



WYRD CON 2013

COMPANION BOOK

**Edited by**  
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# The Wyrd Con Companion Book

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Wyrd Con is an Interactive Storytelling Convention located in the United States. Interactive Storytelling is the concept where the audience and actors are both part of the performance. Participatory events are run throughout the conference to encourage both exploration and immersive play, including but not limited to Live Action Role Playing (larp), Alternate Reality Games (ARG), Live Simulations and other innovative Transmedia experiences. The conference provides a fun opportunity to engage in all aspects of the cross-platform storytelling within and beyond the live role-playing realm.

Wyrd Con strives to not only entertain, but also educate others in Interactive Storytelling. This knowledge can be applied to both professional development and daily life in a variety of ways; through socially immersive gaming, we can evolve our understanding of different social roles and entertain ourselves while gaining confidence to grow as a leader. We learn much from participation and the observation of immersive play that enhances the development of our own interactive story worlds.

Much of our panel and educational programming provides presentations and discussions on how different social scenarios and storytelling environments have multiple psychological effects on the participants, giving insight on how to expand a storyline to other media and market these concepts to generate new opportunities. Education is central to us and allows attendees the ability to better understand, build, and convey their story in the most interactive way possible.

If you have ever had a desire to build a complex story worlds that involve extensions into live participatory gaming environments, solve a mystery, fight the enemy, or experience an event that mixes theater, costuming, and dialogue about the changing face of the entertainment industry, Wyrd Con is the place to be. Fans and producers of Anime, History, Science Fiction, Fantasy, and other genres are all a part of the Wyrd Con experience.

All are welcome to attend.

## Our Mission

At Wyrd Con our mission is two fold:

- 1) To increase exposure to multiple forms of Live Interactive Storytelling by providing entertaining and immersive events.
- 2) To create an educational experience that fosters dialogue between Live Interactive Storytelling and other forms of media entertainment, providing an opportunity for participants and creative producers of live games and cross-media properties to learn from one another.

This two-fold objective of providing entertainment and education ensures that we focus on a variety of experiences that vary from year to year, as well as ensures an unbiased perspective on the evolving forms of live interactive theater and transmedia entertainment that exist our world.

As such, we become talent coordinators and agents, growing the game players into designers, and the designers into creative content producers.

We are invested in the success of every attendee – the players, the designers and those in the entertainment industry, providing them a playspace and a cutting edge learning experience.

# Introduction

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This Wyrd Con Companion Book is late. In the other room, Kirsten is un-silently cursing me for trying to make the cover text look like Danny’s lipstick Redrum from *The Shining*. We swear, we sigh, we argue, we give up slivers of our aesthetic desires to ensure the work is complete. When we share our ideas, we must re-shelve parts of ourselves to the mind’s back pantry. When collaborating, there’s rarely enough room for all of us.

Like Interactive Storytelling.

With participatory mediums like larps and trans-media, sharing is critical. And that means that what you really want to do might not be what anyone else wants to do.

Does that frustrate you or inspire you?

Your answer to that question could indicate your feelings toward the rest of this book. For the *2013 WyrdCon Companion Book* is about sharing—sharing concepts, perspectives, research, theories, and more. Which means you might have to alter your own thoughts and notions based on what you read here just as much as the authors will have to meet criticism on consciousness’s front stoop as well. Either way, this year’s collection of articles and essays from around the world should, hopefully, provoke discussion and more sharing, ideally in a professional, constructive fashion.

The first section, edited by me, has been gathered into the following categories: advice for larp design; perspectives on ARGs, transmedia, and larp; how our physical form factors into our participatory experience; larps and education; and four recollections about specific larps or larp groups.

Each author has shared some of his or her time and effort with us. Let’s enjoy the fruits of their labors, and allow their writings to stake ground in our own mental real estate. Left there long enough, their ideas become our ideas. At least until they’re evicted by the next, newer conception.

Aaron Vanek  
December 2013



# Challenging Sacred Cows: Level Gaps, Permanent Character Death, and Linear Plot

By David B. Williams

“**Sacred Cow.** *Noun.* An individual, organization, institution, etc., considered to be exempt from criticism or questioning.”  
-Dictionary.com

First, a disclaimer: there is no one true way to larp. Many different groups and organizations exist, with different sets of assumptions and expectations shaping each of them. Some larpers want a game, some a want a story, and so on. However, the vast majority of larp groups share similarities from which we can draw a core set of ideals and values.

The majority of larps are hobby organizations based around having fun, which draw on volunteers in order to fill roles and get things done. In such groups there is limited manpower, time, and effort. Larps also typically have a very low or negative profit margin, which means that they rely on the good will and continued investment of their staff and players. Things that damage good will, prevent volunteers from returning, or draw disproportionately on a larp’s resources are therefore negative.

Running or playing in a larp is different from running or playing in a tabletop role-playing game. Instead of three to seven players, larps tend to have from twenty to three-hundred. Instead of sitting around a table, people are often scattered across the event site. Instead of being purely imaginary, larp has a kernel of visual and physical representation. You aren’t observing figurines on a hex grid. You yourself are there as a first person observer.

This holds true for other types of media as well. Larp is not a video game, novel, or stage production. The trouble is that most fantasy larps seek to emulate worlds that we’ve explored primarily through these media. It follows that many game mechanics and narrative tropes which fit better in those forms of media are imported into the larp experience. This begs the question of whether or not some of our traditions are fit for use in a larp. If they aren’t fit, are they needless baggage or are they even active detractors from larp as a whole?

Over the last summer I asked 33 staff members from larps across the world about three of the biggest recurring issues that fantasy larps face. On trial were the gap in power between new players and more experienced ones, permanent character death, and the “single linear plot” type of event throwing. Below I present cases for and against each of these three sacred cows.

## The Level Gap

In the fantasy genre it is common for characters to face more difficult challenges as time goes on, discover new tactics or secrets, and gain in power over time. Most role-playing games have leveling up happen in return for participation, and the power curve is strictly upwards. In books and movies this is usually linked directly to encountering new problems, and it is entirely possible for people to gain and lose power over time. This fluctuating power curve creates more drama, more risk, and enables more plots than strictly linear progression. The noble who has lost everything, or the priest in a crisis of faith are strong examples of plots which involve loss of power. In a larp, we often draw more on role-playing games than their source material. One of the downsides to this is level gap.

The disparity of power between newer players and more experienced ones is what I’ll be referring to as level gap. This includes not only gaining points to put towards your character through attendance, but anything that provides a character with more power. These can take forms such as fixed class levels, gaining points to purchase skills, earning additional items over the course of a larp, crafting systems for better equipment, and many others. The question of how power is earned is irrelevant to the impact of that power on player equality.

From a game design prospective, leveling up helps players learn the game mechanics in manageable chunks rather than all at once. It is a balancer against real world skill or limitations and allows someone to do the impossible or the improbable. Having a level gap allows long-term players more power and subsequently protects their interests. After all, it’s much more difficult for some new player to come out of nowhere and trump the master swordsman if the master swordsman has six times the hit points and striking power of the new player.

The argument for level gap is grounded in teaching the new players over time, but it doesn’t take into account the fact that many abilities require both the user and the recipient to know what the ability does. Video games handle this automatically, but larp requires clear communication and understanding in order to run without frequent pauses to understand the new ability.

Leveling often creates a blind spot where only the game mechanics are looked at. This leaves player skill and practical experience as unconsidered variables.

Things like having more social ties, being better at combat, knowing the location, knowing the weaknesses of common monsters, and having a better idea of what’s going on are tangible advantages. This natural gap in player strength is only exacerbated by adding more power to the older player.

If a new player is able to contribute from the beginning, they are more likely to come back to your game a second time. Having challenges they have no feasible means of dealing with creates apathy and a defeatist attitude, which can in some cases lead to alienation.

From a prospective grounded in engagement, the more abilities you have the more likely you are to be able to participate in any given challenge. This means that you’re less likely to be left without something fun to do.

The engagement argument has trouble because having a wide breadth of skills leads to hogging the spotlight and invalidating the contributions of other players. A game with strongly defined roles can mitigate this somewhat by providing all players with activities to do and preventing anyone from being able to do everything. The end result is a game that favors group participation rather than a game that can be beaten by one individual.

From a narrative prospective it is easy to equate leveling up over time with character development. This means that you can experience a growth of capability and competence as your character becomes stronger with time. With greater abilities often comes a better share of loot, a stronger social position, and people who seek you out for help.

The problem with the leveling equals character development argument is that it only models one kind of story. All characters gain in aptitude and inevitably become better than they were before. This leaves out character development which isn’t tied to stats or new abilities, and it also leaves out character development in a downward direction. Part of what makes a protagonist interesting is struggle, and sometimes loss. Stories about decline or failure can also be worth observing and rewarding to play out.

From a social prospective leveling creates a hierarchy of power where new players can be educated and older players can protect & guide them. This gives newer players a chance to pay their dues and gain status before setting out to leave their mark. This hierarchy can create cliques which benefit the larp community as a whole.

With a low gap comes more threat or risk in any given encounter which prevents the game from growing boring. The smaller things matter more, such as weaponry, tactics, and technique which are all things a player can improve over time. This helps to conquer the stagnation caused by players needing to bring the same character to every event in order to level up quickly. Cliques that develop between near equals

tend to be more receptive to the needs of each member.

When talking about a social prospective it is also worth considering the circumstances of casual players and new players. Not everyone has the resources to go to every larp event, or the ability to set their life aside for a weekend each month. Rewarding attendance too highly incentivizes people against taking breaks or prioritizing the real world. This attitude is unhealthy and it is a tragedy when larp is harmful for people over the long term.

In order to have a level gap you’re required to have a level system. Rewarding progress is well and good, but it is incredibly difficult to write a game which is balanced at all levels of play. Are all the level 5’s balanced? Does everyone have 80 build to spend? If you only have to write a strong game at level 1, you don’t need the additional time, research, testing, and writing to make levels 2 through 50. Because of this added complication it is common for larps which include a level system to be more open to abuse by power gamers than those without.

Despite my points against leveling up as a whole, one should keep in mind that it is entirely possible to have leveling up without having a level gap. **Amtgard** has people level up at their regular park days, but for bigger events everyone is max level. The **International Fantasy Gaming Society** manages the level gap by announcing which levels of character are allowed to attend a given event. Some **Living Adventures** games have done leveling by how far along the current campaign is: early on, everyone is weak. Later on, everyone is strong. **NERO** and many like it maintain a level gap, but allow people to purchase character advancement in order to off-set inequality. **C.A.S.T.L.E.** combats the level gap by giving players skills which are useful at all levels, so even a new player can contribute a bit to a high level party. **Shades of Venaya** focuses on letting new characters contribute to one aspect of the game from the beginning, and with their wide variety of lore documents it’s possible for new players to have abilities which older players have never encountered before. **Legacy of Caern DuShael** combated the gap by making it incredibly difficult to reach high levels: someone could theoretically have done everything they could to gain experience for 15 to 20 years before hitting max level, and even then the gap in character strength was relatively low.

Probably the strongest argument for low gap is increased engagement and risk. Players get more out of a situation if it is challenging and if more is on the line. Skirting disaster feels amazing. With a low gap, even ten or twenty year characters can be threatened by a pile of goblins or a newbie. This lends credence to threats, gives players incentive to work together and bargain with one another, prevents some measure of hogging the spotlight, and saves on event thrower strain. Why



bother preparing shallow content for multiple tiers of players when you can prepare one batch of deeper content that engages everyone?

### Permanent Character Death

One character permanently removing another character from the storyline is relatively common across several different types of media. Where permanent death is most commonly found is in non-interactive media such as novels and movies. When a book or movie is plundered for plot lines and event ideas, it often makes sense to use this trope as a way to raise the stakes.

It bears mentioning that the media which handle permanent character death best are the ones with the greatest amount of director control over the situation. There's no question of the characters in a book or the actors on a show behaving in an unscripted manner. It isn't as common in media where the audience can participate in the story, such as in video games or tabletop.

Any event thrower or larp GM can tell you that it is notoriously difficult to make anything happen as planned at a larp. Because of this lack of control permanent deaths tend to happen under disappointing circumstances. Being killed by a malicious player or being killed during a random encounter doesn't have the meaning of a heroic sacrifice an individual has spent days working up to. It doesn't matter whether you were killed by a player character, a non-player character, or a GM's inventive trap. What matters is that the death has little to no meaning, and will likely have a negative impact on the community experience.

Plainly put, people don't like to lose. Being dead forever without accomplishing something is a fairly direct form of losing. This can lead in turn to win-at-all-costs tactics which value self-preservation over fun, sportsmanship, and the community. Forms of loss which aren't as all-encompassing don't promote this negative attitude to the same degree. At the other end of the continuum are less dramatic forms of loss such as temporary setbacks, loss of progress, and loss of gear which are all viable alternatives to losing out on everything you've put into a character.

The common counter-argument to lowering the stakes is that "the thrill of victory is so much sweeter when you risk dying." The two things that this risk brings are emotional content and added meaning in any given encounter. Frankly, there are ways to play with emotional content that don't risk losing players. All of them begin with consent, which is one thing many types of permanent death don't account for. As for meaning: if your players complain that your game will be boring without permanent death then that indicates that you are using it as a crutch. People aren't fearing the encounter, the monsters, or your scenario. Their energy will be spent worrying more

about losing progress than participating, role-playing, and collaborative storytelling. You'll create a stronger experience if your players are reacting to the world around them, rather than fearing personal loss at every turn.

On the subject of loss, people are hesitant to invest in risky ventures. If people know that their character may not last for very long, they are prone to invest less time and effort into their character. This means that the threat of permanent character death decreases the quality of costume, the depth of role-play, and the level of investment people are willing to commit to. This limited commitment is one reason why American games lag behind games in other countries from a quality and presentation point of view.

From an organizational standpoint it can generate profit if players are allowed to buy their character's life back with money, volunteer hours, or by throwing an event. This also can help prevent the rage quitting that permanent character death often causes in long term players. This can enrich the game to an extent, but it may be derided as unfairly influencing the game. In any case there will still be players who don't opt to or can't afford to buy back in and losing them will likely cost more than you'd stand to gain.

Many games which pair leveling up and permanent death find their players leaving once their primary character is slain. This is because most or all of a player's investment in the game was tied to one character. Making a wide variety of shallow investments is more likely to keep someone around than one massive investment. It eventually comes down to respect a player's investment or they will likely go away.

Too high of a turnover rate can harm episodic games and prevent long term plots from coming to resolution. Handling the process of permanently killing a character can be delicate and require time, tact, and compassion that some GMs wouldn't want to commit. Temporary death reduces the amount of bending or breaking rules to protect investment and the inevitable emotional fallout when investment is lost.

From a narrative standpoint permanent death gives the other players a strong experience to play off of or react to. It is also a way to change up the cast of characters to prevent stagnation. If nobody dies the extra peril and paranoia it creates will still add conflict and encourage creative problem solving.

The trouble with this narrative argument is that it exalts a minor gain for the group over a catastrophic loss for the individual. It does not take into account that the long term contribution from that character could easily outweigh the moment of their demise. The death of a character comes with the loss of whatever personal plots and intrigues they were involved in, and these also have value.

From an event thrower's perspective it provides

a powerful consequence that you can use to control a player's actions. Be it keeping the plot on track, preventing players from doing things the organizer deems counter-productive, or managing conflict between players. When looked at with the other costs of permanent death (loss of time, plot, fun, and investment) it becomes a strong tool to force your will on someone. This touches on railroading, an activity discussed more in the next section.

A common argument is that permanent character death is the only real means to deal with homicidal maniac characters or unrepentant thieves. The argument falls apart because one assumes that the maniacs aren't using permanent death to wreck havoc in the first place, and that getting killed off will stop the player from further malicious behavior. Precisely where to draw the line on this kind of thing varies from group to group, and maintaining a healthy stance on player-vs-player conflict is difficult. That said, conflict among would-be adventurers is a common trope in the fantasy genre.

Another strong component of the fantasy genre is making a stand or pulling through despite a disadvantage. Permanent death discourages people from doing this. It encourages them to stack the odds in their favor each time rather than fight against long odds. It creates a situation where players aren't willing to risk themselves in attempting epic stunts or making a stand for their beliefs. This leads to a mundane experience.

When taken as a whole the problems with permanent character death are a lack of consent, a loss of investment, and a tendency to create emotional fallout. **Emerald Empire** and **Swordcraft** removed permanent death, but retained the ability to attack other players. Though death may be cheap, it can no longer be used to settle out-of-character grudges. **Dying Kingdoms** and several others have policies in place that prevent Player versus Player conflict from happening. In this way, the risk is preserved but players aren't able to act on out-of-character grudges so easily. **Chronicles of Demgard** and some S.T.A.L.K.E.R. larps<sup>1</sup> encourage bringing back-up characters and let people know from the beginning that permanent death is quite easy. This takes the sting of dying out because it is a common part of the experience and can be planned for. **Terra Nova** starts all characters on relatively equal footing so there is little to lose, and there is the option to play a dead character as an undead antagonist. This limits what people lose, lets people resolve lose ends, and potentially gives them a chance to hunt their killers. **Avegost** makes permanent death easy to perform mechanically, but heaps loads and loads of social consequences against it. In this way, they maintain the realism of how easy it is to kill someone, but they make killing of players less likely.

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1 Credited to Bogdan Landjev.



Seven death traps, not including the tray.

### The Single Linear Narrative

Plots which have a single string of actions, which must be completed in a certain order, are common to the fantasy genre and can be a comforting touchstone for some people. These linear plots are easy to understand and can have a strong sense of continuity. If the player can anticipate what they should do next little time is wasted in figuring it out. They're also easier for an organizer to plan over the long term, or to tie in with a large meta plot.

Many forms of media tell a single story and have a set progression. Common examples of this include the vast majority of books, films, and non-sandbox video games. The audience is experiencing the same material in roughly the same way from a limited perspective.

A problem with linear plot is that it doesn't fit the circumstances of a larp very well. Each individual experiences a larp differently than every other individual. Every role at an event is played by a real person, rather than a block of code, and so even scripted NPCs cannot be counted on to behave as expected. Larp is experienced in real time, and as time goes on resemblance to the original plan is often decreased. Structured storytelling techniques tend to fall apart unless there is a serious workshop for plot that all the players are privy to or frequent breaks are taken to plan the next chunk of plot. People are different from one another and this affects the way any given role is played.

Plurality of experience<sup>2</sup>, in particular, deserves discussion. People feel different things, people observe different parts of an event, and players often bring or develop a wide variety of motives or wants at an event. This leads to an experience that is much larger than a single person's perspective. Attending a larp is like being a blind man investigating an elephant: a leg may seem like a tree, a tail may seem like a rope, a trunk like a snake, etc. If you ask one player about what happened it will yield a different story than asking another person. Any given event isn't just the tale of the location or of the villain; the tales of each and every character are also present. I believe that this ability to be many

.....  
2 A concept brought to my attention by Ivan Zalac on Google+'s Larp community.



different things to many different people is one of the main strengths of larp as a form of media.

Planning only for the single narrative does not take plurality of experience into account. It will fail to meet everyone's wants or needs and will often have long stretches where only a few characters really get to shine. People come to a larp to socialize, to fight, to role-play, and for many other reasons. It's naive to assume that you can engage everyone with only one thing happening at a time.

Even in situations that are intended to be linear it is common for multiple things to be happening at once. While the main party may be beating an evil necromancer, others may be attending side plots, taking some downtime, socializing with other cliques, and so on. As such, it's best to focus on making as many of the individual player experiences as enjoyable as possible rather than focusing heavily on one particular thread. With this in mind, larp-as-a-story soon becomes larp-as-a-scenario. If mapped out, the diagram goes from a single line of rising action and climax to an interconnected web of interests. This begs the question: why are linear plots used?

The first reason is logistics. The effort it takes to build and acquire props is significant, and the props that are at hand determine what is going to happen to an extent. If logistics spends two weeks making dragon costumes, there will be dragons regardless of what the players do. Given that staff members are a valuable resource it can be a strain to make multiple things happen at the same time in different places. The larger the plot, the more resources, staff, and time it will take to run it.

Logistics concerns can be mitigated to a degree through preparation and through co-opting the players into helping you. Assigning extra motivations or optional goals to people can encourage them to act out your designs. There are also some sub-plots that don't require people to run them, such as treasure hunts or job boards that anyone can post on.

The second main reason for using a linear plot is that it allows a GM or event thrower to have more control over the storyline. In situations where there's only one group of players to manage at a time, or where the NPCs are all within reach it becomes much easier to coach them. If you can be on-hand you can control the flow of any given scene much more easily.

On the flip side, plot almost never survives the first encounter with the players. Things change, unexpected results happen, and the players are mightily inventive. In games where A has to happen, and then B, and then C it becomes a problem when the players skip a step or fail at a given task. Open ended or non-linear plots don't suffer this problem. A linear plot in which failure is an option also avoids this problem by charting an alternate route.

The third is scripting, or ease of writing an event document. It is much more intuitive to think "the players will do A, then B, then C" rather than "the players will start at A, B, or C, and then progress towards either D, E, or F, culminating in a showdown at Y, Q, or Z based on their actions." This lets you put your prep time into other, more tangible things.

The problem with skimping on scripting is that you'll often fail to properly communicate your intentions to your staff or properly prepare the logistics you need. A strong event document makes planning and organizing things much easier, and it can also help you prepare contingencies in case things go wrong. That said, beware writing scripts that are too long or complicated.

Many of the reasons people go to a larp are to tell their own story, to play a specific role, or to accomplish something to their liking. The underlying thread that is needed to make those things happen is player choice. Being robbed of choice turns a game into a solvable and easily understandable problem, instead of a complex situation that is interesting to play out. This is part of the reason why railroading, or forcing plot on people, is utterly despised among role-playing communities.

To combat railroading **Gisido** sends the players in a general direction and spends a massive amount of effort writing out each individual twist of the plot. In this way they have a plan for the player reactions and can respond appropriately. Lostcoast Larp had marshals following each group of players and tweaking plot on the fly. This provided them with a means to supplement scripted material. **Ring Game** sets up a complex situation with tokens, citadels, and factions wholly controlled by the players. The situation and mechanics they wrote give the players support and context to play out their conflicts in. **Underworld** views railroading as a threat to immersion and defends a player's freedom to act however they wish. **Stargate** has a general direction they want the plot to move in, but avoids writing absolutes and instead focuses on reacting to the players. **Starship Valkyrie** sets up a scenario with certain things going on and lets the players react as they deem appropriate. **Empty Thrones** gives the players direction when they are lost while trying to give the players enough freedom to spread their wings and fly in exactly the opposite direction if they want to.

This isn't to say that larps should not have a beginning, middle, and end or to argue that larp planning should be done without structure. In fact, it's impossible to write a strong planning document without taking time into account. I ask that storytellers provide options, split-offs, and take their audience's wants to heart. It doesn't matter if you've written the best sword and sorcery tale of this generation—players do not want to wait patiently off screen until they are needed. They want to be active and engaged on their terms.

## Summary

In a fundamental sense, larp is its own form of media with its own strengths and weaknesses. For it to be viable it needs an honest assessment and the will to make changes for the best. If larp is to grow as an art form and gain greater acceptance we need to question long held beliefs, invent and utilize tropes & mechanics which play to our strengths, and appeal to a broader audience.

Large factions of our potential audience have different beliefs. Some want larp to be a game. Some want it to be a story. Others are looking for realism or strong representation. Each school of thought has strong appeals, dedicated adherents, and ideas worth borrowing. The fairness and goals of a game. The power and emotional magnitude of a narrative. The amazing presentation and unified reality of a reenactment or simulation. Take the best material available, but do so with a mind to your audience and with attention to responsible practices.

A responsible larp is one that is ethical and aware. No community can survive unless it accommodates the basic wants and needs of its members. It must prioritize creating and preserving social contract, teaching new members to take part & contribute, and setting reliable & realistic expectations. In order to thrive and exceed the bounds of its current niche larp needs to realize that it is in a constant struggle for the interest and investment of its players.

Policies that violate a person's investment in a larp threaten that larp's continued well-being. Things that prevent new players from attending, or that create a boring experience are to be avoided. Things that waste the limited resources of staff, time, and money are harmful. At the end of the day it is my belief that level gaps, permanent character death, and linear plots violate these precepts and are detrimental to larp as a whole.

Why should we accept being a patchwork of disparate tropes? Why not fill as many niches as possible and help larp grow into something better? Question the basic assumptions. It's time to put our sacred cows out to pasture.

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 Darian Velasquez. California. Emerald Empire LARP.  
 David Wood. Texas. **Dallas Chapter IFGS**.  
 Edward Watt. **Underworld LARP**.  
 Eric Bauer. C.A.S.T.L.E. Inc.  
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 Marshall Strong. Georgia. Avegost.  
 Olan Knight. IFGS.  
 Phill Krins. Australia. **Swordcraft**.  
 Rachel Judd. Dying Kingdoms.  
 Rachel Williams. California. Affable Wordsmith.  
 Rebecca Sterling. California. **Empty Thrones**.  
 Rob DeHoff. Kentucky. NERO (retired).  
 Sakura Santos. Ohio. **Gisido**.  
 Sándor Mesterházi. Hungary. Chronicles of Demgard (Demgardi Krónikák).  
 Sarah Miller. Oregon. Lost Coast Larp.  
 Selina Harvey. Massachusetts. NERO Hartford.  
 Silvio Maier. Germany. Several groups.  
 Tim Wilson. Australia. Stargate, Lasertag LARP, NewYorkshire Festival LARP.  
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**David Williams** brings with him a practical background in community service, period reenactment, cultural resource management, acting, stage production, and non-profit leadership. He has been a larper for fourteen years, and an event coordinator for nine of those years. The last two years have been spent in an effort to train up a new generation of young leaders to take over. He hopes that this paper will provide some insight, promote larp as a whole, and contribute to raising larp standards in America. People should check out the Larp Haven group on Facebook. It's awesome.





# Transparency and Safety in Role-Playing Games

By Evan Torner

We'd all love a little more transparency in our lives, because transparency means *control*. We demand transparency in our democracy, so that we might respond to the laws that govern us. We demand transparency in our relationships, so that everyone's motivations are clear and we can react accordingly in a crisis situation. We demand transparency of our food labeling, so that we might be well informed about what we are putting into our bodies. Is it too much to ask that there be transparency in our role-playing games as well? That is, that the players know what they're getting themselves into, and the game organizer or designer does not have some hidden information about the scenario that will be revealed to the players later. After all, the medium is built on communication and group cohesion based on accurate assessments of your fellow players' motivations and information, right?

Well, not quite. Opacity and secrecy still drive much of contemporary tabletop and live-action role-playing, and even constitute vital game elements for some players. Gamemasters *hide behind their screens*. Designers embed plot twists into their scenarios; the "fun" is ruined if the players know about it in advance. Virtually every larp designed today equips characters with secret backstories that are only revealed after the game is over; Tobias Wrigstad, one of the founders of *jeepform*, has polemically called the after-session debrief "the Lie." He elaborates:

Transparency denotes the absence of secrets. The jeep believes that secrets are bad for most role-playing games, including but not limited to jeepform ones. Since jeepform players are collaborating to create the best possible story, they should be equipped accordingly. This means that secrets between characters should not be secrets between players.<sup>1</sup>

In jeepform, clear player-to-player communication of in-game information is seen as an asset. The debriefing at the end constitutes the processing of play, rather than a chance to share their backstories. In most larps, by contrast, players share all the information unevenly disseminated over the course of the larp, while the GMs

rub their hands with glee at their ostensible manipulation of other human beings. What I argue here in these few paragraphs is that transparency and secrecy have no "natural" state in RPGs, but are active design elements that must be deployed with care. The concealment of information or motivations for the sake of suspense or shock value weakens the medium's potential to empower our players to perform better.

Let's start with an obvious example of a transparency deficit that breaks the social contract. There is a genre of serious game that Epidiah Ravachol (author of *Dread*) likes to call "Surprise—you're Hitler!" Perhaps it's less a genre than a game's disposition toward its players. It works like this: players learn what they think are the "rules" to a given game and begin to play. Yet the game organizer or the game itself has concealed a secret from the players: the players' very act of playing the game has made them morally culpable for some sort of pervasive, unspeakable crime. When the time is right, gameplay reveals the secret. All of a sudden the players are intended to feel horrible about their participation in the collective crime. He/she was actually being an evil person for playing this game at all ... Surprise—you're Hitler! This form of moral ambush can be found in plenty of games, from Brenda Romero's 2009 board game *Train*—where players find themselves loading trains literally headed to Auschwitz—to the 2012 video game *Spec Ops: The Line*—where the protagonist begins to react to the morally repugnant war against terrorist forces in Dubai. These games obviously mean well, and are seen as "artistic" in the public eye. The games have been made in the shadow of scholarship such as the *Stanford Prison Experiment* or Christopher Browning's book *Ordinary Men*, which shows that any human caught up in certain social structures may be pressured to commit great atrocities. They show how the kind of instrumental, abstract thinking encouraged by many simulation environments or games actually contributes to a kind of moral callousness similar to that which created societal horrors such as the Holocaust. Manipulating figures or shooting mobs that don't exist can be easily and cheaply transformed into an immoral act, for which the player's only redemption is to walk away from the game. The "Surprise—you're Hitler!" genre inserts *negative emotion* precisely at the moment when a player would otherwise feel *fiero*, or that special feeling of triumph over adversity that many games promise. Such games are leveled at an already-corrupted culture of metrics management (i.e.,

optimizing stats for future character advantage) and "winning." But what on earth do we do with this genre when (as in many role-playing games nowadays) the metrics are less important than the fictional propositions made, or when winning isn't really the objective? What if we were to take Mo, author of Gaming as Women's recent "*Gender and Game Mechanics*" series, seriously when she writes of the split between care-oriented mediation and justice-oriented mediation in role-playing games? Gamers playing care-oriented (i.e., community-centric) game systems rely on trust in one's fellow players, rather than trust being placed in an all-powerful referee or rules set. The moral ambush articulated above needlessly punishes the group that decided to play the game in the first place, and may destroy intra-group trust.

Though they blur all the time, there are two primary types of transparency in RPGs: transparency of expectation and transparency of information. Transparency of expectation would be the clear framing of what can and cannot be introduced into a role-playing session. We often operate under a myth that "anything is possible" in a tabletop RPG, which is not at all true. Games are naught but systems for incentivizing human behavior. Not only are there some undesirable human behaviors in RPG play, but there is also some content that just won't "fit" into a given group's *horizon of expectation* for play. When I pitch a session of the dating RPG *Breaking the Ice*, for example, players can be reasonably certain that if they were to play this game, baby cannibalism will not come up as an immediate theme. When someone runs a session of *Call of Cthulhu* for me, I have enough genre

cues at my disposal to know that my player-character is very likely to die. By playing *The Quiet Year*, I have tacitly agreed that most of the major plot events will happen somewhere on the map and not, say, in Las Vegas 50 years ago. Transparency of expectation lets players make informed decisions about what play *might* look like. Transparency of information, on the other hand, means that there are minimal plot or game elements unknown to the players and GM alike. No player, GM or designer plans are made deliberately secret as part of the game. Jeepform scenarios such as *Doubt*—which lays out all the character sheets, the narrative arc and the rules for all to see—and open-form tabletop games like *Fiasco* or *Vast & Starlit*—which have no GM and publicly introduce all plot elements and rules components as they come—are easily categorized as transparent in this fashion: WYSIWYG. But more conventional RPGs can also deploy transparency of information. When I ran *Unknown Armies* at Grinnell College, one of my players said during character creation: "I'm going to eventually betray the whole party." We established this fact as a known quantity, and structured the entire campaign around it. Another example would be running the Advanced Dungeons & Dragons *Temple of Elemental Evil* module for a group of players who have all read it before. Transparency of information generally sets up transparency of expectation (and not vice versa): the Dungeons & Dragons players know they won't encounter anything outside of the module, just like a previous visitor to a haunted house knows they'll be guaranteed a comparable experience on consecutive nights. Transparency of information lets players know



Brenda Romero's 2009 board game *Train*.

1. Tobias Wrigstad, "The Nuts and Bolts of Jeepform," in *Playground Worlds*, ed. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Helsinki: Ropecon ry, 2008), 131.





**It's safe to say  
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what facts can be considered immutable (beyond the hazy “horizon of expectations”) and the players can plan accordingly. The “Surprise—you’re Hitler!” genre deliberately asserts the moral authority of the designer by violating both transparencies: players’ expectations may not include emotions felt by information withheld until a later date, and this violation is intended to prompt a perhaps-undesired moment of moral self-reflection.

A lot of good art plays with these two transparencies. But RPG designers and players have the choice to do it consciously or not. One of the best examples of transparency used consciously can be found in the “Secrets” mechanism in the vampire-seduction RPG *Annalise* by Nathan D. Paoletta. Here’s how the game works: each character has a public Vulnerability and a private Secret. While each individual player gets to choose their Vulnerability, he/she then must generate a Secret to be tossed into a hat and pick one out at random. This Secret then becomes a core structuring element for their characters over multiple sessions. In *Annalise*, the information is purposefully kept from opaque, but each player knows A) at least 1-2 Secrets at the table (the one they wrote and the one they got), and B) that s/he will have to thematize this horrible truth about their character over the course of the game. The horizon of expectations matches that of literary horror: something isn’t quite right with each character, s/he didn’t craft it for themselves, and the suspense comes from each player’s slow revealing of the “truth.” If a player were to contribute something too offensive or dark for a player’s sensibilities, that Secret can be torn up and a new round of Secrets can go into the hat; no questions asked. The game mechanically incentivizes the creation of information that will shock/scare other players, but will not step beyond their collective horizon of expectations. Another example: *Monsterhearts* is a game in which the conceit of the genre—high-school monsters having flings, petty catfights, and cosmic disputes—provides such a flexible horizon of expectations that the game can consciously incorporate a vast array of concealed information. The MC in *Monsterhearts* creates Agendas that are working against the characters’ best interests. But in contrast to the “Surprise—you’re Hitler!” genre, where there is no “correct” in-game player response, the genre of angsty teenage monsters allows and legitimates almost any player response. The players’ array of Moves affords them precise rules of engagement against the MC’s Agendas—rules of engagement which, in turn, produce palatable fiction—and their failures and successes at engagement already have an alibi. If the player-characters succeed, then obviously they’re drawing on their competent “monster” aspect; if they fail, we are reminded that they’re also just awkward teenagers too. Any number of dark topics such as date rape or blood cults can be broached without violating genre, and yet there is no need for the MC to come up

with some “twist” that isn’t just a natural reaction to a player’s Move. Whereas *Annalise* creates an environment for player-characters to each have one big Secret, *Monsterhearts* deliberately removes the potential for any secret held by the MC to have undue impact on the player experience.

There are also efforts underway to make the larp experience more transparent. At Intercon 2012, I played in a game which, in a typical American fashion, concealed information that situated the larp’s content outside my horizon of expectations. We were all supposed to be playing hippies, goths, emo kids, and hipsters who were hanging out in an old café, at least according to the event text. The larp itself contained a surprising amount of magic rituals, demon summoning, and violent conflict. After the larp was over, many of us discovered a third dimension to the larp anew: that at least three of the player-characters were deeply involved in some kind of human trafficking ring. I found myself horrified and also confused: the game pitch had very little to do with what actually went on, which had very little to do with the information upon which many of the players were acting. Here is where transparency of expectations would have enabled us to incorporate the obfuscation of information. A synopsis like “Hippy bar meets Tim Powers meets *The Wire*” may have communicated a little more about the game, but such a mash-up might have been better served by way of rendering all player information transparent. The dramatic irony of interactions under a fully transparent information structure, in which the players know that Sheila smuggles child prostitutes or Bobby is actually a servant of the Dark Lord, would have been more exciting than the exploration of how players and characters alike react when all their moral outrage is mobilized by a scenario. In the development of Epidiah Ravachol’s forthcoming pulp RPG *Swords without Master* into a larp (with Ravachol himself and Emily Care Boss), for example, I let players come up with their own sordid relationships between each other, and then made sure each character was duly informed about each one of them before the game began. Everything we concealed was for the sake of driving informative conversation between the player-characters (so that they’d have something to talk about), and any suspenseful plot element was decided by the player-characters on their own unless they solicited the GMs’ intervention. The horizon of expectations dictated that the world become their playground, and no information concealed would force the character moral/ethical choices outside that horizon of expectations.

But then what role does the *unexpected* play, especially when all about a game is presumably known? Aren’t suspense and ignorance of important details fundamental components of fictional narrative? What about cases when the short pitches for a game cannot possibly convey the full scale of what might actually

happen in a given RPG? Transparency of expectation and information shifts power over to the player, but it also shifts responsibility onto them as well. There are always information gaps that the player-characters must fill with their speech and actions. Quality play emerges from players knowing it is their cue to invent and explore, and are able to do so within the auspices of collective agreement. The withholding of information or the keeping of secret plans in RPGs must become a deliberate design choice that nevertheless places the agency in the player’s hands to fulfill the social contract of the game. The “Surprise—you’re Hitler!” disposition presumes that players don’t know that abstract structures partially determine their moral inclinations and actions. In 2013, it’s safe to say that the opposite is the case: today’s gamer can be given the meta-game tools to improve their collaborative fiction, keeping it safe while “keeping it feral,” as author Joe McDalno says of *Monsterhearts*. Transparency seems like a good place to start.

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# The Use of Structured Goal Setting in Simulation Design

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By Stephen R. Balzac

## Abstract

Games are written for different purposes: larps to entertain, Serious Games to inform and educate, and simulations as training tools or to discover how people might respond to different situations. No matter the reason, they all need to keep the participants actively involved and interested in the scenario. A failure to maintain interest means that the simulation or game fails in its purpose. Structured goal setting, as described in Locke & Latham (2002), is proposed as a technique for maintaining player focus and interest, and for putting the plot into the hands of the players. Relevant research is reviewed, and application within a variety of games is discussed. Suggested methods of applying goal setting to simulation design are provided.

## The Use of Structured Goal Setting in Simulation Design

Games are written for a variety of purposes. Most larps are for entertainment; Serious Games are written to “inform and educate,” as well as entertain. Simulations are run to discover how people might react in a situation or to train participants in appropriate behaviors. For the sake of this discussion, the terms, “simulation,” “game,” and “serious game,” are used interchangeably.

A key element of any simulation, whether done as a larp for entertainment, or as a serious game, is keeping the participants acting within the game. That is, participants need to suspend disbelief and act within the parameters and world of the simulated environment, not outside it. When the participants move outside the constructed world, they start to see the figurative plasterboard and duct tape holding the game together; this acts to destroy disbelief and undermine the game.

Related to this problem is that of keeping the participants focused on accomplishing their objectives within the simulation. The strength of a well-designed game is that it keeps the players actively involved with one another and with the fictional world of the game. When players lose interest in their objectives, they are likely to become bored, disruptive, or even leave the game. As the number of participants falls off, the consensual reality of the game is slowly unraveled. Boredom can, in other words, become a contagion that undermines and destroys the game for everyone.

A final related problem is that games need to be resilient: if a key player does not show up, leaves early for some unexpected reason (e.g. illness), or is eliminated in the course of play, the game needs to continue on. The remaining players need to be sufficiently invested in their objectives to continue to pursue those objectives, to be motivated to develop creative solutions, and to devise unexpected ways of looking at the problem.

In addition to all these needs, for a game to be successful, the participants need to have fun. In a game written purely for entertainment, this is obvious. However, it is just as true in a serious game or educational game. In both those scenarios, if the participants are not enjoying the experience, they will not focus on it, and the lessons they are supposed to learn will be lost.

So the big question at this point is: is there a mechanism or game mechanic that will satisfy all these needs, and also be easy to use and easy for the GameMasters to implement. Optimally, the solution should be transparent to the players, require no special rules or complex mechanics, and little or no run-time intervention.

Fortunately, there is a simple means of meeting all of the above constraints: based on the personal experience of the author and a study of the psychological research, it appears that structured goal setting, when properly applied, is the best tool for the job.

## Reviewing Relevant Research

Structured goal setting, described in Locke & Latham (2002), provides a comprehensive mechanism for achieving the desired results. Structured goal setting creates a number of desirable effects:

- Focus** – Clear goals naturally direct the mind toward goal directed tasks.
- Increased energy** – Clear goals are energizing. When someone has a clear, well-constructed goal, they tend to exhibit a high level of energy when pursuing goal related tasks.
- Increased persistence** – The clearer the goal, the more likely someone will continue to pursue it in the face of adversity. This is a clear advantage in a game scenario when different groups of players may have contradictory or conflicting goals.

**Decreased distractibility** – Events and information not relevant to the accomplishment of the goal is more easily ignored.

**Improved task related learning and discovery** – when something does not go as planned, or when unexpected obstacles surface, people with clear goals are considerably more likely to make considerable effort to devise alternative means of accomplishing the goal.

In addition, accomplishing a well-constructed, meaningful goal can be incredibly enjoyable (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) and builds self-efficacy (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Both of these last two points deserve further explanation.

As Locke & Latham (2002) point out, a key component of a well structured goal is that progress on the goal is obtained from the environment. In other words, there is, if not continual, then at least regular feedback available on progress toward the goal. Because this feedback is a natural part of the process of goal accomplishment, a person does not need to constantly evaluate where they are; instead, they can focus themselves totally on the goal-directed behavior. This produces a state of total absorption known as flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When in a flow state, a person’s concentration is totally taken up by the activity and there is simply no room for anything else to intervene. The experience is described variously as “exhilarating,” or intensely enjoyable.

Self-efficacy, as distinct from self-esteem, is the belief that one’s actions matter and that one has the ability to influence a situation. Bandura & Locke (2003) point out not just that accomplishing goals leads to self-efficacy, but that belief about whether the goal was accomplished and how well also strongly influences self-efficacy. The structure of the goal therefore makes a significant difference to the lessons that a person takes away from the experience of goal accomplishment.

Goal setting when applied to groups is a bit more complex than when applied to individuals. The most important points are that group members must believe in the goals of the group, and believe that they will benefit through seeing the group accomplish its goals (Brown & Latham, 2002). When individuals believe that their personal goals are better served by ignoring the group and going their own way, they will tend to do just that, despite all exhortations and pep talks to the contrary (Seijits & Latham, 2000; Schein, 1990). However, certain styles of charismatic communication can increase allegiance to the group and support of the group’s goals (Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1996), specifically reverse goal chaining (Balzac, 2004, 2010). Peripheral support for reverse goal chaining as a way to increase agreement with goals can also be found in research conducted by the Harvard Negotiation Project (Ury, 1991, and Fisher, Ury, & Patton, 1991).

## Discussion

Structured goal setting appears to meet many of the needs of well-designed simulation. The obvious question, of course, is whether structured goal setting has been used successfully to design individual and group goals in simulations. In fact, goal setting techniques were used very successfully in a number of games such as *Operation: Atlantis*, *Secrets of the Necronomicon*, *Dragon*, *Nexus*, *Game of Empire*, and *Long Ago and Far Away*. Structured goal setting had mixed results in *Stopover*, *Starfire*, and the *National Capitol Region Pandemic Flu Exercise*. The latter was a serious game, attended by members of the Department of Homeland Security, Department of Health, the US military, and local businesses and non-profits. All of these games were written or co-written by this author.

Examining the different situations and comparing the games where goal setting produced the results indicated by the research and where it did not, several points become obvious. Player goals needed to be carefully structured to provide strong goal-path clarity: in other words, it had to be very clear to the players that the actions they needed to take would lead them to the desired goals. Goal-path clarity is known to increase motivation (Yukl, 2002) and focus (Locke & Latham, 2002), so this result is not terribly surprising. However, what is much more significant is that goal-path clarity needs to be much greater than the game writers originally thought.

A key element of building goal-path clarity turned out to be the style in which information was presented. Consistent with Kirkpatrick & Locke (1996), one of the most critical pieces was the clear, vivid, description of how each team’s goals would change the world and benefit the team both collectively and individually. Whether that goal was world domination by the Secret World Organization for Retribution and Destruction (SWORD), in *Operation: Atlantis*, or the destruction of the world by Cthulhu in *Secrets of the Necronomicon*, the key to successfully motivating the group started with the dramatic presentation of the vision. Each participant knew exactly how their individual needs would be satisfied by helping the group accomplish its goals. This held true even in *Secrets*, where for the Cthulhu cult to succeed meant certain death for the cultists as well as everyone else.

It is highly likely that the presentation of the goal result as a vision of success, coupled with the breakdown into the goal path, produced the equivalent of reverse-chained goals. Because reverse-chained goals cause a person to become significantly more committed to each individual goal along the way, the self-concordance, or personal relevance, of the goals are also increased. The high levels of goal-path clarity also likely serve to increase implementation intentions, or the desire to accomplish a specific step at a specific point. Self-concordance of goals, especially when combined with implementation intentions, drastically



increases goal commitment and completion (Koestner et al, 2002).

When goals were clear and well-defined, player enjoyment increased dramatically, as one would expect. Because social interaction is itself a flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), adding the goal structure of the game world dramatically increased the intensity of the flow experience. Vague goals or the lack of a clear group vision, on the other hand, decreased player enjoyment even more dramatically than clear goals and vision boosted enjoyment. Enjoyment is a subjective measure, gauged by the intensity of player involvement versus players sitting around complaining, and the level of positive versus negative feedback during and after the game.

Considering the connections between goals, beliefs about success, and self-efficacy (Bandura & Locke, 2003), a clear implication for educational games is that teaching a skill must be accompanied by the opportunity to use the skill successfully in the game. It is not enough to merely present the information; rather, the player must take the skill and apply it successfully in a variety of situations in order to develop the belief that they can apply the skill. Further, it appears to be important as well that the background of the character being played speak of the character's prior successes. This appears to help the player develop self-efficacy within the role, which then makes them more likely to be successful.

Of the games that demonstrated successful goal-oriented behaviors, there were several key points in common.

- A dramatic and clear vision of the outcome, which includes a description of how the team and its members will benefit from accomplishing their goals.

- Team's big goal broken down into subgoals, and it is clear which team member is responsible for which piece.

- The goal structure is further detailed for each individual team member.

- Goals that complete prior to the end of the game feed into or generate further goals that will carry the character and the team through to the end of the game.

- The following questions are answered for each person:

- Exactly what is the character seeking to accomplish? Do what extent does the character have control over the outcome, versus needing to recruit others?
  - How will the character and the team know that they are making progress? How will they know if they are succeeding or failing? In other words, how will the game provide the players ongoing feedback?

- What steps are necessary? What resources? How big is the goal? The bigger the goal and the more resources required, the more other players need to be involved, and hence the more intricate the plot can become.
  - For each character, how will their actions matter to the game? How does pursuing their goals help them to become significant characters in the game? How will their activities benefit them and their team?
  - How will the character break up a large goal? What triggering events or activities in the game will interact with the goal? Is there a specific time or event in the game that puts a deadline on the goal? If the goal triggers significantly before the end of the game, how will it feed into the remainder of the game?

The proper use of structured goal setting has tremendous potential to improve game quality and strengthen the level of interaction. It is a powerful tool to maintain player interest and enjoyment. It does take some work on the part of the game writers to use it effectively, but the results are well worth the effort.

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Steve appears in *Under the Boardwalk: The Monopoly Documentary* movie, and has the distinction of being the only guest personally panned by a New York Times movie critic.



# Of Rabbit Holes and Red Herrings: Interactive Narratives of ARG and Larp

By Emily Care Boss

*In 2011, 500 people spent 24 hours in the New York Public Library on a hunt for 100 works by people who changed the world. In this time they collaboratively author a **book** full of their visions of the world and what they can do to make a difference.*

*In 2012, thirty-one cis- and transgender women enter a campground in Connecticut and take on the roles of women in a post-apocalyptic world. A world where all humans with an XY chromosome have died and civilization has been irrevocably changed. The players act out these women's choices as they start to rebuild, collectively painting a picture of adaptation, ambition and love under catastrophic pressure.*

These games look to the far future and ancient past of human storytelling to make transformative participatory art. They are examples of two burgeoning forms of participatory entertainment: the alternative reality game (ARG) and the live action role playing game (larp). In both forms, participants engage in a fictional storyline, solve mysteries and author events. They build out their own narrative, rather than passively watching things occur to others. The first example above, *Find the Future*, was an ARG commissioned by the New York Public Library to build excitement and engagement with the 100 year old building and its collections. The second game, *Mad About the Boy* is a live action role playing game written in Norway. It was produced in the United States in 2012 to introduce players there to Nordic styles of live role play. These, along with others discussed here represent a small sampling of these ever increasingly populated fields of participatory entertainment.

## ARG and Larp Defined

ARG and Larp have different audiences and applications. ARG arose as part of the marketing campaigns for large scale consumer products (films, television shows, etc.) which are known as Alternate Reality Branding (ARB) schemes. Typically, ARGs contain a mystery with clues and puzzles to be solved by a large number of participants. Since the participants may be in disparate locations, virtual media, publicity materials and parts of the fictional property itself are used. These are accessible to a casual audience, and can cast a wide net,

potentially reaching millions. Larps have a story or situation involving many characters that are played by the participants. They range in scale from a handful of players through 10,000+ in large outdoor events. Larps may be run as one-shot shot games, weekend-long games or as ongoing campaigns. And although media may be used in the presentation, in-person interactions are the focus of the activity and the primary mode of communication.

In order to reach large-scale audiences, ARG embraces the new media of our cyberfuture present such as websites, mobile phones, and apps. Mobile device interfaces that “mark” reality with a virtual overlay are often referred to as Augmented Reality devices. ARGs also make use of traditional forms of media such as print, radio, telephone and face-to-face communication. The variety of pre-scripted or open ended media are summarized in a table at the post “**Transmedia Storytelling: A Guide for Authors**” These multi-platform mediums of communications are described by the term Transmedia. They make it possible for the game to reach hundreds, thousands or (in some cases) millions of participants. In *Creators of Transmedia Stories TM 3*, Jeff Gomez [WyrD Con 2012 and 2013 special guest—ed.] described it this way:

“Imagine that each storytelling medium is a musical instrument. If played well, you’re going to get something artful and beautiful. What transmedia does is it brings a few of those instruments together and attempts to compose music that allows for talented people to play them in some kind of concert. Think of the possibilities that open up. As artists we can create vast narratives that play across film, music and books all at once, leveraging the strengths of each medium. We will weave dense, elaborate tapestries of narrative with our mobile devices, for example, to which a few or many thousands of audience members can contribute creatively. Visionaries we haven’t even heard of yet will build transmedia orchestras, immersing us as participants in swirling symphonies of story.”

Transmedia offer the platform for ARGs, and “Participatory Culture” fuels player engagement. The phrase participatory culture was coined by Professor Henry Jenkins of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and the USC School of Cinematic Arts to explain a

dynamic of human interaction and collaboration made possible by the interconnectivity of the internet. “Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement.” (**NML White Paper**) Participatory culture takes place in “affinity spaces,” physical or virtual, where participants can congregate and collaborate. Examples of these are communities of work and play found on forums, chat rooms, email lists and other social media such as Google+ and Facebook. Participatory culture dynamics make these hot-beds for group creativity.

In 2001, this dynamic was harnessed in game form and the first ARG was born as *The Beast*, a promotional campaign by Microsoft for the Steven Spielberg film *AI: Artificial Intelligence*. The game involved viewers in the world of the film in advance of its release, and unleashed massive participation. In “**Storytelling in New Media**”, Kim Jeffrey et al. report that over the three month course

of *The Beast* campaign there were 3 million unique views. Participants were involved in solving a mystery about the (fictional) murder of a psychologist for robots. The campaign delivered the central moral quandary of the film in an interactive format. Key to its success, the participants worked together, creating communities such as the successful and long-lived **Cloudmakers** on Yahoo and other forums.

In contrast to the futurity of ARG, larp harkens back to ancient human story traditions. From the roots of oral storytelling around the tribal fire to the presentation of sacred narrative through ritual and drama in Greece, to courtly Masques praising the virgin Queen, Elizabeth I (as discussed in Lizzie Stark’s book *Leaving Mundania*), and the irreverent and improvisational Italian *com-media dell’arte*. Larp resembles these by including a story portrayed through the embodiment of roles and the immersion of the audience into the play of events.

## Worlds of ARG and Larp

### Alternate Reality Games (ARGs)

ARGs vary in their platforms, characteristics and origination. Four common types discussed in a white-paper from the MIT Convergence Consortium in 2006 **This is Not Just an Advertisement**, are the Promotional ARG, the Grassroots ARG, the Narrative Extension ARG and the Monetized ARG. Promotional ARGs are an application of Alternative Reality Branding. Companies use them to create buzz around a film or game before it comes out through a viral campaign with games and other activities to engage soon-to-be fans of the main property. The previously mentioned **A.I. campaign**, **The Beast** and **I Love Bees**, a marketing campaign for Bungie Studio’s video game *Halo 2* released in 2004, were both hugely successful Promotional ARGs. **Finding the Future** was an educational Promotional ARG. Perhaps not coincidentally, both campaigns had overlapping personnel. The NYPL’s *Finding the Future* was an educational Promotional ARG.

Grassroots ARGs, so called, are “purist” games, created to promote a

message or experience unique to the game, and not associated with a commercial product. Notable examples are, *Top Secret Dance Off*, where people all over the world encouraged each other to dance and collaborated to make public dance events happen, and *World Without Oil*, the simulation of a world oil crisis.

Narrative Extension ARGs are based on a narrative product such as a film or television show whose story is broadened with interactive story elements. This is commonly used as a promotional campaign, as in the case of *The Lost Experience* for the ABC television show *Lost*, that ran during a hiatus between seasons 2 and 3, and the award winning *ReGenesis* campaign **Rethink Everything**. More common are campaigns that provide additional material, but no central mystery such as the *Doctor Who tie-in websites*.

Monetized ARGs have been problematic and rarely successful. A notable failure is Electronic Arts’ 2001 conspiracy-theory thriller *Majestic*. Launched as a series sub-

scription, only 5 out of 8 planned episodes were produced due to low subscriptions once the full campaign launched. The company lost millions of dollars.

A new model, combining elements of each of these types, is made possible by the pervasiveness of mobile computing devices such as tablets and smartphones. An example is Google’s *Ingress*. Successful in beta, and to be launched December 2014, *Ingress* is an independent product that allows players to interact with spatial markers associated with real world landmarks and fight with another faction seeking to take over the world. This type of game, requiring the use of a mobile computing device and operating on just one type of media platform, is called an Augmented Reality game. It varies from the transmedia experience of most ARGs. However, this model is suitable to monetization to create a stable income-generating product such as browser games or Zynga’s *FarmVille*. Pair it with other forms of media interface and you may have a commercially viable ARG.

(Continues next page)



Similarly to table-top role playing games such as the iconic Dungeons and Dragons™, these games involve players taking on the role of a fictional character and entering an imaginative game world where they have adventures. But instead of simply describing them as is done in table-top role play, live action role players act out (to some degree) what their characters do.

The development of larp in the 1970s and 80s in many different places around the world is documented in Markus Montola’s dissertation “**On the Edge of the Magic Circle**” . Early appearances were in the UK’s *Treasure Trap*, in Sweden’s *Gyllene Hjorten*, and in the United states with early communities such as *Dagorhir* and the *MIT Assassins’ Guild*. The game company White Wolf published a live version of their World of Darkness games, called *Mind’s Eye Theater*, which spread larp widely in the United States in the 1990s. Inspirations for larp’s development likely **include** table-top role playing games, miniature war simulations, interactive theater, psychodrama and activist theater traditions such as the

Theater of the Oppressed. Popular misconceptions of how table-top role playing games function, such as in the film *Mazes and Monsters*, may also have contributed.

Semiotics offers useful terminology to describe larp. In “**A Semiotic View on Diegesis Construction**” Charles S. Peirce’s three types of signs are applied to prop and setting materials in larp: the icon, the index and the symbol. Icons have meaning because they are similar to a real world thing. My drawing of a tree looks (at least a little) like that maple growing outside my window. Icons hold resemblances to the real world object even if they are abstracted, as with a drawing. An index refers to the real world object through a relationship or being affected by that object. As a weathervane shows the direction of the wind, a thermometer measures heat or cold, an indexical sign “points to” the real world object it conjures in the mind. A symbol is an image or shape that stands for something else. Words are symbols, so describing my character fly through the air represents that flight.

Take some typical larp elements: A prop gun, a costume, a wooded camp and a building with the sign “Bomb Shelter” on it. These have iconic and indexical similarities to the fictional items they point to: a working gun, ceremonial attire, a battlefield. The sign is a symbol that transforms a scout camp dining hall to a post-apocalyptic refuge. Some larp producers aspire to an aesthetic of high iconic and indexical verisimilitude, or 1-to-1 correspondence between game elements and “game world” components. These are called **360° immersion larps**. These games range in genre and setting from *Hamlet*, a ground-breaking version of Shakespeare’s play set in 1940s Denmark; to *Carolus Rex*, a gritty-toned steampunk space adventure enacted in a decommissioned Russian submarine on exhibit in a museum and rented for the occasion; to *Mellan himmel och hav* (*Between heaven and sea*), set in an alien society with radically different notions of gender, marriage and social conventions than our own world.

Techniques and Tools

Christy Dena outlines “family resemblances” among ARGs in “**This is Not (Just) an Advertisement**”

A given game may not have all of these characteristics, but these are traits noted as uniting ARGs as a form of play:

- “ARGs
1. Use a range of media platforms and real life spaces.
  2. Have a high degree of both narrative and game-play experiences.
  3. Are played collaboratively, mainly through online networking.
  4. Respond to player activities through human intervention by “puppetmasters.”
  5. Create an “alternate reality” where nothing is identified as being fiction.
  6. Are played in real time.”

Worlds of ARG and Larp (continued)

Live Action Role Playing Games (larps)

Larp’s variety of origins shows in the format and techniques used. There are several distinct forms that Larp takes due to regional differences in aesthetics, difference in venue and different focuses of play. Some cohesive examples are Boffer larp, theater style larp, those based on commercially published systems, original convention scenarios, Nordic art larp and its related forms. There is overlap between these forms, variation among those within a category, and other forms not covered here.

Boffer larps have been represented in popular fiction in the documentary *Darkon* as well as the film *Role Models*. In systems like these, **NERO**, and the **Realms**, combat is central to play, and acted out live. Boffer larps capitalize on using real world fighting skills in a playful, non-lethal form. Foam-core padded imitation weapons, called “boffer weapons” are used. It won’t kill you, but it can still hurt or bruise when you are hit by one of these weapons. Players

hone fighting abilities suited to the score based system used with the padded weapons: endurance, running, quickness, and coordination are all rewarded. Player characters are also important and is an element of the plot, but effectiveness hinges on the real-world mock fighting. Likely influenced by the Society for Creative Anachronism (**SCA**), whose fighters research ancient techniques of fighting, arms forging and armor crafting, Boffer larp fighters often practice to gain skill in arms. These games may be one-time or part of ongoing campaigns, and are often offered over a weekend at an outdoor setting where battles can be staged.

Theater Style Larp derived its name from an influential system: White Wolf’s Mind’s Eye Theater, a larp adaptation of their popular World of Darkness games. The term more generically describes a broad style of play used with commercial and non-commercial systems. Games in this style focus on interpersonal interactions and plot, using

a symbolic system for combat, such as “Rock, Paper, Scissors”, though many systems use a numeric skill and “stat” (central abilities used for many activities, such as Intelligence, Strength etc.) that are very reminiscent of *Dungeons & Dragons*™.

Commercially available larps encompass a wide range of styles: Mind’s Eye Theater is one example of a published larp system. The **Shifting Forest Storyworks group** commercially published their set of Parlor Larps starting in 2004. They are now available for free. The Parlor Larps broke ground for published scenarios intended for one-shot play with little to no prep required. Commercial activity in larp among boffer larps is common. There are examples all over the world, but even just taking the United States as a sample, this is a strong trend. Various groups have organized ongoing campaigns as commercial ventures, such as The Realms, NERO (originally New England Roleplaying Organization, now an international group that organizes events across the US and Canada), and Darkon, which was document-

ed in the previously mentioned film, which was documented in the film *Darkon*. Notably, the films mentioned (*Darkon* and *Role Models*) both focus on commercial boffer communities and portray larp in a sympathetic light and present the activity as something that others might want to participate in, not just as a niche pastime of an insular subculture. Lizzie Stark wrote about several such communities in her book about live action role playing *Leaving Mundania*, including the *Avatar system* of Double Exposure in New Jersey, a transdimensional cross-genre game, and **Knight Realms** in Pennsylvania, a medieval fantasy game started by former NERO players. A fast growing commercial campaign system is *Dystopia Rising*, a post-apocalyptic larp and tabletop role playing game system, which provides an intense, adrenaline-heart pumping experience for players.

Larpwrights for the **New England Interactive Literature Society** create brand new games for annual events such as their **Intercon** series, with teams of co-writers working together to write the setting materials, game

rules and characters for games that can have a dozen to sixty or more players. Costumes are optional for these events, though some larp GM teams run elaborate period games each year—steampunk and Victoriana are popular—where participants wear attire appropriate to the time period of play. Specialized game types include the horde larp, where a small team of players have ongoing characters while the bulk of the participants cycle through short-term characters making trouble for the main cast. Games typically run for four hours, and are only presented once at the convention, despite all the care and effort put into them. However, some very successful games are documented, and sold or offered for free online, and may be run again and again. An example is the classic horde larp *Collision Imminent*.

Larp is a popular art in the Nordic countries of Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark which host the **Knutepunkt** larp theory conference. A selection of their larps are documented in *Nordic Larp*, a collection of photographs and descriptions of 30 Nordic larps. They range in genre

and setting from medieval European fantasy in the Swedish larp *Dragonbane* which emphasized real-seeming effects for magic, and featured a life-size, mechanical dragon; to historical experience as in *1942—Noen å stole på*, a Norwegian larp set during the occupation of Norway in World War II; to artistic explorations such as *Luminescence*, a Finnish abstract metaphorical larp, where players immersed themselves in 800 kg of white flour to symbolize facing death through cancer. Typical characteristics of these games are elaborate set dressing, seriousness of topic, minimization of mechanics and aiming for intensity of experience for the players. In these communities tabletop/larp hybrids known as Nordic freeform has developed. Cross-fertilization with US and other tabletop freeform design has brought an American Freeform body of work into being in the US and Canada. Live freeform games are well suited to short-form and one-shot convention play, such as at the long-running **Fastaval** in Denmark, and the recently launched **Stockholm Scenario Festival** in Sweden.



ARG participants explore real world locations to uncover information related to the fictional mystery often at the heart of the ARG. In some cases, participants apply fictional actions to real world elements which have effect on other game participants. A hallmark of a successful ARG is to provide avenues for participants to add to and enrich the fictional elements of the world for other participants.

A common entry point for joining an ARG would be a clue or cry for help on a poster or website. These are known as “rabbit holes” through which players enter the “alternate reality” of the game, a reference to how Alice entered Wonderland. Once through the rabbit hole, ARG play requires real world skills such as decoding, research and physical searching. Portrayal of character roles is most often optional or non-existent. ARGs’ incorporation of players as themselves leads to a conceit that “this is not a game.” Game information is intermingled with real world information, and as one participates you act as though it is all real—though secret—knowledge.

In contrast, many larps share these characteristics:

#### LARPs

1. Take place face to face in a defined play area
2. Have a high degree of narrative and some amount of game-play experiences
3. Are played in collaboration with others, but may be competitive or characterized by team play
4. Respond to player activities through human intervention by Game Masters (GMs), other players with protagonist roles (PC or player characters) and other players with antagonist or supporting roles (NPCs or non-player characters)
5. Create a “game world” where all is understood to be fiction
6. Are generally played in real time, but compression and leaping forward can be done if introduced by facilitators

Just as puzzles are key in ARG, play in larp hinges on the crafting of the character. Past events are parceled out in the character history, with key relationships spelled out by character materials to give players the ability to create dynamics between each other. Is my Vampire in love with your Mortal, and so is trying to resist the temptation to turn or to eat you? Is your Mortal enthralled by the desire for immortality offered by vampirism, and so tempts me to take her into my embrace? When writing a larp a rule of thumb is to connect each character with at least three plots. These may be romance (as in my vampire example), political intrigue in a court setting, ambition and rivalry in a contemporary office setting, betrayal and double dealing in espionage. There may be an overarching plot,

either one that is shepherded by the Game Master facilitators and their non-player characters of villains and allies for the main characters or generated by the main player characters themselves. Some of these plots simply tie to other characters, weaving relationships into play. Others may help the players overcome a challenge or solve a mystery. Some may be red herrings which must be run aground in order to find real solutions.

## Horizons of ARG and Larp

What are the limits and capabilities of ARG and larp? What can these forms lend to one another? Where do they already overlap, and what further opportunities are there? The scale and technologies of ARG can be a barrier in the wrong setting. Larp is focused on strong character experience, but this can be off-putting to the general public.

A question to start with is: what has happened to the bright future seen for ARG? Heralded as a revolutionary art form, it is 12 years later and that potential is still incipient. Some of the most popular ARGs such as Google’s *Ingress* are framed by the context of popular geocaching activities and puzzle apps, rather than as a member of this transformative play activity. Like much future technology, ARG’s manifestation is not as dramatic as expected. The games that have taken our world by storm in the past 20 years have been the fully digital. In 2009 a [study by the NDP Group](#) showed that “Video games account for one-third of the average monthly consumer spending”, and found annual income for the industry to be **\$14.8 billion in 2012**. ARG and its related art form, the live action role playing game, are not even on the radar for gaming industry income. The true following for crossing the boundaries between digital and real world is still being slowly grown.

Major corporations have started to see their potential, however. Disney has filed a patent application for their “**Role Play Simulation Engine**”. This made waves in larp communities, feeding speculation that Disney was attempting to patent the very act of larping. But the truth is something more specific and more futuristic. Their system is an integrated computer visual and audio interface for rides and exhibits in Disney parks. This would allow participants to interact with humans in costumes as well as animatronic figures, or interactive sets that could respond. Imagine this as a single location ARG with the puppetmaster in a control room. Reminiscent of Bentham’s panopticon prison with pervasive surveillance, Disney’s vision bends Kafka-esque surveillance to the purpose of entertainment: a Pirates of the Caribbean ride in which participants can fight the ghost pirates, or a massive haunted house on electronic steroids. The live game *Otherworld* offers this kind of full world experience using analog coordination of a

large staff or support players. The game is carefully distinguished from larps due to its different techniques and philosophies. Oriented toward non-gamers, it has a long history and provides a well-crafted fictional adventure, with opportunities for personal development.

Three-hundred sixty degree larps also attain this type of player immersion in the game world. In the Swedish larp *Hamlet*, set during an alternate history 1940s, the play set was decorated as a bunker where the cast of Hamlet sheltered during the late stages of the Spanish Civil War. Incoming messages, via telephone and recorded message, provided increasingly depressing news of the battles beyond. Players indulged in lavish feasts, more decadent as the night wore on and the tragedy took the lives of many. The text of the original play was used at certain junctures, with players who provided speeches as monologues in public areas. In *Mellan himmel och hav*, another high ambition Swedish larp, the players took part in workshops prior to play to help them learn about the culture they would play out during the game: with “morning” and “evening” people instead of men and women, and elaborate four-party marriages, one of which would become the central plot of the game. The setting for the game was a theater soundstage, with a village built for the players to inhabit. With lighting and music set to an 18-hour daily cycle, players went through four days in the 72-hour period of game play. *The Monitor Celestra*, inspired by the science fiction television show *Battlestar Galactica* (in its 2010s incarnation), took place on the HMS Småland, a retired naval destroyer. From depth of entertainment to altering the way participants see their world, their culture and perhaps even their own identities, larps use fiction to create a holistic experience for the player. These types of experiences are ones that mass audiences of theme parks and 3D films hunger for. The potential for marketing once the form gains popular acceptance are staggering.

However, the centrality of plot or connecting fictional material highlights a potential weakness in larp design: planning and story-crafting by larpwrights can overpower player choice when they play out the scenario. Plus, if a character depends on another fulfilling some action for their character’s story to have any meaning, then it can be seriously disappointing if that player character never does so. Whether by ignorance, lack of interest or inability to carry through, having the expectation that someone will fulfill a needed role—in the absence of clear guidance in the moment of play—is a lot to expect. Player-authored story of this type can be perceived as red herrings from the “real plot” as intended by the larpwrights. Working through this narrative and collaborative challenge is difficult in a notoriously unpredictable art form, which contains a multitude of possible courses of action. The more players, the more potential choices multiply in a geometric

progression. Empowering player choice and providing a realm of fictional play in which many outcomes are equally satisfying can lead to a stronger overall experience for players. “Sandbox” or world based, non-linear storyline games such as Evan Torner and Kat Jones’ *Bloodnet* adopt this strategy. Another option is to embrace transparency [see also [Evan Torner’s essay on Transparency here](#) —ed.], making world and character information available to all, and setting mutually agreed upon explicit goals for the story. Storytelling larps such as Alleged Entertainment’s *The Last Seder* uses these tools and place the focus on player interpretation of roles.

*Momentum*, a pervasive larp, offers a look at a true hybrid between the two forms. Run in Stockholm it took place over the course of two weeks, with weekend long sessions connected by self-directed play during the week. Producer Staffan Jonsson said about the game: “Momentum was built to explore the borderlands of pervasive gaming, what is possible, enjoyable and how far can we take it. We tried to blend larp, MMORPG, crossmedia gaming, urban exploration into a coherent game that was on 24/7 for a long period of time.” Through the use of a virtual platform with a mobile DBA interface, as well as internet forums and extensive real world locations, the players were able to interact and have an experience continuous in space as well as time. The conceit of participation in the game provided dual character positioning that shows the crossover between larp and ARG. As well as interacting in the game as themselves (brought into a secret conspiracy at the start of the game), each player bonded with the spirit of a historical revolutionary (such as Che Guevera) who shared the player’s body with their native personality. The game end involved a real world parade at night, which in the game allowed the players to put the spirits to rest.

The organizers of *Momentum* had a platform tailored to their needs. Access to technology is a barrier to ARG development. Funds to develop a large-scale interface are normally only available from corporations. However, ARG platforms such as **Play AR** is an example of a decentralized tool that gives any group the ability to create their own ARG. This is an Augmented Reality game interface intended to allow ARG designers to tag and mark real world locations with virtual images. An app would be generated which would allow other users to see and interact with the marked-up world. Combine programs like this with Google Glass, and we are coming closer to attaining a Matrix-like experience of an imminent alternate reality. If this type of product becomes available, it will decentralize individual’s ability to create ARGs, increasing the likelihood of grassroots ARGs. Apps proliferate virally, and offer ideal rabbit holes for consumers to enter and introduce to their friends.

Game-based learning is the other major opportunity that both ARG and larp present. As with *Find the*



*Future* and the global energy crisis ARG *World Without Oil*, ARGs offer a tremendous range of ways to share information with participants that can be crafted by an organizing team. Massively Open Online Courses (or MOOCs) have the potential to mesh with ARGs: creating real world objectives in addition to prepared course materials and forum or other cross-interaction. Edu-larps such as those organized by *Seekers Unlimited* and the award winning *Reacting to the Past* program of *Barnard College* engage players in topics such as math and history through the use of embodied narrative. These surmount the cost and equipment barriers experienced by teachers. They might not be able to write or purchase a multimedia array to run a larp, but purchasing the rights to duplicate a game text, and making copies of character and world information for the students is practical. The suitability of an ARG or larp would be different depending on the organization offering it, be it a school, museum, municipality, NGO, neighborhood group, individuals or a company. Schools that have embraced rpg as a pedagogic tool, such as *Østerskov Efterskole* in Hobro, Denmark and the game based *Quest2Learn* in Manhattan, New York offer examples of the breadth of learning games can attain [see also Mark Hoge's essay in larp for learning here —ed.].

Games that embrace serious material, of historical or educational note, or of social or political import have been explored by communities such as the Nordic art larp scene. The book *Nordic Larp* documents the breadth of the games, but many such as *Ground Zero* set in a nuclear bomb shelter and *Europa* dealing with refugees in an alternate history setting tackle emotionally and intellectually challenging situations. These games hold the potential for opening up participants to understanding the experiences of others and re-orienting their political and social positions. *The Larp Writer Summer School* took these tools to Lithuania and Belarus to teach students how to craft narratives out of issues and stories important to them. Like any narrative or performative art form larp and ARG communicate and move viewers and participants. Live freeform games like *The Road Not Taken* vignettes of major life choices, *Drunk*, addressing alcoholism, and *Under my Skin* exploring relationships and fidelity, put the psychological exploration of emotions and problematic real world situations at the forefront. Intended for small groups of 3 up to 12 people, the intimate nature of the games creates an atmosphere appropriate to territory related to psychodrama and therapeutic role-play. If done with the awareness and knowledge that it is not a professionally supported setting, these games offer players unique opportunities for reflection.

## Inside and Outside

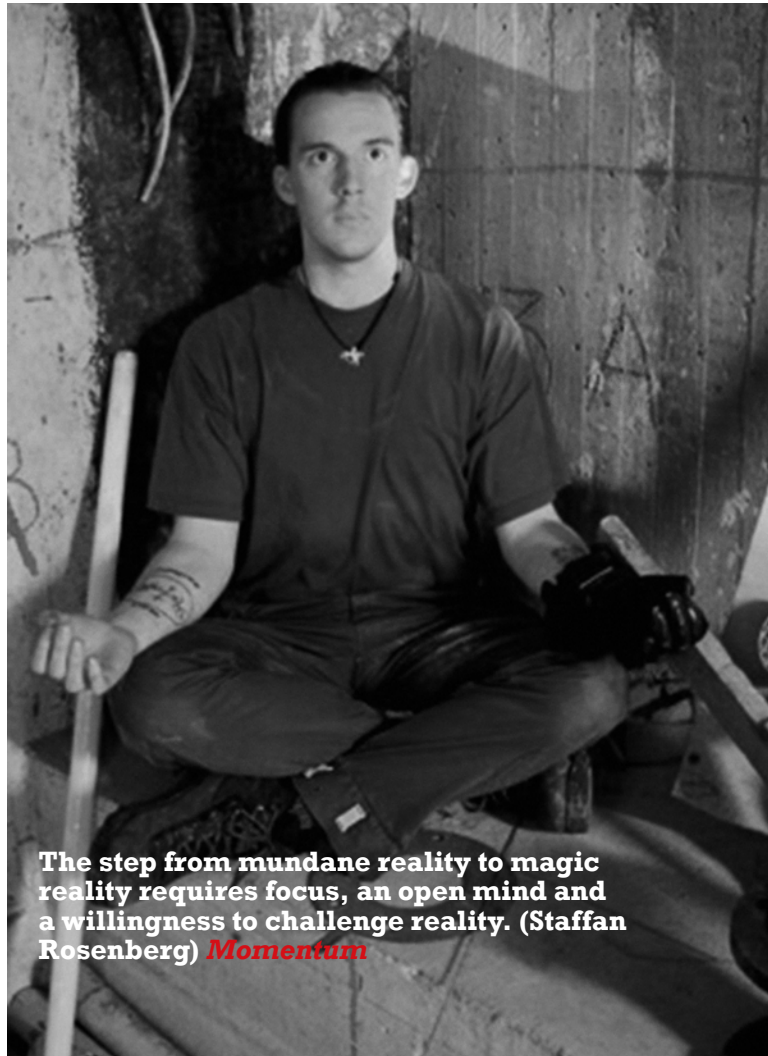
Live Action Role Playing games and Alternative Reality Games are related forms that can learn from one another but that have vastly different trajectories. A fundamental choice for each—scope of playing field—cascades into a panoply of differing experiences for participants. United by the use of live enactment of character actions, each structure provides an alibi for players to engage with a fictional world, but each places different constraints on the actions and imaginative interaction between player, world and game world. Both ARG and Larp engage players in a fictional setting, with challenges that must be overcome. But the two forms point in different directions, inside and outside.

The game designer and theorist Greg Costikyan defined games as generators of information that is given meaning by the context of the game itself. He said they are “structures of endogenous meaning.” (*Endo-* means “within,” *gen-* means “creating”.) However, ARGs commonly focus on exogenous meaning (*exo-* means “outside”), or provide players with real world elements which have meaning that is outside of the fictional confines of the game. Information found in a library about an ancient Egyptian kingdom contains that meaning independently of the game that may lead

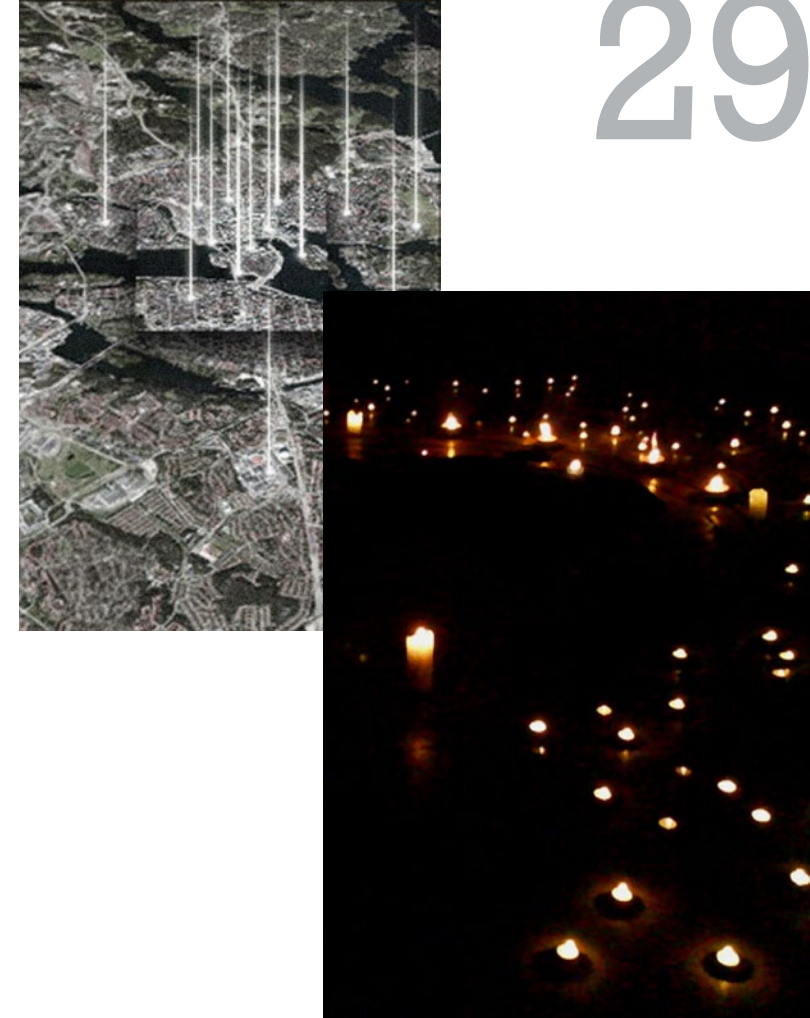
the players to hunt down this information. In fact, ARGs utilize exogenous meaning in order to help generate and motivate players to learn endogenous meaning that is part of the game. It is an inside and outside weaving that happens, piecing together the fragments of normal real life with the imaginative experience, into a vibrant crazy-quilt of something greater than both: the alternate reality.

Where ARG opens the player up to exogenous information, using game as a motivator for interaction with others and the real world, larps immerse a player in a fictional world. The players themselves consume and generate endogenous information and thus allow participants to empower the play of others. Larp gains educational power when it taps into information from the real world. And ARG gains depth of experience when it uses world and character embodiment. Both foster imagination and playfulness, hone player skills in different arenas, and challenge the player to move beyond their normal daily life and abilities.

The horizons are wide open with tools like these. We'll see what impact these forms have when they realize their full potential, and reach their broadest audiences.



The step from mundane reality to magic reality requires focus, an open mind and a willingness to challenge reality. (Staffan Rosenberg) *Momentum*



Top: Some of the nodes were situated in central Stockholm. *Momentum*

Bottom: The players held a commemorative mass in honor of their lost friends on the other side. *Momentum* (All photos Staffan Rosenberg)

## Further Reading:

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# Interview with Frank Rose

By Aaron Vanek

An excerpt from **Frank Rose's homepage bio**: *Frank Rose is a leading writer and speaker on digital culture. His most recent book, **The Art of Immersion: How the Digital Generation Is Remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the Way We Tell Stories**, shows how new forms of storytelling are emerging in response to the Internet. Sparked by his coverage of the shifting media landscape for Wired, it has been called “compelling” by the Guardian and “a new media bible” by La Republica of Rome. He provides frequent updates on the subject in his **Deep Media** blog.*  
He chatted with me for a few minutes via Skype.

**AV: Have you heard of live action role playing, or larps?**  
FR: Oh sure. I'm most familiar with live action storytelling in the ARG sense. I write about ARGs in my book *The Art of Immersion*. I first came across them around 2007 or so when I was a contributing editor at *Wired* and wrote a piece on ARGs that focused on **42 Entertainment** and their ARG for Nine Inch Nails *Year Zero*.  
I was taken with Jordan and Alex and Susan. I just thought it was a wonderful form of storytelling, something kind of unique and fascinating. Ultimately I came to realize this is something really pointing toward where things are going, I think. It's storytelling in the digital age. In fact it was that piece and experience, the *Year Zero* experience, that started me working on the book that became *The Art of Immersion*.  
I felt that there was a new form of storytelling that was emerging, but I didn't know about it, and that's why I did the book.

**What is the new form of storytelling?**  
I think the new form of storytelling is still emerging. It is still being invented. I realized when I was working on the book, every new medium has its own grammar of storytelling that is native to it. It typically takes a good 20 or 30 years for people to figure out what that is.  
Like with movies, the camera was invented in 1890, but it took until 1916 to have a movie that emerged that had the grammar of what we recognize as cinema. The grammar had to be invented.  
Now it's in the horseless carriage phase, when something is defined by the previous incarnation. Like automobiles weren't autos, they were carriages without horses. I think that we're just beginning to emerge from that phase.

**Can you define digital storytelling more?**  
It doesn't have to be digital. I think it is something that is informed by digital technology and the internet in particular.  
As I mentioned in the *New York Times* piece, immersive theater productions like *Sleep No More* and *Then She Fell* have a kind of immersive aspect to them that is really, really different from conventional theater, where you are removed from the action by a proscenium arch and you are in your seat and there is a clear distinction between the audience and the performers. One thing that tends to happen in the internet era of storytelling—whether [a story is] literally on the internet, or something like ARGs, or larps, or immersive theater productions—is these kind of rigid boundaries tend to be blurred, like between artist and audience, or performer and audience, or storyteller and audience.  
I tend to think that transmedia is not the goal. In my mind the goal is, what we've always wanted, is some sort of way to inhabit the story. I think that's what people have always wanted to do with stories that mean a lot to them.

What we’ve always wanted is some sort of way to inhabit the story.





# Physical interactions means physical limitations

By Elin Dalstål

**What do you see as the difference between passive entertainment, like television, and interactive entertainment, like ARGs?**

I think that's natural, too. In any given sort of story, there are people who will want to interact with it or take some sort of active participatory role, and there are people who would much rather sit back and watch it happen. I think that varies from person to person, from one time to another. Sometimes all you want to do is veg out, but that doesn't mean that's what you want to do all the time. It also varies from story to story. There might be one thing that interests and excites you and you take part in that, and others you engage with more on a superficial level.

I think that's a really critical thing to keep in mind, because you can't expect all people to be equally engaged in anything, and what we're talking about is engagement. In the 80s and 90's and before then, all you could do was passively watch TV. Now we have so many different options, but it doesn't mean we want to take advantage of them all the time.

**How will developing technology affect our ability to tell stories?**

I think at this point the idea is to experiment and see what works. Something like Google Glass is just at the very beginning of what that can do, and the technology is still quite primitive compared to what it will be in three or four or five years. Look at how cell phones have changed in the last few years. Miniaturization is going to have a profound effect to technologies like Google Glass. **Oculus Rift**—VR has been around for quite a while thanks to Jaron Lanier and others. What Oculus Rift has going for it is that the technology now exists to do the kind of thing that you could only do or execute in a crude manner 20-odd years ago.

Oculus Rift is great fun, it's an amazing experience. I think it's going to be like video games, like console games that depend on a controller. I think there is a certain number of people who will be comfortable with a controller, and some people will be comfortable with a VR headset, but it probably won't be the vast majority of people. But nonetheless, you can still get some pretty powerful stories with the Oculus Rift. Its really a remarkable experience to have.

**Author William Gibson famously said “The future is already here—it’s just not evenly distributed.” Do you agree with that?**

I do think we're in a time of transition, and one reason that it's taking a while for a new grammar of storytelling to develop is that the technology is still constantly racing ahead. It's not like things changed in 1991 with the birth of the Web and it has been that way ever since. Things are moving quite rapidly. Whereas 20 years ago, something like Oculus Rift, you could talk about it, but you can't do anything that was nearly that good. Now you actually can.

So yes, I think the future is arriving kind of unevenly for all of us, but the important thing is that it's still in the process of arriving, and no one knows precisely where it is going to go.

**How can these new ways of storytelling reach a mainstream audience?**

I don't think it's really feasible for larps. One thing that enables ARGs to have such a potentially wide audience—I guess you can call them the audience—is that they enable so many different levels of interactivity. With something like *Year Zero* or *The Dark Knight* ARG, you are able to kind of just follow along online, and you are able to take part in live events, and you are able to take part in problem solving online if you want to. You can communicate with other people or not as you like. There's just a number of different ways that you can participate, different levels of participation are possible.

One of the thing that you find [in ARGs] is that there is something like 80% or more of the audience who is basically following along, whereas the remaining 20% or so, and it varies from one experience to another, have different levels of participation. Some participate online, some may participate in treasure hunts and go to real world events that are happening.

Larps, in the sense of people acting out their characters and people taking the role of their characters, that's by nature a very participatory act, so I think that makes it more difficult to get anything like a mass audience for it.

**Thanks for talking to me.**

Thank you.

**L**arps are role-playing games where you interact with the physical world. This also means that when you larp you face physical limitations. These limitations can be unfair and excluding.

There are other types of role-playing games without physical elements, e.g., tabletop and computer games. In tabletop games you describe what the characters perceive and how the characters act. In computer games your character perception and actions are represented as sound and images on the screen. In larps, your own perceptions and your character perceptions overlap and you physically act out your character's actions.

This might seem like a small difference, but it's not. It fundamentally influences how you relate to the game and what challenges you face in the game media.

In tabletop games, your characters' experiences are defined by what the game master or the other players describe to you. During a larp your senses—what you see, hear, touch, smell and taste—are all part of the experience. The chill of the evening air, a gentle touch on your shoulder, or how your body aches after a long day of walking are all part of the game.

The interaction with the physical world acts as a complement to the players' imagination. For example, stumbling through the woods in the dark of night with someone on your trail can make it easier to imagine that an actual monster is chasing you. You use the physical perception to strengthen the experience.

But the physical aspect of larps comes at a cost: what you physically can experience in character will be shaped by what you can physically experience out of character.

I'm a 27-year old able-bodied woman that works out a lot and has a bunch of allergies. These are things that are related to my body and my abilities out of character, but not necessarily my characters. During a physical game, my body and my physical abilities affect what I can experience, how I'm perceived, and what actions I can take. In a non-physical game like a computer game, they don't have to.

If I want the physical experience I need to use my body and my physical abilities, but I will have to face the limitations they bring along. If I don't want physical limitations, I can play a game without physical aspects but then I will miss out on the physical experience.

We can't have our cake and eat it, too. The more you use your body as a tool, the more it will be a limitation.

I love physically challenging larps. I love running or sneaking through the forest, eating a meal in character,

and using touch to communicate intimacy. I love letting what I see, hear and feel be part of the game. But each way I physically interact with the game also adds out of character limitations.

Something as simple as eating a meal in character means that all the food restrictions that exist outside the game like allergies, religious dietary practices, health conditions, eating habits, etc, will affect the game, possibly in life-threatening ways.

If you have a game with a lot physical activity like a boffer larp, the players' health and actual fighting abilities will affect both their performance and their experience. A player facing the risk of an asthma attack during combat will have a different experience than someone who doesn't.

If touch is part of a larp, how comfortable a player is with touching will limit how that player character can interact with other characters.

If we perceive how the characters around us seem to be feeling through reading their body language, then how good a player is at reading body language out of character will affect how good the character is. And so on.

**During a larp  
your senses—  
what you see,  
hear, touch,  
smell and  
taste—are  
all part of the  
experience.**





For each physical aspect we include in a game, we also bring the limitations that come with it.

It gets even more complicated. If it was just a game design issue where having more of one element meant that you would have less of another, it would be fine.

But it's not. Each and every limitation has possible consequences when it comes to who can access the game and how. Physical limitations also tie into issues of accessibility and discrimination.

Let's say you run a larp in the forest where players need to be able to walk between camps on uneven forest trails. That will limit who can fully access the game. Some players might not be able to attend at all due to movement disabilities. Other players that might be able to attend could have a problem moving between camps.

If the organizers make bad design choices they can make the situation even worse. Let's say there are camps A, B and C in the forest. Camps A and B are the most accessible and camp C is located on top on a mountain and very hard to access. In which camp is best to hold the super important council meeting?

Most people agree that it probably is best to hold the council at camp A or B so that all players can easily attend it. But you might forget this aspect when you plan the game as an organizer. Perhaps camp C on top of the mountain looks really awesome and was chosen as meeting place for that reason. It's not like anyone thought *"Hey! Let's discriminate all players with movement disabilities or other conditions that affect their mountain climbing ability by placing an important event in a place they can't access!"* But the choice to place the meeting in the least accessible camp might still have that side effect, even though no one intended it.

If there's a mountain in the middle of the larp area, congratulations—just think about how you use it. If not all players will be able to climb to the top of the mountain, perhaps it's a good idea to avoid placing super important events there.

We can't organize larps where we have physical interaction and no physical limitations. They go hand in hand. We can't get around them. Larp as a medium is defined by its physical aspects, and the only way to get around the problem would be to have a larp with no physical aspects. A self-contradiction.

While we might not be able to get around it, we should address it, both as organizers and as participants.

When we design and organize games we need to consider in what ways we want the game to be physical,

and we need consider how the design choice affects the game's accessibility. We need to think through the design so we don't needlessly add discriminating elements.

As participants we can encourage and challenge the organizers to make diverse games. No single larp can fit everyone, but we can encourage organizers to run both indoor and outdoor games, games with lots of fighting and games with no fighting, games with no touching and games where touch is a part of play, and so on. No single game will reach 100% accessibility, but if the larp scene is diverse enough there will hopefully be a game for everyone.

If there are many different cakes around it is possible to both eat one cake yet have another, different cake, too. That is the only way we can have them both.

Larp is a physical medium. It has strengths and weaknesses. Physical experiences and physical limitations go hand in hand, and as a designers and participants we need to be aware of that.

**Elin Dalstål** is a feminist gaming blogger, freelance game writer, larp organizer and former board member of several gaming clubs. She lives in Luleå, Sweden, and has held seminars at Luleå University of Technology and at the Luleå Pride parade. She stated *larping and playing roleplaying games in 2002 and she views roleplaying games as one art form that can be expressed in different kind of media. Be it larp, tabletop, freeform playing over the internet or in some other cool yet to be explored media.*  
<http://www.gamingaswomen.com/>

# Changing Status in Larps

By John Kim

## Abstract

Status is a powerful and pervasive social force that is seen not only in strict social ranks but also in subtle cues like moving out of someone's way, showing embarrassment, moving about, or touching one's face. One of the more powerful devices within larp is the ability to change status among the players. However, often status within the larp is the same as status outside. Low-status players end up with characters who are not respected, even if the character is supposedly of high social rank. Changing this can deeply change the experience of the game for players.

The first step for implementing status changes is to examine status closely within games at play. With this in mind, making status truly a part of the game should include informing and cooperating with the players. I advise looking at how casting of roles works, especially in how parts are given to new players compared to established players known to the organizers. As the larp begins, there are several exercises that may help players to see and create their intended status. As the larp runs, we can look at how the mechanics may influence status.

## Defining Status

Social status is more easily perceived than defined. It is not the same thing as social rank. Status is about how people behave, and in particular who they defer to. For example, the official manager might defer to the smart employee who really knows what is going on. In that case, the employee is higher status. In many cases, status may be earned and/or deserved. In other cases, though, status is imposed by the social order.

The key to status is seeing how it is demonstrated. Status is demonstrated all the time, even in an interaction as simple as walking up and asking someone for the time. There are a host of signals that demonstrate status, many of them nonverbal.

## Recognizing Status

Those in higher status tend to exude a feeling of stillness and relaxation. They take their status for granted, and do not need to be aggressive. They may pause in speech and comfortably sustain the silence. A high status person is often not the person who acts bossy,

but rather the person who knows what is going on, and thus the one whom others turn to.

In contrast, those in lower status tend to exude a feeling of nervousness and movement. They may shift from foot to foot even when standing still, and may rub their hands together or touch their face.

In posture, higher status people have a wider area of personal space. They take up more room with their body, such as placing their feet further apart. In turn, they have less respect for the personal space of others. They make and sustain eye contact. Those in lower status have less personal space, and back away from others. They may stand with their arms drawn in or folded, and sit with their toes pointed inward and hands in their lap. They will frequently break eye contact, but still keep glancing back at the higher status person.

Of course, status is also demonstrated in more overt ways. Higher status people will control the course of events. They say what needs to be done, while lower status people will follow their lead.

## The Importance To Larp

These signals are important because within a larp, signals such as these tend to follow out-of-character status rather than in-character status. Even if a character has been established as a respected king, other players will not give the subtle signals that establish that character as higher status.

This mismatch could simply be accepted as a fact of play, or it could be corrected in two ways:

1. The organizers give players appropriate characters based on their out-of-character status.

or

2. The organizers show players how to act out status on an in-character basis, and encourage them to do so.

Approach #1 is problematic in many ways. It means that the organizers must predetermine what the status of different players are. This can reinforce not only the real existing status differences, but also any biases on the part of the organizers. In practice, many organizers assign high-status parts to players that they know and trust, which makes the larp less open to outsiders.







**Status relations in a vampire larp game. Used with permission from Sarah Bowman.**

Thus, this article is primarily about giving consideration to approach #2.

## How To Show Status

There are a variety of simple steps that players can take to show status within a game. What follows is a checklist of ideas for how to change your status or the status of others.

I used a similar checklist in a larp I designed called *Vikings & Skraelings: 1092*. For a larp about a meeting of cultures, each character had a status rank from 'a' to 'f.' The characters lined up according to their status. I then gave out the checklist of behaviors, and asked players to act out a few of them in an interaction with the neighbor on either side of them. This acted as a micro-workshop or warm-up exercise to the larp itself, and several players said they felt it helped.

Divided into categories, the checklist is as follows:

### Attitude And Posture

#### **To raise your own status:**

- Exude a feeling of stillness and relaxation
- Keep your head motionless as you speak
- Keep your hands away from your face
- Have no visible reaction to what others say

#### **To lower your status:**

- Exude a feeling of fumbling motion and nervousness
- Take up as little space as possible, without leaning forward
- When standing, shift weight from foot to foot
- When seated, swivel toes toward each other until they touch

### Verbal Signals

#### **To raise your own status:**

- Pause and comfortably sustain the silence
- Speak in complete sentences, short and direct
- Mention your personal achievements

#### **To lower another person's status:**

- Talk about your own problems as being more important than theirs
- Criticize, correct, or insult them
- Interrupt before you know what you will say, and ignore what they say
- Give them orders or disobey their orders
- Use their name frequently

#### **To lower your own status:**

- Answer quickly
- Use incomplete or rambling sentences
- Mention your failures or shortcomings

#### **To raise another person's status:**

- Ask for their opinion or their permission to do something
- Compliment them
- Apologize frequently
- Say that they were right and you were wrong

### Body Language

#### **To raise your own status:**

- Delay before reacting, and move smoothly
- Keep head motionless as you speak each phrase
- Keep your hands away from your face
- Hold eye contact for at least five seconds when speaking

#### **To lower another person's status:**

- Invade their personal space, or even push them around
- Touch their face or pat their head

#### **To lower your own status:**

- Nervously touch your own face or head
- Break eye contact quickly but keep peeking back
- Try to keep a distance from others

#### **To raise another person's status:**

- Bow or tip your hat to them, or back away from them
- Subtly imitate their mannerisms

## Potential Issue: Character Leaders

High status characters are generally leaders within the game, and may direct the game events to varying degrees. Many organizers worry that an unknown player in this position could cause problems for the game, since bad decisions by the leaders could make the game less fun for everyone. Therefore, they may prefer to give leader parts only to players they know are dependable. This tendency is similar to assigning based on out-of-character status, as better leaders is roughly synonymous with higher status.

There are a number of ways to mitigate this, primarily by the organizers giving guidance. Specifically, leaders could be given concrete ideas on what to do. Proactive leaders could change these, but those who struggle with leadership would have that support. On the other hand, players of followers should be given clear instructions on how to give status to the leaders.

## Potential Issue: Recognition

Status is part of what is rewarding about larp for players. A player may work hard on their costume, their mannerisms, their voice, and/or other aspects of character. Part of the reward for their effort is the recognition and respect that other players give them. This is often displayed in-game.

If players don't get in-game status for their efforts, there should be a clear out-of-game channel to replace this feedback. The more immediate the feedback, the more powerful it is as a motivator. For example, organiz-

ers could suggest ways to give out-of-character feedback, such as an agreed out-of-character sign to say "Good job!"

To go further, there could be a mechanic to give feedback, such as tokens that players give away OOC to others for good play. Tokens received could be used just as counters, or they could be traded in for out-of-character uses.

## Benefits

Despite these potential issues, I think there are many rewards to the idea of having explicit in-character status and helping players to demonstrate that status in play. It can deepen the feeling of a real social order that's different than the players' real one. It becomes a deeper change from the real world to the game world if the social order also changes. This can help reinforce character background and culture and open new possibilities of play that would not otherwise be explored.

I would be interested to hear about other attempts to explicitly direct status in the game, and will definitely be trying more in my own larps.

**John Kim** is an role-playing explorer who is interested in the broad range of RPGs, from Scandinavian larp to miniature-using skirmishes. He has been writing on RPG theory since 1995, starting on UseNet and his [website](#), and writing on larp theory since the adaptation of his *Threefold Model FAQ* for the 2003 *Knudepunkt* book. He works in K-12 education in the San Francisco Bay area, where he lives with his son.





# The standardized patient

By Natalie McCabe

*Live action role playing as an art form encapsulates more than just for fun fantasy larps. The medical industry uses simulations as part of their education and training, as does the military. The following essay is written by a woman who role-played as a standardized patient, i.e., a real human being with a fictionalized background and symptoms for prospective doctors and nurses to diagnose. This first-person report is included in the 2013 Wyrd Con Companion Book because it reveals the power of larping to expose our own prejudices and limits to perception.—Ed.*

Suppose you are a doctor faced with two patients (really actors) in a clinical simulation: one likely has a sexually-transmitted infection; one probably does not. One is a man who, though not a virgin, has a fairly safe sexual history. The other is a woman with little to no regard for protection coupled with a strong sexual appetite that may or may not be factors in her outward symptoms. Who would you diagnose with a potential sexually-transmitted infection (STI)? For whom would an STI and even an HIV/AIDS test be more appropriate? The woman, most likely.

But let us add details. The man has a stereotypically masculine appearance: muscular, wide shoulders, perhaps some facial hair, certainly not a pretty boy. He was born biologically male and is clearly comfortable in his masculine gender. He has been in a monogamous relationship in which both he and his partner have tested negative for HIV/AIDS multiple times and always use condoms. A scant few of his symptoms may be consistent with an autoimmune disorder; most are not. The woman appears disheveled and admits to having a new sexual partner more often than not but rarely uses any form of protection. She has colored vaginal discharge and acknowledges using drugs. Would you still give the same answer? In all likelihood, at least when faced with the facts, most people would repeat that the woman is more in need of an HIV/AIDS test than the man.

What if sexuality becomes a factor? The man is gay; the actor portraying him may be white or a minority. The woman is young, straight, and white. Does this change the diagnostic game? Do their performances of self- that is, their identified sexual preferences- alter their respective diagnoses? In theory, no. In reality, those in the medical field, particularly students, react as they have been trained to do in life, taking comfort

in the performances of “normal” social roles, such as that of the hard-partying straight young white girl, while simultaneously demonizing the “other”, who is practicing a lifestyle considered by some to be an abomination, regardless of any other information. In too many training cases, personal bias informs the doctor’s diagnosis: the gay male is encouraged to take an HIV/AIDS test while the straight patient, male or female, is not.

Medical students are taught to diagnose and treat patients objectively, based on their symptoms rather than outward appearance. However, gender and sexual roles performed for an audience of one, a doctor or medical student, can and do influence diagnoses and treatment plans in the world where exam rooms become medical theatres.

Fortunately, there is a remedy or at least a treatment that can be employed to thaw frozen biases. Standardized patients, or “fake patients” played by real people, help students of medicine, nursing, and other therapies “practice” without consequence (aside, perhaps, from failing a test). What follows details the collective experiences of myself and colleagues role-playing patients whose stories are based on actual clinical cases and how we helped to change the response of the doctor’s “audience of one” to those performing gender and sexual roles of “other”, outside the norms of modern society.

From December 2008 through the summer of 2011, I worked as a Standardized Patient, essentially a fake patient performing a medical case, complete with symptoms performed in a “standardized” fashion, for two Philadelphia universities. During that time, my colleagues and I performed a variety of (non-invasive) cases for medical, nursing, and therapy schools as well as national testing centers. I say “non-invasive” because we were not required to—nor would I—undergo actual procedures such as consecutive gynecological or rectal exams performed by nervous students whose shaky hands indicated that this was the first time they performed such procedures on live human beings. One school that hired regular standardized patients to undergo these invasive practices offered \$30 per hour, which was \$10 more than the otherwise “standardized” rate of \$20. I deemed the extra \$10 per hour as not near enough to have my genitals exposed on a screen in front of dozens of medical students and then be the first live person on whom the students themselves would practice examinations such as pap smears. I felt that there was no true room for error in that type of medical theatre and opted out of that form of “play.” The most “invasive”

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that exams got during my work in this occupation was gentle palpating on the abdomen and having my ears examined via otoscope. Typically, the schools hired people from outside companies for the more invasive exams and, other than that one medical school, paid significantly more for those who chose to participate.

During this work, I frequently found myself portraying women whose sexual pasts and other habits were deemed “risky.” Their histories included some or all of the following factors: many sexual partners, little to no protection, significant alcohol and drug use, etc.

Sometimes, my characters were gay; more often than not, they were straight or bisexual, which added pregnancy to the list of possible causes for whatever symptoms I was given—and I was usually given many, including stomach pain, vaginal discharge of multiple colors and odors (which, if asked, I described but did not show, as the aforementioned pap smears were not a part of the exam), colds or fevers, breathing issues, and more.

Others, namely male friends/colleagues, however, repeatedly played characters whose lives, habits, and symptoms were quite different, with perhaps the most notable difference being that they played gay or bisexual characters with more frequency.

Many times, my encounters occurred during medical students’ final course exams, in a sort of interactive theatre. Depending on the type of exam, the students might encounter between four to twelve patients in the university setting; they will later encounter a dozen patients in the test that both domestic and foreign-educated medical students must pass at one of five testing sites nationwide in order to practice medicine legally in the United States. They are aware that the patient is, in reality, an actor. They are given fifteen minutes to perform a complete medical and verbal exam and present a diagnosis and treatment plan. At the end of the encounter, the students are to give a summary of their diagnosis and exit the room. We standardized patients then fill out a chart recording exactly what they did or did not say, ask, or do, after which we have five minutes to fill out a questionnaire focusing on the more personal doctor-patient relationship.

After this, if in a university setting rather than a testing site, the students would commonly return to the room for one-on-one feedback directly regarding the doctor-patient relationship. As our job title suggests, even this feedback had a regimented form to ensure that students got the most equal treatment possible from each standardized patient. We were to give one piece of constructive feedback and one piece of positive feedback as well as a suggestion for their future encounters with patients. The constructive feedback came first in order to pacify jittery students waiting to hear what they did wrong—or at least what made the patient uncomfortable. Our feedback was loosely scripted, with room for our own feelings. The formula of our dialogue was to be, “When you did *a*, I felt *b*. When you did *x*, I felt *y*.” We had a list of what we dubbed “feeling words” to help us describe our emotional reactions to the students’ various behaviors and nuances.



**Every once in a while, the students would treat us with disdain because they knew that we were acting, though, ordinarily, the younger students would praise us, perhaps hoping for higher scores.**

sorry to hear that' when I mentioned my father's death, I felt cared for." "When you detailed what you thought my diagnosis was, why you felt that way, and what the next steps and tests were, I felt informed." We tried to lead the students into giving their own suggestions about how they could improve in order to help them think for themselves and evaluate situations quickly.

We could not give interpersonal feedback regarding the case itself, though that did not prevent the students from trying. Every once in a while, the students would treat us with disdain because they knew that we were acting, though, ordinarily, the younger students would praise us, perhaps hoping for higher scores. On one occasion, a particularly obnoxious medical student alarmed my proctors during the fifteen minutes of our encounter because he asked me to jump up and down on one foot while my character complained of severe abdominal pain indicative of appendicitis.

As mentioned, many of my characters were straight, and their symptoms were often highly indicative of some form of sexually-transmitted infection. Their carefree sexual lifestyles and drug habits increased this likelihood. Still, it was not 100% of the time I was given an STI diagnosis by a student. More notable for the purposes of this paper, the students rarely suggested that my character be given a test for HIV/AIDS. As part of one case during which I encountered twelve to sixteen students per day over the course of several days, only one or two students suggested this test, though the symptoms were stacked for this case in such a way that recommending an HIV/AIDS test was considered a "checklist item," one that the students would be penalized for not stating.

My proctors were puzzled. They monitored my encounters with the medical students on camera and felt that my performances were completely accurate. After all, they had trained me, essentially working as my directors, and knew exactly what I was capable of doing. I was giving the information precisely as directed and in the correct manner.

I postulate that my appearance and characters' sexuality factored heavily into the students' diagnoses and encounters with me. I am young and appear younger; at age 28, many people tell me that I look about age 16 sans makeup. Most of the time, my characters were straight. At present, straight young women—and, in particular, straight, white young women are rarely perceived in the media as experiencing sexually-transmitted infections or HIV/AIDS.

The belief that my appearance and sexuality factored into the students' diagnoses is supported by the experience of others. As mentioned in the introduction to this paper, one friend in particular played a character with a very safe sexual history, one who, along with his partner, had tested negative time and again for HIV/AIDS, was in a long, monogamous relationship, and always used protection. Still, the character was gay. His symptoms were mostly inconsistent with an autoimmune disorder. Yet, when interacting with that character, frequently, the students would advise testing for HIV/AIDS. Sometimes, this conclusion would come immediately after the character revealed his sexuality. At times this male actor portraying a gay character was advised to, and I quote, "cease being gay" and/or to "begin having sex with women for his health." Other times his honesty was doubted, whereas mine typically was not, no matter how disheveled, exhausted, or just plain out of it my character appeared.

The fact that students both at well-respected universities and at testing sites, paying a significant amount of money to take an exam determining their eligibility to practice medicine in the United States still made the biased assumption that a gay man must only have HIV/AIDS points to the need for more standardized patient work in national and international universities and a greater need for interactive theatre with the medical field in an increasingly media-oriented age. Through this work, the students learned to truly listen to their patients, rather than evaluating them based on a few facts and appearances. By working with role-players, people whose jobs are to listen to and influence the "other," medical and nursing students as well as those studying to be therapists can better learn to respond to the specific needs of their patients in an increasingly expensive—and thus consumer-oriented—medical field.

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Criticism varied widely. Normally, though, finding just one piece of constructive criticism was tricky. Sample criticisms included: "When you raised your eyebrows when I mentioned that I smoked, I felt judged." "When you kept tapping your pen on your knee and swiveling in the chair, I felt distracted." "When you gasped when I mentioned my discharge, I felt scared." Similarly, positive feedback varied and, as examples, included: "When you put your hand on my shoulder and said, 'It's going to be okay; I am going to get to the bottom of this,' I felt reassured." "When you said, 'I'm



# The larp legacy of Innocent Zhukov

By Yaroslav Kot

Not the sun, not stars, not mountains, not the sea, not the clear sky, not the read dawns, not beasts, not birds, not faces of people, not the body, is the most beautiful what is in the world and in the art – but the Soul of the Man.<sup>1</sup>

The legacy of Innocent N. Zhukov (1875–1948) has many dimensions. Some remember him as an ideologue of Russian scouting and a scout leader<sup>2</sup>; others will remember him as the only person in history who got the official title of “Russian Pioneer in Chief” and will link him with the creation of the Pioneer organization RSFSR<sup>3</sup>. Others remember him as a science fiction writer<sup>4</sup>, a poet<sup>5</sup>, or as an outstanding sculptor of his time<sup>6</sup>. And still others know him as a famous Esperantist<sup>7</sup>.

In the beginning of 20th century, Innocent Zhukov was very popular both in his home country, Russia, and abroad<sup>8</sup>.



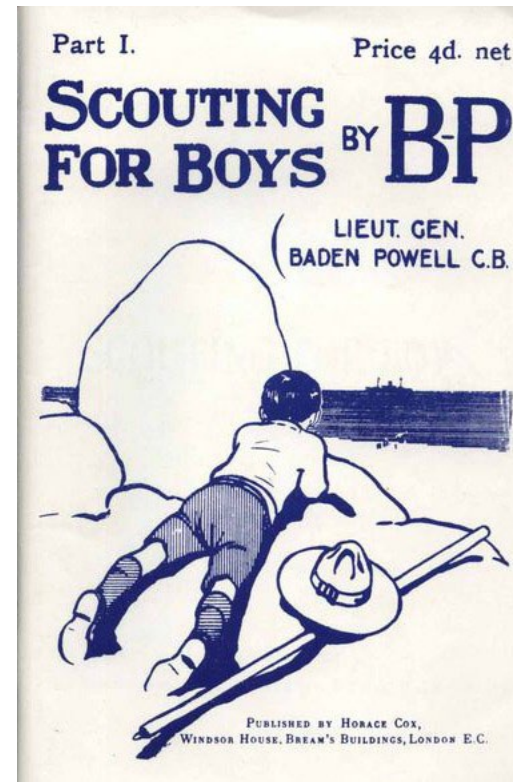
**Innocent Nikolayevich Zhukov (17 October 1885– 5 November 1948 )**

He corresponded with colleagues and Scoutmasters, parents and children, while government and public figures consulted with him. As an educator, Innocent Nikolayevich Zhukov demonstrated unparalleled ingenuity and propensity to innovate. Yes, he was a unique sculptor and a talented teacher, but what we are interested in particular is the fact that before 1920 he became an active promoter of a new heuristic teaching educational system—the so-called “long larp game.”<sup>9</sup> Yes, indeed! He discovered larp as teaching tool and brought it to the classrooms of the Russian Empire and then the USSR.

By his own account, he first thought of this system in 1912 when in his travels through Europe, he learned about an interesting experience of the Canadian naturalist, artist, and writer Ernest Thompson Seton and the British intelligence officer Robert Baden-Powell on the organization of a new form of theatrical game. These gentlemen gave children characters and quests of imaginary significance to complete. They had to abide by rules and could “level up” within a game setting. In 1900 Seton, identifying certain trends in the gaming preferences of children of specific age groups, decided to offer children 8-15 years old an original role model: an Indian hunter. At his estate he organized a game camp based on the rules of Indian life. Thus choosing a model character endowed with qualities and characteristics that the coordinator of the game considered most desirable, and which by virtue of their occupation was most familiar and matched the plot and surroundings and by following the most significant entertainment trends and interests of the target group, Seton formed a role-playing game. The successful experience of the writer led him to develop a special program and model of organized children's role-play. In 1902, a series of articles marked the beginning of a new system: “Seton's Indians”. The success of the idea motivated Seton to develop it further. In 1906 he wrote a handbook called **The Birch-bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians—Containing their Constitution**,

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<sup>9</sup> Российская педагогическая энциклопедия в 2-х томах, том 1, БРЭ, Москва, 1993. — стр. 310.



**The cover of the first book on Boy Scouts by Lieutenant-General Robert Baden-Powell (1908)**

**Laws, Games, and Deeds**, published in 1907, which defined the goals, methods, skills and content of the proposed social roles.<sup>10</sup> The impact and effectiveness of teaching using this approach were praised by British Lieutenant-General Robert Baden-Powell, author of a textbook for military intelligence.

After analyzing “The Birch-bark Roll of the Woodcraft Indians”, Baden-Powell met with Seton. Borrowing Seton's idea, he then militarized it to his own preference. In 1908, Baden-Powell published the textbook **Scouting for Boys**. Backed by the popularity of the author, the idea caught on, first in Britain and then in other countries. One of its first readers was the Russian Emperor Nikolai the Second, who ordered its translation into Russian. Both Baden-Powell and Nikolai II saw that playing a role is a way to learn through empathy, and during such games children learn the roles they play and those roles become part of them.

Starting in 1914, Zhukov begins to implement and experiment with role-playing techniques. I. N. Tyazhelev, a School Inspector, notes that Zhukov was always working on the organization of different role-playing games: modeling a ship, allow children to play the cabinet of ministers, create an interactive theater, etc<sup>11</sup>. Then he began to publish his first role-playing games, or as they called them then, “imitative long games.”

As Zhukov puts it, “In 1918, in Chita, I accidentally found and then launched the game Expeditionary Corps

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<sup>10</sup> Кудряшов Ю. В. Российское скаутское движение . - Архангельск : Изд-во Помор. гос. ун-та, 1997. -- С. 296-297 (393,[34] с.)

<sup>11</sup> Центральный государственный архив РФ, ф.298, оп.1, д.44, л. 68

(EC), the roleplaying game for children aged 10-14. The game [was] attended by over 700 children”.<sup>12</sup>

According to his articles the situation was as follows: as a geography teacher he was telling children about how **Henry Morton Stanley**, with a hundred porters, crossed Africa from coast to coast. All the sorrows of this journey he described so vividly that the children's eyes sparkled with excitement. Finishing the story, he succumbed to an impulse of the moment and unexpectedly offered to role-play explorers. All the children agreed, and Zhukov went home to ponder the rules and setting of such a game. Over the next week he went through all the schools in Chita, and with permission of the administration he gathered fourth grade students and told them the idea. Repeating the short story about Stanley, he asked them to play explorers and make an expeditionary corps: “....So, guys, I declare myself the Head of the expedition, or even the whole Expeditionary Corps (E.C.), as we will have many, perhaps a few hundred people who will participate in a year or two in our great journey through the Trans-Baikal region. This spring and summer, and the following spring and summer, we will only train.”<sup>13</sup>

He mentioned that the E.C. would have whole teams of botanists, geologists, zoologists, cooks, scouts, engineers, fishermen, hunters, shoemakers, musicians, grooms, and other units.

A month later, with the assistance of the editors of Duma Transbaikal Teachers, he published a test program in a little book. For the foundation he asked students to actively accumulate information on nature—to identify ten species of plants in the Trans-Baikal region, ten insects, ten species of bird, ten wild animals, ten fish, and so on. To be able to talk about their lives or, “his ability to care for the horses, some of the signs of their disease and how to treat them.” The final exam was held a month later. “And I must say that the guys did not spend this month in vain. Many of them brought considerable distress to parents, pestering [them] with questions about the five constellations, the planets, the sun and the moon. Parents were not always well-versed in these matters, so they had to go to the bookstore and get a book on astronomy. And, needless to say, the future ‘scouts EC’, avid as mites, were digging into these books.”

The same thing happened with the future “chefs EC,” as some began to spin underfoot in the kitchen, nagging adults with questions about the dishes that were required for the program. Botanists dug in to definitions and assaulted teachers with questions. Future fishermen

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<sup>12</sup> Жуков И.Н. Экспедиционный корпус // «Народное просвещение», 1923. № 6. С. 43.

<sup>13</sup> Жукова И.Н. Экспедиционный корпус // «Народное просвещение», 1923. № 6. С. 43-48.

1. Жуков, Иннокентий. Замок души моей: поэма. — Изд. В. Л. Древс, Москва, 1913. — 2 с. (51с. )

2. Богуславский, М. «Иннокентий Жуков - «Отец» русских скаутов» // Лидеры образования. - 2002. - № 3. - С. 44-46

3. А. В. Луначарский. Иннокентий Жуков. — «Красная нива», № 19, 1926. - 26 с.

4. Жуков Иннокентий Николаевич //Энциклопедия фантастики: Кто есть кто /Под ред. Вл. Гакова. - Минск: ИКО «Галаксиас», 1995. С. 237.

5. Жуков, Иннокентий. Замок души моей: поэма. — Изд. В. Л. Древс, Москва, 1913. — 2 с. (51с. )

6. Горбунова, Л.В. Скульптор Иннокентий Жуков. - Иркутск, Восточно-Сибирское изд-во, 1977. — 126 с.

7 Enciklopedio de Esperanto, 1-a eldono, vol. 2, p.592. — Budapeŝt, 1933-34.

8 N.V. Nekrasov. Skulptisto-fantaziulo Inocento Ĵukov. — «Sennacieca Revuo», № 9 (45), januaro 1927, pp.139-143; Starr, Mark. The sculptor of the revolution. — «The new leader», 4 nov., 1927.



and hunters searched for adult fishermen and hunters in the city, trying to get the information they needed about the ten species, and how to fish and hunt them. When in a month the garden tests for the game were held, it was evident that the whole mass of boys did an enormous job. There were many attempted trials for admission into several groups.

As the basis of these excursions he used the method of group competition (which is described in the article of the same name in the “Bulletin of the Enlightenment” N1, 1921). During the game, two big problems manifested: the high cost of shoes, and a civil war. “The first hurdle was felt by me in April. In the schools, and often on the street, I had been asked or complained to, ‘talk to my mother... she does not want to let me... she says you will wreck my boots.’ ” After the first few trips, the number of such appeals increased. A shoe shortage in 1918 was particularly acute. Players started skipping meetings. But the first hurdle still had not been able to completely paralyze the experience. The second problem, though, was much more serious. In May 1918, the Russian civil war raged from day to day, and a large group of children could be mistaken for members of the “White Army,” the anti-Bolshevik forces—and could possibly be fired at. The EC had to be disbanded.

Zhukov wrote about his experience: “...But I know that if I or someone else in Chita or elsewhere would try again to resume this long-term serious game, the EC would especially have to rely on the sympathy and assistance [of the] Department of Education. [With that], the results would be even more satisfying. This game barely touches the mighty power of nature in the child’s mind—atavistic instinct of vagrancy, immediately turned to the game of children across the city. To make this game even more colorful and attractive, to fulfill its social and altruistic aspirations, elements of political education and labor processes [should be included]—whether it means, on one hand, to come to the aid of schools which languish under the weight of economic disruption, or whether it means to be some new educational system based on a biogenetic theory and use group competition as a method of education and educational work...”<sup>14</sup>

By many accounts we can conclude that the effect of the use of such a larp method had great motivational emphasis to children. The dry science and raw information became the flavor, the color in their lives. The possibility to emerge into the journey of a favorite character, or to adopt their favorite profession, was able to pull even the laziest through the difficulties of learning and added the knowledge acquired to the soul.

Several years later, inspired by the ideas of Zhukov, some teachers held a game of EC, with about 2,000 participants.

14. Жукова И.Н. Экспедиционный корпус // «Народное просвещение», 1923. № 6. С. 48



**A group of children with their teacher, playing larp (1920s)**

These interactive role-playing scenarios, which were published in his anthology “New Staging”<sup>15</sup>, did not require complicated sets and were the result of efforts of teachers and students of the 2nd school [middle school] to raise moral issues. Here are some of Zhukov’s articles on using imitative live games: “School and two ways of education” (1917), “Social education in the village” (1918), “Homeland and scouting” (1918), “New foundations of social education” (1921), etc. This pedagogical heritage of I. N. Zhukov has long been unfairly consigned to oblivion, even though many of its proposals for the reorganization of schools are still relevant.

Reading some excerpts from his article “School and two ways of education,” it may seem that he wrote it not 100 years ago, but recently:

...At the onset of the storm and the terrible iron time, among the issues of paramount importance to us is one to rebuild the school: the institution turned into a musty bureaucratic ward, we have to make it more free and democratic.

What was the essence of the old school? Only one answer: its rationalist, primarily educational tasks. Issues of upbringing did not play a significant role in it. Multidisciplinary, squeezed in a vice of the program, even its good intentions could lack time given for any significant attention.

The dominance of the educational objectives of the school must be put to a decisive limit! With particular strength and perseverance we must nominate and implement objectives of personality education in school.

We ask: what does modern school do in order to develop the character of young people, their strong will and perseverance?

Only one answer: almost nothing. The character of our children is influenced by totally random living conditions.

15. Жуков И.Н. Новые инсценировки. Чита, 1919. 24 с.

What the school did and does in order to develop young people’s sense of courage, resourcefulness, agility, observation? Nothing at all: everything, as the development of the senses, is a matter of external random contingencies.

And finally, what does the school do to wake in young people a sense of duty and honor, and create a habit of active altruism?

The school has no time for it....

In this article, he argued the need for the introduction of role-playing elements in education: “...No one will deny that one of the main features of childhood is imitation. A more vivid form is expressed in pre-school children. All their games, whether playing with dolls for girls or a variety of games for boys, all these games are actually imitations of adult role models.

“Modern education of children of preschool age is trying to use the games, these indestructible motion of child’s soul, giving them a systematic pedagogical character...”<sup>16</sup>

Demonstrating the effectiveness of his own experience and the experience of the Boy Scout organization, Zhukov said that lengthy role-playing games are different from common games. First of all, they are not random and short-term, but long-term or even permanent. Secondly, in them the game is serious, merging itself with life.

He identified two main types of this great educative larp. To the first of them belong the larps, which are based on imitation of adult contemporary citizens. This type of game was carried out regularly as “School of the Republic” and “all kinds of children’s clubs.”

The purpose of “school republics” Zhukov was the practical introduction of school youth to the political system in which they will then have to live.

The “School Cabinet of Ministers and other elected officials” developed in young people a sense of responsibility for others and for the cause to which they serve, as well as public speaking and organizational skills, “so necessary in free democratic countries.”

The School Ministry of Labor, for example, had various kinds of workshops, gardens, and plantations. They were doing everything possible to appropriate the labor of young citizens to the Republic of the school.

The Ministry of Justice instilled into the consciousness of the young citizens legal norms and relations. Interestingly, the most important bills to be debated in Parliament could at the same time can be discussed in school assemblies. Thus already on the school bench young citizens were getting fully acquainted with the laws under the auspices of which they would have to

16. «Игра и детское движение. И. Н. Жуков - в помощь организаторам детского движения и педагогам». Сборник. Сост. Руденко И.В. Москва, НПЦ ЦС СПО (ФДО), 1992 г.

live and work. In addition, this way they learned to be active in the political life of their country.

The School Ministry of Education promoted self-education. Department of Physical Health arranged all kinds of sports, gymnastic games, and so on.

On a more modest scale, the imitative needs of young souls appeared in “children’s clubs”, “houses of youth” and “youth leagues.”

As already mentioned, these types of game organizations were based on the imitation of adults and their social activities.

Of the games of the second type, Zhukov said that they are also based on “imitative properties of the young soul,” though they do not imitate adults and citizens in general, but instead imitate favorite heroes of books, or a certain type of character.

Innocent Nikolaevich wrote “...A young soul over the age of 12 is full of idealistic, romantic impulses. It craves adventure, coupled with a threat to life, whether it’s saving someone anywhere. It inevitably involves wandering in a primitive nature, full of poetry, moonlit nights, camping in the woods or on the shore of the river, crackling evening fire—fading voices at night.”

As examples he mentioned “Seton’s Indians,” “Pathfinders” (Boy Scouts), the English “Boys’ Brigade” and Christian Youth Unions. He proposed the creation of an ambitious international educational game, The Young Scouts: “Not military intelligence, as it is sometimes understood by the people not knowledgeable enough, but ‘scouts’ in the sense of the pioneers of culture, intelligence, and good cause. Young knights who are exploring all roads of life for someone who is in need of their help.”

Zhukov paid special attention to the fact that in all civilized countries, this movement was taken under the patronage of prominent statesmen and public figures.

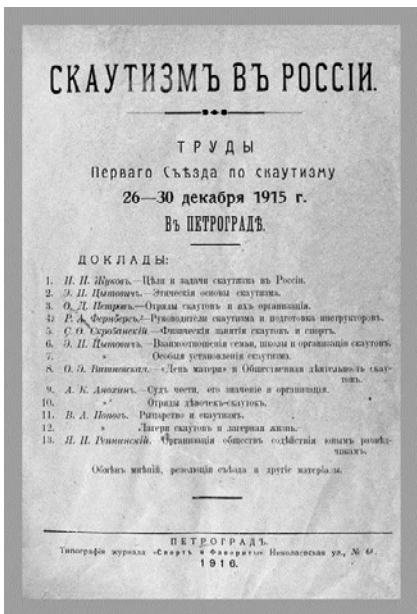
In the United States at that time, each membership ID of a scout had the signature of three presidents: Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson—each members of the Advisory Committee, the supreme body of the organization.

This brings us to the next interesting stage—the largest role-playing game conceived by Zhukov.

In 1919, the Second Russian conference of the Kom-somol Organization made a statement “on physical education and scouting” in which they decided on the immediate dissolution of all existing Soviet Union Boy Scout organizations. But Innocent Nikolaevich continued to hope that the issue of scouting could be reexamined. “Freed from bourgeois political tendencies, Boy Scouting can be recognized by the People’s Commissariat on Enlightenment (the Ministry of Education in those times) as a new form of social education. My reports on the subject were taken with great interests among educators”<sup>17</sup>.

17. Жуков И.Н. Новые основы социального воспитания // Вестник просвещения, 1921. №2. С. 6 (36 с.)





Left to right:  
The cover of the book on the larp “Expedition Unit”. (Republished from articles in 1921)  
“Scouting in Russia: Proceedings of the First Congress of Scout on 26-30 December 1915 in Petrograd”. —Petrograd, “Sport and favorites”, 1916, with the article by Zhukov.  
The page from the draft of his report “Pedagogical paradoxes and forecasts of future pedagogy” (Moscow, 1922), where Zhukov described his proposal of creating a staff position at the People’s Commissariat of Robinson Crusoe and his assistant Friday.  
The cover of the science fiction book (edularp scenario base) by Zhukov “The adventures of pioneers in Egypt” (1926)  
The cover of science fiction book (edularp scenario base) by Zhukov “The voyage of the pioneer’s team “Red Star” in to the land of Wander” (1924)

In 1921 Zhukov gave a series of reports at the Assemblies in the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment about the organization of a children’s movement based on a long-term role-playing game. He singled out the following components of the game:

- **plot and its development throughout the game**—that is also significant part of larp design now, but here Zhukov was going to use the model of knightly service to the community and the search for adventure. By modern accounts it would be a limited experience, because there are many alignments available to choose from nowadays. But he believed that whatever we play, the role shapes us as a person, especially in childhood.
- **conventions of the game**—circumstances on which children depend, the requirements he set upon adults, the uniqueness of the language of communication, gaming attributes and accessories—group symbolism, banners, the ability to evolve, etc—all which help us even today to model fiction and to believe the unbelievable.
- **symbolism of the game**—aimed at the creation of an emotionally intense atmosphere of active life in an educational institution. The symbolism of the game was a condition and means of adopting and strengthening the cultural values of children. In-game culture helped then and helps today as well to make imaginary models living worlds.

- **Strict compliance with the terms of the long-term role-playing game**—to comply with the ideals, tastes, interests and needs of children; to correspond with the objectives of education and educational activities of educational institutions; the ability to create space for free improvisation and to have reasonable rules that do not infringe upon the dignity of children. Basically, what we usually do while GMing.
- **The content of the game** should include game fundamentals, game plots and roles, based on interaction between children and adults to implement the ideas and meanings of the game. And that remains a desired principle of a larp today.

“What games can be considered long-term? It can last for a week, a month, a school semester. There are games designed for one year, and some designed for few years.”  
Zhukov was trying to bring attention to the educational system, which effectively used the special qualities of each child’s age, or developmental stage. In a debate with N. K. Krupskaya, he urged against using certain methods of scouting, but to take the whole system entirely, “clearing from the historic debris.”<sup>18</sup>  
It seems that Zhukov demonstrated some inconsistency in upholding the individual methods in one moment and the whole system in another, yet it could be explained .....

18. Жуков И. Н. Отзыв на книжку Н. К. Крупской «РКСМ и бойскаутизм»// Юный коммунист.— 1922. - № 10-12

by the contradictory nature of the prevailing era. He was a categorical opponent of the politicization of the game, and of statesmen using this system as their tool. Zhukov proposed to tolerate religious children, and the government declared a war against religion. Innocent Nikolaevich tried to combine the interests and needs of children and the needs of the state.

So, after passing through the filter of the new government plan, Zhukov’s project turned into the massive Pioneer movement.

However, in his future diaries Zhukov said: “Since 1923, I was distanced from the Pioneer movement. Moreover, young members of Komsomol who knew me personally, treated me coldly as the employee of capitalistic boy scouting, and showed no initiative to bring me closer to the work created by me.”<sup>19</sup>

The interpretation of the socio-pedagogical potential of long form role-playing games by Zhukov is clearly beyond the scope of Scouting. In it, he saw something more: youth movement as a means of forming a child’s image of man, humanist and internationalist, using the resources of children in suitably exciting forms. Pedagogical ideas, projects, and forecasts presented in the works of Innocent Zhukov is a serious methodological, theoretical and technical basis for understanding the nature and essence of the modern domestic larp movement.

19. Жуков И. Н. Скаутизм и социализм. 1927.





# Experiential Learning for Youth Through Larps and RPGs

By Mark Hoge



I've been a fan of role-playing games (RPGs) since I was introduced to *Dungeons and Dragons*™ in the late 70's. As a teen, RPGs gave me a creative and social outlet I couldn't find anywhere else. Throughout my 20's I played various RPGs as a hobby, and during that time I spent most of my summers working with children at camps and apprenticing with inspiring teachers.

When I discovered live action role playing games in the late 80's, I recognized their potential as an experiential learning tool for kids and teens. While directing summer camps from 1990-1994, I experimented with a simple Native American-themed larps using foam spears, daggers, and arrows. The impact on those kids made it clear to me that a well-run larp or RPG can challenge kids in diverse ways—physically, intellectually, socially, morally, and ethically. The youth were passionately engaged in the larp. They learned a lot about themselves and others. I discovered then that role-playing is an incredible tool for learning cooperation, teamwork, decision-making, creative problem-solving, and self-esteem. Larps, run in a certain style, encourage and support self-confidence, cooperation, critical thinking, and communication skills, and the kids have a blast!

I moved to Boulder in 1995 and founded Renaissance Adventures with the dream to lead quests and inspire youth to learn through play. Since then, I've worked with hundreds of adult leaders and thousands of children and teens, co-creating a fun and inspiring experiential learning program through larps and tabletop RPGs.

Over the last twenty-two years of developing larp experiential learning programs, I've seen what works and what doesn't. Listed below are a few of my discoveries.

## ***1. Participants learn when they are wholeheartedly engaged***

Larps and RPGs have the potential to offer an exciting, engaging story that captures the attention and passion of participants. You can do this by including the following elements:

- Design the adventure to have a highly motivating plot—great tragedy will befall if the players do not act swiftly and effectively.
- Make it personal by passionately role-playing those who are in need of aid, and potentially by tying the story into the personal history or actions of one or more players. Find ways for each player character to feel that they matter and they are needed on the quest.

## ***2. Participants learn when they have frequent, impactful decision-making opportunities***

Larps and RPGs offer frequent decision-making opportunities that have a large effect on the characters, world, and story.

Quest Leaders (QLs—aka Referees or GMs) can hold a framework for the adventure, but must be flexible to allow co-creation by the players' decisions. When players' decisions clearly affect the storyline, they realize how important decisions are. This educates the players in the power of decisions, and gives them a very real sense of personal empowerment in all aspects of their life.

Players learn by experiencing the in-game consequences of their decisions while feeling safe to experiment, explore, and make poor decisions without real-world negative consequences. When a poor decision

affects the storyline negatively, the players experience the effects and learn from mistakes without any real-world consequences.

In seeing how a well-crafted larp is different than most standard RPGs, consider the old-school gaming model of “dungeon crawls.” The plot is often the same: open the door to the north; slay the evil monsters; get the loot; level up your powers; repeat. Not many decisions need to be made in that kind of adventure. Now compare it with a more complex situation that involves different political realms, races, and the conflicting needs and goals of diverse people. This more complex and realistic way of setting a storyline fuels an amazing, dynamic environment that requires creative problem-solving, ethical decision making, planning, and teamwork among the players.

For example: The Ridgeback Dwarves tell tales of how the goblins of the Amber Forest are vicious, cruel murderers. When the Questers investigate, they discover that the goblins are simply protecting their harvesting ground from the dwarves' wood-cutting forays. The goblins eat the fruit that grow on the trees and hunt squirrels. The dwarves need wood for their forges and hearth homes.

The example above is not complex—it is a very simple example. However, it gives the players the opportunity to perceive what's really going on and to try to come up with a win-win negotiation for both races. A few solutions seem obvious when the goals are spelled out so clearly, but of course, learning the goals and motivations are a part of the learning process and the fun of the quest. If the players do not attempt to learn what is going on and think beyond what they are told by the Ridgeback Dwarves, they may charge in to slay the “murderous” goblins, akin to the typical old-school gaming model. The consequences for this blindly simple action—slaying the goblins—will create consequences that the players and dwarves must face. Perhaps a few goblin survivors escape and rally other, fiercer goblin tribes to take back the Amber Forest and hunt down the players in retaliation. Just think of the multitudes of lessons that participants can learn with this scenario.

## ***3. Participants learn when faced with diverse, tough challenges***

Experiential learning that includes larps and RPGs help develop critical thinking skills and creative problem-solving skills by exposing participants to mysteries, riddles, puzzles, and ethical dilemmas. In this way, participants:

Learn how to brainstorm ideas and share feelings. Understand that you learn more by doing and from mistakes, and these “mistakes” are easily handled with acceptance and a light-heart. In fact, very often

“mistakes” in a quest add to the drama and ultimately increase the feeling of shared victory when the quest is successful.

Develop cooperation, teamwork, and communication skills through challenges that require the players to invest in each other's unique perspectives and powers, both in-game and personally. Every player, as well as the character each participant plays, has unique skill-sets and perspectives that the team needs. When appropriate, facilitate the group to hear each participant's perspective, and to make a decision together as a group, not as one boss ordering the rest to follow.

Children often let their emotions create an “us versus them” structure of morality. The mentality for many kids is: if a classmate takes a toy, the classmate should be punished immediately and severely. If a villain attacks a village, the villain is evil and must be killed. Larps can reveal that most “villainous” motivations should not be viewed in such a black-and-white dichotomy. Villains do not need to be evil, and morality does not need to be portrayed as absolute. Instead, the so-called villains in a quest have complex motivations and goals. This makes for better storytelling and it makes for a better lesson. Astute Questers can puzzle out the true motivations of the characters they meet, and by seeking the best means of resolving a conflict, they can enact unique and creative solutions to the dilemmas they face in the quest and on the playground. This kind of discernment, and the resulting negotiations and problem-solving, translate into skills the players can use in real-life challenges outside of the game.

## ***4. Participants learn when supported by a physically and emotionally safe environment***

When the QLs and larp support an environment that is physically and emotionally safe, players can relax, engage, play, and learn. Physical safety is straightforward—if you are sword dueling with foam Swashers, point out potential hazards (such as rocks and trees), and get an agreement from the participants to follow the Swasher dueling safety rules.

Emotional safety takes a lot of experience and skill to support. If players are bullying, name-calling, taunting, putting down other people's ideas, or teasing, then everyone in the group may not feel safe unless that behavior is dealt with swiftly, clearly, and with compassion and fairness. How to do that is a complex subject that is beyond the scope of this article—Renaissance Adventures has developed a program called *Inspiring Invitations*™, which explores this issue.

However, here are some tips:

- Be a role-model of non-authoritarian and non-coercive leadership. Remember that everyone



is entitled to the same rights, respect, and control over their lives. Be genuine in your interaction. Look people in the eyes, listen to them, and respond with fairness, compassion, and a light heart.

- Help everyone feel respected and heard when facilitating conflict resolution. Be alert to the bully-victim dynamic. Consider the possibility that almost everything expressed in a negative way is actually a request for help. If someone is playing the “bully” role in a conflict, it is often the case that they are subconsciously asking for help. People have different unconscious defensive strategies—some attack, some withdraw, some complain or whine, etc. Therefore, don’t judge, criticize, or take sides. In all but the most severe cases of conflict, maintain a no-fault, no-blame attitude, allowing individuals to change their decisions by learning from their choices without coercion.
- Develop the skill of giving consequences rather than exacting “punishments.” In my opinion, this is probably the most important conflict resolution tool I know. While what follows are some ways to portray consequences, the full method is beyond the scope of this article.
- Make an agreement on safe behavior. If that agreement is broken, have a heart-to-heart talk about it.
- Make sure each person understands what is safe, what is not safe, and why. Again, get agreements. If they are broken again there is no punishment, but now it’s time to decide on what the consequence will be if the safety rules are broken a third time.
- Make consequences fair and clear. See if everyone involved can determine and agree upon the potential consequences for the next safety break. If the agreements are broken again, give the consequence, let them know what the next consequence will be, and tell them what you need from them to lift the current consequence.
- If you can understand how to give consequences in a fair, respectful, and firm way then your relations with people will transform, and you’ll find yourself with much less frustration.

## 5. The difference between Larps and RPGs in experiential education

Both larps and RPGs provide great opportunities for learning. If you are willing, I have found that larping is a superior tool for experiential learning because, rather than sitting and rolling dice, participants are running around, swinging Swasher swords, throwing beanbag spell packets, and acting out their characters

in an embodied, expressive way. That level of physical engagement and kinesthetic learning vastly increases emotional engagement and holistic learning. At Renaissance Adventures, we run our *Adventure Quest*™ larps differently than most adult larps—our approach is more similar to how tabletop RPGs are run. One QL facilitates the adventure for a group of 4-6 players (Questers). The QL play-acts all of the creatures and monsters that the group encounters, sometimes with the help of one or more Teen Leaders. The Questers work together to solve the mysteries of the quest. In this relationship, the QL can fully enter the role of mentor and educator—not just a mere “game master.”

## 6. The Impact of Swasher™ Sword Dueling

Renaissance Adventures uses a particular brand of foam “boffer” sword called a Swasher. Using these Swashers are extremely popular among our Questers. They love to sword fight! And why is that? First, it’s fun! Beyond that, kids are physically small and have comparatively little power and responsibility in a world of big people telling them what they can and can’t do. This leads many children to feel disempowered. Disempowerment can present itself as a lack of self-esteem, confidence, and determination. It can also force children to withdraw into insecurity and shyness, or to overcompensate by becoming a bully or blindly rebellious to authority figures. A Swasher sword is seen as a tool of power that is very attractive, symbolic, and meaningful to the kids.

We’ve found that Swashers can be a very useful teaching tool to awaken a respect for physical and emotional safety, and an awareness and understanding of the bully-victim dynamic. Our Quest Leaders use the larp and Swashers to bring awareness to these dynamics and other issues like competition. The QLs role-model how to play fair and be empowered while simultaneously being respectful and compassionate. Those children who are unconsciously or consciously hurting others with their swords or with their words become highly motivated to act less impulsively when faced with the potential consequence of not being allowed to use the Swasher swords—their symbol of power. In other words, they are given the chance to act responsibly with their power, and if their actions become unsafe, their symbol of power is suspended until they can learn to act safely.

## 7. The Use of Larps and RPGs in Education

I believe that interactive storytelling and role-playing can truly transform traditional education. One of the long-range goals of Renaissance Adventures is to partner with educators and summer camps, creating a product line of books and training programs that support teachers and counselors to use these tools in the

classroom and camp setting.

If this article inspires you, then consider how you can use your passion for games or experiential learning to help others. Who do you like working and playing with? I have a friend who volunteers at an in-house treatment facility for teens with substance abuse issues. He leads a tabletop role-playing game with the teens once a week. The teens really appreciate the gaming, and he gains the satisfaction of knowing that, not only is he bringing them some joy and play, he’s facilitating their learning and growth.

I was once asked by a parent of a four-year old if I could help the boy stop his daily habit of hitting other kids. I met the boy for an afternoon of play, and I never even mentioned his bullying behavior. He and I hiked into a park with Swasher swords, and within the larp, the boy—his character—witnessed an ogre bullying a small fairy. Seeing the poor fairy’s fear, hurt, and tears, the boy chose to defend her against the ogre. Then he started talking with the ogre and eventually befriended him. By interacting with the ogre within the context of a simple larp, that boy learned to step into a different role than the bully, learning a tremendous amount. His habit of hitting kids was transformed by one afternoon of role-playing.

I’m passionate in my work with children and teens. At Renaissance Adventures, we lead summer classes with 80-100 participants who sign up for week-long programs, Monday through Friday, either half-day or full-day. Those children and teens are divided into small questing groups of six similarly-aged players. Each group is led by an adult who is trained and skilled at leading *Adventure Quest* adventures, acting, storytelling, and leadership. We also run a simpler “Fundamentals” version for birthday parties, school holiday programs, and after-school programs. We see the potential to offer these programs and methods to others, but cannot do it alone. If you are interested in learning more about launching your own experiential learning larp for kids by starting a licensed business, or adding this program to an existing camp or activity, please feel free to contact us!

I hope that this article will be useful and inspiring, and that we can revolutionize children’s education through interactive, kinesthetic storytelling—through a live action role playing game. Thank you.

**Mark Hoge**, the director and founder of *Renaissance Adventures*, has been leading storytelling, acting, dance, outdoor games, nature activities, swordmanship and interactive quests with children and teens since 1981. As a child and teen, Mark attended creative arts camps with his mother and grandmother. Mark began leadership training with the Boy Scouts and as an Eagle Scout. In the eighties he spent eight full summers teaching at summer camps. He has directed full-length summer camps every year since 1990, and has led *Adventure Quest* classes in public and private schools since the beginning of 1995. Extensive experience in psychology, improvisational theater and storytelling, hand-in-hand with a passion to discover ways to engage and empower children, has given birth to the unique and effective teaching tool of *Adventure Quest*. Mark has brought together a fine staff of teachers with whom he has co-created the high-quality innovative company that Renaissance Adventures is today.





# Melodramatic Mysteries Interactive Theater: A History

By Lianna Lawrence

*A child has been kidnapped...the clues lead to the old mansion on the edge of town...something horrible is about to happen and you have to stop it before it is too late.*

*Tonight's party is certainly an upper class affair and you are here to dig up the dirt on anyone you can because, in your book, information is money. Unfortunately you have a few secrets of your own that you would just kill to keep hidden.*

*The great engines drone as the Graf Zeppelin glides through the moon-lit Atlantic sky. Passengers dance to the latest Jazz tune and drink fine wine as you and your fellows desperately search for the bomb that could destroy you all.*

*Lady Poshbottom is very rich and very dead. The cause of death was anything but "natural", and you and must find out who did the old lady in, and why.*

*Jewel thief was not really a skill one purposely puts on one's resume, but who needs a resume when there are so many precious, sparkling gems here at the party tonight. Now if you can just snag a couple without getting caught.*

Melodramatic Mysteries (MM) is a truly live interactive theater event where the participants are both actors and audience. Each person becomes part of an exciting game as an actor, extra, or writer. These interactive theater events (usually four per year) may last from four hours for a social type game to eight or more for an action type game. You may find yourself steeped in the deception, intrigue and blackmail of a 1920s dinner party at an elegant home (a social game), or creeping quietly, gun in hand, through a gloomy cemetery in the dead of night as you and your fellows follow clue lines throughout the city and beyond, in an action game.

Our unique gaming experience emphasizes role-playing, nuance and high production values. Our world of deep, multi-level plots and well-wrought characters range from steampunk to science fiction; from the historical periods of the Renaissance and Medieval Europe; to the bizarre worlds of fantasy and horror; from Christie to Lovecraft, and from Chandler to Poe.

Our rule system is simple and succinct. Our high NPC to player ratio, creative prop crafters, and talented writing teams makes for a memorable player experience.

Sound like fun? Then read on!



## The Beginning

I remember when it all started...well perhaps not the exact date, but I do know it was a Friday evening in the early 1980s. For the better part of a year, almost every Friday evening, I had been running a D&D campaign. There were six players and I was the DM. We were all avid table-top role-players (D&D, Call of Cthulhu, and a few others) and the game was designed accordingly. As the Dungeon Master, I generally did not stay hidden behind the DM screen rolling dice. I preferred wandering around the game table moving figures about and playing the parts of various NPCs. That evening we had reached a rather intense climatic episode of one of the sections of the campaign and I, as usual, was on my feet walking about the room while playing some NPC part or other. In character, I approached one of the players sitting at the table and confronted her. Without hesitation she stood up and we role-played the interaction between the two characters. Soon most of the players were away from the table and actually playing their parts.

After that evening session we all discussed what had happened...some sort of spontaneous acting. Needless to say, the table top D&D game didn't last much longer and we were all drawn more and more to what we called "standup D&D," and what would eventually be called larp, or, as we call it now at MM, "interactive theater."

At the time, along with fantasy, horror and science fiction, I was very much into mysteries, particularly those by Christie, Chandler, and Hammett. The first live MM game was based very loosely on Raymond Chandler's The High

**All of our early props were handmade. A matchbook from Madam Wanda's Pleasure House, a recurring location in many early games. (Melodramatic Mysteries Archives)**



**Left: Another handmade prop—this was worn by “The High Exalted King Cod” at “The Codfish Ball” at a restaurant in San Juan Capistrano. Right: A group shot of MM in the 80’s. (Melodramatic Mysteries Archives)**

## Fond Memories

Melodramatic Mysteries quickly grew from the original seven D&D players to near 20 dedicated members. The games were memorable, like the train ride (in costume and in character) to a restaurant in San Juan Capistrano where the players attended The Codfish Ball (The Codfish were an in-game fraternal organization like the Elks) where all of the employees of the restaurant and some of the patrons watched us through the door to the banquet hall.

I remember the time a player fell from a boat and into Newport Bay...the water boiled around her!

And there was that night in the old Anaheim Cemetery; the players didn't want to reach into the broken window of a crypt, even though they knew that there was a clue inside.

Somewhat later that night in the same cemetery, we were conducting a graveside ritual to contact the spirit of someone long dead. Another group of people were drinking some distance away and one of the men wandered over to see what was going on. He seemed a bit tipsy, and when he asked what we were doing, I told him (completely in character) that we were trying to communicate with the dead. "No shit?" he replied, as his eyes got big and he backed away, "that's bad shit!" he turned and ran. When he got back to his group, they rather hurriedly left the cemetery!

Grown men who were afraid to enter a dark and somewhat eerie house, which was the final scene that night, for fear of what they might confront (or what might confront them) inside.

In the same horror game, Pam, at a very intense moment in the game, reached through a doggy door and grabbed one of the players leg. The player screamed her head off and I'm sure she never got her underwear clean!



Pam getting a lemon smashed in her face, al la James Cagney and Mae Davis in the film Public Enemy. It was made all the better because it was in an expensive restaurant and you should have seen the reaction of the other patrons!

Players really got into their parts too. It wasn't out of the ordinary for a character who was killed in a game to have a minor bout of depression, or for a player find themselves slipping into character in real life.

And perhaps the best memories of all were what we called an "Ah Ha moment"; that incredible epiphany that occurs when you discover and important clue. You ponder what you have just found, time stops, you hold your breath, your heart races, the hair on the back of your neck stands up, and you say to yourself, "Ah ha! So that's it!" That split second in time when you figure out who the murdered Lady Poshbottom, who is stealing the jewels, who is kidnapping the children and why, how to disarm the bomb on the zeppelin, or who is trying

to find our your deeply hidden secret. Yes, those were the moments that made our games so memorable!

### Decline and a Long Hiatus

Unfortunately, by the late 1980s, the group had begun to burn out. A couple of people in the group got married and had children. Each week of play was taking well over a month of hard work to produce and was costing a lot of money. To many of us (particularly Pam and I), it was turning into a second job, and we were all tired. We tried charging a game fee to cover expenses, but the idea met with a limited acceptance. Eventually, the first incarnation of MM came to an end.

### Resurrection

A few years ago Pam and I decided to try and get back into table-top role-playing. We went to a few D&D Meet-Ups, found some games, and played a bit, but for us, it didn't quite catch on. There was just something missing. The thought of the old days of MM was always in the back of our minds. So just like we had done 30 years before, we walked away from the table and into larping.



**Clockwise from top left: Group shots from recent games "Curse of the Pharaoh," "Nirvana Farm," and "Corbett Manor;" The evil pharaoh himself (Played by Chris Vrem). (Melodramatic Mysteries Archives)**



**Top: Welcome to Wanda's! Bottom: The front page of our early newsletter. Not only did in have stories about past game and upcoming events, but there were clues hidden in the text. The detective with the dog was our first logo.**

While the various fantasy combat larps we tried were fun, there was still something missing. They were too much about combat, too much like adult whack-a-mole. They didn't have the depth, direction, or the feel that we wanted. After about a year of trying various larps, we started the second incarnation of MM.

### The Current Incarnation

The games are shorter now, usually about four hours. Our last game was nine hours long, but that was an exception. The scavenger hunt clue lines are (mostly) gone. The character profiles are larger (5 to 15 pages) and more informative. We use modern conveniences like the Internet, multimedia, and computers, but we still maintain our original ideals of an emphasis on role-playing, complicated plots, extensive character profiles, lots of NPCs, interesting locations and excellent costuming and props. Yes, times have changed, and MM has evolved, but it is still the intense, exciting Interactive Theater experience that it was originally.

### Where Do We Go From Here?

Well, that's a good question. My thoughts are that while we will still rely heavily on the mystery and horror genre, I would like to try some new ideas. Perhaps a fantasy game or two, some Steampunk for sure, a western-themed game might be fun; we could always throw in a zombie here and there, or try something psychological or experimental. Some Euro/Nordic type games would be interesting too. How about a hybrid table top and live action game? The way I look at it, there is no limit to our collective imagination, and therefore no limit to what MM can be and do in the future!

Pam and I are on the verge of completing a 2 ½ yearlong complete restoration on our historic home, which is the scene of many a MM game. Because of this, we are shooting (no pun intended) for early 2014 as the date for our next game.

### So...What Do You do Now?

If I have piqued your interest with this little narrative, and you would like to learn more, you can visit our website for more information:

<http://www.melodramaticmysteries.com/>

Leave the mundane world behind and join us at Melodramatic Mysteries. Take a step into the world of mystery and suspense...who knows what may lie just around the corner?

**Lianna Lawrence** has been role-playing since she was introduced to D&D way back in the 1970s. She is the founder of Melodramatic Mysteries Interactive Theater and The Wyvern Manor Gaming Society (a board gaming group). She is an artist/ maker who enjoys anything creative including, but not limited to, costume design, prop making, sculpture, stained glass, woodworking, computer graphics and writing. When not gaming or busy in her studio, she is often found hiking, backpacking, kayaking or playing volleyball. Lianna lives with her partner of 35 years in Orange, CA where they are currently restoring their historic home. Pam and Lianna were married in 2013.





# The Church of Play

## A Reality Game on Spirituality and Play

By Adam Rafinski

The Church of Play (CoP) is a long-term experiment in establishing a spiritual community of players and game designers that investigate the relationship between spirituality and play. This reality game offers players the possibility to develop, play and communicate their own rituals and spiritual ideology.



**Our visual symbol is the Black Square, the first and last of all images. It appears to be perfect, and yet it is not. It appears to be empty and yet it is full. And it is one side of a die.**

### What is a Reality Game?

A reality game is a pervasive game that blurs the line between reality and fiction utilizing mass media conventions. In contrast to other pervasive games, reality games focus their design principles on the distinction between people who know and understand the rules of the game and people who do not. Think of an alternate reality game, but without the whole media manipulation aspect. All media assets generated by this young spiritual movement are real, and yet they are all part of a game. The game gives birth to a procedurally generated narrative, constantly reissuing a question on the correlation between fiction and reality to players and outsiders on many mediated layers.

### What is The Church Of Play?

CoP is a secret organization that worships play. In contrast to other spiritual movements, members of CoP are highly skilled in reflecting upon their practices while enacting them. CoP also strongly encourages its members to constantly iterate on the design of their beliefs and practices. There are only two fixed rules, while everything else is in constant flux and up to iteration. These fixed rules are:

1. Whatever you design has to be compatible with play. Play is at the core of our religion.
2. The game is going to end at some point. When it's going to end is a secret that only initiated members have access to.

The game is run by players called "Negators". They can use their real name as their fictional identity in the game, since they are masters of play. We call ourselves "Negators" because our primary function is to ensure the safety of players and to make sure that the two rules of

### CHURCH OF PLAY

In CoP there are also Engineers, members who create and distribute the rituals of the organization. They participate under pseudonyms in order to prevent discrimination. Engineers are primarily interested in the design and iteration of their own and the spiritual practices of other members, and not so much in the metagame at large.

Negators are also the ones that run Manifestations and give Workshops, which, in the current state of the game, are the two modules in which the game shows itself in the physical world.

### What is a Manifestation?

A Manifestation is a public ceremony of the rituals designed by Engineers. A Manifestation gives non-members a chance to try out our games, to be in direct



dialog with the organization, and to experience firsthand what we believe in. They are usually organized by at least one Negator and also include embedded players, so called "Guardians of Play" that have specific

roles during the Manifestations. The goal of the game for all participants is to figure out together what play is by connecting with play.

The Codex of Play, our first sacred publication containing a collection of simple instructions on how to connect with play, is the primary resource shaping Manifestations. All of our rituals are broken by design in order to encourage iteration while enacted. Thus not only the Codex, but also the way we approach public ceremonies is in a constant state of flow and every Manifestation is different. In short: The Church of Play can emerge anywhere spontaneously and the answer lies in the process... Keep your eyes open for our symbols.

### What is a Workshop?

Workshops are another form in which the game shows itself. They are designed as games, involving some role-playing elements and simulating some core mechanics of the metagame, such as secrecy. The workshops are about religion design, where participants learn how to make their own ideology and spiritual practices from scratch, how to link them together, and how to communicate them to the outside world. Ultimately they learn how to initiate themselves.



**Introduction of the first CoP workshop, showing another important element of the game: Masks. Masks are important for us, because they allow us to become—both through process and transgression—someone else, to connect with divine play.**

Workshops appear in different forms, but they always consist of multiple sessions. The dates of the sessions are announced publicly but their locations are a secret and only accessible to participants that decided to join the process. Interested participants can join by receiving playful invitations or a public introduction since that is where they received basic information about CoP, the rules and method of the game, as well as the structure of the workshop.

### What is an Initiation?

After the workshops, players that contributed to our Codex during the Workshop by coming up with their own designs are invited to decide whether to join CoP or not. If they choose to do so, they design together an initiation ritual, which will be planned and enacted under the guidance of a Negator, according to a secret protocol. In the current version of the game, new members start out as Negators after the Initiation. If they fail to participate in the metagame they receive an email about their absence and eventually lose this status, but stay on as Engineers in the game nevertheless.

In the current form, there are no hard commitments. Members don't have to give up other beliefs or their relationship to other spiritual organizations. However we do ask for a one-sentence description when they choose to leave our society, for iteration purposes, and punish members with exclusion that reveal our secrets to the general public, as well as losing their original Engineer name forever. If they choose to leave the CoP on their own behalf, they have to go through a whole Workshop cycle again in order to re-become members and thus have to develop a new Engineer identity. Excluded members are unable to become members again.

### How to get into the Game?

Search the web for our practices, try them out, document your connection with play and post-it online, by tagging "Church of Play" to get access to exclusive play experiences. If you wish to bring the game to your community get in touch with us. Check out our website: [www.churchofplay.org](http://www.churchofplay.org)

Adam Rafinski  
Negator ■ Church of Play ■  
8th of November 2013

**Adam Rafinski** is a conceptual and performance artist, reality game designer, curator, and educator. After completing his MA in Art Theory and Media Philosophy at the University of Art and Design (HfG) Karlsruhe in Germany, he founded and ran the GameLab Karlsruhe, a label for Art Games and Pervasive Games at the Media Art Department and Institute for Postdigital Narratives of the HfG till 2013. Adam founded the Church of Play in the summer of 2013. He is currently enrolled as a Master's Student in Digital Media at Georgia Tech, manages the Experimental Game Lab and Emergent Game Group there, and lives in Atlanta, Georgia.





# Mad About The Girl

By Jo Kreil

In early Spring 2012, Lizzie Stark, the author of *Leaving Mundania*, approached me at a party. She asked if I would like to attend an all-female larp inspired by *Y: The Last Man*. We had often talked about gender in larp; she had regaled me with stories of both jeepform and Nordic larp, which often explored gender and other themes that are rarely—if ever—found in most American LARP. *Mad About the Boy* would offer me the chance to experience Nordic larp and take place in something historical in the American larp scene. The game, a Nordic larp based off of the graphic novel series *Y: The Last Man* in which a strange event kills off everyone with the Y chromosome, would explore themes of gender and how a society might run with only females present. It would also explore a world without men and how that might impact such a society, especially before and after a man appears out of nowhere.

This experience would be monumental not only from a larp enthusiast's perspective but also from a personal view. You see, I was not born biologically female. I am a transwoman, one whose mind and soul is decidedly female. I present as female and use female pronouns. *Mad About the Boy* would be big for me as the first time

that I would attend an all-female event. The game would be the first time that I could immerse myself fully into exploring the role of gender in larp. What better way to explore gender-related questions about yourself than through an event designed to do just that?

*Mad About the Boy* would be my chance to step into an event designed for women to reconfirm to myself that I was a woman, and to experience other women accepting me for being myself. The thought was terrifying, but I knew I had to do it.

Transwomen often run into a variety of problems when entering all-women spaces such as festivals, clubs or bathrooms. Sometimes people's reactions can get nasty and downright dangerous. Even normally rational people can behave in a vicious and demeaning manner toward transgender individuals, reacting poorly when confronted by something that confuses or is unknown to them. Though I did not doubt Lizzie Stark's concern for my safety, I could not anticipate how people might react. Some of my fears were proven unfounded when Lizzie announced that the event was open to transgender individuals; transmen, transwomen and genderqueer people were welcome to attend. I admit that I hungrily

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About a month later, I received my character. I would play Ellen of the Wealthy Women, a Triad made up of former businesswomen. While I have always enjoyed playing manipulative characters in larp and tabletop, I had never played a wealthy character with so much potential power. I knew that I needed a new set of clothing, as I owned nothing that could be described as business-like. I went to my local K-Mart and shopped for a button down shirt and a pair of dress slacks. Now, I hate trying on pants. I'm assured that many women have problems in finding pants that fit and of course, I am no different. My thoughts while trying on pants go from "Maybe I can cut off my legs to make me short/stretch them out to make them longer/grow a bigger bottom to fill them out." to "Oh Gods, what the hell is wrong with me? Why don't these fit!" This fit of hatred for my body usually takes about ten minutes. However, I eventually found a pair that looked good on me and away I went. I could not find a jacket, but was able to borrow one later to put together a respectable businesswoman outfit. I was told I looked pretty good and, apparently, wear a business suit well. Who would have thought?

A few days later, I arrived at the campsite along with Jeremy Merritt, the director of a local larp known as *Doomsday*, who attended *Mad About the Boy* for insurance purposes. I was nervous, unsure how the other women would receive me. My fears slowly melted away as players trickled into the common room. A few people—new to larp, but eager for the experience—asked me what to expect. I was pleasantly surprised that I had been afraid for nothing, especially after meeting the wonderful ladies with whom I was to share a cabin.

Friday night consisted of a set of workshops designed to get us into the headspace of a world without men and to introduce a few larping mechanisms that were new, even to experienced larpers. Two of these techniques in particular left a lasting impression on me for different reasons, helping shape a large part of my weekend and my state of being after the larp was over. The first thing was a meditation designed to get us into a proper emotional state for the game. We were asked to lie on the floor and close our eyes, imaging where we as players would be on the day the Disaster hit. The day that everyone with a Y chromosome died.

I closed my eyes, thinking about where I would be. I would be at work in a company that was largely male identified, surrounded by men who would have dropped like flies. At first, I imagined myself as a woman. Not a transwoman, but a biological woman. I was me. Truly

**A group of survivors plan the future of the human race.**



followed that Facebook posting, waiting for someone to respond with a negative response. Anything. I stared at my screen for some time and nothing came. Nothing negative was posted. Perhaps this experience would not be so bad after all.

I followed the group conversations, not saying much. For a brief period of time, I was unsure if I could go. I would have to overcome big hurdles, such as time and limited finances. I was about to bow out though when a friend stepped in who also planned to play in the larp. Avonelle Wing and I had met at her Women in Gaming panel at Dreamation 2012. I had thanked her afterwards for setting up this panel and making transgender women feel welcome. Avie told me that she respected my courage and that it made her happy to see me strolling along the convention floor with no regard that anyone might be staring or whispering to themselves. Avie wanted to see me display that same courage in this situation. I relented and decided that I had to go. *Mad About the Boy* was a once in a lifetime event and I could not afford to miss it.



me. However, I almost broke down crying when I realized something. Everyone with a Y chromosome would be dead, including me. The thought of my own mortality did not almost cause me to cry; what upset me was the realization that I would be lumped in with the men. Because I was among the dead, many would just assume I was another male. I knew who I was and it was not a man. I was a woman and I would not be lumped in with them. I composed myself and eventually opened my eyes with a renewed sense of why I was there: to become one with myself and reach a self realization of my identity. This mediation was a critical step in the weekend, as I realized that I felt more comfortable as a woman. Anything else would feel unnatural and odd to me. I had spent many years feeling as if I was a woman in a man-suit and there was no way I was ever returning to that.

### The women prepare for the Vigil



The second workshop was a technique that I had been eager to try known as *Ars Amandi* or The Art of Love. Developed by Swedish larp designer Emma Wieslander, *Ars Amandi* is a method of enacting scenes of sex, love or rape in a larp. LARPs tend to have mechanics for violence and even diplomacy, so the fact that none exist for romance or sex seems odd. *Ars Amandi* attempted to fill that void in the larp scene. The technique involves two or more people touching certain safe parts of the body. The main focus is the hands, though the technique expands to cover the lower/upper arms and the upper back/shoulders. Contact is made, often gentle caressing or stroking. Surprisingly this touching can feel quiet erotic and *Ars Armandi* allows a wide variety of emotions to get played out. For example, a much stronger and more forceful partner could take control by manipulating where your hands touch theirs. At one point, a partner circled behind me and stroked my upper arms as a way of expressing their dominance over the scene. I admit that I almost melted on the spot.

Some transpeople find sex difficult, as enjoying conventional physical pleasure is hard when your mind does not match up to your body. *Ars Armandi* struck me as a clever and erotic way to express intimacy without the typical physical contact between partners. The technique also helped to highlight something in larp that I never thought I would get to experience. Outside of the larp setting, I imagine it could be incredibly effective with two partners; I would love to try it in a more intimate private setting with a willing partner.

After these workshops were over, we got together in the Triads with whom we would spend the majority of our time with over the weekend. I met Emily Care Boss, an independent tabletop RPG writer who was to play Kristen and Jessamyn, who played Elizabeth. We started talking and built upon the connection/relationship that our characters had. The organizers had given us briefs, but together, we started filling in the holes and making what would become one of the strongest family units in the game.

At first, we decided that Kristen and Ellen were merely business partners who decided to rebuild Philadelphia's infrastructure after the disaster and made a healthy profit on shipping. Elizabeth served as our accountant and somewhat of a stay-at-home partner. Ellen and Elizabeth had become good friends despite having little in common before the disaster. Having met her at a business conference years ago; Kristen sought out Ellen to form their partnership afterwards. Next, Emily asked me a question that would help define our roles further. "Do you think Kristen and Ellen have slept together?" As a lesbian-orientated transwoman, I have experienced plenty of discrimination from cis-lesbians who saw me as "not a real woman". The game offered me the chance to fully experience a lesbian

relationship where discrimination would not enter the picture and a chance to fully explore my sexuality as a woman. I quickly responded with an enthusiastic yes and we started to build a post-apocalyptic romance for the ages.

In addition, we decided that Kristen was openly bisexual before the disaster. Ellen was a deeply closeted lesbian due to the fear that her male business partners might look down on her for her sexual preferences. Ellen, attracted to the successful and beautiful Kristen, fell instantly in love two years before the Disaster. The spent a night together, but Ellen left, still not wanting to face her sexuality. After the Disaster hit, Kristen found Ellen and the two decided to resume their relationship. Together, they grew into the power couple of Philadelphia.

We wheeled and dealt between all the groups while relying on each other for comfort and support. We looked after Elizabeth and, though, not a part of our relationship, she was still a large part of our in-game family. When the Last Man finally appeared and the organizers asked each of us to reveal our character's innermost thoughts, the only thing I could think was this will destroy her. Elizabeth was just starting to get over the death of her husband and sons. The first thing I did was to run into Kristen's arms and make sure that my [Ellen's] life partner was okay. When the time came to meet with The Committee who decided which family got a child, we were bursting at the seams with pride when they revealed we had the strongest family unit.

I left *Mad About the Boy* with a heavy heart. It felt like I had lost a close family member and left behind a wife or girlfriend. The day after I got home, I woke up feeling empty. Like I had lost someone I cared about, someone I did not know if I was getting back. However, I came away from *Mad About the Boy* with something much more important: a sense of self that I have searched for since before I came out as trans. A validation that how I felt about myself was right, that it was correct. As a transwoman, I constantly struggle with my own self worth. Can I pass? Do others see me as female? If I date a bisexual woman, will she be attracted to me as a female or because of the bits of me that were born male? How will others see me? Will they accept me as female? More importantly, would an all-women space accept me as female? After leaving *Mad About the Boy*, I realized that the answers to all of these questions was a gigantic yes. Perhaps the game would have gone differently with another group, especially one that was not put together by a friend of mine. I am certain the experience would have been vastly different if the game had allowed male players to attend and play female characters.

What I can say for certain is I have never been so sure that I am a woman. Ellen became a piece of me after that weekend and I like to think that I took away

the best bits of her. Her ability to command respect. Her sisterly love for Elizabeth and her one true love in the form of Kristen. The valuable lesson that Ellen had learned after the Disaster. It took the death of all her male friends and family to come out of the closet and admit that she was gay. I don't want that to happen to me. I have had setbacks and some of them were prompted by fear of rejection. Unlike Ellen, I cannot wait for a Disaster to wipe the slate clean. I have to take steps to put myself in the best position to come out fully, face my family and admit that I am a transwoman. Hear me roar.

*A self-professed Anglophile, **Jo Kreil** will talk about queer/kink/film theory to anyone who will listen. Sometimes even to those who won't. Her favorite hobbies involve rolling dice, gazing up at the stars and cursing at her X-Box 360. Her writing is powered by copious amounts of Lady Grey tea and red wine.*





# Taking Nordic larp to Discovery Channel

By Claus Raasted

## It's fucking Discovery Channel

"Oh, it's no big thing. It's just a **15 minute Discovery Channel segment** about a larp we did. Yeah, it'll be shown in 170 countries. Yeah, it ends with an expert on extreme behaviours saying "World leaders should try this." Nah, we're not excited. Just part of the daily routine, you know?"

In the fall of 2012 I was contacted by a researcher from Discovery Channel. She'd read an interview with me in the **online edition of TIME Magazine** and thought that Nordic larp sounded interesting. My heart skipped a beat. Then she suggested that we'd fit perfectly into Discovery Channel's new program series *Extreme Worlds*. I put on my straightest telephone poker voice and said "Sure, we can help you out."

They wanted to come and film something interesting. Sadly, I had nothing to give them within their time window, so I decided we'd set something up just for their benefit. They were thrilled. So was I. This wasn't just a local newspaper wanting to do a story. This was fucking Discovery Channel.

The Danish national organization **Bifrost** provided some money for the execution (Discovery paid for the rest), and I recruited Danish larp organizer Charles Bo Nielsen, who'd written a larp called "What are you worth?" in 2009 that would be easy to set up and would be perfect for this occasion.

## Showcasing what we do

Discovery had no influence on our choice of larp. We chose "What are you worth?" because it's quite "Nordic" (whatever that may mean!) in that it's about heavy themes, features a **360 degree aesthetic** and provokes some strong emotions. It had also been run several times before and was therefore a bit of a "safe bet," and we had a clear idea of how much work it would be to run. Last, but not least, there were no interesting Nordic-style larps coming up in the time period available for filming, so we had to do something specifically for Discovery. And I'm glad we chose this.

We invited a lot of experienced international players and got hold of a high-powered crew of Danish larpers to play the roles of non-player characters, and we told everyone that we were doing this as a project specifically made for Discovery Channel. This meant that people were onboard with being filmed from the beginning, and it also meant that when we made fuckups (and we did) they were very forgiving. After all—the whole idea here was to show off what we do, and if it meant that some people got a less-than-satisfactory experience, the big picture still made it worth it.

Story-wise, we chose a larp that's a modern day piece about a controversial law that the (fictional) Danish government has just passed. The idea is that people who have cost the state a lot of money (i.e.,

welfare benefits, health care bills, prison expenses, etc) are rounded up for questioning and have to prove their "worth to humanity." If they can't convince the interrogators—civil servants of different stripes—that they are worth something to society, or could become worth something, then they get a one-way ticket to oblivion. Mode of transport: execution by pistol.

So that was our setting. Players started the larp by arriving at the game location and being locked up in cages (one for players who wanted a high level of physical play, and one for not-so-physical play). After that, soldiers would drag off individuals to the interrogation rooms and they'd be interviewed about their value to society and their worth as human beings. Some ended up being executed, while some were found worthy enough to live and set free.

After about seven hours of play the last execution was carried out, and the guards told the remaining prisoners that their work shift had ended, and that they'd see them tomorrow. They left the room, turned off the light, leaving the remaining players in darkness. A few moments later the rest of us entered the room, turned on the lights again and ended the larp. There was much rejoicing.

## Designing for documentation

One of the nice things about designing for documentation was that everybody was cool with it. Players who had no interest in being filmed or who felt it would ruin their experience to have a camera stuffed up their nose just didn't sign up for the larp. That was wonderful to work with. Another nice thing was that by knowing that we'd do this specifically to produce a TV show, we incorporated the cameras into the larp setting from the beginning. This wasn't a fantasy larp with distracting cameras. This was a modern day story with the camera crews playing the roles of documentation crews *in the fiction also*.

We had selected a few players who'd be our "faces." They would get extra attention from the camera, and had some specific scenes they wanted to play out. There was a breakdown scene, a rage scene and a scene with water torture that were all semi-planned in advance. This was to make sure we had some interesting footage (since the camera people could be briefed on when these events would happen, we were sure to get it), but also worked fine as "fateplay" moments.

On top of the ingame footage, there was of course quite a bit of pregame filming and some interviews both before and after. On the overall level, though, it wasn't something that swallowed up neither tons of time or energy, because it was already built into the process from the start.



**From left to right: The camera crews hid in plain sight; they simply played camera crews in the larp.**

**A welfare recipient collects her dignity before an interrogation.**

**Some players wanted a more physical game than others. Those who "liked it rough" were put in one cage, the "less physical" in another.**

**A guard making a prisoner mop up the floor with her own scarf as a lesson in respect. (All photos by Allan Eising)**



## The risk of speaking up

So what happens now? Of course things turned out a bit differently than we'd hoped. The show didn't up being called "Extreme Worlds" and we didn't end up being bunched together with parkour or base jumping. Instead, the final title was *Forbidden* and we're now lumped in with people with balloon fetishes and the church of Diego Maradona (he's a soccer player). But you can't have it all, and when you play with the Big Boys™, you can't expect to decide the rules. We're still airing in 170 countries and the actual 15 min screen time we have looks very, very good.

Most viewers will probably have seen it and then stored it somewhere in their hindbrain along with all their other Discovery Channel knowledge. Maybe some were inspired, maybe some were disgusted. That's how things are. No, what I'm really curious about is how our own larp scene(s) will react to this. So far, it's only just hit YouTube (yeah, some friendly soul found it and uploaded it, for which I'm eternally grateful) and reactions have been surprisingly few.

Will we be lynched for daring to say that what we're doing is Nordic larp, even though *Jaakko Stenros says we can't know for sure until in a few years whether that's true or not?* Will we be hailed as heroes for giving a 15 minute piece of information quality-stamped by Discovery Channel (or TLC, as it turned out in some countries)? Will it be ignored, spited or

ridiculed? Will non-Nordic larpers see this as an attack on their way of larping or will they think, "Hmm... that looks interesting?"

The truth is that I don't know. I don't know what kind of effect this will have on (or for) our community. Maybe none at all. Maybe it'll mean that Barack Obama hires a larp design company for the next world summit. Probably not, though. What I hope is that it'll give larpers a piece of professionally produced documentation from a highly respected source, that they can show when they need to convince people that larps can be used for serious purposes. So far, there have been *a few reactions*, but not nearly enough for me to get any kind of "feel" for the responses.

## But it's worth it

I've been part of the larp documentation wave for some years now. I've done *three documentation books* on other people's larps. I've published a photo book and an anthology. I've made a larp that got on the front page of the cultural section of one of Denmark's most respected newspapers. The Discovery Channel bit is still my biggest PR scoop to date, and even if it sparks debates and name-calling, I'm still glad we did it.

It's awesome that we have a hobby which has room for many different experiences, and while some of them may look weird to outsiders, they can still be great to those who participate. That said, I don't think we benefit from having "*Lightning Bolt! Lightning Bolt!*" as one of our strongest media representations. If we don't do something to change it, we'll never move past that image. And even if it sometimes feels like throwing rocks into a stream to create a dam, things do change. I just hope this rock doesn't end up turning out to be one I dropped on my foot.

After all... it's fucking Discovery Channel. How cool is that?

**Claus Raasted** (b. 1979) owns the larp company *Rollespilsakademiet* and is the chairman of Denmark's largest larp organization, *Rollespilfabrikken*. He's the author of 13 books on larp, has a podcast that can be found at <http://clausraasted.dk/thoughts>, and is considered by many to be the world's leading expert on children's larp. He also has a past in *reality TV*, but these days, who hasn't?

Watch the episode [here](#).



From left to right: An "unworthy" refuses to face her own death with dignity. A guard tries to get her to kneel properly.

The commander of the soldiers carrying out the sentence for those found unworthy. (All photos by Allan Eising)





# Editor's Introduction to the Academic Section

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**A**nother year has passed for Wyrd Con, which means another year of excellent academic pieces for the *Wyrd Con Companion Book*. Due to the amount of submissions this year, I was able to offer our authors full, double blind peer review—a first in the four years of the *Companion Book* publication. The articles in this volume went through several rounds of drafts, adhering to suggested revisions from the editor and the peer reviewers. Though I plan to keep the review board concealed at this time, the inclusion of feedback from external experts in each field helped our authors further refine their ideas into a more polished format. I extend my deepest gratitude to both the authors and reviewers for their patience and diligence during this process.

The content of this year's *Companion Book* reflects the emphasis of the convention quite nicely, featuring topics from multiple disciplines pertaining to transmedia, tabletop games, and live action role-playing (larp). Three of the authors featured in this volume also attended the convention this year, providing a nice level of consistency between the practical and intellectual facets of Wyrd Con. The first article in the academic section, "Potterless: *Pottermore* and the Pitfalls of Transmedia Storytelling" by Vera Cuntz-Leng, evaluates the limitations of the interactive storytelling environment *Pottermore*, the latest outgrowth of the *Harry Potter* franchise. This critical view of *Pottermore* exposes the virtual environment's relative lack of interactivity compared with other forms of contemporary participatory fiction. Rather than encouraging deeper fan engagement, Cuntz-Leng argues that *Pottermore* alienates its fan base by exerting excessive control over the medium and the textuality of the experience. Emerging out of film studies, this article reflects Wyrd Con's commitment to expand its focus to include transmedia experiences.

The next section features two articles that reflect another recent addition to Wyrd Con's emphasis on Interactive Storytelling: tabletop role-playing. Nicholas Mizer's "No One Role-plays the Spanish Inquisition!: The Early History of Role-playing Games in Spain" provides a detailed analysis of the emergence of tabletop as a Spanish subculture. Mizer approaches his history through a cultural lens, examining how Spanish role-players organized around national gaming clubs and shared information through gamer-run magazines rather than industry-driven publications. This micro-history provides scholars with a model for examining not just the outgrowth of tabletop in various nations, but also the culture around each

of these communities. Alternately, Lars Konzack's "Characterology in Tabletop Role-Playing Games: A Textual Analysis of Character Sheets" takes a close look at the tabletop game materials themselves, demonstrating how the various sections of character sheets inform game play. Drawing upon the concept of characterology and Gérard Genette's notion of a paratext, Konzack examines the amount of space devoted to specific aspects of characters featured on the sheets of four mainstream and two indie tabletop role-playing games. This approach helps scholars understand the way game artifacts such as character sheets may influence play.

The final section focuses specifically on issues pertaining to enactment, leadership, and group health in larp. Building upon her article in last year's *Companion Book*, Whitney "Strix" Beltrán further applies Jungian theory to larp enactment in "Shadow Work: A Jungian Perspective on the Underside of Live Action Role-Play in the United States." Beltrán describes the Jungian concept of the Shadow, which consists of repressed aspects of our psyche that sometimes emerge in larp on both a personal and a collective level. The article aims to increase awareness regarding the psychological processes involved in larp enactment, hoping to decrease the negative consequences of playing Shadow content and increase the potential for individuation, a process by which players grow as people through role-playing experiences. In a similar vein, Shoshana Kessock's "Ethical Content Management and the Gaming Social Contract" evaluates the notion of "questionable content" in larps, using examples drawn from documentation on *Kapo*, *Mad About the Boy*, and *Dystopia Rising*. Kessock asserts that the social contract of a game requires informed consent from all participants regarding content that some may find psychologically triggering. The article details the ethical responsibilities of participants at every level, including game designers, organizers, the community body, and the individual. Both Beltrán and Kessock bring to light the necessity for participants to handle questionable content responsibly and maturely.

The last two articles deal with larp leadership and group dynamics from more general, theoretical perspectives. "Managerial Styles in Larps: Control Systems, Cultures, and Charisma" by J. Tuomas Harviainen examines both commercially and collectively developed larps with an eye toward types of leadership styles. Harviainen examines various established management methods, indicating that many larp organizers intuitively



.. follow predictable leadership patterns. The article uses the term *dialectic charisma* to refer to a game master's influence, indicating that organizers need to exert a certain measure of control before, during, and after play. Alternately, "The Dynamic Life Cycle of Live Action Role-Play Communities" by Diana J. Leonard and Grayson Arango examines the larp group as a whole rather than assessing individual organizer behavior. Applying Tuckman's stages of a group's life cycle, the authors emphasize how larp groups follow predictable sociological patterns in terms of cohesion. Drawing from evidence gleaned from an anonymized boffer larp campaign in the United States, Leonard and Arango argue that understanding the phases of a group's life cycle will help larps as they undergo "growing pains" at critical phases of their development. Familiarizing themselves with theories pertaining to predictable management styles and group development phases can aid larpers in maintaining the health of their communities as a whole.

These articles represent scholarship emerging from Denmark, Finland, and several states in America, contributing to the overall body of studies on role-playing and Interactive Storytelling that are showcased every year by the Wyrld Con Convention. I hope you enjoy reading these valuable works as much as I have enjoyed shepherding each of them through the publication process.

-- Sarah Lynne Bowman, Ph.D.  
Editor, Academic Section  
*Wyrld Con Companion Book 2013*





# Potterless: Pottermore and the Pitfalls of Transmedia Storytelling

Vera Cuntz-Leng

## Abstract

In the past decade, *Harry Potter* became a phenomenon of immense cultural and economic impact that is defined by a most complex texture of different media representations and adaptations. As Harry's maturation in the saga parallels the revolution of online social media and the evolution of transmediality, the digital platform *Pottermore* is the newest manifestation of the continuous transformation process of the *Harry Potter* universe in order to keep it adjusted to the needs and expectations of the participatory culture and the so-called digital generation. Since *Pottermore* simultaneously provides its users with an interactive literary, audio-visual, gaming, and social experience, could it be crowned as the quintessence of transmedia storytelling?

In this paper, the strong contradictions between what *Pottermore* "wants" and what it actually "does" will be explored, which lead to the pitfalls of transmedia storytelling: In the enforced amalgamation of reading, audio-visual, social, and gaming environment, the different media in *Pottermore* often constrain each other rather than maintaining their particular qualities. Apart from this problem of a distinct self-definition, the online platform most importantly does not bear the potential of a strong investment and long-term identification of fans and consumers because of Rowling's ongoing attempts to "start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market"<sup>1</sup> the participation of fans in the *Harry Potter* phenomenon and the whole process of audience reception. At this point, *Pottermore* gives away its immersive potential and, in fact, cripples user participation, alienating new audiences. I would like to present some ideas of how the platform could be improved to meet the requirements of the digital age with the intention to learn from *Pottermore* for future transmedia projects on the Internet.

## Keywords

fandom, *Harry Potter*, immersion, interactivity, *Pottermore*, transmedia storytelling

## 1. Introduction

With the advent of "Pottermania" as a cultural and economic phenomenon and the related success of the first movie adaptation in 2001, *Harry Potter* gradually turned into a most complex texture of media representations and adaptations of international impact, reaching diverse readers and audiences. In terms of book market sales, box-office results, franchise magnitude, and fan output, *Harry Potter* is a phenomenon of unique success.<sup>2</sup> No other mass media product pervaded in a similar amount of different media and texts: official and unofficial; analogous and digital; linear and interactive. The franchise includes a multitude of products: the seven novels; their translations in over sixty different languages; audio books; eight movie adaptations; the largest amount of fan art and fan fiction on the world wide web available so far; many different DVD- and BluRay-editions with additional content; various toys, clothes, jewellery, and other merchandise products; computer games; online forum role-playing games; news and discussion groups on the Internet; related websites; radio shows and podcasts; various video mash-ups; a theme park and two museums; a related musical genre called Wizard Rock; fan conventions; camps, and meet-ups; several academic conferences; and various papers on both the phenomenon and the actual *Harry Potter* text; and—finally—the interactive online-platform *Pottermore*. *Pottermore* will be described and discussed subsequently regarding its transmedia concept and layout.

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2. See Stephen Brown, "Harry Potter and the Fandom Menace," in *Consumer Tribes*, ed. Bernard Cova, Robert V. Kozinets and Avi Shankar (Oxford/Burlington: Elsevier, 2007); Stephen Brown and Anthony Patterson, "Harry Potter and the Service-Dominant Logic of Marketing: A Cautionary Tale," *Journal of Marketing Management* 25, no. 5 (2009); Andrew Burn, "Potter-Literacy—From Book to Game and Back Again: Literature, Film, Game and Cross-Media Literacy," *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* 14, no. 3 (2005); Susan Gunelius, *Harry Potter: The Story of a Global Business Phenomenon* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Tammy Turner-Vorbeck, "Pottermania: Good, Clean Fun or Cultural Hegemony?," in *Critical Perspectives on Harry Potter*, ed. Elisabeth E. Heilman (London/New York: Routledge, 2009).

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1. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (London/New York: New York UP, 2006), 169.



In a video announcement prior to the launch of *Pottermore*, *Harry Potter* author Rowling introduced the goals of the platform as follows:

13 years after the first *Harry Potter* book was published I'm still astonished and delighted by the response the stories met. . . I'm still receiving hundreds of letters every week and Harry's fans remain as enthusiastic and inventive as ever. So I'd like to take this opportunity to say thank you because no author could have asked for a more wonderful, diverse and loyal readership. I'm thrilled to say that I'm now in a position to give you something unique. An online reading experience unlike any other: It's called *Pottermore*. It's the same story with a few crucial additions. The most important one is you. Just as the experience of reading requires that the imagination of the author and reader work together to create the story so *Pottermore* will be built—in part—by you, the reader. The digital generation will be able to enjoy a safe, unique, online reading experience built around the *Harry Potter* books. *Pottermore* will be the place where fans of any age can share, participate in, and rediscover stories. It will also be the exclusive place to purchase digital audio books and, for the first time, e-books of the *Harry Potter* series. I'll be joining in, too. Because I'll be sharing additional information I've been hoarding for years about the world of *Harry Potter*. *Pottermore* is open to everyone from October. But a lucky few can enter early and help shape the experience.<sup>3</sup>

This announcement works at the same time as a proper introduction of the project and as a good starting point of this analysis. According to Jenkins' weblog, the three interesting factors of *Pottermore* are its transmedia concept, its role as the sole distribution channel for the *Harry Potter* e-books and digital audio books, and the significance of the fan as an active participant.<sup>4</sup> Especially in terms of disintegrating the hierarchical relationship between author and fan, this introduction sounds very promising. Could *Pottermore* be at the same time a transmedia adaptation—if not translation—of the *Harry Potter* text and a democratic and productive conciliation between the official and the unofficial world of *Harry Potter*, the author, and the audience?

## 2. How to... *Pottermore*

With a delay of six months, *Pottermore* opened to the public in April 2012. Basically, *Pottermore* is a free-of-charge website for registered users. After completing the registration process, users are able to purchase digital items of the entire series in the *Pottermore* shop and to start the *Pottermore* walkthrough that retraces Harry's journey in a chronological structure—chapter-by-chapter, book-by-book. By October 2013, the walkthrough is only available for the first three novels and for eleven chapters of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Furthermore, users can participate in the social networking aspects of the website: leaving comments on chapters; "liking" chapters and befriending other users in a Facebook-manner; and uploading drawings and pictures.

As a matter of fact, the important aspects Jenkins detected in *Pottermore* fourteen months prior to its launch are mirrored by the three main functions of the platform: (a) distribution of digital *Harry Potter* content, (b) a social networking website for *Harry Potter* fans, and (c) interactive, transmedia experience of the novels. The chronological *Pottermore* walkthrough takes place in a Flash-animated environment that features games (e.g., potion making, duels); challenges (e.g., the sorting hat ceremony); the collecting of certain items (e.g., spell books, chocolate frog cards) and badges; winning house points; and the unlocking of additional content provided by Rowling (e.g., information on wands, backstories of minor characters).<sup>5</sup> Since registered users can comment or upload their fan art during the *Pottermore* walkthrough while the purchase of the e-books is always just one mouse-click away, all three factors of the platform are constantly intertwined during the whole *Pottermore* experience and can scarcely be examined separately. Therefore, the following discussion of the *Pottermore* concept in terms of transmediality will be interspersed with the fandom and economic aspects of the platform.

3. Joanne K. Rowling, "J. K. Rowling Announces *Pottermore*" YouTube, June 23, 2011, accessed October 5, 2013.

4. See Henry Jenkins, "Three Reasons Why *Pottermore* Matters" *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, June 24, 2011, accessed October 5, 2013.

5. See Terje Colbjørnsen, "Harry Potter and the Chamber of Commerce: J.K. Rowling's *Pottermore.com* as the extension of the *Harry Potter* brand in a digital context," in *Magic Is Might 2012: Proceedings of the International Conference* ed. Luigina Ciolfi and Gráinne O'Brien (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University, 2013), 146-48.



### 3. *Pottermore* transmedia

Part of the plethora of different manifestations of the *Harry Potter* phenomenon in various media can be attributed to the time of its release. *Harry Potter* parallels in many ways the digital revolution and the introduction of Web 2.0 and social media. In this sense, the introduction of *Pottermore* is logical and consistent; it pushes further forward the boundaries of media convergence and recombines different manifestations of *Harry Potter* that have already been on the market: the official books, movies, and games on the one hand; the unofficial social media and fandom related web platforms (e.g., *The Leaky Cauldron*, *Mugglenet*) on the other. As Rowling put it, the most crucial addition in *Pottermore* is the fan, mirroring Jenkins' observation of the crucial role of the fan as an active participant in transmedia storytelling:

To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience.<sup>6</sup>

Jenkins argues that *Pottermore* is significant regarding future developments of transmedia storytelling. In contrast to previous, more conventional *Harry Potter* media products, the combination of radical intertextuality and multimodality in *Pottermore* could operate as "an extension of the information we have available about the world rather than as a replication of the story from one medium to another."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Rowling's announcement of adding new material and additional information is crucial. Despite older rumours, Rowling foreclosed the publication of a *Harry Potter* encyclopaedia in the future.<sup>8</sup> Instead, the material she has produced, collected, and hoarded for years will be published gradually through *Pottermore*.

6. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (London/New York: New York UP, 2006), 22.

7. Henry Jenkins, "Three Reasons Why *Pottermore* Matters" *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, June 24, 2011, accessed October 5, 2013.

8. See Joanne K. Rowling, "FAQs and rumors", May 2012, accessed October 5, 2013.

Jenkins argues that additional information, content, and paratexts<sup>9</sup> will have the potential to keep the *Harry Potter* fandom alive although the actual narration had come to an end with the release of the final movie in July 2011. Under the only condition that *Pottermore* is "done well and everything about Potter has been done well by allowing each medium to do what it can do best,"<sup>10</sup> Jenkins believes that the paratexts of *Pottermore* will expand the audience's knowledge of the *Harry Potter* universe and successfully deepen the experience of the story. Looking at the actual features of the platform, it can be argued that in the compulsive attempt to combine the advantages of different media, *Pottermore* fails to function properly and convincingly either as a literary text, as an audio-visual text, as gaming, or as a social experience for various reasons. Therefore, contrary to Jenkins' conjecture, *Pottermore* rather prevents each medium from doing what it does best.

#### 3.1 Reading experience

In *Pottermore*, users work—similar to the linear reading process of the novels—through each chapter chronologically before proceeding to the next. Since October 2013, the journey navigator can be used to return easily to chapters that have been explored earlier (**Fig. 1**, next page). Still, the enforced linearity contradicts the idea of transmedia storytelling in general.<sup>11</sup> Since only three novels are available as complete *Pottermore* walkthroughs yet, the reader's journey through the *Pottermore* infrastructure is still limited. While the *Pottermore* storyline is progressing only slowly whereas all the e-books have been published online right away, there is neither a publishing happening that might re-create the exciting publishing happenings of the physical novels with their midnight release parties as launch events<sup>12</sup> in the digital world, nor can new readers combine their e-book reading experience with the *Pottermore* walkthrough. Further, new readers are especially

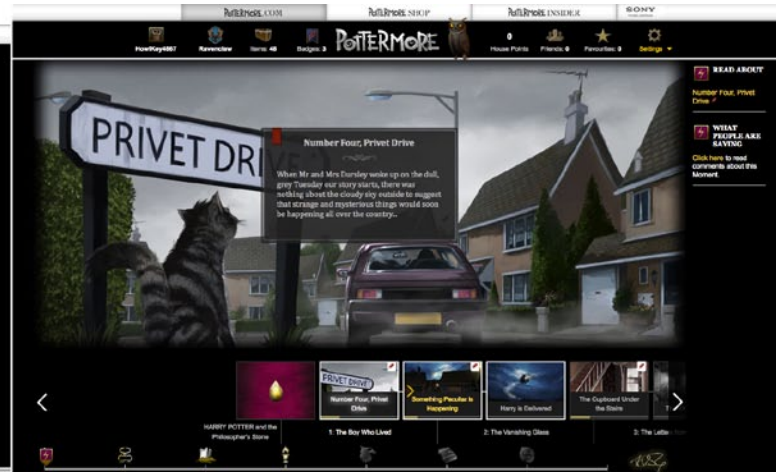
9. See Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge UP, 1997).

10. See Henry Jenkins, "Three Reasons Why *Pottermore* Matters," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, June 24, 2011, accessed October 5, 2013.

11. See Keith Stuart, "The Player IS the Story: Why the Big Publishers Don't Get Transmedia" *The Guardian*, August 3, 2011, accessed October 8, 2013.

12. See Susan Gunelius, *Harry Potter: The Story of a Global Business Phenomenon* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 52-3.





**Figure 1**  
**Pottermore in the old and new design (with journey navigator on the bottom)**

discouraged by the fact that the e-books are only available in the *Pottermore* shop. This complicates the accessibility for readers who are used to buy their media through Amazon or similar online shopping platforms. The enforced detour to the *Pottermore* shop comes along with additional time, effort, and trust for the consumer that some may not consider worth it.

As a reading experience in itself, each *Pottermore* chapter is divided into two or three so-called “moments”; a *Pottermore* chapter only contains a brief summary of the respective book chapter, not the actual text. By clicking on the Flash-based artwork and zooming into the content in more detail, each of the moments can be explored by the user. For example, the first chapter of the first novel *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone* entitled “The Boy Who Lived” is divided in the three moments “Number Four, Privet Drive,” “Something Peculiar Is Happening,” and “Harry Is Delivered.” Within almost all of these moments, hidden items can be discovered and collected for later use (e.g., money, ingredients for spells, books) or to unlock new background information right away.

These exclusive and new paratexts regarding characters, settings, weapons, or specific items enrich the reading experience for many users, although it can be argued that the additional material disenchant the fantasy world of *Harry Potter*. In this regard, Grossman notes for instance that every time he sees “more of the Pottermore realized in other media . . . it takes away from the marvelous, handmade Pottermore I’ve got going on in my head and replaces it with something prefabricated.”<sup>13</sup>

Aside from this rather emotional critique, some concrete technical obstacles can be detected in *Pottermore* that spoil the reading experience. Since the brief synopsis of the plot in each of the moments

works simply as a teaser and can only be understood by users with the full knowledge of the novel, users have to parallel their *Pottermore* walkthrough with the reading of the novels. Since there is no tool available to integrate the purchased e-book into the infrastructure of *Pottermore* as a complete text, the user has to switch between different windows on the computer screen or needs to have the actual physical novel at hand to read the whole chapter while moving forward within the *Pottermore* walkthrough. The user has to deal with the lack of media integration and is constantly confronted with the technical limitations. Although *Pottermore* does provide a hypertextual infrastructure that takes “advantage of the technological features of digital technology, such as hyperlinks, multi-modality and interactivity, and . . . employ[s] these for aesthetic and/or narrative purposes,”<sup>14</sup> it is incapable of organically intertwining *Pottermore* and the novels. Instead, *Pottermore* is characterized by the contradictoriness of the novels and their paratexts. This might be especially frustrating for new, first-time readers who depend on the information provided by the books to understand *Pottermore*.

Reading the *Harry Potter* novels while using *Pottermore* is immensely cumbersome and lessens the immersive power that the narration could have.<sup>15</sup> Immersion means that the attention of a reader, viewer, or player is submerged by a medium in a high degree and its fictional world that the person in question loses track of reality—e.g. one’s sense of time—a feeling described as deeply satisfying.<sup>16</sup> In this context, Mangen’s argument regarding the high

14. Anne Mangen, “Hypertext Fiction Reading: Haptics and Immersion,” *Journal of Research in Reading* 31, no. 4 (2008): 407.

15. See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins UP, 2001).

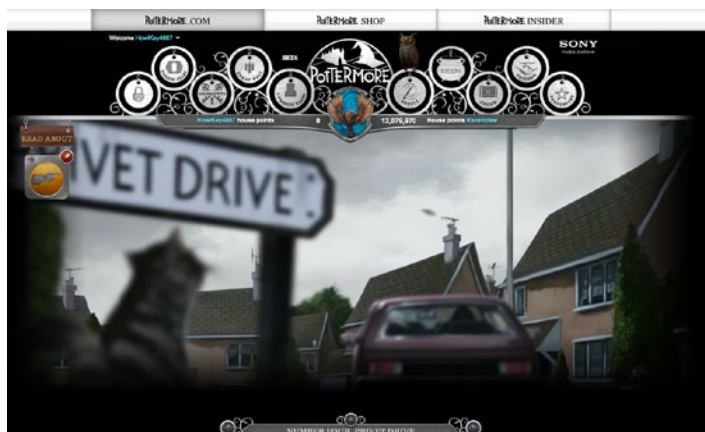
16. See Ernest Adams and Andrew Rollings, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2010), 25.

13. Lev Grossman, “Is Pottermore Good for Harry?” *Time*, June 23, 2011, accessed October 5, 2013.





**Figure 2**  
**Moment “Number Four, Privet Drive” within the first chapter**



**Figure 3**  
**Another layer of sharpness in the moment “Number Four, Privet Drive” with the flying crow**

degree of vulnerability of the user’s concentration is of great significance.<sup>17</sup> Frequent distractions like mouse-clicking, scrolling, scanning the screen in search of new artifacts, navigating through submenus, and switching between different devices all highly affect the immersive power that the story (“narrative immersion”), the world (“tactical immersion”) and the urge to find problem solutions (“strategic immersion”) could have.<sup>18</sup> Ryan points to the reconcilability of immersion and interactivity in computer-generated virtual realities,<sup>19</sup> but this can only work if the interactive components of the environment broaden instead of limit the experience of the world.

Since Rowling has the absolute control over the

17. Anne Mangen, “Hypertext Fiction Reading: Haptics and Immersion,” *Journal of Research in Reading* 31, no. 4 (2008): 407f.

18. See Ernest Adams and Andrew Rollings, *Fundamentals of Game Design*, (Berkeley, CA: New Riders, 2010), 26.

19. See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins UP, 2001), 307-31.

e-book publications, it would have been possible to increase the immersive potential of the platform by choosing a more elegant way to adjust the reading experience of the novels with the *Pottermore* walkthrough. Either integrating the text directly into *Pottermore*—entirely free of charge or as a freemium business model—or implementing hyperlinks to the *Pottermore* website into the e-books and their distribution through many platforms could have done this. With one or both of these strategies, the *Pottermore* platform could have become an organic fusion of different media and a central gathering point for new and old fans. Currently, it is neither and remains broadly irrelevant to the fandom in general.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.2 Audio-visual experience

While disappointing as a reading experience because of its technical limitations, the audio-visual experience of *Pottermore* bears some problems as well, especially when compared with the *Harry Potter* Hollywood movies. The graphic elements of the Flash-animations in *Pottermore* are flat, static, and shallow. Although the pictures and visual effects never look cheap or out of place, there is no real three-dimensionality; *Pottermore* offers visually just two-dimensional, hauntingly empty, lifeless tableaux that consist of three different levels of sharpness (layers) that can be put into focus by scrolling in and out. There is no significant movement within all of these tableaux apart from little animation of leaves, animals, curtains in the air, clouds, lit candles, or the turning pages of a book. For example, in the first moment, “Number Four, Privet Drive,” the cat in the foreground waves with its tail on the first level of sharpness. On the second level, the windscreen wiper and the lights of the car turn on (**Fig. 2**). On the third level, a crow flies away (**Fig. 3**). The visual rigor and the absence of three-dimensionality create a pictorial space that averts immersion because strictly two-dimensional spaces need to exclude the three-dimensional spectator.<sup>21</sup>

*Pottermore* lacks any illustrations of the characters. If characters are displayed at all, they remain faceless, diffuse, are shot from the back, or linger in the far distance from the user’s point of view; this issue applies even to the cat in “Number Four, Privet Drive.”

20. See Bethan Jones, “Pottermore: Encouraging or Regulating Participatory Culture?,” in *Magic Is Might 2012: Proceedings of the International Conference* ed. Luigina Ciolfi and Gráinne O’Brien (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University, 2013), 169.

21. See Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore/London: John Hopkins UP, 2001), 2.



Possibly, this aesthetic strategy is used in the attempt to allow the user more free imaginary space for their own conception of the characters. However, the general absence of humans causes the dystopian feel of a last-man-on-earth-scenario one would expect from science fiction cinema rather than from the colorful fantasy world of *Harry Potter*, which mostly thrives on its large and lively cast. Film historic examples like *Psycho* or *From Dusk Till Dawn* show that infringements of genre conventions usually unsettle the audience—an effect the *Pottermore* aesthetics unintentionally create—while generic coherence strengthens the audience's trust in the narration.

The *Pottermore* audio track is minimalistic, reduced to some nature sounds, a train moving, distant clattering with dishes, or the sounds of incomprehensible conversations. These sounds always match the animations; for example, in the moment “Number Four, Privet Drive,” the purring of a cat can be heard on the first level of sharpness, the honking of the car on the second, and the sound of a croaking crow on the third layer. There is never music or dialogue. Again, the absence of language creates an uncanny atmosphere that mismatch with the funny, dialogue-driven parts of the novels. This ambiance distances the users from the scenery rather than improving their ability to feel involved.

### 3.3 Gaming experience

The lack of audio-visual multi-dimensionality that obviates immersion is a problem of the *Pottermore* gaming experience, too. Even more problematic are the little riddles and challenges that are simultaneously too primitive for gamers and too challenging for readers. The objectives for the user are limited to the detection and collection of items that have little relevance for the progress within the storyline for a reader perspective, but also lack long-term motivation or complexity for a gamer perspective. One user attributes this conflict and the subsequent feeling of frustration during an online discussion with other users to *Pottermore*'s lack of definition because it is not “clear if it's supposed to be a game or not, so it's flailing [sic] somewhere in the middle, disappointing people like me who want to be challenged and ALSO disappointing people like you who just want the content.”<sup>22</sup>

Looking at the dramaturgic quest-structure of the novels and the existence of magical objects, helpers, and monster opponents populating a restricted fantasy environment, it becomes eye-catching that the narrative of *Harry Potter* is ideal

22. Andrew Sims, “Pottermore CEO Talks How They Plan to Bring Fans Back to the Site More Regularly” *Hypable*, February 12, 2013, accessed October 6, 2013.

for its transmission into a game.<sup>23</sup> However, interestingly, the *Potter* computer games have enjoyed only minor success and often been criticized for their limitations, lack of choice, and pre-determinism.<sup>24</sup> *Pottermore* repeats these mistakes; in an era of MMORPGs where player characters have complex backstories, can make decisions, possess individual appearances, and constantly develop with more experience, combined with the popularity of larp, which especially highlights the performative quality of role-playing,<sup>25</sup> it is astonishing how little *Pottermore* is modeled on these examples. Unlike other social media platforms, *Pottermore* does not even offer its participants the option to choose their own user names; to modify the pictures of their avatars; to individualize their animals or give them names; to explore the *Pottermore* world outside the predetermined storyline; or to interact with other users to form alliances. Contrary to Montola's crucial observation that a role-playing game world is defined by the “personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world,”<sup>26</sup> the deserted tableaux of *Pottermore* seem to be fully functional without the users, who are unable to shape their game world or interact with each other. Here, no hunters or gatherers are needed. If the *Pottermore* user is dispensable, is it even transmedia storytelling anymore?

The sorting hat ceremony is another good example of this problem. It marks, together with Harry's receiving of the wand, a key moment within the original narration since both signify the hero's transition into the magical world. Both events were highly anticipated by *Pottermore* users, but caused some upset. Jones pointed to the fact that the *Pottermore* sorting is disappointing since the user has to answer some random questions and has no real say in the process, contrasting with Harry's original experience where he consciously chooses not to be in Slytherin. The *Pottermore* sorting procedure

23. See Andrew Burn, “Potter-Literacy—From Book to Game and Back Again: Literature, Film, Game and Cross-Media Literacy,” *Papers: Explorations into Children's Literature* 14, no. 3 (2005), 1.

24. See Andrew Burn, “Potter-Literacy—From Book to Game and Back Again: Literature, Film, Game and Cross-Media Literacy,” 11.

25. See Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*.

26. Markus Montola, “The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1 (2009): 24.



ignores that “most Potter fans know what house they should be in, having found themselves identifying with a particular house long before the incursion of Rowling’s Sorting Hat test.”<sup>27</sup> Like in role-playing games from *Dungeons & Dragons* to *Diablo* to larp where the player typically can choose a distinct fraction, class or race,<sup>28</sup> the Hogwarts house affiliation stands for a certain lifestyle, ideology, and set of character traits. One user comment exemplarily articulates this longing for a more individualized experience that borrows from MMORPGs:

I was thinking that a good way to handle the sorting without an annoying and easily manipulated quiz, would be to make a series of events on the train before you get to Hogwarts [sic]. For example, a kid is being bullied by upperclassmen, and you choose whether or not to help. That sort of thing. Then your sorting would be based off your decisions.<sup>29</sup>

The absence of essential role-playing characteristics like character development and decision-making lessens the individualized experience of the *Pottermore* fantasy world for the user. Since *Pottermore* denies the fans an individualized character that could add to the *Harry Potter* storyline or create an entirely new personalized narration as suggested in Rowling’s video announcement, the users of *Pottermore* remain distant and powerless observers of the official text.

### 3.4 Social experience

The proclamation of *Pottermore*’s social experience in the video announcement bears at least three reasons for skepticism: firstly, the strong dissonance between the frequent verbal mentioning of fans and their visual absence<sup>30</sup>; secondly, the segregation of *Harry Potter* fans into early, privileged users and the common public through the beta test

27. Bethan Jones, “Pottermore: Encouraging or Regulating Participatory Culture?” in *Magic Is Might 2012: Proceedings of the International Conference* ed. Luigina Ciolfi and Gráinne O’Brien (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University, 2013), 167.

28. Bowman, *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*, 147f.

29. Andrew Sims, “Pottermore CEO Talks How They Plan to Bring Fans Back to the Site More Regularly” *Hypable*, February 12, 2013, accessed October 6, 2013.

30. See Jens Kirk, “Transgression and Taboo. The Field of Fan Fiction”, *akademisk kvarter* 3 (2011): 154–56.

pre-release<sup>31</sup>; and thirdly, the accentuated usage of the word “safe.”<sup>32</sup> Of course, *Pottermore* could be fan-friendly by offering new creative opportunities for fan activity and providing an infrastructure for interactions between the fans, but Jenkins reminds us that Rowling had shown many efforts in the past to shape and control how fans respond to her work. Therefore, the word “safe” can be translated into an attempt to create a censored, regulated, policed environment, where some fans are privileged over others, excluding, for example, fans of the genre of homoerotic slash fan fiction.<sup>33</sup> As it turns out, not only slash fiction, but all kinds of fan fiction, video mash-ups, slash, and adult fan art are banned from *Pottermore*.

Further, *Pottermore* provides no means of interaction between its users except the ability to leave comments below the moments of a chapter: no discussion forum is available; and other users can only be added to a friends list and challenged for duels, but cannot chat or send private messages. Following Evans’ observation that the concept of interactivity is strongly connected to ideas of agency and control as key pleasures for the audience in interactive media,<sup>34</sup> the lack of interactivity of *Pottermore* signifies a denial to transfer some control over the text to the fans. In this sense, Kirk describes *Pottermore* as a market place that intensifies the divide between Rowling and the *Harry Potter* fan community in terms of sellers/buyers and suppliers/consumers, rather than a platform that establishes the more democratic relationship between author/text and fan/reception that the video announcement had suggested.<sup>35</sup>

The non-existence of individual avatars and the attribution of random user names strongly

31. See Terje Colbjørnsen, “Harry Potter and the Chamber of Commerce: J.K. Rowling’s *Pottermore.com* as the extension of the Harry Potter brand in a digital context,” in *Magic Is Might 2012: Proceedings of the International Conference*, ed. Luigina Ciolfi and Gráinne O’Brien (Sheffield: Sheffield Hallam University, 2013), 150.

32. See Henry Jenkins, “Three Reasons Why Pottermore Matters” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan*, June 24, 2011, accessed October 5, 2013.

33. See Catherine Tosenberger, “Homosexuality at the Online Hogwarts: Harry Potter Slash Fanfiction,” *Children’s Literature* 36 (2008).

34. See Elizabeth J. Evans, “Character, Audience Agency and Trans-Media Drama,” *Media, Culture & Society* 30, no. 2 (2008).

35. See Jens Kirk, “Transgression and Taboo. The Field of Fan Fiction” *akademisk kvarter* 3 (2011): 157.



**Figure 4**  
**Banned to the bottom line—Fan art and user comments on Pottermore**

indicate that the promise that the fans would be able to participate in the story of *Harry Potter* remains unfulfilled. Instead, *Pottermore* can be seen as attempt by the author to subtly “start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market”<sup>36</sup> the behaviour of fans and the reception process. *Pottermore* creates an anti-fandom environment, regulated and controlled by a superior authority. The users remain faceless, nameless, and voiceless, and their small contributions are banished to the bottom line of the website, reduced to insignificant emoticons and “likes,” censored and excluded from the official content of the page (Fig. 4).

Within a decade, the participatory culture of the *Harry Potter* fandom evolved into a huge, diverse, creative movement of great visibility. In terms of interactivity, *Pottermore* has little *raison d’être* because the *Harry Potter* fan community has countless modes of less regulated (e.g., LiveJournal) or even unregulated (e.g., Archive of Our Own) social interaction available. Possibly, *Harry Potter* fandom has already become too transmedia in itself to be forced back into an existence of passive consumerism. As a consequence, the social media aspects of *Pottermore* are mainly irrelevant to adult fans and the website “lost its moment in the spotlight.”<sup>37</sup>

## 4. Conclusion

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau discusses the differences between strategies and tactics, between consumption and “making do.” While media producers strategically plan how a certain text should be used, according to de Certeau, consumers develop tactics of “making do”: they actively gain agency through creating new uses and making meaning of these items.<sup>38</sup> *Pottermore* is a strategy to channel the consumption of the *Harry Potter* text, offering a very limited, linear access to the story. In contrast, *Harry Potter* discussion forums, videos, fan art, and fan fiction are a network of different tactics of “making do” that all challenge the privilege of interpretation by the author/producer.

As long as *Pottermore* denies its users agency and tries to regulate the creative process of meaning making, the real interesting things in *Harry Potter* fandom will continue to happen outside on the islands on the web—to borrow a term by Hakim Bey—where rules can be questioned, transgressed, and broken.<sup>39</sup> As long as *Pottermore* pursues this monopolistic, control-oriented publishing model, it seems unlikely that new audiences—the next generation of *Harry Potter* readers—will be able to access conveniently the world of *Harry Potter* through this new medium. Further, a more organic intertwining of the different media, a true understanding of the transmedia concept in general, and the placement of the user instead of the author as the focus of consideration would be necessary. Otherwise, users will remain emersed, easily distracted, and bored by the digital world of *Pottermore* and return to their bookshelves, television sets, discussion groups, or fan fiction websites, which provide either more interactivity or immersive power or both. Without a more critical reflection of the authors’ role, *Pottermore* will not significantly add to the fandom experience of the world of *Harry Potter*. Until then, the un-success of *Pottermore* works as a perfect example to confirm the conjecture that fan culture can only unfold its full potential in a free, almost anarchic environment, which is seldom compatible with the hubris of an author or the interests of major media corporations.

36. Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (London/New York: New York UP, 2006), 169.

37. Emily Scheerer, “Pottermore: the good, the bad and the slow” *Retriever Weekly*, April 30, 2013, accessed October 5, 2013.

38. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 29–43.

39. See Hakim Bey, *T. A. Z. The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism* (New York: Autonomedia, 2003).



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# No One Role-plays the Spanish Inquisition!:

## The Early History of Role-playing Games in Spain

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Nicholas Mizer

### Abstract

Using the history of role-playing games in Spain as a case study, this paper examines the interaction between culture and the global spread of role-playing games. Intended as a “proof of concept,” the paper establishes the sorts of developments that a global study of RPGs can investigate, and serves as a basis for further ethnographic study in Spain or similar projects in other countries. Spain makes a good test case for at least two reasons. Because Spain was not the first non-English speaking country to have native gaming materials (a distinction which belongs to France), studying Spanish RPGs allows a view of the globalization process “in media res,” already a part of the developing global network.

Spanish gaming developed in the social context of formally organized and government-registered clubs, which led to the development of very different power dynamics of the community than the informal gaming group model more common in the American context. Gaming clubs, not game publishers, produced the earliest and most influential gaming magazines, which allowed them to utilize their control over the means of communication to take a stand against perceived abuses on the part of game publishers, distributors, and vendors.

Similarly, Spanish game development was shaped by the cultural context. Special attention is given to *Aquelarre*, often considered the most distinctively Spanish role-playing game. The Iberian setting of the game, as well as the strong Catholic influence, provide insights not only into Spanish gaming and culture, but also about the distinctively American character of games like *Dungeons & Dragons*.

*Aquelarre* continues to serve as a source of national pride for Spanish gamers, and helped to clear a path for distinctively Spanish game design. Through analysis of textual sources, this paper develops two primary arguments for the cross-cultural study of RPGs. First, the social context of play should not be assumed. The American model of informal gaming groups and the Spanish club-centered model are likely only two of many approaches to play. A second implication is the importance of investigating specific cultural adaptations of the imaginary settings of the games. Although Spanish gamers identify a fairly nationalistic game as iconic of their community,

other cultures will have taken a different direction. The final goal of this vein of research is to describe the complex flows passing through the worldwide gaming community, understanding the role of play and imagination in the broader context of other global systems.

### Keywords

history, role-playing games, tabletop, Spain, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Aquelarre*

### 1. Introduction

In recent years, academic knowledge of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) has been developing at an impressive rate. The slow but steady flow of publications following Fine’s seminal ethnography has become a flood following the resurgence of interest (both academic and popular) in RPGs following the death of *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*) creators Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson in 2008 and 2009, respectively. With almost forty years of history, RPGs are no longer considered a novelty, and the most recent turn in scholarship has been situating them in terms of broader cultural histories of the imagination and developing better understandings of their beginnings.<sup>1</sup>

The work of examining the global flows of RPGs, on the other hand, is still in its very early stages. The Knutepunkt conferences have produced preliminary studies of larp in [Britain](#) [Latvia](#) and [Russia](#) and a special issue of Spanish journal TESI on RPGs included a history of game publication in [Spain](#) but the former studies have little to say on tabletop gaming, and the latter is primarily a quantitative analysis of game publication. Similarly, Pareja gives some special attention to Iberian RPGs in his dissertation on their editorial history, but although less strictly quantitative than Semenov, it similarly

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1. Jon Peterson, *Playing at the World: A History of Simulating Wars, People and Fantastic Adventure, From Chess to Role-Playing Games* (San Diego, CA: Unreason Press, 2012); Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 2011).



focuses on the history of games as products rather than the history of gaming as practice.<sup>2</sup> These are valuable inquiries, but new work is necessary to investigate the interaction between culture and the spread of tabletop games. This paper serves as a preliminary step towards developing such an understanding, using Spain as an example.

Faced with gaming research, scholars unfamiliar with RPGs may be left asking, “Why?” In an age when increasing attention is given to “broader impacts” and public application of scholarship, tabletop RPG studies can seem an esoteric misdirection of scholastic energy and funding. Worse, from the perspective of “cutting edge” studies of virtual worlds and video games, writing about small groups of people sitting around tables and using pencils can appear quaint and old-fashioned, out of touch with the modern (postmodern, supermodern) world.

Yet it is because of, not in spite of, the overwhelming popularity of video games that understanding tabletop gaming is more important than ever. As Saler has said, the habits of the geek minority “have arguably become those of the majority in the West: we are all geeks now.”<sup>3</sup> Saler identifies a set of tactics, which he labels “ironic imagination,” and traces their development back to the fin de siècle development of “New Romance” literature. Although the ironic imagination originally developed as an approach to explicitly fictional worlds, it became an approach to modernity in general.<sup>4</sup> What began as playfully treating imaginary worlds as real has extended to playfully approaching the real world more imaginatively, changing Huizinga’s impermeable “magic circle” that separates play from everyday life into “a porous boundary perpetually crossed and re-crossed.”<sup>5</sup>

Based on current trends, it seems that the permeability between games and other aspects of life will only increase in the years to come. By developing more robust understandings of RPGs, we gain insights into their application in those other areas. While this apologetic for RPG studies may not satisfy the most ardent skeptics, hopefully it at least serves to

challenge the assumption that understandings of play have no implications for the more “serious” aspects of culture. As Appadurai puts it, “The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.”<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Globalization of role-playing games

The first step towards understanding the spread of RPGs is developing histories of their early development in the original American context. Peterson’s magnum opus *Playing at the World* has largely achieved that end for tabletop gaming and Barton has accomplished a similar feat in the field of computer RPGs with *Dungeons and Desktops*.<sup>7</sup> Both works draw on historical research to establish the series of events and confluences of influences that led to the current importance of these games. Being primarily historical in nature, they leave much work to be done in the area of cultural analysis, but this is by design.<sup>8</sup> As demonstrated by the list of recent works that opened this essay, however, that interpretive work is progressing at a healthy rate.

Considering the spread of RPGs in terms of globalization opens up a number of theoretical and methodological resources to game scholarship. Appadurai’s five-fold framework of ethnoscapescapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes, and ideoscapes, for example, can guide researchers in considering the multifaceted “imagined worlds”—both in Appadurai’s sense and in the more literal sense of the imaginary worlds in which the games are set—of the global flows of RPGs.<sup>9</sup> In some cases, migration and tourism may be an important aspect of games’ spread, while in others, exposure to RPGs may come primarily through print and electronic media. Because RPGs are not only a hobby but a business, their spread is also caught up in the global flow of capital, especially because *D&D* is now owned by the multinational toy and game company Hasbro. Although not often explicitly political, RPGs also carry political connotations both in terms of their settings and their mechanics, so these must also be considered.

2. Hector Sevillano Pareja, “Estudio Del Sector Editorial De Los Juegos De Rol En España: Historia, Tipología, Perfil Del Lector, Del Autor, Del Traductor Y Del Editor” (Ph.D. diss., University of Salamanca, 2008).

3. Saler, *As If*, 3-4.

4. *Ibid.*, 17.

5. Marinka Copier, “Connecting Worlds. Fantasy Role-Playing Games, Ritual Acts and the Magic Circle,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005 Conference: Changing Views—Worlds in Play*.

6. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at large : Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 31.

7. Matt Barton, *Dungeons and Desktops: The History of Computer Role-Playing Games* (Wellesley, MA: AK Peters, 2008).

8. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, xvi.

9. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33.

### 3. Origins of role-playing games in Spain

Interestingly, a more specific and slightly different version of these origins can be found in the Spanish-language version of Wikipedia. A full explication of the implications of a folkloric understanding of knowledge production in Wikipedia falls outside the scope of this paper, but Doctorow offers a concise summary of how I intend its use here: “Wikipedia tells you what live Internet users are fighting over.”<sup>10</sup>

In the case of “**The History of Role-Playing Games in Spain**” Wikipedia appears to tell us what live Internet users agree on. Since Wikipedia user Kintaro created the article in November 2009, other users have chimed in to clarify minor points, but no challenges have been offered in the article’s three year history and no discussion page has been created. Thus, the article can be tentatively considered an accepted folk history; at the very least, it is the version that Spanish gamers are most likely to encounter.

The history provided by Kintaro begins in Barcelona with the 1959 founding of the *Agrupación de Miniaturistas Militares de España* (The Spanish Association of Military Miniatures Enthusiasts).<sup>11</sup> One of the founders, Joaquim Pla i Dalmau, was the head of Dalmau Carle from 1967 to 1981, the company that would later publish *D&D*. Pla introduced the concept of wargaming to the group in the early 1970s with his personal translation of German *Kriegspiel* rules. In 1977, AMME member Miguel Barceló, a fan of science fiction, heard of a game in that genre just released in the United States called *Traveller*. Barceló’s friend Lluís Salvador learned the rules of the game and ran a session for his friends, making him the first gamemaster in Spain. Two years later, Salvador learned of the opening of a new store, Joc Play, which specialized in wargames and role-playing games. He and his friend Lluís Juliá visited Joc Play just as the first shipment of *D&D* arrived and purchased the first two boxes.

Evidence from the Spanish gaming magazine **MS** provides corroboration for the Wikipedia history. First released as a newsletter in 1979, the magazine was produced by another Barcelonan wargaming club, *Maquetismo y Simulación* (Modeling and

Simulation). The November 1981 issue contains an article titled “Initiation into *Traveller*,” which may be the earliest extant reference to role-playing games in Spain. The article makes no reference to *Traveller* as a role-playing game, suggesting that the term would not be familiar to the readers of *MS*. Instead, **Broto describes the game by way of contrast:**

*Traveller* is no tabletop game [i.e., wargame]. It is made of a great many rule-books, play aids, supplements, and scenario books in order to facilitate the creation of situations when playing the game in a campaign. Considered all together, it can seem vast and very complicated, and doubtless it is. But the form of presentation, step by step, makes it very simple to learn and even simpler when put into practice.

Similarly, no reference is made to *D&D*, lending plausibility to the claim that *Traveller* was played first. Interestingly, given its dominance in the United States, *D&D* is given no pride of place for being the first role-playing game.

While this may seem like a minor detail to establish, two themes present in the Wikipedia history and *MS* article carry forward into the more documented later history. First, the role of clubs and associations seems to be central to understanding the development and culture of role-playing games in Spain. Second, the role of gaming magazines in establishing a canon of games not centered on *D&D* suggests that the game’s prominence in the United States was not a foregone conclusion, but a development with contingent cultural and economic causes. As an ancillary point to this second theme, the 1984 *MS* article also contains the first hint of a problem that would become increasingly prominent in the Spanish gaming community over its history: the importance of developing games on a national level rather than merely importing them. “In Spain (and, evidently in Spanish),” **writes Soteras,**

there is still nothing, although we have in preparation a version based on *The Fantasy Trip* with substantial changes that make it a separate entity titled *Viaje a La Fantasia* (Fantasy Trip). We are also preparing a rule-set titled *Mundo Fantastico* (Fantastic World), which combines mass combat and role-playing games.

Each of these themes will be discussed below, but are mentioned here to establish the connection between the origins of gaming in a country and their later development. As de Tocqueville put it, “they all bear some marks of their origin; and the circumstances which accompanied their birth and

10. William Westerman, “Epistemology, the Sociology of Knowledge, and the Wikipedia Userbox Controversy,” in *Folklore and the Internet: Vernacular Expression in a Digital World*, edited by Trevor J. Blank (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 2009).

11. All translations are my own.



contributed to their rise affect the whole term of their being.”<sup>12</sup>

#### 4. Clubs in the Spanish role-playing community

Perhaps the most striking thing about the Spanish role-playing community when compared to its American analog is the proliferation and importance of public clubs. As has been seen, it is likely that clubs formed the context and impetus for the original introduction of RPGs into Spain. All of the important gaming magazines were created by gaming clubs, and those still in circulation continued to be published in that context. *MS*, the publication for the Barcelonan club *Maquetismo y Simulación*, whose name was changed to *Lider* in 1986, has already been mentioned. Another Barcelonan club, *Auryn*, released the first magazine exclusively devoted to role-playing games, *Troll*, in 1986.<sup>13</sup>

Although Barcelona was the original hotspot for clubs and magazines, other cities soon followed suit. By the end of 1986, *Lider* was able to list 46 clubs in 21 cities, and the head of Tyr, a Spanish gaming company, claimed that there was a club in every province in Spain. Besides producing magazines, these clubs were also responsible for translating and releasing RPGs. The Spanish translation of *The Call of Cthulhu*, for example, was done by *Maquetismo y Simulación* member Jordi Zamarreño, and members of the Madrid-based club The Fumbler Dwarf translated *RuneQuest* in 1988 and *James Bond 007* in 1990.<sup>14</sup>

The distinctive fact about Spanish clubs is not their mere existence, however. As Peterson has documented, clubs like The International Federation of Wargamers, the Castle and Crusade Society, and SPECTRE form an important part of the history of

American RPGs as well.<sup>15</sup> As role-playing games became increasingly popular, however, the role of clubs has mostly diminished in the States. This is not to claim that such clubs do not exist, only that available evidence suggests that club-based play is not normative in the American tabletop scene. Barring a large scale survey, such a claim must remain at least partially anecdotal for the present, but it is telling that out of all the American scholarly literature on the topic, only Fine’s 1983 ethnography centers on a club. Instead American gamers, at least as reflected in the literature, tend to play in the context of loosely organized groups of friends, playing in the home of one of the members.

Even where clubs do exist in the American context, the evidence suggests that they are less formally organized than those in Spain. In 1991, *Lider* published an article in response to one of their most-received questions: how to form a club? The steps they offered are presented here to give a sense of the degree of organization that existed in Spanish clubs:

- a. Get together with your friends and choose a name
- b. Make posters and put them up in the stores, student and recreational centers
- c. Begin the establishment of a club house in a social or recreational space . . . and if possible look for institutional funding.
- d. Participate in local festivals, cultural weeks, youth fairs . . . . This is the best form of presentation and trains the organizational capacities of the group.
- e. Register your club as an association with the cultural or youth departments of your city, county, or community, depending on which is easiest
- f. A fanzine. You can’t go without a fanzine for your club.

American clubs might complete the first two steps of this list, but there is little evidence of establishing permanent club houses or participating in local festivals. Fine, for example, describes the Golden Brigade he studied as a “loosely structured organization” that “obtained permission to use the community room of a Minneapolis neighborhood

12. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve. Vol. 1. New York: Penguin Books, 1899, 17.

13. An extensive archive of Spanish gaming magazines, including many not mentioned here, can be freely accessed at <http://sinergiaderol.com/revistas-rol.html>.

14. Gerard Christopher Klug. *James Bond 007 : El Juego de Rol al Servicio Secreto de Su Majestad*, translated by Karl Klobuznik and Moisés Prieto (Barcelona: Joc International, 1990); Sandy Petersen, *La Llamada de Cthulhu: Juego de Rol en los Mundos de H.P. Lovecraft*, translated by Jordi Zamarreño (Barcelona: Joc International, 1988); Greg Stafford, *Rune Quest: Básico*, translated by Luis Serrano Cogollor and Ana Isabel Utande (Barcelona: Joc International, 1988).

15. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 5-11.

police station.”<sup>16</sup> The **New York Red Box** group, to give one example of an extant American club, meets in the upper room of a local restaurant and has no permanent space. Spanish clubs, on the other hand, often have permanent spaces open to both members and visitors. The **Auryn clubhouse**, for example, is currently open Thursday through Friday, and issues of both *Lider* and *Troll* both regularly featured invitations for anyone to stop by any time.

One might question to what extent clubs followed *Lider*’s advice to become active in the community, but the magazine’s “State of Fandom” column regularly featured reports from clubs who had participated in various festivals and introduced gaming to the community. *Troll* also featured these reports, as when *Auryn* participated in the youth demonstration in the Nou Barris district of Barcelona, inviting passers-by to join them in a game of *D&D*. **The club reported** the event a success and said that many of the visitors expressed interest in the game. Thus, although certainly not all of the clubs presented such a public face, it seems that many of them engaged regularly with the community through festivals and events.

By encouraging the formation of new clubs, *Lider* functioned as an advocate and nurturer of the nascent Spanish fandom. One important aspect of this was represented by taking a stand against perceived abuses on the part of game publishers, distributors, and vendors. Because the clubs were central to all aspects of fandom and controlled the means of communication between fans, they were able to achieve this goal in a way not possible in the United States or Britain, where the most popular gaming magazines—*Dragon* and *White Dwarf* respectively—were owned by game publishers.

A striking illustration of the clubs’ power in this regard comes from the editorial statement in **the March 1987 issue of *Troll*** after game publisher Joc International pressured the staff into including an ad attacking other companies in the Spanish gaming industry, a tactic that went against the magazine’s editorial policy:

Nevertheless, we feel that we have the right and the duty to inform the fans that the following mentality has been confirmed on the part of the “professionals” of the game:

- The important thing is everyone’s “business,” and the profits that this generates.
- The fans are manipulable and what is wanted of them is that they buy, consume, and shut up.
- The means of communication, such as *Troll*, are at

their service and it’s what’s paid that matters, not what’s done.

.....  
This has been the last pressure that *Troll* will put up with and, if we continue publishing . . . we warn advertisers to get in contact with us, because we are tired of begging them for support for something that helps the fans and of course themselves.

This gambit appears to have worked, because none of Jocs and Games ads from that point forward carried the cutthroat attitude that caused so much trouble. A pro-consumer stance is evident throughout both *Troll* and *Lider*, who regularly referred readers to content from competitors’ magazines. *Lider*, for example, printed an ad on the occasion of *Troll*’s first anniversary congratulating them on their tenacity and sacrifice in releasing the magazine.

An attitude of cooperation appears to have been adopted even by some of the game companies. The head of Tyr, for example, **told *Lider* that**

Throughout the trajectory of our company you can see behavior that is a little atypical, like including references in our own games to other companies that have games on the same theme as ours . . . If anyone has an idea to do something in this field, we offer our collaboration, because we also believe in the “hobby” aspect and don’t only think in terms of marketing.

Whether this attitude is feigned or genuine, it shows the effectiveness with which the clubs were able to set the tone of discourse in the role-playing community through their control of the means of communication. Because the clubs were not operating for profit, they served to balance out the profit motives of the companies producing the games.

By way of contrast, the most popular gaming magazine in the United States, *Dragon*, was operated by TSR and, later, Wizards of the Coast. There is little talk of increasing fandom, perhaps partially because the fandom was already increasing rapidly by the time *Dragon* began.<sup>17</sup> The editors of the magazine were themselves gamers, and certainly sought to provide a service to the gaming community, but they were also obligated to act in the interest of their publisher. There were certainly references to non-TSR games, at least early on, but *Dragon* was also used to represent TSR’s stance.<sup>18</sup> Although other voices did exist, notably in the form of amateur press association fanzine *Alarums*

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<sup>17.</sup> *Dragon* 2:3.

<sup>18.</sup> E.g., *Dragon* 12:28-30, 39.

<sup>16.</sup> Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 22.



and *Excursions*, Gygax stated the power dynamic well in a letter printed in the second issue: “I too subscribe to the slogan ‘D&D is too important to leave to Gary Gygax’ . . . . It now belongs to the *thousands* of players enjoying it worldwide, most of whom will probably never hear of you or your opinions *unless* you get them into the *Strategic Review* [TSR’s pre-*Dragon* magazine].”<sup>19</sup> Thus the situation in Spain, where the players controlled the means of communication, produced a very different sort of discourse than that in the United States.

## 5. Developing a national game

Bringing in new players was a major focus for many of the clubs’ activities. While the desire to increase membership is common to most fandoms, in this case, there was a further motive: by creating a vibrant gaming community, the clubs hoped to encourage the development of the first Spanish-developed RPG. As mentioned above, members of *Maquetismo y Simulación* began working on two Spanish games—*Viaje a La Fantasia* and *Mundo Fantastico*—very soon after the first RPGs were played in Spain. Although listed for sale in early issues of the magazine, both projects were soon forgotten. In a 1986 *Lider* article D’Estrées and Jara essentially repeat the 1984 statement in *MS* saying that there were no games produced in Spain, either ignoring or unaware of the earlier efforts. If anything, the verdict is even gloomier:

Unfortunately, on the topic of games, whether role-playing games or strategy games, the Spanish have completed our usual mission of being Johnny-come-latelies. While in the Anglo-Saxon countries the prospects have been good and plenty, here we don’t hear much. But we don’t know much about gaming in countries like France and Germany either, countries with a tradition of play much more important than ours. In any case, when good new Simulation games come to those countries they can quickly jump on the bandwagon.

Despite this self-deprecating attitude, the article ends optimistically. Offering France as a model, the authors say that “traditional French ‘chauvinism’ has become a virtue permitting the birth of various completely French role-playing games” and hope that Spain will follow a similar path.

By the time D’Estrées and Jara were writing their article, that process was already in motion. Ricard Ibañez, a member of *Auryn* and founding member

of the *Troll* editorial staff, had already cut his teeth on game design with *La canción de los sortilegios* (The Song of Spells). Designed for a small group of friends and very closely based on D&D, the game gave Ibañez a desire to write his own game for wider release. After his regular contributions to *Lider* and *Troll* drew the attention of Joc International, he was asked to develop a commercial RPG. Inspired by the French graphic novel originally titled *El Sortilegio del bosque de las Brumas* (The Spell of the Forest Witches), Ibañez decided to set his game in the Iberian Peninsula of the Middle Ages. Titled *Aquelarre* (Witches’ Sabbath), the premise of the game is that all of the medieval folk beliefs in demons and other supernatural creatures were as real as the more mundane history of bishops, kings, and caballeros. Having studied history in college, Ibañez took the historical presentation of the game quite seriously, carefully developed the setting to match fourteenth-century conditions.<sup>20</sup>

The game was considered a success and, as the initial review put it, “*Aquelarre* . . . has nothing to envy in its foreign colleagues.” The game became an emblem of what was possible in the world of Spanish game design. As the designer of *Mutantes en la Sombra* (Mutants in the Shadows) explained “*Aquelarre* is a demonstration that it is possible to make perfectly valid role-playing games designed in Spain.”

Today, although a survey conducted by Pareja suggests that *Aquelarre* is rarely either a player’s first introduction to gaming or their preferred game (honors that go to *D&D* and *Vampire: The Masquerade*, respectively), it is nonetheless considered “the premiere authentically Spanish role-playing game.”<sup>21</sup> Some of the disparity between Pareja’s data and this more qualitative statement may derive from the fact that the survey was distributed just before the release of *Aquelarre*’s third edition increased fan enthusiasm for the game. Data released through *Lider* in the early years of *Aquelarre*’s existence corroborate Pareja’s numbers, however, regularly placing *Aquelarre* as around the seventh most popular game in Spain.

The disparity between *Aquelarre*’s financial success and its iconic role in Spanish gaming culture suggests that the game and its creator struck a cultural nerve. This happened on a number of levels. First, Ibañez himself fits the image of the Spanish gamer quite well: he has been a member of the “mythic and long-lived” club *Auryn* since its inaugural year and as of 2010 still played at the club house six times a month.

20. Ricard Ibañez, *Aquelarre*, Edited by Manuel J. Sueiro and Iván Sánchez Iglesias (Madrid: Nosolorol, 2010), 11.

21. Pareja, “Estudio Del Sector Editorial,” 546-547

19. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 512-513.

Although Ibañez has published a number of other games and has some success as an author, **he is not a full-time professional** firmly placing him on the player side of the player-industry power dynamic.

Perhaps more than Ibañez as a public figure, however, the importance of *Aquelarre* in Spain has to do with its successful adaptation of the Iberian setting. This adaptation runs deeper than the geographic locales mentioned in the game or the fact that spells are based on authentic medieval grimoires and monsters are **limited to those extant in Iberian folk traditions**. The handling of religion in the game, for example, is strongly framed by Medieval Spanish Catholicism, including the existence of mechanics for sacraments, sins, and penance. Unlike in *D&D*, where clerics must only maintain a general accord with their pantheonic deity, priests in *Aquelarre* must maintain their sanctity, measured quantitatively in the form of “faith points.” Gluttony, for example, lowers the score by one, while murder carries a -10 penalty. Priests who conduct black magic or worship pagan gods lose all of their faith points and might never be able to properly perform a ritual again.<sup>22</sup>

Yet the game is far from sanctimonious; the subtitle, after all, is “Demonic Medieval Role-Playing.” The most recent cover is designed to look like a grimoire, with *Aquelarre*’s pentacle and goat head logo, and the illustrations are often quite gruesome. Thus, *Aquelarre* reflects both Spain’s Catholic past and a common sense among Spaniards of feeling “alienated from the traditions and history of organized religion,” a feeling that has connections with the church-supported Franco regime.<sup>23</sup> By taking a very literal interpretation of Spanish Catholicism and placing it within the frame of a game, *Aquelarre* captures some of the tensions running through Spanish culture.

Although I have not yet performed full ethnographic work in Spain, my correspondence with Spanish gamers have both confirmed and expanded these connections between *Aquelarre* and Spanish culture. As gamer Carlos de la Cruz Morales put it,

In Spain, *Aquelarre* is THE Spanish RPG. Even if a spanish gamer didn’t play the game, he/she will [acknowledge] it as the first and foremost ‘Spanish game’ . . . . But *Aquelarre* has another important point that makes the game “Spanish”: the player characters of the game are not shinny [sic] heroes in brilliant armor. They are picaresque heroes

fighting for being alive just one more day. In *Aquelarre*, if there’s a cold day, you can catch a pneumonia and die; if you enter a fight with your armor and sword against some lowly bandits, they can have a lucky day and kill you with a critical hit; and if you fight against the infernal beasts of Hell, you’ll be destroyed fairly easy. Adventures in *Aquelarre* are full of sin, whores and dirt, but also heroism and passion. The heroism of people fighting quixotically against impossible odds, and winning in the end (more or less) by sheer force of will. THAT is Spanish in our eyes.<sup>24</sup>

Understanding the definitively Spanish aspects of *Aquelarre* also sheds light on the culturally specific nature of *D&D* as an American game.

The hodgepodge of sources for *D&D*’s default setting, combining generic Northern European history with American pulp fantasy, can be seen as an analog to *Aquelarre*’s more focused Iberian setting. The markedly different treatment of religion in the two games also reflects the different cultural contexts. Around the same time that *Aquelarre* openly marked its setting as demonic, pressures related to the American Satanism scare forced TSR to remove explicit artwork, assassins, and references to demons for the second edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*.<sup>25</sup> Those changes aside, *D&D* carried an implicit “‘fairytale Christianity’ broadly consonant with American generic Protestantism,” **as one commentator has put it**. This implicit Christianity can be seen in both superficial and systemic levels. The cleric class, already a partial deviation from the common fantasy literature tropes that influenced other classes in *D&D*, has a strongly Christian flavor, with early editions designating the cleric’s holy symbol as a cross and many of the clerical spells as based on Biblical themes (e.g., “sticks to snakes”).<sup>26</sup> On a deeper level, the meritocratic and gold-centered advancement system of the game shows strong **parallels with the “protestant ethic”** described by Weber.<sup>27</sup> On multiple levels, both games represent some of the tensions of the cultural context that produced them.

24. Personal communication.

25. *Dragon* 154:9

26. Peterson, *Playing at the World*, 172–179.

27. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (CreateSpace, 1905).

22. Ibañez, *Aquelarre*, 265.

23. Elizabeth Small, “Religious Institutions in Spanish Science Fiction.” *Science Fiction Studies* 28, no. 1 (2001), 33–48.



## 6. Conclusion

The analysis presented here is obviously only very partial in nature, only sketching out some basic themes that can be explored in further research. Two implications for the cross-cultural study of RPGs can be drawn, however. First, the social context of play should not be assumed. The American model of informal gaming groups and the Spanish club-centered model are likely only two of many approaches to play. Further ethnographic research in Spain can also identify more specific ways that playing in semi-public clubs shape the particulars of gaming practices. A second implication is the importance of investigating specific cultural adaptations of the imaginary settings of the games. Although Spanish gamers identify a fairly nationalistic game as iconic of their community, other cultures will have taken a different direction. Many other aspects of Spanish gaming fell outside of this preliminary study, but also bear investigation. In establishing the foundations of RPGs in Spain, I was forced to focus on the early history of the culture to the exclusion of more recent developments. The relationship between the Old School Renaissance in the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking worlds is one example of this and the role of Internet-based communities is another. More detailed analysis of Spanish game design—from *Aquelarre* to the many modules printed in the gaming magazines—will also offer new insights into Spanish styles of play. Lastly, in establishing an initial framework for understanding Spanish games, I have found myself forced to treat the community as more bounded than it is in actuality. The final goal of this vein of research should be instead to describe the complex flows passing through the worldwide gaming community, understanding the role of play and imagination in the broader context of other global systems.

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# Characterology in Tabletop Role-Playing Games: A Textual Analysis of Character Sheets

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**Lars Konzack**

## Abstract

This is a study of character sheets. It presents the idea that a character sheet functions as a cybertext and represents a tabletop role-playing game's (TRPG) characterology. The study analyzes six different TRPG character sheets in order to understand how the allocation of character sheet texts promotes different player-character activities.

## Keywords

Character sheet, characterology, role-playing games, tabletop, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Vampire: the Masquerade*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Warhammer Fantasy*, *Puppetland*, *Lady Blackbird*

## 1. Introduction

The character sheet of a tabletop role-playing game aids role-playing in at least two ways: 1) the character sheet is a written record, which means that, like any written record,<sup>1</sup> it helps our memory to recall details we would otherwise have difficulty recalling; and 2) the character sheet defines the character to the participants in a role-playing game. What the exact description comprises varies from game system to game system, and is, of course, dependent on the actual character. How the character sheet is interpreted by the player influences how the character will be played. Differences in character sheet design may therefore influence how the character is played and, consequently, the role-playing game session or campaign as a whole.

The aim of this study is to get a better understanding of how character sheets facilitate the creation of player-characters in a TRPG. To do this, I need to find out how character sheets function as texts and what kind of texts they are. The idea is that character sheets are not neutral, but allow for a certain range of player behavior. This notion, of course, can only be fully researched by monitoring player behavior. However, in this preliminary study, I shall analyze the potentiality a character sheet may have for role-playing activity as part of a role-playing game's design. By allocating space on the character sheet for certain measurements and scripts, the

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1. Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington: Smithsonian, 2000).

game designer makes a choice as to what he or she believes to be important. Character sheets support certain kinds of player-character activity and, at the same time, discourage focus on other kinds of player-character activity, either by hiding them away or removing them altogether.

In this study, I will acknowledge the character sheet as a textual part of the game. David Jara, on the other hand, has chosen an approach to rulebooks and character sheets as being external to the real text and, I can only assume, to the performance, or as he puts it, "the gameplay." In his view, there is no proper or fixed main text.<sup>2</sup> That said, Jara himself presents a counter-argument by stating: "the session can also be seen as being 'tertiary,' largely the product of other texts; those that establish the broad fictional premises and the rules by which the fictional space is to be negotiated ('primary texts'); and those that establish the specific fictional premises that allow for a particular game session to develop ('secondary texts')."<sup>3</sup> This view is taken from Jessica Hammer, who defines primary, secondary and tertiary texts thusly:

The primary text is that which outlines the rules and setting of the game in general. The secondary text uses this material to create a specific situation. Finally the tertiary text is created as the characters encounters the situation in play.<sup>4</sup>

Hammer's definition places the character sheet in a peculiar position. From one point of view, it is a part of the rules and thus a primary text, but, from another, is used as a secondary text as well as the material to create a specific role, and, finally, is used when characters encounter situations in play. One could argue that, in fact, the character sheet is involved in the whole process and every aspect

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2. David Jara, "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framing and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-Playing Games" *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013): 39-54.

3. Ibid., 40.

4. Jessica Hammer, "Agency and Authority in Role-playing 'Texts,'" in *A New Literacies Sampler*, edited by Michele Knobel and Colin Lankshear (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2007).

of TRPG. It is the central document from which the player relates to role-playing a character as regards to rules, setting, situation, and performance. In this view, the character sheet transgresses the boundaries of role-playing textuality. The text becomes vital to the role-playing experience as a textual machine in working progress.

Espen Aarseth acknowledges text as a machine—as a mechanical device for the production and consumption of signs.<sup>5</sup> He further defines a cybertext as a machine for the production of a variety of expressions. In this sense, the character sheet, too, is a cybertext. It is not meant to be merely read and interpreted, but used as a tool for practicing the TRPG. The character sheet is made not for one type of expression, but for several kinds of different characters, each with their own distinctive expressions. On the other hand, one could likewise argue that the character sheets are simply texts that constitute fragments of the overall TRPG cybertext, along with the game system, the scenario, and actual game session. Still, the character sheet offers the player information and options for acting out the role.

David Jara, inspired by Gérard Genette, suggests that a character sheet may be understood as a paratext.<sup>6</sup> In Genette's formula, paratext is defined as *paratext* = *peritext* + *epitext*. A peritext is a textual element which surrounds the book such as: a title, introduction, notes, cover, etc. An epitext is a textual element outside the bounds of the volume such as: interviews, reviews, correspondence, diaries etc.<sup>7</sup> The character sheet as paratext is, however, a misleading term. It is evidently not an epitext, but one might be seduced into thinking it a peritext surrounding the role-playing game session as the narrative fiction progresses. Conversely, though, the character sheets function as primary, secondary and tertiary texts, and are as such a central part of the role-playing game experience. It is not outside the "text," just another footnote, but part of the textual machine, an ergodic cybertext, a work in progress within the narrative developments of the TRPG.

5. Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

6. Jara.

7. Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, "Introduction to the Paratext," in *New Literary History: Probing: Art, Criticism, Genre* 22, No. 2 (Spring 1991): 261-272. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press; Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

## 2. Characterology

The study of narratives has a field named narratology. As a part of this study, there has been some research into fictional characters. Vladimir Propp has suggested seven character types being universal to Russian folktales: the villain; the dispatcher; the magical helper; the princess and the father; the committer; the hero; and the bogus hero.<sup>8</sup> Based on this material, Algirdas Julien Greimas worked out an actant model with six actants: subject, object, sender, receiver, supporter, and oppositionist.<sup>9</sup> And, basing himself on Joseph Campbell's Jungian archetypes, Christopher Vogler presented seven archetypes for storytelling and screen writing: hero, mentor, threshold guardian, herald, shapeshifter, shadow, and trickster.<sup>10</sup> While these character types and actants may very well be functional as regards to storytelling and role-playing scenario design, they are not really useful when it comes to understanding character construction in TRPG. Of course, one could translate the character types in e.g. *Dungeons & Dragons* into Jungian archetypes, but it would not really reveal anything other than the similarities between the psychological theory and the role-playing game system.

An alternative approach is to understand the player-characters in role-playing game systems as having not a psychology, but a characterology. The term stems from a fin-de-siècle psychological theory closely related to phrenology in which the aim was to organize human character psychology into a fixed system. This approach to psychology proved very problematic and has for the most part been abandoned.<sup>11</sup> Another psychological method is that of psychological scripts. The idea is that human beings repeat specific behaviors known as scripts if exposed to certain stimuli and that it would be possible to change these scripts if they

8. Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1973).

9. Gerald Prince, *A Dictionary of Narratology* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003).

10. Christopher Vogler, *The Writer's Journey* (Studio City, CA: Michael Wiese Productions, 1998).

11. Katherine Arens, "Characterology: Hapsburg Empire to Third Reich," *Literature and Medicine* 8, no. 1 (1989): 128-155; Erich Fromm, "Psychoanalytic Characterology and Its Application to the Understanding of Culture," *Culture and Personality*, edited by Sargent et al. (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1949).



are adverse or harmful.<sup>12</sup>

I am not suggesting that we should understand TRPG characters in terms of human psychology or psychotherapy. However, I am pointing towards the possibility of reading TRPG characters as having a characterology and that character sheets have scripts, not as a metaphor, but as an actual written text constituting a conceivable problem solving procedure for the player to use during gameplay interaction. The character sheet is, in this sense, an open book into the fictional character's "psychology," if such a term is valid in this context, as this "psychology" is not based on the human brain and the sociological interaction between humans and their surroundings, but, rather, the TRPRG character's interaction with other player-characters, NPCs, the fictional setting, and the game system. Alternately, one could say, the character sheet is an open book into the aspects of the character's psychology that are both rule-bound and need to be remembered. This characterology may be realistic or unrealistic, perchance even magical, but it shows how the different character types are able to use different scripts in the problem solving process of role-playing. Using a player-character script, the player practices an ergodic relationship with the character sheet as a cybertext.

In classic *Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, the characterology would involve choosing a character type from the four human character types: fighter, magic-user, cleric, and thief; or the three demi-human character types: dwarf, elf, and Halfling. Each would have their own script for interactions. The Magic-user, the cleric, and the elf would be able to use different magic spells; the thief would be able to pick pockets, climb, pick locks, disarm traps, and make stealth attacks; the fighter would have better fighting abilities, etc. The underlying script of these actions would be skills, powers, and experience.

I shall therefore define a role-playing game characterology as that part of a role-playing game system that makes available quantifiable measures of player-character qualities and player-character scripts for plausible actions and re-actions within the game world. Furthermore, I shall define a script as an ergodic textual practice.

Some table-top role-playing game systems may have a characterology based on a number of races and/or professions (*Dungeons & Dragons* and *Warhammer FRPG*); while others may have a more open-ended approach with a player controlled skill and/or ability point system (*Call of Cthulhu* and *GURPS*); and some role-playing games systems may be somewhere in between (*Vampire: The Masquerade*). In any case, each and every role-playing game system provides its own specific character generation system with detailed rules concerning character stats, skills, powers, and limitations; as a consequence, each role-playing game system offers a unique role-playing game characterology.

It is important to stress that this role-playing characterology is neither meant as a genuine psychological simulation of the TRPG characters, nor as a therapeutic insight into the behavior of the players. The fictional "psychology" of the role-playing game character is based on the specific rules of the role-playing game system governing character actions and reactions and these character actions and reactions may be changed as the rules are changed. It is a work of fiction and, although it is possible to learn from a work of fiction, developing perspective and insights, it is not meant to be an exact rendering of real-life experience.

I will analyze the character sheets of different TRPG systems, each with their own characterology. In order to do this, I have chosen the character sheets of some of the most popular role-playing games systems: *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Call of Cthulhu*, *Warhammer Fantasy Role-Playing*, and *Vampire: The Masquerade*. In addition, I want to show how these findings can be used for indie games as well, and to do so I will use the role-playing games *Puppetland* and *Lady Blackbird* as examples. The reason for choosing the former four popular character sheets is that they have all had vast cultural impact. *Puppetland* and *Lady Blackbird*, on the other hand, are examples of more exclusive role-playing games that have not had the same cultural influence. One could argue that these two indie games are not representative for all indie games. Then again, it would be difficult to find any indie games which could be representative for all indie games. Finally, I have personal experience with all these specific character sheets and this personal experience will be used as a guideline to grasp their practical use.

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12. John S. Carroll, John W. Payne, and Robert P. Abelson, "Script Processing in Attitude Formation and Decision-Making," in *Cognition and Social Behavior*, ed. John S. Carroll, John W. Payne, and Robert P. Abelson. (NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1976).

### 3. Character sheet breakdown

An analysis of tabletop role-playing games must take into account that in most role-playing games characters have a basic description, certain abilities, characteristics, skills, powers, and experiences and that, often, combat skills are treated in great detail. The character may also have some defensive mechanism in order to survive. The character is capable of having equipment, companions and money. Furthermore the character has a psychology, flaws, and a background. The player may make a picture of the character and add their own notes. Analyzed as a text document, the character sheet has some features that are part of the characterology, such as quantifiable measurements and character scripts. However, there are still other parts of the character sheet made for different purposes. It is advisable to break down the character sheet into the following categories:

**Non-character material:** This is the part of the character sheet not representing the character. Often it features the name of the game, decorative art, or other non-character features. This is not directly linked to characterology.

**Basic character description:** This is the description of the character as regards to its name, physical features, profession/class, race, and power level. These are mostly quantifiable measures.

**Skills, powers, and experience:** These are the active skills other than combat skills, as well as special powers such as magic or other feats. Experience points or other experience systems belong in this category as well. Active skills are not only physical, but can also be intellectual. All can be used actively to affect the game setting, in a variety of ways. All are character scripts.

**Combat skills:** Active melee or long-range skills directly linked to combat attacks. These are character scripts as well.

**Reaction/defensive mechanisms:** These are passive features that preserve the character's life or keep track of whether the character is dead or alive. They include hit points, health, toughness, armor, saving throws, dodge, etc.

**Equipment, companions, and money:** Area on the character sheet dedicated to keeping track of character possessions such as items, friends, allies, and valuables. These may be

thought of as quantifiable measures, although not ones directly connected to the character's "psychology."

**Psychology and flaws:** These are the psychological features of the character as well as character disadvantages. Psychology and flaws includes alignment, sanity points, insanities, virtues, etc. These are either scripts or quantifiable measures depending on how the game system manages player-character psychology.

**Background:** Area for the description of character background information. This is not directly linked to characterology, although, of course, it influences how the character is perceived.

**Pictures and notes:** Area on the character sheet dedicated to pictures and notes. Likewise, this is not directly linked to characterology, although, of course, it influences how the character is perceived too.

This categorization is not meant to be universal. Rather, it is a practical one, based on experience of how character sheets work. New developments in role-playing games might call for new categorization, either by adding categories or rethinking the structure entirely.

By measuring the amount of physical 2D-space on the character sheet—not counting the border—that is allocated to each of these categories in the six TRPGs chosen, it is possible to get a notion of what kind of player-character activity these role-playing game systems promote. As one can see, the designs of the character sheets are quite varied, and this again suggests very different uses. The character sheet allocation system is as follows (see **Fig. 1**, next page):

#### 3.1 *Dungeons & Dragons*

In this case, I have chosen the 1980/1983 *Dungeon and Dragons Character Record Sheet* from *Dungeons & Dragons: Players Manual* by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson and revised by Frank Mentzer, also known as the red box set.

I would have expected combat skills to loom large. Combat is an important, and voluminous, part of the *D&D* rules, after all. However, they take up only three percent in the bottom right margin of the character sheet. It shows that research sometimes comes up with unexpected results. As Gary Gygax wrote: "Whenever possible, conserve time and resources by avoiding unnecessary confrontation."



**Figure 1: Character Sheet Allocation Table**

	D&D	CoC	WFRP	V:TM	Puppetland	Lady Blackbird
<b>Non-character material</b>	8%	7%	4%	12%	23%	46%
<b>Basic character description</b>	2%	6%	7%	10%	7%	2%
<b>Abilities/characteristics</b>	12%	3%	5%	12%	0%	0%
<b>Skills, powers, and experience</b>	11%	43%	30%	41%	3%	25%
<b>Combat skills</b>	3%	10%	9%	6%	0%	0%
<b>Reactions/defensive mechanisms</b>	13%	4%	7%	4%	*64%	5%
<b>Equipment, companions, and money</b>	25%	0%	23%	4%	0%	0%
<b>Psychology and flaws</b>	1%	11%	5%	11%	3%	12%
<b>Background</b>	0%	2%	6%	0%	0%	10%
<b>Pictures and notes</b>	25%	14%	4%	0%	*64%	0%

\* Same space on the character sheet

Slip away without fighting, negotiate, or use trickery.”<sup>13</sup>

The game is about surviving the dangers of the dungeons and the monsters and traps the GM throws at the characters, not so much about characters taking the initiative.

In contrast, equipment, money, pictures, and notes take up half of the character sheet, although mostly to the right. Still, basic character descriptions, abilities, and skills/powers form another quarter of the character sheet. If we look at active skills, powers, and combat skills, they are only fourteen percent of the sheet. Reactions and defensive mechanisms are almost as bulky—thirteen percent—which is very high compared to the other role-playing game examples except *Puppetland*. This tells us that, apparently, the character sheet does not offer many different choices. It seems most of the gameplay is based on reaction scripts than on action scripts. The player-character reacts to the game environment. This makes it easier for players to take action simply because the number of obvious actions is limited.

One could argue that the absence of active skills denotes an action resolution system based on rulings, not rules, in which the role of the GM is central in dynamically generating resolution mechanics or simply narrating the results of actions. Still, it is the GM that throws monsters and traps at the players and they have to react to his or her well-prepared dungeon.

One might instead argue that the focus on

13. Gary Gygax, *Role-Playing Mastery* (London: Grafton Books, 1987).

defense represents that this is an aspect of the character subject to more complex recordkeeping requirements. That might well be so, but it is still the option of scripts the player has to choose from. *Dungeons & Dragons* is, as a game, one in which the players react to the environment—often a dungeon filled with monsters and traps. The focus on the defensive part of the character sheet points to the fact that it is a challenge to keep the character alive under these circumstances. The character is an adventurer with no real background and the character's aim is to get as much equipment and money as possible during the adventure.<sup>14</sup>

One could speculate that the reason *D&D* has so much focus on notes may in fact be that role-playing games were fairly new and the character sheet as form was still in development. As we can see, pictures and notes disappear over time, since these could as well be done on any normal sheet of paper.

### 3.2 *Call of Cthulhu*

This character sheet is from the *Call of Cthulhu: Fantasy Role-Playing in the Worlds of H. P. Lovecraft*, third edition by Sandy Petersen. The big difference from *D&D* is that in this role-playing game, there is much more focus on active skills, even combat skills. Even more important is the focus on psychology. In *D&D*, character psychology was only represented by an alignment system, in which the player could

14. Gygax, *Role-Playing Mastery*; Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2002).

choose for the character to be chaotic, lawful, or neutral. In *CoC*, the psychology of the character is more variable and detailed. The character could lose his or her sanity and become mentally ill. One could say it was a script of mental hit points.

Sanity points did not have to take up as much space on the character sheet as they actually do. The character sheet could merely have a small box for notating maximum sanity points and current sanity points. By putting sanity in the upper middle of the character sheet, just above the list of skills, the character sheet points out that this is an important part of play and one not to be overlooked. Even though the combat skills section is more spacious than in *D&D*, it is consigned to the right bottom of the sheet. Sanity points become the central character script for character development or, rather, a character's ensuing decline and demise.

More than anything else, the emphasis is on character skills. The first skill noted is accounting. This is, of course, due to these skills being in alphabetical order; however, it also implies that they are more academic than action-oriented. Even the mysterious Cthulhu Mythos skill is an intellectual one that will eventually drive the character insane.

The active skills dominate the character sheet, and, contrary to *D&D*, the character is not just supposed to react to the environment, but to actively solve puzzles and investigate mysteries. Contemplation may be afforded more attention than physical action, however, using academic skills is still to actively engage with the game-world rather than defensively react to it. Every skill serves as an example of how such explorations can be performed. In that sense, the *CoC* character sheet works as inspiration and stimulation for creative thinking rather than fighting, although combat skills are an option as well, not so much because using an academic skill in the game calls for creative thinking in and by itself, but the options suggested are more varied than just hack and slash.

Unlike *D&D*, *Call of Cthulhu* offers space for background notes. In this way, the character gains verisimilitude. It is more than just an investigator or adventurer.

### 3.3 *Warhammer Fantasy*

This character sheet is from *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay: A Grim World of Perilous Adventure* by Richard Halliwell, Rick Priestley, Graeme Davis, Jim Bambra, and Phil Gallagher. The *Warhammer* character sheet layout differs from the others, as it is not just a front page, but the back of the sheet as

well or sometimes copied onto two pieces of paper.<sup>15</sup> However, what makes *Warhammer Fantasy* narratively different is the focus on background. Characters have a family, occupation, and a place of birth, as well as a personal career path. They are more grounded in the game world than those of *D&D*.

Though there are not as many active skills as in *CoC*, *Warhammer* still offers far more active skills than *D&D* and, consequently, more active roleplaying opportunities. Like *CoC*, it has a dynamic system for gaining insanities. On the other hand, like *D&D*, it focuses a lot on equipment, money, and companions, although most of these things are relegated to the back of the character sheet. All in all, the *Warhammer* character sheet is quite diverse.

### 3.4 *Vampire*

This character sheet is that of *Vampire: The Masquerade* by Mark Rein-Hagen. Its most remarkable aspect is the big area of non-character material; it puts great effort into decoration compared to earlier role-playing games. Abilities/characteristics—or attributes, as they are called in this system—get as much space as on the *D&D* character sheet. This is because they play a central role in the game system, in which the player combines attributes with abilities (in other games known as skills). Consequently, the abilities/characteristics play a more active role as character scripts than in other role-playing games.

The area for skills and powers is almost as large as that of the *Call of Cthulhu* sheet. Similarly, psychology and flaws fill up the same amount of space as with a *Call of Cthulhu* character, turning them into something the player is forced to keep in mind. However, they are placed quite low on the character sheet—not up front, as in *Call of Cthulhu*—and, in my experience, there is a tendency for the players to ignore them accordingly. One should think a Storytelling game such as *Vampire* would devote more space to presenting their character's background. However, contrary to expectations, it does not, but, rather, keeps most of the character's details within the characterology of its game system. There is a column on the character sheet for backgrounds, but these are merely abstract rule quantifications of equipment, companions, and money, not concrete background descriptions. While this, of course, does not mean *Vampire* characters are completely without any narrative background, it certainly means this is not supported by the character sheet.

.....  
15. Technically, the *D&D* character sheet could be copied in such a way that it gets a front and a back as well. However, since it is presented on one piece of paper, it is hardly obvious that one should do so.



### 3.5 *Puppetland*

The *Puppetland* character sheet is from *Puppetland: A Storytelling Game with Strings in a Grim World of Make-Believe* by John Tynes. This is an indie game about playing puppets living under a totalitarian regime. Every game session is supposed to take but an hour. As such, it is more like a one-shot or a series of one-shots, rather than a long-lasting campaign as would be typical for the role-playing game industry.

What becomes obvious through this analysis is that *Puppetland* has more focus on non-character material, defensive mechanisms, and pictures than anything else. The defensive mechanism, which also happens to be the picture of the character, takes up almost 2/3 of the character sheet. Hence, in the Character Sheet Allocation Table, above, it is marked with an asterisk (\*) because it is, in fact, the same space used for two different purposes at the same time. The player draws his or her character, it is cut up into a puzzle, and whenever the character gets a piece of his drawing back, the character comes one piece closer to death. It works as a script for inducing an intense atmosphere.

The reason the player do not need as much information to play the character is that each session is only going to last for an hour. Consequently a lot of the effort in making this character sheet goes towards style and some basic details about the character rather than extensive game information.

### 3.6 *Lady Blackbird*

The character sheet is from *Lady Blackbird: Tales from the Wild Blue Yonder* by John Harper. This role-playing game was awarded the title of best free game by The Indie RPG Awards in 2009 and also won as the best free RPG in the GoldenGeek Awards by RPG Geek in 2010.

When looking at the Character Sheet space allocation Table statistics for *Lady Blackbird*, it becomes obvious that the designers have chosen to use a lot of space on non-character material—almost half the character sheet, twice as much as *Puppetland*'s. In *Lady Blackbird*, this is not only a question of style, but also explanations of special game mechanisms in the role-playing game. Just like *Puppetland*, this game is not meant to be used for a long-running campaign, but only one-shots. Consequently, the game designers cannot expect the players to keep track of the special kinds of game mechanisms to the same degree.

Other than game mechanisms, it is skills, powers, and experience that take up a quarter of the character sheet. The characters in *Lady Blackbird* have active scripts in the game; they do not merely react to their environment. The character sheet

uses space on defensive mechanisms in the form of hit points or health points, but more importantly, it focuses on psychology and background to a greater degree than any of the previously mentioned role-playing games. The backgrounds represent secrets meant to be discovered during the game. This means the essential part of the game is to unveil character psychology and background information.

Much as *Puppetland*, *Lady Blackbird* does not allocate character sheet space to abilities/characteristics, combat skills, equipment, companions, or money, unlike many mainstream role-playing games. The game is not meant to support long-running campaigns, merely one-shots, and therefore, the character sheet is not supposed to function as a memory aid when it comes to these details.

## 4. Final comparison

The textual analysis of the six character sheets has illustrated important differences in how character sheets are designed and how much space is allocated to different parts of the character sheet. First of all, there is some difference between the large impact role-playing games and the indie games. The large impact role-playing games present a more varied character sheet allocation pattern because such role-playing games are meant to be used in more varied ways and for long-running campaigns. Based on only two indie games, one has far too little material to say if this is a general tendency rather than an indication.

The *D&D* character sheet, one of the first such ever to be made, was not much focused on active skills and powers, but more on a game in which the characters reacted to the environment. One has to remember though, how alien the concept of role-playing games was when first introduced. By limiting the players' choices of player-character scripts it was made easier to comprehend. As the role-playing game culture developed, character agency did as well. However, *Call of Cthulhu* introduced an increased focus on character psychology and active skills and has since functioned as a milestone for role-playing games.

## 5. Conclusion

As we have seen, TRPG character sheets are cybertexts meant to be used actively during role-playing game sessions. They are based on the inherent characterology of the game system. They consist of quantifiable measures plus active and reactive player-character scripts. However, some parts of these character sheets do not directly relate to their characterology.

The textual analysis of these six different TRPGs indicates that their allocation of character sheet space

present different player-character scripts. These player-character scripts promote different sentiments and either reactive or active TRPG tendencies. However, to actually understand how this influence player behavior further studies are needed.

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# Shadow Work: A Jungian Perspective on the Underside of Live Action Role-Play in the United States

Whitney “Strix” Beltrán

## Keywords

subculture, depth psychology, archetype, shadow, ego bleed, live action role-play, larp

## Abstract

The live action role-playing community as a subculture within the United States represents an aspect of repression within the greater society, just as most subcultures in some way do. Due to the unique qualities of the activities in which participants within this subculture engage, indeed because of the very fabric of the subculture itself, it becomes imperative to examine issues of psychological repression and engagement of repressed materials. Within live action role-playing, players both consciously and unconsciously engage in and enact archetypal roles in a liminal and communal setting. Because of the “safe space” that is often created during these forms of play—sometimes referred to as the “magic circle”—participants often find themselves free to explore psychic materials that would be considered part of the shadow. Shadow is a Jungian concept of the repressed, the unknown, or unrecognizable within a consciousness. Just as players may delve into their individual shadows within the frame that archetypal enactment provides them, so too does the subculture as a whole have its own group shadow that can be enacted. In a manner that is somewhat unique to this subculture, group shadow is engaged directly when groups of players play games that evoke shadow issues through their structure.

This paper is an examination of shadow within larp. There are many models and methods through which to interpret this concept. However, because of how relevant and heavily related Jungian concepts of archetype and other depth psychological perspectives are to the issue at hand, and because of the sheer lack of previous academic exploration of this topic through this lens, they will be the primary models through which the issue is viewed. In the case of the individual, I will explore the relationship between shadow work in larp and individuation. From there, I will move on to a wider perspective of the group shadow and its engagement. I will investigate the possible consequences of group shadow enactment, as the individuation process is not possible for group consciousnesses.

Shadow enactment has the potential for both positive and negative effects on players and the community as a whole. Providing a structure with which to identify, categorize, and understand shadow can contribute to the overall awareness of the psychological processes that occur within and because of larp. This awareness can help players, larpwrights, and organizers to make informed decisions as to how they write, run, and play larps.

“We notice when the sunlight hits the body, the body turns bright, but it throws a shadow, which is dark. The brighter the light, the darker the shadow.”

—Robert Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*

Live action role-playing is a unique modern Western art form. It can be a mode of storytelling, of play, of communal ritual, and mythic engagement. More than that, larp has attached to it a global subculture of individuals dedicated to exploring the novel edges of human life. However, the concept of shadow is necessarily tied to specific groups. The academic study of larp is a relatively new field, messy, and struggling for definition. Though larp itself first originated out of the role-playing games created in the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s,<sup>1</sup> the scholarship of larp has so far been more strongly developed in Europe than in its place of birth. This is all well and good. However, each national culture—whether it be Brazilian, German, Norwegian, or any other—brings to bear its own confluence of societal structures that can and do radically affect how larp is interpreted, played, and experienced. No one shadow has the same shape as any other.

It is my belief that scholarship pertaining to the contexts ascribed to larp subcultures in each setting of national identity is both important and illuminating. While American scholars scramble to bridge the gap between themselves and their counterparts outside the U.S. it may be easy to forget that local issues still need attending. This paper will focus exclusively on U.S. larp. With that in mind,

1. The earliest larp currently on record is Dagorhir, founded 1977 in Washington, D.C. Dagorhir Battle Game Association, Inc. 1997. “Dagorhir History” *Dagorhir Battle Games*. <http://www.dagorhir.com/dagorhir/history.htm>

from this point forward all reference to larp culture pertains specifically to larps and larp scenes in the United States unless noted otherwise, though the theoretical structures used in this paper can certainly be extended into other places.

While it would be useful to approach shadow in a broader scale, because of the nature of shadow this sort of analysis would eventually break down. For example, many American larpers might be baffled by a Nordic style game that focuses on the emotional turmoil involved with having brain cancer or being a prisoner of war<sup>2</sup>; Nordic larpers may be equally perplexed by the pervasive American insistence on competitiveness and obsession with complex rule sets. Meanwhile, the Japanese find it almost impossible to put together a larp at all.<sup>3</sup> Not only is each larp scene affected by outside cultural influences, in a way, they *represent* these influences, though not always directly. Larp is indelibly linked with mythology, from its emphasis on hero narratives to its deeply archetypal structure. The essence of a myth is that it is a story people tell to themselves about themselves in order to give meaning to who they are. Larps often strongly reflect these same qualities.

Furthermore, larps created under a specific cultural influence may or may not “correctly” translate when brought over into a different social landscape. This issue was made plain in the first U.S. run of the Norwegian game *Mad About the Boy* in 2012.<sup>4</sup> *Mad About the Boy* is a post-apocalyptic story in which all the men have been wiped out and is inspired by the *Y: The Last Man* comic book series. Eleanor Saitta, a player familiar with the Nordic larp scene, played in the U.S. version and wrote an extensive analysis of it in *Crossing Physical Borders* entitled “Mad About the Yankee.” She writes that the U.S. version was “notably more violent”<sup>5</sup> and

that “the nature of collectivity in each country may have been the core difference between the runs.”<sup>6</sup> The mostly American players clearly brought their own contexts with them when they entered into this Norwegian game despite its original design. However, a propensity towards violence cannot automatically be assumed. While there have been studies that state the United States has the highest rate of violent deaths among industrialized nations,<sup>7</sup> these same studies also go on to say that media pertaining to this violence, such as news reports, may create “unrealistic perceptions of low community safety.”<sup>8</sup> Very different reflections of the same larp were captured in *The Book of Mad About the Boy (2012 US Run): Documenting a Larp Project about Gender, Motherhood and Values*. This contrast illustrates precisely why an analysis has to be broken down into individual cultural contexts. Larp subcultures are directly related to whatever larger culture is informing them. While there may be extensive outside movement, focusing on the U.S. subculture necessarily means sustaining a very narrow analytical view in order to fully contextualize its shadow.

Approaching the subject of shadow in larp requires both psychological and sociological methodologies because shadow exists on both an individual and a collective level. Analysis of shadow on an individual level—and to some extent a communal one—can be couched in a Jungian or depth psychological framework. It is indeed from this discipline that the term shadow originated in its relation to psychology. While there are certainly other avenues, depth psychology is extremely useful in application towards understanding the psychology of larp and the enactment of characters. However, the field does take some unraveling itself. Depth psychology concerns itself with the structure of psyche, archetypes, and individuation. It draws strong associations between myth, active imagination, and lived story. The overlap it shares with game studies is thus not very surprising.

In order to understand the function and role of shadow, a picture must first be painted of the Self through the Jungian lens. Self with an upper case “S” is differentiated in the Jungian sense from the common interpretation of self, which usually refers

2. “KAPO,” KAPO, 2011. <http://www.kapo.nu/>

3. Björn-Ole Kamm, “Why Japan Does Not Larp,” in *Think Larp: Academic Writing from KP2011*, ed. Thomas D. Henriksen, Christian Bierlich, Kasper F. Hansen, and Valdemar Kølbe, Knutpunkt 2011, 61 (Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2011). <http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/c/c5/2011-Think.larp.pdf>

4. “Mad About the Boy: The Larp.” *Mad About the Boy: The Larp*. 2010. <http://mad-about-the-boy-larp.blogspot.com/p/the-larp.html>

5. Eleanor Saitta, “Mad About the Yankee,” in *Crossing Physical Borders*, ed. Karete J. Meland and Katrine Ø. Svella, Knutpunkt 2013, 74 (Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2013). [http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/4/4d/2013\\_Crossing\\_Physical\\_Borders.pdf](http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/4/4d/2013_Crossing_Physical_Borders.pdf)

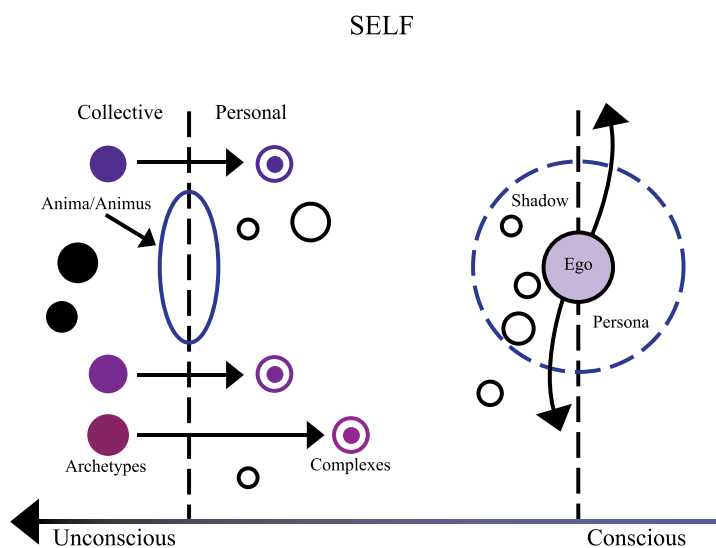
6. Ibid., 76

7. Alan I. Leshner et al., “Priorities for Research to Reduce the Threat of Firearm-Related Violence,” *The National Academies Press*, 2013, 1 (2013). [http://www.nap.edu/download.php?record\\_id=18319](http://www.nap.edu/download.php?record_id=18319)

8. Ibid., 65.



to the conscious personality. In depth psychological terminology, this smaller self is usually referred to as the ego or persona. The bigger Self refers to a whole consciousness. Edward Edinger in *Ego and Archetype* explains, "It was Jung's...discovery that the archetypal psyche has a structuring or ordering principle which unifies the various archetypal contents. This is the central archetype or archetype of wholeness which Jung as termed the Self."<sup>9</sup> The Jungian Self is much bigger than the mere ego, encompassing the entirety of the psychic space that a person inhabits, including both the conscious and unconscious aspects.<sup>10</sup> This definition is also supported by Marie-Louise von Franz in *Man and His Symbols*.<sup>11</sup> The figure below is an illustration of the Jungian construct of the whole Self.<sup>12</sup>



**Illustration 1**

As the illustration shows, in the Jungian model, the ego is the locus of control for the conscious personality. The persona occupies the territory on the fully conscious side of the nebulous circle that defines Self. Regarding the persona, Jung states, "The persona is...a functional complex that comes

9. Edward F. Edinger, *Ego and Archetype; Individuation and the Religious Function of the Psyche* (New York: Published by Putnam for the C.G. Jung Foundation for Analytical Psychology, 1972), 3.

10. Ibid.

11. C. G. Jung et al., *Man and His Symbols* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 162.

12. I first saw it drawn by hand in my graduate program by professor Glen Slater, Ph.D. I have found it unimaginably helpful and have had it recreated.

into existence for reasons of adaption or personal convenience, but is by no means identical with the individuality."<sup>13</sup> The persona is the face of the individual that he or she wants everyone else to see, but it is *not* the individual him or herself. The persona is the surface personality of an individual, which is controlled by the ego.

Lying in the realm of the unconscious is the other half of the circle, which is shadow. Shadow is both the good and bad parts of oneself that have been ignored, repressed, or gone undeveloped. Shadow contains the unconscious, inferiorly developed aspects of ourselves that the ego refuses to recognize. Very often it is the perverse and destructive aspects of self that we cannot bear to confront, which is why the contents of the shadow are often largely negative. In this model, the ego vigorously patrols the border between shadow and persona in order to keep them separated. Jung writes that it does this because:

The shadow is a moral problem that challenges the whole ego-personality, for no one can become conscious of the shadow without considerable moral effort. To become conscious of it involves recognizing the dark aspects of the personality as present and real. This act is the essential condition for any kind of self-knowledge, and therefore, as a rule, meets with considerable resistance.<sup>14</sup>

I will delve deeper into concepts of the shadow once this basic model of the psyche is fully explained.

According to Jolande Jacobi in *Complex, Archetype, Symbol*, complexes are "feeling toned groups of representations"<sup>15</sup> embedded throughout the personal psyche as a whole. Complexes are emotional images or ideas that group themselves around an archetype in the unconscious mind. The most famous and well recognized example is Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex, which revolves around the desire for sexual possession of the archetypal father or mother figure. Jung writes that a complex "has a powerful inner coherence, has its own wholeness and, in addition, a relatively high degree of autonomy."<sup>16</sup> The conscious mind does not have full control of the complexes that surround it and, though it can try to repress these complexes,

13. C. G. Jung and Anthony Storr, *The Essential Jung* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 99.

14. Ibid., 91.

15. Jolande Jacobi, *Complex, Archetype, Symbol in the Psychology of C. G. Jung*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), 6.

16. Jung, *Essential*, 38.

they invariably spring back to action when given the slightest chance. Because of their autonomous nature, complexes can cause psychological disturbance, even neurosis; however, they are not “bad” in and of themselves and neither is shadow. Complexes are the basic building blocks of the personal psyche. While Jung speaks to morality in the conscious mind, this morality is more likely emergent rather than fundamental, heavily influenced by the social mores that surround it. In the Jungian model, the conscious mind applies morality to aspects that have no inherently defined moral value.

Occupying the territory between the collective and personal unconscious is the anima or animus, which is both a personal complex and an archetypal image that acts as a bridge between these two spheres of consciousness. The anima/animus is the inner personality that is diametric to the outer personality in regards to femininity and masculinity.<sup>17</sup> This is perhaps the most notable weak point in Jungian psychology, as the original terminology he developed is no longer appropriate in the sense that femininity and masculinity have become culturally too ambiguous to tie directly to sex. Depth psychology has struggled to adopt a new term or terms that would better deal with the inner personality, such as animai or ying and yang, but so far nothing has stuck. James Hillman, who developed archetypal psychology out of the tradition of Jungian depth psychology, is especially poignant in his criticism of the Jungian model in his book *The Dream and the Underworld* and elsewhere.<sup>18</sup>

At the core of every complex is an archetype, which originates from the collective unconscious. Archetypes are basic universal identity patterns that inform archetypal images such as the Great Mother, the Trickster, and the Sage.<sup>19</sup> Archetypes are a powerful force in both mythology and modern storytelling. Derivatives of the mythologist Joseph Campbell's works are ubiquitous in Hollywood as a guide to script writing, such as Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers*. Explorations of archetypal structures is key to the Jungian concept of individuation, which is the integration of self, and closely tied to embodiment of character in larp. I have written about depth psychological perspectives on larp and the

relationship between player and character in the past, which covers these basics more carefully.<sup>20</sup>

Now that we have established a thorough understanding of the landscape of the psyche in the Jungian model, we can turn more closely towards the shadow. Robert Bly wrote that the individual's shadow is like a bag. We spend the first part of our lives filling it up with parts of ourselves with which we do not want be associated and we spend the second part of our lives trying to drag it all out again.<sup>21</sup> Jung felt that shadow work was better left towards the second half of life. It is by its very nature a threatening subject that at best makes people uncomfortable and at worst very angry. Yet the relevance of the topic is the same, no matter how uncomfortable it is or how old the players are. When shadow is enacted by a group, everyone has to deal with it, ready or not.

The need to explore the topic of shadow in larp stems from the unique structure of larp, which invites players both old and young into immersive psychological exploration and embodiment of mythical archetypes. The depth of exploration possible, while at least marginally novel in the West, has analogues in many non-Western cultures, most especially in African diaspora traditions.<sup>22</sup> I have argued previously that one of the underlying reasons for the manifestation of the art form of larp in the West is the basic human need for vehicles of archetypal engagement.<sup>23</sup> This archetypal exploration can, at some point, be likely to engender encounters with the shadow. If players are unaware, ill-prepared, or simply not ready to deal with the psychic contents they uncover during play, it may lead to a negative experience that is neither illuminating nor enriching. Furthermore, whole groups can be affected by the enactment of shadow in larp. It is far too gravid a subject to ignore, despite the urge to do so. Only by acknowledging the shadow can we begin to integrate it in a healthy way.

In larp, players enact all sorts of archetypal images, from heroes to villains, mermaids to vampires. These archetypal images will sometimes drag the complexes attached to them along to the surface as well. Players engage with these archetypes under the constraints

20. Whitney Beltrán, “Yearning for the Hero Within: Live Action Role-Playing as Engagement with Mythical Archetypes,” in *Wyrd Con Companion 2012*, ed. Sarah L. Bowman and Aaron Vanek (Orange, CA: Wyrd Con, 2012), <http://www.wyrdcon.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/wyrdconcompanionbook2012.pdf>

21. Robert Bly and William C. Booth, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 17.

22. Beltrán, “Yearning,” pg. 93

23. Ibid., 94.

17. Ibid., 110.

18. See also by James Hillman: *Mythic Figures*. Uniform ed. Putnam: Spring Publ., 2007; *Re-visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

19. Jung et al., *Man and His Symbols*, 57.



of a “safe” liminal play space that effectively suspends the persona. In this space, the ego becomes relaxed enough to allow unconscious content to surface. This is very akin to Jung’s concept of active imagination, as previously noted by Sarah Lynne Bowman in “Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-playing Games.”<sup>24</sup> Some of these complexes lie within the shadow itself, as shown in the illustration above, and they can be especially volatile when pulled out into the open. The crux of the matter is that without some kind of a theoretical framework, larpers are effectively operating blind. They may be guided unawares by an instinctual urge towards reintegration of the self, much like a salmon that seeks to swim upstream, but also like the salmon, struggling to make headway against a current with no map. The Jungian model of shadow is far from perfect, but the language and framework it provides for evaluating enactment can help give players a theoretical grounding for dealing with shadow content when it does come into play.

In the earlier stages of the individuation process, the ego-identity starts off specifically unaware of the shadow, as shadow is all the unknown parts of the self. When players choose an archetype to enact when playing their characters, they may not be aware that they are tapping the shadow. Once those contents have been uncovered they may find themselves in the middle of a confrontation with it and no way to pull back. However, having the theoretical foreknowledge of shadow work may help them more easily navigate their relationship with shadow. There are several things we must not forget when considering the Jungian model of shadow. First, shadow work is a vital and necessary part of the individuation process, which involves the reintegration of self into a more enriched whole. Second, that while the shadow may contain repressed negative qualities, it behooves us to come to terms with those qualities, as well as to recognize the repressed aspects of self that are *not* negative. We would never discover any of these things if the shadow was left alone in the unconscious.

On some level, shadow work is something that each individual must discover for him or herself. Many factors come into play: age, emotional maturity, self-awareness, and past experiences. However, on another level, it is possible to spot shadow content before it is engaged. As previously discussed, the contents of shadow can often be largely negative because often we choose to repress the “bad” things about ourselves. These things can include complexes surrounding jealousy, manipulation, greed, and

similar attributes that are frowned upon in society. By taking up archetypal mantles like the anti-hero, villain, or seducer when playing a character, it is likely that a larper will face some aspect of their own shadow within the character that they enact. By directly experiencing this archetypal mode of being, there is an opportunity to learn from it and integrate it into a larger understanding of self, but that is not necessarily an opportunity that a player sets out to take.

In addition, it is possibly unwise to continually play a character or characters that constantly evoke the shadow. When players come in contact with archetypes through direct engagement there is a process that occurs that I have previously identified as ego bleed.<sup>25</sup> Not to be confused with emotional bleed, ego bleed is the process of transference of archetypal qualities across the ego boundary that separates a player from their character, thus integrating those qualities into the persona, not unlike the integration of a complex. If a player has sufficient contact with this unconscious content, it will to some degree “rub off” on the conscious persona, for good or for ill. This concept does not imply that a player cannot embody the character of a Machiavellian murderer for years and years and avoid becoming more like their characters themselves, but from within the purview of Jungian depth psychology, I find it unlikely. There is only so much the conscious mind can control.

While to date hardly anything has been written about the nature of sustaining play of characters with negative characteristics in larp, similar relationships have been deeply discussed in the realm of acting and theatre. In particular, the Stanislavsky technique of Method Acting is of interest. It is a highly intense form of acting in which an actor attempts to “become” their character by dissolving the ego boundaries between themselves and their character as much as possible in order to actually feel what their character is supposed to be feeling.<sup>26</sup> Method acting has documented psychological effects on individuals, both positive and negative, depending on the emotions and type of character they are enacting.<sup>27</sup> It is common understanding that method acting is considered to be

25. Beltrán, *Yearning for the Hero*, 91.

26. William B. Worthen, “Stanislavsky and the Ethos of Acting,” in *Theatre Journal*, vol. 35 (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 36. <http://www.jstor.org/pgi.idm.oclc.org/stable/3206699>

27. Alicia A. Grandey, “When ‘The Show Must Go On’”: Surface Acting As Determinants of Emotional Exhaustion and Peer-Rated Service Delivery,” *Academy of Management Journal* 46, no. 1 (2003): 92, accessed September 10, 2013, <http://php.scripts.psu.edu/users/a/a/ag6/alicia%20amj.pdf>.

24. Sarah Lynne Bowman, “Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-playing Games,” in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, ed. Evan Torner and William J. White (Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2012), 37.

acceptably safe when supervised by professionals, but can also engender dangerous situations when it is not handled properly. The engagement of shadow in larp when treated with the same respect and awareness granted method acting could go a long way towards being a positive experience.

This brings me to my next point. When it comes to engagement with the shadow, all larps are not created equal. Larps can encompass many different themes, themes upon which many different avenues towards archetypal engagement can be forged. Some games have no structures that make a place for shadow at all, while others strongly encourage it. A highly political theatre game is going to have vastly different undertones than a straightforward hack-and-slash game. A game that pits players against each other is going to evoke different emotions than a game that promotes players to work together against a common enemy. Settings that encourage players to seek out high drama are different than those that promotes competitiveness and “winning.” It is my belief that the design and ethos of larps can directly impact the player’s relationship with shadow and likelihood of evocation when enacting their character. Specific focuses like that of competitive player-versus-player scenarios, highly charged political settings, and underhanded social maneuvering are the ones most likely to evoke shadow aspects in players. This is because the personal aspects evoked by these focuses are the most likely aspects to be repressed in the first place.

When the majority of players are engaging shadow the majority of the time, it can become a problem. Both uncontrolled emotional bleed and ego bleed alike may negatively affect player relationships outside of the game, causing strain and confusion. The energy stirred up from the surfacing of too many complexes at the same time may be too much to communally contain. Once more, confrontation with the shadow can elicit a response of projection.<sup>28</sup> Projection is an attempt made by the ego to take one’s own shadow and apply it externally rather than dealing with it directly. Thus, if greed is a player’s shadow aspect that gets too strongly induced and their ego pushes back, instead of acknowledging this shadow aspect of themselves, they will instead unconsciously project it onto another person. Robert Johnson comments in *Owning Your Own Shadow*, “Usually when you receive a shadow projection, your own shadow erupts and warfare is inevitable.”<sup>29</sup>

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28. Jung, *Essential*, 92.

29. Robert A. Johnson, *Owning Your Own Shadow: Understanding the Dark Side of the Psyche* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 36.

With projections flying around, complexes getting activated, and bleed taking its toll, a community of larpers may find themselves in a large mess fast. Improperly resolved, this problem could lead to massive fallout within the group, and often times a complete social collapse surrounding the game.

As mentioned previously, all of these personal shadow issues are informed by larger shadow processes both within and outside the larp subculture. Larp communities themselves carry their own shadow, for a shadow can be sustained by a group just as well as by an individual. For example, an individual larp group may suppress the urge to restrict who can and cannot join the group out of a desire to avoid alienating individuals who occupy the fringe of culture—even to the detriment of the stability of the group—because they cannot say “no” to individuals who are disruptive. Alternatively a part of the group shadow that might form may be exactly the opposite. The group may become distrustful of outsiders and extremely selective due to repressed feeling of being spurned or misunderstood by the wider culture. Both of these impulses stem from a feeling of alienation from the broader culture. In their extremes, neither of these traits are healthy for the group, but in order to address them, the root cause must first be collectively identified and acknowledged. This means each person must individually come to terms with feelings that might make them very uncomfortable. This is no easy task, and as such, the group might rather resort to projection to protect itself. Like individuals, groups can also project shadow issues onto a proverbial black sheep. This black sheep can be a person or a small subset of people within the group who carry the shadow of the whole community. The group projects onto these scapegoats the most feared and denied aspects of its collective self so that it does not have to deal with these issues directly.

The subculture of larp likewise represents feared and denied aspects of American culture. It carries the shadow of repressed impulses towards creativity and play, and suspicion of imaginal richness without an assigned monetary value. Because of America’s capitalistic structure and an outlook on efficiency still largely informed by the protestant work ethic,<sup>30</sup> the larp subculture often finds itself attempting to fight back by substantiating itself in the context of national culture. To do so, the larp subculture often goes out of its way to affirm values that the American culture most strongly espouses. In “We Hold These Truths to be Self-Evident: Larp as Metaphor for

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30. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons. London: Routledge, 2001, 14.



American Identity,” Lizzie Stark writes that American larps seem to be largely preoccupied with equality of opportunity enforced by complex rule sets, a predilection towards litigiousness, and a continual push towards monetization.<sup>31</sup> So, then, the subculture carries complexes of hierarchy and inequality, competitive individualism, trust, and issues surrounding the legitimacy of the free expression that larp promotes. In short, the subculture is trying to overcome the shadow content placed on it from the outside by both consciously and unconsciously compensating for perceived weakness or inferiority.

A large amount of cultural anxiety and stigma surrounds larp in the United States, for larp, like many other subcultures, forms in response to a repressed aspect of the wider national culture. Larp is the shadow of rational empiricism, of dry economic measures of value, of the rendering of myth as meaningless. The American psyche strongly reacts towards its own shadow content when it comes to light and has a habit of projection. One only has to look at the continual string of wars that have plagued our political landscape throughout the last century.

Not all of the complexes carried by the larp community are negative. However, bringing them into communal consciousness may prove exceedingly challenging. Unlike an individual, a community by definition cannot individuate. So while an individual may benefit from shadow work, a community cannot directly do shadow work at all. Rather, it relies in the shift of a large amount of individuals for anything to change. A community as an entity is nearly powerless to address shadow issues without being able to observe them and create dialogue and awareness. A community can only create such dialogue if it has the theoretical tools to do so. The Jungian model of psyche and shadow can be one of those many tools, but only if it is embraced and fully understood, which is also no small challenge given its complexities.

The larp community is in a unique position to explore, learn, and grasp the subtleties of shadow work. Shadow work is hard, and sometimes perilous, but is not without its benefits. In the end the shadow is just as much a part of the Self as any other aspect of the psyche. To completely deny and ignore it forever is a detriment to self-knowledge and to the deep understandings of identity of the self over time, as well as proving harmful to people around those who are completely unaware of how their shadow acts

upon others. To improve the integration and positive cohesiveness of the American psyche at large, to get it to acknowledge its shadow issues, larpers must keep larping and confront their own shadows.

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# Ethical Content Management and the Gaming Social Contract

Shoshana Kessock

## Abstract

This article explores the concept of ethical content management within live action role-playing games, specifically discussing where ethical responsibility lies in regard to managing psychological, emotional, and physical safety of players and organizers. Due to the inherent sociological structures created by the larp participants, there exists a hierarchy of responsibility inherent to everyone involved, from the game designers to the individual players. However, without direct recognition of whose responsibility it is to manage difficult content, responsibility is often passed and the actual issue remains unresolved. Beginning with a discussion of what constitutes problematic or “triggering” content, I follow with explanations of bleed as potential incitement for triggering and the designation of material as questionable. Exploration continues as to who is responsible for managing said questionable content with regard to game design theories like the “magic circle” within the context of social contracts as power structures, as explained by Rousseau. At its core, the article examines the line between personal accountability within game space, interpersonal accountability, and the responsibility of game organizers to create safe experiences.

To provide examples of management strategies for handling such questionable content, examples will be provided from Nordic-style larps such as *Kapo* and *Mad About the Boy* and contrasted with anecdotal evidence of the United States commercial larp *Dystopia Rising*. Finally, we will recognize questionable content management as a design challenge for larp developers as well as community management, with recommendation for further research into effective structural creation.

## Keywords

larp, role-playing games, social contract, triggering, questionable content, bleed, *Kapo*, *Mad About the Boy*, *Dystopia Rising*

## 1. Introduction

Live action role-playing games (larps) can introduce a myriad of topics within their content that might be found objectionable, intense, or emotionally and psychologically difficult to its players. Unlike other forms of media such as television or film, which are consumed via mediated barriers, the larp player steps into performative atmospheres requiring more direct physical and sensory interaction with the game’s content. A player that wants to remain within the game does not have the option of turning off the incoming stimuli as you would with a television; they are typically embroiled in the back-and-forth of player interactions, putting the player at the heart of the difficult content. This material, used overtly within the game by designers or introduced through the course of game events by players, can cause psychological or emotional stress in participants and, unless handled carefully, can inflict real disruption to emotional and psychological well-being.

This emotional and psychological disruption has been at the core of debates about whether larps, and tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* are “dangerous” since the 1970’s.<sup>1</sup> Despite articles being published showing no direct correlation between role-playing games and psychological instability<sup>2</sup> the hobby has been labeled as escapist and potentially hazardous to people’s emotional health. This article does not intend to support those accusations, but instead will point to an ethical and safety issue in larp when dealing with what is called *mature*, *adult*, or *serious* content. For the purpose of this article, these topics will be referred to as *questionable content*.

What constitutes questionable content, however, is nebulous; the responsibility for who manages said content is often ignored, the buck passing from organizer to individual player without explicitly addressing the issue. In the coming sections, I will discuss the issue of what constitutes questionable content, its effects, and the placement of responsibility for such content when viewing larp groups in a sociological light. I will explore the

1. The Escapist, “Facts and Fictions About Role-playing Games,” Version 1.1, 2007, The Escapist. <http://www.theescapist.com/facts-and-fictions-about-RPGs.pdf>

2. Armando Simón, “Emotional stability pertaining to the game of *Dungeons & Dragons*,” *Psychology in the Schools* (October 1987): 329-332.

*gaming social contract*, or the basic power structure of larp communities, comparing it to the foundations of the social contract theory of Rousseau. This social and political structure provides not only the basic community structure for live action role-playing games, but the foundation for responsible content management and the ways in which it may be instituted to provide responsible community care.

Along with Rousseau, I will reference several noted writers on larp and role-playing games to discuss concepts of what defines creation of a role-playing environment, drawn from writers like Montola; Hakkarainen and Stenros; as well as Järvelä's work on the ethical rules regarding questionable content in larps in order to identify the concept of consent. Examples will be drawn from Nordic games like *Mad About the Boy* and *Kapo*, as well as the inclusion of anecdotal reference to the *Dystopia Rising* franchise. The inclusion of *Dystopia Rising* in the discussion is included to juxtapose Nordic games against American larp commercial enterprises, though more research is needed in discussing this game and its content. For this reason, any data regarding *Dystopia* must be considered anecdotal.

## 2. Questionable content, triggers and bleed

To address the issue at hand, one must first identify what content is considered questionable. It would be simple to create allusions to traditional media such as the rating systems for film<sup>3</sup> to identify what content might be considered questionable. Alternately, I could fall back on another gaming genre and import the video game ratings to judge what content is benign versus "mature."<sup>4</sup> However, neither of these forms of entertainment are experienced in the same performative manner as larp. Note the avoidance of the term immersion here. The nature of what defines immersion in games has been discussed extensively by White, Harvianinen and Boss<sup>5</sup> and

further deconstructed by Matthijs Holter,<sup>6</sup> whose text "Stop Saying Immersion" calls for role-playing communities to discard the term. Instead of falling back on this much-debated term, it may be said then that the performative aspect of larp translates the game experience from heavily-mediated to one that is more physically and sensorily immediate. That immediacy of physical sense and direct involvement is discussed by Lankowski and Järvelä in relation to role-playing games in general, citing the connective nature of role-playing providing a more in-depth experience for players than media that is simply viewed.<sup>7</sup> This connection to the material in the game can cause players to react strongly to questionable content. This kind of intense reaction when discussed in psychology is called *triggering*.

Discussions of triggering content in media point to episodes of patients suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and indicate that similar issues may occur in those who intake a piece of stimuli that dredges up reminders of previous traumas.<sup>8</sup> Identifying triggering content, then, becomes a question of understanding what might place a player in a position to react with extreme emotional or psychological distress to events presented. However, as stated before, since each player's experience is individual and their backgrounds diverse, it is impossible to know when designing a game or organizing an event if the content might negatively impact or trigger an individual along the way. The player intercepts the stimulus of the game, translates the information through the lens of previous experiences, and reacts accordingly.

3. Motion Picture Association of America, "What Each Rating Means," 2013, MPAA.org. <http://www.mpa.org/ratings/what-each-rating-means>

4. Entertainment Software Rating Board, "Rating Categories, Content Descriptors, and Interactive Elements from ESRB," ESRB.org, 2013. [http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings\\_guide.jsp](http://www.esrb.org/ratings/ratings_guide.jsp)

5. William J. White, J. Tuomas Harvianinen, and Emily Care Boss, "Role-playing Communities, Cultures of Play, and the Discourse of Immersion," in *Immersive Gameplay: Studies in Role-playing and Media Immersion*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White, 71-86. Jefferson: McFarland, 2012.

6. Matthijs Holter, "Stop Saying Immersion," in *Lifelike* edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, and Line Thorup, 18-22. (Frederiksberg, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP07, 2007).

7. Petri Lankoski and Simo Järvelä. "An Embodied Cognition Approach for Understanding Role-playing," *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 3 (2012): 18-32. <http://www.ijrp.subcultures.nl/wp-content/issue3/IJRPissue3lankoskijarvella.pdf>

8. National Institute of Mental Health, "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)," NIMH.nih.gov, n.d. [http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/nimh\\_ptsd\\_booklet.pdf](http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/nimh_ptsd_booklet.pdf)



This translation of in-game experiences through the lens of out of character experience is an example of an emotional reaction to role-playing games known as *bleed*. The term bleed has been explored extensively in other works,<sup>9</sup> but a brief explanation is noted in Bowman as “the phenomenon of the thoughts, feelings, physical state, and relationship dynamics of the player affecting the character and vice versa.”<sup>10</sup> Specifically in the case of triggering content, players experience *bleed-in*, which occurs “when out-of-game factors affect the player’s experience” and *bleed-out*, in which the events which occur in character cause emotional reactions which affect a player out of game.<sup>11</sup> When the bleed causes positive associations, such as evoking feelings of success or triumph, the experience can be pleasant and the player can continue to engage with the game material in a positive fashion. When a player is disturbed by material experienced in a game, it can trigger powerful negative emotions that may mar the game for the player. Note the use of “may,” as some players instead can find negative emotions experienced in a larp as cathartic and powerful, and therefore enhances the player’s enjoyment. Emotional aims during gameplay are as varied as larp players themselves and what is deemed a positive or negative experience is entirely subjective. This subjectivity means players may also require different methods and levels of emotional consideration, which will be discussed as aftercare in later sections.

To better dissect how content can be judged as questionable or not, a discussion in the book *Pervasive Games* offers a clear breakdown between types of offensive content.<sup>12</sup> The definition provided from Donald VanDeVeer states that “offensive actions are often considered offensive only by a

certain group, based on its traditions and cultural identity” and therefore, for a free discourse to continue, the offensive material has to fall into one of two categories: *harmful* or *nuisance*.<sup>13</sup> The text references Joel Feinberg’s work, which identifies harm as a “lasting setback to one’s assets” while a nuisance does not provide the same lasting harm.<sup>14</sup> Should said offensive material provided in a game be potentially triggering for an individual, then it fulfills the criteria of harmful as well as offensive and marks itself as potentially unethical territory.

Content may also be considered harmful or not-harmful based on the playfulness of a player’s mindset, as is introduced by Lappi when discussing “contra-moral” content in gamespace.<sup>15</sup> Within a game, Lappi argues, as long as players keep a playful mindset throughout the game, then even content considered objectionable might be all in good fun. When that spirit of that playful mindset shifts, due perhaps to the perception of game events and content by players, what was considered ethical content previously may slide into questionable territory.

The identification of content as questionable does not mean said content should be considered ethically off-limits to games entirely. Instead, the management of such content regarding when it is included and who has the power to weigh in on its inclusion is the very subject of this discussion.

### 3. Game Power Structure and Social Contract Theory

The difficulty of content management in larp comes in identifying where the creative power lies. As discussed, negative reactions to content impact those players who, as part of the community, bear with them triggers which may be set off by the questionable content they encounter. Their reactions impact the game state due to how role-playing games operate. I refer to Montola (2007) and his definition of role-playing, identifying role-playing as “an interactive process of defining and re-defining an imaginary game world, done by a group of participants according to a recognized structure of

9. Jeepen, “Bleed,” Jeepen.org, n.d. <http://jeepen.org/dict/#bleed>; Markus Montola, “The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-playing,” in *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2010: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Players, 2010*; Sarah Lynne Bowman, “**Social Conflict in Role-playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study**” *International Journal of Role-playing* 4 (2013): 4-25.

10. Bowman, “Social Conflict,” 16.

11. Sarah Lynne Bowman. “Bleed: How Emotions Affect Role-playing Experiences.” *Nordic Larp Talks Oslo 2013*. <http://nordiclartalks.org/post/48274368386/bleed-how-emotions-affect-role-playing-experiences>

12. Markus Montola, Jaakko Stenros, and Annika Waern, *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (Burlington, MA: Morgan Kaufman, 2009).

13. Donald VanDeVeer. “Coercive Restraint of Offensive Actions,” in *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8, no. 2 (1979): 175-193.

14. Joel Feinberg. *The Moral Limits of the Criminal Law 1: Harm to Others*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).

15. Ari-Pekka Lappi, “Contra-Moral of Play: From Ethics of Game Towards Ethics of Playing,” in *Playing Reality*, edited by Elge Larsson, 193-203. (Stockholm: Interacting Arts, 2010).

power.”<sup>16</sup> He elaborates on this definition in later work by identifying three key rules for role-playing:

1. Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.
2. The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.
3. Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.<sup>17</sup>

This concept of recognized structures of power will be returned to shortly, but note that the boundaries of the game world are constantly in flux and that the flux is created by the participants of the game. This definition is backed by the work of Hakkarainen and Stenros (2002), where they defined role-play as something “created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and game masters within a specific diegetic framework.”<sup>18</sup> By these definitions, we acknowledge the influence a game’s participants have on the game world. Creation of content for a game is then, by Montola’s definition, an exercise of power within not only the game world but among the community of participants engaged in said game. Even within an opposing definition postulated in the provocative Turkuist “Autonomous Identities” by Mike Pohjola,<sup>19</sup> where an individual is capable of role-playing without the external input of other players, the community in said case is made up of one and, therefore, an in-game power structure constructed of one.

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16. Markus Montola, “**Tangible Pleasures of Pervasive Role-Playing**” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Situated Play Conference*, edited by Akira Baba, 178-185. (The University of Tokyo, September 24-28, 2007).

17. Markus Montola. “**The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: A Structural Framework of Role-Playing Process**” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1 (2008): 22-36.

18. Henri Hakkarainen and Jaakko Stenros. “The Meilahti School: Thoughts on Role-Playing,” in *As Larp Grows Up: Theory and Methods in Larp* edited by Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander, 54-64. (Copenhagen: Projektgruppen KP03, 2002). <http://nordiclarp.org/w/images/c/c2/2003-As.Larp.Grows.Up.pdf>

19. Mike Pohjola, “Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering, and Emancipating Identities,” in *Beyond Role and Play* edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, 81-95. (Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2004).

The participants of a game can be broken down into several different categories. There are the *game designers*, writing the content of the game and preparing material to be played by participants. These designers may sometimes also be the *organizers*, whose responsibility it is to manage and curate the goings on both in- and out-of-character, though those two roles may also be separate. The organizers, as well as the staff they employ, are also responsible for handling logistical management of the game, preparing game spaces, and managing safety concerns throughout the event. Finally there are the *players*, who react to the content and then perpetuate the game by creating new content through their responses. The players, for the context of our discussion, need be broken down into two groups, namely the *players as a community body*, and as *individuals* that exists within that body.

The preservation of the game community as a whole is a concept discussed as far back as the work of Johan Huizinga and the theory of the *magic circle*.<sup>20</sup> The much discussed concept, later codified and further explored by Salen and Zimmerman,<sup>21</sup> is a staple of game design theory and debate, but also stands as some of the core theory that outlines the structure of any game’s social contract. Magic circle theory postulates the establishment of a basic ideological contract that people accept upon entering into a voluntary ludic space. The players together create or accept the rules that order the space and then maintain those rules for the duration of the game. Violators of those rules, therefore, violate the space of the game and are often cast out as “spoilsports” to preserve the game space’s integrity. Even early on, Huizinga understood that game space must be preserved based upon conventions of play established by the overall community. These conventions would change from game to game but must be upheld for the magic circle of play to continue.

This social contract notion goes back even further to the political discourse of Rousseau and the creation of original social contract theory.<sup>22</sup> Rousseau put forward that a social contract was a

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20. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955).

21. Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

22. Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *The Social Contract Theory, Or Principles of Political Right*, N.d. [http://mongolianmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Rousseau\\_contrat-social-1221.pdf](http://mongolianmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Rousseau_contrat-social-1221.pdf)



political structure, established to dictate the rules of society and where the power in said society lies. Rousseau postulated that society at large, much like game communities, eschew certain powers while within the structure of their group so that the body as a whole can be maintained. He states, "Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general will and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole."<sup>23</sup>

These powers are agreed upon by every person within the body and, much like in Huizinga's magic circle, violators can be cast out of the body. Yet Rousseau also identifies an important power structure which mimics Montola's view of the player body dynamic. In Rousseau's social contract, should unwanted powers be imposed upon the body, it is within the membership's right to stand up and disagree with the rules established. The power, then, lies in the hands of the communal body and the individuals that make up that body.

Simply put, if Rousseau's is the original social contract upon which all others are modeled, then the idea of a social contract that establishes all game communities laid out by Huizinga as a power structure involves all levels of the community in control. Without agreement from the individual upon the rules of the game space, which includes contributed content, then the very magic circle of play is broken down and violated. Therefore, all levels of the power structure must uphold the needs of the individual and find a way to provide safety and care for him or her.

#### 4. Ethical Content Creation

With an understanding of where the power in the community lies, we move to the problem of questionable content interacting with the very rules of larp creation. After all, policing of content does not necessarily need to be an overt rule in every larp game community. There is precedent for establishing ethical boundaries for content creation in games. For the very nature of a game to continue, those within the space must remain healthy enough to perpetuate the community. It is then almost implied that the game space be protected by the very creation of a game. This protection can occur by considering the best ways to ethically manage game content.

In the essay "The Golden Rule of Larp," Järvelä states that for consent to be true, it must be informed.<sup>24</sup> Players must be aware of what they are getting themselves into, at least to the extent that material can be anticipated. The players choose to accept the game's content, stepping into the magic circle in agreement to play the game presented as informed participants. That notion of informed consent also places power once more into the hands of players, as without their participation there is no player community to run the game and without informed consent the very rules of ethical creation have already been violated.

One of the major difficulties when talking about consent comes when a player cannot make a fully informed choice. This can occur if a game involves secret information that is not disclosed or if new content is introduced mid-game unplanned. Players who do not fully understand the potential ramifications of content that will be introduced may choose to enter a game without making a truly informed choice. For that reason, consent is not cut and dry and Järvelä's rules have to be adjusted. I theorize that to create a morally acceptable state, it must be made up of a *consenting group of players* who have agreed to play *amongst themselves* and who have been *informed to the best of the organizer's capability* about the subject matter of the game.

#### 5. Management of Content Responsibility and Accountability

*Informed consent*, as mentioned above, is the agreement to participate given by a player once they have been suitably notified about the content and circumstances of the game they will play. If we consider informed consent as a fundamental for ethical game design, we can begin to outline the responsibilities of each part of a larp's populace in managing the emotional and psychological safety of its participants. This management includes enforcing informed consent through offered transparency pre-game, monitoring of management during gameplay, and the inclusion of debriefings or workshops to any individuals that might need such aftercare. The responsibility structure breaks down as follows.

**Game Designers:** The game designer's material is going to be interpreted by the organizers; however,

24. Simo Järvelä. "The Golden Rule of Larp," in *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*, edited by Juhana Pettersson, 19-24. Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura, 2012. [http://www.nordicrpg.fi/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/states\\_of\\_play\\_pdf\\_version.pdf](http://www.nordicrpg.fi/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/states_of_play_pdf_version.pdf)

23. Ibid.

they remain accountable for the initial vision. When considering informed consent, the designers are the first ones capable of outlining questionable content. Though content may vary depending on decisions made by the game's organizers later on, the designer's transparency in the original larp text sets the tone for the content included in runs of the game and presents what content will be presented to the players for consent.

An example of this kind of transparency was established in the Norwegian Nordic larp *Mad About the Boy*.<sup>25</sup> The game depicted a world inspired by Brian K. Vaughn's comic series *Y: The Last Man* in which all men were killed by a virus and the women left behind must cope with their loss. The game already has some troubling content—death, grief, and sexuality—when the last section of the game then reintroduces a single surviving man, which can provoke powerful responses in the female characters. When the game was created, the entire script for the game was made available to not only the players who were involved in the first run, but to any and all organizers who might want to run the event elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> The clear availability of the larp script, as well as the documentation on the *Mad About the Boy* website, gave informed access to American organizers and, later, their players when they brought the game to the United States in 2012.<sup>27</sup> While this may spoil certain major events within the larp and strip away any secrecy in the game, this transparency provides a level of access to the material that allows for a much higher level of informed consent.

The United States commercial zombie post-apocalypse franchise *Dystopia Rising* is a second example. As a mature-rated game with multiple locations across the United States, it features a survival-horror setting that often includes mature-rated content. While the exact material of each game is not published, the game designers provide transparent warnings about game content in their published *Dystopia Rising Survivor's Guide*, downloadable from their website for organizers

and players alike to view.<sup>28</sup> This may not prepare individuals for the precise events that will occur during play, but they are least informed beforehand of the potentially graphic nature of the material that they may encounter and can then choose whether or not to opt into the game experience.

**Game Organizers:** Game organizers are presented with a larger job when it comes to community care and responsibility. The game organizer is responsible for the implementation of the game designer's vision, the maintenance of community expectations going into game, and the logistics and actual execution of the game event. While this is a complex set of responsibilities, the maintenance of community expectations as well as logistical concerns provide organizers with the framework to create a safe game environment. Organizers bring the initial content of the game to the players and they have the ability to provide the information regarding content that would allow a player to become an informed participant. It is also within the organizers' purview to maintain an ethical and safe space for the players to enjoy the game by providing whatever structure allows for pre-game preparation and post-game recovery. Workshops post-game are an example of one such structure. These workshops can utilize buddy techniques known as de-roleing or alternately de-fucking<sup>29</sup> to unpack any kind of intense emotional experiences raised by the game and allow players to give valuable feedback to the organizers about the content included in the game.

Returning to *Mad About the Boy*, it is clear when one reads the book compiled about the United States run<sup>30</sup> that the organizers were intensely aware of the need for content preparation and emotional safe space for the game.<sup>31</sup> Not only did they provide the libretto to the players, but extensively prepared players through workshops before the game for the kind of emotional experience they could expect. This open style of play simultaneously introduced a need for keeping in-character and out-of-character information separate while offering players explicit information regarding

25. *Mad About the Boy*. Tor Kjetil Edland, Margrete Raaum, and Trine Lise Lindahl. Original Libretto. 2013. <http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org/>

26. Tor Kjetil Edland, Margrete Raaum, and Trine Lise Lindahl. *Mad About the Boy: Full Manuscript*. 2013. [http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org/Full\\_manuscript\\_Mad\\_about\\_the\\_boy.pdf](http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org/Full_manuscript_Mad_about_the_boy.pdf)

27. Sarah Lynne Bowman, ed. *The Book of Mad About the Boy* (2012 US Run). (Copenhagen: Rollespilsakademiet, 2012). [http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/pdf/books/book\\_matbus2012.pdf](http://www.rollespilsakademiet.dk/pdf/books/book_matbus2012.pdf)

28. Michael Pucci, et al. *Dystopia Rising Survivor's Guide* (Eschaton Media, 2013). [http://www.dystopiarisinglarp.com/thelibrary/DystopiaRising\\_Rules\\_4.20\\_Ed.pdf](http://www.dystopiarisinglarp.com/thelibrary/DystopiaRising_Rules_4.20_Ed.pdf)

29. Tobias Bindslet and Pernille Schultz, "De-fucking," *Playground Magazine* 2 (2011): 30–33.

30. Bowman, ed., *The Book of Mad About the Boy* (2012 US Run).

31. Ibid.



potentially questionable content.

*Kapo* is a Nordic larp game where players experience life within a gulag-like prison camp.<sup>32</sup> The game allowed for extreme forms of play thematics, including simulated physical violence, torture, and simulated sexual violation,<sup>33</sup> all done within the framework of created game mechanics. Given the intensity, the designers created a safe space where players could retreat during game to rest, get a hot meal, and talk to someone should they need a respite. The interviews within their own documentation indicate the need for such a retreat for some players when the game content became too overwhelming. This safety net allowed players to reconnect not only with themselves, but to contextualize their experience and therefore more safely engage with the material.<sup>34</sup> While not all players found the experience as intense, it is important to note that safety structures were in place for those that needed them.

In contrast to those two examples stands *Dystopia Rising*'s lack of formalized de-briefing procedures. Opening announcements before games include a discussion of the kinds of adult content that can be found at game, as well as a description on how to step out-of-character should a situation become too much for a player. There is no formalized aftercare, as is the case in many American larps. Instead, players must seek out individual resolution on their own between themselves or with staff members without a formalized structure in place. However, more extreme *Dystopia* events have had mandated debriefing time, such as in the case of the *Cell Block J-5* event,<sup>35</sup> which was loosely based on the well-known Stanford Prison Experiment. During this event, not only was there full transparency about the nature of the content, but a mandatory safety tutorial before game and additional time set aside after for after-game discussion.

**Community Body:** The community of players as a whole is important to identify as a political power structure within a game. It not only makes up the constituent body of any game circle, but often provides majority decisions about what content is or is not questionable. By agreeing to be a part

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32. Claus Raasted, ed. *The Book of Kapo* (Copenhagen: Rollespilsakademiet, 2012).

33. Ibid., 82-90.

34. Ibid., 94-100.

35. *Dystopia Rising: Cell Block J-5*, Michael Pucci. DexCon 16. Morristown, NJ: 2013.

of the game, the community is effectively putting their seal of approval on what is going on within the game. Should any part of the event not meet with the standard of emotional or mental safety the players want, or should the content presented border on the questionable, then as Rousseau mentions, the power is in the community's hands to question and potentially veto these questionable choices. Their power as a body politic also creates the consensual reality of the game world, as per Montola's earlier definition. Should the body's decision stand against the questionable material provided, then that consensus holds the power to sway the discourse away from the difficult topics.

**The Individual:** At last is the single unit component of the game community, the individual player, who comprises the community as a whole. As stated, it is the individual through whom the content of a game is considered. Whether or not a game aims for players to bleed into their characters, the individual's experiences create a set of emotional triggers that may become active should questionable content hit upon a particular sore spot. This phenomenon is discussed further in Schick's writing on breaking character, which indicates that despite pressures to remain in character, a player may have to take the choice to step out-of-character to express an emotional need.<sup>36</sup> That individual must take accountability for said triggers and either remain within the play space to endure the experience or else remove themselves for their own emotional and psychological health. Structures should be put in place to handle these often volatile situations. Should a player be unable to act for themselves, the responsibility then falls back into the hands of the curators of game experience and the community as a whole to spot potential trouble-signs and initiate those safety measures on behalf of one of their compatriots. In this way, the individual is cared for by the community.

Trouble in such content management arises when the individual's needs are different from those in the community around them. This problem can stem from a number of issues, such as questionable content being judged differently by different players. For example, while one player finds torture to be heinous and uncomfortable, another player might not blink an eye at torture content. This extreme example may also require a simpler one: the inclusion of a wedding plot into a game where one player may object on the grounds that they are widowed or divorced, while

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36. Schick, Laurie. "Breaking Frame in a Role-play Simulation: A Language Socialization Perspective." *Simulation and Gaming* 39, no. 2 (2008): 184-197.

others see no problem. The subjective nature of questionable content calls for not an overstructuring of boundaries and exceptions, but as stated above, a need for available safety measures.

Players who consider availing themselves of those safety measures may find themselves in the unenviable position of standing up for their own emotional wellbeing against the opinions of the majority. Safety techniques such as the utilization of *cut* and *brake*, in which a player may indicate that they want to *cut* from content in a scene or put the *brakes* on the intensity of the scene due to the content, give the players the tools to call a halt to scenes that might become triggering. However, there is a great deal of emotional weight put on the individual who wishes to speak up. The blame is often aimed at individuals for being unable to handle their own emotions and they may be labeled unfavorably for standing up for their own needs. In an article about dealing with post-role-play emotions, authors Bindslet and Schultz call speaking up about feelings that arise from gameplay a courageous act which can open up the discourse about emotions for other game participants.<sup>37</sup> As noted by a player who experienced *The Journey*, a post-apocalyptic game based on Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*: "I considered walking out of the game, but couldn't resolve to—possibly out of respect for the other players, who were performing very well."<sup>38</sup>

If pressure is placed on the individual to stay within a game regardless of comfort, this shifts the power dynamics of the game in favor of the community or organizers; it ignores the needs of the player and goes onto ignore the fact that the community is kept safe by ensuring the safety of each individual within it. This runs parallel to a notion put forward by Bernard Suits, which states that though players may wish to act in a manner that would optimize their play experience, they cede certain options in play space for the betterment of the overall ludic experience.<sup>39</sup> This includes, in the case of larp, ceding that which might be considered, for example, illegal or harmful to the whole body, such as the inclusion of illegal drug use or actual physical violence in gameplay. Since larp is inherently a

created community experience, to slight the needs of the individual for the needs of the whole is to violate the spirit of the consensual reality creation that is the backbone of role-playing games.

## 6. Conclusion

For larp to flourish as a creative medium, its players and creators must feel comfortable to explore questionable content with creative freedom. However a game's participants must also be certain that their safety is being taken into account within the framework of their game space and the within the power structure inherent to their community. Fundamental to our understanding of these power dynamics is the knowledge that they are fluid and require us to understand the social contracts existing within larp communities and the units that make up these structures. By examining the responsibilities of each part of the power structure, we can pinpoint how safety measures can be implemented effectively on behalf of designers, organizers, the community, and even individuals. Additional research is needed into the most effective means to implement such safety measures, as such research can only improve our understanding of the best balance of creative freedom versus ethical content creation in the future.

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# Managerial Styles in Larps: Control Systems, Cultures, and Charisma

J. Tuomas Harviainen

## Abstract

In this chapter, I examine the ways in which organizers and game masters utilize management techniques in larps that they run, as well as the reasons for doing so. Through this process, it is revealed that despite a probable lack of formal management training, game masters intuitively use many commonly recognized management techniques and translate success in that into dialectic charisma. This in turn makes people return to play their other games. I first address the basics of larp management, after which follows a short treatise on the relationship of design, preparation, and narrative structures to game management. Then examples are discussed, focusing on larp as a commercial venture, as a collective effort, and as something where a game master tries to hide his or her influence on play. The article ends with a discussion on larp's relationship with dialectic charisma and on the often intuitive nature of how larps are managed.

## Keywords

dialectic charisma; live-action role-playing; management techniques

## 1. Introduction

In this paper, I explore issues of leadership and management in the temporary realities of larps. Game masters and other organizers influence the course of play, through either preparation, run-time changes, or both.<sup>1</sup> The purpose of this work is to analyze such patterns and to point not just scholars, but also both prospective and active larp organizers towards guidance that might best fit their organizational and management styles. My focus is therefore especially on management classics, as they best display the attitude differences I have also witnessed among larp organizers. Classics have a further advantage in that a layman reader is more likely to be familiar with at least some of their basic tenets, as opposed to the more nuanced,

1. Tychsen et al., "Live Action Role-Playing Games: Control, Communication, Storytelling, and MMORPG Similarities," 2006; Harviainen, "Live-Action, Role-Playing Environments as Information Systems: An Introduction," 2007.

advanced research. I intentionally steer away as much as possible from the factor most commonly discussed in leadership and management studies: performance efficiency.<sup>2</sup> I believe that larps are much too individualized events for such value judgments, excluding those that are intentionally designed for organizational training.<sup>3</sup> In certain larps, furthermore, unlike in corporations and military units, change-inspiring (transformational) leadership need not rely on the power to dictate things (transactional leadership).

In the sense of management theories, larps are social systems.<sup>4</sup> Affecting some aspects of larp before or during play causes systemic changes to the activity, in the manner described by Senge.<sup>5</sup> Changing parameters like response delay or access to necessary information has a direct impact on not just the game as system, but also the play experiences of the players. This makes larps intriguing case studies for the application of managerial activity.

The social aspect of play makes larps of high interest to applications of social psychology and group dynamics theory.<sup>6</sup> In this chapter, however, I focus on the leaders and managers, who are often, but not always, the game masters. This is because in many non-campaign larps, the participants

2. See e.g. Bass et al., "Predicting Unit Performance by Assessing Transformational and Transactional Leadership," 2003.

3. See e.g. Paananen and Smeds, "Systems Snapshot—A Serious Game for Increasing Understanding of Organizational Models, Leadership and Communication in Increasingly Complex Systems," 2012.

4. Harviainen, *Systemic Perspectives on Information in Physically Performed Role-Play*, 2012; see also Klabbers, *The Magic Circle*, 2009.

5. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, 2006; see also Harviainen, "Designing Games for Testing Information Behavior Theories," 2011.

6. See e.g. Bowman, "Social Conflict in Role-playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study," 2013; Leonard and Arango, "The Dynamic Life Cycle of Live Action Role-Play Communities," this book.

attend just that one time and thus the play groups may not have the time to go through the changes in dynamics described by researchers such as Tuckman.<sup>7</sup> In other cases, furthermore, a larp's owner may be so autocratic as to effectively stand outside the development processes of the group, in many regards. As noted by Brown,<sup>8</sup> there are always individuals in a group who are able to influence others more than they themselves can be influenced, i.e., leaders. They stand partially apart from the rest of the group, just like organizational managers do. Larp game masters have also a rare, if not unique position: within the fictional realities of their games, they can effectively be gods. They have the power to re-define the game environment as needed, the results of character actions included. How much they use that power is one of the key defining factors of their differing management styles.

As will be further discussed below, cultural differences also apply. This is normal for all organizations<sup>9</sup> and not just a trait of larps. There are nevertheless generalizable traits to leadership and organization, within a culture and across them.<sup>10</sup> In Northern Europe, for example, larp design and organization very often resembles what management theory, following Bennis,<sup>11</sup> calls an *adhocracy*: "The adhocracy usually involves project teams that come together to perform a task and disappear when the task is over, with members regrouping in other teams devoted to other projects."<sup>12</sup>

The non-profit nature of many Nordic larps<sup>13</sup> further emphasizes this system. Their players expect the organizer not to make a profit out

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7. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," 1965.

8. Brown, *Group Processes: Dynamics Within and Between Groups*, 1988, Ch. 3.

9. Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations across Nations*, 1991.

10. Bass, "Does the Transactional-Transformational Leadership Paradigm Transcend Organizational and National Boundaries?," 1997.

11. Bennis, *Changing Organizations*, 1966.

12. Morgan, Gareth, *Images of Organization*, Updated Edition. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006, 50.

13. See Stenros and Montola, eds., *Nordic Larp*, 2010, for examples.

of the venture. Some organizers in the Nordic countries and especially in the United States are, however, professional or semi-professional, and run their games as corporations with the larp as a sold product.<sup>14</sup> Because of this, I look at larp—both outside and during play—here from an organizational, often corporate, perspective.

Harviainen divides larp organizing (i.e., the game master functions) into three categories: *Design* (the pre-run planning stage), *Preparation* (the actual pre-run production stage) and *Control* (management during play).<sup>15</sup> I believe that a fourth separate category also exists: *Continuity*, which I define as the post-game management of debriefing and, in the case of campaigns or sequels, the tracking of character experience, downtime actions, settling of remaining disputes, and so forth.

The categories are often closely interrelated, but may not always be handled by the same people. This is natural, given how much a 10 player larp and a 4500 participant larp differ as far as their organizational and control requirements go. From a management perspective, however, more variance nevertheless exists between the ideals of various communities of play than between such game scales. The reason for this is that both national cultures and local playgroups' habits tend to emphasize certain traits over others.

Tycksen et al., in their seminal treatment of larp management structure, list four general categories of control functions: game masters, world setting, non-player characters, and rules.<sup>16</sup> They all have varying areas in which they operate:

Note that GMs refer to game masters; NPCs refer to non-player characters. Five overall groups contribute to the control in larps: objectives, events, character generation, division of temporal control, and basic control functions.

In the following sub-chapters, I discuss the way pre-game preparation and design, especially narrative design, reflects managerial decisions, through the aforementioned functions. After that, I move on to two examples of management systems, a feudal-corporate and an anarchic one. I also discuss ways in which game masters try to subtly influence play, the way success builds dialectic charisma that makes new success more likely, and the way that game masters, in the end, tend to rely on intuitive

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14. See Stark, *Leaving Mundania: Inside the Transformative World of Live Action Role Playing Games*, 2012, for examples.

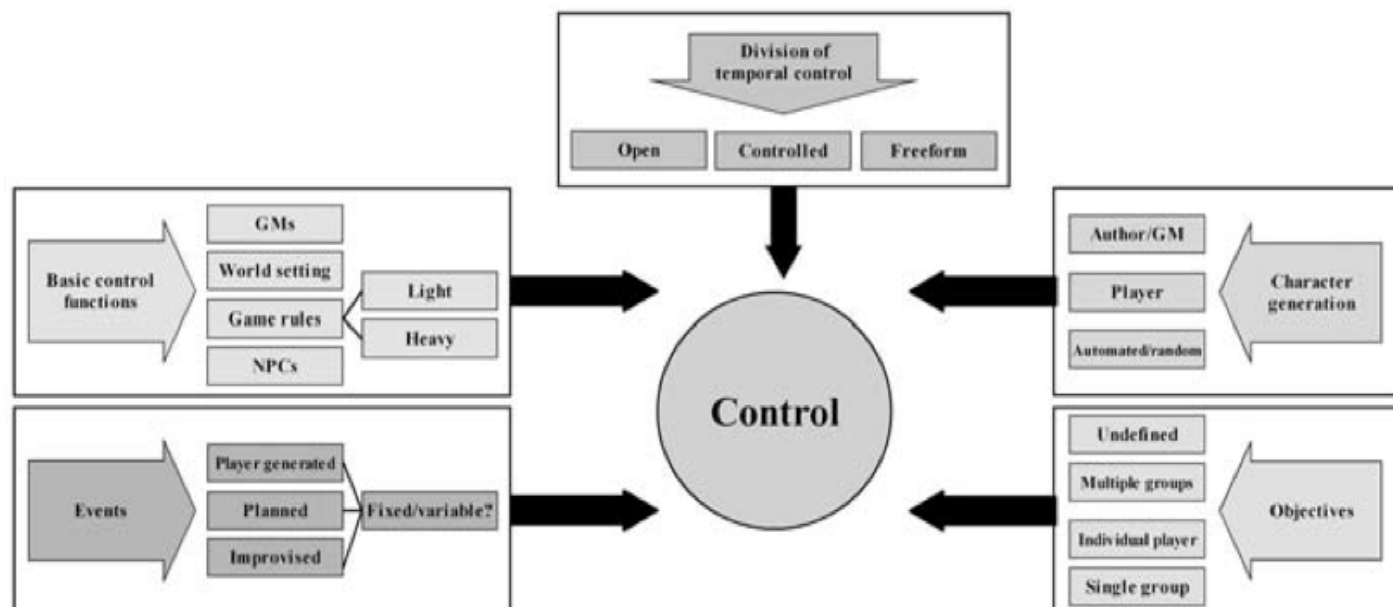
15. Harviainen, "Live-Action, Role-Playing."

16. Tycksen et al., "Live Action Role-Playing Games."



**Figure 1** (quoted from Tychsen et al., “Live Action Role-Playing Games”)

## Control or Management Functions in Live Action Role-Playing Games (LARPs)



2.

applications of managerial power, rather than any formal techniques.

What is, in my opinion, especially notable in larp management is the way larp organizers seem to consistently find their way into using classical management techniques in their work. The systems that arise time and again in the following chapters—such as scientific management, holographic ability, bounded rationality, and so forth—are not a random set of cherry-picked theories. They are themes that keep re-emerging in the way larps are managed. They are also classic templates of how organizations tend to be viewed.<sup>17</sup> Their existence and application in larp communities can to some extent be explained by evolution: only those techniques that function get transported from one game to the next, one leader to another. Likewise, people may bring management techniques they have seen or used in their everyday life into the gaming context. I do not, however, believe that to be the whole truth, as it does not sufficiently explain the way different larps default to very different systems of control. Because of this, this chapter examines several very different types of larps and their management systems. The examples may not be generalizable beyond their particular communities, but I believe they illustrate that key differences exist, and that those differences appear to closely follow well-established patterns recognized also outside of larp.

## Design and preparation as control

A simple small-scale larp with active run-time game mastering (i.e., where the game master overtly influences the course of events during play)<sup>18</sup> is, from a managerial perspective, very easy to prepare. In them, everything can be altered later by GM fiat.<sup>19</sup> When the scale expands, run-time mastering, however, becomes more and more difficult. The “fog of larp” sets in and direct oversight becomes impossible, due to distances and system complexity.<sup>20</sup> The game masters cannot affect that to which they have no direct contact. Beyond a certain rather small level of system complexity, the information that something has been altered is not transmitted to all players, so any game alteration will lead to several co-existing “truths” about the situation. For example, if a game master retroactively decides that a now dead character was not actually killed, yet neglects to inform those who committed the murder, the rest of the game will feature

18. See Lancaster, *Warlocks and Warpdrive*, 1999, and Jonsson et al, “Five Weeks of Rebellion: Designing Momentum” 2007, for examples.

19. Certain larp-like games (e.g. “jeepform” and bibliodrama) may also utilize game masters in overtly directorial positions (see e.g. Wrigstad, “The Nuts and Bolts of Jeepform,” 2008, for examples).

20. Fatland, “Incentives as Tools of Larp Dramaturgy,” 2005.

17. See Morgan, *Images*.

conflicting facts that cannot be explained away as just differing opinions between characters.<sup>21</sup> To avoid this, experienced game masters tend to avoid blatant alterations (especially retroactive ones) during play.

Optimally, a large-scale larp should be able to cater for what Ashby calls *requisite variety*.<sup>22</sup> This is the ability of an organization to sufficiently know its environment and to adapt to its demands by having the necessary expertise available at all positions. Working against this, however, is the fact that larp play requires information gaps in order to be truly pleasurable, so as to create sufficient surprises and maintain the sense of novelty.<sup>23</sup> A significant part of any larpwright's craft is in juggling novelty, intended (potential or overt) stories and executive precision. As Wardrip-Fruin notes, this requires the balanced design of both information (data) and playable potential (processes), and the appropriate visibility of both to the participants.<sup>24</sup>

The more a larp is intended to stand on its own, without run-time changes during play, the more precisely it needs to be designed.<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that changes cannot be implemented later—for example, the massive fantasy larp *Dragonbane*<sup>26</sup> was created very much to sustain the sense of non-management, yet nevertheless required some intervention up to and including the dragon itself.<sup>27</sup> This can in some cases lead to micromanagement decisions by lead designers, who think that they need to control all the minutiae beforehand in order to accomplish their own visions for the larp.

In worst cases, it can also lead to plot and character design that seeks to remove all control of free play from the players, so as to create an intended, pre-scripted impact. This in most cases can ruin the game, as players need to be able to go against what is planned, and to engage in what Myers

calls “functional bad play,”<sup>28</sup> because the illusion of a lived experience—as opposed to a staged experience—is central to the activity of larping itself. Clever larpwrights have, however, found ways to keep the cake of control while allowing their players to simultaneously eat it.

Players need the sense of perceived freedom of action and ability to influence events, in order to truly enjoy game play.<sup>29</sup> Even a scenario on utter hopelessness requires some character leeway, and character boredom cannot mean long-term player boredom, or participant interest is lost.<sup>30</sup> What nevertheless empowers the game master in such situations is the fact that players perceive the larp as a pseudo-autonomous, temporary space that seeks social and systemic autopoiesis; i.e., it is a space that is supposedly isolated from the surrounding world, even as information in truth flows in from the outside. It seeks purely system-internal organization instead of external control.<sup>31</sup> Because of this, players come to seek procedural literacy: the ability to distinguish the processes governing the fictional world, and the way those differ from real life.<sup>32</sup> They appreciate the results of that literacy, which enable them to immerse into the game's fiction more thoroughly than they could with just the sense of goal-oriented, competitive engrossment.

The game master's dilemma is therefore in giving their players the freedom that they desire along with the meaningful, directed content that they also desire—two tasks that often seem to be in conflict with each other. Different play cultures and different individuals have turned to numerous solutions for this challenge, the basic templates of which will be outlined next.

### 3. Narrative Control

The first solution is to have a blatantly clear central plot that is run through the larp, with very little actual freedom for the players to influence it. In managerial terms, such a truly railroaded larp comes very close to the idea of scientific management introduced by

21. See Harviainen, *Systemic Perspectives*, 97, for a key example.

22. Ashby, *Design for a Brain*, 1952, and *An Introduction to Cybernetics*, 1960.

23. Harviainen, “Ritualistic Games, Boundary Control and Information Uncertainty,” 2012.

24. Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing: Digital Fictions, Computer Games, and Software Studies*, 2009.

25. Harviainen, “Designing Games for Testing.”

26. Multamäki, Timo, et al. *Dragonbane*. Live-action role-playing game. Älvdalen, Sweden, 2006.

27. Koljonen, “The Dragon was the Least of it: Dragonbane and Larp as Ephemera and Ruin,” 2008.

28. Myers, *Play Redux: The Form of Computer Games*, 2010.

29. Ibid.

30. See Virtanen, “Ground Zero: The First Day of a Nuclear Holocaust,” 2010, and Harviainen, “PehmoYdin: Sex, Death and Decadence,” 2010, for relevant design examples.

31. As per Maturana and Varela, *Autopoiesis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living*, 1980.

32. See Bogost, *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*, 2007.



Frederick Taylor.<sup>33</sup> It is the idea that organizations should be run like precise machines, implementing the will of the manager or, in this case, game master. It can be compared to wanting to effectively make a novel or movie script out of the larp. What makes railroading, in my view, very Taylorist is that it is a very heavy-handed approach, the ensuring of which often requires micromanagement of gameplay tasks. Organizational theory found early on that under autocratic leadership, people work harder than they do with less rigid systems of control, but only so long as the supervisor is personally present.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, to accomplish a reliable railroading is usually not even possible without run-time game mastering and a suitably small number of players who can be directly controlled whenever necessary.<sup>35</sup> Games being voluntary activities, and enjoyable because of the unnecessary obstacles in them,<sup>36</sup> larpers rarely like such an approach, so the organizers need to give them some leeway.

Too much creative freedom, however, leads players to create something that may run contrary to the designers' intentions. This is especially problematic in larps with an educational goal, because those need directed paths to create the intended learning outcomes.<sup>37</sup> It however also applies to many other larps. Aksel Westlund recommends solving this by making sure that while designing a larp, its creators ascertain that all character goals reflect the main narratives, thus leading to a sufficiently guided story while still allowing players to follow their characters' personalities and desires.<sup>38</sup> Many massive larps, especially in countries like Germany and the United Kingdom, simply opt to have the players create their own characters and subplots, while applying rather railroaded, game master run main plots on top of those.<sup>39</sup>

Other designers, such as Eirik Fatland, suggest the use of Fates.<sup>40</sup> They are mandatory game

elements or events, in between of which the players have freedom to act. A Fate can for example be "When you see a man with a red shirt, you will go shake his hand." When agreed upon in advance by all participants, this networked process can lead to very strong narrative experiences, but some players may feel that such externally imposed rules impact negatively their play experience. Following a Fate can furthermore sometimes seem very inappropriate to players, if preceding game events have not sufficiently led them to that Fate.<sup>41</sup> In managerial terms, this approach functions like a balanced scorecard:<sup>42</sup> while the intended story arcs function as the game-externally set long-term strategic goals of the designer, Fates are the milestones set along the way, both marking and facilitating progress towards the desired direction.<sup>43</sup> A similar process can be seen in corporate-style larps, the owners of which use an episodic system to keep their product feasible in the market. We now turn to those, to see how a manager reduces the risk of his or her game being turned obsolete and non-profitable.

### ***Corporate Larp Case: Knight Realms***

Certain larps are actually organized like corporations, because that is exactly what they are. They do not necessarily follow traditional corporate structures, however. For example, *Knight Realms*, as described by Stark, resembles a feudal system centered upon its owner rather than a modern commercial company.<sup>44</sup> Power flows downwards from game owner to trusted lieutenants and assistants, from whom it is then distributed to more creatively restricted players. The owner's power is like that of a king, in that it is very hard to dispute, and other positions of power can be distributed through criteria other than proficiency, should the owner choose to. (Note that many family-owned corporations can be feudal in a similar manner, so this is not at all uncommon). As a company, *Knight Realms* sells a product: a larp that caters to its players' desires for adventure and character-power

41. See Harviainen, "Testing Larp Theories and Methods: Results of Year Two," 2006, for an example.

42. See e.g. Kaplan and Norton, "Using the Balanced Scorecard as a Strategic Management System," 1996.

43. Note that unless the larp has an allotelic, external (e.g. educational) purpose, these externally set goals are still completely game-internal (i.e., autotelic to the system).

44. Stark, *Leaving Mundania* and "We Hold these Rules to be Self-Evident: Larp as Metaphor for American Identity," 2012.

33. Taylor, *Principles of Scientific Management*, 1911.

34. Lippitt and White, "The 'Social Climate' of Children's Groups," 1943.

35. See Lancaster, *Warlocks*.

36. Suits, *The Grasshopper: Games, Life and Utopia*, 1978.

37. Hsu, "Role-Event Gaming Simulation in Management Education: A Conceptual Framework and Review," 1989, and Henriksen, *Games and Creativity Learning*, 2006.

38. Westlund, "The Storyteller's Manifesto," 2004.

39. See e.g. Balzer, *Live Action Role Playing. Die Entwicklung realer Kompetenzen in virtuellen Welten*, 2009.

40. Fatland, "Incentives."

advancement, while at the end of each gaming event making sure that enough of the status quo stays intact so that the product remains viable for future sales.<sup>45</sup> To do so, the owner uses narrative control that prevents the introduction of plot lines that would harm the product, and game mechanics that ensure as many people as possible are able to participate and play almost whatever they want.

Because the owners of such larps have to make serious investments for the game, handle insurances, game systems, risks of litigation and so forth, they have a high interest in making sure the system runs as they want. That the venture is expected to also be profitable emphasizes the sense of *ownership* rather than *authorship*. Creative and organizational power is shared, in a feudal structure, so that while others are able to contribute, ultimate control always rests in the hands of the owner.<sup>46</sup> As the larp depicts feudal fantasy, this system of control is, in a way, very appropriate for the game content.

In Harviainen's terms, the owner of *Knight Realms* is thus exercising his game mastering power on all three levels.<sup>47</sup> He is also acting, if necessary, as a directive information source, i.e., a person with the supreme power to re-define any aspect of the larp, should the situation warrant it. This is an obvious exercise of managerial power, based on formal authority (i.e., ownership); resource and information control; the use of organizational structure; rules; and so forth.<sup>48</sup> In addition, it also illustrates power based on existing power; if one does not like the product, the communally supported response is to leave the game, not to contest its owner/prime authority.

In accordance with many corporations and other hierarchical organizations, larps of this type also rely on a larger power structure, whether feudal or other. Out-of-game services rendered to a game/corporation may, for example, be rewarded with in-game status or titles, mixing the outside reality and the game fiction to some extent.<sup>49</sup> This system is also used by re-enactment societies.<sup>50</sup> Players can also purchase faster character-power advancement by paying a higher attendance fee.<sup>51</sup>

#### 4. Larps, rules, and dialectic charisma

Interestingly, it appears that *Knight Realms* and its like also exemplify another facet of managerial styles: players may be drawn in by not just the product, but also the personality of the owner. As Stark notes, "if he is a dictator whose word is law within the universe of the game, he's a benevolent one who cares deeply for the well-being of his staff and players."<sup>52</sup> Therefore, the owner also holds charismatic dominion over the community that attends the larps, being perceived as a likeable, polite, and player equality-seeking leader, even if he has at times faults.<sup>53</sup>

The fog of larp and the player-needed leeway make total control impossible in a larp. Yet a larp organizer in most cases needs to preserve his or her authority so that the participants can rely on it. The players must perceive the game master as a person in the know, someone with a mastery of the material, i.e., as a cognitive authority on the game-situation.<sup>54</sup> If a game-system leader is seen as not being able to handle the game, authority vanishes quickly.<sup>55</sup>

The most popular way of achieving an illusion of control in a larp—at least outside the Nordic countries—is the use of game rules as a tool of arbitration and control. Such rules can be either formal, tacit, or a combination of both.<sup>56</sup> This goes to a far deeper level than the conventions, or even laws, governing workplace environments. In a game, the game master created rules can also function as the natural laws of the game-space, defining the absolute limits of what can be done within the fiction. If a player breaks any such rules, he is effectively cheating.<sup>57</sup> In a larp that uses very minimalist rules, systemic game master control is much weaker and the designer often has to transmit his vision to the players in advance through verbal suggestions or orders.

The illusion of control is to a large extent dependent upon two factors. The first of these is

52. Stark, *Leaving Mundania*, 65.

53. On charismatic domination as a phenomenon, see Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, 1947.

54. Wilson, *Second-Hand Knowledge: An Inquiry into Cognitive Authority*, 1983.

55. Lisk, Kaplancali and Riggio, "Leadership in Multiplayer Online Gaming Environments," 2012.

56. Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing," 2008.

57. On the impact of rules on role-playing experiences, see Bergström, *Playing for Togetherness: Designing for Interaction Rituals through Gaming*, 2012.

45. Stark, "We Hold."

46. Stark, *Leaving Mundania*, Ch. 4.

47. Harviainen, "Live-Action, Role-Playing."

48. As per Morgan, *Images*, 167.

49. Stark, *Leaving Mundania*.

50. Stallone, "Medieval Re-enactments," 2007.

51. Stark, "We Hold."



authorship or ownership of the larp as intellectual property and/or vision. The second is attributed charisma. This is different from actual personal charisma, without which it is still possible to be an effective leader.<sup>58</sup> Personal charisma does contribute to attributed charisma as well, but is not crucial for it. Charismatic leadership creates a sense of collective efficacy in participants, making them more sure that their group can complete its tasks well.<sup>59</sup> In a process with a clear leading figure, people may also translate project success—or even expectations of success—to perceived charisma.<sup>60</sup> It is recognized mostly when people are pleased with the results of that attributed charisma.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, a successful and enjoyed larp experience translates into further charisma and authority to the game organizer. Repeated success in an activity keeps building charisma.<sup>62</sup> If the players also have experienced during play strong bleed—emotional leakage between player and character<sup>63</sup>—that charisma is further strengthened.

It is up to each organizer whether the cycle of increasing attributed charisma leads to further success, harmful ego inflation, or both. With the increase come such chances and risks, because charismatic leadership feeds senses of both empowerment and dependency to the other participants.<sup>64</sup> A larp experienced as “good,” “fun,” and/or “very interesting” will bring players back for a sequel even without charisma—for the promise of similar content, the chance to play with the same people again, and so forth. At the same time, it also adds to the dialectic charisma of the

organizer, making it more likely that players would, for example, come to a completely new larp created by the same person.

As observed by Shamir and Howell, while often associated with “strong” crisis situations, charismatic leadership is actually more likely to arise in “weak” situations that contain performance measurement uncertainty.<sup>65</sup> The inevitably somewhat imbalanced multiplayer nature of a corporate larp exemplifies this: even as the owner may have also extrinsic rewarding tools available, he is unable to apply those to all concerned. Were they applied to all, they would have no value. Shamir and Howell explain:

[C]harismatic leadership is more likely to emerge in “weak” situations where performance goals cannot be easily specified and measured, and where leaders cannot link extrinsic rewards to individual performance. In such weak situations, followers’ self-concepts, values, and identities can be more readily appealed to and engaged. Furthermore, in the absence of clear extrinsic justifications for behavior, followers are more likely to look for self-related justifications for their efforts . . . and thus become more prone to the influence of charismatic leadership.<sup>66</sup>

Therefore, by buying into the charismatic leadership of the larp’s owner, the players are able to navigate the variances in extrinsic rewards that affect gameplay. The episodic nature of a corporate larp supports this, as players can also rely on the continuity to stay as it is, because the game exists in a non-dynamic continuity and has no need to adapt to outside pressures. In a similar vein, Shamir and Howell also note that charismatic leadership is especially likely to “emerge and be effective when the tasks of organizational members are challenging and complex, and require individual and group initiative, responsibility, creativity and intense effort”<sup>67</sup>—another statement that well fits the system of larps, both corporate and other.

It is however notable that the same traits that make such game masters respected in one community are not ones that would necessarily garner respect and charismatic authority in another—for example, while some larpers may be accepting

58. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, 2010.

59. Kark et al., “The Two Faces of Transformational Leadership: Empowerment and Dependency,” 2003.

60. House et al., “Personality and Charisma in the U.S. Presidency: A Psychological Theory of Leader Effectiveness,” 1991. On charisma as dialectic and relationship-based, rather than just personal or situational, see Beyer, “Taming and promoting charisma to change organizations,” 1999.

61. Bass, “Does the Transactional-Transformational Leadership.”

62. Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*.

63. See White, Harviainen and Boss, “Role-Playing Communities, Cultures of Play, and the Discourse of Immersion,” 2012.

64. Kark et al., “The Two Faces.”

65. Shamir and Howell, “Organizational and Contextual Influences on the Emergence and Effectiveness of Charismatic Leadership,” 1999.

66. Shamir and Howell, “Organizational and Contextual Influences,” 263.

67. Ibid.

and even welcoming of an ultra-conservative game master who creates potential equality by way of game mechanics, certain others would not be, due to worldview differences, crucial to them. While many of those opt for adhocracies, some groups have chosen something much closer to anarchy, even as they may occasionally appoint a temporary leader or manager to a project.

### **Anarchist Larp Case: Collective Design**

Originating from Norway, collective larp design seeks to do away with game master power. Such larps are designed by all participants in advance, so that the sole authority needed is that of someone first suggesting the game concept.<sup>68</sup> People not always being able and willing to contribute equally, some power imbalance is inevitable, and players may include some material in what they produce that gives some people more to play with than others, but the main goal is a flat power structure with as much equality as possible.<sup>69</sup>

For example, *Enhetsfront* (2005)<sup>70</sup>—appropriate enough for contrast with *Knight Realms*—dealt, for five days and 15 players, with life in a spiritually waning socialist commune in 1978. A sequel to an earlier larp in which the collective had still been in an uplifting stage, it carried the sense of fading idealism. Each player participated in the design, even as some were the initiators of the process, others just part-time players, and continuity issues influenced the whole process. However, it also translated communal design into more collective play, with each participant contributing according to ability.<sup>71</sup>

To anyone versed in organizational theories, this naturally brings to mind Karl Marx and others he has inspired. This is an unfounded association, as the concept arose in a Nordic welfare state, as a dialectic reaction to auterian and authoritarian larpwright-focused structures. The situation is more complex, however.

68. Variations of this also exist: for example, several Danish larps, such as *System Danmarc* (see Munthe-Kaas, “System Danmarc: Political Action Larp,” 2010), have used a lateral power structure, but have not involved all participants in the design, and have also had some people designated to be in charge of certain tasks—up to and including a formal executive position.

69. Svanevik, “The Collective’s Little Red Book”, 2005.

70. Munch-Møller, Marthe G., et al. *Enhetsfront*. Live-action role-playing game. Oslo, Norway, 2005.

71. Munch-Møller and Westlund, “Enhetsfront: A Commune for Disillusioned Idealists,” 2010.

I would argue that what collective larp actually seeks to do is achieve what management science calls a “holographic system,” where the whole of the structure is encoded in each of its parts, at least to a sufficient extent.<sup>72</sup> A collective larp allows each participant to contribute what they want to see in that structure, in an open manner, and thus the game is less likely to suffer from imbalances or a lack of information that requires a game master to solve it. As co-authors, the players all have the permission to fix problems. The problem with this type of anarchistic approach is the same as its advantage: because the larp lacks a definitive authority, it also lacks a directive source<sup>73</sup> who is able to settle disputes, define undeniable in-game truths, and so forth.<sup>74</sup> A collectively designed larp therefore has to create its control systems, rules, and narratives beforehand, because there is no authority available during play.

Likewise, a collective management system is very adaptive in catering for preference variety, but not necessarily to requisite variety, the principle of which states that a system must be as diverse as the environment with which it is trying to deal.<sup>75</sup> In practical terms, this means that if the game-as-system lacks the ability to deal with challenges internal and especially external to play, the game experience is severely disturbed, even disrupted. In an authority-centric system like *Knight Realms*, requisite variety can be ascertained by someone with oversight rights much more easily than in an adhocracy or anarchy organizing on its own terms.<sup>76</sup>

As experiments show, in a collective larp, people may actually avoid being responsible for actions that would drastically alter the game for others.<sup>77</sup> Likewise, a collectively created, (probably) single-run game leaves little room for enjoyable experimentation or what Myers calls “functional bad play”—the exploration of game-systems in a manner

72. See Morgan, *Images*, 73.

73. As per Harviainen, “Live-Action, Role-Playing.”

74. Turning this problem into an advantage is however also possible—for example, a prison or asylum larp can transform the palpable lack of an available game master into a part of the experience (see Raasted, ed. *The Book of Kapo: Documenting a Larp Project about Dehumanization and Life in Camps*, 2012, for an example).

75. Morgan, *Images*, 41.

76. See e.g. Kanter, *The Change Masters: Innovation for Productivity in the American Corporation*, 1983.

77. Harviainen, “Testing.”



that is against the designer's intent.<sup>78</sup> Collective responsibility moves the design towards a holistic system where individuals have responsibilities, but the totality is more important than individual parts. Optimally, in a collective design, the participants become a self-organizing work group able to think of the whole while effectively dividing tasks.<sup>79</sup> At worst, it is an unintended chaotic system (the organizer network), creating another intendedly chaotic system (the larp), with a very messy result that would not be acceptable in a fiscally responsible environment.

Another technique for achieving an illusion of non-control is that the game masters themselves take part of the play as non-player or even player-characters. This, on one hand, makes them available within the fiction and less problematic as influencers of policy, but again this creates new issues. Central to these are questions of equality—if the game master plays a very powerful character, he influences play from within it and, once again, becomes a blatant manager.<sup>80</sup> In the worst case, the whole game is seen as (or really becomes) a power fantasy for that game master. At its best, however, influencing play from within enables the game master to act as a truly transformational leader, whose presence fine-tunes enhances the flow of narrative, smooths over information gaps and increases inter-immersion—the sense of the game feeling “real”<sup>81</sup>—for all involved.<sup>82</sup>

## 5. Discussion

As Wardrip-Fruin notes on digital games, in larp too the game's designers author both data and processes.<sup>83</sup> The physical, chaotic, and fog-restricted nature of the play and the information-environmental limitations, however, mean that the game designer has far less control over his creation than does the writer of a digital game algorithm.<sup>84</sup> Unlike Nephew claims,<sup>85</sup> an author's vision does not necessarily carry into play.<sup>86</sup> Because of this, game masters shift at a certain point from designer techniques to human resource management—they just rarely realize it on those terms, instinctively managing by copied techniques, pick-and-mix, and a lot of black box (or wishful) thinking.

This is not as problematic as it may sound; in a hobby, being perceived as a fellow amateur may provide more attributed charisma and group acceptance than any formal managerial position (due to requiring by nature some distance) could. This can well translate into efficiency. On the other hand, the lack of a formal management position may sometimes lead disgruntled participants to behind the scenes critique and the poisoning of proverbial wells: if the organizer lacks what they see as sufficient credentials, he is seen as an amateurish poseur deserving of derision. Thus, a game master who loses a game-content or rules related argument with a player risks losing his attributed charisma and even perceived expertise—maybe even his sense of content ownership.

Experienced game masters are therefore often able to rely on a multitude of tools to maintain control over their creations. For example, charismatic domination, rule-expertise, ownership and narrative enhancement can go hand in hand without problems—as long as the person owning things is present and active.<sup>87</sup> In a functional feudal system, subordinates are able to arbitrate most disputes, provide narrative control, and so forth. If, however, the sole (or key) game master is absent, the whole process can crash or grind to a halt, if a sufficiently hard challenge or dispute emerges. This, when repeated, causes a significant shift in authority and lessens the likelihood of players returning to play. Therefore the

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78. Myers, *Play Redux*.

79. See Morgan, *Images*, 103.

80. As observed by Prax (“Leadership Style in World of Warcraft Raid Guilds,” 2010) in a digital context, simultaneously managing in-game situations and social player networks requires switching between transactional and transformational leadership techniques according to situation, a demand that may have adverse consequences for group cohesion.

81. Pohjola, “Autonomous Identities: Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities,” 2004.

82. A hidden-game-masters experiment conducted by me and two colleagues (see Harviainen, “Nothing is True, Everything is Permissible: Using Deception as a Productive Tool,” 2005) showed that players are highly willing to accept plot railroading when it seemingly comes from within the game fiction, but at the same time, participants were highly reliant on having a visible, recognized game master to answer their questions and function as a final arbitrator.

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83. Wardrip-Fruin, *Expressive Processing*.

84. Harviainen, *Systemic Perspectives*.

85. Nephew, *Playing with Power: The Authorial Consequences of Roleplaying Games*, 2003.

86. See Harviainen, “Valokaari: The Magnificent Failure,” 2012, for an example.

87. See Stark, *Leaving Mundania*.

maintenance of perceived success-charisma is of high importance to a larp organizer's continual success, especially if scales of investment and game prices rise.

It appears that a lot of what game masters do as far as management is concerned comes down to what is known as management by intuition, which can also include the adaptation of management techniques they have seen or utilized in other contexts. Simon and March argue that organizations always have to act on incomplete information, as their decision-makers have both limited access and, even more influentially, limited information-processing abilities.<sup>88</sup> Game masters therefore act based on what they perceive as the best information available towards various purposes.<sup>89</sup> In Simon's terms, they settle for bounded rationality, i. e. "good enough."<sup>90</sup> Nevertheless, the works created by a number of larp designers and game masters attest to intuitive management not leading to severely imperfect creations.<sup>91</sup> It appears that in a role-playing context, management by intuition is not based on ignorance or limited information, but rather on knowing one's own creative framework and the players involved. Content ownership is partially shared with players by way of, for example, feudalism<sup>92</sup> or pre-game workshops.<sup>93</sup> It is, however, always retained within the final arbitration of the game master—unless the larp is, by omission or intent, designed as something that is left in the hands of the players instead of its game-master-manager.<sup>94</sup>

On a final note, it is necessary to observe that larps, like all organizations, exist in a flux of development. A feudal campaign may eventually

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88. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 1947; March and Simon, *Organizations*, 1958, Cyert and March; *A Behavioral Theory of the Firm*, 1963.

89. The results may be of course be based on a calculation of what is either best for the game continuity, the players or the game master(s)—I have sadly witnessed plenty of game masters (male and female) designing narratives, for example, in order to get themselves laid.

90. Simon, *Administrative Behavior*.

91. See e.g. Stenros and Montola, ed., *Nordic Larp*, and Pettersson, ed., *States of Play: Nordic Larp around the World*, 2012.

92. See e.g. Stark, *Leaving Mundania*.

93. See e.g. Bruun, "Pre-larp Workshops as Learning Situations," 2011.

94. For player-created influences on game content, see e.g. Saarinen, Lainema and Lähteenmäki, "Experiencing Virtual Team Membership," 2008.

become autocratic—or more democratic. A collective larp may effectively promote a leader no different from more hierarchically acknowledged executives, and so forth. Different structures can furthermore exist on different levels of a massive larp system. Just think of the *Mind's Eye Society*, the authorized Camarilla fan club: a local chapter may well rely on attributed charisma, collective content creation, and possibly also adhocracy, but an organization of that scale also requires a bureaucratic system to function efficiently. On the higher levels of bureaucracy, autocracy, feudalism and even scientific management principles tend to be much more prevalent. Otherwise, they would not be as efficient as they are.

## 6. Conclusions

Given both an impetus and a sense of necessity, larp game masters engage in managerial behavior before, during, and even after play. They do so in order to ensure the best possible result for the game, to both the players and—as a result of enjoyable play—themselves. Whatever the style chosen, intuitively or by conscious, informed decision, larp management too reflects previously recognized styles of management. The presence of a fictional world and its borders causes seemingly small, but actually significant changes to the techniques that are used, as the game-master-as-manager has to find a way of influencing play in necessary ways and amounts without disturbing the fiction too much. For this purpose, they may divide power, enter play as characters, or write rules that carry their decisions into the play-space and the fiction. They do so always with the managerial goal of having sufficient control over the situation, in order to reach their own vision, while also granting the players enough leeway to believe they too have reached theirs. The next, necessary stage of this research would be to study practical applications of managerial and executive power in larps and their connections to group dynamics, using the rough typologies presented in this chapter as a starting point for experimentation as well as observation.

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# The Dynamic Life Cycle of Live Action Role-Play Communities

Diana J. Leonard and Grayson Arango

## Abstract

This chapter discusses the challenges that may emerge for live action role-play (larp) communities at each inflection point of the group life cycle. According to Tuckman, groups mature over time and move through four stages: forming, norming, storming, and performing (e.g., Tuckman 1965; Tuckman and Jensen 1977). The aim of the present chapter is to discuss the ways in which the development of real larp communities fit with Tuckman's theory and to highlight inconsistencies that may emerge, in particular due to the multiple layers that can comprise a role-playing experience (e.g., Fine 1983). Since each stage of the group life cycle is fraught with opportunities for member exit and group dissolution, we also argue that cultural practices of successful, long-standing larp communities have manifested to meet these challenges. For example, larp groups may begin a new session with a *listen-up* period in which players gather in a circle to discuss the rules and clarify any misconceptions before gameplay begins.

This activity mirrors the "restorative circle" that can occur before schoolyard play (Costello, Wachtel and Wachtel 2010), which likely promotes group maintenance factors such as informal leadership and procedural voice. We hope this work will have applied value for members of successful larp groups that experience "growing pains" as, for example, the group enters the storming stage characterized by unclear boundaries and fragile self-esteem of group members (Thompson and White 2010, 4). Along with the rules and activities described by role-play scholars (e.g., Montola 2008), this chapter draws on the practices common to a specific, anonymized larp group located in the United States. The scholarly foundation for this work is grounded in various disciplines, particularly industrial/organizational and social psychology, and role-playing studies.

## Keywords

larp, role-playing games, Tuckman, group life cycle, sociology, restorative circle

## 1. Introduction

Live action role-playing (larp) games may be viewed as the product of a group of players whose interactions with one another develop over a period of time, i.e., the lifespan of the larp community itself. Indeed, the interaction between the players is viewed as a defining feature of what it means to role-play.<sup>1</sup> In this chapter we seek to examine the changing nature of larp communities within a research framework that has been utilized by social psychologists and industrial-organizational psychologists alike: the four-stage model conceived of by group dynamics scholar Bruce W. Tuckman and commonly referred to as "Tuckman's Stages" or "Tuckman's Teamwork Theory."

### 1.1 Tuckman's Stages

Many theoretical models of the group life cycle suggest that after a group is founded (or emerges), it progresses through several life stages that reflect the social and emotional needs of its members. In 1965, Tuckman proposed a model of this process, which he developed by analyzing the results of small groups research up to that point. This model posits four principle stages of group life: *forming*, *norming*, *storming*, and *performing*.<sup>2</sup>

While *forming*, the primary concern of group members is trust: whether or not to trust each other and the group leader with whom they have a minimal connection. The second stage, *storming*, is as tumultuous as it sounds: group members are testing the rules and norms of the group and the legitimacy of its leadership. In the third stage, *norming*, the group builds a cohesive unit of mutual investment in the group's activities and goals, establishing norms that will ideally allow the group to thrive. This will lead to a *performing* stage in which the group can effectively accomplish the task for which it was created. However, the nature of these phases and the development of group life may depend on many

1. Jaakko Stenros and Henri Hakkarainen, "The Meilahti School: Thoughts on Role-Playing," in *As Larp Grows Up: Theory and Methods in Larp* eds. Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander (Copenhagen, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003), 56.

2. Bruce W. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin* 65, no. 6 (1965): 396-397.



factors, such as the composition of the group itself.<sup>3</sup>

Tuckman's original model stalls when it comes to clarifying the resolution of group life. This subject has been a controversial part of the model, perhaps because group life can end in various ways, both pleasant and unpleasant. In 1977, Tuckman and Jensen extended the four-stage model by adding an idyllic end stage, *adjourning*, which allows group members to emotionally process the significance of dismantling the group.<sup>4</sup> However, other scholars have argued that an inevitable progression towards this outcome is but one possibility.<sup>5</sup> One reason for this may be the external and internal changes that can cause groups to revert to previous stages and even to experience group dissolution.<sup>6</sup> In Section II, we will discuss the application of this extended model to larp communities, taking into account the various possible trajectories these groups likely experience.

We have chosen to emphasize Tuckman's stages in this review because it has provided a useful model for both theoretical development and practice for over four decades.<sup>7</sup> The predominance of this model in the organizational literature<sup>8</sup> suggests that it is the most common starting point from which group dynamics scholars seek to deepen or diverge. Its predominance in more applied contexts among education and team development professionals is attributed to the model's flexibility and ease of use.<sup>9</sup> Tuckman himself acknowledged that a primary reason for the model's popularity might have been the simple and iconic labels he coined

3. Bruce W. Tuckman, and Mary Anne C. Jensen, "Stages of Small-group Development Revisited," *Group and Organization Studies* 2, no. 4 (1977): 423.

4. Tuckman and Jensen, "Stages of Small-group Development Revisited," 426.

5. Connie J. G. Gersick, "Time and Transition in Work Teams: Toward a New Model of Group Development," *Academy of Management Journal* 31, no. 1 (1988): 12.

6. John F. McGrew, John G. Bilotta and Janet M. Deeney, "Software Team Formation and Decay: Extending the Standard Model for Small Groups," *Small Group Research* 30, no. 2 (1999): 211.

7. Denise A. Bonebright, "40 Years of Storming: A Historical Review of Tuckman's Model of Small Group Development," *Human Resource Development International* 13, no. 1 (2010): 111.

8. Diane L. Miller, "The Stages of Group Development: A Retrospective Study of Dynamic Team Processes," *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences* 20, no. 2 (2003): 122.

9. Bonebright, "40 Years of Storming," 118.

(*forming, norming, etc.*)<sup>10</sup> In this case, we feel that such accessibility is a virtue as we hope the present analysis will appeal to non-academics—larp organizers in particular—as well as academics from other disciplines.

## 1.2 Analysis Framework

We seek to examine the goodness of fit between the four-stage model and the actual development of larp communities. In this initial work, we draw primarily on (1) the rules and activities described by role-play scholars and (2) the 10-year development of a specific, anonymized larp community located in the United States.

The example larp is a role-play heavy game that also incorporates "cinematic" combat with foam weaponry. As players in a cooperative larp game, community members are subject to explicit rules banning excessive player-versus-player behavior. The ostensible main goal of player-characters is to fight injustice and devastation in the fictional world they inhabit. They do so literally through staged combat and military strategy, but also indirectly via political influence and resource distribution. The larp group has staged over 50 official game events, which include a mix of camping and tabletop games.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, the activities and history of this larp community will be used to exemplify and inform the application of Tuckman's model to larps. One of the authors has been a member of this particular larp community since 2010, so we will utilize non-formal observations made during this three-year period. These observations are supplemented with online forum posts and brief interviews that were collected for this theoretical piece.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this chapter is intended as a jumping off point for future research on the development of larp groups rather than a systematic analysis.

Although our discussion focuses on the development of a larp community as a whole,

10. Bruce W. Tuckman, "Citation Classic: Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Current Concerns* no. 34 (1984): 14.

11. This scholarly work has been deemed exempt by the Institutional Review Board of Lewis and Clark College, the college with which the authors are affiliated and where this work was carried out. As such, no formal consent or debriefing was required in order to obtain and publish the quotes and online posts presented in this chapter. However, the forerunners and creator of the anonymized larp group have read and consented to the material presented here. Please feel free to contact the board with any questions you may have regarding this exempt status. [http://www.lclark.edu/committees/human\\_subjects\\_research/](http://www.lclark.edu/committees/human_subjects_research/)

subgroups can emerge when two or more individuals link up within the larger player base. These links can be a source of conflict, but they can also be the means by which the group organizes and carries out its key functions.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Susan Wheelan characterizes such subgroup bonds as an indicator of group health.<sup>13</sup> Subgroups are extremely likely in larp groups, in which interpersonal bonds can emerge on both the player and character level. Thus, we include this important feature of group life in our analysis while maintaining a primary focus on larp groups as a whole.

## 2. Application to Larp Groups

In his initial studies, Tuckman used the frameworks of three primary group settings to analyze group dynamics. Tuckman categorized and separated the groups based upon their group composition, task, goal, and duration of group life.<sup>14</sup> The three primary groups focused upon by Tuckman were therapy groups; human relations (HR) training groups; and natural and laboratory task groups. These groups possess a combination of tasks and goals at the group and personal level. We propose that larp group dynamics are best summarized as an overlap of qualities across Tuckman's three initial groups.

Larp communities share qualities with Tuckman's three initial groups in relation to the nature of their tasks and goals, though larping groups are distinguishable from Tuckman's primary groups due to their group composition. For instance, the group therapy setting consists of both group and personal goals/tasks. At the personal level, the individual has the personal goal of progress and betterment. On an interpersonal level, the individual has the group goal of assisting others in the accomplishment of their personal goal.<sup>15</sup> Like the therapy setting, the larp community may satisfy a combination of group and personal goals. For instance, players may work as a team toward a final goal that is accomplished as a group. Meanwhile, players are also driven to

advance their characters' personal plot and gain experience. Additionally, the growth of the group is often facilitated and shaped by a GM (game master), much like the therapy group's progress is facilitated by a mental health professional.

Human Resources training groups focus on an interpersonal goal, as the group seeks to enhance communication and increase productivity.<sup>16</sup> Similar interpersonal goals are evident in larping. In-game tasks may encourage cooperation, communication, and group cohesion among players, although some game tasks can be competitive as well. Additionally, social interaction outside of the game is facilitated by interactions within the game. Successful completion of cooperative game tasks likely enhances interpersonal relationships among players within the game and outside of it, creating a stronger larp community overall.

Tuckman paired natural-group settings and laboratory-task group settings due to their similar nature and the similar treatment they had received in prior research.<sup>17</sup> Natural-groups come into being outside of researchers' control and orient themselves around a social or professional function, such as neighborhood committees. These groups are tasked with a specific job or function and are not inherently associated with personal/interpersonal goals like Tuckman's other groups.<sup>18</sup> The lab-task group is brought together by the researcher and is directed towards group tasks/goals by the researcher. LARP communities can resemble lab-task groups, in that a GM may gather together the players to form the group like in a lab-task group, although the community may arise naturally. Finally, the maintenance and regulation of the game by members of the larp community—both within and outside of the game itself—resembles the elective activities present in natural-group settings.

The most striking difference between larp groups and the group types assessed by Tuckman is the larp community's apparent fusion of qualities from Tuckman's three initial groups. However, with this new combination of traits from the three groups, some differences also emerge. Many larp communities do not function around a guaranteed termination or group dissolution, as both the therapy groups and human relations training groups tend to do.<sup>19</sup> Also, in

12. Susan A. Wheelan, *Group Processes: a Developmental Perspective*. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994), 93.

13. Susan A. Wheelan, *Creating Effective Teams: A Guide for Members and Leaders*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 1999), 35.

14. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," 384.

15. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," 385.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

19. Tuckman and Jensen, "Stages of Small-group Development Revisited," 425.



forming around both an interpersonal goal and tasks, larp communities are dissimilar to the work-oriented nature of natural groups. Given the differences between all of these groups, there is the question of whether or not Tuckman's models can be applied across groups in spite of demonstrated dissimilarity (cite Bonebright 2010) from Tuckm can be applied across groups in spite of its presumed flexibility.<sup>20</sup>

With these distinctions and commonalities between larp communities and Tuckman's initial group settings in mind, the further exploration of the elements of larp within this chapter will serve to more realistically assess the fit of larp group dynamics with the four-stage model established by Tuckman.

## 2.1 Forming

Tuckman characterized the beginning of group life as a *forming* stage in which participants decide whether to invest their trust in the group. Whereas his model was primarily developed in the context of groups of strangers—e.g., therapy groups—who must orient to an entirely new interpersonal setting,<sup>21</sup> some larps spin off from other communities,<sup>22</sup> suggesting the possibility for deviation from Tuckman's model. Indeed, the example larp community was formed by a group of friends, all of whom knew each other and had role-played together before. Their trust in each other should have been at a higher level than a stranger group; it is likely that the first members would have felt less need to test the boundaries of their interpersonal relationships than Tuckman's model predicts. However, as with other groups that are formed by people who have met previously, such larp groups still need to negotiate trust and relationships in the new and unfamiliar interpersonal context.<sup>23</sup> In addition, larpers presumably must do so while navigating a new game setting and rule system.

In addition, dependence on the leader is developed during *forming*.<sup>24</sup> In the example larp, the

game creator brought back ideas from role-playing out of state, wrote the game manual, and shared it with his friends. By contrast to this example, in his essay in *Talk Larp: Provocative Writings from KP2011* Aaron Vanek has critiqued the "cult of personality" origins of many American larps for promoting insularity and fragility in their games. In either case, in larps in which there is a creator or forerunner, he or she is likely to achieve a great deal of status and scrutiny during *forming*, which should fade over time as the group begins to derive authority and direction more democratically.<sup>25</sup> This transition is considered to be a key source of conflict in the next phase—*storming*—and becomes further established during group *norming*.

## 2.2 Storming

During this stage of high intragroup conflict, group members are trying to exert their own individuality in the face of an increasingly imposing group structure. The intensity of this conflict differs by group type because different groups impose greater demands on their members. In particular, in therapy groups for which self-discovery, exposure, and change are primary group tasks, immersion into group life can be emotionally demanding. Thus, for therapy groups and those larps that share task features with them, the storming stage might be uniquely challenging.<sup>26</sup>

Are some larp groups likely to experience more high conflict *storming* than others? In an essay in last year's *Wyrd Con Companion Book* Lizzie Stark claimed that emotional intensity is more explicitly the focus of Nordic larps, whereas escapism and entertainment are the focus of their American counterparts. Since regional distinctions may not be as useful as viewing the content of larp traditions,<sup>27</sup> we may predict that *storming* will be characterized by more conflict for communities adopting any style of play in which the player submits more of the self to the group and takes greater emotional risks. However, this will also likely differ by the goals and needs of the individual.

Many members of the example larp community profess to enjoy plots that are emotionally

20. Bonebright, "40 Years of Storming," 115.

21. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," 395.

22. Aaron Vanek, "The Non-United Larp States of America," in *Talk Larp: Provocative Writings from KP2011* [http://rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks/talk\\_larp\\_web.pdf](http://rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks/talk_larp_web.pdf) ed. Claus Raasted (Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2011), 128.

23. Wheelan, *Group Processes*, 15.

24. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," 396.

25. Wheelan, *Creating Effective Teams*, 24-25.

26. Kate Cassidy, "Tuckman Revisited: Proposing a New Model of Group Development for Practitioners," *Journal of Experiential Education* 29, no. 3: (2007): 416.

27. Jaakko Stenros, "What Does Nordic Larp Mean?" *Nordic Larp Talks Oslo 2013*, April 17, 2013. <http://nordiclarptalks.org/>

challenging. For example, in a blog entry on the topic of character death, one player described her perspective on higher stakes role-play: “Larp is all about story, which means conflict and drama and tension.” In particular, this player values the emotional experience of fear of loss: “Part of what creates that conflict is having something at risk. Maybe it’s your PC’s life, or maybe it’s something they value almost as importantly (the lives of loved ones, their honor, etc). Fearing the loss of that provides motivation, depth, character growth and story.” Thus, the player seeks to challenge herself emotionally for the purpose of storytelling. Variety exists in the motives of players, however, and this is exemplified by the use of the term “nut-pinch” in the example community. Players may use this term to complain about their character being placed in tough situations by the GM, but they also often use it to express excitement about a great storytelling opportunity.

Given the diverse motives of players in the example larp, it seems likely that some group members are less comfortable than others with the emotional storytelling style of their particular larp community, and will thus have a rougher transition through *storming* than their peers. Such emotional agenda incongruity should also emerge in communities that engage in a more intense style of larp, as they will likely have members who vary in orientation toward emotional role-play. It may be fruitful to explore whether players are responding to objective or subjective emotional risks in their role-playing experiences. For example, Sarah Lynne Bowman’s larp ethnography suggests that some players have experienced self-diagnosed post-game depression following in-game psychological triggers.<sup>28</sup>

Features of game play relevant to a player’s emotional agenda may be aligned with Bowman’s conception of *play culture*, which includes overall theme and player boundaries. On the other hand, conflicts can also arise over mismatched *creative agendas* such that a player’s goals for game play are out of sync with other players or the game as a whole.<sup>29</sup> Wheelan borrows terminology from the interpersonal research literature to describe these types of discussions as *principled conflicts*, which she proposes erupt in the second stage of group life due to disagreement on basic values, ideas, and goals.<sup>30</sup>

28. Sarah Lynne Bowman, “**Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities: An Exploratory Qualitative Study**” *International Journal of Role-Playing* 4 (2013): 9.

29. Bowman, “Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities,” 6-7.

30. Wheelan, *Group Processes*, 71.

However, conflicts over emotional or creative agendas should not be seen as solely detrimental to group life. Indeed, it is through such negotiation of shared vision for the group that cohesion may be said to develop out of this tumultuous stage.<sup>31</sup>

Another way in which apparent conflict can be counter-intuitively positive is through the development of subgroups. On the surface, subgroups appear to detract from overall group stability and foreshadow group splintering (see Section 2.5). According to Wheelan, they are particularly likely to emerge during a stage she calls counterdependency and fight—her interpretation of the *storming* phase—in which coalitions challenge leadership and group norms. However, as discussed, resolving challenges like these can lead to an improved group dynamic. Wheelan defines subgroups not by conflict but rather by the existence of intra-network links among group members, a key component of cohesion.<sup>32</sup>

Similar to Wheelan’s image of subgroup utility, Bowman’s ethnography suggests that out-of-character socialization may be necessary for the health of larp groups, particularly when in-character tension is high.<sup>33</sup> Such socialization likely involves social subgroups meeting outside of regular game events. Further, some larp coordinators may encourage in-character factions as a means to efficiently package and distribute personal plot to many characters at once. The example larp has several leadership trees through which this occurs, often in a “trickle-down” fashion from group leaders. Thus, although Tuckman’s model does not examine the emergence and influence of subgroups in his discussion of group development, they are likely to play an important role in larp groups both within and outside of game events.

## 2.3 Norming

In the norming stage, Neuman and Wright argue that group members must freely contribute, promote open communication, and develop shared mental models for accomplishing group tasks.<sup>34</sup> Although these psychologists primarily studied impersonal

31. Wheelan, *Group Processes*, 81.

32. Wheelan, *Group Processes*, 77-80.

33. Bowman, “Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities,” 5.

34. George A. Neuman and Julie Wright, “Team Effectiveness: Beyond Skills and Cognitive Ability,” *Journal of Applied Psychology* 84, no. 3 (1999): 379.



groups—i.e., HR work teams—it seems likely that for larp communities, developing shared mental models of the game world and rules are each serious undertakings. This is apparent in the many threads on the rules/system online forum of the example larp.

Over 140 different conversations have taken place on the larp group's online forums. These conversations advertise rule changes and clarification, but also discuss more subjective qualities of game play. Example topics include the number of charms a player can use vs. carry, the application of limits on hits-per-second to dual-wield fighting, and confusion over the existence and qualities of an "afterlife" within the collective narrative. Such discussions may constitute *communal conflict*, in which group members share basic values, but still need to iron out the specifics of how those values should be enacted. According to Wheelan, the shift to these conflicts from principled ones reflects the cohesion and cooperation of the third stage of development. Although she calls this stage *trust and structure* and Tuckman calls it *norming*, both agree that a primary emphasis of this stage is on refining and consensualizing group norms.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to refining group norms, the third stage is also about establishing the roles and informal leadership dynamics of the group. We feel that the key to understanding how power crystalized over time in the example larp also lies in the group's forum posts. For example, conversations about game play may have been more frequently initiated by formal leaders prior to the resolution of *norming*, as in a 2009 post by the game creator in which he opposed a new tendency toward creating "shady" characters (i.e., non-heroes). However, in a contrasting post in 2010 an at-large player initiated the discussion of over-populated encounters at camping events (aka "player trains").

Although systematic empirical inquiry is needed to verify this relationship, these anecdotes do underscore objective changes in the group: over time the creator receded from day-to-day operations and new leadership arose from the player base, with community members taking on the role of game staff. These power shifts appear to be vital milestones for larps, as with other groups.

It is important to note that Montola has clarified that the distribution of such exogenous power in a player base is distinct from the power given to the player by game rules (i.e., endogenous power) and that which is given to characters vis-à-vis their roles in the narrative (i.e., diegetic power). Although these other types of power are subordinate to exogenous

forms,<sup>36</sup> they still carry weight in the larp community and are thus group dynamics that may need to be managed toward resolving the *norming* stage.

## 2.4 Performing versus De-norming

According to Tuckman, once a group has negotiated the challenges of *norming* they will enter a "final" stage called *performing*, in which group cohesion is deployed toward the effective accomplishment of group activities.<sup>37</sup> Empathy, trust, and cohesion are at an all-time high in this stage and the group leader best serves the community by playing a limited supportive role.<sup>38</sup> However, McGrew and colleagues argue that groups may naturally decay away from this ideal and back into the *norming* stage, which requires group members to continually reinforce norms in order for the group to remain healthy and functional. As McGrew et al. suggest, "In many ways, the performing stage is a knife edge or saddle point, not a point of static equilibrium."<sup>39</sup> This statement may be particularly true for larp groups.

Why might *performing* be a fleeting stage for larp communities? McGrew and colleagues observed the decay of software teams after product deployment and concluded that changes in group priorities and project scope can often facilitate critical change. Because role-play involves continuous reinterpretation and renegotiation of the game world,<sup>40</sup> many larp communities may be highly susceptible to such a drift backwards in the group life cycle.

McGrew and colleagues noted that this drift, called *de-norming*, can also be precipitated by changes in the team's composition and size. The example larp group is particularly vulnerable to this instability due to two features: (1) the lack of a cap on the number of players in the community (i.e., *player cap*); and (2) the imposed retirement of characters at a certain experience level.

The example group has grown from a steady .....

36. Markus Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing: The Social Framework of Role-Playing Process" *International Journal of Role-Playing* 1, (2009): 29.

37. Tuckman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," 396.

38. Pam Thompson and Samantha White, "Play and Positive Group Dynamics," *Reclaiming Children and Youth* 19, no. 3 (2010): 56.

39. McGrew et al., "Software Team Formation and Decay," 231.

40. Montola, "The Invisible Rules of Role-Playing," 23.

35. Wheelan, *Group Processes*, 99.

base of 10 players in 2004 to 70-80 active community members according to the larp website on April 2013. Rather than gradual development implied by Tuckman's model, this larp group's progress can be described as a punctuated equilibrium like that modeled by Gersick, in which the stability of the group is disrupted by revolutionary events<sup>41</sup>—often precipitated by the influx of new players. Per McGrew and colleagues, the entry of new individuals can be a key inflection point in the group's life history that can cause long-term members to feel under attack; they may consequently defend their vision of the group and thus cause the community to become fragmented.<sup>42</sup>

As an example of the defensive response to group change, players of the example larp engaged in a heated discussion about instituting a cap on the number of players directly following the entry of several new members to the community. The conversation was initiated by one individual as a part of the previously mentioned "player train" thread, arguing that the glut of new players was detracting from the over-all experience and that the larp should prioritize "being good over being successful." The resulting sub-thread received over 50 comments, with a mix of pro-cap and anti-cap sentiment. One early respondent became hostile, using sarcasm and capitalization for emphasis, prompting another group member to express dismay about this turn of events. Thus, at least initially, the influx of new players led to defensiveness and conflict for members of the larp community.

In the example, the main issue was a practical one: how to manage the game with more players, but without increased numbers of volunteer NPCs and staff. Following McGrew et al., however, changes in a group's composition can also precipitate significant changes in standards and norms. This is consistent with Dynamic Social Impact Theory, such that a small cluster of individuals can develop and maintain norms insulated from the group majority.<sup>43</sup> In those larp groups in which new players socialize and play primarily with a subset of members, the norms that they absorb may be skewed from the true consensus. As these new players take up the mantle of observing and transmitting norms to yet more new players—perhaps that they themselves drew into

the game—the community's standards are likely to become unstable and ambiguous. Such standards may range from informal practices to the accepted interpretation of a written rule. Thus, although "fresh blood" may seem like a great way to reinvigorate a maturing player community,<sup>44</sup> classic models of group dynamics suggest that new players may be more trouble than they are worth.

Character retirement may be similarly antithetical to a larp group's stability. Imagine that Emily is a player who retires her character after two years and immediately brings in a new character. She finds she is spending less time socially with players of former allies (those who have yet to retire) and more time with the players of low-level characters (her new peers). At the very least, Emily's retirement has caused the diegetic (i.e., storytelling) frame<sup>45</sup> to shift in composition by removing her earlier character from the game world through death or inactivity and adding a new one. Moreover, character retirement may have attendant consequences for the social and game frame since player relationships and power dynamics can be disrupted. Imagine Steven, who decides to take a break from playing the larp and serve as staff or recurring NPC. His role in the community and access to power within the game frame has radically changed, which has ripple effects for all those with whom he is connected in the social network of the larp community. Finally imagine Susana, who retires a character and decides she prefers to move on from the larp group rather than invest in the development of a new character and backstory. Her exit can likewise affect the group's composition at the social, game, and diegetic levels of the role-play experience. When they occur, transitions in larp groups may well contradict Tuckman's image of performing as a stable end-stage to group life.

## 2.5 Group dissolution and change: *De-forming, Splintering, and Adjourning*

If a larp group regresses through *de-norming*, *de-storming* and *de-forming* as depicted by McGrew and colleagues, the life of the group essentially unravels.<sup>46</sup> In the example larp, one period of tumult might have resulted in the group's dissolution.

41. Gersick, "Time and Transition in Work Teams," 16-17.

42. McGrew et al., "Software Team Formation and Decay," 231.

43. Bibb Latané, "Dynamic Social Impact: The Creation of Culture by Communication," *Journal of Communication* 46, no. 4 (1996): 23.

44. Vanek, "The Non-United Larp States of America," 130.

45. Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games as Social Worlds* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 181-205.

46. McGrew et al., "Software Team Formation and Decay," 211.



Following a series of interpersonal conflicts and member exits, the leadership released a new legal element into the group's dynamic: a Terms of Service (TOS) agreement. According to a current coordinator of the larp, the TOS document had been designed as a means of handling the issues facing the ever-expanding group, which had gone from a small group of friends to a moderate-sized larp. The leaders at the time felt that putting informal rules into writing was a way to protect the players and the group as a whole, particularly in the wake of conflicts with extra-group elements (e.g., the media). However, this step could also be interpreted as signaling a period of *de-storming*, in which collaborative and informal leadership characterized by *performing* was being denied by an exertion of force from formal leadership. Although some players distanced themselves from the game community putatively as a result of this imposition, *de-forming* was averted in this case and the group remains active.

According to Vanek, American larp groups often do splinter and decay due to social, political, and procedural conflicts.<sup>47</sup> When splintering occurs a group in conflict is said to split into loyal and alienated cohorts.<sup>48</sup> Following this period, many of the developmental stages common to all groups are likely to re-emerge for the new group, precipitating the possibility of further fragmentation.<sup>49</sup> Further, the original (loyal) larp group must deal with the aftermath of mass member exit, although in the case of a troublesome coalition this may provide a welcome opportunity to settle on a unified image of the group's goals and structure. Bowman's larp ethnography also suggests that splintering can have both positive and negative effects. For example, they can leave story lines unresolved and have serious financial repercussions, but may also expand the plurality of options in the larger community, i.e., beyond the original larp.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast to the grim picture of *de-forming* and splintering, Tuckman and Jensen characterized the resolution of group life as *adjourning*: accomplishing the concrete task for which the group was formed and resolving emotional and social consequences of a bittersweet end to the group's existence.<sup>51</sup>

Importantly, Tuckman and Jensen—and the studies they summarized—described this termination stage in connection with groups with a finite lifespan, such as study groups. Similarly, adjourning may be a likely outcome for short-term larp communities, for example a group that gathers at a convention to play out a narrative within a finite period of time. However, for larps that have no definitive end-point and continuously take on new members, the reality of group life may be one of constant *de-/re-norming* with brief periods of stability.

### 3. Best practices for life cycle management

Thus far we have suggested that larps may be particularly susceptible to a regressive group life cycle when the characteristics of game play and rules oppose group stability. It is thus at the pinnacle of group life that larp managers and players may need to be most vigilant towards maintenance of group norms and overall cohesion. Such a vigilance is the essence of *de-norming*: it is the best way to both avoid further regression along the group stages and promote a return to the effectiveness and cohesion characterized by *performing*. Therefore, it is likely that long-standing larp groups have manifested or adopted cultural practices to negotiate this challenge. An alternative, if more grim, way to look at this proposition is that groups that fail to do so splinter and dissolve more readily.

To begin, we will draw on theoretical ideas on restorative group play advanced by Thompson and White, in which positive emotions and fairness are central. This work is an excellent resource because it applies Tuckman's model to child playgroups. One key component of child's play that they discuss is the *restorative circle*, which likely promotes group maintenance factors, such as informal leadership and procedural voice.<sup>52</sup> The shape of the circle is key: everyone can see one another and no one is elevated in status above anyone else.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, some larps begin a new session with a *listen-up* period in which players gather in a circle to share enthusiasm for the game, discuss the rules, and clarify misconceptions before gameplay begins.

47. Vanek, "The Non-United Larp States of America," 128.

48. Wheelan, *Group Processes*, 23.

49. Wheelan, *Group Processes*, 24.

50. Bowman, "Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities," 4-5.

51. Tuckman and Jensen, "Stages of Small-group

Development Revisited," 425-426.

52. Thompson and White, "Play and Positive Group Dynamics," 55.

53. Bob Costello, Joshua Wachtel and Ted Wachtel, *Restorative Circles in School: Building Community and Enhancing Learning* (Bethlehem: International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2010).

In our discussions with a coordinator of the example larp, it became clear that the staff is explicitly aware of the importance of signaling the boundaries of the game reality. She stressed that *game time down* is equally as important as *listen-up*. Similarly, Thompson and White suggest that truly restorative play includes a highly elaborated game end. Group members must be allowed to process the activities that have occurred, learn how their participation shaped the game, and digest emotional and social outcomes.<sup>54</sup> In the example larp, post-event wrap-up is similarly elaborative. Relevant practices include the customary post-camper meal (i.e., *afters*) we focus on here, as well as online forum posts (i.e., *shout-outs*), formal and informal debriefings, and even post-game surveys.

Following a camping event, many players of the example larp share a post-game meal. We argue that the primary function of this activity is to build group cohesion and foster group norms. First, in choosing the restaurant, space takes precedence over food quality—all players need to be able to sit together and feel included. Second, the seating is a mix of players and NPCs that allows for alternate forms of social connection from that which may have played out during the game. Third, the meal is punctuated by the celebration of player milestones both exogenous (e.g., birthdays, marriages) and endogenous (e.g., retirement, political achievements) to the game. Finally, this event represents the first round of *snaps*, in which community members recount game highlights in small group conversations to the end of complimenting superior role-playing and heroic character actions. These comments may be accompanied by bursts of positive emotion and social connection. They also serve to express what constitutes “good” role-play in this community. The event concludes with a requisite acknowledgment of staff and NPCs, usually with a group-wide toast at the end of the meal. New group members may also be welcomed at this time.

In her **2013 Nordic Larp Talk** Annika Waern expressed frustration with the inability to really “know” what happens in a larp. We argue that a true interpretation of reality is not nearly the goal of players’ post-game reflections. We feel these practices instead allow group members to share similar interpretations of the game and build connections among the community, as in restorative play.<sup>55</sup> Such strategic pro-group communication by

members and informal leaders may be even more vital during *storming* and *de-storming*, when group members are looking for assurances of safety in the group.

We interpret pro-group communications as those that seek to maintain cohesion and positive emotionality in the group’s discussions. For example, in the online conflict regarding player caps (2.4), the bulk of posts were pro-group: they were welcoming (Commenter 1: “The more the merrier! New players are especially welcome, and the new players who have joined recently are really wonderful!”), constructive (e.g., Commenter 2: “If the game is going to survive these growing pains, then we are going to need to break down the wall between Players and non-Players”), and affirming (e.g., Commenter 3: “Staff is dealing with an ever expanding player base, and, in my opinion, they’re doing quite well with it so far”). Some posters would state the reasons for their opinion, but simultaneously take steps to stem conflict (e.g., Commenter 4: “I am totally not okay with a player cap, but I do recognize what [player who originated the thread] and some other folks are trying to get at”). Thus, it appears that group members used this conflict as an opportunity to affirm and reconnect with the group.

This may be connected to the distinction between task and maintenance statements described by Bales, such that a healthy balance is needed between talk about goal accomplishment and talk about socio-emotional factors, e.g., encouragement and tension reduction.<sup>56</sup> Rather than one golden ratio prescribed at all times for all groups, however, we would suggest that larp groups at different stages of development sometimes need much more maintenance talk whereas other times task-related talk may be more vital. Indeed, Thompson and White recommend that leaders and members of groups that are experiencing *storming*—or, we would add, *de-storming*—should be highly supportive of one another and communicate high expectations for the group as a whole.<sup>57</sup>

We view restorative circles, afters, and online maintenance talk as practices that reflect the overall standards and values of the example group. Although they may contribute to the group’s avoidance of splintering and dissolution, this

54. Thompson and White, “Play and Positive Group Dynamics,” 56-57.

55. Thompson and White, “Play and Positive Group Dynamics,” 57.

56. Robert F. Bales, *Interaction Process Analysis: A Method for Study of Small Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1950).

57. Thompson and White, “Play and Positive Group Dynamics,” 56.



claim is likely vulnerable to *post hoc* thinking common to the assessment of cultural practices of successful or longstanding groups.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, longitudinal and cross-group assessment is needed to substantiate effectiveness of these practices. In addition, because cultural practices can differ widely across larp groups,<sup>59</sup> it is important to examine their transmission within and across broader larp communities as well as between larps and other cultural contexts.

## 4. Discussion

Although Tuckman's four stage approach represent the most cited and long-lived model of group life, it has received its fair share of criticism and, subsequently, alternative models have been advanced.<sup>60</sup> We hope that future work will systematically explore the application of these models to larps in addition to pursuing the links we have presented in this chapter. For example, we have argued that the idyllic fourth stage of *adjourning* may be less likely in larps; instead larp groups may cycle through periods of regression and advancement.<sup>61</sup> In addition, we have observed that the history of the example larp resembles a punctuated equilibrium model as described by Gersick,<sup>62</sup> rather than the gradual progression between stages implied by Tuckman. Finally, by exploring the importance of subgroups in larps, we highlight, as Wheelan does, an important missing component from the four-stage model: the social network of the group.

To better understand the application of the four-stage model to larps, we drew comparisons to a specific American larp community. While this provided a real-world basis for our discussions, it is also a source of bias in this work. Future scholarship should compare a diverse array of communities that vary in both group composition (e.g., size, duration, diversity of membership) and the rules and practices of the larp itself (e.g., immersiveness, retirement policy, and the presence or absence of

player caps). This is particularly necessary because, as we have noted, each larp group may represent a unique blend of the group types originally studied by Tuckman. In addition, the presence of competition within the group could be an important factor to include in empirical examinations of larp group development. This would extend ethnographic data that suggest competitive larps may be perceived by larpers as fomenting group and interpersonal conflict to a greater degree than their cooperative counterparts.<sup>63</sup>

Intergroup competition may also shape larp groups, particularly when they are embedded within a larger community or organizational structure. The example group's participation in their regional larp community includes overlap among PCs, resource sharing (e.g., equipment and NPC support), and local annual conventions where cross-play is at its highest. Such super-ordinate communities may exert unique external influence on larps compared to other extra-group entities (e.g., the media), as players may observe or play in several larp groups within the broader community. Effects of this may include the forming of bonds—and, thus, subgroups—by individuals who have played together in other contexts; upward or downward comparison with other larp groups that exist at different stages of development; and even split loyalties and defection to other groups in the broader community. Per McGrew and colleagues, external influences like these can disrupt or reverse group development.<sup>64</sup> Thus, larp group embeddedness may be another factor that contributes to a poor fit with the gradual, linear nature of group development described in Tuckman's model.

The current work extends group dynamics theory and research to a meaningful variety of group life: adult recreation groups. We feel this analysis provides an interesting counterpoint to classical objects of study (e.g., task and therapy groups) and more recent applications (e.g., to child play groups). Finally, we have offered recommendations for larp members and facilitators on how to navigate group life, in particular while dealing with the treadmill of *performing/de-norming*. We hope that this work will also inspire a greater consideration by larpers about the way cycles of group life can and do naturally shape the dynamics of their communities.

58. Stephen R. Balzac, "Take Off Your Hat: You're in the Presence of Culture," *SF Analog* (January/February 2010): 3-4.

59. Mikael Hellström, "A Tale of Two Cities: Symbolic Capital and Larp Community Formation in Canada and Sweden" *International Journal of Role-Playing* 3, (2013): 41-44.

60. Bonebright, "40 years of Storming," 115-116.

61. McGrew, "Software Team Formation and Decay," 231.

62. Gersick, "Time and Transition in Work Teams," 16-17.

63. Bowman, "Social Conflict in Role-Playing Communities," 11.

64. McGrew et al., "Software Team Formation and Decay," 211.

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