

The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014



Edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman, Ph.D.



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Cover photo by Theresa Garcia: At *Dystopia Rising: Lone Star*, a priest of the King’s Court, a religion that worships music and idolizes rock stars from the past, baptizes a new member. He leads her blindfolded down a rocky path, with her friends and fellow Court members guiding her way. At the end of the journey, the priest removes the blindfold, has her greet the sunset, and asks her to announce the band she wishes to follow.

Foreward

Wyrld Con is a crucible of ideas and concepts. At our core, we have strived to establish a gathering place for the open exchange of ideas in the world of Storytelling.

However, as this *Companion Book* will reveal, far more than our physical location exists in the larger world of Storytelling within which we interact. Our purpose is to grow and learn in ways that we find both entertaining and intriguing. People come to Wyrld Con for the dialogue it generates, the social atmosphere, and the opportunity to experience new stories and worlds dormant in our psyches.

We welcome those who are curious about a level of personal experience that many modern forms of entertainment lack. We focus on the development of worlds that you can see, touch, shape, and feel. We create emotional ties through story, friendship, and ideas that are not fully experienced in a traditional television drama or film. Wyrld Con ties together more than a single moment of experience, showing those around us how to collaborate in new ways and demonstrating how to generate new adventures at a deeply personal level.

This book reveals how you can experience a greater dimension in your designs and, in many ways, it dives deeply into the technical complexities that many may find daunting. However, Wyrld Con realizes that all aspects of stories are required to shape worlds and everyone is different.

It is with pride that I welcome *The Wyrld Con Companion Book 2014* to our audience and I personally thank the contributors for their blood, sweat, and tears. The passion that is required to build a document that pushes the boundaries of understanding is a daunting one. I am grateful for the effort put forth by our authors and our editor, Sarah Lynne Bowman. Without each of you these books would not be possible.

The Companion Book is the foundation of what makes Wyrld Con a safe place for what we call clever debate. However, we must also realize that everyone is welcome in that debate and to have fun. We see Wyrld Con as a clever, creative, and fun place for all.

As a matter of fact, these facets are now in the core of what Wyrld Con is. You will see our identity develop further over the coming years, but we recognize the need for a solid foundation. I encourage those who read this book and these words to discuss and debate what they feel Wyrld Con will offer them.

I once again welcome and thank all those who have contributed to the *2014 Companion Book* and have considered what Wyrld Con seeks to develop.

Clever, Creative, Fun. Wyrld Con is about shaping stories, worlds, and adventures. The next level of play for the curious human.

— Ira Ham
Chairman of Wyrld Con
Orange County, CA
December 16, 2014

Introduction from the Editor

A Maturing Subculture

Investigative analysis of interactive storytelling in its many forms continues to evolve. As our communities mature, so, too, do the levels of discourse around topics as important as the psychology of play, documentation of projects, gender biases, innovative new forms, examination of historical roots, and storytelling as mythmaking. This year's journalistic section of the *Wyrld Con Companion Book* tackles all of these subjects and more, including voices from countries as diverse as various American communities, the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, Canada, and Russia. This maturation is also evident in our featured academic submissions this year from the United States and Poland, which examine psychological safety in larp and the benefits of educational role-playing.

For most of our authors this year, interactive storytelling is not just a hobby, but rather a meaningful object of passionate interest and, in several cases, a profession. The *Companion Book* works to serve as a bridge between diverse voices from around the world, each with their own vested interest in the subject matter. Many of the articles in this volume were inspired, in part, by previous editions of our publication. We hope to continue this fruitful dialogue and provide a space for discourse among authors who normally might never come in contact. Through this collision of ideas and documentation from far-reaching corners of the world, our hope is that this discourse will continue to mature and new avenues of collaboration will emerge.

The Journalistic Section of *The Wyrld Con Companion Book*

This year's journalistic section continues the publication's commitment to provide quality informative, theoretical, and practical discussion about a variety of topics pertaining to interactive storytelling. The majority of the articles this year pertain to role-playing games, although Lars Konzack's and Peter Woodworth's contributions examine the "geek" subculture from broader perspectives. Due to this diversity of topics, I have arranged the articles alphabetically.

"The State of Amtgard" by Sarah Budai and Kristin Hammock provides a remarkable amount of data and explication of the larp phenomenon known as Amtgard. A document initially intended to explain

the current state of affairs within this widespread organization to an internal audience of Amtgard officials, Budai and Hammock graciously agreed to adapt their report for the *Companion Book*. They explain how Amtgard—which focuses on touch-based combat with foam swords, magic, and skills—began in 1983, eventually branching out to 12 countries worldwide with 984 total groups. Budai and Hammock also explain the leadership structure of the organization, including the election of local monarchies and knights. The article provides a vast array of statistics regarding the growth and decline rates of individual groups; the days and times in which Amtgard games take place; and the most common means of promotion and communication. To date, I have yet to see a more thorough quantitative analysis of a larp group. I encourage other games to utilize Budai and Hammock's research model in order to further increase our understanding of the organizational details of larps worldwide.

Next, Kevin Burns takes us on a fascinating journey through various psychological theories, eventually applying them to Nordic larp. "The Therapy Game: Nordic Larp, Psychotherapy, and Player Safety" covers a vast array of psychological theories: psychoanalysis, psychodrama, play therapy, psychosynthesis, family constellations, the collective unconscious, archetypes, the shadow, individuation, and active imagination. Burns connects these concepts with theoretical work in role-playing studies by Beltrán, Blatner, Pohjola, Montola, and me. He interweaves this meta-analysis with personal accounts from himself, as well as from other role-players who participate in Nordic larps, freeforms, and other scenarios. Finally, he discusses the potentially therapeutic nature of role-playing, issues of psychological safety, and appropriate strategies for debriefing. Burns' article contributes one of the most thorough explanations of the links between psychology and role-playing in the current literature, writing in a style that manages both a professional and confessional tone.

In "Culture Shock: Building a Freeform Scene in Edmonton," Eleonora and Mikael Hellström explain the difficult process of transitioning from a Swedish larp scene to a Canadian one after their move from Stockholm to Edmonton, Alberta. They detail the games they previously ran in Sweden, which included a long-term *Vampire* campaign and a Nordic larp entitled *A Song of Mycenae*, which revolved around ancient Greek society and included characters from the original pantheon.

The Hellströms describe their difficulties adapting to the relatively rules-centric North American approach to larp, their initial failed attempts to start Nordic style games in Alberta, and their frustrations with the culture shock. Finally, they detail how they managed to establish a freeform community called the Edmonton Larp Factory, patterned after similar groups in Norway and other countries. This article demonstrates that, despite the differences in our play cultures from group to group, larpers can adapt, find a middle ground, and further evolve design strategies that appeal to multiple play styles.

Switching to a broader perspective, Lars Konzack's "The Origins of Geek Culture: Perspectives on a Parallel Intellectual Milieu" indicates several historical moments as instrumental in the eventual evolution of the geek subculture. These moments include the development of the science fiction genre, the Lovecraft Circle, comic books, war gaming, and role-playing games. Konzack also examines the way that the mass drafting and education of men in World War II influenced the development of most of these categories, creating what the author calls an "alternative intellectual milieu." Konzack details how many of the foundational writers and game designers in these various genres had military history, suggesting that these highly trained men obtained their education through alternate means and, therefore, developed knowledge communities outside of traditional academia. This article compliments recent work by other scholars in the field such as Jon Peterson in helping to explain why much of our current "geek-oriented" media and games emphasize combat and military tactics.

Next, we transition to discuss the potential meanings embedded in interactive stories. In "Playing With

Myth: Applying Mythic Imagination to Live Action Role-play," Craig Page examines how myth functions in larp, developing a theory to explain the levels of mythic engagement. Drawing upon the work of Stephen Larsen, Page details three mythic levels with examples from *Vampire: the Awakening*, *Dystopia Rising*, and *Mage: the Ascension*. The World Myth describes mythic elements present in the overarching story and rules of a larp. Included in the World Myth are two subsections: the Immediate Myth, which includes the practical aspects of the fictional worlds each player needs to know in order to play; and the Meta Myth, which includes mythological structures embedded in the various belief systems and cosmic explanations within the game world. The next level is the Heroic Myth, which involves each character's personal journey of transformation. The final level is the Player Myth: the way in which the collective story unfolds in the minds of participants, in the game narrative moving forward, and in the stories told to one another afterward. This article serves as a nice addition to existing work in role-playing studies by Beltrán, Pohjola, Hook, and me, providing solid theoretical terminology to describe the ways we make meaning specific to the process of collaborative, experiential storytelling exemplified by larp.

The next piece offers both a design philosophy and brief examples of documentation of larps created from

this philosophical perspective. In "The Parlor Sandbox: Counter-Players and Ephemera in American Freeform," Evan Torner and Katherine Castiello Jones explain the parlor sandbox design philosophy, an outgrowth of American freeform. The article responds to the issues inherent to the "secrets and powers" structure of many parlor larps, which can, for some participants, inhibit role-playing and the flow of the narrative. The philosophy also offers an alternative to the Nordic and American freeform tendency to favor socially realistic settings rather than genre-based ones. While the article does not dispute the merits of other forms of parlor larp design, Torner and Castiello suggest another method that still features the appeal of genre games, while encouraging player-created content, transparency, minimalistic rules, and the use of organizers as "counter-players" who respond primarily to player input. This article offers a new perspective for designers and players who wish to experiment with innovative ways to experience freeform, parlor larp, and generic fiction.

We then transition to a highly significant article by Olga Vorobyeva entitled, "Entering and Leaving the 'Magic Circle' as Symbolic Acts: The Case of Russian Field Larps." Summarizing the findings of her Masters thesis, Vorobyeva offers a thorough explanation of the various stages of Russian field larps, which are games based on a multitude of themes that range from "small" (less than 100 players) to "epic" (more than 2500 players). Applying Erving Goffman's theory of frame-switching, Vorobyeva analyzes the various ways in which players slip in- and out-of-character in these games, describing the level of immersion involved at every stage of a larp's development. This blend of practical information and theoretical analysis gives us a fascinating window into the Russian larp subculture, which shares similarities to other larp communities, but also differs in important ways. Aside from providing a detailed case study complete with a Russian-to-English glossary of terms, this study also serves as one of the first articles in English to explain Russian larp, which has a long tradition of elaborate theory and practice unknown to many people due to the language barrier.

Finally, Peter Woodworth's article addresses the complicated issue of gender relations in geek communi-

ties including conventions and role-playing groups. In "Level Up: Guys, We Need to Talk," Woodworth details the ways in which he perceives some of the behavior toward women in these subcultures as problematic. He addresses many of the issues present in current debates about the treatment of women in geek spaces: graphic depictions of hypersexualized female bodies; objectification and harassment by men of "booth babes" and cosplayers; the problematic "gatekeeping" mentality behind labeling women as "fake geek girls"; and the casual inclusion of rape during "trash talk" and in narrative structures such as role-playing plots. Woodworth's goal is help make gaming spaces more inclusive for females by encouraging men to behave in more mature ways. Inclusivity is an important topic in the current discourse around geek subcultures, as fandom, games, and interactive storytelling are becoming increasingly diverse over time.

I offer thanks to each of these authors for their willingness to improve the quality of their papers in terms of grammar and citations. I also offer my deepest gratitude to Kirsten Hageleit for her willingness to apply her layout expertise to our publication for another year. I am deeply honored for this opportunity to help these articles develop to such a high degree of quality and to feature them here in *The Wyrld Con Companion Book*. I hope you enjoy each of these pieces as much as I do.

—Sarah Lynne Bowman
Editor



The State of Amtgard

By Sarah Budai and Kristin Hammock

Amtgard began like a lot of larps do: with few idealistic kids from the local high school's sci-fi club. It was February of 1983 in a small park in El Paso, TX with a small flier and a photocopied Dagorhir rulebook. It took some time for everything to settle and grow to become something that we today would recognize as Amtgard. Early iterations of the rulebook had no magic classes at all. Eventually, the class system included magic, skills, and our very competitive combat system. Our players wear medieval and fantasy style clothes that we call garb, and a colored sash that indicates their class. All of the groups who play Amtgard use the same rulebook, so it is easy to move from one group to another, even across the county, and not have to relearn rules. Role-play in Amtgard varies from chapter to chapter, but the touch-based combat with our highly regulated foam weapons is present everywhere.

Once Upon a Time

In the beginning, there was one chapter, founded by those idealistic kids and a crazy old guy named Peter LaGrue that had been kicked out of another larp. The chapter was called the Kingdom of the Burning Lands because it's hot in Texas. The beginnings of the monarchy were fleshed out. Using a by-right-of-arms system with the tournament winners, Tawnee Darkfalcon, and Joella Starwatcher becoming the first Monarch and Regent respectively. After the first five six-month reigns, all the positions except that of the Champion, which acts as the Kingdom Safety officer and sometimes runs battle games, became elected; after every six months, the Kingdom would hold a vote to gain new officers.

Soon after this change, more chapters started springing up: the Emerald Hills in Dallas, TX; the Kingdom of Dragonspine in Las Cruces, New Mexico; the Celestial Kingdom between Austin and San Antonio, Texas. Today, we have sixteen active Kingdoms covering most of the U.S. Starting a chapter, as well as attending the chapter, has always been free, making Amtgard an appealing game for high school and college students. Camping events may charge a small fee to cover food and land use; however, the guiding principle of free-to-play has certainly encouraged the rapid spread of the game. These 16 Kingdoms are

the Burning Lands (BL), Emerald Hills (EH), Celestial Kingdoms (CK), Golden Plains (GP), Iron Mountains (IM), DragonSpine (DS), Goldenvale (GV), Wetlands (WL), Neverwinter (NW), Rising Winds (RW), Blackspire (BS), Crystal Groves (CG), Desert Winds (DW), Tal Dagore (TD), Northern Lights (NL), and Westmarch (WM). Within these Kingdoms are the principalities of Winters Edge (WE), Northreach (NR), Stormhaven (SH), Polaris (PO), Northern Empire (NE), Rivermoor (RM), and Souls Crossing (SC).

The game has evolved well beyond what its founders could have predicted in its thirty-one years. Since then, we have had eight major iterations of our own rulebook and have grown from a single group to chapters all over the United States and Canada. 981 parks have been founded over this time in 12 countries, with 240 remaining active today in 16 sovereign Kingdoms.

We have a rich history and make a dedicated effort to preserve it, down to the stories of individual players.

Who is That in the Crown?

Coronets in Amtgard, those shiny metal things perched on brows, can be worn for a few reasons. Mostly, they indicate that the person under that shiny hat is an officer at either the local or Kingdom level. A player might also be awarded the right to wear one as a reward for service in an elected office above and beyond the call of duty.

Officers of our umbrella groups, the Kingdoms, are typically elected every six months, and may hold a maximum of two terms in the same office. All players can choose to vote in Kingdom elections. Players have to be contributing in order to compete for office; that is, they have to show up to games and events and pay the small dues amount—six dollars for six months. The hopeful candidates must declare their intent publically and in writing. They must enter the Qualifications Tourney, which has both an Arts and Fighting track. They must be a member in good standing. Those that win the popular vote hold those offices for the next Reign—the cycle of the Kingdom—which lasts for six months.



Left: Group meeting of House Lioness, a household in support of female fighters. Above: Players splitting into teams for battle at Keep on the Borderlands 2014. Photos by the authors. Right: Monarch in the Wetlands, TX. Far right: Coronation in the Wetlands Kingdom of Texas c. 2010-12. Photos by SmilodonArt.



The chief officer of the club is the Monarch. They wear a crown, or coronet, and can be called the Queen, Emperor, Karl, or whatever else they choose. Their chief duty is as the head of the chapter; they choose the style of the Reign like what the theme will be and what policies they will change and enact, as well as inter-Kingdom matters, like with whom they might ally or go to war against. They act as the final arbiter of disputes, break ties, choose who receives awards, and who is elevated to knighthood. When a monarch steps down, they are eligible to be granted the title of Duke or Duchess.

In the order of precedence, the second officer is the Prime Minister. The prime minister is usually elected three months into the Monarch’s reign; that way, there is always someone in office from the previous reign to help preserve continuity. The Prime Minister’s major roles are the guardianship of the group treasury and the upkeep of the chapter’s records of credits and awards. They also have the power to make laws by joint decision with the monarch, which must be up help until the next vote. The symbol of this office is a pair of crossed keys, but it is rarely used. They wear no coronet and are often in the background, but hold major powers.

The Prince or Princess, known as Regent, is the officer in charge of promoting the arts and acts as the vice president of the club. In some Kingdoms, the Monarch and Regent run as a pair, and in others, they run separately. Like the monarch, the Regent is elected for a six month term by popular vote. The Regent wears a slightly smaller or less ornate coronet than the Monarch’s. They often promote Arts competitions and are responsible for handing out Arts-related awards and titles.

The only unelected officer at the Kingdom level is

Waiting for Feast and Court. Photo by the authors.

the Champion. They are chosen from those that compete in the Champion’s Tourney, have declared their intent for the office, have entered a certain number of items in Qualifications, and are the highest placing in the tourney of those that are competing for the office. The Champion carries the Kingdom sword during court, which is used by the monarch to bestow knighthood. The champion organizes games at events if none are already planned, as well as orchestrating weapons and armor checks before battle games.

The Nucleus of the Game

The core of Amtgard participation is the local park, also called a chapter. These groups can consist of 5-70 people and are given designations based on their size; shires are the smallest and grand duchies are the largest. These groups are usually under the umbrellas of Kingdoms, which cover a certain geographic area and have elected Kingdom-level officers. Other chapters might choose to remain freeholds and not owe allegiance to any Kingdom. However, no matter their size, these groups may never rise of the designation of shire. Each chapter holds the same officers as a Kingdom, who do much the same jobs on a smaller scale. These officers work together to run the group and keep it involved with the rest of Amtgard.

The following data was originally collected to represent as many of these groups as possible in a yearly audit conducted in order to assess the health and growth of the game. Audits like this have been conducted on the inter-Kingdom level for the last six years. They are provided to the people of Amtgard as part-encouragement and part-temperature check. Data on methods of recruitment and improving the parks were also collected and can hopefully help the continued growth of the game. The trends shown in the data collected have confirmed that Amtgard continues to be a vibrant and growing game. This report was presented to the governing body of Amtgard, the Circle of Monarchs, at the Clan meeting in July 2014.

Methods for Collecting this Data

A survey was sent to every park with any sort of listing in Amtgard’s records. These included contracted groups, as well as groups that were recorded on the wiki, but were too short-lived to become official. When no individual was available to survey, data was entered for the park based on any information which could be found: old emails, older surveys, etc. A wide variety of data was collected, ranging from officers and participation levels to founding dates to methods of recruitment. The

specific details of this data is recorded in Appendix I.

The survey was conducted in the form of a Google doc, with both multiple choice and open responses. Each Kingdom was assigned a surveyor, who distributed the survey to a member of each park. This member was often, but not always, an officer. The groups that were missed or were defunct were then surveyed more personally, using all records to locate and contact a responsible player. In cases where multiple players answered for one group, the data on that park was combined. In cases where a response was impossible, data from the Amtwiki was used.

Geographic Scope of Amtgard

Amtgard is a wide ranging game, with parks forming at some point in most states and many countries. Many individuals are exposed to Amtgard in high school or college and form their own group when they move away from home or travel with the military. These groups will often introduce people to the game, who will then continue moving and introducing new groups to Amtgard.

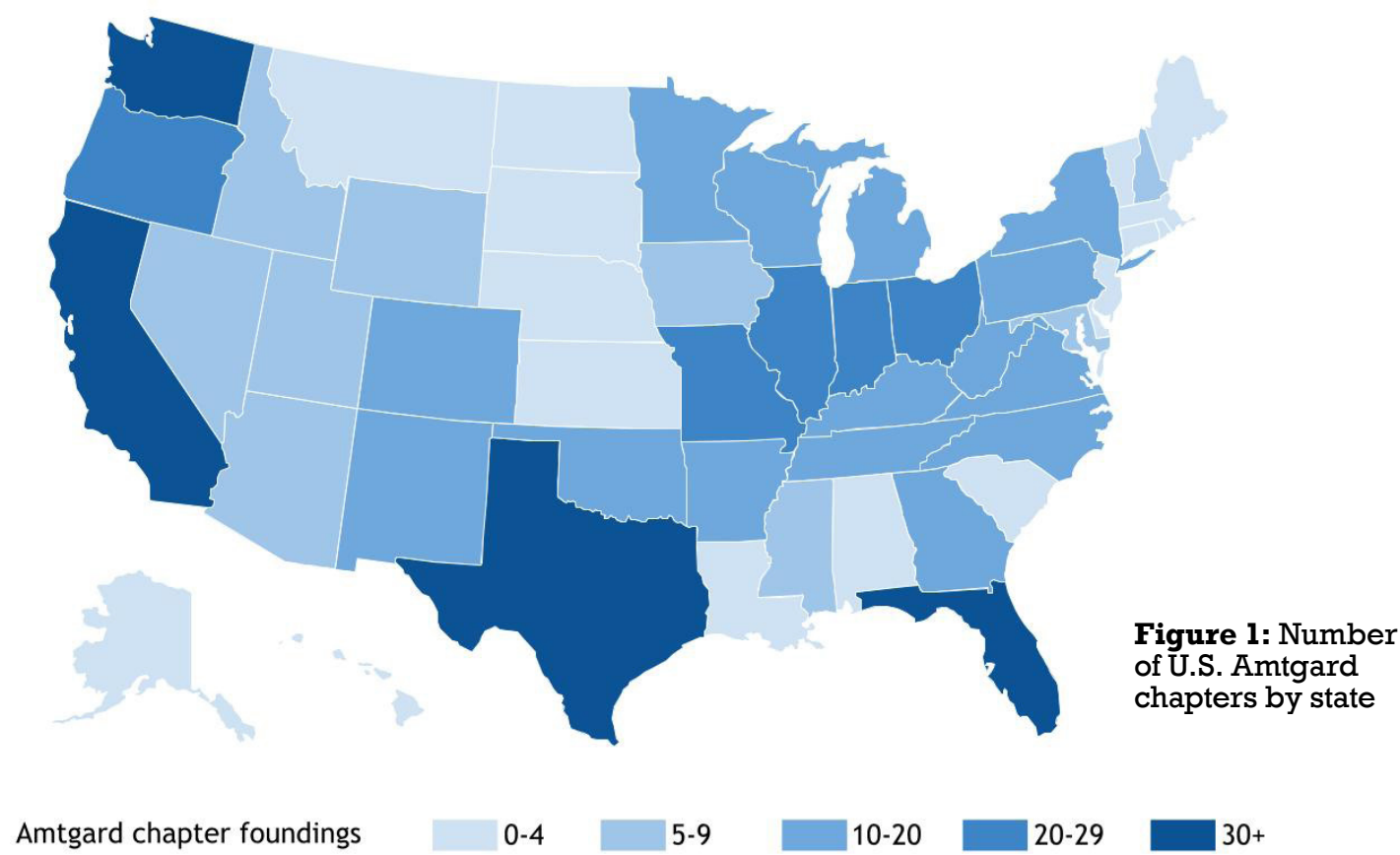
48 states have experienced Amtgard at some point, as well as 12 countries. VA and RI are the only states

which have not hosted a group. The countries that have Amtgard are the U.S., Canada, Croatia, Australia, England, Finland, Germany, Russia, Korea, Guatemala, South Korea, Japan, and Iraq. A report of a defunct group in France and an incipient group in Sweden came in while this report was being written, but are not included in the calculations. Most of these groups are the result of Amtgard members in the military being stationed overseas and gathering a group together; however, the Croatian groups have been formed entirely of natives who found the rulebook online. The U.S., Canada, and Croatia are the only countries with currently active groups; however, there are frequent reports of informal sparring on many military bases and it is quite possible that there are many other groups that were never recorded.

Texas is the state with the most groups, having 93 cities or towns that have hosted Amtgard. No other states come close to this number, with the next highest being California at 36 and Florida at 35. New Jersey holds the fewest groups with only 1. While the size of the state certainly has something to do with these numbers, Texas was also where Amtgard started and spread first and will likely always have the advantage.

Table 1: State and Country distribution

State	Number of Groups	State	Number of Groups	State	Number of Groups	State	Number of Groups
TX	93	NM	13	NH	5	NJ	1
CA	36	TN	13	AK	4	RI	0
FL	35	MN	12	AL	4	VT	0
WA	30	NC	12	KS	4	Country	Number of Groups
IL	26	AR	11	LA	4		
MO	26	GA	11	MA	4	Canada	15
OH	26	NY	11	DE	3	Germany	6
OR	24	PA	10	MT	3	Croatia	4
IN	23	AZ	9	NE	3	England	3
KY	18	NV	7	SD	3	South Korea	3
VA	16	WY	7	CT	2	Australia	2
WI	16	IA	6	HI	2	Finland	1
OK	15	MD	6	ME	2	Guatemala	1
CO	14	UT	6	ND	2	Iraq	1
MI	14	ID	5	SC	2	Japan	1
WV	14	MS	5	DC	1	Russia	1



The large number of groups shown in Texas in **Table 1** may also be influenced by the large number of Kingdoms in Texas, though growth and Kingdom seats are no longer completed focused around Texas anymore. There are 16 Kingdoms in the game today and 8 principalities, not to mention the freeholds. The rate at which we gain Kingdoms has, after the first ones, stayed fairly steady, averaging about one new Kingdom every other year. However, two principalities put in prebids this year, announcing their intent to become Kingdoms next year.

Name changes within the same city limit the number of places that have experienced Amtgard significantly, and in interesting ways. We have data on cities for 891 of the 984 groups and state information for 933 groups. 113 cities have two groups contained within them. 39 cities have 3 groups. 15 cities have 4 groups. 4 cities have 5 groups. One city has contained 6, 8, and 9 groups each. These cities with large numbers of groups are

San Antonio, TX, with 6, Killeen, TX, with 8, and Austin, TX, with 9. This leaves us with only 620 cities that have experienced Amtgard at some point in time. There are 19,355 cities in the U.S., so we feel the need to step up our recruiting and spread the word.

Table 2 illustrates the number and percentage of groups that have either splintered from another group or changed their name from a previous name for both active and inactive groups. It also shows the same information for the number and percentage of parks that have either changed their name or merged into another group.

Obviously, active groups are unlikely to have a new name or have merged into other parks. The one group that did is an interesting situation, where they merged and play with another local park, but maintain their own set of role-play officers within a household. This may be a good solution for any parks facing a merger, but worried about losing their own identity.

Table 2: Group Renaming

	active	% active groups	inactive	% inactive groups	All	% all groups
Splintered/ Previous name	39	16.2	90	12.1	129	13.1
Merged/New Name	1	0.4	105	14.1	106	10.7
Both	0	0	26	3.5	26	2.6

Table 3: Common Name elements

Word	Appearances	Word	Appearances	Word	Appearances
Valley	37	Haven	16	Black	12
Keep	26	River	16	Crimson	11
Dragon	24	Waters	16	Mystic	11
Winds	22	Woods	16	Coast	10
Hills	21	Moon	15	Emerald	10
Grove	20	Mountain	15	Hold	10
Hollow	18	Shadow	14	Plain	10
Lands	18	Forest	13	Silver	9
Dark	17	Gate	13		

While the number of active groups that have previous names is smaller in number than that of inactive (39 to 90), it is actually a higher percentage of groups (16% to 12%). This number is not overly large, but it does appear that having some sort of history does not hinder a group's growth and activity and may, in fact, help it. This runs contrary to most generally negative feelings about splinter groups. In the future, clarifying which groups were splinters and which were simple name changes may help shed further light on this question.

All of these parks require a large range of names and it is no surprise that there would be common elements between them. Table 3 displays the 26 most common name elements in Park names within Amtgard, along with how many times each one occurs. This table did not separate out compound words, such as Deadwood, so many elements are likely underestimated. The next park that submits a contract with a name already in use is being named Dragon Valley Keep, just as a warning to everyone.

There were also several unique names which kept the research interesting. These honorable mentions go to Celestial Simian Mafiosos, Flaming Purple Mountains, Bamph, and Barksaucer.



Three castle guards, wary of an intruder at Crystalline Chronicles 2013.

Graph 1: Founding and defunct dates for all parks. Photo by the authors.

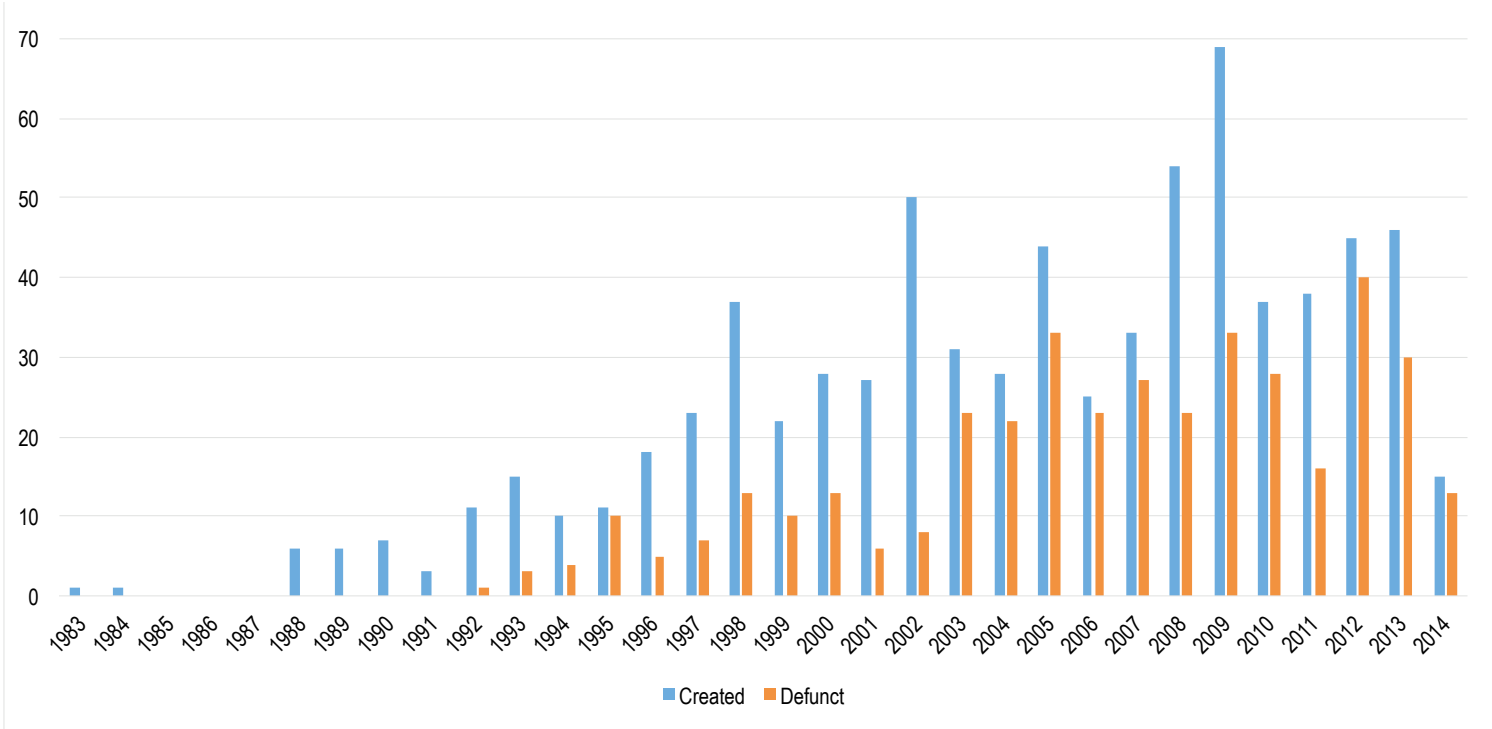


Table 4: Founding and defunct dates for all parks.

Year	Founded	Defunct	Gain	Year	Founded	Defunct	Gain
1983	1	0	1	2000	28	13	15
1984	1	0	1	2001	27	6	21
1985	0	0	0	2002	50	8	42
1986	0	0	0	2003	31	23	8
1987	0	0	0	2004	28	22	6
1988	6	0	6	2005	44	33	11
1989	6	0	6	2006	25	23	2
1990	7	0	7	2007	33	27	6
1991	3	0	3	2008	54	23	31
1992	11	1	10	2009	69	33	36
1993	15	3	12	2010	37	28	9
1994	10	4	6	2011	38	16	22
1995	11	10	1	2012	45	40	5
1996	18	5	13	2013	46	30	16
1997	23	7	16	2014	15	13	2
1998	37	13	24	Total	741	391	350
1999	22	10	12				

History and Growth Rates

Each of these parks goes through a life cycle, with new groups forming and older groups going defunct for various reasons. While it is true that groups do go defunct, Amtgard as a whole is growing and forming new parks regularly.

Graph 1 illustrates the number of groups that were founded each year in blue, as well as the number of groups which became defunct each year in orange. Founding information is missing for 238 parks, mostly the older ones from Amtgard’s early years. We are also missing defunct dates for 338 parks, again, mostly earlier parks. Even without these parks, there is a clear trend of growth visible, with more parks being created each year than going defunct. **Table 4** illustrates this trend most clearly, with all numbers in the Gain column being positive, showing how many more parks were founded than went defunct in a given year. 2009 was the highest growth year yet, with 69 new parks joining Amtgard. The year with the most groups going defunct was 2012, with 40 groups closing their doors. Interestingly, this date is 4 years after the large growth spike, and, as **Table 5** illustrates, the average age of a group is about 4 years, though most deaths happen in the first year.

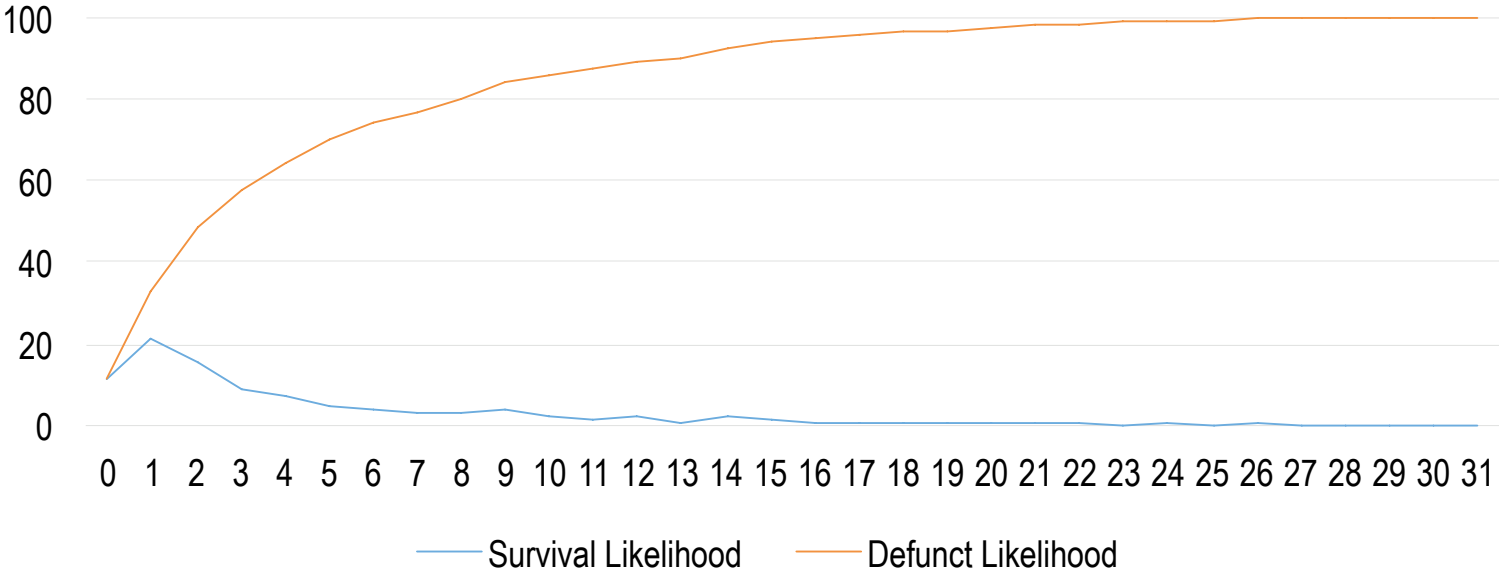
As you can see from **Table 5**, the average age of groups is around 4 years, with a very large standard deviation. Once you pass the spike of 0-2 years, as you can see in **Graph 2** (next page), the numbers slowly decrease, with few making it to those points. That said, ages of existing groups do range from a few months to 31 years, so it certainly is possible for a group to survive over time.

Interestingly, this table shows that school and military focused groups are more likely to have a longer lifespan than other groups. This runs counter to our prediction that they would have a strong tendency towards lasting no longer than 4 years, as most groups seem to be founded by a single strong leader and die out when that person leaves the area. This data may prove that anecdotal evidence incorrect, or these groups may simply be able to ride the novelty past the first year or two. This trend may be worth examining further in later surveys.

Table 5: Group life spans

	Mean	Standard Deviation
Only Groups Listing both Defunct and Founding	3.06	3.36
Only Groups Listing both Defunct and Founding and Ignoring Non-Natural Entries	3.57	3.37
Assuming Defunct of 2014 for Unlisted	5.87	5.92
Assuming Defunct of 2014 for Unlisted and Ignoring Non-Natural Entries	6.45	5.9
No Assumptions of Defunct	1.98	3.07
No Assumptions of Defunct and Ignoring Non-Natural Entries	3.57	3.37
Age of currently Active Groups	7.62	6.79
School/Military Groups	6.66	6.56
School/Military Groups Ignoring Non-Natural Entries	7.51	6.49

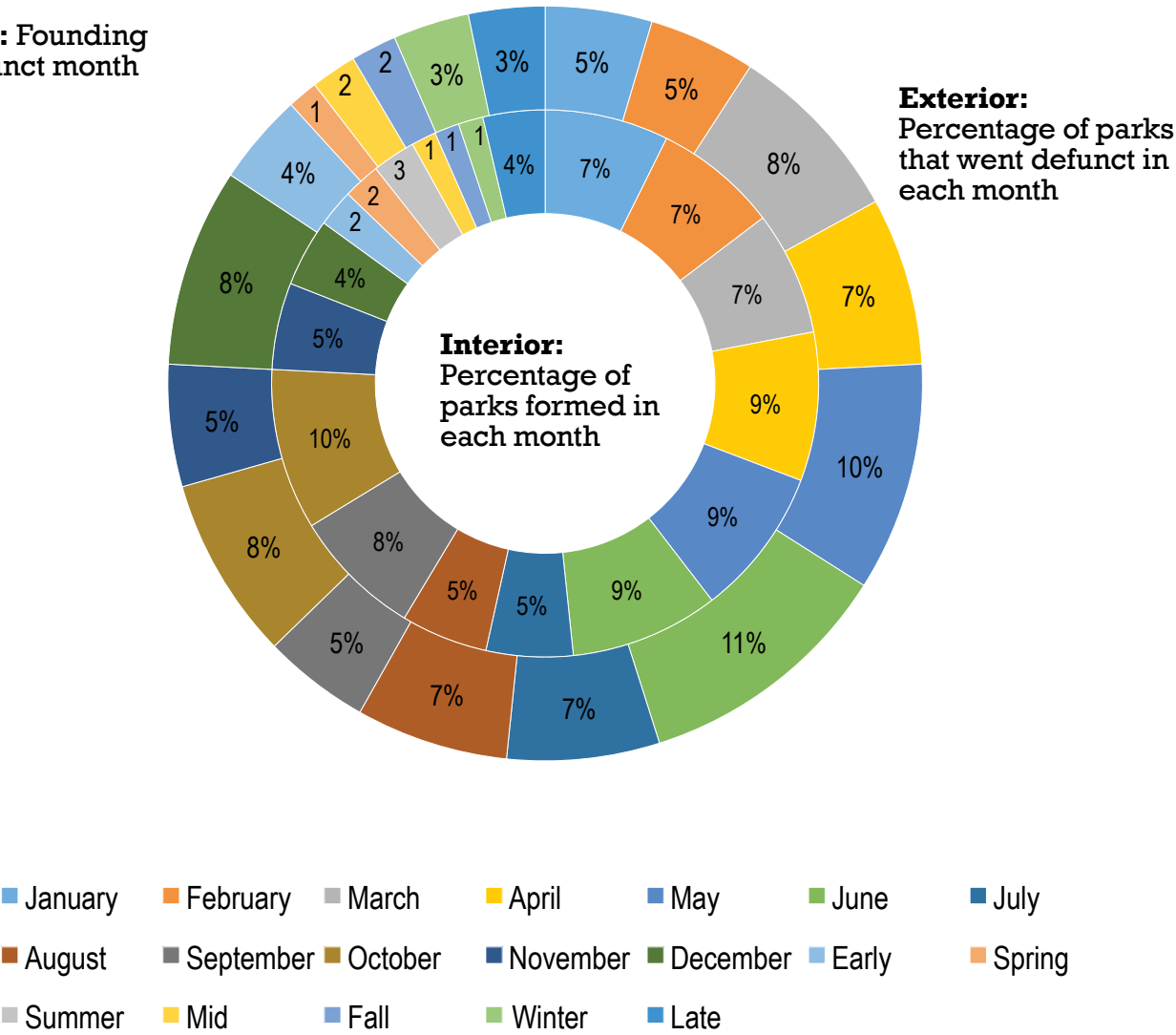
Graph 2: Death rate over time



The blue line in **Graph 2** indicates what percentage of groups have survived for the specified number of years, while the orange line is those percentages summed, indicating how likely a group is to go defunct by the time it reaches a particular age. You can see that parks often do not survive the first few years, with more than 50% making it less than 3 years. However, there is no magical point after which a group will be established and no longer at risk. For the purposes of this chart, currently active groups were assigned a defunct date of this year.

It is worth noting that the way the data was organized and collected may highlight this effect, as each iteration of a park—including name changes, reforming after being inactive, etc.— was given its own entry, slightly inflating the shorter lived parks. The number of cities with more than one park, examined later, indicates that parks will go defunct and restart fairly frequently.

Graph 3: Founding and defunct month



This double pie graph in **Graph 3** shows one pie as a ring inside the other, making comparisons more obvious. The inner ring shows the percentage of parks that were formed in each month, and the outer ring shows the percentage of parks that went defunct in each month. June is the most common month for parks to go defunct, followed by May. October seems to be the most common month to found a park, though no months seem significantly higher than any others.

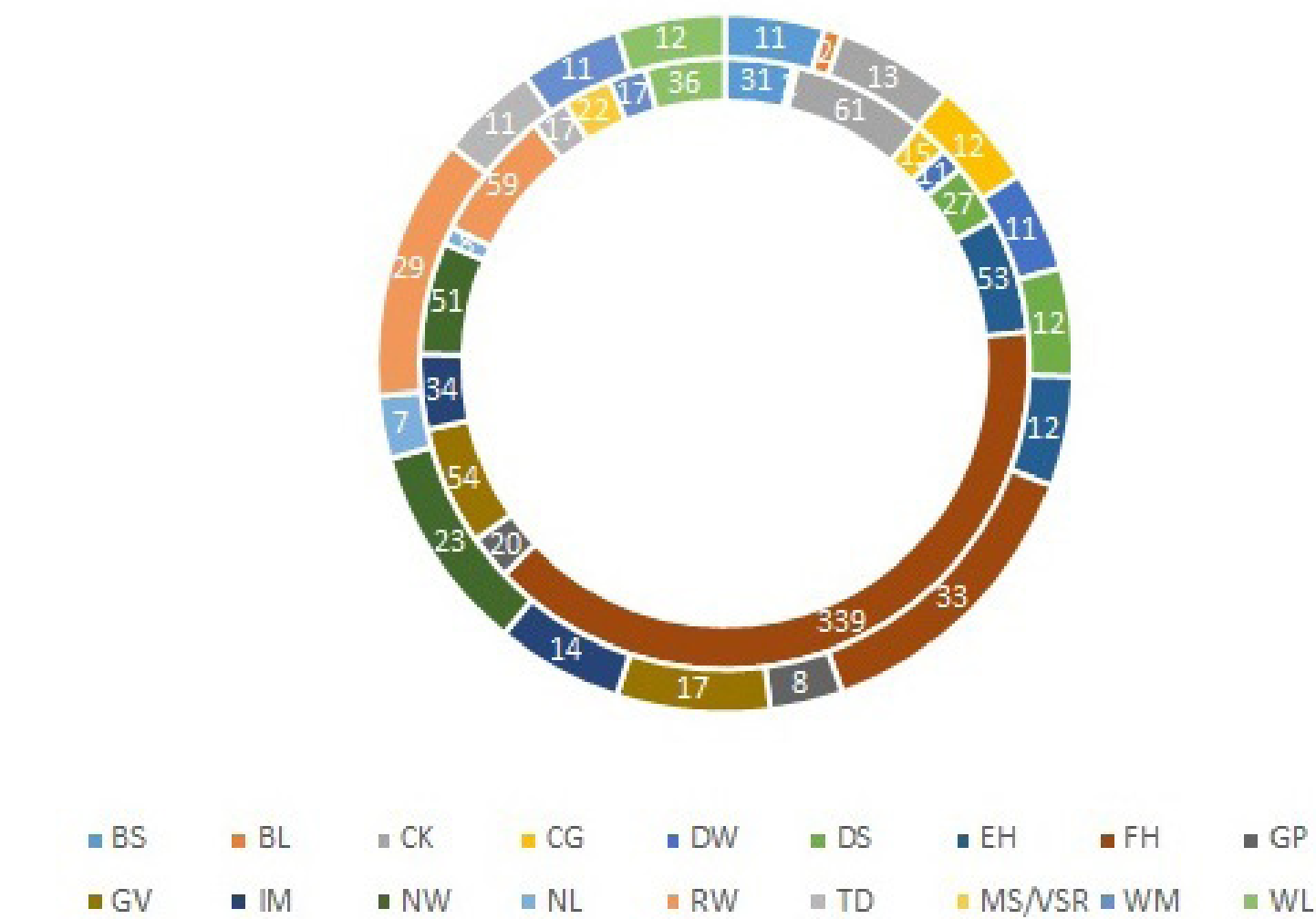
Table 7: Park distribution by Kingdom

	All parks	Active parks	Inactive parks	Kingdom life	Parks per year	% still active	% of active parks	% of all parks
BS	31	11	20	9	3.444	35.484	4.583	3.150
BL	2	2	0	31	.065	100	0.833	0.203
CK	61	13	48	24	2.542	21.311	5.417	6.199
CG	15	12	3	7	2.142	80	5	1.524
DW	11	11	0	6	1.833	100	4.583	1.118
DS	27	12	15	20	1.35	44.444	5	2.744
EH	53	12	41	26	2.038	22.642	5	5.386
FH	339	33	306	31	10.935	9.735	13.75	34.451
GP	20	8	12	22	.909	40	3.333	2.033
GV	54	17	37	19	2.842	31.481	7.083	5.488
IM	34	14	20	22	1.545	41.176	5.833	3.455
NW	51	23	28	15	3.4	45.098	9.583	5.183
NL	8	7	1	2	4	87.5	2.917	0.813
RW	59	29	30	12	4.917	49.153	12.083	5.996
TD	17	11	6	4	4.25	64.706	4.583	1.728
MS/VSR	22		22					2.236
WM	17	11	6	1	17	64.706	4.583	1.728
WL	36	12	24	18	2	33.333	5	3.659
Blank	128	1	127	31	4.129	0.781	0.417	13.008
All	984	240	744	31	31.741	24.390		

Table 7 shows the distribution of active and inactive parks within each Kingdom. The All column lists the number of all parks which have joined each Kingdom at some point, while the active and inactive columns list how many parks remain active and inactive within the Kingdom. The lifetime of the Kingdom column lists how many years each Kingdom has been around. The parks-per-year is simply the total number of parks divided by the number of years they have been a Kingdom. The percentage still active shows the percentage of the parks that have joined the Kingdom and remain active, while the percent of active parks shows how much of the total number of currently active parks that Kingdom comprises. Similarly, the percentage of all parks shows the percentage of all parks that have existed that have been a member of that Kingdom.

The number of parks added per year is much more a function of how long the group has been a Kingdom than of time. The average number of parks per year of existence is 3.43 (excluding freeholds/blanks), but this number seems heavily skewed and not useful. The number of active vs. inactive parks also seems to primarily be a function of the age of the Kingdom. The percentage of parks that are still active is more interesting, though still somewhat biased by age. Freeholds are by far the lowest, with less than 10% surviving to today. CK is the lowest Kingdom, likely the result of the several splintering and reforming processes that some of its parks have undergone. All DW parks remain alive, which is somewhat influenced by its age, although other factors are also likely at play. The Kingdom affiliations are also flawed to some degree, with principalities, both current and past, throwing things off, along with issues with the records lagging behind reality. Still,

Graph 4: Kingdom proportions



the data definitely confirms previous statements that parks that join a Kingdom have much higher survival rates than parks that do not. The inner ring of **Graph 4** illustrates the number of parks held by each Kingdom over the entire course of the game, while the outer ring illustrates the number that are still active. This image provides a graphical illustration of parts of **Table 7**. It shows that freeholds are the largest Kingdoms, but in active parks, RW is not far behind with 29 parks. NW is next, followed by GV, IM, CK, CG, DS, EH, WL, BS, DW, TD, WM, GP, NL, and finally BL. Including all parks changes the order slightly, with freeholds followed by unknowns leading the list. CK jumps up to supplant RW, followed by GV, EH, NW, WL, IM, BS, DS, MS/VSR. GP, TD, WM, CG, DW, NL, and BL.

These 16 Kingdoms are: Burning Lands (**BL**), Emerald Hills (**EH**), Celestial Kingdoms (**CK**), Golden Plains (**GP**), Iron Mountains (**IM**), DragonSpine (**DS**), Goldenvale (**GV**), Wetlands (**WL**), Neverwinter (**NW**), Rising Winds (**RW**), Blackspire (**BS**), Crystal Groves (**CG**), Desert Winds (**DW**), Tal Dagore (**TD**), Northern Lights (**NL**), and Westmarch (**WM**). Within these Kingdoms are the principalities: Winters Edge (**WE**), Northreach (**NR**), Stormhaven (**SH**), Polaris (**PO**), Northern Empire (**NE**), Rivermoor (**RM**), and Souls Crossing (**SC**).

Knightings

Knighthood is given in Amtgard by a sitting Kingdom monarch, usually by suggestion of the Knights circle. A player must earn certain awards along the particular path of knighthood, and be an upstanding and contributing member of the community. This process can take anywhere from 5 to 20 years and is not achieved by the majority of players. There are four orders of knighthood in Amtgard: Knight of the Flame, which is given for steadfast service; Knight of the Crown, which is given for leadership and serving in several high offices; Knight of the Serpent, which is given for teaching and excellence in the arts; and Knight of the Sword, which is bestowed for excellence in combat. Over the course of Amtgard's history, only 363 Flame, 219 Serpent, 211 Crown, and 127 Sword knighthoods have been awarded. Some knights have multiple belts, so fewer than 920 players have ever been knighted. With over 72,542 players listed on the ORK (Online Records Keeper), this is a very small percentage of players.

2014 has already far surpassed 2013 in the number of Knights created. The largest difference is in Flame and Serpent knightings, with CK creating 5 Flame knights

so far. In overall Amtgard history, being knighted into the order of the Flame is the most common, Serpent and Crown are approximately equal, and Sword is the least common. Sword appears more common in the past two years than in previous years, actually equaling the number of Flame belts given in 2013.

Graph 5 displays the average attendance for each year, as informed by the monthly unique attendance of each park in the ORK data. See Appendix for more details on this ORK data. It is of a very limited time frame, but it displays an approximately even, but slightly growing population over the years that the ORK has been in use.

The ORK, or Online Records Keeper, is used to track trends in attendance as it is a much more objective measure than the memories of players. The Prime Minister of the park is able to enter attendance sheets into it each week to track how many credits each player has, as well as to track the numbers at the park. The ORK provides fairly accurate data of attendance over time, much more accurately than subjective memories.

These charts clearly show that Amtgard as a whole is

growing. Occasionally players will report that the game is shrinking, due to one cause or another, but this does not seem accurate from the available evidence. If the game is shrinking, it is likely a local phenomenon. To examine how local it is, the same data was separated into the Kingdoms and Principalities, and graphed similarly.

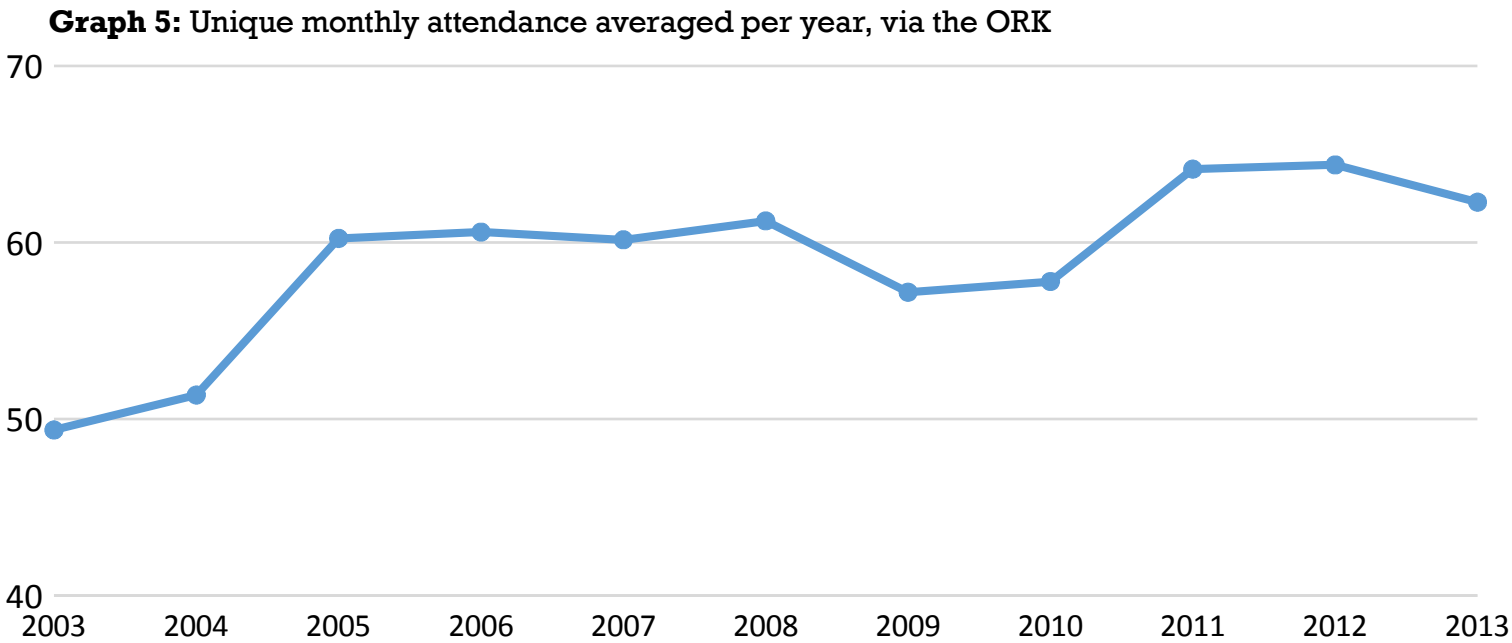
We examined the averaged unique monthly sign-ins for each Kingdom (please see Appendix for details on this data). The data show some local areas with population downturns, though it also shows several areas with positive trends. This data emphasizes the fact that while one area may be facing difficulty at any given time, Amtgard as a whole is growing. This does not mean, however, that the park level rise and fall is not important to those it involves. What happens on the weekly levels is what most people care about.



The Knighting of Dame Faunna by Queen Clio. Photo by the authors.

Table 8: Knighting distribution

	Flame	Serpent	Crown	Sword	'14	Flame	Serpent	Crown	Sword	'13
BL	1				1					
CK	5	1		1	7					
GP	2	1			3					
IM	2	1			3					
DS	2				2					
WL				1	1	2	2			4
NW			1		1					
DW			1		1					
TD	1		1		2	1	1	1		3
NL	1	1		1	3					
EH							1	1	1	3
GV							1		1	2
RW									1	1
BS							1			1
CG										
WM										
All	14	4	3	3	24	3	6	2	3	14



Individual Parks

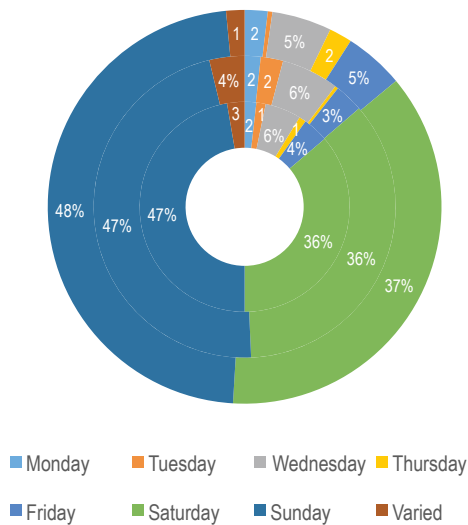
The individual park’s weekly meeting is where most Amtgarding occurs. While several parks will come together for weekend events, it is entirely possible to play Amtgard without ever traveling outside one’s home park. This ability makes the trends of these parks most valuable in determining the overall health of the game. It also makes their successes the most valuable to pass onto other parks.

Chapters in Amtgard typically meet one or two days a week for battle games and hanging out. This graph shows the distribution of start times and shows that there is very little difference between all parks (center), active parks, and inactive parks. Most groups meet on Sunday, followed by Saturday, with Wednesday only very narrowly being the next most common. There does not seem to be any noticeable distinction to indicate that one day or the other is more successful.

Start times range from 10 a.m. to midnight for all groups regardless of meeting day. Evening times tend to be on the weekdays, though this is not always the case. As secondary meetings tend to be on the weekdays, these meetings are more likely to be later, but neither of these are exclusive. Some groups meet on both Saturday and Sunday.

Noon or one o’clock are the most common, comprising about half of all start times for both active and inactive groups. Two o’clock also comprises a fairly large section. All other times are very minor, with no more than 5% each. Again, there is no noticeable difference between the still active and the inactive groups. It was expected that inactive groups would show a later start time, as these groups became lazier about starting, but this does not appear to be the case. Both of these graphs show that no matter where you go, Amtgard is Amt-

Graph 7: Meeting Day



Intense combat on a bridge. Photo by the authors.

gard. It will happen at around the same times, likely in around the same ways as well, even using the same tools to communicate and recruit new players.

All but 16 active groups have Facebook pages. Facebook has certainly become the default means of communication for the average player and it seems to be everyone’s anecdotal experience that online participation has increased since the switch from Yahoo groups. In the survey, two parks simply stated that their Yahoo group was outdated, so many active groups likely had Yahoo groups in the past, but no longer use them, and thus did not list them. This data was only collected reliably for Active groups, as most inactive groups chose not to answer the question.

The ORK attendance and Reported attendance columns display the attendance for each park with these tools averaged together, followed by the average attendance of the parks without these tools, in order to highlight any differences between the average attendance with and without it.

Graph 8: Starting times.

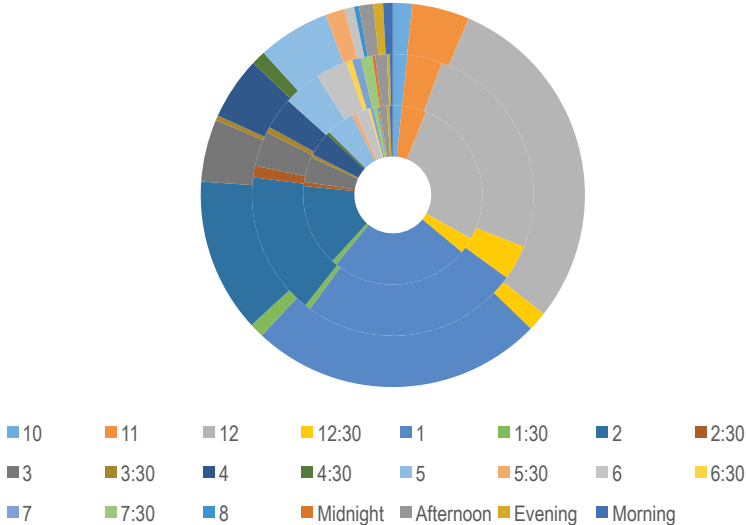


Table 8: Communication methods

	Number of Groups	ORK Attendance	Reported Attendance
Facebook	224	60/57	16/12
Yahoo	21	84/57	20/15
Meetup	18	63/59	22/15
Website	39	80/55	20/14

The parks with Yahoo groups also show the highest average attendance on the ORK. However, this number may be a function of those being older, more established groups. Meetup does not seem to have a strong impact on average attendance, being barely above the overall average, though it may be too new of a tool for this measurement method to be effective. Website usage and attendance correlated more highly than we expected; however, this is also likely the result of larger, more established parks being more likely to have a website.

A large number of recruitment methods were mentioned on the survey. These were coded into Demos, Presence at conventions, Posting fliers, Word of mouth, Community involvement, Location of the park, Internet advertising, Crossgaming with other games, Running interesting games, Radio advertisement, Contacting old players to invite them back, Running good role-play, Offering bonus credits, and Offering classes. Many

Table 9: Recruitment methods

	ORK Average	Rep Average	Act/in number	ORK Chi	Rep Chi	Act Chi
Demo	69/35	21/14	58/2	0.7428	0.3721	1.918
Con	85/36	24/14	29/1	0.3063	0.2991	0.04796
Fliers	57/36	16/15	74/3	0.6649	0.2058	3.1106
WOM	60/36	16/15	70/5	0.4654	0.0566	2.7275
Community	66/36	18/14	50/4	0.6335	0.4372	1.3837
Location	59/37	17/15	54/5	0.7051	0.2253	1.6006
Internet	62/38	18/15	26/0	0.1413	0.0286	0.3942
Crossgaming	72/38	20/15	11/0	0.03967	0.0005	0.0705
Games	44/39	16/15	3/1	0.0044	0	0.0041
Radio	28/39	14/15	1/0	0.0005	0.0007	0.0005
Contact old	82/39	17/15	2/0	0.0019	0.0029	0.0023
RP	54/39	21/15	3/0	0.0044	0.0006	0.0023
Credit bonus	8/39	12/15	1/0	0.0005	0.0007	0.0005
Classes	23/39	6/15	1/0	0.0005	0.0007	0.0005

parks did not answer this section at all, particularly the inactive ones; out of those that did, several simply stated “nothing.”

The first 2 columns show the average attendance of the parks with that measure, contrasted with the average attendance of the parks without that recruiting tool. The third column shows the number of active followed by inactive parks who listed that method. The final three columns show the Chi squared values for each of these methods, as calculated against the various measures of success. None of these Chi squared values are significant. If a Chi squared value was significant, it would indicate that the difference between the two averages was caused by the variable in question.

From this chart, Conventions seem to be the most strongly correlated with large parks, with parks that use Cons for recruitment having an average attendance of 85. This number is well above both the 36 parks without it and above the 60+ parks with other methods. Contacting old players to invite them back does have a high average ORK attendance as well at 82. However, only 2 parks reported using that method, so it may not be the most reliable. Crossgaming seems to be the next most correlated with higher attendance, with an average ORK attendance of 72, though only 11 groups practice it.

The credit bonus seems to be the least effective, but as it is only practiced by one park, the numbers are not particularly useful. Any method of recruitment seems

to be significantly better than none, and many parks practice more than one method.

There is a large bias in this portion of the research, as parks, particularly inactive parks, were less likely to list recruiting methods when filling out the survey. This issue may be compounded by the unreliability of both measures of attendance, and particularly the fact that parks that attend cons often enter the mundanes who participated in their ORK records, possibly inflating the attendance. Still, this research gives us a direction with which to begin when conducting further surveys, as well as hopefully some suggestions for the parks which are not recruiting, as almost any method is better than none.

Conclusion

After this year's data was collected and spread out, it was easy to see the differences and similarities in our far-flung game. The undeniable fact that sticks out is the growth in populace and parks that we are experiencing all over the United States and also in Canada. We continue to grow, change, and become better than we were before. We hope that we are even further encouraged by the numbers next year.

This data shows how Amtgard is still Amtgard no matter where it is, with far-flung groups sharing the same culture and ideas. Meeting times and days are similar through all groups, as are recruitment and communication methods. The methods of recruitment used in Amtgard are likely to be effective in other games as well. This means that conventions are a good way to go if you are looking to have high attendance in your group.

Amtgard is one of several similar, high combat games. Today these games have all progressed an enormous amount, beyond what any who founded them would have expected. Amtgard has grown from a few kids playing in a park to an international organization. Its journey has been incredible so far and we hope to use these results to encourage even more growth in the future.

Appendix I: Data explanation

This section provides a short explanation of each column of data used to create this report.

The data collected begins with the group name, Park in which the group meets, City, and State. Next is the Kingdom. All of this information was collected primarily through the survey. However, it was augmented with information from the Amtwiki (amtwiki.net) for parks that did not answer. The Kingdom information on the wiki often lagged behind reality; however, no other sources were available. The founding year, founding month, defunct year and defunct month were also primarily informed by the survey; however, all missing data points were checked for on the Amtwiki to create as complete a history as possible.

The existed for column was a simple subtraction of defunct year from founding year, with 2014 inserted for the defunct year of all currently active parks.

The Facebook, Yahoo, Meetup, and website columns were solely informed by the survey, and thus were only applicable to active parks, as many inactive parks simply did not enter that information.

The player high, low, and average were all informed by the survey, and thus biased towards active groups. Any player averages that were not on the survey were calculated from the high and low, and rounded down.

The ORK (Online Record Keeper) average was the result of a custom report on the ORK, where the unique monthly players for each group from 2004 to present was calculated, then averaged together in order to form a single attendance number for each park. There are many flaws with this number; however it holds the benefit of allowing comparison between a large number of parks.

The splintered/previous name and merged/new name columns were mostly added for tracking purposes, though they also provided valuable data. They were mostly gleaned from the wiki, though some were mentioned in the survey. They are likely not entirely complete, as they were not specifically requested in the survey.

The day of week, second meeting day, start time, and second start time are all populated using the survey, as well as the wiki for those groups that did not complete the survey. A few of the day columns also contain a third meeting day, which was simply included with an "and," and counted by hand.

Activity was informed almost exclusively by the survey, with the groups that did not answer being assumed to be inactive.

The v8 Rules playtest was entirely survey data, with all inactive groups being labeled inactive and assumed to not have play-tested.

Mentioning A&S nights, college, and high school were not fields on the survey, but were simply examined through free response questions, including recruiting methods and location. Parks that did not fill out the survey were filled through the wiki.

Recruiting methods were coded from a free response into 14 categories. This only applied to the groups which completed a survey.

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Sarah Budai began playing Amtgard her freshman year in high school as Tyedye and has continued playing through a Bachelor's degree with a dual major in Anthropology and Sociology, a Masters in Forensic Osteology, and now a Masters in Museum Studies. She credits Amtgard with keeping her relatively sane through these moves by providing a community, as well as people to hit with sticks. She also has experienced playing Belegarth, Dagorhir, and the Society for Creative Anachronism. She updates Amtgard.com, the Amtgard Facebook page, and is head admin for the Online Records Keeper.

Kristin Hammock began playing Amtgard in 1996 under the name Linden Tul, and has continued to play actively on an inter-Kingdom level for more than seventeen years. She acted as the de facto historian for the club, coordinating the annual audit for five years and organizing the structure of the Amtwiki for two of its iterations. She also was Administrator for the Online Record Keeper for eight years. These days, Kristin is an amateur historian, painter, stay-at-home mom, and reenactor with the Society for Creative Anachronism. Kristin credits Amtgard for her interest in game theory, wikis, mob mentalities, and for encouraging her creative drives.



The Therapy Game: Nordic Larp, Psychotherapy, and Player Safety

Kevin Burns

He who fights with monsters might take care lest he thereby become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you.
—Friedrich Nietzsche¹

Introduction

Larp scholarship to date has made tentative links to academic psychology. I believe that a better point of comparison is with psychotherapy, the discipline in which I am trained and work. In this paper, I will explore the connections between larp and psychotherapy, with particular attention to the Nordic larp tradition.

The early psychologists could be seen as falling into two groups. The first, including Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung, were not academics, but psychotherapists working to make their patients better. This group was primarily interested in the inner experience. The second group were academic psychologists who ignored the subjective experience of the participant, like Ivan Pavlov or John B. Watson. Famously, Pavlov's subjects were dogs, and he wrote, "At first in our psychical experiments... we conscientiously endeavored to explain our results by imagining the subjective state of the animal. But nothing came of this except sterile controversy and individual views that could not be reconciled. And so we could do nothing but conduct the research on a purely objective basis."² Watson, the founder of behaviorist psychology, wrote in his manifesto of 1913, "Psychology must discard all reference to consciousness"³ and, in 1929, that consciousness has "never been seen, touched, smelled, tasted or moved. It is a plain assumption just as unprovable as the old concept of soul."⁴

Although many Nordic larps look from the outside

as if they are psychological studies similar to Zimbardo's 1971 *Stanford Prison Experiment*, their focus is not on finding out how people behave in a situation, but rather on what it is like to experience it.⁵ As with psychotherapy, the participants in a prison camp or mental asylum larp are there voluntarily and take part for their own enjoyment, learning and, often, to find an emotional catharsis. Afterwards, larpers are primarily interested in talking about their experiences within the game, and only secondarily in what the organizer might have learned from it. Larp is meaningless without reference to consciousness and subjectivity.

One of the most powerful descriptions of therapy is that of James Hillman, who said, "I have come to see that the uncertainty about what the client and I are really there for—is what we're really there for."⁶ The role of the psychotherapist is similar to that of the larpwright: guiding an experience while also co-creating it with the client. The Jungian therapist Nathan Schwartz-Salant, describing the experience of the therapeutic dyad, compares it structurally to a paradoxical Klein Bottle, a three-dimensional equivalent to the Möbius strip that has neither inside nor outside.⁷ What he means by this is that although the psychotherapist can and must view the relationship from the outside forming a hypothesis about the client, he or she is also simultaneously *inside*. A psychotherapeutic relationship is, like larp, a liminal space of transformation, like an alchemical crucible. It is a place that is no place, one where we can learn new possibilities, a place of risk and uncertainty for both client and therapist. Larp players often say that their experiences within larp often have an intensity that cannot be explained and, furthermore, say how difficult it can be to communicate their experiences within the "magic circle" to those who were outside. It is just the same in therapy, where time, space, and reality appear to bend under pressure from the unconscious forces that come into play.

Storytelling is at the heart of psychotherapy. Clients make sense of their lives by telling stories to therapists.

Freud, for all his scientific pretensions, was a storyteller who founded his work on myths such as that of Oedipus and Narcissus. Jung's archetypal theory is another attempt to found psychology on stories about mythical figures. Viktor Frankl, to give a later example, created logotherapy after his experiences in Auschwitz convinced him that "man's search for meaning" was at the heart of psychological health.⁸ Many therapeutic modalities, such as psychodrama, Gestalt, drama therapy, and movement therapy, involve physical expressions of the story.

Psychotherapy is itself a kind of role-play in which the therapeutic relationship stands in for other relationships in the client's life, whether from the past, present, or future. Together, client and therapist create a relationship that can seem like an intimate love relationship or friendship, but which is neither of those things. The reality behind the illusion is held by the professional skill of the therapist. A therapeutic axiom holds that "the relationship is the therapy," which is to say that therapy is a place in which the client may heal her psyche through relating to the therapist. A client that has been abused, wounded, neglected, or damaged will discover a place where she can express rage, desire, seductiveness, fear, grief, and so on, without receiving punishment in return. This is similar to a larp in which a player is given an "alibi" to behave in any way she chooses, to try things out, to experiment.

The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, to whose work I will return later, strongly emphasises the playful aspect of therapy:

Psychotherapy takes place in the overlap of two areas of playing, that of the patient and that of the therapist. Psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together. The corollary of this is that where playing is not possible, then the work done by the therapist is directed towards bringing the patient from a state of not being able to play into a state of being able to play.⁹

In this paper my attempt to say something about either larp or psychotherapy will be made bearing in mind the Klein Bottle: I can look in at either activity from the outside to hypothesize meanings, but I need to stay in contact with how each of them feels from the inside as a participant, because neither activity is meaningful outside of the subjective experience of the participant.

I will begin by surveying therapeutic modalities that are close to larp. I will develop a theory about the psychology of larp, drawing on the work of D.W. Winnicott

on therapeutic play. Then, I will use Jungian psychology to explore the question of psychological depth in larp. Finally, I would like to make some observations about the development of psychological depth and safety, and of the debrief—fairly new concerns within larp, but well understood within what might be called the therapy game.

Larp-like Psychotherapy

I. Active Imagination: Exploring the Archetypes

Dream was fundamental to early twentieth century psychology. Sigmund Freud said that "the interpretation of dreams is the royal road to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind" and made dream analysis a key aspect of his clinical work.¹⁰ For Freud, dream was a private experience of hidden or suppressed parts of the individual psyche, but for C.G. Jung it had greater significance as a place of connection to what he called the *collective unconscious*. Within this realm, Jung said that there existed archetypal figures that might be given names such as the Warrior, the Orphan, the Trickster, the Great Mother, the Magician, and so on. Although these are not literally people, they have an independent existence and life, having their origins in our evolutionary history. We do not imagine the archetypes, but discover and commune with them.¹¹

In order to explore the unconscious more effectively, Jung developed a technique called *active imagination*, a sort of waking dream that involves the conscious mind as well as the unconscious. Here is Jung's account of the discovery of the technique:

It was during Advent of the year 1913—December 12, to be exact—that I resolved upon the decisive step. I was sitting at my desk once more, thinking over my fears. Then I let myself drop. Suddenly it was as though the ground literally gave way beneath my feet, and I plunged down into the dark depths. I could not fend off a feeling of panic. But then, abruptly, at not too great a depth, I landed on my feet in a soft, sticky mass. I felt great relief, although I was apparently in complete darkness. After a while my eyes grew accustomed to the gloom,

1. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Wikiquote.org, last accessed December 2, 2014. http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Beyond_Good_and_Evil

2. Ivan P. Pavlov, *Psychopathology and Psychiatry* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers 1994), 17.

3. "John Watson and Behaviorism," Psych.utah.edu, last accessed December 2, 2014. <http://www.psych.utah.edu/gordon/Courses/Psy4905Docs/PsychHistory/Cards/Watson.html>

4. Quoted in Duane Schultz and Sydney Ellen Schultz, *A History of Modern Psychology*, 10th Ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2011), 192

5. The Stanford experiment had profound effects on many of its participants, but this was an unintended and undesirable by-product rather than its purpose.

6. Quoted in Michael Kearney, "Spiritual Pain," Theway.org.uk, last accessed December 2, 2014. <http://www.theway.org.uk/back/30Kearney.pdf>

7. "Nathan Schwartz-Salant." DharmaCafé.com, Vimeo, last accessed December 2, 2014. <http://vimeo.com/21284700>

8. Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (London: Rider, 2004).

9. D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 51. Italics removed from original.

10. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Bartleby.com, last accessed December 2, 2012. <http://www.bartleby.com/285/>

11. C.G. Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Collected Works Vol 9 Part 1* (London: Routledge, 2000).

which was rather like a deep twilight. Before me was the entrance to a dark cave, in which stood a dwarf with a leathery skin, as if he were mummified. I squeezed past him through the narrow entrance and waded knee-deep through icy water to the other end of the cave where, on a projecting rock, I saw a glowing red crystal. I grasped the stone, lifted it, and discovered a hollow underneath. At first I could make out nothing, but then I saw that there was running water. In it a corpse floated by, a youth with blond hair and a wound in the head. He was followed by a gigantic scarab and then, by a red, newborn sun, rising up out of the depths of the water...¹²

Here we can see what Jung means by the encounter with archetypes. Instead of “thinking over... fears” Jung instead meets, as it were, the mummified dwarf, the dead youth, the gigantic scarab. These have a different character—deeper and more significant—than the mundane concerns with which we habitually clothe and cover them. What do they mean? Jung says that the “immediate manifestation [of the archetype], as we encounter it in dreams and visions, is much more individual, less understandable, and more naïve than in myths, for example. The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear.”¹³ Therefore, the archetype is both universal in nature and personal to the consciousness in which it appears.

Bowman and Beltrán have explored the connections between Jungian active imagination, archetypal psychology, and role-playing. For Beltrán, archetypal psychology offers a superior framework to understand larp than “current scientific models such as cognitive, psychodynamic, or behavioural psychology.”¹⁴ She says, “Larp is the West’s solution to addressing the need to connect with other roles and states of physical and emotional being—essentially, to ‘live’ myth”¹⁵ (2012:

95). Bowman meanwhile suggests that larp could be a way to engage with archetypes of the unconscious.¹⁶ Later in this paper, I would like to explore how archetypes can function to facilitate personal growth and cultural richness, and the implications of this for larp.

II. Psychosynthesis, Sub-personalities, and Gestalt

Another important strand in psychology with, as Bowman notes, much relevance to role-play, is the theory of sub-personalities, as developed originally by Freud’s one-time follower Roberto Assagioli (1888-1974).¹⁷ Sub-personalities are an aspect of Assagioli’s system of *psychosynthesis*, the modality in which I am trained. Today, sub-personalities are widely used by therapists in various traditions. A sub-personality could be seen as a character that lives within the psyche, whether or not the individual is consciously aware of its existence. As twentieth century philosopher Hermann Keyserling puts it, “Each fundamental personality tendency is actually an autonomous entity, and their combination, conditions and transmutations produce... an inner fauna, an animal kingdom the richness of which is comparable to the external one. It can truly be said that in each of us can be found, developed and active in various proportions, all instincts, all passions, all vices and virtues, all tendencies and aspirations, all faculties and endowments of mankind.”¹⁸

According to John Rowan, an average human being possesses between four and ten subpersonalities. Rowan explains, “Some of the names which have come up in people’s self-examination include the Hag, the Mystic, the Materialist, the Idealist, the Pillar of Strength, the Sneak, the Religious Fanatic, the Sensitive Listener, the Crusader, the Doubter, the Grabbie, the Frightened Child, the Poisoner, the Struggler, the Tester, the Shining Light, the Bitch Goddess, the Great High Gluck and the Dummy.”¹⁹ As these evocative names suggest, this theory comes to life in clinical psychotherapy, where certain clients will almost spontaneously start to explore

their sub-personalities and dialogue with them. To give a personal example, I worked with a young woman who discovered she had a Good Sally and a Bad Sally.²⁰ As we explored these two, Good Sally was renamed Slave Driver, and Bad Sally became Little Playful Sally. I decided to use a technique from the Gestalt tradition, known as “the empty chair.”²¹ The client takes the chair to play one of the personalities and talks to the other, represented by an empty chair. Then, she moves seats and takes on the other personality, giving her right of reply. In this way, the two characters start to relate to each other and it is even possible to conduct negotiations. In this case, the Slave Driver character needed to pay attention to how unhappy Little Playful Sally was and listen to her need for some fun and relaxation; in return, Little Playful Sally promised to stop sabotaging the Slave Driver’s work plans. This process had immediate therapeutic benefits for the client. Once the sub-personalities are brought into conscious awareness and begin to talk to each other, the individual can find a more harmonious, less contradictory way of living.

Sub-personalities are arguably a better starting point for someone wanting to use psychotherapy to develop a larp than Jungian archetypes, because they do not require an understanding of the complexities of the unconscious, shadow, archetypes, and so on. If someone wants to play the Bitch Goddess or the Doubter, then maybe that is enough to create a larp character. In active imagination, the drama takes place between a central observing self and other characters that have archetypal significance; sub-personality work, initially at least, involves a more democratic, chaotic structure, with various characters all competing to have their voices heard, negotiating with each other, or pursuing their own agendas. The central observing self can be an emergent or discovered feature, rather than something that is present from the beginning. Sometimes, a particular sub-personality will develop until it takes on this role, the “conductor” of the orchestra of sub-personalities.²²

There is no room here to do more than sketch the outlines of sub-personality work, but I would suggest that this is a fruitful area for those interested in exploring role-play either academically or in practice.

III. Moreno’s Psychodrama

The origins of larp, or live-action role playing, have been traced to ancient Egyptian and Greek rituals, ini-

tiation rites in indigenous cultures, Greek drama, and many other sources. However, as Eirik Fatland notes in his *History of Larp* [lecture](#),²³ there is no evidence of a link between such larp-like activities and what is practiced today. As Fatland explains, the lineage of larp in the modern world can be traced, instead, to Moreno’s invention of psychodrama in the 1920s. His techniques were picked up in the U.S. for Cold War military simulations, which, in turn, influenced the tabletop fantasy game *Dungeons & Dragons*, developed by E. Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in the 1970s. This led to the invention of larp in the 1980s and early 1990s. Although the development of the Nordic larp tradition out of mainstream larp has been inspired mainly by the performing arts—improvisation, theatre, dance, and performance art—Nordic larp could be seen as the return of larp to its psychodramatic roots.

Psychodrama, developed by Moreno originally in Austria and later in the U.S., is a method of exploring conflicts and problems within the individual by re-enacting them with the help of one or more others. Sometimes the enactment is a literal recreation of a traumatic childhood event. On other occasions, the drama is more abstract and will include characters that might represent qualities or feelings such as “ambition,” “fear,” and so on. Once the difficulty has been enacted, the facilitator will usually look at ways to adjust the drama so that the protagonist can re-experience things in a different way. This could simply be a matter of saying or doing things differently, or it could be that the conflict is resolved by the creation of a ritual. Blatner argues that psychodrama underpins many modern psychotherapeutic techniques, such as Gestalt therapy. In his view, Moreno’s difficult writing style and personality have stood in the way of this being more widely appreciated.²⁴

As the best-known of psychotherapeutic techniques in the literature of larp, I will not say much more about psychodrama here, but I will return to Moreno when speaking about debriefing in the final section.

IV. Bert Hellinger’s Family Constellations

Bert Hellinger (b. 1925) is a German psychotherapist who developed an unusual technique for group therapy with some affinities to Moreno called *family constellations*. “In a single session, a family constellation attempts to reveal a previously unrecognized systemic dynamic that spans multiple generations in a given family and

12. C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams and Reflections* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1963), 179.

13. “Symbols of Transformation.” Trans. R. F. C. Hull. *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung*. Vol. 5. Bollingen Series 20 (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1990).

14. Whitney “Strix” Beltrán, “Yearning for the Hero Within: Live Action Role-Playing as Engagement with Mythical Archetypes,” in *Wyrd Con Companion 2012*, edited by Aaron Vanek and Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012), 92. <https://dl.dropboxusercontent.com/u/1793415/WyrdCon%20Three%20CompanionBook.pdf>. It should be said that Jungian psychology is in fact classed as psychodynamic.

15. Ibid., 95.

16. Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-playing Games,” in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 31-51. <http://www.mcfarlandpub.com/contents-2.php?id=978-0-7864-6834-8>

17. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 142-3.

18. Jean Hardy, *A Psychology With Soul* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1986), 39.

19. John Rowan, *Discover Your Subpersonalities: Our Inner World and the People in It* (London: Routledge, 1993), 6.

20. Details and names have been changed to protect client confidentiality.

21. Blatner, 2. According to Blatner, “the empty chair” was a technique pioneered by Moreno and picked up by the Gestalt pioneer Fritz Perls.

22. -. -,

23. Eirik Fatland, “A History of Larp—Larpwriter Summer School 2014,” *Fantasiforbundet*, YouTube, last modified August 3, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rf_gej5Pxkg

24. Adam Blatner, “Psychodrama,” Blatner.com, last accessed December 3, 2014. <http://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/corsinichapter13.html>

to resolve the deleterious effects of that dynamic by encouraging the subject to accept the factual reality of the past.”²⁵ Typically a constellation workshop will involve between five and twenty participants, who each take a turn on center stage working with the therapist. After an initial brief conversation, usually establishing the issue with which the client wants to work, the therapist will invite the client to choose people to represent the different characters in their family. According to family constellation theory, everyone in the family has a place, and needs to be in their rightful place. If someone is missing, or in the wrong place, then that imbalance will be reflected in the individual. The term “constellation,” which in astronomy refers to a collection of stars that stand in relation to one another, reflects the way in which having the family represented visually and spatially allows us to see and feel where things are wrong. All of the key figures need to be represented by other workshop participants—the client, mother, father, siblings, step-parents, and so on—and the client will arrange them in a kind of diorama. When the client has completed this to her satisfaction, the therapist may then start to explore the constellation.

The most surprising thing for someone who has never experienced this way of working is that the “client” is usually not much involved in this next stage. The people who are playing father, mother, and so on will intuitively start to feel what is wrong or right about the constellation that they are in. The facilitator might ask, “Father—how are you?” “I feel uncomfortable, isolated, and my hands are tense.” “And mother?” “I feel happy when I look at my son and husband. But I don’t feel connected to my daughter.” The participants spontaneously intuit energies that are inherent in the role they have taken on. Gradually the therapist begins to discover the problems inherent in the constellation. For example, it might be that there was an older child who died in childbirth, who is never mentioned and is not represented. Alternately, the father’s second wife has not been given her place in the family and remains an outsider even twenty years after the mother’s death. Any missing elements are added in and the characters are rearranged so that harmony is found. Often, as with psychodrama, the facilitator will set up a ritual to resolve the conflicts and to give all of the elements their rightful place.

Although the practice of family constellations has been criticized as “quantum quackery” from an experiential point of view, it has affinities to the way that an improvised larp can rapidly develop emotional

resonance and depth.²⁶ Dynamics and relationships seem to spontaneously appear when people are playing roles, even with very little information. Taking part in a constellation is rather like an improvised dance in which people are placed on a stage, immediately begin to feel an energetic relationship to each other, and move to explore and express it. When we role-play a character, similarly, we immediately start to feel not only how our own character is, but also what its relationship is to the other characters.

V. Winnicott’s Theory of Play

It has been observed by several writers that larp is closely connected to the play of children, which involves pretending, role-playing etc.²⁷ I want to explore this further by introducing a theory of play from psychoanalysis which appears to be novel to larp scholarship, that of D.W. Winnicott (1896-1971). Winnicott was a child psychoanalyst who spent over 150,000 hours with very young children and their parents. He became skilled at interpreting play, which he came to believe was the principal means by which children learned about the world, about themselves, and about their relationship to reality.

Earlier in the paper, I quoted Winnicott’s statement from *Playing and Reality* to the effect that “psychotherapy has to do with two people playing together.” Therapy, in this view, means having the plasticity of psyche that allows us to play, to test out new realities, to explore, while mental illness means being in some sense stuck and unable to change the internal record, no matter how unpleasant it is to listen to. Neuroscience has shown, for example, that depression is a state of high brain activity and self-monitoring; the brain is stuck in an active, but repetitive pattern. Similarly, children that have been traumatized do not play. For Winnicott, “the opposite of play is not work, but coercion.”²⁸ Whether this coercion comes from outside or from pre-established fixed patterns in the individual’s psyche does not really matter. If we cannot play, then our mental health depends on moving from a state of fixity and coercion to one of play.

Here, I need to say something about Winnicott’s famous idea of the transitional object. It begins with his theory that, at first, babies perceive the world as fused with themselves. Gradually, in the months after birth, they come to understand that there is something “out there” which is not them. In order to cope with this potentially terrifying fact, they create a reality

26. Ibid.

27. For example, Bowman, in *Functions*, relates the creation of imaginary friends to role-play, 127-134.

28. Adam Phillips, *Winnicott* (Harvard University Press, 1988), 55.

which is transitional between subjectivity (the self) and objectivity (the other). The teddy bear or comfort blanket, which becomes the transitional object, is a form of otherness that remains within the control of the self, and which the baby believes it has either created or discovered—an important ambiguity. This transitional object is cathected, or infused with this powerful meaning, until finally the baby pushes it out into the realm of otherness. In the fantasy of the baby, the object is now destroyed; yet, it has miraculously survived. Thus, begins the relationship between self and other; they ought to be utterly separate realms and, yet, for the healthy human being, they are not.

Play is the relationship that happens in the potential space between self and other. The joy of life could be said to be the miraculous moment-to-moment discovery that I can create a transitional space in my consciousness between myself and the world and play within it. The misery of life is when I am alienated and utterly estranged from the other, from the world, and from other people. This misery could be said to be most total when I am out of relationship with myself or with the parts that make up me.

In larp, one might imagine that the play is taking place between the characters or between the players, but, in fact, much of the play happens in the inner space between player and character, between conscious and unconscious parts of the self.²⁹ I want to suggest that my character is potentially a transitional object, something that I have either created, or discovered (an important ambiguity) in the unconscious. My character is both self and not-self simultaneously, and it is the gap between player and character that creates transitional space. In the larp world, *bleed* takes place when emotions leak from player to character (“bleed-in”) or from character to player (“bleed-out”).³⁰ This emotional energy is like electricity jumping between two oppositely charged poles. If the gap is too large—I feel no connection to my character at all—then, nothing happens. Again, if there is no gap—my character is simply me—then, there is no potential difference in charge and, therefore, no current. Player and character need to be in relationship, which is different from either identity or opposition.

The idea that larp is primarily taking place in transitional space between player and character is supported by the Turku Manifesto, which claims that larp

29. The post-Jungian Michael Fordham has called active imagination “a transitional phenomenon.” “Active Imagination,” Wikipedia.org, last accessed December 3, 2014. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/active_imagination

30. Markus Montola, “The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing,” Proceedings of Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players-First Nordic DiGRA August 16-17, 2010. Stockholm, Sweden, 2010. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/10343.56524.pdf>

can be a solitary activity.³¹ In a later essay, the same author, Mike Pohjola, comments, “It is... conceivable to role-play in a diegetic frame that is strictly personal, that takes place inside the role-player’s head.”³² In Fredrik Hossmann’s larp *Before and After Silence*, all of the characters believe themselves to be involved in a different narrative. One is the captain of a ship at sea, another is a silent movie star re-playing scenes from her films, and a third is a soul in search of its parents in the before-life. Because no-one speaks in the larp and mime is discouraged, each character is allowed to maintain its own subjective diegesis, which has no connection to the diegesis of anyone else.³³ This kind of experience can occur even in more conventional larps. In my research for this paper, I interviewed one regular Nordic larper, Helene Willer Piironen. Piironen said of the larp *Mad About The Boy*, which was set in a world without men:

I think the strongest memory from that game for me was, they had a black box, where you could go and play scenes like memories or dreams or things from the past or whatever you want to do. And I went up there and they had two guys in that room... they were both guys I knew and one of them is a really good dancer, and I went up there and I said, “I want to have this dream scene with this lady where she is dancing with a man, it’s not a specific man, I just want someone to represent that man” and... I closed my eyes and danced the entire dance with eyes closed, and the other guy he blew soap bubbles, but I didn’t see them! It was supposed to be really beautiful (laughs). And it was actually beautiful, because I had an opportunity to put into practice, “What is a guy to me?” besides people just occupying my life. And I didn’t realise that before that game. And after that, when the twist came into play and the guy showed up, it turned into an action movie... and that wasn’t interesting to me at all. I felt that ruined the game. That wasn’t the interesting part... I play

31. Mike Pohjola, “The Manifesto of the Turku School,” in *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp*, edited by Eleanor Saitta, Marie Holm-Andersen and Jon Back (Denmark: Knutpunkt, 2014), 295-303.

32. Mike Pohjola, “Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities,” in *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp*, edited by Eleanor Saitta, Marie Holm-Andersen and Jon Back (Denmark: Knutpunkt, 2014), 113-126.

33. Fredrik Hossmann, *Before and After Silence*, LaivVerkstaden, Larps from the Factory, last accessed December 2, 2014. <http://larpfactorybookproject.blogspot.co.uk/p/welcome.html>

25. “Family Constellations,” Wikipedia.org, last accessed December 3, 2014. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Family_Constellations

games to explore how I feel about things.³⁴

The point, then, is not whether we larp alone or with others, but that regardless of the numbers of participants, the essential play in a Nordic frame is that which takes place between player and character, between conscious and unconscious, between the supposed “I” and the possible “I”s in the dark caverns of the unconscious, waiting for us to discover them.

In a run of the larp *Pan*, the players were given ink-blot tests, in which they had to say what they saw and, then, explain why they saw those things. According to Hook, who ran the larp, they commented later that *what* they saw came from their characters, but what they said about *why* they saw it came from them as players.³⁵ If it is correct that “player” at least broadly corresponds to the conscious self, and “character” to the unconscious, then it suggests that characters may be “discovered” rather than merely “invented,” although once again, as for small children, perhaps the ambiguity is important. Moving away from the Freudian tradition of Winnicott, this could be seen in the frame of sub-personalities. Alternately, we could speculate that larp can help us to access archetypes of the collective unconscious—to find our inner Dragon, Hag, Queen, or Trickster.

Games, Playing, and Psychological Depth

As noted above, both Beltrán and Bowman note the potential of larp as a means of exploring Jungian archetypal energies, with benefits for both personal development and cultural enrichment. I would like to take this further by exploring what they say through a psychotherapeutic frame. As both note, Jung has fallen out of favor in academic psychology departments and it could be said that he failed in his attempt to create an objective basis for psychology. Nevertheless, he continues to influence some of the most powerful and exciting work within psychotherapy, where concepts such as archetypes are found to be practically useful.

Part of Bowman’s aim is to assert that role-playing is not “escapist,” but is concerned with psychological depth. I agree that escapism is a unhelpful term, but I would argue that merely indicating that archetypes seem to be at play in fantasy role-playing is not enough to justify it against such a charge or against similar charges of psychological regression. To justify larp as an adult pursuit, we need to look both at what archetypes are invoked and what effect they have. Bowman

suggests that *Dungeons & Dragons* could be seen as a Jungian exploration:

...comparative religion holds that certain imagery repeats cross-culturally; a common symbol is the serpent or dragon, which features heavily in many Creation and Destruction myths around the world. When studying the rich tapestry of mythological symbols, the meaning embedded within a title such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, for instance, ceases to be merely arbitrary. Hook suggests that each player in a role-playing game can be seen as enacting his or her own hero’s journey during play. Slaying the dragon becomes a symbol for individuation in the Jungian model, as the individual is able to confront the unconscious—the primordial existence before individuality—and integrate its power into the sense of Self. In addition, descent into the Underworld to reclaim some important part of one’s self is another common theme in mythology, a process for which the Dungeon becomes a metaphor. Characters emerge from the Dungeon having gained something; these gains are tangibly articulated as “experience points” that improve their character’s abilities and items to help them on future journeys, but psychologically, player-characters also gain the experience of potential individuation.³⁶

What has so far not been included within the larp discussion of archetypes is the understanding—important within psychotherapy—that archetypes relate to different developmental stages. There are archetypes that define and strengthen the heroic ego—therefore relating to the ego-formation tasks of adolescence—and archetypes that undermine the ego in order to bring about individuation—the task of midlife. Children, adolescents and young adults, who are attempting to form an ego, need “heroic” archetypes, Apollonian solar heroes like the “skywalker” of *Star Wars* who are all about daylight, reason, good versus evil, ascent, self-reliance, “levelling up,” gaining experience, and worldly prominence. In adolescence, the self needs to become an individual, separating from the world of the mother and father and forming an independent ego. The dragon, at this stage of life, typically represents the negative Mother archetype, attempting to ensnare the young hero within a home that has now become hellish and suffocating, or the negative Father, whose envy of the youth’s energy makes him an aggressive bully. Wherever there is dragon-slaying, we are probably dealing with an archetype of the ego, in which the

ego defines itself against what it is not, light against darkness. Individuation, on the other hand, is not about defining oneself by opposition, but about including and integrating opposites relationally within the self. In the more developmentally advanced sequel, Skywalker has to realise that Darth Vader is his father, lose his sword hand, and fall into an abyss. The reconciliation that eventually takes place involves Luke’s realization that the “Dragon” of the piece is an alternative version of himself, the man he would have been had he taken a different path. The hero of light has to come to know the potential for darkness within him, a theme to which I will return later.

The ego, represented in this example by the younger Skywalker, has no way to understand the unconscious. This point was made by Jung himself, whose description will be striking to role-players. He says the conscious ego “sees everything separately and in isolation, and therefore sees the unconscious in this way too, regarding it outright as my unconscious.” Jung continues, “Hence it is generally believed that anyone who descends into the unconscious gets into a suffocating atmosphere of egocentric subjectivity, and in this blind alley is exposed to the attack of all the ferocious beasts which the caverns of the psychic underworld are supposed to harbor.³⁷” In other words, the paradigm of “descent into a dungeon to battle dragons” is likely to be an expression of the fears of the ego about what it does not understand. Against this fear, the ego insists that it can descend into the unconscious, defeat what it finds there, and come back with treasures of wealth and experience.

“Playing is always liable to become frightening,” says Winnicott, who comments that “games and their organization must be looked at as part of an attempt to forestall the frightening aspect of playing.³⁸” I take this to mean that there is a distinction between playing in the therapeutic sense, which is frightening and unpredictable because it upsets the usual order of things in order to bring about healing, and game-playing, which is comforting precisely because it is unlikely to reach psychological depth. What are the implications of this distinction for larps? Those which include competitive elements, score-keeping, goals, rewards, power-ups, XPs, levelling-up and so forth, will tend to support the conscious ego, which must always keep score. The same could be said of games with a quest-like objective. Such games are developmentally related to the tasks of adolescence and young adulthood, and as such can help in the establishment of a stable and functional ego. This is not problematic in itself, but I would argue that so long as larps keep reminding the player of ego concerns, the player will remain unconscious of the archetypal

significance of what is taking place. To this extent, playing games with quest-like or competitive elements *could* eventually become a way to avoid psychological depth.

Psychotherapy can also become ensnared in fantasy. The Jungian writer Robert A. Johnson might almost be describing a *Dungeons & Dragons* player in his 1986 account of “a professional with an office and a busy daily schedule” who spends some time most evenings in active imagination. In this imagining, the professional journeys to a quasi-medieval realm where he meets an emissary of a noble, but misunderstood Queen, undertakes quests, heals the sick, and so on. As a larp-like preparatory ritual before entering the realm of imagination, he removes his everyday plaid shirt and puts on a blue monk’s robe: “When he is ready to leave the world of imagination and return to the daily human world, he gets up from his desk and puts on a plaid flannel shirt that his wife gave him. By putting on that shirt, he reaffirms his other commitment, to his wife, to his family, to the earthbound world of daily, physical human life.”³⁹ For me, there is something dubious about Johnson’s account. It almost seems as though his company man client uses active imagination to avoid having to go on the real adventure of his life—in other words, as escapism.⁴⁰ Reading Johnson, I wish his client would stop fantasizing about a faerie queen and find out for whom or what he is really longing. That might upset the applecart of his settled existence, of course—and the fear of that may be why he is so dedicated to escaping it.

The distinction that I am hypothesizing here between game and play holds true at any stage of life. Children who create imaginary friends are gaining a different psychological benefit than children that are playing table tennis.⁴¹ Bowman cites the moving example of an adolescent playing *Vampire: the Masquerade* who created a seductive character called Saffir:

This is the first place in my psyche that I explored, a strange choice for a chubby, low-self-esteem racked, barely-been-kissed, 17-year-old, gothic virgin, with a history of sexual abuse to go. I was slowly coming into my own, but truly had no feeling of myself. I had always been a very sensual, if not sexual, creature. Some might say that I was obsessed with being desired, and I would often sit in front of my mirror when no one was home and

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39. Johnson, *Using*, 154.

40. Escapism is a word commonly used to disparage role-playing games, wrongly in my view. Nevertheless, I think it does have a more specific meaning, as in this example, when role-playing appears to have become a substitute for action.

41. Bowman, *Functions*, 133. Bowman cites Carlson on the observed benefits to children of creating imaginary friends.

34. Helene Willer Piironen, Skype discussion with the author, 2014.

35. Nathan Hook, Skype discussion with the author, 2014.

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36. Bowman, “Jungian,” 22-23.

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37. C.G. Jung, “Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious,” 20.

38. Winnicott, 67.

act out various seductions in my head. Doing this in real life had always seemed folly... With Saffir, though, I could be as sexually open as I pleased with... relatively few consequences and judgments made by my peer group. They would see me as an actress.⁴²

Although this takes place within the context of a highly organized game, this is play in the sense Winnicott means: exploring the space between conscious player and unconscious character (“this is the first place in my psyche that I explored”). The benefits attested to by Kirstyn here are that the character Saffir allows her to explore aspects of herself that remain unconscious and to bring them into the light of consciousness, enlarging the scope of her adult ego by including within it sexual expression. The foolishness and shame experienced by Kirstyn around her sexuality (“doing this in real life has always seemed folly”) is exactly why it remains unconscious, but the character Saffir is helping her to bring it into consciousness. One of the troubling aspects of role-playing for outsiders is that it might somehow corrupt its players, or make them behave unpredictably. I would note that this paranoia is very similar to the fears that people have about therapy; in each case, it is a confusion between “acting-out” (acting from aspects of the self that are unconscious) and “acting-in” (exploring unconscious aspects in play or therapy). Playing Saffir, who represents an archetype of Seduction, prepares the way for Kirstyn not to become a wicked temptress, but to bring her own healthy sexuality into light. Role-play, like therapy, may be seen as threatening by families, friends, and colleagues because it can and will precipitate change. “Change is the business of psychotherapy,” as Yalom says, “and therapeutic change must be expressed in action—not in knowing, intending, or dreaming.”⁴³

With regard to the question about whether role-playing is psychologically helpful or regressive, the same test could be applied. If larping is supposed to have psychological benefits, then the evidence would be that individuals and groups within the larp world manifest those benefits. Larp cultures that perpetuate sexist attitudes to women, for example, are probably failing to develop emotional maturity, or at any rate are not doing better than the wider culture of which they are a part. As a personal observation, the Nordic larp world, with its advanced notions of gender equality, appears to be more developed than surrounding cul-

tural norms. Again, account needs to be taken of the prevailing culture within the Nordic countries, which may be more advanced than those of other Western nations. However, equally this cannot be disconnected from the experience of playing Nordic larps such as the ground-breaking *Mellan himmel och hav*, in which gender identity was explored by setting the larp on a planet in which gender was replaced by something completely different.⁴⁴

Archetypes of the Shadow

The challenge of ego-formation is a real one that every human being has to undergo in the uncertain, liminal space of adolescence. As I hope I have made clear, role-playing has a valid and useful function here. Dismissing a high-fantasy larp as “adolescent” says more about our society’s lack of respect for adolescence than it does about the validity of the larp. However, I want also to make a distinction between larps of adolescence and larps of later life. The meeting with shadow and the integration of previously rejected archetypes that this involves is the work of another, later liminal space: that of mid-life. Mid-life is, like adolescence, a life stage that is given little respect in our society. We can all recognize that figure of fun—the middle-aged man who buys himself a Harley-Davidson and leaves his wife for a secretary—and I want to do something to redress this. Mid-life is where we begin to glimpse old age and death, and the glorious victories of the ego—whether actual or imaginal—start to seem hollow and meaningless. Of course, nothing is linear in human life, and the encounter with shadow can take place at any point, but in broad terms, it belongs to mid-life. Individuation, which is a task of later life and not of adolescence, depends on our ability to include and integrate “shadow” aspects—those parts of us that the conscious heroic ego does not wish to see or accept—rather than in continuing to fight against and repress them. For Jung, the unconscious includes within it the archetype of the Self, which has the quality of wholeness and integration of contradictory opposites. We descend into the archetypal realm by means of active imagination and other methods in order to become more whole and less fragmented. We defeat evil in ourselves not by slaying it once and for all, but by acknowledging our own capacity for evil and bringing that into the light.

The practical application of this is easier to explain by means of an example. In 2008, when I was 39 and

very much on the edge of mid-life liminality, I took part in a group exercise, derived from Jungian psychology and from Hillman’s archetypal psychology, which used active imagination to explore the myth of St. George and the Dragon. The story was told to the group and, then, we had to imagine ourselves to be each of the three figures in the myth—Hero, Dragon and Maiden—and to draw a picture of each of these aspects. I had a very clear vision of myself as Hero, but I struggled to see or draw myself as either Dragon or Maiden. Surely, I thought, the point of the story was to identify with the hero? I was amazed at the powerful Dragons that others had drawn, which represented their anger, ferocity, lust, passion, and so on. I was also deeply impressed by the Maiden images, which embodied “yin” qualities of vulnerability, sensitivity, and passivity. It is not an exaggeration to say that this exercise changed my life, because it showed me how deeply stuck I was in an unconscious identification with heroism, do-gooding, and rescuing others—not useful qualities for a therapist or, indeed, for a human being. It had not occurred to me—by which I mean, to my conscious ego—that there was an alternative to being the “hero.” Beltrán suggests that consistently playing an evil character for year after year may have an adverse effect,⁴⁵ but the same could be true of a good one. The Self is the archetype of wholeness and makes no distinction between “good” and “evil” as conventionally defined. Getting stuck in an over-identification with any persona, good or evil, brings about a fragmentation of the self. This is likely to be a risk for players of larps that continue over many years: that what was at first a refreshing exploration of hidden possibilities solidifies into an alterego, hindering psychological change.

It must be emphasized that if we are to draw on the archetypes in larp, we need to appreciate that they are not something we can manipulate at our will, or play with, or pick and choose from. They used to be called gods and, if we want their blessing, we need to find ways to honor them. The Jungian therapist Murray Stein’s book *In Midlife* is a series of essays on Hermes: the god of messages, thieves and doorways, and the archetype of midlife liminality. The task of Hermes is to undermine the heroic ego: one of his first acts in Greek mythology is to steal cattle from his brother Apollo, the Sun-God. We probably cannot get in touch with Hermes by deciding to play a Trickster character; more likely that Hermes trips us up by foiling our well-laid plans, messing up our larp, or making us fall in love with the wrong player.

Stein gives the example of a client, a middle-aged woman who is well-off and has a conventionally perfect life, with a rich husband and children, but who is inexplicably stealing cheap beauty products from shops.

As Stein explains, “psychopathological symptoms are manifestations of ‘neglected archetypes.’” Stein gives the example of traditional Korean folk beliefs, in which people exhibiting signs of madness would become devotees at the temple of whatever god was calling for attention through their symptoms. The neglected archetype here is Hermes in his role as God of Thieves. This woman has been repressing her own desires for many years, putting them aside for others during the best years of her life and, in the meanwhile, her own youth and beauty have been lost, stolen from her. She is trying to steal them back. The message from the thief Hermes in these shameful, potentially life-destroying, petty crimes is that the ego-ideals that have driven her for twenty or thirty years will no longer serve. Her soul is calling her—thanks to the intervention of the Trickster or Thief archetype, to discover a meaning that she has forgotten—the sides of herself that have been neglected while she has been playing the Good Wife. She is being called to the mid-life encounter with shadow.⁴⁶

This same thinking could be applied to role-playing. The question is not: which archetype would you like to use to create a character? If we are “using” an archetype in this way, then it is not really an archetype. The process would be better thought of as summoning, or invoking, or something equally respectful. This is not, I must emphasize, because I am harboring superstitions. As the examples above make clear, the whole point about archetypes, whether they are regarded as gods or as unconscious psychic contents, is *that they are potent whether or not we are aware of them*. In my own example, I was identifying with the Hero archetype, but I was neglecting the Dragon and the Maiden. Stein’s client was identifying with the Good Wife, but was neglecting the Thief.

However, even summoning is perhaps the wrong approach: gods and demons do not always do what we ask. It might be better, as we enter the liminal realm of larp, to notice instead what archetype is calling attention to itself in the way that we find ourselves playing. My most powerful larp experiences have involved this kind of occurrence. For example, playing the Nordic larp *Kink and Coffee*, “open night at your local BDSM club,” I became the Sadist, who finds pleasure in causing harm. Playing a blind, evolving creature in the wordless larp *Beginning*, I became aware of myself as the Innocent waiting to be born. As it came to me that I was about to meet a world that destroys innocence, I wept for nearly ten minutes—a cathartically healing experience. Each of these archetypes, of which I am more aware since these larps, has a gift to offer me.

42. Ibid., 169.

43. Irvin D. Yalom, “Chapter 7,” in *Existential Psychotherapy*, Lifecourses.ca, last accessed December 3, 2014. <http://lifecourses.ca/sites/default/files/Yalon%20on%20Meaninglessness.pdf>

44. Tova Gerge, “Temporary Utopias: The Political Reality of Fiction,” in *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp*, edited by Eleanor Saitta, Marie Holm-Andersen and Jon Back (Denmark: Knutpunkt, 2014), 59–65.

45. Beltrán, “Shadow,” 98.

46. Murray Stein, *In Midlife: A Jungian Perspective* (Putnam, Conn: Spring Publications, 2009), 63–81.

Safety and Risk in Larp

It is generally becoming recognized that while physical safety is well managed in larp, psychological safety is not, as highlighted by Koljonen, Bowman, Kessock, and others. Hook notes that one of the players who acted as a guard during the larp *Kapo* later had to seek counselling.⁴⁷ Høgdall, a vociferous critic of larp safety, backs this up: “I know people who needed professional help [after a larp] and friends waking up in the middle of the night suffering from panic attacks because of what we do.”⁴⁸ After playing *Delirium* in 2010, Bindslet and Schultz wrote their essay “De-fucking,” in which, while proposing some mechanisms to render larp safer, they say

We do not want to make role-playing safe. We want to explicitly acknowledge the dangers and prepare for the possible consequences. Because we do want something to be at stake. That something is our self-images, our emotions, and our relations... role-playing is fucking dangerous! It gives us great experiences that can help shape us as human beings, but these experiences can really fuck us up sometimes. That has never kept us from playing, though. In fact, it is part of what makes role-playing so exciting—danger is sexy. So, we do not want less danger. We want to acknowledge that roleplaying can really fuck people up. And we want to explore ways for people to get de-fucked afterwards.

Although Bindslet and Schultz make an excellent point about the relationship between risk and opportunity, their description makes larp sound like an extreme sport, or taking recreational drugs, rather than something therapeutic. I would like to be clear that there is nothing good about people getting traumatized, triggered, or psychologically damaged, and that there is no good reason for these things to be happening. These are not the risks that we need to take for psychological depth. It is true, of course, that for some people “danger is sexy,” but that is not an authentic statement about psychotherapy. Yes, there is risk between therapist and client, but only unsuccessful therapy risks actually damaging a client. Additionally, I would argue that larp is not truly sexy, any more than therapy is. Therapy can be charged with the erotic, but if that is acted-out sexually between therapist and client then, again, the therapeutic benefit that was

inherent in the erotic charge is lost. If a client or therapist sexualizes the relationship, then the magic circle is broken. Winnicott, again, emphasizes that play is not connected (as Freud had claimed that it was) to sexuality, because he says sex invariably stops or “spoils” play. Larp play, like therapeutic play, is non-climactic in its nature; even if a larp ends with a climactic moment, this may not be the most significant moment for all, or even any, of the players.

The truth is that, as Hook points out, larps currently adhere to far lower ethical standards than therapists or academic psychologists: Markus Montola had great difficulty in getting ethical permission to study the larp *GR*, dealing with a gang rape, even though he was not proposing to run the larp, but only to interview players afterwards.⁴⁹ However, larpers are learning from experience. Grasmø, speaking of the first run of *Just a Little Lovin’*, told the story of the after-party being held in a BDSM dungeon, which seemed like a cool place to have it. What she did not expect was to find a large number of the participants weeping, struggling to contain the impact of their experience over the preceding days.⁵⁰

It is not surprising that Bindslet and Schultz are talking about getting “fucked up” by larp, given that they had just taken part in *Delirium*, one of the most ground-breaking Nordic larps ever, as notorious for its dark after-effects on some as it is famous for its brilliant originality. Set in a mental asylum, it had the objective of making the players so disoriented that, according to the *Delirium* **documentary**, “they would not have to pretend to be mad, because they would be driven mad.” This is a somewhat bombastic statement from the organizers and, as such, needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, but I would argue that if a player is not pretending to be mad, but is actually temporarily mad, then she is no longer larping. In the documentary on *Delirium*, Helene, one of the players, breaks down as she talks about the effect in the months afterwards, of hearing the song “My Body is a Cage,” featured in the larp. In my judgment, at this moment, she is displaying signs of mild trauma. When I interviewed Helene, she said to me that a key problem with this larp for her was the lack of autonomy the players had once in the game, which meant that it was impossible for her to influence events. This made it difficult for her to take herself out of the game, although she eventually did so for a time.

Delirium is undoubtedly a very cool larp—that much comes across in every conversation about it. Whether people feel it was wonderful or questionable, they are united in the sense that it was a very extreme

experience, one that has sparked many debates about after-care and safety in larp. For me, the language of coolness and extremity, of getting “fucked up,” suggests that the designers succeeded very well in creating an experience that was indeed similar to psychosis. I would further argue that this is not something that anyone can expect or prepare for in advance. There is a valid risk in larp, a risk that the players voluntarily take. Introducing extreme shocks, taking risks with the players to which they did not agree, or thrusting them into an experience for which they could not have prepared is unnecessary and counterproductive because it takes away the ability to play deeply in character. This playing, as we said before, is the therapeutic thing, and it is what differentiates a challenging larp experience from being, for example, threatened with a knife by a stranger. Speaking of working with small children, Winnicott comments that “the significant moment is that at which *the child surprises himself or herself*.”⁵¹ Note that the surprise comes from the child, and not from someone else artificially introducing a surprise. This accords with my own experience of both psychotherapy and larp. If something dramatic is done to me, then it always has a questionable status, even if at the time I feel that intervention to be valuable. What really counts is the surprise that I give to myself.

Debrief and Sharing

Given time and experience, it can be expected that larp designers will learn from their mistakes and develop stronger larps as a consequence. There are already a number of practices such as safe words, off-game areas, “buddies,” and so forth that will tend to make larp safer and more responsible. In this final section, I want to make some remarks about the debrief that follows a larp, particularly those that deal with difficult topics or play with emotional depth.

Firstly, I would like to call attention here to the word itself: “debrief” is reminiscent of military terminology, and it suggests briskness, a lack of emotion, a purely informational way of communicating about events. Of course, the purpose of using dry, administrative language in the military is that what there is to report may be terrifying, heart-breaking, inspiring, or devastating. If a counselling client spoke about coming to see me as a “debrief” of the week’s events, I would be wondering about that client’s discomfort with emotion and about their rather masculine affective style. This echoes the somewhat macho language of “getting fucked up,” which is perhaps how a soldier might speak privately about events that were described differently in the debrief.

Larpers often talk jocularly about their “war stories” in a similar vein. All of this is done partly ironically, of course; larpers are aware that they are not parachuting into enemy territory or going into the trenches, but the choice of words is telling. It suggests, at the very least, an ambiguity in the larp community about whether emotions are really a good thing to be feeling and, at most, an anxious wish to get away from the emotions stirred up as quickly as possible.

This is not to say, of course, that debriefs are always inadequate or that the question has not been given consideration within the larp community. Eirik Fatland, for example, in his paper “**Debriefing Intense Larps 101**,” gives detailed instructions about debriefs lasting 2-4 hours following a larp and Bowman talks of this as “formal debriefing.”⁵² The techniques described, such as sharing in pairs, small groups, and then in a large group, are in my opinion fit for purpose. In my experience, however, which is admittedly limited to a number of short larps, I have never felt that the actual debrief experience was satisfactory. As an artifact of larp history, perhaps the model may be theatre, to which larp is often, misleadingly, compared. In theatre, days and weeks of preparation lead up to the cathartic release of performance, and there is no formal tradition for what follows. Larp workshops, similarly, are often two or three times longer than the larp itself, while the debrief might be nothing more than a quick *runda* (Swedish for “round”) of a minute from each player. The disadvantage of this for larp is not only that players who are strongly affected have little opportunity to “decompress,” but also that certain insights may be missed or lost altogether.

The problem is not that debrief technique needs attention, but that debriefing is not understood as an essential part of the larp. A three-part structure, including workshop, larp, and debrief, would create a different frame for the experiences of the larp. This would reflect analogous practices in ritual, as Bowman writes:

Several scholars have noted that the role-playing experience is similar or identical to a ritual, in which participants engage in a *liminal* experience. *Liminality* describes an in-between, amorphous, and ephemeral space where the social rules of reality are changed and new roles are inhabited for the purposes of the ritual. Drawing upon Arnold van Gennep’s and Victor Turner’s theories, role-playing scholars note the ways in which just as in religious or other social rituals, role-players experience a *preparation*,

47. The guards in *Kapo* played under their own names and were not given any special preparation, which may have contributed to the player’s difficulty.

48. Rasmus Høgdall, “O Safety, Where Art Thou?,” in *Playground 7* (2012): 50-53.

49. Hook, in Skype conversation, 2014. This is obviously not a criticism of GR.

50. Hanne Grasmø speaking at “All The Mistakes I’ve Ever Made” presentation, Knutpunkt, April 2014.

51. Winnicott, 68. Italics in original.

52. Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Returning to the Real World: Debriefing After Role-playing Games,” Nordiclarp.org, last modified December 8, 2014. <http://nordiclarp.org/2014/12/08/debrief-returning-to-the-real-world/>

liminal, and return phase.⁵³

If a larp really is a kind of ritual, then we might ask why the “return” phase is ever seen as optional or informal, except in obviously light larps. Individuals may choose not to participate, of course, as with any part of the workshop or of the larp action, but that is a different question. The presumption should be that all three phases are integral parts of the whole.

The same structure holds in psychotherapy, as clearly seen in psychodrama, which has three phases called *warming-up*, *action*, and *sharing*. Blatner says, “Moreno maintained that every catharsis of abreaction [that is, what is experienced in the “action” phase] should be followed by catharsis of integration, which means there is a more subtle release at the level of the “aha!” experience as clients are able to discover how their authentic emotions may be realistically worked with in their own lives.”⁵⁴ Earlier I mentioned an exercise in which a group imaginatively explored the story of Hero, Dragon, and Maiden. In that example, the value that I gained was not due to my own individual experience of the exercise, but from the opportunity that I had afterwards to compare and contrast my experience with that of others. This can only happen within a context that gives both time and importance to sharing.

“Sharing” is a word that requires examination, too. It perhaps suffers from overuse in personal development or therapy circles, where it can be little more than a euphemism for “speaking.” It has overtones of warmth, generosity, communication, softness, and—to be stereotypical—is as feminine a term as debrief is masculine. But it also has a technical meaning, explained by Blatner, “After a protagonist has risked and explored, respecting this unusual degree of self-disclosure, the director invites not analysis, not criticism, but simply a counterdisclosure of what the enactment has meant in terms of the lives of the others in the group.”⁵⁵ Although a larp has multiple protagonists rather than a single one, the same principle of respect for self-disclosure applies. If I disclose my experience, I am genuinely sharing something that would otherwise be unknowable; if you counterdisclose your experience, then we are sharing our individual experiences. In sharing, we each have the opportunity to understand more about our own experience. This is why, in post-larp sharing, it is important for the facilitator to insist that the participants talk only about their own experience. The players should be asked not to criticize or analyze the larp—this should be given

its own space later—or the play of others, but to talk about their own experience and how it impacted them.

In sharing, players are revealing things to themselves, just as they are to others. If, as I have argued above, a larp is an exploration of what is unconscious or partly conscious, players need to take some time to adjust and bring what they have learned back into the conscious realm, to ground their new understanding properly before they return to everyday life.

As larps develop greater psychological depth, there is no need to constantly raise the stakes or make them riskier and edgier. Players do not need to be pushed beyond their limits by larp organizers: if they feel safe enough, then players will voluntarily take the risks they need to. As they do this, the sharing phase becomes more important in helping players to process their experiences and ground their insights. And of course, by making the transition from the magic circle of larp both gentler and slower, we make larp not only psychologically safer, but more powerful.

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53. Ibid.

54. Blatner.

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Culture Shock: Building a Freeform Scene in Edmonton

Eleonora and Mikael Hellström

Landing Immigrants

Place: Edmonton International Airport, Alberta, Canada.

Date: September 1, 2005.

Time: Just after 2 a.m. local time.

Jetlag: 8 hours.

We had just stepped off the plane together with our two cats, confused and totally mind-blown. We had finally made it happen; we had crossed half the world to start a new, hopefully better, life in Canada. Labor market prospects in Sweden had been bleak, at best, for us. Mikael had spent seven years working for a small NGO. Mission: to bridge long-term unemployed, highly skilled immigrants to the labor market. Despite higher success rates than what the public agencies could deliver, the EU funding to the NGO had been cut and it was Mikael's turn to face long-term unemployment. Going back to university was not an option. The number of spots open in Ph.D. programs at political science departments was limited indeed, and there were no professors interested in Ethnic Relations in the entire country. Eleonora had achieved the long-sought goal of a Master's degree in Archaeology. Finding employers at anything beyond a short-term summer position as a historical interpreter at one of the local heritage sites, like the Viking proto-city Birka, was a tall order, though, given how scarce the funding for the sector was. Not even that site had been properly excavated, even though evidence suggested it was the single biggest Viking settlement in Scandinavia.

Edmonton offered opportunities for both of us. Mikael had a chance to enter the Ph.D. program in Political Science at the University of Alberta under the supervision of one of the world's most prominent experts on multiculturalism and would go on to enter the program the next year. Meanwhile, Eleonora was accepted to the Cultural Management program at Grant MacEwan College (now MacEwan University), a logical next step in building her resume. The Canadian heritage sector seemed considerably better funded compared to what she had experienced in Sweden. Indeed, she later found an internship at the Royal Alberta Museum as well as the St. Albert Heritage Museum.

Experiences from the Old Country

One of top things we wanted to do was to become involved in the Edmonton larp scene because we both had been heavily engaged in larping back in Sweden. In fact, larping was how we met years earlier, a very common tale for most larpers: you meet a character in larp to whom you feel attracted, you get that common larp-love, you get curious about who the person behind the character is, you find that you like him or her, and suddenly you are a couple and married.

We are both blessed, even though sometimes it feels like a curse, with a never-ending, non-stopping flood of ideas for larps that we want to share with other people. In Sweden, this passion had led to Mikael organizing a *Vampire: the Masquerade* type of larp called *Stockholm's Night*, and to Eleonora organizing an ancient Greek larp with a mythological touch, called *The Song of Mycenae*.

Stockholm's Night was what is known today as a pervasive larp,¹ which means that play occurred all over the city using whatever location was appropriate as a backdrop for the scene, even though it might occur among the non-playing public. Players—some thirty at its biggest—met in regular night clubs, sometimes in rented venues, but also parks and alleys. When we later became involved in the Edmonton larp scene, we realized that *Stockholm's Night*, although similar to local vampire-larps, differed in some interesting ways. The most notable example is that Mikael's larp wanted to experience the vampire's everyday (un)life rather than an epic drama. Further, while the *Stockholm's Night* in theory used the Mind's Eye Theatre rules and each player did have a character sheet with stats accordingly, players never really used them. The campaign ran for three years (1995-1998) and only on three or four occasions did anyone use their character sheets; in those cases, use was mostly confined to displaying one of the hand signals as an acting cue to indicate the use of a vampire power.

Another example of the differences is not all of the players were involved, or even knew about, every event, but rather only those who had something to explore

1. Nordic Larp Wiki, "Pervasive," last accessed November 30, 2014. <http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Pervasive>



Sarissa, the potter from *A Song for Mycenae*. Photo by the authors.

story-wise during it knew. If the Toreador Primogen wanted to organize an art exhibition, only the players of characters with sufficient Status would attend, as invited by the Toreador Primogen. Another event might be a Brujah rally for the Anarchs only. Why was this setup important? With a setting like this one, Mikael and his co-organizers could give the characters and their (un)life a more in-depth experience. Everyone felt that they and their characters were important and had something to contribute with to the game, even when they just met at a pub to discuss recent events over a glass of... well, beer that they did not drink because they were vampires. These elements also made the setting much more convincing, functioning much like a city would as described in White Wolf's *By Night* books.

In one example, a new player entered the larp and decided to play a newly-arrived vampire. As such, the character had to be introduced to the Prince. Mikael and the player who played the Prince went to ask the manager permission to use a local nightclub for that scene. Thus, the night came. The new character turned up at this high-end nightclub to meet the Prince. Mikael, as the Prince's ghoul, introduced the two. After some idle talk, the Prince approved the newcomer and the scene was over. In total, the role-play spanned just above half-an-hour and only involved two players. However, for the players, acting the scene out in an immersive environment added to the experience considerably.

These scenes happened when the time suited the involved players best, rather than at a time decided by the organizers. When a scene had concluded, the involved organizer would spread the word to players of characters that might reasonably have heard about it. Also, the players involved would communicate as their characters gossiped about what happened at the last social event. As such, the narrative grew organically; the organizers could facilitate the next meeting as players reacted to events as they unfolded.

Another example was the Spring and Fall salon, hosted by the Prince. The player of the Prince decided that his vampiric overlord was not very interested in holding a monthly court. Stockholm is close to the Arctic Circle compared to most other capitals in the world; the nights get very short and bright during the summer and play only happened when it was dark outside. Thus, play had to take a break for the bright summers. The in-game explanation for this issue was that vampires did not have time for social activities any more—just sleep and the occasional meal. Therefore, these times of year became good opportunities for the Prince to hold court to mark the beginning and end of the season. These events became important social gatherings that lasted all night, in contrast to most other events.

By contrast, the Edmontonian vampire larps—which have been many, as it is one of the most popular genres—followed roughly the same structure: a monthly event—the Princely court—where all the larping between characters takes place. Thus, a dozen to maybe thirty vampires gather in a large room to plot, scheme, and socialize. Often the venue will be a rented church. The larp *Purgatory*, in which both Eleonora and Mikael played, differed from most others in that it was set in Victorian London rather than contemporary Edmonton. Also, *Purgatory* made use of the rentable venues at the heritage site Fort Edmonton Park for some events, thus emphasizing the 360 degree illusion more than most such larps would. Anything that happens between the courts is covered by the organizers in a downtime turn based on submissions by the players. The larps thus alternate between play by e-mail and larp events.

The Song of Mycenae, on the other hand, was a larp set over three days and nights, rooted in the 360 degree illusion principle that was and remains a mainstay of the Nordic larp. This principle states that a larp should strive to make the set as physically immersive as possible, where the eye is effectively fooled by using an authentic venue, props, and costumes and removing anything that does not look authentic for the setting. The 360 illusion allows players to focus on role-playing in an authentic way rather than relying on imagination or the "mind's eye" to fill in what they are actually seeing.² For *Mycenae*, Eleonora chose a rural area without paved roads or electrical wiring in the in-character area, and so on. At that point in Sweden—the summer of 2000—no larps had been set in the ancient Mediterranean world. Eleonora was studying Classics at Stockholm University and found the whole society and religion of the Greek world fascinating; she really wanted to bring ancient Greece to life, including the mythology. Eleonora took a well-known event—the abduction of the fair Helen—and re-created the society with its intricate web of power

2. Nordic Larp Wiki, "360°," last accessed October 1, 2014, from: <http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/360%C2%BA>



Sketches from the scenography of *A Song for Mycenae*: the oracle on her throne, the temple, mother with her children.

and hierarchies between men and women; free people and slaves; the oracle and her priests/priestesses and the kings and queens; and, finally, between the humans and the gods and goddesses.

At this time, an intense debate was transpiring in Sweden about gender and larping in which critiques were raised towards two main subjects: the lack of powerful female characters and plots in larps and the difficulties to get women to play powerful and influential characters or be willing to engage in important plots. In many of the larps Eleonora attended, the characters she portrayed were both powerful and influential and she did not experience any difficulties from other players due to gender. However, when she organized *The Song of Mycenae*, she really wanted to have women in powerful and influential positions, but it was very difficult for her to find women who wanted to take on such a character. She often met opinions that were built from low self-esteem, such as “I don’t know how to play such a character,” “No one would listen to me,” “I would just ruin the whole thing,” etc. This issue was, of course, a great concern and Eleonora tried to encourage quite a few women to battle



their fear of taking a role of importance.³ In the end, *The Song of Mycenae* had one *wanassa* (queen) who took active part in the summit, one oracle, one oracle priestess, one regular priestess, two *hetaerae*,⁴ one amazon, the *wanassa* Clytemnestra, the sorceress Medea, and her *dysdaimon*,⁵ as well as the goddesses Persephone, Hera, Athena, Aphrodite, and Artemis.

Some years previous to *Mycenae*, a serious trend toward gender-equality characters in the Swedish larp-community emerged. Therefore, *Mycenae* met with some resistance from people who despised the idea of a patriarchal world, but for Eleonora, patriarchy was an important theme. She wanted to show and explore how the power between men and women was not as rigid as it might look like from the outside. It was also impossible for her, she felt, to re-create a historical society and ignore such important structures. Yes, Greece was a patriarchal society, but there were areas where women held power over men, and the men accepted and even bowed to that.

Post *Mycenae*, other Nordic larps explored similar themes of status (*Totem*, 2007),⁶ ritual (*Koikoi*, 2014)⁷

3. Not all women shied away from the chance to play an influential and powerful character, of course. There were quite a few who grabbed the chance and were willing to take on such a role.

4. A *hetaera* was a courtesan: witty, intelligent, and well-schooled in arts and politics.

5. According to ancient Greek belief, every newborn got either an *eudaimon* (a spiritual force who helped the person and brought her luck) or a *dysdaimon* (a spiritual force who brought sorrow and misfortune) to guide them through their entire life.

6. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Totem,” last accessed October 1, 2014. <http://nordicclarp.org/wiki/Totem>

7. “Koikoi,” last accessed October 1, 2014, from: <http://www.koikoilaiv.org/>



and gender and sexual relations (*Mellan himmel och hav*, 2003).⁸ The latter is particularly noteworthy for developing *Ars Amandi*, a technique for abstracting character sexuality in a safe and egalitarian way,⁹ so these issues have been and continue to be discussed within the community. At the time for *Mycenae*, however, little explicit exploration had been done yet, so the larp stands as an example of early exploration of how these issues intersect.

Preparing for *Mycenae*, players and organizers built a village of about eight wooden houses, including a tavern and a temple, a camp for the kings, a site for the oracle, and a secret camp for the gods of the Olympus. The gods were player roles, whose intrigues affected the mortals in many ways directly tapping into the themes and story tropes of classic Greek myths. Hades had his own site in a lake and player characters that died were placed in a cave where they waited to be taken to Charon guided by Hermes. Another example of mythic Greek story elements was the Bacchante celebrations, only open to women, held to honour the god Dionysus. Any male character approaching the feast would be killed, the organizers had instructed. The men of the village huddled around a fire listening to the seer Kalchas, played by Mikael, who told stories of how ill fates befell those men foolish enough to interrupt the

8. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Mellan himmel och hav” last accessed October 1, 2014. http://nordicclarp.org/wiki/Mellan_himmel_och_hav

9. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Ars Amandi,” last accessed October 1, 2014, from: http://nordicclarp.org/wiki/Ars_Amandi



Photos, left to right: Medea in *A Song for Mycenae*; the gods from the Hades realm. Photos by the authors.

feast while the screams from the women echoed over the forest.¹⁰ One of the players later told Eleonora that this moment was the first time she had ever experienced music taking on such an important role in a larp, and that really gave the larp an extra dimension. Some sixty players thus experienced Mythic Greece this way.

A commonality for both Mikael’s and Eleonora’s larps was the attitude towards rule-sets. The Swedish larp culture is, by North American standards, highly focused on rules-light play, relying mostly on the Honour System, where players trust each other to role-play appropriately for the scene rather than stepping out-of-character and implement mechanics to resolve conflicts between characters.¹¹ A typical Swedish larp would have a couple of pages worth of rules, covering matters that cannot safely be conveyed through role-play, like character combat, or supernatural matters, like magic. Even magic is played in a minimalist style, keeping any out-of-character information or action to a split second moment to avoid disturbing the role-play. For example, at a fantasy larp, a sword fight would consist of the combatants engaging one another with

10. Books that were used as background material were amongst others: *Women of Classical Mythology—A Biographical Dictionary* by Robert E. Bell; *Religion in the Ancient Greek City* by Louise Bruit Zaidman and Pauline Schmitt Pantel; and *Greek Religion* by Walter Burkert.

11. Nordic Larp Wiki, “The Honour System,” last accessed September 28, 2014. http://nordicclarp.org/wiki/Honor_System

boffer or larp swords without damage calls. A hit would be a hit, and the characters would only have a couple of hit points. This is WYSIWYG play, or What You See Is What You Get, where players have to develop their real life skills to convincingly act them during play. Thus, someone interested in a fighting role would have to practice boffer fighting quite a bit between events, because the rule-set would have no skills or feats to help the character during play. Likewise, those who want to play minstrels practice using period instruments and singing as part of the preparation. While Swedish vampire larps often do formally rely on MET, the larpers mostly try to avoid actually using anything but the hand signals. In *Stockholm's Night*, in the total number of sessions, no player ever bid any traits or used rock-paper-scissors to resolve a conflict, as far as Mikael recalls.

Before leaving Sweden, we attended quite a few larps as players, too. For Mikael, most of his activity was from the early 1990s and mostly fantasy boffer larps, including *Äventyr i Blå Bergen*, 1992, *Nattens Ögon*, 1993, *Sagan om Ariannas Bröllop*, 1993, *Tar-Atanamírs Fylke* (“The County of Tar-Atanamír”) 1993, *Grådager*, 1994, and *Nymfdans*, 1994. Eleonora also preferred fantasy larps and attended *Nattens Ögon* (“Night Eyes”) and *Tar-Atanamírs Fylke* (“The County of Tar-Atanamír”) 1993, *Grådager* (“Grey Days”), *Nymfdans* (“Dance of Nymphs”), and *Trenne Byar* (“Three Villages”) 1994, *Voice of the Wastelands*, *Skogens Tårar* (“The Tears of the Forest”) and *Skymningstjärnen* (The Dusk Tarn”) 1995, *Toppmötet* (“The Summit”) 1996(?), *Nyteg* (“Till of New Land”) 1997, and *Högting* (“High Council”) 1998.

On Canadian soil

With these experiences, we thus arrived in Edmonton. Mikael had made contact with a girl in the city's larp-community even before we left Sweden, and she was very helpful in introducing us to the local larp scene. At that point we tried out a couple of MET larps, and although we found them fun, we missed the 360-degree illusion Nordic larps to which we were accustomed. Eleonora also felt that the heavy rule-sets that were standard here in 2005 were not appealing to her at all. She thought the character sheet and the mathematical rules were in the way of truly getting to know her character and really immerse in the setting, particularly when players stopped role-playing to use the mechanics to resolve conflicts.

A couple of years of trying out this kind of larp and discussing with some of the local larpers who also were tired of the heavy rule-sets made us want to try and introduce the Nordic larp style with the minimalistic rule-set and 360-degree illusion. It might have been naïve of us to think that people here would welcome it with open arms just because a few wanted something else. What we failed to calculate was that the larpers here was as attached to their form of larping as we were to ours and that these methods were so taken for granted that few could imagine larp being done in any other way.

We started by trying to organize *The Song of Mycenae* to give Edmontonian larpers the full experience, and in the beginning, people were very interested in the concept of mythical Greece. As a head-organizer used to the Nordic style, Eleonora did not even think about the way she presented it. Now, she realizes that the style was too overwhelming and scary. People did not want to commit to that amount of time and money and seriousness that would go into *Mycenae* and Eleonora did not want to compromise the vision of the larp. We also felt that the local larpers did not understand what we were trying to achieve. They probably didn't because we didn't know how to present it to them properly. We were simply speaking different larpese—using different vocabulary that made mutual understanding impossible. For example, when we pitched the larp for some ten interested Edmontonians, they quickly concluded that we were trying to organize a “quest,” a term that was completely new to us. Then, they gave us suggestions for some venues to use, all of them campgrounds that were completely inappropriate for a 360-degree illusion-style larp. They had not understood us and we did not understand them. The result was quite obvious; we cancelled it.

Another year went by and we welcomed our daughter to the family. This took up a lot of time and energy, but the thoughts of introducing freeform larp here did not leave us. When our daughter was around two years old we tried a new approach with new people who weren't as involved in the particular community where we were known. Again, we again wanted to try a full-weekend, 360-degree illusion larp, but this time, we decided to try a setting that would be easy accessible for local players and also popular. We chose the Verse of Firefly, a setting that had already seen several very popular larps in town. Calling the larp *The Auction*, we joined with two Edmonton-born men to initialize workshops where freeform was on the agenda and pitched group suggestions to interested people.

Together, we met one-on-one with players and explored their characters with what we call The Lazy Bone, an interview technique where Eleonora, as the character's subconscious, asks questions that the player, who is in character, has to answer honestly. It took an hour or two for each player and created a very rich background narrative for the character. It worked as a blend between two strategies: the “hot seat,” where players take turn asking each other questions about their characters¹²; and the “confessional,” where players could sit down and discuss with an organizer the direction to take with their character in a formalized way where the player stays in-character, but is outside the diegesis for all other players.¹³ When enough groups were formed and all the players had gone through The Lazy Bone, we managed to have meetings with two fully formed groups; we had planned for five factions and a total of about thirty-six players. The players told each other what they thought their characters would know about them and created relationships.

This time, we actually went quite far, including booking a venue and trying out a low-rule nerf-gun battle to see how it would work. We didn't expect nor did we encourage any gun battles in the larp, but there was a possibility for it to happen so we did want to know how it would work. Also, players were very enthusiastic over the “interview” method of generating characters. Many described it as the most immersive experience they had had, creating a much more in-depth understanding of their character than they were used to.

Why did our attempt to organize freeform not work

12. <http://lizziestark.com/tag/pre-larp-workshop/>

13. Anders Hultman, Anna Westerling, and Tobias Wrigstad, “Behind the Façade of *A Nice Evening with the Family*,” in *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-playing Games*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon.ry, 2008).

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this time? That is a very good question. We are not the only ones who have experienced similar challenges; Mikael has discussed the problem of recruiting players across larp formats with others who encountered similar problems on international Internet forums like the Facebook groups Larp Haven¹⁴ and the North American and Nordic Larp Exchange.¹⁵ American freeform players and organizers shared many experiences with us, it turned out.

We guess that for our case, it was most likely the scale of the larp. *The Auction* was too big and we did not manage to get enough interested people to fill all the groups that we needed; the people we did get were not used to attaching themselves to such a time consuming larp event. There was also quite a bit of suspiciousness about the whole idea of a 360-degree illusion WYSIWYG larp that would go on for a long weekend, including the nights. The thought of waking up as your character if something happened in the middle of the night scared some people, who were used to weekend boffer games being called for the night.

Another effect that might have played in, too, concerns the attitudinal readiness to try out unfamiliar larp forms. When larp designer Aaron Vanek lamented the lack of collaboration between American larpers, he described how players go through a series of attitude shifts, starting with the belief that theirs is the only larp, or the *a priori* best one, and they need to overcome some wariness before they are ready to even try to attend other larps.¹⁶ Larp scholar Sarah Lynne Bowman described this attitude as the “My Larp is Better Than Your Larp” phenomenon.¹⁷ Such hesitation, often based on misconceptions, could certainly have made recruitment harder for us.

Also, those players who did show interest were often too passive for the logistics to work and seemed unable to organize their own meetings autonomously without organizer supervision. When we were no longer assembling the groups and expecting the players to do so on their own, momentum rapidly fell. Eventually, even some of the organizers started to lose interest and

the whole thing just withered and died. The final nail in the coffin was when only a single player announced interest for a freeform combat workshop. We shelved our plans again.

Another year went by and Mikael constructed a Facebook page: *The Edmonton LARP Factory*. This page was inspired by the Larp Factories in Oslo¹⁸ which started as an attempt to create highly accessible larps on a monthly basis, a concept that spread to Stockholm and elsewhere.¹⁹ Accessibility for the “Factory” concept meant that going to one of these larps should be like going to the movies. Therefore, the organizers could not demand that players design elaborate costumes or background stories for their characters or build very complex rule systems for the larp, since that would be too challenging to learn in a 15 minute set-up before play start. Also, the larp would have to be possible to play from start to finish in a single evening.²⁰ The Oslo Larp Factory organized larps ranging from the humorous ones like *The Hirelings*—a parody of *Dungeons & Dragons* tropes about a group of adventurers off on their first dungeon crawls and how they deal with the fallout of that disastrous effort—to the mature, like *Screwing the Crew*, about a contemporary dinner party with a complex set of past sexual relationships between the attendants. Several of these larps have been published in the book *Larps from the Factory*.²¹

For us, the Facebook page was a way to create a social media space to discuss Nordic, freeform larp design ideas in a forum that was not dominated by discussions on heavy mechanics larp designs, precisely because the other social media sites were dominated by the mainstream larp form. Note that our use of the label “freeform” here does not correspond to how the term is typically used by academics and larp experts, like for instance Stark’s definition of American freeform larp.²² Rather, we have coopted the term to focus on any larp design that is rules-light, or, equally, any de-

sign that does not involve heavy quantitative mechanics. Using the term “freeform” also allows us to avoid saying “Nordic,” which often is controversial and sets off defensive and dismissive attitudes that ultimately create barriers to diversification, since those who become defensive often are reluctant to try playing the larp design in question. Freeform, in this case, thus captures the lowest common denominator: rules light. That doesn’t necessarily mean that we’re striving to do freeform in Stark’s sense of the term specifically. We do freeform often because of a shortage of resources, but *Mycenae*, for instance, wouldn’t fit the freeform definition; it’s rather a straight WYSIWYG and 360-degree illusion larp.

Even though there was some struggle in the beginning both to get people to write and comment on the page as well as making the rules-mechanically interested people understand the vision and mission of the page, it eventually gained a substantial membership (139 as of the time of this writing) and remains well-visited. While anyone is free to organize and promote a larp under the Larp Factory name, we did set up a series of guidelines for larp design that organizers needed follow to do so:

- To always be in character: This way I will be able to help create and sustain the alternate reality of the larp and explore it and its underlying themes. Moreover, by always staying in character, I show my fellow players respect by helping them to stay in character at all times. The exception to this is in case of an OOC emergency [when play would be broken according to cues defined by the organizers].
- Minimize mechanics: If the larp has any rules, they will not be more than a couple of pages (say, 5ish) long. The rules should be designed in such a way as to allow them to be implemented in character. Conversely, they should avoid forcing players to step out of character for implementation, and any such disruptions should be kept at an absolute minimum, preferably requiring only a quick gesture or single word. For example, boffer combat rules should not have damage calls that are disruptive to the illusion.
- To strive for authenticity: This means that I’ll find a costume, props, and venue that facilitate the creation of an alternate reality and help players stay in character and sustain a 360-degree illusion of the alternate reality. For example, if the larp setting is a fantasy world, I will not organize it at a venue with visible electric wiring, cars, parking lots or anything else that can remind the eye of the real world. Likewise, I will not attend

such a larp wearing sneakers, or drinking coke from a plastic bottle with a Coke company logo.

- Focus the time on narrative and role-playing: Time should be spent on building props, rigging sets, exploring and developing your character’s background, relations, and psychological state, rather than discussing and refining mechanics.²³

One of the first meetings was a well-visited larp theory meet up in February of 2013. Even so, it was not clear that momentum was building. Mikael tried to organize a small scale event requiring no preparation at all from players, for maximum accessibility and chose the American freeform larp²⁴ *The Road Not Taken*.²⁵ Even though about a dozen players announced interest, no one showed up.

The breakthrough came in October of 2013. Eleonora organized a micro-larp as a surprise for Mikael’s birthday. Five players, all connected to our tabletop role-playing group, abducted Mikael for the mini Firefly larp *The Debt* with a cast of six players. *The Debt* ended with Mikael’s character chained to a chair in the basement, as a shady gangster type mused over whether to torture him straight away or send him to the notorious gangster boss, Niska. Eleonora’s character came to the rescue in a thrilling showdown involving gunplay. Not a single rule was invoked. It was an exhilarating, intense larp experience, corresponding closely to what Bowman described as Golden Moments in larping, i.e. when “the game seems to crystallize into one distinct pinnacle,”²⁶ or as I would put it, that moment when the player is fully there in the *somewhen else*, those flash-points that we afterwards recall with such clarity and that become the basis for our storytelling about how that was our larp.

From this experience, we realized that the micro-larp was actually what we wanted. That led us to start

14. Facebook group, “Larp Haven,” last modified November 30, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/336974479739553/>

15. Facebook group, “North American and Nordic Larp Exchange,” last modified November 30, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/larpexchange/>

16. Aaron Vanek, “The Non-United Larp States of America,” in *Talk Larp: Provocative Writings from KP2011*, edited by Claus Raasted, 134–131. Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2011.

17. Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study,” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 3 (2013): 4–25.

18. Lajvfabrikken, “Lajvfabrikken,” last accessed September 30, 2014. <http://laivfabrikken.no/english.html>

19. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Larp Factory,” last accessed September 30, 2014. http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Larp_Factory

20. Lajvfabrikken.

21. Laivfabrikken. “Welcome!” Larps from the Factory: Game Materials and Videos from the Larp Factory Book Project, last accessed September 30, 2014. <http://larpfactorybookproject.blogspot.ca/p/welcome.html>

22. Lizzie Stark, “Introducing American Freeform,” last accessed September 30, 2014. <http://leavingmundania.com/2013/11/18/introducing-american-freeform/>

23. Facebook group, “Edmonton Larp Factory,” last accessed September 28, 2014. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/422861157773817/>

24. Lizzie Stark, “Introducing American Freeform,” last accessed September 30, 2014. <http://leavingmundania.com/2013/11/18/introducing-american-freeform/>

25. Interactivities Ink, *The Road Not Taken*, last accessed September 30, 2014. <http://www.interactivitiesink.com/larps/download/trnt.pdf>

26. Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Bleed: How Emotions Affect Role-Playing Experiences,” last modified January 18, 2012. Presented at Nordic Larp Talks 2012, Oslo, Norway. <http://nordiclartalks.org/post/48274368386/bleed-how-emotions-affect-role-playing>

discussing building a group that would concentrate on mini freeform larps. Mikael invited some of the more freeform interested people to a first meeting and we created the group of Edmonton Larp Factory (ELF) organizers together.

The winter of 2013-2014 finally saw a series of mini freeform larps. Eleonora designed another mini-larp called *The Dilemma*, played in our basement for about half a dozen players. The players took the role of employees at the Edmonton Valley Zoo who had to decide what to do with the animals in the middle of a military invasion by a foreign power. Also, our group ran *Working at Pravda*, written and organized by Mikael, which was about the news team at the state-run newspaper in a Communist country. It was a larp about totalitarianism and its culture of fear, designed as an edu-larp for Mikael’s undergraduate students in political science. *Working at Pravda* aimed to increase the understanding of the role of political culture for the challenges of transitioning from totalitarianism to democracy in Eastern Europe and was organized on demand from players who wanted to try it out. In addition, we ran *The Hirelings* from the *Larps from the Factory* book, written by Håken Lid and Ole Peder Giæver and organized by Mikael Hellström and Ben Davies, which is described above.

There was also *Parallel Worlds*, written and organized by Nikolai Smith and Tom Cantine. The larp was about two dimensions of reality existing in parallel to each other. One was a uchronic steampunk version of Victorian England and one was the contemporary bayous of New Orleans. Both communities centered on the study of the interactions with “those on the other side,” but they interpreted these quite differently. In effect, two larps played out at once, parallel to each other and dietetically linked through what the characters perceived as “aether science” and “spirit magic” respectively. Finally, there was *Zombies vs. Archetypes*, written and organized by Sarah Nelin, a comedic larp about the drama ensuing between characters based on storytelling archetypes like The Jock or the Cheerleader in the midst of the zombie apocalypse.

These larps have attracted the attention and curiosity of about thirty of Edmonton’s larpers and we are finally getting the word out that there is an alternative to the usual larping system. Several meta-techniques have been tested and adopted. These are larp design methods used to develop and enrich the narrative.²⁷ Stark describes how these methods can help focus on specific narrative moments that enhance the storytell-

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27. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Meta-technique,” last accessed September 30, 2014. <http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Meta-technique>

ing even if they disrupt the narrative continuity.²⁸ The response has been quite positive and we will be very happy to continue with the ELF when Fall comes. In fact, players have expressed wishes for an expanded version of *The Hirelings* that uses more of the 360-degree illusion.

Conclusions

What we learned during these years is that patience is a key word if you want to introduce a non-traditional larp design into an established community. With that come also optimism and stubbornness, as well as respect for other people’s preferences. We met with—and still meet with sometimes—anger and fear of change. These emotions need to be met with respect as well, but also with an open discussion about how the larp community as a whole can only benefit from diversity. We do not wish to change the larp scene from one sort to another. We do not want to see heavy mechanics larps disappear. We wish to broaden and enrich the larp scene. There is room for so many different versions of larp, and freeform is not the only one, just as the traditional form is not the only one. It has been, and still is, a learning process. At this point, we can’t say that we should have done anything differently, because without the experience, we wouldn’t be where we are today. We are looking forward to new learning experiences and new challenges, as well as lot of fun times.

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28. Lizzie Stark, “Defining Meta-Techniques,” last accessed September 30, 2014. <http://leavingmundania.com/2014/08/28/defining-meta-techniques/>

Ludography

Grådager, 1994, Malin Strid, Robert Weitz, Daniel Krauklis, m.fl. Stockholm.

Högting, 1998, Lars Lundh, Henrik Bergqvist, et al, Arvika.

Koikoi, 2014, Eirik Fatland, Tor Kjetil Edland, Margrete Raaum, Martin Knutsen, Sandtjærnsberget.

Mellan himmel och hav, 2003, Emma Wieslander.

Nattens Ögon, 1993, Christian Nylund et al, Edsbro.

Nymfdans, 1994, Mattias Hessérus, Ferdinand Kjellin, Christian Nylund, Falun.

Purgatory, 2006-2007, David Gaider, Cameron Johnson, Edmonton.

Sagan om Ariannas Bröllop, 1993, Ralf Lindgren, Emma Ahlberg, Daniel Krauklis, Edsbro.

Screwing the Crew, Elin Nilsen and Trine Lise Lindahl, Oslo.

Skogens tårar, 1995, Kalle Grill, Johan Knutsson, Gabriel Mellqvist, Jens Thomasson, Svartnäs.

Skymningsstjärnen, 1995, Christian Nylund et al, Falun.

Stockholm’s Night, 1995-1998, Mikael Hellstrom, Johannes Löfgren, Björn Stenfors, Christian

Nylund, Eleonora Haglund, Amir Mansourian, Erik Häggström, Mattias Samuelsson, Gabriel Velarde, Owain Connell, Paul Bodin, Karin Tidbeck, Anders Holmström, Stockholm.

Tar-Atanamirs Fylke, 1992, Jonas Hjärpe et al, Örebro.

The Hirelings, Håken Lid and Ole Peder Giæver, Oslo.

The Road Not Taken, Mike Young.

The Song of Mycenae, Eleonora Haglund, Sofia Edgren, Malena Beijer, Christer Nilsson, Edsbro.

Totem, 2007, Peter Andreasen, Kristoffer Thurøe, Mathias Kromann, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Rasmus Høgdall, Randers.

Trenne Byar, 1994, Aigars Grins, Gabriel Walldén, Christian Angerbjörn, Alexander Graff, Christopher Sandberg, Gabriel Sandberg, Joakim Skog, Martin Ericsson.

Voice of the Wastelands, 1995, Rikard Elofssoon et al.

Äventyr i Blå Bergen, 1992, Mattias Geisler, Per Henriksson, Mats Lindqvist, Per Lindqvist och Daniel William-Olsson, Jukka Tilli, Rikard Alm, Örebro.

Eleonora Hellström, M.A., was born in Sweden to Norwegian and Swedish parents and spent most of her childhood in Greece, which influenced her a lot. Her deeply rooted interest in Ancient Greece, its religion, culture, and mythology made her choose Classical Archaeology and Scientific Archaeology at Stockholm University in Sweden. When she started larping, this interest and knowledge turned into the larp *The Song of Mycenae*. After moving to Canada, Eleonora became involved in the freeform larp movement in Edmonton, while also pursuing a career as photographer, photo editor, and author.

Mikael Hellström holds a Ph.D. in political science and lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. Before entering the Ph.D. program at the University of Alberta, he spent 7 years working for a small NGO bridging highly skilled newcomers to the labor market. His research focuses on how immigrant communities mobilize to address unemployment and labor market integration issues in Canada and his country of origin, Sweden. He started larping in 1992 and has integrated larp design into the design of the courses he teaches for undergraduates, allowing students explore the curriculum in an experiential way.



The Origins of Geek Culture: Perspectives on a Parallel Intellectual Milieu

Lars Konzack

Jon Peterson has proven¹ that role-playing games can trace their ancestry back to the German game Kriegspiel and fantasy literature. Furthermore, it seems to me that even considering such exceptions to the rule as the Nordic style of role-playing with its focus on social realism and artistic experiments, role-playing games generally return to geek cultural genres like fantasy fiction, science fiction, comic book superheroes, and Lovecraftian horror. I am not trying to make the point that Nordic style is progressive and geek culture is reactionary; creativity does not follow any one rule book. Fantasy fiction can be equally progressive or reactionary, and, likewise, social realism can be either progressive or reactionary. The goal here is to find a cultural historical explanation as to why fantastic fiction has had such a strong influence on role-playing games and vice versa and to determine from where this influence originates.

I claim that geek culture grew out of WWII military culture. The veterans of WWII were not themselves geeks or nerds, but they created a culture whose heirs were considered geeks or nerds, and these individuals developed this heritage in unforeseen directions. The USA was forced into WWII and had to draft millions of young men to go to war on short notice. Many of these young men got an education provided by the state as engineers and intelligence officers. When they came back from the war, they expressed their reaction to this unique experience through science fiction, comic books, and military strategic war games. Science fiction and strategic war games were not invented by WWII veterans, neither were comic books; nevertheless, science fiction, comic books, and strategic war games came together as a coherent alternative culture in the period following WWII: the Cold War.

This article is not a study of science fiction history, as such a history has already been written.² Histories also exist of imaginary worlds.³ The history of comic

books has also been covered.⁴ This article is neither a history of war games or role-playing games, because such histories have, too, been written.⁵ This paper is about what shaped the geek culture and how the very notion of geek culture came to be. These studies evidence a growing understanding of what geek culture entails; however, most often, these developments are seen in the context of popular culture, which raises the question of whether or not these cultural products are simply random acts of naïveté or if there is an intellectual, coherent force behind this geek culture. In the following, I will not only show that geek culture is a rational, intellectual subculture, but also that geek media generated a communication network with its own literary and cultural critical apparatus: a coherent, scholarly alternative to established academia with cultural ties that transcend it.

There is a growing tendency, also among academics, to see these manifestations of science fiction, fantasy fiction, role-playing games, etc. not just as popular culture, but as geek culture. What, one might ask, is the difference?

Popular culture is, implicitly, the culture of the populace, the sub-literate majority, the volgus. Even if no longer completely illiterate, most people still satisfy themselves by merely participating in culture, rather than analyzing it—that analysis, understandably enough, left to those who actually get paid for doing so.

The term geek itself was originally a derogatory one, coming from German *geck*, meaning fool or freak. Another term often associated with “geek” and used as a substitute is “nerd.” The origin of the term “nerd” is said to come from a goblin-like creature in the children’s book *If I Ran the Zoo* by Dr. Seuss from 1950. Another origin story of the term “nerd” is that it was coined by science fiction writer Philip K. Dick—who originally spelled it as *nurd*.⁶ Both “geek” and “nerd” connote bookishness and social ineptitude, as well as people

who enjoy science fiction, fantasy fiction, horror fiction, superhero fiction, war games, role-playing games, and video games, and related subjects. The geek or nerd is associated with obscure scholarly knowledge, an understanding of computers, and of technology in general.⁷

However, geek culture is equally implicitly not popular; the culture of the geeks is defined by being unlike the majority, or, for that matter, those supported by the majority to cultivate them. To the degree geeks have been appointed and paid to develop their culture, they have done so, until very recently, for and by other geeks.

Less implicitly, geek culture is also unpopular because it is an intellectual one and self-conscious; this very article is an example of that. Its development is a matter of written history, not folklore. Hence, the focus of my research is the written records of influential individual geeks, rather than the sociological behavioral observations appropriate to the analysis of mass movements, or the *vox populi*.

Therefore, if this discussion regards whether or not the culture of geeks is a vulgar one, the question arises: why put the works of J. R. R. Tolkien, Philip K. Dick, and H. P. Lovecraft in the same category as Barbara Cartland, Danielle Steele, and John Grisham at all? Today, many find it more convenient to see the first category as geek culture and the second as popular culture, in the sense that the latter is considered vulgar. This development in the interpretation of what is considered geek culture and what is considered popular (vulgar) culture is a matter of simple necessity, as our contemporary world has become increasingly defined by it.

Another approach to understanding geek culture has been the concept of fan culture, and although this tactic positions geek culture more favorably, it is still problematic. Geek culture—such as being a fan of *Lord of the Rings*, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, or *Dr. Who*—is not the same as being a fan of music like Beatles, Rolling Stones, Justin Bieber, or One Direction, nor is it the same as being a fan of sports like soccer, rugby, bicycling, or basketball. The difference is that most popular music and sports fans primarily invest a high level of emotional energy into their passion, but any intellectual investment is secondary.

Not to say that it is the other way around with geeks: that they primarily invest a high level of intellectual energy into their interests. Rather, the intellectual level of their engagement coincides with the emotional, creating a more whole fan culture that speaks to both

the cognitive and emotional part of the brain. In fact, their emotional and intellectual engagements, rather than working against one another, are in harmony, reinforcing one another. Does that mean, then, that music and sports are outside the domain of geek culture? Not necessarily, but they do have to be as intellectually rewarding as emotionally rewarding. One example of this could be martial arts; another, fencing. In both cases, the physical sports also have interesting philosophies and are culturally exciting to delve into. Likewise, certain forms of music—such as classical music, heavy metal, comical lyrics, and movie sound tracks—often have the ability to raise the intellectual level of engagement, making it more suitable for geek culture. All of the above reward study.

In order to grasp geek culture as a whole, we have to find out what fantastic fiction, game culture, scholarly knowledge, and aptitude with computers and technology all have in common. A logical cultural historical explanation to this entire phenomenon would make more sense than just reducing it to happenstance, as if it were weeds growing in a garden.

Science Fiction: The Combination of Science and the Arts

Science fiction can be traced back to, at least, Jules Verne and H. G. Wells.⁸ The term science fiction explains a lot in itself. It is a combination of science and fiction. Usually the established academia responsible for the arts focus on humanistic, rather than scientific issues, even in literature, leaving science to the science faculty. The combination of science and fiction was hard to grasp for the established academia.

C. P. Snow recognizes this boundary between what he perceived as two different cultures in academia: the culture of science and the culture of the humanities.⁹ Each speaks its own language, almost incapable of communicating with one another. Caught between these two cultures, we find science fiction: the extrapolation of scientific ideas as a means of creating fiction. The humanities of the twentieth century were not prepared for this aspect of modernity, and for the most part could not comprehend or acknowledge its significance. Science fiction fell between two chairs, neither real science and nor recognized as real literature, and whilst most scientists and engineers were able to appreciate scien-

1. Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventures, From Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012).

2. Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1986).

3. Mark J. P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (London: Routledge, 2012).

4. Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art*. London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996.

5. Jon Peterson. *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People, and Fantastic Adventures, From Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego: Unreason Press, 2012); Philipp von Hilgers, *War Games: A History of War on Paper* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012).

6. Jim Burrows, “The Origin of the Nerd,” Last modified 2005. <http://www.eldacur.com/~brons/NerdCorner/nerd.html>

7. Olan Farnall. “Transformation of a Stereotype: Geeks, Nerds, Whiz Kids and Hackers,” in *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, 2nd. Ed., edited by Paul Martin Lester and Susan Dente Ross (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2003), 233-40.

8. Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (NY: Palgrave, 2005).

9. C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (London, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

tific literary material, they weren't in the right position to develop a system of literary criticism suitable to it.

Within science fiction fandom, the notion of what became known as the “science fiction ghetto” goes back to 1926 when Hugo Gernsback launched the science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories*.¹⁰ It became obvious that, almost exclusively, modernist literature got the attention and critical effort of established academia while fantastic literature—not only science fiction, but horror and fantasy as well—was neglected. This starting point created an alternative literary milieu.

The Lovecraft Circle

It is one thing to operate as an alternative literary milieu; it is another thing is to provide an intellectual stance for it. We can thank H. G. Wells, Edgar Allan Poe, Edgar Rice Burroughs, and many others for making great stories and thinking about what they are doing. They had, without a doubt, tremendous influence on geek culture. Not the least of which was H. G. Wells, whose understanding of past and future history helped support later science fiction writers. Even so, nobody had the same influence on what would later become geek culture as did H. P. Lovecraft and his friend Robert E. Howard.

Both were great writers in their own right. Lovecraft, inspired by Edgar Allan Poe, forever transformed modern American horror with his Cthulhu Mythos, while Robert E. Howard was creating a fantasy universe based on his main character Conan the Barbarian. H. P. Lovecraft contributed to the intellectual debate about “weird fiction,” as he termed it, through thousands of letters distributed to a circle of writers including Robert E. Howard, but also Clark Ashton Smith, Frank Belknap Long, August Derleth, Donald Wandrei, C. L. Moore, Henry Kuttner, Robert Bloch, and Fritz Leiber. However, neither H. P. Lovecraft nor Robert E. Howard had a formal academic education. They were more or less self-taught; though Lovecraft went to high school, he never graduated. These men had an interest in fields such as literature, mythology, history, and, in the case of H. P. Lovecraft, chemistry and astronomy as well.¹¹

H. P. Lovecraft insisted on taking an intellectual approach to weird fiction. In 1914, he came in contact with the United Amateur Press Association (UAPA), which, at the time, was the last remnants of a widespread alternative publishing forum aloof to mass media, mostly devoted to publishing Victorianesque poetry. A UAPA

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10. Ben Bova, “The Many Worlds of Science Fiction,” *Elementary English* 47, No. 6 (October, 1970): 799-804.

11. S.T. Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life* (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1996).

involves people who produce and copy their own content pages, which are then sent to a central mailer for assembly and distribution to all members of the group. Invented in the U.S. in 1876, it was a pre-Internet, low-cost method of sharing intellectual content among one's peers.¹²

Lovecraft saw the potential for publishing his own poetry, fiction, and non-fiction outside the pulp magazines upon which he otherwise depended. One of the essays published through this outlet, H. P. Lovecraft's “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” is now considered a groundbreaking introduction to the horror genre at an academic level.¹³

The idea of amateur press publishing eventually spread from the Lovecraft circle to science fiction fandom. In 1937, inspired by the UAPA of H. P. Lovecraft just before his death the same year, the Fantasy Amateur Press Association (FAPA) was established.¹⁴ One of first science fiction fanzines, *The Comet*, was launched in 1940 by the Science Correspondence Club in Chicago. Even though fantastic fiction was ignored by established academia, the writers and fandoms managed to create parallel intellectual forums for literary criticism and debate even before WWII.

The World War II Mass Drafting of Sci-Fi Fandom

On December 7th 1941, the United States of America was forced into World War II. This called for millions of U.S. soldiers to enter the war being fought in Europe and the Pacific.¹⁵ It was a humongous task to sort out who should be declared unfit for service, who should be ordinary soldiers, and who would be suitable as engineering troops, intelligence operatives, officers, or other such select military personnel. To accomplish this task, army administrators required not merely physical tests, but also made use of an intelligence test. This test was originally developed for WWI, but ended up being introduced into actual use at the end of the war in 1917 after recruitment no longer was an issue.¹⁶

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12. L. Sprague de Camp, *Lovecraft: A Biography* (London, UK: Gollancz, 2011).

13. S. T. Joshi, *H.P. Lovecraft: A Life* (West Warwick, RI: Necronomicon Press, 1996).

14. Francesca Coppa, “A Brief History of Media Fandom,” in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet: New Essays*, edited by Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (Jefferson: McFarland, 2006), 41-59.

15. George Q. Flynn, *The Draft, 1940-1973*. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1993).

16. Clarence S. Yoakum and Robert M. Yerkes, *Army Mental Tests* (NY: Henry Holt and Company, 1920).

The intelligence test had far-reaching consequences for the U.S. soldiers of WWII. If the recruit scored high, his advancement opportunities were correspondingly higher and he might be chosen for the engineering corps or military intelligence service. As George Q Flynn explains:

In contrast to the World War I efforts, the tests [in World War II] were used to great effect in selection and classification. Never before had it been feasible to so quickly move through cycles of job analysis, creation of ability tests, and evaluation of test validity and reliability, and refinement procedures.¹⁷

This development meant that a lot of young men who enlisted for WWII, and who would never otherwise have had the chance to get an education at this level, suddenly found themselves to be engineers and intelligence officers. They got a chance to travel the world and experience the most frightening war ever. Not only that, the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, informally known as the G. I. Bill, stated that World War II veterans received a wide range of benefits including low-cost mortgages, low-interest loans to start a business, cash payments of tuition and, most pertinently, free university, high school, or vocational education. For young men that would not otherwise have had the chance to attain higher education, this opened up a wide range of opportunities.

This development meant that a lot of young men received an education outside the normal channels for entering established academia. The G.I. Bill was a socialist initiative that helped citizens from otherwise non-academic backgrounds to get an education, which was not otherwise feasible in the American educational context of its time. It also meant that some of the people who had been in the military could formulate thoughts and ideas and what better way to do that for a WWII veteran than through military science fiction. The influence of technology was of obvious interest to such young men; WWII had birthed an unprecedented technological leap forward, one that included such modern marvels as radar, the computer, and the atomic bomb. Thus, during the Golden Age of military science fiction in the 1940s and 1950s, many of the writers had a military background.

Isaac Asimov (1920-92) worked at the Philadelphia Navy Yard's Naval Air Experimental Station along with L. Sprague de Camp (1907-2000) and Robert A. Hein-

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17. Ruth Kanfer, Phillip L. Ackerman, Todd Murtha, and Maynard Goff. “Personality and Intelligence in Industrial and Organisational Psychology,” in *International Handbook of Personality and Intelligence*, edited by Donald H. Saklofske and Moshe Zeidner (NY: Plenum Press, 1995, p. 587), 577-602.

lein (1907-88). James Blish (1921-75) worked as medical technician in the United States Army from 1942-44. John Christopher, whose real name was Sam Youd (1922-2012), served in WWII in the Royal Corps of Signals from 1941 to 1946. Cyril M. Kornbluth (1923-58) served in WWI as a member of a heavy machine gun crew. Fritz Leiber (1910-92), a member of the Lovecraft Circle, worked with aircraft production. Frederik Pohl (1919-2013) served in the United States Army from April 1943 until November 1945, rising to sergeant as an Air Corps weatherman. E. E. Smith (1890-1965) worked for the U.S. Army between 1941 and 1945. William Tenn (1920-2010) also served during WWII as a combat engineer in Europe. John Wyndham (1903-1969) first served as a censor in the British Ministry of Information, then joined the army, serving as a Corporal cipher operator in the Royal Corps of Signals.

After World War II, Henry Kuttner, Fritz Leiber, and Robert Bloch, all old members of the Lovecraft Circle, became part of the newly formed science fiction establishment. By doing so, these writers continued the Lovecraft Circle's tradition of written debate.¹⁸

Comics and Superheroes

Science fiction was not the only genre that was heavily influenced by WWII. Superheroes, invented just before WWII with *Superman* (1938) and *Batman* (1939), were used for wartime propaganda purposes. The most obvious propaganda character is Captain America, who engaged in fisticuffs with Adolf Hitler himself. As Chris Murray explains,

One of the key myths of 1940s comics was the patriotic superhero and one of the best examples of the patriotic superhero was, of course Captain America. The Cover of Captain America #1 (1941) is an image any propagandist would be proud of. Captain America, a newborn symbol of American strength and moral superiority delivers a punch straight to Hitler's jaw.¹⁹

The first comic book fanzine was launched after WWII in 1947, when Malcolm Willits and Jim Bradley launched *The Comic Collector's News*. In the following

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18. John Clute and Peter Nicholls. *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction* (London, UK: Orbit, 1993); Brian Aldiss and David Wingrove, *Trillion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1986).

19. Chris Murray, “Propaganda: Superhero Comic and Propaganda in World War Two,” in *Comics & Culture: Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*, edited by Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2000), 145.

years, further short-lived fanzines about comics and superheroes surfaced. In 1960, Richard and Pat Lupoff started *Xero*, which was a combined fanzine of science fiction and comics. This fanzine first introduced analytical articles on the subject of comic books. In the following year, 1961, the fanzine *Alter Ego*, founded by Jerry Bails, devoted itself to “costumed heroes,” including mostly superheroes. Jerry Bails also created the first comic book UAPA in 1964, named CAPA-alpha.²⁰ It was not that established academia did not notice comic books; the infamous thesis *Seduction of the Innocent* from 1954 by Fredric Wertham discussed how harmful comic books were to the young generation, how they caused juvenile delinquency, and why they should be censored or outlawed. This work was hardly a constructive starting point for the serious literary criticism of comics.²¹

Like science fiction, superhero comic books have ties to WWII, and the fandom developed its own media distribution system after the same model as science fiction fandom, presumably inspired by it. Interestingly though, the rise of comic book fandom almost overlaps with the break from the Golden Age of superheroes (1938—c. 1950) and the turn towards the science fiction inspired the Silver Age (1956—1970), with its more advanced stories and world building.²²

Wargames: War Strategy as Entertainment

Modern wargames—sometimes called Kriegspiel, which is simply German for “wargame”—has a history dating back to the Germany of the Napoleonic Wars. However, it was not until the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1 that *Kriegspiel* became popular outside Germany. Germany had won the war against a bigger French army. One explanation was that the French army was defeated because the German military command had played out different scenarios beforehand as game simulations. Whether or not this theory was actually true, the idea that a war could be won this way ensured that wargames

spread throughout Europe and even to America.²³

Major William R. Livermore of the U.S. Army developed *American Kriegspiel* in 1882. It was, however, science fiction writer H. G. Wells that turned wargaming into a hobby, when he wrote two wargame rulebooks: *Floor Games* (1911) and *Little Wars* (1913). In these books were rules for playing wars with toy soldiers, as entertainment for the general public.²⁴ In 1940, science fiction and fantasy writer Fletcher Pratt published *Fletcher Pratt’s Naval War Game*.²⁵ In the following year, 1941, The Miniature Figure Collectors of America (MFCA) was founded, publishing the newsletter magazine *The Guidon*.

Wargames were used during WWII as a way to predict enemy maneuvers and strategic outcomes before the actual battle.²⁶ However, it was some years after WWII that the wargaming passion really took off. Charles Roberts, who joined the Army in 1948, was discharged in 1952, and joined the Maryland National Guard, established the Avalon Game Company the very same year as his discharge. By 1954, he had begun selling his game *Tactics* via mail order. A few years later, in 1958, Charles Roberts changed the company name to Avalon Hill. Rather than selling rule books for miniature gaming, Avalon Hill sold game boxes complete with maps, rules, and paper counters.²⁷ In addition to Avalon Hill games, other entertainment strategy games began to emerge. Best known are *Risk* (1957) by the French film director Albert Lamorisse and *Diplomacy* (1959) by the mail carrier Allan B. Calhamer. These designers only had a one-hit game and never followed up by designing other games.

The practice of boardgaming itself was the basis of their community, but could not have developed without fanzines and magazines to convey and discuss their experiences with others. Jack Scruby, who designed and sold 30mm miniatures for fifteen cents apiece, writes about the fanzine *War Game Digest* (1957-62):

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23. Philipp von Hilgers, *War Games: A History of War on Paper* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012); Peterson; Michael J. Tresca, *The Evolution of Fantasy Role-Playing Games* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2011); Sebastian Deterding, “Living Room Wars: Remediation, Boardgames, and the Early History of Video Wargaming,” in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games*, edited by Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne (NY: Routledge, 2010), 21-38.

24. Tresca.

25. Donald Featherstone, *Naval War Games: Fighting Sea Battles with Model Ships* (London, UK: Stanley Paul, 1969); Ron Miller, “Jack Coggins,” *Outre Magazine* 23, 2001: 42-9.

26. Francis J. McHugh, *The Fundamentals of War Gaming*, 3rd edition (Springfield: Dept. of the Navy, 1966).

27. Frederick N. Rasmussen, “Charles S. Roberts, Train Line Expert, Dies at 80.” *The Baltimore Sun* (August 28, 2010); Peterson; Tresca.

Many an old time wargamer would agree that a history of *War Game Digest* would cover the beginning of “modern” war gaming, for until the first edition of *WGD*, there was no literature on this aspect of military miniatures except for the long out of print *Little Wars* and a now and then article on war games that appeared in some collector’s news bulletin.²⁸

In Britain, Donald Featherstone, who fought in the Royal Armoured Corps during WWII, followed up with the fanzine *Wargamers’ Newsletter* (1962). In 1964, Avalon Hill began publishing the magazine *General*. Shortly after, a number of American wargaming fanzines appeared such as *Strategy & Tactics* (1967), *Panzerfaust* (1967), and *The Courier* (1968). Within this community, in 1966, the 28-year old Gary Gygax joined the wargaming group the United States Continental Army Command (USCAC). This occurred shortly after Gygax submitted a short ad in the fanzine *The Spartan* seeking opponents for wargaming and even for cooperating on game design.²⁹ Gygax, with Dave Arneson, later developed the first role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974).

As with the science fiction and comics community, a strong link exists to the military endeavors of WWII in wargaming. Over the years, the wargaming community built up a network of magazines and fanzines, thereby promoting the intellectual development of their hobby.

An Alternative Intellectual Milieu

This article illustrates that since the Lovecraft Circle, demand increased for an exchange of ideas and the means to communicate theoretical and practical knowledge about what would become geek culture. One could ask if any other set of hobbies or interests would spark the same desire for an exchange of ideas and rightfully so. Other hobbies have their own forums devoted, for example, to pets or knitting, but they seem unconnected to any broader subculture. Even other literary genres without formal academic representation, such as romance novels, have not attempted such alternative means; one can hardly find any fanzine or UAPA unconnected to science fiction and fantasy.

This section will illustrate how these three pillars of geek culture—science fiction fandom, comic fandom, and wargaming fandom—relate to one another. They are not just fandoms in their own right, but engage in cultural exchange. The science fiction writer H. G.

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28. Jack Scruby. “The Story of War Game Digest.” *Vintage Wargaming* (Fall 1971): 3.

29. Peterson.

Wells created strategic war games. Henry Kuttner, Fritz Leiber, and Robert Bloch from the Lovecraft Circle had strong ties to the writers from the Golden Age of science fiction.

To explicate one such connection, L. Sprague de Camp, who wrote several fantasy and science fiction stories together with strategy game designer Fletcher Pratt, authored a biography about Lovecraft, as did science fiction and fantasy writer Lin Carter. Lin Carter is of further interest for being one of the first writers to take J. R. R. Tolkien seriously in the U.S. with his book *Tolkien: A Look Behind The Lord of the Rings* (1969).

Another link to H. P. Lovecraft was Julius Schwartz, who met with Lovecraft in 1935 and helped publish his masterpiece, *At the Mountains of Madness*. As an agent, Schwartz also helped get works published by writers such as Robert A. Heinlein, Ray Bradbury, Henry Kuttner, and Robert Bloch. In 1932, Schwartz had started *The Time Traveller*, one of the first science fiction fanzines, and he helped organize the first World Science Fiction Convention in 1939. Nonetheless, he is most notable for forever changing superhero comics, when he, as editor, launched a rewrite of the backgrounds of the superheroes *Flash* (1956), *Green Lantern* (1959), *Hawkman* (1961), and *Atom* (1961) in a new science fiction-like style that would later be known as the Silver Age of superhero comics. Schwartz also revived *Batman* (1964) and *Batgirl* (1967) and was editor of *Superman* in the Bronze Age of Comics from 1971 to 1986.³⁰

Modern wargames likewise came under the influence of science fiction fandom. Art “Popeye” Widner was the founder of the science fiction society The Stranger Club in 1941. He also chaired two Boston-area conventions, Boskone 1 and 2, in 1941 and 1942 respectively. In addition, Widner published no less than 164 science fiction fanzines. In this context, he designed what is considered the first real science fiction board game, titled *Interplanetary*, although it was never officially published and only played at conventions since 1943. Art Widner is also said to have coined the term “fen” as the plural of fan.³¹

Tony Bath, a British wargamer who served in WWII, is said to have invented the first fantasy wargame, *The Hyboria Campaign* (1957-1960). *Hyboria* was a play-by-mail game based on the world of Conan the Barbarian, itself created by H. P. Lovecraft’s friend Robert

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30. M. Keith Booker, *Encyclopedia of Comic Books and Graphic Novels* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publ., 2010); Harlan Ellison and Brian M. Thomsen, “Softly: A Living Legend Passes,” *DC Comics Presents: Mystery in Space—Julius Schwartz Tribute* (September 2004).

31. Jeff Prucher, *Brave New Words: The Oxford Dictionary of Science Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Mark Rich, *C.M. Kornbluth: The Life and Works of a Science Fiction Visionary* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2010); Peterson.

20. Bill Schelly, *Founders of Comic Fandom: Profiles of 90 Publishers, Dealers, Collectors, Writers, Artists and Other Luminaries of the 1950s and 1960s* (Seattle, WA: Hamster Press, 2002).

21. Roger Sabin, *Comics, Comix & Graphic Novels: A History of Comic Art* (London: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1996).

22. Shirrel Rhoades, *A Complete History of American Comic Books* (NY: Peter Lang. Publ., 2008).

E. Howard. In 1965, Tony Bath formed the Society of the Ancients, an international club promoting ancient and medieval history as well as wargaming based upon these themes. Society of the Ancients has since then published the bi-monthly journal *Slingshot*. Tony Bath was also wargamer Donald Featherstone’s first opponent.³²

Finally, the historical reenactment group The Society for Creative Anachronism was founded at a graduation party in UC Berkeley in 1966 by science fiction and fantasy writer Poul Andersen, fantasy writer Marion Zimmer Bradley, and fantasy writer Diana L. Paxson. Bradley had coined the name. Two years later, upon moving from Berkeley to New York, she founded the Kingdom of the East. The Society for Creative Anachronism is often seen as a forerunner of live action role-playing games.³³

In all of these examples, the three pillars are shown as not merely connected, but as imparting vital inspiration and development to each other: 1) science fiction fandom, with its close ties to horror and fantasy going back to the Lovecraft Circle, 2) the superhero comic fandom, and 3) wargaming fandom. It is, however, possible to argue that the science fiction fandom with its roots in the textual exchanges of the Lovecraft Circle colonized the two other, less self-referential, pillars: superhero comic fandom and wargaming fandom. In either case, there is no doubt that an alternative intellectual milieu, tied to WWII, connected these three pillars, creating a coherent cultural development outside the established academic culture.

These were not random acts of popular culture or illiterate folklore collected by the literate academic establishment. This alternative intellectual milieu exchanged ideas within its own sovereign public sphere.

End Game

This paper set out to discover what fantastic fiction, game culture, scholarly knowledge, and aptitude with computers and technology all had in common. Fantastic fiction such as science fiction, fantasy fiction, horror fiction, and superhero comics all had their own fandoms, complete with their own intellectual distribution system in the form of fanzines and APAs outside established academia. They could cultivate scholarly knowledge of these fantastic genres within forums of their own making. Wargaming fandom, likewise, developed fanzines and correspondingly became more and more influenced by science fiction and fantasy fiction. As for

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32. Peterson; Tresca; John Curry and Donald Featherstone, *Donald Featherstone’s Lost Tales: Including Wargaming Rules 300 BC to 1945* (Lulu.com, 2009).
33. Peterson; Tresca.

aptitude with computers and technology, science fiction fandom sprang from the culture of WWII military engineers that invented, among other gadgets and gizmos, the computer. Computer culture might itself be considered the fourth pillar of geek culture, but that was a later development, though one closely connected to the processes described above. All in all, geek culture can be perceived as fandoms with their roots dating back to the Lovecraft Circle and the culture of WWII military engineers.

This perspective explains why the original geek culture was predominantly male. We do not need psychological or cognitive explanations. As a mere matter of statistics and U.S. Army regulations, only men were selected for military duty. It seems, however, that as the years have gone by this has slowly changed with more on more women entering into geek culture, a process I personally applaud.

This article also explains why we do not make many Barbara Cartland or Daniel Steele role-playing games. They are simply not part of our literary tradition, in spite of these romances being considered popular (vulgar) culture on the same level as ours. The alternative intellectual milieu explains why we do not see the “literary” writings of Ernest Hemingway, Henry Miller, or James Joyce being used for role-playing game purposes. They also were not part of the geek cultural tradition. Even writers such as Gabriel García Márquez, Umberto Eco, or Salman Rushdie, purportedly naive magical realists, have escaped the attention of this subculture, simply because they, for various esoteric reasons, were taken into the jealously guarded fold of official scholarship, and digested into concerns and agendas foreign to ours.

Or, rather, these agendas used to be foreign. Increasingly, the established academics of which I have written so disparagingly are geeks as well. I, myself, am both. The traditional barriers between us are becoming more artificial; our cultural interests are becoming more and more parallel. Both groups are, after all, scholars.

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Playing With Myth: Applying Mythic Imagination to Live Action Role-play

Craig Page

Myths appear interwoven with our feelings and our behavior—and our dreams. We think we know how we feel most of the time, but we may not take the time in daily life to notice all of the connections; how our soul life does in fact hang together. By exercising both a little extra consciousness and a knowledge of how myths operate, we can help ourselves make sense—to ourselves.

—Stephen Larsen¹

The study of the relationship between archetypes and larps has become a point of interest in some corners of the larp academic community. While many scholars remain skeptical of Jung's theories, several voices in the field find Jung's writings useful as a way of examining, designing, and utilizing live action role-playing scenarios overall. This subsection of players and researchers view larps as a way of exploring archetypes—a form of unconscious patterns—in a conscious way.² Before larping, the most assured way of examining archetypes externally was through the study of mythology. If we could recognize the dark beings, heroes, mentors, and gatekeepers in myths, we could better understand them in life.³

In 1990, Stephen Larsen, a renowned student of Joseph Campbell, published his belief about developing the personal myth. In the past, myths were developed through cultural evolution and transmission, espousing the core beliefs and taboos that underscored their group. In the modern age where information is abundant and the role of the individual has taken precedence in the western world, mythology is now a potentially personal experience fueled by the individual's imagination and personal needs. During his research, Larsen spoke to a late '80s live action role-playing group, who discussed the intricate relationship between mythology and their games and experiences. While they clearly

use common archetypes and tropes, they also spoke about personal experiences that both the characters and the players shared.⁴

I have a theory that looks toward mythology and its archetypal underpinnings as intrinsic elements in developing most larps and as potential byproducts of those larps. We rely on mythology to develop our games and, in return, our games develop myths of their own. I believe that larps carry within them the capacity to hold mythic elements on three levels.

The first level is the World Myth, or Meta Myth, where the game developers cultivate the world in which the players inhabit and explain how to inform the players of the rules in-game as well as outside of game. The second layer is the Active Myth, or the Heroic Myth, where the characters in the game interact with each other and the world around them. In turn, the characters have the potential to become myths themselves within the world. The third layer is the Player Myth. In this layer, the stories and experiences that the players share with one another develop lives of their own and become artifacts that last even after the players or the events have gone by. Often, the Player Myth is transmitted by other players to newer ones both inside and outside of the game space.

This theory, based on Larsen's writings, assumes that mythology serves two functions. The first function of myth serves as a tool of cultural identity and transmission of values and mores. The second function is as a personal theology conjured by one's cultural and immediate background where fiction and reality both can contribute. We are told stories that give us emotional touchstones and analogies to give us something to help us understand things that may not be easy to explain otherwise: death, love, rejection, struggle, despair, courage. Before contemporary times, these stories were told by our families, friends, and religious leaders, or were created by ourselves to give us something from which to draw. In the modern age, entertainment and media are now ubiquitous. Artists make the stories for us, creating a new source of mythology upon which we can base our touchstones.

While I will cite and quote several authors from academic circles, this article itself is purely theoretical. Its intent is to give a possible look at how archetypes and mythology may work in live action role-play (larp).

4. Ibid., 288-302.



Top: A Vampire court at SCaRE 2011, Houston, TX. Photo by Heather Halstead.

At right: Religious rituals in *Dystopia Rising: Lone Star* in Texas inspired by the Meta Myths of the game world. A priest baptizes a new member into the Sainthood of Ashes; Telling Visionist priests worship the long-lost Signal through a broken television set. Photos by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Josh DeMott. Photos courtesy of Dystopia Rising, LLC.



The goal of this paper is to further the discussion about how myth operates within a game and to describe how larps develop myths in their own right.

I. The World Myth

For a larp to happen, it needs to be placed in a setting. This is the layer where the rules of the game are transmitted in a way for both the players and the characters. These rules help to create what is commonly called the *magic circle*,⁵ the agreed-upon time and space where the gamers join and share in an experience together.

This layer takes on two different forms. The first is the Immediate Myth. This myth is the Lie Agreed Upon, the information that is the most common denominator that players should know walking into a game. In a game like Eschaton Media's *Dystopia Rising*, this knowledge is that you are a sub-type of survivor in the post-apocalyptic wastes, subject to potential attacks by zombies, raiders, and an ever-present entity known only as the Gravemind. You and those around you struggle to survive and redevelop some semblance of society. In a game like White Wolf's *Vampire: the Requiem*,

5. Markus Montola, "The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing," in Proceedings of Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players-First Nordic DiGRA August 16-17, 2010. Stockholm, Sweden, 2010. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/10343.56524.pdf>

the Immediate Myth is that you are a vampire, sired by another vampire and now a member of a society, culture, and race of predators who rule the night.⁶ This framework sets the tone of the world into which you are walking, backed up by whatever mechanics the Storytellers have developed.

Another form of this layer the full narrative of the world, deeper than the Immediate. The Meta Myth is the mythology that is buried deep into the world itself. In *Dystopia*, the Meta Myth is the story of what caused the apocalypse in the first place, the nature of the zombies, and the Gravemind. No immediate hard facts explain the Meta Myth, at least none that the players have discovered. The various organizations and religious groups that have formed in the generations-long aftermath have divergent and contradictory theories as to what has transpired and how to go about dealing with their environment. Some religions see the dystopia as a landscape to rebuild. Other faiths wish to cope, while others have embraced the nihilistic wasteland for what it is. All of these cultures and concepts have a grain of validity and during play they can clash with one another in disagreement.⁷

Another example of the Meta Myth is in White Wolf's *Mage: The Awakening*. Mage's lore states that mages

6. Ari Marmell, Dean Shomshak, and C. A. Suleiman. *Vampire: the Requiem*. Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing, 2004.

7. Eschaton Media Inc., *Dystopia Rising* (Eschaton Media Inc, 2009).

1. Stephen Larsen, *Mythic Imagination: The Quest for Meaning Through Personal Mythology* (New York: Bantam Books, 1996), 26.

2. Whitney "Strix" Beltran, "Yearning for the Hero Within: Live Action Role-Playing as Engagement with Mythical Archetypes," in *Wyrd Con Companion 2012*, edited by Aaron Vanek and Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012), 95.

3. Larsen, xxiv.



Caption: At *Dystopia Rising: Lone Star*, a priest of the King's Court, a religion that worships music and idolizes rock stars from the past, baptizes a new member. He leads her blindfolded down a rocky path, with her friends and fellow Court members guiding her way. At the end of the journey, the priest removes the blindfold, has her greet the sunset, and asks her to announce the band she wishes to follow. Photos by Theresa Garcia.

economic castes. The most important part about the game is the Immediate Myth: you are a member of one of these four castes, have been arrested by the totalitarian government, and were put into a jail cell with other detainees from various castes. By the end of the night, only three of you will survive execution. You do not need to have a deep Meta Myth. You do not have time for one. According to the Immediate Myth, your character may be dead by game's end. This lack of deeper stories and understanding, the lack of touchstones for players to utilize, adds to the sense of nihilism that *Prison* engenders.

The World Myth is the realm of the game developers and runners. These myths are developed before the players come in or in the process of writing plots. As such, the landscape is seeded with archetypes--more often than not presented by NPCs of both supporting and antagonistic natures. These archetypes are there to guide or challenge players and their characters. The players can influence the World Myth by creating stories within that world and can either enforce the universal rules or defy them. The characters explore the facets of the Meta Myth at the level of the Heroic Myth.

II. The Heroic Myth

In my Classical Studies classes, my professor told us the term "hero" applies to a mortal who has done something on the level of the Gods. This does not always mean valor or any positive qualities. Many of the heroes in antiquity were not superheroes. Heracles' actions that lead to his epic twelve labors were caused by his own rage. Even without divine intervention, he, by no means lead his life in a way we would call "heroic." Achilles spent the better part of the Iliad in his tent, only for his grief and rage to become so absolute that even the gods gave pause when he readied for war. Most of the heroic journeys we know come from the Odyssey and the stories of Perseus, Theseus, and Aeneas. These heroes, and many more after them, follow what has largely become known as the *monomyth*.

The *monomyth*, as written by Campbell, consists of several phases. The first phase is the departure, where the protagonist is called away from his normal life either by choice, chance, or force to fulfill a goal. The protagonists' journeys lead them into encounters with figures that wish to help, hinder, or bar their completion of their goals. When the goal is complete, the protagonist returns to where they began, but as a different person, a

changed person who is at balance with the world.⁹ This cycle has been a marvelous phenomena in writing and, with Campbell, it became a writing tool for young authors.

However, in the world of role-playing, the system is quite different. The world is more open-ended, with the stories being written live by a group rather than one author. Sometimes the game is not long enough for the traditional hero journey to be completed, or even to begin. Other times, the campaign has no end; what becomes one journey of discovery or transformation leads into another journey. Sometimes in role-play, the hero may not even be a "hero," but instead something that cannot easily be put into a binary setting of good or evil.

This is the meaning of the Heroic Myth in larps. It is the playing field upon which the characters, in whatever form they take, begin their exploration of the world around them and within themselves. This may be in the form of an actual quest or it may be in the form of a personal discovery, but this is the realm of the character's journey.

There is an odd relationship between the player and the character. There are varying ways players portray their characters. They may fully immerse themselves, letting the character's personality take over for the span of the game. Some players may wear their characters like a name badge. Their characters are still there with them. So, when it is said that the characters are "engaging the mythic," it is implied that the players are engaging the mythic along with them. No matter where these characters come from, whether they are idealized aspects of one's self or complete whole cloth creations that are divorced from ourselves, we are there with them.

Here is a hypothetical example:

A player in Dystopia Rising, a game focused on life at the end of the world where zombies and raiders roam and attack the caravans and struggling settlement towns of the world, plays a Sniper Guardsmen. It's January; ice is on the ground, but the sun is out and warm, leading to a hazy fog that permeates throughout the camp. While the player is on guard, he hears the tell-tale groans of zombies (colloquially known only as "zed"). He hears only a few, then more, and more. A scourge of the infected dead are shambling their way close. In the mists, the character can't see that the zed are stationed around some bushes at respawn points, or that the game marshal is acting as their out-of-character guide. He can only see the zombies. And they are coming towards him.

The town is well on the other side of the camp. Only he and his spotter are aware of the oncoming wave. The player's character tells the spotter to run

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9. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, 3rd ed. (New World Library, 2008), 23.



A character faces a horde of zombies in *Dystopia Rising: Lone Star*. Photo by Paul Scofield.

for town and warn them, to unite their defenses and prepare for incoming. The spotter doesn't ask what the Sniper will be doing; either he's just happy to be out of the killing field or he doesn't need to be told. The Sniper hunkers down in a defensible perch, with what limited ammo and resources he has. They, and by this I mean the dual identity of the player and character, know precisely what they are doing and the sense that this is right. He is making, or at the least willing to make, the ultimate sacrifice to slow down an oncoming horde. The character is the principle driving personality in this moment, his role in the game coming to the fore and the very real reality of death. The character's beliefs, informed in-game by the myths and deeds of those before him, tell both character and player that if death is something imminent, it best be done right.

He takes aim at the closest zombie and fires into the mist.

When it's over, the townspeople have formed in droves to clean up the remaining scourge. Countless dead meet them, bullet holes marking their second and final demise. Amongst the few shambling dead that they meet is the Sniper himself. His sacrifice dwindled the wave of dead long enough for the town to be saved. Lives were saved at the cost of his own. The actions of the Sniper are remembered by the townspeople and are an example to those there, especially those that knew him and those that have also sworn to protect the town. Meanwhile, the player of the Sniper experienced through the character the sense of an epic sacrifice, of being one person making a difference against insurmountable odds.

come from a time before history and that magic was founded and brought into being in a place called the Awakened City. Mages, whose magic comes from the forces of reality and the universe, became proud and tried to build a direct link with those forces. Civil war broke out among the mages and the link split, irrevocably damaging reality and the way magic is perceived. The Awakened City, once the proud capital of magic, disappeared from space, time, and being with only echoes of it being told in stories such as Atlantis, Ur, and other mythical cities whose historical status is currently unknown. Like the beginnings of *Dystopia Rising*, this story is hotly debated amongst the various factions of mages. For example, when taking into consideration that magic in this game involves altering time and space, the City might not have even existed yet in the first place.⁸

While the Meta Myths lead to fun depths in larps, they are not absolutely necessary. At the Living Games Conference in March of 2014, I played a freeform game called *Prison*, a three hour one-shot larp translated from Russian by Christopher Amherst. Amherst's game gives a simple Myth: society has become a totalitarian regime after years of terrorism and people are put into socio-

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8. Kraig Blackwelder, et al., *Mage: The Awakening* (Stone Mountain, GA: White Wolf Publishing, 2005).

As readers and researchers, we've heard this story before. We've read about it in a million books and seen it in as many movies. What makes this special was that this archetypal action of the lone guardian making the ultimate sacrifice was experienced live by people, where someone got to embody that trope and live it to its final conclusion and others got to feel its effect. It's a powerful act that speaks of what one is capable of when they are all that stands between oncoming death and the ones they love and have sworn to protect. It's sacrificing the life of one to save hundreds.

Several factors need to go into the process of making this sort of scenario possible. The character is the vessel through which the player experiences the game world, but this link is not the only interaction that is taking place. Characters have their own goals, desires, and beliefs informed by the World Myths that make up the game they are in. Even if we are playing idealized versions of ourselves, there are often differences given the very nature of the world our characters inhabit. Our mage, vampires, or dystopian survivor characters may be little more than our avatars, but they still must function in the way the Immediate World Myth dictates they function. Even connected, there are differences between character and player.

The process through which we bridge this gap between the world of the player and the world of the character is through what Beltrán has called *ego bleed*. Ego bleed is the transference of identity between player and character. Beltrán states that through ego bleed, the identity of the character may "rub off" on the identity of the player and visa versa.¹⁰ In the case of the Sniper above, we see an example. The player, who dedicated time, money, and quite a lot of experience points to make his character, is not in that big of a rush to kill him off, but is willing to accept it if the stakes are big enough and it is appropriate. The character of the Sniper, though, knows that this is the right thing and takes on the archetypal mantle of the Heroic Sacrifice. The identity of the character informs the player and the player, in turn, runs with it as it meets his requirements for an appropriate end.

For an event to be considered mythic, there must be a present a level of synchronicity. Synchronicity, as Jung described, is the meeting of two or more events in a single moment that are considered to be meaningfully relevant by witnesses.¹¹ In Larsen's conversation with the larpers, he found that many of the things that happened were merely left open for players to stumble upon and not overtly orchestrated by them. The organizers created the possibility for events to happen. Who, how, and when were often blessed accidents.

The game runners of the larp Larsen interviewed recounted one example of this phenomenon. One of their players had a very long lived character. They were afraid that he had become too attached and would not be able to let the character go when it came time. At some point during the game, the character entered the realm of the dead, a space in their larp to where the dead characters travel when they pass on. A person playing the NPC of the God of Death emerged from his domicile. He looked to the character and asked if it was his time to enter his realm. At that moment, the character decided it was time and entered the realm of the dead with him to become a guide to others.¹² While this NPC had the convenient function of bringing this particular character's death, the recollection of the game runners suggests there was no plan to spring that upon the player. Both emerged at the same place and the same time and precipitated that outcome.

The situation above, and the hypothetical one in *Dystopia Rising*, represent a confluence of coincidences. The odd weather gave the environment a sense of verisimilitude and lent to the reality that the zombies were this great and numerous threat coming his way, leveling the player's sense of reality with the character's. The ice also made it feasible for the Sniper to take out a large section of the slower moving zombies. Where he was located was not a known hotspot for incursions by the zed, and it was decided by the game runners more or less by chance. These circumstances, combined with the character's group's belief in the act of sacrificing oneself for the good of all, led to a moment where the character became something *more*.

This journey with our characters is not unlike Jung's concept of individuation. Beltrán defines individuation as "the integration of self."¹³ The process is not dissimilar from the monomyth mentioned above. The individual, largely unaware of the world inside him or her, experiences an unbalancing of his or her normal sense of being. On the way, he or she encounters several figures, which are archetypal representations of inner consciousness. The individual meets, learns from, and confronts these aspects. From these encounters, the individual understands him or herself more, becoming a fuller and more complete person. The individual returns to his or her original starting point—in this case, the normal state of perception—as a more integrated and enriched being. These experiences and confrontations can manifest through envisioning the scenario or

12. Ibid., 301-302.

13. Whitney "Strix" Beltran, "Shadow Work: A Jungian Perspective on the Underside of Live Action Role-Play in the United States," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek, 92. Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2013.

10. Beltrán, 96.

11. Larsen, 292.



In *Dystopia Rising: Lone Star*, a doctor leads her injured, in-character husband off of the battlefield. Photo by Paul Scofield.

dialoguing with a therapist. Bowman notes that one of the manifestations of envisioning is role-play.¹⁴

A note on non-player characters (NPCs): NPCs, in their myriad forms, represent a link between the layer of the World Myth and the layer of the Heroic Myth. Unlike player characters, who are the creations of the players as a means to exist and explore the world, NPCs are purely a creation of the world and those who have written or run that world. If player-characters are interacting with the World Myth, they are often dealing with NPCs on some level, often representing certain facets or themes inherent within the game/World Myth. All interactions, both before, during and after, reflect the actions the player-characters have taken on that level. This is not often a goal in games, but it exists if the players have reached that level of interaction and play.

The Heroic Myth is the realm of all of the people involved in the game, including both the game runners and the game players. The game runners develop the world and run the plot; the players react to the plot and explore the world, leading to both positive and negative collisions. The layer of the Heroic Myth is the main stage on which all myths are displayed, explored, altered, and enhanced.

III. The Player Myth

When the game is over, when the stories are told and the characters have reached their conclusions for the evening, all that remains are the players and the war stories they have to tell. This is the heart of the Player Myth: the layer of myths told by the players and for the players. These are the stories told during debriefings, during after-game at the diner, during the late hours of the night in convention lobbies and bars. The players share these war stories—some quite literal—in order to share moments that stood out for them, that made an impact.

When I first started larping, I joined the Mind's Eye

14. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-Playing Games," in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co., 2012), 31-51.

Society's *Vampire: the Requiem* game. I was invited to a group meeting of some of the characters who were involved in the Ordo Dracul (for non-*Requiem* players: Vampire Darwinists founded by Dracula). It was held in a real life bar based on the theme of Victorian horror, complete with statue of a werewolf nibbling on a tavern wench. We ate and drank, mostly out-of-character except for various points when we went into character to recap what had happened at last month's game and what we were planning for this month. In between those moments, the players reminisced. The group had players who were in the club when there was only *Vampire: the Masquerade*. There were cumulatively decades of stories and anecdotes being passed around at the table: great role-play scenes they had engaged in, moments when characters were killed in blazes of glory. They spoke of the characters and the players that played them. When I kept hearing names repeated in different scenarios, I could tell that the people telling the stories thought highly of them and their qualities that they valued. As a new player, I saw these war stories as moments to live up to.

This concept of myths being made about players is reminiscent to John Kim's concept of "status." Status is described by Kim as the way people behave and to whom they defer.¹⁵ Status can exist on both an in-character and out-of-character level and one may inform the other. Kim's description of status implies that it is simply a matter of how one presents oneself to the outside world. I think it is more the reverse. It is my belief that status is *conferred upon* a person by one's own peers, and while presentation of oneself is a factor, it is not the definitive factor. Sometimes, our status has nothing to do with how we present ourselves to the world, but how the world perceives us.

Status is conferred upon role-players by performing acts that uphold and bolster the beliefs of the group in an overt or covert manner, so that the social norms are maintained and, in some ways, idealized by these actions. Larps are collaborative efforts and larpers tend to remember who helped them improve their craft. These players, whether they realize it or not, have had a transformative effect on other players around them, not unlike the archetypal figures coming in to contact with a protagonist on their own journey.

Of course, there are also the stories where someone teaches the players what *not* to do in larps. In her paper on "Social Conflict in Role-playing Communities," Sarah Lynne Bowman lists several events that lead to out of game drama and issues. The most prevalent incidences involve forming cliques that exist both within and without the game and developing a "them or us" attitude. This leads to drama and arguing inside the game, and

15. John H. Kim, "Changing Status in Larps," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2013), 35.



Female characters from *Dystopia Rising: Lone Star* pose for an photo shoot on a beach. Characters often take on a heroic or epic status in the mind of participants. Photo by Mineralblu Photography.

the formation of political blocs outside of the role-play. The arguing leads to both a need for new players to take sides and the effect of scaring off new players, which then threatens to dissolve the game completely.¹⁶ While it is possible for this level of strife to exist in one-shot games, it is most prevalent in campaigns. Campaigns, especially ones that have no clear ending, run the risk of personalities clashing and bleeding into the role-play, thereby creating unnecessary and unhealthy drama.

It is my belief that larpers want to tell stories with each other that they will remember. It is my belief that life is a narrative experience. The people met in life and the influence they have form the basis of that narrative. If players are creating these ties and experiences as other people, what is to stop them from taking those experiences with them when they return to their normal lives?

IV. Putting It Together

To summarize, the World Myth is where game developers and storytellers lay the possibilities for mythic events by allowing archetypal concepts and tropes to be played out in its narrative. The Heroic Myth is where the characters interact with and take on archetypal roles in that world. Finally, the Player Myths are the war stories transmitted between players during and after the game, which take on lives of their own, become learning experiences, and form the basis for cultural identity for the group involved in their making.

What goes into the process of making games out of myths and myths out of games? The most important thing that should be stressed is that experiencing mythic elements in a game on a personal level is something that cannot and should be forced. Sometimes a player wishes to experience something, but the environment

16. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4, no. 4 (2013): 4–25.

does not allow for it. This process is not something that you can coerce.

This last part applies just as much to the game developers and runners. This process relies strongly on a narrative-focused approach. It is the building of stories with your players and for your players. Edwards' oft-mentioned GNS Model defines narrativism as, "The characters are formal protagonists in the classic Lit 101 sense, and the players are often considered co-authors. The listed elements provide the material for narrative conflict (again, in the specialized sense of literary analysis)."¹⁷

Unfortunately, one of the downsides of narrativist role-play and game design is the possibility of railroading: the forcing of plot. Game runners who wish to cultivate the building of myths among their world and their players need to be mindful that they are not forcing the story. The stories began with the game runners, but the ending belongs to everyone. The larp that Larsen interviewed described combating this problem by creating what they called "possibility chambers." They described these chambers as locations in the game site they had set for modules that the players and characters could choose to approach or not. The encounters would change as the day went on, making the experience in which the players took part random. The situations were planned, but the outcomes were unknown to everyone involved, making each experience unique.¹⁸

The key ingredient is synchronicity, which by its nature cannot be controlled. It must be allowed to happen. Larsen and the larpers he interviewed had the right of it when it came to timing. Myths are meaningful coincidences, being in the right place at the right time. Jason did not plan to meet Hera and help her cross the

17. Ron Edwards, "GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory," The Forge, last modified 2001. <http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/3/>

18. Larsen, 294.

river; Odysseus never asked to land on the Cyclops' island. Myths happen on the journey of life and we do not get to dictate when they happen. Stories in larps represent watershed moments for these opportunities, but forcing their presence robs us of the magic.

Likewise, while larping is a collaborative effort and people often take on roles both in- and out-of-character, players should avoid forcibly placing someone into a role or position. While a person can take on the mantle of an archetypal role, they are not just *that* role all of the time. Nor, for that matter, are the characters they are playing. This is a group effort, one that requires communication and a safe foundation to discuss the process among the various parties, no matter which layer you are dealing with. Always discuss and debrief with those around you; they may help give you insight and clues as to how to develop the next piece in your narrative.

Finally, it should be noted that these layers feed back on each other. The world myth gives space for the player to make characters. The characters explore the world, interact with its myths, and take roles upon themselves given time and chance. The players take these experiences into themselves and their own narratives. Given better insight into their own narratives, the players and characters develop further in the world, and the World Myth is enhanced by the stories they are now developing.

V. Conclusion

Myths serve a primal function: to form an identity. In the past, myths were a result of cultural transmission, relaying stories of the values, taboos and mores of a people. By forming a common narrative, communities formed a common cultural identity. In the modern western world, the focus on individual identity takes precedence. Mythology is now viewed as a personal theology to form individual core beliefs.

The geek community is blessed by a plethora of stories. These stories, whether they are television programs, books, movies, comics, or a myriad of other media, are gifted an importance by the people who attach their emotions and identity to them. Whereas most of these stories are written and made by media producers, larpers have the opportunity to create them from the ground up.

Larps serve as a liminal bridge. Identities are created and explored in a space constructed for them. The characters and the players who embody them have the chance to explore another world, explore the stories that have made the core of that world, interact with those stories, continue, and possibly exceed them. And like a Campbellian hero, when the game is over, when the archetypes have returned to the shadowed halls of the collective unconscious, the player has the chance to return to the normal world all the better for the journey.

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The Parlor Sandbox: Counter-Players and Ephemera in American Freeform

Evan Torner and Katherine Castiello Jones

“[We] are the fools looking at the finger when someone points at the moon. Games are the finger; play is the moon.” —Miguel Sicart¹

This article offers both some observations and a program for action about genre-based **freeform chamber larps**, or what the Society of Interactive Dramas calls “**scenario-based, theatre-style, interactive drama, freeform, live-action roleplaying [sic]**.” J Li came up with the shortened term “parlor larp,”² which stuck with us as we formulated the term “parlor sandbox,” our own sub-genre of **American freeform** described below. The observations concern patterns in American genre-inspired, convention-run, one-shot larps, whether they are set on a steampunk vessel, in a vampire court, or beneath a medieval dungeon. Parlor larp organizers are often excited about their individual games, and advertise them as if they possessed unique-and-awesome qualities. Yet parlor larps often inherit design tricks and larp-cultural rituals from their predecessors, which means that certain unconscious systems of communication and behavior sometimes crop up in games that may not be in accord with the organizers’ overall design goals. It is hard to break with the past without active effort.

Both of us charge American larp designers with providing their players both fiction and rules that demand the minimum possible cognitive load before play while maximizing every individual player’s engagement during play. Play should be seen, as Miguel Sicart argues, “not as an activity of consumption but as an activity of production.”³ Designing toward this goal makes freeform games in particular more accessible and confers more responsibility and agency onto the players. Many larpwrights and organizers already do a good job of this, but all of us can continue to improve and grow as designers in dialog with others. Our suggested program for action explains the techniques behind the parlor sandbox, offering a simple means of distributing authority over in-game fiction and ad-

ressing meta-game concerns about player involvement and interaction. First, we will discuss what we have observed in our years with the parlor larp scene and then, we will present our own design response, which draws upon our experiences with Nordic-style **meta-techniques** and **indie tabletop RPGs**. We hope to inspire and intrigue designers and organizers with our hybrid method and, by doing so, help them meet their players’ needs.

Observations

Genre larps constitute the overwhelming majority of one-shot larps to be found in the American scene. Many of them are what indie tabletop RPG gamers call “secrets and powers” larps.⁴ Such shorthand describes larps for which the chief design interventions include the depositing of hidden information among the player-characters (PCs) that may or may not be revealed over the course of play (e.g., “Ronald is really the queen in disguise,” “There is a ticking time bomb under this whole complex,” “My character wants to kill yours”). Other design interventions include the delineation of limits to characters’ abilities that affect the world and other characters (e.g., “A Strength stat of 4 means you can lift 500 lbs.,” “I can only use my magic if I spin around in a circle 30 times,” “Characters in our clan can opt for Obfuscation, which turns them invisible”). Overall, secrets and powers larps instantiate a sense of game master (GM) control over the game. Secrets will reveal themselves at an arbitrary rate (i.e., based on the rhythms of play), but a game master can certainly anticipate a closed set of likely actions the player-characters (PCs) will take when they encounter specific bits of information.⁵ Limitations on PC powers and abilities then ensure any action based on new information that comes to light will be appropriately constrained and will not upset the GMs’ horizon of expectations for a given larp event. The larp will deliver the experience

the GM intended. If there are multiple GMs, often a “master” GM must manage everyone else’s access to knowledge and capabilities within the game. Secrets and powers larps originate in a valuable larp-design tradition that relies on an unspoken player-to-organizer contract in which the players acquiesce to a level of social and psychological manipulation in exchange for some mostly pre-planned “surprises” during the larp.

Bernard Suits famously defined a game as any context in which there is a “voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles.”⁶ To some degree, however, this requires the players to know to *which* “unnecessary obstacles” they are assenting to overcome. Unnecessary obstacles in a certain larp may be summarized by a couple of pointed questions. For example: *Which PCs must be disabled from blocking my bid for the kingdom? How can I survive when that other PC wants to kill me? Who is Charles and why is he important to everyone in the room?* etc. Vincent Baker has recently posited **objects of games** *vis-à-vis* their unnecessary obstacles as a kind of word game: “In this game, the object is to _____. You might not be able to do it, though, because _____.”⁷ In chess, the object is to capture your opponent’s king. You might be not able to do it, though, because your evenly-matched opponent maneuvers pieces to block your movement. In an ideal *Vampire* larp, the object is to win political and personal victories. You might not be able to do it, though, because of the chaotic and volatile political situation in the Prince’s city.

However, the fundamental tension in larp is the degree to which the game system poses unnecessary obstacles that players may *not* want to deal with while in full costume and surrounded by strangers. For example, a magic system that requires the assembly of various ingredients of no fictional importance held by different players—a typical method of affording social interaction among PCs—could also have the unintended side effect of discouraging magic-using PCs from casting spells at all; they have not talked to the right person about the right ingredients and would maybe have to break character to get them. In this larp, the object may have been to choose whether or not to use magic for virtue or vice, but a PC might not be able to even approach the object of the game if mechanics that prevent improvised usage of magic stand in the way.

Naturally, the above scenario poses an age-old game design dilemma: how do we regulate the abilities of the magic-user so that they do not overpower other aspects of the game with limitless control while still

giving this player the kind of “magic-user” affordances that they sought when he/she signed up for the game? Superheroes will want to fly and shoot laser-beams. Fighters will want to show that they can hold their own in a fight. Vampires will want to suck human blood and sire new vampires. Each one of these activities requires rules arbitration in a traditional larp setting. Such arbitration itself can serve as an obstacle to other play possibilities, as time spent with the GM to determine whether or not a superhuman action is feasible could be spent on generation of emergent story and/or deepening relationships with the other PCs.

Coming from a primarily tabletop and Nordic freeform background, we observe genre-based parlor larps through different eyes. Many of the design practices taken for granted in the larp community actually produce a very specific type of game and we hope to expand the design options available to all our communities. Now, we will articulate our own points of departure from this model for our parlor sandbox designs.

The Program for Action

What is the parlor sandbox? How does it draw upon the innovations of various larp cultures, including parlor larps, American freeform, Nordic larp, and even “Let’s pretend” from our youth? To many larpers, parlor sandbox looks like tabletop; to many tabletop players, parlor sandbox play is definitely larp. It is a type of **freeform**—a tabletop/larp hybrid—that specifically helps players co-create genre fiction through rapid improvisation and the crafting of emergent narratives. We like to think of it as a sub-genre of **American freeform**, a sub-genre of freeform which is itself a hybrid sub-genre of larp.

Let us define some of these terms. *Larp* is a medium of expression that tells a story from many angles, with the players serving as their own respective audiences and acting out the parts of characters in a dispersed environment in real time. Of course, the medium stretches and breaks these rules all the time. *Freeform* is a kind of scene-based larp inspired by tabletop role-playing in which players can step out of their characters and describe the scene or use meta-techniques like **inner monologue** to enhance the play experience. They frequently employ transparency in game presentation and feature intense, focused scenes. An example would be *Previous Occupants* (2008) by Tobias Wrigstad and Frederik Berg Østergaard in which players play a young Christian couple about ready to lose their virginity haunted by an older couple with a horrible history. **Australian** and **British freeform** scenes have existed since the 1980s, though many recent innovations in the genre have come from the respective **Nordic freeform** communities. American freeform is a specific movement of designers who deploy the tropes of Nordic freeform

1. Miguel Sicart, *Play Matters* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 2.

2. John H Kim, “Parlor Larps: A Study in Design,” *Playground Worlds*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon r, 2008), 178-185.

3. Sicart, 5. In his theoretical overview, Sicart defines play as “contextual... carnivalesque... appropriative... disruptive... autotelic... creative... [and] personal.” pp. 6-17.

4. In this article, the term “secrets and powers larps” appears to be receiving its first mention on the Internet, despite at least a year of its colloquial usage among RPG social circles.

5. See Markus Montola, *On the Edge of the Magic Circle: Understanding Role-Playing and Pervasive Games*. Diss., Tampere, Finland: University of Tampere, 2012), 82. Montola describes the inherent tension regarding a GM’s ability to afford and limit creative role-play activity.

6. Bernard Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia* (Calgary, Alberta: Broadview Press, 2005), 54.

7. Vincent Baker, “The Trouble with RPGs,” Anyway, last modified July 23, 2014. <http://lumpley.com/index.php/anyway/thread/805>



Players of *Voyage to Venus, Planet of Death* pose after the game has wrapped. Photo courtesy of Sarah Lynne Bowman.

in games in ways that the Finns, Danes, Swedes and Norwegians never expected. *Under My Skin* (2007) by Emily Care Boss is an example of American freeform, in which a group of friends falls in love with each other. *The Climb* (2013) by Jason Morningstar pits a group of illegal climbers against a deadly mountain.

Parlor sandbox games look a lot like a group of PCs in awesome genre-appropriate costumes telling exciting stories in a room full of folders labeled as diverse locations. The games largely rely on American freeform conventions, but are explicit about 1) increasing player agency by overt methods of “steering” of which all are aware, 2) increasing individual GM engagement by adding and embedding more GMs—who we call “counter-players”—into the game, 3) co-creating a rapidly evolving genre fantasy world through meta-techniques, and 4) generating ephemera that reinforce play while everything is happening to remind us of play both during and after the game. About a half-dozen parlor sandbox games exist, including *BloodNet* (2012), a cyberpunk vampire game, based on a 1993 *Microprose* game; *Blood in the Bayou* (2014), a southern supernatural/gothic game based on the television series *True Blood*; *City of Fire & Coin* (2013), a pulp fantasy based on the tabletop *Swords Without Master; Revived* (2014), a zombie rehabilitation therapy based on the BBC show *In the Flesh*; *Cady Stanton’s Candyland* (2013), a sex toy party at a feminist bookshop; *All Hail the Pirate Queen* (2013), a pirate politics game based on *Poison’d*; and *Voyage to Venus, Planet of Death* (2014), a communist spaceship sex farce based on the East German film *Silent Star*.

One might notice a pattern running through the above games. They have all been featured at *Intercon*, though these games have also made their appearance at venues across the country: *SigmaPlay*, *GenCon*, *OH! Nerd* and *Larp House* events. They mostly draw from other established properties—usually low-brow genre fiction—in order to increase the players’ already-extant sense of mastery over the “content” of a given game. The crystal-clear audience contracts that underlie

boilerplate genre fiction also work well for larp social contracts, as it turns out.

Abandoning distinctions between “tabletop” and “live-action,” the parlor sandbox looks at freeform as a means of literary co-creation with numerous GMs, called “counter-players.” Players generate their backstory by steering a strong genre-character concept through *pointed questionnaires* assembled by the counter-players. These questionnaires encourage players to make fictionally interesting choices about their character’s trajectory going into the game, and confirm them with the group. The “steering” process is then mirrored in actual play, where the counter-players provide adversity to the player-characters as they struggle to define themselves through constant action. Players gather around distinct folders in the playspace containing the descriptions of different locations and act out scenes there; players are free to contribute their characters’ own impact on the location. Writing, drawing, and designing compose just as much of the parlor sandbox as play-acting and so-called “fictional positioning.” One resolves combat through an exchange of plot resolution and delayed gratification: the loser of a fight “takes the fall” and is rewarded at the end of the game with a tale of glory related about their character. Meta-techniques permit the players to act outside of their characters in order to broadcast their inner worlds and the directions in which they wish to take these characters. In many different ways, the system continuously channels positive and agonistic attention toward each character in the larp, so that they feel “protagonized” (to use Paul Czege’s term)⁸ but must make some interesting choices about their character’s future direction in order to resolve important plot points.

There are three principles underlying the parlor sandbox: 1) Be safe, 2) Be interesting, and 3) Be generous. By being safe, we mean one should not behave recklessly with one’s own or other players’ physical and emotional safety. Period. By being interesting, we mean something akin to Avery McDaldno’s agenda from the now-classic tabletop RPG *Monsterhearts* (2011): “Keep the story feral.”⁹ Everyone’s involved in making the story and is laying the description on thick, but ultimately no one is in control over all of it. By being generous, we mean this: the PCs and the counter-players must make the other players look and feel awesome, even if what is happening may be intense and fraught on the character level.

We know that many have spilt ink over transparency

8. Paul Czege, “My Life with Master: The Architecture of Protagonism,” last modified October 13, 2007. <http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/protagonism>

9. Avery McDaldno, (2011), *Monsterhearts*. Buried Without Ceremony, 103.

in games,¹⁰ so our focus in this article is to explain a little more about the *counter-player* role, as well as the active creation of in-game *ephemera*, whether through folders signifying location or other artifacts of play.

Counter-Players

In defining the duties of a “director” in the *Hamlet* scenario, J Li wrote an excellent summary of the kind of response a PC might expect from a counter-player:

You will frequently have to answer questions about a given situation. When doing so, answer based on what is consistent with booklet information and previous answers, generally logical, appropriate to atmosphere and genre, compatible with pacing, interesting for the plot... feels fair to the players, and will leave you ample room later to guide the game in a variety of directions.¹¹

A counter-player provides the PCs with adversity and cedes them glory for their accomplishments. The main difference between a typical larp GM and a counter-player is that actively making up new material constitutes part of his/her job description.

The role of the counter-player can be quite flexible depending on the game in question. In general, counter-players perform four services for parlor sandbox games:

1. Generate pleasurable adversity for the PCs. Counter-players actively work to keep the PCs on their toes while maintaining their engagement in the co-created story.
2. Cede “glory,” meaning that counter-players help the PCs have a meaningful impact on the world and the storyline.
3. Offer thick description. Counter-players

10. Aksel Westlund, “The Storyteller’s Manifesto,” *Beyond Role and Play*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Fëa Livia, 2004), 249-257; Mathias Lysholm Faaborg, “Quantifying In-Game Economy,” *Dissecting Larp: Collecting Papers for Knutepunkt 2005*, edited by Petter Bockman and Ragnhild Hutchison (Oslo: Knutepunkt, 2005), 189-203; Chris Chinn, “Making Good Flags,” *Deeper in the Game*. Last modified November 19, 2013. <http://bankuei.wordpress.com/2013/11/19/making-good-flags/>; Evan Torner, “Transparency and Safety in Role-Playing Games,” *WyrdCon Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2013), 14-17.

11. J Li (2004-5). *Hamlet*. Shifting Forest Storyworks, 10.



Players and counter-players gather in distinct locations in the Intercon 2013 run of *City of Fire & Coin*. Photo by the authors.

co-create the world with their words and gestures. They actively encourage PCs to make the world more interesting too.

4. Maintain coherence. They ensure that information in the game does not actively contradict itself. They settle facts when necessary.

The counter-player collaborates with everyone in the game and it is a role with an expanded creative license. Rather than leading the players through a story, counter-players work *with* players to explore the world and build the actively-shifting narrative through their dignified characters. Everyone is a badass in genre fiction; counter-players shine the spotlights on that badass quality.

The adversity generated by counter-players can take several forms. In some games, like *The City of Fire and Coin*, adversity can be somewhat unknown to the PCs—loosely agreed upon in advance among the counter-players. For example, zombies crawl out of the catacombs and begin to attack the city if none of the PCs venture down to deal with them. If they attack or ignore this imminent threat, PC decisions will have affected an important aspect of the city’s safety itself. In some cases, the counter-players will take the roles of additional characters (NPCs) within the diegesis. Sometimes these diegetic characters will be played throughout the games as in the case of the “group leaders” in *Cady Stanton’s Candyland* or *Revived*, but in other games, these characters might only exist for a few interactions. These characters have personalities and interests, which counter-players use to create adversity for the PCs. Because players help co-create the world, counter-players will have some idea of the issues and plots that players want to explore. The counter-players use their NPCs to bring these issues and plot points



Evan Torner (left) and Katherine Castiello Jones (right) serve as counter-players for the 2014 Intercon run of *Voyage to Venus, Planet of Death*. Photo by Sarah Lynne Bowman.

into the game on their own terms. Counter-players can also drive conflict between player characters and feed players information that will help them advance toward a specific character milestone. What is distinctive about counter-players is that they remain flexible at all times, such that NPCs can be created on the spot, major plot points can be instantly toppled, etc. The counter-player fundamentally builds on *player interest* rather than a *pre-determined plot*.

In some games, like *City of Fire and Coin*, *BloodNet*, or *Blood in the Bayou*, counter-players will be specific given areas of expertise. In these cases, one counter-player will be in charge of (say) magic, technology, vampires, or combat. This way, players can approach the appropriate counter-player if they have particular actions they wish to undertake in that sphere of influence: approaching the “magic” counter-player when they want to do a spell, for instance, or if they want information on particular aspects of the world. PCs playing vampires in a game, for example, would go to the vampire counter-player with questions about vampiric powers or weaknesses. The counter-player would collaborate on the creation of these weaknesses, accepting player input.

In games like *Voyage to Venus*, one counter-player takes on the role of a more nebulous concept: the Spirit of Communism. In this case, the counter-player adopts the still-enjoyable position of the *bird-in-ear*, interrogating characters about their true ideals, motivations, and the implications of their actions.

Many larps could benefit from a few more GMs, but past designers have presumed that gamemastering is somehow less “fun” or that too many GMs means too many cooks in the larps kitchen. Counter-players, in contrast, can be added with few logistical hassles, since

there is no fixed “plot” to which they must adhere. They also have the injunction to have a good time themselves and push back against the PCs in the way that is the most enjoyable for all involved.

Ephemera

Another aspect that distinguishes the parlor sandbox is its use of ephemera. Ephemera in a parlor sandbox game help reinforce immersion in the co-created fictional world and communicate narrative cues across that world. For one thing, pre-game activities can use ephemera to flesh out the narrative: *inspirational pictures* (eidolons) in *City of Fire & Coin* directly impact character concepts; off-handed comments in the *BloodNet* questionnaires can spawn whole side-plots if the counter-players run with it. Asking players to generate this ephemera gives counter-players vital clues about what aspects of the genre and the world interest players, what plots players want to explore, and how to provide adversity and glory to the PCs in order to shape a narrative interesting to all parties involved. Ephemera speaks.

The parlor sandbox relies on fundamentally incomplete characters and environments. In some games, like *City of Fire and Coin*, characters are generated through extensive questionnaires. Players answer questions about their character’s past exploits, current goals, and relationships with other characters. In other games, like *Revived* or *All Hail the Pirate Queen!*, players receive short descriptions of their characters that they then expand pre-game based on a few short questions or introductory activities. The generation of this ephemera encourages players to take *ownership* of their characters, rather than viewing them as *pre-generated* and *imposed*. The PCs must fill in the gaps, so the counter-player can help them take the character in the direction most interesting to the player in question.

Similarly, parlor sandbox play encourages collaborative world creation, whether this happens before the game starts, or during play. In games like *City of Fire and Coin* or *BloodNet*, players can create new locations during game, expanding the game environment and allowing for new narrative pathways. In games like *Revived* or *All Hail the Pirate Queen!*, the world creation takes on a more symbolic tone. Before play starts in *Revived*, players collectively brainstorm an FAQ about Partially Deceased Syndrome: the in-game term for rehabilitated zombies. Players then collaborate on both the questions and answers, determining topics that they want to explore in game (e.g., Can zombies eat? Can they vote?); in doing so, they actively shape the intense kind of world their characters inhabit. One game generated a pro-zombie political party, while another constructed a pro-zombie terrorist group. Collaborative

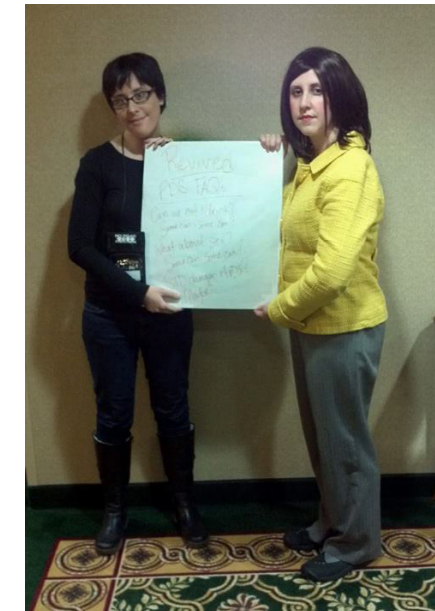
world creation prevents new players from feeling like intruders in someone else’s imaginary world, instead letting them use genre fiction as their shared language to take play to the next level.

During play, the use of location folders in games like *City of Fire and Coin* or *BloodNet* allows players to explore the world geographically; moving between different folders throughout the play space represents different locations within the city, as well as their own scene. Multiple scenes can thus take place at once, unlike most other freeform games. These locations remain in flux during the game, as players are encouraged to add their own descriptions or narratives reflecting how the space has changed as a result of their character’s actions: the destruction of a temple, the addition of a cursed artifact, or a scrawled graffiti message are all possible examples. During these games, players must generate fiction in order to accomplish tasks. In *BloodNet*, a player whose character wants to write a program might be asked to draw it or write a journal entry about the experience. Spells in *City of Fire and Coin* work similarly. Want to turn people into frogs? Show a counter-player the symbols for the ritual, and make the counter-players *believe* this is the kind of thing that will turn someone into a frog. The fictional positioning here enriches the narrative world and can be used not only for an individual’s character exploration, but can be drawn upon by other characters or used to influence future interactions.

Tangible and visual prompts reinforce character and relationships while helping players exercise their creativity in a way that enriches the game narrative. While children can easily “make believe,” adults are often discouraged from engaging in this activity. Many of the parlor sandbox techniques let adult players recapture this sense of imagination: these chairs are a coffin, this folder contains a Map of the 7 Wonders (which *you* get to draw!); this portrait of a robot you drew in 5 minutes



An example of a location folder from *City of Fire & Coin*. Photo by the authors.



Kate Anderson (left) and Katherine Castiello Jones (right) show off player-generated content from *Revived*. Photo by the authors.

expresses your character’s ultimate creation. Players expend much creative energy *during* the game, based on the belief that player- and counter-player-driven emergent narratives through improvisation will lead to a more engaging genre-fiction play experience. *City of Fire and Coin* uses eidolons to generate characters, giving everyone involved a visual representation of their character, but also allowing players to highlight *which* aspects of the image captured their attention. In the *Candyland* games, *PCs generate play-doh sculptures*, drawings and sex toy descriptions while in character to explore both relationships among characters and issues related to women’s sexuality.¹²

Game design is a conversation and RPGs are games that themselves mostly consist of conversations. Parlor sandbox stands as our contribution to an ongoing design conversation in larps about the roles of the PCs, GMs, and the constantly-evolving narratives that make the medium so worthwhile. In case you, dear reader, feel like we have lead you in circles, we have assembled a manifesto that will make it all clear.

12. Katherine Castiello Jones, “Sex and Play-Doh: Exploring Women’s Sexuality through Larps,” *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/09/sex-and-play-doh/>

The Parlor Sandbox Manifesto

The larp form should be a tool to facilitate *play* above all else.

Whereas traditional parlor larps contain many secret elements to drive the action, the parlor sandbox relies on dramatic irony: you already know Bill will betray you, so now you can milk the emotion of putting your PC's absolute faith in him.

Whereas traditional parlor larps adjudicate conflict based on a complicated set of rules, the parlor sandbox relies on the players' personal sense of judgment as well as that of multiple counter-players, all of whom are there to help make each character's life interesting.

Whereas traditional parlor larps are set in a fairly static physical location and social situation (i.e., a party, a senate meeting), the parlor sandbox permits the geographical shaping and exploration of a space.

Whereas traditional parlor larps present characters with pre-written, complex backstories, the parlor sandbox presents characters that the players must complete themselves vis-à-vis the other PCs; characters only attain their full quasi-life through their relation through others and their environment.

Whereas traditional parlor larps often have too few GMs to handle everything, parlor sandbox games have an overabundance of counter-players, so as to make the diegesis and the fiction it generates responsive to the PCs' input.

Whereas traditional parlor larps rely on concentration of authority, the parlor sandbox distributes that authority in the hope that each design will let adults and children alike play "let's pretend" in myriad ways: never blocking, but always twisting.

The epigram from Miguel Sicart at the beginning of this article suggests a simple truth: we design games not for their own sake, but to facilitate *play*. The parlor sandbox relies on a similar simple truth: many larpers like to dress up in costume, pretend to be someone else, feel powerful in that role, and get embroiled in the messy details of the fiction as it unfolds. Our game design helps address the spirit of these desires with minimal mechanical intervention. As in sandbox play, many individual courses of action are possible, but only with the collaboration of others can solid and memorable constructions emerge.

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Entering and Leaving the “Magic Circle” as Symbolic Acts: The Case of Russian Field Larps

Olga Vorobyeva

Introduction

The larp tradition in Russia starts from the early 1990s. Since then, several larp-cultures have developed almost independently from the European and American ones—and even from each other, as is stated in Alexey Semenov’s history of Russian larps.¹ The most numerous larp communities are based in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ural, and Siberia, but there are smaller traditions in other regions. In the following article, I explore the case of larp communities in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Despite all their variations, for the purpose of this work, these communities might be treated as one tradition that I will further refer to as “Russian larps.”²

Not many publications on larp theory have appeared in Russia, and even less information on Russian larp is available in English. Therefore, most of the information below is from my own observations. My research project has been dedicated to the study of perceived dropping out of the game frame in field larp and the social interaction aimed at the repair of the game frame. I used systematic self-observation by players as a data gathering technique as presented by Rodriguez and Ryave.³ That is, my informants, including myself, reported cases when they dropped out of their characters or witnessed someone else dropping. Systematic self-observation took place in 2012-2013 in

13 field larps: five fantasy, four historical, three sci-fi, and one dystopian world developed by organizers. The balance between the chosen larp topics is illustrative of the overall thematic variation within Russian larp. I have been larping since 2008, so I could also use information from my previous larp experience. The resulting database containing some 600 episodes was analyzed by means of Erving Goffman’s frame-analytic approach.⁴ This work resulted in a classification of the triggers of frame-switching that covers possible types of events that provoke dropouts and takes into account the target frame of frame-switching.⁵

I noticed that some typical cases tended to occur in the beginning and towards the end of a larp, probably having to do with the “borderline state” between daily life and the game world. In this paper, I would like to indicate the ritualized practices employed to construct the game world; to show how individual players and the group of participants enter the game world and leave it; and to comment on the devices the participants use to mark their presence or absence in the “magic circle” during a larp. Entering and leaving the game are important symbolic acts worthy of an ethnographic study.

Let me begin by indicating the features of Russian larp that differ from other traditions. First, as a result of the community’s historical development, these larps are not based on published rule-sets: the rules are usually developed by game masters for each larp in order to better fit to each particular larp’s concept. Even though Russian tabletop players do use published rule-sets, there are no larp rulebooks in Russia. Second, there are few campaigns; most larps are one-shot. Third, Russian field larps are not repeatable, but held only once.

Larp-settings are usually based on fantasy novels (by J. R. R. Tolkien, George R. R. Martin, Andrzej Sapkowski, J. K. Rowling), sci-fi novels (by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, Kir Bulychev, David Weber), historical periods (mostly European history since the Middle Ages, the Ancient world, or Russian history since the nineteenth

century), fiction books (by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Nikolai Gogol, Milorad Pavic, Boris Akunin etc.), settings of existing non-larp games (*Fallout*, *Warhammer*, *Western: Deadlands*), or just developed by game masters.

Larps with less than 100 participants are considered “small” ones, between 100 and 300 as “classic,” and more than 500 as “epic” ones. The biggest field larps were held in 2005 (“The Witcher: Something Bigger” based on Andrzej Sapkowski’s setting) and 2012 (“Black Flame” based on George R. R. Martin’s world): they gathered more than 2500 players.⁶

The community holds small and classic larps almost every week—more larps in the summer, less in the winter—and one or two epic games a year. For example, in 2014, the number of field larps per month increased from four larps in January to twenty-five in August.⁷ Field larps take place mostly in wild public land in the country or in tourist camps. Chamber larps are usually held in private apartments or, more rarely, in a rented space.

1. Preparing for the Larp

Forming a Working Group

Pre-larp preparation starts with an idea of a new larp coming to a larper’s or a group of larpers’ minds. The person with the original idea attracts other members of the larp community also interested in the subject. This is the first step of forming a “master group” (MG): the future larp designers and organizers of the event.

Sometimes new larps are organized by an existing master group with established distribution of functions, e.g. the head, larp-writers, rules developers etc. Such groups usually have their own distinctive style. Thus, the biggest Moscow-based larp-club, Golden Forests, houses their own master group, Stairway to Heaven, which mostly works on “epic” games reproducing events from some historical period. Smaller groups make “small” or “classic” games based on historical, fantasy, or sci-fi settings. These groups include JNM,

6. It is an interesting point that mega-larps with more than one thousand participants are always run by Moscow organizers, but gather Russian-speaking players from many other regions of Russia and nearby countries. Therefore, a larp of 2000 players does not mean that all of the participants are from Moscow and St. Petersburg only.

7. According to the database “Kogda-igra” (see below). I emphasize that this number characterizes Moscow and St. Petersburg only: in the whole of Russia, about 70 field larps were held in August 2014. It is also crucial to note that not all larps appear in this database. In fact, really small games (less than 50 participants) and chamber larps are hardly taken into account and are not mentioned in general sources, so we cannot even evaluate an approximate number of all larps held.

Hold’n’Gold, and Romulus and Remus in Moscow; and Bastilia, Albion and Ordinary Miracle in St. Petersburg. There are many more master groups in these regions; I only mention the most active ones.

However, it also happens that, for a small game, a larper gathers his or her own master group, no matter how experienced the gathered members are. The best games of this kind are invented by a “fresh” head master involving an experienced larp-designer, so a new point of view combines with good coordination and proven techniques. During my participant-observation, eight games were held by established master groups and five by occasionally gathered groups.

After the master group starts working on the larp development, the event is announced at larp-conventions like ZilantCon in Kazan, ComCon in Moscow, BlinCom in St. Petersburg, and other conventions. The event is also posted in blogs and in special web resources like Kogda-igra⁸ (“When is the Larp”) containing schedule of larps in all regions of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus. Organizers also create a webpage or a community in a social networking site.⁹

During this period, a boundary between larp organizers—I call them the “demiurges” of the game world—and players, or “mortal men” of the game world, is established. Since there is no strict division between players and game masters in the community, game masters in one game are players in another, and few players have never been involved in running some larp as game masters, NPCs, or in some other role.

Supervision of Player Groups

Each group of players, e.g. a group of characters belonging to one location, is supervised by a special larpwriter *siuzhetnik*. This persons serves as the “plot-writer,” who develops connections between the characters inside and outside their group and legalizes (or bans) different players’ ideas about the characters and their relations. This process is reminiscent of Tadeusz Cantwell’s reports on French larps: “Each group [of players] has an organizer attached to them to supervise its creation.”¹⁰ The preparation can take two months in the case of a small larp and up to two years in the case of a “thousand-participants larp” (*tysiatchnik*).

Usually the characters are not given to players pre-

1. Alexey Semenov, “Russian Larp History: The View from St. Petersburg,” in *Playing Reality*, edited by Elge Larsson (Stockholm: Interacting Arts, 2010), 243-249.

2. Nobody knows exactly how many larpers there are in these two communities. According to the database for larp applications allrpg.ru, there are about 8000 authorized users in Moscow City and Moscow province and about 2000 in St. Petersburg City and Leningrad province. (I am grateful to Leonid Tsarev for this information). I am not sure if these figures are representative enough, but there is no source that would be more valid. We hope that the web project “LARP Census” will help us to know more, even though the questionnaire does not distinguish between different larp communities within a country.

It is difficult to evaluate changes in the number of larpers in recent years; we do not even know whether the number goes up or down. It is also crucial to note that most of the larpers of these regions do not belong to any larp club or society, so it is quite impossible to count them all.

3. Noelie Rodriguez and Alan Ryave, *Systematic Self-Observation* (London: Sage, 2002).

4. Goffman, Erving. *Frame Analysis: An Essay in the Organization of Experience*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974.

5. Olga Vorobyeva, *Frame-switching in Live-Action Role-playing Games: Maintaining the Coordinated Social Reality* (Thesis, European University at St. Petersburg, 2014). (In Russian).

8. Calendar of Russian Larps: [http://kogda-igra.ru/ calendar of Russian larps](http://kogda-igra.ru/calendar)

9. Usually LiveJournal or the Russian social networking site vk.com is used.

10. Tadeusz Cantwell, “Ten Comparisons Between UK LRP and French GN,” in *Larp, the Universe, and Everything*, edited by Matthijs Holter, Eirik Fatland, and Even Tømte (Oslo: Knutepunkt, 2009), 43-54.

pared by larpwriters without player involvement.¹¹ There is no division between the larpwriters writing a script before the larp and organizers who run the larp on the playground, so normally, the same larpwriter will be the group's organizer and game master—*regional'shchik*, or “master of the region”—who supports the development of action during the larp.

Communication with GMs

This character development is mostly realized via Internet messengers, e-mail, and specialized web-based services.¹² Such services first appeared some four years ago, and are becoming more and more popular in the community as tools for cooperation between game masters and players and as instruments for team work inside the master group. Organizers also regularly—every month or week—arrange pre-larp meetings (*strelka*) in some café or other public space where players can choose a character, discuss their characters with game masters face-to-face, hand in their participation fee,¹³ etc. This is not like the kinds of workshops held in preparation for Nordic larps. There are no organized exercises; instead, the *strelka* feature informal communication.

Players' Preparation

A short preparatory larp by a group of players called *sygrovka*, or team-building training, can be run about a month before the main larp and is intended to represent an important event or daily life of the characters. Unlike Nordic workshops,¹⁴ this event develops continuously, not as a series of shots, and there are no exercises or training sessions. All the communication during the event is done by characters, not their players. The players' aim of this mini-larp is to get acquainted with their partners, to try out their own characters, and to elaborate upon characters' relationships.

.....
11. However, there are some proponents of the “all-inclusive” approach among famous game masters, namely, Milena Tyrenko (St. Petersburg) and Andrew “Askold” Sapozhnikov (Moscow).

12. <http://allrpg.info>, <http://rpgdb.ru/>

13. The participation fee depends on the place of larp running and the time before the game; it increases when getting nearer. Fees for larps in the woods start from about \$24, playing in a tourist camp costs from \$50. It includes accommodation (if needed), expenses of printing, devices, costumes, props etc. Organizers do not get a profit (as larps are not commercial) and even have some budget deficits often

14. When speaking about Nordic workshops in this case, I mean the Nordic freeform chamber larps held at the conventions where I engaged in participant-observation: Knutpunkt 2014 (Sweden) and the Minsk Larp Festival, held by followers of Nordic tradition (Belarus, 2014).

During the preparation period, players engage in several activities. They develop the characters, their history, and their psychology. They read inspiring books and watch films to enrich their understanding of the setting or historical period. They rehearse martial arts if arms are supposed to be used and also prepare the costumes and artifacts used by their characters, e.g. armory, weapons, personal belongings, dishes, furniture, jewelry etc.

Since there is no mass production of costumes or armory in Russia, many larpers sew costumes themselves, or else their clothing, armory, weapons, leather, wooden items, and jewelry are bought from craftsmen. In the absence of the mass production of larp-stuff, these goods are more expensive, but more unique. Minimal requirements for the costume are represented by the “five steps principle”: if a person standing five steps away can recognize the costume as appropriate for the setting—that means absence of remarkable non-game world elements (jeans, sport shoes, zippers etc.)—the costume is acceptable. Most of the costumes would meet much more than this minimal requirement, however.

Participating in a larp can require some skills from the players, particularly in archery, swordcraft, gun work, and scouting. As exotic as fighting may be conceived, still it involves certain physical skills. For example, in the *Harry Potter* larp campaign *Hogwarts Seasons* (2005-2011), charms were represented by a system of certain dancing movements, which players had to memorize beforehand and perform when charms were cast. Musicians are required to be able to play and sing, dancers to dance, kings to organize and manage, but most parts of other in-game abilities are represented by meta-game techniques not requiring special skills.

Interfaces with the Outer World

As there are few private playgrounds in Russia. Field larps are mostly held in wild public land, in tourist facilities, summer camps, or rented summer houses. Game masters have to present their activity to local authorities and the playground owners (if they exist). Larpers are usually seen as “freaks” in Russian society and game masters tend to announce the larp as something like an “interactive drama event,” “corporate team-building exercise,” or “youth festival.”

During the first decade of larping in Russia, there was not such a problem at all. However, in 2006, a large, Tolkien-based larp called *The Last Alliance* was ruined before it began. The players were pushed out of the woods by police because they had not received approval from local authorities for the use of public land for the event; no one had thought they were supposed to get this approval. Since then, the larp community faced the necessity of presenting their hobby to outsiders in some understandable way, which means, among other things, that the image of the larp community in the mass media



Left: An Elven 3-level watchtower constructed of wood and covered with fabric: an example of “*stroyak*” prepared in a forest before the larp. Field larp: *The Second Age* (2010), based on *The Silmarillion* by J. R. R. Tolkien, Tver' region. Photo by Yekaterina Aleshinskaya.

Right: Diegetic dance lesson in a historical larp about the beginning of the twentieth century in Russia. All participants are dressed in boarding school uniforms. Pavilion larp: *Smolny Boarding School: In the Dawn of Life* (2014), Kaluga region. Photo by Xenia “Ksurr.”

appeared to be very important. Game masters usually do not like when journalists appear at their larps, but have developed strategies of dealing with them with what they consider minimal harm for the larp and the image of community.¹⁵ Some game masters give interviews to the media and appear on TV so as to present roleplaying games to the broader audience.¹⁶

Using public forests for larps is free; renting a tourist camp costs from around \$12 per person per day. Renting a private forest playground starts from \$5 per person per day,¹⁷ which is the price of the most popular private playground, “Extreme Play” in the Moscow province, a forested area without any construction.

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15. For these strategies, see Elena Kareva's article, “A Journalist Descended Upon You” (2013).

16. Among the popularizers I can name, Moscow businessman Vladimir “Nuci” Molodykh, the head master of the Stairway to Heaven group; one of the first Russian larpers, Vyatcheslav “dyadya Slava” Rozhkov; sociological researcher Roman Pustovoit; and others.

17. A text conversation with Moscow game master Andrew “Askold” Sapozhnikov.

2. On the Playground Before the Larp

Symbolic Dividing of the Space

In Russia, there are no special villages or buildings for larps like those existing in Scandinavia and other places. Preparation of the playground in the case of a camp larp (also called “pavilion larp”) involves the decoration and symbolic division of the space, whereas construction of the “buildings” themselves is not usual. Here, we dwell upon the practices of setting a “field larp” in a place where there are no buildings.

Preparation of the playground starts a week (or less) before the larp, depending on the scale of the event. The organizers divide the playground (“polygon”), mark space for each group of players (“lokatsia”) and surround the playground with barrier tape and warnings like, “Because of a youth festival, we do not recommend your presence on this territory for the sake of your safety.” Game masters also arrange a special location (“*masterka*”) for game masters and NPCs to work and rest.

Constructing Props

Some players take part in the constructing of the props (the process is called “*stroyak*”—literally “construction”) with special fabrics and wood. They dig



Survivors struggling against zombies. All participants wear protective glasses, as playing involves both foam hand-made weapons (seen here) and shotguns. Field larp: *Zombie: the Amnesia* (2012), Moscow region. Photo by Irma “Stryga.”

latrines,¹⁸ do wiring, and other necessary work. Props are rather conventionalized compared to the costumes, which mostly look more real: a field can represent the sea, wooden poles covered with fabric can represent a fortress or a palace. Inside a building, there is always some work needed to achieve an acceptable stylization of space in order to transform it into the game setting, so that a group of one-storied log cabins could represent the castle of Hogwarts or for a former factory building to become a submarine.

Participating in construction works is by no means obligatory, but it is regarded as an expression of community identity, which is why there are always some players involved. During preparatory works, participants who meet for the first time get acquainted with each other while being out-of-character, thus contributing to a background for their characters' relationships. At the same time, the egalitarian nature of cooperation in prop construction emphasizes the conventionality of the in-game hierarchy; here, the king, is installing the walls of his future palace together with his future vassals. As soon as the game starts, symbolic borders will arise, and constructing the props is an opportunity to see all the locations without negotiation access rights within the game world.

Playground's Structure

The playground houses not only “in-game zones” where the characters live; there is also a *masterka*, or territory for game masters and NPCs, a sanitary zone with toilets, and sometimes also a special out-of-game camp (“players’ zone”), with players’ tents and their belongings like backpacks, sleeping bags, etc. Some master groups tend to integrate the “players’ zone”

18. Portable toilets are used very rarely in a forest, so normally it is just a hole in the ground in the distance from the playing territory screened off with fabric.

into the “in-game zone,” so that cooking, eating, and sleeping take place in-game.

Ceremonies of Passage

Just before the game when the props are ready there are two symbolic ceremonies that separate participants’ daily life and the game world. These are character approvals by GMs (“*chipovka*”) and presentation of characters to each other (“parade”).

The term *chipovka* is derived from *chip*—a tag attached to in-game weapons approved for using. The proceeding involves characters’ features and items being inspected and approved by game-masters. As a result the player is provided with in-game items like money or ammunition and a meta-game identity card—colloquially referred to as *ausweiss*¹⁹—with information on player and character names, in-game status, location, skills, and characteristics. Weapons, armory, and magic artifacts are submitted for approval, without which they and also the character’s features are “illegal,” even if they were already discussed at a preliminary stage. The pragmatic value of the process is evident in case of weapons and their out-of-game safety: a special “battle-master” (a marshal who is responsible for the supervision of rules accomplishments in battles and fighting) checks whether arrows, swords, or shotguns are safe enough. For English larps, a similar procedure has been described: “Before a player can join a game, their weapons and armory are examined by a qualified weapons tester. Any item found to be unsafe cannot be used in-game.”²⁰ Outside weaponry, the procedure is more symbolic than pragmatic.

Speaking of weapons, I should describe the most common types. As I mentioned before, there is no mass production of weapons in Russia, so most players or craftsmen make items themselves. The arrows are wooden with foam heads 50mm (2 inches) in diameter (in the past, 30 mm was more common). The most widespread material for swords is textolite, while the use of metal swords, such as duralumin or steel, has become a thing of the past. Any kind of sword for larp is never sharpened. The foam swords common in Western communities were used occasionally in recent games, but most Russian larpers look down upon them because of their flexibility and high price compared with traditional

19. In the Soviet movies where action took place during World War II, this was the word the Germans used for a permit granting access to the right of free transit in certain restricted area.

20. Tadeusz Cantwell, “Ten Comparisons Between UK LRP and French GN,” in *Larp, the Universe, and Everything*, edited by Matthijs Holter, Eirik Fatland, and Even Tømte (Oslo: Knutepunkt, 2009), 43-54.



Police (NPCs) attacking hippies trying to push them out of their camp. Some hippies try to persuade the police to stop with flowers, while others fight. Batons are made by participants of duralumin and foam. NPCs use harmless smoke pellets. The photo is stylized as a picture of *Life* magazine. Field larp: *Saint Summer* (2014), Moscow region. Photo by Anatoly Kazakov.

textolite swords.²¹ Firearms require 6mm ammunition; strike ball weapons or toy guns like Nerf are usually used. Some specific larps use laser-tag guns. I should note that injuries caused by larp weapons are quite rare, usually no more than a few bone fissures each year. Throughout the history of Russian larp, there were one or two cases of eye injuries; recently, any larp with firearms requires strike ball protection glasses.²²

The participant “parade” is another ceremonial act giving people access into the game world. Players are in costumes, but the game is not yet here. Game masters, core characters, and locations of the game are introduced, and the most important rules and techniques are once more explained. Players use this event as a possibility to greet friends and to show their brand-new costumes and make-ups while they are not yet in-character. After the ceremony, they will leave the gathering place as characters, not players. This ceremony is an interesting case of ambivalence between in-game and out-of-game states: players already look like characters, but behave as members of a larp community. At the end of the parade, the game master announces the start of the larp.

Step into the “Magic Circle”

In the Norwegian larp tradition, there are some symbolic ways of entering the diegetic frame like “a countdown sequence followed... [at] the count of ‘one,’

21. It is interesting that the word pronounced as “larp” (ларп) for a Russian larper means a foam sword, not a role-playing game. It happened because the acronym reached Russian communities as a term for Western foam swords (“larp sword” reduced to simply “larp”).

22. I would like to acknowledge an engineer of electronic devices for larps, Gennady “Kreyl” Kruglov (Moscow), for consulting me in this complicated issue of larp weapons.



Players are heading to the opening parade, already looking like a troop. Field larp: *The XVI Century: A Step to Immortality* (2009), Tver’ region. Photo by Valeria Tarasova.

the players were in-frame.”²³ In the Russian tradition, there are no such rituals, but pre-planned in-game events opening the larp can take place: a school party, a city festival, a military parade, etc. depending on the setting. Such events facilitate entering the “magic circle”; during them players set their mind on the game world and start playing their individual plots.

When participants begin playing before the parade, it causes strange situations like meeting between an in-character and an out-of-character player or a question like “Are we already playing or not?”

According to my database, there are some specific kinds of frame-switching in the beginning of a larp caused by the lack of immersion and difficulties with entering the game world:

1. When players are not immersed enough into their characters, they afford themselves to maintain out-of-character talks about their daily life, especially if they have not met during the preparation time and want to socialize;
2. In the beginning, players perceive much more references to previous games and characters when they see something connected with their previous larps;
3. Players can be so tired after the construction work that they do not feel ready for playing or they cannot switch into playing for some other reason;
4. Players are not yet accustomed to speak in their characters’ manner and involuntarily use their

23. Geir Tore Brenne, *Making and Maintaining Frames: A Study of Metacommunication in Laiv Play* (Thesis, University of Oslo, 2005).

Caption: A game master on *masterka* sitting on an electric power generator; behind him, walkie-talkies are recharging. He wears camouflage and has a green ribbon as a marker of “non-character.” Field larp: *There Is a Craft* (2013) based on *The Witcher* by A. Sapkowski (2013), Moscow region. Photo by Lilia “Lilsla” Barladyan.



Caption: Emperor’s speech in the Roman circus. Roman citizens are sitting on the grandstands; slaves are watching from under the seats through the fabric. The circus is constructed of metal carcass, wood, and fabric before the larp. Field larp: *Caligula: The Empire of the Impossible* (2014), Moscow region. Photo by Natalia Klimenko.



- regular everyday speech style. Since there is no tradition to use badges with characters’ names, participants often forget each other’s in-game names;
- As players are not yet accustomed to game techniques, it takes much more time to perform certain in-game activities;
 - Early in the game, it is more possible to find something that remained unfinished during the preparation stage, and players have to get it ready or adjust it during the larp;
 - Some players are late for the larp, so they hurry across the playground in daily clothes with their backpacks, greet their friends, and solve their problems with accommodation.

Thus, the reasons are many for breaking the diegetic frame at the beginning of the larp. The connection to daily life and to previous larp experience is still stronger than to the game world, game rules and the game world have not become something that goes without saying, and there might be technical problems at the start.

3. Being Out of Diegetic Frame During the Larp

The Russian larp community declares nonstop playing without dropping out of character as strongly recommended behavior. Many rule-sets emphasize obligatory continuity of the playing process and the game world: e.g. “Playing time is round-the-clock” (from the historical larp *1924*, 2013), “All events, round-the-clock are in-game ones” (from the fantasy larp *Deathly Hallows* based on Rowling’s books, 2013), “Your playing should be *serious and continuous*. Dropping out of character, out-of-game

talks, discussing the rules, and mentioning game mechanics during the larp are *strictly prohibited*” (from the fantasy larp *There Is a Craft* based on Sapkowski’s *The Witcher*, 2013), etc. However, shifting between the diegetic frame and the game frame²⁴ during a larp is inevitable, so participants use certain symbolic instruments for marking their absence in the diegesis.

Players use two common visual signs that are used during any Russian larp for demonstrating their out-of-character state. The first is arms crossed above the player’s head. It is used to occasionally exit the game to problem solve, consult with game masters, etc. Another common sign is a white ribbon around a player’s head—it is used during longstanding absence of the person out-of-game, e.g. in case of character death. Some larps develop their own additional signs of absence like an opened umbrella in a larp campaign *Hogwarts Seasons* (2005-2011), which was inherited by other “Harry Potter” larps.

If the character exists in the game world, but the player needs to say something to another player out-of-character, he or she makes a “play-off” sign with the hands (the same as in football) or uses a verbal marker of “out-of-game” (“*po zhizni*”). There is no practice of common safe words like “cut” and “break” that are used in Nordic larps.²⁵ The marker *po zhizni* is used not only for physical or psychological problem solving, but for any reason, so it is not only about safety.

Besides the players, there are also organizers, referees, and marshals on the playground. If they do not represent characters, they also use some visual signs of their permanent absence in the diegesis: a ribbon of

24. Gary Alan Fine. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

25. Brenne.

a certain color, a badge, a scarf, etc., depending on the rules. Besides these symbols, marshals usually wear street clothes or camouflage, and have a walkie-talkie for connecting with other game masters.

Therefore, during the playing process, presence in the game world is unmarked, and any absence, whether that of players or game masters, requires a special symbol. Unlike Nordic freeform larps, players do not use out-of-game badges with character names, except for settings that require such badges as a feature of the diegesis, like wooden plates with the names of a slave and their owner in *Caligula: The Empire of the Impossible* (2014), a larp about the Roman Empire.

4. Leaving the “Magic Circle” *Land of Death*

There are two ways to leave the “magic circle” of the game in Russian larps: an individual one in the case of permanent character death before the larp’s end and a group exit at the end of the larp. Russian larps have never forbidden permanent character death as some traditions have, so death is an important part of a larp. According to the rules of the game, a character can be killed, poisoned etc. After his or her death, the player usually goes to a special game location: “*mertvyatnik*,” literally meaning “Land of Death.” It is a really important larp technique in Russia that “can help players focus on the meanings and ideas consid-

ered essential for the larp.”²⁶ Therefore, while in the American discourse, there is discussion on whether a larp really needs permanent character death,²⁷ in Russia, character death is turned into a meaningful process that sometimes can change the whole perception of the larp in a player’s eyes. I will not re-write the survey of the different kinds of the Lands of Death from the brilliant case-descriptive paper by Fedoseev and Trubetskaya, but I will sum up this unique technique that sometimes looks like a larp inside a larp.

The Land of Death is a special game zone on the playground for player de-roleing—getting out-of-character and out of the game world. Events and processes in the Land of Death are dedicated to acceptance of the fact of the character’s death, debriefing, and reflection on the meanings of the larp. The concept of the Land of Death is ambiguous. On the one hand, it is definitely an in-game location, meaning the interaction between participants is framed as an in-game one, but the game world in it totally differs from the world of the rest of the larp. Roughly speaking, the Land of Death can be defined as a specific kind of blackbox: a place on the playground where linearity of the plot and/or the setting breaks.²⁸ There is a

26. Alexey Fedoseev and Diana Trubetskaya, “Life After Death,” in *Crossing Physical Borders*, edited by Karete Jacobsen Meland and Katrine Øverlie Sveta, 92-98. Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2013. http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/4/4d/2013_Crossing_Physical_Borders.pdf

27. David B. Williams, “Challenging Sacred Cows: Level Gaps, Permanent Character Death, and Linear Plot,” in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Los Angeles, CA: WyrdCon, 2013), 8-13.

28. Yaraslau I. Kot, “Nordic-Russian Larp Dictionary,” in *The Cutting Edge of Nordic Larp*, edited by Jon Back (Denmark: Knutpunkt, 2014), 161-168.

great variety of Land of Death scenarios, but most of them include the following components. NPCs perform gods, judges, remote descendants, accidental confidants etc. depending on the main setting; who speak to the players about their dead characters, the characters' lives, feelings, experiences and values (psychological reflection); and who strongly change or broaden the perspective of the players' perception (distance). For example players can be asked to act out their characters' stories on the stage; answer questions from a "celestial judge" or a barman in a pub; or express and reflect the characters through a letter, a song, a fairy-tale, an image, etc.

After the Land of Death, a player can be offered a new character if the GMs need someone particular and it fits the player. If a player is not eager to immerse into a new role, he or she can help GMs as an NPC or as a technical supporter. Such players are also free to stay in the out-of-game camp or go home.

Resolution is Coming

The final part of a larp also has its common particularities no matter what genre it is. First of all, participants are tired and nervous at the same time, as a larp usually lasts 2-3 days without out-of-game time. It can cause over-immersion when a player loses the border between diegetic and non-diegetic frame or, alternatively, a participant drops out-of-character because of some trigger, such as being too stressed out. Also weariness can diminish acting, especially with players that are not very interested in character immersion.

Secondly, awareness of the game's end causes players to force their character plots and to rush in finishing them. It causes gamist players to start "winning" the larp and even cheating, forgetting about characters' motivations. The similarity between the current plot and previous larps can also be a problem; the participant can lose interest in the plot because he or she has already experienced it before in a similar way.

Thirdly, by the end of a larp, there are more and more players who have left the game world for some reason, e.g. the character died, travelled away etc. Normally, such participants are asked to stay in non-game zones if they do not get a new character, but in fact, many of them are present at the playground with white ribbons on their foreheads observing the game or even speaking, which distracts in-character participants. Different exit times from the game world is also a problem, as I explain below.

Group Closing Brackets

There are two main ways to end a larp: an announcement by GMs or the larp's fading. These are "sudden death" and "choose the red button" ways according to

a classification by Ada Fredelius.²⁹ The first one is used quite rarely, unlike in the Swedish and Norwegian traditions—only in the case of some common final event—e.g. the last battle, a ball or festival, etc.—where all the players take part. In these cases, a GM announces the end of the larp so it is clear to everyone.

However, most larps do not have such an event because of many plot lines and sub-plots, so it is quite impossible to gather all the characters in one place by a certain time. Therefore, the larp "fades out" on Saturday night, as most larps start at Thursday or Friday evening and finish on Saturday night, and the plot-lines of different characters end. On the one hand, it is a "soft" way of getting out-of-character because the game is not broken from the outside, but this kind of ending produces a "twilight zone"³⁰ when a player is not sure whether or not people around him or her are still playing. It causes certain difficulties, such as the absence of a character in the game world when his or her player has already quit the game, yet the character may be necessary for some other players who are still in-game. Questions like "are you still playing?" are very common during this period.

De-roleing

Having finished their plotlines, players gather around fires if the larp takes place in the woods or in rooms to discuss character events, share emotions, clear up puzzles and quests, thank partners, and reflect upon the game in general for themselves. Physical contact is very important during this process; players hug each other with great pleasure reconstructing egalitarian relationships inside the larp community and cancelling the hierarchic or even hostile ones that existed during the game between characters.

This event is as ambiguous as the "opening parade," as players are still in the game space and wearing characters' costumes, but their communication is already out-of-character, at least on the meta-game level. The characters are still in present perfect, not in past simple. This process is very important; if a player has to leave the playground just after the larp without post-game interaction, he or she usually has some difficulty with sensing the game's end, separating character's feelings and relationships from the player's, and transforming larp experience into daily life. This can result in negative consequences like *bleed-out*, which "occurs when the game influences

29. Ada Fredelius, "To Live Happily Ever After: Techniques for Ending a Larp," in *Role, Play, Art. Collected Experience of Role-Playing*, edited by Thorbiörn Fritzson & Tobias Wrigstad (Stockholm: Foreningen Knutpunkt, 2006), 43-46.

30. Fredelius.



Players applauding GMs in a "closing parade." Pavilion larp: *To Kill a Dragon* (2013), Kaluga region. Photo by Anatoly Kazakov.

players despite the protective framing."³¹ Bleed-out can occur during post-larp frustration or depression; over-identification with the character; out-of-character conflicts caused by in-game conflicts or competition; and other types described by Bowman.³² Certainly, the lack of post-larp interaction is not the only reason for these effects, but an important one.

There are no common rituals for getting out-of-character after the larp in the Russian community. I have information about particular ceremonies like the "round chalice," when all players sit in a circle and pass a bowl of alcohol to each other, thanking their characters for the game, symbolically refusing characters' names, and accepting their out-of-character ones. A similar process is described as the first step leading to debrief.³³ However, this ceremony is not common among Russian larpers and is usually used by some certain sub-communities like larp-club Tirion in Moscow.

A formal debrief as defined by Eirik Fatland is "a structured conversation amongst players about their larp experience, usually held immediately after a larp"³⁴ and is also not common in this community. Sometimes GMs hold a kind of a formal debrief after some psychologically stressful larps with a few players, but it mostly consists of the GMs disclosing all the mysteries, answering players' questions about general plot lines, and getting feedback about the game from players.

31. Markus Montola, "The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-playing," in *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2010: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, Players*, 2010.

32. Sarah Lynne Bowman, "Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013): 4-25.

33. Lizzie Stark, "How to Run a Debrief," *Leaving Mundania: Inside the World of Larp*, last modified December, 2013. <http://leavingmundania.com/2013/12/01/run-post-larp-debrief/>

34. Eirik Fatland, "Debriefing Intense Larps 101," *The Larpwright*, last modified July, 2013. <http://larpwright.efatland.com/?p=384>

Therefore, it is in fact a structured conversation between organizers and players about the larp, but not about the players' feelings and experiences.

For example, such conversations took place after *Zombies: the Amnesia* (2012), where almost all characters died in a post-apocalyptic world, and after the dystopian *To Kill a Dragon* (2013), where a pressing totalitarian setting appeared to be a purgatory and this information was hidden from both players and characters until the end of the larp. Even without explicating players' experience, this discussion was still very important and helpful because it broadened the players' perspective from their individual larp tragedies to the larger picture. Both games had less than 100 participants, so it was possible to discuss subjects that concerned all players, not just some of them.

There is also a custom called a "closing parade," when all organizers and players gather to thank each other for the game. This ceremony is more widespread than the conversation described above and it does not depend on the size of the larp. For example, such parades took place both after historical larp *Smolny Boarding School: On the Dawn of Life* (2014) with 30 participants, and after the fantasy larp *The Witcher: The Big Game* (2014) with over 500 players. The ceremony is usually much shorter than the "opening parade" and consists of presenting the organizers to the players for mutual acknowledgement. In the case of post-larp conversations (see above) the closing parade is an integral part.

After that, informal communication between players usually occurs while wandering from one group around the fire to another, hugging everyone, and consuming alcohol. Sometimes GMs also join them, but as egalitarian interlocutors, not moderators. By Sunday morning, players go to sleep one by one.

Deconstruction

Sunday is the day to deconstruct props and leave. Participants wake up in the afternoon and start to clean up the playground and pack their bags. The process of deconstructing props is not only a pragmatic, but a

highly symbolic act. It forms the last border between the “magic circle,” which is already in the past, not in present perfect, and daily life. The space becomes normal again. Clothes are also out-of-character; nothing resembles the previous state of the place. Players continue sharing experiences and hugging each other during the process.

Participants usually leave the playground at different times and the GMs leave last to make sure the playground is in order.

5. After Returning Home

Right after the larp there are dozens of reports and acknowledgements made via the Internet, especially on players’ blogs and the larp’s blog. The structure of an acknowledgement is usually as follows: first, a player thanks the GMs for making the larp, then, their personal co-players, and then, all players of the larp in general “for making this world real and natural.”

There are different kinds of reports, both in-character (without player’s remarks) and out-of-character (from the player’s point of view). Writing a report helps a player to structure in-game events and to turn it into a linear narrative with the players’ characters as the protagonist. Therefore, it is a way of reflecting and forming the image of the larp in players’ minds. Russian larpers also feel the post-larp experience as it is described by Munthe-Kaas (2013): it is “an experience that ‘others don’t and can’t understand,’ ‘a need to talk to those who do (other players)’ and ‘a need to get together physically with other players.’”³⁵

About a week later, the stream of reports and acknowledgements decreases and comes to an end soon. If the larp was really impressive, there is a possibility of a “second wave” of creative reflection: pictures, songs and poems, photo-sets, texts-sequels, and sometimes even board games inspired by the larp. For example, the larp campaign *Hogwarts Seasons* inspired the players to publish a tarot deck depicting their characters and in-game events and symbols. A player of *There Is a Craft* painted some portraits of characters that were used for designing cards in a board game developed by the GMs and players based on this larp.

Players can also demonstrate loyalty to their favorite larps during community events like conventions: they put on their characters’ costumes and have post-larp meetings. It helps them to demonstrate and maintain group identity based on participating in a certain larp.

General reflection of the larp community crystallizes during the annual larp awards held by some conventions, the most famous one being *The Golden Cube* in the

35. Peter Munthe-Kaas, “Post-Larp,” Munthe-Kaas.dk/blog, last modified October, 2013. <http://munthe-kaas.dk/blog/?tag=post-larp>

Glossary

Lokatsia (location): a group of players and their place on the playground.

Masterka (masters’ place): a special zone on the playground for game masters.

Mertvyatnik (Land of Death): a special blackbox zone for players after their characters’ permanent death for safely getting out-of-character and understanding the idea of the larp.

Parade: a meeting of all players before and after the start of the larp in costumes, but out-of-character.

Polygon: a playground.

Regional’schik (regional master): a master-supervisor for a certain group of players.

Siuzhetnik (plot-writer): a larpwriter. There are general ones and “regional” ones, who are attached to certain groups of players.

Strelka (pre-larp meeting): a meeting between masters and players to discuss the characters.

Stroyak (construction): making props on the playground before the larp.

Sygrovka (pre-larp playing): a possible small larp for trying on the characters.

Chipovka (approving): a process of approving character’s skills and belongings before the larp.

ComCon convention in Moscow. Any player can nominate a larp as “the best classic (small, epic) larp of the year,” “the best rules,” “the best pre-larp work,” “the most important innovations,” etc. Such events help to reflect upon and evaluate all the larp processes during the year and to figure out the most important achievements in larp practice. Therefore, conventions are the first and the last stage of the larp’s life cycle.

Summary

In this paper, I demonstrated processes of building borders between daily life and the “magic circle” of game. Entering a larp requires a lot of preparation beforehand, such as developing rules and plots, elaborating characters, learning skills, the preparation of the playground. Larp preparation also involves some symbolic acts for dividing the in-game state and the daily state, such as the opening parade and “chipovka.” Border states at the beginning and the end of larp are characterized by special types of frame-breaking. Leaving the game differs between individuals leaving using the Land of Death technique and the group leaving at the official end of a certain larp. Some means for preventing bleed-out and constructing symbolic borders are used, such as a closing parade and informal

group conversation.

Finally, I hope this paper will contribute the global larp conversation and help to introduce the enormous tradition of Russian larp knowledge into international use. Very few articles about the Russian larp tradition are available in English—mainly by Alexey Fedoseev, Yaraslau Kot and others—so, I hope this paper will become another bridge between Russian and English articles on larps.

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Links

- Databases for applications to larps: <http://allrpg.info>, <http://rpgdb.ru/>
- All Russian schedule of larps: <http://kogda-igra.ru/>
- BlinCom, a convention in St. Petersburg: <https://vk.com/blincom>
- ComCon, a convention in Moscow: <http://comcon.su/>
- ZilantCon, the oldest Russian convention in Kazan (since 1991): <http://zilant.konvent.ru/>

Olga Vorobyeva is a Ph.D. student in Cultural Anthropology at the European University at St. Petersburg and has larped since 2008. She is one of the few academic researchers of larp in Russia, writing, translating, and editing articles on larp in Russian. Vorobyeva defended her Masters thesis on frame switching in Russian larps in 2014. Her current work focuses on the body and embodiment of larpers in-game and their characters. Vorobyeva presents the results of her research at role-playing conventions in Russia and abroad (e.g. Knutpunkt). She participates in field larps in Central Russia, preferring historical larps on European and Russian history, as well as fantasy ones.



Level Up: Guys, We Need to Talk

Peter Woodworth

A Community Apart

I’ve been a gamer for thirty years. I started playing tabletop RPGs when I was in first grade and I’m in my mid-30s now. I actually have trouble remembering a time in my life when I wasn’t reading one game book or another. So, while I may not be able to wax nostalgic about the glory days when the only way you got to play *Dungeons & Dragons* was by hanging out with Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax, I do have a pretty good vertical slice of what gaming has been like in my lifetime. When I was a kid, it really was largely a boys’ club. Yes, there were female gamers, but in my experience they were a tiny minority. I knew two growing up, for example, as compared to the dozens of male gamers I knew back then.

Around the time I turned fourteen or so—and started playing more White Wolf games and less *D&D*, as it happens—suddenly, there were a lot of girls in my gaming group. While we didn’t poll the group exactly, there were comments from some of my friends to the effect that women felt they were better represented in White Wolf’s horror universe than in the high fantasy world of *D&D*. Flipping through the artwork available in the books at the time sadly proves the point; in *D&D* books of the time, most female characters depicted look like little more than scantily dressed afterthoughts or were clad in male fantasy “bikini mail” style outfits.

Alternately, while the White Wolf books still featured beautiful and sometimes sexualized female characters, they were far more often depicted as tough, powerful, and autonomous individuals in their own right. Perhaps this is why when we organized our first high school LARP, the ratio was just about even. While the ratio still fluctuates somewhat depending on which gaming subgenre you happen to belong to, it has slowly but steadily improved since then.

I fully recognize that my anecdotal experience isn’t sociological data. However, I think it’s still significant, in the anecdotal if not the scientific sense of the term. In the course of my gaming career, I’ve been all over the country, attended dozens of conventions, worked for several prominent game companies, and been involved in everything from larps to tabletop campaigns to CCG tournaments to board game societies. This involvement makes it even more infuriating that recently it seems to have become fashionable in mainstream media outlets to talk about women in geek culture as though they were some newly discovered species. Any

gamer who’s been in the hobby for more than even a couple years could tell you this simply isn’t so.

Instead, I suspect it’s more like “cultural critical mass” is being mistaken for “new arrivals”—that is, there are finally enough women in geek culture willing to speak up about some of their inequities that they’re making headlines. To put it more plainly, there are now enough women who are tired of being told to put up with the same sexist nonsense and are speaking up that they’re finally being noticed.

Yet women have been here for a long time, and acting as if they’re some sort of new phenomenon is in equal parts patronizing and unproductive. It’s a way to avoid dealing with gender issues by pretending that women are something new and unexpected. In reality, they’ve been around for a while and there was simply a lot of subcultural inertia holding them back.

Before I go any further, I wanted to acknowledge the fact that a lot of this article contains gender binary language. This is not intended as a slight against or a dismissal of transgender, genderqueer, or other gamers who do not adhere to the traditional gender binary structure, many of whom have similar experiences of alienation and harassment in the gaming community. My sympathies go out to anyone who has been made to feel this way, and I hope that shedding light on problem areas will help raise community standards for everyone.

In the end, though, the article is written this way because quite honestly that is experience base that I have. While I do have gamer friends who fit these other descriptions, on the whole, I do not feel comfortable talking about populations about which I am not as knowledgeable. That may seem a poor excuse, but I felt it was a lot better than trying to claim a familiarity of experience that isn’t genuine.

That said, it’s time to talk about some of the subcultural problem areas that have been plaguing gamers for far too long.

Perception and Entitlement

There are many who earn money working gaming conventions, whether in costuming or otherwise. I’m not so naive that I don’t understand the notion of “sex sells” and its utility in the advertising world. However, that still doesn’t excuse some of the reactions I’ve seen

in these spaces. While members of our culture may deem that skimpy outfits at a gaming convention grants special license to act in negative ways towards those wearing them, the rest of us don’t have to follow that line of thinking.

I also want to take a moment to address sex positivity in this equation, because it merits discussion. I am in no way suggesting that women need to cover up or avoid dressing in ways that might be construed as “provocative.” I think that everyone should be free to dress in a way that makes them feel awesome—it’s the harassers that need to be shut down. Any time someone thinks about working a booth or doing cosplay, but discards the idea because they don’t want to deal with all the unwelcome attention they feel, that’s a loss for all of us.

Geek culture prides itself on being progressive and forward-thinking, and yet at every single one of the gaming conventions I’ve attended in my lifetime, I’ve either heard or seen a man be completely inappropriate toward so-called “booth babes.” These incidents are so prevalent that most men don’t even notice them unless they specifically listen for them. I guarantee you, though, that the women around them register and remember these incidents every time they occur. From GenCon to Wizard World, I’ve watched guys do everything from drop things just to get a woman to pick them up (and on one occasion take a picture while she did) to badger a woman for her number to “jokingly” ask a woman if they could come by her room to “party” later.

Even worse, many men at these conventions not only expect to be greeted with an array of nearly-nude women for their camera phone gratification, but also are completely unembarrassed about the kind of entitled behavior it brings out in them. They leer, they “accidentally” cop a feel while setting up a photo, and they make crude jokes and sexist comments. When confronted, their defense is often a watered-down version of the “she dressed like she was asking for it” excuse—that by dressing in a certain fashion, women are inviting attention, which really equates to harassment. I find it hard to believe this is even still an issue, and yet, it comes up time and again.

At Wizard World in Philadelphia, I heard one man loudly talk to his friend in clinical and exhaustive detail about everything that was right and wrong with the body of a girl he’d just cuddled up with for a photo at a publisher’s booth. The woman from the photo was still standing about three feet away, trying her best to smile and ignore it. What was even worse was what she said when I apologized to her on behalf of my gender. She said, “It’s okay. I hear that sort of thing all the time.”

We can do better than this. I’m not so naïve as to think that we’ll be able to de-sexualize our advertising, but we, as a culture, at least can agree that we’ll call people on it when they’re engaging in this kind of behavior. I realize that some people will respond with,

“This is just the way conventions work. No one’s forcing the women to do it.” My response is to ask them, “How is that supposed to make it better?” I can’t be the only one who finds it disturbing that many geek cons still pander to the boys in the crowd with scantily-dressed women. I can’t be the only one who finds it disturbing that the bad behavior of these men is deemed as excusable simply due to the fact that companies are using booth babes in the first place.

“If they didn’t want us to look, then they wouldn’t have booth babes in the first place” is a common phrase that I’ve heard. However, it’s about as much of an excuse as saying it was okay to steal because employees left the tip jar right out on the counter where anyone could grab it. Just because you can see something doesn’t mean that it’s yours.

The response to this problem requires that people act like decent human beings and demand that conventions, tournaments, and other places where members of our culture gather uphold those same standards. While it is encouraging that different games and conventions are starting to instate Code of Conduct policies that cover harassment and other forms of disgusting behavior, we also have to recognize our own role in helping to enforce those standards.

For example, *Dystopia Rising*, a post-apocalyptic campaign boffer larp with network games around the country, not only covers player harassment in its game guidelines, but outright bans the topics of rape and sexual assault from play, whether in discussion during game or as elements of a player’s backstory. When some players objected, the game’s creators responded that they did not feel those topics had enough narrative value to be worth making players with very real experience with those subjects uncomfortable at what is supposed to be a fun gaming experience.

When a horror game that frequently tests players’ fortitude with topics like cannibalism, torture, mad science experimentation, assassinations, and other dark subject matter draws a line at rape and sexual assault at their game, I think that says a lot about recognizing just how powerful these subjects are.

In the end, this is not about being gay, straight, sex-positive, or prudish. It’s about being decent and respectful to your fellow human beings. Just because geek culture passively allows men to get away with this behavior does not mean that it’s right, and it certainly does not guarantee the ability to continue doing it in the future.

There Are No Gatekeepers

Over the past year or so, the idea of the “fake geek girl”—and backlash against the notion of labeling people as such—has received a lot of attention. The

general controversy stems from the idea that some girls at gaming and entertainment conventions are “faking it.” They’re labeled as people who are not “real geeks” at all. Instead, these “fake geek girls” simply attend gaming conventions for purposes that range from marketing ploys to trolling guys by feigning interest in their culture as a setup for a cruel prank to attempting to “pick up” geek boys. In addition, there’s a general distrust when it comes to these “fake geek girls,” who are viewed as a type of invading force when it comes to the geek culture.

The notion is obviously absurd, of course. There are certainly a lot of people working conventions who aren’t actually into the subject matter; after all, going places and doing things you aren’t really interested in is the definition of having a job for a lot of people. There are also women who describe themselves as geeks or gamers who might not have the history that some feel as sufficient to have earned the title of “geek.” However, who is to say what makes a geek? It’s time to stop mistaking personal standards for scientific constants. There will always be a bigger fish in the geek sea. There will always be someone who knows more about a subject on which you believed yourself to be an authority.

It’s also important to remember that, like any other culture, geeks have a hierarchy of their own. For years, for instance, larpers have been widely derided in the gamer community as occupying one of if not the very bottom rung of the ladder. I’ve always thought it a little odd that sitting around a table pretending to be an elf is “cooler” than pretending to be one while running through the woods, but then, I’m a larper. Unfortunately, in any scene with a hierarchy, there are always going to be those who fight to hold onto their perceived position. Recently, that battle has stimulated a lot of discussion over the place of women in the great geek hierarchy. The defensive assertion that some, if not most, of these women aren’t real geeks at all is a way of maintaining one’s own status higher up the chain.

The debate over “fake geek girls” reminds me of the endless discussions about “poser punks” during my days in the hardcore scene. At the time, a number of angry self-appointed punk rock authorities believed that there were an awful lot of “poser punks” who simply liked to dress up in the style and pretended to like the music. These “poser punks” weren’t “real punks” and therefore didn’t know or understand “what it was all about.” How to spot these “posers” was a subject of much intense discussion, of course. I remember one supposed authority setting out some very specific advisories: a poser punk wouldn’t know who the Dead Boys or GG Allin were; or would have bought some of their gear at that notorious poser store, Hot Topic; or

wouldn’t have been to any shows in church basements or dive bars like real punks.

All of this is nonsense, of course. Plenty of “original” punks never listened to the Dead Boys. They bought clothing from wherever they wanted. Many didn’t actually like going to dangerous and grungy places to see shows; they only did it because they had no other choice to see the bands they liked.

At one time, I wasn’t above this type of thinking. I remember going to see Rancid when I was in college, and standing near the back of the crowd in my Operation Ivy shirt. That’s when I unwisely remarked about how a lot of the “kids” there wouldn’t know why I was wearing it to a Rancid show, thinking myself very cool for wearing the shirt of the precursor band to their show. A much older punk heard my snide comment and proceeded to berate me about how all of us “kids” were ruining his scene, and how he hadn’t seen a real punk show worthy of the name since about 1988. It was a humbling experience, and one I’ve yet to forget. If you think you’re a gatekeeper for an entire sub-culture, then you had best think again.

The most common and yet insidious way that this phenomenon is expressed in geek culture is “the quiz.” When a guy meets another guy at a convention, he automatically assumes that guy is as into the subject matter as he is and the two start chatting happily about their mutual interests. In contrast, a lot of guys still haven’t accepted the notion that there are women that share the same hobbies as well. That’s why when a man meets a woman, he may begin quizzing her—sometimes subtly, but often not—in an attempt to determine if the woman is a “real geek.” Most of the time, of course, the man picks the most obscure or heavily bias-laden questions he can think of, so that when the woman doesn’t answer with exactly the response he wanted, he can dismiss her as a fake and feel secure in his authority and his fandom.

This response isn’t wholly surprising. Many geek guys feel put upon because deep down, one of the reasons they got into their hobby in the first place is because it comfortably insulated them from the gender politics of middle school and high school. Now, though, they feel that women are invading their territory, so they lash out in any way they can. This is doubly sad because there is no gatekeeper— not in gaming, not in comics, not in anything geek-related. Unfortunately, we let people get away with being this sort of gatekeeper all of the time and it needs to stop.

Threatening Rape Is Not Just “Trash Talk”

There has been a fair amount of coverage lately about what women endure on gaming networks like Xbox Live and PSN, not to mention MMOs and other online gaming experiences. As soon as their gender is discovered, they receive a barrage of crude pickup attempts and pornographic images/requests, or are called sluts and whores and urged to “get raped.” They are then called thin-skinned and worse if they can’t handle it. “Trash talk is a part of gaming,” these boys say. “If you can’t handle it, you shouldn’t play.”

They’re not wrong about one part of that statement—yes, trash talk can be part of gaming. It’s unlikely we’ll ever be able to completely remove the practice, at least from some forms of gaming. The anonymity of many forms of online play, for example, is a lot more difficult to police than in-person behavior, which explains the ugly vitriol found in a lot of online gaming outlets.

However, there is a significant difference between mocking an opponent’s gameplay as a psychological strategy and simply spouting a litany of racist, sexist, and/or homophobic language into a microphone or across a table. That’s not a matter of being prudish; that’s simple linguistics.

To paraphrase the superb Extra Credits series, which addressed this problem very eloquently some time back, the problem is that we’ve given the loudest, crassest members of our community the proverbial megaphone. Naturally, they’re shouting into it. We need to turn the culture around. While I’ll let folks like EC tackle the difficulties of doing so on online gaming platforms, we can do a lot to shut down this type of behavior in our gaming groups and at our geek events.

The next time you hear someone talking about how “the NPCs just totally raped us” at your larp or how they just “got totally molested by this guy in Street Fighter” at your gaming store, I recommend that you call that person out on their language. The chances are that if they are a decent person, they’ll just apologize and not do it again. If they object, I’ve anticipated some of the common arguments for you:

- “Freedom of speech!” The First Amendment only states that the government can’t stomp on your speech. It says nothing about what’s allowed on corporate-owned gaming networks, or at public gaming cons, or at your local larp. In addition, you are specifically not protected from the consequences of your language. You can threaten people all you like, but they are just as free to call the cops on you for it, and guess who’s getting punished in that scenario?

- “I didn’t mean anything by it! Chill out!” Okay, I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. However, if it’s really not such a big deal, pick a different topic. Rape hits home with a lot more women—and men, for the record—than you know. Would you make a suicide joke to someone you know has suffered through family or friends committing suicide? It’s best to leave out a topic with which many people have history in their lives.

- “But what’s so different about threatening rape? Lots of guys say they’ll kill each other and don’t mean it!” If you ever needed an example of male privilege, you have it right here. Most of us were bullied at one time or another; if you were, you know the difference between a friend joking about kicking your ass as opposed to a bully really threatening to do it. We know one party isn’t a threat, but the other is a different story. Now, imagine that a total stranger bumps into you and promptly threatens to beat you up; are you going to assume that they’re kidding? Then, consider the fact that rape is not nearly the remote threat that murder is, especially for women, and you can begin to understand the problem.

- “But [player name] is a girl and she doesn’t care!” Just like I can’t claim to speak for all men, the acceptance (or indifference) of one woman to hateful comments doesn’t make misogynist language okay. I’m still allowed to be offended and call you out on something I feel is unacceptable.

- For the men: “You’re a guy! Why do you even care? You’re just white knightting to try to impress girls!” I’ve lost count how often I’ve heard these comments directed my way. For one thing, as someone who has women in his life that he cares about, I have all the right in the world to care about how someone else talks about or threatens to treat women. For another, even if my motives were as base as suggested—that I didn’t really care, I was just standing up for women so I’d look good to them—that still doesn’t change the horrible nature of what was said.

Last but not least, I want to make an important distinction about this sort of discussion. Ultimately it’s not about telling someone “You can’t say that!” If you tell someone they can’t do something, but give no other

In the end, this is not about being gay, straight, sex-positive, or prudish. It's about being decent and respectful to your fellow human beings.

When the ban on rape and sexual assault as topics to use at game originally came up in *Dystopia Rising*, the organizers didn't simply announce the ban, but also made sure to explain why they felt that subject matter and terminology simply wasn't worth it when you considered to discomfort of players who've experienced it in the real world. It wasn't simply an arbitrary decree, but a decision supported with an explanation based on empathy and encouraging players to support others in the community.

Furthermore, once in effect, the ban was enforced by game staff and a number of regular players as well. Any time someone slipped and said something like, "we just got raped by a bunch of raiders out in the woods," other people typically corrected them—not necessarily harshly, but definitely firmly. Now, you don't hear those comments at *Dystopia Rising* games very often at all—and when you do, it's usually a momentary lapse that's quickly corrected, or simply a new player who hasn't absorbed the rule yet.

You might say, "Well, that doesn't mean those players aren't still using that language elsewhere." You're probably right, at least for some of them. However, at least at *Dystopia Rising*, the game culture has upped its standard a bit and that's a real improvement for its players. They can come to game and know that people aren't going to be casually slinging words like "rape" and "molestation" around, much less encounter those topics as plot devices. This knowledge frees them up to dive into the game more and not worry about any unpleasant surprises, at least of those varieties.

After all, small changes like that one ultimately build to bigger changes in the community as a whole. While some players might simply swallow their misogynist comments at *Dystopia Rising* and then go home to spew them on Xbox Live, others might very well have simply realized why those comments are so harmful and edited them out of their vocabulary in general. This realization may not have occurred with a lot of fanfare or perhaps not even with much soul searching, but just because their favorite game discouraged it and so they changed.

That's pretty incredible progress, when you think about it.

reason for it than "because I said so," quite a few people will do it just to prove you wrong. No, it's about telling someone, "You know, you shouldn't say that," and making them understand why it's unacceptable. If they can come to understand why it's upsetting and inappropriate, they might actually change their behavior, whereas if you simply put a flat prohibition on it, they'll just do it behind your back.

Now, you might not be able to stop and explain gender politics in detail to some kid at your gaming store. However, even a simple comment like, "Dude, not cool, seriously" can have more of an impact than you know, because it removes the permissive environment around that comment. Comments like these are especially effective if reinforced by others in the environment, which in turn changes the culture of the whole event or location. It's using the power of peer pressure in a constructive way.

Women on the Line

I've been fighting at boffer larps for more than a decade, starting with a traditional fantasy game called *Mystic Realms* and most recently in the ragged world of *Dystopia Rising*. I still see men who reflexively shoulder women out of the way when it comes to arranging shield walls, picking combat patrols, and otherwise throwing down. What's worse is that many don't even seem to notice they're doing it. Instead, they unconsciously leave women out of the thick of things.

I remember one of the first times I saw this happen first-hand. I was playing at a fantasy game and rolling out to battle with another guy and a group of my female friends. The ladies were ferocious and powerful, with weapons aplenty and a bunch of magic at their disposal. My male friend and I were actually the weak links in this chain at the time, being newer and less powerful characters. We came up to the main battle line and the guy in charge immediately looked past the five heavily armed and powerful women and ordered the two guys to head to the front. When my female friends asked what they could do, he mumbled something about defending the healing circles and basically dismissed them on the spot. I was shocked and they were furious, but it was far from the last time I'd see it happen.

The problem seems to be a little less prevalent at a game like *Dystopia Rising* where gender equality is encouraged by the game canon, though it is by no means entirely absent. I think this might be a combination of a few factors, chief among them being that traditional high fantasy still has much more firmly cemented gender roles than the survival horror genre. Additionally, as a younger larp, *Dystopia Rising* benefits from the fact that the current generation of larpers entering the hobby is more coed than in years past. Even so, I've still seen male players literally shoulder female players out of a place on the shield wall, even when the female players had far more experienced and powerful characters. This misogynistic behavior not quite as bad as some environments, but it's still there.

Speaking as the husband of a Markland heavy fighter and the friend of many other female larpers that love wading in and kicking ass, please stop treating women as the "damsel in distress." Watch someone fight and judge them on that, not anything else. Assume that if someone is wearing armor and carrying weapons, then they want to be part of the fighting. If you don't think you have this prejudice, then think again—even I still struggle with this one from time to time and I most certainly know better.

A Final Word for the Guys

I admit that, in many ways, I'm sad and ashamed by some of the standards that geek culture considers as acceptable and I want to help change them. I realize that many men probably read sections of this article and think to themselves, "That's a pretty big generalization. That's not true of *me*." I hope—I *know*—that this is the case for a lot of men. I painted with a pretty broad brush, and I realize that this gets some paint on the good guys as well as the bad. For that, I apologize. However, the best way we can prove that these generalizations are not true of all men involved in geek culture is by living up to a higher standard.

It's not enough to just say that these things don't apply to us. That's the flaw in the logic behind the #notallmen response to the #yesallwomen trending tag that flared up online a while back. Getting defensive and going on and on about how *you* aren't sexist is missing the point. Instead of finding reasons to disagree, find ways to make the community better.

In the end, in order to facilitate change, we can't just avoid sexism ourselves. We also have to call other men on it when they behave badly toward women, whether it's making a rape reference in an online game, groping a booth babe, or pushing women aside when it's time to stand shoulder-to-shoulder at a boffer larp. This isn't about "saving" women from "wicked sexists," either. We don't need more white knights clouding the issue. Indeed, part of the necessary change required to reform our culture is recognizing that it's not just a decision men make.

Instead, guys, this is about doing our part to enact change and hold ourselves accountable. We can do it. I know we can. We have to. Because in the words of John Custer to his son Jesse from the incredible comic *Preacher*, "You gotta be one of the good guys, son, 'cause there's way too many of the bad."



The Academic Section of *The Wyrd Con Companion Book*

This year's academic section features four articles on interactive storytelling, with a primary focus upon live action role-playing (larp). Since last year's 2013 edition, *The Wyrd Con Companion Book's* academic section has featured double blind peer-review from experts in the field. Our international community of scholars is growing and becoming increasingly interconnected as we find one another on the Internet, at conferences, and at conventions. Consequently, the review process is becoming increasingly more rigorous, demanding, and well-informed. I am pleased to announce the names of the external peer reviewers who offered valuable insight during this year's editorial process (in alphabetical order):

Daniel Eison, M.S., M.D. student at Columbia University

J. Tuomas Harviainen, Ph.D., M.B.A. student at Laurea University of Applied Sciences

Nathan Hook, M.A., Ph.D. student at University of Tampere, Finland

Shoshana Kessock, M.F.A. from NYU Tisch School of the Arts Game Center

Nicholas Mizer, doctoral candidate at Texas A&M University

Michał Mochocki, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at Kazimierz Wielki University in Bydgoszcz, Poland

David Simkins, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at Rochester Institute of Technology

Anne Standiford, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at Texas State University

Evan Torner, Ph.D., Assistant Professor at University of Cincinnati, Ohio

Aaron Trammell, doctoral candidate at Rutgers University

I appreciate each of these reviewer's fine commentary on the drafts and am especially grateful for J. Tuomas Harviainen's help in facilitating the double blind peer review process for my own submission. Furthermore, I offer thanks to the two anonymous reviewers of my own paper for their insightful advice on resources, structure, and terminology.

The first article in this section is unique in theme to the rest the academic collection, though it resonates with Kevin Burns' work in the journalistic section due to its emphasis on psychological safety and larp. Maury Brown's "Pulling the Trigger on Player Agency: How Psychological Intrusions in Larps Affect Game Play" provides an in-depth discussion of the psychological mechanism of triggering. Brown explains how, when triggered during a larp, players experience stimuli that connect with previous trauma embedded in the psyche. She offers a series of models for how to understand the phenomenon of triggering, including a spectrum approach that ranges from individuals becoming nervous/hyper-aware to completely overwhelmed. Brown explains triggering as a form of bleed, where the boundary between the player and character weakens, thereby also weakening the alibi and social contract of the game. Ultimately, Brown encourages a greater awareness about the nature of triggers and communal responsibility around psychological safety in larps.

Our next three papers each focus upon particular aspects of educational live action role-playing (edu-larp). My paper, “Educational Live Action Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review,” provides an extensive, if not comprehensive, review of the literature regarding the benefits of experiential learning in various fields: simulation, drama, games, and role-playing. Though it emerges from the subcultural roots of the role-playing game leisure activity, edu-larp has many similarities with more established forms of experiential learning. By examining the literature in each of these fields and organizing the benefits into cognitive, affective, and behavioral categories, I detail the ways in which experiential learning can offer similar benefits regardless of format. I also emphasize the importance of proper workshoping and debriefing in the educational process. Acknowledging the anecdotal and theoretical nature of much of the literature, I detail the articles that feature quantitative and qualitative data, ultimately encouraging researchers to gather more data on edu-larp in order to support these claims.

Along these lines, the next piece in this section is one of the few in my review to offer data on the benefits of edu-larp. Michał Mochocki’s “Larping the Past: Research Report on High-School Edu-Larp” details the results of a three year research project in which larp was used in Polish high schools as a tool to teach history. The goal of edu-larp in this context was to review subject matter and improve test scores rather than to teach new facts. Collecting quantitative and qualitative data, Mochocki explains his data collection method at length, evaluating its strengths and weaknesses. While some of the data collection remained incomplete due to teacher non-compliance, his preliminary results suggest that edu-larp may help students retain information by adding an experiential connection between participants and the material. In our current educational climate, which often focuses upon assessment, measurable positive results on test scores such as these may pave the way for greater institutional support of edu-larp in the future.

Finally, Anne Standiford offers us a window into the world of nursing simulation. In “Lessons Learned from Larp: Promoting Social Realism in Nursing Simulation,” Standiford explains the various degrees of simulation in terms of fidelity, meaning the level of social realism within the scenario. Using J. Tuomas Harviainen’s “Multi-Tier Game Immersion Theory” and other Nordic larp concepts as a foundation for her analysis, the author explains how larp theory can inform simulation practice. She summarizes a consultation made by Aaron Vanek from the edu-larp organization Seekers Unlimited at her department at Texas State University in the Spring of 2014. During this visit, Vanek detailed how techniques from Nordic larp and other role-playing communities can improve simulation. This article segues nicely with the other two papers on edu-larp, further demonstrating the interconnectedness of experiential learning and the ways in which these previously unrelated fields could inform one another.

Overall, these scholarly articles further demonstrate my earlier assertion in this volume regarding the maturing nature of the discourse around role-playing and other forms of interactive storytelling. As we continue to experience more, the need for improved psychological safety in games has become apparent to many researchers. Additionally, the pedagogical opportunities of the leisure activity of role-playing have become clear to many individuals, as larp offers first-person identification with character, problem solving, and fictional framing to produce empathy and greater understanding. Indeed, many role-players are finding innovative ways to include fictional scenarios in learning environments, translating their personal experience into professional expertise. As each of the articles in this anthology demonstrates, we are experiencing an exciting time in terms of the innovation of interactive storytelling.

—Sarah Lynne Bowman, Ph.D.
Editor



Pulling the Trigger on Player Agency: How Psychological Intrusions in Larps Affect Game Play

Maury Elizabeth Brown

Abstract

This paper discusses the prevalence of exposure to trauma, the discourse about trigger warnings, and the embodied nature of larps. The goal of this paper is to inform players, designers, and critics about the nature of psychological triggers, how they arise and function in a larp, and what makes them an important issue for larping communities. Larps can contain triggering content; a trigger reaction is a powerful response that affects individuals, communities, and the games they play. Lastly, this article considers steps that can help prepare and care for those who experience a triggering reaction at a game event.

Introduction

Trigger Warnings (TWs) are short descriptive statements intended to alert readers, viewers, or participants that the material they are about to encounter may cause or “trigger” intense, negative reactions. Used widely in the feminist blog community originally for content related to sexual violence, trigger warnings have been variously described as “advanced notice that the material to be presented contains content that might evoke a strong and painful emotional response, particularly in someone who has been traumatized,”¹ “advanced notice to people who are suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) that the words or images that are about to confront them might psychologically trigger them and bring an unwanted emotional state,”² or “a statement that warns people of a potential trigger, so that they can prepare for or choose to avoid the trigger.”³

In 2014, a movement⁴ in the United States to ask or require professors to include trigger warnings on their syllabi gained momentum at several universities, including University of California at Santa Barbara,⁵ Oberlin College,⁶ Rutgers University,⁷ and George Washington University.⁸ In June 2014, consideration of how such trigger warnings might apply to live action role-playing games (larps) was publicly discussed on *Examiner.com*.⁹ The movement from the more passive medium of literature, film, or blog posts to the interactive realm of gaming brought with it discussions about the nature of the larp medium and the relevance or need for trigger warnings in these embodied, improvisational games that span a variety of styles, cultures, and play agendas.

Although many people have questioned the need for trigger warnings,¹⁰ the sheer number of people

4. Jennifer Medina, “Warning: The Literary Canon Could Make Students Squirm,” *The New York Times*, last modified on May 17, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/18/us/warning-the-literary-canon-could-make-students-squirm.html>

5. Bailey Loverin, “Tongue-Tied on Campus: ‘Trigger Warnings’ Open Up a Dialogue,” *The New York Times*, last modified on May 19, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/roomfordebate/2014/05/19/restraint-of-expression-on-college-campuses/trigger-warnings-encourage-free-thought-and-debate>.

6. Oberlin.

7. Philip Wythe, “Trigger Warnings Needed in Classroom,” *The Daily Targum*, last modified on February 18, 2014. http://www.dailytargum.com/opinion/columnists/philip_wythe/trigger-warnings-needed-in-classroom/article_cecbf732-9845-11e3-a65e-001a4bcf6878.html

8. Justin Peligri, “Why We Need Trigger Warnings on Syllabi,” *The GW Hatchet*, last modified on April 16, 2014, <http://www.dailytargum.com/article/2014/02/trigger-warnings-needed-in-classroom>

9. Tara Clapper, “Should LARPs Include Trigger Warnings?” *Examiner.com*, last modified on June 21, 2014. <http://www.examiner.com/article/should-larps-include-trigger-warnings>

10. See e.g.: Macleans Editorial Board, “Trigger Warnings: ‘Demanding to Be Regarded as Vulnerable Infants,’” *Macleans.ca*, last modified on May 21, 2014. <http://www.macleans.ca/general/the-editorial-demanding-to-be-regarded-as-vulnerable-infants/>; Laurie Essig, “Trigger Warnings Trigger Me,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 60, no. 27 (March 21, 2014): B2; Jenny Jarvie, “Trigger Happy,” *The New Republic*, last modified on March 3, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116842/trigger-warnings-have-spread-blogs-college-classes-thats-bad>

1. Todd Pettigrew, “Why ‘Trigger Warning’ Policies Miss the Mark,” *Macleans.ca*, last modified on April 24, 2014. <http://www.macleans.ca/education/uniandcollege/everyone-talks-about-the-triggers/>.

2. Juno Parrenas, “Why Trigger Warnings Harm Instead Of Help,” *Lesbian News* 39, no. 11 (June 2014): 20.

3. Oberlin College Office of Equity Concerns, “Sexual Offense Resource Guide—Support Resources for Faculty.” Oberlin College | Office of Equity Concerns | Support Resources for Faculty, December 22, 2013.

who are affected by trauma and live with PTSD makes them relevant, especially to those who create content. A 1993 study of 4,008 adult women in the US indicated a lifetime exposure to any type of traumatic event of 69%. At that time, the overall sample prevalence of PTSD was 12.3% for diagnosis or treatment over the lifetime and 4.6% within the past 6 months.¹¹ A 2013 national sample of U.S. adults ($N = 2,953$) found that “traumatic event exposure using *DSM-5* criteria was high (89.7%), and exposure to multiple traumatic event types was the norm.”¹² Researchers reported lifetime, past 12-month, and past 6-month PTSD prevalence of 8.3%, 4.7%, and 3.8% respectively.¹³ The authors note that PTSD prevalence was higher among women than men and that it increased with greater exposure to trauma. When such a large number of people have been affected by trauma, it is quite likely that game content and experiences may trigger one or more group members. With regard to larp in particular, Torner and Bowman point out that “the sheer amount of emotional intensity experienced in a short time frame can impact any given larper,”¹⁴ while Bowman notes in another article that “players may possess underlying psychological problems that events within the game world trigger or intensify.”¹⁵

Given the prevalence of exposure to trauma, the discourse about trigger warnings, and the embodied nature of larps, it is important for players, designers, and critics to understand what triggers are, how they arise and function in a larp, and what makes them an important issue for larping communities. We need to acknowledge that larps can contain triggering content and that a trigger reaction is a real and powerful response that affects individuals, communities, and the games they play. Lastly, we need to consider steps that can help prepare and care for those who experience a triggering reaction at a game event.

11. Heidi S. Resnick, Dean G. Kilpatrick, Bonnie S. Dansky, Benjamin E. Saunders, and Connie L. Best, “Prevalence of Civilian Trauma and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in a Representative National Sample of Women,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 61, no. 6 (1993): 984–91.

12. Dean G. Kilpatrick, Heidi S. Resnick, Melissa E. Milanak, Mark W. Miller, Katherine M. Keyes, and Matthew J. Friedman, “National Estimates of Exposure to Traumatic Events and PTSD Prevalence Using *DSM-IV* and *DSM-5* Criteria,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 26, no. 5 (October 1, 2013): 537–47.

13. Ibid.

14. Sarah Lynne Bowman and Evan Torner, “Post-Larp Depression,” *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (August 1, 2014). <http://analoggamestudies.org/2014/08/post-larp-depression/>

15. Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study,” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1, no. 4 (2013): 4–25.

Defining “Triggers”

The updated *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (*DSM-5*) recategorizes Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) from an anxiety disorder to a new grouping of Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorders. In it, trauma is defined as *direct* (being the victim) or *indirect* (being a witness); the latter is defined as “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence.”¹⁶ For the first time, sexual assault is explicitly included as a traumatic event, and the 5th edition further expands the definition of trauma to include repeated micro-exposures that create an accumulative effect. When a traumatic experience results in PTSD, four categories of symptoms are noted: *intrusions, hyper-arousal, avoidance, negative thoughts, mood or feelings*, generally described as persistent and distorted.¹⁷ The *DSM-5* further suggests that PTSD might be better conceptualized as a spectrum disorder with a range of responses, an idea that is explored in this article with the Negative Reaction Continuum (Fig. 1) and the Player Response Continuum (Fig. 4).

Scholarly psychology research provides no specific definition for a “trigger,” instead using the term “intrusion” (one of the symptoms of PTSD and trauma-stressor disorders) to describe unwelcome sensory impressions from moments of a previous trauma. These intrusions may include visual, auditory, smell, bodily sensations, actions, thoughts, and emotional responses.¹⁸ Kleim et al. note that “the intrusiveness of these memories, along with a ‘here-and-now’ quality, contributes to a sense of current threat, as the sensory memories from the trauma may be experienced, without realization that they are from a past event.”¹⁹ UCSB sophomore Bailey Loverin, who began her school’s movement to place trigger warnings on course syllabi, states that when encountered with a trigger, “[p]eople suddenly feel a very real threat to their safety—even if it is perceived.”²⁰ When a threat is perceived, the body

16. American Psychiatric Association, and American Psychiatric Association, “Trauma and Stressor-Related Disorders,” *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: DSM-5*. 5th ed. Washington, D.C: American Psychiatric Association, 2013.

17. Ibid.

18. Birgit Kleim, Belinda Graham, Richard A. Bryant, and Anke Ehlers, “Capturing Intrusive Re-Experiencing in Trauma Survivors’ Daily Lives Using Ecological Momentary Assessment,” *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 122, no. 4 (2013): 998–1009; Anke Ehlers et al., “The Nature of Intrusive Memories after Trauma: The Warning Signal Hypothesis,” *Behaviour Research and Therapy* 40, no. 9 (September 2002): 995–1002.

19. Kleim et al., 1.

20. Medina.

experiences a “stress response,” during which an amygdala reaction releases stress hormones, elevates heartbeat and breathing, and increases blood flow to larger muscles, while the brain attempts to decide whether to flee, fight, or freeze.²¹ Although these responses are outside of conscious control, they are not always directly related to an original trauma or traumas; a stress response can occur from an everyday occurrence, such as a traffic jam, for instance.

In popular speech, to be “triggered” has broad meaning. Oberlin College defines a trigger as “something that recalls a traumatic event to an individual,”²² while Kessock says triggering is an “intense reaction” to what she terms “questionable content” or “what might in other areas be known as mature or adult or serious content.”²³ Trigger warnings may include “anything that might cause trauma.”²⁴ Possible triggers have included “racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism, and other issues of privilege and oppression.”²⁵ However, fanfic, YouTube videos, and internet posts, particularly on Tumblr and Livejournal, have been tagged with trigger warnings (TW) for such diverse topics as swearing, sex, male/male, pregnancy, addiction, spiders, bullying, suicide, sizeism, ableism, homosexuality, violence, abuse, transphobia, slut shaming, victim-blaming, alcohol, blood, insects, small holes, hand job, and animals in

21. Harvard Medical School, “Understanding the Stress Response—Harvard Health Publications,” *Harvard Mental Health Letter*, March 2011. http://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletters/Harvard_Mental_Health_Letter/2011/March/understanding-the-stress-response.

22. Oberlin.

23. Shoshana Kessock, “Ethical Content Management and the Gaming Social Contract,” in *The Wyrld Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek, 102–103 (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrld Con, 2013).

24. Oberlin College Office of Equity Concerns, “Sexual Offense Resource Guide—Support Resources for Faculty,” *Oberlin College | Office of Equity Concerns | Support Resources for Faculty*, December 22, 2013.

25. Ibid.

wigs, prompting some to declare that the phrase has lost all meaning.²⁶ To “be triggered” may also be used to describe general anxiety from an experience associated with something the person fears.

The current popular use of trigger and trigger warning merges distinct phenomena: the psychological intrusion of past trauma and being provoked initially into strong emotions. Those calling for trigger warnings typically use language describing the more extreme distress of intrusion because their concern is with acknowledging and preventing its injurious effects. It is important to note, however, that the word trigger may be used to signify:

1. An intrusive and involuntary recollection of previous trauma due to new stimuli and a resulting physical and emotional response; and/or
2. To be provoked by exposure to content, resulting in a strong physical and/or emotional reaction, such as becoming upset.²⁷

We can imagine the use of the word trigger to describe a response along a “Negative Reaction Continuum,” spanning a disagreeable emotional provocation, to an uncomfortable physical anxiety reaction, to intrusive overwhelming physical, psychological and emotional pain that may be intolerable or debilitating. This sort of “spectrum” of reactions aligns with current thinking about PTSD symptoms (see below):²⁸

26. Jenny Jarvie, “Trigger Happy,” *The New Republic*, last modified on March 3, 2014. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/116842/trigger-warnings-have-spread-blogs-college-classes-thats-bad>.

27. In addition to these meanings, the word trigger can also be used to mean to cause, such as cigarette smoke triggering an asthma attack, or low quarterly revenues from a major corporation triggering a sell-off in the stock market. It should be noted that these non-psychological meanings of the word trigger are not associated with the phrase Trigger Warning.

28. American Psychological Association.

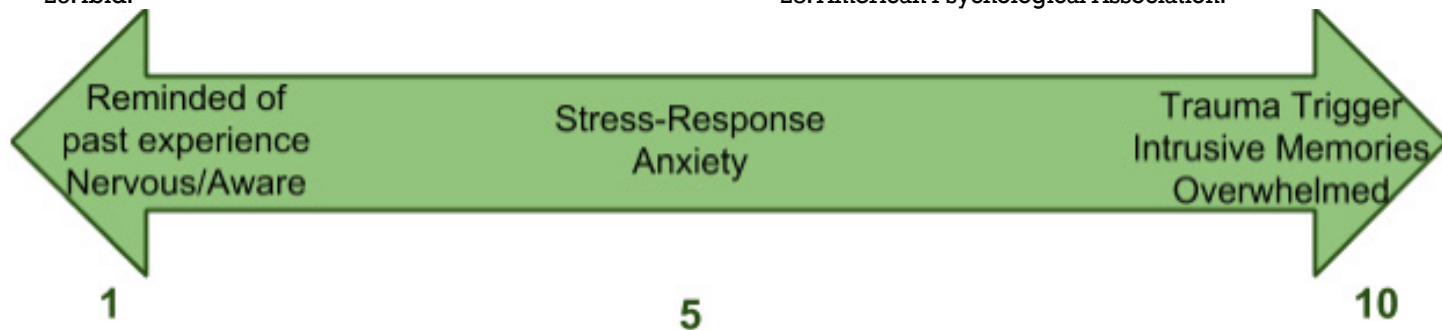


Figure 1: Negative Reaction Continuum

Negative Reaction Continuum

Although triggering reactions can occur with various degrees of severity, the lack of clarity and consensus regarding the meaning of the word trigger can trivialize the severe intrusive responses experienced by those who may have stressor-related disorders. This chapter seeks to recognize the word trigger as having a specific meaning that should not be trivialized or dismissed. In this article, a trigger is defined as the collision between a latent internal vestige of prior trauma and an external mechanism, causing an unwanted and involuntary physical, emotional and/or psychological response from the upper end of the Negative Reaction Continuum (see Fig. 1).

As will be shown in more detail later, this trigger reaction is not the same as painful play, which begins with a participant's choice to experience discomfort in the setting of the game. To a player who has been triggered, the game is no longer an empowering mechanism. For a person experiencing a trauma intrusion, the game begins to happen to them, rather than happening with them or because of them; agency can be replaced with victimization.

How Triggers Arise in a Larp

With respect to triggers, a larp may be more potentially threatening than cinema, books, art, or other more traditional narrative and aesthetic forms. As a game, larp is ergodic,²⁹ depending upon active input from the player to create the narrative and game experience. Clapper states that "part of the fun of LARP is that PCs [player characters] may get to determine the story."³⁰ The PCs will act, react, and respond in a way unpredictable to the organizers, meaning at any given time, one character's actions could trigger a player."³¹ Ruggill and McAllister note that "any given set of game conventions—the foundations of game play—can produce an infinite variety of play variants."³² Games designed for high levels of improvisation exacerbate the unpredictability that may lead to a trigger. In a highly improvisational larp, players may choose to take

the game "off the rails," in a direction that is very different from the designers' intent. Players are not limited to a discrete number of game options and choices, but can, individually or collectively, create a new agenda, plot, or tone. A game originally designed not to include certain elements may find them introduced through game play.

Larp game characteristics such as scenarios "designed to surprise and terrify the participants; to move characters and immerse players while creating dramatic events and responses that develop characters"³³ also increase the likelihood of triggering. Larps are more prone to producing triggers because physical bodies—with all their sensory perceptions—are in play, complicating the difficulty the brain has distinguishing between an actual threat and a perceived one.³⁴ Because players use their bodies and their imaginations to experience the game and because some developers often work toward a goal of 360 degree immersion as a way to make the game look, feel, and seem as real as possible, the alibi of the felt experience being "just a game" and "not real" is compromised. If it is happening to the character, it is happening to the player, whose body is at risk and whose bodily reactions perceive little distance between the constructed character and the player portraying it. In some game communities, the goal of total immersion into the game and character is paramount; the conflation of character and player adds a psychological layer that again complicates the already tenuous and unstable line between fiction and reality. This blending of psyches and enactment of alternative identities is part of the thrill of larping, as role-play is an opportunity to get outside of the conventions of everyday life. While reaching a level of immersion where the external self and reality seems to fall away is certainly a goal of many role-playing games, this conflation of self can exacerbate or even create a psychological intrusion triggered in the game.

To enact a larp's ergodicity, players, as characters, use words and physical actions (rhetoric) to evoke verbal and physical responses in other players, who express these responses through their character. These discursive moves are interpreted and enacted diegetically to drive the plot and narrative and create the larp experience. As shown in Fig. 2 below, characters, as portrayed by players, interact with one another and the game world. The rhetorical elements of the game—divided into four categories of *Speech*,

29. Espen J. Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

30. Clapper has a predominantly narrativist point of view about games and particularly addresses those larps that feature clear hierarchical distinctions between Playable Characters (PCs) and Non-Playable Characters (NPCs).

31. Clapper.

32. Judd Ethan Ruggill and Ken S McAllister, *Gaming Matters Art, Science, Magic, and the Computer Game Medium* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2011).

33. Clapper.

34. Harvard Medical School; Kleim et. al.

elements from a larp since they hold the potential to trigger a player who is predisposed due to prior real-life experience. These potentially triggering elements are the rhetorical elements of a larp itself; to remove or restrict them is to compromise or eliminate the game. However, larp communities must be aware that the activity of larping contains within it both the possibility for great imaginative landscapes and liberating self-exploration as well as the potential for serious traumatic experiences that usurp or preempt player agency. This awareness does not require a change to the elements themselves,³⁵ but may indeed require a change in how the players and designers respond when the assumed ergodic structure is interrupted by an unwanted trigger.

A psychological trauma intrusion arises when a trigger mechanism meets the potential to enact it, which resides, often unconsciously, in a particular person. The figure above (Fig. 2) delineates the myriad potential trigger mechanisms present in a larp. In any given larp iteration, one, several, or none of these mechanisms may trigger an intrusive response. To enact its triggering potentiality, a mechanism must come into contact with a player who is susceptible to it, as a result of prior lived experience. Much like exposure to cigarette smoke does not a guarantee one will develop lung cancer,

35. Some larps, such as *Dystopia Rising*, have prohibited any role-play that resembles rape.

certain characteristics, both biological and historical, predispose some people to negative effects. Who may be harmed and when, cannot be predicted, but that possibility must be accounted for and planned for so that when it arises, appropriate and immediate action can be taken. The figure below shows how a given trigger can arise from the diegetic or non-diegetic space and the possible responses that affect the player and the game:

Map of Trigger Origin and Possible Responses in Larp

In this graphic (Fig. 3), the player-character represents the body and mind of the player portraying a character as a single entity in order to demonstrate the dual consciousness of role-play. The player-character simultaneously embodies two identities: the “player” identity is ideally in the non-diegetic world, while the “character” identity—although embodied in the same person—is inside the diegetic world. Each player-character straddles the line of the “magic circle,”³⁶ drawn as dotted because it is a permeable border between the ostensibly separate spaces of “game” and “not-game.” Each dual-conscious player-character participant appears in a comic talk bubble

36. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1955); Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2003).

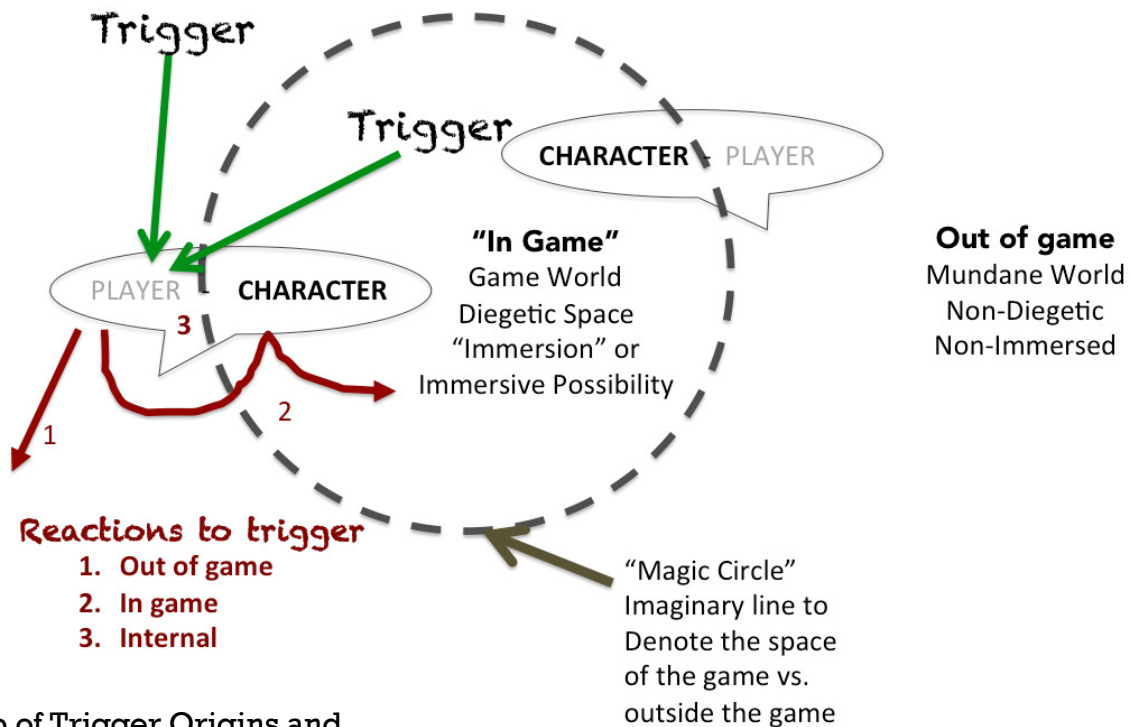
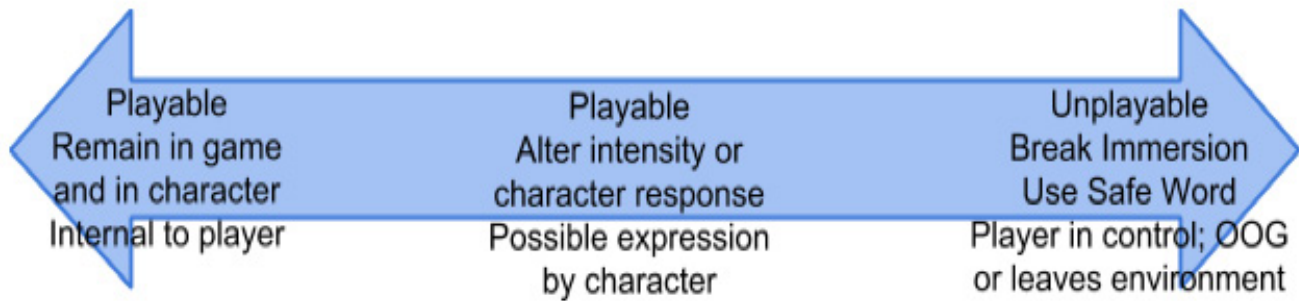


Figure 3: Map of Trigger Origins and Possible Responses in a Larp

Figure 4: Player's Response to Triggers Continuum



because of the discursive nature of larp; players typically interact as characters through speech. The word “player” is grayed out because s/he is not to be acknowledged during game play due to the immersive ideal of leaving behind your mundane world identity through role-play. I refrain from using the in-character/out-of-character (IC/OOC) duality here because I believe that the player is always present, even when pretending not to be. The fact that a trigger can occur inside a fictional realm at all is evidence that this purist ideal of immersion and separation of IC/OOC may be a fantasy; indeed Pohjola calls it “impossible” and “based on a faulty premise of character that originates with traditional fiction and that cannot be applied to immersive, immediated artforms like role-playing.”³⁷

As we have seen, a trigger may come from inside the game or outside it (diegetic or non-diegetic) and *it provokes the player, not the character*. The player is reminded of a previous traumatic experience in the non-diegetic world and experiences a strong negative physical and/or emotional reaction. Once triggered, there are two main types of responses the player may enact: those that may be visible to others and affect the game and those that are not. A response may be more conscious or unconscious and fall along another continuum (Fig. 4):

Player's Response to Triggers Continuum

As shown above (Fig. 4), player responses to triggers may be playable or unplayable depending on the severity of the reaction and the available (perceived or actual) choices to the player. On the far right of the continuum are non-diegetic responses made from the position of the player, such as using a safe word, choosing to leave, or displaying symptoms of trauma unrelated to the character. In these cases, a player may or may not wish to re-enter the game

37. Mike Pohjola, “Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities,” in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2004).

space while they cope with the trigger response. Game play often slows or is halted and other people's immersion is generally affected. At the opposite end of the continuum, players who repress negative experiences or use other internal coping mechanisms may not affect communal game play, but the player's personal diegesis is affected from the triggering moment onward. A player may choose to repress his/her triggered reaction in an attempt to remain in character and immersed in the game world. Negative emotional responses and intrusions may then occur later after the game is officially ended.

Triggers and Bleed

Once the player has been triggered, s/he may have a reaction that bleeds into the game's diegesis. A trigger response is a marker of the presence of a type of *bleed* and the player must cope with the intense emotional reaction through diegetic or non-diegetic means. Bleed as a larp characteristic is described by Bowman as “the phenomenon of the thoughts, feelings, physical state, and relationship dynamics of the player affecting the character and vice versa,” despite the attempt at distance from them through the act of roleplaying.³⁸ According to Montola, bleed is a type of “design rhetoric”³⁹ that can be increased or decreased depending on a particular creative agenda, a community's values, and player preferences.⁴⁰

Although some have stated that not all bleed is

38. Bowman, “Social,” 16.

39. Markus Montola, “The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing,” in *Proceedings of Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players*, First Nordic DiGRA, August 16-17, 2010 (Stockholm, Sweden, 2010). <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/10343.56524.pdf>.

40. William J. White, J. Tuomas Harviainen, and Emily Care Boss, “Role-Playing Communities, Cultures of Play and the Discourse of Immersion,” in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2012), 71-86.

sought or desired,⁴¹ bleed, as typically conceived, is not only emotional or psychological. Montola distinguishes between *bleed-in*—or leakage from player to character—and its reverse, *bleed-out*, where the experience of playing the character affects the player cognitively, emotionally, or psychologically. He refers to *direct bleed* as similar to character immersion and as a conflation of the player's psychological responses so closely resembling the character's as to plausibly be his/hers. *Indirect bleed*, according to Montola, is when gameplay “produces strong feelings even though they do not correspond with the characters’ diegetic feelings.”⁴²

If we accept these definitions, then a trigger is a type of *indirect bleed* (unintentional and unaligned with the character) that is both *bleed-in*—when something from the player's life and experience has an impact on the character's decisions and the outcome of the game—and *bleed-out*, whereby in-game experience affects the player beyond the game. This concept demonstrates that in larp, a trigger is a type of bleed; however, it's important to note that not all bleed should be considered a trigger. A trigger is a type of bleed that larp communities should seek to minimize; bleed itself, as a larp characteristic, is neither inherently positive nor negative, to be avoided or encouraged. Its appearance depends on designer choices based on the creative agenda of the game and player preferences regarding their experience of it. Bleed-in can create a synergy with the character that is sometimes seen as authentic. However, three important differences distinguish the general notion of bleed with a trigger:

1. **Distinction of desire:** Bleed-in can be desirable in a larp, and can be explicitly designed for and nurtured during play for pedagogical or emotional reasons, such as social analysis of out-of-game issues or personal catharsis that the psychodrama style of role-play can evoke. A trigger, however, is not desired. In fact, potential triggers are often avoided out of fear of experiencing the negative reaction and reliving trauma.
2. **Distinction of agency:** Triggers are not chosen by the participant. A trigger is an involuntary response that can feel violating. It is a loss of

agency for the player—however temporary—in the sense that certain physical and emotional reactions occur without conscious control. The moment a trigger occurs, a player has to assert an out-of-game coping strategy to recognize the trigger and move it from the realm of the involuntary or unconscious to the realm of exerting conscious and voluntary control over what happens next. Bleed-in “happens” in the sense that it is not scripted or on a timeline. Given the number of variables in play in a larp, its occurrence cannot be fully predicted, even if a larp, a character, or a play-style actively encourages it. Even if one is making conscious decisions to seek bleed-in through character choices and player allowances, it is not always achieved. This spontaneous attribute of bleed-in can cause it to be conflated with a trigger. However, some bleed-in begins with a conscious choice by the player to play close to home, or to use techniques that foster it. A trigger in a larp occurs as a result of play, but not as a deliberate player choice. The only choices a player has regarding a trigger are limited to how to respond to it, a position of compromised agency.

3. **Distinction of power:** While bleed-in can ultimately be empowering as the player can come to some realization or catharsis based on the experience, a trigger is disempowering. A trigger can reenact a power dynamic that causes the person to re-experience being a victim and to feel controlled by the game, GM, or other players and feel unable to escape. This perception may be inaccurate, but it is real nonetheless as physical, emotional and psychological manifestations.

But can't triggers be “useful”?

Despite the more problematic nature of larps with regard to triggering content, some say they can be safer than other games since participants play with active minds and presences as the game develops ergodically. The social contract of the game states that you are entering a safe space to attempt new ways of thinking and being. For some, larp is an escape from their mundane world and the performed identities there; for others, it is an enhancement—a path to power, esteem, or emotions that they may have difficulty accessing out of game. Players often seek a game for its imaginative powers: the ability to be transported away from the mundane world and into something different. In fact, there are cultural differences about these preferences, as Stark notes

41. White, Harviainen, and Boss, 82; Laurie Schick, “Breaking Frame in a Role-Play Simulation: A Language Socialization Perspective,” *Simulation & Gaming* 39 (2): 184–97.

42. Montola, 16.

in her blog post about Jeepform: “In the US, we often think of bleed as something to be avoided, but in many Nordic role-playing games, it is encouraged and managed by the game formats. Playing for bleed can lead to insight about oneself and the world, and it creates intense emotions that some players crave.”⁴³ In fact, Montola and Holopainen note that “many players emphasize the intense emotional experiences gained within role-playing games as the most valuable component.”⁴⁴ As noted above, bleed is not always the result of a trigger and, therefore, the two cannot be always be conflated.

According to a standard argument in role-playing games, a mindful player could take action in game to reduce the threat of a stressor; for example, choosing to confess in character to stop a diegetic interrogation that may feel uncomfortable or cause triggering. Furthermore, the argument continues, other players or GMs can intervene to also reduce a stressor. Most players look for cues regarding what actions to take and what’s expected of them, and in general, they will not defy a call to moderate extremes.

However, this argument rests on several precarious assumptions. First, the ergodicity of the larp experience renders gameplay unpredictable, making it difficult to foresee a stressor; the stressor must be experienced to demand a response. A trigger causes an involuntary reaction, which, by nature, is not mindful. To become mindful, the player must have the ability to overcome the intrusion. In order to do so, the player becomes aware of his or her player identity and to leave, to at least some degree, the current character identity. Second, the argument relies on other players and GMs to first notice that gameplay has created a stressor that has threatened a player’s well-being and also be able to consider and enforce a change of direction. While this does occur in well-constructed games with GMs who are deliberately watchful, no GM can be all places at all times and some game designers do not possess such an ethos. The assumption that a player has sufficient control to reduce any potential stressor if only s/he attains an ideal of mindfulness can be used to create an ethos of shaming for those who experience involuntary intrusions. Admitting one was triggered becomes an admission of not playing mindfully enough with the presumption that “better” play would have prevented it.

Players do have rhetorical choices, such as whether to play “close to home”: intentionally playing a character with personality traits, issues or experiences similar to the player, such as illness, violence, addiction, relationship issues, unwanted pregnancies, deaths in the family, etc.^{45, 46} Playing close to home is also considered a design element that offers a variable in the amount of bleed that can be predicted.^{47, 48} The prevailing argument in some larp communities is that by playing close to home, players can control the level of investment in the game, often leading to a heightened experience and more meaningful game that offers new insights about the player. The presumption is that the closer to home you play, the more bleed there will be, which would include a greater likelihood of triggering. However, it should be noted that the amount of bleed is not directly correlated to the potential for triggering. As shown above, innumerable elements can be mechanisms to trigger an intrusion. To argue that players either *can* or *should* be able to control whether they experience a trigger is counter to the nature of a trigger itself. Indeed, when one is triggered, he or she may lose the ability to make the rhetorical choices and take the actions that could reduce the threat. This inability is a result of the intrusion’s involuntary physical, psychological and/or emotional responses.

Sarah Roff, a psychiatrist and former professor, notes that avoidance of potentially troubling content can actually exacerbate and prolong PTSD symptoms and that the “solution is not to help these students dig themselves further into a life of fear and avoidance by allowing them to keep away from upsetting material.”⁴⁹ One of the most effective treatments for PTSD is “exposure therapy, which helps patients unlearn the associations between traumatic events and triggers so that they can start functioning again.”⁵⁰ Though it can be argued that sometimes one does need to “push through” a difficult or uncomfortable situation as a way to lead

43. Stark, “Jeepform for Noobs.”

44. Markus Montola and Jussi Holopainen, “First Person Audience and the Art of Painful Role-Playing,” in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2012), 13–30.

45. Zalac.

46. “Bleed—Nordic Larp Wiki,” last modified December 11, 2013. <http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Bleed>.

47. Montola, “Positive Negative.”

48. White, Harviainen, and Boss.

49. Sarah Roff, “Treatment, Not Trigger Warnings,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education Blogs: The Conversation*, 2014. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/conversation/2014/05/23/treatment-not-trigger-warnings/>

50. Ibid.

to new insights or potential healing of trauma,⁵¹ ⁵² we should recognize that, except in rare cases, a game designer is not a therapist, psychiatrist or social worker⁵³ trained to administer methods such as exposure therapy or psychodrama, nor are most community members well-versed in appropriate mental health methods to cope with and process negative emotions. We cannot assume that larp designers—and certainly not all larp players—are trained or capable of creating and holding a safe space to allow for what amounts to psychological treatment.⁵⁴ Despite good intentions, participants and designers may quickly find themselves beyond their level of expertise in dealing with trauma intrusions triggered by game content or play. Trying to overreach can burden a game or a community and may even do harm to players—the opposite intent of the actions.

Furthermore, Bowman notes that “intense in-character moments can leave a lasting emotional impact,”⁵⁵ more precisely in line with the definition of trauma and later intrusions that may manifest. The effects of a powerful or triggering experience in a larp may not be fully known by the player during or immediately following the experience. Indeed, as psychologists point out,⁵⁶ PTSD symptoms may occur months or years after a traumatic event. Bowman reiterates that “while players often describe intense emotional moments as the best parts of the game *after reflection*—the Golden Moments that keep them role-playing in the hopes of re-experiencing something similar—extreme emotional reactions sometimes have negative impacts on the community as a whole.”⁵⁷ They can provoke conflicts and challenges within a player community that are often

out-of-game and result in players feeling excluded or deciding to leave the game and group. Thus, although the larp ethos might promote—or in some cases even fetishize—intense emotional experiences, when these cross the line into trauma intrusions, the potential benefits disappear with the player’s agency. Additionally, such intense experiences have to be considered on more than the individual level or in terms of the immediate game play, as Bowman notes. Although games are enacted by characters, they are played by real people whose lived experience both informs and is informed by the game. To relegate a person’s trauma intrusion to a mere side-effect of the game or to negate it by attributing it to a character is to commit what can amount to an act of aggression to the player, who re-experiences victimization by the power differential in play in the game.

What Larp Communities Can Do About Triggers

When the primary concern is on designing the most powerful, most memorable gaming experience for players, “[t]he ethicality and safety of larp is often taken for granted. Participating voluntarily is taken as a sign of agreement that you are willing to endure what is going to happen.”⁵⁸ This is an assumption of blanket consent, which would be better replaced by *provisional or iterative consent*, whereby initial consent can be revoked or renegotiated throughout the game as conditions change at the discretion of the player. Järvelä advocates for a flexible, rather than prescriptive, rule, since “everyone draws his or her own line somewhere.”⁵⁹ Koljonen also notes that game designers “can never take risks for someone else” because that is using their power position to affect another’s safety.⁶⁰

Järvelä⁶¹ highlights important aspects of an ethical community, including giving information about a game’s content and themes, something that can be accomplished with a trigger warning among other ways. Although the responsibility for identifying triggers and stressors and handling their own engagement rests with individual players,

51. Jaye Wald and Steven Taylor, “Responses to Interoceptive Exposure in People With Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): A Preliminary Analysis of Induced Anxiety Reactions and Trauma Memories and Their Relationship to Anxiety Sensitivity and PTSD Symptom Severity,” *Cognitive Behaviour Therapy* 37 (2): 90–100.

52. Roff.

53. Even if a game designer should happen to also be a therapist, psychiatrist, or social worker, they are not in that context at the larp and cannot be expected to perform that role at the event.

54. Ibid.

55. Bowman, “Social,” 21.

56. American Psychiatric Association and American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

57. Bowman, “Social,” 17–18. Emphasis added.

58. Simo Järvelä, “The Golden Rule of Larp,” in *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*, edited by Juhana Pettersson (Helsinki, Finland: Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura, 2012).

59. Ibid, 1.

60. Johanna Koljonen, “Emotional and Physical Safety in Larp—Larpwriter Summer School 2014,” Presentation at the Larpwriter Summer School 2014, Vilnius, Lithuania, last modified Aug. 3, 2014, YouTube, Fantasiforbundet, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g-cPmM2bDcU>.

61. Järvelä.

appropriate decisions cannot be made without transparency from game designers and organizers. Pedersen recommends displaying the “guts, trust, and cooperation to have a completely open dialogue about these things.”⁶² Koljonen adds that it is the responsibility of game designers to make sure that participants not only *are* safe, but *feel* safe.⁶³ This is an important distinction because in order to explore and enjoy the game players must feel that their participation will not harm themselves or others. It is also important with regard to trigger reactions, since these are perceived, both psychologically and physically, as actual threats, even if the person is not in immediate danger. A person who is triggered may *be* safe in the larp environment, but not *feel* safe, and thus, designers and other players have a responsibility to act. Discussions like Järvelä’s and Pedersen’s about what makes for an ethical gaming community can be replicated in gaming communities in the U.S. and around the world.

Larp communities need to recognize that triggering is not only a possibility, but a probability, due to genre attributes of the medium: blurred distinctions between the imaginary and the real caused by the physical embodiment of a character by a player and bodily sensory perceptions. These experiences may be perceived by the brain as similar enough to an authentic situation or even indistinguishable from the “real.”⁶⁴ For players who find themselves in distress, such as experiencing a traumatic intrusion triggered in game, the environment of a larp community or game can feel hostile and threatening, safe and welcoming, or somewhere in between. Kessock claims that “it is impossible to know when designing a game or organizing an event if the content might negatively impact or trigger an individual.”⁶⁵ Indeed, on an individual basis, we must recognize that there are too many variables at stake for game designers and participants to control all possible reactions (see Fig. 2). Nor is it desirable to do so; larps by nature are ergodic and people choose to play them because they have agency to affect the game experience and outcome. Kessock offers a four-level system of responsibility for ethical content management and player safety comprised of game designers, game organizers, the community body of players, and the

individual.⁶⁶ Her goal is to both share and delineate responsibility for minimizing potentially triggering content among those who create, organize, and participate in larps. At each level of game design, organization, collective, and individual play, there are reasonable ways to consider the possibility of triggering an individual and compromising their real or perceived safety.

While triggering cannot be prevented entirely, there are steps that larp communities can take to create structures and norms to inform players, obtain provisional consent, and process negative experiences. Like the universities, school systems, and organizations that have instituted policies to create “safer spaces,”⁶⁷ many larp communities are concerned with protecting participants’ emotional and physical safety. While these discussions do not always rise to the level of formal policy, some communities have explicit rules that state an intention to maintain a respectful and tolerant community: a safer space. All communities have a specific play culture: guidelines, norms, or implicit rules that may not be codified or written into the game rules and mechanics, but are nonetheless expectations of participants and are enforced informally by community members and/or game organizers. I will briefly give examples of these ways to demonstrate *Intent* and obtain provisional *Consent*.⁶⁸

Explicit Statement of Game Themes and Conflicts:

Some games clearly advertise their content and play style prior to the game, either in communication from the GMs, on the game website, or in social media groups. The “Bad Apples” larp, which ran at Intercon N in the Boston area, contained the following detailed statement:

Trigger warnings: this game is fairly dark, exploring sometimes abusive relationships, moral grey areas, people who do bad things, and the people they affect. Triggers in the game may include violence, gangs, domestic abuse, adultery, dysfunctional families, religious

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66. Ibid.

67. Coalition for Safer Spaces, “What Are, and Why Support, ‘Safer’ Spaces,” Coalition for Safer Spaces, last modified April 4, 2010. <http://saferpacesnyc.wordpress.com/>

68. I am borrowing the concepts of Intent and Consent from tort law, where they are criteria to help determine who should bear the costs of unintended injury. Increasingly legal scholars note that case law reflects a debate about whether criminal intent means to act to “cause harm or offense” or to act in the absence of the consent of the victim. To learn more, see Nancy J. Moore, “Intent and Consent in the Tort of Battery: Confusion and Controversy,” *Am. UL Rev.* 61 (2011): 1585.

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62. Bjarke Pedersen, “5 Things We Lie About in Larp,” *Playground: The New Wave in Role-playing*, no. 6, (2012): 42-43.

63. Koljonen.

64. Kleim, et. al.

65. Kessock, 103.

zealotry, homophobia, and drugs. There are no explicit sexual abuse situations, though one relationship borders on it (some coercion via power dynamics).⁶⁹

This trigger warning may be a bit overzealous; by attempting to list all themes, it has conflated trauma, such as abuse, with everyday experiences, such as moral grey areas. Despite these flaws, it is an honest attempt to demonstrate care for players considering the game. Another example is the Nordic larp “Last Will,” which provides a detailed *Vision Statement*. The designers state up front that the larp “deals with issues concerning human dignity, capitalism, slavery, human rights, democracy, vulnerability, hope and despair” and that “as a player you can expect a physically and mentally quite demanding larp” during which a player may “suffer some degrading and dehumanizing behavior.”⁷⁰ This open disclosure allows potential players to make an informed decision about the game and is an example of what Torner calls transparency of expectation, or the clear framing of what can and cannot be introduced into a role-playing session.⁷¹

Casting Questionnaires: For larps where players do not design their own characters, pre-larp questionnaires such as the one used prior to “Bad Apples” delineate specific character types or attributes and ask players to rank their preferences using a Likert scale. Strong dislikes and refusals to play certain aspects indicate an unwillingness to engage with content that may represent a trigger, or make the person uncomfortable or offended. Casting applications may also have one or more direct questions asking players to self-identify any triggers they wish to bring to game designers’ attention. The “Bad Apples” questionnaire asked, “Are there any specific triggers or anything else that you want to avoid?”⁷² Clapper notes that players should not feel compelled to describe their triggers, but should have the opportunity to disclose if they wish.⁷³ Compelling

disclosure of triggers can result in a loss of agency akin to the trauma itself. These practices help create a transparent environment for individual players. Exposure to these contemplative questions on the casting questionnaire helps all players of that game to be aware of potential issues for others and offers them the opportunity to reflect on their own game play within this environment.

Safe Words:⁷⁴ Safe words are a larp component that varies by community and allows players to have agency in halting or lessening game play to maintain safety. Not all games have safe words, which makes them inherently problematic for traumatic and unwanted experiences. Some communities use “hold” or “stop” to halt activity and allow for intervention of the game master, organizer(s), or medic(s). Others suggest unique words, such as “cheesecake” to avoid the possibility of the word being used in the course of ordinary gameplay.⁷⁵ Still other communities use the phrase “game stop,” which makes obvious the fiction of the larp by delivering the conscious jolt that it is a game. Each community that uses safe words generally also has an ethos of when such phrases are allowed.⁷⁶

While many larp communities have such procedures in place to maintain physical safety and allow for non-diegetic intervention to players in need, each larp group also needs to develop procedures and ethos to support players who experience serious psychological distress that compromises their actual or perceived safety. The Nordic tradition has the long-standing protocols of *kutt* (“cut”) to halt a scene and *brems* (“brake”) to lessen its intensity, although they report similar problems with players feeling they do not have “permission” to use them.⁷⁷ Kessock reiterates the idea that neither the community norms nor the game’s social contract should apply so much social pressure to remain in game that it becomes impossible or difficult for a player to use safety techniques or exit a situation.⁷⁸ Some games require players to stay in character

69. Tom Dimiduk, Alon Levy, and Thomas Wohlers, “Casting Application: Bad Apples,” *Intercon Noir*, December 2013. <http://www.interactiveliterature.org/N/>

70. Frida Gamero, Sofia Stenler, and Annica Strand, “LAST WILL: Vision,” last accessed September 29, 2014, <http://lastwilllarp.com/vision/>

71. Evan Torner, “Transparency and Safety in Role-Playing Games,” in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2013), 14–17.

72. Ibid.

73. Clapper.

74. The concept of safe words has its rhetorical origin in the BDSM community of domination and submission. This has interesting implications for a kind of play invoked in larp that has rhetorics of power and a culture of exploring the boundaries of pleasure.

75. Stephanie Twilley, *Safe Words at LARPI*, YouTube, 2014. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G6qcMyaIS3o&feature=youtu_tube_gdata_player.

76. Ibid.

77. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Safewords,” last accessed June 30, 2014. <http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Safewords>

78. Kessock.

the entire time, such as Nordic larps or high immersion boffer larps. As out-of-character behavior is considered “disruptive,” pressure exists on a social level to stay in scene, even when feeling uncomfortable, harassed, or distressed. Merely having the techniques available is not enough; larp communities need to make explicit and demonstrate that players have both permission and agency to use them. A player experiencing a psychological injury is no less in danger and deserving of no less respect than someone who has been physically injured in the course of game play.

Inform, Sustain, Process Model: Emily Care Boss uses transparent methods to create what I will call an *Inform, Sustain, Process* model that is concerned with player safety before, during, and after the larp. Like most Jeepform games, *Under My Skin*, which role-plays relationship issues including infidelity, divorce, and typical arguments and stressors, is designed for heavy bleed. Players are encouraged to play close to home in order to explore their own relationship patterns and responses. Boss prepares for this expected level of engagement—and the associating triggers that may arise—by communicating with players and giving clear descriptions of the content on game documents before the larp. The game bills itself as “an intense role-playing game about faith, love and commitment” and states that “partners and lovers have to face up to their fears and jealousies.”⁷⁹ In a short out-of-character workshop prior to the start of role-play, Boss asks players to give information about their mundane world identities and relationships. This grounding technique helps people prepare for their role and the intensity of emotions that arise during play, which tend to arise from the player’s actual experience. It also makes explicit the player identity, since the heavy bleed tends to elide player and character and strong emotional reactions directed toward a character may become identified with a player.⁸⁰ These techniques occur during the *Inform Stage*.

During the game, Boss manages safer space via her own interactions that uphold an ethos of vulnerability, empathy, and trust. Should someone’s intentional bleed become instead a psychological trigger that provokes an intrusion, safe words (demonstrated beforehand in the *Inform Stage*) are

79. Emily Care Boss, *Under My Skin: Part 3 in the Three Quick Games about the Human Heart Trilogy*, Black and Green Games, 2008. <http://www.blackgreengames.com/ums.html>.

80. These kinds of social conflicts that arise from game play, particularly when bleed is involved, are the subject of Bowman’s 2013 article, “Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study.”

used, either by the player being stressed, another player, or the GM. These actions demonstrate an effective *Sustain Stage*.

She also makes space following the game for interpretation and assimilation of the game’s experience, both on an individual and a collective level, which occurs during the *Process Stage*. The importance of post-larp processing has been noted by several designers and scholars.⁸¹ The Process Stage may include a formal de-roleing process immediately after the game using techniques borrowed from psychotherapy to help participants distance themselves from the character or the experience. Processing techniques may also include social events with participants, which Torner and Bowman note tend “to increase the feelings of emotional safety in the larp space, so that players get to know one another well and can better distinguish between in-game and out-of-game actions.”⁸² The Nordic larp tradition advocates workshops prior to the larp to go over community norms, procedures, and game content, as well as debriefs after the game⁸³ to process both the subjective diegeses of individual players⁸⁴ and the powerful emotions the larp may have raised. These techniques from one larp form or tradition can be explored for use in others in order to provide safer space.

Conclusion

A trigger in a larp is serious because it threatens players and play by breaking two game conventions: alibi and the social contract. A trigger thwarts player agency in a powerful and involuntary way and can cause players to experience physical, emotional, or psychological trauma. Players in role-playing games who are experiencing a trigger reaction have their out-of-game lived experience thrust into the game without warning or permission, often breaking the alibi that a character allows one to enact behaviors that are inconsistent with the player’s usual identity.⁸⁵

81. Lizzie Stark, “How to Run a Post-Larp Debrief,” *Leaving Mundania*, last modified December 3, 2013, <http://leavingmundania.com/2013/12/01/run-post-larp-debrief/>; Nordic Larp Wiki, “Aftercare,” last accessed November 14, 2013; Eirik Fatland, “Debriefing Intense Larps 101,” *The Larpwright*, last modified July 23, 2013, <http://larpwright.efatland.com/?p=384>

82. Torner and Bowman, “Post-Larp Depression.”

83. Fatland, “Debriefing Intense Larps 101.”

84. Markus Montola, “Role-Playing as Interactive Construction of Subjective Diegeses,” in *As Larp Grows Up—Theory and Methods in Larp*, edited by Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander (Frederiksberg: Projektgruppen kp 03, 2003), 82–89.

85. Montola and Holopainen.

A trigger reaction makes plain that more than a game is at stake and that characters do have a referential relationship to real players with real minds and bodies. This negative experience breaks the social contract that a game offers a place of safety separate from the world.

All larps have the potential to trigger a player somewhere along the Negative Reaction Continuum due to the rhetorical elements of the game and the physical nature of the play. What stimuli does the triggering, when, and to whom cannot be effectively predicted. For these reasons, and since triggers are an extreme example of larp's element of bleed, we should stop warning about triggers in *certain* games, or trying to determine which games *should* have warnings. I advocate for transparency of expectation⁸⁶ in *all* games. Designers and organizers can simply note, "this game's themes and content are designed to include..." and offer a succinct statement of play philosophy that describes methods to create safer space.⁸⁷ As Torner notes, "transparency of expectation lets players make informed decisions about what play *might* look like,"⁸⁸ but does not preclude the introduction of other elements by the players. The statement of the themes, the general content, and the knowledge that the community includes ways to support and process intense emotional experiences as they arise describes the intent of the game designer(s) and establishes an ethos of the game; the fact that there is transparency prior to the game is a rhetorical marker of the designer's sensibilities. This information allows the participant to decide if they wish to enter the described social contract with appropriate personal preparation. Players seeking transparency of expectation are not attempting to control game content, nor necessarily to actively avoid it.

Furthermore, in a medium such as larp, where characters are embodied and interacting in

physical space, the ambient world allows for greater opportunities for triggers to intervene through such non-linguistic representations as body position, bodily sensations, sensory experiences, and objects. Though how a player will react to a particular trigger when it occurs cannot be predicted, the way the community supports those who experience a trigger⁸⁹ can be regulated through explicit and implicit rules, game mechanics, and an established community ethos. When players are able to feel safe and embrace the agency a game allows, they tend to have fun and return for additional games. Communities of larpers who consider the potential effects of the hobby and create networks and systems to assist players also find that they have fewer conflicts and more sustainable groups.⁹⁰ Understanding trigger reactions will benefit the practice of larping by making games more inclusive and player communities more consistent in their caring for their members. While no amount of care, preparation, or warning can remove the possibility of triggers for all players, larp communities can and should be aware of the nature of triggers in larps. They can make conscious decisions to ensure that although the primary responsibility for navigating a larp experience rests with the player, the ethos of the larp community has a meaningful and continuing impact on the creation of a safer space for players, designers, and organizers alike.

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86. Torner.

87. An example is in the Vision Statement for the Nordic larp *Last Will*, which states: "In the design of vulnerability, you might need to sleep rough (but you will get to sleep), eating nasty food (but you will not go hungry), and suffer[ing] some degrading and dehumanizing behavior (spoken to in the third person, evaluated and categorized), but always with producers present to ensure the player's safety and emotional well-being. You will, as a participant, get a well-written role with depth and relationships to help you into the larp's setting and history and the role will partially be tailored to your wishes for gameplay. Through workshops before the larp, the players will work together to develop the characters and get a feel for the world and the game's atmosphere." See Gamero, Stenler, and Strand, "LAST WILL—Vision."

88. Torner.

89. Support may also be needed for a player who caused the trigger in another. Feelings of guilt or blame may also be harmful.

90. Bowman.

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Educational Live Action Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review

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Sarah Lynne Bowman

Abstract

This article will cover the current literature pertaining to educational live-action role-playing games (edu-larp) and related phenomena. Though edu-larp is a rather recent development emerging from the leisure activity of role-playing games, various other spheres have emphasized the pedagogical value of role-playing as a method, including education, theatre, psychodrama, military, business, and health care. This literature review will streamline the discourse surrounding games, simulation, drama, and role-playing with the recent development of edu-larp, emphasizing the various cognitive, affective, and behavioral benefits detailed in the research. The review will also discuss the challenges faced by edu-larp designers and instructors, offering possible solutions.

Introduction

This article will cover the current literature pertaining to educational live-action role-playing games (edu-larp) and related phenomena. Though edu-larp is a rather recent development emerging from the leisure activity of role-playing games, various other spheres have emphasized the pedagogical value of role-playing as a method, including education, theatre, psychodrama, military, business, and health care.¹ This literature review will streamline the discourse surrounding games, simulation, drama, and role-playing with the recent development of edu-larp.²

The importance of game play to skill training and problem solving is prevalent in recent scholarly work. Childhood pretend play and games appear to serve

an evolutionary purpose, both in identity formation and in “practicing” skills for adult social roles. In addition, video games have arisen as a dominant form of entertainment for both children and adults alike, rivaling traditional forms of passive media such as television and radio. This cultural shift emphasizes the value of integrating game play into pedagogical practice in order to connect with the current generation. Game play affords active engagement, problem solving, agency, and participation.

Just as video games have risen in popularity as leisure activities, so too have role-playing games, including larp. Role-playing games offer many benefits specific to the form, including community building; tactical and social problem solving; and identity exploration.³ In addition, current literature on role-playing emphasizes the strength of the form in producing empathy and self-awareness. For example, the Nordic larp movement has used role-playing in order to raise social consciousness on important issues such as homelessness, immigration, and imprisonment.⁴ Even within more traditional forms of role-playing, such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *World of Darkness* larps, the form encourages spontaneous, co-creative participation and intrinsically motivated “as if” thinking.⁵

Literature extolling the benefits of role-playing as an experimental training method are already prevalent in several unrelated disciplines. Many educators advocate role-play in the classroom, particularly as a means to teach social sciences.⁶ An early adopter and developer of simulations, the U.S. military has recently developed full-scale role-playing exercises in order to prepare soldiers for

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1. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010), 80-103.

2. Portions of this research are duplicated in two a case study on an edu-larp program by the organization Seekers Unlimited in the following papers: Sarah Lynne Bowman and Anne Standiford, “Educational Larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Mixed Method Case Study,” *International Journal of Role-playing* 5 (In press for 2015 publication); Bowman and Standiford, “Edu-larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Qualitative Case Study,” In DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association), *Proceedings from the RPG Summit at DiGRA 2014*. (Salt Lake City, UT, August 3-6, 2014). (In press for 2014 publication).

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3. Bowman, *Functions*, 7-9.

4. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola, eds., *Nordic Larp* (Stockholm, Sweden: Föa Livia, 2010).

5. Bowman, *Functions*, 104-126.

6. Howes, Elaine and Barbara C. Cruz, “Role-playing in Science Education: An Effective Strategy for Developing Multiple Perspectives,” *Journal of Elementary Science Education* 21, no. 3 (2009): 33; David Simkins, *Negotiation, Simulation, and Shared Fantasy: Learning through Live Action Role-Play* (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin, 2011), 68; Mark C. Carnes, “Setting Students’ Minds on Fire,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, last modified March 6, 2011.

immersion into battlegrounds and new cultures such as Afghanistan and Iraq.⁷ The therapeutic method of psychodrama uses role-playing exercises to help patients practice new social skills, work through trauma, and increase empathy.⁸ Role-playing is also used in psychological training for professionals.⁹ A multitude of experimental improvisational drama groups, such as Theater of the Oppressed and Healing the Wounds of History, use theatrical and role-playing methods in order to encourage individuals to engage with social issues.¹⁰ Medical simulations help students learn spontaneous problem solving, as well as “soft skills” such as bedside manner.¹¹ Many businesses employ role-playing exercises in order to train employees in customer service, sales, team work, and leadership.¹² In addition, role-playing is useful in

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7. Lizzie Stark, *Leaving Mundania* (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 2012); Aaron Vanek, “Inside the Box: The United States Army’s Taxpayer Funded Larp,” in *Wyrd Con Companion 2012*, edited by Aaron Vanek and Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012), 77-80.

8. Adam Blatner, “Role playing in Education,” *Blatner.com*. Last modified on October 18, 2009. <http://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/rlplayedu.htm>

9. Howes and Cruz, 37; Bradley J. Brummel, C. K. Gunsalus, Kerri L. Andresen, and Michael C. Louie, “Development of Role-play Scenarios for Teaching Responsible Conduct of Research,” *Sci Eng Ethics* 16 (2010): 575.

10. Bowman, *Functions*, 40-41.

11. Bowman, *Functions*, 100-102; Brummel et al., 573-589; Zahra Ladhani et al., “Online Role-playing for Faculty Development,” *The Clinical Teacher* 8 (2011): 31; Natalie McCabe, “The Standardized Patient,” in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2013), 38-41.

12. Brent Ruben, “Simulations, Games, and Experience-Based Learning: The Quest for a New Paradigm for Teaching and Learning,” *Simulation & Gaming* 30 (1999): 502; Thomas Duus Henriksen, “Games and Creativity Learning,” in *Role, Play, Art: Collected Experiences of Role-Playing*, edited by Thorbiörn Fritzson and Tobias Wrigstad (Stockholm: Föreningen Knutpunkt, 2006), 11; Karen Griggs, “A Role Play for Revising Style and Applying Management Theories,” *Business Communications Quarterly* 68, no. 1 (2005): 60; Howes and Cruz, 33; Steven R. Balzac, “The Use of Structured Goal Setting in Simulation Design,” *Journal of Interactive Drama* 4, no. 1 (2011): 51-58; Huei-Tse Hou, “Analyzing the Learning Process of an Online Role-playing Discussion Activity,” *Educational Technology & Society* 15, no. 1 (2012): 212; Martin Eckhoff Andresen, ed., *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying* (Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012), 17; J. Tuomas Harviainen, Timo Lainema, and Eeli Saarinen. “Player-reported Impediments to Game-Based Learning,” in Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global—Games in Culture and Society, 2012. <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/12168.02279.pdf>

pedagogical training itself.¹³

These experiential forms of learning connect subject matter with visceral, emotional memory, not just rote memorization of facts outside of a personal context. Certain scenarios, particularly those involving first-person identification with a character, also offer the aforementioned potential for personal growth, self-awareness, and empathy toward others. Well-designed role-play activities can train several skills at once. While applying subject matter knowledge, students also learn social skills such as diplomacy, debate, leadership, public speaking, critical thinking, and spontaneous problem-solving.

In the leisure setting, some larps focus on fantasy, science fiction, horror, or post-apocalyptic genres, whereas the Nordic larp tradition often tackles real world social issues through intense, immersive scenarios, attempting to raise consciousness on important topics from multiple perspectives.¹⁴ Regardless of the setting and format, edu-larp emerges from these game-based leisure activities rather than the aforementioned professional contexts, offering the potential benefits of both spheres.

Interest in edu-larp has received significant recent scholarly attention, e.g. the Role-playing in Games Seminar (2012) in Finland, the Living Games Conference (2014) in New York, and the Edu-larp Sweden Conference (2014) in Gothenburg. Several examples of edu-larp exist throughout the world, including the ELIN Network; the all-larp Danish boarding school Østerskov Efterskole and the larp-oriented Efterskolen Epos; organizations such as the Swedish LajvVerkstaden; the Norwegian Fantasiforbundet; and the American Seekers Unlimited and Reacting to the Past. Various other outgrowths exist in countries as diverse as Finland,¹⁵

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13. Gabrielle McSharry and Sam Jones, “Role-play in Science Teaching and Learning,” *School Science Review* 82, no. 298 (2000): 74-75; Blatner; Howes and Cruz, 37.

14. Stenros and Montola.

15. Jori Pitkänen. “Studying Thoughts: Stimulated Recall as a Game Research Method,” in *Game Research Methods*, edited by Petri Lankoski and Staffan Björk (In press for 2014 publication).

Brazil,¹⁶ Poland,¹⁷ Russia,¹⁸ Belarus,¹⁹ Taiwan,²⁰ and Korea.²¹ Unfortunately, extensive coverage of these efforts and their game design is beyond the scope of this study and reserved for future work. Instead, this literature review will contextualize the current research on educational larps within existing pedagogical practices such as simulation and Drama in Education.²²

Approach to the Literature

Literature extolling the benefits of role-playing as an experimental training method are already prevalent in several disciplines unrelated to the larp leisure activity. Edu-larp follows the theoretical principles of the educational theories of experiential learning²³ and situated learning.²⁴ According to Kolb, experiential learning posits that cognitive skills are developed and knowledge is acquired through concrete experience (doing), reflective observation (thinking back to the experience),

16. Elaine Bettocchi, Carlos Klimick, and Rian Oliveira Rezende, "Incorporeal Project: Stimulating the Construction of Competencies and Knowledge by Co-creating RPG Narratives and Their Supports." Paper presented at the Roleplaying in Games Seminar, University of Tampere, Finland, April 10-11, 2012.

17. Michał Mochocki, "Edu-Larp as Revision of Subject-Matter Knowledge," *The International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013): 68.

18. Yaraslau I. Kot, "Educational Larp: Topics for Consideration," in *Wyrd Con Companion 2012*, edited by Aaron Vanek and Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012), 118-119; Alexey Fedoseev, "Role-playing Games as Educational Technology: The Implications of Modern Activity Theory," Paper presented at Roleplaying in Games Seminar, University of Tampere, Finland, 2012.

19. Kot, 122; Aliaksander Karalevich, "Experiences from 1943: Teaching History Through Larps," in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckoff Andresen (Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012), 37.

20. Michael Cheng, "Student Perceptions of Interactive Drama Activities," *Journal of Interactive Drama* 3, no. 3 (2008): 2.

21. Gord Sellar, "Thinking Big: RPGs, Teaching in Korea, and the Subversive Idea of Agency," in *Wyrd Con Companion 2012*, edited by Aaron Vanek and Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012), 9-12.

22. Mochocki, "Revision," 56-59.

23. David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

24. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

abstract conceptualization (forming a theory about what was observed), and active experimentation (testing the new theory). In situated learning, Lave and Wenger explain that learning does not occur in a vacuum and is socially co-constructed in a dynamic physical environment. Furthermore, Dreyfus and Dreyfus theorize through the use of hermeneutic phenomenology that expertise is gained through extensive experience rather than emerging based solely on book knowledge.²⁵

This article acts as an extension of my previous work on the skill-training benefits of both leisure and educational role-playing environments in my 2010 book *The Functions of Role-playing: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity*. In the sections on problem-solving and scenario building, I describe the variety of different skills trained through role-playing. I previously categorized these skills under five dimensions: personal, interpersonal, cognitive, cultural, and professional.²⁶ I further explore the institutions that utilize role-playing for training purposes, including military, government, education, corporate, and healthcare applications.²⁷ I encourage interested readers to review these previous chapters for a more extensive exploration of these topics and a list of resources additional to those featured in this review.

Similar to this previous research, the current discourse surrounding edu-larp focuses upon several benefits of the method as compared to traditional learning. While this article uses my previous method of thematic discourse analysis, I have reorganized the benefits found within the literature under the broad categories of cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of learning (see Figure 1), similar to previous work by Kot.²⁸ For the purpose of this review, literature regarding drama, simulation, game-based learning, and edu-larp are considered alongside one another as cousins,²⁹ indicating similarities within the discourse regarding their benefits.

The process of research included collecting articles from various larp publications such as the *Knutepunkt Nordic larp books* and the *Wyrd Con Companion Books* over the last ten years, as well as searching EBSCO and other academic databases for articles pertaining to role-playing, drama, simulation,

25. Stewart E. Dreyfus and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *A Five Stage Model of the Mental Activities Involved in Directed Skill Acquisition* (Washington, DC: Storming Media, 1980).

26. Bowman, *Functions*, 85-95.

27. *Ibid.*, 95-102.

28. Kot, 122.

29. Mochocki, "Revision," 2013.

and education. While this review is meant to be thorough, readers should not consider it exhaustive, as previous publications surely exist in other formats and new research continues to emerge. Also, this review only covers English-speaking literature, while several useful sources exist in other languages. Finally, in an effort to narrow search parameters, I removed most references pertaining to digital games

with the exception of role-playing exercises that use a computer interface such as emails, forums, etc. While many of these benefits are also observable in digital games, the live action component of larp is somewhat unique in terms of the affordances allowed to players such as creativity, improvisation, interaction, and personal input into the game content.

Figure 1: Cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of student learning through edu-larp.

Learning Dimension	Student Development
<i>Cognitive</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical ethical reasoning • Exercising creativity, spontaneity, and imagination • Intrinsic motivation* • Improved problem-solving skills • Learning multiple skills and knowledges simultaneously • Self-efficacy, perceived competence
<i>Affective</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active engagement* • Enhanced awareness of other perspectives • First-person identification improving emotional investment • Increased empathy • Increased self-awareness • Intrinsic motivation* • Raising social consciousness • Social skills development, e.g. cooperation, debate, negotiation
<i>Behavioral</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active engagement* • Exercising leadership skills • Intrinsic motivation* • Improving team work

* Literature suggests that intrinsic motivation and active engagement have cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions, hence organizing them in multiple categories.³⁰

As edu-larp, simulation, and edu-drama research is still developing, the majority of the sources in this review emphasize theoretical principles or feature anecdotal, observational reports from designers and educators. However, a few studies include some degree of data collection. Sancho, et al., collected grades and student evaluations after an online role-playing exercise used as a method to

improve team work.³¹ Similarly, in a language role-play study, Cheng used open-ended questions and quizzes regarding comprehension of persuasive techniques.³² Hou, et al. provide quantitative support for their claim that online role-playing improves cognitive skills such as motivation.³³ Guenther and

30. Paul D. Eggen and Don P. Kauchak, *Educational Psychology: Windows on Classrooms*. 9th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2012; Jennifer A. Fredericks, Phyllis Blumenfeld, Jeanne Friedel, and Alison Paris, "School Engagement," in *What Do Children Need to Flourish?: Conceptualizing and Measuring Indicators of Positive Development*, edited by Kristin Anderson Moore and Laura H. Lippman (New York, NY: Springer Science and Business Media, 2005), 1-5.

31. Pilar Sancho, Pablo Moreno-Ger, Rubén Fuentes-Fernández, and Baltasar Fernández-Manjón, "Adaptive Role Playing Games: An Immersive Approach for Problem Based Learning," *Educational Technology & Society* 12, no. 4 (2009): 110-124.

32. Cheng.

33. Houet al.

Moore³⁴ evaluated their leadership scenario with open-ended qualitative survey questions; responses indicated improvement in communication skills, depth of comprehension, and critical thinking. Howes and Cruz³⁵ used a similar method to evaluate their scenario for science pedagogy, showing an increase in sensitivity to diversity and empathy. Harviainen, Lainema, and Saarinen³⁶ also asked students open-ended questions to explore the limitations and impediments to a business simulation, finding issues with unrealistic trust, competitive play, and cheating. Brummel, et al.,³⁷ used a quantitative and qualitative mixed method design to evaluate their role-play exercise on teaching responsible conduct of research, demonstrating increases in engagement and depth of understanding. Each of these studies involved university or graduate level participants.

A few studies exist on edu-larp in secondary education. Mochocki³⁸ evaluated edu-larp by assessing history subject matter retention over time in Polish high school students using a mixed methods design. A study by Harviainen and Savonsaari³⁹ used teacher observations and reflective writing as a means to gather data on two edu-larps at the high school level in Finland: one focusing on secondary language acquisition, music history, and health education; the other emphasizing debate skills and empathy. Pitkänen⁴⁰ used the stimulated recall method to study the effectiveness of historical edu-larp in producing empathy in students. In addition to increased empathy, the study found that students were intrinsically motivated to perform historical research by the scenario.⁴¹ Pitkänen also attempted the stimulated recall method when studying how game design affects student thinking at Østerskov Efterskole, though further data gathering is needed for solid conclusions.⁴²

Gjedde⁴³ also gathered data at Østerskov in a year-long mixed method study, investigating the edu-larp curriculum with regard to creative thinking linked with intrinsic motivation, as well as social creativity through participatory culture. Gjedde found that some students were motivated by the emotional, narrative elements of the game, whereas others found motivation in the strategic or competitive game properties. Additionally, the study reveals that students at Østerskov scored just as well on standardized tests as the national average in all subjects and slightly above average in specific areas.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Bowman and Standiford conducted a mixed method project on middle school science students gathering self-reports on several learning dimensions: perceived competence/self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, leadership, and team work.⁴⁵ The data revealed an increase in overall intrinsic motivation, interest/enjoyment of science, and perceived competence, described in more detail in the Conclusion of this article.

Overall, more research is needed with solid data on each of the benefits of edu-larp. Thus, readers of this review should bear in mind the theoretical and anecdotal nature of many of these sources, even those published in academic journals, as the field of experiential learning continues to develop.

A broad view of the Literature

Examining the literature from a broad view, although the method is diverse enough for educators to apply to any field,⁴⁶ role-playing is especially

34. Joseph F. Guenther and Lori L. Moore, "Role Playing as a Leadership Development Tool," *Journal of Leadership Education* 4, no. 2 (2005): 59-65.

35. Howes and Cruz.

36. Harviainen, Lainema, and Saarinen.

37. Brummel et al.

38. Michał Mochocki, "Larping the Past: Research Report on High-School Edu-Larp," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2014). In this anthology.

39. Harviainen and Savonsaari.

40. Pitkänen.

41. Harviainen and Savonsaari.

42. Pitkänen.

43. Lisa Gjedde, "Role Game Playing as a Platform for Creative and Collaborative Learning," in *Proceedings of the 7th European Conference on Games-Based Learning Volume 1*, edited by Paula Escudeiro and Carlos Vaz de Carvalho (Reading, UK: Academic Conferences and Publishing International Limited, 2013), 190-198.

44. Gjedde, 195.

45. Bowman and Standiford, "Qualitative"; Bowman and Standiford, "Mixed Method."

46. Malik Hyltoft, "Full-Time Edu-larps: Experiences from Østerskov," in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckoff Andresen (Oslo, Norway: Fantasisforbundet, 2012), 23.

suited for social studies,⁴⁷ including history,⁴⁸ religion,⁴⁹ government,⁵⁰ and economics.⁵¹ Edu-larp is also exceptionally useful in the study of Language Arts,⁵² including public speaking,⁵³ secondary language acquisition,⁵⁴ and exploration of literature.⁵⁵ While Mochocki critiques edu-larp's effectiveness in science education,⁵⁶ other educators

find the form helpful to teach science⁵⁷ and math.⁵⁸ On the professional front, simulations are often applied in military,⁵⁹ health care,⁶⁰ business,⁶¹ and psychological training.⁶² While psychodrama and process drama are not learning styles in the strict sense, practitioners have used these forms of drama in learning contexts, which indicate similarities of traits with edu-larp. In addition, edu-larp is useful in pedagogical training.⁶³

As detailed in Table 1, role-playing offers many potential benefits over traditional education, including increased self-awareness,⁶⁴ critical ethical reasoning,⁶⁵ and empathy.⁶⁶ Educational role-

47. Howes and Cruz, 33-46; Simkins, *Negotiation*, 68.

48. Sanne Harder, "Confessions of a Schoolteacher: Experiences with Role-playing in Education," in *Lifelike*, edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, and Line Thorup (Copenhagen, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP07), 230; Malik Hyltoft, "The Role-players' School: Østerskov Efterskole," in *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-playing Games*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Jyväskylä, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2008), 17; Adam L. Porter, "Role-playing and Religion: Using Games to Educate Millennials," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 11, no. 4 (2008): 230; Blatner; Howes and Cruz, 33-46; Bowman, *Functions*, 98-100; Carnes; Simkins, *Negotiation*, 71-72; Frida Sofie Jansen, "Larp the Swedish Way: An Educational Space Odyssey," in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckhoff Andresen, 30-35 (Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012), 31-32; Karavelech, 36-44; Erik Aarebrot and Martin Nielsen, "Prisoner for a Day: Creating a Game Without Winners," in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckhoff Andresen (Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012), 24-29.

49. Harder, 232; Porter, 230-235.

50. Ruben, 502; David Simkins, "Playing with Ethics: Experiencing New Ways of Being in RPGs," in *Ethics and Game Design: Teaching Values through Play*, edited by Karen Schrier and David Gibson (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2010), 69-70; Harder, 232; Porter, 230-235.

51. Thomas Duus Henriksen, "On the Transmutation of Educational Role-play: A Critical Reframing to the Role-play in Order to Meet the Educational Demands," in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys, and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2004), 107-130; Elge Larsson, "Participatory Education: What and Why," in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys, and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2004), 244; Simkins, *Negotiation*, 72-73; Hyltoft, "Full-Time."

52. Simkins, *Negotiation*, 193-200.

53. Ruth Martin, "Assessment of Task-Based Activities in University EFP Classes," *Journal of Interactive Drama* 2, no. 2 (2007): 9; Cheng, 2008.

54. Harder, 234; Harviainen and Savonsaari.

55. Tisha Bender, "Role playing in Online Education: A Teaching Tool to Enhance Student Engagement and Sustained Learning," *Innovate* 1, no. 4 (2005); Blatner.

56. Mochocki, "Revision."

57. Abour H. Cherif and Christine H. Somerville, "Maximizing Learning: Using Role Playing in the Classroom," *The American Biology Teacher* 57, no. 1 (1995): 28-33; Blatner; Howes and Cruz, 33; Brummel et al., 573; Simkins, *Negotiation*, 73-74; Hyltoft, "Full-Time," 20.

58. Harder, 230; Hyltoft, "School," 20; Blatner; Paul Heyward, "Emotional Engagement Through Drama: Strategies to Assist Learning through Role-play," *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (2010): 198.

59. Bowman, *Functions*, 95-97; Stark, 125-136; Vanek.

60. Bowman, *Functions*, 100-102; Brummel et al., 573-589; Ladhani et al., 31; McCabe, 38-41; Anne Standiford, "Lessons Learned from Larp: Promoting High-Quality Role-play and Immersion in Nursing Simulation," in *The Wyrld Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrld Con, 2014). In this volume.

61. Ruben, 502; Henriksen, "Transmutation," 11; Griggs, 60; Howes and Cruz, 33; Balzac; Hou, 212; Martin Eckhoff Andresen, "Bringing Fiction Alive: An Introduction for Education and Recreation," in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckhoff Andresen (Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012), 17; Harviainen, Lainema, and Saarinen.

62. Blatner; Howes and Cruz, 37; Bowman, *Functions*; Brummel et al., 575.

63. McSharry and Jones, 74-75; Blatner; Howes and Cruz, 37.

64. Agnes Downing, "A Critical Examination of Role Playing as a Model of Teaching," Proceedings from the 24th Conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (Brisbane, Queensland, Australia, July 3-6, 1994), 4; Harder, 231; Larsson, 245; Karavelech, 42.

65. Brummel et al., 575; Simkins, "Ethics," 73; Simkins, *Negotiation*, 215; Mark Hoge, "Experiential Learning for Youth Through Larps and RPGs," in *The Wyrld Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrld Con, 2013), 49.

66. Harder, 231-234; Porter, 234; Howes and Cruz, 42; Bowman, *Functions*; Simkins, "Ethics," 212; Mikko Meriläinen, "The Self-perceived Effects of the Role-playing Hobby on Personal Development—A Survey Report," *The International Journal of Role-Playing* 3 (2012): 59.

playing research often focuses upon the experiential medium as potentially intrinsically motivating,⁶⁷ following the definition of the term by Deci, et. al.⁶⁸ Our traditional learning method promotes a certain level of passivity, as students are expected to receive and assimilate information from the instructor,⁶⁹ whereas the open, participatory nature of games lends to a higher degree of active engagement and participation.⁷⁰ The method may also improve feelings of self-efficacy and perceived competence through goal setting and achieving,⁷¹ allowing individuals to contribute their personal talents to the success of the group,⁷² which may increase the student's sense of agency and empowerment.⁷³ Role-playing is often used as a method of increasing leadership skills⁷⁴ and team work.⁷⁵

This article will detail the commentary made by experts in larp, simulation, and drama regarding these dimensions of learning, emphasizing quotes by edu-larp designers, theorists, practitioners, and researchers. Furthermore, this paper will feature considerations within the literature regarding the potential challenges to the practical use of edu-larp and suggestions for improvement. These challenges include resistance from students; the learning curve involved for teachers; the difficulty in assessing the degree to which the scenarios teach specific facts; issues with transferring knowledge gained in-game to a more general context; and the entertaining elements potentially outweighing the educational ones.

The literature emphasizes the need for thorough class preparation through workshops and other activities, as well as extensive debriefing and decontextualization of learning material. Assessment and evaluation should emphasize the goals of the exercise. The literature suggests that larp designers carefully structure games with specific pedagogical goals embedded in the roles of each student while

remaining open for creative exploration on the part of participants. In addition, teachers should train their skills in facilitation and role-play, as well as accept a certain degree of chaos in the classroom during games. Ultimately, this review will caution against viewing edu-larp or any other experimental program as a "cure all" for the ills of education, but will rather present edu-larp as a useful tool to develop alongside other emergent forms of experiential play in the classroom and traditional learning exercises.

While this article aims toward comprehensiveness, a complete synthesis of all materials in this field is beyond the scope of this study, as an impressive amount of literature extols the benefits of experiential learning across disciplines for children and adults alike. The goal of this paper is to streamline these benefits and place them in conversation with the current discourse surrounding edu-larp as a unique manifestation of an existing pedagogical phenomenon.

Definitions: Role-playing, Game, Simulation, Drama, and Edu-larp

The practice of role-playing has its roots in the essential human activity of childhood pretend play. Children use pretense as a way to explore identity and "practice" adult activities, such as playing house, chase play, etc.⁷⁶ Citing the work of pioneering psychologist Jean Piaget, McSharry and Jones explain that children instinctively use pretend play in order to develop their intelligence and knowledge. McSharry and Jones explain, "The desire to play, and therefore to learn, is a fundamental part of human psychology and is a potentially powerful resource residing in the children themselves."⁷⁷ Indeed, younger students may actually be more adept at role-play, as the external pressure to adopt a fixed identity throughout adolescence and adulthood has not been imposed yet. Consequently, in Swedish edu-larp designer Anna Karin-Linder's experience, young participants have less problems jumping into new roles than adults do.⁷⁸

As children age, complexity and coherent systems in play become necessary. Systems allow participants to build the mental schema that enable them to play the game consistently according to an established social contract. Often, mechanics of some

67. Larsson, 243; Guenther and Moore; Henriksen, "Games," 11; Carnes; Sancho et al., 111; Brummel et al., 580; Heyward, 200; Hyltoft, "Four," 48; Andresen, 17; Hou, 211.

68. Edward L. Deci, Haleh Eghrari, Brian C. Patrick, and Dean R. Leone, "Facilitating Internalization: The Self-Determination Theory Perspective," *Journal of Personality* 62 (1992): 119-142.

69. Henriksen, "Games," 11; Porter, 230; Blatner; Hyltoft, "Four," 51.

70. McSharry and Jones, 74; Howes and Cruz, 34; Hyltoft, "Four."

71. Balzac.

72. Hoge, 48-49.

73. Henriksen, "Transmutation"; Harder; Blatner.

74. Downing, 15; Hyltoft, "Four," 53; Hyltoft, "Full-Time," 20.

75. Karalevich, 37; Guenther and Moore, 59; Jansen, 32.

76. Mary Ellin Logue and Ashlee Detour, "'You Be the Bad Guy': A New Role for Teachers in Supporting Children's Dramatic Play," *Early Childhood Research & Practice* 13, no. 1 (2011): 1-16.

77. McSharry and Jones, 73.

78. Jansen, 34.

sort are included in order to resolve conflict and simulate actions that cannot be represented through physical or verbal activities.⁷⁹ For the purposes of this article, the term *role-playing game* will refer to a form of pretend play that includes systems for bounding the reality of the fiction and the possible actions within it. Often, such systems are enforced through the design of the game and the imposition of some sort of authority, usually through the facilitator and rules.⁸⁰

Game-based learning is on the rise in Western society.⁸¹ Game play provides unique, shared, singular experiences for participants that cannot be replicated through more traditional forms of social communication and top-down learning structures. As Raybourn and Waern state, “Games provide a structured environment for quickly learning complex behaviors.”⁸² They also quote early game theorist Johan Huizinga in insisting that playing games together is one of the most common ways to form new social groups, adding that groups formed through game play tend to become more stable.⁸³ These benefits will be explored further in the below sections on cognitive and behavioral dimensions.

Possibly the most common form of educational role-playing is simulation. For the most part, simulations attempt to replicate a real or possible scenario in the low consequence context of a game or experience. Simulations are common in military, health, psychology, and business training, offering the participants the opportunity to apply their knowledge through experience, rather than passive, rote memorization. Interest in simulated instruction has been popular since the ‘70s, as evidenced by the many articles in the academic journal *Simulation & Gaming*, first launched in March 1970. Similar articles abound in journals across disciplines as educators seek to find more engaging and collaborative modes of learning, a sample of which are cited in this article.

While not all simulations require the enactment of a role, especially those mediated by a computer, most can be considered a form of a role-playing game. Simulation offers the structured, rule-bound environment necessary for students to opt-in to the

reality of the game. As psychodrama and Art of Play expert Adam Blatner explains,

Role-playing is simply a less technologically advanced form of simulations. What astronauts do in their practice for missions; what pilots do in learning to navigate in flight simulators; what thousands of soldiers do in the course of military exercises—it’s all role-playing. Teaching salespersons to deal with customers, teaching doctors to interview patients, teaching teachers to deal with difficult situations, all these require some measure of actual practice and feedback.⁸⁴

Blatner further expounds that just as musicians and actors need to practice their trade, “role-playing is nothing more than rehearsal” for real life situations.

Another common term in the literature is drama, which refers to theatrically- or psychologically-based education. Drama is distinct from theatre in that it avoids extensive scripting in favor of collaborative, creative enactment.⁸⁵ Emerging from the therapeutic work of Jacob Moreno in the ‘30s and improvisational theatre in the ‘70s, many terms for similar styles of learning exist, including Drama in Education, process drama, psychodrama, etc.⁸⁶ Theatre education expert Shifra Schonmann insists that seventeen different terms exist for similar activities within the realm of drama with overlapping genres and blurred lines between.⁸⁷ Ultimately, Schonmann describes all of these activities as “celebrations of human interaction and creating and sharing meanings together.”⁸⁸ Unlike traditional learning, which tends to favor logic-based instruction over emotion, Paul Heyward explains that the emotional nature of drama pedagogy is important for facilitating change and understanding as it offers the potential for catharsis.⁸⁹ Similarly, Blatner sees drama as more generally applicable than theatre, as it encourages improvisation and spontaneity training.⁹⁰ He explains that children need to be empowered to enjoy these “primal vehicles of self-discovery and self-expression” without the concerns of technical proficiency inherent to theatrical performance.

79. Bowman, *Functions*, 105-108.

80. Markus Montola, “The Invisible Rules of Role-playing: The Social Framework of Role-playing Process,” *International Journal of Role-playing* 1 (2008): 23-24.

81. Nicola Whitton, *Digital Games and Learning: Research and Theory*, New York: Routledge, 2014.

82. Elaine M. Raybourn and Annika Waern. “Social Learning through Gaming.” Proceedings of CHI 2004 (Vienna, Austria: CHI, April 24-29, 2004), 1733.

83. Raybourn and Waern.

84. Blatner.

85. Heyward, 199.

86. Mochocki, “Revision,” 56-59.

87. Shifra Schonmann, “‘Master’ vs. ‘Servant’: Contradictions in Drama and Theatre Education,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 39, no. 4 (2005): 31-39.

88. Schonmann, 34.

89. Heyward, 199.

90. Blatner.

Similar to edu-drama, psychodrama is a reenactment of scenes from a person's life or hypothetical situations in a therapeutic setting for the purpose of psychological processing. While psychodrama is not, strictly speaking, an educational experience, patients can also practice social skills such as empathy and communication in this manner.

Finally, the leisure activity of role-playing games emerged separately from the development of drama and simulation. Most scholars mark the "beginning" of the modern role-playing game (RPG) in 1974 with the publication of the first edition of the fantasy RPG *Dungeons & Dragons*, though not all role-playing games emerged from that root.⁹¹ Role-playing games have three forms: tabletop, with verbal descriptions of character actions; larp, with physical enactment; and virtual, with a computer-mediated interface of some sort.⁹² Edu-larp, therefore, emerges from the passion of designers who have personally benefitted from the leisure activity of role-playing games and wish to bring the experience of larp to both formal and informal learning environments. Edu-larp advocates believe that the method is useful for children, adolescents, and adults, as long as the game design reflects the cognitive needs of the students in question.

Edu-larp can offer greater and lesser degrees of drama, simulation, and game, but should always feature the live action element of physical enactment, some degree of role-playing, and the basic framework of a game structure.⁹³ Unlike simulations, however, edu-larps sometimes feature more fantastical elements in their scenarios, such as alternate history, fantasy, science fiction, crime dramas, etc. Some edu-larp advocates assert that a perfect simulation of reality is not necessary for students to learn important skills; in fact, Linder believes that portraying real life issues in a fantasy environment might be easier for students to grasp.⁹⁴ Perhaps an alien setting facilitates distraction from the pressures of daily life, an element that Danish edu-larp pioneer Malik Hyltoft believes is crucial for concentration upon the subject at hand.⁹⁵

Despite these subtle differences, for the purposes of this article, the claims made in the edu-larp literature are synthesized alongside those made by advocates of these other forms of experiential role-play. In a few cases, studies on

online role-playing scenarios are included in this review when the pedagogical goals are the same and the interface is not crucial to the success of the exercise. Interestingly, the benefits listed for pretend play, simulation, drama, game-based learning, and edu-larp are often identical. As Polish edu-larp designer Michał Mochocki asserts, edu-larp is not only similar to Drama in Education, but should be viewed as "a kind of edu-drama" and a "twin sister" to the technique of improvised scenes.⁹⁶ Following Mochocki, I believe that researchers should view edu-larp as a sibling to these other forms, in spite of their differing cultural evolutions.

Skill Acquisition in Edu-Larp

According to the literature, edu-larp can offer a multitude of benefits along several dimensions of human development, including cognitive, affective, and behavioral.⁹⁷ These benefits are explained in detail in the below sections. The degree to which a single larp can address each of these pedagogical goals remains open to interpretation and strongly depends upon the quality of the game design and facilitation by the instructor. In addition, the efficacy of the technique requires a certain degree of opting-in on the part of the students, as explored in the Challenges section of this study. However, the fact that many of these benefits also apply to the leisure experience of role-playing games strongly suggests that their appeal along many of these dimensions is fairly universal and functional.⁹⁸

Cognitive Dimensions of Learning

One of the most important facets of experiential learning is that it promotes intrinsic motivation, which makes it appealing to educators.⁹⁹ Digital games are posited as inspiring similar degrees of motivation.¹⁰⁰ More often than not, teachers must rely upon externally motivating factors such as grades in order to encourage learning, while internal motivation is far preferable.¹⁰¹ While to a degree, possible success within a game framework might be seen as an extrinsic motivator, the unexpected fervor with which students often engage in research and game-related activities suggests an internal drive for engagement.

96. Mochocki, "Revision," 56-57.

97. Kot.

98. Bowman, *Functions*, 104-126.

99. Henriksen, 11.

100. Whitton.

101. Hyltoft, 48.

91. Bowman, *Functions*, 16.

92. Bowman, *Functions*, 24-32.

93. Hyltoft, "Four," 43.

94. Jansen, 34.

95. Hyltoft, "Four," 43-57.

Reacting to the Past's Mark Carnes designs historical role-playing scenarios for college students. He refers to the intrinsically motivating qualities of these games as "setting students' minds on fire." Carnes quotes one of his students, Nate Gibson, in an article for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*:

Every student felt a strong personal investment in their roles ... We read more in the weeks of the game than we had at any time before in the class. We plowed through the game manual, our history texts, Rousseau, you name it. We spent hours writing articles. I spent several all-nighters editing my faction's newspapers, and the other editors did, too. It had become more than a class to us by that point. The early-morning sessions were the only way to honor the sacrifices that everybody had made.¹⁰²

Similarly, Guenther and Moore also observed students conducting in-depth research in order to better perform in their college-level scenarios in *Agricultural Business*.¹⁰³

Hyltoft is one of the founders of Østerskov Efterskole, the Danish middle school that uses edu-larp as its primary method of instruction year-round. Hyltoft explains that due to the larp setting, the motivation, concentration, and participation remains strong, even in situations where the teacher is explaining material in a traditional manner. He further suggests that a narrative structure or game play can help keep motivation high even in repetitive work tasks.¹⁰⁴ Hyltoft attributes this intrinsic motivation to the student adopting the goals of the role, observing:

It can be very hard to explain to a whole class of students with different interests and agendas, why some piece of abstract learning is relevant to them. It is much easier to create a character to whom it is relevant. As an example, most 15 year olds have no use for nuclear theory, but secret agents in the later part of World War 2, will memorize it gleefully.¹⁰⁵

Hyltoft further emphasizes three forms of motivation in edu-larp: the motivation of the character, the motivations provided by the narrative, and meta-narrative motivation, such as embedding learning in the

game mechanics. His example of all three motivators is a scenario in which the characters need to save their space ship, a process that requires them to do simple arithmetic exercises.¹⁰⁶ The American edu-larp organization Seekers Unlimited has also designed this type of scenario for middle schoolers with positive results.¹⁰⁷ In addition, Hyltoft classifies engagement in preparatory research and post-game evaluations as meta-narrative activities, as students see them as part of the process of the larp.

However, former Østerskov teacher Sanne Harder warns against assuming that all edu-larps are intrinsically motivating by nature, insisting that it is safer to think of them as a means to organize teaching rather than a way to make learning more inherently entertaining.¹⁰⁸ Edu-larp expert Thomas Duus Henriksen, who specializes in constructivist learning theory, emphasizes that an excess of "fun," might disrupt the learning process, asserting that frustration should be the primary driver by utilizing the desires and needs of the participants in the embedded structure of game play.¹⁰⁹ As explained in the final sections of this paper, not all scenarios succeed at engaging students and no tool should be viewed as a "cure all" for educational ills. Nonetheless, several other researchers in the literature mentioned motivation as an explicit benefit of the method, suggesting a degree of generalizability.¹¹⁰

The edu-larp process may enhance student feelings of self-efficacy through setting and achieving goals.¹¹¹ Increased self-efficacy and perceived competence often contribute to feelings of greater self-esteem. As larp youth camp organizer Mark Hoge explains, games often encourage everyone to share their unique skills and perspectives in order to increase the success of the group as a whole.¹¹² This sort of empowerment is not always afforded to young people, who often rely on adults to make decisions for

106. Hyltoft, "Four," 49-50.

107. "Programs."

108. Harder, 233.

109. Thomas Duus Henriksen, "Extending Experiences of Learning Games: Or Why Learning Games Should Be Neither Fun, Educational Nor Realistic," in *Extending Experiences: Structure, Analysis and Design of Computer Game Player Experience*, edited by Olli Leino, Hanna Wirman, and Amyris Fernandez (Rovaniemi, Finland: Lapland University Press, 2008), 140-162.

110. Larsson, 243; Sancho et al., 111; Heyward, 200; Andresen, 17; Brummel et al., 580; Hou, 211.

111. Balzac.

112. Hoge, 48-49.

102. Carnes.

103. Guenther and Moore, 59.

104. Hyltoft, "Full-Time," 20.

105. Hyltoft, "Four," 49.

them or to force them into a course of action.¹¹³

Additionally, larp may be especially suited for Special Needs students with regard to self-efficacy. Blatner asserts that some Special Needs students are physically, emotionally, or developmentally disabled and do not perform well in traditional classroom settings.¹¹⁴ These students often need a more active, experiential, multi-modal approach. Along these lines, Hyltoft explains that 15% of students at Østerskov Efterskole have a mental handicap such as ADHD or Asperger's; one quarter are dyslexic; and one quarter come from socially challenged homes. These students tend to thrive in the complex learning environment, proving their "ability and smarts" through larp. This enhanced engagement leads Hyltoft to comment that "it's easier to be different in edu-larp."¹¹⁵

Edu-larps excel at improving cognitive skills pertaining to problem solving.¹¹⁶ Blatner believes that role-playing allows students to integrate their knowledge in action by addressing problems, exploring alternatives, and seeking creative and novel solutions.¹¹⁷ Hoge expands upon this idea by stating that participants learn when faced with tough, diverse challenges, such as "mysteries, riddles, puzzles, and ethical dilemmas."¹¹⁸ Role-playing scenarios allow students to bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application.¹¹⁹ Sancho, et al., extol the benefits of problem-based learning, claiming that it leads to deeper levels of comprehension, critical thinking, long-term retention, and shared understanding.¹²⁰ This assertion that role-playing leads to a greater depth of understanding is also echoed by other authors.¹²¹ In examining his role-playing exercise for a teacher education class, Cherif observes that as the difficulty of the problems increased, so did the amount of effort, time, and enthusiasm amongst the student-teachers.¹²²

The open, participatory nature of games lends to a higher degree of active engagement and participation.¹²³ Much of the battle in traditional education centers upon the lack of student involvement with the content and process. The traditional learning method promotes a certain level of passivity, as students are expected to receive and assimilate information from the instructor.¹²⁴ While this strategy assists students in taking tests, it tends to lead to a lack of engagement. Young people in the current generation especially expect a high degree of interactivity as a result of the popularity of the Internet, social media, and video games.¹²⁵

As McSharry and Jones state, role-playing gives students "ownership" over their education.¹²⁶ Hyltoft further asserts that "activity is the mother of all learning" and that edu-larp "activates students in a school setting at an unusually high level."¹²⁷ He speculates that several factors contribute to this high level of activity, including competitiveness, the strong group structure, and the narrative.¹²⁸ One of the strategies Østerskov commonly employs is situating the student in the role of an expert, such as hospital staff, bard, navigator, CSI detective, etc. The students in the group wish to perform the job as realistically as possible, working to speak and perform according to their given status.¹²⁹ Linder agrees with this sentiment, stating that putting on costumes and acting out decisions with important consequences gives life to history lessons.¹³⁰ Hoge suggests that personalized plots and histories in game design make every player feel like their presence and actions matter in the world.¹³¹ Regarding his experience running larp adventure camps, Hoge further asserts that a certain level of physical engagement and kinesthetic learning vastly increases emotional engagement and holistic development.¹³²

Central to this engagement is empowering the students through the agency of decision making. As Howes and Cruz assert, "It stands to reason that the

113. Blatner.

114. Blatner.

115. Hyltoft "Full-Time," 23.

116. Downing, 2; Bowman, *Functions*, 80-103; Malik Hyltoft, "Four Reasons Why Edu-Larp Works," in *LARP: Einblicke*, edited by Karsten Dombrowski (Braunschweig, Germany: Zauberpfeiler Ltd, 2010), 50-51; Meriläinen, 57; Hou, 211; Hoge, 48.

117. Blatner.

118. Hoge, 49.

119. Harder, 234.

120. Sancho et al., 116.

121. Howes and Cruz, 33; Brummel et al., 580; Andresen, 16.

122. Cherif, 29.

123. Howes and Cruz, 34.

124. Henriksen "Games," 11; Porter, 230; Blatner; Hyltoft, "Four," 51.

125. Porter, 233; Sancho et al., 110.

126. McSharry and Jones, 74.

127. Hyltoft, "Four," 51.

128. Hyltoft, "Four," 53.

129. Hyltoft, "Four," 53.

130. Jansen, 32-33.

131. Hoge, 50.

132. Hoge, 50.

more input students have, the more engagement and involvement will be generated.”¹³³ Henriksen explains that larp is not linear like theatre; inherent to the process should be a field of opportunities and interactivity where students are allowed to engage with the more interesting and relevant aspects, not dragged through all possibilities.¹³⁴ As Harder further states, player choices should remain a central part of the unfolding action, as the role-playing context allows students to hone their ability to make competent choices.¹³⁵

Furthermore, these scenarios offer the students the permission to fail without real world consequences, allowing them to make decisions and live with the results.¹³⁶ At Østerskov, the teachers avoid disrupting the game unless for narrative modifications or to arbitrate game mechanics, which allows students to test boundaries and opt to fail.¹³⁷ This empowerment could lead students to a conviction that their actions can influence their own lives and the future of the world, as well as a greater belief in their own abilities.¹³⁸

Another advantage to edu-larp is the ability to train multiple skills and knowledges simultaneously. While the larp might explicitly attempt to address one lesson, designers can embed the opportunity to gain implicit knowledge in the scenario.¹³⁹ For example, Howes and Cruz state that role-playing characters allow designers to convey the social history of individuals that “the headlines usually miss” rather than focusing upon famous individuals.¹⁴⁰

Hyltoft claims that Østerskov’s method teaches a broad range of curricula in fewer lessons. They also dispense with homework by embedding it in daily activities.¹⁴¹ Each week’s larp is themed and includes several subjects. For example, during their “cyberpunk week,” students researched subjects related to science in order to develop or “hack” scientific achievements.¹⁴² Along with that explicit goal, students also ran the group economy by inventing or taking out loans, as well

as negotiating in both Danish and English with other students and teachers.¹⁴³ The year-end test scores of Østerskov students are similar to the national average for Denmark, indicating that this method is at least as effective as traditional teaching in terms of performance.

This form of synergistic learning shows students the connection between subjects that are usually modularized by traditional teaching methods. However, inherent in this training is the need to explain the learning material ahead of time. Mochocki insists that edu-larp is better as a tool for subject matter revision rather than initial exposure to the material.¹⁴⁴ Harder agrees, stating that the method is not successful at teaching facts, but rather allows students to internalize skills, knowledges, and competencies.¹⁴⁵

Finally, role-playing allows students to exercise creativity, spontaneity, and imagination.¹⁴⁶ Henriksen believes that creativity and innovation are necessary for the West to continue to succeed in our increasingly globalized world. He asserts that creative thinking and cross-contextuality will help us “learn to think outside the boxes our knowledge is usually organized in.”¹⁴⁷ Along with creative problem solving, students performing in edu-larps often engage in other forms of imaginative play. For example, when offered a choice, Howes and Cruz’ students offered a range of presentations about their role-play characters, including poster presentations, songs, Powerpoints, responding to questions in an “Oprah simulation,” and skits on TV or game shows.¹⁴⁸ During Harder’s first experience with edu-larp, her 3rd graders were similarly excited about role-playing, making drawings of their characters and writing stories about their characters’ lives.¹⁴⁹ Thus, even in activities structured toward a certain learning goal, the role-play method inspires creativity that often leads to unexpected developments and imaginative stimulation.

Affective Dimensions of Learning

Edu-larps can help individual students develop skills of self-expression, awareness, and agency. These games often include opportunities for

133. Howes and Cruz, 41.

134. Henriksen “Transmutation,” 114.

135. Harder, 234.

136. Hyltoft, “Four,” 54.

137. Hyltoft, “Four,” 54.

138. Larsson, 245.

139. Larsson, 245.

140. Howes and Cruz, 42.

141. Hyltoft “School,” 12.

142. Hyltoft “Full-Time,” 20.

143. Hyltoft “Full-Time,” 20.

144. Mochocki “Revision,” 55.

145. Harder, 229.

146. Meriläinen, 49.

147. Henriksen, “Games,” 3-4.

148. Howes and Cruz, 38.

149. Harder, 230.

active agency within the game world, as opposed to the passive ingestion and reiteration of facts administered in the traditional classroom. Role-playing offers the benefit of a sort of “double consciousness” in which the player’s identity is relaxed while the role is enacted.¹⁵⁰ While in role, the students must learn to examine and express the perspectives of their characters.¹⁵¹ Harder refers to this immersive experience as “aesthetic doubling,” explaining, “The character is at once alien and part of the player herself, and in defining the boundaries between player and character, the player is forced into a meta-cognitive process.”¹⁵²

This double consciousness offers a first-person perspective that serves as a window into another way of thinking. While similar to identification with characters in films or novels, some edu-larpers believe that immersion into a game character is more intense.¹⁵³ According to Heyward, the adoption of an alternate perspective facilitates increased knowledge construction, as learners have to work through the confusion of emotions and often must engage in sustained, thought-provoking dialogue rather than repeating a single dominant viewpoint.¹⁵⁴ This emotional investment, facilitated by the first-person perspective and, in some cases, the potential of a measure of “success” in the scenario, often leads to a greater degree of engagement.

While sheltered by the alibi of the character and the game,¹⁵⁵ immersion into the role and reflection after the end of play help students become more conscious of their own values, belief systems, and attitudes.¹⁵⁶ This increased self-awareness combined with the experience of agency can help students realize their own sense of choice in daily life and how values impact their behavior. As Swedish larp theorist from the Nordic larp community Elge Larsson explains, role-playing offers “insights into students’ own capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, and fears and barriers the students had not been aware of. Not the

least of the effects is the possibility to express intimacy, resentment, or indifference without risking dire consequences.”¹⁵⁷ Similarly, historical larp designer Aliaksander Karalevich explains, “We have seen that a game can help a person discover the qualities they hide under social and moral pressure.”¹⁵⁸

As noted above, several researchers explain that the adoption of a role contributes to a greater awareness of one’s own perspective, but also lends to an increased understanding of the perspectives of others, especially in scenarios designed to present multiple viewpoints.¹⁵⁹ Harder states that this process is important for making points in rhetorical arguments, especially when that point is inconsistent with one’s own opinion, as the student may discover holes in their own argument through interaction with different perspectives.¹⁶⁰ Heyward further explains that these multiple perspectives on issues apply both at the micro level of the game, but also at the macro level of the class material and society as a whole.¹⁶¹

These processes not only lead to a greater cognitive understanding of the perspectives of others, but also increased emotional comprehension through the development of empathy.¹⁶² As edu-larp researcher David Simkins explains, in role-play, participants pass through four stages: role absence (disengagement), role awareness, role acquisition, and role adoption, which leads to empathy.¹⁶³ Citing Roslyn Arnold’s theory of empathic intelligence, researcher Mikko Meriläinen further indicates that the enactment of narrative is important to this empathetic process, as narrative offers the ability to position oneself in a world created by another person. He adds that empathy is more common when playing someone dissimilar to the self.¹⁶⁴ Henriksen refers to this entire process as “structural recentering,” in which one moves their center of perception from a real world situation to a fictional one.¹⁶⁵ According to Henriksen, this fictional recentering happens on three levels: the structure of reality, the role, and the relationship between the two.¹⁶⁶

150. Brian Bates, *The Way of the Actor: A Path to Knowledge & Power* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 1988), 72.

151. Myriel Balzer, “Immersion as a Prerequisite of the Didactical Potential of Role-Playing,” *International Journal of Role-playing* 2 (2011): 32.

152. Harder, 231.

153. Andresen, 15; Karalevich, 36.

154. Heyward, 199.

155. Markus Montola and Jussi Holopainen, “First Person Audience and Painful Role-playing,” in *Immersive Gameplay*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company Inc., 2012), 13-30.

156. Downing, 4.

157. Larsson, 245.

158. Karalevich, 42.

159. Downing, 4; Henriksen “Transmutation,” 126; Guenther and Moore, 59; Harder, 234; Brummel et al., 574; Andresen, 17.

160. Harder, 234.

161. Heyward, 199.

162. Bowman, *Functions*.

163. Simkins, *Negotiation*, 212.

164. Meriläinen, 59.

165. Henriksen, “Transmutation,” 109.

166. Henriksen, “Transmutation,” 110-111.

This empathy is observable in different ways depending on the larp. Examples include realizing the difficulties world leaders face;¹⁶⁷ respect for other religious viewpoints;¹⁶⁸ understanding the relative challenges and opportunities of living in a different era or culture;¹⁶⁹ and experiencing the emotional implications of bullying.¹⁷⁰ Bullying and abuse in particular are emotionally powerful experiences in larps. Harder explains that her students had the theoretical education teaching them that bullying was “wrong,” but the embodiment of the situation led to deeper understanding.¹⁷¹ Hoge shares an anecdote of a young man who had difficulties with bullying and was able to step into another role through a fantasy scenario. He asserts that the child’s “habit of hitting kids was transformed by one afternoon of role-playing.”¹⁷²

In another elaborate scenario entitled *Prisoner for a Day*, 16-19 year olds in Norway were led through an immersive, entirely consensual role-playing experience in which they played prisoners in a WWII work camp. The goal of this game was not to provide students with a method to “win” or become empowered, but rather to experience the disempowerment prisoners feel in camps around the world. Aarebrot and Nielsen describe multiple runs of this scenario, explaining that preparation and debriefing were necessary tools for facilitating empathy.¹⁷³ Without those tools, students had difficulty connecting their experiences in the game with the daily difficulties of prisoners elsewhere. The importance of preparation, workshopping, and debriefing is examined later in this paper.

Role-playing is especially useful as a platform to raise and explore socio-cultural issues. In the theatre world, several forms exist that attempt to raise social issues, including Theater of the Oppressed, Forum Theatre, Theatre-for-Awareness, and Theatre-for-Development.¹⁷⁴ On a more immersive level, the “leisure” activity of Nordic larp has raised awareness for issues as diverse as homelessness, immigration, and imprisonment.¹⁷⁵

Several of the existing edu-larp organizations

in the world were developed from ideas arising from the Nordic larp scene, including the Danish Østerskov, the Swedish LajvVerkstaden, the Norwegian Fantasiforbundet, and the American Seekers Unlimited. Larpers who have experienced profound, perspective-changing moments in larp often feel motivated to share the power of that experience with the next generation. For example, in the aforementioned *Prisoner For a Day* larp, Norwegian teenagers were encouraged to gain subjective knowledge of human rights abuses rather than simply looking at facts in a passive, bureaucratic, and ungraspable manner.¹⁷⁶ LajvVerkstaden, for which Linder works, develops games that are specifically designed to fit into social science classes, offering a great opportunity to enhance student understanding of social issues currently in the world through fantasy.¹⁷⁷ Karalevich insists that role-playing can explore a wide variety of social issues, including history, human rights, gender equality, and ecology.¹⁷⁸

Simkins believes that schools should develop a respect for diverse cultures and opinions in students, as well as foster historical, multicultural, and contextual understanding.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, Harder explains that edu-larp “particularly excels in areas that cover some of the more elusive elements of the curriculum,” such as developing competencies that relate to what kind of citizens students choose to become.¹⁸⁰ Even outside of the larp context, many simulations feature issues intended to raise social consciousness or explore political implications.¹⁸¹ For example, Cherif and Somervill’s biotech scenario placed college students in the roles of city council members figuring out how to disperse funds responsibly.¹⁸²

Related to social consciousness is the skill of critical ethical reasoning.¹⁸³ Larps create environments with freedom of choice, including the choice to play the villain. As Simkins explains, ethical behavior in games does not mirror the way students behave in real life; in many cases, the player is being a good citizen within the game by adding positively while in the role of a villain.¹⁸⁴ Karalevich

167. Larsson, 244.

168. Porter, 234.

169. Howes and Cruz, 42.

170. Harder, 231-234.

171. Harder, 234.

172. Hoge, 51.

173. Aarebrot and Nielsen, 29.

174. Schonmann, 34.

175. Stenros and Montola.

176. Aarebrot and Nielsen, 25.

177. Jansen, 34.

178. Karalevich, 115.

179. Simkins, *Negotiation*, 208.

180. Harder, 233.

181. Howes and Cruz, 34.

182. Cherif and Somervill, 29-30.

183. Brummel et al., 575.

184. Simkins, *Negotiation*, 215.

asserts that edu-larps can raise issues around black and white concepts of good and evil in morally complicated situations.¹⁸⁵ By allowing students agency in edu-larps, they can try out values in game, decide which ones they dislike, and try new ones in the real world.¹⁸⁶ Hoge explains that his fantasy games offer complex situations that involve different races, political realms, and the conflicting needs of diverse people. This “dynamic environment requires creative problem-solving, ethical decision making, planning, and teamwork amongst players.”¹⁸⁷ Players that behave unethically in games often face the consequences of those decisions, either through in-game ramifications or out-of-game feelings of guilt. Hoge believes that the kind of ethical discernment practiced in the game can be applied to real-life challenges, a sentiment echoed by other researchers in this review.

Behavioral Dimensions of Learning

The majority of the studies in the review emphasized the development of professional and interpersonal “soft” skills as a strength of edu-larp over traditional forms of instruction, which can lead to potential shifts in behavior.¹⁸⁸ These soft skills include strategies in conflict resolution, communication,¹⁸⁹ team work,¹⁹⁰ relationships,¹⁹¹ initiating discussions,¹⁹² and debating/speaking skills.¹⁹³ The complex social nature of this form of learning stimulates students intellectually and socially. Larsson believes experiences in edu-larps may provide insight into ways that social or cultural capital influences one’s chances for their career and education later in life.¹⁹⁴

Some scenarios encourage the development of professional interpersonal skills such as writing articles, delivering oral presentations, and finding

funding.¹⁹⁵ Many scenarios encourage teamwork by requiring multiple student actions and perspectives for success.¹⁹⁶ Edu-larp also offers opportunities for peer-to-peer learning as a function of teamwork, which helps students develop new ideas and approaches to a problem.¹⁹⁷ Still, as with all group exercises, edu-larp designers warn that group work requires careful consideration on the part of the instructor with regard to the makeup of the team for proper motivation to occur.¹⁹⁸

In addition to collaboration, edu-larp can encourage students to exercise their leadership skills. Referring to a drama exercise, Downing explains how active engagement inspires students to become directors of the action and offer suggestions for the played scenes.¹⁹⁹ As mentioned previously, Østerskov often places their students in the role of expert in order to encourage the development of leadership faculties.²⁰⁰ They also encourage students and teachers to play together on equal footing during larps, which transforms both parties into individuals rather than their usual social role.²⁰¹

Sometimes, specific leaders are assigned by the organizers in order to address the needs of each group.²⁰² Referring to their college-level leadership exercise, Guenthner and Moore state, “Graduates who have gone into leadership positions cite role-playing as an important part of their leadership development.”²⁰³ Interestingly, some students who are otherwise reserved have shown spontaneous leadership in edu-larps. Linder tells the story of a normally quiet student stepping forward in an edu-larp and pleading with the group that they should rid their world of an alien threat. She explains, “In an instant, a student who has never uttered a word aloud in an English class is transformed into a confident and eloquent leader just because of a larps!”²⁰⁴ Hyperbole aside, such leadership experiences may lead to a greater sense of one’s self-efficacy, feeling of agency in the world, and ability to move others to action.

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185. Karalevich, 41-42.

186. Simkins, “Ethics,” 73.

187. Hoge, 49.

188. Cherif and Somervill, 28; Sancho et al., 111; Brummel et al., 581.

189. Downing, 14; Howes and Cruz, 33; Brummel et al., 581; Hou, 211; Hoge, 48.

190. Sancho et al., 111; Hoge, 48.

191. Brummel et al., 581.

192. Harder, 230; Hoge, 48.

193. Guenthner and Moore, 62; Harder, 230; Blatner; Howes and Cruz, 33; Hou, 220.

194. Larsson, 244.

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195. Brummel et al., 583.

196. Porter, 232; Blatner; Hou, 211; Hoge, 48.

197. Downing, 3; Cheng, 25.

198. Guenthner and Moore, 63; Sancho et al., 111.

199. Downing, 15.

200. Hyltoft “Four,” 53.

201. Hyltoft, “Full-Time,” 20.

202. Karalevich, 37.

203. Guenthner and Moore, 59.

204. Jansen, 32.

Challenges of Edu-larp and Suggested Solutions

Despite the many benefits explained above, educators do face several challenges when attempting to apply the larp method to classrooms. While the majority of students report enjoying the process of edu-larp, some students may have difficulty enacting roles or connecting with the game as the result of boredom or inhibition.²⁰⁵ These students may attempt to disrupt or leave the game. As with any classroom, confident and assertive leadership can help ameliorate these situations.²⁰⁶ Providing each character with specific, structured goals is also important.²⁰⁷

Educators may face a learning curve with edu-larp, especially those unfamiliar with drama, games, or role-play.²⁰⁸ The inherent chaos of the classroom during a larp may prove daunting for teachers who expect to assert a certain degree of authority.²⁰⁹ Mochocki suggests simplifying the roles of the players and the complexity of design in edu-larps in order to ease the process for teachers.²¹⁰ Other researchers emphasize the need for teacher training of the method in order to maximize successful implementation.²¹¹

Another potential problem with the chaotic nature of these scenarios lies in the difficulty in tracking and assessing student learning. Especially problematic is when designers embed learning materials in certain areas of the game that students may or may not uncover due to their choices. Henriksen and Harder both worry about the entertaining elements outweighing the educational ones.²¹² Mochocki believes that edu-larp should serve only as a revision of subject matter rather than exposing students to new material,²¹³ echoing sentiments by other researchers.²¹⁴ Again, many of these issues can be resolved by strong game design with pedagogical goals embedded into the characters and game

framework,²¹⁵ though strategies for such design is beyond the scope of this study.

Ultimately, many researchers insist upon the need for adequate preparation activities. Several researchers emphasized the benefits of warmups and workshops.²¹⁶ Other useful preparation activities include traditional lessons²¹⁷ and pre-game research.²¹⁸

The other crucial element for achieving pedagogical goals is the successful implementation of thorough debriefing.²¹⁹ Other excellent post-game activities include reflection,²²⁰ follow-up lessons,²²¹ journaling,²²² quizzes,²²³ and evaluations by the student, peers,²²⁴ or instructor.²²⁵

These activities are necessary because educators must provide students with sufficient context to understand the materials within the game and find them relatable. In addition, teachers must decontextualize the subject matter outside of the fictional context and reframe the experience in terms of overall pedagogical goals. Aarebrot and Nielsen describe two runs of their *Prisoner For a Day* scenario. In the first, the lack of proper preparation by the teacher led the students to find little usefulness for the experience outside of the context of the larp. In the second, another teacher worked to integrate the scenario into the existing curriculum of the school,

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215. Hyltoft, "Four," 49.

216. Harder, 230; Blatner; Heyward, 201; Jesper Bruun, "Pre-larp Workshops as Learning Situations—Matching Intentions with Outcome," in *Think Larp: Academic Writings from KP2011*, edited by Thomas Duus Henriksen, Christian Bierlich, Kasper Friis Hansen, and Valdemar Kølbe (Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2011), 196; Andresen, ed., 103-108; Harviainen, Lainema, and Saarinen, 10-11; Hyltoft "Full-Time," 21; Jansen, 34.

217. Aarebrot and Nielsen, 27.

218. Andresen, 17; Karalevich, 38.

219. Cherif and Somervill, 29; McSharry and Jones, 79; Henriksen, "Games," 12; Martin, 8; Howes and Cruz, 42; Brummel et al., 577, 582; Heyward, 202; Aarebrot and Nielsen, 29; Andresen ed., 17; Harviainen, Lainema, and Saarinen, 10-11; Hyltoft "Full-Time," 21; Karalevich, 42.

220. Harder, 230; Heyward, 200; Andresen, 17.

221. Mochocki "Revision," 101-111.

222. Hyltoft "Full-Time," 18.

223. Cheng, 14.

224. Bender, 6.

225. Cherif and Somervill, 32; Howes and Cruz, 41; Sancho et al., 120; Brummel et al., 579.

205. Mochocki, "Revision," 55.

206. McSharry and Jones, 78; Harder, 229; Hoge, 49-50.

207. Balzac, 52-55; Harviainen, Lainema, and Saarinen, 5.

208. Harder, 234.

209. Larsson, 247; Harder, 234; Hyltoft "Four," 51.

210. Michał Mochocki, "Less Larp in Edu-Larp Design," in *Crossing Habitual Borders: The Official Book for Knutepunkt 2013*, edited by Katrine Øverlie Svela and Karete Jacobsen Meland (Oslo, Norway, Fantasiforbundet, 2013), 72.

211. Ruben, 501; Larsson, 246; Blatner.

212. Henriksen, "Transmutation," 15; Harder, 230.

213. Mochocki, "Revision," 55.

214. Harder, 229; Henriksen "Transmutation," 7.

providing students with the necessary context to make connection between their own experiences, the historical time period, and current-day real world examples.²²⁶ Indeed, other educators who have neglected to use workshops and debriefs during edu-larp regretted these omissions.²²⁷

Conclusion

This paper examines the literature regarding the benefits of edu-larp across three student learning dimensions: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The degree to which practitioners describe these across disciplines that are not always in conversation with one another, such as simulation, drama, games, and larp, suggests a certain degree of generalizability.

However, as noted in detail above, many of these resources feature anecdotal stories or theoretical principles. While readers should not consider such observations “invalid” as the experiences of practitioners in particular are highly valuable to the development of the field, these assertions would benefit from solid case studies and sound data collection. Thorough assessment of each these categories with regard to edu-larp would assist researchers by offering quantitative and qualitative proof of these benefits from the perspectives of the students.

For example, a mixed methods research project conducted by nursing simulation professor Anne Standiford and me measured a middle school science class before and after a semester-long edu-larp intervention facilitated by Seekers Unlimited. Students offered self-reports according to several of the above categories: perceived competence/self-efficacy, intrinsic motivation, behavioral engagement, emotional engagement, cognitive engagement, leadership, and teamwork, the investigators found that the edu-larp intervention helped increase overall intrinsic motivation and interest/enjoyment of science in the quantitative data. The qualitative and quantitative findings converged to reveal improvement in perceived competence in science. Additionally, students expressed a strong belief that larp aided in the development of all five dimensions and displayed a universal interest in learning through edu-larp in the future. Overall, adding the edu-larp component to the existing science curriculum impacted the experience of students by increasing

interest, engagement, and perceived competence in science through game play and role enactment.²²⁸ More research of this sort would further help support the claims made in this review.

Ultimately, while teachers should not view edu-larp as a “cure-all” for the problems of the educational system, the benefits of the method do appear significant enough to warrant the consideration of increased practical application.

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226. Aarebrot and Nielsen, 29.
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Larping the Past: Research Report on High-School Edu-Larp

Michał Mochocki

Abstract

The paper presents the results of “Live Action Role Plays in School Education,” a quasi-experimental project piloted in 2010 and 2012 and conducted in 2013 by Games Research Association of Poland and educational publisher Nowa Era. In this project, larp was used in high-schools as a revision class before a test in History, the hypothesis being that larp as pre-test revision leads to higher retention of knowledge than traditional revision classes. Small sample size cannot be considered conclusive evidence, but the preliminary findings seem encouraging for further research. Beside students’ test scores, the report provides non-standardized qualitative observational data on participant attitudes, plus information about practical issues of edu-larp research in public school environment. Next to the findings, the text reports on the research process and the rationale behind its modification.

Introduction

To be appreciated by formal education systems, larp needs efficiency in teaching the curricular content. This is to say that school teachers and administrators will be likely to reach for larp as an educational tool if they are convinced it can boost student achievements in core subjects such as, for example, History or Geography. An individual teacher, in turn, will focus on one particular core subject s/he teaches in a given class. Therefore, from the formal education perspective, the most important question is: how can larp be effective—or how effective can larp be—in teaching monodisciplinary subject-matter knowledge? The best way to find a reliable answer seems to be experimental research carried out in authentic school environment and focused on measurable learning outcomes.

Such was Live Action Role Plays in School Education, a quasi-experimental project piloted in 2010 and 2012 and conducted in 2013 by the Games Research Association of Poland and educational publisher Nowa Era (a local branch of Sanoma) in cooperation with volunteers from larp communities. In this project, larp was used as a revision class before a test, its functions being to recall, integrate, and consolidate knowledge from several previous lessons, which corresponded with one textbook

unit. The initial hypothesis was that the use of larp as pre-test revision leads to higher retention of knowledge than traditional revision classes based on presentations and discussion.

The project aimed at verifying this hypothesis by quantitative data collected from standardized content-based tests administered in experimental (larp) and control (non-larp) groups, the results of which are presented in this paper. Additionally, the volunteers and teachers provided non-standardized qualitative observational data on participant attitudes, as well as the encountered problems and other practical issues they found worth mentioning. This data, also included here, will be valuable for teachers interested in bringing larp to the school environment. Finally, this paper reports on the research process and the rationale behind its modification.

Literature Review

The monodisciplinary and knowledge-centered approach to edu-larp fails to have its body of literature yet. Both theory and practice of edu-larping, as discussed by the international larp community in the Knutpunkt books since 2003 and the academic section of the Wyrd Con Companion Books since 2012, focus on the training of social skills, empathy, creativity, etc. These articles seem to dismiss larp as a tool for teaching monodisciplinary subject-matter; edu-larp expert Thomas Duus Henriksen said openly, “The method is awful for delivering hard knowledge.”¹ Larp could be employed for teaching mixed curricular content in experimental game-based schools such as Østerskov Efterskole in Denmark² or inspire reflection on social

1. Thomas Duus Henriksen, “Learning by Fiction,” in *As LARP Grows Up—Theory and Methods in LARP*, edited by Morten Gade et al. (Copenhagen: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003), 114. <http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/c/c2/2003-As.Larp.Grows.Up.pdf>

2. Malik Hyltoft, “Full-Time Edu-Larpers: Experiences from Østerskov,” in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckhoff Andresen (Oslo, Norway: Fantasisforbundet, 2012), 20-23.

issues such as discrimination and immigration,³ but the prospect of larps used in regular schools seemed unlikely. The existing research shows that teachers prefer single-subject to cross-disciplinary activities⁴ and are increasingly being forced “to ‘teach to the tests’ imposed by national standards programs.”⁵

The 2013 Kickstarter campaign of Seekers Unlimited offers a solution: games designed “specifically to meet scholastic standards in math, science, social studies, language arts, etc.” and supported with instruction “so any teacher can run them without us present.”⁶ However, this is an isolated initiative: Seekers claim they are probably the only company in the U.S. to use larps in this way.⁷ Above all, data on edu-larp efficiency Seekers researchers have released concentrates on such indicators as intrinsic motivation or perceived competence,⁸ while studies on the impact of larp on measurable scholastic achievement are yet to come. In general, the curriculum-based model of edu-larp is heavily under-researched, if not un-researched (see Bowman⁹ in this book). A prior literature review did not find any experimental studies on the educational efficiency of such larps compared

to traditional teaching, while such a study exists on tabletop role-playing games used to teach cellular biology to medical students in Brazil.¹⁰ The 2013 Polish research project described in this article was an attempt to fill this gap.

Why should educators suspect larp could be an efficient tool for teaching curricular knowledge? As discussed at length in “Edu-Larp as Revision of Subject-Matter Knowledge,” available in the *International Journal of Role Playing*,¹¹ edu-larp should be considered a type of Applied Drama/ Drama in Education as defined by Heathcote¹² or Howell & Heap¹³ building upon the theory and practice of drama educators. Edu-larp is also a *simulation* of socio-cultural environments according to Utne,¹⁴ Larsson,¹⁵ and Henriksen¹⁶; as a simulation, it is likely to improve student achievements, retention

3. Erik Aarebrot and Martin Nielsen, “Prisoner for a Day: Creating a Game Without Winners,” in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckhoff Andresen (Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012), 24-29.

4. Sanne Harder, “Confessions of a Schoolteacher: Experiences with Role-playing in Education,” in *Lifelike*, edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, and Line Thorup (Copenhagen, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP07), 234, <http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/a/af/2007-Lifelike.pdf>

5. Adam Blatner, “Creative Drama and Role Playing in Education,” in *Interactive and Improvisational Drama*, edited by Adam Blatner (New York: iUniverse, 2007), Kindle edition, 1872.

6. Seekers Unlimited, “Creating Educational Live Action Role Playing Games” (Kickstarter.com, 2013), last accessed August 10, 2013, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/160286787/creating-educational-live-action-role-playing-game/>

7. Ibid.

8. Sarah Lynne Bowman and Anne Standiford, “Educational Larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Mixed Method Case Study,” *International Journal of Role-playing* 5 (In press for 2015 publication); Sarah Lynne Bowman and Anne Standiford, “Edu-larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Qualitative Case Study,” in DiGRA (Digital Games Research Association), Proceedings from the RPG Summit at DiGRA 2014. Salt Lake City, UT. 3-6 August 2014. (In press for 2014 publication).

9. Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Educational Live Action Role-playing Games: A Secondary Literature Review,” in *The Wyrld Con Companion Book 2014*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrld Con, 2014). (In this anthology).

10. Marco A. F. Randi and Hernandes F. de Carvalho, “Learning Through Role-Playing Games: an Approach for Active Learning and Teaching,” *Revista Brasileira de Educação Médica* 37, no. (2013): 80-88. <http://www.scielo.br/pdf/rbem/v37n1/12.pdf>

11. Michał Mochocki, “Edu-Larp as Revision of Subject-Matter Knowledge,” *International Journal of Role Playing* 4 (2013): 55-76. <http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue4/IJRPissue4mochocki.pdf>

12. Dorothy Heathcote, “Contexts for Active Learning—Four Models to Forge Links Between Schooling and Society,” Presented at NATD Conference 2002, accessed May 10, 2012, <http://www.moeplanning.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2008/05/dh-contexts-for-active-learning.pdf>

13. Pamela Howell and Brian S. Heap, *Planning Process Drama: Enriching Teaching and Learning* (London: Routledge, 2013), Kindle edition, 246-255.

14. Torstein Utne, “Live Action Role Playing—Teaching through Gaming,” in *Dissecting LARP—Collected Papers for Knutepunkt*, edited by Petter Bockman and Ragnhild Hutchison (Oslo: Knutepunkt, 2005), 24. <http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/9/95/2005-Dissecting.Larp.pdf>

15. Elge Larsson, “Participatory Education: What and Why,” in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2004.), 244. <http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/8/84/2004-Beyond.Role.and.Play.pdf>

16. Thomas Duus Henriksen, “On the Transmutation of Educational Role-Play: A Critical Reframing to the Role-Play in Order to Meet the Educational Demands,” in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2004), 121, <http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/8/84/2004-Beyond.Role.and.Play.pdf>

and understanding of complexity.¹⁷ Because of its immediacy and emotional appeal, larp motivates students to *active involvement* according to Bowman¹⁸ and Hyltoft,¹⁹ which heightens its *educational potential*.²⁰ Active participation in a classroom activity may be encouraged by *collaboration*²¹ or *competition*²²; edu-larp combines both these incentives. In addition, larp allows for self-expression, while “the blending of competition,

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17. Thomas Duus Henriksen, “Moving Educational Role-Play Beyond Entertainment,” *Teoria de La Educacion en la Sociedad de la Informacion* 11, no. 3 (2010): 241, <http://es.youscribe.com/catalogue/libros/conocimientos/ciencias-humanas-y-sociales/moving-educational-role-play-beyond-entertainment-1781104/>; David Crookall, Rebecca Oxford, and Danny Saunders, “Towards a Reconceptualization of Simulation: From Representation to Reality,” *Journal of SAGSET (Society for the Advancement of Games and Simulations in Education and Training)* 17, no. 4 (1987): 150; Lisa Galarneu, “Authentic Learning Experiences Through Play: Games, Simulations and the Construction of Knowledge,” in *Changing Views: Worlds in Play. Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference*, 2005, 4, <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/06276.47486.pdf>

18. Sarah Lynne Bowman, *The Functions of Role Playing Games. How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2010), 86.

19. Malik Hyltoft, “Four Reasons Why Edu-Larp Works,” in *LARP: Einblicke. Aufsatzsammlung zum MittelPunkt 2010*, edited by Karsten Dombrowski (Braunschweig: Zauberpfeiler, 2010), 56, http://www.zauberpfeiler-verlag.de/Produkte/MP10/MP10_Artikel-04.pdf

20. Myriel Balzer, “Immersion as a Prerequisite of the Didactical Potential of Role-Playing,” *International Journal of Role-Playing*, Issue 2 (2011): 35, <http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue2/IJRPissue2-Article3.pdf>; Paul Heyward, “Emotional Engagement Through Drama: Strategies to Assist Learning through Role-Play,” *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (2010): 198, <http://www.isetl.org/ijtlhe/pdf/IJTLHE751.pdf>; Yaroslau Kot, “Educational Larp: Topics for Consideration,” in *Wyrd Con Companion Book*, edited by Aaron Vanek and Sarah Lynne Bowman (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012), 122; Frida Sofie Jansen, “Larp the Swedish Way: An Educational Space Odyssey,” in *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying*, edited by Martin Eckhoff Andresen, 30-35 (Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012), 32; Howell and Heap, *Planning Process Drama*, 613-614.

21. Eyal Szewkis et al., “Collaboration Between Large Groups in the Classroom,” *International Journal of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning* 6, no. 4 (December 2011): 566; Marco Villalta et al., “Design Guidelines for Classroom Multiplayer Presential Games (CMPG),” *Computers & Education*, 57, no. 3 (November 2011): 2045.

22. Crookall, Oxford and Saunders, 165; Byron Reeves and J. Leighton Read, *Total Engagement* (Boston: Harvard Business Press, 2009), Kindle edition, 28-29.

cooperation, and self-expression,” promises Karl M. Kapp, “will encourage the most engagement and activity with the gamified content.”²³ To avoid failure when students face problems with immersion and acting, edu-larp can be *task-orientated* so that gameplay itself can keep the game running even in the absence of role-play; see the “mantle of the expert” approach in drama education,²⁴ “role distance... by the assumption of an attitudinal role,”²⁵ goal-orientated incentives,²⁶ or “productive tension.”²⁷

As I have previously discussed, to become eligible for mass implementation in schools, edu-larp should be 1) *monodisciplinary*: targeted at a single school subject, 2) *knowledge-oriented*: focused on knowledge and understanding of core, textbook subject-matter, and 3) *teacher-friendly*: eschewing time-consuming preparations, ideally through print-and-play form.²⁸ Furthermore, the edu-larp functions best as the “consolidator of knowledge”²⁹; it should be applied not so much to introduce new content as to conduct a *final review* of previously learned things. As experts claim, educational content should be embedded in the game, making it part of gameplay³⁰ and the game itself should be “embedded in a program of instruction” rather than as a “stand-alone simulation.”³¹ Hence, in this project, larp was positioned as a pre-test revision class at the end of a large content unit covering several weeks of class work in a high school course in History.

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23. Karl M. Kapp, *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction: Game-based Methods and Strategies for Training and Education* (John Wiley and Sons, 2012), Kindle edition, 3471-3472.

24. Gavin Bolton, “A conceptual framework for classroom acting behavior” (Ph.D. diss., Durham University, 1997), 387, <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1627/>

25. John Carroll and David Cameron, “Playing the Game, Role Distance and Digital Performance,” *Applied Theatre Researcher* 6, no. 1 (2005): 11, http://www.griffith.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/54945/playing-game.pdf

26. Thomas Duus Henriksen, “Moving,” 249.

27. Dorothy Heathcote, “Productive Tension. A Keystone in ‘Mantle of the Expert’ Style of Teaching,” *The Journal for Drama in Education* 26, no. 1: (2010), 8-23. <http://www.mantleoftheexpert.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Jan-101.pdf>

28. Mochocki, “Edu-Larp.”

29. Steve Guscott, “Role play as active history,” in *A Practical Guide to Teaching History in the Secondary School*, edited by Martin Hunt (New York: Routledge, 2007), 40.

30. Alejandro Echeverría et al., “A Framework for the Design and Integration of Collaborative Classroom Games,” *Computers & Education* 57, no. 1 (August 2011): 112.

31. Kapp, *The Gamification*, 2449-2453.

METHODS

Participants

The main stage of research was launched in 2012/2013 as a joint project by Games Research Association of Poland and the Nowa Era publishing house, with the support of volunteers from larp communities in Gdańsk and Kraków. Responsibilities were divided as follows:

GRAP: The overall design of experiment and the preparation of all written materials: larp scenario, instruction for gamemasters, and standardized tests.

Nowa Era: Recruitment of schools and teachers for the project in two cities: seven schools in Kraków and six in Gdańsk. The choice of Kraków and Gdańsk resulted from the availability of volunteers; the selection of particular schools was up to the recruiters.

Volunteers: Running the larps in schools according to the scenario delivered by GRAP and authored by myself. In Kraków, the partner was Pospolite Ruszenie Szlachty Ziemi Krakowskiej (PRSZK), a society for historical reenactment and education, well-experienced in school larps after the DEMOcracy Project.³² The Kraków games were coordinated by Łukasz Wrona, Vice President of PRSZK and the former head of the DEMOcracy Project. In Gdańsk, the team comprised experienced larpmasters from the Science Fiction/Fantasy club Zardzewiały Topór, the Science Fiction Club of Gdańsk, or non-affiliated. Gdańsk was coordinated by Krzysztof Chmielewski, the editor of the first Polish book on larp (*Larp. Myśli i szkice*, 2012), counted among the best larpwrights in Poland.

Teacher participation: While the larp class was conducted by 2-3 volunteers, the teacher was present as a passive observer. The teacher's primary contributions to the project was to distribute and grade tests on schedule and to send test scores to the project coordinator. The complete measurement in the given group would entail two post-larp tests and two non-larp tests, as discussed below.

Students: All groups were in the second year of high school (aged 17-18), comparable to 12th grade in K-12, although Poland requires another, final high-school grade attended by 18-19-year-old. The total

number of participants was 132 in the 2010 pilot study, 105 in the 2012 pilot study, and 153 in the main 2013 research.

Legal issues: Innovations and experiments in Polish public schools are regulated by an April 9, 2002 decree by the Minister of Education and Sport.³³ The decision to introduce and test innovative methods in a school is within the powers of the principal and teachers' council, and should be consulted with the parents' council.³⁴ With approval from the parents' council, it is also within the principal's abilities to start cooperation with NGOs and other organizations as specified by the 1991 Act on Education System.³⁵ Here, the only third party intervention was the larp itself, conducted by external volunteers, but still supervised by the local teacher, who incorporated it in the ongoing didactic process as pre-test revision. Tests were administered, were marked by the teacher as part of regular grading and diagnostic practice; and the scores were anonymized (e.g. "5 students got 12 points; 6 students got 11 points"). In no way were the researcher or volunteers given access to students' personal data. None of the above required individual consent forms from parents or students according to Polish research policies.

Apparatus

According to Mayer, "a richer vision of how to improve educational practice emerges through a multileveled set of measures, which may include both quantitative and qualitative measures."³⁶ In this project, quantitative data should help answer the question of larp's efficiency in building the knowledge of core subject matter. Qualitative data brings insight into the practical side of organizing larps in school and also into the affordances and constraints of conducting

33. MENiS, Rozporządzenie Ministra Edukacji Narodowej i Sportu z dnia 9 kwietnia 2002 r. w sprawie warunków prowadzenia działalności innowacyjnej i eksperymentalnej przez publiczne szkoły i placówki (Dz. U. z 2002, Nr 56, poz. 506) (Decree of Minister of National Education and Sport on the requirements for innovative and experimental activity in public schools and facilities, April 9, 2002), <http://www.dziennikustaw.gov.pl/DU/2002/s/56/506/1/>

34. Ibid., §4.

35. *Ustawa z dnia 7 września 1991 o systemie oświaty* (Dz.U. z 2004, Nr 256, poz. 2572) (Act on Education System, 7 September 1991), Chapter 4, Art. 56, <http://www.dziennikustaw.gov.pl/DU/2004/s/256/2572/1/>

36. Richard E. Mayer, "The Failure of Educational Research to Impact Educational Practice: Six Obstacles to Educational Reform," in *Empirical Methods for Evaluating Educational Interventions*, edited by Gary D. Phye, Daniel H. Robinson and Joel Levin (San Diego: Elsevier Academic Press, 2005), 77.

32. Michał Mochocki and Łukasz Wrona, "DEMOcracy Project. Larp in Civic Education," in *KoLa 2013. Larp Conference Proceedings*, edited by Jakub Tabisz (Wrocław: Wielosfer, 2013), 20-27. <http://issuu.com/wielosfer/docs/kola13-publication/>

pedagogical research on larp.

a) Quantitative Assessment

Unlike in America, “standardized test” here does not mean “based on U.S. Common Core standards,” but rather “designed according to a precise, measurable, and replicable standard.” Learning outcomes were measured with standardized tests with 12 closed questions. Students were to provide the right answer constituted by a short and specific piece of knowledge, e. g. “Which country was the most interested in getting the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth into war against Turkey? Answer: Austria.” Standardized tests came as a convenient choice; as Łobocki points out, they a) face all students with identical challenges, b) allow for fair and measurable assessment with minimized subjectivity, c) allow for simultaneous assessment of large groups, d) make it possible to compare the results of different groups and schools.³⁷

Both the experimental and control groups were taught the same content by their history teacher. The follow-up test was based strictly on the textbook unit that the students were supposed to learn. All tests were designed by the research coordinator (Mochocki) and approved by the teacher as a valid tool of measurement.

All tests were administered twice, at short and long distance. In other words, the test was announced, took place, and was graded for the first time about 7 days after the revision. The same test was administered again about 30 days after the revision, this time unannounced and ungraded. In the pilot studies, we only administered one test, the same for both experimental (larp) and control (non-larp) groups. In the 2013 main stage, however, each group received two separate tests for different textbook units: one test was experimental (larp), the other control (non-larp). The group’s achievements in the experimental test(s) were to be compared with control test(s). This was a design challenge: to make comparison possible, the difficulty level of both tests should be equivalent, even though they covered different content.

All experimental (larp) tests were based on the “Poland in 18th century” unit, with the control (non-larp) tests from another unit (see Table 1, where the test covers Europe in the first half of 19th century).

³⁸ To establish the desired equivalence, each standardized test for the control (non-larp) stage was designed as an equivalent counterpart of the “normative” test on 18th century Poland (larp). The equivalence of the tests as a whole was based on the equivalence of all its 12 items, considered on a one-on-one basis. In other words, every question in the control (non-larp) test was paired with one corresponding question in the experimental (larp) test, and carefully crafted as equivalent in format, topic, level of detail, and relative importance/prominence of the content item. For example, if one test asks for the name of a well-known military leader counted among prominent public figures of the period, so does the second test in relation to the other period/country. The difficulty level of both tests was evaluated by the teachers—who are treated as subject-matter experts³⁹—and approved by them as equivalent.

Table 1: Sample Equivalence of Test Content

Test 1 (Poland in 18th century)	Test 2 (the first half of the 19th century)
1. What was the name of a “ministry” of education created in 1773? (Answer: Commission of National Education)	1. Which act replaced the constitution of the Kingdom of Poland in 1832 (Answer: Organic Statute)
2. The First Partition of Poland was carried out as “punishment” for [what event?] (Answer: the Bar Confederation)	2. The Congress of Vienna was summoned in the aftermath of [what event?] (Answer: the defeat of Napoleon / the collapse of the Napoleonic rule)

The collection of this data was entirely in the hands of the teachers, who were asked to administer four tests on schedule: 1 week and then 1 month after the revision class, in both the experimental and the control group. The teachers were also asked to check the results on a 12-point scale, cross out students who did not participate in the larp, and send anonymized scores to the researcher.

It was important that the first test be taken about

³⁸. Please note: it does not have to be the next textbook unit after the larped one. The length of time between the larped and non-larped units seems to be of little relevance. In the 2013 study, all groups took *Facing the Second Partition* (Poland in 18th century) as the larped (experimental) class, but different textbook units were used in control groups.

³⁹. D’Agostino, “Measuring,” 142.

.....
³⁷. Mieczysław Łobocki, *Metody i techniki badań pedagogicznych* (Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza “Impuls,” 2003), 150.

7 days after the revision class; if it was delayed for another week or two (e. g. due to the teacher's illness), it could not be used as measurement of short-term retention. The tight schedule made it is a fairly demanding task, and not all teachers were able to meet it—as clearly demonstrated in the below Results by the number of schools that did not provide complete (or any) test scores.

a) Qualitative Assessment

The qualitative observational data—i.e. reports of specific issues observed in classroom practice and in cooperation with the school as institution—was collected primarily for the needs of larp/drama educators and teachers interested in the practical side of bringing edu-larp to schools. Delivered by larpmasters—in this case, volunteers who administered the larps in class—and teachers in written reports and online/telephone interviews, this data comes from all 13 games in the 2013 run and 10 games from the pilot studies in 2010 and 2012. The volunteers were asked to report on:

- students' and teachers' attitude to larp
- ratio and level of (un)cooperativeness
- technical and organizational problems
- any other factors that they found to have influenced the larp or the larp experience in a positive or negative way

This data was gathered in a non-standardized form as paper notes, e-mails, notes from telephone conversations and face-to-face meetings. It was then processed in the form of listings and descriptions, leading to the report in the Results below.

Procedure

With non-random assignment of students to groups, as the researchers tested already-formed classes, the project constituted a quasi-experimental study, or “design research” as distinguished from strict experimental research by Collins et al.⁴⁰ The project stayed in line with the idea of design research: “the design is constantly revised based on experience, until all the bugs are worked out.”⁴¹

40. Alan Collins, Diana Joseph and Katerine Bielaczyc, “Design Research: Theoretical and Methodological Issues,” *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 13, no. 1 (2004): 15-42. <http://treeves.coe.uga.edu/EDIT9990/Collins2004.pdf>

41. Ibid, 18.

Overall, three methods of experimental pedagogical interventions have been considered and tested within 3 years of pilot studies and the main study. As described by Valentine & Cooper (2005) in their summary of William McCall:

a *one-group study* often compares students before and after receiving some intervention. An example of a one-group design would be if a researcher noted the achievement levels of students in a school both before and after a uniform policy was introduced. If the students' achievement changed, the researcher may be tempted to say that it was due to the policy. If their achievement stayed the same, the researcher may conclude that the policy had no effect...

an *equivalent groups study* assesses the effect of an intervention by comparing a group of students who received the intervention with a group of students who did not receive the intervention...

...the *rotation or crossover design*... is that participants receive one level of an intervention and then another. To borrow McCall's example, if a teacher were interested in the effects of praising versus scolding students, he or she could first praise a student and note the effects. The teacher could then scold the student and note the effects. This could be done with several students. If implemented in conjunction with other features (e.g., using random assignment to determine which students receive which condition first), the crossover design presents a very strong basis for making inferences about an intervention's effectiveness.⁴²

This study hypothesized that larp as pre-test revision leads to higher retention of knowledge than traditional revision class based on presentations and discussion. In operational terms, the higher retention of knowledge would be demonstrated if tests covering the larped units show significantly higher scores than tests from the non-larped units. More specifically, as test-based measurement breaks down in two components—short-distance (1 week) and long-distance (1 month)—it is possible to hypothesize that larped units should have *slightly* higher scores in short-distance tests and *significantly* higher scores in long-distance tests. Why? The first test had been

42. Jeffrey C. Valentine and Harris M. Cooper, “Can We Measure the Quality of Causal Research in Education?,” in *Empirical Methods for Evaluating Educational Interventions*, edited by Gary D. Phye, Daniel H. Robinson, and Joel Levin (San Diego: Elsevier Academic Press, 2005), 90-91.

announced and graded, with students in both groups expected to do pre-test studying at home. Therefore, the score could be much more influenced by last-minute cramming than by the form of in-class revision. This problem is universal in ludic edu-innovations. In graded evaluations, they usually do not show better results than traditional methods; they only shine in measurements of “natural” long-term retention where students make no special pre-exam preparation.⁴³ For this reason, the long-distance tests—unannounced and non-graded—were selected as the primary means of verification of the main hypothesis.

a) Procedure in 2013 Study

With the abandonment of equivalent groups in favor of the one-group method after the pilot studies (see below), in the main 2013 study, the total procedure followed six steps in two stages in all the participating groups.

During the experimental stage:

- a larp was played in class as pre-test revision of a single textbook unit covering 18th-century Poland;
- 1 week later, students took an announced and graded standardized test;
- 3 weeks later, they retook the same test with no prior announcement.

During the control stage:

- another textbook unit, Poland and Europe in the first half of 19th century, was completed with a typical pre-test revision led by the teacher and mostly based on presentation and discussion;
- 1 week later, students took an announced and graded standardized test;
- 3 weeks later, they retook the same test with no prior announcement.

Turning to how this experiment was positioned in the ongoing process of instruction in schools:

1. A given unit from the History textbook was discussed in class over several weeks for one 45-min. period a week (two in humanities-focused programmes), followed by home assignments. Methods of instruction varied; predominantly, they

comprised presentation, discussion, Q&A, worksheets, source text analysis, etc., with the strong control of the teacher. Each new lesson covered a new part of the overall content of the unit;

2. A pre-test revision class reviewed the previously discussed text/commissioned reading. Typically, it was still based on content presentation, Q&A, and group discussion. In the control groups/stages, teachers conducted it in the traditional way. In the experimental groups/stages, the revision class took the form of larp.
3. A formal test measured the learning outcomes based on the given unit. It had been announced in advance and was graded by the teacher. This was the short-distance test, administered 1 week after the larped (experimental) or non-larped (control) revision class.

Normally, a student who passes the test no longer needs to return to the content of a completed unit unless they choose to take History as a component of the maturity exam (comparable to A-level) at the end of high-school. In the project, both experimental and control groups took the same test again 3 weeks later (4 weeks after the revision), without prior notice.

a) Procedure in 2010 and 2012 Pilots

Initially, the idea was to use the *rotation method* based on the comparison of test scores of experimental groups (classes in which larp was used as pre-test revision of a book unit) and control groups (classes revising the same book unit for the same test with no larp).⁴⁴ In line with the rotation method, recommended as the most reliable by experts on pedagogical research,⁴⁵ in one semester the experimental group would play a larp while the control group would not and in the next semester they would switch; the former control (non-larp) group would now play another larp as the experimental group and vice versa.

With this goal in mind, a pilot study in 2010 included 3 larps (addressed below as A, B and C) on History classes in two high schools in Bydgoszcz, Poland. The researchers obtained quantitative data (test scores) from 132 students in total, as well as

44. The concept for this research was first presented in: Michał Mochocki, “Teatralne gry fabularne (IARP-y) w nauczaniu szkolnym,” *Homo Ludens* 1/2009, 177-189.

45. Władysław Zaczyński, *Praca badawcza nauczyciela* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1995), 99-100; Łobocki, *Metody*, 112-114; Albert W. Maszke, *Metody i techniki badań pedagogicznych* (Rzeszów: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Rzeszowskiego, 2008), 184-185.

43. Teresa Siek-Piskozub, *Gry, zabawy i symulacje w procesie glottodydaktycznym* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 1995), 46.

non-quantitative data from observation and reports (see Qualitative Assessment, above). Additionally, 6 other editions of the same larps run by myself or my co-workers in high schools in Bydgoszcz, Gdańsk, and Myślenice brought only qualitative information, as no tests were delivered by the teachers. In the second semester, the procedure was supposed to be repeated with group rotation, to reduce the risk of outcomes being distorted by “pre-instructional student differences in aptitude or achievement.”⁴⁶ However, not even once did this procedure occur as detailed under Discussion below. Without the rotation, it effectively turned into the *equivalent-groups method*. The next pilot study—conducted in 2012 by teacher and researcher Jerzy Szeja in a high-school in Łochów near Warsaw,—used the equivalent groups deliberately with no attempt at rotation to make it consistent with the 2010 study. However, my growing distrust in the credibility of this method resulted in the change of procedure for the 2013 research. The new procedure reached its final shape in the six steps listed above. Further justification for the selection of one-group method is detailed in the Discussion below.

RESULTS

a) Qualitative

The following problems were observed at least once in the 23 games played in Polish high schools in 2010, 2012, and 2013.

“Swarm tactics,” a term by larpmaster Tomasz Łomnicki: In the middle phase (unofficial negotiations of all parties; see Appendix—Game Materials), students do not break into small groups but form one chaotic and noisy crowd, ignoring the fact that their opponents can eavesdrop. Tested solution: specifically warn against this problem in the briefing.

Small rooms: In a small classroom, it is difficult to accommodate the first two phases (prepping in separate factions, then unofficial talks in small groups). Obvious solution: use the corridors. However, loud talk in the corridors irritates teachers working in other classrooms.

Refusal to role-play: Some students are unwilling to get involved in role play, especially those with no experience with drama or RPG. A student may openly refuse to play, or use passive resistance⁴⁷: watch

and follow the herd without active involvement. The rate of students who remain uninvolved and passive throughout the game is estimated by larpmasters at about 10% (2-3 people in a class). Tested solutions: approach the student as out-of-game larpmaster and a) make the student feel his/her character is very important, which works with ambitious and easily bored students, b) ignore role-play by encouraging them to simply focus on task completion, which works with shy and self-conscious ones, c) focus their attention on a personal conflict/competition with another character, which works with competitive and aggressive students.

*Game-based logic:*⁴⁸ Students may approach the game as a “puzzle” with specific victory conditions and a pre-defined outcome. These individuals feel frustrated when they cannot find the right combination. Solution: Make it clear in the briefing that the larp is a simulation of complex socio-political reality with no obvious answer to be found.

Anachronisms: Students may use references to events or technology unknown in the period, ruining the potential for immersion and reasonable debate. Tested solution: specifically warn against anachronisms in the briefing by explaining that using anachronisms generates “system errors,” as there is no way other characters can logically respond. Without this warning, students feel tempted to test the limits, but when it is made clear that anachronisms disrupt the game and can easily ruin it, they behave responsibly.

Teacher’s anxiety: The teacher may feel stressed by the prospect of a third party researcher studying the achievements of his/her group in comparison with other schools. One local coordinator suspects that some of the teachers deliberately “sabotaged” the test schedule due to this anxiety. It could be the main reason why so many teachers did not deliver test results (see Results and Findings below).

The most important positive findings were:

Positive attitude of students: The great majority of students seemed to enjoy the larp class, and declared they were willing to repeat this experience. Krzysztof Chmielewski, the local coordinator in Gdańsk, reports that the edu-larp inspired several students to take on larp as a hobby and one of them started to write larps herself.

Positive attitude of teachers: Also, the majority of teachers found larp a valuable tool and expressed interest in further cooperation with the volunteers.

Since the qualitative data deliberately focused on problems, the negative findings outlined here

46. Joel Levin, “Randomized Classroom Trials on Trial,” in *Empirical Methods for Evaluating Educational Interventions*, edited by Gary D. Phye, Daniel H. Robinson, and Joel Levin (San Diego: Elsevier Academic Press, 2005), 7.

47. Jansen, “Larp,” 33.

48. J. Tuomas Harviainen, Timo Iainema, and Eeli Saarinen, “Player-Reported Impediments to Game-based Learning,” in *Proceedings of 2012 DiGRA Nordic*, 2012, <http://www.digra.org/dl/db/12168.02279.pdf>

outnumber the positive findings. However, the overall conclusion falls strongly on the positive side (see Discussion / Findings below).

a) Quantitative: Pilots

In each case, the students' achievements (test scores) were based on standardized 12-item tests with closed questions (see above under Apparatus).

Table 1 covers the 2010 pilot study with 3 larps (addressed below as A, B and C) on history classes in two high schools in Bydgoszcz obtaining test scores from 132 students in total. Each larp group was paired with a control group and they were supposed to switch roles in the next semester which did not happen (see the above section regarding the inadvertent change from the rotation method to equivalent-groups). The average score (%) was calculated for the entire group: the sum of all individual scores was divided by the number of students and converted to a percentage.

Ultimately, in 2010, the 3 experimental (larp) groups outperformed the 3 control groups in all tests, both in short (1 week) and long (1 month) distance.

Table 2 shows the results of the 2012 pilot study by Jerzy Szeja in Łochów with 105 students in total. Test scores of the experimental group (larp group D) are compared with the score of 3 control groups that took a traditional, teacher-led revision. The average score (%) is calculated as above: the sum of all individual scores is divided by the number of students and then converted to %.

Table 2: Average Score in 2010 Pilot Study (equivalent-groups method)

Group	1 week after revision (ca. 7 days after larp/revision)	1 month after revision (ca. 30 days after)
Larp group A	75.5% (30 students)	81.6% (29 students)
Control group A	— *	50% (24)
Larp group B	66.8% (28)	60.2% (27)
Control group B	25.8% (21)	22.9% (22)
Larp group C	72.5/85% (26/23)**	52.5% (25)
Control group C	45% (28)	36% (22)

* No parallel test was carried in due time here, so there are no results of the control group.

** 3 tests came back unsigned and with no answers at all. If included in the total score, it is 72.5%; if excluded, the score is 85%.

Table 3: Average Score in 2012 Pilot Study (equivalent-groups method)

Group	1 week after revision	1 month after revision
Larp group D	69.1% (24)	73.4% (21)
Control group D-1	70.7% (25)	65.3% (24)
Control group D-2	65.9% (23)	— (not delivered)
Control group D-3	72.22% (33)	90.5% (28)

In the short-distance test, all groups have similar average results (65.9 to 72.2%). The long-distance retest shows a decrease in the score of control group D-1, but an increase for control group D-3 and for the larp group D. Class D-3 achieved top score in both tests. According to their history teacher, this ideally illustrates the difference in the overall competence between the groups: the larp class and control classes D-1 and D-2 are on a comparable level, while control D-3 has always been best-performing. This information was obtained by Jerzy Szeja, the researcher conducting the 2012 pilot study and fellow teacher in the school.

a) Quantitative: 2013 Research

6 out of 13 schools participating in the 2013 edition of the project had to be removed from the pool of quantitative data because of delayed or incomplete testing in the first experimental stage.

Table 3 presents the results of the remaining 7 groups (153 students in total), delivered in

varying degrees of completeness. The “post-larp” (experimental) and “non-larp” (control) sections show the average scores in tests following the larp and in the non-larp revision class, respectively, which were conducted in the short- (ca. 7 days) and long-term (ca. 30 days). In each case, the table shows:

1. Point value of the average score of the group: the sum of individual scores divided by the number of students. With 12 questions worth 1 point each, the maximum score is 12 and the minimum is 0.
2. (in parentheses) Percentage of the above-mentioned point value with 12 as 100%.
3. [in brackets] Number of tests taken into account.

Out of the seven schools, only 1 (Group 4, in **bold**) provided the full set of data for all four tests, including the second (non-larped, control) stage, hence the empty boxes in the table.

Table 4. Average Scores in 2013 Research (one-group method)

Group	Post-larp tests (Experimental)		Non-larp tests (Control)	
	1 week	1 month	1 week	1 month
Group 1	9.43 (78.6%) [16 students]	8.47 (70.58%) [17]	7.19 (59.91%) [21]	
Group 2	9.36 (78%) [25]	10.25 (85.41%) [24]	8.36 (69.66%) [19]	
Group 3	10.90 (90.83%) [32]	11.65 (97.08%) [29]		
Group 4	8.43 (70.25%) [23]	10.52 (87.66%) [19]	9.65 (80%) [23]	9.04 (75%) [25]
Group 5	8.9 (74.16%) [22]	8.47 (70.58%) [21]		
Group 6	7.06 (58.83%) [15]	6.58 (54.83%) [12]		
Group 7	8.22 (68.5%) [20]	6.36 (53%) [19]		

No division into Ctrl and Exp groups here. Each group first underwent an experimental (larped) revision class before a test, and then a control (traditional) revision before another test.

DISCUSSION

a) Findings

As discussed in Methods, the primary hypothesis—larp as pre-test revision leads to higher retention of knowledge than traditional revision class based on presentations and discussion—would be verified if the experimental (larp) groups had achieved significantly higher scores in the unannounced long-distance tests. This hypothesis indeed happened in the only complete data set (Group 4) in the 2013 study: the short-distance post-larp score (70.25%) was worse than non-larp (80%), but in the long distance, the post-larp score rose from 70.25% to 87.66% with the non-larp score dropping from 80% to 75%. Should this pattern consistently repeat in a large sample, the hypothesis would be verified. At this moment, the small sample (~23 students) only counts as preliminary findings that encourage further research.

The secondary operational hypothesis claimed that experimental (larp) groups should have slightly higher scores in short-distance tests. For this hypothesis, the comparison can be made in three 2013 groups. For Groups 1 and 2, the average score in the short-distance (1 week) post-larp test is higher than in the corresponding non-larp tests, the difference being remarkable in Group 1, with 78.6% vs. 59.91%, and less so in Group 2, with 78% vs. 69.66%. However, in Group 4, the scores show the opposite: it is the post-larp test that has lower short-distance performance: 70.25% vs. 80%. Again, only a much larger sample could bring conclusive evidence.

Because of the change of method from equivalent-groups in 2010/2012 to one-group in 2013, it does not make sense to put them in one box. They should rather be treated as separate data sets.

In the pilot study of 2010, test scores from all three experimental larp groups A-C are significantly higher than in all three control groups A-C, both in short- and long-distance. In the pilot of 2012, the one and only experimental larp group D performed slightly better than control groups D-1 and D-2 but worse than control group D-3. In both pilot studies (A-D) put together, the larp scores were remarkably higher than non-larp scores 3 times; on 2 occasions, the numbers were more or less equal, and a non-larp group performed better 1 time.

How reliable are these numbers? Contrary to the initial plan, the pilot results were obtained with the equivalent-groups method without group rotation. "The problem with the equivalent group's design... is that we cannot be sure that the groups are truly

equivalent,"⁴⁹ as said by Maszke⁵⁰ and Zaczynski.⁵¹ Indeed, according to their teacher, the non-larp group D-3 which topped the score in 2012 had always been best-performing. In research on already-formed school classes, when researchers have no means of improving equivalence, it is clear that groups will often not be equivalent. In each particular case, the difference in tests scores might be attributed to initial competence levels.

A stronger case for the usefulness of larp is found not in the one-to-one comparisons, but in the total average scores (see Tab. 5) of all 2010-2013 studies.

Table 5 (next page) puts together all scores from the pilot and post-pilot studies and calculates the average score of all larp-based tests compared to the collective average of the non-larp ones.

Larp-based revisions in 11 classes [258 students] correlate with the average of ~70% score on short-distance test, with only 1 out of 11 dropping below 60%; while the corresponding short-distance average for the 8 non-larp classes [200 students] is ~65%, with 3 dropping below 60%. In the long-distance retest, the 11 larp classes [243 students] retain the average of ~70%, with 3 out of 11 below 60% and none below 50%, while the average of the 6 non-larp ones [145 students] is ~55%, 3 of them below 50%.

In these figures, all experimental groups are counted as one large meta-group, as are control groups. Therefore, the non-equivalence between two particular small groups is less worrying. There is still potential non-equivalence between these combined meta-groups; the experimental meta-group may have more top-performing and/or less bottom-performing students than the control meta-group or vice versa. Still, with 258 "experimental" students and 145 "control" ones, it may be believed that the ratio of top- and bottom-performers in both meta-groups is statistically similar.

All these findings should be approached with caution; the preliminary results suggest—not prove—the superiority of larp as a revision class. They are not conclusive enough to reject the null hypothesis, i.e. that larp as a revision class may have no significant effect on test performance. One thing, however, is certain: not even once did larp seem to negatively impact the group's test performance. Further experiments should not meet objections.

When it comes to the qualitative findings, it should be concluded that edu-larp is widely applicable in regular school environments. This was

49. Valentine and Cooper, "Can We Measure," 91.

50. Maszke, *Metody*, 184.

51. Zaczynski, *Praca*, 97.

Table 5: Total Average Scores of Post-Larp and Non-Larp Tests

	Post-larp 1 week	Post-larp 1 month	Non-larp 1 week	Non-larp 1 month
Pilot 2010*	[81 students]	[81]	[56]	[68]
A	75.5%	81.6%	—	50%
B	66.8%	60.2%	25.8%	22.9%
C	85%	52.5%	45%	36%
Pilot 2012*	[24 students]	[21]	[81]	[52]
D	69.1%	73.4%	70.7%	65.3%
D			65.9%	—
D			72.22%	90.5%
Project 2013*	[153 students]	[141]	[63]	[25]
Group 1	78.6%	70.58%	59.91%	—
Group 2	78%	85.41%	69.66%	—
Group 3	90.83%	97.08%	—	—
Group 4	70.25%	87.66%	80%	75%
Group 5	74.16%	70.58%	—	—
Group 6	58.83%	54.83%	—	—
Group 7	68.5%	53%	—	—
Total Average	74.64% [258 students]	74.16% [243]	63.64% [200]	53.66% [145]

* *It should be remembered that Pilots 2010 and 2012 used equivalent-groups, i.e. the “post-larp” (experimental) group is different than the “non-larp” (control) group. By contrast, in Project 2013 there are “post-larp” and “non-larp” scores the same group that went through the experimental and the control stage.*

confirmed not only by the 23 larps carried out in high schools as part of this project and pilot trials, but also by 56 first-level larps run in junior high schools under the DEMOcracy Project.⁵² Out of the 79 games, there were only two reports of serious struggles with group's uncooperativeness when the larpmasters failed to get the game running because of the collective refusal to participate.

The usual 10% of people who, according to the qualitative reports, stay uninvolved and passive while others are playing is unfortunate. Still, it is very unlikely that other alternatives, e. g. a traditional pre-test revision class, would be more successful. Student disengagement is a huge problem⁵³ in general and all school activities tend to suffer from it. If edu-larp is reported to keep 90% students actively involved for over an hour, this is a strength—not weakness.

Generally, with the exception of teacher's failure to deliver test scores, all reported problems were observed rarely and can be met with field-tested solutions.

b) Limitations

The overall idea of standardized tests is very practical: well-established in the school environment and, thus, easily accepted by teachers and students. However, should the test be repeated after 3 weeks with the very same questions? It is clear that students who received correct answers in teacher's feedback after test A are better prepared for test B.⁵⁴ This could be seen as a serious limitation of the study (see the discussion of the AB method and unacknowledged interdependence between A and B in Levin).⁵⁵ However, the object of study was long-term retention of this particular knowledge that had been measured in the first test, in which case a different set of

52. Mochocki and Wrona, *DEMOcracy*.

53. Helen M. Marks, “Student Engagement in Instructional Activity: Patterns in the Elementary, Middle, and High School Years,” *American Educational Research Journal* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 154.

54. D'Agostino, “Measuring,” 118.

55. Levin, “Randomized,” 11.

questions does not seem a viable option. The fact that students had been given the answers makes it even more relevant to the school practice. This is the regular cycle: a) teach, b) revise, c) test, d) give feedback on test results with correct answers in the hopes that e) students will long retain some of this knowledge. The research hypothesis can now be rephrased as: if the b) “revise” stage takes the form of edu-larp, then e) long-term retention will be higher. Thus, the purpose should be to check how much knowledge stays with students after they have been tested and graded. Retaking the same test unannounced 3 weeks later should then be counted among “measurement methods... that match the purposes of the intervention under study.”⁵⁶

The weakest spot of the 2013 study is the lack of researcher’s control over the process of testing, which was left entirely in the hands of teachers. It was the teacher’s responsibility to prevent cheating on the tests, to meet the test schedule, to eliminate non-larpers from the data pool, and to deliver the exact scores without miscalculations or typos. Each teacher was testing only one group to avoid work overload, but the possibility of human error remains nevertheless. Still, the biggest problem with teacher’s responsibility was not errors, but the failure to conduct the tests and deliver the scores. With 13 schools in the project, 7 delivered no quantitative data, 5 did it partially (with very limited usefulness of this data), and only 1 provided the full set (Group 4). Researchers working with Seekers are facing similar difficulties in the United States,⁵⁷ so the problem seems to be universal. Such is the flaw of unpaid voluntary collaboration. The next edition of this research, if it comes, must come with funding and paid contracts to eliminate this specific problem.

In the 2010 pilot study, intended group rotation was not achieved in any of the three trials. A scheduled performance of the larp and related tests turned out to be executable only once; its repetition with group rotation was too much to demand from voluntary teacher’s cooperation. This is not to be understood that the teachers were uncooperative; they simply could not facilitate enough properly scheduled meetings before the end of the semester. Experts are right: although the rotation method may be the most reliable type of pedagogical experiment, it is very difficult to implement in a public school

daily routine.⁵⁸ This was probably the most important conclusion of the pilot studies: if the rotation method seems unexecutable and the equivalent-groups unreliable, the right course should be *one-group* experiments: no more division into control groups and experimental groups, instead favoring an experimental stage (with tests) and a control stage (with tests) for a single group.

Transition to the single-group method was not an easy decision to make, as it is considered not very reliable, unable to take into account other factors that might have influenced the outcome.⁵⁹ Among these factors is non-equal difficulty of the tested content. In the one-group procedure selected for the 2013 study, the experimental stage focused on 18th century Poland, while the control stage used a different textbook unit, early 19th century Europe. Two different book units mean different content tested with a different set of questions, which may translates into non-equivalent difficulty level.⁶⁰ This would distort the results; the experimental (larp) stage could have led to higher scores not because the method was superior but because its tests were easier. However, when the choice is between “the same edu-content with different learner groups” and “different edu-content with the same people” variables, the latter prevails.

Neither allows for 100% equivalence of the compared samples, but in the case of content/test difficulty, equivalence can be at least partially secured by strict adherence to the book, thorough content analysis, and—first and foremost—careful design of tests: the same number, type, and difficulty of questions addressing the same thematic issues (see above under Apparatus). This is a strong advantage of the one-group method: the difficulty level of book units and test questions can be compared on the basis of recorded data and consulted with subject-matter experts. Anyone who wants to question the equivalence of compared samples can study both book units and back up his or her argument with evidence. By contrast, in the equivalent-groups method, the differences reside in humans, leaving no chance for later verification of their equivalence. Therefore, if sufficient care is given to assure equal difficulty of post-larp and non-larp tests, it should be more reliable than the equivalent-groups method.

56. D’Agostino, 123.

57. Sarah Lynne Bowman and Anne Standiford, “Educational Larp in the Middle School Classroom: A Mixed Method Case Study,” *International Journal of Role-playing* 5. (In press for 2015 publication).

58. Łobocki, *Metody*, 113; Zaczyński, *Praca*, 102.

59. Maszke, *Metody*, 182.

60. D’Agostino, “Measuring,” 120.

Table 6: Groups Equivalence vs. Content Equivalence

Problems with equivalence of groups (in two-groups method)	Problems with equivalence of content (in one-group method)
Once the groups are selected, the researcher can do nothing to increase equivalence	Equivalence can be increased by careful design of learning materials and tests
Differences in group competence hidden in people -- difficult to assess, impossible to verify without access to group members	Differences in content difficulty are verifiable through analysis of textbook material -- accessible for any researcher

Table 7: Suggested Data Analysis based on Individual Performance

Student number	Post-larp 1 week	Post-larp 1 month	Non-larp 1 week	Non-larp 1 month
1	10 points	8 points	10 points	9 points

A small room for non-equivalence remained in the changing number of tested samples; if the “1 week” test in Group 3 was taken by 32 students and “1 month” by 29, the sample size changed by 3. Even if the number was the same in both tests, the group was not always 100% identical.⁶¹ The 2013 project accepted this level of attrition in order to minimize the burden put on the teachers as unpaid voluntary work. They were asked only to eliminate the tests of students who had not participated in the larp. More accurate data would have come from reports tracing the performance of individual students, e. g. Table 7, with only those who took part in the larp and submitted all four tests taken into account. If this research is continued in the future, it should adopt this stricter policy of elimination.

CONCLUSION

The idea of monodisciplinary and knowledge-oriented edu-larp worked well with the teachers, with most of them interested in further cooperation. It is yet to be seen if or when the teachers are ready to run print-and-play scenarios on their own without larpmasters coming from outside of school. It was widely accepted by students with a high engagement ratio (90%, as assessed by organizers).

When it comes to quantitatively measured educational efficiency, in all studies since 2010 with various research methods, edu-larp generally correlates with higher—or comparable, at worst—test scores than traditional revision classes, especially in long term knowledge retention. Still, the hypothesis of larp’s superiority has not been substantially verified due to the unexpectedly small sample. With highly encouraging preliminary results, research should be continued, as “replication... strengthens the credibility of evidence.”⁶²

The evolution of procedures from pilot studies to the main study illustrate the value of constant improvement of research methods in subsequent iterations. The ultimately selected one-group method makes a strong case for its reliability as compared to alternatives and has been field-tested for its applicability in the school environment. Should other teachers and researchers be willing to follow this model, or get inspired by it, I would be very interested in the results.

62. Angela M. O'Donnell, “Experimental Research in Classrooms,” in *Empirical Methods for Evaluating Educational Interventions*, edited by Gary D. Phye, Daniel H. Robinson and Joel Levin (San Diego: Elsevier Academic Press, 2005), 215.

61. Valentine and Cooper, “Can We Measure,” 107-108.

Appendix A: Game Materials

Larps used in pilot studies and the main study contained three types of game materials: 1) instruction for gamemasters (available only to them), 2) one-sheet summary of the major period events players should know (one copy for everyone), 3) role cards with description of the character and his/her tasks in the game (individual). Content was based on a high-school history handbook by M. Kamiński and R. Sniegocki, covering a large unit on the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the second half of the 18th century.

a) Instruction for Gamemasters

The larps were administered by experienced larpmasters who did not need general guidelines. They received a brief description of the formula elaborated upon in the IJRP paper (Mochocki 2013, 67-68): a larp designed as a negotiation game for conflicted-yet-cooperating factions to be played in three stages:

1. Prepping: each faction meets separately, their aims being to get into character get acquainted with other faction members and their opinions; and discuss the course of action for the upcoming meeting. Playing time: 15-20 minutes.
2. Unofficial talks: all factions meet in one place before the official session and break down into small groups; trying to cut deals; form alliances; recruit followers; obtain/trade information; blackmail or bribe adversaries, etc. Playing time: about 60 minutes.
3. Official debate: formal negotiations at a table, potentially leading to a resolution, e.g. voting. Playing time: about 20 minutes.

In addition, the gamemasters received a list of characters divided into factions with suggestions for modifications to the character cast: which roles should be dropped first if the number of players is smaller and which roles are gender neutral and could be easily replaced with the opposite sex without changes in tasks or character details.

b) Unit summary

This particular scenario, called “Facing the Second Partition,” was used in all games in the 2013 edition (tested in the 2010 pilot study) and was set in February 1794 near the end of the period covered by the school textbook. It was the grim history of Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in 18th century, when it was incrementally carved into pieces by its three

neighbors. As players, students would know that the Second Partition, which meant yet another substantial loss of territory, had sparked a desperate rebellion that failed hopelessly and was punished with the Third Partition, i.e. the complete annihilation of the state. As characters, the students were faced with the Second Partition and the question of starting the rebellion was theirs to discuss.

The one-sheet unit summary had three parts:

- 1) Bullet-point timeline of major events. There is no room to print it here; readers interested in historical context for the below-described factions and challenges can research the Partitions of Poland online (e. g. on Wikipedia).
- 2) Brief characteristics of all in-game factions, based on former parties of the Great Sejm (parliament) of 1788-92:

Hetmans’ Party, led by hetmans Branicki and Rzewuski, general Potocki and prince Poniński (later leaders of the Targowica Confederation):

- supporters of the old Sarmatian tradition, enemies of French novelties (especially of revolutionary ones)
- supporters of the Cardinal Laws of 1767 and of Russian supervision over the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

Patriotic Party, led by Sejm marshal Małachowski, Ignacy Potocki, Stanisław Potocki, Adam Czartoryski (ideological leader: bishop Kołłątaj, who wasn’t a member of parliament)

- supporters of the enlightened reform of the state (Constitution of May 3)
- enemies of Russia; until recently, supporters of strategic alliance with Prussia
- don’t like the King for his subservience to Russia

Royal Party, the King and his followers

- supporters of the enlightened reform of the state
- BUT: want to keep good relations with Russia

(while the Great Sejm was proceeding, the King allied with the Patriotic Party)

None of the influential figures listed here were played by students, but many player characters had connections to them.

3) Introduction to the opening scene of the game:

Facing the dire situation and the imminent reduction of the army, some of the patriots press for a new war. They are being contacted by repentant Targowica members, who no longer support Russia after the shameful Second Partition. The king is quietly following Russian instructions for the time being, but is also looking back at the attitude of the nobility. In great secret, members of all three former Great Sejm factions are meeting in Warsaw on trilateral talks. Things that must be decided:

- Is reconciliation between the patriots and the targowicans possible?
- Should (or when should) war with Russia be restarted (and what about Prussia)?
- Should the Constitution of May 3 be reinstalled or should Cardinal Laws remain in place?
- Should king Stanisław August Poniatowski be deposed?

c) Role cards

Each player was given an individual role card with character description and a numbered list of tasks (usually three, rarely two or four). Here is a sample:

Castellanea of Calisia

You come from the proud Greater Poland aristocracy, distantly related to the Potockis. Your family used to support the old traditions of Golden Liberty, but when the “liberty” became enforced with Russian bayonets, it was time for a change of mind. As an educated and experienced lady, you now support the enlightened thought and the Constitution of May 3. You deeply regret the collapse of the Constitution after the Russian military intervention and you feel even more hurt by the Second Partition of the country. You dream of a great and victorious war bringing independence and sovereignty back to the Commonwealth. You do understand, however, that right now the Polish forces are too weak and none of the other European countries are coming to help. It is said the patriots are preparing a new rebellion; they need to be talked back to their senses as the new war can only bring new disasters.

Task 1: Strongly advise against any military actions against Russia. At the moment, 100,000 Russian troops are stationed on Polish soil and the Prussians and Austrians cannot wait for the opportunity to grab more. War has to be postponed to a convenient time when the hostile army goes to fight somewhere else. Without a strong ally, the Commonwealth stands no chance.

Task 2: Do not let the patriots slip back into the backward Sarmatian ideology. The restitution of the Constitution of May 3 must be the primary goal, as its reforms are the only way to bring the nation back to power.

Task 3: Convince the congregation that King Poniatowski cannot be trusted, because he is likely to switch to the side of the Russians again when times get hard. But, he must be tolerated as necessary evil. After all, it is better to have him on the throne rather than some new puppet sent from Moscow.

Most tasks revolved around the initial questions listed on the summary sheet, which reflected major conflict of ideas and interests of the period: textbook-based curricular content.

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Lessons Learned from Larp: Promoting Social Realism in Nursing Simulation

Anne Standiford

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to discuss simulation theory, larp theory, and how researchers can blend the two to increase the perception of realism in educational simulations. I begin with a discussion of the history of simulation, specifically as it is used in nursing education. Next, I will discuss the concept of social realism and the struggle to design simulations that adequately represent the challenge of a real life situation. I then explain immersion according to Multi-Tier Game Immersion Theory, citing examples of ways to improve social realism in nursing simulation. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of strategies introduced by Aaron Vanek of Seekers Unlimited at a recent consultation at the Texas State Nursing school. Vanek suggests techniques from traditional, freeform, Nordic, and Jeepform larp that can be used to encourage role-playing and immersion and enhance social realism in nursing simulation.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to discuss simulation theory, larp theory, and how researchers can blend the two to increase the perception of realism in educational simulations. I begin with a discussion of the history of simulation, specifically as it is used in nursing education. Next, I will discuss the concept of social realism and the struggle to design simulations that adequately represent the challenge of a real life situation. I then explain immersion according to Multi-Tier Game Immersion Theory, citing examples of ways to improve social realism in nursing simulation. Finally, I conclude with a discussion of strategies introduced by Aaron Vanek of Seekers Unlimited at a recent consultation at the Texas State Nursing school. Vanek suggests techniques from traditional, freeform, Nordic,¹ and Jeepform larp that can be used to encourage role-playing and immersion and enhance social realism in nursing simulation.

1. Jaakko Stenros, "What Does 'Nordic Larp' Mean?" (Keynote address, Nordic Larp Talks 2013, Oslo, Norway, April 17, 2013), <http://jaakkostenros.wordpress.com/2013/04/18/keynote-script-what-does-nordic-larp-mean/>

Background

Simulation involves re-creating situations as realistically as possible to help students practice responding to real-life situations in a safe environment.² Simulation is used for professional training in a variety of fields and frequently in healthcare education. In nursing, simulation is an attempt to reproduce as accurately as possible the essential aspects of a hospital or clinic situation so that the participants can more readily understand and manage this situation in a real-life situation.³ Simulation is theoretically grounded through the educational theories of experiential learning⁴ and situated learning.⁵ Experiential learning, developed by David A. Kolb, posits that knowledge is acquired through concrete experience (doing), reflective observation (thinking back to the experience), abstract conceptualization (forming a theory about what was observed), and active experimentation (testing the new theory). In their theory of situated learning, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger explain that learning does not occur in a vacuum; rather, it is socially co-constructed in a dynamic physical environment.

Simulation is also theoretically founded on the works of Stuart and Hubert Dreyfus, hermeneutic phenomenologists who studied skill acquisition and decision-making in military simulation.⁶ Hubert Dreyfus's student, the nurse theorist Patricia Benner, then adapted that theory to apply to skill acquisition

2. David Crookall, Rebecca Oxford, and Danny Saunders, "Towards a Reconceptualization of Simulation: From Representation to Reality," *Simulation/Games for Learning* 17, no. 4 (1987): 147; Andrew J. Bland, Annie Topping,

3. Pamela R. Jeffries, ed., *Simulation in Nursing Education: From Conceptualization to Evaluation* (New York: National League of Nursing, 2007).

4. David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984).

5. Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

6. Stuart E. Dreyfus and Hubert L. Dreyfus, *A Five Stage Model of the Mental Activities Involved in Directed Skill Acquisition* (Washington, DC: Storming Media, 1980).

and decision-making in nursing.⁷ Dreyfus and Dreyfus (and later Benner) theorized that what separates a novice from an expert is not solely theoretical knowledge gleaned from books, but also knowledge gained through experience with many similar cases.⁸

In other words, an expert nurse knows how to best care for a patient with pneumonia not only because she or he has graduated from nursing school, but also because she or he has taken care of many patients with pneumonia, knows what patient needs to expect, what signs and symptoms the patient will likely report, and what physician orders she or he can expect to receive. The expert nurse assimilates this process on an intuitive level and may not actually be able to readily explain his or her effortless process.⁹ As such, practical experience is necessary for a student to become a competent nurse.¹⁰ The realistic experiences that simulation provides help to replicate that real-life experience, augmenting and enhancing the clinical experience.

Simulation in Nursing

Nursing requires proficiency in cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains of learning.¹¹ As a service profession, nurses must be not only technically proficient, but also physically coordinated and emotionally intelligent. While the most common use of simulation in nursing is to teach psychomotor skills,¹² such as inserting a urinary catheter, nursing simulation is also used

to teach affective skills,¹³ such as comforting a grieving patient, and cognitive skills,¹⁴ such as evaluating physician's orders and determining how to respond to treat a patient's signs and symptoms. Most nursing degree programs have some degree of simulation, but the realism of the setting and equipment varies widely depending on the budget of the school and the creativity, commitment, and adaptability of the faculty.

In simulation, we use the word *fidelity* to describe degree to which a simulation can physically resemble a real-life simulation.¹⁵ In much of the literature, fidelity is defined by the sophistication and adaptability of the human patient simulator used and simulations are categorized as high-, medium-, and low-fidelity.¹⁶ A human patient simulator is a highly specialized type of mannequin that is made to look human for the purpose of healthcare simulation.¹⁷ Some examples of human patient simulators are Laerdal's medium-fidelity, low-tech mannequin Nursing Kelly and Laerdal's high-fidelity Sim Man® 3G, a wireless, high-tech robotic patient simulator that can be programmed via computer to exhibit a variety of medical conditions, carrying a price tag of around \$60,000.¹⁸

7. Patricia Benner, "Using the Dreyfus Model of Skill Acquisition to Describe and Interpret Skill Acquisition and Clinical Judgment in Nursing Practice and Education," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 24, no. 3 (2004): 188.

8. Patricia Benner, "From Novice To Expert," *American Journal of Nursing* 82, no. 3 (1982): 402.

9. Patricia Benner and Christine Tanner, "Clinical Judgment: How Expert Nurses Use Intuition," *American Journal of Nursing* 87, no. 3 (1987): 23.

10. Patricia Benner, Christine Tanner, and Catherine Chesla, *Expertise in Nursing Practice: Caring, Clinical Judgment, and Ethics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer, 2009).

11. Susan B. Bastable, *Nurse as Educator: Principles of Teaching and Learning for Nursing Practice*, 4th Ed. (Sudbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett Learning, 2013).

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13. JoAnne Gatti-Petito, *Nursing Students' Perception of Caring Before and After Simulation in Nursing Education* (PhD diss., University of Connecticut, 2010).

14. Susan Lashinger, Jennifer Medves, Cheryl Pulling, Robert McGraw, Brett Waytuck, Margaret B. Harrison, and Casey Gambeta. "Effectiveness of Simulation on Health Profession Students' Knowledge, Skills, Confidence, and Satisfaction," *International Journal of Evidence Based Practice* 6, no. 3 (2008): 278-302.

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17. Wendy M. Nehring, Wayne E. Ellis, and Felissa R. Lashley, "Human Patient Simulators in Nursing Education: An Overview," *Simulation & Gaming* 32, no. 2 (2001): 194.

18. Laerdal Medical Corporation, "Patient Simulators, Manikins, and More," last modified 2014, Laerdal: Helping Save Lives, http://www.laerdal.com/us/nav/36/Patient-Simulators-Manikins-More#Patient_Simulators.



Figure 1. Students practice physical assessment on each other in an example of a low-fidelity simulation.



Figure 2. Students practice tying sutures on a task trainer arm and leg—an example of medium-fidelity simulation.

An example of a low fidelity simulation is pictured in Figure 1, where Bachelors of Science in Nursing (BSN) students practice physical assessment on each other. There is a limit to what the student in the role of nurse can do with the student in the role of patient (e.g. the student cannot simulate illnesses or injuries) and is therefore limited in its resemblance to a real life nurse-patient interaction.

An example of medium fidelity is illustrated in Figure 2, where Masters of Science in Nursing (MSN) students practice suturing a laceration on a rubber task trainer arm. While the arm is crafted to look like a human arm, it is not attached to a human patient simulator, will not respond to or interact with the students, and is, therefore, limited in its ability to represent a patient.

An example of a high-fidelity simulation is found in Figure 3, where BSN students check vital signs (temperature, pulse, respiration, blood pressure) on a human patient simulator who breathes, coughs, moans, and is programmed with a medical condition such as pneumonia with difficulty breathing. This condition can worsen or improve in response to student nursing interventions such as giving medication or administering oxygen. Still, students sometimes question the utility of a simulation that they do not perceive as realistic.¹⁹

Nursing simulations are not solely defined by the sophistication of the equipment or the realism of the simulation lab. Nursing educators are beginning to realize what larpers have known for years: that mere physical representation of real-life situations is not enough to make the simulation feel like a real-life

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19. Kathie Lasater, "Clinical Judgment Development: Using Simulation to Create an Assessment Rubric," *Journal of Nursing Education* 46, no. 11 (2007): 496.



Figure 3. Students check pulse, blood pressure, and respiratory rate on a Sim Man in this high-fidelity simulation.

situation for students. Bland, Topping, and Tobbell²⁰ have proposed the concept of *authenticity*, e.g. how real a simulation feels. Authenticity is conceptually distinct from fidelity in that a low-fidelity simulation can be high-authenticity. For example, a simulation where a student assesses a standardized patient—an actor trained to portray a specific patient case²¹—can feel very real to the student, but require no special expensive equipment.²² An example of a standardized patient is portrayed in Figure 4. Other strategies to promote authenticity include things as simple as having students wear gloves and a mask when practicing skills in the simulation lab or as complex as designing a simulation with multiple possible outcomes.

Social Realism in Simulation

While past nursing simulation have relied on task trainers and human patient simulators, simulation designs are increasingly moving toward social realism. Examples of social realism include designing simulations to include relevant backstory such as health history, presenting difficult choices, and developing emotional intelligence such as situations in which student work out the best way to support the family members of a dying patient.²³ This increase in social realism helps students to fully involve themselves in a simulation, making a simulation lab feel like a real hospital and a human patient simulator feel like a real patient. In fact, the psychological state of immersion is essential to promoting the situated learning inherent to simulation.²⁴ In addition to increasing immersion, simulations with a heavy role-play component can help students learn to question

their biases and assumptions, work with incomplete information in complex and dynamic situations, and negotiate cultural differences while working toward a common goal.²⁵

While socially realistic simulations can have many advantages for nursing education, barriers may be encountered in the process of adoption. Students can feel self-conscious in a simulation that requires extensive role-playing. These students may have difficulty getting started when the simulation begins, and may not know what to do when they are confronted with a problem they feel incapable of solving.²⁶ Students may also feel that although the simulation is fun, it is so abstracted from actual clinical practice as to be inapplicable to real life situations.²⁷ Faculty may see the interest in socially realistic simulation as a fad that will soon go out of vogue; others may be hesitant to spend time and money on what they consider to be a political move to keep up appearances; and still more may be hesitant to change their established teaching practices.²⁸ However, authentic, immersive, and engaging simulation is possible and achievable, although it does require meticulous planning, attention to detail, well-developed roles, and clear direction.²⁹

Immersion in Simulation

One of the ways to promote social realism in simulation is through increasing immersion. J. Tuomas Harviainen's Multi-Tier Game Immersion Theory divides immersion into three categories: *reality immersion*, *character immersion*, and *narrative*

20. Andrew J. Bland, Annie Topping, and Jane Tobbell, "Time to Unravel the Conceptual Confusion of Authenticity and Fidelity and their Contribution to Learning within Simulation-based Nurse Education: A Discussion Paper," *Nurse Education Today* 34, no. 7 (2014): 1112.

21. Natalie McCabe, "The Standardized Patient," in *The Wyrld Con Companion Book 2013*, edited by Sarah Lynne Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrld Con), 39.

22. E. Adel Herge, Arlene Lorch, Tina DeAngelis, Tracey Vause-Earland, Kimberly Mollo, and Audrey Zapletal, "The Standardized Patient Encounter: A Dynamic Educational Approach to Enhance Students' Clinical Healthcare Skills," *Journal of Allied Health* 42, no. 4 (2013): 229.

23. Wendy M. Nehring, and Felissa R. Lashley, "Nursing Simulation: A Review of the Past 40 Years," *Simulation & Gaming* 40, no. 4 (2009): 528.

24. Myriel Balzer, "Immersion as a Prerequisite of the Didactical Potential of Role-Playing," *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1, no. 2 (2011): 33.

25. Carol Russell, "Games, Simulations and Role-Plays for Developing Systems Thinking," in *Simulations, Games, and Role Play in University Education*, edited by Claus Nygaard, Nigel Courtney, and Elyssebeth Leigh (Faringdon, Oxfordshire: Libri, 2013).

26. Nicola Whitton, "Game Engagement Theory and Adult Learning," *Simulation and Gaming* 42, no. 5 (2011): 596.

27. J. Tuomas Harviainen, Timo Lainema, and Eeli Saarinen, "Player-reported Impediments to Game-Based Learning," in *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global—Games in Culture and Society*, 2012.

28. Andrea Miller and Rosalind M. Bull, "Do You Want to Play? Factors Influencing Nurse Academics' Adoption of Simulation into Their Teaching Practices," *Nurse Education Today* 33, no. 3 (2013): 241.

29. Brenda Whitman and Alyssa Backes, "The Importance of Role Direction in Simulation," *Clinical Simulation in Nursing* 10, no. 6 (2014): e245.



Figure 4. Students apply EKG leads on a standardized patient for cardiac monitoring in an emergency room simulation.

*immersion.*³⁰ Reality immersion is defined as placing oneself within the mutually agreed-upon environment of a larp, accepting the established history, and anticipating the potential for non-mundane events to occur. In a simulation context, reality immersion is the students' acceptance of the setting of the simulation as reality for the purposes of the scenario. For example, when reality immersion occurs, a simulation laboratory becomes a hospital, and a Sim Man becomes Mr. Jones, a patient with pneumonia who is experiencing difficulty breathing.

Character immersion is what most role-players mean when they use the word "immersion." It is the ability to become one's character by taking on their thoughts, personality, and moral code. In a simulation context, character immersion occurs when a student channels feelings of grief, fear, and loss to portray a young woman newly diagnosed with advanced-stage cancer, responding to students portraying nurses as she feels her character would respond to real life nurses trying to care for her. She may weep, yell at the nurse, or become withdrawn and refuse to talk with the nurse.

Narrative immersion occurs when players accept the existence of narrative elements such as storyline, plot, etc. within a game, and accept them as real

30. J. Tuomas Harviainen, "The Multi-Tier Game Immersion Theory," in *As Larp Grows Up: The Lost Chapters*, edited by Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander (Copenhagen, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003), 4.

events. Simulations do not typically include narrative elements, but narrative mechanics such as fast-forwarding in time and scene changes are sometimes used to move through multiple staging areas and time periods in a simulation.

While there are no simulations that are exactly like larps, there are a few that include elements designed to enhance reality, character, and narrative immersion. In the *Hearing Voices That Are Distressing* simulation,³¹ students listen to a 1-hour audio track via MP3 player and headphones that simulates a schizophrenic voice-hearing experience. Students listen to this track while trying to solve puzzles, do reading comprehension tests, and undergo a mock psychological evaluation.³² The goal of this simulation is to help students empathize with people that hear voices, and ultimately see them as not all that different from themselves.³³

In this simulation, students are encouraged to immerse into the reality of being a person who is hearing distressing voices in their head. Character immersion could be promoted by giving students individual goals and motivations, e.g. "You were diagnosed with schizophrenia at the age of 18, but do not believe the diagnosis was accurate. Yes, you hear voices, but you believe they are angels who give you divine messages. Most of all, these voices tell you not to tell anyone about them. Your goal is to try to convince the doctors that there is nothing wrong with you." To increase reality immersion in this simulation, instead of simply using a recorded track on an MP3 player, voices could be transmitted via radio receiver to the students, and people could transmit additional voices, providing a live response to students' actions. As in the Danish larp *Delirium*, theatrical lighting, props, and non-chronological scene changes could be used to promote a sense of disorientation.³⁴

Another example of a simulation that promotes immersion is the high-fidelity Complicated Depression scenario, designed as part of a

31. Patricia Deegan, "Hearing Voices Curriculum: Complete Training and Curriculum Package," Last modified August 2014, The National Empowerment Center, <http://www.power2u.org/>

32. Karen S. Dearing and Sheryl Steadman, "Enhancing Intellectual Empathy: The Lived Experience of Voice Simulation Perspectives," *Psychiatric Care* 45, no. 2 (2009): 173.

33. Shirley A. Smoyak, "Blending Two Realities into a Unique Perspective," *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing* 34, no. 9 (1996): 39.

34. Peter Schønnemann Andreasen. "Fabricating Madness." (Presented at Nordic Larp Talks 2011, Copenhagen, Denmark), <http://nordiclarptalks.org/post/16057480638/fabricating-madness>

psychiatric nursing course.³⁵ The first part of the scenario is set in the emergency room, where students interview an elderly patient and her adult daughter. They learn that the patient has been experiencing increasing muscle spasms, insomnia, and loss of appetite. Her daughter reports the patient has become suddenly disoriented, forgetful, and may be taking both her current antidepressant and her old antidepressant. The signs and symptoms presented are clues that the patient may be experiencing serotonin syndrome: a life-threatening condition caused by taking too many antidepressants. The patient's condition worsens and she is transferred to the intensive care unit, where the physician orders a number of tests, treatments, and medications. The patient is now being played by a high-fidelity human patient simulator whose blood pressure and pulse are rising out of control as the patient's condition becomes unstable. As the nursing students rush to perform a multitude of tasks, the patient's daughter becomes upset and anxious about her mother. The students must talk to her about what they are doing to treat the patient or she will become more and more agitated, interfering with the student nurses' ability to care for the patient. Ultimately, the treatment is effective and the patient recovers both physically and mentally to the great relief of her daughter.

This multi-component simulation requires a number of skills in addition to the basic nursing tasks with which students are familiar. The addition of standardized patients facilitates reality immersion with a nearly 360° illusion, i.e. a physically realistic experience.³⁶ It should be noted, however, that the 360° illusion alone does not automatically generate character immersion.³⁷ Character immersion for those playing the patient, daughter, and nurses also can be encouraged through the use of character sheets detailing individual motivations, their opinions of the characters relevant to the scenario, and their physical and emotional states at the beginning of the scenario, e.g. exhausted, anxious, stressed,

etc. Students could be encouraged to add or change details to make the characters their own. This simulation has a definite timeline and story progression, but it could definitely be developed further by adding some time for in-character interaction between nurses before the arrival of the patient and after the patient has been stabilized.

The Texas State University School of Nursing

We are a nursing school in central Texas that admits 100 students a year into our Bachelors of Science in Nursing (BSN) program and 35 students a year into our newly created Master of Science in Nursing (MSN)/Family Nurse Practitioner (FNP) program. The Texas State University School of Nursing is a new program established in 2010 with a focus on innovative teaching through technology utilization and hands-on education. The entire second floor of our three story building is a simulation lab; rooms are designed to look like hospital rooms, clinic exam rooms, and one home care suite. First semester students practice basic skills such as giving injections, starting IVs, and listening to the heart and lungs. In the second, third, and fourth semester, students use high-fidelity human patient simulators to simulate medical conditions such as anaphylactic shock and cardiac arrest. Simulations also include role-playing to help improve communication and health history-taking in situations that range from teaching a new diabetic how to give himself insulin injections to comforting the parents of a dying child. Having successfully graduated three classes of BSN students, we are reasonably confident in our ability to educate competent nurses, although there is always room for improvement.

35. Susan Rick and Cindy Zolnierok, "Meeting the Challenge of Developing Complex Simulations in Psychiatric Nursing Education" (Paper presented at the 27th Annual Conference of the American Psychiatric Nursing Association on October 10, 2013), http://eo2.commpartners.com/users/apna_kc/downloads/2031-Rick-Color.pdf

36. Lizzie Stark, "Nordic Larp for Noobs," last modified August 8, 2012, [LeavingMundania.com](http://leavingmundania.com), <http://lizziestark.com/2012/08/08/nordic-larp-for-noobs/>

37. Johanna Koljonen, "Eyewitness to the Illusion: An Essay on the Impossibility of 360° Role-Playing," in *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp*, edited by Eleanor Saitta, Marie Holm-Andersen, and Jon Back, Copenhagen, (Denmark: Projektgruppen KP14, 2014), 90.

Simulation Challenges at the School of Nursing

Although we have a state-of-the-art simulation laboratory, the degree of social realism in our simulations is limited. Like many nursing programs, we lack funding for a standardized patient program. As a result, the roles of patient and family member are played by a student or a high-fidelity human patient simulator that can be programmed to respond through the remote-controlled use of a PDA with pre-recorded phrases such as “yes,” “no,” “I don’t understand,” or responses specific to the simulation such as, “I’m feeling very dizzy.” Sometimes the simulations go as planned—the students work hard, get into the role, and reach the desired outcome—but sometimes they do not. Either the students cannot figure out how to respond to the student playing the patient, the faculty cannot get the equipment to work properly, or the student playing the patient feels self-conscious and is unable to fully immerse him or herself into the role. Sometimes the student playing the role of the nurse and the student playing the role of the patient forget their roles and revert to their student roles. A common example is two students who approach the instructor to say, “Ok, we did what you told us to do, what we do now?”

In order to get some outside help and advice, I consulted with Aaron Vanek, Executive Director of the edu-larp non-profit organization Seekers Unlimited, for tips on improving the social realism of simulations at the nursing school. In the fall of 2013, Vanek came to the School of Nursing to observe two days of simulation for Nursing Care in Complex Health, an advanced BSN course with a heavy simulation component. In April 2014, Vanek returned to the school to present suggestions to faculty for improving role-playing in simulation, using techniques honed through experience from traditional larp, Jeepform, freeform, and Nordic larp. He asserted that using larp techniques would help increase the reliability, adaptability, flexibility, ingenuity, and creativity of simulations. Additionally, larp would help students increase their emotional intelligence, communication skills, and ability to adapt to unexpected changes in the dynamic healthcare environment.

Increasing Social Realism in Simulation

Vanek suggested techniques that, while familiar to larpers, were novel to nursing educators. For example, he explained how to create a character sheet for each role in the simulation—nurse 1, nurse 2, doctor, respiratory therapist, mother, father, sister, etc.—and not just for the patient. He asserted that creating a fictional persona allows the student

to feel free to take risky actions or even fail in the simulation, and that failure can be a powerful tool for learning (see Appendix A for an example character sheet). At the beginning of the simulation, students should be given prepared packets containing all the information, props, rules, forms, and role-playing tips they needed for the simulation. Prior to declaring the start of the simulation, it is useful to give students a moment of silence to get into character and to have a formal start point. For example, have the students walk outside the room. When they are all outside the room, tell them, “When you walk through this door into the lab, you will be in-character, and the simulation will begin.” Other examples of start cues include flicking the lights on and off, playing music, or ringing a bell. It is also important to have a clear end cue for the simulation. Bells, lights, or music can also be helpful for this, or you can structure it into the script for the standardized patient. For example, the standardized patient could say, “Thank you for all your help! I think I am ready to go home now.”

While most people who have run simulations are familiar with debriefing, pre-briefing—or as it is known in the larp community, workshopping—may be useful to help students to become comfortable in their roles.³⁸ Additionally, when students get deeply into their roles, integrating larp debriefing techniques into the traditional post-simulation debrief may help students deal with feelings that came up during the immersive simulation.³⁹ Additionally, Nordic larp techniques may be useful during the simulation, such as brake, a signal to reduce the intensity of the scene,⁴⁰ and cut, a signal to stop the scene.⁴¹ Jeepform larp⁴² techniques such as bird-in-

38. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Pre-Larp Workshop,” [NordicLarp.org](http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Pre-larp_Workshop), http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Pre-larp_Workshop; Lizzie Stark, “How to Plan a Basic Pre-Larp Workshop,” last modified November 31, 2013, [LeavingMundania.com](http://leavingmundania.com), <http://lizziestark.com/2013/11/21/plan-basic-pre-larp-workshop/>

39. Lizzie Stark, “How to Run a Post-Larp Debrief,” last modified December 1, 2013, [LeavingMundania.com](http://leavingmundania.com), <http://lizziestark.com/2013/12/01/run-post-larp-debrief/>; Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Returning to the Real World: Debriefing After Role-playing Games,” [Nordiclarp.org](http://nordiclarp.org), last modified December 8, 2014, <http://nordiclarp.org/2014/12/08/debrief-returning-to-the-real-world/>

40. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Kutt,” [NordicLarp.org](http://nordiclarp.org), <http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Cut>

41. Nordic Larp Wiki, “Brems,” [NordicLarp.org](http://nordiclarp.org), <http://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Brake>

42. Tobias Wrigstad, “The Nuts and Bolts of Jeepform,” *The Foundation Stone of Nordic Larp*, edited by Eleanor Saitta, Marie Holm-Andersen, and Jon Back, (Copenhagen, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP14, 2014), 139.

ear (an “invisible” person whispers in the player’s ear; those whispers come to represent character thoughts);⁴³ monologue (the scene pauses and the facilitator chooses a character to speak about their thoughts and feelings at the moment),⁴⁴ and repetition (discussing the scene at the end, then replaying it differently).⁴⁵

Aaron Vanek also highly recommended using standardized patients, explaining that they can greatly enhance the social realism of a simulation. However, standardized patients and the staff needed to train and coordinate them can go beyond the budget of most schools. In lieu of standardized patients, students and faculty members can use character sheets and costuming, such as wearing street clothes or hospital gowns instead of scrubs, to look the part of patients or family members. For maximum realism, simulations should combine both human patient simulators and actual humans portraying patients.⁴⁶ Finally, simulations, especially those designed for more advanced students, should contain complications that are typical of the clinical environment so that students can learn to function in the midst of setbacks: understaffing, new policy changes, construction within the facility, lack of adequate supplies/medication, broken computers, broken copy/fax machines, etc.

Conclusion

Nursing education must continue to evolve to meet the increasing demands of the profession or risk graduating students who are unprepared for practice. Nurses must be competent in all domains of learning—cognitive, affective and psychomotor—in order to provide safe, effective, and compassionate patient care. In order to promote retention of material covered, simulations should be coordinated to occur concurrently with the didactic curriculum, so that material learned in the simulation is reinforced by material learned in class, and vice versa.⁴⁷

In nursing, clinical knowledge is acquired through a cycle of reading about a topic, discussing how to apply this knowledge, applying it in a hands-on scenario, reflecting upon how one’s actions influenced the outcome, and pondering how to improve in similar situations in the future.⁴⁸ This cycle of theory-application-theory facilitates the higher-level knowledge and decision-making skills that are required of professional nurses, enabling students to transition smoothly into practice. While this article has focused specifically on nursing simulation, larp techniques are widely applicable to many professional fields.⁴⁹ Larp techniques can facilitate social realism in simulation, regardless of the technology level of the equipment available in the simulation laboratory. Socially realistic, immersive simulations will provide meaningful learning experiences, facilitating the development of professional identity, critical thinking, decision-making skills, and emotional intelligence.

43. Vi åker Jeep/We go by Jeep, “Bird-In-Ear,” *Jeepform Dictionary*, <http://jeepen.org/dict/#bird-in-ear>

44. Vi åker Jeep/We go by Jeep, “Monologue,” *Jeepform Dictionary*, <http://jeepen.org/dict/#monologue>

45. Vi åker Jeep/We go by Jeep, “Repetition,” *Jeepform Dictionary*, <http://jeepen.org/dict/#repetition>

46. Susan Rick, “Developing Complex Simulations in Psychiatric Education,” Paper presented the 27th Annual American Psychiatric Nurses Association Conference, San Antonio, TX, 2013.

47. Michał Mochoki, “Less Larp in Edu-Larp Design,” in *Crossing Habitual Borders*, edited by Karete J. Meland and Katrine Ø. Sveta (Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2013), 101.

48. Christine A. Tanner, “Thinking Like a Nurse: A Research-Based Model of Clinical Judgment in Nursing,” *Journal of Nursing Education* 45, no. 6, (2006), 208.

49. Jana Pouchla, “Business Larp,” *Crossing Habitual Borders*, edited by Karete J. Meland and Katrine Ø. Sveta (Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2013), 27.

Appendix A

Sample Standardized Character Sheet

Whatever the final format of this sheet, it should remain the same across all classes.

Name: (either allow role-player to name, or provide first initial and last name, which also can make the character gender neutral for non-gender-based conditions)

Nickname (if any):

Age:

Gender identification:

Race/ethnicity:

Education level:

Insurance:

Residence:

Medication(s):

Then, in detail:

Reason for visit: (medical condition) in clinical terminology

Bio as third person: (including medical history)

All of the above answers should be considered true to the character, whether they know it or not.

Questions for you, the role-player, to answer (these answers may conflict with the above):

Does this person know their medical history?

Does this person know they have the medical condition (disease, illness, etc.)?

Do they understand it?

Is the person afraid?

Are they in pain?

Do they have a support network?

Who wants to visit them?

Married, children, grandchildren?

Is this patient friendly?

Is this patient religious? If so, what faith?

Does this patient have reason not to trust the RN based on age, race, ethnicity, gender, auditory challenges, past experiences with other nurses?

Is the patient a native English speaker?

If possible have the standardized patient fill out a medical history form before the simulation as if they were a patient and give that to the RN.

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