

On Role Playing¹

Immersion and ideas. When a Reacting game asks you to play a role, it is not an attempt to replicate the *lived experience* of historical individuals. Even though it may be fun, remember that this is an educational exercise designed to immerse you in the intellectual collisions of the past. Your job is to express the ideas related to your role in a specific historical context. Take it seriously and avoid caricature. If you play to your objectives and inform yourself with the documents and historical context, you are on firm ground.

People are more important than the game. Strive to play your role to the utmost but remember that the well-being of the players is more important than the game. Use your words and actions to push the game forward, but never forget that your interactions are with other human beings. If you become overcome by negative emotions, step away. Similarly, if it seems like another player is struggling, check in with them.

Bleed is inevitable. *Bleed* refers to the relationship between the real world and the game world. Your lived experience may inform your role-playing in unexpected ways. Similarly, you may find yourself incorporating your in-role experiences into your own life. *Bleed* becomes likely when you encounter issues that resonate with your own experience and that of the players around you. Preventing *bleed* is impossible, but you can take steps to shape it in ways that are positive and enriching for everyone.²

Ground rules. During the setup, work with other players and the GM to set ground rules. These can help to maximize the educational potential of immersion while minimizing potential drawbacks. Sharing ideas about ground rules is a good way to develop trust, which helps players become a community governed by shared values.

Language. One of the important issues to consider is racist and sexist language. How will you handle this? Prohibitions on vocabulary may be an important aspect of this. You may also want to ban accents.

Cultural Appropriation. Notional costumes, like special ribbons or colored clothing, can be a good way to show your identity and allegiance. On the other hand, using cosmetics or clothing to alter your physical appearance to align it with

¹ 31 January 2021 draft. Trey Alsup, Mark Carnes, Alison Kibler, Johanna Koljonen, Bill Offutt, Mary Jane Tracy, and Jenn Worth all informed it with their ideas and comments.

² Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Bleed: The Spillover between Player and Character," *Nordic LARP*, March 2, 2015. <https://nordiclarp.org/>

stereotypical ideas about your role is always a bad idea. If you decide that historically appropriate costumes aid immersion, make sure that everyone agrees.

Check-in. If you are having an in-role conversation with players and you think that they may be experiencing too much bleed, confirm that everyone thinks the game is going in a useful direction. An easy way to do this is to ask, “Is this a good thing for us to discuss?”

Time Out. If you need to step back from the game, use the phrase “red light.” (Alternatively, you use your hands to make a “T” shape.) This signals other players and the GM that you need to exit the game. You might just need to take a few breaths, remind yourself that you are playing a game, and then step back into role. Alternatively, you might need to talk about your experience with other players or the GM out of role.³

Debriefing. Every game ends with a debriefing session. This gives players a chance to exit their roles and to discuss the experience of playing them. One good way to leave roles behind is for every player to thank their role for teaching them something, remind everyone of their real name, and then explain how they are different from the role that they have been playing. Additionally, they may want to take the opportunity to “talk back” to their role.

Reflection. In addition, after the game ends, it is immensely useful if everyone writes a short reflective essay about the experience while it is fresh on their minds. This can be a good opportunity for players to reflect upon the roles they played, their reactions to the game’s intellectual collisions, the degree to which they experienced *bleed*, the interactions that they had with other players during the game, and their understanding of the historical situation. Ordinarily, this is a required assignment. (See “Assignments” below for details).

³ Johanna Koljonen, “LARP Safety Design Fundamentals,” *Japanese Journal of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies*, 1: 3e-19e, 2020.