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Exploring Access & Accessibility in Analog Role-Playing Games

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Abstract

The editorial to the 2024 issue of the journal guides into the interconnected themes of access and accessibility within analog role-playing games. By highlighting structural barriers and societal biases, the editors emphasize the importance of fostering inclusivity for marginalized and minority groups in gaming. The editorial advocates for moving beyond universalist approaches to access, stressing the need for adaptable frameworks that consider diverse needs, including gender, race, socioeconomic background, and disabilities. Drawing from academic, activist, and personal perspectives, the issue highlights key challenges and innovations in making analog role-playing games more inclusive, from design tools to participatory strategies. Ultimately, this issue invites a collaborative dialogue to rethink and reshape gaming spaces, ensuring they are welcoming and empowering for all participants.

Keywords: access, accessibility, dialogue, diversity, inclusivity

要約

本誌 2024 年号の発刊の趣旨は、アナログ・ロールプレイングゲームにおける「アクセス」と「アクセシビリティ」という相互に関連するテーマへと読者を導くものである。構造的な障壁や社会的偏見を浮き彫りにすることで、編集者たちは、ゲームにおける周縁化された人々や少数派のグループに対する包摂性の促進の重要性を強調している。本趣旨では、普遍主義的な「アクセス」のアプローチを超えることの必要性を訴え、多様なニーズ—例えばジェンダー、人種、社会経済的背景、障害などを考慮した適応的な枠組みの重要性を説いている。学術的、活動家的、そして個人的な視点から得られた知見に基づき、本号では、アナログ・ロールプレイングゲームをより包括的にするための設計ツールや参加型戦略といった革新や課題が取り上げられている。最終的に、本号は、ゲーム空間を再考し、再構築するための協働的な対話を呼びかけ、すべての参加者にとって歓迎されると同時に力を与える場を確保することを目指している。

キーワード: アクセス、アクセシビリティ、語り合い、多様性、包摂性

1. Welcome to Join

The intersection of access and accessibility within the field of analog role-playing games is a topic that is both expansive and deeply complex. In this editorial, we try to give shape to the term “access” as an intersectional, interdisciplinary, and transcultural umbrella concept of researching and opposing structural restrictions that restrain how minority and marginalized groups can join and shape play while recognizing their heterogeneous nature. As there is blooming niche literature on the subject of “access” to play through the lenses of gender, race, and class, sometimes already intersected, we offered to

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include more explicitly the concept of “accessibility,” the heterogeneous disabilities dimension of access, with which we believe we might foster more original and creative reflection.

As editors, our journey toward curating this special issue has been one of reflexivity, introspection, and an ever-evolving understanding of what access means in the context of play – and what we do not yet understand about it. This issue is not just about presenting answers but about opening up a space for inquiry – one that challenges us to rethink and reframe the very questions we ask about access and accessibility in gaming.

2. Why Access Matters

When we first sat down to write this editorial, the gut reaction was to look for definitions. What is access? Who is accessibility for? How *should* we conceptually frame them? As we have engaged with the topic, it has become clear that access and accessibility, especially within the context of analog RPGs, are separate concepts that exist on a spectrum that might limit the diversity of submissions if we were to confine it.

Our decision to focus on access and accessibility and their siblings, inclusivity and diversity, was driven by the increased interest of the people involved in making and playing various types of role-playing games due to decades of research and activist work. For one of the two co-editors of this special issue of JARPS, Björn-Ole Kamm, the point of departure for asking about accessibility in gaming was related to his own previous research on neurodiversity, his own experiences of dealing with a chronic disease during play, and a group discussion about accessibility beyond ramps for wheelchairs at Knutpunkt 2022 in Linköping (*Disabilities, seen and unseen*, Andreas Lykke Jensen). He especially relates to the insight that larp organizers may need to take more questions into account than just physical access (like sound or olfactory barriers or information overload) and directly connects it to the idea of exploring related questions in JARPS 2024. For the other, Michael Freudenthal, it was determined by their socio-cultural and gender background. Being always simultaneously insider and outsider to gaming communities led them to have a place at the table while perceiving some of the underlying carelessness, disdain, and prejudice towards them. Paradoxically, their first public struggle was to stand against classism in the way some progressive Nordic larp ideas were imported into France mid-2010s, leading them to favor a radically nuanced intersectional and queer posture and ultimately to join academia with ongoing doctoral research on board gaming’s complex relationship with fiction.

Conversations about access in analog RPGs are not just about ensuring that minority groups can participate – they are about critically examining who is left out of play, how and why, and exploring paths to acknowledge and listen to the raised issues, even before trying to find solutions. To rephrase, access here broadly refers to the right or ability for individuals to participate in or benefit from a system, institution, or service, regardless of their identity or background, such as gender, race, socioeconomic class, or disabilities, with the ethical position of focusing on the targets of unfair restrictions, while seeking to avoid the pitfalls and paradoxes of an all-encompassing universalistic approach. Access is not merely about accommodating individuals with different needs, it is about examining the structures, cultures, and material spaces that shape who gets to participate in the first place. This issue is rooted in politically charged discussions because access – or the lack thereof – is a profoundly structural phenomenon and a question of power distribution. It reflects broader societal inequalities that manifest in who is invited to the game table and who is excluded (see [Trammell 2023](#)). In practice, sometimes access is trying to make a small gaming space better than what lies outside of it.

Björn-Ole Kamm’s research on the flows of role-playing practices coming in and out of Japan ([Kamm 2020](#)), for example, revealed that issues of access are already at play, even when they are not explicitly framed as such. Only a few female players participated in public TRPG conventions in the 2010s. In the first interviews, male participants mused that women just do not like rules-heavy games and were thus absent. As it turned out, this was hardly the case but rather due to how some male players behaved at these conventions. Not only did female players stay away, but an equal number of male informants also rather played at home with friends. However, the study of this kind of public events’ niche socio-demographics gives a biased account of gender disparities and clouds the understanding of these issues.

The underrepresentation of women in public game spaces is an issue of gender access that intersects with broader questions of culture and power. It highlights the need for research to use a more intertwined conceptual framework of access – one that goes beyond a narrow focus on forms of exclusion.

The issue of access is not confined to any one region or culture, genre of game, diegetic setting, etc. It is a global concern that manifests differently across various socio-cultural and material contexts. Any kind of universalistic approach runs the risk of reinforcing ethnocentrism and its siblings, the polar opposite of equality or even caring. An access issue in North America or Western Europe may be experienced and perceived differently in North Africa or in Southwest Asia (Evans 2020). Such an awareness opens up a broader discussion about the cultural dimension in gaming practices and the barriers that may prevent certain forms of play from taking root in specific cultural contexts. Acknowledging this can prompt a more nuanced, inclusive discussion, resisting the urge to generalize and instead respecting the localized, contextual nature of access struggles.

Finally, from an ethical perspective of social justice, access should be more than just a keyword or an item on a checklist. It should be a fundamental consideration in the scholarly study, the design and the facilitation of games and play – not something tacked on (cf. Greco 2018; Hofmann et al. 2020). The act of asking questions about access leads to deeper inquiries into cultural and material spaces, as well as the practices that govern play. These questions are not meant to provide definitive answers but to foster inclusivity as a continued posture that might result in new practices that can expand the boundaries of who gets to play.

3. Challenging Naturalized Boundaries of Play

We're not a negative stat (Sjunneson 2019, 6).¹

One of the insights that emerged from our literature and this issue's submissions is that there is no natural boundary to play. The boundaries we perceive as given are socially constructed, sometimes made material, and can be reimagined through a more inclusive approach to access. Following Bruno Latour (2005, 89–90), we do not mean that “socially constructed” equals “not real.” A brick wall is as much a construct as are gender roles, but nobody would question its existence and effects (e.g., blocking our path so that we need to go around it). Saying that something is socially constructed does not mean that it has no effects on people or that materiality does not affect it. However, when access is argued to be “natural” through biology or other means, which is especially the case with disability, it limits our understanding and our imagination of what is possible. We, scholars, designers, and players, need to unmake the wall brick by brick in order to understand how it was constructed as a natural barrier. When we use “access” as a fluid concept that should always be adapted and expanded, new possibilities for play and the study of it emerge.

The discourse on accessibility, related to disability, makes this clear. It often pivots between two predominant frameworks that can be synthesized as such: the medical model, which views disability as a problem intrinsic to the individual and its biology, and the social model, which posits that disability is primarily the result of societal barriers. This dichotomy echoes the age-old nature versus nurture debate, where the locus of the issue is either within the individual or within the environment. Critical disability studies emerged as a counterpoint to the medical model, challenging the view of disability as an abnormal condition. This field advocates for seeing disability as an integral part of human life, a stance that has profound implications for how society designs its systems – including games (Garland-Thomson 2013). Many argue that accessibility is not only about meeting the needs of disabled people but also reshaping society's very fabric to promote equity. Accessibility should no longer be a reactive process – addressing issues when they arise – but rather a proactive one, integrated into all design processes

¹ Elsa Sjunneson, the lead designer of the *FATE Accessibility Toolkit* (2019), also published the article “Reimagining Disability in Role-Playing Games” on *Analog Game Studies* under the name Elsa S. Henry, cited below, and has furthermore used the double name Sjunneson-Henry. We are referencing her work as it was published. In this case, Sjunneson for the toolkit and Henry for the article.

from the start (Greco 2018). This shift is important: going from thinking of accessibility as an accommodation made only to compensate for disabilities to seeing it as part of a broader movement toward design choices that consider every individual with each their own specificity.

Implementing accessibility proactively into your larp [or other type of role-playing game] means that you consider what is and is not absolutely essential to how your larp is run, and you consider what you need to implement to make sure people with varying levels of ability and different limitations can participate in the larp to the greatest extent that is possible (Livesey-Stephens and Gundersen 2024, fourth paragraph).

As one engages with the topic of accessibility, it becomes clear that access, especially within the context of analog RPGs, is always a negotiation. And negotiation is always dependent on information: knowing where, what, when, and who constitutes a particular game, play session, or event, for players to decide autonomously if it is something they can and want to participate in.

The articles in this issue show existing initiatives to make adaptations to enhance access in gaming. As we argued earlier, these adaptations should not remain confined to the realm of disability. They can and should be extended to address other forms of exclusion. The difference between universal approaches – where everyone is accommodated in the same way – and accessibility becomes crucial here. In contrast to universalism, accessibility requires a process of constant adaptation – an acknowledgment that different players may need different forms of support to fully engage in the game.

While much of existing accessibility research focuses on areas such as human-computer interaction (Spiel et al. 2020), and, by extension, on digital games (Cairns et al. 2019; Hassan 2024), the principles of inclusive design and access extend into discussions about non-digital gaming spaces. Thus, another critical dimension of accessibility in analog RPGs emerges from the mediation of play devices. The tools and materials we use to facilitate play – whether they are dice, character sheets, or rulebooks, as well as chairs and tables – can either enhance or hinder accessibility. The choice of materials, the design of game mechanics, and the facilitation style, all play a role in determining who can participate fully and autonomously in the game. For instance, in TRPGs, designers could offer alternative mechanics for rolling dice or reading character sheets that account for diverse visual, mobility, or cognitive capabilities and challenges.

This mediation is not just about making physical adaptations, such as providing braille dice or large-print character sheets, though these are important. It is also about considering how the very structure of the game can be adapted to accommodate different players. For example, can the rules be flexible enough to allow for different modes of participation?

The question of whether people want to play a game or not also relates to how they see themselves reflected in these games: “representation,” which is not limited to the art but transcends the whole game. In this regard, we can observe an “unholy” alliance between the medical model of disability and rules with “point-based disabilities” (Henry 2015), common in many role-playing games. For example, *The World of Darkness* games (cf. Rein-Hagen 1991; Achilli and Bridges 2004), reduce disabilities to “flaws,” often assigning them point values that can be exchanged for “positive” traits, as shown by Elsa S. Henry (Sjunneson). The same goes for *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th edition (Crawford et al. 2014), analyzed by Michael Stokes (2017) and Shelly Jones (2018). These analyses critique that this kind of system erases the complexity of some individuals’ lives and identities, reducing disability to a (negative) mechanical hurdle rather than an integral part of a character’s experience. It shows that game designers, at times, create systems that exclude disabled players, either by neglecting the players’ needs or by framing disability as a negative trait that characters should overcome. The question of access, thus, is also very much related to feeling welcome and allowed to participate (Minich 2016). Players with disabilities² should feel that

² Following Dunn and Andrews (2015), we alternate between person-first (“person with a disability”) and identity-first language (“disabled person”) in this editorial (see also Best et al. 2022). Among anglophone autistics, for example, identity-first language (“autistic,” not “person with autism”) is preferred because they want to express that the autism cannot be divorced from themselves (see Bottema-Beutel et al. 2021). In other cases, people prefer person-first language to emphasize that they should

they are welcomed and respected, not only in specific game events but within gaming communities. The critique of disability as a mechanical “flaw” underscores the need for more thoughtful representations of disabled characters in games. Inclusive design should extend to the culture of play, where the experiences of disabled players are normalized or thoughtfully represented rather than marginalized (Henry 2015). Can the narrative be shaped in a way that includes diverse voices and perspectives? As a bare minimum, TRPGs might also provide storytelling mechanics that emphasize the strengths and contributions of disabled characters rather than framing them as burdens or obstacles (Grammenos et al. 2009). Representation should be considered a part of accessibility, as a welcoming and respectful access for people with disabilities, not separately.

Linking accessibility back to access and considering the slogan “Nothing About Us Without Us” (Williams and Gilbert 2019) for game design leads to participatory and inclusive frameworks for design. It means that people we want to make the game accessible to should be directly involved in the game design and their perspective should be taken into account. For example, the Mixing Desk (Stenros, Andresen, and Nielsen 2016), a larp tool used for analysis and design describing fundamental characteristics of larp, might add respective faders to consider the diverse perspectives and needs of players, which includes what a game offers in regards to access and accessibility. In that regard, Björn Butzen’s (Marienhaus GmbH) exploration of immersion and ableism, titled “Inclusion in Larp: Between Challenge and the Experience of Limits,” published initially in *Liminal Encounters: Evolving Discourse in Nordic and Nordic-inspired Larp* (Kangas, Arjoranta, and Kevätkoski 2024) and translated from English into Japanese as the first essay of this issue of JARPS, echoes this editorial’s focus on structurally accessible gaming environments that move beyond tokenistic inclusion. He discusses the complexities of inclusivity in larp, where accessibility must extend beyond physical adaptations to respect self-determination and informed choices. Continuing from Butzen’s essay, the other articles of this issue match the focus on creating accessible, inclusive analog gaming spaces that go beyond basic accommodations, addressing diverse barriers to access and participation.

4. Expanding Research on Access and Accessibility

In the call for papers for this special issue, we sought contributions dealing with the above concerns and related questions. How can TRPGs and larps be designed to be culturally sensitive and inclusive? What strategies can be implemented to make game events physically accessible to all players, including the diversity of mobility, sensory, or cognitive individual characteristics? How can game narratives and characters be crafted to reflect a more diverse and inclusive world? What role can technology play in enhancing accessibility in analog gaming? How can community-driven initiatives contribute to a more inclusive gaming culture?

And our authors provided answers and raised new questions. This year’s issue includes articles that fall into four broad categories: (1) accessible best practice, (2) design theory, (3) learning with games, and (4) game analysis.

The second essay of this issue, Peter D. Jung’s (Behavior Bridges) “Autistic Social Advocacy as Accessibility in TRPGs,” argues that TRPGs serve as a social medium for autistics, fostering advocacy-centered accessibility rather than enforcing neurotypical norms. This speaks to the view on inclusive design beyond physical disability, advocating for spaces where autistic individuals can recognize and support each other.

The third article is also about creating supportive spaces for diverse player needs, particularly in educational and therapeutic settings. Kinoshita Go (Yokohama National University) & Tanji Takayuki’s (University of Tsukuba) case report, “TRPG Use in Afterschool Day Services,” shows how TRPGs can enhance communication for children with developmental disabilities in Japanese daycare services, showcasing TRPGs as a support tool in structured environments.

not be reduced to a disability. We made the choice to use both to highlight that language matters but also that it is a personal matter, each expression emphasizing different lived experiences and circumstances.

Challenging structural cultural biases and promoting a more reflective approach to play for younger players, Maryanne Cullinan (Lesley University and Great Brook School) critiques colonialist tropes in RPGs in her educational material, “Deprogramming Indiana Jones: Anti-Colonialist DMing with Kids,” advocating for TRPGs that center empathy and anti-colonial narratives in educational settings.

Moving from accessible best practice to design theory, the fifth article addresses varied access needs through adaptive structures that empower all players to engage fully. Beatrix Livesey-Stephens (Abertay University) offers a research article on “Reimagining Calibration Frameworks Through Crip Theory,” in which she uses Crip Theory, arising from Crip Studies and Critical Disability Studies, to highlight the role of calibration tools in ensuring accessibility for TRPG players with disabilities, emphasizing “crip time” as a flexible gaming pace.

Ilias Tsiaras and Vasileios Neofotistos (University of Macedonia) demonstrate in “Edu-LARPs in Adult Education” that adult educators’ familiarity with TRPGs correlates with positive views on edu-LARPs as teaching tools. Their pedagogical approach and findings focus on educational inclusion, where experiential role-play methods bridge accessibility gaps in adult learning.

Echoing this year’s focus on accessibility by using TRPGs as tools for fostering awareness and inclusivity for marginalized experiences, such as those of the deaf community, Peter Clynes (University of Fukui) explores in his research “A Case Study in Increasing Empathy towards Deaf People Using the Role-Playing Game *Sign*” how playing this game increases empathy among educators towards deaf individuals.

Jean-Charles Ray, Roxanne Chartrand, and Kevser Güngör (Université de Montréal) close the special issue section with their game analysis. In their experimental dialogued article, “Enjoy the Silence: A Discussion around Players’ Experience and Emotional Accessibility in *Alice is Missing*,” they examine this game for its unique emotional accessibility and silent play, fostering player safety and intimacy. Their discussion succeeds in exploring how nonverbal, inclusive frameworks can accommodate a wide range of emotional needs and support sensitive participation.

This year’s release of JARPS further includes a rolling submission not specific to the topic of access and accessibility but still speaking to questions of engaging diverse player needs. Keiichirō Fujibayashi’s article “Experience Point Rules to Promote Good Roleplay: A Look at the “Touched by the Heartstrings” Achievement Points in *Shinobigami, a Ninja Battle RPG*” investigates how the achievement points system of *Shinobigami* incentivizes in-character role-playing and binds players to the game.

5. Expanding the Discourse on Access

As we conclude this editorial, it is clear that the conversation about access and accessibility in analog RPGs is far from over. This special issue is not meant to provide definitive answers but to serve as a starting point for further inquiry. We invite readers to engage with the articles in this issue, not just as passive consumers of knowledge but as active participants in the ongoing dialogue about access.

In our exploration of access, we set out with a broad, intersectional vision, aiming to welcome contributions that approached the topic comprehensively, inclusive of the historical and social strides toward justice that continue to shape it. While we aspired to open a space that connected various facets – social, cultural, and technical – under a unified lens, the submissions we received tended to focus on very specific elements of access. This specificity underscored a deeper complexity in discussing access holistically.

Throughout our editorial process, we encountered a recurring pattern: efforts to broaden the scope of access often resulted in frameworks that could appear universalistic, potentially homogenizing diverse experiences. The attempt to encapsulate multiple facets within a single term risks an oversimplification, wherein unique contexts, histories, and forms of activism may be overlooked. For instance, categorizing access challenges under a generalized umbrella might inadvertently sideline the particular struggles and achievements of specific communities, whether regarding disability, race, or gender. Each of these dimensions carries its own history and advocates, with distinct needs that deserve focused attention.

This realization resonates with our broader editorial commitment to examining access and accessibility as a united dynamic and context-sensitive issue. We hope to continue this discourse, not as an attempt to distill access into a single, universally applicable framework but as a call for ongoing, situated dialogue that honors the diversity of experiences across the global landscape. This special issue, then, becomes both a reflection and a reminder of the necessity to respect the multiplicity of voices and histories that inform the evolving conversation on access and accessibility. We look forward to continuing this conversation with the broader gaming and research community. Together, we can work toward a future where everyone has the opportunity to engage in the rich and diverse world of analog role-playing games.

6. Future Issues

JARPS continues to invite contributions dealing with access and accessibility, even though the thematic focus of future issues will concern other areas of researching and practicing non-digital role-playing games. Next year, we will deal with **props, techniques, and technologies for analog role-playing games**, such as dice systems, hybrid play, or the use of digital tools. Thus, we encourage authors to continue addressing questions of inclusive design and tools.

If you are considering applying TRPGs or larps in educational or therapeutic contexts, we encourage you to share your experiences through a “Case Report.” Such contributions provide valuable insights into practical applications and foster a deeper understanding of the potential these games hold in various settings and for various players. Similarly, if you have encountered impactful books on role-playing games, consider submitting a “Book Review” to contribute to the ongoing dialogue and enrich the community’s engagement with TRPGs and larps.

We also welcome theoretical explorations of core concepts such as immersion, bleed, or calibration, as well as original research studies that investigate how players interact with game mechanics, how particular genres have shaped the field, or how organizers address challenges like transparency and this year’s topic, access and accessibility. These contributions advance the field by offering new perspectives and data-driven insights.

Additionally, if you are interested in becoming a reviewer,³ please let us know – we are always eager to expand our network of engaged scholars and practitioners.

Special and guest issues alike, each covers a specific aspect of current role-playing game-related research and practice, such as educational applications, player-character relations, or the human body in play. Potential guest editors are asked to submit their ideas for a possible issue via the regular submission system.

Since 2023, JARPS is also open to rolling submissions. We welcome contributions even if they do not match a particular issue’s topic or if they are submitted outside a call for papers’ timeframe. After review, we will include such submissions in later issues.

We look forward to continuing to explore the vibrant field of non-digital role-playing games alongside our authors and readers.

Acknowledgments

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³ During the account creation process on this website, you can choose to be registered as a reviewer and inform the editors about your areas of expertise.

⁴ Game in Lab: <https://www.game-in-lab.org/> (accessed 2024/10/10).

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