

# Editorial

## The Increasing Specificity and Maturity of Role-playing Game Studies

This issue of the *International Journal of Role-playing* signals several hallmarks. First, the issue is our 15th since the inception of the journal, with Issue 1 helmed by editor Anders Drachen (2008). Not only has our editorial team grown over the years, but our reviewer list is large, varied, and highly interdisciplinary. This issue also corresponds with the revisions and rebranding of the *The Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Game Studies* (Zagal and Deterding 2024), which has been updated with relevant research and expanded from its original publication only six years ago (Zagal and Deterding 2018) and will also be released in June 2024.<sup>1</sup>

Since that publication, the field has exploded to the point where not only are new publications difficult to track, but they contain information that was previously relegated to “wish lists” for scholars and practitioners. Examples include (to cite just a few):

- Completed manuals for tabletop role-playing games as therapeutic interventions published through academic channels, (e.g., Connell 2023; Kilmer 2023);
- Theoretical work on the transformative potential of RPGs informed by practice (Kemper 2020; Bowman and Hugaas 2021);
- Hard qualitative and quantitative data on the impacts of role-playing games on participants, e.g., in wellbeing and therapeutic applications (Katō 2019; Helbig 2019; Wright et al. 2020; Abbott, Stauss, and Burnett 2021; Causo and Quinlan 2021; Ball 2022; Varrette et al. 2023);
- Review articles compiling themes and synthesizing the results from several such papers at a time (Mendoza 2020; Henrich and Worthington 2021; Arenas, Viduani, and Araujo 2022; Baker, Turner, and Kotera 2022);
- Detailed guidance for educators on the use of RPGs in classroom applications (Geneuss 2021; Cullinan and Genova 2023; Westborg 2023);
- The application of RPGs in a wide variety of educational contexts, including fashion design (Hixson and Eike 2024), computer science (Fey et al. 2022), and American Sign Language (Cullinan and Wood 2024);
- Clear connections formed between RPGs and other related phenomena, e.g., practices in counseling (Diakolambrianou and Bowman 2023) and psychodrama (Pitkänen 2019);
- A thorough examination of players exploring and expressing marginalized genders and sexualities through RPGs (Sihvonen and Stenros 2019; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019; Baird 2021), as well as the heritage of associated alternative communities (Groth, Grasmö, and Edland 2021; Baird 2023; Levin 2023);
- A critical approach to problematic representations and issues with inclusion regarding marginalized identities (Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman 2021) such as gender (Stang 2021; Stang and Trammell 2020; Dashiell 2020), sexuality (Sihvonen and Stenros 2019), race/ethnicity (Eddy, Samantha 2020; Dashiell 2022; Trammell 2023), and disability (Jones 2018), among other important factors;
- The negative impacts on RPG communities, play styles, and game texts of capitalism (Torner 2018, Seregina 2024), cultural appropriation (Eddy, Samantha 2020; Eddy, Zoë Antoinette

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<sup>1</sup> To herald the arrival of the book on June 27, we have updated the references in this issue to *The Routledge Handbook of Role-playing Game Studies* to reflect the recent revisions, but the core content remains the same as the 2018 version. Page numbers to follow.

- 2020), and colonialism (Eddy, Zoë Antoinette 2020; Trammell 2022);
- The development of safety discourses in RPG communities over time reflected in academic work (Koljonen 2020; Villarreal 2021; Bowman and Lieberoth 2024), etc.

These developments signal not only the maturation of the field, but its increased specificity in terms of evidence-based work and complex theoretical models. In a maturing field, the literature is extensive enough to build upon itself. Academics can make larger scale assessments about assertions they previously only hypothesized. New knowledge is theorized, articulated, tested, and shared. Developing scholars can easily find information on their chosen topic through indexing, search engines, and citations, leading to far fewer “vacuum studies.” Areas that were previously siloed into distinct categories now cite and learn from one another, e.g., tabletop vs. larp; educational vs. therapeutic vs. leisure; traditional vs. indie. Students can now pursue an online Master’s degree in Transformative Game Design at Uppsala University, the first in the world to our knowledge that focuses exclusively on analog RPGs, with hopefully many more programmes in our field to follow. Regardless of the many catastrophes, injustices, and alarming developments present in our world today, within this small bubble, we are honored to be involved in the increasing specificity and maturity of role-playing game studies.

The articles in this issue represent an impressive culmination of this work, reflecting many of the topics on the above-mentioned wishlists. As befits our call for papers, each of the articles emphasize the transformative potential of role-playing games in leisure, educational, and therapeutic settings in some way.

The issue begins with an ambitious theoretical exploration by Kjell Hedgard Hugaas entitled, “Bleed and Identity: A Conceptual Model of Bleed and How Bleed-out from Role-playing Games Can Affect a Player’s Sense of Self.” The article unpacks the complicated and sometimes nebulous topics of bleed and identity, connecting them not only to the role-playing game studies discourse, but also to relevant concepts in psychology, neuroscience, and social psychology. The article contributes three important innovations to bleed theory: the concept of the bleed perception threshold; the distinction between basic bleed components and higher bleed complexes; and a relational matrix of bleed components and complexes. Hugaas’ work brings us closer to answering questions about why these games can be so transformational, as well as explaining some of the psychological mechanisms behind these meaningful changes within a player’s sense of self. He highlights expression and validation of marginalized gender identities as an example.

Our next article deepens into these questions with an emphasis on incidental positive impacts of RPGs for players in leisure environments. Orla Walsh and Conor Linehan’s “Roll for Insight: Understanding How the Experience of Playing *Dungeons & Dragons* Impacts the Mental Health of an Average Player” gathers 10 semi-structured interviews and applies a reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) to examine the self-reported connection between playing *D&D* and well-being. Walsh and Linehan highlight five key themes that illuminate the transformative potential of role-playing: escapism, exploration of self, creative expression, social support, and establishing a routine. Since these games were not applied in a therapeutic context, this research emphasizes the raw potency not only of the world’s highest selling RPG, but the practice of role-playing games more generally.

Continuing this thread, Emry Sottile’s “‘It Might Have a Little to Do with Wish Fulfillment’: The Life-Giving Force of Queer Performance in TTRPG Spaces” focuses specifically on the potential of *D&D* communities to facilitate queer gender exploration. To build his case, the author engages with past scholarship, autoethnographic writing, and various forms of cultural production surrounding TTRPGs, queer identity, avatars, and gender performance. Sottile’s powerful personal accounts punctuate their examination of theory and description of RPG communities. He interrogates how such spaces might provide self-expression and acceptance for trans and nonbinary players in societies that are becoming increasingly “adversarial to their existence and visibility” in recent years, providing a first-hand account of some of the types of bleed explained in Hugaas’ paper.

Our next article explores the topic of wellbeing through the lens of a series of larp interventions. Kerttu Lehto's "Nordic Larp as a Method in Mental Health Care and Substance Abuse Work: Case *SÄRÖT*" details the creation and implementation of three larps intended to have positive impacts on participants' well-being. Developed by the author, a community educator, in collaboration with a psychiatric nurse, the *SÄRÖT* trilogy tackles three major themes respectively: mental health, substance abuse, and the experiences of a bystander. Lehto discusses how respondents reported changes in the way they experience their current situation in life in data gathered from interviews, observation, and free feedback. Positive impacts players attributed to the larps include players processing traumas, gaining tools for dealing with problems, making active changes such as applying for a new job, getting help for mental health issues, and turning to social workers. Unlike the previous two articles emphasizing games like *D&D* produced for entertainment, *SÄRÖT* was designed within the Nordic larp tradition, which often features intense socially realistic themes on difficult topics with progressive aims. Lehto concludes with design recommendations for creators wanting to use larp as an intervention in the future.

Continuing this theme, Lennart Bartenstein's "Live Action Role-playing (Larp) in Cognitive Behavioral Psychotherapy: A Case Study" provides an in-depth exploration of the design, implementation, and longitudinal results of a therapeutic larp intervention. The study provides quantitative and qualitative data taken two months before the larp, two weeks after the larp, and three months later. The study results supported CBT-oriented larp as a suitable treatment for participants with specific mental challenges. While the participants had positive experiences and good goal attainment overall, in some cases, negative trends were observed. Importantly, several participants mentioned that longer lasting effects might have been more likely with repeated larp experiences rather than the one-shot nature of the intervention, although the author acknowledges the heavy preparations needed to run a therapeutic larp of this nature. Bartenstein also emphasizes the importance of ongoing psychotherapy alongside the adjunctive larp interventions to reinforce lasting positive change.

Shifting our attention from mental health to educational development through RPGs, Maryanne Cullinan gathers research from teachers in the field in her article, "Surveying the Perspectives of Middle and High School Educators Who Use Role-playing Games as Pedagogy." Cullinan is especially interested in educators in 5-12th grade classrooms. She gathers 11 interviews from teachers in the United States, Canada, and Cambodia and analyzes them through the lens of Gary Alan Fine's (1983) frame theory. The practitioners reported increased engagement, new social connections, the development of affinity groups, and a lowering of perceived social stakes for students in the setting. Teachers also reported a shift in classroom attitudes about success from individualism to a more collectivistic stance. Cullinan emphasizes the need for more research on how educators are using RPGs in the classroom, as well as more theory-informed pedagogy based on best practice in role-playing game studies.

Our next authors explore larp as a method of leadership development education for adults in various settings. In Mátyás Hartyándi and Gijs van Bilsen's "Playing with Leadership: A Multiple Case Study of Leadership Development Larps," the authors present an extensive discussion of larps that feature leadership as a theme, as well as games designed specifically with leadership development theories and goals in mind. Applying versions of Fine's (1983) aforementioned frame theory, as well as J. Tuomas Harviainen's (2011) definition of larp as compared to simulation and other forms of educational role-playing, they categorize the attributes of 4 case studies, including 2 larps designed by each author respectively. The case studies were run for a variety of populations, including job seekers at an assessment center, cadets at the Royal Norwegian Naval Academy, consultants in a Hungarian firm, students at a university, simulation experts at the ISAGA conference, and managers and directors at a retreat. Hartyándi and van Bilsen conclude with several design recommendations, also posing additional questions as to the distinction between larps and other forms of educational role-playing.

The authors of the final article in this issue also use educational theory to understand the potential of RPGs, this time through the lens of tabletop source material. In Jeremy Riel and Rob Monahan's "Learning from Ludemes: An Inventory of Common Player Actions within Tabletop Role-Playing

Games (TTRPGs) to Inform Principled Design of Game-Based Learning Experiences,” the authors discuss the many benefits of experiential learning, applying established pedagogical theories to *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Ed.*, evaluating its potential for helping students achieving educational goals. Riel and Monahan focus explicitly on the developmental value of potential actions offered through the *Player’s Handbook* (Wizards 2014), which the authors refer to as *ludemes* (Stephenson et al. 2021). After identifying 379 original ludeme codes through thematic analysis (Thomas 2006; Merriam 2009), the authors identified 37 axial codes, and distilled them into 7 supercategories: performing an in-game action; role-playing; receiving information and instructions; resolving actions and uncertainty; realizing a character; table talking; and serving as DM. The authors attach learning objectives to each of these actions, offering an impressive array of skills that the game implicitly invites and offering recommendations for ways in which educators can cultivate these skills further in educational interventions.

Altogether, these articles offer a tremendous display of the maturity and increased specificity present in our now-thriving field. We look forward to what the future will bring to role-playing game studies with the support of this excellent foundation in its growing number of publication channels.

-- Sarah Lynne Bowman, William J. White, and Evan Torner  
June 13, 2024

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