Hanne Grasmo

Hanne Grasmo is a university lecturer at Molde University College, and a doctoral researcher at the Centre of Excellency in Game Culture Studies, Tampere. Her PhD centers around embodied role-play and sexual emotions. She holds an MA in sociology with a background in sexology, education, theatre and larp design. For over 25 years Grasmo has written about larp, founded the Knutepunkt conferences, wrote the first Nordic larp book and a larp monograph.

Neurospicy Larpers

Role-play as a Method for Working with Neurodivergent Youth with Challenging Behavior Regarding Sexuality

Neurospicy youngsters and adults are telling researchers how role-playing has been an important part for them in training skills, exploring social relations, and making friends. Both larping and tabletop are meaningful leisure activities for people on the autism spectrum and folks with ADHD. A lot of us larpers are *neurospicy,* a more positive and inclusive term than using the diagnosis mentioned. But how can social workers and educators use this knowledge professionally for challenged and vulnerable youth? That was the question that emerged from Oslo Metropolitan University for a Master's course about Sexually Challenging Youth on the Spectrum. Oslo Met wanted to make a Reader for the course, explaining all the methods available for professionally working with this group of youth, and they wanted to include role-playing as one of those methods. By doing a literature review, this essay was my answer, now re-written for the KP-book 2025:

Introduction

Tabletop role-playing games and larp are forms of social role-playing where participants play characters in a fictional world. In role-playing, we use our imagination and creativity together with others, acting out a situation or adventure in an agreed-upon setting or world. It could be a story we create within a pre-existing role-playing game (such as *Dungeons & Dragons/DnD*, *Vampire: The Masquerade*, or the Norwegian *Fabula*) or something specially designed by us or others. The fictional world we play in might be a fantasy realm, science fiction, set in a historical period, or resemble our own world.

The games themselves are not dangerous, as some educators still seem to think - even if the worlds and stories we create can be scary or violent. However, some individuals, especially those who are vulnerable, may develop an addiction to various activities - including gaming. It is not the gaming itself that is harmful but rather the potential addiction that can arise. This phenomenon can partly be explained by dopamine release, although this is more associated with social media than with games in general - particularly not analog role-playing games.

Research over the past 30 years shows that role-playing games (and games in general) do not make people more violent or criminal. This also applies to neurodivergent individuals. It is also essential to distinguish between different types of gaming: Playing role-playing games alone on a computer, online with others, or playing in the same physical space without screens. The latter provides an opportunity for direct feedback from others and a space to set and practice social norms.

When it comes to content, the same principles apply as they do for movies, books, and theater: Not all content is suitable for everyone. This is especially challenging for adults with cognitive and/or post-traumatic issues. It is important for those around them to assess what is appropriate for different kinds of individuals. Processing dangerous, violent, or criminal thoughts and themes through role-playing games is, of course, much safer than watching real news or experiencing such events in real life. Generally, it is essential for adults to engage in the world of vulnerable children and youth and to discuss their experiences.

Role-playing in Education

Role-playing is a well-known tool in education (Bowman & Standiford, 2015; Algayres, 2018; Westborg, ref; Gjedde, 2014; Pomerantz, 2003; Harviainen, 2016), simulation (Harviainen, 2018), and therapeutic and clinical contexts (e.g., Morin, 2012; Snow & Maeng-Cleveland, 2009; Standiford, 2014; Burns, 2014; Gianotten & Reisman, 2017; Lee, Jacklin & Boyer, 2012; Ogden, 2017). This article examines two traditions of fantasy role-playing for recrea-

tional use, where participants play characters in a designed and planned fiction: Tabletop role-playing games and larp.

Participating in role-playing within fantasy worlds offers joy, exploration, and meaning for children, youth, and adults. We provide an overview of how analog fantasy role-playing games can serve as tools for social and therapeutic work with children and adolescents. There is a rapidly growing body of knowledge showing how role-playing games can promote personal development and transformation (Meriläinen, 2012; Bowman, 2022; Bowman, 2015; Daniau, 2016; Aron, 2012)

What Happens to Us in Role-playing Games?

When we participate in fantasy role-playing games, we use our creative, social, and emotional skills in interaction with others. Participants act out a situation or adventure in an agreed-upon setting or world, designed for entertainment, art, or education. Gary Alan Fine (1983) conducted an ethnographic study of a D&D club in the USA in the 1980s, defining role-playing as "any game that allows players to assume imaginary characters and operate with a degree of freedom in an imaginary environment."

Role-players act through their fictional characters, which may be similar to, or vastly different from, themselves. Every role-playing game has rules - or a "system" - and various techniques to portray elements like magic, violence, and romance (Grasmo & Stenros, 2022). While imagination is central to role-playing, it's distinct from "just fantasizing" because role-playing is always collaborative and intentional. Games with rules create a defined time-space unit, allowing participants to "lose themselves" in the process and act without self-consciousness (Csikszentmihalyi & Bennett, 1971). In tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), participants sit around a table with a game master (GM) and two to six players, telling a story or adventure together, where dice rolls commonly determine how successful the team is in various choices. Larp (live-action role-playing) came to Norway in the 1980s (Grasmo, 1998) and uses the physical world to represent the game world. It is collaborative, physical, and takes place in prepared locations where a handful to hundreds of participants live and act in a fictional world for hours or days (Grasmo, Sihvonen, Stenros, in press).

Sometimes the setting and costumes are "360" (Koljonen, 2019), designed to be as realistic as possible, while other times it follows the "black box" tradition, without costumes or props. There is no audience; everyone participates. Often, organizers or designers are present to conduct workshops, oversee the game's progress, and facilitate a shared debrief afterward.

Unlike theater, larp is based on co-creation and improvisation; there is no script, but each player has a written background for their character. Players are simultaneously "actors" and the audience, a concept called "first-person audience" (Montola & Holopainen, 2012), meaning they witness their own play from within. Role-playing games have proven effective for developing social skills, increasing self-awareness, and promoting creativity. For children and youth on the autism spectrum, fantasy role-playing especially supports social interaction, empathy, perspective-taking, and communication skills (Fein, 2016). It also trains problem-solving and stress management, offering a "break" from oneself by being someone else temporarily (Helbig, 2019). Role-playing games can also be used for emotional regulation training.

There are specialized training programs for teachers and social workers to become "Geek Therapists" employing tabletop and larp. Worldwide, there is a growing body of professionals using role-play methods to work with neurodivergent youth, as well as more research on and with neurospicy players.

The ASD Role-player: Training Social Skills and Regulating Emotions

As early as 1984, Kallam (Baker, Turner & Kotera, 2022) observed that a group of "mildly handicapped" youth, who played D&D role-playing games twice a week for nine weeks, gradually developed better self-efficacy and the ability to handle creative and complex situations.

Elizabeth Fein (2016) conducted a study at a role-playing camp for autistic youth and found that the fundamental structure of role-playing aligns with the needs of the participants' "cultural ecology for organizing themselves and their interactions with others." The character sheets and rules for social interaction provided a meaningful framework for communication and participation. Fein noted that because the games often feature battles between good and evil, and characters with extraordinary powers and magic, this resonated with the participants.

A later study (Valorozo-Jones, 2021) also found increased inclusion and development of teamwork skills in a group of five neurodivergent tabletop role-players. Visuri (2024) conducted an extensive study on larp and autism involving 10 experienced autistic larpers. She investigated why there appears to be a large proportion of autistic larpers, even though immersing oneself in a character and playing in a fictional world requires multiple levels of social interaction, complex coordination, and handling of unforeseen events. Visuri (2024) found that autonomy, inclusion, and friendship (also with non-autistic individuals) are key benefits of larp. One reason for this is that since it is "just a game," larp serves as a safe space to test social boundaries. Participants highlighted that bodily feedback and support systems in cases of "social prediction" errors contribute to both social confidence and personal growth. The conclusion is that larp is an "optimal autistic brave-space" (Visuri, 2024), from a cognitive theory perspective, where participants feel safe and courageous enough to test social boundaries - thereby learning better "social predictions." Experimentation and learning from mistakes facilitate bodily learning. From the participants' perspective, larping contributes to increased social confidence and improved well-being in daily life outside of larping. One reason larp works well for individuals on the autism spectrum is that autistic players have been involved in shaping larp from the beginning, helping create a space that suits them, according to Visuri (2024).

An important aspect of larp is that it usually includes a debrief afterward, providing an opportunity to address mistakes and misunderstandings and to learn more. Other larp researchers also highlight the debrief as a space where development and transformation can occur (Westborg, 2022; see also Bowman & Hugaas, 2018, Bowman, Diakolambrianou & Brind 2024).

Research on using tabletop role-playing games and larp for learning, transformation, and therapy shows that fantasy role-playing is effective for developing social skills and creating social networks (Helbig, 2019). It can also reduce bullying better than traditional empathy training (Bagès, Hoareau & Alain, 2020) and is an effective tool for transformation and identity work (Aron, 2012; Rusch & Phelps, 2020; Bowman & Braid, 2022). Role-playing games create a structured "safe space" to explore psychopathologies (Dare et al., 2021).

Baker, Turner & Kotera (2022) suggest that the narrative structures in D&D make fantasy role-playing games particularly suited for therapeutic work. The stories involve overcoming adversity, exploring alternative identities, and reflecting on aspects of mental health recovery (Kerr et al., 2020). The therapeutic effects of larp have also been explored in a project for Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in groups (Varrette et al., 2023; Barnstein, 2022). Barnstein concludes that CBT-oriented larp is a useful component

in the treatment of various mental disorders. This case study tested a clinical CBT manual in a group of young adults and showed that larping had positive effects on mental health.

Another field where role-play and larp have shown positive effects is identity work and exploring both gender and sexual identity (Sihvonen & Stenros 2019), especially with the more and more common deliberate design of erotic larps. Working with challenging and vulnerable youth would benefit from including sexuality as a theme in the role-playing games.

Sexuality and Romance in Role-Playing Games

Sexuality and romance are common themes in role-playing games, particularly in the Nordic live-action role-play (larp) tradition (Stenros & Montola, 2000; Grasmo & Stenros, 2022; Grasmo, Sihvonen & Stenros, in press). In these fictional worlds, characters may fall in love, engage in transgressive sexual activities, or even commit acts of assault (see *Transgressions in Role-Play*: Bowman & Stenros, 2018/2024). However, what is allowed in these stories must be agreed upon by the players beforehand. This is especially critical for vulnerable groups, where an adult therapist, teacher, or social worker may need to take responsibility.

In larps with erotic content, players can engage in sexual and romantic interactions as their characters in various ways (Stenros, 2013). Although physical genital contact is not acted out, some instances may include performative "theater-sex," with clothes on (Grasmo & Stenros, 2022). Other common methods for simulating sex include: Verbal descriptions, shoulder or hand massages (Wieslander, 2004), or using specially designed "meta-techniques" that fit the story and the player group (Grasmo, 1998).

A crucial aspect of Nordic erotic larp is calibration among players (Grasmo & Stenros, 2022, Koljonen, 2020), which involves setting boundaries before the game, taking brief pauses to recalibrate during play, and using physical cues like saying "no," "yes," "less," "more," or "stop". This makes larp a particularly effective way to practice social and emotional skills related to sexuality. Since everything occurs in a fictional setting, participants are not exposed to real risk.

Role-playing and larp are also especially suited for exploring queer identities (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2019; Baird, 2022/2024; Grasmo & Stenros, 2022). Many players report that they first experimented with their gender or sexual identity in a larp setting (Sihvonen & Stenros, 2019; Grasmo, 2023)For trans individuals, experiencing their gender identity embodied in this way has been important and empowering (Baird, 2022; Baird & Bowman, 2023; Grasmo, Sihvonen & Stenros, in press).

A recent study (Grasmo, NACS 2023 and Fagdag NYT conference, 2024) collected 43 anonymous accounts on how larpers experience sexual desire when in character during a larp. Preliminary findings show that for many players, sexual desire is often heightened during larp compared to everyday life. For some, having sex as a character in a fantasy role-play setting is the only way they can achieve sexual arousal; this was particularly the case for two neurodivergent larpers.

Role-playing is already a tool in professional practice for addressing sexual issues and sexual education (e.g., Mendoza, 2020; Lescano, Brown & Johnson, 2003). Combining sexual education with fantasy role-playing is also seen in the annual workshop "Clitical Games", an annual event in US, where health professionals and role-play designers collaborate to create role-playing games for sex education and therapy.

Erotic larps always have an age limit of 18+. When Grasmo and

Stenros examined the design of 25 Nordic larps (Grasmo & Stenros, 2022) with erotic content, they found that these experiences can be transgressive, adult, emotionally intense, and even shocking. However, the game is bound by rules, ensuring player safety, with constant renegotiation, and with the option to stop or leave the game at any time.

Integrating role-play with complex sexual themes can be safer than discussing them directly. In this way, participants have the alibi of a character and a fictional world, with agreed-upon rules to rely on.

The Way Forward

My literature review shows that there are already a number of published articles that show how beneficial roleplaying is - and can be - for neurospicy people. Most of the research is about leisure, so the next step would be to study professional use of role-play games for function-variant youth.

The results from the research so far seem to emphasize social skill training and friendship. I imagine that there is an abundance of potential for professionals to explore. I will especially encourage social workers and educators to dare go into delicate themes like sexuality and darker themes like violence, war, and loss. My key insight is that the potential is great when we co-create and immerse into fantasy worlds with problematic, difficult, and dangerous situations. The larps and tabletop games do not need to be made "safe" nor "appropriate" by the professional, but rather address troublesome themes in breaks or debriefs. Unfortunately, few professionals know how to do that.

The biggest challenge currently is, that even if there is education available for professionals, very few have any knowledge of roleplay and larping nor how to professionally use these tools. My hope is that both larpers in professional roles, as well as the larp community at large, manage to reach out further with the knowledge we already have to promote role-playing as a professional tool. I hope we can pave the road for organized larp- and tabletop activities, therapy, and training for those of us who are neurospicy, and introduce our hobby to those who haven't tried it yet.

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