

Props, Techniques, and Inspirations for Analog Role-Playing

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Abstract

The editorial to the 2025 issue of the journal examines the material dimensions of analog role-playing games under the theme “Tools of the Trade.” Extending last year’s discussion on access and accessibility, this issue examines how objects, environments, and technologies co-produce play. Drawing on a relational-materialist perspective, it argues that dice, rulebooks, costumes, props, and even AI tools act as collaborators rather than mere accessories, shaping creativity, inclusivity, and learning. From accessible rulebook design and embodied storytelling in larps to the integration of digital systems in live play, the featured contributions investigate diverse forms of material agency. Together, they reveal how the tangible and intangible intertwine in analog gaming, inviting readers to rethink the tools, practices, and relationships that sustain the field.

Keywords: actor-networks, agency, materiality, relationality, tools

要約

本誌 2025 年号の発刊の趣旨は、「Tools of the Trade (七つ道具)」をテーマに、アナログ・ロールプレイング・ゲームの物質的次元を検討するものである。前号の「アクセスとアクセシビリティ」に関する議論を発展させ、本号では、物体、環境、技術がいかにして遊びを共同生成するかを探究する。関係の物質主義の視座から、本趣旨は、サイコロ、ルールブック、コスチューム、小道具、さらには AI ツールまでもが単なる付属物ではなく、共創者として創造性、包摂性、学習を形づくると論じる。アクセシブルなルールブックデザイン、LARP における身体的物語表現、ライブプレイにおけるデジタル技術の導入といった多様な事例を通じて、本号の各論文は多様な物質的エージェンシーの形態を考察する。それらは総じて、アナログ・ゲーミングにおいて有形と無形がいかに交錯するかを明らかにし、本領域を支える道具、実践、関係性の再考を読者に促すものである。

キーワード: アクターネットワーク理論、エージェンシー、物質性、関係性、道具

1. Tools of the Trade

Analog role-playing games (RPGs) have long been celebrated for their imaginative narratives and the social collaboration between players around the table. But lurking in the background of every epic story and critical dice roll is a cast of humble objects: The dice themselves, character sheets, rulebooks, miniatures, cards, pencils, costume elements, props, and even the table, stage, or room in which play happens. These are the “tools of the trade” for analog RPGs, and this issue of JARPS shines a spotlight on their material significance. We often take these tools for granted, treating them as auxiliary to the “real” action of role-playing, which is imagined and interpersonal. This editorial invites a different perspective: What if these physical tools are not just passive props, but active participants in the play? In other words,

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can we understand analog RPGs as networks of both people and things, all entangled in the creation of a play experience?

To answer this, we ground our discussion in a relational-materialist approach, often better known as actor-network theory (ANT). Bruno Latour famously argued that we should grant agency wherever we see an effect: “*any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor” (Latour 2005, 71; emphasis original). In the context of RPGs, this means that a twenty-sided die that changes the course of a narrative, a rulebook that constrains or enables a player’s choices, a character sheet that mediates between imagination and rule mechanics, or a costume piece or prop that transforms how a character is embodied – each of these is an actor in the gaming network. They are not “just objects”; they actively shape what unfolds. When a die roll sends a story in an unforeseen direction or when the layout of a rulebook makes learning a game easy or hard, those outcomes are not solely attributable to the human players’ intentions – the material tools have had their say in the matter. Adopting this view encourages us to see analog games as assemblages of human and non-human elements rather than purely human dramas augmented by props. The tools of the trade are part of the trade, through and through, co-creating the play alongside us.

2. Material Agency in Play

Viewing RPGs through ANT’s lens of distributed agency has several implications. First, it breaks down the traditional hierarchy that places human creators and players at the top and tools as subordinate. Instead, we would consider all contributors to play as part of a network: Players, game masters, dice, books, maps, pens, costumes, safety mechanics, and so on, each linked in relationships of influence. This does not mean a die has intentions or desires like a person, but it means the die’s material properties (its shape, weight, randomness) and its interactions (being rolled, read, consulted) have a real impact on what happens next. ANT uses the term “actant” to indicate any entity, human or object, that acts or causes things to happen, emphasizing that action is a *relation* rather than a trait. A player and a rulebook together, in interaction, produce an outcome (e.g., an interpreted rule) that neither could alone. The relational-materialist stance asks us to map out these interactions without prejudging which ones are most significant. In practice, this can be revelatory. Suddenly, the clatter of dice, the feel of a character sheet, or the illustrations in a rulebook are not trivial details; they are sites of action where the game’s course can change. For example, more diverse illustrations in *Dungeons & Dragons* 5e’s rulebooks (Crawford et al. 2014; Crawford 2024) led to reports of an influx of new players and the creation of safe spaces (McGrane 2018; Carlson 2020). By acknowledging material agency, we gain a richer understanding of how and why RPG sessions take the turns they do.

Each participant carries affordances, possibilities, and constraints for action that arise from an agent’s position in the network and how it interacts with others. The material makeup of a game thus plays a part in shaping the emergent narrative and the social dynamics. A heavy reliance on miniatures and grids tends to encourage careful, tactical play and rules precision; a game played with just pen, paper, and imagination tends to encourage descriptive creativity and flexibility. Similarly, a larp that centers on elaborate costumes and physical environments often fosters embodied immersion and improvisation, while one relying on simple tokens or minimal props may highlight interpersonal dynamics and emotional storytelling. Neither approach is inherently superior – they are different assemblages of people and things, each with its own network effects. This brings us to a key theme in contemporary RPG studies: uncertainty and multiplicity.

3. Embracing Uncertainty and Multiplicity

Rather than seek a single, essential definition of what a role-playing game *is* or what tools it *must* use, a relational-materialist view encourages us to embrace the uncertainty, diversity, and ever-evolving nature of the practice. Any attempt at a general definition is quickly undermined by the sheer variety of contents, play styles, and creative agendas in actual play. One cannot stress enough how fluid and context-dependent the practice is, with each group potentially doing things a bit differently. What counts as a

meaningful game element in one setting might be incidental in another. This insight aligns neatly with Latour's point that we should follow the actors (human and non-human alike) and see what they actually *do*, rather than impose an abstract definition upfront. When we do this, we find uncertainty at every turn, but not in a negative sense. It's the productive uncertainty of an open-ended activity that continually redefines itself in practice.

Uncertainty here means accepting that the "shape" of the social activity is not fixed in advance – groups form and dissolve, rules are debated and house-ruled, outcomes are unpredictable. Multiplicity encourages us to see that there is a *heterogeneity* of forms and a plurality of definitions, each valid in its context. The lead editor of this year's issue once described role-playing games as an "assemblage of practices" (Kamm 2020), the *sum of humans, materials, and ideas entangled* in various arrangements of play. This concept of an assemblage emphasizes that an RPG is not a single isolated thing (like a text or a story or a game system alone) but a constellation of elements that come together during play. By thinking in terms of assemblages or networks, we acknowledge the heterogeneous nature of role-playing: A session involves people with ideas and goals, bodies, movements, material and symbolic things, such as concepts (like rules or fictional tropes), all interacting. Change any part of that network – introduce a new tool, a new player, a new cultural context – and the experience may change.

Embracing multiplicity also means acknowledging the "*messiness*" of role-playing games as (social) practices and how we can study them (cf. Law 2004). Speaking of a singular, monolithic "role-playing community" or a universal RPG culture, as if it were homogeneous, runs contrary to the reality that human and non-human interactions are messy, situational, and continually transforming. There are many *communities*, many micro-cultures, each weaving together their preferred tools, terminologies, and values. This heterogeneity is a feature, not a bug. It shows that RPGs are *alive* – they evolve and adapt as people and materials find new configurations. Uncertainty, in this sense, is not just about a dice roll's unpredictability; it's about the openness of the role-playing practice-as-network to re-invention. New game designs introduce novel tools (consider the rise of cards, tarot decks, apps in otherwise analog games), and new player communities modify practices – all expanding the boundaries of what an RPG can be. A mindset attuned to uncertainty and multiplicity will be comfortable with the idea that there is no final form of "the RPG," only a rich landscape of possibilities connected by family resemblances (Wittgenstein [1953] 2009; Arjoranta 2014).

4. Networks Over Definitions

The relational view we're advocating – focusing on networks over definitions – has practical and inclusive benefits. When we stop asking "does this count as a proper RPG?" and start asking "what *network* of players, tools, and ideas is at work here?", we open ourselves to learn from every corner of the RPG world. For example, a live-action role-play in a park with costumes and foam weapons might seem, on the surface, utterly different from a dice-and-paper dungeon crawl – and indeed the material *tools of play* are different – yet both can be understood through the same relational lens. Both are networks of people and things: the larpers have their bodies, props, and physical space as key actants, whereas the tabletop gamers have dice, maps, and books. Both networks must negotiate social agreements, interpret rules (explicit or implicit), and collaboratively create a fictional reality. By comparing these networks, we might find insightful contrasts: the immediacy of embodied action in larp versus the mediating role of notation (hit points, character stats) in tabletop play. Each format teaches us about the other. More importantly, neither needs to be privileged. They are *differently realized* through different tools.

This issue's theme, "Tools of the Trade," therefore is not just about listing the physical implements used in analog games – it's about understanding how those implements fundamentally participate in and shape the activity of role-playing. The contributions to JARPS 6 each take up this materialist inquiry in distinct ways. For example, to make the ANT framework more precise and more concrete, we invited a contribution that demonstrates how objects and materials in games can "collaborate" with players, rather than serve as mere backdrop. Another contribution turns a critical eye to one of the most ubiquitous tools in our hobby: the rulebook. By examining rulebook design through an accessibility lens, the paper

shows how the physical and visual form of rules documentation can include or exclude players. This serves as a potent reminder that tools carry social and ethical dimensions. Adding to these perspectives, another article explores what happens when digital tools enter the analog arena, raising questions about how digital infrastructures can become part of the material network of play, blurring the boundaries between the human and non-human, the analog and the algorithmic. All contributions echo the broader argument of this editorial: That the material format of our games matters deeply in how the *social experience* of play is structured (e.g., who gets to participate fully and comfortably).

5. Continuing the Dialogue on Inclusivity

This focus on materiality follows on the heels of last year's JARPS issue, which examined *access and accessibility* in analog gaming. The 2024 editorial highlighted the structural barriers and biases that can exclude participants, urging the development of more adaptable and inclusive design frameworks (Kamm and Freudenthal 2024). It emphasized moving beyond one-size-fits-all solutions and considering diverse needs, such as gender, disability, socioeconomic background, and more, to make gaming spaces welcoming for all. In many ways, material tools are where such inclusive design meets practice. Rulebooks, character sheets, dice, costumes, or even the layout of a gaming room can either invite or impede participation. By zeroing in on material aspects this year, we continue that conversation: How can the props and techniques of analog role-playing foster greater accessibility, creativity, and connection? The six contributions in this issue each tackle that question from a different angle, collectively weaving a narrative about the agency of things in play.

This issue begins with the invited paper by Rafael Bienia, who shares an affinity for actor-network theory (ANT) and the materiality of games with this year's lead editor. Bienia's work on *Role Playing Materials* argues that costumes, computers, pen and paper are not passive elements in RPGs (Bienia 2016); instead, these materials actively work together with narrative and mechanics, changing and being changed through play. In "ANTs on the TRPG Table," Bienia provides a brief summary of his approach and vocabulary. He dissects an apparently disordered gaming table, full of rulebooks, dice, snacks, background music, scattered notes, and shows how it constitutes a complex actor-network. By analyzing five key material actors (light, table, character sheet, pencil, and GM screen), he illustrates the subtle agency that non-human elements exert in a play session. In a creative twist, his analysis allows these objects to "speak" for themselves: adopting a first-person voice, such as that of a lamp or a character sheet, to reveal how each contributes to the role-playing experience. This unusual method of giving voice to props challenges our anthropocentric habits and makes visible the often-overlooked mediators of play. The magic circle of a game is held up by an assemblage of human and material actors working in concert. By inviting Bienia to contribute, we sought to underscore a conviction that runs through this issue: That the physical tools of role-play are not just accessories, but co-creators of the narrative and social experience.

If Bienia provides a theoretical reflection on material agency, the following article turns to very practical material: The humble rulebook. Cátia Casimiro, Michael Heron and Carla Sousa ask, "What Makes a Rulebook Accessible and Entertaining?". Learning a new board game or TRPG often begins with reading the rules; essentially, a technical manual for fun. Yet as Casimiro et al. point out, "learning a game requires specialist literacy," and the failure to grasp a game from its rulebook is usually a result of the rulebook's complexity and cognitive load, not an inadequacy of the player. In other words, if the rulebook is impenetrable, that's a design flaw, not a gamer flaw. This article builds directly on themes of accessibility raised in the previous issue: The authors analyze how rulebook design can lower cognitive barriers and include, rather than alienate, newcomers and people with varying needs. They propose best practices grounded in cognitive psychology and inclusive design – from using *Easy Language* guidelines to reduce jargon, to optimizing layout, typography, and even the physical size of manuals for better readability. The material form of rules (text, tables, diagrams) is treated as a crucial tool that can invite players into a game's world or inadvertently shut them out. By foregrounding cognitive accessibility in analog game rules, Casimiro et al. extend inclusivity into the realm of design technique. Their

recommendations show how thoughtful adjustments to this often-overlooked tool of the trade – the rulebook – can make tabletop gaming more welcoming and enjoyable for all.

The following contribution turns to a genre of analog gaming where the environment itself is the key prop: The escape room. Ishida Kimi explores the role of narrative in Real Escape Games, a popular form of live puzzle event pioneered by *SCRAP* in Japan. These games position players as protagonists in a story who must “escape” by solving a series of puzzles in a themed setting. On the surface, they promise an immersive narrative experience: players often feel like characters in a movie or novel. Yet Ishida’s article probes a curious tension: the *precise* role of “story” in escape games is often ambiguous. Unlike an RPG, where players can dramatically change the story, escape games tend to have fixed sequences (you must solve puzzle A to get to puzzle B to reach the ending). How, then, does narrative function as a design element in these games, especially when young creators set out to make their own? Ishida investigates this question by analyzing proposals from a high school escape game design competition. The findings reveal a fascinating common thread. First, student designers almost always adopt the same fixed “story events,” namely, a cycle of solving puzzles and escaping, as the core narrative structure of their games. In essence, regardless of setting or plot dressing, the escape trope anchors the story, providing a ready-made narrative spine that is replicated or remixed from game to game. Second, these young designers show a pattern of reinterpreting everyday reality through a fictional lens to generate their game worlds. Classrooms, lockers, and school mysteries, so ordinary places and experiences, are transformed into the building blocks of fictional scenarios once viewed from the standpoint of “what if this were a game?” This suggests that the performative material setup of escape games (the physical space with its puzzles and props) heavily defines the narrative. Rather than intricate plots, it is the act of puzzle-solving itself (and the imaginative use of real-world environments) that provides the dramatic arc. Ishida thus frames “narrative” as another tool of the trade: A design instrument that can be lifted out, modified, or plugged into new contexts by creators. The article shows that even story elements can function like props or techniques, subject to creative appropriation. Moreover, it highlights the feedback loop between material reality and fiction. In escape rooms, the material constraints (locks, clues, physical rooms) both enable and constrain the story. This is a poignant reminder that in analog gaming, the stories we tell are always, to some extent, co-authored by the spaces and objects we tell them with.

Moving from rulebooks and narratives to game systems, we next have an essay by Jacob Reed that explores an emerging bridge between board games and traditional tabletop RPGs. Reed’s piece, “Campaign Board Games as a Steppingstone towards TRPGs,” examines a new breed of board games that emulate the long-form storytelling and character progression of RPGs. Games like *Gloomhaven* (Childres 2017) or *Kingdom Death: Monster* (Poos 2015) feature serialized narratives and evolving characters, yet operate without a human game master. Reed highlights how these *campaign board games* mirror key aspects of TRPGs (collaborative story, player agency, strategic complexity) while differing in their reliance on pre-defined scenarios and stricter rules. Crucially, he argues that such games offer “an approachable alternative to TRPGs, especially for newcomers,” since they provide a structured experience with rich narratives “in a more accessible format.” Unlike a full-fledged RPG, which may require an experienced GM and improvisational skills, a campaign board game offers an “out of the box” adventure that anyone can jump into, serving as a gateway into the TRPG hobby. Reed’s article thus spotlights another facet of materiality: The game system and components themselves (boards, cards, scenario booklets) act as a training ground for storytelling play. In the spirit of this issue, it frames these hybrid games as tools — onboarding tools that lower the entry threshold to more free-form role-playing. The essay invites readers to see continuity rather than a hard divide between board games and RPGs, suggesting that innovations in board game design can inspire more inclusive pathways into role-playing experiences.

The theme of accessibility and its limits is picked up from a different angle by Terashima Teppei and Fukamatsu Ryōta. Their short research note asks: Can analog games be effective tools for long-term learning? In an exploratory study on using board games as educational materials in a university setting, they observed an interesting outcome. Immediately after gameplay, participants showed heightened interest and engagement with the learning content, indicating a short-term success. However, when

tested one month later, no long-term learning effects were confirmed. In their article, Terashima and Fukamatsu discuss the pedagogical implications of this finding. Board games, with their tactile pieces and rule-based challenges, can clearly motivate and engage learners in the moment. Yet, the lasting educational impact may be limited if the knowledge doesn't transfer or stick after the game is over. This sobering result serves as a reality check on the current vogue of "gamification" and the assumption that any learning game is a silver bullet. It underscores the importance of evaluating our tools critically: A board game might be a great prop to spark interest (an inspirational tool), but perhaps not a standalone solution for complex skill retention over time. By documenting the limits of what an analog game can achieve in a curriculum, the authors remind designers and educators alike that a tool is only as effective as the broader context and strategy in which it's used. Their study adds nuance to this issue's throughline: Material tools can empower and engage, but we must also understand their constraints to use them wisely.

From physical props and games, the issue moves to digital technology entering the analog arena. In a forward-looking case report, Moroishi Toshihiro introduces an experimental use of generative AI as a tool to support live-action role-playing events. Moroishi's article recounts how Google's *NotebookLM* (an AI language model service) was deployed during two recent larp events in Japan. The report addresses two key questions: First, can an AI assistant reduce the operational burden on small-scale larp organizers? Second, can it enhance the participant experience by helping players navigate the game's content (for example, by answering rules questions or aiding in character creation)? From an organizer's perspective, *NotebookLM* was like an extra gamemastering aide, able to quickly answer players' in-game queries or provide on-demand narrative details, thus freeing up the human organizers to focus on adjudicating complex interactions. For players, especially newcomers, the LLM tool served as a guide through the labyrinth of a larp's lore and rules, lowering the entry barrier into an otherwise information-dense experience. Moroishi's practical insights resonate with the materialist theme: In this case, a piece of software becomes part of the toolkit of analog role-playing. By treating an AI language model as a prop or non-player character (NPC) that participants can interact with, the boundary between digital and analog play becomes blurred. Significantly, this does not diminish the "analog" nature of the larp. Instead, it augments it, much like a well-placed hint or a rulebook clarification, only delivered instantly by an ever-attentive virtual assistant. As RPGs continue to evolve, such examples provoke us to expand our notion of what counts as a "tool of the trade." Even an AI, operating behind the scenes, can join the actor-network of a larp, mediating the play experience in service of immersion and accessibility. The use of generative AI naturally raises many more questions, both material and social, which we will not address here.

Taken together, the articles in this issue of JARPS offer a journey through the often-underappreciated landscape of analog role-playing tools. We began by illuminating the table itself – the network of people and things that come together to make play possible – and we end by considering how even narrative and design conventions are part of a material toolkit that can be tweaked for new purposes. A common thread running through all contributions is an emphasis on materiality and agency. Whether it's a rulebook's language, a board game's structure, an AI support, or an escape room's puzzles, each material element carries the potential to include or exclude, to inspire creativity or impose limits, to bridge worlds or reinforce barriers. By paying close attention to these props and techniques, the authors collectively argue, we can better understand analog role-playing games as assemblages of humans and non-humans – assemblages that we, as designers, scholars, or players, can intentionally shape.

In a field often enamored with storytelling and imagination, this issue invites a refocusing on tangible realities and the unsung heroes that enable our flights of fantasy. As the actor-network approach reminds us, the social experience of role-play is co-produced by these material actors (Bienia 2016; Kamm and Becker 2016; Kamm 2020). Embracing that insight opens up new possibilities. It means that improving inclusion or accessibility might start with tweaking a component or rewriting a rule. It means that innovation can arise from repurposing an old prop in a new way, or borrowing a design trick from a different gaming genre. And it means that research into analog RPGs must continue to follow not just the players, but the *things* – the tools of the trade that populate every table and larp site, quietly orchestrating the drama. In shining a light on these tools, we hope this issue sparks a broader

conversation about the material foundations of play. After all, when we acknowledge that the dice, the boards, the books, and even the room lighting matter (quite literally), we empower ourselves to craft more engaging, inclusive, and imaginative role-playing experiences, and provide us with new angles to analyze these practice-as-networks more thoroughly.

6. Future Issues

JARPS continues to invite contributions dealing with the materiality of play, even though the thematic focus of future issues will concern other areas of researching and practicing non-digital role-playing games. The planned upcoming issues will explore questions of history and historiography, with a focus on local histories of analog role-playing as well. How to write the/a history of larps and TRPGs? How to play with history?

If you are exploring the use of TRPGs or larps within educational or therapeutic environments, we invite you to share your observations in the form of a “Case Report.” These submissions offer crucial perspectives on how role-playing functions in practice, deepening our collective grasp of the possibilities such games open up across diverse contexts and for different participants. Likewise, if a book on role-playing games has significantly shaped your thinking or practice, a “Book Review” is an excellent way to continue the conversation and expand the community’s appreciation of the field.

We further encourage theoretical discussions of foundational ideas like immersion, bleed, or calibration, alongside empirical research examining how players engage with mechanics, how specific genres influence play cultures, or how organizers navigate issues such as transparency and material constraints. Such work pushes the boundaries of our field by introducing fresh perspectives and evidence-based insights.

If you would like to join our pool of reviewers,¹ we warmly invite you to reach out. We are continually seeking to broaden our community of dedicated scholars and practitioners committed to advancing research on role-playing games.

Both special and guest issues focus on particular dimensions of contemporary role-playing game research and practice, such as educational uses, relationships between players and characters, or the role of the body in play. Scholars interested in serving as guest editors are encouraged to propose their ideas for an issue through the standard submission process.

As of 2023, JARPS now accepts rolling submissions. We welcome manuscripts that may not align with a specific issue’s theme or are submitted outside an active call for papers. Once peer reviewed, these works will be scheduled for inclusion in upcoming issues.

We look forward to continuing our shared exploration of the rich and evolving landscape of non-digital role-playing games together with our authors and readers.

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¹ 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.

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