

Editorial

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1. INTRODUCTION TO ISSUE 11

Academic readers are, by now, two years into the global COVID-19 pandemic, accustomed to editors opening their journals with texts articulating the many setbacks in the creation of their issue. Suffice to say: there have been challenges this year (2021) in bringing this issue into the world. Yet we can also celebrate the fact that role-playing game studies appears to be as vibrant as ever, with increasing attention paid to the form in scholarly monographs and peer-reviewed articles across a variety of disciplines.

In particular, we as editors detected in the past few years a broader shift toward “applied” RPGs: role-playing games and activities used in educational, therapeutic, spiritual, corporate, and other settings to achieve specific outcomes. Whereas in previous decades -- e.g., the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and the resultant RPG-shaming of the 1990s and 2000s -- when one could hardly get an institution of repute to take RPGs seriously, nowadays role-playing games can be integrated into virtually every sphere of human interaction and potentially receive support. For this reason, scholarly interest in studying the design and impacts of analog RPGs as vehicles for change has flourished, leading one of our editors, Sarah Lynne Bowman, to co-found the Transformative Play Initiative at the Department of Game Design at Uppsala University. For similar reasons, we devoted this year’s Call for Papers to applied role-playing, and will continue to center our focus on the potential impacts of these games, while still accepting academic articles pertaining to RPGs more broadly as usual.

Accordingly, now that the world is starting to take RPGs seriously, the articles in this issue examine some of their benefits beyond play, as well as the serious limitations and constraints of these play media. *Critical Role*, *Stranger Things*, and other popular media have played an outsized role in presenting role-playing games to the world beyond our close circles. Millions more are connecting with the hobby -- almost all of them with *Dungeons & Dragons*, the game prominently featured in those media. This has forced us role-playing game scholars to (a) take those RPG media seriously (Jones 2021; Hedge and Grouling 2021) and (b) question the fundamentals of D&D-style RPGs. These fundamentals include their violence, their bio-essentialist depictions of race, and the identity tourism predominant in the hobby, in addition to their possibilities of healing or teaching others through moderated sword-and-sorcery storytelling. From this vantage point, as well as a more expansive definition of RPGs that includes forms such as Nordic larp and Story Games, our issue takes shape.

Questioning the centrality of violence in *D&D*, Sarah Albom’s article, “The Killing Roll: The Prevalence of Violence in *Dungeons & Dragons*,” finds a game threaded with player-characters’ requirements to engage in combat and be necessarily good at it, despite the otherwise negative social effects of violence in the real world. This textual analysis of the game’s 5th Edition *Player’s Handbook* reveals how player-characters are encouraged by the text to escalate to violence and peaceful resolutions are neither normalized nor mechanically supported in many cases.

With regard to themes of violence and oppression, Diana J. Leonard, Jovo Janjetovic, and Maximilian Usman look at how larps can offer a space for perspective taking, empathy, and reflection

in “Playing to Experience Marginalization: Benefits and Drawbacks of ‘Dark Tourism’ in Larp.” They explore how players can portray characters who have a marginalized identity different from their own, which can be beneficial. However, they remind us that structures of privilege figure prominently in the representation of the marginalized, showing the limits of an “empathy” framework in our RPG discussions. Thus, the authors offer best practices and recommendations with regard to engaging in this type of play respectfully.

Looking at these themes in a different light, as Joe Lasley points out in “Fantasy In Real Life: Making Meaning from Vicarious Experiences with a Tabletop Role-Playing Game Live-Play Internet Stream,” *D&D* as a game of fantasy violence *also* permits the fandom of, say, *Critical Role* to explore their own identities, work through mental health challenges, and grow personally as people. How can this be? Lasley’s qualitative analysis of the experiences of seven (7) “Critters” reveals the parasocial dimension of *Critical Role*, oft-framed in a negative light, as a means for fans to self-reflect, engage in meta-cognition, and experience a sense of closeness with the actors on the show as role models.

Kerttu Lehto’s “Role-Playing Games and Well-Being” is a terrific companion piece to Lasley’s, for she provides an exhaustive literature review of RPGs with respect to well-being and the arts. Lehto’s work reminds us that psychodrama and therapy have always exerted significant pressure on role-play practices, not only in therapeutic climates but also in the entertainment sphere. This article emphasizes the need for greater integration and sharing of knowledge between these fields of study, as well as the practices surrounding them, as RPGs hold significant potential as vehicles for personal development and well-being.

Along these lines, Josephine Baird’s autoethnography, “Role-playing the Self: Trans Self-Expression, Exploration, and Embodiment in (Live Action) Role-playing Games” provides further evidence that RPGs for entertainment also form a pivotal space of gender exploration for those who identify as trans and/or are in any stage of gender transition. Baird looks at the liminality and character enactment of RPGs as the core component, particularly for players who have limited outlets for other forms of gender expression and play. Baird sees tremendous potential for larps especially to provide spaces for embodiment of gender by facilitating moments for players to have socially validating experiences of gender performance, which can be crucial for well-being.

Finally, in terms of more broad applications of applied role-playing games, Katrin Geneuss offers a stand-out example of educational use of role-play in “The Use of the Role-playing Technique STARS in Formal Didactic Contexts.” Geneuss examines the results of 16 live action role-playing games with a total of 53 cycles of Design-based Research (DBR) designed over the course of 5 years, which were conducted in German schools. Geneuss’ rigorous work provides helpful guidelines for any and all teachers seeking to use educational role-play -- or edu-larp -- in their classrooms.

When role-play is applied, as in so many cases above, we see both its transformative potential as well as its riskier dimensions. Role-playing games bear both the legacies of war games and therapy, and are now heavily mediated within an exponentially expanded commercial entertainment sphere. From education to self-actualization, their use value is apparent, if still rife with ambiguity and larger questions. It is our belief as editors of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* that scholars in our field should continue to ask these big questions, for the broader philosophical implications and practical uses of role-play are now more urgent than ever.

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