INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ROLE-PLAYING

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

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Editorial

Transformative Play Seminar 2022: Education, Meaning Making, and Personal Development

Welcome to Issue 13 of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. This special issue is the first of a two-part series collecting the short articles presented during the Transformative Play Initiative Seminar, held at Uppsala University Campus Gotland in Visby, Sweden on October 20-21, 2022. The Transformative Play Initiative explores the use of analog role-playing games as vehicles for lasting personal and social change. Uppsala University now also serves as the host for the *International Journal of Role-playing*, after years of stewardship by Marinka Copier at Utrecht School of the Arts. The editors are profoundly grateful for Copier's service to the journal and academic community.

The hybrid seminar was hosted by the Transformative Play Initiative research group in the Games & Society Lab at the Department of Game Design. This seminar was sponsored by the Sustainable Heritage Research Forum (SuHRF) at Uppsala and Region Gotland. All seminar talks were recorded and most are featured on the Transformative Play Initiative's YouTube page, where they are accessible to a worldwide audience. The main theme of the conference was Role-playing, Culture, and Heritage, although participants could submit presentations on any relevant topic. While the seminar actively encouraged presentations from academics and practitioners alike, this issue contains only open peer-reviewed, scholarly articles. Seminar participants contributed to the peer review process, commenting on each other's work as part of the submission process, engaging in scholarly dialogue during the seminar, and following up afterwards to respond to peer review recommendations for their post-seminar proceedings articles.

The need for a seminar devoted to analog role-playing games (RPGs) is evident, as the topic is often marginalized in game studies as a whole. Similarly, academic exploration of the transformative potential of analog RPGs is less common than in digital games within the discourses of Serious Games, Games 4 Change, game-based learning, gamification, etc. In total, the seminar had 31 in-person presentations, including keynotes by Tadeu Rodrigues Iuama from Brazil, Liv Hernø-Toftild from Denmark, and Michał Mochocki from Poland. Our fourth keynote speaker, Mohamad Rabah from Palestine, was not able to attend our seminar, as the Swedish Embassy in Israel did not issue him a visa in time. Instead, Rabah sent us a statement, which was read aloud at the seminar. In addition, the seminar featured 10 online poster presentations, which were presented through Zoom as a parallel event to the conference. To our knowledge, the number of countries represented by speakers was at least 18, including presenters from Asia, South America, North America, and Europe, indicating a wide interest in this subject matter cross-culturally.

This issue will emphasize Education, Meaning Making, and Personal Development, with our upcoming Issue 14 reserved for topics specifically related to culture and heritage. Our first two articles present new approaches to educational theory with regard to analog role-playing games. Maryanne Cullinan and Jennifer Genova's "Gaming the Systems: A Component Analysis Framework for the Classroom Use of RPGs" presents terminology and a conceptual model for understanding the various aspects present when using RPGs in formal learning contexts, divided into context, materials, structural, and functional components. Their Conceptual Matrix unpacks these various categories with regard to specific domains of learning objectives, such as academic skills, social emotional skills, and executive functioning skills.

In a similar vein, Josefin Westborg's "The Educational Role-Playing Game Design Matrix: Mapping Design Components onto Types of Education'' establishes the various types of role-playing games from which people can learn—leisure games, stand-alone educational RPGs, RPGs in education, and educational RPGs. In her matrix, Westborg distinguishes these games with regard to their relative use of framing activities, including emotional, intellectual, and educational processing, as well as the settings in which they likely take place, including informal, non-formal, and formal learning. While based in existing pedagogical literature, Cullinan, Genova, and Westborg's theories arise from personal experience as practitioners who have been using RPG in school settings for several years.

The next article focuses upon the applied use of role-playing for educational purposes with an emphasis on human rights. Aditya Anupam's "Playing the Belly of the Beast: Games for Learning Strategic Thinking in Tech Ethics" describes an interactive digital narrative the author is developing called *Lights Out Warehouse*, which is geared toward engineering students in universities. The game explores ethical issues around automated labor and organizing, topics that players navigate through a series of conversations with their manager at *NileCorp*, a company similar to Amazon. Players are encouraged to find solutions that increase justice for everyone, "where workers have more rights, the company benefits, and players keep their job."

Pivoting toward patterns of participation, our next article explores player behavior in the hugely popular Murder Mystery Games (MMGs) in China called Jubensha, a form of larp. In "Player Category Research on Murder Mystery Games," Shuo Xiong, Ruoyu Wen, and Huijuan Zheng present a player typology inspired by Bartle's (1996) Player Taxonomy of MUD participants, as well as GNS Theory (gamism/narrativism/simulationism) originally outlined as the Threefold Model by John Kim et al. (1997) based on theory developed by the indie tabletop role-playing game community in discussion forums, which was later developed by Ron Edwards (2003) at the Forge. The authors posit eight types of players based on their research into Jubensha players: professor, braggart, conqueror, detective, actor, politician, socializer, and viewer.

Our topics then shift more toward meaning making and personal development through role-playing games. Miguel Angel Bastarrachea Magnani's "A Coin with Two Sides: Role-Playing Games as Symbolic Devices" explores the ritual and mythic nature of RPGs and how these elements converge as symbols. The author's rich theoretical approach contributes to the growing literature on role-playing games and philosophy, as well as depth psychology, exploring RPGs "as apt tools that profoundly transform our subjectivities and re-enchant our worlds with new mythologies."

Along these lines, Ayça Durmus and Sedef Topcuoglu present an example of game design for such purposes in "*Self Arcana*: A Self-Reflective, Story-Based Tarot Game." The authors discuss the development of *Self Arcana*, a role-playing game involving drawing one's own tarot cards and engaging in storytelling in order to achieve greater self-insight. Durmus and Topcuoglu present a duoethnography, describing their own experiences playing the game, as well as their takeaways about its potential as a reflective tool.

Our last two articles discuss the use of role-playing games as a tool for identity exploration, particularly with regard to sexual identity. In Giuseppe Femia's "Reparative Play in *Dungeons & Dragons*," the author presents an autoethnography about his experiences playing *D&D* and his ability to express his queer identity through emergent play, particularly around expressions of asexuality. This example highlights RPGs' potential for what Femia describes as reparative play, following the work of Eve Sedgwick (2003) and Kara Stone (2018), in which queer players can use fiction to "give an accurate and positive representation of themselves while promoting alternatives to heteronormative culture."

Finally, Albert R. Spencer's "The Vampire Foucault: Erotic Horror Role-Playing Games as a Technologies of the Self" describes the potential of games such as in the World of Darkness to provide opportunities for *transformative bleed* (Bowman 2010; Beltrán 2012, 2013; Kemper 2020), in which players can experience personal transformation as a result of experiences bleeding-out into their daily lives. Spencer describes how character creation in World of Darkness games emphasizes deep character exploration and shadow work, as they are directly inspired by Jungian depth psychology. His autoethnography of his own experiences in *Vampire: Dark Ages* offer a vivid account of such play, in which Spencer used the character and co-created fiction as a springboard to explore dilemmas personal to him as a player. According to the author, in such play, the character and game function as what Michel Foucault (1988) called a "technology of the self."

Placed together, alongside the upcoming *Issue 14: Role-playing, Heritage, and Culture*, these articles represent a maturing field of role-playing game studies: one moving beyond basic definitions and foundational work to develop more complex theory and practice. They also represent a deepening of work in this emergent field of transformative play, which encompasses not only what happens in classrooms or non-formal learning environments, but also leisure play experiences.

As editors, we find these developments exciting and look toward the future of our field with great enthusiasm and curiosity as the journal transitions into its next era.

-- Sarah Lynne Bowman, William J. White, and Evan Torner
May 9, 2023

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Gaming the Systems: A Component Analysis Framework for the Classroom Use of RPGs

Abstract: In recent years, as *Dungeons & Dragons* has entered the mainstream American cultural zeitgeist, the use of role-playing games has exploded in settings such as therapy and education. There is anecdotal and emerging academic evidence that RPGs can promote personal growth of participants in both academic and therapeutic settings. However, it has been challenging to capture the impact of RPGs on learning in classrooms. We submit that this is because both the term "RPG" and the term "learning" are too broad. There are myriad RPGs available, with different skill sets required to play. Similarly, there are many different types of learning an educator may be looking to develop in their students. Building on the 1983 work of Gary Alan Fine, the 2008 work of Klabbers, and the 2011 work of Mariais, Michau and Pernin, we propose two things. The first is a schema describing the structures of an RPG within the educational context. The second is a matrix is designed to identify the kinds of learning that an educator wants to promote in students through use of Learning Role-playing Games (LRPGs) (Mariais, Michau, and Pernin 2012), then match that learning to specific elements within an RPG that will support those objectives. Educational objectives include specific content learning; social emotional skills such as turn taking or teamwork; executive functioning skills; math fluency; and reading skills. Future work will include application of this conceptual framework to actual classroom settings and potential use in therapeutic settings.

Keywords: learning role-playing games, education, learning objectives, conceptual framework, growth

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1. INTRODUCTION

As the world begins to emerge from the earliest stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and examine its impact on all aspects of society, it has become clear that there is a disconnect between traditional pedagogy and curriculum and the needs of the 21st-Century student. As educators have faced the demand to pivot their instruction we can look to what students choose as leisure activities as potential new methods of teaching. One thing that has been made abundantly clear is that students of all ages and ability levels choose to spend their free time and resources on many different types of games. Without teacher or parent input, students are intrinsically motivated to pursue success in these games, whether they are team sports, video games, board games, etc. Examining the ways in which games introduce, reinforce, and measure player progress toward specific goals can allow teachers to recreate those systems and structures in their classrooms. Co-opting these elements of gaming to an educational setting can reach learners who are not served by traditional methods of instruction and assessment.

Given that the push for increased focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) has gained momentum, especially after COVID-19 forced schools to go to remote learning, a learning tool that taps into existing structures of motivation within student and promotes social-emotional skill development has the potential for great success in the classroom. To that end, we propose that role-playing games, with their combined emphasis on taking a perspective different from one's own (Bowman 2010, 8), group collaboration, and flexibility of setting and gameplay would be an efficient and meaningful classroom experience across a variety of educational settings. However, in order for teachers to make effective use of games as pedagogical tools, a shared vocabulary must be developed. This vocabulary must not only describe role playing games in terms of their concept, aim, tone, and structure, but also align those descriptors to specific skills that games demand of student players.

We are beginning that conversation with a conceptual matrix through which educators can guide

their selection of RPGs to meet the needs of their students within the context of their classroom. It is our goal to merge the work done in game analysis with the continual work of curriculum development through this matrix. Educators will be able to use this tool to define their specific goals for their students and identify elements of games that would give students the tools needed to meet those goals, or conversely, use this matrix to build their own Learning Role- Playing Games, or LRPGs, as coined by Mariais, Michau, and Pernin (2012, 25). But first, we must further define what we mean by both learning and RPGs.

2. WHAT IS LEARNING?

Explicit semantic learning is what many people think of when discussing learning, e.g., has a child memorized important facts and vocabulary from the curriculum? However, there are many other kinds of learning that educators weave into their lessons. For example, classrooms must support social-emotional learning, executive functioning skills, problem solving, application of multi-step processes, and conceptual analysis of content, not just rote knowledge.

There are many variables in a classroom setting that make it challenging to quantitatively investigate the efficacy of games in the classroom (de Fritas 2017). A lack of empirical research on LRPGs and a lack of materials to support teachers exacerbate this issue (Garcia 2016). A first step is to address the fact that current anecdotal descriptions of RPGs for learning have not drilled down specifically enough into what the educator is teaching via LRPGS and the specific areas of learning being supported through the use of the LRPG format.

The educator must identify what it is that they are hoping to support through the use of LRPGs. These goals can then be used to match an existing potential LRPG to the desired outcomes or to take various components that support specific skills and create one's own LRPG to fit their specific classroom needs. To help teachers determine exactly what skill areas a teacher may want to address, we developed the following flowchart (see Figure 1).

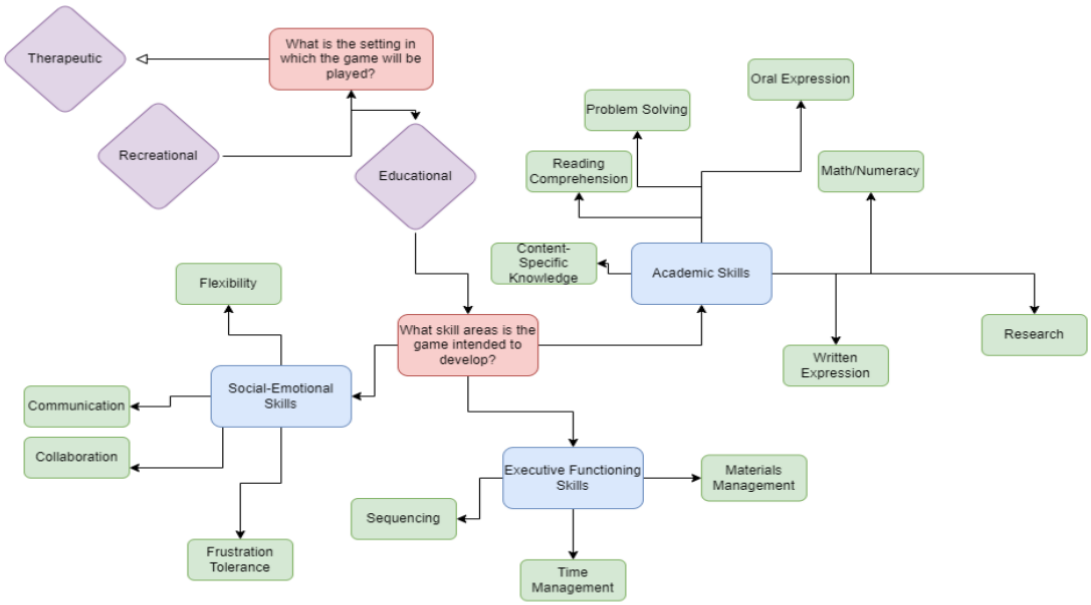
2.1 RPGS: Collaborative Storytelling Games

We have drawn on the work of Klabbers (2018), Montola (2008), and Mariais, Michau, and Pernin (2012) to define RPGs. Klabbers (2018) suggests that games feature three things: actors, rules, and resources. Actors are the participants; the rules are the limitations and boundaries for gameplay; and resources are the ways in which participants may work within the rules to get to their goals. Role-playing games, as a subset of games, include all of Klabbers' key game features, but additionally RPGS have an imaginary game world, a power structure within that world, and characters that are personified by players (Montola 2008). Additionally, role-playing is a primarily qualitative shared experience rather than a quantitative one, such as can be found in competitive games (Montola 2008). There is a wide variation in the RPG genre. Some are turn-based and involve rolling dice, while others are done by journaling, pulling cards, or pulling blocks from wooden block towers.

2.2 Learning in Role-Playing Frames

> Often the argument is made that the motivation provided by games is their most important feature with regard to their potential for learning, but we believe that it is at least as important that games are able to facilitate the kind of learning engagement—on a cognitive, affective, and sociocultural level—that promotes learning in ways other media cannot (Plass, Homer, and Kinzer 2015, 277).

Figure 1: Gaming the System Flowchart



In agreement with Plass, Homer, and Kinzer (2015), thoughtful selection and use of RPGs in the classroom can make use of the unique experience of games, specifically LRPGs, to improve student achievement and growth in a wide variety of skill areas.

Klabbers (2018) describes a fourth aspect of RPG game play as the magic circle: the diegetic world within which gameplay takes place (Ed. note: see also Huizinga 1958; Salen and Zimmerman 2003). Mariais, Michau, and Pernin (2012) use similar descriptors—actors, resources, and rules, respectively—but do not detail the "more than the sum of its parts" aspect of RPG play that Klabbers gets at through the magic circle lens. Although the work of Mariais, Michau, and Pernin has been key to our understanding of LRPGs, we see this as a limitation of their work, and a key learning benefit of LRPGs.

Additionally, the foundational work of Gary Alan Fine (1981; 1983), proposed that RPG participants simultaneously inhabit three cognitive frames of reference when playing an RPG. The first frame is analogous to the "actors," used by Klabbers (2008) and Mariais, Michau, and Pernin (2012): participants as themselves, a person in the real world. The second frame is the frame of the participant as a strategic player of the game—interpreting the rules and using the resources (Klabbers 2008) or functions (Mariais, Michau, and Pernin 2012) to work towards a win condition. The last frame, the diegetic frame, is the frame where the role-play happens, and the participant acts as if they are the character within the game. This can be compared to Klabbers' magic circle.

2.3 Material + Structural + Context = Function

We framed the descriptor of the participants, setting, time restrictions, frequency of play, and other practical realities of the classroom setting under the term *context*. Although in many educational settings the overall context of the setting cannot be significantly changed, contextual elements must be taken into account by both teachers and players for the game to function, e.g., size of groups, playtime of the game, player experience, background knowledge, and other logistical considerations.

Table 1: Authors' terminology compared with Fine (1981, 1983), Klabbers (2008), and Mariais, Michau, and Pernin (2012).

Our Terminology	**Fine**	**Klabbers**	**Mariais, Michau, and Pernin**
Context	Frame 1: Player as person in real life	Actors	Actors
Materials	Frame 2: Player as player	Resources	Functions
Structural	Frame 2: Player as player	Rules	Rules
Functional	Frame 3: Diegetic	Magic Circle	*Not Noted*

The *materials* of the LRPG are the resources, game pieces, curriculum, required academic content standards, character sheets, and other tangible and intangible items that the game is made out of. We may think of materials as tangible objects. However, in an educational context, the materials are not just dice and in-game items, but the required concepts and standards embedded in the learning. For example, a United States kindergarten level mathematics Common Core standard is for students to be able to count to 100 by 1s and 10s (Council 2010, 11). This standard could be one of the important "material" elements of the game. Much as a player needs to be able to understand and utilize a character sheet or a die, understanding and utilizing required learning standards is crucial to play and success in an educational RPG.

The *structural* elements of the game are the rules and norms that are either explicitly established within the game itself, or as a part of the overall classroom/group culture that are expected to carry over into the game experience. These structures form the foundation that players will need to be successful within the game.

The structural and material elements of the game must be selected within the exigent classroom context to get the best possible result for all players. If educators are thoughtful in designing LRPG experiences with relevant material and structural components, they are more likely to get the desired functional outcome—both engagement with, and practice of, the fundamental learnings they desire to teach their students. The *functional* experience of the game is composed of the structure, context, and material of the game. This function is also the learning ecology (Brown 2000)—a complex system that contains adaptive, dynamic elements to create a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts. Choosing a game that specifically supports or challenges students in a purposeful way is a key part of creating the desired functional outcomes.

2.4 The Conceptual Matrix

Considering all of the factors that impact the successful implementation of LRPGs in educational settings, combined with the lack of a cohesive vocabulary to discuss these factors, it becomes evident that educators need a more specific set of criteria by which to analyze RPGs for pedagogical usage in the classroom. Educators must study the relationship between challenge and reward for both enjoyment and potential benefit in pedagogical settings (Bowman 2010). So, how can we describe the interaction

between the structural, contextual and material aspects of games in relation to their functional outcomes in an educational setting? Specifically, how can we analyze and describe games in terms of their effectiveness at teaching, reinforcing, or assessing specific skills?

If a teacher's goal is to improve turn-taking skills in their class, they may choose *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), as the simulated combat demands players take turns effectively. If a teacher's goal is to improve collaboration between students, they may choose a game like *To Serve Her Wintry Hunger* (Dewey 2018), as it demands players to use their character's individual skill set to accomplish a shared goal that no single player can accomplish alone. Alternatively, an educator may build their own RPG for classroom use, taking into consideration the skills needing to be taught or reinforced.

To aid in this process, we have developed a draft skills matrix around the conceptual frameworks of materials, structure, and context, with the goal of helping educators achieve the desired function of this pedagogy (see Table 2). This matrix is based on the understanding that to teach and practice a desired academic, social-emotional, or executive functioning skill, it should be a purposeful featured component of the classroom experience. The matrix is not intended to speak to any pre-game or post-game class discussion, processing, or debriefing. Educators are strongly encouraged to consult David Crookall's (2014) "Engaging (in) Gameplay and (in) Debriefing" for further learning about the debriefing process.

3. LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER WORK

While we believe that the discursive structure represented here by both our definitions of the elements of games and the proposed matrix will be useful in providing educators with a foundation upon which they can build a successful practice of integrating LRPGs as pedagogy, we acknowledge that there are several limitations to our current work. We view this work as a first step in a much larger and longer process of integrating LRPGs meaningfully into classrooms.

One significant limitation of this work is that this framework is theoretical and has not yet been tested and evaluated. The worth of this work will be proven as more teachers make the leap of using RPGs as part of their instructional practice and we intend this work to be a tool to help them begin to do so.

Also, we must recognize that every element of the gameplay experience cannot be accounted for before play. Returning to the magic circle concept, we must remember that some of the functional outcome of gameplay (the "magic") only reveals itself as play progresses. We account for some of this in discussion of the "context" as an important consideration, but even so, there will be vitally impactful experiences for players that educators could never predict or plan to occur. Our goal is not to ignore that potential for "magic" to happen, but rather give educators a clearer method for choosing or creating games for classroom use with the very intention of allowing this to occur in a purposeful setting.

We have several avenues for future work on this project. First, we will find educators to use our matrix and either select or design a LRPG experience for their classrooms. We will then elicit feedback regarding where our work needs revision and incorporate that feedback into future work. It is our goal that this matrix and descriptive model serves as a starting point for educators to purposefully and critically examine the value that RPGs could add to their instructional practices alongside similar resources (e.g., Westborg 2023, this issue).

Table 2: The Conceptual Matrix

Context: Describe the players (age, grade, RPG experience etc). Describe the setting (time allotted for play, institutional culture, etc). What experiences do students have with role playing games? Games? Collaboration? Describe gameplay resources available. What other factors impact gameplay?			
Desired Outcome	**Structural Elements** **Examples of rules & norms that structure the play experience, i.e., What does the game tell me to do?**	**Material Elements** **Examples of material or conceptual elements needed for play, i.e., What do I need to have or know in order to play the game?**	**Contextual Elements** **Constraints & considerations for setting within which the play will take place, i.e., How can I make this game work in my specific circumstances?**
Academic Skills			
Content Specific Knowledge	Rules include expectations of use of content material, vocabulary, and concepts for character and/or plot advancement.	Materials support use of content knowledge, such as equations, timelines, sentence starters, key vocabulary.	What background information do students currently have? What knowledge do you intend to teach through this game? What specific vocabulary will students need?
Reading Comprehension	Rules written in a format/reading level appropriate to the reading level of students. Puzzles, advancement connected to demonstration of reading skills as appropriate to class reading level.	Embedded reading content is a significant component of gameplay or advancement. Players are given copies of reading for use in annotation, close reading, note taking.	Is the reading level of the text(s) appropriate to the reading levels of the students? What specific vocabulary will they need? What vocabulary or concepts will you teach? What kinds of texts will be embedded in the game?
Problem Solving	Gameplay focuses on collaboration, sharing resources, or puzzle solving with norms that support equity of voice and collaborative thinking.	Hands-on components support student thinking while solving puzzles.	Is the developmental level of the players a good match for the challenges presented in the puzzles? What experiences with puzzle solving do they have? Will they need direct instruction?
Written Expression	Gameplay focuses on journaling, letter writing, reflection, persuasive writing etc. as part of diegetic experience.	Gameplay includes journals, open-response questions, sentence starters, rubrics, etc.	Which forms of writing do the students already know? What forms do they need to practice through this experience?

Oral Expression	Gameplay focuses on in-character verbal interaction, non-combat solutions, collaborative world building, etc.	Gameplay includes in-game diegetic conversation sentence starters or prompts to support students.	What expectations do students currently have? What will need to be taught/ modeled?
Math/ Numeracy	Gameplay focuses on dice rolling, quick mathematical calculation, numeracy, etc.	Character advancement focuses on adding up XP, combat focuses on beating certain number thresholds, puzzles involve math content, etc.	Which skills do students already have? Which skills should be highlighted and practiced?
Social Emotional Skills			
Communication	Rules include turn taking, focus on collaborative solutions, require specific kinds of communication between players, etc.	Gameplay includes in-game diegetic conversation sentence starters or prompts to support students, safety tools, etc.	What structures are already in place in the classroom that can be built upon?
Flexibility	Rules make space for changing circumstances or require players to alter their style of play as the game progresses.	Game includes situations in which players need to come to a consensus to advance, decisions are made collectively, players make choices that impact other players, players must solve a problem in multiple ways, etc.	What are the norms and expectations for managing disagreement in the classroom? How skilled are students in communicating their needs? How much processing time is needed for students to consider each others' ideas?
Collaboration	Gameplay specifically requires or encourages working together, low combat, collaborative world building, etc.	Game includes shared, limited diegetic resources, use of safety tools, etc.	What is the social power dynamic between the students? What are the norms and expectations for managing disagreement in the classroom? Do students have the appropriate vocabulary to express their needs and offer help or support to others?
Frustration Tolerance	Gameplay involves puzzle solving, "Choose your Own Adventure" style pathways with opportunities to change choices, low/ adaptable stakes for player failure, etc.	Game includes visual representations of progress, e.g., maps, % of damage done to enemies. Also includes safety tools.	How is this process modeled and supported in the classroom? What practices are in place to support students who struggle to process their emotions? How is equitable "airtime" secured for all students in this class?

Executive Functioning Skills			
Organization	Rules expect students to keep track of and be able to reference different sources of information and materials. Rules require students to go through steps in a procedure to advance.	Game includes physical components to keep track of, mindful structuring of character sheets, diegetic resource management, etc.	What are the current organizational systems in the classroom? What systems do you hope to teach or practice?
Time Management	Gameplay has a finite amount of rounds, a limited time to play, etc.	Game includes timers, round trackers, visual cues for initiative order, etc.	How can the teacher support students in keeping track of time within the class period?
Sequencing	Gameplay involves timelines, generational storytelling, first-then-next narrative. Rules require students to go through steps in a procedure to advance.	Game includes graphic organizers, step-by-step directions, materials that can be organized sequentially, etc.	Are there current supports with sequencing in the classroom that can be utilized to support this?

4. CONCLUSION

As the modern workplace continues to evolve away from what the "factory model" of education was originally designed to support, it has become vitally apparent that students require integrated skill sets that include, but are not limited to, "traditional" academic learning. RPGs offer a unique opportunity to support student development in multiple skill areas as well as apply knowledge learned in the classroom to novel situations and changing circumstances. The purpose of this paper is to provide teachers with a roadmap for purposefully integrating RPGs into their instruction. We have provided teachers with a method of organizing and categorizing the skills goals for their classes and a tool for analyzing existing RPGs or creating new games for classroom use. This method will allow teachers to create more dynamic and responsive classroom experiences tailored to the specific needs of their classes, thus producing the integrated skill sets that modern life demands.

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The Educational Role-Playing Game Design Matrix: Mapping Design Components onto Types of Education

Popular abstract: In analog role-playing games and larps, the design will often include not only what happens during the time we play but also what happens before and after the game. From a design perspective, we can categorize these as two different designable components: the gameplay and the framing, the latter of which is divisible into pre-game, mid-game, and post-game phases. These designable surfaces (Koljonen 2019) can be intended for either leisure or educational purposes.

In light of this understanding, the Educational Role-playing Game Design Matrix is proposed as a way of calling attention to the different designable components in relation to their intended purpose. The matrix is meant as a conceptual framework for designers and educators. The purpose of the matrix is threefold: 1) to allow for a common language among game designers and educators; 2) to help designers create games that actively and intentionally address the formal or informal learning the designer wishes to engender in the participants of their game; and 3) to help educators identify if a game fits with their intended learning, what parts need to be addressed for it to do so, and if the game is worth the effort.

First, this article details the purpose of the authors' work, sets the context, and defines the terminology. Then, it outlines the main characteristics of the matrix and how they relate to types of education. Furthermore, the applications and limitations of the Educational Role-Playing Game Design Matrix are discussed.

Keywords: education, leisure, analog role-playing games, game design, framing, learning objectives

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1. INTRODUCTION

When working as an educational game designer over the last decade I have felt that I lack the terminology to talk about different types of educational games, their parts, and how these aspects relate to the design process and learning. When talking to other game designers I have had questions like: What is the difference between designing a game for educational purposes versus a leisure game? What parts of the design are affected? What does this design choice mean for the designer?

When talking to educators I have had questions like: How does the design affect the learning process? Do different types of design facilitate different types of education? These inquiries led me to create the Educational Role-playing Game Design Matrix.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 Learning in Relation to Parts of the Game

When designing role-playing games and larps, in contrast to digital games, often the design will not only include what happens as part of the gameplay but also what happens before and after the game. It is more common in certain traditions, for example in bespoke larp design (Koljonen 2019), and, I would argue, in relation to games for education. Games for education can be separated into three different parts: pre-game - what happens before the game, mid-game - what happens during the game, and post-game - what happens after the game. Learning can happen in all these parts. In the pre-game, prep for the game might require a participant to read up on something or practice a skill. The mid-game might require the use and practice of previous knowledge in a new context or reflection upon the causes and

effects of in-game actions during a mid-game break. What is usually highlighted as the most important part is the post-game (Bowman 2014a; Crookall 2014; Genuss 2021). The post-game is where the processing happens. It can happen in direct relation to the game or over a longer period of time. The processing can be more or less facilitated depending on the content of the game and on what part it focuses. A formal debrief is a facilitated post-game process happening in direct relation to the game in which each participant is granted time to share their experience (Bowman 2014b).

The processing can be divided into three main parts:

- *Emotional processing:* Activities focused on the emotional content of play and the relevant associations that emerged from it.
- *Intellectual processing:* Activities focused on the intellectualization of the game and its relevance to other domains of knowledge and/or experience.
- *Educational processing:* Activities focused on the intellectualization of the game specifically connected to learning objectives and/or curricular goals. (Westborg 2022)

The processing can either be consciously designed or left up to the players depending on the themes of the game, the game tradition from which the designer/organiser comes, and the needs of the group and/or individuals. When planned and designed, each part of the processing can be addressed through many different activities (Brown 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2019). In a game that includes educational processing, that processing should be done through some kind of formal debrief because, without it, players tend to learn the system but deeper learning tends to get lost, as seen with digital games (Hays 2005; Linderoth 2008; Ke 2009).

3. DEFINITIONS

3.1 Gameplay

Gameplay is often related to interactions, rules, actions, and the system (Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Esposito 2005; Ermi and Mäyrä 2007). It is used here to keep the focus on what is relevant for the players' interactions and agency. Since story and actions are more intertwined in analog role-playing games, gameplay will contain more than just the system or the rules. Here, gameplay will include things like the general plot, characters (if pre-written), groups, relations, meta techniques, and what happens during the playtime such as scenes or more general themes.

In tabletop games, often an already existing system is used and the design work is aimed at creating an adventure, not designing the full system. Gameplay design includes the design of adventures. It should be taken into consideration that different RPG systems give different affordances and can be better or worse for certain types of gameplay experiences.

The difference between gameplay design and runtime design from the Nordic larp discourse (Stenros and Montola 2019) is that runtime design does not include anything before or after the playtime, such as character design.

3.2 Framing

Framing includes what happens pre-, mid- and post-game outside of the gameplay, e.g., workshops, structured breaks between scenes in which players talk out-of-character about what is happening, facili-

tated debriefs after the game. Framing is used here in terms of experience design rather than considering framing as an interpretive lens as used in the work of Goffman (1986) and Fine (1983).

4. EDUCATIONAL ROLE-PLAYING GAME DESIGN MATRIX

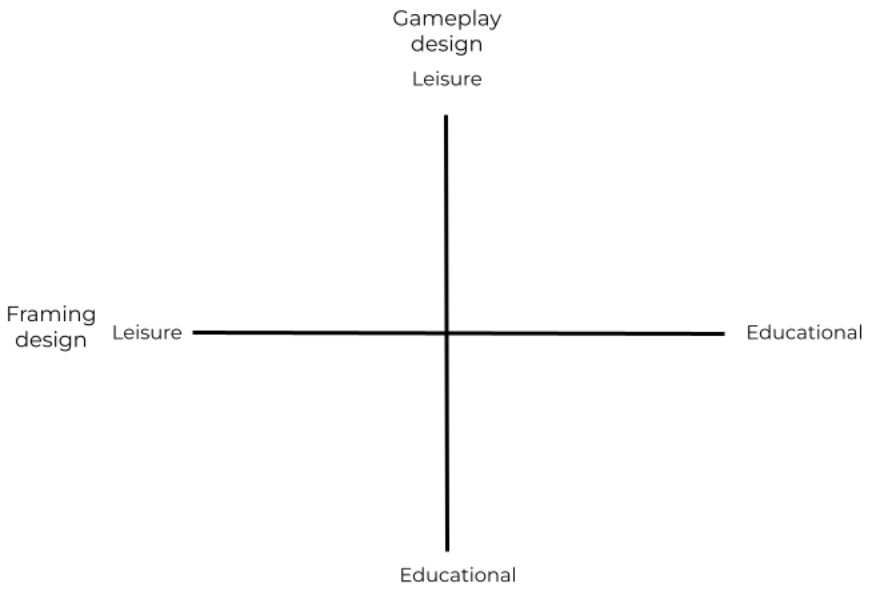
4.1 Approach

Creating a commonly accepted conceptual framework for games is hard since game studies is a multi-disciplinary field and many different terms are used (Klabbers, 2006, p. IV). While others have tried to create frameworks for educational role-playing games based mainly on theoretical work (e.g., Mariais et al. 2012; Cullinan and Genova 2023, this issue), I based the conceptual framework in this article on my experience in the field and how games were discussed by the designers and teachers I met. From that base, I used theory to further develop the framework. Being a practitioner at heart I want to create a theory that is useful and easy to understand for practitioners as well as academics.

4.2 Design vs. Purpose

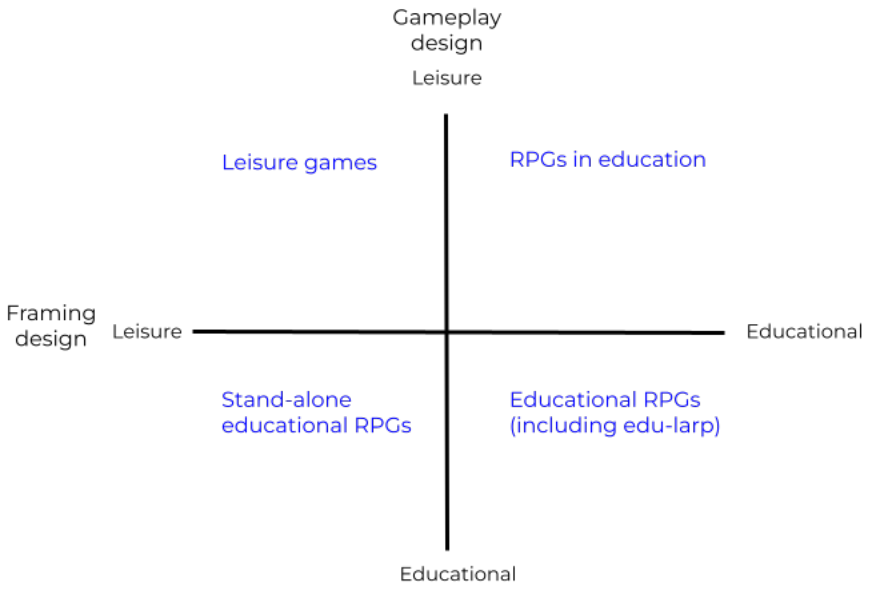
The Educational Role-playing Game Design Matrix shows which part of the game design is designed for which purpose (Westborg 2022). The parts of the game design are the two axes: Gameplay and Framing. Both of them can be designed either for educational purposes, where you have specific learning objectives, or for leisure purposes, where you do not. This process creates four quadrants (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Axes of gameplay and framing design for leisure and educational purposes.



In each of the four quadrants, we have a different type of game as can be seen in the updated matrix:

Figure 2: The Four Quadrants (clockwise): Leisure games, RPGs in education, standalone educational RPGs, and educational RPGs (including edu-larp).



We will now go through each of the quadrants and what they entail.

4.2.1 Leisure games

The top left quadrant is Leisure games. Here, creators design both the gameplay and the framing for leisure use and not for any specific learning objectives. Consequently, there can be a facilitated debrief that includes emotional processing and intellectual processing, but there will not be any educational processing.

Example:

Designing a game about being stranded on an island when camping. Let us call it *The Island.*

4.2.2 RPGs in Education

The top right quadrant is Role-playing Games in Education. Here, creators either take an existing leisure game or design a new one. Then, framing is designed based on specific learning objectives. This process includes ensuring educational processing is happening in relation to the game.

Example:

Here the leisure game *The Island* can be used as a start. The learning objectives could be about practising cooperation, resource management, or how to set up a tent. The framing a creator designs will be

different depending on which of these learning objectives they aim to teach even if the gameplay stays the same.

4.2.3 Stand-alone educational RPGs

The bottom left quadrant features Stand-alone Educational Role-playing Games. The gameplay is designed based on learning objectives. No framing is designed to facilitate the learning objectives and no educational processing is included. The game is designed to inherently teach the learning objectives through play. A lot of the digital educational games for young kids would fit here, for example, math games that are played on a tablet. This type of design can work well for practising physical skills or basic knowledge that needs to be repeated over and over to help it get automated.

Example:

Here creators start out with specific learning objectives and then design the gameplay to help teach those. This type of design could work well if the learning objective was "practising setting up a tent" and the design made sure the players got to practice over and over again in the game. Even if the gameplay design in the end also could be used for teaching something more abstract like cooperation, since there is no educational processing, it might also do the exact opposite.

4.2.4 Educational RPGs

The bottom right corner is Educational Role-playing Games, which includes edu-larps (Bowman 2014a). Here both the gameplay and the framing are designed based on the learning objectives.

Example:

Starting with the learning objectives, e.g., "working with resource management," creators design the framing and the runtime based on those learning objectives. In the end, the runtime design might also be used for teaching cooperation, but the gameplay would probably look different if "cooperation" was where the creator started and the framing would definitely be different.

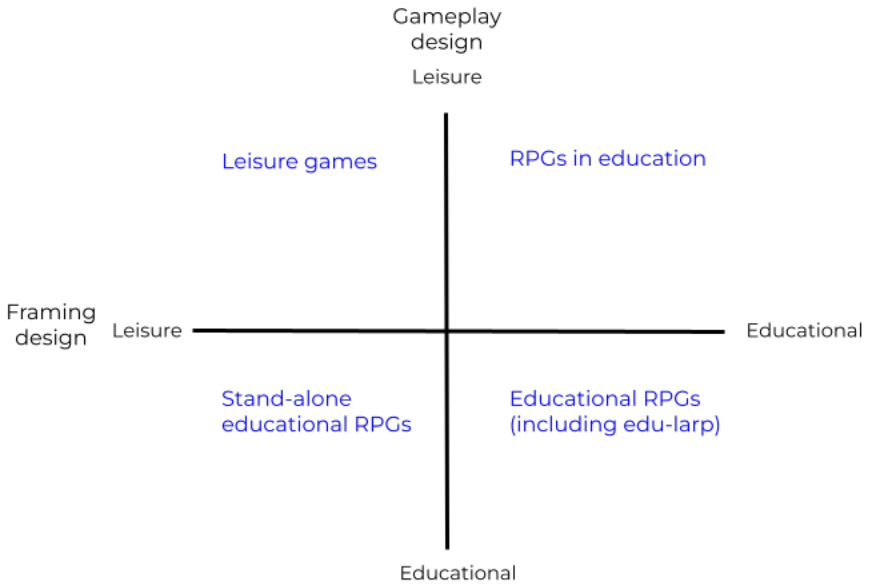
When integrating which parts are designed for educational purposes, the matrix now looks like Figure 3.

4.3 Design vs. Types of Education

The different quadrants of the matrix can be related to concepts about different types of education such as formal, non-formal and informal.

- *Formal learning* is learning within established educational systems like schools, universities, and training institutions. Specific learning outcomes and a syllabus are established. Usually, some type of assessment is present in which learning outcomes are measured.
- *Non-formal learning* is learning with a specific learning purpose that happens outside of the established formal educational system. In non-formal learning, some kind of organisational framework usually exists, which is often linked to cooperative learning even if organization also can be on an individual level, e.g., having a book club or learning a language in Duolingo. Non-formal learning often has learning objectives but does not have to follow a formal syllabus. There are usually no assessments, at least not for an external audience.

Figure 3: Types of design needed for each quadrant, including gameplay and/or educational processing.



- *Informal learning* is the type of learning that happens throughout everyday life by just existing and interacting with the environment and other people (La-Belle 1982; Eshach 2007)

For more information, Josephine Baird (2022) has explored these types of learning specifically with regard to role-playing games.

By relating the matrix's different quadrants to formal, non-formal, and informal learning, it is possible to map out which types of education the different designs mainly facilitate.

4.3.1 Leisure games

Facilitate informal learning: No specific learning objectives are established in leisure games, but learning might still happen in all parts of the game. Players might get inspired and research survival techniques pre-game, learn how to set up a tent mid-game, or gain a stronger empathy for people in survival scenarios while processing the emotional experience post-game. However, the gameplay and the framing are not designed for these specific purposes.

4.3.2 Stand-alone Educational RPGs

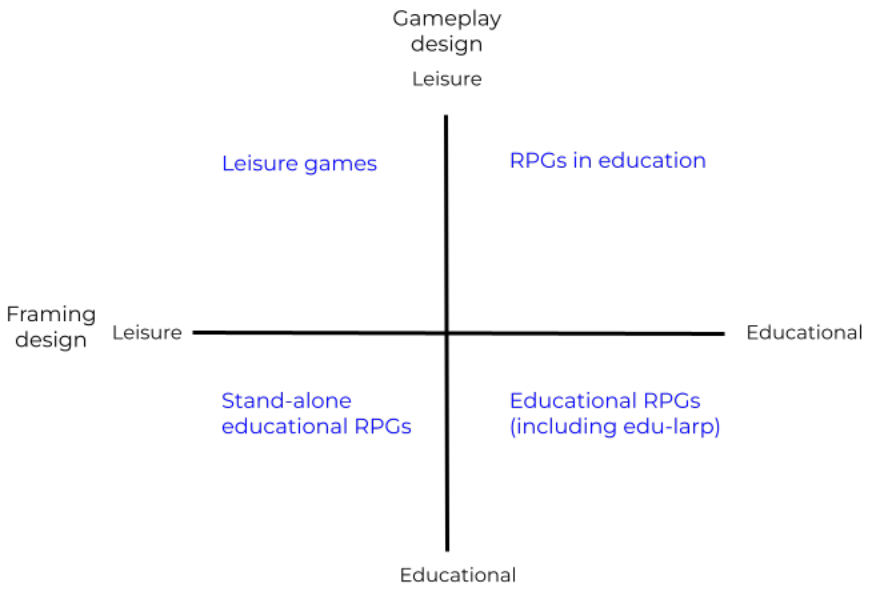
Facilitate non-formal learning: Since learning objectives are the basis for the design, stand-alone educational RPGs do not facilitate mainly informal learning. These games are also designed to inherently teach those objectives without any type of educational processing. The lack of educational processing makes these games unlikely to be used in formal education without adding additional framing, although it is possible.

4.3.3 RPGs in Education and Educational RPGs

Facilitate both formal and non-formal learning: Both RPGs in education and educational RPGs have a basis in learning objectives and therefore are not informal. Both have educational processing, which makes them well-suited for formal learning as well.

The matrix now looks like this:

Figure 4: The types of education suited for each quadrant: informal, non-formal, and formal.



Here we can see that you can learn from any type of role-playing game, but that the different types of games facilitate different types of education.

5. PRACTICAL APPLICATION

When working with games for learning in practice an important part is how much control one can have over the learning process and the learning outcomes. As with all types of teaching, one can never have full control over what students learn, but one can facilitate and steer learning by the design of the process. Both the runtime design and the framing are ways to steer the learning process. If both are aligned towards the same goal, this practice increases the chance for the intended learning to happen and enables a higher control over the learning process.

This assertion does not mean that we should only use educational RPGs for learning. When using any type of educational game in practice, other external factors need to be considered. Factors like location, budget, time, experience, and skill will affect what is doable and efficient. Designing a game takes time and experience, and a teacher in primary school might have neither. On the other hand, primary school teachers usually have a lot of experience designing educational processing. Since the post-game part is the most important part for deeper learning, using an existing game and designing the educational process many times can be a better choice for educators than trying to design a game from scratch.

All the different quadrants give different possibilities to control the learning process and they all have their pros and cons in relation to learning.

5.1 Leisure games and control

- *Possibility to control the learning process:* Low
- *Pros:* In leisure games, players can relate the content to their own experiences and discover different takeaways.
- *Cons:* The players might leave the game with totally different takeaways.

5.2 Stand-alone educational RPGs and control

- *Possibility to control the learning process:* Low
- *Pros:* Stand-alone educational RPGs are good for practising basic skills for automation.
- *Cons:* These RPGs are not good for any type of deeper learning, as they feature no way to catch and deal with misunderstandings due to the lack of educational processing.

Table 1: Overview chart of types of design required for each type of game.

		Leisure game	**Stand-alone educational RPGs**	**RPGs in education**	**Educational RPGs**
Gameplay Design	Leisure	x		x	
	Educational		x		x
Framing	Leisure	x	x		
	Educational			x	x
Type of Education	Informal	x			
	Non-formal		x	x	x
	Formal			x	x
Possibility to control the learning process	Low	x	x		
	Medium			x	
	High				x

5.3 RPGs in education and control

- *Possibility to control the learning process:* Medium
- *Pros:* RPGs in education can be used for deeper learning. They are flexible since the same game can be used for different learning goals depending on the framing. They do not require game design skills.
- *Cons:* Parts of the design might work against the intended learning.

5.4 Educational RPGs and control

- *Possibility to control the learning process:* High
- *Pros:* Educational RPGs can be used for deeper learning. They can be designed for specific learning content.
- *Cons:* They are not as flexible as they are designed for one specific thing.

6. LIMITATIONS

The Educational Role-playing Game Design Matrix is a conceptual framework that has not been tested in any quantitative or qualitative way. To test it, the framework would need to be further developed, e.g., with more specific subparts and questions related to each quadrant. I hope to be able to do this work in the future.

The following factors might affect the implementation of an educational role-playing game. While I will briefly discuss them here, these factors are outside of the scope of this paper and not taken into account in this version of the Educational Role-playing Game Design Matrix.

6.1 Setting

All of these games could be run in a school or in a leisure setting. The setting will affect the expectations of the participants and that in itself can affect the game and also the learning.

6.2 Quality

The matrix does not measure the quality of the game from a learning perspective. A stand-alone educational RPG can have a gameplay designed to teach a specific concept and then fail. A leisure game might not be intended to teach anything, but end up having participants leave having learned a very specific thing every time it is run.

6.3 Facilitation and Game Mastering

How a game is run and facilitated will affect the experience the players have and the learning. An experienced facilitator will usually have a higher control over the learning process compared to an inexperienced facilitator no matter what type of game is being run.

7. CONCLUSION

The Educational Role-playing Game Design Matrix is a conceptual framework for designers and educators. By connecting the designable components of a game—framing vs. gameplay—with their intended purposes—leisure vs. educational—it creates four categories. These categories can be used as a language for designers and educators to talk about educational role-playing games. By connecting the four categories to different types of education—formal, informal and non-formal—the matrix can help educational game designers design with intentionality and help educators analyse if a game works for their requirements, or what components need to be addressed for the game to work.

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Playing the Belly of the Beast: Games for Learning Strategic Thinking in Tech Ethics

Popular abstract: Amidst a rise in systemic injustices perpetuated by technology, there has been a growing focus on tech ethics in education. While ethics courses often teach students how to spot and deliberate over ethical issues, they rarely focus on what students can do to affect these issues as engineers in tech corporations. Given that corporations often retaliate against activist employees, learning how to strategically navigate corporate structures is necessary to practice tech ethics. Digital games can provide one avenue to help students learn how to do this as they can simulate corporate environments such as their structures of access, power, and market-culture.

This paper asks: "Can games be designed to help students learn strategic ethical inquiry, at a distance from the workplace? If so, how?" To explore this question, I discuss the design of a game, *Lights Out Warehouse* (in-progress), which situates players as an engineer in a tech corporation seeking to automate its warehouses. The game is an interactive digital narrative revolving around the player's conversations with the automation team, warehouse workers, and managers. While the game has multiple endings, the challenge is learning how to navigate its corporate structures and persuade others towards solutions that work for all: where workers have more rights, the company benefits, and players keep their job.

Keywords: tech ethics, interactive digital narratives, higher education, engineering, automization, power

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1. INTRODUCTION

Technology is becoming increasingly complicit in social injustice. Mass surveillance, automation, and predictive algorithms have amplified systemic inequalities (Benjamin 2019; Parvin 2019; JafariNaimi 2018; Eubanks 2018). Yet, there has also been a rise in ethical awareness about tech, particularly in design/engineering education. A broad movement for social justice in engineering has been taking shape in the past decades (Leydens and Lucena 2018; Riley et al. 2009; Karwat 2020) and many tech/engineering courses are laying more emphasis on ethics (Fiesler, Garrett, and Beard 2020).

However, educational approaches rarely engage students with strategies to navigate the structural challenges of *strategic ethical inquiry* in tech corporations as engineers and designers (Anupam 2022). This refers to inquiry that seeks to achieve ethical outcomes and practices by finding, incorporating, and acting on knowledge about *organizational structures*; that is, the implicit or explicit rules or norms that govern resources and people within an organization. Specifically, I focus on three kinds of organizational structures: (1) the *material structures* which are concerned with how resources are distributed and accessed; (2) the *sociopolitical structures* which are concerned with issues of power and agency of people in the organization; and (3) the *cultural structures* that encompass the underlying shared norms, values, and beliefs of the organization.

Learning strategic ethical inquiry is important, as practitioners in tech organizations must tackle structural challenges such as limited agency and the possibility of retaliation by their company in order to adhere to their ethical values. This is not easy, even for established practitioners. For example, Timnit Gebru was allegedly fired from Google's AI Ethics research team for raising concerns about the racial biases of Google's technology (Metz and Wakabayashi 2020). This situation—where one is trapped within a potentially hostile system— is the "Belly of the Beast" problem (Kvande 1999). This problem is even harder for students to learn to navigate, as they are not even situated in the "belly" to begin with.

One approach to this problem is to employ games to recreate the structures of tech organizations (Schrier 2021; Anupam 2022). They can simulate complex organizational structures and allow students to explore them without fear of retaliation. In particular, Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs) are increasingly becoming widespread media for their ability to engage audiences with complexity safely (Koenitz, Barbara, and Eladhari 2021).

Drawing on the above points, I ask:

- Can digital games be designed to help students learn strategic ethical inquiry, at a distance from the workplace? If so, how?

In particular, I explore this question in relation to warehouse automation. As companies like Amazon increasingly aim to make warehouses "lights out" (i.e., fully automated), workers are beginning to unionize (Clark 2022). This paper discusses a game, called *Lights Out Warehouse* (in-progress), that explores the role of automation engineers in the middle of this conflict as they aim to support exploited warehouse workers, while also retaining their job, and benefiting the company. This requires learning how to tactically navigate the corporate structures of their fictional tech company, NileCorp. While the game does not aim to provide a detailed blueprint of what real engineers can do (as real situations are far more complex), its primary goal is to illuminate the importance of strategic thinking to ethical practice. In doing so, it aims to build on and contribute towards movements for social justice in engineering more generally.

2. BACKGROUND

There has been a rise in digital games that focus on navigating structural challenges in a variety of ethically contentious contexts. This is partly because games, and particularly Interactive Digital Narratives (IDNs), have affordances that are conducive to fostering engagement with complex systems. They afford "multilinear and multi-perspective narratives (including conflicting views)" that are ideal for exploring different ethical standpoints; their procedurality allows for the simulation of complex systems; they support increased engagement due to continuous feedback and interaction; and they allow players to "fail safely" due to their simulated nature (Murray 2012; Anupam 2021; Koenitz, Barbara, and Eladhari 2021).

However, there is still a key gap in games (and IDNs) in relation to the topic of this paper, i.e., they have rarely situated players in the position of an engineer in an ethically challenging situation.

Some games that have focused on ethically problematic situations but not in a corporate tech organization. For example, games such as *Papers, Please!* (Formosa, Ryan, and Staines 2016) and *This War of Mine* (De Smale, Kors, and Sandovar 2019) are effective at simulating the difficult ethical decision-making needed in war-like situations. Games that *do* focus on tech corporations rarely explore the problem of how to do ethical inquiry *as* a designer/engineer. For example, in *Union Drive* (Matajuegos 2021) or *Sim Sweatshop* (Norridge 2012), players assume the role of the exploited workers attempting to better their own situation. Finally, games that position players as engineers in tech organizations such as *Eliza* (Zachtronics 2021) do not engage players with the structural challenges of realizing ethical outcomes and goals. For example, in *Eliza*, players must decide which philosophy they ascribe to in relation to the use of AI in mental health counseling, such as using it to collect data for healthcare or opposing it. However, it focuses less on what one can do to *change* the situation within corporate structures.

What do I mean by corporate "structures"? Drawing on my previous work (Anupam 2022), which draws from Iris Marion Young (1990) and Klein and Kleinman (2002), I understand "structures" to mean the implicit or explicit rules that govern what one can or cannot do in a given environment. Notably, I focus on three kinds of structures: distributive structures, power structures, and cultural structures (or simply, culture). Distributive structures refer to the rules that govern how material goods are shared in a corporation, such as rules of the market and internal wage structure. Power structures refer to the rules which govern who has authority over whom, such as the hierarchy of management and the division of labor. Culture refers to the shared norms and beliefs of people, such as market fundamentalism (Metcalf, Moss, and boyd 2019).

3. *LIGHTS OUT WAREHOUSE*: GAME DESIGN

Lights Out Warehouse is designed as a conversation-based interactive digital narrative (IDN). It draws on a review of research on warehouse and tech workers, particularly *The Cost of Free Shipping: Amazon in the Global Economy* (Alimahomed-Wilson and Reese 2020) and its essays on Amazon's warehouse workers. The goal of making the game is to explore if IDNs can teach students to engage in strategic ethical inquiry as future engineers in a tech corporation.

To do this, the game situates the player as an automation engineer in a fictional eCommerce corporation called NileCorp who must navigate an ethically challenging situation. Their team's "official" task is to automate the local warehouses, which will eradicate many warehouse workers' jobs. Yet, not automating at all can lead to the company losing market share. The player's goal in the game is to develop and realize ethical resolutions that support the workers, the engineering team (including themselves), and the company.

More specifically, players must discover that they can act in two key ways. First, they can persuade the warehouse workers to unionize before they are replaced. Simultaneously, they can also persuade their team to develop automation tools that assist workers rather than replace them. Collectively this approach will provide a suitable (albeit temporary) ethical resolution within the game. While players will be able to sense their progress through conversations with the other characters (such as if they are being persuaded or not), they will only know if they have been successful by the final act of the game.

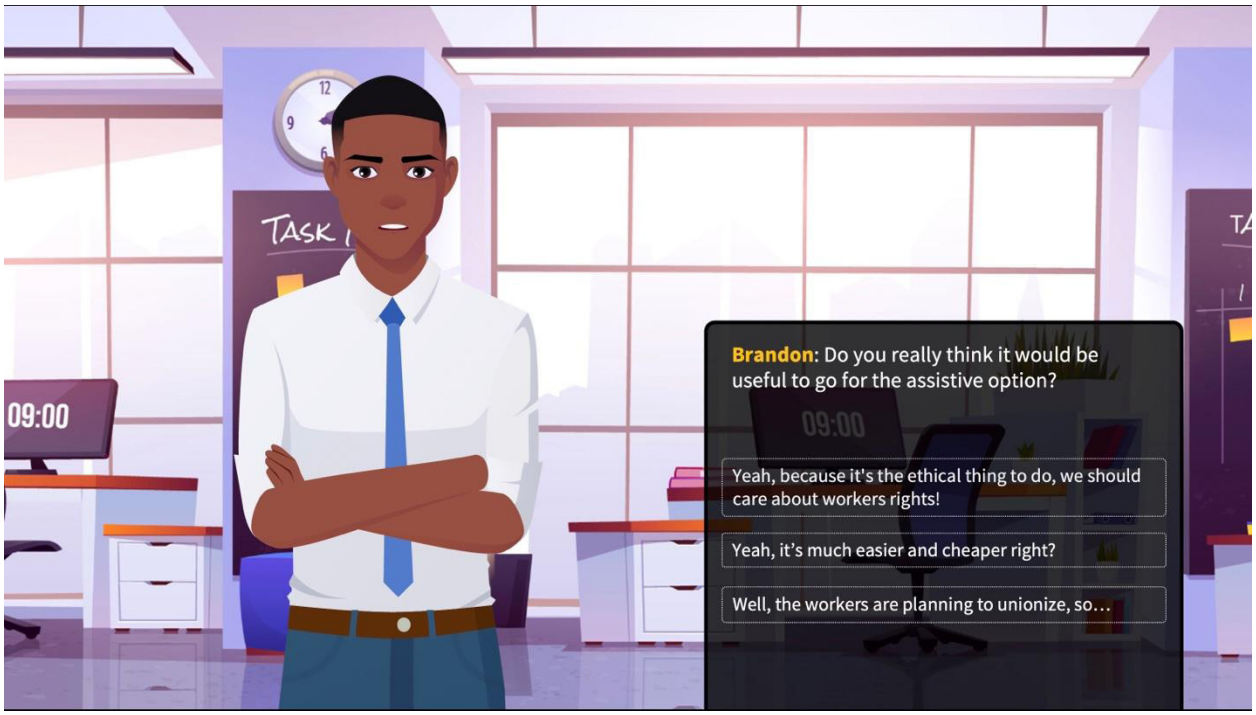
The game progresses as a sequence of conversations with different characters. Each conversation takes the form of a series of multiple-choice statements where players decide what to say and how to say it. Their choice affects the direction of the conversation and four key variables of the other characters—their trust in the player, their trust in other characters, their support level for unionization, and their support level for different kinds of automation robots (full automation, semi-automation, assistive automation). The game is currently in an early prototype stage and it is planned to have five main story acts. Each act will be a series of conversations with different characters. Once the game is finished, the aim is to get feedback from real union and tech workers, and revise it for release. Here, I discuss the planned design of the 5 story acts: The Research, The Robot, The Warehouse, The Slowdown, and The Deadline.

Act 1: The Research

The first act focuses on information gathering. The player learns about their automation team, the local warehouse which they are to focus on, and the key objective assigned to them by the management—to improve the output of their warehouses. Through conversations with their manager (Figure 1), teammates, and warehouse workers, the player learns of the game-world: the beliefs/backgrounds of different characters, the plight of the warehouse workers, and a highly competitive automation and

labor market. A key choice in this phase involves deciding how to spend time with other characters. The more the player focuses on building a positive relationship with a character, the more they are likely to get their trust and support.

Figure 1: Screenshot of current game design showing a conversation with the manager.



Act 2: The Robot

The key issue in the second act is deciding what option to pursue to improve warehouse output—full automation (replace workers) or assistive automation (support workers). What decision is taken depends on factors such as how many team members support it, the evidence for it, and who is present. These factors play out through conversations with NPC characters. For example, to persuade the manager to support the assistive automation option, the player can tell them that the workers are planning to unionize. This takes advantage of the fact that managers are afraid to lose their jobs if the workers do unionize. Yet, such an argument also carries a risk. The manager may use this information to strengthen anti-union efforts rather than listen to the player. Having the support of other engineers is crucial as more voices are hard to ignore.

Act 3: The Warehouse

The third act focuses on the warehouse. As the team begins developing an automation system based on the decision in the previous act, the warehouse workers have their own debates about unionization. The key issue is in garnering enough support to call for a unionization vote. By default, most workers are not interested in conversations about unions or are anti-union. There are two key strategies the player can try to change this situation. The first is to get outside support for unionization. This would involve reaching out to a college friend who is part of a large union organization such as the Amazon (NileCorp) labor union. Such support can give more legitimacy to the unionization effort, but it may

not be effective locally if these organizations are considered to be "outsiders" by warehouse workers and may be corrupt. The second approach is to share inside information with the workers about the automation plan. Players can share details about what tasks they are planning to automate, how quickly it will be done and so on. This can alert the warehouse workers and motivate them to unionize more quickly. However, if the player stays away for too long from the office or they are found talking to the warehouse workers too often, their manager might get suspicious of them.

Act 4: The Slowdown

The fourth act returns after some months. The key issues involve progress on the automated system (decided in Act 2) and the upcoming deadline.

If full automation has been selected in Act 2, things are not going so well. It is much harder after all. There are two options that the player can pursue here: they can attempt to push the deadline and keep trying for full automation; or stick to the deadline, but narrow the focus of the full automation robot to a selective robot, only focusing on a specific kind of object such as cans.

If partial automation was selected in Act 2, then things are going well, and all that is needed is some testing with warehouse workers. Again, the player has two possibilities. They can attempt to push the deadline by deliberately slowing down testing. That means colluding with the warehouse worker participants to delay the testing process. Or they could stick to the deadline and test normally.

If the player manages to convince their team to push the deadline by a few more months in either of these scenarios, then it will significantly increase the chances of the workers unionizing as they have more time until the robot is built to form a consensus.

Act 5: The Deadline

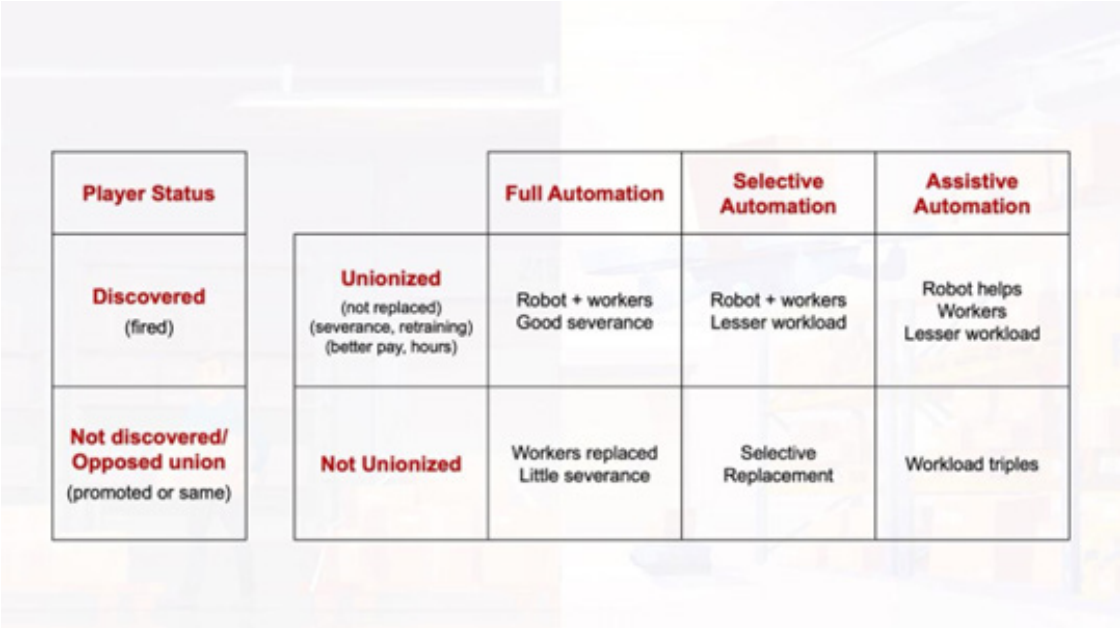
The final act of the game focuses on different possible endings based on three key variables (Figure 2): unionization, the kind of automation system, and the manager's opinion of the player.

If workers do not vote to unionize and the fully automated solution works, the company will start replacing all workers with their automated counterparts. If the selective automation robot works out, then the company will replace only those workers whose objects are now picked by the robot. In either case, if the player did not support unionization and instead supported the full/selective automation decision, they will be viewed favorably by the manager, given a raise, and promoted to manage other warehouse automation projects.

If the workers do not vote to unionize and the assistive automation robot works out then the workload of the workers will triple. For example, if the robot assisted the worker by bringing them shelves, workers will spend more time picking and stowing, and less time walking. Given their increased efficiency, the company will assign them three times the items to pick and stow.

If workers do vote to unionize in time, they stop the fully automated solution from being enacted. Further, they will demand higher pay, lower workloads, better severance packages, and retraining programs if they agree to be automated. Robots will assist workers in all cases here. While the company will not profit as much as it could have compared to the fully automated solution, the enhanced efficiency achieved by assistive automation helps it retain its market share. This is the best case scenario in the game.

Figure 2: Chart of possible outcomes and their dependencies



Player Status		Full Automation	Selective Automation	Assistive Automation
Discovered (fired)	Unionized (not replaced) (severance, retraining) (better pay, hours)	Robot + workers Good severance	Robot + workers Lesser workload	Robot helps Workers Lesser workload
Not discovered/ Opposed union (promoted or same)	Not Unionized	Workers replaced Little severance	Selective Replacement	Workload triples

4. DISCUSSION

In this section, I briefly discuss how the game aims to support players in strategically navigating the corporate distributive system, its sociopolitical structures, and its tech culture outlined earlier.

First, the player needs to know and leverage distributive structures such as the surveillance system, the budget/time of the company, and the warehouse wage structure. For example, they cannot meet openly with the warehouse workers and discuss unionization within the company premises, or they risk being caught. Rather, they have to persuade the workers to meet them in another location (such as the local bar).

Second, players engage with sociopolitical structures such as the company hierarchy, the social groups/dynamics of employees, and the fears and desires of different individuals. For example, players may realize that while the manager has power over the team, this power is contingent on the team's collective compliance. Consequently, one can leverage a united team front to persuade the manager to make decisions the team wants.

Finally, players have to engage with cultural structures such as the union culture of the warehouse and company, the market fundamentalism of the manager, and the technological solutionism of the engineers. For example, to tackle the cultural mindset of technological solutionism (that technology can solve all problems), players must convince the other engineers to question why their assigned problem ("improve warehouse output") should be accepted as given. Why must the problem be only about packages and not also about workers' rights?

Through this design, the game aims to encourage students to consider not just the technical aspects of their work, but also the material, social, and cultural structures of their organizations in order to practically bring about ethical outcomes.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This paper describes the design of an in-progress game to teach strategic ethical inquiry. It explores how games for teaching tech ethics rarely focus on the challenges of strategic ethical inquiry in a

tech corporation. The game attempts to approach this gap in the context of warehouse automation by simulating players as engineers in a large eCommerce corporation. Players must learn to strategically navigate corporate structures in the game to support worker's rights, while also retaining their job, and benefiting the company. In doing so, the game highlights how it is necessary to consider practical structural challenges as part of ethical deliberation.

Future work for the game lies in two key directions. First, the content of the game will be revised to be more accurate based on interviews with activists and engineers. Second, I aim to have the game be part of real ethics courses where it can help students learn the basics of ethical strategization. I envision extending the digital game to a tabletop variation where students assume the role of the game's different characters and explore new possibilities/strategies, thereby organically extending the discourse initiated by the digital version. The game can also be redesigned by students, as the process of design itself can teach students more about tech ethics.

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Player Category Research on Murder Mystery Games

Popular abstract: Murder Mystery Games (MMGs), which are called Jubensha in China, have become a behemoth with more than 10 million players and a market size of more than 20 billion yuan (36kr Research, 2021). The total number of Jubensha players in China alone may match or even eclipse the global number of larpers outside of China. As the newest superstar from the big family of live action role-playing games (larp), the MMG was born in the UK in the 1930s but had never been as popular as it is now in China. For Chinese young people, it is not only a game but a huge industry combined with socialization, movies, TV shows, and traveling destinations as well. In other words, the MMG has become an important part of young people's daily lives. Why has the MMG had such an impact? In this paper, we want to answer this question from the players' side. The main topics of this paper are 1) introducing the development process of Jubensha in China and 2) inspired by Bartle's (1996) player taxonomy, building a model of player typology for MMGs. In a previous study, Dr. Shuo Xiong collected 292 questionnaires from players about their motivations for participating in Jubensha, analyzing the questionnaire and using GNS (Gamism/Narrativism/Simulationism) theory (Kim et al. 1997; Edwards 2001), we have built a player typology that serves as an empirical model of Chinese Jubensha players. The typology contains eight categories in a 3D quadrant: professor, braggart, conqueror, detective, actor, politician, socializer, and viewer.

Keywords: Murder Mystery Games, larp, Bartle's Player Taxonomy, GNS Theory, player typology, game design

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many scholars assert the point that the tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) is the origin of live action role-playing games (larp). There is a reasonable logic of the development from TRPG -- the most famous example being *Dungeons & Dragons* -- to larp in Western countries; in other words, players in Western countries have developed a habit of playing live action RPG games. However, in China things go totally different-- there is no history of *Dungeons & Dragons* and only a few people talk about larp -- Jubensha is a totally imported product. What is still unknown today is why Jubensha has grown so rapidly in China, even becoming a mainstream social channel for young people. In this research, we focus on players: why they want to play the game, and what they want to get from the game.

Firstly, we combed through the history and lineage of the development of Murder Mystery Games. In our view, the Murder Mystery Game is the child of live action role-playing games and detective novels. Although it was born in the West, the Murder Mystery Game has exploded in China and formed a massive industry with many young Chinese, especially the highly educated wanting to play the Jubensha. After the epidemic of Covid-19, more and more Chinese youth rely on Murder Mystery Games for socializing.

Secondly, we introduce the basic Chinese Jubensha game process as featuring the following six steps: Preparation stage, Reading stage, Evidence search stage, Analysis stage, Voting stage, and Review stage. Finally, considering the Murder Mystery Game is similar to the Multiple User Domain game (MUD), this research uses a ludology method -- Bartle's Player Taxonomy -- to describe and analyze Murder Mystery Games. According to Bartle Player Taxonomy, we establish a new independent model with three axes, in which all Murder Mystery Game players can be divided into eight categories in a 3D quadrant: professor, braggart, conqueror, detective, actor, politician, socializer, and viewer. Each category of players has its special game inventions and scenario tendencies. Based on these

research conclusions, Murder Mystery Game authors could design better scenarios. If a MMG script has the following characteristics, the script is bound to be a success: sophisticated murder techniques and logical puzzles; rich storylines and tasks; deeply written characters and interpersonal relationships; meaningful motives and clues for committing crimes; smooth narrative expression; sufficient space for debate and interaction; and a certain degree of difficulty but with a relatively fair game competition environment at the same time.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Origin and Development of the MMG

The MMG is a special type of larp that has become the most popular social entertainment among Chinese youth nowadays. According to Shuo Xiong's previous questionnaire survey of 292 players, 83.3% of players have a Bachelor's degree or above, which indicates highly educated players with a balanced gender ratio. The quality of the MMG scripts on the market is uneven with many types of scenarios. The development of the MMG industry is also facing the dilemma of how to provide more interactive and immersive experiences for players. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the players' motivations and types and makes suggestions on the script creation and industry development of MMGs.

As the name suggests, larp, like its sister game type TRPGs, requires participants to play a specific role. During the larp game, players generally do not need to use traditional gaming hardware consoles such as computers or chessboards. In terms of rules, larp looks more like an improvised drama performance to onlookers, with the entire game role-playing in reality, and the game format often places extreme emphasis on the dramatic and narrative nature of the story. The operation of larp relies on a narrative system, in which players play the desired character through communication and interaction based on the initial character settings of the game. The game world is a consensus environment in which both space and time are governed by a set of rules, some of which may be formalizable and quantifiable. The earliest larps appeared around the late 1970s and were inspired by tabletop role-playing games and popular novels. Then in the 1980s, larp began to spread around the world, and the script and game format became diversified, giving rise to a wide range of offshoot systems, of which MMG was one of the leading types during this period. The costs associated with larps can range from almost zero cost to expensive immersive venue layouts, and the time can be as short as a few hours or as long as several days. Today, more and more people are getting involved in the creation and game process of larp.

In many canonical larps, the author is first required to write or design a scenario and story containing different game characters, and then the players and the game master are combined together to form the complete game participants. In layman's terms, we can understand that the author is the scriptwriter who provides the story and background. Usually, the larp author does not appear in the game scene; the players are the actors, can play the role within the scope of the scene, and are allowed a certain degree of freedom during playing. For example, when a player plays a doctor in the 1910s, the doctor's specific personality, movements, speech, and behavior are allowed to be controlled by the player, but because of the setting of the times, it is obvious that DNA testing technology cannot be used to find clues about the murder case. Therefore, for this issue, the games also often require a game master, whose role is similar to that of a director: to prepare, manage and direct the performance of the larp process. With a scriptwriter, game master, and players, the larp game can advance normally. (Of course, for some scripts and skilled players, the DM can be omitted).

Like movies and novels, larps are divided into different themes to meet the needs of the corresponding users, and our research mainly focuses on the most common theme of current marketization:

the MMG. In the framework of literary works, detective novels have always had their own unique charm and stable audiences. However, in the relationship between larp and MMGs, the deduction, mystery solving, suspense, and horror are abstracted from script reading and further expanded by the interactive form of the game. Thus, MMG has become the most popular form of larp among young people nowadays in China.

Solving the MMG -- including deducing the real killer, uncovering the method, and piecing together the story -- is the core experience of the game; it is also the most attractive part of the MMG that distinguishes it from other larps. In fact, the earliest version of the murder mystery game was born earlier than the conceptually broader larp, having originated from the adaptation of a mystery novel. Its prototype can be traced back to the popular party game *Jury Box,* which was launched in the United States in 1935 (Steamfunk Detectives, 2021), and the reasoning game *Cluedo* patented by British musician Anthony Ernest Pratt in 1948 (Steamfunk Detectives, 2021). The original MMG of that era was simple in its reasoning and storyline, and by 1986, the post-Soviet psychology professor Dimitri Davidov perfected the *Mafia Game* (commonly known as *Close Your Eyes When It's Dark* in China), in which players are randomly assigned identities in the absence of a script and reason out latent killers through social interactions. Later, relying on many talented writers, increasingly complex plots were created to present the MMG seen now. Today, people do not even need to participate in the game for some excellent MMG works; simply participating in the audience to enjoy the stories performed by others is also quite enjoyable, such as the Mango TV network variety show *Star Detective Season 5*, inviting several famous stars in China to play Jubensha in front of cameras, has been broadcast up to 27.1 billion (Steamfunk Detectives, 2021).

Similar to mafia games or werewolf games, each player in MMGs is randomly assigned an identity, including detective, suspect, and the real killer (with possible accomplices), and some complex plots even have a mastermind behind them. In the game, the detective must find the murderer and uncover the plot; innocent suspects need to clear themselves and to complete their own various side quests in line with the persona, while trying to help the detective find the real killer. Of course, for the participants playing the killer, they must find a scapegoat, plant suspects (commonly known as "carry push," that is, find innocent people to s blame for the crime), and escape the detective and other players to avoid being captured. A large number of overseas MMG classic board game scripts such as *Death Wears White* (Parel 2008) were translated and introduced. A steady stream of original Chinese works were produced, for example, the series *The Magnificent Ambersons*.

The import of *Death Wears White* into China in 2013 is seen as the origin of Chinese Jubensha. But this kind of game did not draw too much attention until 2016, when Mango TV released a variety program named *Who's The Murderer* which was imported from JTBC (South Korea). The fifth season of the program broadcasted to up to 2.17 billion people (36kr Research, 2021). This development pushed Jubensha to become one of the most popular entertainments among young people. As of now, there are more than 45,000 stores in China with a player sizemarket size will increase to 23.89 billion RMB (36kr Research, 2021).

Nowadays, MMG can be easily purchased in physical and online stores. In the past two years, MMG mobile Apps have sprung up, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, due to the non-meeting social game properties. The MMG apps have been a big hit, such as *I Am the Mystery*, *The Great Detective*, *Who is the Murderer*, etc. The market of Jubensha on mobile phones seems to have entered the Sengoku Period. Of course, the highest level of MMG form -- immersive dress-up live-action evidence searching -- which does not rely on any electronic equipment nor tabletop games, directly sets the scene in the physical room in a dramatic way. The player needs to change into the character's clothes and actually perform the game; the form is very close to the parent node larp of

MMG. This model is trendy among young people in major cities across the country. Of course, the cost and quality of a game are usually much higher than that of video game apps and tabletop game boxed decks. Therefore, in this context, it is imperative to carry out research around the MMG, and there are considerable values and gaps in the research, whether from the direction of ludology; communication psychology; advertising and marketing; new Internet media; or even criminal investigation.

2.2 Research related to the MMG

Searching for the keyword "MMG Game" on Google Scholar reveals that a considerable number of researchers have conducted research on murder mystery games. A.S. Jennings mainly focuses on the Serious Game application of MMG and in his 2001 paper "Murder, Mystery, Game: A Novel Approach to Science Writing." He notes that students involved in creating an interactive, scientific MMG can help them describe scientific facts and principles. At the same time, the process of constructing the MMG script narrative stimulates the students' potential ability to analyze the causes, influences, conclusions, and solutions.

Then, in 2002, in his paper "Creating an Interactive Science MMG game: The Optimal Experience of Flow," Jennings found that traditional science writing group projects were difficult to make interesting for students and that being forced to work in teams could lead to a series of collaboration problems. Jennings set up a control group for this purpose -- one using a traditional teaching model and the other creating based on the background of MMG -- and found that the creative group of MMG was more motivated to complete the group project. In "Using an MMG to Teach Evaluation Skills: A Case Study," Elise Blas (2016) describes how a teaching librarian created an active learning online MMG game to engage students. The MMG required students to evaluate information in the course, use online searches to verify information, and demonstrate critical thinking skills in a gaming environment. Fatwatul Hasanah and Desvalini Anwar's paper, "Teaching Speaking Recount Texts to Senior High School Students through MMG Game" describes the use of MMG in teaching oral retellings texts for high school students. Through the MMG game, students are able to use existing clues to solve problems and share ideas with other students, thus motivating them to speak English.

In addition to serious game applications, there is also research in the field of information science around MMG. In 2006, Maria Arinbjarnar proposed a new game engine in her paper "Murder She Programmed: Dynamic Plot Generating Engine for MMG Games," which can dynamically create new game scripts for MMG games. This engine uses Bayesian networks to create new plots based on the probability graph of a typical detective mystery novel. Each new game has a unique story with a logically consistent, coherent, and complete storyline, and ensures that the game can solve puzzles through logical reasoning. In the article "MMG Generation from Open Data," Gabriella Barros et al. (2016) describe a mathematical model for finding the real killer among the many suspects in a MMG. By analyzing the suspect's characteristics and collecting data, the player can narrow down the search for the real killer.

In "*ClueGen*: An Exploration of Procedural Storytelling in the Format of MMG Games," Andrew Stockdale introduces *ClueGen,* an MMG game that generates its own narrative. The author explains the implementation and basic principles behind *ClueGen* and that the system can be used to trick characters through text dialogue in the generated game by using voice cues. In his paper "Eliminating the Impossible: A Procedurally Generated MMG," Henry Mohr (2018) presents a murder mystery generation system in which characters are procedurally generated to achieve a set of goals within the game's script. Players can also solve murder mysteries by collecting real evidence as well as interrogating characters, and even though some characters may hide evidence, the system ensures that

players can always solve murders theoretically.

In summary, the current research on MMG in overseas literature is still mainly focused on serious games and artificial intelligence technology. This paper analyzes the players involved in the MMG from the perspective of ludology, based on Bartle's Player Taxonomy, which has a certain novelty.

2.3 Bartle's Player Taxonomy

Richard Bartle is a British author, professor and game researcher focusing on the massively multiplayer online game industry. Bartle co-founded Multiple User Domain 1 in 1978 (the first MUD), a multi-user virtual space game, which is a collective name for text-based online games, and was one of the earliest online games. Bartle published the book *Virtual World Design* in 2003. His most famous theory is his paper "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players who Suit MUDs," (1996) in which all players are classified into four types from player needs and traits: Killers, Achievers, Explorers, and Socializers. This paper also became the theoretical basis for many modern multiplayer game player analyses, as well as part of the foundation of the game studies discipline; usually the industry will call it "Bartle's Player Taxonomy."

In brief, based on players' motivations to play the MUD, behavioral patterns, attitudes toward verbal interaction, and other factors, Bartels established a coordinate system, as shown in Figure 1. The X-axis of the coordinates represents the object in the game, whether the player is more focused on real people or on the virtual world. The Y-axis represents the way the player behaves in the game, whether the player is more comfortable with concrete actions or with interaction. By crossing the X and Y axes, the whole plane is divided into four quadrants, corresponding to four types of players, which in the English sense correspond to the suits of poker. So Bartle (1996) drew up the title vividly and made it memorable with the following: Achievers always complete tasks and seek rewards, so they correspond to Diamonds; Explorers always dig for information, so they correspond to Spades; Socializers like to communicate with others, so they correspond to Hearts; Killers always intend to conquer other players, so they correspond to Clubs. Specifically, the characteristics of each type of player are as follows:

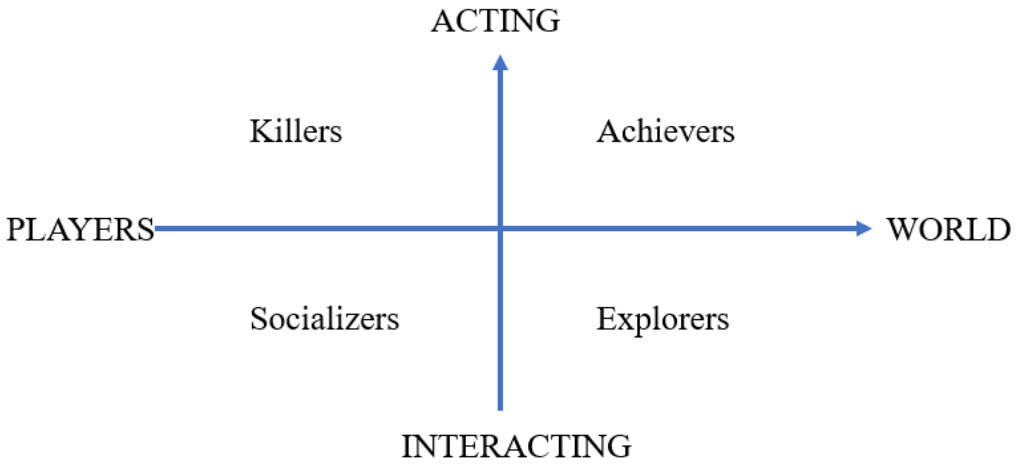
- **Achievers** like to do things in the game and play to achieve goals, such as completing tasks, passing levels, winning, etc. They like to get pleasure from achieving self-worth by completing mission goals.

- **Explorers** are interested in feeling all kinds of interesting things in the game, including discovering the Easter eggs buried by the designer and the story behind it and obtaining spiritual joy through the pursuit of discovering new things.

- **Socializers** are interested in interacting with other players, and the game world is just a platform and setting for them. Socializers like to meet others in the game and use it as a social tool, but often do not care much about the game itself.

- **Killers** are interested in doing something to other players, e.g., showing their advantages over others, usually by killing, destroying, conquering, defeating opponents, and other acts to prove their power.

Figure 1: The coordinate system of Bartle's Player Taxonomy



The advantage of Bartle's (1996) Player Taxonomy is that it turns design problems into intuitive categories, which can help solve many game design problems in a general and useful way. The theory has often been used as the basis for game development since it was proposed. Although the model has been questioned by some people in academia and the industry, such as the commonly mixed players and the unstable results in many tests (Yee, 2005; Williams, Yee, & Caplan, 2008). In general, Bartle's Player Taxonomy can give convenient ideas for game research, and it can also quickly help game designers and companies complete a general user analysis in a short time. Therefore, as a preliminary study of the MMG in Chinese, this article will quickly analyze the user composition of MMGs based on this theory.

2.4 GNS Theory in RPGs

GNS theory is an informal field of study originally created as the Threefold Model in role-playing communities (Kim et al. 1997) and later developed by Ron Edwards (2003) that attempts to create a unified theory of how role-playing games work. Focused on player behavior, in GNS theory, participants in role-playing games organize their interactions around three categories of engagement: Gamism, Narrativism and Simulationism.

- *Gamism* is expressed by competition among participants; it includes victory and loss conditions for characters, both short-term and long-term, that reflect on the people's actual play strategies.
- *Simulationism* heightens and focuses on Exploration as the priority of play. Players may be greatly concerned with the internal logic and experiential consistency of that Exploration.
- *Narrativism* is expressed by the creation, via role-playing, of a story with a recognizable theme. The characters are formal protagonists and the players are often considered co-authors.

As Jubensha (MMG) is a special type of larp, GNS theory could be a proper and accurate way to classify player types of Jubensha.

Inspired by Bartle's (1996) Player Taxonomy, we want to construct an empirical model on player classification of Chinese MMGs based on GNS theory.

3. OVERVIEW OF MURDER MURDER MYSTERY GAMES

3.1 MMG Game Process

Like the genres of speculative fiction such as "Mystery School," "Orthodox School," "Unorthodox School," and "New Mystery School" (Songsheng 2000), MMG has different settings, characters, scripts, and scenarios. Some stories are based on contemporary reality, some stories imagine future technology, and some stories are set in ancient China and possibly with fantasy elements. For these different backgrounds and genres of works, the games also have different rules in the details of the process, such as: some must be hosted by the game master, some can be driven by the players themselves, some scripts encourage players to chat privately to gang up on each other, and other scripts explicitly prohibit players from having any private communication. Regardless of which rule it is based on, in general, the complete game can be described by the process shown in Figure 2. Different from larp in a broad sense, MMG is usually 2 to 5 hours long due to the specificity of the plot (the longer the game, the worse it is for the player who draws the murderer) and to avoid disruptions to normal life (humans usually eat at 5 to 6-hour intervals). The length of the game is determined by the complexity of the puzzle and the intelligence of the players, and once the game exceeds the specified time, it will be forced to enter the murderer voting session.

According to Figure 2, the whole MMG game process can be divided into six stages: preparation stage, reading stage, evidence search stage, analysis stage, voting stage, and ending stage.

Preparation stage: Before the game officially starts, the player or DM must choose a script, and according to the theme and introduction of the script, decide whether it is necessary for the player to understand the story's themes, rules, forms of reasoning, and time period's social context. After reading the basic theme and rule settings, all players will receive their script, preparing their emotions for formal reading and role-playing.

Reading stage: All players must read their scripts carefully to confirm the storyline, as well as their tasks. When all players have finished reading the story and confirming their quests, the performance begins, with players first introducing their characters' identities and settings to each other, and making preliminary discussions about the events of the case (even at this time, the part of the script of the homicide has not yet occurred). This part is very similar to that in larp, players are supposed to enter the magic circle (ed. note: Huizinga 1958; Salen and Zimmerman 2003) and try to play the roles in the script; this process gives players an alibi (ed. note: Deterding 2017) and encourages them to immerse into the coming fantastic world created by the game master and themselves (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). The levels of immersion differ between different kinds of MMGs. The most traditional type of MMGs is only for reasoning; there are only some weak relationships between players' characters, generally about tasks, like, "You should help player A or frame player B," and they do not require deep immersion. However, recently the most popular type is about emotion, which focuses on the relationships between the players, as well as the players and game master, which could provide players with a very moving emotional experience.

Evidence search stage: After the characters and story have been introduced and the murder has taken place, all players need to search for relevant evidence to deduce who the murderer is. The search here can be provided interactively based on the MMG app or using the boxed board game version of the card. The most advanced is the real scene immersive evidence search, in which players look for evidence in a

real live set, with a sense of immersion. Of course, some of the evidence obtained from the search is an interference option, or simply used to reveal the hidden story of certain suspects in the branch. During this stage, the murderer character must hide the evidence against him or her.

Analysis stage: Analytical reasoning is the fourth and most central and crucial step of the MMG. At this time, the vast majority of evidence has been searched and presented to each player. Then, around the case and the puzzle, players will state their story timeline, alibis, character relationships, motives for the murder, etc.

Voting stage: Also known as the round table stage, depending on the entire game time setting, the game master should announce the coming end of the analysis and discussion when the game is about to end with 15 minutes left, or when all players think that the murder puzzle has been solved with no need to continue the discussion. All players must reason who is the real killer, and then write down the corresponding character name to vote, and each character completes their own side quests during this period.

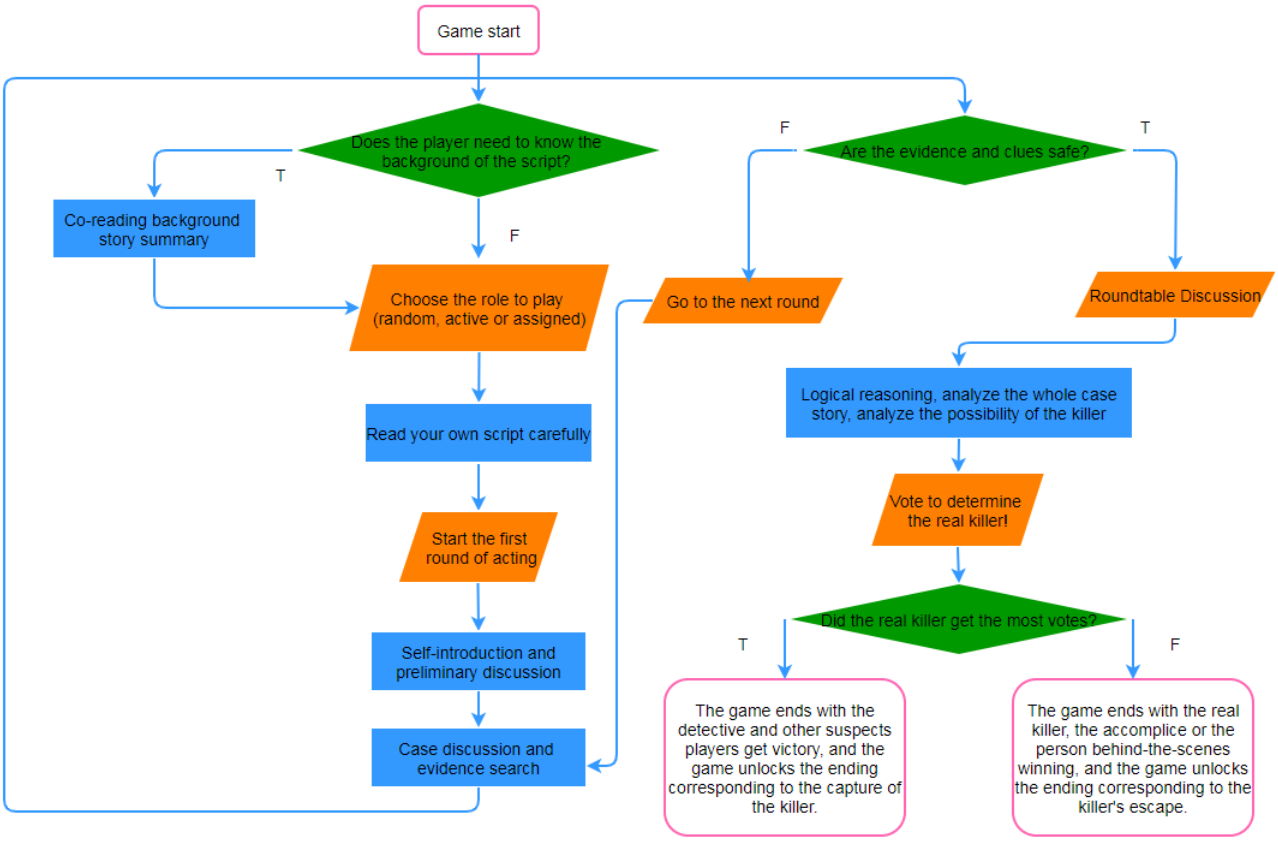
Epilogue stage: When all players have finished voting, the game master will announce the result of the voting, and the player with the most votes will be regarded as the "real criminal." If two or more players have the same votes, a final vote will be held among them to determine the "real criminal," and then the game master will tell all players whether the result of the "real killer" voted by all players is correct. If the reasoning is correct, the detective and suspect players win; otherwise, the killer player wins. Depending on the winning party, the game master will tell the players different story endings at this time. After completing play, players thank each other and then the game ends.

Due to the complexity of the entire MMG game process and the diversity of the stages, this type of game is destined to attract different types of people to participate in it. Therefore, we will try to use game theory to classify and model the MMG players, in order to help future MMG authors and practitioners when creating scripts and designing scenes, so that different types of players can enhance their experience in a wider and diversified manner. Considering that MMG as a party game has natural social attributes, while the strong logical reasoning element makes the players verbally confront each other fiercely, the entertainment attributes of the game itself, as well as the exploration of clues, puzzles, and stories is a mysterious process that is enjoyable for people. We found a high degree of similarity between MMG and Multi-User Dungeon (MUD) games, so we decided to borrow the famous Bartle's Player Taxonomy from MUD research to model and generalize the player typology of the MMG.

4. PLAYER TYPOLOGY OF MMGS

Firstly, the "parents" of MMGs are historically derived from larp and detective mystery novels, and the combination of the two has given birth to the modern form of the MMG game. Regarding the motivations and interests of larp players, Staffan Jonsson et al. clearly point out in their paper "Prosopopeia: Experiences from a Pervasive Larp" that larp started as a subculture in the Tolkienist fantasy world, and through continuous development, modern larp culture has included contemporary and historical larp; conceptual larp (focused on emotional or moral dilemmas); and improvisational drama. The role in larp is the central focus of everything, and players mainly enjoy different scripts and characters with different settings of life, and experience and think about other people's stories through performances.

Figure 2: The general game flow of the MMG



As a sub-category of larp, MMG naturally inherits this "performance and experience" element in player motivation. The charm of mystery novels lies in the intricately designed puzzles, the unknown fear before they are solved, and the sense of accomplishment and fun that comes from the moment of solving them, like pushing down dominos. So, players of MMG may be fans of drama or users of works of deduction art (including novels, movies, plays, anime and games).

Secondly, MMG is indeed a party game. Since it is a game, it will inherit the common characteristics of the parent category of games. Any multiplayer game has social attributes and the game as an information medium originally also assumes the role of a social platform. In fact, in China, MMG has effectively become a channel for young people to get a break from video games and to gather socially away from theaters, bars, and restaurants.

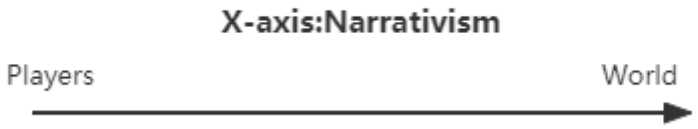
Moreover, MMG requires multiple players to play "drama" together, the requirement for communication is stronger than that of computer games, and the language confrontation in the middle and late stages of the game is also an essential part of the MMG process. As Bartle's (1996) theory of player categorization argues, "socialization" is a motivation for MMG to attract players.

Thirdly, MMG is a zero-sum game with clear opposing camps and a win-lose relationship; the murderer and the shady player always hope to successfully frame other players and escape, while the detective and the innocent suspect player desperately hope to bring the real killer to justice. Their mentality is very similar to the game between police and criminals in the real world.

4.1 The Axis Concept of MMG based on GNS Theory

4.1.1 X-Axis - The Object of the Game - Narrativism

Figure 3: X-axis for Narrativism, including players and the world



Setting Narrativism to be the X-axis, this section focuses on the preferences of players in MMGs in terms of how they treat the real world and the game world, i.e., Players-World relationship in Bartle's (1996) player Taxonomy. On the X-axis, the left means players in MMG pay more attention to interaction and socialization with real players rather than the game and the story; the right means players are more likely immersing in the game world and do not care too much about who they play with.

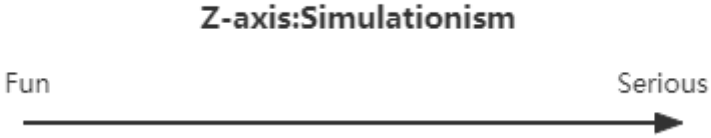
4.1.2 Y-Axis - The goal of the Game - Gamism

Figure 4: Y-axis for Gamism, including interacting and acting

Consider the meaning of the Y-axis. In Bartle's (1996) Player Taxonomy, it has acting, which refers to players being more likely to achieve things in the game, and interaction means they like to interact with others and feel in the game, this is called Gamism in GNS theory. These concepts describe players' goals in MMG. In Y-axis, the left means players in MMG enjoy the thrill of overcoming others, they play games for the win; the right means players just play for experience and do not like competition in games, or they do not care about the outcome.

4.1.3 Z-Axis - The motivation of the Game - Simulationism

Figure 5: Z-Axis for Simulationism, including fun and seriousness.



Finally, we consider the most common player motivations to mark the Z-axis, a very important concept in the field of games called Serious Games. In 2002, the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington D.C., USA, launched the Serious Games Initiative to promote game development in policy and regulatory affairs (Wilson Center n.d.). When faced with specific problems,

the application of Serious Games in the fields of education, communication, and psychology has also been quite fruitful. As a player chooses to play MMG, their motivation is based on two branches, as Alice Mitchell and Smith (2004) argue: "The use of computer and video games for learning -- one is pure entertainment, and the other is an attempt to achieve a partially serious characteristic through the process of the game."

So Simulationism is set as the topic of the Z-axis. Left means players just want to have fun during playing MMGs; right means players play these games for some serious purpose, for example, practicing social abilities or doing research.

4.2 The Empirical Model of Player Categories in MMGs

Dr. Shuo Xiong conducted a survey and in-depth interview among 292 players of Jubensha in previous research. According to the above logic discussion and analysis, this research is instructed by Bartle's (1996) Player Taxonomy and builds a model based on GNS Theory (Kim et al. 1997; Bartle 2003) and previous research. The players of MMGs can be divided into eight quadrants with a set of X-Y-Z axes (as shown in Figure 6) to represent the characteristics and differences of the eight types of players.

5. RESEARCH DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper combs the origin, development history, and recent popular phenomena in China, and the universal process of murder mystery games. Based on this background, this study introduces Bartle's (1996) Player Taxonomy model and GNS theory (Kim 2003; Edwards 2001), establishing a coordinate system to differentiate the players of MMGs. The categorization of players can help to create the scripts of MMGs, and also can serve as a foundation for the subsequent research on MMGs.

Figure 6: The player classification Empirical Model of MMGs

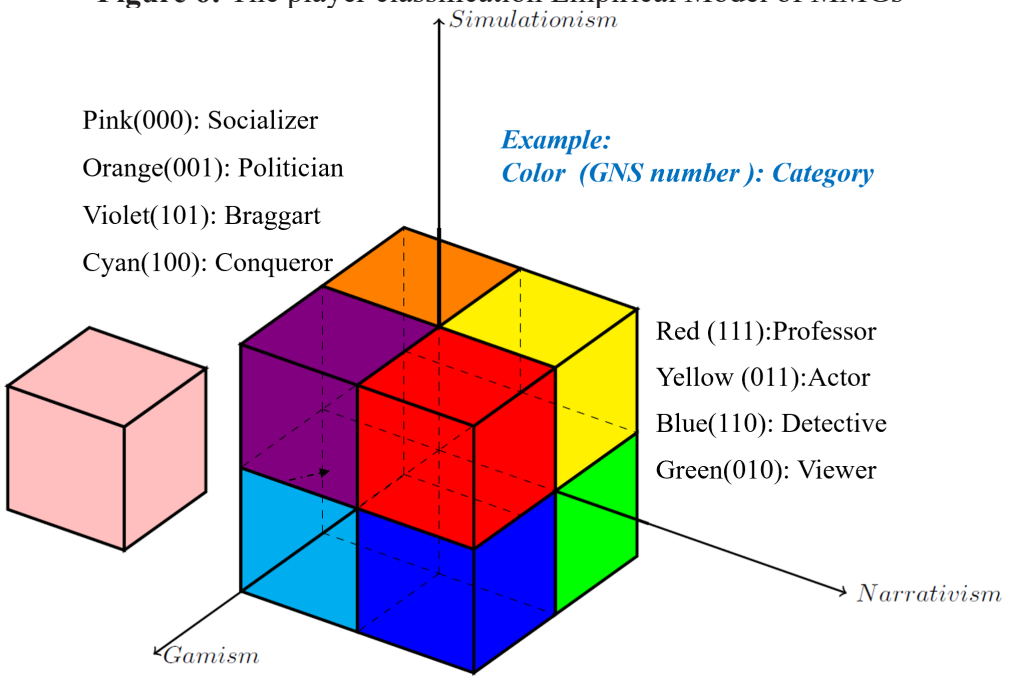
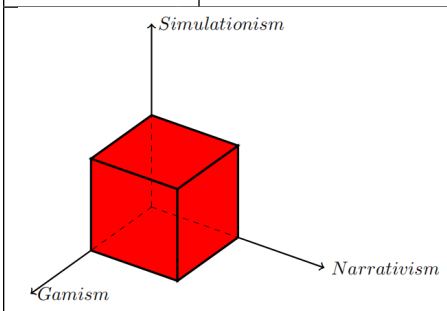
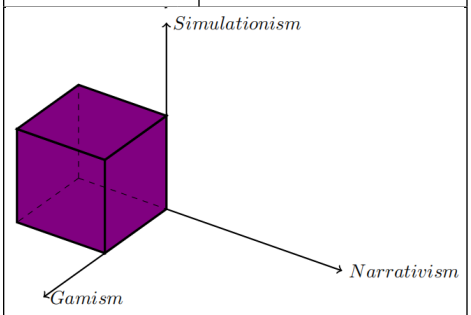
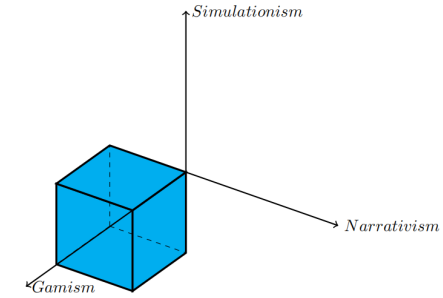
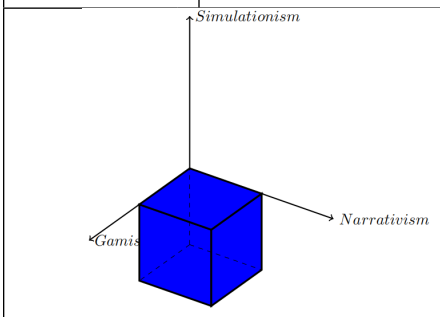
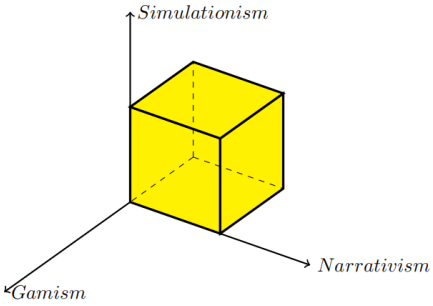
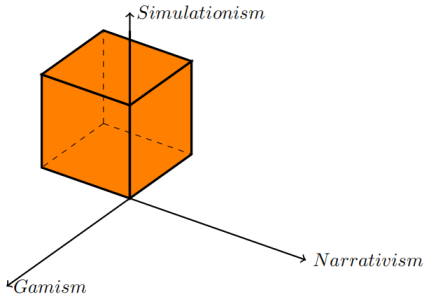
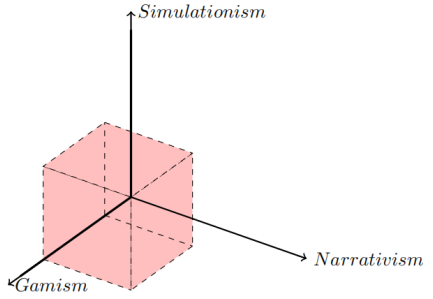
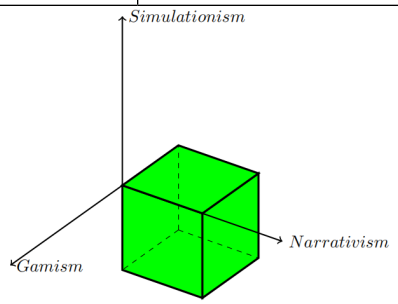


Figure 7: Specifics of player classifications in MMGs

Category	Description
Professor G:1, N:1, S:1 	**Playing to win, expecting a serious outcome from the game and enjoying the immersion into the narratives.** Most professors are fans of detective fiction, with the purposeful desire to train their logical and analytical skills, or to strengthen their reasoning skills through entertainment. They are the most professional players; therefore, we called this type the "Professor."
Braggart G:1, N:0, S:1 	**Playing to win, expecting a serious outcome from the game, and enjoying the interaction with other players.** Winning by playing games in the hope of bringing associated benefits such as social bragging and showing off one's ability to be favored and complimented by others. There are such guys in China who like to attract girls in this way. They play Jubensha to catch the eye of others; therefore, we called this type the "Braggart."
Conqueror G:1, N:0, S:0 	**Playing to win, expecting to get relaxed from the game, and enjoy the interaction with other players.** Playing games is all about winning and getting a thrill by beating others. Nothing else matters; it is as if they are participating in a special e-sports. They just want to beat the others; therefore, we call this type the "Conqueror."
Detective G:1, N:1, S:0 	**Playing to win, expecting to get relaxed from the game and enjoy the immersion of the narrative.** Most of these players are lovers of detective fiction, like to immerse themselves in the deduction play, and simply enjoy solving puzzles in the game. They are the original MMG or Jubensha players; we called this type the "Detective."

Actor G:0, N:1, S:1 	**Playing for fun, expecting a serious outcome from the game, and enjoying the immersion of the narrative.** Most of these players are similar to larp enthusiasts, so they do not have a strong sense of winning. Compared to reasoning, the story of the role-playing performance is more important. They enjoy the benefits that this scripted immersion brings to them in reality, such as performance ability training, pulling on other players' emotions, and creating atmosphere. Therefore, we called this type the "Actor."
Politician G:0, N:0, S:1 	**Playing for fun, expecting a serious outcome from the game, and enjoying the interaction with other players.** Typically these players use Jubensha as a channel to train their social, acting, oratory, and even lying skills. They are more interested in the training that the game process gives them in various skills than in the existence of the game itself; therefore, we called this type the "Politician."
Socializer G:0, N:0, S:0 	**Playing for fun, expecting to get relaxed from the game, and enjoying the interaction with other players.** Typically, these participants play games as a channel to pass the time with friends. The same holds true for replacing Jubensha with other things, such as drinking or karaoke together. Therefore, we called them the "Socializer."
Viewer G:0, N:1, S:0 	**Playing for fun, expecting to get relaxed from the game, and enjoy the immersion of the narrative.** Most of these players are similar to larp lovers, so they do not have a strong desire to win. Compared to reasoning, the story of the script performance is more important, and they hope to be moved or entertained by the story emotionally. They are more like the audience of a play, only more actively engaged and interactive; therefore, we called this type the "Viewer."

5. RESEARCH DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This paper combs the origin, development history, and recent popular phenomena in China, and the universal process of murder mystery games. Based on this background, this study introduces Bartle's (1996) Player Taxonomy model and GNS theory (Kim 2003; Edwards 2001), establishing a coordinate system to differentiate the players of MMGs. The categorization of players can help to create the scripts of MMGs, and also can serve as a foundation for the subsequent research on MMGs.

There are many different scripts on the market, with mixed reviews. Our analysis of the player classification model of MMGs can provide scriptwriters with certain reference opinions -- when a script can meet the conditions of diverse players as much as possible, the overall evaluation of the script will naturally increase. Moreover, the needs of the eight types of players do not need to conflict within the same script. If a MMG script has sophisticated murder techniques and logical puzzles; rich storylines and tasks; deeply drawn characters and interpersonal relationships; meaningful motives and clues for committing crimes; smooth narrative expression; sufficient space for debate and interaction; and a certain degree of difficulty but a relatively fair game competition environment, the script is highly likely to be a success.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A Coin with Two Sides: Role-Playing Games as Symbolic Devices

Popular abstract: Role-playing games (RPGs) undeniably possess common elements with rituals and myths. The study of these elements remains a timely issue because it unveils the possibility of archetypal engagement. However, it is often overlooked that rituals and myths are fundamentally the two possible exegeses of the symbol. In this work, I propose a new perspective to study these features in RPGs by drawing ideas from philosophy and departing from the concept of RPGs as symbolic devices. Here, a symbol is understood both as an archetypal figure and as a special object characterized by its autonomy, synthetic power, and tautegoricity, i.e., the identity between meaning and being.

Under this perspective, I revisit RPG ritual aspects, such as the magic circle, liminality, and collective immersion. A particular advantage of the symbolic standpoint is that we can integrate these elements into a broader scope, as philosophy reveals a deep kinship between symbols, art, and organisms, areas that otherwise would seem unrelated. Thus, RPGs cannot be merely reduced to either rituals or myths. Instead, they constitute a perfect combination (undifferentiated balance) of mythic narrative and ritual interpretation, organic and autonomous objects we create to connect ourselves to our cultural roots. This proposal aims to develop a complementary theoretical approach that paves the way in the current understanding of how RPG players interact with the archetypal domain, not only in the psychic, social, and cultural realms but also in the religious and metaphysical ones. Also, this proposal explores RPGs as apt tools that profoundly transform our subjectivities and re-enchant our worlds with new mythologies.

Keywords: ritual, myth, liminality, role-playing games, symbol, archetypes

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1. INTRODUCTION

Role-playing games (RPGs) certainly share common features with rituals and myths (Bowman 2010; Laycock 2015). Their suspension of the ordinary world and collective creation of meaning resemble the ritual separation between the profane and the sacred and the depth of mythic narrative. RPGs have been historically misjudged by the prejudice of considering their practice a kind of cult, which has scourged the RPG community in past decades, for example, claiming they produce a dissociation from reality or the rejection of traditional values (Laycock 2015).

Then, the study of the mythic and ritual dimension in RPGs remains thus a timely issue, not only to redeem them from misconceptions but also to pave the way for exploring their power to create meaning and transform all our worlds, the imaginary, the fictional, and the real ones. It is often overlooked that rituals and myths are *fundamentally* the two possible exegeses of the *symbol* (Frank 1982). This suggests we treat RPGs' ritual and mythic nature on the same footing. In this work, I aim to develop a unifying perspective for studying these traits by drawing ideas from philosophy and departing from the concept of RPGs as *symbols*. Hence, RPGs are recognized as a perfect combination (undifferentiated balance) of mythic narrative and ritual interpretation. Neither RPGs can be merely reduced to rituals nor myths. Despite this balance, it should be noted that one side could be intensified, leading to a taxonomy of RPGs from a symbolic perspective. While tabletop RPGs have a predominance of verbal description to support game dynamics, instead, larp fosters the dramatical embodiment of actions (Zagal and Deterding 2018).

2. MYTHS AND RITUALS

Defining myth and ritual is a titanic task, and I will restrict myself to pointing out their main features. Since the dawn of Western philosophy, rationalism has tried to vanish myths from our intellectual scenario by stripping them of any pretension of truth. The idea of the "progress of spirit" claims that myth and its related domains—ritual, magic, religion, etc.—were proper to the primitive world. So, they must gradually yield via a process known as *disenchantment* (Weber 1978). In a disenchanted world, reason would stand as the absolute judge, vanishing all those fields of our culture where imagination, lacking unambiguous quantitative certainty, plays a significant role. Then, both concepts have struggled in Modern times. In particular, the interpretation and delimitation of myth have constantly been subjected to confusion and exaggeration (Duch 1998). However, nowadays, it is clear that the disenchantment project cannot be completed, and an ultimate process of de-mythologization (or de-ritualization) is impossible. Not only did the magico-religious grounds of our world go into hiding to avoid destruction (from where they could return repressed), but also Modernity has become a *disenchanted enchantment* (Saler 2012): the illusion of vanishing myths has posited them in the center of reason. Nevertheless, the project has had important effects like the loss of sensibility in our societies and a condition of isolation and mutism in the world.

Myths are usually identified because of four traits: their narrative character (as stories), the use of fantasy in their creation, their synthetic power, and their connection to the sacred (and the divine) (Frank 1982). Also, because of their *social function*: to legitimate and constitute our individual and communal existence by posing a supreme value. Myths bring truth to our lives, but in a way, we can bear it. A life mythically undressed, i.e., without stories, will be impossible. Only something that can be actual in any era, in any place, can be interpreted from contingent, biographical conditions of individuals and collectivities alike; such a thing can offer us a sensible way to endure the becoming and the massive weight of the world. Contrastingly, rituals are less complicated to grasp because they are experienced in the form of ceremonies. They have three major features: a *magic circle*, a *liminal character,* and *collective effervescence*. Thus, one can define a ritual as a suspension of everyday life to establish a temporary, transient, and liminal spatiotemporal experience where a new set of rules emerge to support the creation of meaning and the redefinition of objects, words, and actions. As a result, participants who abide by those rules return socially transformed to their ordinary lives (Turner 1995). Likewise, rituals have a social function: to strengthen social bonds and foster the creation of a community by positing a common ground where a strong cohesion emerges, whether the context is secular or religious (Durkheim 1995).

3. THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH

The central thesis of this work is that myths and rituals find each other in the symbol. Here, I will understand the symbol in metaphysical terms as the *romantic symbol*, a notion developed during the *Goethezeit* in the XIX century (Halmi 2007), and by drawing ideas from the German idealist F. W. J. Schelling. According to him, the imagination produces three types of representations: schemata, allegories, and symbols (Schelling 1989). They can be "dialectically" organized in terms of oppositions: meaning against being and universality against particularity. A schema is a representation where being is subordinated to meaning and the particular to the universal. For example, a device's sketch is a concept containing an infinity of variations of concrete implementations that imagination can actively build. Conversely, allegories are representations where meaning serves being and particularity rules over

universality. A concrete element, such as a metaphor or emblem points to complex objects, typically non-empirical ones like values and ideas.

The symbol constitutes the third moment of representation that exhibits the perfect balance or absolute indifference between meaning and being, universality and particularity, or even freedom and necessity. Symbols find their *telos* (finality) in themselves, like archetypes and divine figures. This means that the symbol is not only a unique representation (sign) of human imagination (Durand 1968), but all together can be regarded as an archetypal figure of our culture and psyche (Jung 1980) or even an element with which we can understand the metaphysical dynamics of reality as a whole (Schelling 1989). Note that, in this framework, concepts are an extreme case of schemas, so symbols are not concepts (Whistler 2013). They possess three properties: autonomy, *syntheticism* (the synthetic power able to reunite opposites), and tautegoricity, i.e., the identity of meaning and being (Whistler 2013). Symbols *are* while they *mean* and *mean* what they *are*. When a symbol loses content, it ceases to exist for us. This also means that it is almost impossible to capture the symbolic completely because any approximation is always inadequate: symbols become incarnate in the archetypal figures that give rise to our culture, and we constantly change our relationship with them by re-signifying them.

In the symbolic, an idea can become an image when it reaches sensible completion, in other words, when it exhausts its representation. Thus, the symbol is an immediate, inexhaustible, irreplaceable testimony. However spiritually powerful they are, we access them only through mediation. We establish a relationship with them via their two possible exegeses. The symbol expresses itself either linguistically as a myth or dramatically as a ritual (Frank 1982). From this perspective, rituals and myths are defined as symbolic acts and word systems, respectively (Duch 1998). Thus, the symbol can be considered the perfect balance of myth and ritual (narrative and drama).

4. RITUAL FEATURES OF RPGS

To exhibit the symbolic character of RPGs, I will show that they balance the two oppositions: universality versus particularity (schema versus allegory) and word versus action (myth versus ritual). Before, describing those features that make RPGs rituals and myths is necessary. Because of extension, I will focus on the ritual domain only and leave the mythic dimension, tied to the world-building discourse (Page 2014) for later work. To the extent RPGs are games, they possess a ritual dimension, given that they are functions full of meaning and exist in a special spatiotemporal framework where they evolve under their own rules (Huizinga 1949; Caillois 2001). The idea that RPGs are a modern form of ritual and myth is not new (Lehrich 2005; Bowman 2010; Harviainen 2012). In *Dangerous Games,* J. P. Laycock (2015) asserts explicitly that "Fantasy role-playing games, then, can be thought of as modern forms of ritual and myth. Although they do not have the same status as ritual and myth in world religions, these games are powerful because they utilize humanity's most primal faculties of meaning production" (185).

Rituals rely on a boundary that guarantees the separation between an ordinary (primary) reality and a created (secondary) one. This barrier is called the *magic circle*, a term coined by Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* (1949) and later adapted to game studies by Salen and Zimmerman (2003). The applicability of the concept has been disputed in the study of games and RPGs (Copier 2005; Calleja 2011; Stenros 2012; Schallegger 2018) because, in rituals, the magic circle is usually thought of as a blunt separation of the profane from the sacred; for games, a strict division between everyday life and the gaming world is, in general, impossible because exchanging information between the game participants and their environment would be hindered (Salen and Zimmerman, 2003). To circumvent this, the idea that the

game's domain is a pure space (Caillois, 2001) and call upon the specific permeability of the magic circle. Such is the case of the RPGs' magic circle.

On the one hand, it must be open (to some degree) to supporting the *metagame*, i.e., the information flow from the players to their characters, which is forbidden in some gaming groups but encouraged in others. This information flow is necessary for players to continuously draw content as the game sustains itself, thanks to improvisation, and thus keep the existence of characters within the shared narrative. On the other hand, it must be somewhat closed. Otherwise, the distinction between the player and the character may be dissolved. This permeability points out several lines of investigation, such as Beltrán's *ego bleed* (2013; Bowman 2015).

A second ritual feature in RPGs is *liminality*. Proposed by van Gennep and later developed by Victor Turner to explore its social consequences (Turner 1995), it denotes the state where one cannot decide, not even relatively, if one is on the profane side or the sacred one. There is no absolute sacred place but only a *pivotment* between them (van Gennep 1960). Liminality allows transient and neutral ritual zones to exist, common grounds where the participant can transform their roles, making possible social cohesion in both secular and religious contexts. The onset of the liminal state in RPGs is evident. Laycock (2015) claims:

> Within this state of ritualized play, players are able to achieve a form of liminality. As their characters, players have temporarily escaped the structure of their ordinary social roles. Within the small body of scholarly literature on role-playing games, it now goes almost without saying that role-playing games are a form of liminal experience. (183)

Liminality in RPGs allows for the active creation of meaning strengthened by the shared narrative as a communal negotiated process (Schallegger 2018, 195). Unlike other rituals, RPGs become unique neutral spaces where one can play as a character with a completely different idiosyncrasy than that we own in everyday life or even an entirely fictitious one, thanks to the interplay of active imagination.

Lastly, we have what Émile Durkheim coined as *collective effervescence*, i.e., the fervor that arises in the ritual action that excites the participants toward ecstasy and unifies them (Durkheim 1995). For games, this is intimately related to *immersion*, i.e., the intensity of involvement of the player with the game (Calleja 2011; Bowman 2012; Lehrich 2005; Bowman 2018). The more a player gets involved, the subjective distance concerning the game reduces, fostering ludic continuity. RPGs are particularly special in this regard. Their ludic experience is more vivid as players interact with a co-created, *alive* narrative. As Mark Silcox and Jonathan Cox (2012, 131) remark, "The game hardly ever allows players to view things in the game world purely as objects of contemplation. Rather, it always requires us to immerse ourselves in the world that the DM envisages, via the first-person perspective of a fictional character." In any ritual, the experience is intensified by the presence of witnesses. This happens in games, too, and probably with the highest intensity in RPGs because the fictional world collaboratively built recognizes the presence of the player (Calleja 2011). Playing an RPG is living stories "in the flesh" of the characters, reinforcing the liminal state. "Thus, the 'audience' of a role-playing game invents the narrative as well as experiences it" (Bowman 2010, 13). We can conclude alongside Schallegger that "The immersive nature of the secondary reality produced and its performative procedural creation using elements of appropriated pre-texts clearly link ritual and RPG" (2018, 193).

5. THE SYMBOLIC APPROACH OF RPGs

Once we have revisited RPGs as rituals, we can explore them as symbols. We know that RPGs depend on a set of rules due to their ludic character. Since Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, RPG writers have designed adventures that groups worldwide can enact on their own terms. The extensive rulebooks and variety of *props* (miniatures, maps, screens, costumes) and *system elements* that support the ludic character of RPGs serve as the schematic side. They constitute a general draft that can lead to infinite personal realizations (general to particular). Inversely, RPGs possess an allegoric, metaphoric character because what has been collaboratively narrated points to a fictional world even though it exists, in principle, only during a single session. Each session is an allegory (a window) to a fictional world that can be built and stands on itself (general to particular) (Ehrett and Worth 2012). Players and game directors often get involved in worldbuilding that develops into large campaigns lasting for years. Unlike other games, RPGs *simultaneously* support the intimacy of the personal, co-created world and the transcendental conditions for others to visit. This means that RPGs' gamist (schematic) and narrative (allegoric) characters are balanced even if they seem irreconcilable.

Now, let us turn to the opposition of RPGs' narrative (myth) and dramatic (ritual) dimensions. Generally, narrating something is not equivalent to immediately experiencing what is told. Rituals help to save this distance by creating a direct experience (Duch 1998). But RPGs constitute an exceptional case because, as we discussed before, one genuinely experiences the fictional world when one plays it. Narrative and drama are deeply intertwined. So, the performative act of taking the role of characters, actively pretending what they think, sustains the continuity of the narration; simultaneously, it is the narration that directs the action. In other words, one would say that in RPGs, the ritual side creates a space for the narrative to flourish in a mythic way, while the shared story preserves the ritual as a ludic activity. As Schallegger claims, "If RPGs are performative narrative processes, they are therefore also ritualistic narrative spaces, as the experiences concerned are repeated" (2018, 196). Thus, RPGs cannot be merely reduced to either rituals or myths; they work in the two levels and constitute a perfect combination (undifferentiated balance) of mythic narrative and ritual interpretation. In this sense, RPGs would be an example of what Rusch (2018) calls a *mythical game* where:

> the boundaries between myth and ritual are blurrier. In games, you are not just told a myth. You perform a myth. The actions you take – even your moment-to-moment core mechanics – become part of the myth, and the way to experience the myth is through enactment. (7)

Moreover, the myth-ritual axis unfolds a spectrum where either the narrative or dramatic features can be intensified. Thus, we can locate tabletop RPGs as an intensification of narrative and myth due to their verbal dependence and larp as that of drama and ritual thanks to their specific eidetic reduction (Harviainen 2006) resulting from their physical embodiment and interpretation. Nevertheless, all RPG expressions would still be symbolic.

6. SYMBOLIC DEVICES

Tautegoricity helps us to exhibit the advantage of the symbolic standpoint: to the extent that RPGs are symbols, they can also be thought of as organisms and works of art. Following Schelling's philosophical ideas, these two share a deep metaphysical kinship with symbols (Schelling 1989). Art and organisms are not only tautegoric but autonomous, i.e., they should not be judged as mechanisms, i.e., according to a *telos* outside them (Kant 2007). They stand by themselves and serve no other purpose than keeping

themselves *alive*. We have already recognized this autonomous and living character of RPGs. They are not mere mechanisms serving only a ludic purpose, even though they have a schematic side. According to Pete Wolfendale and Tim Franklin (2012, 221), these traits make them a unique form of art, "It also gives this world a kind of *autonomy* from us, letting us experience the world as if it is unfolding *itself*, even though all its elements are contributed by us."

RPG fictitious worlds are larger than the players and allow us to interact with them as if they were independent of us: "only role-playing mimics the friction we encounter in bumping up against an autonomous reality" (Wolfendale and Franklin 2012). RPG worlds resist us, and the deepness of this interaction is reflected in the intense immersion and liminality, even though it is not a fully independent world as its substance is made of our subjectivity and imagination. From the symbolic perspective, I would define that RPGs are living mythic rituals and the art of the (ironic and collaborative) imagination (Bateman 2012; Saler 2012).

I deem RPGs as *symbolic devices* (because we employ them) and *symbols themselves* (because they gain autonomy) (Bastarrachea 2017). To live and grow, they feed upon the cultural elements that participants bring to the table, what Daniel MacKay calls *fictive blocks* (2001). When active, in the liminal state, the shared narrative takes those elements from the players and reconfigures them to create new meaning at the *symbolic level*. Laycock (2015, 183) expresses that in RPGs, "The normally fixed order of things becomes fluid, and symbols and people can be infused with new meaning." From this point of view, RPGs imply direct engagement with the archetypes because they are symbolic.

Thus, playing an RPG is an "easy way" to enter a symbolic domain, where we directly interact with symbols without mediation, connecting ourselves to our cultural roots with the gifts and dangers that come along. Our psychic, spiritual and metaphysical relation to the roots of our culture is refurbished in the mythic-ritual space of RPGs, easing the constellation of the archetypes (Jung 2010). We cannot create symbols out of the blue, but we can allow them to be embodied in new incarnations and, thus, live and mean differently. As a result, not only fictive blocks are transformed, but our whole subjectivity. In this regard, tabletop RPGs and larp pose as complementary options for archetypal engagement and subjectivity transformation as they would be located at different points in the spectrum of symbolic exegesis.

7. CONCLUSIONS: ANSWERING THE MODERN CONDITION

Once a game session has finished, the RPG -- as an autonomous organism and ephemeral work of art -- either dies or goes dormant. Then, we are left only with the testimony of the experience in the form of personal mythology (Larsen 1996). Not every RPG session would reach the symbolic level, only those with an onset of this lingering, anecdotic experience. Hence, RPGs have the potential to create mythological meaning and spaces where we can heal the harmful effects of the disenchantment project. As Bowman claims, (2010, 15) "Role-playing games fulfill the need for a modern-day ritual, cultivating the archetypal symbols of myth and providing a co-created social activity for the enactment of meaningful narratives." Even though the manifestation of symbols is not exclusive to our times, we could claim that RPGs are a necessary result of imagination's evolution in Modern times. Maybe RPGs are a unique device that emerged in postmodern times as an answer to the disenchantment project by providing a balance of rationalization (conceptual, schematic) and enchantment (imaginal, allegoric) (Mizer 2019), an equilibrium proper, again, of the symbolic. A timely opportunity considering the Modern acute discomfort in a secular, fragmented, and globalized world demands the creation of spaces and experiences based on mutual interests to foster social cohesion (Bowman 2010).

Games evolve because imagination does so (Saler 2012). The traditional perspective where games capture a fundamental aspect of our culture may be accurate. Still, it seems insufficient to grasp all the complexity of evolved and postmodern games like RPGs, which continue to grow in both the indie and most commercial scenarios as we speak. My proposal strives to unify theoretical dichotomies in role-playing game studies and pave the way in the current understanding of how RPG players interact with the archetypal domain, not only in the psychic, social, and cultural realms but also in the religious and metaphysical ones.

The remaining question is: how to harness this power to design games that improve their symbolic reach, i.e., to explore them as capable devices that profoundly transform our subjectivities and re-enchant our worlds? Archetypes are always there (so myths and rituals); RPGs offer a chance to renegotiate our relationship with them. People need stories, people need a community, and RPGs provide both. Schallegger (2018, 196) points out, "This revitalization of the individual will in turn lead to a revitalization of the society it reintegrates with." Even though my approach to the symbolic dimension of RPGs has been philosophical, it may be complemented with an approach from psychology, necessary for the exploration of symbolic, archetypical, and mythic engagements (Beltrán 2013; Rusch 2018), shadow work (Beltrán 2013) and soul guiding (Rusch and Phelps 2020), as well as the dangers of affirming social inequalities due to their ritual character (Lehrich 2005). Finally, a detailed discussion that recognizes the symbolic (and mythic) features proper to different RPG expressions, such as tabletop RPG and larp, as well as their ritualization (Hoover et al. 2018), would be necessary for the future.

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Self Arcana: A Self-Reflective, Story-Based Tarot Game

Popular abstract: *Self Arcana* is a collaborative, 2-player storytelling/self-reflection card game. The game requires players to create personalized tarot cards with which to play. Tarot imagery can be interpreted through the use of archetypes (Barrett 2009, 19), which can then become a tool for self-reflection (Hofer 2009). The creation of cards from personal symbols prevents players from interpreting meaning through traditional tarot imagery already associated with the collective unconscious or psychological resonance (Bowman 2017). Players are then encouraged to build narratives and role-play using cards that speak to them personally. We drafted the game through an initial design which we then built upon with research on Jungian psychology, archetypes, tarot and role-playing practices. After iterating our initial design, we playtested *Self Arcana* and wrote a duoethnographic playtest report on it.

Keywords: self-reflection, role-playing, tarot cards, duoethnography, game design

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1. INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Having an end goal of self-reflection prompted us to design a role-playing game due to the genre's potential to transform the player and aid them in their individuation process. Bowman compares Jung's active imagination and role-playing practices: while active imagination is generally a solitary and internal process, role-playing is an inherently social activity and typically takes place among two or more players. Moreso, "In Jung's active imagination, the person undergoing the dialoguing is the primary ego identity of the participant, not an imagined character" (Bowman 2012, 1); thus, distance between the participant and fiction is reduced.

Nevertheless, active imagination can be done in role-playing spaces; after going through processes of envisioning, dialoguing, and enactment during gameplay, what has been discovered stands to be reconciled with once the magic circle is broken. "The Ego experiences itself as individual in this moment – separate, somehow, from the archetypal entities with whom it has interacted, and yet altered through the experience of interaction itself" (Bowman 2012, 13). In itself, this is the process of individuation. The importance of archetypes in role-playing games for the individuation process is furthered, as "Active imagination leads to the aforementioned stripping of one's individual Ego identity, allows for the player to tap into their personal unconscious, then to further delve down into the collective unconscious" (Bowman 2012, 6). In turn, archetypes from the collective unconscious emerge as players continue to engage in gameplay—a process, in itself, of active imagination in a ritual setting.

Before the *Self Arcana* game session, players create their own tarot decks with which to play the game. To help players in card creation, we decided to utilize archetypes already present in tarot, as they can be interpreted using Jungian archetypes (Cook, Eladhari, and Sullivan 2018). It should be noted here that the Fool's Journey can be likened to Hero's Journey, and "can be read as a bildungsroman, a coming-of-age story" performing "the same function as mono-myth or 'hero's journey'" (Barrett 2011, 25). Moreover, Coulter (2004) claims that tarot contains "what psychiatrist Carl Jung referred to as deep-rooted transformational archetypes" and these archetypes "symbolize the hero's journey from childhood to adulthood" (as cited in Hofer 2009, 16), creating potential for storytelling practices through the cards and the archetypes.

Traditional tarot spreads and layouts can be used to create narratives using the archetypal symbols associated with the collective unconscious. Examples of these stories can be seen in games

like *tarocchi appropriati* among the Italian aristocracy based on the sonnets of 16th century Italian poet Teofilo Folengo, which incorporated themes and symbols from the Major Arcana (Cook, Eladhari and Sullivan, 2018). Another example is in Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, where he "realized the tarots were a machine for constructing stories" (1976) (as cited in Barrett 2011, 21), taking advantage of the "semiotic system, akin to languages" (Barrett 2011, 19) in the tarot imagery and symbolism.

Moreover, research suggests tarot can be used for self-reflection and in therapy, which is examined in Hofer's research (Hofer 2009). Kopp "investigated the archetypal themes that can be described as represented in each of the Major Arcana," which resulted in data implying that individuals who were not well versed in Jungian theory could identify said archetypal themes in tarot cards regardless (as cited in Hofer 2009, 25). The therapeutic potential and symbolic familiarity of tarot makes it a useful tool for self-reflection.

2. METHODOLOGY

Design research "is a practice that requires reflection, leading to an emergence of understanding throughout the design process" (Hook and Coulton 2017, 172). It differs from "the more traditional positivist methodologies used by many researchers considering games; which place most value on quantifiable outcomes" as explained by Nacke et al. in 2009 (as cited in Hook and Coulton 2017, 172). With our end goal of *Self Arcana* being self-reflection, we utilized Research through Design framework when creating the game.

We adopted a duoethnographic approach to examine how our design can encourage self-reflection, starting with the design process' and design's effect on ourselves. "Duoethnographers seek to examine and reconceptualize their narratives of interpretation—how they have come to understand an incident or theme in and through their lives" (Sawyer and Norries 2013, 3).

While we had previous literature needed to create a vague framework before starting the design, the game necessitates players to engage in some degree of personal insight to first create the cards. Thus, our research started with an initial design draft highlighting our main goals. Game designers' "understanding (of) their own unconscious is the first step to understanding the unconscious of their society" (Rusch 2018, 5-6). Therefore, we took a personally intuitive approach to card creation before designing the guideline for it.

Before the playtest, we established the design by way of research on archetypes, transformative game design frameworks, and related fields. The report is based on duoethnographic observations on the design process and playtest session.

The game session is split into two parts, with the first part of the session having players act as the game master (GM)/non-player-character (NPC). This was inspired by Carl Rogers' humanistic psychology, in which it is supposed that clients seeking therapy will naturally "gravitate towards growth, healing, and fulfillment of their potential," while the therapist's role is to "hold space, help the client identify areas of growth, and to guide explorations of alternative ways of acting and being to overcome personal obstacles" (Rusch 2020, 11), similar to the GM/NPC creating space for players to identify topics that may then be addressed in the second part of the game.

We instinctively drafted card designs based on our previous familiarity with tarot and symbolism, referring to imagery from creative works; influential real-life places and people; literary motifs; nature; everyday objects; traditional tarot; and other personal attachments. The visual design was done by Topcuoglu while in a dialogue with Durmus, leading to further discussion on why certain symbols were chosen and their implications. The research aims to externalize this intuitive approach through

a guideline and systemize it in a way that any player, regardless of their background, can identify symbols relevant to them, allowing for a space to practice self-reflection.

We aim to invite players to create narratives from personalized cards and to form a semiotic system of their own. In an unofficial playtest of an earlier iteration of the game, we found tarot archetypes and their meanings were unclear to players who had no previous experience with them. In order to make the game more accessible and to avoid overwhelming players with getting acquainted with pre-existing cards, a guideline for personal card creation and layouts to help with narrative building is to be provided. Utilizing cards personal to players also allows for better immersion.

3. DESIGN

3.1 Card Design

To provide players with a systemic guideline for card creation, we chose the Major Arcana from the Rider-Waite-Smith deck to be our leadoff. This is not only the most common Tarot deck, but also depicts the Fool's Journey (Barrett 2011, 25), which is a common story structure, also relevant to the game. Based on the descriptions of the tarot cards by Arthur Edward Waite in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* and intuitive interpretation, we simplified the deck by grouping cards according to concepts they represent (depicted in Table 1 below), as the rich archetypal symbolism of all 22 Major Arcana could prove overwhelming. Note these groupings are not definite, and some overlap may be present in the interpretations of the cards, as these analyses are ultimately subjective.

3.1 Card Design

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Applying these themes to the cards we initially created, we found parallels between ideas we wished to convey through our personal symbolism, suggesting that some level of archetypal engagement is manifested regardless of intent.

While the self is represented by one card, the remaining concepts can be paired by either their opposition to one another, or through their depiction of parallel concepts, thus becoming the upright and reversed positioning of the cards. In accordance, the reversed Self card represents the Jungian Shadow, exemplified in Table 2.

Table 1: Groupings of tarot cards based on concepts they represent (Waite 1959).

Tarot Card	**Concept the Card Represents**
Self	The Fool
Creation	The Magician, High Priestess, and Empress
Connections and Duty	The Emperor, Hierophant, and Lovers
Conflict	The Chariot and Lovers
Source of Power / Will	Justice, Hermit, and Strength
Transformation	The Wheel of Fortune, Hanged Man, and Death
Virtues	Temperance and Star
Ruin, Destruction, Chaos	The Devil and Tower
Enlightenment	The Moon, Sun, Judgment, and World

We ask our playtesters to create cards based on these concepts/binaries before the game session; doing so provides a foundation from which to build their ideas.

3.2 Character Creation

For the game session, we do not ask players to create complicated characters requiring extensive background writing. Based on Bowman's Nine Types of Role-playing Characters (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 403-404), and our assumptions of what would be best for self-reflection, we suggest playing as one the following character types:

Doppelganger: Play as yourself.

Devoid: Which part of you would you subtract? Play as yourself, minus that part.

Fragmented: Which part of you do you want to highlight?

Repressed: Which parts of you do you dislike? Repress? Ashamed of? Try to play with those parts in mind. OR, play as your favorite villain.

Idealized: Play as your ideal self OR as your favorite hero.

Oppositional: Who are you NOT? Who do you see when you imagine your opposite? Play as that person.

Table 2: Oppositional or parallel concepts and card positioning.

Example Card	**Upright**	**Reversed**
Goddess	Self	Shadow
God	Transformation	Enlightenment
Crow	Creation	Destruction
Mother	Source of Power	Duty
Sun	Virtues	Conflict

As this paper mainly focuses on card creation and tarot imagery, the character creation part of the game has been kept minimal.

Although asking players to consider their repressed aspects is difficult to do consciously and on demand, the game itself is centered around creating a magic circle between two players. It invites them to explore aspects of themselves they may not have previously been aware of and are therefore significant to include. Regarding this play space, Beltrán states, "The ego becomes relaxed enough to allow unconscious content to surface. This is very akin to Jung's concept of active imagination," which is a tool through which we implore players to consider their values, needs, and emotional states (Beltrán 2013, 98).

3.3 Spreads

Spreads provide structure upon which to build narrative, which players can do individually and by combining cards. "Once a spread is chosen, the referents are defined, and an interpretive code is established, a number of story-building techniques are available to the creator of Tarot texts. The generative narrative of the cards can be deliberately directed by the reader," (Barrett 2011, 25). Similar

to how narrative structures give shape to language and lead to the creation of a story, the semiotic structure of tarot cards can be shaped by spreads into a narrative whole.

Tarot-Based Narrative Generation makes use of a 5-act story structure to generate a tale from tarot cards. Spreads can also function as a means to form narrative structure similar to McKee's principles (Cook, Eladhari and Sullivan, 2018).

The game has two stages—first, each player role plays with their own deck of 5 cards, then, players join cards. In the latter, a 10-card spread, freeform or pre-existing, can be used to generate a narrative. The first stage encourages individuation in the players separately, to then lead to the second stage, where the pair will role-play to form introspective dialogue.

3.4 Location

We encourage players to choose a location for their stories to take place. Preferably, the setting would be familiar to both players as this would both help with immersion in the role-play, and allow players to communicate narratives better. This factor is especially significant to consider during the second half of the game when narratives are combined.

Three techniques that have helped designers create stories are as such: tarot as a storytelling system, stories to story worlds, and storytelling to worldbuilding (Ciancia and Mariani 2019). Location was therefore a significant storytelling device to add, as it is necessary for both worldbuilding, and can be used to refer to players' real-world experiences.

3.5 Rituals

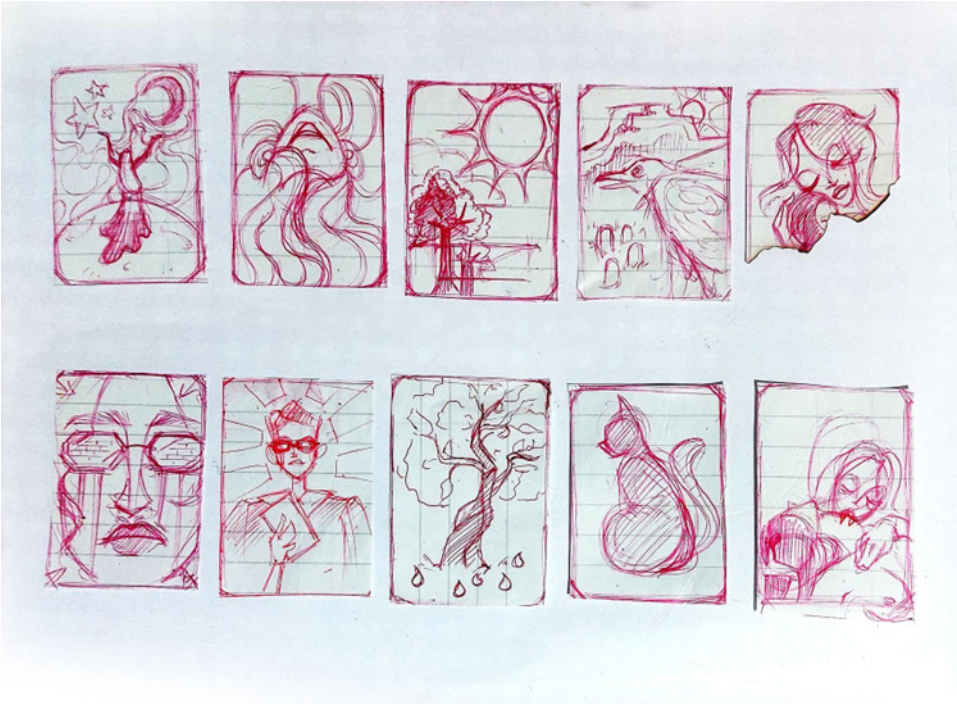
End-game rituals are significant as they encourage introspection, self-reflection, and provide players with an overall therapeutic experience. Asking players to choose one card to burn, to keep, and to change after the session will mimic rituals used in psychotherapy, which "are designed together with clients, oriented towards their individual needs and drawing on elements that are symbolically potent for them" (Rusch 2018, 7). Moreover, rituals can enhance mythic aspects of the game as Joseph Campbell explains, "Ritual is simply myth enacted; by participating in a rite, you are participating directly in the myth" (as qtd. in Rusch 2018, 7). Players are also encouraged to bring items or imagine symbols related to the location they have chosen for the session to enhance immersion through an altar-like ritual space.

In summary, players first create their own personalized mini-tarot decks with the card creation guideline (Table 2) and choose a character type they want to play as. Players can use cards to either play with a tarot spread or to play freeform. Furthermore, a location is chosen and they agree on what rituals to enact. After these preparatory steps are done, they can move on with the 2-part game session.

3.6 Playtest Report

We playtested the game with the cards designed, choosing the original sample scenario "The Bar at the End of the World" as it resonated with both of us. The Bar was meant to simulate a purgatory-like setting with no passage of time or foreseeable exit. We played as our Doppelganger selves and used freeform spreads, improvising throughout. To increase immersion, we played music appropriate to the setting.

Figure 1: Example Cards Designed by Durmus and Topcuoglu. Art by Topcuoglu.



In the first stage with individual spreads, the player whose cards were being used played the main character, the other the GM/NPC. Roles were then reversed to observe the other player's deck.

During the playtest, we wanted to see how we could create stories with as little narrative structure as possible and see to what degree we could improvise. Freeform role-playing with the cards created confusion and lack of harmony. Though personal reflection through the cards was possible, it was limited to characters reacting to them or wanting to switch their Doppelganger character to the archetype associated with the chosen card. As part of the playtest-improvisation, we came up with possible game rules on spot, testing them out. Though this approach showed possible rulesets and mechanics that could be adapted to the game, the meta aspect of it broke immersion in role-play.

We both realized the majority of the reflection process came from the card creation, rather than the game itself; as mentioned before, choosing which symbols to use for the cards led to conversations about the importance of the said symbols.

3.6.1 Durmus' Perspective

The burning ritual felt meaningful because I felt a connection to my cards and the symbols associated. This connection transformed into desire to play as characters depicted in the cards, to change my perspective. Such an approach led to dialoguing with different selves, suggesting that active imagination was practiced. Therefore, I believe the cards have storytelling and self-reflection potential but lack structure.

I had an easier time immersing myself in the story thanks to my role-playing experience; however, the reflections I had during gameplay when I wanted to play as one of the archetypes in my cards disturbed the flow of the story.

The playtest we had triggered distress regarding one of the archetypes portrayed in my cards. To this day, I find myself thinking about the archetype and what it has signified for me in the past,

the effects that it has on me currently, and the possible reflections it will allow me to make in the future. However, since I am one of the co-designers and researchers of this game, and have an existing tendency to ruminate on personal issues, it is challenging for me to separate my designer and player roles. It should not be assumed the processes that I went through will occur in the same manner for all players, or have the same impact as they did for me, as personal interests and perspectives on life may differentiate. Even within the parameters of this duoethnography, the significance of the game session had for Topcuoglu highly differs from the significance it had on me. Future playtests can allow for varying experiences to be observed.

3.6.2 Topcuoglu's Perspective

Starting the game with the end goal and expectation of self-reflection limited my ability to play the game fluently. Because I was aiming to understand myself better overall, but didn't have a specific question I wished to find an answer to, I played the game through arbitrary decisions, choosing cards at random. However, in doing this, I generated narratives for characters through role-play, actively drawing connections between cards picked, their contexts, and interpretations. I therefore believe the game is better suited to build stories than it is as a tool for self-reflection (which is difficult to engage in on demand). Narratives generated in this process hold potential to incite self-reflection, either through the player's personal connection to the themes present, or through retrospective analysis and reflection.

I believe the game is successful in creating space to improvise narratives. Shifting its focus to story generation would allow players to take an indirect approach to self-reflection, which may be more effective for introspection, and appealing to a broader group.

4. DISCUSSION

The playtest-improvisation led to the following takeaways:

1) Because the game relies so heavily on improvisation and role-play, players who have had no experience with either may have trouble with immersion. They may also find it difficult to role-play in scenarios that have similarity to real life situations, as they are playing with cards that hold personal symbolic meaning.
2) Familiarity between the two players also affects the way the game is played. Limitations, as well as advantages, may arise from the level of intimacy between players.
3) Players should negotiate the game terms and story elements before starting the session for safety reasons as well as to create a coherent narrative.
4) As the card creation process was so significant to our pre-game discussion and reflection, we wanted to use cards during gameplay to facilitate role-play, or further the plot of the game. In turn, the cards acted as prompts. However, a tarot spread creates a story through interpretation, not role-playing; future players can bear this in mind and adjust rules accordingly to avoid lack of harmony.
5) Generating stories through cards personal to the player invites them to intrinsically make connections to their own experiences. Thus, having players create narratives in this manner can allow for better self-understanding.

As a limitation, the analysis of the playtest results is limited as it is based on duoethnography and not on comprehensive playtests conducted with other players.

Based on takeaway 4 and 5, future iterations of *Self Arcana* can employ design principles detailed by Wallis (2008). He argues that game instructions and mechanics making use of players' genre familiarity lead to story creation games that produce coherent stories. Although Self Arcana's card creation guideline holds potential to help players who are unfamiliar with tarot symbolism, it does not offer a sample story that can be created with these mechanics. Thus, future iterations of *Self Arcana* will aim to provide players with rules and guidelines that familiarizes them with story development and creation.

5. CONCLUSION

Future iterations of *Self Arcana* will be based on qualitative and quantitative data we plan to collect in future playtests, as well as autoethnographic observations made throughout the design process and playtest. We aim to test *Self Arcana* to observe its effect on players with differing role-playing experiences and various relationship dynamics to iterate the design based on playtest data.

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Reparative Play in *Dungeons & Dragons*

Popular abstract: This article examines the creation of queer rhetoric through role-play to find the reparative value that *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974-) can potentially provide the queer communities. My work focuses on the concept of reparative play, an adaptation of reparative reading which was first proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1995 (Sedgwick 2003). Reparative reading explores alternatives to heteronormative ideals through the act of reading. Instead of getting caught up in the problematic implications of a text, the alternatives are foregrounded (Sedgwick 2003, 137). Reparative play then expands reparative reading into the realm of play, where one explores the possibility for a sustainable queer livelihood through play (Vist 2018). I conclude with an observation of safety tools designed for tabletop RPGs, that enable reparative play.

This work will be posited alongside an autoethnographic reflection of my own role-play experience as a means of demonstrating reparative play in practice. My work is founded on Sedgwick's (2003) *Touching Feeling*, Kara Stone's (2018) "Time and Reparative Game Design," and Sarah Lynne Bowman's (2010) *The Functions of Role-Playing Games.* These scholars observe role-play as a method of queer performativity and identity exploration. I propose that through the embodiment of a *D&D* character, set in a more accepting world, the players can enact reparative play to give an accurate and positive representation of themselves while promoting alternatives to heteronormative culture.

Keywords: reparative play, *Dungeons & Dragons*, queer identites, asexuality, emancipatory bleed

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1. INTRODUCTION

As queer identities continue to be marginalized in contemporary culture, the spaces for queer discourse in most media are limited. Through queer performativity, members of the queer community have the chance to accurately represent ourselves and overwrite the more harmful stereotypes that are associated with us (Sedgwick 1993, 1). Like film, literature, music, and performance (Jones 2020; Sedgwick 2003; Tau 2021), role-play provides an opportunity for queer performativity, allowing us to create our own progressive discourse (Lasley 2021, 62). Role-play can commonly be found in drag or theatre but more recently it has been popularized through role-playing games (RPGs). *Dungeons and Dragons* (*D&D*), being the most popular RPG to date, is considered a common pastime for people all over the world. However, for some, it is much more than just a game. *D&D* helps people in ways that many of us do not realize.

I identify as asexual, and this aspect of my identity influences how I relate to people and navigate the world. However, aside from maybe Todd Chavez from *BoJack Horseman*, I do not see members of the asexual/ace community adequately represented in popular media. Instances in independent gaming media, such as Parvati Holcomb from *The Outer Words* or the playable class in *Monster Hearts 2*, do accentuate asexuality but I would not consider those examples to be mainstream. In the more mainstream realm, there is an instance in *House M.D.* where the topic of asexuality comes up, but ultimately it was something that Dr. House could cure, which is problematic and how doctors often approach ace community members. As a queer individual, how I tell my story is critical to my self-representation, as no one can tell my story better than I.

That being said, I know that as consumers, media plays a huge role in how we view the world and perceive one another. It becomes detrimental to us as people when the discourse surrounding this same media socializes us into accepting problematic mindsets like gender norms and teaches us how we should act based on the identity assigned to us at birth. The opportunity to play the role of a character

who inhabits a more accepting world can then be used to assist the queer community with the difficulty we may experience in accepting our own identity (Stone 2018), and help to develop us further as people (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Lasley 2021, 51).

To explain how this works, I look at the creation of queer rhetoric through role-play to find the reparative value that *D&D* can potentially provide the queer communities. My work focuses on the concept of reparative play, an adaptation of reparative reading, which was first proposed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in 1995 (Sedgwick 2003). Reparative reading explores alternatives to heteronormative ideals through the act of reading. Instead of getting caught up in the problematic implications of a text, the alternatives are foregrounded (Sedgwick 2003, 137). Reparative play then expands reparative reading into the realm of play, where one explores the possibility for a sustainable queer livelihood through play (Vist 2018).

I conclude with an observation of safety tools designed for tabletop RPGs that enable reparative play. This will be posited alongside an autoethnographic reflection of my own role-play experience as a means of demonstrating reparative play in practice. My work is founded on Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*, Kara Stone's "Time and Reparative Game Design," and Sarah Lynne Bowman's *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*. These scholars observe role-play as a method of queer performativity and identity exploration. I propose that through the embodiment of a *D&D* character set in a more accepting world, the players can enact reparative play to give an accurate and positive representation of themselves while promoting alternatives to heteronormative culture.

2. REPARATIVE PLAY

At its core, reparative reading is placing focus on a positive framing of a story with the intention of constructing a more optimistic view for our future. Ellis Hanson describes it best by saying "a reparative reading focuses not on the exposure of political outrages that we already know about but rather on the process of reconstructing a sustainable life. . . In other words, we rebuild our immediate surroundings. . . [and our] belief in a future," (Hanson 2011, 105). For the queer community, reparative reading is a frame through which we can see and access progressive representation, which positively frames our values, within narratives. Sedgwick's reparative reading of *In Search of Lost Time* points out how it would not have been possible for the narrator to take joy in the truths he came across if he were being held back by a heterotypical family (Sedgwick 2003, 147-48). This reading reframes the heterotypical family as restrictive and favours an alternative to this heteronormative value. Similarly, the reparative reading of queer characters in ideal situations allows us to see potential changes for our world to bring these ideals to fruition. In terms of reparative play, we can see that it has similar aspects to reparative reading as a frame of interpretation, but its focus as an object text is performance centred around queerness, which is visible in the gaming communities.

Queer performativity uses performance in a way that allows people to question the restrictions of traditional gender roles and heteronormative expectations. We can then see a useful application for reparative reading when it is applied to queer performativity, the former being used as an interpretation for the latter. As such, Kara Stone (2018) notes a link between the reparative and the performative:

> Reparative art is a method to work through difficult feelings but is also a method to stay in them as long as they need to be felt . . . Reparative art is not a way to move on from or be cured of mental illness, psycho-social disability, or the states in need of healing, but actually a mode of staying in them. Sometimes that means moving around in them, sometimes being stuck in them. (Stone 2018)

In this manner, queer performativity allows people to "move around" in the discourse they create, with a reparative reading of the context being used to interpret a hopeful image of the future. This performativity acts as a counternarrative to heteronormative culture that develops sustainable motives, or practices, for the queer community (Tytler 2022, 248; Vist 2018). This reparative reading frame can be present elsewhere, like podcasts or drag shows. However, in this article, I observe this reframing potential with tabletop RPGs being the primary media site. Seeing how queer performativity can be used as the performative of a reparative practice, we can direct our focus to the culmination of these two practices: reparative play (Vist 2018).

Reparative play, like reparative reading, is an idealistic interpretation of the story that transpires. Unlike reparative reading, which lacks a performative aspect, reparative play is enacted by queer performativity so that the player is healing by exacting their autonomy through their actions. By formulating psychological problems and solutions for both the characters and their players, and showing how they fail or succeed in the actions they take, the enactment of particular values and behaviors can be experienced (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014, 31; Payne 1989, 28). This creation of discourse can help them reimagine the world in a positive light and change how they view their positionality in and alongside the world's problems (Muñoz 2009, 28). Elektra Diakolambrianou notes that "reality is not objective but socially constructed, and thus having narratives is our way of maintaining and organizing our personal reality and making sense of our experiences" (Diakolambrianou 2021).

Engaging with the rhetoric of these types of narratives might let the players resolve tensions they experience in the world (Lasley 2021, 58; Payne 1989, 29). These liberating actions taken by role-players allow for the freeing cathartic experience known as emancipatory bleed. When said players steer themselves into situations where they can fight oppression, Jonaya Kemper notes how emancipatory bleed becomes a liberating feeling they can acquire through play (Kemper 2020). This liberatory steering then is an available act the players can use to seek out and enact freeing experiences in game (Kemper 2020). Simultaneously, reparative play constructs progressive narratives with the experiential reading it affords players through the performance. Therefore, I situate emancipatory bleed as a potential benefit alongside reparative play and liberatory steering as an available action to enact these benefits during play. Where reparative play is conducive to a rhetorical experience that formulates progressive stories through play (Stone 2018), the emancipatory bleed felt in these experiences can be greatly beneficial to the player's sense of empowerment (Kemper 2020).

3. SO, WHY *D&D*?

According to Michelle Nephew, *D&D* is the ideal setting to navigate cultural taboos because the game allows players to easily enact a form of wish fulfillment since they are always viewed as the "good guys" (Nephew 2006, 126). Additionally, it is worth noting that "gender and film scholar Doty insists on studying mainstream texts and argues that these are more likely and more productive sources for queer readings precisely because they reach wider audiences" (Ouellette 2014, 36). As we can observe in modern media, *D&D* is a staple in the RPG community, reaches wide audiences, and is an ideal example through which I can explore the concept of reparative play for creating progressive queer experiences in an RPG format. On top of that, opportunities for reparative play arise in RPGs played by the queer community because "The worlds that queer gamers play in are inherently queer, inherently different, and inherently optimistic" (Codega 2020; England 2021). This phenomenon of queergaming, as coined by Edmond Y. Chang (2017, 18), is why I focus on the more popular game *D&D* as opposed to lesser known indie games made by queer designers. Even in games where the source material can initially be problematic, there is still potential to create progressive queer discourse through reparative

play when played by members of the queer community (Sedgwick 2003, 146).

While previous versions of the game have been restrictive with their character creation affordances, like class requirements and race options, newer editions make diverse character options more accessible. *D&D* fifth edition's free-flowing rules and heavy reliance on world-building contribute two key elements towards the act of reparative play: 1) it affords individuals room to craft their own stories within a greater arching narrative, and 2) it encourages the use of personalized characters—often avatars of the players—as a way for them to exist in a safe space. As such, the positionality and purpose with which a player approaches the game will heavily influence the reparative play they experience from it (Moriarity 2019). The improvised experience of the game allows players to act and present themselves as they please while exploring queer themes (Stenrose and Sihvonen 2019). Through this freedom, the role-playing aspect of *D&D* can be used as a productive and entertaining tool to facilitate reparative play.

The social benefits of *D&D* have been reported previously, even if the players did not realize that they were already taking part in a form of reparative play. Taliesin Jaffe touches on reparative play, with his bisexual genderfluid character Mollymauk Tealeaf on the *D&D* podcast *Critical Role*, saying how it allows him to explore a life he had considered (Kenreck 2018). Joan Moriarity, in her article "How My Role-playing Game Character Showed Me I Could be a Woman," discusses at length how tabletop RPGs were crucial to her journey of self-discovery (Moriarity 2019). In a similar vein, game designer Josephine Baird describes the alibi that *D&D* gave her to take part in her own gender performativity in high school (Baird 2021, 100), while Ally Beardsley's portrayal of their trans character, Pete Conlan, on the *D&D* podcast *Dimension 20*, explored the life of a person who has undergone gender-affirmation surgery before Beardsley underwent their own (Hanna 2020). These tabletop RPG narratives help to normalize queerness and enable reparative play while emancipatory bleed empowers the players (Kemper 2017).

4. TOOLS FOR PLAY

While playing *D&D* has the potential to allow for a shared space where the players can act more freely and comfortably than they would otherwise (Cazeneuve 2018, 4), this is not a guarantee. If we wish to employ reparative play effectively, there are scholars and game designers developing tools to facilitate this play. These tools allow us to assist players in accepting their queer identity and allow them to portray themselves as they see fit.

Axiel Cazeneuve, for one, brings up some initial strategies to make room for more gender exploration in role-play through the use of pronouns. Creating a world where every character is referred to as "they/them" or every character can be referred to with any pronouns, "he/him, she/her, xe/xem," makes room for those who wish to transcend the gender norms by which their characters could be constricted (Cazeneuve 2018, 4-6).

Kemper explains how members of marginalized communities steer for survival, where they navigate the game in a manner that does not bring up any disparaging or insensitive subject matter (Kemper, Saitta, and Koljonen 2020). This steering, in *D&D*'s case, would be excluding racist content, like the Hadozee race option (Hall 2022), which has been banned from my table as it would be triggering and act as a barrier to reparative play. The way that this is often achieved is a practice known as Session 0 in which the group gathers before the play and begins to discuss their boundaries and expectations, what they are okay with experiencing, and what they hope to achieve in the play. While events that violate the players' boundaries may never occur to begin with, this practice ensures everyone that the players will collectively be steering away from any potential triggers, as the group is obligated to maintain these rules. Session 0 has become such common practice that it was included as part of the official guidelines

in the *D&D* module *Van Richten's Guide to Ravenloft* as a precaution for running a horror game safely (Schneider et al. 2021, 186). Session 0 also assists in working towards the design goal and ensuring the sustainability of the endeavour. Here, the players might create characters that work well together and are willing to assist each other in meeting their socio-emotional needs, which can aid in their reparative play as everyone is looking for an experience and willing to help each other attain it.

If these rules are broken, the Dungeon Master (DM)—the player with the most authority—can stop the game. However, if it comes to it, the players can enact their own agency and quit a game that they do not wish to be a part of anymore. One safety tool for these moments would be an X-Card placed on the table that a player can touch at any time to alert everyone of their discomfort (Cook 2019, 6). The DM's intervention would be some initial warning; however, if a player needs to intervene, that would be more serious, as they do not trust the DM to stop the play. In this case, the setup needs to be re-examined and the game will potentially need to end.

With regard to character creation, Bowman takes a typological approach to the characters that a player might design, classifying them based on how the character is derived from aspects of the player. I find this useful as it helps me organize the approaches that players, who want to employ reparative play, might take to the game, as well as the portrayal of their character. While there are trillions of possible variations in the characters that could be created, I want to make note of the nine types that Bowman examines relative to the player, which I believe would be ideal for reparative play. To summarize, these are the Doppelganger Self, the Devoid Self, the Augmented Self, the Fragmented Self, the Repressed Self, the Idealized Self, the Oppositional Self, the Experimental Self, and the Taboo Self (Bowman 2010, 155-56). These character types are not mutually exclusive of each other and there are large areas for potential overlap between two or more of them while embodying a single character. I do not have the space to go into detail with every one of these character types, but I personally found the Doppelganger Self most useful when enacting reparative play by telling one's own story.

The Doppelganger Self is made to act and think like its player, as though the player has been put in the context in which the character finds itself. This character type provides the player with more self-awareness of their own perspective than would typically be the case if the player were trying to figure out how a different character would act. This is a very common character to make for beginners, as they would have an easier time navigating the world when they are not preoccupied with the dissonance that comes between a player's wants and a character's wants. While more experienced players often disapprove of this type, feeling like it is not role-playing if you are playing yourself, Bowman notes, "The similarity between the primary self and the persona can also work to enhance self-esteem, offering an 'ordinary' person the opportunity to do extraordinary things and make a difference in crisis situations" (Bowman 2010, 155-56).

5. RPG PRAXIS AS RESEARCH

In terms of my own autoethnographic approach, I found the Doppelganger Self insightful for when I decided to play an asexual firbolg named Vander Annamson. Vander was the son of the giant god and was tasked with uniting the giant kingdoms. He was forced to marry one heir from each kingdom and through this I was able to create a new narrative for myself with Vander. I treated each relationship I was in as queer platonic instead of doing the whole "yes, and…" of improv when another character flirted with me. Even though I was not romantically or sexually attracted to my partners, I was still able to be good friends with them and that was more functional for me as a member of those relationships. Through this character, I created my own narrative where asexuality was approached as a positive alternative to the heteronormative ideal.

This benefited me greatly because I was able to create a piece of media, in my own canon at least, where an asexual character, like me, had a fulfilling existence without a sexual or romantic partner (Kemper 2020). This is in line with larp designers Laura Wood and Quinn D, who note how the separation of sexual and romantic attraction in how these aspects are experienced by the character is useful for designing a character for the desired play that the player wishes to take part in (Wood and D 2021). Considering aspects of my identity this way aided in creating a character who was more attuned to the way I felt about the world. In cooperation with my fellow players, I was able to "steer" away from any social pressure to pursue romance and felt supported in my exploration of asexual identity. Having this type of self-representation (Kemper 2020) gave me the rhetorical support I needed to begin openly identifying as ace, and with that came a greater degree of fulfillment in my social relationships.

6. CONCLUSION

Over the course of this essay, I have looked at the use of *D&D* as a tool for facilitating reparative play. Setting up the concept of reparative play from Sedgwick's reparative reading, I showed how the alternative frame of play could better accommodate the performativity necessary to help normalize, and develop progressive discourse around, queer identity. Through the application of the tools presented, I illustrated how one might approach reparative play in RPGs in my autoethnography. I have found that *D&D*, along with other RPGs, has great untapped potential for progressive change through reparative play and it will all start with players coming together to imagine a brave new world.

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The Vampire Foucault: Erotic Horror Role-Playing Games as a Technologies of the Self

Popular abstract: In Technologies of the Self (1988), philosopher and sociologist Michel Foucault summarizes his life work as an analysis of how various truth games explore "the relationships between truth, power, and self" and in this series of lectures he investigates the "practices whereby individuals, by their own means or with the help of others, acted on their own bodies, souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being in order to transform themselves to attain a certain state of perfection or happiness" (Foucault 1988, 15, 18). While Foucault provides a genealogy of religious and philosophical examples of these technologies of the self, those familiar with role-playing games (RPGs) recognize that their practice also meets these criteria. Even though most people play RPGs for entertainment and escapism, they are potentially transformative (Kemper 2020; Bowman and Hugaas 2021), especially erotic-horror RPGs, like *Vampire: The Masquerade* (*VtM*) (Davis et al. 1992).

This essay will explain how RPGs function as a type of truth game and how they can be understood as technologies of the self when played to achieve *transformative bleed*. It will also use Foucault's thought to explain how some RPGs, like *VtM*, are better suited for transformative bleed because their *technology of signs*, i.e., the setting and rules that define meaning within the game, enable the development of more psychologically complex characters through game mechanics inspired by Jungian depth psychology (Bowman 2010; Beltrán 2012, 2013). Finally, my most recent character, Robin Alecto, will be used as a case study of how the game mechanics of *VtM* function as a *technology of the self.*

Keywords: transformation, empancipatory bleed, Foucualt, erotic-horror, *Vampire: the Masquerade*

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In *Technologies of the Self* (1988), a posthumous anthology of lectures delivered by Michel Foucault just two years prior to his death in 1984, he summarizes his wide-ranging thought as follows:

> What I have studied are the three traditional problems: (1) What are the relations we have to truth through scientific knowledge, to those "truth games" which are so important in civilization and in which we are both subject and object? (2) What are the relationships we have to others through those strange strategies and power relationships? And (3) what are the relationships between truth, power, and self? (Foucault 1988, 15)

While Foucault probably never encountered Dungeons & Dragons (D&D) or one of the other commercial role-playing games (RPGs) available during the 1970s & 1980s, he did enjoy and advocate BDSM as a technology of the self and multiple scholars note how BDSM is a type of RPG (Plant 2007; Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020). This bridge allows us to consider RPGs as potential truth games and to apply these three questions, and other analytic tools developed by Foucault, to the content, play, and functions of RPGs.

According to Foucault, *truth games*, like medicine, science, and law enforcement, shape society through a sophisticated process of role-playing. Participants assume or are assigned certain roles (e.g. doctor-patient, police-criminal) which structure their power, norms, and actions. Consequently, truth is not an independent object waiting to be discovered, but a product that emerges through the interactions of the participants. While RPGs have lower stakes than the previously mentioned truth games, they follow the same process of role assumption that seeks an outcome or truth that emerges through the complex interaction of setting, player-character actions, non-player character reactions, stats, rules, and

ludic elements, like dice, which simulate randomness. Likewise, its participants function as both players and characters, which speaks to the oscillating roles of subject and object to which Foucault refers. Players oscillate between holding our characters at an objective distance, which theorists label *alibi*, and experiencing their characters subjectively, which is labeled *immersion* (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018, 253).

This oscillation between subject and object, player and character, and alibi and immersion often result in bleed or the "phenomenon of emotions, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spilling over between in-game and out-of-game" (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018, 254). Bleed can be positive or negative, but it can also be transformative when it reveals hidden psychological insights to the player and empowers the development of new capacities in their daily lives. Transformative bleed usually emerges as an unexpected byproduct when RPGs are played for entertainment. For example, a player might notice that routinely playing a certain class, like a Ranger, symbolizes a deep personal motivation, like the need to feel self-sufficient. However, it is not uncommon for some players to experiment with "playing for bleed" through a variety of techniques, such as creating characters who are close to their own identity, playing to lose, steering their character towards extreme circumstances, ascetic practices in real life (e.g. sleep deprivation, drugs, fasting, etc.), or by exploring taboo scenarios (Bowman and Lieberoth 2018, 254-255).

Playing for bleed is a form of edge play and can be risky; nevertheless many communities and scholars support the idea that if play occurs in a safe setting with mutually supportive adult players and routine use of safety tools, then RPGs can harness bleed for the purpose of self-transformation. For example, members of the Nordic larp community insist that role-playing can function as a "transformative space within which we can explore our edges and mold our self-concepts through play" (Bowman and Hugaas, 2021). Consider how this emphasis on self-creation of identity resonates with the following summary of Foucault's technologies of the self:

> His new project would be, rather, a genealogy of how the self constituted itself as a subject. . . . an investigation of those practices whereby individuals, by their own means or with the help of others, acted on their own bodies, souls, thought, conduct, and way of being in order to transform themselves and attain a certain state of perfection or happiness, or to become a sage or immortal, and so on. (Foucault 1988, 4)

Peak experiences during play often signify that transformation has occurred or is immanent and include such experiences as a possessing force where the player is so immersed that "the player abandons a personal identity and surrenders to the character. . . to directly experience the full subjective reality of the character" (Turkington 2006); character realization or a "strong sense of the character as a distinct entity" from the self (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 403); archetypal enactment where the player sets "aside their own identity for a time in order to take up another, more essential kind of role" usually of a mythic or religious nature (Beltrán 2012, 94); and emancipatory bleed where the player frees themselves from the internalized mythic norms of systemic forms of oppression (Kemper 2020).

Thus, role-playing games, especially transformative play, resemble the historical technologies of self that Foucault discusses (Socratic self-care, the Stoic practice of askēsis, and the sacrament of confession in the Catholic church) because they involve communal social practices to achieve self-transformation and similar states of perfection (Foucault 1988, 19-41). It should also be noted that all these technologies are dialogical and involve conversations between a student seeking transformation and a master guiding that process. Traditional RPGs mimic these structures, especially ones which involve a game master who verbally describes a scenario to which the player-characters respond.

Foucault also insists that truth games empower self-transformation through their technologies of signs or the tools which "permit us to use signs, meanings, symbols, or signification" (Foucault 1988, 18). With regards to RPGs, their technology of signs would be the settings and rules they use for play and naturally some rules increase the possibility of playing for transformative bleed. Thus, a game like Vampire: The Masquerade (VtM) (Davis et al. 1992) that focuses on narrative storytelling as opposed to tactical combat, like D&D, is more likely to explore content and scenarios where transformative bleed might occur. First, the players are not the human heroes who fight these monsters; they are the monsters! Therefore, the drama of these games is less about completing quests or good deeds, than it is about experiencing the perspective of a supernatural being through the pursuit of personal agendas; the negotiation of complicated political scenes; guarding against or confronting other supernatural beings; uncovering forgotten forbidden lore; remaining undetected by humans; and maintaining one's sanity across decades or centuries.

Consequently, these different narratives require different rules than tactical or combat games, thus a different technology of signs which is most obvious at the level of character creation. While most editions of D&D focus on calculating the combat stats of the character with minimal attention to their social, psychological, or philosophical traits, in VtM this ratio is reversed. In all World of Darkness (WoD) games, only three of the core Attributes are Physical (Strength, Dexterity, and Stamina) whereas the other six form an equal balance between Social (Charisma, Manipulation, and Appearance) and Mental (Perception, Intelligence, and Wits) Attributes. This ratio signals to players that they should use their combat skills as a last resort when solving problems. Indeed, an important dramatic tension in VtM and other WoD games is that characters should resist using their often-overwhelming supernatural powers, especially for violence, out of fear of exposing themselves as monsters or psychological degeneration.

More importantly, the VtM character creation also includes elaborate stats for a character's psychology. Players begin to create their characters by selecting a Nature and Demeanor from a list of personality Archetypes (e.g. Autocrat, Bon Vivant, Child, Judge, Rebel, etc.) that reflect their Character Concept. Acting in accordance with these Archetypes allows a character to regain Willpower, another psychological trait, that they use to resist various forms of supernatural manipulation and can spend to increase the likelihood that a specific action will be successful. Furthermore, the rules encourage tension between a character's Nature (true self) and Demeanor (public personae) because diverging Archetypes allow a character to regain Willpower through a wider range of behaviors than if they were the same or similar. This tension provides a mechanical advantage for creating characters with psychological depth and multiple scholars have discussed extensively White Wolf's deliberate incorporation of terms and concepts from Jungian depth psychology (Bowman 2010; Beltrán 2012).

For example, when creating my most recent character, Robin Alecto, I selected the Rebel archetype for her Nature and Defender for her Demeanor. Rebel's regain Willpower when they "inflict significant damage on the order you despise" and Defender's regain Willpower when they "successfully defend your chosen object of loyalty from some outside threat" (Baugh et al. 2002, 139-140). Robin was patterned on vengeful female protagonists, like The Bride and O-Ren Ishii from Kill Bill and Arya Stark from Game of Thrones. According to her backstory, Robin turned to a life of crime and violence when her father, a politically conscious teamster, was murdered by the local lords for rabble rousing. Indeed, she draws her surname Alecto from one of the Furies from Greek mythology. The name translates to "implacable or unceasing anger," specifically against the mortal criminals she chastises. During play, her Nature and Demeanor mechanically represented Robin as a traumatized individual motivated by her childlike rage against those who harmed her (her Rebel Nature), yet she found night by night through her loyalty the other PCs in her vampire coterie (her Defender Demeanor). These

complex psychosocial motivations allowed me to find the balance between an antisocial character who nevertheless maintained her own moral compass by putting the needs of her companions over her own.

Characters also possess a Humanity rating which is the total of other Virtue stats, like Conscience, Self-Control, and Courage. These psychological and philosophical stats are perhaps the most important in rules because they symbolize the central tension of the game: maintaining the character's sanity and avoiding becoming a complete monster. When confronted with stressful circumstances, players have no guarantee their characters will react according to their will. If a player fails a Virtue roll, they will engage in problematic behavior such as violence, depravity, gluttony, or panic, because the Beast within seizes control and acts according to fight-flight-freeze-fawn responses. Coping with these moral failures heavily shapes the drama of VtM, especially if it leads to Degeneration (a reduction of the character's Humanity rating) which pulls them closer to becoming a mindless monster. If their Humanity reaches 0, the player is no longer allowed to play that character because the Beast is in full control, and they will likely be banished or destroyed by the other members of vampiric society out of fear that the presence of such a monster will jeopardize their own security.

Not only do these elaborate psychological game mechanics quantify a character's process of self-transformation, but they also allow players to explore how their deepest desires and fears are intertwined. The genre of VtM is best described as erotic-horror roleplaying because vampires are characters that represent both our ideal self and taboo self: the person we desire to be (eros) and the person we fear becoming (horror) (Bowman 2010, 172, 176). We find vampires compelling because they symbolize ideal beings who are immortal, eternally young, virile, charming, and supernaturally powerful, yet they have obtained this power by engaging in behaviors that many cultures consider forbidden, from deep taboos, like cannibalism (vampires must drink blood) and necrophilia (vampires are animated corpses), as well as behaviors that are repressed in some societies, like bisexuality (vampires desire the blood of all genders) and androgyny (vampires cannot procreate sexually so gender is purely a matter of social construction and personal identity).

As a result, role-playing a vampire requires a player to explore their desires and their fears, both of which can be transformative. The game is erotic in the broadest Platonic sense of the word because each character must explore a purpose that gives meaning to their parasitic immortal existence whether that is a desire for status, honor, wealth, power, knowledge, redemption, transcendence, etc. Given that these desires also shape our real lives, players learn by proxy about their advantages and disadvantages through the drama of the game. Likewise, VtM also enables exploration of eros in the sense of sexuality and gender through erotic role-play (ERP). Players can easily play gender non-conforming characters and may use their sexuality to solve problems, specifically to seduce their prey for feeding or to otherwise manipulate mortals.

Indeed, Ashley Brown investigates the nature, risks, and benefits of ERP in her book Sexuality in Role-Playing Games (2015) and uses both Foucault's theories of sexual normativity and sexual discourse to analyze how the setting and systems of WoD support ERP:

> . . . erotic role-play can be understood as an activity undertaken voluntarily to explore the mysteries of sexuality with the reassurance the activity is frivolous and thus contains limited risks to the self. Rules are additionally understood as confining potential self-discoveries made through erotic role-play and limiting their potential to supplant normative notions of "austere" sexuality with alternate sexualities developed through play. (Brown 2015, 7)

Essentially, ERP allows players to liberate themselves from the sexual norms of their society and to use the game and its technology of signs to create their own sexual discourse. This liberation and discourse results in several unique advantages, such as exploring sexual fantasies and scenarios in a

safe, supportive, manageable, and bounded space; experimentation with their own gender and sexual identities; imagining sexual behavior beyond the bounds of realism and the physical limitation of human bodies; and as a tool for deepening the psychology of their characters, their relationship to each other, and their connection to the shared imagined world (Brown 2015, 33-35, 72-74).

While risky and not to be attempted except by adults who consent to this type of play and subject matter, this sexual discourse can result in several tangible benefits, like stronger Platonic friendships, insights into the players' own sexual desires, and the actual creation and experience of new carnal pleasures (Brown 2015, 126). ERP is exciting in the same way that viewing a sex scene in a fantasy drama, like True Blood or Game of Thrones, is exciting, except the participant is not a spectator but a co-creator of this pleasure. From Foucault's perspective, this act of creation is crucial for RPGs and ERP to qualify as technologies of the self for a truth game can only be transformative if it empowers participants to create new pleasures as well as new truths. Self-discovery liberates us, but Foucault insists that self-transformation requires the participant to be the agent of her own creation (Plant 2007, 535).

One relevant scene occurred not long after their transformation when they were experimenting with their new powers. Recognizing she was the only member with martial experience and that she was supernaturally resilient, Robin invited her companions to stab her in the gut so that they might overcome their fear of combat. While the intention was pragmatic, the scene was unexpectedly erotic. Feeling confident enough to allow a companion to penetrate their body in an act that could be fatal to mortals demonstrated a high degree of trust on the part of Robin and her coterie. This led to them mutually experimenting with their powers on each other, including Obtenebration (shadow tentacles) and Rego Motus (telekinetic manipulation of limbs and bodies). This experimentation concluded with the characters sharing each other's blood. The surface justification for this communion was to exchange vampiric powers, but the unspoken motivation was to create a more intimate bond among them. In VtM, if a mortal or vampire drinks a vampire's vitae (blood) on three separate occasions, they will become Blood Bound to that vampire and serve them without hesitation. Even one drink creates a mild supernatural affection and is often used in the setting either to seal alliances or as a punishment for transgressions.

Thus, this session represented the characters creating their own bulwark against the warring powers through a free, innocent, and queer communion in contrast with the "Last Supper" where the Conspirators forced them into their supernatural society. The intimacy of this scene bled into our relationship as players. While we already had a strong bond after years of play, the effect was not unlike Truth or Dare or other adolescent icebreakers where the alibi of the game facilitates an acceptable amount of light eroticism that binds the group together. This bonding occurred simultaneously in the game among the characters and in real life among the players. Indeed, we fondly and jokingly refer to it as the "Vampire Slumber Party" session.

Returning to the previously mentioned scholarship on RPGs and Jungian depth psychology, Bowman insists that character creation and transformative bleed are best understood as mimicking Jung's process of active imagination through which players access their personal unconscious and the collective unconscious which allows for individuation or a return to their actual persona but enriched through their experiences (Bowman 2012, 35). Except for characters who are randomly generated or assigned, this model builds on the Jungian idea that all characters emerge from our shadow, the subconscious parts of our psyche that are repressed or hidden from us but out of which all imagination and growth springs. Thus, horror play allows us to access these dark and frightening regions of our being; theorists like Yeonsoo Julian Kim suggest that it can be healing and transformative by empowering player agency; safely exposing us to our fears in a controlled environment; witnessing the ordeals of

others which creating a sense of togetherness among participants; consciously unpacking our fears through the process of debriefing; managing existential dreads fundamental to the human condition (e.g., aging, death, grief); and exploring the manifestation of fears across cultures (Kim 2022).

Like ERP, horror play is a form of edge play and even its enthusiasts caution that while risks can be minimized through active consent and routine use of safety tools, the risk of harm cannot be eliminated. Bowman warns that engaging in shadow work inevitably triggers what Jung called the complexes or patterns of emotions, memories, perceptions, wishes, and behaviors which reside within the shadow (Bowman 2012, 36-37). While facing these complexes is worth the benefits, doing so will likely trigger negative bleed which must be responsibly processed through personal reflection and debriefing with fellow players. Indeed, Bowman acknowledges in her exploratory ethnographic study of social conflict in role-playing communities that this genre of RPGs does generate more negative bleed than other games and it can be difficult for groups to process this bleed, especially after long-term play (Bowman 2013, 19-21). Beltrán echoes this concern saying, "While this engagement is not necessarily problematic, the more people involved with engaging the Shadow in a game, the more likely that one of them will have difficulty coping maturely with exposure to that archetype" or more succinctly, "you are what you eat" (Beltrán 2012, 96-97).

Heeding the advice of Bowman and Beltrán, I discussed with my Storyteller and the other players during Session 0 that Robin was a conscious exploration with the unresolved anger towards my father that lurks in my Shadow. He abandoned me when I was five and his sporadic presence throughout my life has been very complicated. Likewise, I deliberately chose Clan Brujah for Robin because their clan curse of rage mechanically represents the theme I wanted to explore. When I discovered VtM as a teenager, I was immediately attracted to the Brujah: a noble, but begrudged, clan of philosopher-kings who have fallen from grace due to their vampiric curse of excessive rage. Most members of this clan either pine for their idyllic past, yearn for a utopian future, or rebel for the sake of rebellion. You do not need to be a trained psychoanalyst to recognize the parallels with my own experience. Playing members of this clan allowed me to channel my adolescent frustrations not only towards my father, but with oppressive and exploitative power structures in general.

Throughout the recent Chronicle, Robin would often face the dilemma of whether to pursue vengeance or forgiveness and employing a game mechanic that quantified and randomized her fits of anger created dramatic situations. Frequently, she discovered that impulsive rage only left her with guilt for the unintentional suffering it created, whereas a calculated and deliberate revenge often satisfied her needs and the agenda of the coterie. Forgiveness emerged as an alluring temptation, but one she could not consistently pursue. These dilemmas culminated in the final battle of the Chronicle when Robin masterfully assassinated the vampire lord who murdered her father during the first round of combat. However, with her vengeance quenched, her next move was more ambiguous. She began indiscriminately killing the other members of her opponents, including one who unbeknownst to her was a deep cover spy for her allies. This enraged the leader of her allies who immediately attacked and killed her in the next round.

Robin's death was a powerful moment of character realization where I simultaneously identified with her and disassociated from her. First, experiencing the fulfillment of vengeance and fresh betrayal in the same scene was intense. Robin's rage had finally been discharged only to be replaced instantly with a new nemesis. I experienced this catharsis with Robin, but more importantly, I witnessed the devastation Robin's death provoked at the table as the other characters rushed to her aid and defense. As a player, the response of my fellow players and their characters was transformative. Their in-game lamentations and pietà soothed my mostly resolved feelings of abandonment. Sensing the impact of the moment, the Storyteller created an "out-of-body" moment for Robin where she had the option of

choosing forgiveness and finding final peace at last. In real life, I wanted to choose forgiveness for I am a practicing Buddhist-Stoic trained in conflict resolution and aware that vengeance only leads to more violence. But that choice did not feel authentic to Robin, who chose to cling to her spite and returned to her body. Thus, the Storyteller ruled that Robin was not dead, but had entered Torpor: a deathlike state that can last for years or even centuries as a vampire's consciousness lies dormant.

That complex experience of catharsis with Robin followed by dissociation with her was transformative. I witnessed in stark relief the difference between Robin, the archetype of the wounded child grieved by her companions, and me, the wise adult surrounded by supportive friends. Something from my Shadow was finally purged and I will continue to unpack its significance. Likewise, I am relieved that Robin is dead and that those feelings have been buried, even as I muse about her possible resurrection as an NPC in my own Chronicle. These moments of character realization and transformative bleed can happen in any RPG, but by employing themes and game mechanics that support this kind of play, VtM provides special tools for this type of conscious self-development. Of course, such playstyles should only be attempted with a supportive group, the consent of all players, and the routine use of safety tools. This allows them to function as technologies of self and VtM models how such psychological elements can be woven into game design.

As can be seen, all role-playing games function as truth games and by applying Foucault's tools of analysis we reveal how an RPG's technology of signs affect how it functions as a technology of the self. While all RPGs have the potential to be transformative, erotic-horror role-playing games, like VtM, provide more opportunities for self-discovery and self-creation because their setting, rules, and content allow for the exploration of more psychological, mature, and challenging subject matter than combat-focused games like D&D. The power of self-transformation is limitless, and a subsequent paper must examine how RPGs function as technologies of power which empower us to reflect on other power relations and to create our own norms. Indeed, Jonaya Kemper's article "Wyrding the Self" resonates with Foucault's insight when she calls for gamers to use character creation and play as an opportunity to "to decolonize the body and search for liberation from internalized oppression" (Kemper 2020). The potential for self-transformation also coheres with Joseph Laycock's explanation of the perennial suspicion of RPGs by conservative political and religious forces because the possibilities imagined through play threaten the possibility of cultural hegemony (Laycock 2015, 215).

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