

Editorial

Transformative Play Seminar 2022: Role-playing, Heritage, and Culture

We are pleased to introduce Issue 14 of the *International Journal of Role-Playing!* This special issue companions Issue 13 as the second part of a series of short articles reflecting work presented at the Transformative Play Initiative Seminar, held at Uppsala University Campus Gotland in Visby, Sweden on October 20-21, 2022. The conference was organized with support from the Sustainable Heritage Research Forum (SuHRF) at Uppsala University. As such, the main theme of the conference was Role-playing, Heritage, and Culture, which is also the eponymous subtitle of this special issue. The topic itself is fruitful enough that we are likely to see more discussions related to heritage in the pages of the *IJRP*.

Even though analysis is the bread and butter of those of us in media studies, larps and TTRPGs in particular are not often discussed as mediators of the past. The recent surge of interest in edu-larp (see e.g., Geneuss 2021) is connected with larger efforts to respectfully render human history through multi-sensory, embodied experiences. What happens when we, in the present, simulate and embody that which happened in the past?

Such a seemingly simple act of role-playing one's cultural heritage is, unsurprisingly, mired in complexity. Previous work of one of our seminar keynoters, Michal Mochocki (2021), reveals historical reenactment, live-action role-play (larp), and tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs) are all *media* that offer embodied, agentic representation of heritage and the historical record. Mochocki's (2022) keynote for the seminar, "Multilayered, Selective and Contested: The Heritage of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in Polish Role-playing and Reenactment," provides a specific example of such heritage work through his own cultural lens.

Such heritage work can also take place within more traditional established heritage structures such as museums, as evidenced by another keynote by larp designer and museum curator Nór Hernø-Toftild. Their lecture, "Historical Empathy: How Larp Can Facilitate Cultural and Historical Understanding" (2022), highlights how such interventions can give context and personal relevance to heritage work for museum-goers through embodied play.

. These words, however — "heritage," "history," and "culture" — are also laden with inequalities and trauma. That pain must be acknowledged. The Russian invasion of Ukraine, the American decimation of sacred indigenous lands, and the Chinese internment of the Uyghurs all remind us that empires enforce what they believe to be "heritage" or "culture" at gunpoint, erasing or neglecting anything that does not fit their mold. In other words, the playful representation of the past via role-play has surprisingly high stakes.

Keynoter Mohamad Rabah opens the special issue with a statement revealing why he was unable to attend the October 2022 conference in Visby, due to a delayed visa approval by the Swedish Embassy in Israel. The statement was read in person by co-organizer Kjell Hedgard Hugaas (Rabah 2022). Rabah is a long-time veteran of the international larp scene and has facilitated edu-larps in Palestine and other Southwest Asian/North African (SWANA) locales, as well as in various countries in Europe. Not only was his presence at the conference missed, but also the geopolitics of culture were to blame. Re-kindling global collaborations following the forced separation of the COVID-19 pandemic has been difficult, in part, due to exacerbated local and international tensions everywhere. Rabah serves his communities

through edu-larps and other playful activities that impart cultural heritage and social dilemmas, and has much to teach the rest of us. His statement affirms play as a powerful agent of empowerment, while also recognizing the conditions of occupation and other forms of oppression that make belief in one's future and one's autonomy in the world heartbreakingly difficult.

In a similar vein, Weronika Szatkowska's "*The People: A Serious Role-playing Game Designed to Address a Humanitarian Crisis*" presents a case study of an educational role-play game created as a response to the migration crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border. The game was developed in cooperation with an engaged collective of researchers and groups of activists as a means to raise awareness around the suffering and imperilment of Belarusians forced to live in the Polish woods. Players are given characters with different motivations and abilities to support "the People," as they are called in this region, exploring the ethical dilemmas presented by trying to follow the law vs. administering humanitarian aid.

As already evidenced by these examples, heritage role-play assumes different forms around the world, a diversity that necessitates further study and discussion. Tadeu Rodrigues Iuama's "Towards the Post-Modern Art Week: Anthropophagic Reflexes in the Brazilian Larp Scenes" initiates this discussion by way of the arts in Brazil. Iuama discusses how much of the experimental art in Brazil is in genealogy with Oswald de Andrade, whose 1928 "Anthropophagous Manifesto" proposed that Brazilian culture cannibalizes and digests other cultures. Iuama proposes that larp, too, has anthropophagic tendencies, with its "critical digestion of the media and biographical contents." Rian Rezende and Denise Portinari offer a precise example of this very phenomenon in Brazil in "Playing with Wonders, Objects, Role-playing Games and the Cultural Legacy of Bispo do Rosário for the City of Rio de Janeiro." Their work is an homage to outsider artist Arthur Bispo do Rosário, who created beautiful objects out of trash during his 50-year internment in an asylum. Rezende and Portinari describe how Bispo do Rosário's improvised textile work inspired their own Storytelling Cloak project, in which participants interweave their own personal histories into living heritage objects. This also corresponds with other recent work seeking the meaning of materiality in our games and heritage practices (Germaine and Wake 2022).

But then there is the culture you cannot touch. In "Experiencing China's Intangible Cultural Heritage in Role-playing Games: Comparative Studies between MMORPGs and Larps," Yuqiao Liu explores "intangible" cultural heritage practices such as acupuncture and taijiquan, or Chinese Tai Chi. Chinese MMORPGs such as *A Dream of Jianghu*, *Justice Online*, and the Jubensha *The Secret of the Gauze Lantern* present and preserve these practices for their Chinese gamer audiences. His work compares heritage practices in MMORPGs to those in Jubensha, a popular form of larp in China, using specific case studies as examples. Entertainment role-playing, Liu argues, places UNESCO-level heritage in the hands of even the most casual player.

In "Playing With The Fictitious 'I': Early Forms of Educational Role-playing in Hungary, 1938-1978," Bálint Márk Turi and Mátyás Hartyándi examine intangible cultural heritage activities from their cultural background, a heritage that enriches our general understanding of how pervasive role-playing simulations were throughout the world. Turi and Hartyándi discuss how the Bánk education program promoted democratic and individualist values within the Communist context of mid-century Hungary. Role-play can preserve intangible culture, but role-play *itself* is also intangible culture. As such, we have scarce notions of how much we have already lost through lack of documentation and academic study, an issue this project seeks to remedy within the Hungarian context.

Role-play does not just seamlessly pass on culture, but rather mediates it through its own affordances. In "Jeppe and Maria Bergmann Hamming's Literary-Musical Larp Adaptations," Evan Torner takes on larp's re-enchantment of high culture in an essay on the work of a larpwrighting team from Denmark. Analyzing the Bergmann Hamming's larps based on artists (*Sarabande* 2013),

composers (*Deranged* 2015), and operas (*Encore* 2022), Torner finds in their work a deep engagement with the European high-art canon that is activated through logics shared between larp and music.

The ephemerality of adult pretend play lends itself well to exploring the ephemerality of art, even though much cultural infrastructure is needed to impart this heritage on the next generation. In “Larp as a Potential Space for Non-Formal Queer Cultural Heritage,” Josephine Baird explores what this ephemerality means for mediating queer cultural heritage. Can non-formal and ephemeral spaces such as larps adequately capture a fraught, marginalized past in order to secure them for an uncertain present and future? Important to Baird are the “how” and “why” of particular queer practices, which are perhaps better embodied than simply imparted.

In “Bridging Historical and Present-Day Queer Community Through Embodied Role-playing,” Hilda Levin pursues a similar line of thought: how larp is a safe, distanced space that helps queer larpers grapple with and further engage with their communities. The Nordic larp *Just A Little Lovin’* (2011; Groth, Grasmø, and Edland 2021), Levin contends, has catalyzed renewed and active activist engagement from the larp community in the ongoing fight against HIV/AIDS and homophobic bigotry. Levin’s work demonstrates the power of role-playing to provide personal relevance and agency such that players feel the need to take social responsibility in the world outside of the larp. More work in this vein is needed to establish how, where, and under what circumstances role-playing games encourage participants to engage in processes of lasting social change in their various communities.

Issue 14 concludes with “Gaming Capital in Contemporary Role-playing Game Platforms,” in which Henry Korkeila and J. Tuomas Harviainen outline a different intangible heritage, namely: gaming capital. Influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1986), gaming capital, originally formulated by Mia Consalvo (2007), also constitutes part of the heritage of RPGs, with power relations continuing as active agents within the games we play, discuss, and canonize. While not focusing explicitly on power, Korkeila and Harviainen bridge between what is inherited between analog and digital role-playing spaces, emphasizing information flow and social space perspectives.

When we think of the many crises present in 2023, whether they be political, economic, or environmental, we must ask ourselves: How do we adapt to survive, and how do we pass on what we have learned? As the authors of this issue show, role-play is a valuable tool in everything from daily survival to the long-term mediation of otherwise-endangered cultural heritage. Role-play *is* also cultural heritage itself, muddying the waters, as all media do. It is here where we note that the brevity of the papers in this issue is a provocation for future work. There is so much to be written on the topic, with this issue as an aspirational origin point of many conversations to come.

-- Evan Torner, Sarah Lynne Bowman, and William J. White
September 18, 2023

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