Agents of Empowerment: A Role-Playing Game in Service of Cultivating a Soulful and Sustainable Academia

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As learning tools, analog role-playing games can be particularly good at exploring personal development, interpersonal conflicts, and systemic issues (Bowman and Hugaas 2019). At the Department of Game Design at Uppsala University, the Soulful and Sustainable Academia project explores role-playing games as vehicles for academics to recover their sense of purpose, empowerment, and interconnectivity. Academics face unique challenges with regard to sustainability due to the constraints of knowledge-producing institutions, as even highly lauded and prolific academics face highly competitive institutional pressures. Some potential consequences of high pressure work environments such as academia include perfectionism (Verner-Filion and Vallerand 2016), obsessive passion (Lavigne, Forest, and Crevier-Braud 2011), burnout, exhaustion, and a loss of meaning (Längle 2003). Thus, the project attempts to address the following overall question: If "burning out" is a common experience, can games help academics "keep our lamps lit" in terms of illuminating our curiosity, creativity, harmonious passion (Dalpé et al. 2019), and sense of meaning (cf. Rusch and Phelps 2020)?

Our research group is developing an analog role-playing game entitled *Agents of Empowerment*. Based upon research on the Batman Effect (White et al., 2017), sustainable transformational leadership (Sharma 2017), and role-playing communities as transformational containers (Bowman and Hugaas 2021), *Agents of Empowerment* guides participants to develop a superhero alterego that can help them feel more empowered in common stressful academic situations. First, participants engage in a workshop involving somatic experiencing, meditation, character design, and relationship building. Players develop a superhero alterego, as well as a power phrase, symbology, imagery, archetypes, and somatic emotional states that help them activate their "superhero power" within themselves. Importantly, they also construct fictional relationships with other player-characters who have supported them in the past.

Participants then participate in a short educational live action role-playing game (edu-larp) within which they play a version of themselves that has activated this superhero alterego. A benevolent agency tells them they are candidates to form an *Avengers*-like supergroup that can infiltrate academia, provide support, and cooperate within it. They are led through a series of simulations in which they face typically stressful academic situations with a non player-character (NPC) Antagonist placing either internal or external pressure on them. Participants are asked to activate their superhero -- i.e. to slip into somatic states and personality traits conducive to empowerment in these situations -- as well as receive support from other characters in their superteam.

As with other forms of educational role-playing, thorough debriefing follows the larp. In its current form, the larp also includes an additional hour-long integration session a week later. Throughout the week, participants are asked to try to "activate their superhero power" in stressful life situations or practice it when relaxed. The integration session is intended to further

distill and reinforce the takeaways from the larp in order to concretize learning (Bowman and Hugaas 2019, 2021). On a meta level, the game's design is intended to facilitate non-fictional relationship-building among the players as a means to build sustainable support networks within academia. To date, in addition to the researchers, the game has been playtested by a group of 4 graduate students, who showed a great interest in continued play. Ultimately, additional play sessions may also be added to this structure, further reinforcing the goal of sustainable well-being, as such skills take practice.

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