

# Editorial:

## Retrospective, Challenges, and Persistence

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### 1. RETROSPECTIVE: THE EVOLUTION OF THE IJRP FROM 2006 TO 2020

The editorial team of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* is delighted to announce our 10th issue of the publication. The journal was envisioned in 2006 and established soon after to provide a space for scholars and practitioners to dialogue within the emerging field of role-playing game studies. The first issue, edited by Anders Drachen, was published December 30, 2008. In the "Introduction," Drachen writes,

*The International Journal of Role-Playing* is a response to a growing need for a place where the varied and wonderful fields of role-playing research and development, covering academia, the industry and the arts, can exchange knowledge and research, form networks and communicate. (Drachen 2008)

By its very nature, role-playing is often an embodied, interactive, and experiential medium. Given its unusual space within academic study, a space for researchers, artists, and industry professionals to share knowledge became crucial in advancing the field. Although the annual publications affiliated with the Knudepunkt conference serve a similar function for Nordic larp, those books also include materials such as theoretical treatises, manifestos, documentations pieces, and more recently, advice for players (Nordic Larp Wiki, 2020). The website Nordiclarp.org also contributes to the role-play discourse, publishing opinion pieces alongside quasi-academic popular articles. In the United States, *The Wyrd Con Companion Book* (2012-2015) attempted to bridge the gap between leisurely and scholarly writing, including one section for popular pieces and another for double blind peer-reviewed articles.

Ultimately, the need for a consistent peer-reviewed publication exclusively committed to academic work on role-playing games became pressing. Scholars in this field around the world have produced an impressive number of papers, theses, and dissertations since the release of that first issue of IJRP in 2008, many of which rely upon the wisdom of the authors published in this volume among other excellent journals such as *Analog Game Studies*, the landmark anthology *Role-Playing Game Studies: Transmedia Foundations* edited by José P. Zagal and Sebastian Deterding (2018), and the popular literature generated by practitioners. The scholars in our field can benefit from a rigorous process of review not only for their academic credentials, but also for their professional growth and the development of their academic skills.

Thus, the field remains informed by discourses unfolding within role-playing communities, as is evident by the amount of citations in academic articles that reference the above-mentioned popular publications among others. However, under the leadership of J. Tuomas Harviainen

from 2011-2015, as well as our current editorial board, the *International Journal of Role-Playing* has narrowed its scope over the years and now focuses exclusively on scholarly, peer-reviewed articles. While the editors do consider articles from non-academic practitioners, we have focused our attention on obtaining quality, informed reviews from our growing cohort of passionate and engaged scholars in the field.

In this edition, we have also changed our layout structure for greater readability and accessibility. We give thanks to the hard work of Drachen, Markus Montola, and Harviainen for establishing this journal, as well as to all the authors, reviewers, and layout designers past and present.

## 2. CHALLENGES AND PERSISTENCE

Due to this focus on rigor as well as other painful challenges, Issue 10 of the *IJRP* has been a long time in the making. We began shepherding full-length articles through the review process in 2017. Since that time, we were able to publish shorter conference-length papers for Issues 8 and 9, but this current issue has been a labor of love for the editorial board, not to mention our exceptionally patient authors and reviewers.

Issue 10 has faced other unusual and painful challenges. The author of our first fully accepted article for the issue, Matthew M. LeClaire, tragically passed away on September 21, 2018. The editors have been working with Matthew's former supervisor at University of Nevada Las Vegas, Andrew L. Spivak; his colleague, Shekinah Hoffman; and his parents, Guy M. and Mary Jo LeClaire; to ensure that all parties are informed and approve of the publication. His parents graciously agreed to write his professional biography for his article, which also features a touching memorial. We are in their debt and humbled to have the honor of carrying on Matthew's legacy and sharing his passion for scholarship with the world in a small way by publishing his work in our journal. We have dedicated this volume to Matthew, where Shekinah has shared the profound influence Matthew had on her life and the lives of others.

In addition, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the events of 2020, with the challenges of the global pandemic; uprisings against police violence; public advocacy for institutional reform and civil rights for Black and Indigenous people of color (BIPOC), immigrants, trans, and nonbinary folks; the economic crisis; catastrophic natural disasters due to climate change; and growing uncertainty about the future of democracy in the USA, UK, Belarus, Hong Kong, India, and elsewhere. We send our gratitude for the persistence of our authors and reviewers during this often unstable and devastating period of history and renew our commitment to providing a quality publication channel for scholars in our field.

## 3. ISSUE 10: SOCIAL DYNAMICS WITHIN ROLE-PLAYING COMMUNITIES

The strongest commonality among the six articles of this issue is an emphasis on *social dynamics within specific role-playing communities*. These communities cover a vast range of activities that fall under the label "role-playing," including traditional tabletop games, indie benefits, some articles discuss problematic behaviors within communities, such as in-group stigmatization of certain members, status jockeying, and the perpetuation of sexist and racist practices that make participation difficult for people who are not White, straight, cis male, and middle- to upper-class.

Taken as a whole, this issue represents a fascinating glimpse into the interpersonal

dynamics within several past and present analog play cultures. We begin with Aaron Trammell and Nikki Crenshaw's "The Damsel and the Courtesan: Quantifying Consent in Early *Dungeons & Dragons*," which examines the discourses of early tabletop role-playing communities through the lens of critical gender theory. The authors review discussions in 1975 in a fanzine called *Alarums & Excursions* on two controversial player-generated classes for *D&D* (1974): the Damsel and the Courtesan. The article demonstrates how misogynist tropes and the objectification of women were reinforced by the game mechanics within these classes. Importantly, they unpack discussions within the fanzine community as women and other members of the community pushed back against these stereotypes, arguing that the perpetuation of sexist tropes may have been exclusionary to women since the inception of modern role-playing games.

An excellent complement to this piece is our next article, "Hooligans at the Table: The Concept of Male Preserves in Tabletop Role-playing Games." In this work, Steven Dashiell provides an excellent analysis of the socio-linguistic dimensions of rules discussions in tabletop groups. Dashiell posits that practices such as "rules lawyering" and "gamesplaining" reinforce tabletop gaming as a male preserve: a space within which men can perform otherwise problematic or aberrant behaviors due to the alibi of play. Dashiell argues that these practices further alienate women and players of color by reinforcing a form of "nerd" dominance, within which White, middle-class cis-men use the rules and game lore to jockey for status. This behavior sets the tone for others who enter the space to either adopt the problematic behavior or leave. This article demonstrates how the sexist and racist behavior within role-playing communities still persists within these exclusionary practices, despite growing awareness and progressive activism in recent years. This work is especially important when considering the huge influx of new players into role-playing communities inspired by the online streaming actual play communities such as *Critical Role* (2015-) and difficulties they might face with their sense of belonging.

Shifting from intragroup to intergroup dynamics, William J. White's "Indie Gaming Meets the Nordic Scene: A Dramatistic Analysis" analyzes a public conversation between key figures within two indie role-playing subcultures that have developed somewhat independently. The discussion took place at the Italian conference InterNosCon in May 2010 between the American Ron Edwards, who moderated the Forge indie tabletop community, and the Swede Tobias Wrigstad, one of the founders of the Jeepform collective, a specific subset of freeform role-playing emerging out of the Nordic countries that emphasizes social realism in role-play. The panel had been expected to be controversial, given Edwards' (2004) theoretical emphasis on the rules of a particular RPG determining its gameplay outcomes weighed against Wrigstad's (2008) emphasis on the autocratic power of the game master and otherwise flippant rejection of most play-cultural norms of RPGs, writ large. White applies Kenneth Burke's dramatistic pentad as a means to analyze the rhetorical moves made by each participant, which either differentiated their position from the other or emphasized their role as participants within a larger dialogue of play. This interaction is particularly interesting with reference to the previous papers in that it describes the perspectives of keyfigures who have influenced and shaped these parallel "indie" discourses as alternatives to more traditional games.

Transitioning to American boffer larp, in "Live Action Role-playing: Transcending the Magic Circle," Matthew M. LeClaire explores how *Dagorhir* players create characters and build community. Using symbolic interactionism, LeClaire's participant-observer ethnography emphasizes that, even within a primarily combat-focused game, players can explore different aspects of identity through the fictional framework. In spite of this identity exploration,

LeClaire observed how some players may not connect these character aspects to off-game growth in their self-concepts in spite of the corresponding behavior within the two frames that he observed. He also discusses the ways in which group members reinforce belonging within the *Dagorhir* community through social bonding, as well as the way players are given names and labels to signify their role in the group. However, LeClaire describes how some of these labels may reinforce social hierarchies and factionalism within the community, e.g., referring to combat-focused players as “stick jocks” and participants who role-play their characters as “flurbs.” Such labeling can reinforce in- and out-group behavior within larps, where players may stigmatize other participants with a different play style than their own and group themselves accordingly. This work is also especially interesting with regard to the concept of the *alibi* of play, as some participants within the subculture LeClaire interviewed seemed unable or unwilling to view their characters as influential to their own personal growth..

Shifting in tone, we have two pieces pertaining to interactions within role-playing games as they pertain to player skill acquisition or demonstration. The first article with this focus is Matthew Orr, Sara King, and Melissa McGonnell’s “The Influence of Role-playing Games on Perceived Social Competence.” The authors conducted 6 qualitative interviews with tabletop players and analyzed how gaming may have impacted positively their participants’ perceived social competence. Their data is presented here along four major themes: Content Focus, Social Focus, Creativity Focus, and Identity Focus. While exploratory in nature, this research offers a foundation for future studies related to how gamers view their participation in role-playing communities and what sort of personal meaning and/or growth they might experience within these groups.

Our final paper discusses the performance of the skill of teaching by professional instructors in both in-game and off-game spaces. Juliane Homann’s “Not Only Play: Experiences of Playing a Professor Character at College of Wizardry with a Professional Background in Teaching” presents rich qualitative data obtained from 9 participant interviews. Homann’s research seeks to understand the relationship between labor and play by discussing with teachers their experiences playing professors in the Danish-Polish blockbuster larp *College of Wizardry* (2014-). Homann applies several useful concepts from the study of work and leisure to larp. Notably, she connects *spillover* with *bleed*, where qualities or habits of work life spill over and are exercised in the frame of leisure. Homann also discusses *compensation*, where players seek out leisure activities that involve certain experiences or skills that they are not able to perform at work. These concepts are helpful in understanding player motivations, as one might assume that participants might prefer to do activities wholly different from their work life; indeed, many players perform labor activities in fiction that are quite similar to their professions as *first-* and *second-order* labor (Jones, Koulu, and Torner 2016). Ultimately, while play can feel liberating for participants, many larps require them to engage in forms of labor that may or may not feel stressful. Homann gives us terminology and examples of this phenomenon, helping us understand the relationship between the professional social frame and role-playing as a leisurely social activity.

As a whole, we remain pleased and humbled by the quality of work and determination demonstrated by everyone in this process. We hope these studies move our field further in its investigation of the social dynamics within leisure role-playing games.

— Sarah Lynne Bowman, Evan Torner, and Bill White  
October 29, 2020

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