

# Editorial

## Special Issue: Living Games

Welcome to Issue 7 of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*.

Legends in role-playing games are born in play. But others are created thanks to the confluence of ideas and people. The Living Games Conference 2016 is one such legend: a conference held in Austin, Texas on May 19-22, 2016. The 4-day series of lectures, experimental workshops, games, and exciting social events marked a watershed in live-action role-playing (larp) discourse. Experts, organizers, enthusiasts, and designers from around the world found common ground between them to advance more ambitious thinking and projects related to role-playing. Living Games was a place for different scenes and aesthetic ideals to co-mingle and find expression: for boffer larpers to collaborate with freeform role-players, for theatre-style players to exchange ideas with simulation experts. Dialogue between theorists and practitioners wishing to advocate for larp and innovate the form were particularly encouraged; *Sharing Insights* was indeed the theme of the conference. As a result, a body of correspondingly diverse scholarship has emerged from Living Games.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, a publication dedicated to bringing together divergent threads of RPG scholarship, is devoted to the work collected and presented at the Living Games Conference 2016. These six papers represent many sub-disciplines, although virtually all use social science qualitative and quantitative methods. Rather than pursuing a laser-like focus, the field of role-playing studies instead expands in all directions at once. The articles do share a preoccupation with power dynamics, be they a player controlling their character, games marginalizing specific groups, or social interactions producing their own hierarchies.

Ryan Blackstock's essay "Origin Stories: The Phenomenological Relationship Between Players and their Characters" relies on a dozen personal interviews of *Vampire: The Masquerade* players to determine the uses they have for their characters. Applying a mental health framework, Blackstock paints a picture more nuanced than previous player motivation studies; players' ambiguous relationship with their characters, their flow, their freedom, and what they can learn from the character are fluid

structures that help shape player experience. Psychology complicates our relationships with our characters, rather than explains them away.

In a similar vein, Diana J. Leonard's "Conflict and Change: Testing a Life-Cycle Derived Model of Larp Group Dynamics" puts psychology at the center of discussion, but this time group social psychology. Leonard analyzes data collected by the 2014 Larp Census to determine if socially competitive larps also produce gradual emotional disinvestment from the same. Her findings suggest the opposite: a quantitative scrubbing of 17,371 survey responses finds players who are attracted to intrigue and political play reporting greater overall satisfaction with their larp experiences. This ties into larger discussions about "positive negative" experiences in role-playing, as framed by scholars such as Markus Montola (2010).

Explicit discussions of power relations in larps have taken center stage with respect to design and consent. In "The Reality Code: Interpreting Aggregate Larp Rules as Code that Runs on Humans," Samara Hayley Steele takes a macro-level perspective on boffer larp. Steele argues that researchers can draw many analogies between computer programming languages — often seen as remote from larp — and the rules to which we attend when we larp. This offers an opening for critical code studies to integrate larps into their field of inquiry. The relationship of the programmer to the program, especially when humans are the "hardware," is always asymmetrical; Steele shows how such programming perpetuates specific social fantasies while also promising some revolutionary potential.

Similarly, Jason Giardino and Timothy Hutchings look at ludic power relations through a classic post-structural perspective in "Foucault's Heterotopias as Play Spaces." They define the "otherness" of the larp space, both in terms of its temporary quality, as well as the social norms it suspends or amplifies. Using the tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons* and the Nordic larp *Just a Little Lovin'* as case studies — two RPGs that appear to have little to do with each other — Giardino and Hutchings highlight the societal tensions that different rules and play cultures evoke..

The Living Games 2016 essay collection offers us short works that reflect new ideas with respect to power, the social sciences, and RPGs. We should attend to not only the results, but the methodology and networks at play here. After all, many of these voices represent the coming generation of young RPG scholars, their interests, and their own disciplinary struggles within the field. We are enthusiastic to now present this material in a publicly accessible forum so that the rest of the world can witness this great expansion of issues and disciplinary approaches as well.

Evan Torner  
University of Cincinnati

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