


# ROCKET

A stylized teal rocket bird logo. The bird is depicted in profile, facing left, with its wings spread wide. The tail feathers are integrated into a flame-like shape that tapers downwards. The entire logo is rendered in a gradient of teal colors, from light to dark.

Transformative RPGs

An Erasmus+ Higher Education Cooperation Partnership  
Göttingen University, Uppsala University, Groningen University



# Transformation and role-playing games

# What is transformation?

## Our view of transformation:

1. A prolonged and sustained state of change.
2. A process or series of processes that lead to growth.



# Transformation and roleplaying games

**Transformation** as a prolonged and sustained state of change.

- Is a **shift** in one's state of consciousness that has **lasting after effects**
- Remains **prolonged** and **sustained** long after the game has concluded, which may affect:
  - How the player views **themselves**, i.e. their **identity**
  - How the player views **reality**, i.e. their **paradigm**
  - How the player views **others** and **interacts** with them, i.e. their **relationships**
  - How the player views **society**, including its **structures**, **their place** within those structures, and **the roles of others** within it
  - How the player views **cultures**, **subcultures**, and **countercultural** movements
- This shift may help players to build toward greater awareness, peace, and justice.

As Jonaya Kemper puts it, role-playing games allow us to **wyrd the self** (2020), consciously transmuting our identities through intentional play, also called **steering** (Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015).

**Role-playing games** hold the **potential** to provide a **vehicle for change** processes to occur for **all participants**, including **designers** and **facilitators**.


# Transformation and role-playing games



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“I’d argue larp **doesn’t transform people** – it **opens for transformation**. A well-designed game can be a **great beginning**, but no more than a beginning. It **has to be followed** either with **more role-plays** in order to make it a repeated, not single, experience – **or with equally well-designed reflective and creative activities.**”

(Mochocki 2013)

# Transformation and role-playing games

What is a transformative experience and what do we mean with vehicle for change processes?

Any activity, including leisure role-playing games, can be **educational** or **therapeutic** in some way, often accidentally or as a “side effect” of participation. Some participants may be **primed for transformation** based on what is happening in their lives and the role-playing experience **acts as a catalyst** (Mochocki 2012). But this doesn't mean the experience itself is transformational.

“I'd argue larp **doesn't transform people** – it **opens for transformation**. A well-designed game can be a **great beginning**, but no more than a beginning. It **has to be followed** either with **more role-plays** in order to make it a repeated, not single, experience – **or with equally well-designed reflective and creative activities.**” (Mochocki 2013)

**Vehicle for change:** you can design a larp that **holds space and open up for change.**

The **prolonged process** after is what keeps the spark of transformation going which **can then lead to long-term change.**



# Types of transformative role-playing games

# Types of transformative RPGs

## Leisure



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## Educational



Photo by David Pennington on Unsplash

## Therapeutic



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# Types of transformative role-playing games

We further distinguish between **leisure** and **applied role-playing games** (**educational**, and **therapeutic role-playing games**) in the following ways:

- **Leisure role-playing games:** Designed and played for a variety of reasons, mostly personal and individualized, even if the game has a specific goal in mind.
  - **Voluntary** in one's **free time**.
- **Educational role-playing games:** Designed and played with explicit and/or implicit educational goals in mind.
  - May be **voluntary**, but is often **mandatory**, e.g., in classrooms during school time.
- **Therapeutic role-playing games:** Designed and played with explicit therapeutic goals in mind. Facilitated with emotional support from a mental health paraprofessional or professional, i.e. a coach, therapist, social worker, mental health first aid worker, community healer, etc.
  - May be **voluntary**, but is sometimes **mandatory**, e.g., required by parents or the court system.

There may be **crossover** between these types of games, e.g. a **leisure larp** having **onsite support** from a **psychotherapist**, a **therapeutic larp** also guiding participants to learn **social skills** and **emotional intelligence** through practice, etc.



# Leisure role-playing games

# Leisure role-playing games



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# Leisure roleplaying games

## Leisure Role-Playing Games:

- **Leisure** is often distinguished from **work** as an **activity** a person:
  - Does in their **spare time**
  - **Does not get paid** to do
- **Leisure** is often associated with **playfulness** as a **counterpoint to work**
- However, **some leisure activities** are associated with states of **flow** (Csíkszentmihályi 1990): energized **hyperfocused** on a particular action that is **challenging** and **requires skill**
- In addition, many **role-players engage in labor** in order to make games happen (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016; Torner 2020):
  - **Designers**
  - **Facilitators**
  - **Players**
- Some even **perform their daily jobs** in role-playing games, e.g. **real life teachers** instructing **fictional students** at a wizard school (Homann, 2020)

# Leisure roleplaying games

What distinguishes leisure role-playing games from professional ones? Varies, but in general:

- **Goals:** Participants engage in their **free time**, have **various reasons** for doing so
- Ranging from “**entertainment**” to **social connection** to **self-actualization**
  - These **goals do not always overlap**
  - Some players insist that **games** are just “**fun**,” “**entertainment**,” or “**escapism**,” **downplaying their meaning**
  - Other players **find profound meaning** in these experiences and **intentionally use them** for **personal** and **social development**
  - Even **players only intending** to experience “**fun**” often **engage in learning** and **practice skills** as necessary parts of the structure of games
- **Settings:** Often played in **non-professional spaces**: homes, hotel conference rooms, rented vacation locations
- **Social roles:** Often played as one’s “**off-work**” **leisure identity** rather than as part of their **responsibilities as a professional**

**However, many of the benefits of role-playing in professional contexts are often experienced in leisure ones.**



# Professional role-playing games

# Professional role-playing games

Professional, or *applied* role-playing games:

- Take **elements** from the **leisure activity** and **apply** them to **specific settings**
- Often work with **practicing specific skills** through experiential learning and behavioral rehearsal

**Applied role-playing games** focus on particular **educational, therapeutic, professional, or well-being** goals.

These goals may focus on one or more of the following levels: **personal, relational, structural, or cultural** (Lederach 2014).

# Professional role-playing games

Examples of settings where role-playing activities already take place:

- Professional training
- Educational interventions
- Crisis management
- Health care
- Therapeutic interventions
- Personal development
- Community outreach
  - Graduate students from George Mason University's **School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution** role-playing **peacebuilders providing aid to civilians during a civil war** in a scenario designed by the Forage Center (McClain 2017)



# Education role-playing games

# Educational role-playing games



Photo by David Pennington on Unsplash



# Educational role-playing games

**Edu-larp** is used to describe many different live action role-playing activities for students of all ages.

- A larp by Center “POST” designed to **teach adults about the experiences of Belarussians** during WWII (Karalevich 2012).
- A **peace demonstration larp for a history class** held at Østerskov Efterskole, one of two Danish schools taught almost entirely through edu-larp.
- A **science fiction game** by LajvVerkstaden in Sweden designed to **help students practice English** (Jansen 2012).
- A role-playing game to help **young adults design their careers** called *SingaLand* in Singapore and *IdaLand* in the U.S. (Transformative Play Initiative, 2021).
- A collection of five small larp scenarios to **help researchers develop skills in interdisciplinary collaboration** created for CIRCUS (Center for Integrated Research on Culture and Society) at Uppsala University (Bowman and Westborg 2024).

# Educational role-playing games

Using role-playing games in education can take many forms:

- **Playing an existing RPG in an educational setting** without adaptation
- **Adapting existing RPGs to fit into new educational structures and curricular learning objectives**
- **Designing new RPGs to target specific learning objectives**, for example:
  - **Edu-larp: STARS curriculum: 16 larps in German schools for various subjects (Geneuss 2021)**
    - **Social Science:** *Europe, the Band*, ages 14+ -- democracy, European history, and conflict solving
    - **Physics:** *Time Agents*, ages 10-14 -- gravity, recoil
    - **German as a Foreign Language:** *Space Journey*, ages 10-12 -- appreciation of native/first languages, linguistic diversity
    - **Geography:** *The Party*, ages 14+ -- argumentation strategies, conflict solving
    - **Drama:** *Rumpelstilzchen*, ages 8-10 -- fairy tales, agency

# Educational role-playing games

Given the **right design**, role-playing games can be adapted to teach **virtually any subject**, training **multiple skills** at once (Bowman 2014). One way of organising **skills** that can be **learned** through role-playing is through the three categories: **cognitive, affective and behavioural**.

# Educational role-playing games

Learning Dimension	Student Development
<i>Cognitive Skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="643 374 894 407">• Engagement</li><li data-bbox="643 440 1164 472">• Motivation/self-determination</li><li data-bbox="643 505 1097 538">• Creativity and imagination</li><li data-bbox="643 571 948 603">• Critical thinking</li><li data-bbox="643 636 1049 669">• Decision-making skills</li><li data-bbox="643 702 1083 734">• Complex problem solving</li><li data-bbox="643 767 923 800">• Self-reflection</li><li data-bbox="643 833 977 865">• Perspective taking</li></ul>

# Educational role-playing games

Learning Dimension	Student Development
<i>Affective Skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="643 369 1039 401">● Agency/empowerment</li><li data-bbox="643 440 842 472">● Empathy</li><li data-bbox="643 511 1035 543">● Personal development</li><li data-bbox="643 582 1020 614">● Emotional regulation</li><li data-bbox="643 653 1035 685">● Coping/adaptive skills</li><li data-bbox="643 723 1184 756">● Self-esteem and self-confidence</li><li data-bbox="643 794 1083 827">● Sense of accomplishment</li><li data-bbox="643 865 1020 898">● Feelings of belonging</li></ul>

# Educational role-playing games

Learning Dimension	Student Development
<i>Behavioral Skills</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Prosocial behaviors/social skills</li><li>● Communication</li><li>● Balancing self-interests with community responsibility</li><li>● Debate/persuasion</li><li>● Conflict management/resolution/transformation</li><li>● Practicing democratic skills</li><li>● Collaboration/Cooperation</li><li>● Self-advocacy</li></ul>

...plus many more based on current research. (Bowman et al, 2024).



# Therapeutic role-playing games

# Therapeutic role-playing games



Photo by youssef naddam on Unsplash



# Therapeutic role-playing games

A therapeutic view of role-playing games acknowledges the self as psychodynamic, i.e. composed of parts or configurations of self (Rogers 1959; Diakolambrianou et al 2021).

We frame therapeutic role-playing as:

- A **transformational container** (Bion, 1959; Bowman & Hugaas 2021)
- A **secure enough holding environment** (Winnicott 1960)
- A **space of playful experimentation** where **authentic expressions of self** can emerge (Winnicott 1971)
- Held by **professionals** or **paraprofessionals** who help participants **process** the experience

# Therapeutic role-playing games

**Therapeutic Role-Playing Games** are grouped according to the **goals** of the **client** and **therapist**, including:

- The **types of activities** expected to take place,
  - E.g., The **ratio of playfulness** to **processing** time, the **degree** to which **therapeutic modalities** will be **introduced in play** or **supplement it**, etc.
- The **types of support** agreed upon between the therapist and client
  - E.g., The **amount of processing** between **therapist** and **client** that will occur **before, during, and/or after a game**, sometimes established by a **legal contract** and/or **ethical code**

# Therapeutic role-playing games

Types of therapeutic role-playing games:

- 1) **Therapy:** Games designed to support therapeutic goals, such as **trauma processing** and other **mental health challenges**. May be run by the therapist themselves, or **in collaboration** with the client's therapist.
  - **High expectations of emotional processing** before, during, or after.
    - **Example:** The Bodhana Group, a non-profit in the U.S. that has run interventions for **therapeutic treatment of sexual abuse, trauma from grief, etc.**

# Therapeutic role-playing games

2) **Social Skills:** Games designed to support social development goals, such as learning how to **make friends, communication skills, conflict resolution,** and other forms of **behavior rehearsal.** May be **contracted from an outside group** as an **adjunct to therapy** or run by the **therapist.**

- **Medium expectations of emotional processing** before, during, or after.
  - Example: Game to Grow, a non-profit in the U.S. run by **trained therapists** that often focus on **social skills within groups, including working with neurodiverse populations.**
  - Have their own **role-playing system** called *Critical Core* (2020) that guides players to:
    - Build social confidence, communication and collaboration skills
    - Develop frustration tolerance, emotional tolerance, and caring for others

# Therapeutic role-playing games

3) **Recreation:** Games designed with an **emphasis on the importance of the activity itself as therapeutic** rather than specific goals to achieve or skills to learn, e.g. **recreational therapy**.

- **Low to no expectations** of emotional processing before, during, or after.
- **Example:** RPG Therapeutics, a U.S. company that works with clients with a **variety of disabilities** and **psychological challenges**
  - E.g. Running larps for **children with muscular dystrophy to improve physical and psychological well-being**
  - **Traveling to various sites with a wheelchair-accessible trailer to run tabletop games for disabled clients, etc.**

The background features a soft, ethereal aesthetic. It consists of layered, wavy brushstrokes in various shades of teal and light blue, creating a sense of depth and movement. Interspersed among these strokes are thin, elegant lines in a golden-brown hue. The overall composition is accented with numerous small, out-of-focus circular bokeh spots in white and light blue, giving the impression of a misty or dreamlike atmosphere.

# Transformative role-playing games

# Transformative role-playing games

## *Clear goal/desired impact*

- **All designed components of the game should consider the desired impact/goal.**
- **Components that run counter to the desired impact/goal should be removed or reframed.**
- **Impacts will likely extend beyond your initial expectations or goals -- embrace the chaotic nature of the form.**

# Framing



Frame: CC0 Public Domain



# Framing

## *Framing the Game*

Role-playing games have three phases:

- **Before:** Workshops, briefing, lectures, costuming, other ways to prepare
- **During:** The game itself, an in-between phase where social identities within a community can shift (van Gennep 1960; Turner 1974)
- **After:** Derolling, debriefing, processing, integration practices

# Framing - Safety



Photo by Heather Wilde on Unsplash

# Framing - Workshop



Photo by Stefan C. Asafti on Unsplash

# Framing - Derolling



Photo by Reve2k m

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/intricately-carved-mask-in-dramatic-lighting-28542962/>

# Transformative role-playing games

## *Framing the Game*

### **Safety**

Establishing and maintaining psychological safety is important in all three stages. Role-playing games have established methods for this, including safety mechanics, consent discussions, post-game debriefing, etc.

### **Workshops**

All activities in a workshop should prepare the participants for play with the transformative impacts in mind through **practice**, not just briefing information

**Examples:** Character creation, character relations, learning names, practicing safety-techniques

### **Deroling**

Stepping out of character and the game. A clear transition is helpful.

# Framing - Debriefing



Photo by Pixabay  
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/red-wooden-lounge-chair-on-brown-boardwalk-near-body-of-water-during-daytime-161029/>

# Framing

## Debriefing

Allows players to process the experience, crucial for reinforcing educational goals -- the game itself is not enough!

Debriefs can be **structured** through facilitation or **unstructured** -- structured is recommended to give everyone the chance to speak.

- **Emotional processing:** Processing the emotional experience, sometimes according to goals, common in leisure and therapeutic settings
- **Intellectual processing:** Processing according to general intellectual concepts or themes related to play, common in leisure, therapeutic, and educational settings
- **Educational processing:** Processing according to specific learning objectives, common in educational settings

# Integration Practices

Lasting change requires integration of takeaways into daily life, not just temporary engagement

## Forms of integration:

- **Creative Expression:** Journaling, Studio art, Performance art, Game design, Fiction writing, Storytelling
- **Intellectual Analysis:** Contextualization, Researching, Reframing experiences, Documentation, Theorizing, Applying existing theoretical lenses, Reflection, Distilling take-aways
- **Emotional Processing:** Debriefing, Individual or Group therapy, Validating own experiences, Identifying and acknowledging needs/desires/fears, Distancing identity from undesirable traits/behaviors explored in-character, Incorporating personality traits/behaviors

# Integration Practices

Lasting change requires **integration of takeaways into daily life**, not just temporary engagement

## Forms of integration:

- **Interpersonal Processing:** Connecting with co-players, Re-establishing previous social connections, Negotiating relationship dynamics, Sharing role-playing experiences with others
- **Community Building:** Networking, Collaborating on projects, Sharing resources and knowledge, Establishing safer spaces, Creating implicit and explicit social contracts

# Transformative role-playing games

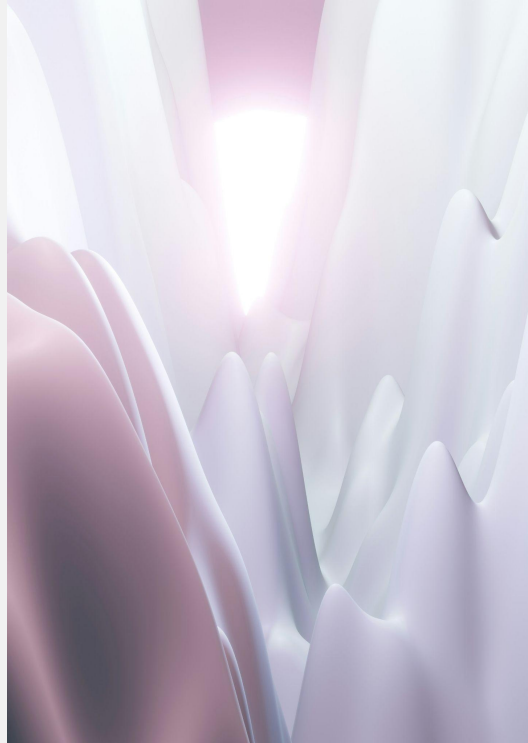


Photo by Salvatore Andrea Santacroce on Unsplash



# Transformative role-playing games

Regardless of the type of transformative role-playing game:

- The **most important parts** for a successful **transformative process** are **reflection** and **processing**.
- **Goal setting** can also be helpful, but keep in mind that role-playing games are **unpredictable in their impacts** as a result of **emergent play**.
- **Intentionality** at all stages -- **design, implementation, and play** -- can help groups steer toward **transformative impacts** (Bowman & Hugaas 2019).
- The **perception of safety** is important to **establish** and **maintain** in role-playing communities.
  - **Safety** allows participants to **lower their vigilance** and **surrender more deeply to playfulness** as a **central part of the transformative process**.
  - **Safety** necessitates **enthusiastic consent**, the **ability to opt-in and opt-out**, as well as **calibration** and **other forms of negotiation** and **self-advocacy**.

# Transformation and role-playing games

Role-playing games add these extra affordances (Bowman and Hugaas 2021):

Alibi



Photo by Claudia Ramírez on  
Unsplash

Bleed



Photo by Jill Burrow  
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/vase-with-violet-pigment-streams-in-water-6402529/>



# Transformation and role-playing games

Role-playing games add these extra affordances (Bowman and Hugaas 2021):

- **Alibi:** Permission to behave in ways that might otherwise feel **risky** or **socially unacceptable** (Montola 2010; Deterding 2017). Alibi allows participants to **feel more confident taking risks** and even **failing** as part of the learning process.
- **Bleed:** The **spillover** from player to character and vice versa of **emotions, thought processes, physical states, relationships, personality traits, etc.** (Montola 2010; Beltrán 2013; Bowman 2013, 2015; Kemper 2017; Hugaas 2019)



The background features a soft, ethereal aesthetic. On the left, there are layered, wavy bands of teal and light blue, resembling mist or water. A single, thick, golden-brown line meanders across the frame, starting from the left and looping towards the right. The right side of the image is filled with a light, airy texture, including numerous small, out-of-focus circular bokeh spots in shades of teal and white, creating a dreamlike atmosphere.

# Summary

# Transformative role-playing games

## Transformation:

1. A prolonged and sustained state of change.
2. A process or series of processes that lead to growth.

## Desired impact/goal in the three types of transformative games

- **Leisure:** Transformative impact
- **Therapy:** Therapeutic goal
- **Education:** Learning objective

The keys to success for any transformative process are: reflection and processing, intentionality at all stages, and safety.

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# Thank you!

The ROCKET team