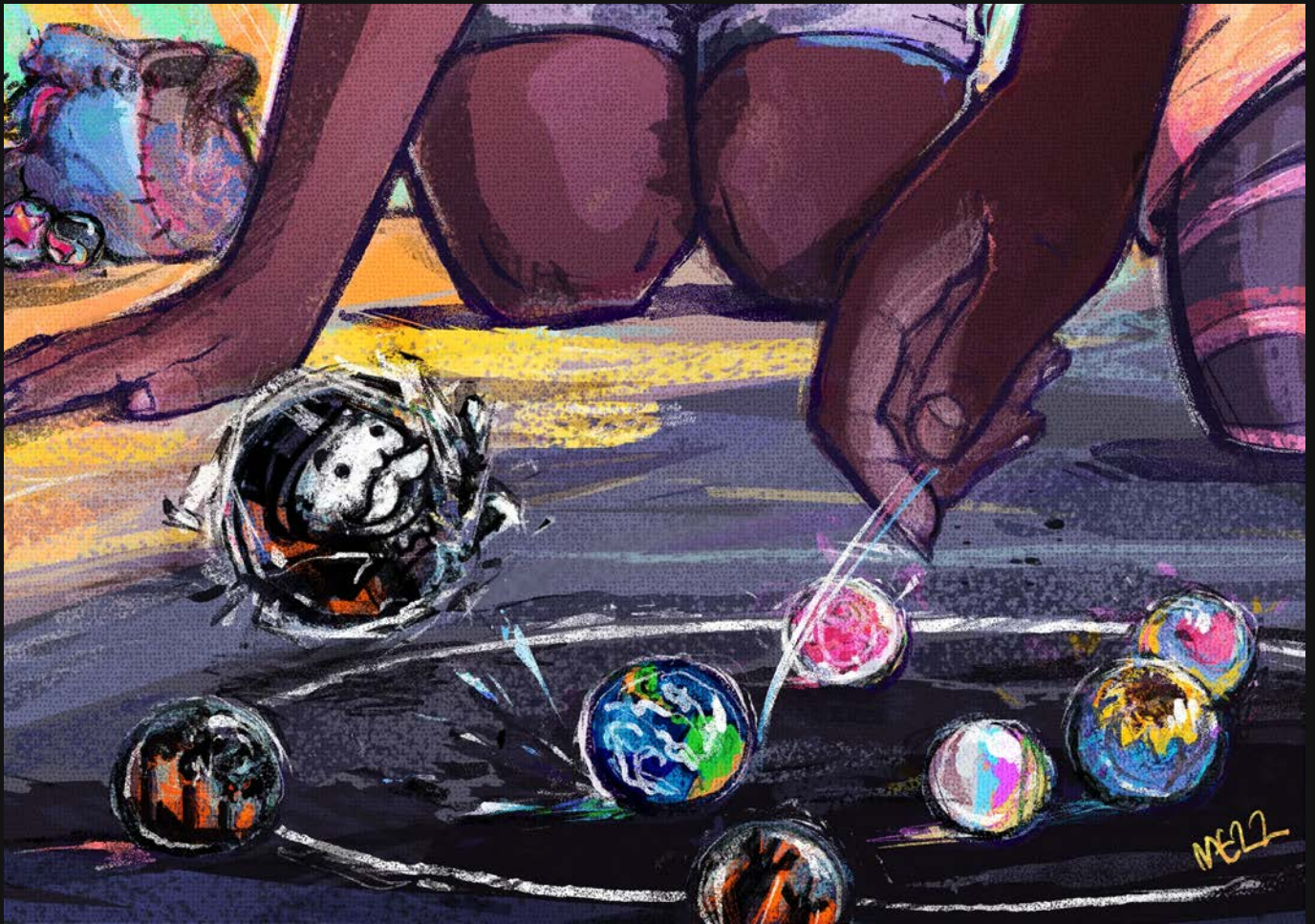


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Special Issue

This Time it's for all the Marbles.
Towards Social Justice in Digital Gaming

edited by
Patrick Prax

Issue 17 (2022)

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Learning About Ourselves: Communicating, Connecting and Contemplating Trans Experience Through Play

Josephine Baird

Abstract: This article posits that intentional non-formal and informal educational game design can provide an opportunity for the safer exploration of, and learning about, (trans)gender subjectivities. Non-formal and informal learning has been shown to be a more accessible and safer proposition for marginalised communities who are often excluded from formal and recognised social institutions. Non-formal and informal learning is also a structurally appropriate approach for exploring counter-normative topics, including diversities of gender and sexualities. I will demonstrate how studies of game-based learning and edu-larp put these principles into practice through gameplay and framing activities which facilitate experiential and situated learning. I will argue that this approach is particularly useful for the simulation of the complex intersectional socio-cultural function of gender. I will conclude that an edu-larp design approach can provide the basis for intentional educational game design utilising principles of safer containers of play, emancipatory bleed, and transformative role-play to explore trans experience, for both trans- and cis-participants alike.

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Keywords: LGBTQIA+, Trans, Digital Games, Analog Games, Live-action Role-playing, Edu-larp, Non-formal Learning, Informal Learning, Game-based Learning, gameenvironments

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LGBTQIA+ people have until recently been almost entirely excluded from officially recognised accounts of history and society (Kunzel 2018, Stein 2022) except in the forms of allusion, insinuation or defamation (see Terry 1999). More representative understanding of our existence throughout history needs to be read in the margins of

such texts or sought for in other sites (Feinberg 1997, Stryker 2008, Kunzel 2018). LGBTQIA+ experience has historically been more often communicated and recorded in arts, social spaces and queer kinship (Feinberg 1997). These sites are now being recognised as spaces of LGBTQIA+ histories and culture (Stein 2022), with records of/from them being gathered in the form of oral histories and archives of communities and art; for example the multiple LGBTQIA+ oral history collections within the *British Library Sounds archive*, the *Hall-Carpenter Archives* located at the London School of Economics which contains “ephemera and printed material documenting the development of gay activism in the UK since the 1950s” (Murphy 2017, np), and the *Transfabulous Archive* at The Bishopsgate Institute which holds a similar collection of materials for the *Transfabulous* arts and community events from 2006 to 2012. These archives document and educate on the otherwise unspoken histories of LGBTQIA+ people in a country where being gay was illegal until 1967 and the Gender Recognition Act – legislation which allows trans people to change their legal gender – only became law in 2004; a law which is currently in jeopardy in the UK due to a particularly aggressive wave of anti-trans sentiment in popular culture and politics (see Zanghellini 2020). The recently opened (2022) *Queer Britain museum* – the UK’s first national queer museum – presents its collection of artefacts (ephemera, pictures, accounts and stories) for the purpose of recording our histories but also explicitly to educate on them (Stephanie Stevens interviewed by *The Economic Times* 2022). I argue that this is a critical endeavour in the current socio-political climate, wherein the experience and histories of marginalised communities are presently being actively removed from (formal) education in many countries; for example, in some parts of the United States of America limitations are being placed on the teaching of Black history and Critical Race Theory (see Schwartz 2021) as well as on LGBTQIA+ issues and experience (see Phillips 2022) in schools. Furthermore, in the United States of America and the UK there is a recent surge of laws and proposed

rules which restrict young trans people from attending schools through threats of exposure or even enforced gender normativity (see Rummler 2022, Kelleher 2022, Ashbury 2022). Also, in the United States of America, there has been a resurgence of initiatives to ban books referencing themes of race, gender and sexualities in schools and wider libraries (Luscombe 2022, Tensley 2022). In Hungary, gender studies programmes were removed from university teaching by governmental decree (ECREA 2018) and in Russia the laws restricting any public expression in support of LGBTQIA+ issues and people impede “access to affirming education and support services, with harmful consequences for LGBT youth” (Human Rights Watch 2018, np). A similar rule was proposed for schools by the UK’s Attorney General in 2022, 34 years after an equivalent law (colloquially referred to as *Section 28*), which banned local authorities from any positive expression about homosexuality, was repealed for being highly damaging and discriminatory (Baska 2022).

Given that socio-political environments remain potentially hostile to the recording of, and education on, marginalised experiences – including LGBTQIA+ people’s – informal and non-formal sites of culture, expression and communication remain critical. LGBTQIA+ representation in the popular media has been just such an informal site, and has seen scholarly consideration of its potential impact on both LGBTQIA+ people and wider society (see Marshall 2016). With the seemingly ever-increasing popularity of video- (see Sinclair 2022) and analog-games (see Griep 2021), I argue these are just such a popular media site to be considered; a site which is an accessible example of informal or non-formal representation, communication and potentially education on LGBTQIA+ issues. LGBTQIA+ game studies is an emerging field which has in its inception broadly been concerned with the representation of queer people (Shaw 2014, Shaw and Friesam 2016, Ruberg 2019) and the opportunities that games might provide for the conveyance of our experience and issues (see Anthropy 2012,

Pozo 2018, Ruberg 2020). There is debate however, on what constitutes good representation of LGBTQIA+ people in games and what can be learned from that and by whom. Shaw (2010) notes that games, especially those in the mainstream, will tend to reproduce normative cultural representations. Shaw (2016) also notes that there is a significant lack of LGBTQIA+ representation in games, and in cases where it has been evident, it has not necessarily been positive per se (see Blume 2021). In the past decade however, there has been some shift in this, with more mainstream titles including LGBTQIA+ characters, plots and interactions (see Rivers 2019). Also, independent (indie) games – generally smaller productions, produced and disseminated outside of the mainstream – have shown a greater amount, and variety, of LGBTQIA+ representation (Ruberg 2018). Bo Ruberg examines the increasing number of out LGBTQIA+ game-makers, describing a community of what they call the queer games avant-garde of indie designers who try to “*explore queerness beyond representation*” (Ruberg 2020, 19; italics in the original). For Ruberg, games as an interactive medium allow us to consider the textual representation of characters and stories (what they consider surface representation) but also to examine the “aesthetics, interfaces, and development practices” of game design (ibid.). From this perspective, games can convey LGBTQIA+ experience not just by the textual representation they might include but also through their structural features; and as such, even games that do not intentionally include overt LGBTQIA+ themes might be considered a site for queer expression and exploration. Edmond Y. Chang (2017) describes this practice as *queergaming*, which involves LGBTQIA+ players co-opting, repurposing/reclaiming and appropriating games which may not include LGBTQIA+ content or design features. Ruberg (2019) presents several examples of the ways in which games can be interacted with, as well as read textually and structurally, through a queer lens in this way. Theorists like Welch (2018) and Howard (2021) consider how queer players can more literally include themselves through modifications (mods) to

a game’s code, rules, and representations. By examining these interventions, we can contemplate what opportunities modifying games might provide LGBTQIA+ players, and what these mods (and the need for them) can teach us about LGBTQIA+ experience and issues.

I propose that the above consideration of inclusion, textually and structurally, in games inspire the questions: *what* opportunity might games offer for learning about LGBTQIA+ people and our lives? For *whom* are these games created and what could different players learn from them and when? And, *how* could these games convey this learning to players? I argue that games provide a useful and accessible site for informal and non-formal learning about LGBTQIA+ experience and issues – to players who are themselves LGBTQIA+ and those who are not. Below I present that argument in relation to theories of informal and non-formal education spaces and approaches, which can be seen to function within game-based learning and edu-larp. I argue that this approach is particularly appropriate for LGBTQIA+ communities, who might be marginalised in formal learning space. I conclude by considering exactly what kind of learning about specifically trans experience and issues might be achieved through game design and play.

Informal and Non-formal Learning and Games

To examine the learning potential of games in relation to trans issues and experience, it is important to delineate the different categories of education, demonstrate their key features and differences, and why certain types are particularly applicable and appropriate for marginalised experience and communities. I will describe how non-formal and informal education functions and is particularly accessible to marginalised communities, and furthermore allows for learning that is contextually useful and

practically functional on the topic of trans experience. Following this, I will demonstrate how these approaches are modelled in game-based learning generally, and edu-larp specifically, as part of my argument for their particular appropriateness for exploring trans experience and issues.

Educational theorists (e.g., La Belle 1982, Selman et al. 1997) suggest that there are broadly three types of education: formal, non-formal and informal. Formal learning includes any educational environment/practice which is inscribed in society as such; this usually means any learning conducted within an accredited institution (for example, a school or university). Non-formal education tends to lie outside such institutions, often does not have a set curriculum nor set medium, and is usually characterised by learners co-creating their pedagogical goals, methods and outcomes. This type of learning can be carried out in a variety of ways usually as part of a purposeful and delineated group (for example, in workshops, study groups, etc.). In contrast, informal learning often does not necessarily include organised activity or delineated groups for the purpose of education and tends to have no defined educator who guides the process. In this pedagogical form, the individual may not engage in organised learning per se, and education might be a by-product of other life activities.

Formal education is not always accessible to all and as such, non-formal and informal education is considered a critical alternative for those groups who might not otherwise be represented or included. I will describe how non-formal and informal education functions and is particularly accessible to marginalised communities, and furthermore allows for learning that is contextually useful and practically functional on the topic of LGBTQIA+ experience. I will demonstrate how these approaches are modelled in game-based learning and edu-larp as part of my argument for their

particular appropriateness for exploring trans experience and issues.

Non-formal Learning

Whilst formal learning is relatively clear in its definition, Romi and Schmida (2009) suggest that it may be difficult to make a comprehensive definition of non-formal learning because it can be experienced in a large variety of constellations and forms. Citing La-Belle (1981, 1982), Romi and Schmida (2009) suggest that whilst formal education meets rigid and consistent standards, rules, and time-frames, non-formal education is characterised by its flexibility, co-creativity and potential to function as part of life-long learning (see also Selman et al. 1997, Romi and Schmida 2009, Gee 2015, Ravenscroft 2020, Ullah, Ul Hassan and Muhammad 2021).

Formal systems of education traditionally function to reinscribe the cultural hegemony and as such can structurally exclude nonnormative people and experience (hooks 1994, Regnier 1995, McCready 2013, Ravenscroft 2020). bell hooks (1994) in her description of the structural exclusion of Black women argues that in order to pass in formal education, students from marginalised backgrounds have to limit or hide any markers of difference to try to fit in. Students from marginalised backgrounds are excluded through a systematic understanding that their experience and identities are inappropriate or invalid (Ravenscroft 2020). hooks (1994) argues that education should instead allow all students and teachers to bring their entire selves into the learning environment. Citing Paulo Friere’s (1970) work on liberatory education, hooks (1994) argues for an engaged pedagogy within which traditional authority dynamics of power are systematically broken down through co-operative effort and learning. Advocates for this approach suggest that environments that break down traditional hierarchies in this way create the possibility for emancipatory and liberational learning (Ravenscroft 2020); which emphasises collective rather than

just individual empowerment (Ladson-Billings 1995).

Non-formal learning can involve such consultation and cooperation and has the potential to blur the delineation between educator and learner. Furthermore, it can be a useful approach for LGBTQIA+ people as a more accessible and safer space to learn (Peña 2019, Peña and Rosson 2019), by potentially bypassing dangerous socio-political environments (Kjaran 2020). Making learning safer and more accessible can help develop confidence and social/organisational skills which may have been limited by marginalisation and discrimination (Passani and Debicki 2016, Ravenscroft 2020). Ravenscroft (2020) suggests that this approach is also particularly useful for engaging with socially excluded people because it promotes pedagogy that is relevant to the learner and can be developed using their current experience and challenges. In Ravenscroft’s (2020) study of Participatory Internet Radio as a form of non-formal learning, he found that LGBTQIA+ participants created their own radio content, challenging social experiences brought about by societal discrimination. Their learning was situated in their current lives, and was *relevant* to their context, with a common goal to approach the challenges thereof. Ravenscroft (2020) argues this can lead to reflection, developing social skills around organising, mental health support and mobilisation for action – all alongside learning and experiencing the skills associated with creating and disseminating a radio programme. In addition, it can lead to an artefact which could then be accessed by others as a learning source in turn; in this case, a radio programme about LGBTQIA+ experience that can be listened to by others.

Furthermore, McCready (2013, 514) notes that intersectional non-formal approaches can encourage “analyzing how social and cultural categories of identity and oppression are interconnected.” This, in turn, can foster critical literacy and the basis

of collective organising to challenge the “multiple norms, discriminations and oppressions that hurt us all” (ibid.). This form of reflexive learning is considered part of potentially transformative pedagogy by Few-Demo et al. (2015), in that it could have a substantial transformative impact for the learner and the potential social influence for change that learner may be able to exert.

From these perspectives, a co-operative non-formal approach may provide LGBTQIA+ people an accessible and safer environment to learn situated and contextualised information and practices, develop social skills and form collective groups, reflect on the intersectional marginalisation that might cause the learner to be excluded from society (including in education) and potentially produce artefacts which could in turn teach others. However, non-formal approaches often still rely on a certain level of organisation, structure and leadership which may not always be present or appropriate for all learning contexts and opportunities. This might be partially resolved by examining an informal approach to learning.

Informal Learning

Whilst non-formal learning does not follow a set curriculum, nor is it located in a specific accredited arena, it is still often considered to be an organised act of pedagogy. Most common definitions of non-formal learning suggest that participants choose to engage in an arranged activity with learning as a set and overt objective. Informal learning, by contrast, is often considered to be an unorganised experience and may be unintentional (Golding, Brown and Foley 2009). Like non-formal learning, informal learning is difficult to define therefore. Selman et al. (2007) characterise informal learning as unstructured and possibly secondary to another social activity; such as for example, learning a fact from a conversation, learning a perspective from an article read in a magazine or learning a skill through consistent practice. Golding,

Brown and Foley (2009), however, argue that informal learning, especially in the era of the Internet, needs to be considered more flexibly. They suggest that informal learning should be characterised as often intentional, but perhaps more opportunistic and ongoing than non-formal or formal learning (op cit.); for example, choosing to look something up on the Internet leading to hyperlinking to multiple sources and topics. Self-study is often listed as an example of such (online) intentional informal learning, and this could be a highly complex, even life-long endeavour. As such, informal learning should not be considered any less viable than other forms of learning in terms of its potential. But perhaps it can be characterised as often being indeterminate in content and process (Golding, Brown and Foley 2009).

The opportunity to engage in self-study is one of the factors that makes informal learning particularly useful to LGBTQIA+ people when seeking out information about ourselves and our potential communities. Fox and Ralston (2016) have found that the affordances offered by social media and networking sites are particularly important to LGBTQIA+ people, in that they provide a safer space to learn, but perhaps with an added advantage over non-formal learning, in the form of relative anonymity with the added distance that self-study can provide from others. Furthermore, unlike non-formal learning which might require organisation and timing, informal learning can be characterised by a sometimes more accessible and visible presence of persistent relevant information and sources (for example online social communities). Providing a lower risk and higher potential reward proposition, learning online Mizzi (2021) argues, is especially useful for LGBTQIA+ people in socially restrictive spaces. Based on interviews with LGBTQIA+ people about their use of social media, Fox and Ralston (2016) find similar potential learning outcomes common for LGBTQIA+ people's online learning: traditional- (cognitive), social- and experiential-learning. In their study (op cit.), traditional learning formed the function of seeking out factual

information about LGBTQIA+ issues: for example, looking for sources of relevant news, pertinent laws, and networks, etc. Social and experiential learning functioned more as a way to seek out other LGBTQIA+ people and learning about potential communities (and what the norms are therein). Craig and McInroy (2014) in their study of LGBTQIA+ young people’s use of Internet-based new media, found that it enabled them to access relevant resources, explore and express their identities and digitally connect online – and, as a result, these opportunities allowed them to develop and express their identities offline as well. Fox and Ralston (2016) also noted that following informal learning online, many of their interviewees would engage in subsequent teaching of their own in similar venues; this was more prevalent from those who were out about their identities socially and those from more unrepresented groups, such as asexual and trans people.

This informal method, where the line between learners and teachers are blurred, is common to many of the non-formal approaches I describe above and it can be difficult to delineate non-formal and informal learning in these cases. The line between learning models can be further challenged by approaches which seek to combine methods, or draw from one to inform others. Mizzi suggests that formalised education should take into account these less formal approaches and argues that a more inclusive form of pedagogy can draw on queer theoretical principles which emphasise: “(1) Openness and respect for diversity, (2) queer storytelling, and (3) social media engagement” (Mizzi 2021, 70).

Game-based Non-formal and Informal Learning

From these perspectives, informal learning provides an unstructured, potentially unintentional, but accessible and safer form of self-study which does not require direct communication with others. Like its non-formal counterpart, this might lead to

cognitive-, social- and experiential-learning, but perhaps with a focus on different subject matters or approaches. Informal learning presents perhaps an even greater life-long learning proposition with access to online sites being a low-cost, relatively persistent and visible resource; whereas non-formal learning may still need delineated times/places. Informal learning online seems to also provide an opportunity for LGBTQIA+ learners to quickly become educators through the same mechanisms. And finally, like non-formal learning, informal approaches might lead to a transformative impact outside of the learning environment and into learners' (offline) daily lives – specifically because they are able to practice and explore expressing themselves in semi-anonymised spaces. Potentially unlike non-formal learning, the sites in which informal learning occurs are almost always exclusively created for other purposes – such as social media sites. Digital- and analog-games are also considered as potential sites for informal learning for LGBTQIA+ people (for example, Straus et al. 2019) who may be able to use them as sites to explore identity, community and queer subjectivity. Games are also included in non-formal approaches to teaching on LGBTQIA+ issues, but this is more commonly analysed in terms of learning by non-LGBTQIA+ people. Game-based learning and edu-larp both demonstrate non-formal and informal learning in practice using digital- and analog-games. As such, they can provide important and different opportunities for LGBTQIA+ people to learn about our histories, communities and selves.

There is significant research that suggests that game-based learning can function effectively as a site for informal and non-formal pedagogy generally (Prensky 2001, Gee 2007, Virvou and Manos 2005, Squire 2006, Feng and Yamada 2019). Current consideration of game-based learning tends to focus on the use of digital games either as informal opportunities for players to engage with certain personal educational experiences, or as part of non-formal teaching programs attempting to

convey specific lessons on a chosen topic by a defined educator. Game-based learning is generally defined as an engagement with any game that is used for educational goals (Connolly et al. 2012) whether that game was designed for that purpose or not. This is distinct from gamification, which is defined as the use of game-like features in non-game environments to encourage engagement (Simões, Redondo and Vilas 2013); and is also distinct from serious games, which are defined as any game that is not entirely for entertainment purposes (Djaouto et al. 2011). However, as such, serious games may be used for game-based learning purposes.

Stiller and Schworm (2019) note that studies of the impact of game-based learning, like studies of non-formal and informal learning generally, have found significant potential for cognitive-, behavioural-, and affective-outcomes. Game-based learning theorists suggest this potential impact is due to a number of factors. Plass, Homer and Kinzer (2015, 260-261) note that these include the motivation to learning that games can provide, the player engagement that games can inspire, the adaptivity of games to learning needs and the opportunity to engage in what is termed, graceful failure – which is akin to having a space to practice a potentially challenging activity in an environment that is safer from consequences of such action (Gee 2003, Harteveld et al. 2020). Plass, Homer and Kinzer (2015) suggest that, as a result, the outcomes of game-based learning are often characterised as either (or both) cognitive or sociocultural; where cognitive outcomes are considered in terms of the depth and context-relevancy of information conveyed, and sociocultural outcomes are defined in terms of learning of socioemotional, interpersonal and communication (sometimes called soft- or 21st Century-) skills (see also Ranvenscroft 2020).

Whether play is communal or individual, however, Plass, Homer and Kinzer (2015) argue that socioemotional learning through games can involve relatedness; which is a

sense or acknowledgement that the player is part of, and connected to, a community of others – whether inside or outside of the game. They argue that players can participate in groups (in- or out-of game) and use collective knowledge whilst relating experience and learning the sociocultural norms and identities of the group and game. In this way, game-based learning can engage in relevant and situated learning (see Lave and Wenger 1991) for players. This relatedness also facilitates self-perception and an awareness of self in context, and may allow for reflection and consideration.

LGBTQIA+ Game-based Learning

Non-formal and informal educational theory is well represented in the arguments in favour for game-based learning, with many of the pertinent features that benefit LGBTQIA+ learners being clearly present. For example, the ability to engage in a safer space, learn with and through communities and practice without the significant consequences of failure that a discriminatory society presents. I argue that this makes games a particularly useful medium for the non-formal and informal education on LGBTQIA+ issues, especially for marginalised learners. This forms the basis for my argument that games may provide an opportunity to explore trans(gender) subjectivity. In order to establish how, I ground my approach in queer game studies, game-based learning approaches to LGBTQIA+ people’s experience and edu-larp.

Curiously, unlike in the wider theory on informal and non-formal learning, there is significantly fewer studies on how game-based learning might be useful to LGBTQIA+ people (see Blume 2021); and even fewer still for trans people specifically (Griffiths, Arcelus and Bouman 2016, Straus et al. 2019). Most examinations of the potential for game-based learning in relation to LGBTQIA+ issues, centers on what a non-

LGBTQIA+ person might learn about us through a game experience in a non-formal learning environment (Allen 2016, Schuch 2017, Yang 2020). Yang (2020) for example, examines the ways in which game-based learning might be deployed in teaching competency-based medical education on LGBTQIA+ issues to healthcare providers in Taiwan; a socio-cultural context, it is noted, in which LGBTQIA+ education is restricted generally. In this study of both medical learners and educators, Yang (2020) argues that knowledge about gender diversity was successfully taught through the alibi of play, with learners able to integrate positive knowledge, attitudes and skills in areas that might make healthcare provision more accessible and welcoming to LGBTQIA+ people.

Allen (2016) similarly argues for teaching about trans experience using video games created by trans people – in this case, *dys4ia* (2021), *Lim* (2012) and *Mainichi* (2012) – to cis-players in her *Introduction to Women’s Studies* course. These three games seek to express aspects of trans experience, including gender dysphoria, the social need to pass for cisgender, and the impact of discrimination. She argues that the interactivity of the games provides a moment of identification with the games’ trans creators. This encouraged the sympathy and empathy from her students “to experience some semblance of another person’s struggle” (Allen 2016, 66). She emphasises the role and effectiveness of experiential and participatory learning that games might provide for this purpose. Citing Kaufman and Libby’s (2012) concept of experience-taking (which involves adopting the experience of a persona) and Bogost’s (2008) concept of procedural rhetoric (which involves the conveyance of meaning through interactions in gameplay rather than narrative), Allen (2016, 71) argues that these games had allowed her cis students “to understand, in part, the experience of being transgender.”

I do not wish to negate Allen’s (2016) findings in her own classroom, especially as she argues that her students experienced such a strong moment of revelation and identification with trans people through these games; however, in related work, myself and Sabine Harrer (Baird and Harrer 2021) have questioned a seemingly simplistic conception of the learning of empathy just through gameplay. Harrer and I (op cit.) had been part of a team attempting to purposefully design a game to teach empathy for trans experience to cis-players and during our research we noted that several trans theorists and game designers (including Anna Anthropy 2015, and Mattie Brice 2016, the designers of *dys4ia* and *Mainichi* respectfully) have critiqued the *walk a mile in the shoes*, approach to game-based learning of empathy for trans experience (see Ruberg, 2017, Pozo 2018). Harrer and I (Baird and Harrer 2021) advocated instead for Ruberg’s (2017) use of Haraway’s notion of *becoming with* as an alternative model for educational game design for cis-players to learn about trans issues and lives. In this perspective, *taking* of experience is not the focus of game-based learning of empathy. Rather it advocates for a praxis of play that allows for the enacting of the real-world experiences of others whilst respecting the differences between players and designers who are from different backgrounds (see Wilcox 2019). This, we argued, allows for a more nuanced approach to the concept of learning about others’ experience (Baird and Harrer 2021). And perhaps this is what also occurred in Allen’s (2016) classroom, as she noted that in addition to playing the games there were post-game discussions with students to reflect on the themes of their experience of play.

This use of extra-game activities (sometimes referred to as meta-techniques or framing activities) which promote the processing of learning surrounding gameplay is also emphasized by Blume (2021) in her examinations of how game-based learning facilitated *English as a Foreign Language* students to explore issues of gender and

sexualities in her own classrooms. She recommends the use of workshops and discussions before and after gameplay; and through those sessions found that games that highlight marginalised LGBTQIA+ experiences allowed learners to discuss and reflect on their own identities (op cit.). For example, she describes the use of *Dream Daddy: A Dad Dating Simulator* (2017) to explore linguistics of heteronormativity, sexuality and identity, in such a way that highlights “the intertwined nature of language, identity, and gender in digital contexts” (Blume 2021, 183). Blume (2021) concludes that games that represent LGBTQIA+ experience offer cis/heterosexual players the opportunity to reflect on similarities and differences within their own lives. She also notes that such games provide a rare opportunity to be visible in the classroom environment for LGBTQIA+ learners as well.

This experience of visibility – of being represented or recognised in different environments has been shown to be vital to the mental health of trans people in therapeutic and everyday settings (Turban 2017, de Vries et al. 2020). The potential positive impact of game-play on the mental health of trans players is emphasised in one of the few studies on the topic by Griffiths, Arcelus and Bouman (2016). In their case studies, they found that trans players used games to increase their awareness of gender identity (akin to traditional-learning as categorised by Fox and Ralston 2016), but also to express their gender in safer and non-critical environments (akin to the practice and expression of identities as highlighted by Craig and McInroy 2014). Furthermore, Griffiths, Arcelus and Bouman (2016) noted some players used gaming to come out to others, initially within online games and then subsequently in offline communities. This is similar to Craig and McInroy’s 2014 findings of LGBTQIA+ people’s use of online forums and very much mirrors an informal learning approach using games.

The prevalence of the use of informal learning and games by trans and gender-diverse young people was recorded by Straus et al. (2017) in their study of 859 participants. They found a full 50% of their respondents used games for a self-reported positive impact on their mental health. In their later work, Straus et al. (2019) investigated trans and gender diverse young people’s experience of digital mental health interventions and found similar results to Griffiths, Arcelus and Bouman (2016), in that respondents reported that the “ability to play as, and express, their affirmed gender” was a very positive feature in games (Straus et al. 2019, 8). Furthermore, Straus et al. noted that having those expressed gender identities validated and reflected back in-game was considered important and empowering. And once again, trans and gender diverse people reported that the safety of online play allowed them to explore their identities, learn about their communities and express themselves prior to coming out. Furthermore, Straus et al. (2019, 1) noted that it is precisely because of the oft inaccessibility of wider institutional resources (including mental health services where trans people could learn and express themselves), that games should be explored as a “feasible, but understudied, approach to consider for this population.” Not instead of, but rather hopefully in conjunction with, dedicated mental health interventions, Straus et al. (2019) argue that the opportunity for gender exploration and learning in games can be considered to be a source of resilience for young trans and gender diverse people. They also noted that a majority of respondents felt that mental health interventions should be discrete, and as such the fact that many games are not overly for the purpose of gender expression was also of significant importance. In this sense, games can provide both the alibi and the opportunity to explore and learn about gender in safer spaces through informal learning approaches.

The concept of alibi, and its use in allowing for the exploration of taboo, is an oft

cited concept in live action role-playing games (larp) studies, including in discussion about the function and effectiveness of edu-larp (larps designed for the specific purpose of educating). Edu-larp is a form of game-based learning, which I highlight here because of its embodied nature and its emphasis on creating games for non-formal learning purposes. I argue that edu-larp may provide an accessible way to achieve the advantages of non-formal and informal learning I have explored above, as it pertains to LGBTQIA+ experience and expression for both cis- and trans-players in my own wider work. I will show how this can be applied to the design for games that could facilitate the exploration of trans subjectivities and experience.

Edu-larp and Non-formal/Informal Learning

In her extensive literature review on the subject of edu-larp, Bowman (2014) notes that though it is a relatively recent practice, it can be considered in parallel to more established (non-formal) pedagogical methods such as: psychodrama, emergency response training scenarios, mock therapy-session training for mental health professionals, drama in education, educational theatre (such as Theatre of the Oppressed), etc. Similar to these approaches she notes, edu-larp embodies the theoretical principles of experiential- and situated-learning. The pan-European consortium of edu-larp partners, DiveIN (2021), describe how experiential learning is applied in their larps according to Kolb’s (2014) findings that the ability to retain and integrate knowledge can be significantly more effective through experience and the opportunity to reflect on that experience. Kolb’s (2014) notion of experiential learning highlights how cognitive skills can be acquired through two associated processes, grasping experience and transferring experience. Grasping in this sense, is a function of Concrete Experience (the act of doing something) and Abstract Conceptualisation (constructing an understanding of what occurred during the activity); whilst

Transferring is a function of Reflective Observation (recalling and considering the experience) and Active Experimentation (which is testing what has been determined and its validity in other times and contexts) (Kolb 2014).

Edu-larp offers such an experiential learning opportunity through its function of active engagement and its reliance on contextual problem solving (Bowman 2010), as well as its regular use of framing activities such as workshops, debriefs, etc. (Stenros and MacDonald 2020). These framing activities function as a form of metareflection that allows players to consider and incorporate what they have learned within a larp (Levin 2020). Like in wider non-formal and informal game-based learning, what can be learned through edu-larp is often delineated into three broad categories, cognitive-knowledge, socio-contextual skills, and affective awareness; however, it is noted that these cannot be considered separately as they occurring simultaneously and intersectionally.

For example, Bowman (2014, 122) notes that edu-larps are particularly good at developing problem-solving skills as role-play situates cognitive theoretical knowledge in its practical application. Learning in relevant socio-cultural contexts which feature dynamic and reciprocal environments with other people, facilitates cognitive knowledge learning from the individual's own experience, but also from observation of others and the results of their actions (Bandura 1986, Lave and Wenger 1991). Co-created learning such as this is also impacted by the individual's self-belief in their capabilities. Bowman (2014) argues that through goal setting and accomplishment, an individual's sense of self-efficacy and agency can be developed, which in turn can lead to increases in leadership and team-working skills.

This is similar to the way Ravenscroft (2020) described social skills were learned

alongside the practical knowledge of how to create Internet radio programming in his case study. Unlike in Ravenscroft’s (2020) case study however, edu-larp scenarios are simulated. Edu-larps often attempt to replicate possible or near-real scenarios, which can then be engaged in with lowered consequences to allow for practice and experimentation (Henriksen 2004). In this sense, like wider game-based learning approaches, edu-larp allows for exploring choices and experiences which might be inaccessible or unsafe in other aspects of life – the major difference here being that these experiences can be pursued in a fully embodied way. This can also allow players to rehearse difference through intentional identity-play (Turkington 2016), in the sense of inhabiting a role that differs significantly to the one an individual express in everyday life. For Turkington (2016) this can include the adopting of an identity that the player may wish they were able to express in everyday life or one that they would not. In the case of the former possibility, I have argued that larp may provide a site to explore and express gender in an embodied way for people who may not feel free to do so in other aspects of their lives (Baird 2021a). In the case of the latter possibility, Bowman suggests that this might lead to a greater understanding of others as the “double consciousness” of both being the player and exploring the perspective of someone else functions as insight into another way of thinking and feeling (Bowman 2014, 124). This double consciousness I argue is functionally similar to Ruberg’s (2017) argument that empathy should be sought through a process of becoming with.

Larp theorists suggest such multiplicity can be well represented and experienced in edu-larp. Kangas, Loponen and Särkijärvi’s (2016) edited volume *Larp Politics – Systems, Theory, and Gender in Action*, contains a series of essays on how larps have been used to represent and teach on complex and intersectional political themes and issues. The theorists in the volume describe how larps have attempted to recreate

political contexts and historical moments with the goal of teaching on a wide-range of topics including history, refugee experience, environmental upheaval, authoritarianism, oppression, the horror of war, gender and socio-political conventions. Levin (2020) suggests that teaching on multiple levels and on large socio-cultural issues is possible in larp through the psychological principle of conceptual integration. This is the ability to consciously hold multiple interpretative frames simultaneously and associate them. For Levin (2020, 65), conceptual integration "...makes it possible for humans to think abstract thoughts, compare different experiences to each other – and to turn play into performative expression." Henrikson (2004) similarly argues that larp may not always be very good for teaching contextless information, but through this process of multiplicity can facilitate learning about complex social processes – and as such can function both as a way of conveying information about socio-cultural practices, as well as being a space to practice within social spaces.

Bowman and Hugaas (2021) suggest that a larp can act as a container within which such exploration can occur, but warn that only by establishing adequate boundaries of play can the required sense of security be established. Bowman and Hugaas (2021) recommend a framing activity that establishes that the game is going to begin, with rules established and a social-contract agreed, to help form that container of play. Depending on the nature of the larp, this will be more or less co-created by the unique group of players. A de-rolling activity and opportunities for reflection might also confirm these borders, but they also promote the possibility of retaining what is learned within the game through the process of bleed (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). Bleed is the function by which player experiences during (role)play may be retained in other aspects of their life outside of the game and/or how player experiences outside of the game might impact on the way in which they play their roles in-game (Stenros

and Bowman 2018, 421). The experience of bleed out of the game is what is sought in edu-larp and wider game-based learning: namely that an experience within the container of play will be retained and provide insight into other aspects of the individual's life.

This does not mean that this will always be the case. Cazeneuve (2018) notes that larp, like any other social activity exists within, and is a product of, its socio-cultural context. As such, potentially-problematic social structures can easily be recreated within these containers of play if not reflected upon consciously. Cazeneuve (2018) argues it is the larp creator's responsibility to carefully construct these games with this in mind.

I have argued elsewhere that larps which specifically include (let alone centre) trans experience are rare (Baird 2021a). There are some that centre the exploration of gender more broadly, such as *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003) and *Mad About the Boy* (2010), both of which are set in fantastical fictional worlds that are quite different from our own. *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011) is one of the few larps that both centres LGBTQIA+ experience and is set in a recognisable setting, albeit one from the near-past. The narrative is set in New York and the larp follows a community of mainly queer characters as they experience the impact of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s. During the larp, players learned about queer experience during the 1980s and the personal and socio-cultural impact of AIDS. Bowman (2015) notes that this was achieved in part by the interplay between on- and off-game activities; including workshops before the larp which educated on the real rise of the AIDS epidemic and opportunities to reflect and debrief thereafter. This represents one of the few larps that explicitly includes trans characters and history, and I have noted (Baird 2021a) that there is anecdotal evidence for its impact on trans players who were able to

express their gender in the game for the first time, and as a result, subsequently out of the game as well. This was not however, what the larp was designed for and as such, I concluded that a more intentional design was required to explore the potential that larp could provide for the exploration and expression of trans subjectivity (op cit.). The present article serves in part as the theoretical approach I propose for this endeavour.

Edu-Larp Design for (Trans)Gender Exploration

Above I have explored non-formal and informal learning as it can be enacted through game-based learning and why this is a potentially very useful site for LGBTQIA+ people. Games, whether designed intentionally to include LGBTQIA+ experience or not, can be important and useful mediums through which people can explore themselves, community histories, culture and society in a safer and potentially complex and intersectional format. I have noted that larp, and specifically edu-larp is an embodied version of this, with the advantage of experiential learning and a focus on co-creation and validation. As, such I have argued for the potential that larp, designed for education or not, might provide a particularly appropriate and useful medium for trans(gender) exploration. To conclude, I will explore how these theoretical principles form the basis for intentional (edu-)larp design for trans(gender) exploration, locating it within Josefin Westborg’s design matrix for educational role-playing games.

Josefin Westborg is one of the members of the *Transformative Play Initiative*, along with Sarah Lynne Bowman, Doris Rusch, Kjell Hedgard Hugaas and myself. This is a group researching and forwarding the understanding that playing games might lead to transformative experiences – in part through the non-formal and informal role-

playing processes I describe above. Based on her decade of experience leading an organisation that designs and runs edu-larps, Westborg (2022) has developed a matrix for mapping the design components of learning objectives in larps. The matrix is a function of two axes of design: that of *gameplay* and *framing* components. The gameplay axis refers to the design of the game function, scenarios, social-relations and mechanics. The framing axis refers to the practices pre-, during- and post-play, which can include workshops, reflection exercises and discussions. Both of these aspects of a game can be designed for leisure and/or education purposes. Depending on the combination of framing and gameplay design, Westborg (2022) argues, the resultant games and their use will likely fall broadly in one of four quadrants in the matrix (see Figure 1).

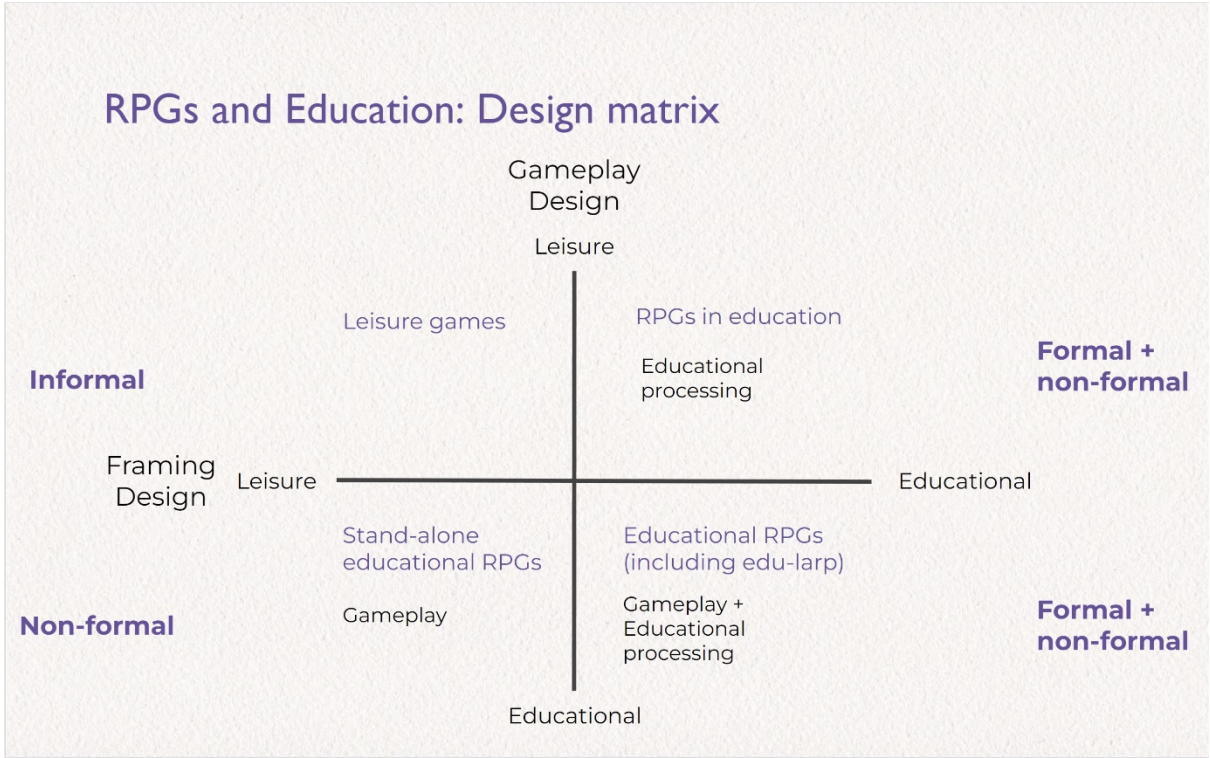


Figure 1: RPGs and Education: Design Matrix (Westborg 2022)

In each quadrant, a particular type of game/larp design is typified. And in each quadrant, there is also learning opportunities, informal or non-formal (or both). For

example, if gameplay and framing design is focused on leisure goals, then a leisure game is likely to be a result. These games might be used by players for informal learning purposes, but the impetus would need to come from players themselves. In the case of trans players, this might be characterised by Chang’s (2017) understanding of queergaming; through which players may read experience and understanding that is relevant to them into a game that has no explicit trans content.

If gameplay is designed for leisure purposes, but the framing is designed for education, this is typified by the use of an established (pre-designed) game in a non-formal or formal education setting (Westborg 2022). For example, Allen’s (2016) use of pre-existing games by trans creators in her teaching on gender, framed by discussions about what those experiences could teach the students, is a formal-learning approach that includes non-formal inspired game-based educational processing. By contrast, Westborg (2022) suggests children’s digital education games (in which they learn to count or read) would be examples of gameplay designed for pedagogical purposes but the framing is designed for leisure. In these instances, educational processing is not accounted for and would need to be sought elsewhere for deeper learning. An example of this kind of game in relation to trans experience, I argue, can be found in *The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories* (2018). I have described how the cis designer of this game has argued it was an attempt to inspire empathy in the (presumably cis-) player for the playable trans protagonist (Baird 2021b). The game was released commercially with no educational framing provided or recommended. Though its success at teaching empathy is hard to establish without further study, I have argued that *The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories* proved to be a popular game, receiving praise from both cis- and trans-players for its depiction of trans experience (Baird 2021b).

If both the gameplay and the framing design is created for educational purposes, Westborg (2022) posits, the game is likely to have been designed with specific learning goals in mind from its inception, and is created to be played with framing activities to facilitate educational processing to meet those goals. This could be typified by the kind of edu-larps that the DiveIN (2021) designers have created to facilitate learning about radicalisation and violence through play, metareflection, experiential- and situated-learning elements. To date, I have argued, there is no larp which is purposefully designed in this way to allow for the exploration of trans subjectivities and issues (Baird 2021a). However, I believe that a design that is inspired by the non-formal/informal game-based learning/edu-larp approaches I describe above might be ideal for such an endeavour.

In earlier work, I suggested that larp might be a good way for trans players to explore their subjectivities (Baird 2021a). I argued that the larp-theoretical emphasis on providing an opportunity to explore societal taboo through the alibi and container of play might allow a trans person to feel comfortable enough to express a gender identity other than the one insisted upon by wider society. I posited that within the container of play, a trans person might be able to practice difference in the way that Turkington (2016) describes and through the inter-immersion of all players co-creating an inclusive scenario and social dynamics, that identity could be witnessed and validated. I argued for steering this larp experience for the possibility of emancipatory bleed – so that if an individual, who had enacted their authentic sense of gender within the game, might be able to retain that sense upon leaving the safer container of play.

By exploring non-formal/informal and game-based learning as well as edu-larp, I see further evidence that a larp intentionally designed to allow for gender exploration

may indeed function in such a way. Studies of non-formal and informal game-based learning and edu-larp suggest that these approaches could provide a safer space to learn, by being more accessible sites outside of the formal dynamics of normative education and wider society. The studies I have presented suggest that these methods are particularly useful for, and sought out by, marginalised communities including LGBTQIA+ people. Through these processes, there is the possibility to learn about oneself and practice expressing identity in another way – which may result in LGBTQIA+ people being able to do so in other aspects of everyday life as well. In my earlier work (Baird 2021a) I drew parallels between such an activity (and the transformative experience it might potentially have) with the LGBTQIA+ social spaces I had experienced when I was younger. I suggested that these night-clubs and performance venues functioned as an unintentional or instinctive version of this kind of larp-activity. With the venue itself providing a container, and the conventions of performance and playfulness therein forming the co-created immersion that allows for gender exploration and validation.

With the consideration of learning theory, I find myself recharacterizing my perspective of these venues as informal sites of play and exploration. They contain within them several elements that I had not considered initially – for example, the opportunity to seek out information about our communities and other relevant information in these venues; as they function as a persistent and visible environment and resource for pertinent knowledge. These venues provide a space to explore in a safer and supportive environment, which in turn may encourage a sense of confidence and self-efficacy. Furthermore, they present an informal opportunity to engage in communal dynamics, wherein one might develop social and organisational skills, as well as be a site for the mobilisation of action. LGBTQIA+ social spaces have historically functioned as environments to communicate pertinent histories, socio-

cultural issues, but also become safer spaces for community organising and even political work; see for example the *Transfabulous Archive* which describes how this art and social space provided a hub for the development of political activism and community development, and how recordings thereof became a resource for education on trans experience. As such, these venues function as a source and site of LGBTQIA+ heritage and community development, wherein individuals come to learn about themselves and some develop the skills, knowledge and agency needed to become community teachers and leaders themselves.

What venues like this – as valuable and essential as they are – do not have, however, is the intentional function of education through play and exploration. In Westborg’s (2022) model, these venues act as informal (leisure) sites which do not have the framing design to help process any learning that might occur therein. As such, the learning that I describe above is an instinctive (and critical) outcome of engagement in these spaces. Furthermore, as social environments they often include aspects that might make them less secure as learning environments, for example, they often involve access to alcohol.

In considering all of the aspects of (non-formal/informal) game-based learning and edu-larp, I have come to the conclusion that a larp which simulates this kind of environment using intentional educational gameplay and framing design, might prove to be a site of learning for both trans- and cis-players alike. I posit, such a design would provide for the modelling of a recognisable, yet fictional, environment of a night-club or social space. This would provide enough alibi and the initial scaffolding for the container of play, but also be close enough to lived reality to be an experiential- and situated-learning opportunity. Edu-larp theory has demonstrated that larp design is able to model complex socio-cultural processes and environments.

As such, this seems like a pertinent game format, given its facility to also contain the multiplicity of complex socio-cultural processes which gender-play would need to function within. Additionally, larp is a fully embodied experience, and gender – as an intersectional process of embodied social role- and identity-performance – is perhaps best explored in an embodied way. This allows for experiential learning of gender exploration, as well as situated learning in a simulated real-world dynamic co-created with others. The larp gameplay could be designed to mirror certain real-world practices in these spaces, but intentionally incorporated in order to facilitate gender-exploration, validation, self-efficacy and agency. Initial concepts include creating a near real-world space to develop the alibi, opportunities to adopt aspects of another gender to allow exploration and performance and social activities to facilitate inter-immersion, reflexivity and self-efficacy. The exact design elements will be explored in future work, but they will be based on the strengths and opportunities of non-formal edu-larp gameplay.

Framing activities, such as a workshop prior to the larp could further develop a safer container by collectively forming a social contract of respectful play. Additional workshops or reflective exercises after the larp could function as an opportunity to process what was learned during the role-play. By designing these for the possibility of (emancipatory) bleed, players could be encouraged to retain knowledge and affect from the game and apply it into other aspects of their lives. Such framing would also function as an opportunity for metareflection on both the personal gendered experience the space allowed for but also on the intersectional processes of support recognition and validation this is a product of.

For trans players, it is my hope that this could be a part of a transformative experience (Baird 2021a). Through an intentionally designed safer container of play,

within which gender exploration and play is allowed for and validated, a trans person – who may not feel safe to express their gender in their everyday life – could be provided an opportunity to learn about themselves and their communities in a considered and supportive way. For a cis player, playing a gendered role that might not reflect their own in a simulated LGBTQIA+ environment, may provide insight into the complex socio-cultural need and functions of such a space, as well as facilitate understanding about the expression of gender in their own everyday lives. Through functions of non-formal learning, this could provide an opportunity to develop a *becoming with* praxis of play, leading to a greater understanding of trans lives and experiences. In this case, the framing activities may provide the opportunity to avoid a potentially simplistic approach to the development of empathy for other gender experience. Rather, a larp designed to explore the relatedness of co-created (game) environments may provide the opportunity for reflection on how gender operates socio-culturally for cis players as well.

Conclusion and Provocations

Non-formal and informal game-based learning as expressed through intentional edu-larp gameplay and framing design provides the potential to simulate complex and intersectional socio-cultural experiences. This approach provides for the opportunity to co-create a safer container of play, within which gender might be explored in an embodied way. This in turn could facilitate simultaneous cognitive, affective and socio-cultural learning through experiential- and situated-experience. The alibi and fiction of the game provides the intellectual distance for potential metareflection on what this exploration might mean for the player. And framing activities allow for that to be processed and possibly integrated into other aspects of everyday life.

For a trans person, who may not be able to access other socio-cultural environments safely to explore these issues, this could provide the alibi and (transformative) container to do so in a low consequence site. For a cis player, this may provide the opportunity to explore the role of another in a way that emphasises becoming with as a praxis for play, and also for becoming a greater ally to trans people outside of the game.

In order to achieve this safer container of role-play, the design thereof must be carefully considered. Games, like any social endeavour, can easily reproduce problematic and discriminatory structures. All levels of gameplay and framing activities should be designed with this in mind so as to create a fictionalised, yet recognisable, space for non-formal learning. This is what I propose to do in my continuing work in collaboration with team members from *The Transformative Play Initiative* and the University of Vienna Department of Education and Learning – to put these theoretical principles into practice through the design of a larp to facilitate gender-exploration and learning, called Euphoria. This design will then be tested with trans and cis players in order to validate such an approach with the hope that it can facilitate a learning and potentially transformative experience for both.

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