. Previous research and practices focus mainly on live action role play (larp) and well-being, suggesting a positive impact. Online RPGs share their own traditions, but studies on tabletop RPGs and well-being are difficult to find. The studies are often case-studies or examine abstract topics such as human experiences.

In these studies, it becomes evident that RPGs do indeed impact well-being. However, questions such as how, why, and what features in RPGs affect well-being remain unanswered. In addition, the research has mainly been executed from the perspective of either RPGs or arts and well-being. Interdisciplinary cooperation is the key to successfully diving into the world of RPGs and well-being. Doing so would offer both fields useful practices, interesting perspectives, new opportunities for publication and academic discussion. It would not only add knowledge about RPGs and well-being but offer perspective to the unresolved ontological questions of each field. Eventually, further study on RPGs and well-being could transfer into the usage of RPGs in the fields of well-being, health, and therapy in a similar manner that arts are currently being used.

Keywords: role-playing games, larp, literature review, arts, well-being

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1. INTRODUCTION

During the recent decade, role-playing games (RPGs) have been studied as a significant part of western culture, (MacCallum-Stewart et al. 2018), performance (Hoover et al. 2018) participatory art (Cox 2018; Pettersson 2005; 2010), pervasive games (Montola 2012a), an educational method (Hammer et al. 2018), and a form of political expression (Kangas, et al. 2016). Some studies also approach the topic of RPGs and well-being. (See e.g.: Taylor 2018; Stenros and Bowman 2018; Brown and Stenros 2018; Bowman and Schrier 2018, 399-400; Bowman 2010, 127-154; Trammell 2018; Pettersson 2010, 168-173; Meriläinen 2012.)

With this review I provide an overview on the research of RPGs and well-being, and the possibilities the topic holds in the future. I begin by presenting the traditions and methodologies of role-playing game studies and the study of arts and well-being. Next, I pinpoint previous research that has somehow addressed the topic of RPGs and well-being in six sections: (1) practices of sociodrama and replication therapy; (2) social, cultural, and digital capital; (3) leisure time research; (4) performance studies; (5) the topic of erotic role-play; (6) problematic vs. therapeutic gaming; and (7) health education. I discuss what we can learn from already existing research on the topic and examine the best ways to study RPGs and well-being. Finally, I discuss the possibilities arising from combining RPG research and the study of arts and well-being. The emphasis of this text is on Nordic and North American research.

The purpose of this review is to better define the framework of RPGs and well-being, enabling new spaces and interdisciplinary opportunities for both fields, and by doing so, encouraging new studies

about the topic. Eventually, this could enable approaching RPGs in a similar way that arts are currently being used: to improve well-being on individual and communal level (See e.g., Clift and Camic 2016a; Kuppers 2007; Simon 2010; Sosiaali-ja terveysministeriö 2015).

2. THE TRADITION AND METHODOLOGY OF RPG STUDIES

In RPGs, the players create, enact, and govern the actions of their characters, defining and pursuing their own goals with great freedom in what actions they apply (Zagal and Deterding 2018b, 47). In various types of RPGs, the players play their characters differently: verbally with the assistance of rulebooks, character sheets and other tools (tabletop RPG); physically with their own bodies (larp); or on an internet platform (online RPGs) (See: Stenros and Särkijärvi 2018, 6; Stenros and Harviainen 2011, 63; Leppälahti 2009, 25; Montola 2012, 11). The common feature is that the player is playing a role: performing actions, thinking, and speaking for the character, sometimes even feeling their characters' emotions.

Role-playing as a cultural phenomenon is usually seen to have originated in the publication of the first well-known role-playing game, Dungeons & Dragons, in 1974 (Montola 2012, 108; Stenros and Harviainen 2018, 116; Deterding and Zagal 2018, 1; Peterson, 2018). The research on role-playing in games originates in the late '60s and '70s from the fields of education and sociology (Deterding and Zagal 2018, 9). This early academic discussion was about the importance and possibilities of role-play in serious or entertainment gaming (see: Abt 1970), and the developers of Dungeons and Dragons, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, took part in the discussion (Deterding and Zagal 2018, 4 and 9; Torner 2018, 193). The academic debate laid the groundwork for sociologist Gary Alan Fine's book Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds (1983), which has been influential in fields of performance studies and sociology and essential on the development of RPG studies (Deterding and Zagal 2018, 9).

RPG studies today is multidisciplinary, heterogeneous, and done in a variety of academic fields (Stenros and Harviainen 2018, 114). Sociology and pedagogy are still popular approaches to RPG studies (Vartiainen 2010; Williams et al. 2018; Hammer et al. 2018), but the topic is studied also on fields such as game research (Montola 2012; Stenros 2015), information studies (Harviainen 2012), performance studies (Hoover et al. 2018), digital culture (Haverinen 2014), even in craft science (Vartiainen 2010), and economics (Knowles and Castronova 2018). Thus, RPG research is highly diverse and includes a variety of approaches and traditions; their only common denominator is the topic of RPGs (Stenros and Harviainen 2018, 114).

Furthermore, the methodological approaches in RPG studies vary. There are qualitative (Stenros et al. 2012; Bowman 2013); constructive studies (Montola 2012; Stenros 2015); reviews (Atwater 2016; Bowman 2014; Loponen and Särkijärvi 2016); and case studies (Bowman and Standiford 2016; Jordan 2016). Quantitative research exists as well, and it is often connected to qualitative data by method triangulation (Crow and Nelson 2016; Harviainen 2012; Meriläinen 2012). Fine's (1983) ethnography of RPGs as social worlds was eye-opening and various ethnographic approaches have been popular ever since, especially amongst doctoral dissertations and master's theses (See: Nardi 2010; Haverinen 2014; Siitonen 2007; Kemper 2018; Vesa 2013; Lehto 2019a). In addition, the definitions of the key concepts vary according to the perception of the researcher. RPGs can be studied for instance as play, games, roles, media culture, or art (See: Deterding and Zagal 2018, 2-7; Stenros and Särkijärvi 2018, 6; Meriläinen 2012; Pettersson 2005, 9).

Within the topic, the tendencies of RPG studies also vary. In the Nordic countries, larps have been studied more than tabletop RPGs, whereas tabletop RPGs are a more popular topic worldwide (Stenros and Harviainen 2018, 115 and 124). Then again, the essence of different kinds of RPGs varies

around the world. For example, a Nordic larp focused upon deep immersion into a socially realistic setting dealing with the refugee crisis is quite different than a traditional American fantasy boffer larp focused upon heroic displays of battle prowess, but both traditions are called larp. Other analog games related to RPGs (board games, card games, miniature games) or other phenomena related to these (fan culture, etc.) are also often addressed in RPG studies. However, research of online RPGs has traditions of its own (Stenros and Harviainen 2018, 115). In some studies, online RPGs are included and observed as one branch of RPGs (see Zagal and Deterding 2018a; Bowman 2010; Simkins 2015), but in others, online RPGs are excluded (see Stenros and Harviainen 2018, 115; Leppälahti 2009; Pettersson 2005, 10; Meriläinen 2012). Furthermore, RPGs are occasionally referred to as "non-digital" or analog games, which excludes online RPGs (see Montola 2012, 102).

In RPG studies, the ontological and epistemological questions twirl around the need to understand the topic of the study, RPGs, better. The essence of character versus self has been theorized on several occasions (Sihvonen 1997; Bowman and Schrier 2018; Brown and Stenros 2018, 432-434; Pettersson 2018, 87-96; Järvelä 2019). The ontological questions about playing/being in a character and immersion -- such as what is self, what is character, and where is the line between the two -- and the epistemological issues rising when measuring human experiences -- for instance, the biasness and subjectivity of experiences; the loss of knowledge of oneself in a character -- are at the core of RPGs, and therefore RPG studies (see: Bowman 2018; Zagal and Deterding 2018b).

Academic RPG studies are strongly influenced by RPG communities. Conference books from RPG events such as Knutepunkt or Wyrd Con are commonly used as references in academic research (see Montola 2011, 102; Harviainen 2016; Long 2016). The Nordic tradition of RPG studies especially has been developed by active, academic individuals from the role-playing community with the support of the group (Stenros and Harviainen 2018, 114-119).

3. THE TRADITION AND METHODOLOGY OF ART AND WELL-BEING RESEARCH

Well-being is a phenomenon that correlates with the surrounding culture and society, and is influenced by various individual, social, cultural, economic, material, and political variables (see WHO 2015 and 2013; Saari 2011a, 10). Well-being has been said to consist of individuals' needs and their fulfilment, and of opportunities to participate and act in their environment. Experiencing well-being means that people have a possibility to live in such a way that their lives become meaningful to themselves (Lehikoinen and Vanhanen 2017, 15). In the Well-Being Assessment, the term is defined as "a condition in which all members of society are able to determine and meet their needs and have a large range of choices to meet their potential" (Ketovuori 2011, 107). Sociologist Erik Allardt (1976) defines well-being by fulfilment of three components: having, loving, and being (basic needs, social connections, and self-expression) (p. 17-21). The context of arts and well-being emphasize the importance of human agency to one's well-being: participation, doing something meaningful, and functioning as a part of something bigger (Pirnes and Tiihonen 2010, 207; Virjonen and Rouhelo 2018, 9–1). In addition, they tend to focus on a person's own estimation of their well-being (Nenonen et.al. 2014, 236; Lilja-Viherlampi and Rosenlöf 2019).

The word culture stands for the behaviours, artefacts, and beliefs that define social identity (Riqueime and Rosas 2009, 352). Art in all its forms is an essential part of culture. The Merriam-Webster English dictionary defines art as something that is created with imagination and skill, that is beautiful, or that expresses important ideas or feelings. According to Ketovuori (2011, 107), art as a concept is too broad to grasp because, on an individual level, it always means something slightly different. This is because we all live in our own cultural bubble and define art from our perspective. In

the context of arts and well-being, the element of cultural agency is essential and even more important than the actual artistic or esthetic outcome. Therefore, I also approach art as a piece of work or act that reflects the artist's own culture, that is created with imagination, and that expresses important ideas or feelings.

The research of art and well-being in its current form originated in the early '70s from the field of sociology, although the idea of culture having a direct role in healing illnesses and in promoting recovery and well-being appears in several cultures throughout the history (Lehtonen 2005, 3-4; Clift and Camic 2016b; Bourdieu 1974). During the last 60 years, the idea of using arts and culture in a broader context of well-being of communities and individuals has been gaining ground (Clift and Camic 2016b, 3). For instance, in 1974, Pierre Bourdieu wrote about the importance of cultural capital (knowledge, skills, intellect, experiences, relationships) to social capital (social networks, ability to function socially, participation, sense of belonging) in his article Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction. He does not use the words "health" or "well-being," but the idea of the causality between art and well-being is presented (Bourdieu 1974). His work and ideas about causality are considered as an opening for a certain way of thinking, which enabled pilot projects in the 1980s that deployed the arts for community health development (Belfiore 2016; White 2009).

Today, culture -- a broader concept that includes art -- is seen as a part of humanity and thus, as a part of an individual's well-being (Lehtonen 2005, 4; see: WHO 2015; Fancourt and Finn 2019). It has become an essential part of the indicators used to measure the well-being of nations, such as the Human Well-Being Index (Prescot-Allen 2001, 13; Ketovuori 2011, 107). The number of publications about arts and well-being is increasing and so is the number of the regional and national Arts for Health organisations around the globe (Clift and Camic, 2016b, 3-4). Most of this research either supports the hypothesis that art impacts well-being or examines the reasons behind such impacts. The common consensus is that participating in cultural activities is associated with a better life and well-being (see Gladstone-Barrett and Hunter 2016; Vella-Burrows 2016; Robertson 2016; Cuypers et al. 2012; Johansson et al. 2001; Kim and Kim 2009; Nenonen et al. 2014, 235; Laitinen 2017; White and Hillary 2009; Clift and Camic 2016a; Fancourt and Finn 2019).

Sociology and psychology are common approaches to the research of arts and well-being, as are also the health sciences, the research of art and culture, social and culture politics, economics, and anthropology (Laitinen 2017, 16; Saari 2011b, 33; Clift and Camic 2016b). The sociological approach is strongly impacted by Bourdieu's (1974), and Putnam's (1993, 177) work and theories about social capital in relation to cultural capital. Sociologist research on art and well-being is often very pragmatic, tied to a specific social phenomenon (such as youth), and case studies and constructive approaches are common (see Koivisto et al. 2010). Then again, the physical or psychological effects of art in individuals are examined in medical sciences and the focus of the research is on an individual rather than a society or community (see Trzaskowski et al. 2014; Bittman et al. 2013). In psychology, the research covers ontological issues such as the essence of well-being or happiness, whereas in economics, well-being is researched in the context of money and resources in a relativistic manner (Saari 2011b, 33) With all these perspectives, the field is dispersed.

The philosophical and methodological approaches of arts and well-being also vary widely. Pragmatism is common, but so are relativism and even critical realism. It is easy to find qualitative and quantitative research, and case studies are especially popular (Clift and Camic 2016a and 2016b; Lilja-Viherlampi and Rosenlöf 2019). In quantitative research, respondents' well-being is usually measured by comparing indexes, such as Quality of Life (QOL) and Self-Rated Health (SRH) (Saari 2011a, 21; Hoffrén and Rättö 2011, 219; Nenonen et al. 2014). QOL is measured by asking the respondents how they feel about their life in terms of psychological and physical factors, purpose in life, sense of

belonging, and environmental resources, whereas SRH has been used to examine the effects of cultural participation (Nenonen et al. 2014, 236). Noticeably, even in quantitative research, attempts have been made to understand the experience of an individual when participating in culture or arts (See: Nenonen et al. 2014, 236; Cuypers et al. 2012; Johansson et al. 2001; Michalos 2005; Michalos and Kahlke 2008 and 2010; Nummela et al. 2008 and 2009). Qualitative research and case studies tend to verbalize these experiences and understand the impact that culture has on one's health on a deeper level. The case studies are often focused on traditional forms of art and culture, such as theatre, dance, painting/drawing, sculpture, and music (Clift and Camic 2016a and 2016b; Lilja-Viherlampi and Rosenlöf 2019). What connects all this research is that it is holistic and gives value to human experience.

4. RPGS, ART, AND WELL-BEING

The disciplines of RPGs and art and well-being have many similarities and overlap in several places. Well-being is such a wide concept that most of the studies about the player's relationship with the role, immersion, transgression, sexuality, discrimination, physical aspects of RPG, self-expression, identity, emotions, power, and control can be interpreted as studies about RPGs and well-being. In addition, RPGs can be approached from various points of observation, which means that majority of the research about arts and well-being is also somehow related to RPGs. In this chapter, I present research that addresses some aspects of RPGs and well-being: the most evident overlaps.

4.1 Practices of sociodrama and replication therapy

The most evident overlap is found in their histories, specifically in sociodrama and replication therapy. As a matter of fact, the concept of pretending to be someone else to better understand them or oneself, or otherwise gaining profit is something very natural and found in religious and shamanic traditions, and even in animal behavior (see Belfiore 2016, 13-14; Huizinga 1938; Stenros 2015; Montola 2012). According to Marvin Carlson (2004, 75) this is because playing a role or pretending not only meets reality in an essential manner, but allows us to find, test, and develop materials for responsible behaviour in the real world.

In the 1920's, Jacob Levy Moreno started to explore roles as a social structure and, eventually, in therapeutic processes. In 1946, he presented the idea that role-play or being in a character can be therapeutic in group settings and called this process sociodrama (see Moreno 1946; Carlson 2004; Stenros 2015; Montola 2012, 102; Huizinga 1939; Bowman 2010, 12-13). Theodore Serbin and Vernon L. Allen (1968) approached the possibilities of role-play or drama in therapy from a different angle. They thought that the therapeutic part of drama happens outside of character: the director or therapist gives the actor feedback and thus helps them to develop. In their opinion, the aim is to learn social and psychological skills in a similar manner that an actor learns from a director. Their approach to using role-play or drama as therapy is called replication therapy (Serbin and Allen 1968; Carlson 2004).

Viola Spolin developed several drama games that are used globally for pedagogical and artistic purposes, but also in therapy (Spolin Games Online 2018). However, it is important to notice that "role-play" is a different thing than role-playing games. In the context of Moreno (1946), Serbin and Allen (1968), or even Spolin (Spolin Games Online 2018) role-play simply means playing to be someone else for a while and is similar to improvisational theatre. Studying role-play is not necessarily RPG research (Stenros 2015, 11 and 2018, 11; Blatner 2007; Montola 2012, 105-106. See also Yardley-Matwiejczuk 1997; Crookall et al. 1987).

4.2 Social, cultural, and digital capital

A second obvious overlap between RPGs, arts, and well-being studies can be found from sociology and in the research of social and cultural capital. Social capital refers to an individual's set of social skills and abilities (e.g. social networks, ability to function socially, participation and sense of belonging), cultural capital refers to the cultural abilities that increase social status or cultural competence (e.g. knowledge, skills, intellect, experiences and relationships), whereas digital capital refers to the set of digital skills (e.g. content-creation, intelligence, problem-solving, and communication). Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's texts about the importance of cultural capital to social capital resonates with Fine's early work about RPGs as a social phenomenon and microcultural system (Bourdieu 1974; Fine 1983; Williams et al. 2018). For example, Fine suggests that RPGs act as an arena for young people to practice their social skills, form social connections and thus improve their social capital (Fine 1983, 59-62). This has been further researched by game educator Mikko Meriläinen (2012). Then again, observed in the light of Putnam's research, social capital is built on events of co-operation, trust, and civic activity, and is strongly linked to collective well-being that appears also on individual level (Putnam 1993, 177).

Davis and Boellstroff (2016) and Kuppers (2007) offer an interesting crossing point with disability, cultural capital, and particular vulnerabilities their target groups face. Kuppers is a disability activist, and accessibility is strongly present in her work about community practices. Her work is directly adaptable in certain kinds of RPG events, such as larps or conventions, thus bringing accessibility and well-being to the RPG scene, but it also has a message of possibility of social empowerment via cultural and social capital. Then again, Davis and Boellstroff (2016) have studied disability in online RPG environments. They examined how playing in the virtual world Second Life impacted people with Parkinson's disease's (digital) social capital and well-being. They discovered that the players gained not only access to social networks, but forms of embodied engagement, object creation, and life satisfaction previously lost because of their illness. Not only did they gain digital social capital, but also digital cultural capital. (Davis and Boellstroff 2016, 2112.)

Nardi (2010) also approaches the themes of social and cultural capital. Her ethnography paints a realistic picture of the online RPG World of Warcraft. She states that the act of gaming in a guild provides a possibility to meet new people from different social classes with diverse interests from all over the world, while also being fun and eye-opening (Nardi 2010, p.23-24). Her notions are an example of the increased digital cultural capital researched by Davies and Boellstroff (2016).

Bourdieu and Putnam are also present in discussion about RPGs and race. Dietrich (2013) writes about the portrayal of avatars, the character representations that a player can choose from when playing an online RPG. According to him, in most electronic RPGs, there are no non-white avatars available. The opportunity to play with an avatar that visually resembles the player is reserved for the players of Caucasian heritage. According to him, this enhances the normative Whiteness. Loponen (2019) also talks about the problematic representation of racialized races in fantasy worlds, as well as in RPGs. He states that fantasy books and RPGs are representations of our time and that we repeat harmful, racial stereotypes in RPG worlds. He also points out the problems in the general moral structure of RPGs, where killing orcs or robbing random villagers is rewarded without question.

Fein (2015 and 2018) has also studied the transformativity of role-playing (especially larp) amongst people with autism. Fein does not mention social or cultural capital in her ethnography, but she describes the larp (camp) where she conducted her research as a catalyst for an increase of social and cultural capital:

> I argue that the camp engaged participants by being congruent with their needs on three levels:
> in the structure of its practices, the narratives that comprised its mythology, and the nature of its

community. The structured social practices of role-playing, from the character design sheets to the genre-specific formality of interactions, constituted a sociocultural ecology whose affordances provided the support and organization participants needed for successful social coordination. (Fein 2015)

Similarly, Cross and Atherton (2016, 13) confirm that gameplay may serve as an essential tool for increasing social capital for people with autism.

4.3 Leisure time research

The concepts of cultural capital, social capital, and self-expression are also in close relation with concepts of leisure time and free time. This is also the approach that is usually applied to RPGs (e.g.: Fine 1983; Meriläinen 2012; Stenros 2018). The take is similar in arts and well-being: the respondents' assumed position to art or culture is hobby or leisure time activity instead of profession (e.g.: Gladstone-Barrett and Hunter 2016; Vella-Burrows 2016; Robertson 2016; Virjonen and Rouhelo 2018, 9-10; Tomka 2013; Pirnes and Tiihonen, 2010; Clift et al. 2016).

According to the principles of cultural agency, the positive impact an individual gains from culture or arts varies according to the level of the individual's own activity and their level of involvement. People are divided into experiencers, partakers, and actors according to the level of their engagement (Tomka 2013, 261; Virjonen and Rouhelo 2018, 10). Experiencers interact with everyday culture: listen to music while exercising, wear clothes or watch television without really thinking about it actively (Virjonen and Rouhelo 2018, 9-10). Partakers take part, doing something to get closer to culture; they go to a theatre, church, concert, or museum either alone or in a group. The role of a partaker depends on the subject being active doing something or going somewhere (Tomka 2013, 261). Actors do art or culture themselves (Pirnes and Tiihonen 2010, 208). They act, dance, sing, paint, write, or do other kinds of art or culture individually or in a group. This is usually enabled by a professional that facilitates a group (Virjonen and Rouhelo 2018, 9-10). Simon (2010, 19-20) describes more levels of cultural agency than these three, but the main idea is similar. According to her, the attraction in being a participant/actor is the fulfillment of the person's needs to contribute and succeed. She also states that some people want to engage from a distance and enjoy observing, but also that an individual can function on more than one level of cultural agency (2010, 26-27).

The tripartition to experiencers, partakers, and actors is problematic in RPGs because it only involves the target group, or "clients," and does not say anything about the facilitators, professionals, or game masters. It leaves the organizers outside of the picture. That is why it is important to add another slot, enablers, to the list (Lehto 2019b). Then again, the idea of enablers doing more than e.g. actors is not unproblematic either. In addition, in the context of RPGs, the tradition is to have a low threshold for shifting roles (player, game master), and that all partakers are equal. Nevertheless, the roles of a game master and a player are different. Therefore "enabler" should not be following the "actor" as a fourth slot, but as a separate one from the triplet, and rather should be portrayed as its own group alongside the other three.

The perspective of cultural agency transforms the focus to the doing -- and how that affects individuals or groups -- instead of the art or culture itself. This could offer an interesting possibility to research other leisure activities, such as sports or RPGs, in the light of cultural agency. According to previous studies, participation, doing something meaningful, and functioning as a part of something bigger, which are all elements found also in RPGs, increase an individual's well-being (Pirnes and Tiihonen 2010, 207; Virjonen and Rouhelo 2018, 9–10).

4.4 Performance studies

Nordic larp as art or performance is a topic addressed in both RPG studies and performance studies, but also for instance in reminiscence work and oral history (see Carlson 2004; Arlander 2015, 7-25; Hoover et al. 2018; Stenros 2010; Kelley 2010; Lampo and Huuhka 2015, 329; Snow 1993; Kuusisto-Arponen 2012; Lehto 2019a). Allan Kaprow's Happenings and un-art (as he called it) has inspired discussion about the differences and similarities between theatre, art, larp and performance. Stenros (2010) reflects on whether Nordic larp can be seen as art, theatre, or performance even though it is also a game. According to him, these approaches are valid, but none of these alone quite catch the whole picture. Kelley (2010) writes about Kaprow's pieces and Nordic larp-reminiscent performances as art, although Kaprow himself called them "un-art," which also raises thoughts about Nordic larp as art or performance. Whose privilege is it to define whether larp is a performance or art? Lampo and Huuhka (2015, 329) suggest that performance studies should be applied to the larp research due to their bodily presentation and discursive performativity. Larp and performance have also been used in similar ways as methods in reminiscence work in an attempt to increase participants' well-being (see Snow 1993; Kuusisto-Arponen 2012; Lehto 2019a).

Although both Lampo and Huuhka (2015, 328) and Hoover et al. (2018) mention also other kinds of RPGs, claiming that they can be interpreted as performance, such research is difficult to find. This is not surprising, since larps are the most popular topic in the Nordic tradition of RPG studies (Stenros and Harviainen 2018, 115 and 124). In some ways, larps are more reminiscent of art than the other forms of RPGs. For instance, larps are photogenic and visually interesting, which is one of the reasons why they have been documented more than tabletop RPGs. Then again, they are more public than traditional tabletop RPGs, which are commonly played in small groups in a closed environment. Still, even tabletop RPGs are played in public nowadays and they are accessible to audiences online. The presence of an audience and publicity brings an element of performance to the otherwise closed setting. In addition, both playing and game mastering tabletop RPGs can be considered acts that reflect the artists' or players' own culture. These acts are created with imagination and express important ideas or feelings, which is the Merriam-Webster English dictionary definition of art. Then again, as Stenros (2010) says about Nordic larp: RPGs are not solely art and approaching them as such is not unproblematic.

4.5 Erotic role-play

Another topic where role-playing games and well-being are both present is the research of sexual identity, sexual well-being, BDSM, and erotic role-play. According to Brown and Stenros (2018), tabletop RPGs in general do not have a lot of rules for sexual or erotic play, but erotic role-play is popular in electronic RPGs. During the last decade, sexuality and erotica has also increased in popularity as a topic in Nordic larps. Erotic larp has been compared to sexual role-play or BDSM in previous research. Erotic larp and BDSM offer similar possibilities for self-exploration, which is beneficial for participants' well-being and even can be therapeutic (see Bowman 2010, 8; Hébert and Weaver 2015; Van Der Walt 2014, 8-9; Lindemann 2011; Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020).

Then again both BDSM and larp are physical, involve role-play, and in some erotic larps, they might resemble one another immensely. Harviainen (2011, 62) even claims that BDSM is a form of larp, because both play with power dynamics agreed on beforehand, and after the game, the everyday power structures are restored. The similarities he pinpoints are interesting from the well-being point of view because this kind of power play alongside the support of a community are major attributes in BDSM that impact participant's well-being positively (Van Der Walt 2014, 12-13; Lindemann, 2011).

According to Harviainen (2011, 59), all BDSM has an element of role-play in it. The main difference between erotic larps and BDSM is that in larp, sex itself is simulated in different ways. Larps where sex is played are very rare (Brown and Stenros 2018, 431-432). The intention of arousal, or physical pleasure is a key factor in BDSM, whereas it is not in a larp (Harviainen 2011, 63, Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020).

4.6 Problematic vs. therapeutic gaming

RPGs and psychology have been studied, but the emphasis has been on online RPGs rather than larps or tabletop RPGs. Both Fuster et al. (2012) and Yee (2006) write about psychological motives in online role-playing games and their psychological and social impacts on players. According to Männikkö (2017), one of the qualities a problematic player looks for in a game is role-playing. Männikkö connects problematic playing to increased preference to interact online rather than in person (often caused by social and psychological problems). According to him, playing a role deepens the gaming experience, offering social contacts and escapism at the same time. Scott and Porter-Armstrong (2013) claim that playing massively multiplayer online role-playing games such as World of Warcraft are strongly associated with both helpful and harmful impacts on adolescents and young adults' psychological well-being, stating that further research is needed. Nardi (2010, 13) specifies that focused play offers a refuge, or escape, from the real world. Snodgrass, Lacy, Dengah and Fagan (2011) suggest that the key is not only in seeking meaningful social interactions in the game environment, but how and with whom the players interact. They state that playing World of Warcraft with real-life friends allows gamers to transfer in-game accomplishments and experiences to real life, and this tends to turn out beneficially for the player's offline lives. They also tend to be more aware of their offline communities, relationships, and responsibilities. The players who socialize solely online evolve problematic gaming habits more likely.

Analog RPGs and psychology have also been connected by Bowman and Lieberoth (2018). They create an overview on RPGs from the perspectives of neuroscience, motivation, personality, attitudes, psychoanalytic theories, conceptuality, and developmental, cognitive, behavioral, clinical, and social psychology. They present terms and concepts that have been developed to better grasp the psychological aspects of role-playing and discuss some core psychological questions of RPGs, such as whether role-playing is psychologically dangerous. According to Bowman and Lieberoth (2018), there does not seem to be RPG-specific psychological dangers. Instead, interest in using RPGs in the field of health care and therapy has increased, particularly in USA, but also in Australia and Europe, and a growing number of therapists are interested in using and developing RPGs as a tool in therapy (see Bean et al. 2020; Causo and Quinlan 2021).

4.7 Health education

RPGs and well-being overlap slightly in the study and practice of health care. In these studies, RPGs are commonly presented as a form of (art-based) participatory learning, not as a source of well-being (see Bowman and Standiford 2016; Karppinen et al. 2014; Hyvärinen et al. 2014.) These studies do present a mutually beneficial working field for RPG researchers and especially RPG developers in the field of health pedagogy, although its nature has been more practical than academic. Other research and field reports about pedagogical RPGs, especially larps, also imply a connection to well-being, although it has not been at the center of research (see Bowman and Lieberoth 2018).

5. DISCUSSION

As presented above, there are several interesting studies related to the topic of RPGs and well-being that indicate that RPGs do indeed impact well-being. These works are often case studies or examine abstract topics such as character versus self, immersion, and being in character. They often measure human experiences, happiness, or emotions.

Until now, the research has been done mainly from the perspective of either RPGs or arts and well-being. The lack of connection leads to a situation where already existing practices need to be reinvented, valuable research reaches only half of the people it should reach, and opportunities for fruitful discussion and practices are being missed. Especially the questions about role, self, and immersion in the field of well-being would benefit immensely from a stronger connection to RPG studies. Then again, it would be interesting to compare RPGs to theatre, performance, or storytelling in the context of well-being and ask what makes them impactful. RPG researchers might find useful approaches to measuring human experiences from the study of arts and well-being. They can challenge each other's views and concepts in a fruitful way, such as in the case of RPGs and cultural agency (Lehto 2019b). This kind of constructive, interdisciplinary discussion might lead to new and updated scientific theories.

What is not yet clear, is how, why, and what features in RPGs affect well-being. Answering these questions is essential if RPGs are to be applied in healthcare or therapy in a similar manner that arts are currently being used. Methods and approaches commonly used in the study of arts and well-being could be applied when answering these questions. Then again, understanding the complexity of RPGs is equally important.

For example, Viola Spolin's theatre games were first used in other forums just as RPGs are currently used. Later their impact on participators was researched more and eventually they were brought to health care (Spolin 1963; Spolin Games Online 2018). Spolin represents a common approach to arts and health that emphasizes the pragmatic nature of the field: the research begins with a case study of an already existing practice, leading to a purposeful and goal-orientated use of something entertaining. The same approach could be applied to RPGs and well-being, but it requires both knowledge of the topic and the way it is purposefully applied.

In my opinion, researching RPGs and well-being requires understanding and expertise for the complex nature of RPGs; the multiple layers and levels of well-being; and for the multiple ways the arts are being used to increase well-being. This could be accomplished in an interdisciplinary team and would provide useful information. This kind of knowledge could be applied in health care and could enable new interdisciplinary opportunities for academic discussion.

6. CONCLUSION

RPG studies and the research of art and well-being are both young interdisciplinary fields of research. Both are heterogeneous and commonly approached from traditions of sociology, education, game studies, information studies, and performance studies with approaches such as pragmatism, relativism, and critical realism. Definitions of the key concepts vary according to the perceptions of the researchers. Both are dispersed and lack obvious choices in methodology.

The variation in the definitions of the key concepts such as well-being and RPGs lead to the situation where a variety of studies can be interpreted as studies about RPGs and well-being. The most essential overlaps are in (1) practices of sociodrama and replication therapy; (2) social, cultural, and digital capital; (3) leisure time research; (4) performance studies; (5) the topic of erotic role-play; (6)

problematic online gaming; and (7) health education. The works are often case studies or examine abstract topics such as character versus self, immersion, and being in character. They often measure human experiences, happiness, or emotions.

In these studies, it becomes evident that RPGs do indeed impact well-being. What does not become clear is how, why, and what features in RPGs affect well-being. Until now, the research has mainly been done from only one perspective: either RPGs or arts and well-being. In order to fully understand the impact RPGs have on well-being, an interdisciplinary connection needs to be established. Doing so would offer both fields useful practices, interesting perspectives, new opportunities for publication and academic discussion, and increased knowledge. Eventually, this could lead to the usage of RPGs in healthcare and therapy.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Role-playing an Authentic Self:
Trans Self-Expression, Exploration and Embodiment in (Live Action) Role-playing Games

Abstract: Accounts of trans people using role-playing games (RPGs) as a safer space to "try out" another way to be gendered can be found in numerous sites – from the memetic, to the anecdotal, to the academic. Using autoethnography and post-structuralist queer theory of performativity in combination with scholarly perspectives of RPGs as sites for potentially transformative experiences, I consider the ways in which live-action role-playing games (larps) might help trans people express, explore, and embody their subjectivity. I argue that despite there being a relatively small (though growing) number of larps designed to encourage players to consider gender and sexuality norms in society, there remains no larp that intentionally allows trans people (or those questioning their gender) to consider their gender subjectivity therein.

Scholarly perspectives on larps suggest that they might provide a site for the simulation of complex socio-cultural dynamics, a space to adopt different social roles, and the alibi and scaffolding to do so in a way that is validating with a community of like-minded role-players (Deterding 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2021). I present examples of larps that, either by design or not, seem to have provided opportunities for gender role-play and transformative experiences for some trans players. I consider the possible limitations the embodied experience of larps -- as opposed to digital and table-top RPGs (TRPGs) -- might have in allowing such exploration for some trans players, particularly in potentially transphobic play environments. I argue however, that the embodied nature of larps might also provide an opportunity to explore gender role-play in such a way that allows for the validation of more diverse physical and social gender presentations, as well as the rehearsal thereof in a safer space. I present accounts of trans people -- including my own autoethnography -- using role-playing games, larps, and other activities/environments not necessarily consciously designed for the purpose of gender exploration as the basis for how this might be designed for intentionally in larps. I conclude by proposing to design a larp that could provide an opportunity to express, explore, and embody non-normative gender, and I pose a series of questions that I believe such a design should seek to answer.

Keywords: trans, role-play, larp, emancipatory bleed, autoethnography

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1. INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: Tweet by @SuperMichelleHD, March 7, 2021

The above is a post on *Twitter* by my friend Michelle Belcher, who amongst her other qualities is a game event coordinator, a game player, and a trans woman. The image she created, suggesting that role-playing as a woman in a game was an important part of some trans women's experience, quickly went viral, garnering a mass of replies and retweets expressing empathy and recognition from other trans role-players.

The now popular meme represents a narrative that I recognise in many personal stories of trans players – such as in conversations with other role-players (e.g., at the Knutepunkt 2021 conference, which included a roundtable on "Designing for Gender Exploration" in live-action role-playing games, hosted by Carnelian King), posts on social media (including other virally-shared memes suggesting similar experiences), auto-ethnographies in blogs or journalistic articles (e.g., Moriarity 2019; Constantine 2021), and accounts in role-playing scholarly work (e.g., Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). It is also a narrative that I recognise in myself – as a trans woman who often role-played my gender in digital and tabletop role-playing games prior to feeling able to embody it in everyday life; and even thereafter as I continued to seek out role-playing experiences in games, stage and film performance, social spaces, and finally in scholarly work and live-action role-playing games (larps). In each space, I realise in hindsight, I was looking for opportunities that allowed me to explore, experiment, and embody my gender in a way that was not allowed and/or unsafe in the wider social environment I was in.

I argue that the apparent ubiquity of this experience suggests that role-playing games might provide an opportunity for (trans) people to explore their gender. It is this possibility that I consider in the following paper, as well as making the argument that larps, intentionally designed with this in mind, might be particularly well-suited for such an endeavour.

Below, I present an autoethnography of role-playing in two different senses. Drawing from theories of gender performativities and social roles (Butler 1990, 1993; Goffman 1956, 1963, 1986), I firstly discuss the experience of being cast in a (gender) role from birth and then being required to play it by society whether it is concordant with the sense of self or not. Secondly, and in contradistinction to this, I present my experiences with role-playing games as one of the few ways I was able to express myself, which had been hindered by this other version of enforced social role performance. I will suggest that LGBTQIA+ people have a long history of doing this in different spaces, most not initially designed for such a purpose, and this includes role-playing games – from digital, to tabletop, to larp.

I will show how consideration and analysis of this phenomena is an emerging area in games studies including in larp studies – which especially shares a significant overlap with queer theoretical traditions considering social roles and performativities. I will highlight how scholarly approaches to the study of larps suggest they can be a site to model and challenge problematic social norms by providing participants the opportunity to experience them in a safer and intentional container of play. I will also discuss a number of larps which appear to provide an opportunity for gender role-play, and I will draw out which elements of their designs seem to allow for it. However, I will also present the potential barriers to gender exploration in larps, in part because larps are also artefacts of society and as such can reproduce discriminatory structures and experiences for trans people. I will note how the embodied nature of larps can especially exacerbate any issues that might arise from this, a concern that might be less of an immediate problem in digital or tabletop games.

I will argue, however, that it is precisely the embodied nature of larps that might provide for a particularly important aspect of gender exploration in role-playing environments, because it includes the physical element of gender experience. However, since there are no larps that are currently intentionally designed for this purpose, I present another autoethnographic narrative of my experiences in LGBTQIA+ social spaces as a source for potential design principles that could allow for such a safer larp play container. I will conclude that these considerations might best be tested through design: namely, the attempt to intentionally develop a larp that would allow participants to express, explore, and

embody non-normative gender. Finally, I pose a series of guiding questions that I believe such a design should seek to answer.

2. EVERYDAY PERFORMATIVITY AND THE OPPORTUNITY FOR FANTASY ROLE-PLAY

I grew up for the most part in England in the 1980s and '90s, a culture and time that seemed to me to be replete with rigid social structures: some overt, but most unspoken and just to be "understood" and "obeyed." Even in this context, as a child, I was certain that I was a girl. But I was also certain that it was not a good idea to talk about that fact. I knew it was much safer to pretend to be a boy – to role-play, mask – and try to pass for a normatively gendered person by following the rules of the environment I was in. And I knew all of this without needing to be explicitly told.

Judith Butler (1990, 1993), one of the scholars (along with theorists like de Lauretis 1991 and Sedgwick 1991) credited with being formative of the post-structuralist perspective of socio-cultural processes, might characterise this as an example of "gender performativity." Butler argues that gender norms as we know them exist and are perpetuated through their performance in everyday life (1990, 24-25). We are taught our roles from birth through a myriad of different discursive forms, most so subtle and constant as to be almost imperceptible and thus become "naturalised" in everyday understanding. These include observing and copying the performance of gender roles by others, and the enforcement of norms if they are broken by others as well. In the contemporary Western society within which she developed her theory, Butler argues, this creates a socio-cultural discourse that gender is binary, immutable, natural, and normal in origin, and thus undeniable. The fact that gender needs to be so firmly policed (for example by school-yard bullying, social roles enforced by law, mockery in media, homophobic/transphobic assaults, etc.) immediately demonstrates that this is not the case. Nonetheless, a very specific gender (binary) is conceptualised as an immutable natural function through this continual role-performance and policing.

The result of this process for me was that I had no way to express my subjectivity as I felt it to be. I didn't even know the word "trans" existed for most of my early years. The closest that I got to knowing anything about there being a "trans" way to be when I was younger were whispers and innuendo, communicated through the regular social policing of gender performance. For example, comments made when someone strayed away from prescribed gender norms were ubiquitous to the point that they were often uttered without consideration for the implications they actually have: "you throw like a girl," "take it like a man," "man up," "boys don't cry." All of this contains the thinly veiled implication that playing the role incorrectly was against the (social) rules and would lead to an unspeakable state of being which was inherently wrong, dangerous, and liable to be severely punished in some form or another.

This enforced social role felt "fake" in relation to the sense of gendered self that I didn't really have access to yet – because the culture I lived in did not discursively allow for it. This notion of gender performativity being inherently "artificial" is central to many discourses, and even critiques, of the Butlerian perspective. I find that a common epistemic slip when considering post-structuralism and gender performativities is to presume that just because one's subjectivity is expressed through, and impacted upon by, social circumstance that there does not exist any subjectivity beyond that. This is certainly a criticism that has been levied at post-structuralist (queer) theorists, including Butler. Jay Prosser (1998) for example, argued that Butler's earlier theory could be interpreted as denying a (trans) subjectivity by positioning it strategically as the basis for her post-structuralist argument about discursive gender reality, and by implication negated any sense of self or embodied subjectivity. In this view, the argument is that if gender is entirely performative, then all gendered subjectivity is somehow false including trans subjectivity.

Judith Butler herself argues against such misreading of her work that would negate an embodied (gendered) subjectivity, especially by those who might use it to for anti-trans political ends:

> One problem with that view of social construction is that it suggests that what trans people feel about what their gender is, and should be, is itself "constructed" and, therefore, not real . . . I oppose this use of social construction absolutely, and consider it to be a false, misleading, and oppressive use of the theory. (Butler in interview by Williams 2015)

Where the phenomenological line between subjectivity and the performative role begins and ends is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I do present the consideration of gender performativities in this way as a useful theoretical framework to consider why role-play is such a useful site for trans subjective exploration. The friction between subjectivity and the roles that we are required to play in everyday life has been a critical consideration not only for queer/gender theory but also for role-play theory. For example, Erving Goffman's work on how we sociologically present ourselves performatively in everyday life as a form of game theory – in which interactions could be seen in terms of "rules" and "moves" which people could invoke and play out in order to navigate their roles (1956, 1963, 1969, 1986) – is regularly cited by theorists as a way to explore the functions of social roles and how they can be (re-)enacted, impacted upon and/or altered through role-playing (Mason 2004; Choy 2004; Deterding 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

I suggest therefore, that Butler's work -- like Goffman's -- provides a useful starting point to consider wider social role performativities and role-play as both representations and responses thereof, whilst retaining an understanding that these processes do not negate the existence of gendered subjectivity, which can be expressed *through* role-play. Indeed, it is the potential for a conception of social role performativities and role-playing games to allow for the exploration of gendered selves that I find so compelling.

To put this in terms of my autoethnography, as a young person growing up in such a rigid social structure, I would seek out any chance to play another role despite the certain yet nebulous threat of gender policing. Opportunities were few and far between, but most often I would find them in games. I found one such opportunity playing the iconic digital role-playing game (RPG), *Final Fantasy VII*, and specifically its equally iconic, especially amongst many trans players (Henley 2020), scene in which the cis male protagonist, Cloud, must disguise himself as a woman in order to complete an objective.

I remember my heart seeming to leap with a combination of panic and excitement at the prospect of enacting the taboo which I could not do in my everyday life. But I had an *alibi* in this case – it was a game. *I* was not going to present as a woman so authentically that others around me would recognise me as such. No, it was *Cloud* who would do that -- the role I was playing. And the rules of the game dictated that I should play along. That, in fact, I must play along to advance the narrative. And so, I did. With tremendous joy. I played the role of my character, presenting and being acknowledged as a woman. And in that moment, there was recognition and reflection. And I didn't want it to end. So, for far longer than the designers intended I have no doubt, I walked around the fictious environment avoiding the action that would advance the plot, playing my make-believe game in a role that felt true to myself. I made sure to save the game at that point, so I could revisit the moment and play it from there again, whenever I should choose. Because it was an opportunity to inhabit a self that I was otherwise denied – a chance to explore and learn in a *safer* space, where the consequences of my everyday environment did not exist, although I wouldn't have put it in those terms at the time. Rather I did this almost instinctively, trying to find a way to exist, even if briefly, in another *space* – where I could transform, be and be seen as a person closer to something that felt true and real to me.

Figure 2: *Final Fantasy VII* (1997)

Final Fantasy VII offered me a glimpse of an identity that was both parallel to my own, yet also completely distant. It was frustratingly limited however. I could not go further in the story without losing this precious moment and I could not stray from the script either. The only thing I could do was linger in that digital world by myself, which in a way had some advantages. It was safe from the possibility that others might question why I was lingering and thus question my alibi. But it gave me little other opportunity to express or explore. Nonetheless, that moment of recognition and fictitious verification from the non-player characters (NPCs) in a safer space had such an impact that I would never forget it, and years later I eagerly sought out *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020) – which as the title suggests is a modern remake of the original game – just to see how that scene played out and to experience that moment of recognition again (cf. Vincent 2021). This experience demonstrates both the problematic gender social roles that society can impose, and also some of the opportunity that role-playing could provide. It is also an example of what Edmund Y. Chang (2017) calls *queergaming*.

3. "ROLE-PLAYING HAS ALWAYS BEEN QUEER…"

Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) note that a queer approach to games and role-play studies is still an emerging field. An initial concern for queer game studies has been the representation of LGBTQIA+ people, themes, and issues (and the significant lack thereof) in games (Shaw 2014; Shaw and Friesam 2016; Ruberg 2019, 2020). Despite a general lack of such representation, there are those that examine how LGBTQIA+ players interact with games in such a way as to incorporate themselves regardless. Chang (2017, 20) coined the term queergaming to describe the act of LGBTQIA+ players "borrowing, appropriating, and repurposing" games that otherwise do not overtly include us.

One version of this can be found in what Ruberg (2017, 2019) describes as "queering 'straight' games." Ruberg (2019) examine games that on the surface do not suggest a queer understanding, but nonetheless, could be seen to have queer readings and potential impact on the player. For example, Ruberg reads the digital game, *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (2014), as an analogy of queer embodiment and passing (2019, 84). In *Octodad*, the player assumes the role of an octopus who has somehow found their way into a circumstance where they must pretend to be a husband and father to a suburban family

by reproducing a series of stereotypically normative behaviours. Ruberg (2019, 85) suggests that in the game, "[p]layers quite literally play at heteronormativity, attempting to convincingly perform the role of the straight cisgender, masculine father." And as such, it "can be understood as a video game about 'passing'" (85).

Figure 3: *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (2014)

Passing in this sense, is the presentation of the self in such a way that can be recognised and perceived as normative in the established socio-cultural gender discourse. Passing, as a term, often refers to the impulse or need to appear to be cis-gender for trans people in order to navigate our environments in safer ways (Spade 2006). But it can also refer to one's gender subjectivity being recognised, if that gender is comprehensible in normative terms – for example a trans man being "read" as a man. Passing as a notion, therefore, encompasses a number of different experiences – which can have both negative and/or positive connotations for the individual. In this context, I posit, it demonstrates the way in which engagements with gender might be represented through gameplay. In the case of *Octodad* (2014) for example, the game can be read as a navigation of gender performativity for a character attempting to pass for normatively gendered in a social world. Interestingly, however, it is never suggested throughout the game that the octopus does not consider this normative gender to be reflective of their gender subjectivity.

Yet, this is still an example where such a reading must be placed onto a game which does not contain overt queer codification (Ruberg 2019). There remain few mainstream overt engagements with (trans) gender diversity within digital or non-digital games. However, there are more examples emerging in independent game design. Ruberg (2020) presents a series of interviews with queer (predominantly digital) game designers, who are a part of a very recent movement of what they term the *queer games avant-garde*. This is made up of games designed usually outside of the mainstream games industry and "engage with queer perspective" (2020, 3). Ruberg notes these games tend to explore queerness beyond just representation or attempts to create empathy for queer people per se, and present queer identity as complicated, multiple, politicized, and intersectional (2020, 14-22).

Strenros and Sihvonen (2019) find, however, that even within queer games studies as an emergent discipline, there is perhaps even less study of non-digital games and role-play. Stenros and Sihvonen (2019, 2015) in their recent works on the subject have found that there remain few examples of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) or larps featuring overt LGBTQIA+ representation or themes. However, similar to Chang (2017) and Ruberg (2019) in their studies of predominantly digital games,

Stenros and Sihvonen (2015) find that in non-digital games, "queer role-play has been possible since the beginning regardless of whether there were cues for it or not." They go on to suggest that due to their co-creative nature, tabletop RPGs and larps potentially provide significant opportunities for players to incorporate queer themes. Furthermore, in an examination of responses by queer larp players in a digital forum, Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) found that many participants experienced role-playing as a space for transformative self-exploration.

This is something that I also recognise from my own experience. Around the same time that I discovered *Final Fantasy VII*, I joined a high school *Dungeons & Dragons* group within which I had managed to pluck up the courage to role-play a woman character. In hindsight, I realise that none of the group really knew the rules of the game that well, nor was anyone particularly keen to run the game as game master. And so, the campaign we attempted was rather doomed to fail. However, I recall that we did all enjoy very much creating our characters and simply having them exist in another world.

I couldn't say if it was the same for the other players – I would have never had the courage to ask or suggest – but for me, it felt like an opportunity to explore a different way of being. I was a teenager in a strict British school – which meant gender-prescribed uniforms and rules for every form of behaviour. In hindsight, I realise I was under tremendous strain. I was trying my best to fulfil the requirements of my supposed gender and follow what even then felt like absurd rigidly-enforced ritual, rule and custom. I was old enough to have realised more consciously just how I was different. This was in part courtesy of a daytime talk-show where I had learned the word "transsexual" whilst watching a trans woman speak about her life whilst silhouetted and with a voice changer. It had been both a revelation and a horror to realise that being trans was possible, but it was also so dangerous that we had to be anonymised simply to speak publicly about it. Confronted with this, I simply had no idea what I was going to do.

However, the game gave me a chance to consider a different "kind of me." In my mind and on the character sheet I created a role to play. In fantasy terms, she might actually have been considered quite plain. She didn't have special powers nor have a mythological origin or form. She was born in a village, a human fighter with a thoroughly unenchanted sword and sensible armour. She was strong and confident though – that was very important, I had decided – and she was practically-minded with a Neutral Good worldview. In hindsight, she could be defined as quite "boring" by *Dungeons & Dragons* standards. She was perfect however for a teenager who was trying to find herself by tentatively trying out being who she really was. As our party of adventurers awkwardly tried to find their way to an actual adventure, I was able to play out being her in fictional everyday environments by having conversations with other characters as her. I could play out scenarios and imagine and feel out how it might be to be this person – who seemed so much closer to a self that felt like me.

Here again, the game provided me the alibi to enact the taboo, but for me, *Dungeons & Dragons* seemed to give a different opportunity than the one I had found in *Final Fantasy VII*. Here I wasn't playing a character that had been handed to me. Rather, I could make my own. And the character didn't have to be a man pretending to be a woman. She could just be a woman. The game space was made up through our improvisation, our dialogue, and conversation, acted out collaboratively both in our imagination but also in the moment between us. It felt like the game gave me a chance to explore this character more comprehensively. I was able to "be" the role and perform it socially, and have that role validated and reflected back at me by people who were there and were not simply reproducing a script. And that play felt natural, real, and safer in our common interpersonal fiction.

The problem was that I had to do all that still under the guise of being a cis-boy. I felt like a double-agent somehow. Playing a role whilst playing another role. And even the stolen moments of being able to enact my subjectivity was short-lived, because the ruleset was complicated and none us seemed inclined to follow them properly. So, shortly the adventure just faltered. The game was not

designed for what we wanted it to do and that friction was obvious, especially for me. But I couldn't share that either.

Nonetheless, the game had provided a very important moment in allowing me to be myself. And this opportunity had an impact not only on me then but in my life following, because I had glimpsed something that was possible and I wanted to find a way to have that experience more, in-game and out of it. I have found similar themes in accounts in both popular and scholarly literature on role-playing and the possible transformative impacts it can have on a person's perspective and life.

4. TRANS(FORMATIVE) ROLE-PLAY

My life has been transformed, in no small part because of what I learned from my character in a role-playing game. (Moriarity 2019)

In Joan Moriarity's (2019) autoethnographically-based article, she describes an exploration of a trans character that she created in a tabletop RPG prior to her coming out as trans herself. She emphasises how transformative the experience was for her personally, as she was able to perform and inhabit a subjectivity that felt more authentic – something she did instinctively at the time but analyses in hindsight via theories of role-play. Moriarity cites Sarah Lynne Bowman's (2013) definitions of role-play *bleed* as one of the reasons her role-playing had such an impact on her sense of self; bleed here is described as the process by which emotions and experiences of a character role-played may affect or impact on the player's "real life" outside of the game, and vice versa (Stenros and Bowman 2018, 421). Moriarity (2019) locates her ability to explore and embody herself in the opportunity role-play provided for her. And as a result, she was able to experience the bleed between her sense of self and the character that she role-played.

Moriarity narrows down the specific type of bleed she experienced in terms of what Jonaya Kemper (2017, 2020) calls *emancipatory bleed*. Kemper (2017) in her visual autoethnography, defines emancipatory bleed as "the idea that bleed can be steered and used for emancipatory purposes by players who live with complex marginalizations." Kemper (2020) suggests that role-play, highlighting larp specifically, provides the possibility to explore "selves" that we might otherwise have been denied in other aspects of our lives. Kemper (2017) notes that especially those who live their everyday lives with "a double consciousness" or a "fractured identity" due to marginalisation can use larp and emancipatory bleed in this way. She (2020) suggests that emancipatory bleed can be intentionally sought through "navigational play": consciously seeking out opportunities before, throughout, and after a role-play to consider how enacting an alternative to marginalisation can lead to a change in how we might live in our everyday lives.

Both Moriarity (2019) and Kemper (2017, 2020) describe transformative experiences from role-playing in terms of the emancipatory bleed that can result from explorations therein, allowing us to access another sense of self beyond the roles we are otherwise asked to play in everyday life. Bowman and Hugaas (2021) outline the transformative potential of role-playing, and highlight the impact it can have on identity exploration by "adopting alternate identities in fictional worlds." They argue for intentionally designing larps with this transformative potential in mind, proposing we see role-playing space as a *transformational container* within which we might explore and experiment (2021). Bowman (2010) and Bowman and Hugaas (2021) have argued that larp as such a transformational container allows for participants to experiment with different selfhoods, and perhaps especially explore those characteristics of self that we have been excluded from in our everyday lives, which reflects the observations of Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) and Kemper (2017, 2020).In my case, I chose "self-compassion" as that aspect and as we played through the game, I was deeply touched by the opportunity

to express something that I had felt was possible, but in many ways, out of reach in my everyday life. It is an oft-overlooked aspect of being marginalised that there are many complex and intersectional issues that follow, most especially in areas of adverse effects on mental health from living in a society that marginalises your difference (cf. Hunter, Butler and Cooper 2021). One of those aspects for myself, is a reduced capacity for self-compassion. This larp provided an opportunity to embody a self who had that capacity and I have taken that with me out of the game. From playing this larp, I was keen to explore what it was that allowed me to have such an experience, and what potential it might offer to my own project.

I was struck by the similarities the larp had to other impactful moments of role-playing I have had. For example, like my experiences with *Final Fantasy VII* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, the larp had provided me the safer space and alibi to express a different version of myself, both aspects of a transformational play container as described by Bowman and Hugaas (2021). They place great emphasis on the safety that such containers must incorporate, precisely because of the exclusion players might feel elsewhere in their lives. For the authors, this safety is considered in a number of ways, such as for example, the security that the alibi of the larp being "a game" provides for a player to experiment more freely within themselves (Deterding 2018). Bowman and Hugaas note that a transformational play container is a potential opportunity for the temporary suspension of normative roles and rules (2021). Paradoxically, this very mechanism of alibi can also inhibit the ability for the player to incorporate something from in-game into their selfhood outside of the game -- the bleed between the two -- because the alibi can include an aspect of *role distancing*. In this way, the role that is played in-game can be considered significantly different and critically separate to the self out of the game, or the playful space itself feels impossible to experience or reproduce in another way outside of the larp.

This problem is reflected in some of the responses that Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) received in their questions to queer larp players in a dedicated Facebook forum the researchers set up to discuss these experiences. In these cases, some players reported that though they were able to explore gender and their sexual orientation more freely within the game space, they could not extend that self-exploration out of it. Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) do not analyse in great detail which factors might encourage a queer player to be able to experience the bleed between an in-game exploration and an out-of-game one. However, they suggest that certain community-based factors may have a significant impact according to their respondents. They specifically note that many respondents who were exploring selfhood in larp environments mentioned the importance of their interactions with other players. Citing Pohjola's (2004, 89) notion of *inter-immersion* – the process by which the fictional world and all the characters within it are established by the participation and cooperation of all the players – they suggest that what was especially important for those engaging with this kind of self-exploration was to have those roles "reflected back at them" by others in the larp. They found that by being validated in the role they were playing, respondents felt seen and affirmed.

This kind of affirmation can be critically important for those trying to find a way to express their subjectivity in the wider world outside of safer spaces like a game environment. For example, such validation is found to be vital to the mental health and well-being of trans people in therapeutic environments (Turban 2017, de Vries et al. 2020). More generally, this validation is understood to be a critical aspect of wider identity theory within social psychology, which argues that identity verification occurs when individuals perceive "that others see them in a situation in the same way they see themselves" (Stets and Serpe 2013, 35). This identity verification has a significant impact on forming a cohesive sense of self in a social environment.

Maio-Aether (2021) advocates for such verification being used in affirmative therapy being applied specifically through the use of tabletop RPGs in clinical therapeutic environments, which he conducts with queer and questioning clients. Using games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Vampire:*

The Masquerade, he introduces opportunities for his clients to engage with affirmative environments within which they can explore gender and sexuality in the relatively safer fictions of the game. In Maio-Aether's (2021) examples, he seems to advocate for players "rehearsing desires through characters." This reflects Stenros and Bowman's (2018) argument that one of the ways to design specifically for bleed in larps is to encourage players to "enact *thin characters*, or Doppleganger Selves" (422), which are characters that are very similar to selves experienced outside of the game (Bowman, 2010, 167).

Similar themes regarding the importance of co-creation, role validation, and role distance are often cited in relation to three larps that contain overt themes relating to gender and sexuality: *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003), *Mad About the Boy* (2010) and *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011). One of *Mellan himmel och hav*'s (2003) designers, Eliot Wieslander (2011) describes the larp as intentionally designed to allow players to enact a different form of love, affection, and intimacy as well as to engage with gender in a more metaphorical way. Gender in the game is still binary, but instead of being related to any specific physiological formation, people are either categorised as Morning or Evening people. This binary is still prescriptive with certain roles and values being considered immutable depending on the gender assigned (Gerge 2004, 209). Sexuality too continues to be coded in a "normative" function, in that there is a religious taboo cited that requires there only be sexual contact between Morning and Evening people (and that "homosexuality" or queerness in this sense is prohibited).

Wieslander (2011) notes that there is no explicit learning outcome that was presumed in the making of the larp, but rather it was designed to give players the opportunity to explore and question the stereotypes of gender and sexuality that they know in their everyday lives. Tovanen and MacDonald (2020) suggest that the ensemble focus of *Mellan himmel och hav* is an integral part of its functioning as an exploration of complex social roles and intersections. They see the larp as a co-creative effort by the players, facilitated by structured discussions, workshops, and dynamics (meta-techniques), which were engaged with prior and in-between play sessions, and could then play out during the larp. Gerge (2004) notes that the experience of *Mellan himmel och hav* was particularly impactful because of its prescriptive and rigid (gender) roles. She found that "several groups and individuals were so sad and shaken by what was happening to the characters, and by the nonfictional questions these events raised, that they found it necessary to cut the game to be able to fight against the spreading sorrow" (2004, 213).

One of *Mad About the Boy*'s (2010) designers, Tor Kjetil Edland (2011), similarly describes the larp as being designed in direct opposition to stereotype – in this case, the common media (and larp) narrative that women characters are often seen as accessories to men in many storylines. Interestingly, like Wieslander (2011), Edland (2011) suggests the larp functioned in part as "an experiment" with no clear pedagogical goal for the participants, rather presenting it as an opportunity to explore a different form of gendered formation. Turkington (2016) describes the larp's narrative as a near-future story in which all men have died and women have formed a new society. Turkington (2016) describes several runs of the larp, finding that though there were some issues in the ways in which gender was defined in the structure of the game, it allowed players the opportunity for "self-engagement" and "intentional identity practice" (2016, 96). She highlights the account of a trans woman player who had not yet begun to socially present herself as a woman, who was able to use the opportunity to role-play in this game to explore the "emotional impact of that transition" (2016, 96). This was not the explicit goal of the game, but the fiction of the larp as well as the explicitly open definition of gender by the designers allowed for this to occur.

The designers behind *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011) similarly report accounts of players finding opportunities to explore their subjectivities within their larp. *Just a Little Lovin'* is focused on the impact of the 1980s AIDS crisis on a community of predominantly queer characters in New York. Paisley (2016) presents an autoethnographic account of how his role-play within *Just a Little Lovin'* allowed him to explore non-heterosexual desire and sexualities. He advocates for larps to be designed

like *Just a Little Lovin'* specifically because of its overt queer focus. The alternative, he notes from his own experience, is playing in larps that struggle to allow for difference and instead make him feel like he was "imposing [his] queer agenda on the game" by being asked to be included (2016, 171).

Edland and Grasmo (2021) report that, though anecdotal, they have significant evidence from player accounts that their larp has had a transformative impact on participants' lives: notably, "trans and gender non-conforming people expressed their gender publicly at *Just a Little Lovin'*, and some transitioned after the larp" (2021, 21). Curiously however, there is only one canonically trans character in the larp script (Groth et al. 2021), and even though certain themes like homophobia and racism are explicitly discouraged or disallowed as a theme in the game's rules, transphobia is explicitly allowed for (Groth et al. 2021, 134). This suggests that (trans) gender exploration is not an explicit goal or theme for the larp, and yet it still does allow for it.

The reasons for this perhaps relate to the reflective emphasis of the larp, which functions throughout the game. Bowman (2015) highlights the intersection and interplay between both in- and out-of-game activities in *Just a Little Lovin'* and how that contributes to "strong moments of catharsis" for the players (2015). She notes how the larp incorporates workshops, Act breaks, and metatechniques that emphasize reflection and consideration throughout the playtime of the larp. Bowman (2013) conducted interviews with role-players and found that by going in and out of character this way and with such regular engagements, they were able to shed "social roles," don and perform "new identities," and then return to the previous self with some measure of change socially and individually from the experience – but also with a greater sense of community with the other players. Larps, in the perspective, offer transformational opportunities including for trans players seeking space to explore and embody their subjectivities.

In each of these examples, the common theme of the communal aspect of larp is highlighted as one of the reasons for their transformative function. Also, the opportunity for the character being played (or rehearsed) to be potentially "thin" in relation to the subjectivity being explored is emphasised, as well the potential for that character to be validated and reflected back to the player. This presumes however that the community of the game is one that allows for this process to occur unimpeded by the socio-cultural aspects that might be hostile in any other aspect of society. Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) note, for example, that particularly for trans larp players, "transphobic co-players are a particular anxiety for many." Kemper, Saitta and Koljonen (2020) similarly note that larp exists within the wider socio-cultural context, so those factors can pervade even into the fictions that are supposedly operating on different social rules. They describe how players from marginalised groups have to *steer* their character's behaviour and interactions specifically around this. Or worse, if they are not able to, this can lead to what van der Heij (2021) describes as "very bad bleed situations" specifically because larp is an embodied experience. She notes that, like any social environment, larp can reproduce appearance-based prejudice, which means that the "thin" nature of the character play that might lead to transformation can instead be particularly precarious.

This notion might suggest that a role-playing game that does not involve embodied play could be safer in terms of its play container. This certainly removes some of the fear that might be encountered in terms of appearance-based prejudice. For example, in my own cases that I described above, it was because *Final Fantasy VII* was a single-player digital role-playing game that I could first dare to enact the role in the first place. In terms of larp theory, I was able to play the role and have a transformative experience because I was given sufficient alibi by the character. The role (at the time) was sufficiently "thin" enough and I even received some of the reflection and validation in the role from the automated interaction with NPCs. I was able to do this *because* I was by myself. But, as noted, each of these elements was significantly limited. I could not leave that moment in the fiction; much of the character's agency and attributes were out of my control; and I felt no real sense of interaction. However, I found

much more of that freedom in *Dungeons & Dragons*. The tabletop game provided sufficient alibi, but more so, I could create and enact the character myself. The reflection of the character's subjectivity and her validation was more under my control and interactive with my co-players. The character in many ways could be "thinner" in that regard, but also crucially for me at the time, I did not in any way have to embody her. The environment in which I was living most certainly contained the appearance-based prejudice van der Heij (2021) describes and I felt tremendous fear of being exposed in any way. The tabletop game allowed me to express myself in a veiled way without needing to embody my subjectivity.

However, embodying my subjectivity was precisely what I ultimately wanted to do. Digital and tabletop role-playing gave me an opportunity to express a part of my subjectivity, to rehearse an aspect of my difference as Turkington (2016) might put it. But gender is (as noted above) performative, and located in and on the body. It can, and is, expressed in any number of subjective, interpersonal and physical ways – including through manner, language, dress, and more (cf. Goffman 1979). As such, the embodied nature of larps might provide an important opportunity for physically rehearsing that aspect of ourselves as well.

Cazeneuve (2018) notes that larp is a mimetic activity and as such it has both the potential to reference and reproduce our socio-cultural reality and challenge it. As such, Cazeneuve advises caution, for "performing sex (or gender), whether it is in 'real life' or within larp contexts, runs the risk of reproducing social norms and stereotypes, while at the same time offering opportunities to rework and subvert them." Therefore, they place the responsibility on the larp designer to be aware of these considerations and, with that knowledge, intentionally subvert problematic norms in every aspect of their games – from in-game content and themes, rules, meta-techniques, accessibility, communications about the game, and all other design decisions (2018).

There are role-playing environments this notion reminds me of, which I believe exhibit a number of the features of a safer transformative role-playing container and attempt to do so in the way Cazeneuve (2018) argues for: queer performance clubs.

5. QUEER PERFORMANCE SPACES AS TRANSFORMATIONAL CONTAINERS

In 2003, after I had moved to the big city and managed to find my way into a university, I started to come out awkwardly in my everyday life. In those formative years, I was lucky enough to come across some very special places that encouraged everyone who attended to be whomever, whatever, and however they felt they wanted to be in the space that was collectively created. One of those spaces was called *Club Wotever* (which still continues to run as a weekly event in London called *Bar Wotever* and a regular event called *Wotever Malmö* in the south of Sweden).

I have tried to find the exact words to explain what it feels like to walk from the "outside" world into a little club where the social rules are just different. For a start, you suddenly aren't the minority anymore. Even if you think and feel differently from all others present, there is still a common experience of being the odd one out everywhere else. For me, I was so used to hiding in everyday life, and even when I had just months before plucked up the courage to come out, I still felt like I was the only one in my environment who was like me. Walking into *Wotever* on the opening night in 2003 was genuinely scary at first.

But I slowly got used to it and started to see it as a joyful play-space. The club was also a performance venue but it wasn't just that. It seemed like people were performing on- and off- the stage. It was like people were able to come into a safer space, and present a different version of themselves than the one they might have felt comfortable sharing elsewhere -- often brighter, louder, and joyous. I would eventually begin my career as a performer in that club. I was an enthusiastic but amateur contemporary

dancer when I started going to *Wotever*. But I was introduced to the promoter as a budding performer by my friends that first night and was asked to perform for the next month's event. I honestly could not tell you why I agreed. I was terrified. But I am so glad that I did. When the next *Wotever* came around I performed a dance piece as a character that was "myself." I wanted to play an "authentic" role, to try to express something that I just couldn't anywhere else. The piece I performed that night was about being trans in everyday life. I will never forget how special it felt to perform something so real to an audience who seemed to recognise it and celebrated my attempt to perform it.

Figure 4: Performing at *Club Wotever* in 2003. Photo by Verena Radulovic.

It is no exaggeration to say that performance changed my life. Firstly, it directly led to my career as a performer and actor, but perhaps more profoundly, I realised that I had a safe space to explore myself. To put it in the terms that I have mentioned above, *Wotever* was a transformational container (Bowman and Hugaas 2021) that allowed myself and others to perform and (role-)play both on- and off- stage.

In hindsight, I realise that we were trying to make a space where people could explore and experiment, but also take some of that with them when they left. Not long into *Wotever*'s existence, different activities began to be run in the space, one of which was called The Dressing-up Corner. The premise was simple in a way – anyone who came to the club would find at the entrance a large friendly sign reading The Dressing-up Corner, a clothes rail, and a station with make-up and accessories. The Dressing-up Corner was run by one of our regulars who made it a point to welcome everyone enthusiastically but also gently to ask them to consider trying on something new for the night. The visitor could then choose any item of clothing and/or make-up combination. They were encouraged to be creative -- maybe be a different self -- just for the night. *Wotever* was more established then and we had made sure that the environment was welcoming and encouraging for self-expression. At the end of the evening, the person who had changed into something else for the night was encouraged to take the clothing home with them if they wanted, though they certainly were under no obligation to do so. If

they did, however, they would also be asked if they would like to leave something else behind – perhaps for the next person who might like to try it.

We did not consider it consciously, but The Dressing-up Corner was designed to be a transformational container inside the larger *Wotever* container. The person enters the space, which has a clearly defined boundary at the door. They are then given an opportunity to engage with this exploration or not. The *alibi* was that they were entering into a club and did not necessarily come for this specifically, and of course, a nightclub (especially a queer one) is a place for flamboyance and expression, which could always after the fact be dismissed as simply getting into the spirit of it. Should the person engage, however, they were received as they were now presenting by the organiser of The Dressing-up Corner, the organisers of *Wotever* as a whole, and invariably also by the rest of the patrons. They were validated and verified in the role that they had chosen for the night. This was a role that they could *remove* at the end of the evening when passing the Dressing-up Corner on the way out. But they were also encouraged to consider taking something of the experience with them in a very tangible way, a form of *bleed* that was offered in terms of the clothing they had worn for the evening. The notion was to give that person something that they could take away with them if they wanted to, that perhaps would give them a chance to retain and continue to explore something they had been able to inhabit that night. And in turn also they were given the chance to leave behind something, the thought here being that perhaps they might let go of an aspect of another role that they no longer wanted. But whatever they chose to do, there was always the border of the door that allowed them to leave it all safely within the *container* that was *Wotever* if they could not, or chose not, to bring it with them.

Wotever was not a fictional place, but it did contain performance and space where one could present a different and heightened sense of self on- and off- stage. This environment, in a way, presents something slightly different to a larp, in that there is potentially an inherent point of bleed there already for anyone who is exploring a different sense of self. This process does not really allow for the role-distancing noted by Stenros and Sihvonen (2019), but it could also mean there is less alibi for those who might feel especially anxious about the implications of experimenting in the space.

6. CONCLUSION

These last examples from *Wotever* are not larps. They are, however, I argue, descriptions of people trying to find their way to a space that allows for the experimentation, exploration, and embodiment of their subjectivities in the context of existing within a potentially hostile socio-cultural environment. They are instinctive attempts to enact what the larp theorists I have described above define as the critical features of a potentially transformational container, which is a safer, co-created, validating space that facilitates bleed. *Wotever*, like many of the games I have described (and some of my experiences playing them) was not intentionally designed for this purpose but sought for it regardless. It was not an intentionally designed container, though it is an instinctive one, I argue. It did not provide an overt fiction to aid the alibi. It is not consciously held with a clear social contract for exploration and play in a way that a larp might be. Rather it is an established part of a party culture which involves all the aspects thereof, including alcohol.

Nonetheless, I believe *Wotever* was an embodied space in which transformative role-play might occur within the parameters that were set. I present my experiences with *Wotever*, role-playing games, and larps in the context of a researcher and a designer who is considering what kind of playful arena could allow someone to explore themselves freely enough that they could find out, on their own terms, what their gendered subjectivity might be.

I have not found a larp designed intentionally for this purpose. I have found games that allow for exploration in spite of the possible intention of the designers. I have found games that explore aspects

of queer or gendered experience. I have not found a game that is explicitly designed to fulfil a function that I see trans people searching for in the interviews and autoethnographies that I describe above.

As such, I propose to begin a design for such a game on the basis of the theoretical work I have cited above, beginning with the questions that my analysis and my own experiences raise:

- What kind of alibi would a game need, such that it would include someone who is perhaps questioning their gender and is fearful of exploring that notion because of the social circumstances they live in? How can we encourage someone to inhabit a character that might be close enough to their potential subjectivity so that they can benefit from experiencing a "thin character"?
- How can a game allow for a player to steer for the bleed that they are comfortable with experiencing?
- How can we encourage a player to take away something from the role-play safely into the rest of their life and perhaps leave behind an aspect of the role that they currently play, but fits them poorly?
- How can we make sure that the space is fictionalised enough to give the player the distance that they need, but not so unreal as to be impossible to be incorporated into their everyday life?
- How might we design a game that is flexible enough to allow for a breadth of experience – including those questioning their gender identity and those who are more certain?
- How might we make such a game safer, so that the players feel comfortable sharing an aspect of themselves that they may have hidden for so long and are taking a risk – even in such a space – in exposing?
- And how might we create a community for such a game -- one that can reflect back to each of its participants that the subjectivities they might just be starting to express through play are valid and welcome?

These are the questions I ask myself now as I have carefully considered my own explorations and the opportunities I hope to facilitate for others. I cannot say yet if they will work or falter, but I believe the way to know is to research through design based on the theory and considerations I have outlined here. From personal experience, I know how important it is to have a chance to express the self in an embodied, playful environment, safe from a hostile world that would deem such an act as dangerous and worthy of assault. I believe I have argued for why a larp specifically might be a suitable space to do that in – and how it might provide for the communal, co-creative, safer, validating, transformational play container for which I instinctively looked in my past, and will now try to intentionally design.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The Use of the Role-playing Technique STARS in Formal Didactic Contexts

Abstract: Live action role-playing games (larps) are an effective, yet uncommon learning tool in schools. For broader implementation, the design of the game has to serve curricular and pedagogical needs alike. This paper presents core principles of design and implementation of educational live action role-playing games in curricular primary and secondary education. Over the course of 5 years, 16 live action role-playing games with a total of 53 cycles of Design-based Research (DBR) including design, testing, and evaluation were conducted in German schools. This paper synthesizes 17 essential principles from the DBR cycles as best practice in the context of subject-bound curricular focus. The results of our study show that four parameters differ in schools from extracurricular live action role-playing activities: curricular guidelines, compulsory participation, grading practices, and time/space confinements. These four parameters need to be taken into consideration at all times when designing and conducting a live action role-playing game in a school environment. Moreover, design for simplicity and inclusion is paramount for successful implementation within subject-teaching in schools as a rewarding tool to foster content-knowledge and to promote social and personal skills.

Keywords: educational role-playing games, edu-larp, Design-based Research, best practices, classrooms, Germany

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1. LIVE ACTION ROLE-PLAYING PRACTICES IN SCHOOLS

Role-playing techniques are frequently applied in curricular contexts such as schools. Especially in language and literature learning, they serve the purpose of contextualizing scenes and visualizing relationships (Hochstadt et al. 2013), engaging students actively in interpretation processes and the active usage of language (Hallet 2008; Scheller 1998). More often than not, role-playing units do not exceed short scenes, and it is a common practice that after rehearsing a scene, certain groups present their dialogue to an audience in front of the class (Warm 1981).

Live action role-playing, however, is a role-playing concept in which everyone present in the room, including the pedagogues, represents a character in a fictional scenario. Usually, participants interact simultaneously and scenes are not presented to an audience. Even though there is no text-manuscript to be recited, the role-playing game usually follows a pre-written narrative structured in scenes. Sometimes, this script is developed with the students, but in most cases only the facilitating pedagogue knows about the upcoming major incidents in the narrative. Live action role-playing in curricular and extracurricular contexts is also known as *edu-larp* (Branc 2018), or as *Process Drama* (Bowell and Heap 2001; Heathcote and Bolton 1995) in schools. Similar concepts are *Simulation Globale* developed in France (Maak 2011; Yaiche 1996) and *Szenisches Spiel* in Germany (Scheller 1998), both being holistic drama techniques through which students explore a certain topic whilst being in-character. These techniques have in common that all of them include a preparatory phase, a rather long improvisational acting phase without any external observers, as well as a reflection moment after the acting (Geneuss 2019). Moreover, all strive to guide the student towards pre-set learning goals. Larp emerged as a leisure acting activity from tabletop games in the late 1970s and later as edu-larp turned into an educational tool in different contexts (Bowman 2014, 120). In contrast, Process Drama, Drama in Education, Simulation Globale, and Szenisches Spiel were developed as didactical tools to be applied in curricular teaching at around the same time. Since these practices can be referred to as being cousins or twins (Bowman 2014; Mochocki 2013), this article will refer to all these practices as live action role-playing games, regardless of their evolutionary history.

Pedagogues and researchers have identified live action role-playing games as useful tools benefitting curricular teaching in a wide array of subjects including history (Mochocki 2013, 2014; Munz 2015), language and literature (Torner 2016; Hulse and Owens 2019) or science (Bowman and Standiford 2015). Even though these live action role-playing formats have existed for quite some time and their potential has been described (e.g., Balzer and Kurz 2014; Bowman 2014; Neubauer 2015; Simkins 2015; Vanek and Peterson 2016; more examples in Bowman 2014), they are far from being a commonly used method in the teacher's toolbox. There is little evidence that transferring the learning concept on a broader scale to traditional institutions has taken place. Two Danish boarding schools, Efterskole Epos and Østerskov Efterskole, who apply live action role-playing for students aged between 14 and 18 on a regular basis (Hyltoft 2012), are illustrious exceptions to the rule.

Reasons for the lack of widespread implementation despite the clear potential in daily pedagogical practice are manifold. The obstacles for teachers are still high. Role-playing games are a complex technique and teachers feel that they lack skills to conduct them (Geneuss, Obster, and Ruppert 2020). Moreover, teachers are often constrained by a culture of testing and correction (Kao and O'Neill 1998, 28) and run the perceived risk that such innovative practices may challenge the teacher's professional identity and strenuously established hierarchies of power in the classroom (Hulse and Owens 2019). Practical reasons could simply be the lack of accessible material. There is no equivalent to a library where pedagogues could choose from a variety of live action role-playing games designed for their subject contexts following certified quality standards. This paper contributes to closing that gap by suggesting design and implementation standards that emerged from Design-based Research (DBR). These standards may serve as the basis for the establishment of a library compiling live action role-playing games developed for schools. Standards not only refer to the material, but include advice for advanced pedagogical training enabling pedagogues to perform these games in curricular context to the benefit of their students. The specific curricular demands for the respective country or region as well as methods of assessment will have to be taken into consideration by each team designing the games.

1.1 Live action role-playing in school environments

When applying live action role-playing games as a drama tool in institutional teaching, the curricular and institutional framework conditions need to be considered in design and implementation. The four major differences to conducting leisure role-playing activities are curricular guidelines, compulsory participation, grading practices, and time/space confinements.

Curricular guidelines, such as subject-specific teaching aims and learning goals, usually define the choice of methods in subject teaching. In addition, several countries have overarching goals that ought to be included in all subjects, including values education, democracy, 21st century skills, or media education. Once the goals for a certain learning unit are defined, pedagogues choose methods and material accordingly and impart how the choices contribute to the goals. As a consequence, when opting for a live action role-playing game, the pedagogue has to justify their choice with the contribution to specific curricular and overarching goals. For the live action role-playing tool, researchers point out that preparation and reflection are crucial for the achievement of pedagogical goals (Bowman 2014, 127).

Attendance and active contribution are usually compulsory in school settings, arguing that teachers apply a variety of tools that eventually reaches out to all learners and leads to increased performance. In subject teaching, it is the teacher's responsibility to offer all students learning opportunities and to make sure that all learners are promoted according to their abilities, interests, and needs. Thus, one of the teacher's challenges in any subject is to interrelate the individual student with general curricular teaching aims. When opting for a role-playing game, all learners must be given the chance to participate and to actively contribute to a positive atmosphere. Negative social behavior in game-based learning such as disrespect can block any intrinsic motivation from the other participants:

The combination of social learning as well as social game playing can be sustainable if it is perceived as a situation of (mutual) generosity – giving knowledge, skills, or time and attention of each other – because in this way intrinsic motivations (e.g., perception of relatedness and competence) for learning and gaming can coincide. Negative behaviour is likely to destroy this tie. (Remmele and Whitton 2014, 122)

Formative or summative feedback is a common practice in all schools. In open, explorative settings, prescriptions for performance could minimize creativity, agency, and interaction. On the other hand, they can create a safe space for all participants. Feedback on the students' performance is crucial even in drama tools. Yet, it has become best practice not to convert it into grades or credits. Pedagogues implementing drama techniques in curricular teaching find orientation in guidelines of facilitating drama in education (Hilliger 2014, 24). This is first and foremost a respectful attitude among all participants. Furthermore, separating the character from the player and not having any real-life consequences for the character's in-game actions is essential. During reflection, the character's actions are referred to by the character's name, not the player's. Also, in-game and off-game phases are clearly indicated by certain mechanisms.

Lastly, formal learning environments are usually organized in time slots and classrooms. Of course, there are settings of formal education where learning is organized differently (Montessori or Waldorf, just to mention two), but this paper aims at finding out how live action role-playing games can be implemented in subject-teaching in a traditional environment.

In terms of game design and implementation, game-based learning research indicates that:

a) the narrative or the characters ought neither be boring, complicated or illogical, since that might inhibit the subject-matter learning processes (Seelhammer and Niegemann 2009);

b) the role-playing experience ought to be a positive one for each participant, because if that is not the case, negative feelings evoked by the game can cause a negative attitude towards the entire subject (Orr and McGuinness 2014, 53); and

c) transferring the in-game learned lessons to the subject context and the learning goals is difficult, but crucial (Grebe 2012).

Therefore, this paper establishes principles for implementation and design of live action role-playing games that allow pedagogues to opt for larps as a means of contribution to curricular teaching aims and learning goals. The STARS project seeks to develop live action role-playing game formats that are applicable as a low-threshold learning tool in traditional curricular environments.

1.2 Student Activating Role-playing GameS (STARS)

The role-playing technique STARS (Student Activating Role-playing GameS) was initiated as a derivative from role-playing formats such as edu-larp and other drama tools that are applied in formal school settings. Starting in 2016 at Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, we mapped live action role-playing in curricular teaching based on empirical data, including the perspectives of experts (Geneuss 2019), teachers, and students (Geneuss, Obster and Ruppert 2020). Since adapting to the parameters mentioned in Section 1.1 implies limiting some of the openness and the explorative character of an edu-larp or Process Drama, the acronym STARS (Student Activating Role-playing GameS) was coined to convey the distinction in any communication about the project.

The concept of STARS aims at maintaining as much of the open and explorative character of a spare-time larp, but adapted through the Game-based Research (GBR) cycles as much as required to school settings. As opposed to most of the techniques mentioned above, a STARS offers a clear

timeframe. It claims to be feasible within only four lessons, which is a significant difference to some of the methods mentioned above, for example *Globale Simulation.* It requires 45 minutes of preparation, 90 minutes for the acting phase, and 45 minutes for reflection activities after the game. Also, a STARS is a closed unit to which the teacher may recur in subsequent lessons, but does not necessarily have to. The role-playing game can take place in one single classroom and be implemented by one single in-character pedagogue. The pedagogue is not required to undergo special training, but needs open-mindedness regarding the students' improvisation. Loosening hierarchies established in the peer group and between teacher-student is as important as the will of letting the students explore the narrative on their terms.

The STARS concept focuses on contributing to curricular teaching aims and learning goals. Each script outlines which skills can be promoted and which goals can be included in primary and secondary school subject teaching. Albeit feedback being crucial, teachers and pedagogues are urged not to include the game itself into the grading practices. Since most STARS were tied to language and literature teaching, we suggested that curricular goals that could be tested in graded exams after the unit included historicity of language, communicating in an appropriate way to the addressee, writing from a literary character's perspective, reflecting the communication within a culture, etc.

Since participation in school activities is mandatory, we expected active contribution to our drama interventions. However, according to experts, the participation in live action role-playing such as edu-larp ought to be voluntary (Geneuss 2019). This discrepancy is partly solved by offering scalable participation, mechanisms of slow approach, and by allowing students to opt out of the game in a way that does not disturb the group's dynamics. It has to be taken into consideration throughout the entire process of design and implementation that the students are not participating out of their own initiative as they would be in a spare-time drama or larping activity. Just as any other method, it might appeal to some and be highly demanding or even be daunting to others. Therefore, the STARS project strives for inclusion and a positive experience for each participant throughout the entire process.

2. EMPIRICAL STUDIES

The overarching aim of the STARS project research is to assess the suitability of live action role-playing games in schools and derive best practices for game design and implementation. Several sets of empirical data, both qualitative and quantitative, have been analyzed since 2016. The focus of this paper is the data generated by Game-based Research (GBR) of 16 live action role-playing games that were tested and evaluated in all school forms in Bavaria, Germany, with learners of all ages. The following sections give a short overview of the STARS project research.

2.1 STARS Project Research

Starting in 2016, I firstly examined how international experts in live action role-playing, as well as pedagogues and teachers, describe the contribution of larps to formal and informal learning processes, within which potential and challenges are generally identified (Geneuss 2019). Secondly, the perception of teachers and students regarding promotion of subject-matter content as well as the training of personal and social skills through live action role-playing games were assessed. This includes discussion of different perspectives on challenges when designing and conducting larps (Geneuss, Obster, and Ruppert 2020). In addition, live action role-playing games were described in detail as an example for holistic learning (Geneuss 2020), second language acquisition (Geneuss and Hilgers 2020, 2021), and literature (Geneuss and Ruppert 2020).

The empirical studies conducted during the STARS project took place at community-driven schools in the Munich area during regular lessons, always aiming at contributing to curricular subject-

specific teaching aims while considering the individual learner's needs and abilities. Overarching learning goals were also taken into consideration. The evaluation process of the quantitative data was monitored and supported by the statistical advisory center at LMU (StaBLab).

Having established that pedagogues and students perceive live action role-playing games as a meaningful contribution to content learning and skill training in schools (Geneuss, Obster, and Ruppert 2020), the current focus of our research is to develop principles for the design and implementation of the drama tool in formal education, independent of the educational system and subject curricula. To do so, we extract crucial principles from the live action role-playing games facilitated in over 20 schools throughout the past five years: 16 role-playing games have undergone 53 cycles of Design-based Research (DBR), meaning that each unit undergoes at least two loops of design, testing, evaluation, and re-design, with iterations that result in a documented best-practice model. Aligning this model with the results from the quantitative and qualitative studies, the aim is to present a standard for facilitation and design of live action role-playing games in formal contexts such as subject-matter teaching in schools. Table 1 presents an overview over the research conducted within the STARS project:

Table 1: Material, methods, and research questions of our empirical research on the suitability of live action role-playing games in a school context.

Set of data	Research Questions	Method	Material	Publication
1. Experts in live action role-playing games, edu-larp, and other similar forms	What is larp/ edu-larp? How can it contribute to formal learning?	Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)	12 experts: semi-structured interviews	Geneuss 2019
2. Teachers	Impact and learning-progress? Skills? Challenges?	Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)	7 teachers: semi-structured interviews	Geneuss, Obster, and Ruppert 2020
3. Students	Impact or learning progress?	Statistical analysis	161 surveys	Geneuss, Obster, and Ruppert 2020
4. Students	Learning progress after participating in several role-playing-games?	Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA)	Formative feedback talks	Geneuss, Obster, and Ruppert 2020
5. 16 STARS (Student-Activating Role-playing Games)	Best-practice of design, implementation, and facilitation of live action role-playing in schools?	Design-based Research (DBR)	16 Live action role-playing games, 53 cycles	This current study

2.2 Material and Methods

Striving for a deliberate, purposeful, and comprehensible pattern in the design and facilitation of role-playing games in school settings and working towards curricular goals, we proceeded according to the Design-based Research methodology (Edelson 2002; McKenney and Reeves 2018). This methodology is well-established in the field of educational research since it bridges the gap between theory and practice. Practical implementation becomes the nucleus for theories in teaching and learning environments, aiming at implementing innovation in these contexts (Reinmann 2005). According to

Edelson (2002), the innovation design process can be defined as a series of decisions between goals and constraints. The design procedure shifts back and forth between problem analysis and design solution, adapting the decisions to the contextual circumstances in the best suitable way. Figure 1 shows the maturing progress of the intervention through increased implementation:

Figure 1: Design-based Research cycle for the STARS research.[1]
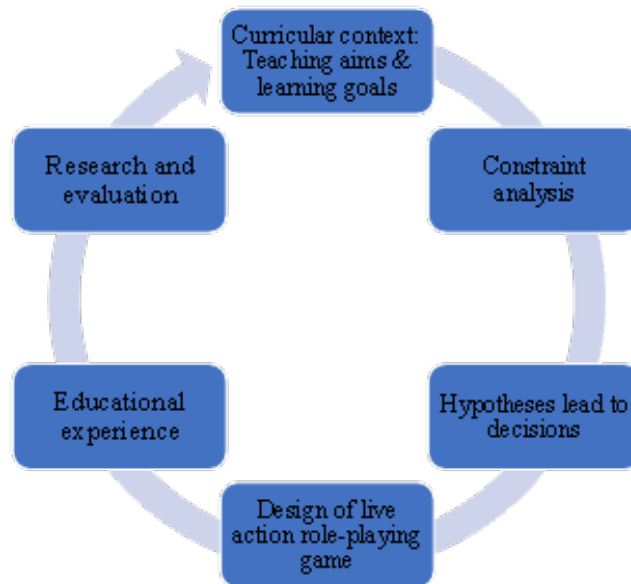
As a first step in this DBR model, the curricular context needs to be assessed. The educational goals are analyzed carefully in the context of the specific subject matter and common learning and teaching practices. Second, the constraints are identified when choosing the innovative learning format in this subject matter context. Third, a series of articulated assumptions (hypotheses) are made about how narrative and game mechanics support the learning process. This discussion is followed by the fourth step of designing the live action role-playing game in accordance with the established hypotheses, defining the narrative, characters, group constellations, activities, and interactions that constitute the learning environment. With the role-playing game scripted and the game-master instructed, the game is simultaneously implemented and observed in a fifth step. The pedagogues and researchers reflect over all decisions regarding design and implementation, gathering these minutes in digital journals which serve as the basis for taking design decisions in a new cycle of testing. The documentation of these cycles is used to pass new iterations and, at this stage, to draw conclusions on best practices.

The live action role-playing games that went through one or more cycles in schools in Bavaria, Germany are summarized in Table 2:

Table 2: Overview of role-playing games, curricular focus, learners' ages, subject, and number of cycles. The teaching aims and learning goals for each age group tie to the curricular demands in Bavarian schools and were coordinated with the pedagogues from the respective field. To make this paper accessible for an audience beyond Bavaria, the curricular focus is only expressed in very general terms.

1　　http://hdl.handle.net/10138/38878

Number	Title	Teaching aim/ learning goal	Age learners	Subject	Cycles
1	*Pompeji*	Verbalize Latin; historical event	10 - 14	Latin	3
2	*Children's Rights*	Expand knowledge about children's rights; perspectives	8 - 12	German	5
3	*Accused*	Medieval justice and societal circumstances, tied to the novel *Oskar and the Disappeared Children* by Claudia Frieser	10 - 14	German, History	6
4	*Adventures on Olymp*	Greek mythology	12 - 14	German, History	5
5	*Intergalactic Union*	Poetry, verbal expression, and perception	12 - 14	German	3
6	*King*	Appreciation of native/first languages; linguistic diversity	12 - 16	German as foreign language	2
7	*Space Journey*	Appreciation of native/first languages; linguistic diversity	10 - 12	German as foreign language	1
8	*Who's the Thief?*	Interaction/communication	8 - 12	English/ German	5
9	*Faust, or What is happiness?*	Literary education: *Faust* by J.W. von Goethe	14+	German	1
10	*Rumpelstilzchen*	Fairy tales; agency	8 - 10	Drama	2
11	*School of Wizadry*	Imagination; interaction	8 - 12	German	3
12	*Jim Knopf*	Literary education: *Jim Button and Luke, the Engine Driver* by Michael Ende	8 - 10	Drama/ German	1
13	*Europe, the band*	Democracy; European history; conflict solving	14+	Social science	3
14	*The books that disappeared*	Interaction/communication	8 - 12	Drama/ German	9
15	*The Party*	Speed limit; argumentation strategies; conflict solving	14+	German/ Geography	2
16	*Time Agents*	Gravity; recoil	10 - 14	Physics	2

　　All games were facilitated by *Starmanufaktur*, which is the umbrella name under which pedagogues, researchers, and actors present themselves to schools and other pedagogical institutions. As the games were implemented, they were observed by researchers of Ludwig-Maximilians-University Munich, who also conducted the surveys (empirical sets of data 1 – 4, table 1). Most of the games were designed for the subject German, since the focus of the initial research project was to investigate the implementation of live action role-playing games in curricular German lessons (Geneuss 2019). Games 14 and 15 are hybrid games and can be conducted digitally or in classrooms. To find out how the design standards would work in other subject-matter contexts, some games were facilitated in Geography, Drama, English, German as a foreign language, and Natural and Social Sciences. Games 2, 3, 4, and 5 were originally designed by *LajvVerkstaden* (Sweden), a company producing and facilitating live action role-playing games in curricular and extracurricular contexts. All other games were designed by team members of the STARS project in a cooperative process. For all games, the students received a short role sheet that indicated which family or group they belonged to. For the older learners, more information was provided, such as conflicts within their families. To foster engagement and motivation before the

game, the students could add some items of information, such as name or profession. All games had a scripted structure with a clear progress of action. Nevertheless, open phases were implemented as well. Parameters considered for evaluation were learning goals, game mechanics, social interaction, tasks, degree of immersion, and setting. Since the games differ in target group, topic, character immersion, etc., there was always room for free associations and unstructured exchange. Once the assessments were documented, a new cycle of design and facilitation was initiated.

2.3 Ethics

The core principles of ethics in this research concern the humans involved and the methods used; striving for objectivity; internal and external validity; reliability; rigor; open-mindedness; and honest and thorough reporting. Striving for maximized objectivity and integrity of all researchers, we aim at maintaining our data intersubjectively comprehensive by sketching all major steps in the process of our research.

The main codex for committing to ethical guidelines include objectivity and integrity of the researchers involved, as well as minimizing risks for all participants, including voluntary participation and informed consent when participating in interviews and surveys, as well as depersonalization of confidential data (Unger 2014). All participants were informed about the research project and consented to the use of data (Caspari et al. 2016, 111). To maximize the participants' integrity, each individual could choose to anonymize or pseudonymize their data. Also, not participating in the surveys would not lead to any disadvantage for the individual. To protect the participants privacy, the participating institutions are not mentioned by name.

3. RESULTS

Results of DBR can be projected in several ways to ensure to be transferred to other contexts. One way is to sketch procedural and design principles (van den Akker 1999) to provide guidance and indicate direction, but not to give certainties and prescriptions. In the following, I expand on 17 principles that have proven to be efficient for the design and implementation of the live action role-playing games we conducted. These follow from a set of overarching guiding principles. In the context of our study, the demands of schools were considered to the highest degree, aiming for feasibility of the concept under the active participation of all students. Based on a total of 53 cycles of 16 different live action role-playing games, I conclude that larps can be designed and facilitated within the framework of institutional needs. As in any live action role-playing games, the "conscious implementation of any and all design choices matter" (Hugaas and Bowman 2019, 19).

3.1 Guiding Principles

For our initial design, we decided upon the following seven guiding principles for live action role-playing games to meet curricular goals in primary and secondary schools. These decisions were based on international larp experts' perspectives (Geneuss 2019) and have been similarly formulated by practitioners and scholars alike (e.g., Hammer et al. 2018; Mochocki 2018).

I. There is no uninvolved, observing audience. Every person in the room participates and acts within a character in the same narrative.

II. The acting phase is framed by a preparation and a reflection process, tying the role-playing experience to previously defined learning goals. Prior to the acting phase, a set of rules and opt-out mechanisms are communicated clearly. The uninterrupted acting phase stretches out over

several scenes.
III. The atmosphere is coined by mutual respect, careful curiosity, and a positive attitude towards making mistakes, co-creating, and exploring a setting. The interaction is affirmative and cooperative, not competitive.

Beyond these general characteristics of educational live action role-playing games, they address the practices of educational institutions such as schools as follows:

IV. Any of our live action role-playing games can be conducted by one single teacher in one classroom. The game unit is feasible within the teacher's timetable.
V. The role-playing unit is not subject to any grading practice. Yet, students get feedback on their performance.
VI. Learning goals are extracted from the curriculum. Every phase of the unit is cross-checked for its contribution to achieving these goals.
VII. Since participation is mandatory, all games are designed for inclusion and have opt-out mechanisms.

3.2 Design: General

3.2.1 Communicate method choice and learning goals

The curricular teaching aims and learning goals are guiding parameters throughout the entire design process. The unit of preparation, game, and reflection follows an inner progression and is tied to these goals. In several cycles, students and teachers enquired the reason for choosing this particular method. Participants were more engaged throughout the unit, the earlier and bolder we sketched the reason for opting for live action role-playing games as a method of working with a specific subject content. Furthermore, we noticed the relevance to point out how the role-playing activity contributes to the students' skills and their performance in the subject. In the GBR cycles, students appreciated to see how it could improve their results in exams.

3.2.2 Consent and some degree of voluntariness is crucial

In contrast to informal larp, where participants join in voluntarily, learners in schools have to attend the lessons and have no or only little command over the methods chosen by the teacher. Therefore, any role-playing format ought to be designed in a way that learners have maximum control over their degree of involvement and can opt in and out of challenging experiences based on a principle of trust and consent.

The educators' frequent concern in facilitating a live action role-playing game was that students would not want to partake in the game. In the 53 DBR cycles, we only encountered this phenomenon four times. We found it is best addressed by telling students in the very beginning that their active participation is appreciated, but optional. Several preparation exercises such as *black box*, *room walk*, or *mirroring* help the students to get an idea of what to expect. Rehearsing opt-out mechanisms confirm that the students really have command over their participation. If the reluctance persists, a conversation outside of the classroom is useful, where students are told that they do not have to be active, but for the game to work and not to discourage classmates, they should just follow the instructions. In three independent cases, this strategy helped students to gain control over their degree of participation. They overcame their insecurities, and in two cases, the initially reluctant students were the ones who in the debrief said that the role-playing unit was a very rewarding experience.

3.2.3 Feedback, opt-out and reflection require training

Throughout the cycles, we realized that not only the role-playing format was new, but also the feedback and reflection mechanisms. Students (and teachers) might not be familiar with giving constructive feedback or with having a feedback discussion in which the participants' impressions remain uncommented by the teacher. The open approach towards ambiguity in these rounds might be uncommon in school settings, but in our games was defined as an important learning goal on the level of values education.

In almost all cycles of feedback discussions, participants reflected upon the in-game characters with their classmates' real names. It is important though that exclusively the characters' names are used when talking about in-game actions, relationships, or similar aspects, to make clear that there are different levels of reflection. This avoids assigning motives to the players, not the characters. We realized that it was not enough to only point it out, but it needed to be trained before the feedback and reflection phase could start. Also, stepping out of the game without inhibiting the other participants' game had to be trained, not only explained. Despite the high amount of time needed, it helped students to remain in character and to feel safe and in command during the game. Several students mentioned that it increased their perceived confidence to know that they could take a break if needed.

3.2.4 Varied feedback is appreciated

Feedback is crucial, especially after the acting phase. Appreciation for each learner's participation should be expressed by the pedagogue as an immediate response and a sign of appreciation after the game, regardless of how effectively or deeply the student contributed to the role-playing game. To make feedback nuanced, it can be given on several levels: teacher to student, peer to peer, and self-assessment. This combination has proven to be effective when aligning the role-playing experience with subject-matter content. Also, asking for improvement suggestions was highly appreciated.

3.2.5 Frame the live action role-playing by traditional learning tools

We found it useful to frame the role-playing unit by traditional learning tools. Thereby, we supported learners who did not feel comfortable with the drama tool and needed to achieve the learning goals by other means. Moreover, students appreciated reflecting on the role-playing game as an unusual experience and comparing it to other learning strategies.

3.2.6 Variations in constellations, assignments, and levels of intensity

The scenes of a live action role-playing game represent a variety of social constellations and communication tools. Therefore, a STARS ought to include group work, work in pairs, and individual tasks. The tasks could cover speaking, listening, writing, and reading activities, maybe even drawing, acting, singing, and speaking different languages. A scaffolding design technique is appropriate: students start with activities that require little to no exposure and agency (reading, writing) and slowly add interactive (discussing) and creative elements (acting, singing). A talk in front of the group is demanding when unprepared and spontaneous, so the participants could be given a chance to discuss certain arguments first, then defend their position in another group constellation. Instead of demanding, "Sing a song for the queen," we required that "everyone perform for the queen." The participants chose according to their own preferences whether their characters would sing, act, or perform a poem, and whether they would do it individually, in pairs, or in groups.

3.2.7 Design for a positive experience

It is crucial that the game creates a positive learning experience for the students, both on an individual level and as a group. The younger the students were in our cycles, the more important positive endings became, e.g., the class wins over the evil. We also found it to be ambivalent when characters died at the end; some students were deeply disappointed.

The designers ought to assess the game from a participant's perspective: What is required to achieve the learning goals? What elements are well-known and what are new, both in terms of content knowledge as well as methods and techniques? It is therefore helpful to include scenes that are foreseeable, transparent, and similar to classroom situations, while other scenes can come as a surprise and require spontaneous, unplanned engagement.

3.2.8 Limited material, props, and costumes

To keep organizational efforts low, only a limited number of costumes, props, and other materials should be included. Also, the printouts for the entire unit should be limited, since we could observe that the participants felt overwhelmed by receiving more than two assignments on paper. Technological features can be included, but scarcely, since they demand the students' focus and disrupt the immersive experience. We also observed that nametags with symbols and images created a high incentive for students. Students also appreciated haptic elements as well as eating and drinking during the game. Props and costumes are helpful devices that indicate whether the participants are in character or not. When transitioning in and out of the acting phase, these props and costumes indicate to the participants that a new phase has started.

3.2.9 Repetitions are advised

It is advisable to facilitate 3 to 5 repetitions of live action role-playing games over the course of a school year. We could see that when regularly exploring a certain theme or topic through a role-playing game, students became more comfortable with interacting on par with all participants. They learned to take on roles and understood that a STARS depends on their cooperation and co-creation, as opposed to many traditional learning tools.

3.3 Design Characters

3.3.1 Short descriptions of characters and inclusive names

The design of the characters should be kept simple using a very short description. We aimed for simple characters, because that can obstruct the participant and thereby obstruct access to the subject-matter (see chapter 1.1). Students reacted positively to those names that were applicable to all genders. Moreover, participants appreciated being encouraged to choose genders that do not represent their assigned genders in real life.

To give students more command over their in-game experience, it has proven to be beneficial if the students do not get fully set-up characters, but make up some relationships, add details to their biography, come up with hidden skills, etc.

3.3.2 Inclusive design of constellations

It is rewarding to design groups of characters, so that each participant feels the safety of an in-game social net. In an investigative setting for example, this could be groups like the detectives, the spies,

and the agents. Each group has one specific trait, interest, or goal that unites them. Furthermore, each character has at least one positive relationship to one other character. By designing groups, we avoided that one character stands out in a positive or negative way. Throughout the cycles, we found that students appreciate working in constellations that differ from their group of friends in real life.

3.3.3 Fictional and younger characters are tricky

When designing for the use in literature teaching, a direct transfer of characters into a live action role-playing game should be avoided. We realized that when including roles such as Harry Potter, Faust, or Jim Button, the participants' notions of how to portray these characters diverged to a high degree. They interrupted each other, added details, or even demanded to stop the game to discuss how the character was portrayed. Therefore, we opted for designing characters with similar functions, such as a wizardry student, a desperate researcher, or a curious traveler. In the reflection, we still extracted similarities between the novel's characters and the role-playing activity.

Designing characters that are younger in age than the actual participants lead to unexpected challenges. Some students did not take their characters seriously when embodying young children, refrained from immersion, and thereby obstructed the game for the others. To avoid this, children characters ought to be above the players' age. We also noted that the students behaved especially considerately and respectfully when they used the more distant form of addressing the other characters (Sie, Usted, etc.).

3.3.4 Facilitator's character should be low-key

The facilitator's role should fit into the narrative, not be closely tied to singular characters, and somewhat neutral, like a journalist, a visitor, or a messenger from another time or place. This makes it natural for the facilitator to ask questions, not to take sides, and to hand over instructions that might have come from a third party.

3.4 Implementation

3.4.1 Respect is a hard rule

It is the pedagogue's utmost duty to ensure every participant's well-being and comfort. If the pedagogue observes disrespectful dynamics among two or more players, or if the group targets one character too hard, the game is to be interrupted immediately. We found it useful to do this in-game, since it was easier for the students to continue acting in-character. In-game reasons could be a volcano erupting, a meteorite approaching, or a fire alarm going off. The students in the disruptive group needed to work in different constellations from then on. If disrespect occurred once more, the process of role-playing was interrupted off-game. Only if everyone agreed to interact respectfully, the role-play was resumed.

3.4.2 All participants are on par

In a live action role-playing game, participants are on a par with each other, including the participating adults. Within school settings, this is difficult because student-teacher relationships imply a certain hierarchy. We found it useful to clearly communicate that any in-character interaction will not have any negative impact on the real-life relationship or on the grade.

Facilitating the game requires both seriousness and playfulness. If facilitators embody the character with ease, they are a role model for the students and it will be easier to imitate that attitude. It

has proven to be useful not to play too intensely because that seemed to intimidate some students. By acting moderately, students realize that they have options both to withdraw exposition and intensity, but also to increase it.

3.4.3 Maintain and restore the focus in loud noisy surroundings

Throughout several of the DBR cycles, loud interaction was problematic when students interact too lively with each other, speak up, interact physically, sometimes push each other, or do not follow instructions or the narrative. This behavior might be stimulated by the unusual form of interaction in school contexts and does not deliberately disrupt the narrative. Among several different strategies, it has proven to be useful to stay in character and find a mechanism within the narrative that makes everyone sit down, be silent, not touch each other, etc. Once silence is restored, the pedagogue ought to be very clear that rules for respectful communication need to be followed. Whether this is communicated in-game or off-game depends on the degree of disruption.

  Our team also experienced that there are several external sources of interruption, such as fellow teachers knocking on the door, announcements through speakers, curious schoolmates behind the windows or electronic devices going off. Thus, taking preventive measures such as signs on the doors, closed curtains, cell phones in bags, etc. is useful.

Table 3: Best practice model for the implementation of role-playing games in institutional settings.

Before the acting	During the acting	After the acting
Communicate:	**Act in-character:**	**Debrief:**
Define and discuss teaching aims/learning goals and how the game contributes to achieve them. Train the usage of gestures, mimicry, and verbal expression. Communicate rules and opt-out mechanisms. Train constructive feedback, how to remain in-character, affirmative play.	Respect towards all participants is a hard rule. As a facilitator, take the game seriously, but act joyfully. Remain in character all the time. If students leave their character, show explicity that you still are in-character. Make mistakes, show overtly how to embrace them. If allowed or possible, leave smaller groups unattended for short periods of time to let them take responsibility.	Sitting in a circle, every participant gets to say how they feel and what part in the game they liked. This is not to be commented on, but to show the diversity of perception. Appreciate honest and serious feedback. Point out how the game is tied to curricular learning goals. Make transfer exercises with more traditional methods. Ask for nondisclosure of game and the interaction, so that the game can be run with other groups. Regularly during subsequent weeks, remind students of the role-playing experience and its contribution in the learning process.
Prepare:		
Make sure to understand the progression of the unit and know the structure of the scenes. Delete all sources of irritation (phones switched off, sign on door, curtains closed). Prepare material, props, costumes, nametags, technological devices.		

3.4.4 Breaks without external contact

During scheduled breaks, we found it best to remain in the classroom. We encouraged avoiding contact with people not participating in the game in order not to disrupt the process of immersion too much. Similarly, engaging in social media during breaks was counterproductive and we asked participants to refrain from it.

For the purpose of facilitation, we made a simplified overview for the educator implementing the unit. The various aspects in Table 2 indicate recommendations for the different phases.

4. DISCUSSION

This paper outlines 17 core principles for the design and facilitation of live action role-playing formats in school settings. The design for this research relies on previous work by scholars and practitioners such as Hugaas and Bowman 2019; Branc 2018; Hammer et al. 2018; Mochocki 2018 (just to mention a few), as well as the 16 international live action role-playing experts interviewed by Geneuss (2019). The 17 principles are not to be understood as a prescriptive model, but as direction and guidance. We are aware that school settings are culturally bound. Therefore, the fact that the 53 cycles of GBR took place exclusively in schools in Southern Germany is a limiting factor in this study. Conclusions have to be transferred carefully to other regions and learning environments. Also, the STARS project has a focus on German literature and language, and it will be subject to further research to broaden the perspective. Another limiting factor is that all live action role-playing games were conducted by the *Starmanufaktur* team.

Even though teachers always took on minor roles, they did not implement the games themselves. They argued that the tool was unknown to them and that it was overwhelming to simultaneously follow the narrative, foresee the students' activities, and interpret a character (Geneuss, Obster, and Ruppert 2020).

Future steps towards encouraging teachers could be pedagogical trainings as well as offering accessible materials to them. The STARS project team suggests setting up workshops on how to implement live action role-playing, based on best practice models for Drama in Education and the principles presented in this paper. Also, we suggest that the material for the unit be gathered in a digital surface with a clear distinction of the different levels of the game, such as phases; in-game and off-game assignments; materials; characters etc.

The principles presented in this paper are a step towards the feasibility of live action role-playing games in schools, but further empirical research is required at this point. Once teachers implement the games themselves, researchers could focus on the parameter "teacher-facilitator" to find out about their impact on the game format, the teacher-student relationship, and the students' subject performance. Moreover, surveys will generate empirical data compiling challenges and indicating how material and training units can best be developed to support pedagogues when they facilitate the units themselves. We are happy to announce that there is remarkable demand for the digital version of our live action role-playing game *The Books that Disappeared*, which as of February 2021, is distributed free of charge across schools in Germany by the Munich Pedagogical Institute.[2]

If teachers, despite accessible material, pedagogical training units, and purposeful game design, still feel that the implementation through external teams is what fits their curricular and pedagogical purpose best, we advocate to supply that demand. If role-playing techniques in schools can only be embedded by role-playing companies or associations, these professionals should not hesitate to offer their services of implementing such units, demanding a multidimensional level of engagement. With low social exposure through simultaneous acting, the students get to explore a curricular theme, social

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2   https://medienbox.medienbildung-muenchen.de

interaction, their own personal experience, and esthetical perception of a narrative. To offer this unique experience on a broader scale, we suggest that more external teams specialize in larps and offer games that meet the schools' curricular, institutional, and pedagogical needs. Consequently, teachers could get accustomed to the format and learn on-site how to conduct live action role-playing games, inspiring them to implement this tool themselves in their teaching one day.

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