EDITED BY
SARAH LYNNE BOWMAN, PH.D.
AND AARON VANEK

Join the discussion about The Wyrd Con Companion Book on Facebook:
http://www.facebook.com/groups/390244477724076/

WyrdCon 4: September 19-22, 2013 in the City of Orange, California: http://wyrdcon.com/

Help Wyrd Con:
http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/wyrdcon/wyrd-con-4-interactive-storytelling-convention
(expires January 1, 2013)

Tips for interacting with the Wyrd Con Companion Book:

Use the latest version of Adobe Acrobat Reader

Text in red (unless a name) will link to a webpage if you are connected to the Internet

Text in dark blue will link to other articles in the document

You will need to "trust" the document

Table of Contents

Journal section editing by Aaron Vanek
Academic section editing by Sarah Lynne Bowman, Ph.D.
Layout and design by Kirsten Hageleit
Published by Wyrd Con under Creative Commons License December 21, 2012

Cover: Insurgent NPCs at Fort Irwin's National Training Center
Photo by Aaron Vanek, art design by Kirsten Hageleit
Font: The Battle Continuez

The Wyrd Con Companion Book

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

The content you have before you would not exist if not for the following: Ira for indulging us, Sarah for being my co-pilot, Kirsten for confining her overworked rage to mere swearing, all the Knutepunkt books (past, present, and future), the *Nordic Larp* book, Amber Eagar's editing of the first two Wyrd Con books, and all the contributors for putting their writing shoulder to the plow without pay (and only the occasional lash).

The essays in the non-academic section are roughly ordered and grouped as follows:

- Personal reflection on the power of role-playing games
- RPGs in the real world
- Design and play advice, tips, and approaches
- History of larp
- Documentation of larps
- The future of interactive storytelling

There is a theme to this third Wyrd Con academic book, which is "Eulogies During an Accouchement", or laments for the deceased while something is being born in the same room. The idea was to look at what has gone before, what is here now, and what is coming on the horizon. I think we conjured a quite stalwart and perspicacious vision into all three temporal zones.

I believe that interactive storytelling, larp, transmedia and role-playing games are in a golden era of creativity, a renaissance akin to the 1960's in music. These streams of artistic culture are closely parallel. With some bridge spans and digging in the mud that separates them, we can create a delta of amazing works. This book, I hope, will serve as a shovel, and that it gets well worn.

While editing, I noticed connections in nearly every essay: John Tynes references Emily Care Boss's *Breaking the Ice*, Evan Torner references John Tynes's *Unknown Armies*, Emily references Lizzie Stark's run of *Mad About the Boy*, and so on. It is striking to me that we interactors operate in the same ballpark, dealing with the same playbook: agency, meaning, psyche, archetypes, story, and how everyone is going to be fed for the weekend. Interactive story is such a vigorous, thrilling medium full of so many uniquely creatives that I think we only need to poke our heads out of left field to see amazing work occurring in the next city, county, state, or even country. Work we can use and re-tool.

Thus I encourage you to discuss and distribute this Companion, which can also keep you company until September 19-22, 2013, the dates of Wyrd Con 4. If you read this before January 1, 2013, please consider donating to the Kickstarter campaign.

Lay on!

Aaron Vanek
December 20, 2012

A Lament for Gaming's Lost Days

by Ethan Gilsdorf

I played Dungeons & Dragons back in what my nostalgia-tinged mind likes to call the "Golden Age." Or perhaps it's better described as the Sepia Age. Or the Aqua Graph Paper age.

Whatever the moniker, those early gaming experiences, from the late 1970s through the mid-1980s, represent for me not only the gauzy memories of glory days—memories of Monty Haul dungeons, trap-riddled chambers, battles against frost giants and someone (was it Eric or Bill's character?) jumping on the back of a vicious purple worm mid-battle, as we all laughed our asses off at the ridiculousness of it all. There was something else happening in all those hours logged in the imaginary realms. Those regular Friday night game sessions were as much about the vicarious derring-do we all immersed ourselves in as it was about the goofy, testosterone- and Mountain Dew-fueled banter we let fly around the dining room table. People gather in groups, primarily for social interaction. D&D gave us proto-nerds a place and a reason to gather.

But even the social aspects of my role-playing game (RPG) heyday now seem pale in comparison to another key benefit: a private, self-made entertainment space we'd carved out for ourselves. We had entertained ourselves.

We didn't need video games (although we also played them). We didn't require movies or TV (although this was the emerging days of cable TV and the MTV generations, and we watched our share of Billy Idol and Iron Maiden videos). What I mean is: For five or six hours every Friday, and for the many additional hours one of us spent dreaming up the maps and monsters the rest of the players would encounter, we were immune to the temptations of distraction and superficial pleasures. We were able to conjure a space, jointly and improvisationally, that rivaled the power of anything the entertainment-media-Internet complex could throw at us. Our immersion was total.

To remind you: I played D&D in an era before email, before smart phones, before iPads and before the Internet. Subcultures such as mine— those who played RPGs—were left to thrive or die on their own wits. I could not reach out to other gamers unless I had seen a paper flyer hanging up in our local hobby shop. I could not Google "Tolkien fan club" or "comic book convention" or "miniature war game message board." As far as I was concerned, TSR Hobbies Inc., the company that made D&D (and AD&D, and other spin-off RPGs we played, such as Gamma World and Boot Hill) might as well have existed in Middle-earth as Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Both worlds were equally as distant, foreign, and inaccessible to me.

At home, our venues for continual and episodic escape and immersion were limited. Sure, I was a *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* fan, but if I wanted to see it again, I had to wait for it to be re-broadcast on TV, or, once the 1980s hit, I could rent the VHS tape. But there was no YouTube, no Final Cut Pro, no mashups, no electronic toys to spin that thick web of fandom interconnectedness we all know and love today. I devoured video games like Centipede and Galaga and Robotron: 2084, but that activity happened at the arcade, and each adventure cost a quarter. We had the chunky, clunky worlds of Intellivision and Atari, but those pixel-scapes were a far cry from the rich tapestry the PS3 or Xbox 360 now offers.

Now, I know what you're thinking (or, I think I know what you're thinking). Ethan, you're an old fogie. Ethan, you're a luddite. Ethan, stop complaining. I'm not complaining. These changes to technology and the way we entertain ourselves are inevitable, and mostly welcome. But as we move forward, it's important to understand whence we came, and what has been lost.

"In those days"—it's almost painful to say it. But in those days, we had stumbled around in the adolescent dark to find this tool, this device, this marvelous medium of the RPG to entertain ourselves. All D&D and its ilk required—and still requires, should you choose to play the game in its most stripped-down, low-tech form—is a few pencils, a handful of funny-shaped, polyhedral dice, blank paper, some rule books, and the appropriate expenditure of attention, time and imagination. Ah, and who has the time today, when you can pop into the plug-and-play worlds of Mass Effect, Halo or Portal.

Yet D&D is powerful. We were connecting ourselves to one of humankind's greatest inventions: the story. We told stories, we weaved tales, we posed riddles in the dark. The stories that issues from our minds and mouths and collective hive consciousnesses linked us back to the campfire, the cave, the saga, the ballad, the bard. These stories were original, and (sadly) ephemeral. They lived and live (if they still live at all) only in our craggy memories. And those D&D narratives were not extension of some larger, corporate-run universe.

But since those days, in the intervening decades, the culture of storytelling has been largely dominated by corporations who want to sell us franchises, sequels and transmedia narratives spread across multiple platforms: video games, novels, TV shows, movies, apps, YouTube channels. Again, don't get me wrong: I love Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (and will surely fall for his trio of *Hobbit* films, too). They are masterful at what they do: creating a fully-immersive visual and emotional experience. I cry every time Boromir gets skewered by the evil Uruk-hai.

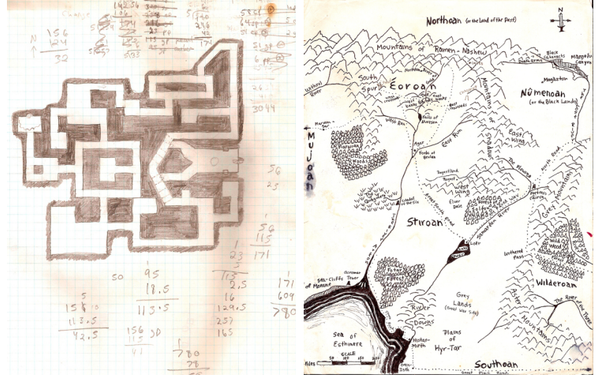
But who or what will teach our children to entertain themselves? To understand that the story, not the special effects and painstaking rendering, is what truly matters? The humble role-playing game as well as larp (and you might add fanfic to this list as well) are activities still instructing people how to be storytellers again. How to entertain themselves, rather than be entertained; how to create and participate in story rather than simply consume story.

This is a space worth preserving.

So, yes, I give you this lament for the old ways, as I also offer a warning against the rising, global story-making industry. But I also express a guarded hope that RPGs will survive in small pockets and niches, preserving these important storytelling skills for future generations. Think of the struggle of poetry —how the poem wages a continual and probably losing war against the misuse of language. No one reads poetry, it is said (and oft-lamented), but people do write and sometimes read it, and the act of spending time with poetry cleanses the language from its abuses by marketing and politics.

As a 46-year-old, after a long absence from the game, I now play D&D again. It took me a while to collect my role-playing mojo. Never tried it? Role-playing and storytelling is easy. We all do it everyday, we just don't know it. Job interviews, first dates and Facebook posts are easy examples of role-playing in the great RPG of life. "How was your day, dear?" you are asked, and suddenly, you find yourself spinning a yarn. No one is recording or selling these stories. But you are making them up just the same.

Teaching role-playing skills is easy. The next time you are telling your kid a bedtime story, stop and ask, "OK but what happens next?" I tried this recently with my 10-year-old nephew. At first he was confused. "What do you mean? You tell me, Uncle E." But I wouldn't budge. "You're in the tunnel under the rose bush, and there are three passageways in front of you. Which do you choose?" Soon enough, my nephew understood, and we quickly found ourselves deep in the give-and-take realms of role-playing, ours alone to see and feel and inhabit, and real.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *A dungeon map played by the author and his gaming group back in the 1980s; One of the author's world maps, from a time in the 1980s when, as a teenager, he was the DM of his gaming group; A sampling of D&D gear from the author's personal collection: TSR rule books, modules and dice, from the 1970s and 1980s.*

Ethan Gilsdorf *is a journalist, memoirist, critic, poet, teacher and geek. Over his working life, he's been employed as a dump truck driver, a movie projectionist, an A/V nerd, a bookseller and a landfill manager. He is the author of the award-winning travel memoir investigation* Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for Reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms. *Based in Somerville, Massachusetts, he publishes travel, arts, and pop culture stories, essays and reviews regularly in the* New York Times, Boston Globe, *Salon.com, wired.com and* Christian Science Monitor, *and has published hundreds of articles in dozens of other magazines, newspapers, websites and guidebooks worldwide, including BoingBoing, CNN.com,* Playboy, National Geographic Traveler, Psychology Today, San Francisco Chronicle, USA Today, Washington Post *and* Fodor's *travel guides. He is a book and film critic for the* Boston Globe, *former bicycling culture columnist for the* Boston Globe, *and is the film columnist for* Art New England. *He is a core contributor to the blog "GeekDad" at wired.com and his blog "Geek Pride" is seen regularly on PsychologyToday.com. He also writes for blogs at Boston.com's Globetrotting; Tor.com; ForcesofGeek.com, and TheOneRing.net.*
Read more and contact Ethan at www.ethangilsdorf.com *or Twitter* @ethanfreak.

Thinking Big: RPGs, Teaching in Korea, and the Subversive Idea of Agency

by Gord Sellar

Standing in the front of the room, I scowl at my students and say, "I hope you committed your crimes better than you planned them, suckers. Who's first? I wanna hear everything." They giggle nervously as I eye each group until one young woman, named Kyunghee, cautiously raises her hand. Her group gapes at her in alarm for a moment, until I clear my throat loudly and growl, "What?" with a ridiculously exaggerated hand gesture, and they suddenly realize it's not Gord, their Canadian professor, but Mr. S, their gangster boss, who is running the show... and to **not** comply means trouble.

I swear I'm not a Korean crime lord. My students are not *gangpae*—that is, Korean gangsters—but rather middle class kids, most of them with workable English ability and a sense of being frustrated, stalled in their progress with the language. While I teach many subjects—a little literature, some cultural studies, a bit of creative writing, and more—on some level I am fundamentally here to help my students improve their spoken and written English... and yet, the homework for my class this week was to prepare a rundown of how the capers they planned out and pitched to the class last week "went down."

Today's lesson would probably disturb the parents who paid their tuition; it would perhaps raise eyebrows among my Korean colleagues; it is not the "normal" way of teaching English in Korea.

Which is precisely why it's a good thing.

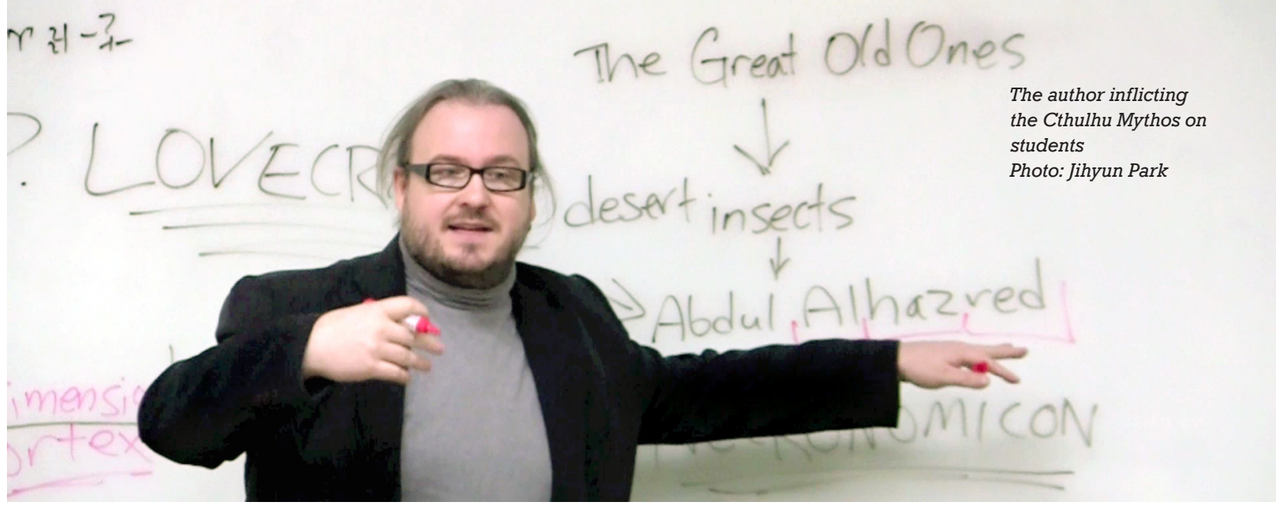
When I think of Ursula K. Le Guin's comment in one of her essays about the patriarchal distrust of fantasy in America[1], my mind boggles: *You think it's rough over there?* I address her in my mind, *You should see things over here!* While Korea's neighbors to the East and the West—Japan and China—abound with supernatural folklore, magical creatures, and weird mythology, the most popular Korean folktales today are generally more prosaic: talking animals are the predominant presence of the supernatural. It wasn't always that way: just two dynasties back, the monarch was claimed to have emerged from a golden egg that descended from the sky. But the dynasty that followed—the Joseon Dynasty—was aggressively Confucian, and its local brand of that philosophy was particularly hostile to supernatural aspects of Buddhism, Taoism, and shamanism that had previously existed throughout the land.

The cultural politics of centuries past matters. In Korea, not only does nonfiction outsell fiction by a vast margin (especially self-help and finance-related books), but genre fiction like SF and fantasy are read by surprisingly tiny numbers of people. Speculative fiction actually has such a bad reputation among Koreans that, as a translator friend of mine commented, plenty of South Koreans who saw *Avatar* and loved it dismissed the idea that it was SF on the grounds that no SF film could be that enjoyable. Since fantasy/SF novels and movies are often a major gateway into the ecosystem of geek culture, including both other fantasy/SF media and also tabletop RPG gaming, the latter hobby is vanishingly rare here. In fact, most Koreans seem to assume "RPG" has always referred to MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft*. While a fair number of my students have heard of D&D at some point, I've only met a couple of Koreans in the past decade who have actually played it.

Well, knowingly. The fact is that most of my students have unwittingly played RPGs in my classes. Usually they conceive of the games as language exercises, and I let them think that: after all, as soon as the word "game" enters into the discussion, students (and their tuition fee-paying parents) tend to become critical of such methodologies. Their wariness is understandable, of course. A lot of what passes for English teaching in Korea consists of white college graduates with no experience teaching (or even learning) foreign languages, playing hangman or word bingo with children or (more embarrassingly) with adults.

Games, the logic follows, are escapist. Little do they realize the importance and value of that aspect of the hobby, or how direly necessary it is in establishing a functional English-teaching class.

When I first took up gaming, escape was absolutely one of its attractions. It's no coincidence that my interest in fantasy narratives and RPGs followed a relatively upsetting dislocation from an idyllic Nova Scotia town to a much rougher, more troubled community in Northern Saskatchewan, where I spent much of my early childhood. My pursuit of RPGs undoubtedly had something to do with the difficulties of being uprooted, transplanted to a violent, hostile place, and the struggle to make sense of the world, to figure out who I was in this new, dangerous place, largely without help from the baffled adults around me.



The author inflicting the Cthulhu Mythos on students
Photo: Jihyun Park

Fantasy fiction came first—starting with Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, naturally—but gaming soon followed, when I reached that "golden age" of everything, twelve years old. When I started gaming, I would never have believed that I would choose to take a hiatus from the hobby—let alone the long hiatuses I've since taken. D&D gave way to AD&D, but after a break during high school (I'd moved to a new city, had few gamer friends, and was busy with other things), that gave way in university to White Wolf's *World of Darkness* games—especially *Wraith: The Oblivion*, which for me was the most powerful and moving of the RPGs I'd ever run. But once I left my hometown in 1998 to attend graduate school in Montreal, gaming slipped out of my life... or rather, I slipped away from the hobby, I suppose. Not completely—never completely, not even though my massive collection of books got lost in the mail, not even though I have nobody to play with—but there was no rolling of dice, no late-night pizza orders, no GM prep duties through all the years since... until this year.

I still had gamer friends online, of course. None of the people I'd played with in the past, but I have a few friends online who are active gamers, most prominently an Austin gamer named Adam Lipscomb who occasionally sent me gaming-related stuff he figured I'd like: a *G.U.R.P.S. Hellboy* supplement, an *Illuminati* card game, and some *Car Wars* thing. I bought game books occasionally, when I happened upon them during travels overseas (or in used bookstores in Korea), just to thumb through them, see what was current in game design and immerse myself in cool game-applicable metaplots. I've always kept my dice nearby, the worn-down ones I got with my red D&D Basic boxed set, among the many others I picked up later. I suppose I kept them around because one never knows when one might need to make a saving throw, or toss 5d10 onto the table and see whether one can dodge a Garou attack. I suppose I'd always hoped to come back to gaming eventually, and I talked about it from time to time, even.

But it wasn't until a month ago (November 2012) that I actually participated in a real-life gaming session. It's a bit stunning, really: fourteen years without gaming! Sure, I've been busy: grad school, work, moving to South Korea, playing in an indie rock band over here, working as an editor and amateur screenwriter, helping launch an independent film production company, composing music (in the form of soundtracks, so far), and busing into SF as a professional writer by getting short stories published in many of the major magazines in that field.[2] But as I list these accomplishments off, I feel like I'm justifying having not done any gaming for so long, because my RPGing hobby, well, it's been absent....

Sort of. At the same time, it's been there all along, though I've just realized it lately.

To explain how and why that's the case, you need to know a little about what it's like to teach English in Asia. Specifically, in South Korea.

Like most non-military foreigners in that country, I work in the field of education. I've been teaching at a university for the last six years, mostly subjects like Creative Writing, Understanding Anglophone Culture Through Film, or Public Speaking and Argumentation. TEFL classes—Teaching English as a Foreign Language, coaching students on improving their ability at speaking in English and comprehending others' spoken English—make up a small minority of the courses I teach today, but for my first five years here, they were almost all I taught.

And here's a funny little secret about TEFL: you're basically trying to get people to become competent at communicating in a foreign language. The thing about communication is that one masters a language only when one has the motivation to do so. Steven Pinker is right that people learn to talk because our brains are wired for us to learn to talk and to soak up language like a sponge,[3] but it's impossible to separate that from the fact that our brains

1. "Why Are Americans Afraid of Dragons?" The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction. (New York: Putnam, 1979.)

2. One thing I've discovered is that among speculative fiction authors, a vast number of us actually have a past in RPGing. Not just China Miéville, and not just Charles Stross, either: plenty of us have some kind of background with tabletop RPGs.

3. This is the fundamental premise of his book The Language Instinct (New York: Morrow, 1994)

are also wired to make us hungry, thirsty, afraid, horny, and so on. Little wonder that expats in Korea so often speak "Survival Korean": they can order water and beer and the most common foods, ask directions to the bathroom, tell cabbies where they need to be dropped off... and some of them even memorize pick-up lines to talk to Koreans of the opposite sex. Expats' motivation to learn Korean is *intrinsic*, because the alternative is to go hungry and thirsty, empty their bladders in the street, walk everywhere, and go celibate for their entire stay in-country.

A funny thing about learning Korean: it's also a crash course in role-playing, in many ways. You can't simply act like yourself in Korea: the cultural differences are simply too profound and except with people who are effectively bicultural, you're going to unwittingly offend a lot of people if you don't quickly develop a number of personae and consciously deploy them in contextually-appropriate situations. The cultural codes for politeness, for male-female interaction, for playing the role of teacher (especially teacher as understood in a Korean cultural context), and so on have always felt weirdly reminiscent of what I've imagined larping would be like.[4]

Anyway, this intrinsic motivation expats feel to learn Korean is not mirrored by their students. On the contrary, most Korean students living in Korea have no such need to learn English: their immediate needs are met perfectly well using their mother tongue. Korean students' apparent motivation for language learning is *extrinsic*: they need to get good scores on tests, because test performance is the fundamental bedrock of Korean life. Kids are tested in elementary school to figure out which middle school they should go to. Middle schoolers are tested to figure out what high school they should attend. High school kids spend their senior year studying for the Korean equivalent of the SAT exams, which will determine which university they'll be able to get admitted to. And while studying for class often stops at that point for most students, there's always the TOEIC exam, a business English test that most companies expect applicants to have taken. (The test scores are used to filter applicants even for jobs that involve no English ability whatsoever, such as managing a convenience store or teaching mathematics in a cram school!) If you want to become a teacher or work as a civil servant, there's even a standardized national exam for that.

The traditional approach to TEFL in Korea is to take the students and put them in a classroom with a native English speaker for a certain number of hours per week. The theory is that exposure to a native speaker will force students to use English, and more exposure is supposed to translate to more language acquisition. But the problem is that, even in the rare instance when the teacher is qualified, the fundamental question of motivation is unaddressed. After all, for a classroom full of Koreans studying English, only a minority are intrinsically motivated. In many classes only two or three students at most, and sometimes none, actually want to master the language. After more than a decade—and sometimes several decades—of study, they struggle even with simple sentences such as "Do you have any brothers or sisters?" ("How many families?" is the usual attempt.)

This is where RPGs can help. Kindness, encouragement, and friendliness can only do so much to overcome this problem, because, frankly, when Korean EFL students (English as a Foreign Language) enter the classroom, they are bound by the realities of the situation, both the real ones (grades) and the illusory ones: being in a classroom, with "friends," with whom they will be "learning English," because they "need to do so." Simply put, not one of these assertions is true. Anyone who knows Jean Baudrillard's concept of the *simulacrum*[5] can see why I've put the phrases above in scare quotes: in natural, first-language acquisition, one learns a language from one's immediate community—one's friends, family, and yes, enemies, antagonists, and strangers—to communicate about shared concerns or interests, or about interpersonal issues, in authentic or "natural" spaces—in shops, in the street, in the schoolyard and at home. The resultant difference between the language learned out of need—"Where is the bathroom?" or "What's your phone number, beautiful?"—and what students learn from EFL textbooks is stunning. This is why, after a mere month or two in Korea, almost every foreigner can produce some comprehensible variation of, *"Hwajangshil eodiyaeyo?" ("Where is the bathroom?")* whereas more than a decade of English most often produces "How many families?" or some equally incomprehensible variation on the theme.

Looking back on my own teaching over the last eleven years, it seems clear to me that the successes my students have achieved—the successes I've helped make possible as a teacher—have always involved

RPGs that put agency at the forefront—emphasizing motivation, action, and personal decision-making—suddenly seem outright subversive

pushing students to abandon these constraints. RPGs aren't the only way to break free of these constraints, of course: semester-long group projects like comic book creation or scripting and shooting a film work well too. But RPGs are the most affordable, flexible, and interesting approach to breaking through the simulacra that have come to define and constrain standard TEFL practice. Students resist at first, often because the language they use in playing an RPG isn't necessarily what they will use in real life (even when you can adjust things so it includes very useful grammar drills); but usually, they come around... precisely because the gaming disconnects from their daily life.

Such a disconnect is useful. It's especially useful in Korea, where students tend to be shy, risk-averse, and timid. Part of that is cultural, and the rest is an artifact of their education system. Games, though, are essentially motivation engines. As gamers, we all know this: when you sit down at the gaming table with friends, very rapidly you find motivations bubbling up from inside you: suddenly, you want your character to survive an encounter with Hastur the Unspeakable, help take down the red dragon that's hassling a nearby village, or outsmart the local vampire primogen. Succeeding at these tasks won't solve your problems at work, or patch up an ailing marriage, or make your health problems go away, but somehow the motivation is real anyway, and it is shockingly intrinsic. When they experience this, it effectively shakes up my students' relationships with classwork, with one another, with the classroom setting, and with the object of their study... the English language.

Looking back now, I realize that I've been using a simplified form of RPGing ever since I started working in TEFL. Getting students to role-play aliens planning an invasion of their earth—introducing their made-up alien species, negotiating how to divide up the Earth among them (and explaining their decisions), collaborating in development of strategies for invading: that's pure role-playing, though neither I nor my students realized it when we did that. Getting students to plan out and pitch heist scenarios to the class; having them role-play a gender switch to talk about the benefits and pains of being a member of the opposite sex (and then having the male and female students compare notes, while still role-playing the opposite sex)... yes, now I can see that TEFL for me has often involved RPGing on some level.

Then that friend of mine, Adam, mentioned Jason Morningstar's *Fiasco* to me. He mentioned Wil Wheaton's Tabletop videoblog episode featuring the game. As I checked it out, I realized that the exercise I'd constructed for my student years before—the bank heist scenario—could be so much more. Morningstar had laid it all out. I ordered a copy for the school, my mind still buzzing with possibilities. In fact, my class had already gotten together and made up their "character" personas (nicknames like "Black Velvet" and "Bad Boy" and "Cutie"), planned out their heists, and prepared PowerPoint presentations to pitch the heists to the class; I was to play their "gangster boss" and I'd implied that the stakes were high for this pitching session. But after plowing through the rules of *Fiasco*, I realized that there was no way that system could be introduced as it is laid out in the book.

So I did what teachers have always done: I stole conceptual bits of *Fiasco*, hacked them apart where needed, and glued them together with other stuff. I gave the students a dice game to play, involving points and betrayals and negotiations. Then I gave them story prompts—slips of paper with phrases like "an untied shoelace" and "a slippery floor" and had them construct narratives to describe how each character met his or her dreadful fate, something like the epilogue round in *Fiasco*.

And that is why I walked into the classroom, one morning last month, and talked to my students in the voice of a crazed, slightly insane gangster boss.

Paradoxically, my own return to playing RPGs was not a game of *Fiasco*, but something much more basic: Dread.

All right, to tell the truth, my return to playing was actually through a couple of card games: Apples to Apples, for one, and the Creative Commons-released Cards Against Humanity. But after playing a few rounds of those games, I started to feel a hankering for something a little more interesting, which, for me, means RPGs. I'd been thinking about how I could maybe bring RPGs more to the fore in my teaching. A game mechanic that relied on pulling blocks from a Jenga stack—a tower of wooden blocks originally

4. Bear in mind, I've never actually larped; however, part of the reason I say this is because Koreans, given the nature of their culture, are also constantly switching personae in a very conscious way that seems, at first, quite alien to most Westerners. This is likely true in all societies that consider themselves "conservative": the behavior of Victorian Londoners could perhaps be quite interestingly considered in as a form of extended, bizarre larping as well.

5. Baudrillard argues that a *simulacrum* is like a simulation, except that what it "simulates" does not actually exist in reality. Through the process of this pseudo-simulation, it attains the status of truth in itself, or "hyperreality." (One example of many he provides is Disneyland.) For more, see Jean Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation, translated by Sheila Faria Glaser. (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1994.)

marketed as a game back in my childhood—sounded perfect. Having students pull a block from the stack to determine the success or failure of a given action would do away with dice, tables, and other aspects of role-playing that entail a learning curve. The one problem was that *Dread* requires a GM. Teaching situations usually involve students split up into multiple groups, so unless I could train a small group of students as GMs, *Dread* seemed an unlikely candidate for the classroom.

Still, the game concept had me hooked, and I had an unused set of Jenga blocks on hand, so I contacted some friends—a writer, his fantasy-reading girlfriend, a brewer, and my fiancée—and arranged for a game session. The result was fascinating for a number of reasons. For one thing, I learned a lot about how delicate scenario design can be: the particular choices players made in selecting character sheets resulted in an unbalanced group, one off-color implication too many turned the game into horror-comedy, and pacing was kind of an issue. And yet we had wonderful fun playing, my guinea pigs immediately asking about our next game session.

The most surprising thing for me was how my return to gaming affected the way I think about writing. RPGs have gotten a lot more sophisticated in terms of storytelling: I remember when White Wolf games seemed radical for emphasizing story, but they look as dice-based as D&D now. For another thing, as a writer I struggled for a long time with character motivation, and sometimes I still do. (That writer friend who joined us in for a round of *Dread* has a habit of asking everyone, after reading a manuscript, "So what does this character *want*?") For me, designing a scenario for *Dread* taught me several things, but most prominently that motivation can work differently in different genres and different stories. In horror, traditional motivations (like those that form the backbone of a game like *Fiasco*) take a backseat to motivations generated by whatever it is that makes the story a horror story: people want to survive a monster's attack, survive the dangerous place, escape, make it 'til sunrise, whatever. That's why the Jenga pull is such a brilliant dynamic: characters want to act, and need to act, but finally their prime motivation is to manage to do so while also fulfilling their most fundamental motivation of survival. (At least till the moment for a dramatic self-sacrifice comes.) Having learned how motivation really seems to work in horror, I realize why someone like me, who'd started out in horror fiction, struggled so long to get a real handle on how motivation works in other genres, and it reminds me that other models of character motivation remain possible in all genres.

After recently designing a few scenarios/setups for different systems—especially *Fiasco*, but also for *Dread*—I feel like I have a newly deepened sense of how character motivation works. I'm not the only one: a "mainstream" writer I know marveled as I described the process of *Fiasco* playset design, and was excited to check out the rulebook. He's talking about doing scenario design purely as a kind of "etude" for character and story-setup practice. Personally, I've been experimenting to see just how far I can push the limits of the game's design, while making it work for the people I know. And since the people I know includes Koreans and expats alike, there's another layer to that: making the games work for a mixed group with different cultural backgrounds, differing expectations of how games and narratives work, and so on. How can one design a *Fiasco* scenario for a mixed group whose pop cultural lexicons and assumptions about narrative are so radically disparate?[6] What about a game like Montsegur 1244—which deals with the persecution of an obscure heretical religious group in a medieval Europe, a topic and a setting orders of magnitude more unfamiliar to Koreans than to modern Westerners? How could a game like that best be adapted for a Korean audience? These are interesting challenges in these kinds of complex acts of translation and transplantation. Enlivening challenges.

And while gaming is extremely marginal in Korea, I'm really curious to see how the results of answering such questions might be received here.

In a Korean TEFL context, there is no doubt in my mind that gaming can help learning: I've seen it happen before my very eyes.

I could go on theoretically about how it demonstrates the possibility of developing strategic competencies or how it can serve as a non-standard form of comprehensible input, perhaps best supplemented by an extensive reading program and so on, but the simple fact is that RPGs shatter all those simulacra that are central to TEFL: the class-as-community, the textbook-as-language-source, the choreographed-classroom-interaction-as-real-language-act, and the self-as-TEFL-student, as well as the biggest inhibitor of all, the grade-as-pseudo-motivator. And while it does set up a different set of simulacra, relying on students to imagine people and places that are not real, and actions and goals that have no relation to reality, it refocuses their attention on the one thing that really should be the point of TEFL courses: using language to turn their motivations into results. Mastering the language becomes a secondary motivation, to its proper place as a medium for the fulfillment of more immediate and primary needs or wants.

There's another effect that I believe more widespread use of RPGs in language education could have in Korea, and that's to help fend off the effects of the education system in general. Many Koreans have told me that their experience of schooling was essentially to have the creativity drained from them throughout middle and high school. Role-playing, on the other hand, forces players to imagine situations, characters, and settings that they have not themselves known or experienced previously, fulfilling a function that has long been used to justify the teaching of literature in the West, but which arguably Korean literature courses don't.[7] Young Koreans are often commenting that their school lives involved little exercise, and that physical education programs need to be improved, but they rarely recognize the lack of exercise that Korean childrens' imaginations get—a perilous oversight.

Finally, there's a third area where I believe RPGing can help young Koreans, and indeed, it's linked to what I myself have recently relearned from designing scenarios for *Fiasco*: it's an effective **reacquaintance with motivation**. One of the big problems translating Korean literature into English is that Korean narratives operate along lines rather alien to us in the English-speaking world. For us, characters are fundamentally composed of motivations, which may come into conflict with external factors, with the motivations of others, with duties or obligations, with the limits of characters' abilities, and so on. Tension in Western fiction arises from the conflict between motivation and something else. But Korean narratives often don't work this way: Korean characters often seem, for a Western reader, lacking in agency or self-directed motivation. Korean characters appear to be, at their core, composed of obligations and restrictions, primarily to bear various forms of oppression and sadness. If you can imagine what it's like to live in a world where so-called "helicopter parents" are the normative mainstream, where parental input is forced onto most people not only in the question of what to major in as an undergrad but also whom to date or marry, whether or not to take or quit a job, where to live, and where it's not unusual to be told to change one's haircut, lose weight, or get plastic surgery by family members, coworkers, or even complete strangers, then you can imagine life as a South Korean. Little wonder that self-directed agency has almost no place in Korean fiction, except as a conspicuous absence.

But in a context like that, RPGs that put agency at the forefront—emphasizing motivation, action, and personal decision-making—suddenly seem outright *subversive*. While there was no substance to the lame-brained evangelical-Christian TV talk show accusation that role-playing games would turn kids into psychotic Satan-worshipping murderers, I can't help but optimistically imagine that the younger generation in Korea is absolutely ripe for an infectious outbreak of that dangerous meme known as agency, and a rash of self-motivated assertiveness. The best way to get that in the front door, of course, would be to market it as something that can improve kids' English, and it could be designed to do that as well, but... well, the best teaching methods change the student, sometimes profoundly.

The best teaching methods also change the teacher, too. Me, I'm on the verge of taking a hiatus from teaching (and from Korea) for at least half a year, maybe more. I have a lot of big plans: write a novel, draft a feature film script or two, make at least one film, get back into shape, read like there's no tomorrow.

Gaming is part of that plan too, now. If gaming is my native land, then I'm planning to stay for a good long time. I ordered myself some dice—which, would you believe, are so much cheaper in the States than in Korea that I could afford dice bags and shipping and still come out ahead for the number of dice I got? Now I have to use them. I've got a session of *Fiasco* set up for next weekend, and another one sometime soon after that; I'm contemplating running a session of *Montsegur 1244* and maybe even an extended series of sessions (a few weekends in a row, maybe) during my winter holidays: maybe we'll play Don't Rest Your Head or some hacked version of *Dread* (perhaps with color-coded cards to be pulled prior to drawing from the Jenga stack to facilitate multi-session gameplay with the same characters). When we leave Korea, I'll probably throw a little more time into experimenting with game design, and try to mix in some gaming online via Google Plus. For me, this time around, things seem to be converging: storytelling, role-playing, fiction- and screenplay-writing, game design, literature... they all seem to connect now, in an interesting way.

I'm excited to see where it leads me.

Gord Sellar *is a Canadian SF writer, musician, a member of the Brutal Rice Productions film group (brutalrice.com), and has lived in South Korea since late 2001, working as a professor there since 2003. He attended the Clarion West Workshop in Seattle in 2006, was a finalist for the John W. Campbell Award for Best New Writer in 2009, and his writing has been published in many English-language SF, fantasy, and horror magazines. If you would like to download his* Fiasco*-inspired "caper" lesson plan for TEFL teachers, you can find it on his website, at the following address:*
http://www.gordsellar.com/2012/12/09/lesson-plan-the-caper/

6. My current, incomplete attempt to find an answer to that question (regarding *Fiasco*) is explored in this series of posts.

7. The interpretation of literature in a Korean classroom context tends to involve translation of literature, or the regurgitation of interpretations prescribed by a teacher or professor: the moon is a metaphor for one thing only, of the instructor's designation.

Warcrack for the Hordes: Why Warcraft Pwns the World

Catalog essay for the exhibition WOW: Emergent Media Phenomenon at the Laguna Art Museum, June 14—October 4, 2009

by Eddo Stern

"First there are the utopias. Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces. There are also, probably in every culture, in every civilization, real places—places that do exist and that are formed in the very founding of society—which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias." [1]

Image from World of Warcraft, Blizzard Entertainment

Fantasy themed, text-based, Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) have been around since the late 1970s, but in 1997, the addition of real-time graphics and the mainstreaming of the internet allowed Ultima Online to become the first major commercial success of the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG, MMOG, MMO) genre. World of Warcraft, released in November 2004, was preceded by a litany of 3-D sword and sorcery MMOs dating back to 1996, including Meridian 59, Everquest, Asheron's Call, Shadowbane, Dark Age of Camelot, Phantasy Star Online, Final Fantasy XI, Asheron's Call II, Ragnarok Online, and Everquest II . More recently a series of big budget online fantasy games have been released to great fanfare, including Vanguard, Hellgate London, Age of Conan, and most recently Warhammer Online.

But, none of these "post WoW" games has been able to hit the mainstream nerve the way WoW has with its 11 million-plus player base and pop cultural prominence. The common wisdom you will often hear about WoW's massive appeal is that Blizzard simply just "got it right." "A fundamentally well designed and executed game at the base level. WoW just feels right when you play it, something that we didn't really have in the MMOG genre prior." [2] Or, "Why is it so popular? It's easy. That's about as simple as it gets."[3]

Truedat….But, is there something more about World of Warcraft that has made it the best selling MMO ever and allowed it to redefine the position of online role-playing games in the cultural landscape, from what was previously a gamer geek subculture to a mainstream cultural phenomenon? Maybe.

World of Warcraft is a Heterotopia. The term was coined by Michael Foucault in his 1967 lecture titled "Of Other Spaces," and fits World of Warcraft like a Furious Gladiator's Mooncloth Glove. Foucault writes: "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible."[4] WoW allows for a multitude of permutations and paradoxical combinations in its gameplay and narrative structures that do exactly this to manifest it as a unique game in its genre.

Image from www.westozwarlords.com

The most significant change that WoW brought to the fantasy MMO genre was the Alliance/Horde player faction division. Warring factions are not new to MMOs. Neither is the division of the world into "good" and "evil" races. Yet what WoW has done with its faction-centered dichotomy is fundamentally different. Playing the Alliance faction "races" in WoW—Humans, Elves, Dwarves, and their friends—affords the player not only an identification with the heroic archetypes belonging to the traditional high fantasy genre, but an advertent alignment as a stereotypical member of the fantasy role-playing game community, what some might call a "classic geek gamer." By introducing the Horde as a gang of playable races that includes the thuggish Orcs, the Rastafarian Trolls, and the cannibalistic Forsaken, WoW has transformed the familiar offering of "evil" into something much more radical—the Horde are the "other."

Earlier MMOs such as Everquest offered a small selection of playable "evil" races such as Dark Elves or Trolls. Choosing these races allowed players to play against the common "heroic" grain, but as Everquest was a collaborative game, players of these races routinely blended in and teamed up with the good races, nullifying any non-cosmetic difference between the races.

WoW's Horde, who cannot communicate with the Alliance, exist on the periphery of the fantasy world's diegesis. Their inclusion as active agents feels alien to the genre. WOW offers players an opportunity to participate in the fantasy of World of Warcraft without buying into its narrative core. Horde play as interlopers, outsiders who are here to crash the party, who seemingly play the same game but do so in a subversive and ironic way. The Horde defines the unique culture of World of Warcraft while simultaneously occupying its counterculture. By allowing players the choice of experiencing the game sincerely as members of the Alliance or ironically as the Horde, WoW lets us have our cake and eat it too.

In his often-cited 1996 essay "Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs," Richard Bartle presents a taxonomy of player motivations in multiuser games. Bartle divides players into the following categories: Achievers, who "regard points gathering and rising in levels as their main goal," Explorers, who "delight in having the game expose its internal machinations to them," Socialisers, who "are interested in people, and what they have to say," and Killers, who "get their kicks from imposing themselves on others."[5]. In general, MMO designers have been wise to try to accommodate all four player archetypes and their various permutations.

At first, as was the case with Ultima Online, game designers tried to create a "realistic" simulation of society—allowing for the coexistence of players who wish to kill other players for fun with players who had no such motivations. The experiment proved to be too big a challenge, as killers ruined the experience of non-killers and Ultima Online became a utopia for killers and a dystopia for the rest of the population. The eventual solution, introduced in Everquest and epitomized in World of Warcraft, is to divide the player population into separate versions of the game played on different servers: Player vs. Player servers for the Killers and Player vs. Environment servers for the rest. By offering a selection of parallel game worlds identical in all ways except for their social rules of engagement tailored to accommodate opposing world views, WoW offers players the choice between one utopia and another.

Most gamers who strongly identify with the more aggressive and competitive First Person Shooter (FPS) and Real Time Strategy (RTS) genres—hardcore Counterstrike or Starcraft players—avoid and stigmatize the congenial fantasy Role Playing Game (RPG) genre.

1. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias", http://www.foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html

2. http://hgamer.blogspot.com/2007/09/why-is-world-of-warcraft-so-popular.html

3. Ibid.

4. Foucault.

5. Richard Bartle, "Hearts, clubs, diamonds, spades: Players who suit muds", 1986, http://www.mud.co.uk/richard/hcds.htm

World of Warcraft provides an opening for such players through the kind of counterplay offered by Player vs. Player servers and by identifying with the Horde and keeps them playing by offering game experiences that mimic the FPS and RTS genres' core game mechanics.

WoW is structured as a multi-genre game—a game that contains within its framework a diverse variety of game experiences. Players looking for standard RPG experiences—such as detailed game-lore, a narrative back story, monster slaying, dungeon crawling, character development, and loot collecting—may spend their time completing quests on their own, or with real-life friends or family, random strangers, long-term in-game acquaintances, or fellow guild members.

Players can scratch their RTS and FPS itches by engaging in strategically complex Player vs. Player group battles, both in staged arenas or in open-ended planned encounters. Ranked Arena PVP seasons offer an even more acutely competitive context for the same sorts of gameplay dynamics offered by RTS and FPS tournaments. This wide range of gameplay experiences allows WoW to function more like a closed circuit television network with its own selection of internal channels to choose from.

Image from www.bannanashoulders.com

Tom Shippey, in his writing on J.R.R Tolkien's work, points to the variety of main characters in The Lord of the Rings as a key contributing factor to the book's unprecedented mass appeal. For his analysis, Shippey uses Northrop Frye's framework of literary modes. In summary, Frye's model divides narrative into five hierarchical categories with myth at the top, followed by romance, high mimesis (tragedy or epic narratives), low mimesis (the classical novel), and finally, irony. Shippey identifies The Lord of The Rings as belonging

World of Warcraft is perhaps the first online role-playing game to truly function in tune with the internet generation

to all five categories at once. He maps the main characters from the book as follows: Samwise as irony, Frodo and the other hobbits as low mimesis, humans as high mimesis, the Elves and Dwarves as figures of romance, and finally Gandalf, Bombadil, and Sauron as belonging to the realm of myth. He also points to the way Tolkien navigates these modes: "The flexibility with which Tolkien moves between the modes is a major cause for the success of The Lord of the Rings. It is at once ambitious (much more so than novels are allowed to be) and insidious (getting under the guard of the modern reader, trained to reject, or to ironize, the assumptions of tragedy or epic)."[6]

A similar process is at work in World of Warcraft. Looking again at the choices of race that players can choose from in WoW, and considering that even within the counter-cultural frame of the Horde there are modes of engagement that develop beyond an initial irony in relation to the high fantasy genre, I would categorize the choices in the following way: Forsaken, Gnomes and female Dwarves as irony, Taurens, Orcs, Draenai, Dark Elves, Trolls, and Dwarves as low mimesis, Humans, Elves, and Forsaken (again) as high mimesis or romance. The specific placement of playable races using this model is subjective to each player, but WoW offers players a choice of how they prefer to identify their relationship to the narrative experience of the game world through the choice of character. The stratification of WoW's literary modes as a consequence of character race is brought to the foreground when players have more than one character they can play. The race of the active character often mirrors the player's current mood.

Want to create an earnest alter ego? Likely you will not choose a female dwarf for the task, but when creating an alternative character used for casually chit-chatting in town, picking a female dwarf character for your roster does come in handy.

Even the more concrete design elements serve WoW's appeal to a wide range of players and player emotions. The art styling is extremely bold, even expressionistic, all the while hedging the ironic against the sublime. The overall effect is uncanny. The blocky, low polygon character models and colorful pixilated textures are comically exaggerated. The animations are smooth, yet childishly cartoonish or grotesque. The outdoor environments are vividly colorized and ever flowing. The game is littered with in-jokes and pop cultural references to books, movies, celebrities, games, and other real world paraphernalia. The dialogue is overtly goofy and self-deprecating.

The sound effects are deft. The music goes hand in hand with the environments to mesmerize the player, the score is epic, and while the compositions may be high fantasy clichés, they do not engage the player cerebrally, the way the character models, animations, and dialogue do. It is as if WoW's world craft is calibrated to swallow you up in its synthetic world and just as you are on the brink of total immersion, it spits you out. And then sucks you back in again.

World of Warcraft exists within a nexus of game related contexts, sometimes referred to as the Meta-game, the extra-diegetic game world, or simply the WoW community. This context includes personal fan sites and blogs, guild home pages, official and nonofficial discussion forums, game databases, strategy guides, encyclopedias, player ranking lists, sites that offer game add-ons and modifications, portals of fan-made films, and game related news sites. The cultural artifacts generated in the Meta-game: guides, tricks, rants, treasure maps, walkthroughs, helper applications as well as fan created stories, comics, and films are openly fed back to the in-game experience. Nick Yee, who uses polling and statistical analysis to examine MMO player behavior, reports, "the average player spends about 10.8 hours each week performing game-related tasks outside of the game... . players spent on average 23.4 hours each week in the game. Thus, on average, the majority of players spend about an additional 50% of their game-playing time outside of the game performing game-related activities."[7]

WoW is perhaps the first online role-playing game to truly function in tune with the internet generation, where a more hermetic idea of "fantasy" as a cordoned-off reality of hardcore role-playing has been consciously replaced by a porous pseudo-fantasy game. The illusion has been shattered long ago, bearded paladins are swapping Chuck Norris jokes, Dark Elves are doing the Napoleon Dynamite, and Undead Warlocks are talking Pakistan in Orgrimmar, while everyone else is doing their best Leeroy Jenkins impersonation. WoW coolly embraces the Meta-game and paradoxically, by letting its guard down and allowing bits of reality to slip in and out of its fantasy world, has become the most compelling and immersive game ever.

"In the mirror, I see myself there where I am not, in an unreal, virtual space that opens up behind the surface; I am over there, there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent: such is the utopia of the mirror. But it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position that I occupy."[8]

Eddo Stern *works on the disputed borderlands between fantasy and reality, exploring the uneasy and otherwise unconscious connections between physical existence and electronic simulation. At the UCLA Design | Media Arts Department he teaches courses on game design and culture; computer game development; and physical computing in an art context.*

6. Tom Shippey, J.R.R. Tolkien, Author of the Century, Princeton 2000, p 223

7. Nick Yee, "Time Spent in the Meta-Game", from "The Daedalus Project", http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/001535.php

8. Foucault.

Prismatic Play: Games as Windows on the Real World

From Second Person: Role-Playing and Story in Games and Playable Media, **MIT Press, 2007 - reprinted with author permission**

by John Scott Tynes

Elves and orcs, spaceships and robots: any survey of well-known works of interactive storytelling reveals most are set in worlds very different from the one we live in, worlds of visionary futurism or fantastical imagination. The imagery communicates the subject matter's dislocation from the real world. Likewise, they in no way attempt to address modern life or any themes other than, say, good vs. evil or underdog vs. oppressor. They exist in a void of meaning where recreation is king and the only goal is entertainment. This inevitably consigns such works to a metagenre: *escapism.* Escapism is a departure from the real world, an opportunity for an audience to let go of everyday anxieties in favor of an unreal experience. Escapism has its place. The human mind is a busy beast and flights of fancy are a welcome reprieve. Alien and inventive genre worlds are tremendously popular, as witness the *Final Fantasy* and *Myst* video games.

But while escapism has its joys, it also carries with it a connotation of irrelevancy. The trailblazing likes of *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Doom* may have been enjoyed by millions of people, but few assigned them even the feathery cultural weight of children's cartoons such as *Shrek*. Such escapist entertainment is commonly considered meaningless, or at best serves as a vehicle for bland homilies. Every medium whose signature works are escapist becomes perceived as irrelevant, immature, and meaningless. The prose novel, for example, reached a mass audience with the proliferation of the printing press, but educated aristocrats did not deign to read them; their modern descendants would likewise not consider playing the video game *Grand Theft Auto.* It took more than two hundred years for the novel to be taken as seriously as, say, classical religious painting or poetry. Movies made a similar journey in just forty years, and rock music went from "Rock Around the Clock" to *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* in about twenty. In all such cases, it was the combined work of innovative practitioners and influential critics that elevated each medium into the cultural mainstream.

Yet three decades into its life, interactive storytelling remains in an immature state. Video games and tabletop roleplaying games are seen as childish wastes of time. The demographics of the audience and the experiences they demand are very diverse, but this reality has not penetrated the mainstream consciousness. The controversies over *Grand Theft Auto* illuminate this disconnect: games made for adults, and only for adults, are perceived as a menace to children because the cultural authorities do not understand who the audience has become.

For interactive storytelling to mature into a form that earns the same critical respect and mainstream acceptance as novels, movies, or rock and roll, it is vital for this form's content to evolve beyond escapism. I believe the next step in its development is already at hand but unrecognized and underutilized.

This step is the development of **engagist** works that embrace the modern world around us instead of rejecting it for a fantastic otherworld. An engagist work is one that uses the modern world or the recent historical past as its setting and that provides tools and opportunities for participants to explore and experiment in that setting in ways that real life prohibits or discourages. It may still have genre conventions such as ghosts, monsters, or mad science, but it uses them deliberately and symbolically within a familiar real-life context.

The differences between escapism and engagism are profound. They are fundamentally driven by the intent of the creator and richly manifested in the experience of the audience. But the simplest difference of them all is that escapism is a **state** and engagism is a **tool**.

As a state, escapism offers no change, no enlightenment, no redemption. It is a prisoner of form, a sitcom-game that puts its pieces in the same starting positions with every episode.

As a tool, engagism is an agent of change, capable of leading journeys through enlightenment, redemption, or any other genuine human experience. It uses form and transcends it, a restless exploration of life.

The tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons* is the archetype of escapist interactive storytelling. Participants adopt personas in a fantasy world and enjoy rollicking adventures through a hodge-podge of myth and imagination. As published, the game is a vehicle for heroic storytelling and an engine for fictional accomplishment, as the personas "level up" to become more powerful in ways that have no relationship to the participants' own lives. They may take satisfaction from the experience, but any meaning they derive from it is only what they brought with them.

Power Kill by John Tynes is the deliberate antithesis. This engagist metagame posits that *Dungeons & Dragons* participants are living out their fantasies through real-world psychotic episodes in which they practice robbery and home invasion against ethnic and economic minorities—a violent incursion to a black ghetto is, to the participants, just another "dungeon crawl" in which orcs and their money are soon parted. They are asked to reconcile the differences between their *Dungeons & Dragons* character sheet of statistics and treasures with their *Power Kill* character sheet, a patient record from a mental ward for the dangerously insane. Once they are prepared to accept the latter and reject the former, they are released from the hospital and the metagame. *Power Kill* is intended as a Swiftian satire, an engagist attempt to take the escapism of *Dungeons & Dragons* and explore its connections to the real world of human behavior.

Admittedly this is an extreme illustration of the differences between escapism and engagism, as *Power Kill* is a didactic attempt to measure the distance between these two metagenres by placing itself and *Dungeons & Dragons* at opposite ends of a span. In more common practice engagism can entertain just as well as escapism. But engagism has three primary practical and conceptual advantages that provide sharp distinctions and make it a useful tool. These advantages are **narrative**, **educational**, and **revelatory**.

The Narrative Advantage

Participants in engagist media are intimately familiar with the modern world. Cultural, religious, linguistic, political, and technological concepts are already understood and available for use. This familiarity solves simple problems, such as explaining to the participant how personas travel from one town to another, and allows for much freer use of irony, symbology, metaphor, and other literary conventions that depend on cultural comprehension. It's hard to make a pun in the Black Speech of Mordor.

Imagine an interactive story based on Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* books. The participants take the roles of hobbits traveling on a grand adventure. In a distant land they encounter a group of strange people. Do they speak the same language? What language do hobbits speak, anyway? For that matter, what about this traveling thing: how far can a hobbit walk on foot in a day? How much sleep do hobbits need? Does a human need to eat more Lembas bread than a hobbit or is it a magical food that can sustain anyone with an equal amount of consumption?

These are pedestrian questions—literally, in some cases—but they illustrate the fundamental lack of familiarity that participants will have with a fantastical setting. In some works, these questions may be irrelevant. If travel in the work is abstracted, so that participants merely arrive in one interesting scenario after another with all intervening time bypassed, then the land speed of a hobbit is irrelevant. But take a further step back: what the heck is a hobbit? What is an orc? For a novice audience, there are a lot of questions to answer before the story can be fully understood. The opening exposition utilized in the film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, for example, offered a potted history of Sauron and the ring of power but did not try to explain the many fantasy concepts contained in the book. For audiences unaccustomed to the fantasy genre, it was not at all intuitive that dwarves live underground or that they have an ancient rivalry with elves.

The tabletop roleplaying game setting known as Tékumel is an excellent example of this challenge. M.A.R. Barker, a former professor of linguistics and South Asian studies at the University of Minnesota, has been developing this fantasy world for three decades. Tékumel first saw print in his 1975 game *Empire of the Petal Throne* and has since appeared in several different game incarnations and many volumes of supplementary material, as well as novels. Tékumel exceeds even Tolkien's Middle-Earth for obsessive documentation by its author, with Barker issuing treatises covering languages, histories of particular military units, guides to the various religions, and even the tactical use of magic on the field of battle. This summary from the game's web site illuminates its complexity:

> Tékumel is a world of tradition, elaborate bureaucracies and heavily codified social structures and customs. They have mighty, well-organized legions like those of the Romans. Their gods are like those of the Hindus, with a heavy dose of the bloodthirsty Aztec or Mayan deities. Their legal codes and sciences are much like those of the Arab philosophers of the Middle Ages; they are obsessed with personal and family honor much like the medieval Japanese. The societies presented with the game are very intricate and very old, with histories, traditions, and myths stretching back some twenty-five thousand years. (Gifford 1999)

In short, this is no *Shrek*. Participants in Tékumel stories must overcome a substantial barrier to entry, as the game mandates a high degree of cultural literacy

for a culture that does not even exist and that has been documented in only piecemeal form across dozens of small-press publications—many of them out of print—for longer than many players have been alive. When the site's Frequently Asked Questions includes entries such as "What is Mitlanyál and where can I get it?" one wonders that anyone other than Professor Barker can even play the game. Its adherents are devoted but few, as the work's scattershot publishing history can attest.

At the opposite end of the comprehensibility scale lies *Millennium's End.* Created by Charles Ryan, this tabletop roleplaying game took the technothriller novels of Tom Clancy as its inspiration and posited a modern setting of terrorists, espionage, covert military actions, private security forces, and international intrigue. While first published a decade before the 9/11 attacks, *Millennium's End* has remained timely and even prescient, as concepts such as "collateral damage," "covert operations," and "low-intensity conflict" are now household terminology instead of baroque jargon.

In *Millennium's End*, participants take the roles of private security contractors employed by a firm resembling the real-life African mercenary corporation Executive Outcomes. Story topics include corporate espionage, counterterrorism, kidnap resolution, executive security, and other hot-button concepts involving professionals with guns working in real-world danger zones. It's the sort of game where a storyline can be readily improvised just by reading the newspapers.

Participants in the game already have the required cultural literacy. They have reasonable shared expectations for how well cell phones work in rural areas, how many bodies you can shove into the trunk of a car, and how to get a plane ticket to a foreign country. If a story is set in wartime Iraq, participants have at least some notion of how that setting looks and feels, courtesy of cable news networks or movies such as *Three Kings*.

The barrier to entry for *Millennium's End* is low, at least in terms of required comprehension. The need for supplemental material is lessened, as well; no participants are demanding a sourcebook on the American criminal justice system or the restorative qualities of milkshakes.

Millennium's End, therefore, enjoys a substantial narrative advantage over the Tékumel games. It is more accessible, simpler to play, and easier to create new stories. Similar tabletop roleplaying games include some of the most popular: *Vampire: The Masquerade*, *Spycraft*, *Mutants and Masterminds,* and *Call of Cthulhu* all layer genre conventions on top of the familiar modern world and have much larger audiences than the alien and otherworldly Tékumel.

Such real-world games are not simply more accessible. They also reward familiarity with the modern world and improve that familiarity—which brings us to the second advantage enjoyed by engagist interactive storytelling, the educational advantage.

The Educational Advantage

Participants in engagist media acquire knowledge of the world around them. This is not the case in worlds consisting of dungeons and spaceships and should be considered an interesting alternative "loot drop" to video game rewards such as magic swords and superspeed. By engaging with the real world through interactive storytelling, participants can travel to foreign countries or local but unfamiliar subcultures. They can experience historical or current events firsthand and conclude the work more knowledgeable than when they began.

A precursor to this form can be seen in the 1953 television series *You Are There,* in which recent and distant historical events were reenacted by actors and explained by journalists. I believe the first interactive storytelling attempt at this educational approach was the 1971 computer game *Oregon Trail*, in which participants recreate nineteenth-century pioneer caravans traveling from Missouri to the West Coast. In both of these early examples, immersion is used to facilitate education.

This informative visualization of the past has manifested most recently in the form of *Kuma\War,* which updates the mandate of *You Are There* and demonstrates the ability this form has to richly present knowledge in an engagist manner.

Kuma\War is a subscription service that regularly delivers new computer game scenarios based on actual military conflicts. Single-player and online multiplayer play are supported in first-person or third-person perspective, as well established by escapist action games such as *Unreal* and *Max Payne*. Participants take the roles of soldiers in conflict, fighting enemies and achieving objectives. The scenarios released thus far have almost entirely been set in Afghanistan and Iraq, dramatizing the recent conflicts there, but historical scenarios have included the Korean War and, most surprisingly, U.S. Senator John Kerry's Vietnam swift-boat action that earned him the Silver Star and became a major point of controversy during his presidential campaign.

With *Kuma\War*, participants can take the role of John Kerry and command his swift boat in a scenario recreated directly from the battlefield reports. Besides presenting this playable game scenario, *Kuma\War* offers written analysis of the battle and the controversy, as well as a ten-minute video interview with a swift-boat veteran and a game designer. Links to media coverage and official commentary round out the presentation.

While most of *Kuma\War*'s offerings blur into an endless sandy horizon full of gun-toting Jihadists, their up-to-the-minute approach is intriguing. When a lone Navy SEAL escaped from Asadabad, Afghanistan, in late June of 2005, in a conflict that left nineteen other soldiers dead, *Kuma\War* had a recreation on subscribers' hard drives within a month, complete with satellite images of the area and extensive notes and references. This attempt to publish on a journalistic schedule with educational goals helps distinguish *Kuma\War* from games such as the World War II titles *Call of Duty* and *Medal of Honor.* Those are popular games of escapism, offering no commentary, no historical context, and no timeliness. They use historical events as a simple backdrop to pure entertainment and do not educate their audience. *Kuma\War*, by comparison, makes a real attempt to expand the participants' knowledge and immerse them in an authentic experience.

> For interactive storytelling to mature into a form that earns the same critical respect and mainstream acceptance as novels, movies, or rock and roll, it is vital for this form's content to evolve beyond escapism

An even more immediate example of this approach appeared in Jonathan Turner's tabletop-roleplaying game scenario "When Angels Deserve to Die," which he first ran at the Convulsion game convention in July 2002. Turner had recently returned from a three-month stint in Kabul, Afghanistan, where he worked as a press officer for the British-led International Security Assistance Force. His scenario placed the participants in the locale he had just left, and the intensity and vividness of his depiction were remarkable. Turner brought with him the latest unclassified maps of Kabul and surrounding regions as published by the British military, with current safety and risk zones marked, as well as his rucksack, which supplied props for the experience. He notes:

I wanted to get across to the players what it was like to be in that place at that time. I wanted to do what I always do, which is to make it more real for them. My goals in providing them with genuine props such as unclassified "mine maps," old Russian medals bought in a marketplace, all that stuff, was to let them get their hands on something cool that gave them a tangible connection to what their character was experiencing, something that they as players had never seen before, that they would remember afterwards. This even came down to smell—I had an Afghan shemagh [bandana] which still smelled like Afghanistan. … I used to pass it around the players and have them take a deep whiff of it. That conjured up an image of the marketplace in a way no photograph or map or verbal description ever could. (Turner 2005)

Still wired from the experience, Turner powerfully immersed the participants. We were there, on the ground in Kabul, navigating our personas through a treacherous setting of intrigue and risk. We attended a Buzkashi game, the traditional game of Afghanistan where riders on horseback struggle over the headless carcass of a goat to score points. There we interacted with U.S. intelligence operatives mingling in the crowd and escaped a bomb scare, then journeyed on truly treacherous roads into the countryside to negotiate assistance from a regional warlord. All along, Turner evoked the sights, sounds, and smells of occupied Afghanistan and the mix of chaos and optimism that followed the fall of the Taliban.

Genre elements were certainly present: the plot concerned a horrific supernatural manifestation that had to be defeated. For this, Turner drew on the Cthulhu mythos created by 1930s pulp horror author H.P. Lovecraft, as expressed in the roleplaying game book *Delta Green*. Yet even this fictional construct was subservient to the scenario's educational goals, as Turner notes:

The [Cthulhu] mythos is kind of the least of your problems. You're more likely to step on a mine or get rolled and robbed or shot in a feud between people

in a market. Or more likely, die in a car accident. I think most players find great novelty in that approach, especially if I can put them coherently and convincingly in a place that is real but still feels alien and threatening to them. (Turner 2005)

The educational approach to interactive storytelling seen in *Kuma\War* and in "Angels" engages the participants in exciting new ways not seen in escapist works. Watching television news reports from Kabul, I could shake my head sadly at the misery and horror. In Turner's masterful game I lived it vividly, my pulse racing, and in my mind I saw an Afghanistan I'd never seen on television: the Afghanistan Turner knew. The knowledge acquired in this engagist way can have a lasting impact on the participants' lives and thoughts; by definition, escapism does not enjoy this advantage at all.

As interactive storytelling has evolved, its sophistication has evolved as well. When we move from explaining and illustrating the modern world to interpreting and critiquing it, we realize the third advantage of engagism: the revelatory advantage.

The Revelatory Advantage

Participants in engagist media can make choices that are denied to them in the real world due to finances, physical limits, laws, or personal reticence. They can experiment by adopting personas different from themselves, ones that they perhaps have coveted or even feared in life. They can use the engagist experience as a Skinner box, exploring not just alternative behaviors but testing the consequences both within the narrative and in themselves. Engagist works can reveal insights and interpretations beyond simple facts.

The roleplaying practiced in therapy is a narrow example of this advantage. Patients are asked to act out situations they find troubling or intimidating in real life so they can learn to respond to them appropriately and add those responses to their repertoire for the next time they face such a situation. A patient who cowers before anger may learn useful responses he can offer the next time a family member loses her temper, and the exercise of roleplaying turns an abstract lesson into a (simulated) life experience.

Working with a broader canvas than that of therapy, engagist works use the revelatory advantage to give participants unusual experiences. These experiences might be difficult to explore in the real world, such as living the life of a politician or spy. They can even be impossible, positing situations that defy reality. But even with such genre elements they remain a tool for participants to explore, learn, and grow.

The creators of *Waco Resurrection* characterize it as a "subjective documentary." Participants don a helmet sculpted to resemble a polygonal model of the head of Branch Davidian messiah David Koresh and then use a mouse and keyboard as well as voice recognition to control a Koresh video game persona during the 1993 showdown with the federal government. This Koresh is imagined as a supernatural reincarnation with mystical powers, as per one of his prophecies.

Each player enters the network as a Koresh and must defend the Branch Davidian compound against internal intrigue, skeptical civilians, rival Koresh and the inexorable advance of government agents. Ensnared in the custom "Koresh skin," players are bombarded with a soundstream of government "psy-ops," FBI negotiators, the voice of God, and the persistent clamor of battle. Players voice messianic texts drawn from the Book of Revelation, wield a variety of weapons from the Mount Carmel cache, and influence the behavior of both followers and opponents by radiating a charismatic aura. (C-Level 2003)

The goal of *Waco Resurrection* is right on its face: to put participants into the head of David Koresh and reveal his vision of a messianic apocalypse. The nature of the work is distinct from *Kuma\War* in that it transcends educational accuracy by giving the Koresh persona supernatural powers that serve as metaphoric tools to explore an historical event. Fantasy is thereby yoked to critique in the service of a larger truth: that the tragedy at Waco was not simply an armed conflict but a nexus of religious, social, and legal issues complicated by one man's insanity. This exploration of a truth larger than simple facts is the hallmark of the revelatory advantage.

Breaking the Ice has an entirely different goal and approach, yet it too embodies revelatory engagist principles. This tabletop storytelling game depicts the first three dates of two characters as a romantic-comedy plot. Two participants create the characters by switching something about themselves, such as their gender or their marital status, and then verbally play out their first dates using a game system that introduces conflicts, mishaps, and opportunities to grow closer. There is no gamemaster, and it's up to the participants to create the experience they want.

The game is, of course, set in the modern world and relies on comprehension of western dating customs; setting it in a sci-fi future or a medieval fantasy world would derail its goal. *Breaking the Ice* gives participants an opportunity to explore the early stages of romance without real-life consequences. It could increase confidence for those nervous about dating, spark ideas for actual dating activities, or prompt discussion between the participants about their own lives and romantic histories. While the tone is light and entertaining, at every stage the game encourages the participants to engage with reality, not escape from it.

The use of genre conventions as revelatory metaphoric tools is a primary feature of *Unknown Armies*, by Greg Stolze and John Tynes, a work that tries directly to apply engagist principles. This tabletop roleplaying game is set in a modern America of trailer parks and shopping malls but weaves into it a supernatural milieu known as the Occult Underground. Participants take the roles of crackpots, visionaries, mystics, and schemers in a clandestine struggle to acquire magical knowledge and power in order to change the world in whatever way best fits their personal beliefs.

> We live in the real world, and our lives are full of real problems and real joys. When works of interactive storytelling can teach us how to solve those problems and discover those joys, while entertaining us just as novels, movies, and music do, these works become worthy of real cultural critique and join the great conversation of human thought

The setting of *Unknown Armies* posits that people who embody cultural or mythic archetypes ascend into a higher reality and serve as demigods, granting magical powers to people who abide by the traits and taboos of those archetypes. Their goal is a cosmic endgame in which the final archetypes ascend and jointly create the next reality, rebooting the cosmos into the form unconsciously demanded by the aggregate desires and behaviors of humanity. A warlike cycle might produce more violent archetypes, leading to an even more perilous incarnation of reality—it is existence as if determined by a truly representational government. The modern world we know, therefore, is the product of human archetypes from the previous version, and it is this world that the game is concerned with.

These archetypes go well beyond the formative ones of Jung and express modern ideas. Thus we have the Demagogue, who can discern and alter the belief systems of individuals or entire societies; the Flying Woman, embodiment of unconstrained femininity and freedom of choice in the post-feminist west; the MVP, the star athlete whose power comes from the fervency of his fans and who is supernaturally incapable of letting down his team; and many more.

Participants can choose to "walk the path" of one of these archetypes. They gain in power by faithfully mimicking the archetype's behavior and lose power when they violate one of the archetype's taboos. If they gain enough power, they can eventually challenge the ascended archetype and take its place, bringing their own new interpretation of the archetype into the cosmic realm. For example, the Messenger archetype seeks to banish ignorance and spread true knowledge. Its most powerful adherent in the setting is a man who attempts to replace the archetype with his interpretation, the Heisenberg Messenger: delivering uncertainty and spin instead of truth, changing events rather than reporting them.

Unknown Armies explores other forms of symbolic magic as well. Adepts are people who gain magical power by pursuing personal obsessions. They are essentially schizophrenics who decide that they know what *really* matters, and the force of their will bends reality to conform to their delusion. Examples in the game include the Boozehound, who uses the power trip of alcohol consumption to fuel his destructive spells. The Fleshworker is obsessed with body image and body manipulation, moving from "cutting" behaviors to actually reshaping her flesh and that of others with supernatural force. The Vidiot turns watching television into a ritual act, using its conventions to manipulate daily life; for example, he can make someone remain completely calm in a stressful life situation by magically convincing the person that he's merely experiencing a rerun.

The game's supernatural elements are pervasive, but in every case they are based directly on modern life and modern culture. *Unknown Armies* is a Swiss army knife of metaphoric tools, allowing participants to deeply immerse themselves in symbolic constructs and explore archetypes and behaviors that exist in the real world. Participants can heighten their awareness of positive and negative traits in themselves, their friends and family, and their society, and adopt a wide variety of personas to experience these traits firsthand. This is the heart of the engagist ideal: interactive storytelling that is both entertaining and seriously thought-provoking.

Ongoing participants in the game frequently report the real-life effect of these metaphoric tools. Online discussions between participants often critique the daily news cycle by viewing the people and events through the lenses provided by the game. When American tourist Natalie Holloway disappeared while vacationing in Aruba during the summer of 2005, obsessive and out-of-proportion media coverage of her case generated substantial critique in the press. *Unknown Armies* participants analyzed this coverage in terms of the Messenger–Heisenberg Messenger rivalry, and proposed that a new archetype was taking shape: the Oppenheimer Messenger, in which reporting the facts actually destroys the facts.

Maybe the first of this new breed was Geraldo Rivera, who made up a story about being under fire, gave away troop movements while live and on camera, and pledged not to leave Afghanistan until Osama Bin Laden was dead, dead, dead, and yet he enjoys a degree of credibility that's not inconsequential. (Toner 2005)

Because of its engagist philosophy, *Unknown Armies* has worked itself into the mental toolsets of its participants and given them new ways to examine and critique the modern world. Any engagist work can do the same—and should.

Conclusion

We live in the real world, and our lives are full of real problems and real joys. When works of interactive storytelling can teach us how to solve those problems and discover those joys, while entertaining us just as novels, movies, and music do, these works become worthy of real cultural critique and join the great conversation of human thought. Such engagist works can utilize and expand our knowledge, immerse us in real ideas and cultures, and provide tools to explore behaviors and interpret events. Art, knowledge, performance, and imagination intersect therein and bestow profound gifts.

It has been thirty years since *Colossal Cave Adventure* introduced early computer gamers to its "twisty maze of little passages." We're still waiting for our *Sorrows of Young Werther,* our *Napoléon,* our *Sgt. Pepper's.* Endless regurgitations of dwarves and elves or action-packed recreations of Omaha Beach will not get us there. But genre is not the enemy; it is simply a tool we have clumsily wielded to middling effect. The real missing ingredient is intent, the authorial intent to create works that engage our world and lives. When future participants delve into that twisty maze of little passages and find themselves at its heart, we'll know we're doing something right.

Citations

C-Level. (2003) Description of *Waco: Resurrection.* http://waco.c-level.cc.

Gifford, Peter. (1999) "New to Tékumel?" http://www.tekumel.com.

Toner, Timothy. (2005). Email correspondence on the Unknown Armies RPG Mailing List.

Turner, Jonathan. (2005). Email correspondence with the author regarding "When Angels Deserve to Die".

Works Mentioned

Breaking the Ice. Emily Care Boss; Black & Green Games. 2005.

Colossal Cave Adventure. William Crowther, Don Woods; DECUS. 1976.

Delta Green. Dennis Detwiller, Adam Scott Glancy, John Tynes; Pagan Publishing. 1997.

Dungeons and Dragons. Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson; Tactical Studies Rules. 1974.

Empire of the Petal Throne. M.A.R. Barker; Tactical Studies Rules. 1975.

Kuma\War. Kuma Reality Games. 2004.

Max Payne. Remedy Entertainment. 2001.

Millennium's End. Charles Ryan; Chameleon Eclectic Entertainment, 1993.

Oregon Trail. Paul Dillenberger, Bill Heinemann, Don Rawitsch; Carleton College. 1971.

Power Kill. John Tynes; Hogshead Publishing. 1999.

Unknown Armies. Greg Stolze, John Tynes; Atlas Games. 2002.

Unreal. Epic Games. 1998.

Waco Resurrection. Mark Allen, Peter Brinson, Brody Condon, Jessica Hutchins, Eddo Stern, Michael Wilson; C-Level. 2003.

***John Scott Tynes**, also known as Rev, is a game designer and writer in Seattle. He's currently the Competition Manager for Microsoft's Imagine Cup global student software competition. Previously he was Lead Game Designer at Microsoft Studios Kids & Lifestyle Entertainment creating original Kinect games for children including Kinect Sesame Street TV. He founded Pagan Publishing and Armitage House and has worked or written for Bungie, Acclaim, Wizards of the Coast, Atlas Games, Steve Jackson Games, Daedalus Games, Chaosium, Salon, McSweeney's Online, The Stranger, The Escapist, Tablet, and many other companies and publications.*

The Greatest Story Ever Interacted With

by Maria Alexander

A great story reaches into us and takes root in our souls. It captures our devotion and imagination, our conversation and company. Those who are truly inspired by the tale expend enormous energy meeting and communicating with other people who have been similarly affected, possibly wearing clothing or symbols that reflect their affinity for that story. They read and re-read the story, debating what the author meant at times, drawing inferences and making interpretations. They might go so far as to create stories that extend the plotline, often incorporating themselves into these new stories so that the story lives on far beyond the first telling. The characters are real to them in a personal way that reaches into their everyday lives.

While it might sound like I'm talking about fans of *Harry Potter, Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Twilight*, I'm actually describing the behavior of those who practice Western religions, most notably Christianity, which is our greatest and most vibrant example of narrative interaction today. That's because when human beings are deeply affected by a story—whether it's of faith or fiction—they interact with that story in similar ways especially when it deals with themes of death, resurrection and a Magical Savior.

The Magical Savior

The Magical Savior is a strong motif in modern franchises where fan behavior most resembles the narrative interaction of Christians—in particular, the *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* novels and the *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Doctor Who* television shows.[1] We'll first look at the motif and then see how it's replicated in those franchises.

Many people are already familiar with the New Testament storyline, but for those less familiar, I'll summarize it here. A child is born in Bethlehem under auspicious circumstances. At 30 years of age he embarks on a three-year ministry to the Jews in Jerusalem where he gathers disciples, performs miracles, admonishes temple leaders and talks about the true nature of God—love, forgiveness and sacrifice. Many decide that Jesus is the Messiah foretold in the Old Testament who has come to rescue the Jews from their persecution and fulfill the Law. Jesus eventually upsets the status quo so badly when he claims to be the Son of God that he's arrested for blasphemy after betrayed to authorizes by his friend Judas. He is sentenced to death. In the climactic ending, Jesus is mocked for being The King of the Jews as he's forced to drag his own cross through the streets after being severely beaten by Roman soldiers. His supporters scatter in terror as he's nailed to the cross to suffer a horrific death as God's sacrificial lamb, taking on the sins of all mankind that they might be able to rejoin God again if they so believe in Him. Three days later, he is resurrected and appears to some of his followers.[2]

SPOILER ALERT: *For those who are not familiar with the details of the above-mentioned books and television series—including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's story, "The Final Problem" and even* Star Wars*—this paper may contain spoilers. Proceed at your own risk.*

One of the most beloved characters in literary history, Harry Potter is prepped through seven novels to eventually face off with the evil Voldemort, who had tried to kill him as a child but failed, killing Harry's parents instead. Harry's remaining Muggle family and the Slytherins bully him throughout the series. He has a small band of friends, namely Hermione and Ron, although that group grows with time to include Dumbledore's Army and its "Judas," Marietta Edgecombe. The final battle breaks out in the seventh book. Meeting Voldemort head on, Harry voluntarily goes to his death and the part of him that is Voldemort dies. He briefly meets his dead mentor Albus Dumbledore in the afterlife, and he's then resurrected.

In *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, Buffy is known as "the Chosen One" as she battles the forces of evil that escape the Hellmouth and try to destroy the world. Her comrades comprise "the Scoobies;" for a time, her soulful vampire boyfriend, Angel; and her "Watcher," Giles, who abandons her in later seasons. She dies and is resurrected twice in the television series: once in the first season, prompting the appearance of a second Slayer, and again at the end of the fifth season. Ultimately she saves humanity with the help of her friends, closing the Hellmouth forever.

One of the most popular and longest admired Magical Saviors in genre history is The Doctor in *Doctor Who*, a television series that first aired in the UK from 1963 to 1984, then reappeared from 1986 to 1989, to return once again in 2005 to the present. The Doctor is an alien humanoid who, with the help of his Companion(s), protects the human race against threats of annihilation. The Doctor's Companions occasionally abandon him by choice or death. In the new series, he feels isolated with or without Companions because he is the last living Time Lord. Like Jesus, he upsets the status quo. ("I'm usually called 'The Doctor', or 'The Caretaker', or 'Get Off My Planet', though the last one isn't so much a name, really...")[3] He has the unique ability to regenerate when he dies, although he can die permanently if he receives a second deathblow during the regeneration process. As of the end of Season 7, he's been resurrected ten times in bids to save humanity.

Second only to Harry Potter in the amount of fan fiction devoted to its characters and story lines, the *Twilight* saga riffs on the Magical Savior motif with Edward Cullen, a vampire who is over 100 years old. While initially reluctant to admit his love for the human Bella Swan, he saves her life many times. Themes of death, resurrection and immortality echo throughout all four of the books in the series, which features vampirism and lycanthropy. As Bella is dying during the violent birth of their daughter, Edward turns her into a vampire to save her—effectively killing and resurrecting her in the same moment.

For thousands of years, the magical savior motif has fueled the greatest stories of humanity. From Osiris and Dionysus to Tammuz and Mithras, the motif has traveled over the millennia. It's no wonder that the same themes seep into the most powerful tales of our time.

Narrative Interaction: Filling in the Gaps

Narrative interaction entails the myriad ways in which audiences contribute to and celebrate their favorite stories. Fan fiction—defined as the fiction produced by fans based on a popular novel, movie, TV show or other franchise—is one of the best known forms of interacting with a narrative. According to scholar Francesca Coppa, fan fiction "fill[s] the need of a mostly female audience for fictional narratives that expand the boundary of the official source products offered on the television and movie screen."[4] Transmedia storytelling pioneer Henry Jenkins says, "Fan fiction can be seen as an unauthorized expansion of these media franchises into new directions which reflect the reader's desire to 'fill in the gaps' they have discovered in the commercially produced material."

Fan fiction is only one type of narrative interaction or what Jenkins calls "participatory culture." He explains, "patterns of media consumption have been profoundly altered by a succession of new media technologies which enable average citizens to participate in the archiving, annotation, appropriation, transformation, and recirculation of media content. Participatory culture refers to the new style of consumerism that emerges in this environment."

But "participatory culture" didn't begin with the emergence of new technologies. Participation in the narrative of Christianity—including annotation, appropriation, transformation and recirculation—has been ongoing for centuries. The practice of storytelling to fill in the gaps predates Christianity itself.

According to Stephen Prothero, a Boston University religion scholar, *midrash* is storytelling in Judaism that fills in the gaps[5] of the Bible. Other sources claim it resolves problems in the Hebrew text. Modern Christians not only use *midrash* to illuminate messianic passages in the Old Testament, but some scholars assert that all of the Gospels and Acts are *midrash*.[6]

---

1. I am omitting two major franchises that fall into this category—*Star Wars* and *Star Trek*—due to both space constraints and because they bridge the gap between the pre-Twitter and Twitter eras. I am focusing on narratives whose popularity surged in the latter era as that seems to be more directly connected to Jenkins' "participatory culture" definition, which I will explain momentarily. This includes the new *Doctor Who* series.

2. For the purposes of this paper, I am accepting the narrative as set during the 4th Century in the Nicene Creed.

3. The Doctor in "The Doctor, the Widow and the Wardrobe," December 25, 2011, Season 7.

4. Bacon-Smith, Camille (2000). *Science Fiction Culture*. University of Pennsylvania Press. pp. 112–113. ISBN 978-0-8122-1530-4.

5. "My Take: I don't know if Jesus was married (and I don't care)," by **Stephen Prothero, Boston University religion scholar, CNN.com, September 21, 2012.**

6. "But in the end the result is a new perspective according to which we must view the gospels and Acts as analogous with the Book of Mormon, an inspiring pastiche of stories derived creatively from previous scriptures by a means of literary extrapolation." *New Testament Narrative as Old Testament Midrash* by Dr. Robert Price.

The only difference between *midrash* and fan fiction is that, unlike *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, an enormous number of people deem the Biblical story of the Magical Savior to be authentic. Because of this distinction, it can be difficult to recognize that Christians interact with their favorite narrative much the same way people do who have been deeply affected by other Magical Savior stories.

In the early centuries of Christianity, believers focused on those gaps regarding the nature of Jesus and his divinity (or lack thereof), as well as God and the Holy Spirit. In order to make sense of the Gospels, and therefore make sense of their own existence and relationship to God, they analyzed and extended the narrative until it fit their needs, using scripture to bolster their conclusions. Unfortunately, the early Church labeled some of the narrative expansions heresy rather than *midrash* because the stories included elements that didn't meet the approval of the unified Christian church as promulgated in AD 325 by the First Council of Nicea.[7]

Invitation to Participate

Fan fiction is considered an unauthorized expansion of the original franchise because authors rarely invite their readers to contribute to the narrative. Similar to interactive narrative designers, the "author" of the New Testament invites readers to participate and expand the original narrative—that is, within carefully established limits.

The first invitation comes in Romans 10:9, which states: "For if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved." A typical conversion prayer goes like this:

> Lord Jesus, I believe You died for me and that you are alive and listening to me now. I repent of my sins and ask Your forgiveness. From this moment on, I decide to live for You and no longer for myself, to do Your will and not mine. Make me the kind of person You want me to be. Show me the way to the Father. Now fill me with the Holy Spirit, Who will teach me how to live for You and how to tell the world You are my Savior and Lord. I love You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[8]

In Christianity, the very act of belief is participatory and the numerous activities following conversion contribute to one's own narrative: baptism, communion, confession and congregation. Millions of people over the last two millennia have participated in—that is, interacted with—the story of Jesus through these behaviors. No new technology has ever been necessary.

If it seems a little thin to think of belief as participatory, consider that critically acclaimed author Toni Morrison argues the very act of reading is participatory: "I never describe characters very much. My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and that I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it."[9]

These holes are not unlike the gaps that Coppa and Jenkins describe, right down to the physical description of Jesus, the lack of which has invited interpretation by artists for centuries.

But the strongest invitation comes in The Great Commission, which appears in Matthew 28:16-20: "Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.'" Believers actively engage with the story and its characters, not just through prayer and daily behaviors, but by recruiting others for engagement.

Note that the Gospel verses comprise a direct invitation to become part of the narrative, to insert yourself into the story so that you're interacting with Jesus and acting on his behalf. When a new believer accepts Jesus Christ as their personal savior, they personalize the story. This is not unlike when fan fiction authors draw readers into their narratives with the "Y/N" convention. "Y/N" indicates that the reader is to insert "your name" wherever it appears in the text. This convention specifically enables the reader to become one of the main characters of the story by inserting his or her name in the narrative.[10]

Forms of Participation

The participatory behavior of today's franchise fans goes far beyond media *midrash* while still resembling that of Christians. (And by extension Judaism, although some behaviors are clearly proscribed.) Everything from the symbols they wear to the way they congregate helps them interact with the original narrative. It's important to note that the Gospels do not explicitly command any specific behaviors beyond The Great Commission except for Jesus' commands to break bread and share wine "in remembrance of (him)" during The Last Supper, thus creating early Christian Eucharist traditions.

Symbols

We see them almost every day: crucifixes atop churches, fish on car bumpers, animated angels in email messages. Symbols are extremely important to most religions, and these in particular telegraph profound concepts in Christianity.

In every story of the Magical Savior, a symbol captures his or her death-defying powers. In Christianity, that symbol is the crucifix, either empty or depicting the suffering Christ. The cross is possibly the most recognizable symbol of death and resurrection in the world. Crucifixes not only adorn churches inside and out as a reminder of the risen Christ, but they are very commonly worn as jewelry, on clothing and as tattoos.


11


12


13

14

Another symbol is the *ichthys*—the fish used by early Christians to identify one another. It may or may not contain the Greek word within, which is an acronym for "Jesus Christ, God's Son, Savior." The ichthys is most commonly found these days on car bumpers.


15

7. This council focused primarily on the Arian heresy, as well as the Nicene creed and the date Easter was to be celebrated.
8. © 2012 Presentation Ministries.
9. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*,t
10. This convention is currently more popular in fan fiction for the band One Direction than anywhere else, but its origins are in traditional fan fiction.
11. http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2012/03/12/britain-fights-christians-right-to-wear-cross-infuriating-activists/comment-page-2/ (image captured 12/7/12).
12. http://www.publicdomainpictures.net/view-image.php?image=3407&picture=church-cro (image captured 12/7/12)
13. http://rlv.zcache.com/ (image captured 12/7/12)
14. http://about-lady.blogspot.com/2011/12/cross-tattoos-designs.html (image captured 12/7/12)
15. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ichthys_C-Class.jpg (image captured 12/7/12)

Harry Potter

Like the cross, Harry Potter's lightning bolt scar represents the overcoming of death. It marks his initial defiance of death at Voldemort's hands and presages that one day he'll overcome Voldemort once and for all.

Fans wear the scar on their foreheads and other body parts,

as well as on jewelry and clothing.


16


17

16. http://img0.etsystatic.com/000/0/5570420/il_570xN.195125744.jp (image captured 12/7/12)
17. http://www.redbubble.com/people/perdita00/works/7599721-lightning-bolt-potter-style (image captured 12/7/12)

Doctor Who

The police box—also known as the T.A.R.D.I.S. (Time and Relative Dimension in Space)—ties together the many Doctors, representing his numerous resurrections. It also symbolizes mastery of death through time travel.

Fans display this particular symbol on buildings, jewelry, clothing, car bumpers and numerous household items such as jewelry boxes, cookie jars, tattoos,

18

and even bars [19]

20

18. http://www.tumblr.com/tagged/tardis-tattoo (image captured 12/7/12)
19. You're drunker on the inside.
20. http://www.tqsmagazine.co.uk/7-wonderfully-wacky-tardis-inspired-creations/(image captured 12/7/12)

A Word About Tattoos

The most permanent way of personalizing a narrative is to make it a part of your very flesh. Tattoos are extremely popular for both Christians[21] and fans of modern narratives. Images of Christ, his disciples and doves are just as popular as images of the characters in stories like *Harry Potter* and even *The Hunger Games*. Plus, we see tattoo quotes from scripture as much as from books, movies and television episodes.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer

The stake is the most prominent symbol in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* although the cross necklace she wears comes a close second. Representing the final death of vampires, the ultimate weapon against resurrection of the dead, the stake appears in all of the usual places in fandom. But since the stake by itself can be misconstrued as belonging to one of many franchises, we often find the initial "B" or her full name attached to the stake.


22

23

24

21. Some of the more conservative sects do not allow tattoos, either because they shun adornment or because they follow many of the Old Testament admonishments in Leviticus against making marks on the body.
22. http://img3.etsystatic.com/000/0/6242014/il_fullxfull.339011299.jpg (image captured 12/7/12)
23. http://www.angryyoungandpoor.com/store/pc/viewPrd.asp?idproduct=163125&idcategory=0 (image captured 12/7/12)
24. http://tattoosinatlantabymelissacapo.blogspot.com/2012/08/creating-tattoos-that-bring-back-fond.html (image captured 12/7/12) Note how the stake is the spine of the "B."

We even see some aggressive cross-placement of the symbol as franchises compete:

25

Speaking of Twilight...

The apple in *Twilight* is probably the most interesting symbol as it ties into both the new and biblical narratives. In traditional Old Testament readings, the "fruit" from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil—commonly described by Western culture as an apple—represents spiritual death. But in Mormonism and medieval narratives such as the poem *Paradise Lost*[26], the apple refers to the Fortunate Fall (also known as the *Felix Culpa*) where Adam and Eve's disobedience to God by eating of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, and subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden, are considered fortunate because otherwise mankind could not have received the full extent of God's goodness: Christ's redemptive death.


27

25. http://www.jinx.com/p/buffy_staked_edward_t_shirt.html (image captured 12/7/12)
26. An epic poem composed by the radical, heretical Puritan John Milton, *Paradise Lost* is an excellent example of interaction with the original narrative to fill in "the gaps."
27. http://astore.amazon.com/stepheniemeye-20/images/0316160172 (image captured 12/7/12)

But author Stephenie Meyer, who incidentally is a devout Mormon, says the apple symbolizes something more essential:

> The apple on the cover of Twilight represents "forbidden fruit." I used the scripture from Genesis... because I loved the phrase "the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil." Isn't this exactly what Bella ends up with? A working knowledge of what good is, and what evil is. The nice thing about the apple is it has so many symbolic roots. …In the end, I love the beautiful simplicity of the picture. To me it says: choice.

It's clear in the story that Bella considers her choice—that is, her decision to die and be resurrected as a vampire—a *felix culpa*. Fans seem to agree.

As for the symbol itself and how fans display it, a simple Google search reveals that it matches the previously described patterns.

Communal Interaction

Almost every organized religion hosts regular gatherings for believers to read and re-read the source material, to listen to an authority figure expound on excerpts, and to engage in community. The desire for relationships based on a similar interest in the narrative drives people together in many different forums both online and offline. They write, perform and listen to related music; create art; and even reenact the original narratives in sacred plays. In Catholicism, the Eucharist Tradition amplifies the sacred play as its practitioners relive The Last Supper, with the belief that the wine and bread are actually turning into Christ's blood and flesh. Believers celebrate special days related to the original narrative such as Christmas (the birthday of Christ) and Easter (his death and resurrection).

Fandom engages in all of these same communal behaviors. *Harry Potter* reading clubs like the "Harry Potter Alliance," celebrations of Harry's birthday (which is July 31, in case you'd forgotten, Muggle) and *Twilight* conventions (for the "Twihards") are just a few examples. Annual conventions such as Gallifrey One for the Whovians have been around for decades. And while *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* reenactments are not quite as ritualistic as Passion plays, they demonstrate the same desire to act out and therefore commemorate pivotal moments from the narrative.

Music

Like Christian musicians who write songs inspired by the Bible, "wrock bands" play music known as Wizard Rock, which is inspired solely by the Harry Potter universe. *Doctor Who* fans have penned a rich collection of fan music called Time Lord Rock or "trock" for short. Buffy has inspired an enormous amount of music, which isn't surprising seeing that music was an important element of the series. But what *is* surprising is the number of actors in the television series who have bands of their own. These aren't exactly hymns praising The Creator—if you don't count songs about Joss Whedon—but they do praise The Creation.

Online "Midrash"

Like *midrash* itself, sites such as Mugglenet, The Leaky Cauldron and others once tried to dissect the events of *The Half-Blood Prince*, as many fans couldn't accept the death of Albus Dumbledore, posting scores of essays and hosting endless discussions and debates. The conversation continues to this day on many fan sites about the series as fans reminisce, review and even dispute events in the books. The same is true for the other series and then some. *Doctor Who* sites like Timelash.com, WhovianNet, DoctorWho.com and many others—not to mention any nook or cranny of social media—serve as outlets for fans to debate the events laid out in the series as to how they might affect *Who* cannon. Many times, fans are simply debating what the hell happened in the first place. The tolerance for "heresy" is of course higher than for those early Christian sects, but the discussions can be just as heated.

The Changing Story

Who wrote the "original narrative" of Christianity? Scholars have hotly debated authorship of the Gospels for ages. They've also called into question exactly who called Jesus "The Savior" in the first place because, while Jesus made the blasphemous claim that he was the Son of God, he never called himself The Messiah. Therefore if it really was someone outside of the narrative who called Jesus the Messiah, then participation is what changed the story from one of a magical man to that of a Magical Savior.

The process of participation changes the narrative. One of the more striking examples of this occurred in Mormonism with the tale told by Joseph Smith. The angel Moroni told him where to find a "buried book of golden plates as well as other artifacts, including a breastplate and a set of silver spectacles with lenses composed of seer stones, which had been hidden in a hill near his home."[28] With this event Smith not only used the [Y/N] self-insertion of fan fiction but he sparked the development of a whole new narrative tangential to the original, eventually revamping the story and borrowing its terms and character names to create a brand new cosmology and mythology, complete with a *felix culpa*.

This sort of metamorphosis happens all the time in fan fiction as authors expand the original content both to explore new stories with the old characters and to insert themselves into the narrative. Bella is an orphan, Edward is human and has a girlfriend named Tanya, or the wolves show up a few minutes later… Sometimes the story changes to the point where it's no longer recognizable. The mega blockbuster *50 Shades of Gray,* for example, was initially *Twilight* fan fiction.

A popular version of fan fiction creates a romantic or sexual relationship between characters where none existed previously. An enormous number of stories couple the male characters (in what's called "slash"), as well as female characters ("femmeslash") and even heterosexual partnerships ("het" or "general" slash). While not as popular a practice in ancient times, both medieval Catharists and modern authors have changed the narrative around Jesus' relationship to Mary Magdalene. Modern writings include the nonfiction, *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*[29], and the novel that cannibalized it, *The Da Vinci Code*[30]. Referring to the recently uncovered Coptic papyrus that purportedly reveals Jesus had a wife, some commentators even describe the papyrus writings as "fan fiction."

In an example of contemporary Christian fan fiction, the *Left Behind* series extends and therefore changes the narrative of The Book of Revelation. The series weaves the enigmatic imagery described by John of Patmos with references from other epistles to fill in the "gaps" between prophecy and future. Author Tim LaHaye states that, "*Left Behind* is the first fictional portrayal of events that are true to the literal interpretation of Bible prophecy." Yet its premillenial dispensationalist interpretation of the bible is considered less "literal" and more fictive by almost all other Christian denominations besides evangelicals.[31] Ironically, John of Patmos warns in Revelation 22:19, "And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book."[32] This makes Revelation the one book of the New Testament that discourages participation, if for no other reason than for fear of what might happen should one accidentally subtract in the process of adding.

---

28. Smith, Joseph, Jr.; Mulholland, James; Thompson, Robert B.; Phelps, William W.; Richards, Willard (1839–1843), "History of the Church, Ms. A–1", in Jessee, Dean C, Personal Writings of Joseph Smith, Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2002, ISBN 1-57345-787-6.

29. By Michael & Leight, Richard & Lincoln, Henry Baigent, Jonathan Cape, © 1982.

30. By Dan Brown, Doubleday, © 2003.

31. "Beam Me Up Theology" by John Dart, former religion writer for the *Los Angeles Times*.

32. King James 2000 Bible.

But it's not just the story that changes. The names of the participants can change when they come in contact with the narrative. For example, the apostle Saul's name changed to Paul after his conversion. No one is certain why Saul changed to Paul at that time. It's possible that he chose to use his "Gentile" name because he felt it would be more effective in preaching to the Gentiles. Yet in the Orthodox and Catholic churches, the baby is given a baptismal name in addition to its birth name. While this can be and often is the same name as the birth name, it doesn't have to be. Regardless, the type of name—usually those of saints, angels and other bible characters—reflects that child's permanent connection to the Christian narrative. Reminiscent of the baptismal name, fanfic authors and artists almost as a rule use pen names, creating a unique persona within the world of participation.[33] While some authors use one pen name for all of the fan fiction that they write across franchises, others use a unique pen name for each franchise. The latter practice allows an author to write for various franchises without having to deal with the friction that occasionally occurs when other authors realize that he or she writes fan fiction for a "rival" franchise or genre.

Participation Creates Ownership

As fan writers and artists interact with the storyline and "fill in gaps," they develop a sense of ownership. The participants no longer see the story belonging solely to the original author because they have fed it with their emotional, intellectual and creative energy. The result sometimes does produce a work that's different enough to garner a book deal with a major publisher, such as what happened with *50 Shades of Grey* and *Mortal Instruments*.

Their feelings, however, go far beyond authorial proprietorship. Whether it's a tale of fiction or faith, the personal investment is just as strong. For example, Dumbledore's death sent fans scrambling back to the books, combing the pages for clues to see if he was Obi Wan-dead or just Sherlock Holmes-dead. This mirrors the reaction of both early Christians and modern believers when Jesus fails to return as predicted or when the Rapture doesn't materialize. Even the intensity of the outrage over the unexpected addition of Dawn Summers, Buffy's little sister, bordered on bizarre. Because story franchises are crossing from books to screen, story participants embrace the behavior and values of the original story world to some degree. They might even be so rigid as to expect the actors who embody the characters to embrace those same behaviors and values. We've seen it for years in other franchises, such as the *X-Files*, but the strongest example occurred recently with the betrayal of Rob Pattinson who plays Edward in *Twilight* by his real-life girlfriend Kristen Stewart who plays Bella. When the two actors became romantically involved, they took an element of the story and made it real. At first, the fans supported it enthusiastically because it followed the script, so to speak. But when Stewart betrayed Pattinson and broke the story rules, fans went ballistic, some video taping their hysterics and others physically attacking her.

Participation isn't acceptable by those who become too much a part of the original story, such as Stewart and Pattinson when they took on real-life roles resembling their onscreen relationship. They have to tell the story "right." Only outside participants can interact with the story, change it and own it. While not a part of the original Jesus story, famous televangelists like Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker and Ted Haggard took on the roles of Jesus' original disciples and broke the rules of the New Testament narrative with their sexual transgressions. The members of their congregations were deeply upset. They didn't physically attack anyone or make Internet accusations, but in the case of Ted Haggard they did grieve and express anger, and about 20% even left the church.

What This Means for Interactive Storytellers

Death. Resurrection. Salvation at the hand of the Magical Savior. Why do stories with these themes provoke such a strong need to interact? Why do we want to become part of these stories, to even own them to some degree? Is it a way for us to deal with our own vulnerability and mortality?

Regardless of what it means to fans, interactive storytellers should take note. Whether you are creating an alternate reality game, a live-action role-playing game, an interactive theater experience or something entirely new, people must *want* to participate in your story regardless of the interactive features. This means you must focus first on the story itself and not the design. As we've seen in these examples, participation is spontaneous and prolific when the narrative captures the reader's heart and imagination. When creating the story, consider using the Magical Savior motif, as well as themes of death and resurrection. Think about symbols, too. Raise the stakes as high as possible and infuse your story with deep emotion, strong relationships and catharsis. Your design should aid and abet the participatory behaviors that will then naturally arise. If your story is powerful enough, the participation that results can create not just an interesting online experience or evening of intrigue, but rather a cultural force majeure.

May the plot be ever in your favor.

33. See the terrific variety of pen names on Fanfiction.net and even DeviantArt.

Maria Alexander *is an author and interactive narrative designer living in Los Angeles. In addition to publishing numerous stories and poems, she's created virtual worlds, online games, live-action roleplaying games, and interactive theatre events. She has a special passion for transmedia storytelling. And she is sometimes mistaken (?) for River Song.*

Gaming the Players

Four meditations on the physics of building games out of humans

by J Li

I. What Our Games are Made Of

Live action plays by different rules than tabletop roleplaying. A writer can't make a larp about all the things she might make a tabletop game about. A player can't contribute as wide a range of characters or content.

This is because in larp, what happens gets established by what players *do*, whereas in tabletop, what happens gets established by what players *describe*. Words are cheap, but actions are expensive. The more *live* an action is, the tougher it usually gets to represent. Live is just a harder medium to make things in.

This is both the blessing and the curse of larp. Being surrounded by a reality built of real-time actions is profoundly immersive. Few things are as exciting as watching a story unfold around you, while you play a meaningful part in it. But regardless of the standard of *live-ness*, some actions can be vastly more difficult to represent than others. This creates a gravity *across the medium* toward stories built out of those actions that can be expressed more easily.

That's why so many larps end up being about politics, relationships, beliefs, interactions, decisions, and so on. There's a home field advantage for plots that can be represented by a bunch of people moving around a room, handling simple objects, and talking to each other. Even if you tried to write a game about the challenges of survival in the cold, dark void of space, it would probably end up being about how people felt and talked about it.

Larp is more often about humanities simply because humans are the basic building blocks— after all, people are the only things complex enough to carry a plot that can be in a game without our having to build or buy them.

This makes it impactful, then, that there is also gravity *within an individual player* toward characters who are more similar to herself. When larping, every detail of every action we take, from where we stand, to how we hold ourselves, to our choice of words or hints of emotion, become a part of the in-game reality. We can't choose most of that— and even if we do consciously make the bigger decisions, it's often the confluence of smaller choices that shapes a game's direction. But where our minds can't control every little detail of our actions, just like they never do in real life, we default to our unconscious habits.

And it's not just OOC mannerisms that come into play. It's also not easy to roleplay different modes of thinking and feeling, especially when immersively improvising in real time. A character might react differently to perceived hostility than the player would, but she's far more likely to consider the same things hostile. A character could have different feelings about a situation than her player, but her emotional range is probably about the same. And if suspicions are aroused, then where exactly is the line between character and player intuition?

I once had a player come to me in angry, panicked tears in the middle of a week long game. His character had just escaped from a harrowing fight. I thought he would be delighted, but instead he was distraught that his character would be unable to attend any other important events, and was thus practically removed from the game. I tried to reassure him that his injuries were not severe enough to hold him back from further involvement, but it didn't seem to make a difference. It took me a long time before I understood that his concern came from the fact his enemy had used an ability to leave a disfiguring facial scar. The player felt that his character was paralyzed from going out in public, in a way that wasn't affected by a war raging and the fate of the world at stake. I cheered him by undoing the scar, but I walked away feeling like I had learned far more about the player than I had about the character.

In order to play someone whose social mannerisms are really different from you, you have to be a skilled actor. In order to play someone who experiences details in the world differently from you, you have to be sort of zen. I know players who are one, and a couple who are both— but the majority of players I've met are neither.

And that's great. But it means that we have to be prepared to work with what's really going on inside players' heads— because that's what our games will be made of.

II. Dirty Secrets

In the past, I had a secret trick. The more games I ran, the more I stopped believing in this mythical wall between IC (in character) and OOC (out of character). When someone asked me for larpwriting advice, I would confide that the biggest lesson I had was that the players are all playing the game, but the GM's real job is to game the players. What I meant was that everyone wants the shelter of feeling as though the game is a completely fictional creation, but in truth it's built out of the inner world of the players, and the person who is running it needs to know not just how to run their characters but how to run *them*.

Now, I don't think it's such a secret anymore. I no longer think that people need to be sheltered from the existence and impact of their own subconscious. I do think that larp could benefit from an open, honest, transparent analysis of how player psychology really behaves.

Most of all, though, I think we should embrace two aspects of larp that have typically been considered dirty laundry.

The first is wish fulfillment. Where I come from, wish fulfillment is a very bad word. But as a designer and a GM, I *love* wish fulfillment. I never learn more about someone than by watching the things they do with their imagination when they think that no one is judging. It's often condemned as artless, or crass, but you cannot have high art without deep motivation. I think it's an important part of gaming that all dreams are beautiful, even if those dreams are on our own behalf.

Larping a personal wish is not a substitute for living it. But especially for those desires we guard quietly, it gives us practice to master them— whether it be toward making them someday come true, accepting that they can't come true, or making sure that they never come true. Wishing for an experience holds a secret, and wisdom can follow from chasing it.

The second thing I think we could embrace is player drama. Another bad word, associated with toxicity, messiness, irrelevance and destruction. But this is because we only discuss player relations when they're bad. In truth, the same forces that lead us to lose so much to poor player relations will also causes us to gain so much from good player relations.

The habits by which players interact shape both the IC and OOC world. Player relations lie at the intersection of the interactive social with the player subconscious. Since larp tends to engender both social-heavy plots and subconscious-heavy characters, that means that OOC politics is a strong influence in IC reality. Like any other mechanic, it's literally a part of the game. And that means that handling it should be a part of the design.

But that is also great. People put their real passions into larp because larp holds an open place for passions to go. Players go to a game because they want an experience in which their passions are moved. The game takes up those passions, mixes them up, shuffles them around, intertwines them with each other. And if it's a well-designed game, it leads them to flow back out the other end, to return changed back into the players' hearts.

III. Intense Conversation

A larp is, fundamentally, a conversation—a very, very high bandwidth conversation, incredibly nuanced, about a topic that we could never convey in a million words. Maybe about it's a particular feeling, or a way for things to work, or a type of situation, or something else.

Each player brings to the table what he personally has to say, contained mostly in his unconscious. His conscious character choices may shape which slice of all that he has to offer will be put forth, but at the end of the day he can only say what he carries with him.

The playing of the game is the incredible confluence of what everyone has to say. It does not happen in chronological sequence, but rather simultaneously across time, where an action at the end and an event at the beginning may be different parts of the same word.

Each scenario, itself, hosts the conversation differently. Some may serve forward topics to converse on, and facilitate that conversation. Others merely give topic suggestions and leave the players to choose which to pursue. Still others offer their own strong voice into the conversation, stringently drive the subject matter, and conduct a dialogue with the players. But every game will be different as every set of players takes the conversation in a different direction.

Something happens when you talk: you grow closer. When players' voices join in play for a long period time, they build an incredible amount of common understanding. And that understanding is the more powerful because it touches on topics for which there are no words.

But common understanding has both advantages and risks. On one hand, you gain both enlightenment and intimacy. On the other, you grow habits, shortcuts, and assumptions. When the reality that you share with someone is crisscrossed with intense conversations past, it's both easier to visit together from idea to idea, and harder to notice the gaps in between.

IV. Gaming The Players

Because much intense, subconscious, and interpersonal content is in play when players larp together, the best way to game the players has everything to do with the shape of the group the larp is being run for.

There are so many dimensions that groups could vary on— gaming experience, perhaps, or demographics, or life backgrounds. A beautiful thing about larp is that each difference has an impact. The one that matters the most to me, though, is the difference between a group that larps together once and one that larps together over and over.

Playing a one-shot with strangers is like a one-night stand: unpredictable, perhaps a bit intoxicating, usually eye-opening. It has the advantage that you can trot out your old ideas and be proud that they feel exciting and new to your collocutors. And when that happens, it is quite likely that you will learn something new about a familiar topic by way of their unfamiliar response. You grow much wider understanding about a given conversation topic by larping it many times with strangers.

Larping with an old, familiar group is more like a marriage. If it's a group you enjoy gaming with, it's a marriage of love. (If it's the only group around, it's probably more like a marriage of convenience.) At the beginning, you were excited to explore one another, eager to hear more of each other's voice with each subsequent game. Over time, you grew familiar with what each person had to say, but enjoyed the conversation just to hear them say it again anyway. As even more time went on, you stopped having anything new to say, and the games passed in unremarkable silence, interspersed with shorthand actions representing elaborate chains of thought. Assumptions and habits formed, and it grew harder to say anything simple and unadorned because of the weight of all of those extra conclusions attached.

Just as bringing richness and color into a one-night stand is completely different from bringing it into a marriage, so is running a game for strangers different from running it for a community.

To succeed in the former, you might create opportunities for inspired improvisation, make sure the best moments shine through, perhaps connect the dots loosely and let the dance do the rest.

But to be really, really successful in the latter, you actually need to tackle the community itself.

Is the level of mutual commitment high?

Do players want to make sure other players get what they need?

Does everyone occasionally feel challenged?

Do we embrace being a part of fulfilling one another's wish fulfillment desires? (And, like in a marriage, are we prepared to have a conversation about it when some of those desires are inevitably taboo?)

Where the one-night-stand succeeds by letting the brightest voices lead, the marriage succeeds by making sure that no one is left behind. Compromising in the former is a kindness, but compromising in the latter is an investment toward everyone having more of what they need in the long run.

Doing something untested, stupid, or disruptive could ruin the entire experience for a one-shot. But encouraging abject experiment failures in a community allows for innovation and growth. The one-shot's greatest threat is failing. But the community's greatest threat is the moment when there is nothing left to offer each other, and nothing new to do.

J Li *is a predominantly larp writer who loves running gaming communities as much as running games. She is the creator and former puppet master of the Stanford Gaming Society. In larp writing, she goes for density of plot, ease of play, and long-term sustainability. She's not involved with Nordic larp, but is influenced by Bay Area values like simplicity, experimentation, and user-focus. Parlor Larps and other games at* shiftingforest.com*, dialogue on G+ at* bit.ly/XYgkSK.

Revisiting the Threefold Model

by John Kim

How did it start?

The Threefold Model came out of discussions on the newsgroup rec.games.frp.advocacy in 1997. The term was coined by Mary Kuhner in a July 1997 post, but more people became familiar with it through a "Frequently Asked Questions" document, written by myself in October 1998.

The FAQ describes the model in more detail, but briefly, it postulates a three-way split for how people view and make decisions within an RPG. In gamism, situations are resolved so that play is a fair challenge to player skill. In simulationism, situations are resolved as consistent, logical consequence from in-game causes. In dramatism, situations are resolved to create a satisfying storyline.

What It Represents

The model does not represent goals or rewards. Rather, it represents three approaches to logical decision-making within or about the game. Given many possibilities in the game, logical decisions must be based on premises. If a person doesn't know what to do next in the game, they need a basis for doing so. As gamemaster, do you make the call that is most fair, most real, or most dramatically interesting? As player, do you make the choice that most demonstrates skill, that best fits your character, or that best enhances the storyline?

The rewards for play are generally emotional rather than part of a logical decision-making process. We play for the social experience, the vicarious thrill, the cathartic release, or various other personal reasons. We may emotionally prefer one of those models, but we also have preferences that go far beyond those models. One player might like big fight scenes, and another might prefer science fiction over fantasy. The other personal preferences don't form a broad model for logical decision-making, however.

A few players might play for logical real-world goals such as practice in language or math skills, or learning history or science. However, such logical goals tend to be independent of most in-game decisions. You aren't going to decide whether or not to charge straight through to the leader based on which choice would help your math skills.

Gamer Divisions at the Time

In its original form, the model was created in the mid-1990s. At the time, there was a sharp division among role-players between Dungeons & Dragons and White Wolf's Storyteller system games. TSR's Dungeons & Dragons was still very popular but its popularity was seen as waning, while White Wolf's Storyteller games were in their heyday. Larps mirrored this, with a strong split between home-grown fantasy boffer larps and White Wolf's Mind's Eye Theater. GURPS retained a proliferating series of books and had a solid following as well, along with other tabletop systems and larps with a focus on realism. Several vocal splits echoed the Threefold Model fairly closely.

Among other gamers, D&D and fantasy larps were criticized for rewarding killing and its emphasis on collecting experience points—gamist features. White Wolf games were criticized for pretentious material and players along with linear plots—dramatist features. GURPS was criticized for detailed mechanics, involved math, and prosaic results—simulationist features.

During the 1990s, the overall trend had been towards more dramatist games—including White Wolf's World of Darkness and its imitators, but also cinematic action games including Shadowrun, Deadlands, and Torg. This changed starting with the resurgence of third edition Dungeons & Dragons in 1999. In particular, many players reacted against the advice in storytelling and cinematic games to have their storylines predetermined by the gamemaster or module author. This was also the time when independent story games and Nordic art larps were emerging as their own scenes.

How did it change things?

Previous models of role-playing were generally pitched as "player types"—implying that players had fixed personality types that guided their play. One of the earliest models was expressed by Glenn Blacow in his 1980 article "Aspects of Adventure Gaming". He postulated four basic types of RPG players: "Role-Playing", "Story Telling", "Powergaming", and "Wargaming". The former is described as focusing on character lives, making characters "as alive as the players who created them"—related to simulationism though the language differs. Blacow's "Story Telling" matches closely with dramatism, and "Wargaming" with gamism. "Powergaming" players seem like less mature version of wargamers—still interested in challenges and competition, but disliking any setbacks or defeat.

Also common is a simple two-sided model that contrasts more serious with less serious. This was expressed clearly in third edition D&D, written at the same time as the Threefold Model was being formulated. The new D&D suggested that styles varied between the extremes of "Kick in the Door" and "Deep-Immersion Storytelling".

The Threefold Model changed the landscape mainly by looking at the types more broadly than just pre-set types of players. It could be applied equally to players, game masters, and game designs. Further, both players and game masters could follow different modes in different situations. In addition, it emphasized the split between drama and simulation that was sometimes glossed over in two-way splits.

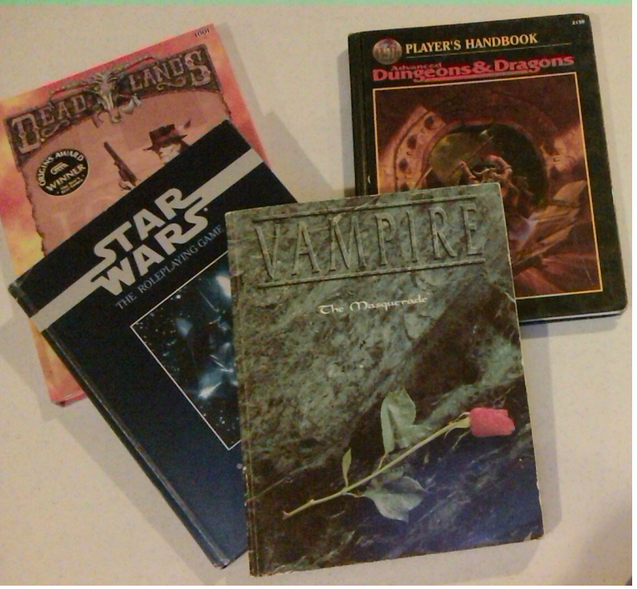
How was it adapted?

Within a year, the model was discussed on other forums, including discussion lists for the game Sorcerer and the website The Gaming Outpost, as well as overseas in Nordic larp circles. In January 1999, Ron Edwards' essay "System Does Matter" showed a version of his "GNS" system that closely resembled the Threefold Model. In it, a simulationist player "is satisfied if the system 'creates' a little pocket universe without fudging." A narrativist players "is satisfied if a roleplaying session results in a good story." A gamist players "is satisfied if the system includes a contest which he or she has a chance to win."

However, in October 2001, Edwards posted a more lengthy essay entitled "GNS and Other Matters of Role-Playing Theory"—and followed with more essays. These drastically changed the definitions for the three categories. Most notably, they classify many games that explicitly espouse story as the goal and structure (such as White Wolf's Storyteller games) as simulationist. In the Threefold, simulation is an uncommon third option compared to gamism of D&D or the dramatism of Storyteller. In the revised GNS, simulationism is roughly all of the first 25 years of RPGs.

This difference is a frequent point of confusion and/or controversy. Many people interpret "simulation" as being specifically about simulating an alternate reality—but the revised GNS simulationism was much broader. It even encompassed games that had unique mechanics for story elements, such as the diceless game Theatrix.

In some sense, this unification paralleled changes in the RPG market. In 2001, third edition Dungeons & Dragons and its d20 system were in the process of briefly unifying the market. For a number of years, most new



tabletop RPG systems would either use the d20 system or a close parallel.

At the same time, the model was also adopted among live-action role-players in Nordic countries. Petter Bøckman formalized an adaptation of the Threefold Model published in 2003, though it was already referred to as a "classic". This kept to the original definitions of gamist and dramatist, but replaced simulationist with the term "immersionist". That had similar rhetoric, but emphasized in-depth probing of character while treating the fiction as reality. This was included in the Threefold description of simulationism, but the name simulation emphasized the external more.

Where Is It Headed?

GNS remains a controversial topic of discussion in most forums, and the original Threefold Model is often considered the same as GNS. The divisions among gamers have shifted, however. Dungeons & Dragons remain the core of the market, but there is a schism between the solidly gamist 4th edition and the more moderate Pathfinder. In addition, there is a small but significant simulationist movement for earlier editions of D&D, known as the Old School Renaissance, and a significant dramatist movement of self-published "story games"—which have explicitly influenced many new releases such as the Dresden Files RPG and Marvel Heroic Roleplaying.

Larps remain primarily home-grown and thus have more regional variation. Still, broad categories such as fantasy boffer larps, Nordic art larps, and White Wolf style larps remain distinct categories—and many similar splits appear among these groups, such as clash between immersionist larps that focus on character details and dramatist freeforms or "jeepforms" that encourage scene breaks and stepping out of character.

Where Should It Go?

The key to using the Threefold Model is understanding each of the three types as a mode of logical thought. They are not goals or personality types, and they can support different goals of play. For example, following the logical consequences of decisions as if they were real can be a powerful exploration of ethical issues—something that has often been associated with drama and story. By accepting these as modes, we can look past them at emotional and social goals of games.

References

Blacow, Glenn. "Aspects of Adventure Gaming". Different Worlds #10 (October 1980).

Edwards, Ron. "System Does Matter". http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/11/ (1999)

Gade, Morten; Thorup, Line; Sander, Mikkel (editors). As Larp Grows Up: Theory and Methods in Larp. http://www.laivforum.dk/kp03_book/ (2003)

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. He lives in the San Francisco Bay area, where he works for an educational non-profit. cf.* www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/

Good Play for Game Designers

You are already a good player. Are you using good play as the foundation for your game design?

by Jason Morningstar

Players are underrated. As a community we spend a lot of time thinking about how to facilitate, how to lead, how to organize, how to design. These are high prestige, high status activities that require discipline and skill. A great game master can garner a lot of praise, and a great writer or designer can see their influence reverberate far and wide. While everybody loves a great player, they are often regarded as a happy accident, something precious and appreciated but not something to be celebrated or even *made*.

Perhaps this should change. The skill of a great player—their *playcraft*—is foundational to a great game. Proportions will vary with style and approach, but in contrast to designer and facilitator, what do the players bring to a game, and how much attention gets paid to their contribution to its success? The skills that comprise solid playcraft are skills game designers should be paying close attention to, for obvious reasons.

What follows is an outline of positive player behavior. The individual items run the gamut from highly social to highly procedural. Many of these suggestions overlap. If you are listening actively, for example, you are probably also listening more than you talk. If you are strongly advocating for your character, you are almost certainly also accepting gifts of adversity and confrontation. It's worth noting that this is not holy writ, and not every item is going to apply to every game. Similarly, a design that deliberately and transgressively contravenes one or more of these rules could be amazing.

If you are designing a game, this outline presents a list of behaviors your rules should probably support if you can, procedurally or otherwise. If you are facilitating a game, this outline presents a list of behaviors you should probably model and encourage. If you are playing a game... do this stuff.

Playcraft

Be Generous

Listen and share: Generosity means giving freely, sharing, and accepting what others share in return. Be patient and kind.

Listen intently, all the time.
Find the group's vibe and go along with it. Listen more than you talk.

Incorporate and reincorporate others' ideas. Reduce, reuse and recycle the fiction.
Think of yourself as a conservator of other people's genius. Using someone else's idea is a wonderful gift to them.

Offer ideas when necessary or appropriate
Even a conservator needs to bust out and paint something occasionally, to stay fresh and keep their skills up. Your contribution is a gift to other players looking for things to reincorporate themselves.

Grab the spotlight when appropriate, but shine it elsewhere more often
This is the performative adjunct to "listen more than you talk:"—balance attention generously and gracefully. Happily give the gift of your interest and enthusiasm.

As a game designer, do you procedurally or socially reward kindness and generosity? Is listening valued, either explicitly or implicitly?

***J. Tuomas Harviainen**'s **The Tribunal** is an intense short-form live action game that completely relies on players' ability to listen attentively and share the spotlight —twelve characters find themselves in a life-and-death pressure cooker that demands discussion, debate, and decision. The fictional situation expertly molds player behavior and effectively forces generous play.*

Plot and Scheme

Be interesting and make trouble: As a player you should constantly be looking for opportunities to complicate and challenge, judiciously acting on those opportunities in the service of a better experience for everyone.

Make your character interesting to everyone, including yourself.
Aim to delight. Use humor and pathos, strive for a well-realized and sympathetic character.

Have strong, clear goals and motivations as a player *and* a character
Know what you want and know what your character wants. If those two things are different, so much the better.

Explicitly and implicitly tie your character to others.
If you have the opportunity to establish existing relationships, dive in—be sisters, be lovers, be rivals. If relationships are fixed, amplify and build and transform. Make it complicated and messy and interesting.

Give your character weaknesses and hooks.
Trust your fellow players to use your vulnerability to make the game (and your character's life) more fun, by some definition of fun. Characters in safety may not lead interesting lives.

Accept gifts of lower status, adversity and confrontation.
Danger, humiliation and defeat are the finest tokens of esteem one can bestow on a player. That you are worth endangering, humiliating or defeating is the highest praise. Strive to return the favor.

Build, escalate and break patterns.
It is very common to form social patterns, and this is a fundamental play activity. Be aware of the patterns you build, and seek to intensify and ultimately transform them. An obvious example—if you begin with a rival, make them a murderous rival, and then fall in love with them.

As a game designer, does your game offer clear structures that support rich, meaty relationships and clear motivations? Do players have the tools and agency to transform those relationships in play?

***Liam Burke**'s tabletop game **Dog Eat Dog** asks players to tell a story of colonization ending perhaps in bloody revolution and perhaps in meek assimilation. Characters are effectively place-holders for dominant ideas within the culture under occupation, tied together by a rich web of affinity and affiliation. Goals emerge as the game's mechanisms kick in with brutal efficiency—you may want to maintain the status quo, but it will not let you. You will rebel (and die) or you will join your oppressors. Along the way, it is almost impossible not to paint compelling and tragic portraits of a doomed culture.*

Be patient and kind

Be interesting and make trouble

Play it as hard as you can

Take metagame ownership of the game

Keep your priorities straight

Embody

It's your game, too: Play it as hard as you can, including on the metagame level where appropriate.

Play transparently and honestly.
Show good judgment. Play fair and play openly. Let people know what you are doing and what you want.

Really sell character personality and emotion.
Play a real character, according to the game's fiction and theme. Respect genre and premise.

Strongly advocate for your character and the elements you control.
Advocacy does not necessarily mean the relentless pursuit of success.

Allow in-game events to change your character.
Don't think too far ahead. Be open to the developing fiction's transformative chaos.

Absorb the rules and use them vigorously.
Rules are there for a reason, so don't avoid them. Note that "rules" exist on the social level, too.
Lose enthusiastically and fail in interesting ways.
If you are given the gift of failure, fail in an ignominious way that makes someone else look good and deepens their relationship with you.

As a game designer, do your rules both demonstrate and reward constructive in-game behavior? Is direct character advocacy, regardless of outcome, always the most interesting and fun choice for a player?

*In the Jeepform game **The Upgrade!**, characters arrive on a reality TV island paradise as couples with detailed and problematic backstories, poised for conflict and surprising changes of heart. Since the game's secret purpose is to train players in Jeepform techniques, those techniques are front and center at all times. Honest, direct play demands throwing your poor contestant into the fan blades of salacious television and emerging transformed—the metaphor supports brave, even reckless play.*

Facilitate

Even if it isn't your job, it is your job: Take metagame ownership of the game as it grows and changes.

Shepherd the plot
Keep an eye out for fictional loose ends and tie them together.

Troubleshoot
Identify and help to correct problems wherever they occur, on every level. This includes problems that develop in the fiction, of course, but also social issues between participants.

Be a fan of other players characters and contributions.
Empathize with every character in the game. Support their arcs and gift them with challenges, complications, and reversals.

Respect cause and effect.
Think ahead, too!

Help pace the game.
The very best way to maintain a satisfying pace is to edit judiciously but decisively. End scenes, shift time, and keep things moving. Strive to build a local culture of play that embraces and encourages editing by any player. When you are involved in a scene it can be difficult to see the logical edit point, but an otherwise-unengaged fellow player may spot it easily. If they have social permission to end the scene, so much the better. Strive to build a stable of eager editors! This has the added benefit of keeping everyone involved at all times.

As a game designer, do your rules regulate facilitation chores like pacing and plot? Do they support and encourage player agency on a metagame level?

***Ben Robbins**' tabletop game **Microscope** tasks players not with advocating for characters, but for ideas across a vast swathe of history. To play Microscope is to constantly monitor cause and effect, always watching and waiting for opportunities to neatly tie up disparate and sometimes consequential snippets of history.*

Be Safe

Keep your priorities straight: Remember that people are more important than the game.

Use space wisely.
Use personal space and volume to communicate appropriately, giving other players the physical and temporal space they need.

Help others with rules and concepts.
Be helpful generally, but particularly as a resource for players either newer or less adept at absorbing procedures than yourself.

Work hard, but encourage occasional breaks.
Come prepared to really invest some effort in making the game great.

Ask for help, suggestions and feedback.
Your idea is probably not the absolute best idea. Your frustration probably isn't necessary. Feedback—on your own choices and involvement and on the game in general, can be a positive force for improving the experience for everybody.

As a game designer, is participant safety baked into your procedures? Do you incentivize asking for help or hard-code feedback mechanisms? Do you offer suggestions for healthy interaction, such as taking breaks?

In the tabletop game Fiasco, at the game's mid-point there is an explicit break that is called for. This typically falls 60-90 minutes into the game, and is a time when creative energy is flagging as the emerging fiction is taking definite shape. Requiring a break after introducing two new disruptive elements (the Tilt) tacitly encourages players to assess their session and make necessary corrections. In addition, Fiasco has a built-in "ask for help" mechanism—a player can choose to resolve a scene, delegating framing responsibility to the collective efforts of their friends.

Acknowledgements

The notion of playcraft comes from John Stavropolous, president of NerdNYC, who first outlined and aggregated most of the concepts included in this article. My role here is one of comment and refinement. Elin Dalstål, Marshall Miller, and Frank Tarcikowski also provided clarity and insight. Additional thanks to Emily Care Boss and John Stavropolous.

The Tribunal
http://dl.dropbox.com/u/3441990/tribunal_02.pdf

Dog Eat Dog
http://liwanagpress.com/dog-eat-dog/

The Upgrade!
http://jeepen.org/games/upgrade/

Microscope
http://www.lamemage.com/

Fiasco
http://www.bullypulpitgames.com/games/fiasco/

***Jason Morningstar** is a game designer whose interests include GMless and freeform tabletop and short-form live action roleplaying, as well as using analog games for teaching and learning. He is a two-time recipient of the Diana Jones Award for Gaming Excellence and is a frequent guest at game gatherings nationally and internationally. As a consultant, Jason has worked with clients that include Kaiser-Permanente Health Care Systems, the Innovation Learning Network and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Co-President of Bully Pulpit Games LLC, Jason lives and works in Durham, North Carolina.*
jason@bullypulpitgames.com

Skin Deep

by Emily Care Boss

Fluff: *Slang for the parts of a RPGbook other than the rules—such as setting details, game fiction, history, et cetera. Usually contrasted with Crunch, which is the actual rules.*
http://wiki.rpg.net/index.php/RPG_Lexica:DEF

Color: *Details that provide atmosphere.*
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GNS_Theory

Fluff: *Opposite of crunch. Most often story based material designed to enhance role-playing. This material includes background information for NPC's, scenarios, settings and/or even scenes. Material used to 'flesh-out' elements of a role-playing game so they appear in the mind's eye as more than just a list of statistics. Non-mechanic based material.*
http://rpggeek.com/wiki/page/RPG_Glossary

One common approach to role-playing is to look at rules and mechanics as the skeleton of play, and "fluff" are the details occasionally handed out to keep the bones from sticking out. There is a dismissive quality to fluff. If it's not connected to mechanics, if it doesn't help increase your advantage during play, it's derided as "color". Color and fluff are terms used to describe the bits of role-playing games that fill the space in between the important moments: when you roll the dice, when you engage the rules. That's when what you do suddenly matters. Everything in between is seen as filler.

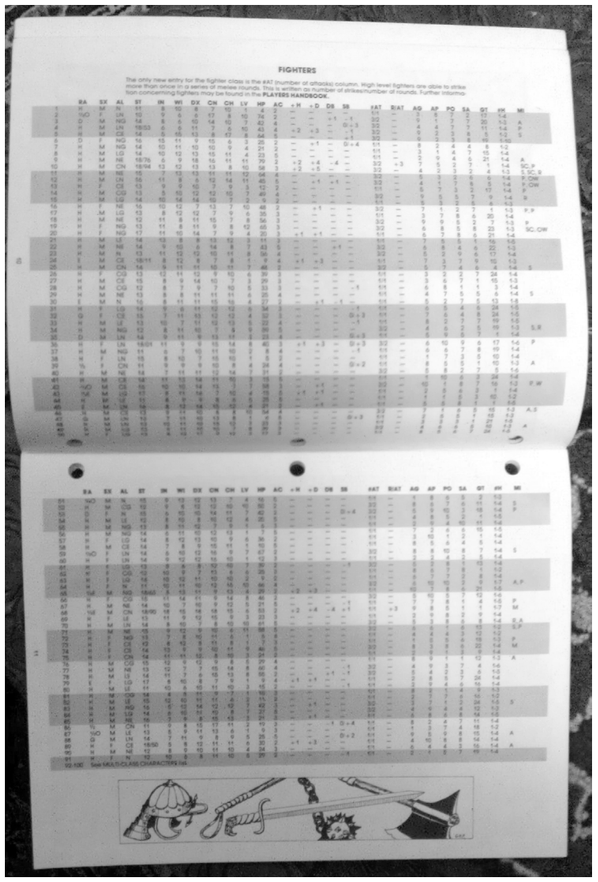
However, there are four ways of relating to the fictive material give different emphases with respect to the fiction of the world:

- **fluff/color**
- **mechanical leverage**
- **fictional positioning**
- **explorative**

Let's look at each approach.

Fluff/color

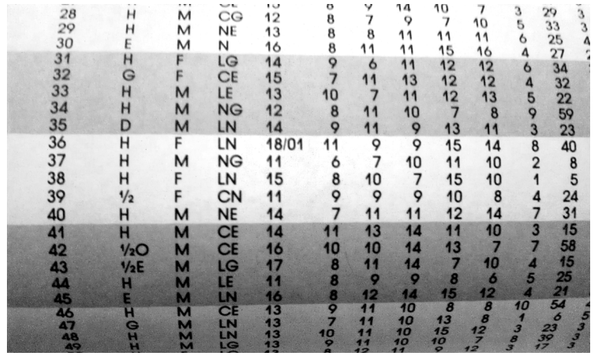
To examine Fluff and Crunch more deeply, come meet one hundred characters:



Row upon row of numbers. This page of fighters from The Gallery of Rogues (TSR, 1980) was generated as a miscellany of random characters that GMs could call upon to throw into their games at a moment's notice. They're bare bones, but the numbers communicated to their users: high strength, low wisdom—this was the fellow who'd been hit one too many times in the head, that was the one who was going to make it home alive. The numbers were a skeleton on which play crafted a life, blew breath into the beings and set them on their path (most likely to destruction). But when it came down to it, these quantified markers were what it all hinged on. Any personality or "fluff" grafted onto the numbers could only go so far. The flesh was only skin deep.

The writer of the blog "Roles, Rules and Rolls" introduced a useful set of terms that break down the fluff/crunch divide: *analog details*, *digital stats* and *procedural instructions*. (Roger the GS, April 2012) Analog details are the qualitative descriptions of character and world that make up the fictional universe. Digital stats are the numbers behind them, being fleshed out by the analog fluff. The Procedural Instructions are "directions for running the adventure in an if-then format. [For example,] in this room are 6 kobolds including a leader. If they detect the party first, the leader will take 1 combat round to rally his wary troops, and then charge headlong." This kind of instruction is useful for GMs who later want to run a given module or scenario. They are instructions on how to make the analog details meaningful.

Mechanical Leverage



There's a common approach to tabletop role-playing games reflected in a skin and bones character. Players interact with the world as it is presented by the GM. Many things are described. Many of them are red herrings—that is to say, they are fluff and are merely seen as background details to hide the digital grid underlying our words. But amidst the fluff, there are important facts to be found. Who is my enemy? How are they armed? What are the dangers here? Whom must I convince to the set the revolution in motion?

These things have an effect downstream. The young noble you used your Charisma stats to charm becomes an important member of the rebellion. Your +2 bastard sword breaks a spear cast at your head. The fiction you describe (charming the noble, moving your sword) triggers the use of stats and associated game mechanics. The mechanics mediate the fiction in your favor (or against, depending). We can say they are mechanically leveraged. Rather than being details included for the sake of atmosphere, these parts of the fiction connect to quantified parts of the rules that lets you negotiate with someone else (the GM) to say, "I accomplish this."

Welcome to the matrix, Neo. Fluff married to crunch is the lever you need to move the world.

When you make moves that are purely mechanical in nature (playing a hand of poker, rolling dice with no reference to a game world) you improve your tactical position, fluff free. Games without fiction, (such as traditional card games like gin and rummy, or classic board games like chess and go) are tactical in nature, and what you do in them is all tactical positioning. All crunch.

Fictional Positioning

When you look at games with a fictional component of a specific and moment-to-moment nature, this narrative component brings with it different capabilities and different needs. Fiction builds upon itself. Role-playing is an iterative process of building a shared and active world of the imagination created by an interplay between players, referenced to written texts and timely usage of set procedures. Satu Helio describes the complex nature of the narrative experience created through role-play:

> Still, we must note that there is no actual story in the game of the role-playing game, though there are events, characters and structures of narrativity giving the players the basis for interpreting it *as a narrative....* We also have the ability to follow different kinds of narrative premises and structures as well as imitate them for ourselves to create more authentic and suitable narrative experiences. (Helio, 2004)

With each word, the participants in a role-playing game shape and mold a world that never existed before. Each statement is reflected upon by the others at the table (or online, or in live action, as the case may be). What you say has meaning and effect independent

Five Fates of Fiction

by Epidiah Ravachol

Let's imagine a unit of fiction. It's a tiny thing with no mass but full of potential energy. This unit is the smallest useful bit of fiction derived from something uttered in a role-playing game. Take something a fellow player (or GM) says and divide it up into its component parts, and then divide those parts again. You know you've reduced the fiction to the size of these imaginary units the moment you realize you can divide the fiction no further without producing gibberish. Here's an example:

"A gnarl-toothed goblin in a purple tunic carrying a rusty cleaver limps over to you and demands to see your trousers."

We can winnow from this sentence the fact that there is a goblin, he has gnarled teeth, a limp, carries a cleaver that is rusty, wears a purple tunic, and wants to see our trousers. Each of these is a unit of fiction.

Each of these units contain no mass, but they are full of potential energy. Each of them is a boulder perch precariously upon the edge of a grand cliff. Each eagerly awaits its chance to fall and impact the fiction like the canyon floor below. Just how and where it falls, what it spends its potential energy on, is up to the system and the players, and how they treat these boulders.

Some may fall straight down, taking only one path. Others may bound along several paths before expending all their energy. Others still may never fall. It is impossible to tell with 100 percent certainty how any boulder is going to behave until it has done so. The fate of each unit is unknown until it is fulfilled. But let's look at four potential resting spots for these imaginary units of fiction.

Color/Fluff—This is the barest of the fates. Color is fiction that exists solely to disguise the fact that we're just doing math exercises. If a goblin is nothing more than a bundle of hit points to reduce and experience points to collect upon said reduction, then all the imaginary units in our statement are just fluff. The facts that he was a goblin, that he was gnarled-toothed, that he wore a purple tunic, that he walked with a limp, that he wielded a cleaver, that the cleaver was rusty, that he makes demands, and that he's appears interested in your trousers all have no meaning beyond their ability to distract you from the endless tedium of reducing numbers.

Mechanical Leverage—This is when the system has decided to place mechanical importance on the imaginary units. A cleaver will do a certain amount of damage to you, but a rusty cleaver means damage plus some nasty effect. But that limp means you get a bonus to knock him over! The path of Mechanical Leverage and the path of Color are very close. They're both there to essentially disguise the fact that you're playing a numbers game, but Mechanical Leverage occurs when a system attaches rewards, bonuses, effects and penalties to different bits of the fiction in the hopes of influencing player behavior and the fiction.

Fictional Positioning—Here our imaginary unit is used to constrain and shape the nature of future fictional input. In a world where only royalty may wear purple, the fact that our goblin wears a purple tunic is going to shape the fiction that will follow. Perhaps you will not be so eager to reduce his hit points for fear of retaliation. Perhaps you feel obligated to show him your trousers. Maybe you think him an imposter. Maybe you will remain ignorant of the importance of the purple tunic at the moment of your meeting, and will pay the price later in the game. Like Mechanical Leverage, you can use Fictional Positioning to maneuver the story in directions that are advantageous to you. Unlike Mechanical Leverage, the system isn't necessarily backing your play.

Explorative—This is fiction that has captured your attention on its own merit. Why a purple tunic on such a lowly beast? Why the interest in your trousers? For that matter, how did he get that limp? Sometimes we explore fiction because we catch a whiff of some Mechanical Leverage or Fictional Positioning to be had—perhaps this feels like a trap and you don't want to caught unaware. Explorative imaginary units are bits of fiction that have really and truly snagged our interest. Not because we think we can get something out of them, but because we're genuinely curious to see how they're going to play out. Why don't you show the goblin your trousers already and so we can see what this is all about?

Audience Appreciation—Because sometimes we find things amusing. Imaginary units that follow this path are looking to get a rise of some sort out of the audience. Perhaps to hit a comedic note, or a tragic note. Think of a horror game and how many fictional details is spent on creating a creepy or eerie atmosphere. Think of a dying character's final words aimed at producing tears. Think of thousands upon thousands of jokes made breaking the fourth wall of every game that have ever been played ever. Just try not to think about what the goblin wants with your trousers.

of whether or not mechanics are involved. The GM describes a path in the woods that my party is taking. I describe my character moving off from the beaten path, farther and farther from my companions. Do I have to roll on my Wilderness score, or does it just make sense that my character gets lost? Once upon a time this was how it worked:

You see, in Old School play... fluff is crunch. The sandy floor, moist walls made of soft stone, composition of the gate, and disposition of the kobolds all can feed into the players' improvised plans and the DM's improvised rulings. Critics of "fluff" in adventure writing, already prejudiced by that term, call it unnecessary.

http://rolesrules.blogspot.com/2012/04/analog-digital-procedural.html

Using Roger's schema, the analog details can also be organized into procedural instructions (formulated by the GM) which indicate what the consequences will be for certain types of interactions with the game world. This mushrooms when you remove the singular arbitration of the GM. In games where all players are empowered to mirror and reflect effects of the world for one another, it transcends a set of instructions one might give to another to run a scenario. Instead, each decision cascades into the next, creating a waterfall of narrative experience, flooding outward into an ever-changing fictional world. The fiction becomes a basis for negotiating advantage that feeds into fictive outcomes not necessarily mediated by mechanics or stats. This is fictional positioning.

Larp and Fictional Positioning

Larp highlights this form of interaction. Once in play in a larp, your portrayal of your character is the primary text that the other players read to learn about your character. There is a shadow, a penumbra between the "you" that you portray—the character—and the character on paper. This can be a problem for larp. The story you play out might be seen as secondary or lesser than the story written in the prepared background of the character, or the story intended by the writers as implied by pre-set goals and connections. In all games there is an element of retroactive attribution, making the narrative experience into a story, whether it be in "my character did this" war-stories, or post-larp spill sessions where everyone hears about what went on in other people's experience of the same larp. But in larp, since there are multiple streams of narrative experience happening in parallel (rather than the single stream commonly found in tabletop or Nordic freeform), the end of play is often a time of massive sharing and significant retroactive retribution. Players learn how their play informed the experience of others, and how it is re-contextualized by the intents of the larpwrights and the implicit story in the libretto or game materials. This process can be enriching, or lead to great disappointment at having let down the expectations of the facilitators or other players.

Some schools of thought work to break down the authority of the larpwright. Dogma 99 was an explicit attempt to put authorship in to the hands of the players. An evocative setting was presented by the designer, but what it turned into was up to those in play. Their imaginations reign supreme and if it rose or fell, it was theirs to claim for praise or blame.

Playing a larp is a multi-faceted experience. Look at *Nordic Larp* and *Leaving Mundania* to get a sense of this breadth. The fluff of the world is represented in a more concrete manner in larp than in tabletop. The elements of the character and world—the color—have real world analogs. Larp is also primarily about in-character play which places the emphasis on the players fictional offerings. Mechanics similar to those used in tabletop play are still employed in larp, for example, using cards or rock-paper-scissors to settle conflicts, calling upon powers, or comparing ability scores. However, there are more and more additions of meta-techniques, particularly in Nordic larps (such as the black box technique, where an area is set aside for players to play out flashbacks, fantasies, alternate futures, etc.), which focus back on the fiction, rather than on quantified representations such as ability scores.

The recent Nordic larp *Mad About the Boy*, run by Lizzie Stark in Connecticut, worked in this vein. From the casting that put (almost) all players into trios or quartets to pre-game introductions and transparency about the other characters in-play, to developing the backstory of characters in collaboration with their triad-mates in a workshop, to a schedule that allowed a great deal of time for open-ended character interactions, to a strong injunction to freely make up what we did not know and an admonishment to listen to and build upon what was shared with us by others about the world, it was a glorious playing field for our imaginations and our emotions.

Explorative Joy

This is the final view of fluff: simple explorative joy in the fictional world. The analog details become the goal. This style of play melds nicely with the others: any part of the world can be connected to mechanical procedures and stats. All of the fictive experiences can be leveraged against other fictive experiences, depending on how it is interpreted by the other players. And any of it might be fluff pure as the driven snow: purely atmospheric. The great thing in this view is that atmosphere is valued and honored.

Disclosure: my earliest gaming days were dyed-in-the-wool explorative. I'll come clean.

Going back to the early nineties when I started role-playing, the first games I was involved in hammered into my head the importance of the world over its representations via quantified mechanics and digital stats. I fell into the company of role players who decided that the fun parts were in-depth shared world building, playing out characters' lives and generally seeing what kinds of crazy plot developed from seeing the strongly motivated, segmented society that an Ars Magica game encouraged.

It was a bit of serendipity that we stumbled on that system. Embracing the concepts of troupe-style play as found in Ars Magica, while rejecting or neglecting the mechanical crunchy bits for the most part, our interest was in seeing how the backstory and world informed the characters' choices as well as exploring the wildly diverse assortment of motivations: the grogs who made a good living but were contemptuous of their crazy mage masters; the mages, some deeply enthralled with their own magical pursuits, others tapped and trapped into political maneuvering, others with their own aspirations like helping the populous in order to create a lasting legacy for their power or memory in the world. Companions made their way pursuing loves and ambitions, dangling amidst the mages as pawns, lovers, and compatriots.

We spent much time with all the things that might well be glossed over in a traditional tabletop RPG, or worse, mechanically represented and blandly presented as fait accompli. "You spent a season working on learning the magical composition of plants and rare earths used to make arcanely powerful frescos. Bump yourself up a point in Creo and do you want Herbam or Terram?" That works, it gets you there, but what is lost is a world of choices, emotions, bonding, challenges and momentary decisions that make the characters people rather than broad sweeps of probabilities. Making the brush strokes fine, to paint a picture, gives you a whole different look at play.

Conclusions

The centrality of mechanical representation to much of tabletop role-playing is embedded in the commonly used terminology of "fluff" and "crunch". As if the details of who you meet, the needs, drives and emotions of the characters, their quirks, loves and hatreds were not what makes fiction—and life—compelling. Why settle for less in our recreational fictive play? But as bridges get built between different styles such as larp, and people continue to accept new ways to play, we see that the rules are there to help us create and that the fluff is an essential component of play.

Fluff vs. Crunch means that the details of the world only matter when connected to stats, or numbers. Fluff can also be *mechanically leveraged*, meaning words that affect the barely-hidden numbers, if discovered amongst the atmospheric red herrings. If the fictional elements matter and help the player gain advantage even outside of mechanics, that is to say, if having a gun matters even if you never have to fire it—this is *fictional positioning*. Here, imaginative play is convincing and gives you leverage in the scene by it's very presence. The final approach is *explorative*, which is when the colorful details, the powerful tools, the interior world and exterior expanses—matter for their own sake. They may lend a helping hand when you are trying to have effect, either by correlation with mechanical advantage, or by their inter-relations with other fiction. But the deepest enjoyment comes from learning about them, and the engagement they give yourself and the other players.

The terms Fluff and Crunch focus attention on one viewpoint, but we are not looking deeply enough into the beauty of role-play if we stick solely to that approach. We'll keep missing what's right in front of us. There are other ways to play, where the color *is* the game.

References and Further Reading

Advanced Dungeons & Dragons: The Rogues Gallery. Blume, Brian with Dave Cook and Jean Wells. TSR Games. (1980: Lake Geneva, WI).

Alleged Entertainment. Website, blog, larp archive and online store. http://www.aegames.org/

Color. GNS Theory page. Wikipedia. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/GNS_Theory [ref. November 28, 2012]

Dogma 99. A programme for the liberation of LARP. http://fate.laiv.org/dogme99/en/ [ref. November 28, 2012]

Mad About the Boy. Edland, Tor Kjetil, Margrete Raaum and Trine Lise Lindahl. Original Libretto. http://madabouttheboy.laiv.org/ [ref. November 28, 2012]

Fluff. Role Playing Geek Glossary. http://rpggeek.com/wiki/page/RPG_Glossary#F [ref. November 28, 2012]

Fluff. RPG Lexica D-E-F. RPGnet Wiki. http://wiki.rpg.net/index.php/RPG_Lexica:DEF [ref. November 28, 2012]

Nordic Larp. Stenros, Jaakko and Markus Montola (ed.). Fëa Livia. (2010: Stockholm, Sweden.)

LaTorra, Sage. "Fluff". *Syntax Error*. Blog entry January 23, 2012. http://www.latorra.org/2012/01/23/fluff/ [Ref. December 14, 2012]

Leaving Mundania. Stark, Lizzie. Chicago Review Press. (2012: Chicago, IL, USA)

Rifts. Kevin Siembieda, C. J. Carella, Kevin Long, Patrick Nowak, Julius Rosenstein, et al. Palladium Games. 1990.

Roger the GS. "Analog, Digital, Procedural." Blog entry April 14, 2012. Roles, Rules and Rolls. http://rolesrules.blogspot.com/2012/04/analog-digital-procedural.html

"Role-Playing: A Narrative Experience and a Mindset." Helio, Satu. In *Beyond Role and Play*. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (eds.) Ropecon ry. (2004: Helsinki, Finland)

Stark, Lizzie. "Mad About the Debrief." Blog entry October 22, 2012. http://lizziestark.com/2012/10/22/mad-about-the-debrief/ [ref. November 28, 2012]

Universalis. Mike Holmes and Ralph Mazza. Ramshead Publishing. 2004. http://ramshead.indie-rpgs.com/ [ref. December 8, 2012]

Born on a dark Epimas night, ***Epidiah Ravachol*** *would grow up to become the creator of the Jenga-based tabletop horror game* Dread *and co-creator of its family-friend sibling* Dread House. *He is also responsible the autobiographical game* Time & Temp *based on his extensive travels in time and under-employment. Most of his projects can be found at Dig a Thousand Holes Publishing: www.dig1000holes.com.*

Emily Care Boss *(M.S.For.) is an independent role-playing game designer/publisher and forestry consultant living in western Massachusetts, USA. Her designs include* Breaking the Ice *and* Under my Skin *which won the player's choice award at Fastaval in 2009. An early participant at the Forge forums (indie-rpgs.com) and a proponent of independent publishing, Emily founded JiffyCon in 2006, a regional role-playing game convention showcasing indie games. Editor of* RPG = Role Playing Girl *(rpgirl-zine.blogspot.com/), a zine by and about women in rpg gaming. Other essays of hers may be found in* Push: New Thinking about Role Playing; Playground Worlds*; and in* Immersive Gameplay: Studies in Role-Playing and Media Immersion. *Emily's games are found at Black & Green Games (blackgreengames.com).*

An interview with Ford Ivey about Larp Design

First, his Wikipedia Bio:

Ford Ivey, sometimes called the Grandfather of NERO,[1] is the founder of several live action role-playing games, including NERO International, Shandlin's Ferry, Wildlands, The Isles, a live version of Call of Cthulhu, and his newest game, The Osiris Sanction. Ford is the recipient and namesake of the LARPY Lifetime Achievement award, and is the LARP Guest of Honor at Origins Game Fair in July, 2007.

After attending the University of Texas at Austin school of Architecture, Ford Ivey worked in all parts of the construction industry, doing everything from design to supervisor of construction on some major projects in the Boston area. He got disenchanted with the construction industry and went back to one of his early loves, opening The GameMaster, a full service game store In Arlington, MA. This store had tables for playing roleplaying games and miniatures. While doing this, he heard about a Live Roleplaying game in New Hampshire called Mid Realms Adventures, based on the Treasure Trap games in England.

While he enjoyed this game, he was convinced that it could be done in a way that would allow more character freedom of action. After running a series of games for a couple of years in Sudbury, MA, under the umbrella of the Explorer Scouts, he (with input and assistance from several others) developed the idea of everyone playing the game: everyone was someone else's NPC. This event was known as Shandlin's Ferry, which was run in the fall of 1987 and was the immediate predecessor to NERO.

NERO was a unique development in LARPing, based on character growth and freedom of action. It grew far more quickly than the organization could handle in those early days, after an article appeared in Dragon Magazine, written by Michael A. Ventrella. NERO suddenly had over 5,000 active members.

NERO began to expand with new chapters quickly, starting with one in New Jersey, called the Ashbury Campaign. They later broke off to form Alliance LARP. Other early chapters were the Pittsburgh chapter (now PRO), and the Atlanta chapter, now running a game based on an early set of the NERO rules, now calling themselves SOLAR.

Ford ran the first game to own its own site dedicated to Live Roleplaying in Ware, Massachusetts. This site had 105 acres of woods and fields and 27 structures, including an old New England Inn, barns, and many cabins.

Ford sold the game in 1998 to Joe Valenti. After overcoming health issues, Ford is now involved in several new projects, including a new concept in LARP, The Osiris Sanction.

Now let's delve deeper into Ford's past, which is also one of the major tap roots of larp in America. NERO is arguably the largest larp group in the United States, roughly comparable to Dagorhir, Belegarth, and Amtgard, but smaller than the Society for Creative Anachronism, who steadfastly refuse to call their activities larp anyway.

How did you get started in live action role playing?

I ran a Friday night D&D game in the basement of a Boy Scout office (we started an Explorer Scout group just for this purpose) for a couple of years. Then we heard about a game in New Hampshire called Mid-Realms Adventures. Mid-Realms, in turn, was based on a game in the UK called Treasure Trap. Mid-Realms was a module-based game, boffer combat, and hit-by –location damage. The magic system was very minimal. These were, it turns out, virtues. Simplicity is always a virtue in game design. It actually became a paintball game, but they ran combination events with boffer and paintball occasionally. I don't know if they currently exist. One of the founders, though, played NERO for a few years, and complained about it consistently. He was very enthusiastic about a live version of Call of Cthulhu I ran about six times. That was much smaller and a more intense (and deadly) game.

We set out to make our game as complex as we could. The D&D game I was running at the time was based in a city, and I had images of that sort of game, so I wanted it to be big. Mid-Realms was a small group of players wandering about looking for whatever trouble they could get into, followed by a Marshall who informed them of the ways the fantasy world they were in differed from the world they could see. The Marshall made judgments calls about the rules. I found it to be very restrictive and not the game I wanted to run, so I set out to make the game I wanted.

I got together a great group and we began to design that game. Something I wanted was a system by which we could add in fantasy skills, things that enabled a character to do more than the player could do. I wanted to allow players to become great Warriors, amazing Wizards, and stealthy Thieves, all the staples of epic fantasy. This meant a vastly more complex set of game rules.

So we came up with a system that allowed the character to augment their native abilities, and allow that augmentation to increase over time. The scale of the augmentation and the speed that the power of that augmentation went up was an issue, and it took a couple of years to get that to the point that the scale of the power increase from a rules perspective was…well, not right, but minimally acceptable.

We ran the games at Nobscot Scout Reservation (Framingham, Massachusetts) for a couple of years, working it out as we went along. The Explorer Scout group we started for D&D gaming ran the larp as well. The very first game was a group of players essentially hosted by the Explorers working as production team and NPCs.

What was your system like for representing magic and other things people can't do in real life?

We started with, believe it or not, Party Poppers as our magic system. If you are unfamiliar with these, they are things you might use at New Years' for celebration—a champagne bottle-looking thing about two inches long that you pulled one end off of, causing a minor explosion that blew a bunch of confetti out the other end. It pretty much ruined the whole feeling of a sleep spell, and they didn't work that well if they got wet, but hey….it was sort of magic-like. They left a mess that we had to clean up and they were expensive and hard to find, so we then tried the next, clearly obvious choice: Silly String.

Silly String is a can that sprays a thread of foam looking stuff out about ten feet on a calm day. This stuff would stick to you but dissolve quickly. The idea was that you could cast spells until you ran out of Silly String… which was no fun if the nozzle on your can broke.

We finally settled on spell packets. These were originally tissue paper with a spoonful of flour in them, which we quickly changed to corn starch. We liked this because if you handled it right the packet would explode upon impact and mark the target and give a nice smoke effect. That was the good of it; they had a lot of downside, too, not the least of which was the fact that they turned into a paste in the rain. The worst of it was that everyone ended up covered in corn starch, an issue when people wanted to put together good looking costuming, which we wanted to encourage. So we dropped the exploding packet idea and went to re-usable packets filled with birdseed, which made them recyclable.

Did you try other techniques from other larp groups?

We only had Mid-Realms to compare ourselves to, and, to be honest, we didn't rise to their level in those early games. In fact it took us a couple of years before we had an event whose production values rivaled theirs. We were largely divorced from the larp world at large. Most of what we did was original, and we invented it for our own use. The fact that in many cases others came up with similar conclusions doesn't diminish the validity of our process. The general approach to the game, though was, in our view far preferable to Mid-Realms, with our emphasis on individual freedom of action and only using a Marshal for closed adventures.

Eventually we became aware of Hero Quest in the UK and the IFGS [*International Fantasy Gaming Society, inspired by IFGS in the book Dream Park by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes.*—ed.] here in the states. I read as much as I could find about Hero Quest, but it all seemed to be disjointed and inconsistent. The IFGS seemed to have a Mid-Realms type of structure (a closed course and no character bridge from event to event) and their Magic system was just bizarre, depending on players wearing different colors so a mage could designate a target for his spell by hollering the predominant color of the target. They were also heavily dependent on a Marshal's involvement, which is exactly what we were trying to get away from.

We worked hard at that last. We got rid of the senseless mindsets we started with, and worked on what could and could not be represented in a self-marshaled game, like no flying or invisibility spells. It's not reasonable, in the latter case, to expect a player to stand there and act as if he's unaware of an enemy "sneaking" up on him in plain sight and not react to him. In the case of the former, the only way to represent a flying character was to have him walking around and by some means keeping track of how high he is supposed to be. If he needs to fly over a wall, now we need to find a way through the wall at ground level, and the problems start there. Scrying spells (and Obfuscate spells to counter them), Truth spells, and many others were tried and thrown out.

"The 'First weekend' was actually the second, and that was about a third of the total attendees. It was taken after the event had ended and many had already left, but it does include many of the founders of the game, including me and Mike Ventrella." Photo: Ford Ivey

How did you handle character development and advancement?

We reached an event late in our first year where we put it all together and actually wrote a game system which included hit points by class and level, different skills divided by class, and increasing skills and abilities depending on the time you spent in the game. This started a whole new round of silliness. We were sort of mind-locked into D&D, and had our healers (we avoided religion in the game, being rather close to the Bible belt) unable to use edged weapons, for instance. This in retrospect made no sense, and was removed after a while.

We gave the players points by which we could measure their game experience. We started by giving them a block of points for attending an event. Simple. Then we decided that just coming wasn't sufficient to reward someone, so we started giving those points to those who survived an event. That proved to be a bad choice, as it rewarded those who hid in their cabin all weekend and not those that were out there being heroic.

So then we gave the monsters little chits that they handed to the player who killed them. That sort of made sense, so of course we needed to change it. We decided that some things would reward a fighter type person, but not a thief, a healer but not a wizard, and so on. We made several different types of reward points to be handed out according to a very arcane set of rules we came up with. So that didn't work.

Then we went for simple again: you got a base number of points for just showing up to the event, plus another number if you could turn in game money to buy more points. The money became our replacement for those experience points we handed out before, but now those points had further use in that they could be used to buy stuff in the game. This was an eventual nightmare, too, of course.

Now we add in the "Goblin Point". These are points we gave out for doing things for the game: setup, cleaning, working in the kitchen, and so on. They were Goblin Points because, see, there used to be Green Stamps, you know? Green Stamps were an incentive program where a retailer would give "green stamps" to customers, which were turned in at redemption centers for stuff. And goblins are green, so…that would be funny. It was a joke we would NEVER get tired of.

(sigh)

We eventually got rid of the class system and went to a skill based system, which I was told on several occasions would never work. It actually did work pretty well, in spite of being rather complex. There are simpler ways to do this, of course, but they were developed over the years, in many cases, by other games. We tried to fix the game, we really did. I have said on more than one occasion that when we started NERO, it was a Model T Ford. We tried to make it better, but we couldn't shut it down while we did, so we were stuck trying to fix the car as we drove it down the road. We made improvements. I figure that the rules are now about the equivalent of a 1958 Edsel.

Lots of little things got thrown into the game design that hung on in odd ways. One of those, for instance, was the means by which we marked a person who was "out of game", as in not there in game terms. The convention was originally to have a white headband that marked you as not there. This had some issues, as someone wearing a white hat caused confusion. A quicker method evolved, which was to hold your sword above your head, making you clearly unready for combat. This evolved over the years to just holding your hand over your head. I never really approved of that, as it was sometimes unclear what your status was, but there you go: the game is an organic thing and such things arise spontaneously.

How did NERO become a business?

NERO was a business of sorts from the first game that bore that name. We rented a campground, had liability insurance and so on. I paid the bills and bore the financial risk for the thing, though I was far from the only person involved in running the game.

We rented campgrounds all over the place. But I got really tired of taking everything down and packing it all away after every event, and then, at the start of the next event, getting it all back out and setting it up. That's a lot of work, especially when you rely on volunteers to do it. I wanted to get a permanent site. I spent a couple of years looking and finally was able to make a deal to buy a place in Ware, MA. We signed the deal on January 1, 1993. We ran an event there the next month with the water not on and the heat pretty unreliable, but we did it, and it was successful. As the spring arrived, we found that there were many issues with the camp, but the good stuff was great. I now had places to store everything, I could set up things like the Tavern and leave it set up, and everyone knew where things were. We did that in 1993, and ran there until I left the game in 1998.

What happened to the campground?

We lost it when I left the game. My ex-wife and I sold it to Joe Valenti in 1998. I lost the camp in the divorce at about that time and got out of gaming for a while, with severe health issues and, frankly, a large case of burnout. I had been running games pretty much seven days a week for almost ten years. I had to leave for the issues I mentioned, and because I felt that there were some legal issues that were coming up that I didn't have the resources to handle, and Joe apparently did. I felt that if I did not meet them I would be violating the contracts I had signed with the other chapters, and I was trying to honor those.

What do you think propelled NERO's success through the mid-90's?

NERO began at a time when there were no other games like it in the USA except Mid-Realms. NERO grew so quickly because of three factors: First, the continuing universe/individual action model. Second, I recruited for the game from my game store in the Boston metropolitan area and at the gaming conventions we attended as the store. The third major factor was Mike Ventrella's article in Dragon Magazine in September of 1991. This drew in members from all over the country, far faster that we could handle them, truth be told. It made us develop into a national organization quickly. Since we got under way, there are around 50 games of a type similar to NERO in the New England area.

What happened after you left NERO?

A couple of years later, after having lost a lot of weight and recovered my interest in gaming, I worked on a new game called The Isles with Aidrian O'Connor. We got it up and running in a year or so, the rules reflecting the things I thought were wrong with the rules in NERO. The game ran well. The first campaign ran for five years before retiring, and a second campaign based on that first one still is running in central Massachusetts. It was more or less successful, though never to the extent that NERO was.

After The Isles, I got interested in a new concept that Aidrian brought to me. It was a game that you were playing all the time, one that sort of ran parallel to your real life, and let you interact with it when you wished to. It would be out there with other players interacting with it, and you could step into it and take up the challenge for whatever time you had, and be this "other" person for that time…a sort of alternate you in a universe of mystery, misdirection, conspiracy, and hidden powers. It was you and your friends fighting a powerful and near-omnipresent foe.

This would be The Osiris Sanction.

The fight takes place in the real world, many times. You have to discover what evil is afoot and thwart it. But first, you get a message that gave you a person and place to meet, and you go there. This is a real world person in a real world location. You role-play that meeting, giving the information your contact sought to establish your own identity, perhaps a password, and so on. You've seen this scene in many a spy movie. Let him know you're the guy, and he gives you information. You need to gather a lot of that sort of information, and put it all together to figure out what's going on. Once you identify the plot, you need to go into the lair of the enemy and cut the thread that leads to the undesirable outcome.

The lair of the enemy is a virtual computer world. We put the player into a simulation of a near-perfect virtual world to fight the security bots and defeat the

other security measures to get to the point of foiling the enemy. There will be fighting and disarming bombs, hacking and picking locks, healing devices and all the rest, actually in your hands. We have the most advanced laser tagging system in the world, as well as cool supplemental devices like bombs and medic kits and hacking devices for the players to play with.

To get an idea of how this game works, look at the story of a run: "A Coyote's Story" and read the article about us in Turnstyle.

We'll be running a full game at Vericon in Cambridge, MA on the weekend of March 16 2013, and again at Gen Con in Indianapolis on the weekend of August 15 through 18, 2013.

The most advanced laser tagging system in the world? More than the U.S. military's MILES?

Our system is based on the MILES system. The best thing the Army has going for it over ours is that they use actual weapons, shooting blanks. Past that, ours can do anything theirs can do and a few other tricks as well. Ours shoot lasers that carry information about the damage each round does when it hits you. The range of ours is about 300 yards, but we can adjust the beam to simulate any bullet type from a sniper rifle to a shotgun. We can set whether or not you can shoot a team mate, what sound pallet it will use, how many "life" points you carry, armor (cuts the specified number of hits damage in half), how many rounds a clip will hold, how many clips you carry, how long it takes to change clips, automatic, burst or semi-automatic fire, how fast the gun will fire (time between rounds on automatic fire), bleed out time which allows us to get a medic to the wounded person, and a few other things. We also have grenades and claymores, bombs attached to tripwires and a few other things in development. They can do an area affect attack and we can't past a local area like a hand grenade, but other than that, we have everything they have, more reliable, and a whole lot cheaper.

Later, Ford contacted colleague Annie for more info via email, the exchange as follows:

Annie got back to me just a minute ago from her phone. I asked her *Hey, kid…you have told me a few times that the system we have is better than the one the Army uses. In what way is that true? I want to be able to support the claim that ours is better. Ford*

Her answer:

"It's lighter, it looks better, more accurate. The stuff they issued me didn't even work."

What do you see in the current state of larp, and the future of it?

All of this [Osiris Sanction] is a blueprint for a new profession: a larp professional. The financial model for this indicates a lot of money to be made. We'll be targeting the console gamers and the paintballers and airsoft crowd. Gaming on a computer or game console used to be seen as a geek thing to do, but now, games like this generate billions of dollars a year for the companies that put them out.

In recent years, I have been invited to sit in on the formation of new games. I see people full of ideas and energy and certain they know what will fix the game. They usually make it worse. When I try to point out that it is not going in a good direction, they are certain they know better than I do. Maybe they will, one day. There certainly have been wonderful developments in game design since I left NERO. But by and large, the same mistakes get repeated over and over, and worse, usually.

Larp is a vibrant, energetic, and, above all, creative form of expression. There's a lot of room in it for a lot of different sorts of games. The people who run those games are allowed to do it any way they wish. However, I have an idea of what is possible with this sort of thing, and I really want to see us approximate that at some point while I can still appreciate it. I'm still in there, trying, and I can see that there are many others doing it as well. I am amazed at the things people come up with and I look at each one, wondering if this is that new game that carries us forward a few more steps. I've seen that happen a couple of times, and it's always very exciting. But, of course I'm convinced I know better than anyone else how it REALLY should be done. I am very interested in taking larp into the mainstream. In fact, I want to make it into a viable business, making the same sort of transition that paintball and video games have made.

Larpers are a strange bunch who are proud of the quirkiness of their hobby

The Osiris Sanction gun system.

MENU	PARAM	RANGE	Function
Edit Settings	TeamID	Org, Blue, Yellow, Green	
	FrndFire	Yes, No	Friendly Fire. Yes = same team hits are allowed and scored.
	Sounds	Milsim, Sci-Fi, Silenced	Changes the main firing sound and the reload action sound.
	MuzFlash	On, Off	Enable or disable muzzle flash
	Life	1 to 999	Initial health value
	Armor	Off, 5 to 200	
	ClipSize	1 to 250, INF.	Rounds per clip
	Clips	2 to 200, INF.	Number of clips
	Reload	1 to 30 Sec.	Reload delay time
	Fire Sel	FullAuto, SemiAuto, Burst	Firing mode (Burst = 3-rd burst)
	Burst	2 to 6 Rnds	Burst rounds
	Cyclic	250 to 800 RPM.	Rate of fire in rounds-per-minute (RPM)
	Damage[4]	1 to 100	Sets the damage inflicted to opponent by each "hit"
	HitDelay	.00 to 28 Sec	
	Overheat	Off, 10 to 100	When enabled (On), sustained firing will cause the gun to "overheat"
	StartDly	0 to 240 Sec.	Delayed game start
	DeathDly	0 to 120 Sec	Death Delay time, 0 = disabled
	GameTime	0 to 120 Min	Time limit for game in minutes. Set to "0" for unlimited time

[4] Sixteen available Damage values [1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 15, 17, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 50, 75, 100]

To program the gun:

Start it up with the "Mode" button depressed. This lets you operate the menu choices on the chart to the left. The "trigger" button advances to the next parameter, and the "mode" and "Reload" buttons add or subtract from the value of the chosen parameter.

To start a game, typically the "start game" will be enabled; when instructed, you will pull your trigger and a countdown will begin, at the end of which the gun will come on and you are in the game.

The gun can keep track of many things not shown here, which we will bring on line as we are able.

The "Chest Pack" is worn in a Holster on the chest of the MOLLE vest you will be wearing.

All of the 'gun' functions are in the Chest Pack. The only things in the gun are a trigger switch, the speaker, the muzzle flash LED, and, of course, the laser itself, making it easy and relatively cheap to make multiple guns to use with One Chest Pack. The values possible make it, as you can see, possible to program in any gun, from a small light firearm to a sniper rifle or shotgun. The laser has a range of around 300 yards, so a sniper rifle is a quite reasonable choice.

Which new things do you think brought us forward a few steps?

Keep in mind that I have been pretty isolated while developing my games. Lately that's been on purpose: I want to try to do original work and not board someone else's bandwagon. But games that I think have driven larp forward? I'd have to say the whole theater style has driven the hobby on one entire flank, and the SCA has driven it on the other. I'd throw in Dagorhir and Amtgard on (generally) the SCA flank.

A huge influence has been the White Wolf games, of course. When I talk about larp, when I find someone who says they know what it is, they usually mean a White Wolf game. ARGs are a new thing, when applied to larp…that is an area I intend to exploit that I think has been hardly touched.

Andy French is running a new version of a live Call of Cthulhu game, called the Lovecraft Legacies. He's used some of my old ideas as well as a bunch of new game mechanics to bring the game to life. He's getting great reviews. But the single biggest set of new ideas that I admire is Rob Ciccolini's Accelerant game system. To quote from his web site:

> The core rules are comprehensive, easy to learn, and infinitely flexible—game effects are defined totally outside the individual game. This means that players who are familiar with the core rules will already understand the system, which allows you to get players involved quickly, and create skills specific to your game without cumbersome rules updates.
>
> Since Accelerant games completely divorce flavor (called traits) from in-game effects, it is simple to create creatures in a fanciful and flavored way.

It's an example of how rules should work: A simple, predictable framework such that any new rule has a structure that a player will find familiar, allowing him to assimilate it quickly. The system allows for a huge amount of flavor and variation. In my opinion, it's a blueprint for larp rule systems of the future for a NERO-style game.

I'll also say that The Osiris Sanction represents a whole new level of rules: a game system that you wear. All the effects, all the accounting, all the timer functions, indeed, the whole game (with a couple of exceptions) is contained in equipment you just put on. Those exceptions are that you have to understand what the red light means when it comes on, what the green means, and what the amber means, for example. We're just getting started on where this will lead us. I think it's really pretty exciting.

How close are we to larp entering mainstream America? Are we there yet?

No, we're not there yet, though I think the stage is set. We need to take the nerd factor out of it and make it a cool thing, though of course us nerds can still enjoy it, too. Again: look at the way that video gaming was seen by the public in the early 90s, and look at the way it's viewed today.

Larpers are a strange bunch who are proud of the quirkiness of their hobby. As it goes mainstream, larpers will resist and complain about how this new form just isn't like the old days. They will be right. But a mainstreamed industry gives a lot more options for fun as more and more money comes into it. There is no reason that the old school larpers can't continue to play the games they love…but you don't see many video gamers sitting home nights playing Zork.

Over Time

Intercon and the evolution of theatre-style larp in the Northeast

by Nat Budin

Intercon and the Northeast larp scene

Greetings from the frozen Northlands! The landscape is blanketed in a picturesque sheet of fluffy white snow, the trees sit leafless and solemn, and teams of dogs pull sleds across the tundra, their flannel-clad masters shouting "mush!" Between the ice-capped cottages and the abominable snowmen, larpers lurk, hidden, but watching, always watching, and larping.

New England has long been a hotbed of innovation in theatre style larp, and in recent years, the Intercon conventions have been the standard-bearer for the New England theatre-style scene. Intercon is a series of all-larp conventions hosted by various regional groups at locations including Maryland, Southern California, New Jersey, and even on a cruise ship in the Caribbean.

Intercon New England is one of the biggest and longest-running Intercons. Hosted by New England Interactive Literature (NEIL), a non-profit corporation, it takes place in the Boston area every March. New England Intercons can be recognized by their use of letters to denote the year (the 2013 convention is Intercon M).

The New England Intercons have benefited greatly over the years from a symbiotic relationship with the local college larp scenes, drawing games and players from MIT, Harvard, Brandeis University, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute, among others. Intercon larps have both influenced the style of larp at these institutions and been influenced by them.

The face of larp in New England has changed a great deal over the years, and that change is still ongoing. **In my opinion, it's important to understand where we came from, and in that effort, I interviewed several prominent figures in the Intercon community. What follows is a brief history of theatre-style larp in the Northeast with a focus on Intercon, as well as a discussion of changes, trends, and directions for the future.**

The early days: MIT, SIL, and the TSFL era

Two of the earliest organized larp groups in New England were the MIT Assassins' Guild and Harvard's Society for Interactive Literature (SIL). Both groups were actively running larps by the early 1980s, and the Assassins' Guild is still active today. Both were instrumental in the evolution of theatre-style larp.

The earliest Assassins' Guild events were "circle games" (otherwise known as Assassin or killer games), in which the goal was simply to be the last player left alive. An account of one such game from 1995 by Andy Ellis paints a general picture: "Dean shot Matt in the back behind senior house. Dean falls to his contact poisoned doorknob... Joi's mailbox at ESC blows up thanks to Greg's Oreo Cookie mousetrap bomb..." and so on.

By 1983, the Guild had branched out to more narrative larps. 1983 was also a watershed year for SIL. At Boskone XX, a major science fiction convention in Boston, SIL produced its first public event, *Rekon-1*. According to the Boskone program book, *Rekon-1* is "a 'real-life' roleplaying game involving a large number of participants," involving "a maze of secrecy and deception."

Rekon-1 has been cited as the first modern theatre-style larp by several sources[1]. The game ran alongside the rest of the convention over the course of the entire weekend, and contained several tracks of puzzles, each one leading to another, as well as a great number of secret factions, hidden identities, widget hunts, clashing genres, and an overarching plot involving the possible destruction of the Earth.

Rekon-1 begat a series of follow-ups (titled *Rekon-2*, *Rekon-3*, etc.) as well as a parallel series of larps called *Reklone*. The original *Rekon* was later rewritten by SIL West (a California group that split from SIL in the 1990s) and published in a book by Chaosium under the name *Nexus* (not to be confused with several other similarly-titled larps) [*I just bought a copy of Nexus on ebay.—ed.]*.

In 1986, SIL began running its own weekend-long conventions under the name SILiCON. SILiCONs I through III ran in Massachusetts, and over the years the convention moved slowly down the east coast until it ended up in Annapolis, Maryland for SILiCON VI. The format of SILiCON conventions was a group of all-weekend (or "theatre-style full-length," "TSFL" for short) larps running alongside one another. Attendees were playing different games simultaneously in different parts of the hotel.

During this time period, the weekend-long was the predominant form of theatre-style larp in the Northeast. Weekend-long larps were produced not just for conventions and college gaming clubs, but also at independent venues such as hotels and homes. Tim Lasko, a longtime Intercon organizer, describes one such series of larps: "These infamous games, run by George and Roberta Berry, would run for an entire weekend in an off-season Vermont hotel where everyone was totally immersed (and costumed) in their role. Of course, during the weekend, a body would fall and the several of the players would be invested in finding the solution but all of the players in the game had other plot to work on, often with no relationship to the main murder." Jeff Diewald, who led the effort to bring Intercon to New England, elaborates on reading one character sheet from the Berrys' mystery larps: "Let me be absolutely clear. I've seen a *lot* of character sheets, for games of all lengths. This sheet was a better character sheet than in most 'modern' larps. This was a full-fledged larp, by everything we know today. These games were real-time, real-space games, with minimal mechanics. The GMs played full-time characters with plots, flaws and foibles."

1 For example, Walt Freitag talks about it in this forum post, and Greg Costikyan mentions it in A Short History of Paper Gaming.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Cyndy Cooper in* Muppet Purgatory *at Intercon H. Photographer: Beth Baniszewski*

Laura Boylan as Rainbow Brite in Saturday Morning Massacre *at Intercon C. Laura is the co-chair of the upcoming Intercon M. Photographer: a random con-goer that Laura handed her camera to*

Joshua Sheena and Nuance Bryant in Oh God, Everybody's Dying! *at Intercon H. Photographer: Haz Harrower-Nakama*

Alex Bradley and Nat Budin playing in Mahabharata *at Intercon XXI. Photographer: Laura Boylan*

From SILiCON to Intercon

As SILiCON grew, its membership expanded and grew the hobby of theatre-style larp in the Northeast. Weekend-long games flourished up and down the coast. Some notable examples from this period include *Shakespeare's Lost Play*, the *Covention* series, and *RMS Titanic*. The scene centered primarily around the Baltimore/Washington area, where SILiCON ran, and the Boston area, where SIL had originated.

By 1991, SIL was a Boston-based organization with a highly mid-Atlantic membership, running conventions in the mid-Atlantic region. In retrospect, a schism seems almost inevitable.

That year, the SIL board voted to change the organization's name to the Interactive Literature Foundation. SIL continued at Harvard as a larp writing group, and separately, SIL West continued to run weekend-long larps in California. SILiCON, now under the auspices of the newly-formed ILF, changed its name to Intercon and continued to run annually in the mid-Atlantic region.

It is worth noting as well that during this time period, the MIT Assassins' Guild continued more or less independently. At MIT, while weekend-long games were common, ten-day games were also a staple. These larps tended to run over the course of two weekends and the intervening week, often over school breaks. By some accounts, weekend-long games were considered short by MIT standards.

The short-form era

Much like larp itself, there is no one inventor of the short-form theatre-style game. Rather, it was simultaneously created by many groups at once.

Jeff Diewald was writing short-form larps as early as 1986. Finding himself unable to get in off the waitlist for the Berrys' Vermont-based hotel murder mysteries, he decided to produce his own. The result was *Sex, Drugs and Rock & Roll*, a murder mystery taking place at a party hosted by a rock band. According to Diewald, "I didn't know if I could write enough for a weekend, or if I could find people who would commit to a weekend with me... I figured an evening would be a good duration that might be doable." The game was successful enough that Diewald and his writing group produced two sequels as well as many other games.

Intercon 7.5, a smaller Intercon convention in 1992, was the first convention exclusively devoted to short-form larps and panels. It included five larps, one of which (*Miskatonic Class Reunion* by Mike Young) spawned a trilogy of popular Lovecraftian games. The success of 7.5 led to 1994's Intercon 9.5, also devoted to shorter games, which was over twice the size of its predecessor. (During the 90s and early 2000s, the "point five" Intercons were a series of officially sanctioned side conventions that ran approximately six months after the annual conventions, which got roman numerals.)

For many larpers and larp writers, the game that proved the form could work was Jim MacDougal's *The Final Voyage of the Mary Celeste*. Set on a historical doomed sailing vessel in the 19th century, Mary Celeste has run literally hundreds of times around the world. It wasn't the first of its kind, but it was chaotic, fun, and good. Echoing Brian Eno's famous remark about the Velvet Underground, everyone who played it wrote a four-hour larp.

The period between 1994 and 1998 saw weekend-long games and short-form games coexisting in parallel universes. Gordon Olmstead-Dean notes in his history of the Intercon name that "1995-1998 was also the 'Golden Age' of the hotel based Theatre Style Full Length game." Notable examples included *1897: The Queen's Diamond Jubilee*, the *Dark Summonings* campaign, and Olmstead-Dean's own *Four Aces*.

But during this period at Intercon, short-form games took over quite quickly. In 1995, Intercon X had a weekend-long game simultaneous with several shorter games, and the same was true of 1996's Intercon XI. Jeff Diewald contrasts his experience at Intercon XI with his friend's: "[He] signed up for the weekend long game, which I think had some kind of cyberpunk theme. On the other hand, I signed up for a slate of the shorter games... his weekend had dragged along, with nothing notable. I'd played in five different games, every one of them was different, and every one of them was brilliant."

The Intercon conventions have become a hub for independent theatre-style larp, and several new and experimental forms have become a part of the fabric

Diewald concludes that "As a writer and a GM, it's a lot easier to be brilliant in four hours. As a player... if you pick several shorter games, you're much more likely to have a good experience in at least one of them." Jim MacDougal concurs: "Players discovered that mini-s [short-form larps] were fun with lesser risks; if the game sucked you had 4 or 5 more chances to save your weekend."

The college scene

In New England, much of the theatre-style larp in the 1990s took place on college campuses. This stands to reason, given the Boston area's wide array of universities and the history of larp at Harvard and MIT.

One influential game was *Etherlines: The Morning After* (*TMA* for short). Written by Don Ross, *TMA* is a weekend-long larp in which the characters wake up with amnesia, remembering nothing but their names, and are given memories on index cards as the game progresses. *TMA* always runs on college campuses, and has run over twenty times since it was written. For many in the local scene, it was their first introduction to larping.

Chad Bergeron, a longtime *Etherlines* staff member, suggests that *TMA* "had a strong impact on building larping communities at various schools, both as a weekend long shared experience, and as a way for larpers of different generations from the same school to help bring larping to the next generation." *TMA* has run at many schools in the region, including Worcester Polytechnic Institute, MIT, Brandeis, Wellesley, and Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

Etherlines was a style innovator in that it was one of the first amnesia larps in the New England scene, if not the first. Hot on its heels, however, was *Tabula Rasa*, which debuted in July 1996 at Dexcon in New Jersey. Mark Waks, one of the game's three creators, remembers: "While we were still talking about *TR*, Don Ross came out with *The Morning After*. That scared the snot out of us, fearing that our thunder had been well and truly stolen, so Alexx [Kay] went and played in the first run, to see what it was like. He reported back to us... and we decided that the two games were different enough to not be redundant."

According to Waks, one of the differences between *Tabula Rasa* and other amnesia larps is that *TR* "is a game *with* amnesia, but not a game *about* it." At its core, the larp is "actually a suspense/politics/espionage game, where everyone is desperately trying to put the pieces together without letting the situation come apart at the seams." *Tabula Rasa* was widely acclaimed and was followed by a spiritual sequel the following year, which has run multiple times since. Other prominent amnesia-based games have followed in years since, including Straitjackets Unlimited's popular *Jamais Vue* series.

Another very popular style of larp also began in the 1990s: that White Wolf's Mind's Eye Theatre system. Developed as a larp adaptation for the company's popular *Vampire: The Masquerade* tabletop RPG, Mind's Eye Theatre grew to international prominence, and MET groups sprung up at colleges everywhere. For various reasons, though, the cross-pollination one might expect never seems to have happened: seasoned larpers weren't interested in Vampire games, and people reading the White Wolf books had no reason to suspect a wider larp scene beyond the World of Darkness

Return to New England

By the late 1990s, Intercon was firmly rooted in the mid-Atlantic region—every Intercon from 1991 through 1997 had been held in either New Jersey or Maryland. Yet the flame started by SIL and the Assassins' Guild was still burning. The college-based scene had kept interest in independent theatre-style larp alive in New England.

In 1996, Jeff Diewald called a meeting at his friend Charley Sumner's home. He recalls: "There were around a dozen people who showed up. No one knew everyone else in the room. It stayed that way until Uncle Don [Ross] walked into the room—he was the only one who knew everyone. I organized things; the management structure you see today, well, I know where it came from because I put it in place."

Diewald wrote up a bid proposal for the ILF. In it, he cited "a growing contingent of larp enthusiasts in the Northeast, scattered in numerous enclaves." He proposed to reach out to these communities and pull together a convention, which he hoped would attract at least 70 attendees. The bid was accepted, and Diewald describes what happened next: "When we passed 100 [pre-registered attendees] late in 1997, we were ecstatic, but I knew we were already stretched. The signups accelerated in January. There was more begging, asking, insisting, demanding, and such for games... we more than *doubled* in size between January and the con."

After 18+ months of preparation, Intercon XIII, with Diewald as con chair, ran in March 1998 in Natick, Massachusetts. It was the first Intercon in New England since the SIL days. The schedule included over 25 short-form larps in addition to other events such as a build-your-own-game workshop, a dance party, and a poker tournament. Intercon XIII also brought in events from the local NERO and Minds Eye Theatre communities. Its final attendee count was 223, breaking Intercon records by a significant margin (Intercon 14.5, the previous record-holder, having topped 170).

Intercon XIII established three important traditions for subsequent New England Intercons, which have taken place annually since then. First, it was a team effort from the beginning, with a leadership structure similar to the current NEIL con committee. Second, after the convention, Diewald deliberately stepped aside in order to let someone else be con chair for XIV, and since then, only two people (Chad Bergeron and Tim Lasko) have served as con chair twice. Finally, Intercon XIII established ties with the local college larp communities from the start, and those ties have kept the flow of new attendees steady to this day.

Death of the weekend-long

By 1999, according to Gordon Olmstead-Dean, it was obvious that the weekend-long larp was, for all intents and purposes, dead. Weekend-longs were rarely seen at Intercon any longer: Intercon XI had included one, but no subsequent Intercon did, with the exception of XV. Independent TSFL games at hotels had also more or less stopped by that point. They continued to run in the college communities for a while longer, but for the exceptions of *Etherlines* and the Assassins' Guild, were mostly unheard of by the mid-2000s.

Theories abound as to what killed the format. It's tempting to blame Intercon itself as the center of a vicious cycle: once the predominant format at Intercon

shifted, more and more writers began to create games specifically for Intercon, which took away resources that might otherwise have been spent writing weekend-long games. Similarly, it helped drive a change in the collective consciousness of the larp writing community. According to Mark Waks, "what folks started realizing was that you could tell a good, tight story in four hours—often a much more intense story than you would get in a full weekend." Chad Bergeron adds that **the lower barriers to completion on a short-form game have made that the preferred format,** since all-larp conventions have become "a showcase, and so it has a higher social or emotional cost for a GM to not be there or to have to withdraw."

Both Jim MacDougal and Gordon Olmstead-Dean argue that the format has only itself to blame for its decline. MacDougal points out that "even at their best, weekenders have some inherent problems. There is a lot of down time, you can't run something balls to the wall for 3 days. This works if the game is a side event hosted at an SF convention, you can drop out for a while a find a party or hit the con suite or go to some programming. But as a stand alone all you have is the game." Olmstead-Dean cites a "string of expensive [1997] TSFL howlers that left audiences crying... and not for more," and MacDougal concurs, adding that "there was one Intercon where most of the games submitted either were never finished or didn't meet minimum [player count] and withdrew."

There have been several attempts to resurrect the format in the Northeast, most notably by Andrew Zorowitz's Foam Brain Productions, which was founded in 2004 at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York. Over the next six and a half years, Foam Brain put on 13 weekend-long larps and over 200 short-forms. The group paid the authors of classic weekend-long larps for the rights to produce their games.

In late 2010, Zorowitz announced an end to Foam Brain's larp activities in a mailing list post. The group lives on, reincarnated as a board and card game retailer in downtown Troy, and Lime Shirt larping, a group formed from many of the former Foam Brain GMs, continues to put on weekend-long games at RPI.

But new authorship in the weekend-long format is very scarce (again, with isolated exceptions such as MIT). According to Diewald, "writing a good weekend-long game is *hard*... you need a wealth of strong character material to start with. You need things to keep the pacing going over the span of the weekend.... Things have to be spread properly throughout the game so that everyone has a good time, and not just a select few."

My own writing group, Alleged Entertainment, wrote a new TSFL larp in 2010—probably the only non-MIT one in the Northeast that year—and the experience more than bears out Diewald's words. The mid-Atlantic region, similarly, has seen a dearth of new TSFL games, with the only recent exception being Mike Young's *Lullaby of Broadway* trilogy.

New directions

The Intercon conventions have become a hub for independent theatre-style larp, and several new and experimental forms have become a part of the fabric. Some have come from within the community; others originated elsewhere and have become a presence in the Northeast.

The "storytelling" form of larp dates back to nearly the beginning: the weekend-long *Tales of the Arabian Nights* created it in 1988. In this style of larp, the players occasionally break out of their main character in order to play out a short scene, which diegetically represents the main characters hearing a story, having a flashback, or the like. The *Arabian Nights* game ran at least once more, and years later, in 2004, a group of writers who fondly remembered playing it wrote their own: *Tales of Pendragon*, set in Arthurian legend.

Pendragon spurred revived interest in the form, and in 2006, a group led by Jeff Diewald created Across the Sea of Stars, a 10-hour storytelling larp that debuted at Intercon F to great acclaim. My own group got in on the action in 2008 with The Last Seder, and has created two other storytelling larps since. The format allows for backstories that would otherwise be very difficult to achieve in a theatre-style larp, and I've written about it extensively on the Alleged Entertainment blog.

Horde larp is a different form that also dates back quite a while. In a horde larp, there is a core cast of main characters, and the rest of the players are assigned to the horde. Horde players are handed a short character sheet (perhaps 1-3 paragraphs) and assigned to play that character for a short period of time, at which point that character will leave game and the player will pick up another short character. This repeats until the game is over, so the main characters are constantly surrounded by a revolving cast of new characters.

The earliest horde larp in New England was most likely *Buses Welcome*, which was created at a Build Your Own Game workshop at Intercon 10.5. That game takes place at a fast food restaurant called BurgerMeister, where chaos ensues. The format proved popular and has been used in many other games, including *An Un-Conventional Odyssey*, *Panel: the LARP*, *Purging Purgatory*, and *Collision Imminent*. The horde format lends itself well to madcap comedies, and most horde larps fit into that genre.

Similar to horde games is the micro-larp genre, first popularized at Intercon by Alex Bradley's Intercon Z experiment, in which players signed up to play a suite of one-hour larps back-to-back. Each was a fully conceived, but very small, larp scenario that could be fully played out within an hour, and they spanned all genres. Intercon Z was a popular and successful concept and brought repeat performances for several subsequent years. A similar project near and dear to my heart is the 10 Bad LARPs series, which puts together a series of 10-minute farcical, improvisational games. Mike Young's The Road Not Taken is another noteworthy micro-larp, which takes more or less the same format as 10 Bad LARPs but turns the genre on its head, putting together a series of intensely dramatic 10-minute decision scenes.

Every New England Intercon since XV has included at least one British larp, brought across the pond from the UK Freeforms community. The Britain-New England connection began in 1998, when Brian Williams attended Intercon 13.5. Jeff Diewald recalls: "Who knew that when I hosed Brian Williams over completely in the afternoon game... and then had to convince him to trust me in the truly intense evening run of *Intrigue in the Clouds*, that he would start coming to [New England] Intercons, and then start bringing friends, leading to the entire British invasion?" The number of British games has grown year after year, and UK Freeforms have proven wildly popular with the New England crowd, their registration lists filling within the minutes of signups opening every year.

Similarly, members of the MIT Assassins' Guild have been running larps at Intercons since 2004 and have brought games with a focus on high-quality mechanics, player-versus-player interaction, and tight design. MIT-created systems and mechanics have made their way into several other games from other corners of the Intercon community, and likewise, the Assassins' Guild has produced larps that originated at Intercon and gained members from the Intercon community.

Nordic larp has its own long and storied tradition, and many books could be written about it (and have been). The first Intercon to feature Nordic larp was 2007's Intercon XXII, which had a run of J. Tuomas Harviainen's *A Serpent of Ash*. Intercon H in 2008 brought a repeat of *A Serpent of Ash* in addition to *Under My Skin*, a Jeepform game from American writer Emily Care Boss.

Since then, Nordic larp has been a growing presence at Northeastern conventions: Intercon L (2011), for example, featured a workshop on the Ars Amandi mechanic led by Lizzie Stark as well as two games that mention Jeepform as an influence in their descriptions. In addition, looking at New England Intercons over the years, there is a clear trend towards games more in line with Nordic and Jeepform aesthetics. According to Chad Bergeron, "Nordic styles of play echo with those who want more depth of characterization, more Role in their role play, less play or mechanics."

Nordic larp is not the only influence driving the New England community towards more character-focused, darker games. *Kind Friends Together*, a larp by Cyndy Cooper (née Wakefield), had its first run in the Boston area in 2007, and despite not actually running at an Intercon until 2011, became the stuff of legend within the community due to the intense emotional reactions it provoked in nearly everyone who played it. More dark, emotionally raw games followed, both from Wakefield and the people who had played in her games.

The future

As I write this, Intercon New England has just broken through all previous registration records—the current paid pre-registration total for Intercon M stands at 352 attendees. As the GM Liaison for the con, I feel a sense of excitement as well as dread—how are we going to fit enough games in the Chelmsford Radisson to accommodate this many players? I'm sure we'll work it out somehow.

Unfortunately, Intercon Mid-Atlantic was last held in 2008. In 2009, Gordon Olmstead-Dean announced the cancellation of Intercon XXIV, citing financial concerns and low registration. There have been two attempts to hold the convention in subsequent years (one by Eric Johnson and one by Hank Kuhfeldt), but both have cancelled.

Other Intercon conventions have similarly fallen by the wayside: Intercon Northeast ran as part of Dexcon in New Jersey for several years, but in 2007, Dexcon dropped the Intercon branding for Dexcon 10. The convention does, however, continue to include a strong track of larp events to this day. Similarly, Wyrd Con II used the brand Intercon West for its second year, but has since dropped the name. This leaves New England as the last Intercon standing, at least for now, although the Live Action Roleplayers Association (LARPA), holder of the trademark and the successor organization to the ILF, has not ruled out further Intercon franchises in the future.

Larp at Intercon and its surrounding community has changed a great deal over the convention's history. We've gone from weekend-long games to short-forms. We've added new and experimental formats. We've assimilated stylistic influences from other larp communities around the world. We've changed our name and venue.

What does the future hold? Mark Waks sees a trend in cross-pollination between local campaign larps and the Intercon crowd: "A lot of the traditional Intercon crowd has moved into the campaign-game arena and made it their own, producing a flowering of long-form games of many different genres. That's where I see much of the serious energy going these days."

Tim Lasko predicts that technological advances will begin to make their way into short-form larps: "Technology is at the point where it is both relatively easy and inexpensive to, say, use a half-dozen tablet PCs replacing the classic 'item card' or other physical mechanics." Indeed, we have seen a few such games in recent years: the 2010 larp Blackout, for example, used a custom electronics-based setup to give physical reality to a survival-horror scenario in a spacecraft. Gordon Olmstead-Dean has been working on technologically-advanced larp in a different direction: running larp scenarios on Second Life and other virtual reality platforms. According to him, "I really see very little difference... between the quality and type of RP [roleplay] in that environment and most mid-range larps that I can find surviving in the area, and I'm sort of pushing a new take with a slightly higher threshold of continuity and RP."

Chad Bergeron sees "a shift currently away from 'genre' games... and a shift towards a wider range of settings, and a bigger focus on believable characters." He also points out that the age range of Intercon attendees is widening in both directions: "Before Intercon people tended to drift away from larp after college. Now people are staying in the hobby much longer and later, and that means kids."

Whatever the future may hold, larp in New England appears to be on a growth trajectory, both within the Intercon community and outside it—and those lines, too, are blurring. We've had a great thirty years—here's to the next thirty!

Nat Budin *has been larping since his freshman year of college. With his writing group,* Alleged Entertainment, *he has written over a dozen original theatre-style larps, including* Time Travel Review Board, The Last Seder, Resonance, *and* 10 Bad LARPs. *Nat founded Brandeis University's Festival of the LARPs in 2006, served as chair of Intercon I in 2009, and enjoys writing about himself in the third person. In his copious free time, Nat plays guitar and sings with the folk-rock band Stranger Ways.*
natbudin@gmail.com

Mad About the Techniques: Stealing Nordic methods for larp design

by Lizzie Stark

Across the room, my lovers are persuading people to join tonight's celebration—a little party to lighten the somber mood. The tenor of the room is macabre tonight because three years ago today, everyone with a Y chromosome dropped dead—cars crashed, planes fell, and each of us has keenly felt the loss. I am talking to Thomas, a trans man and stand-up comic who performs at a club that belongs to one of my partners. He is here with his family—his mother and his girlfriend. They hope that the government will give them sperm, to start a family. That is what my two lovers and I want too. No babies have been born since the disaster despite raids on the local sperm banks, but now the government is selecting future potential families. This is a pilot program.

Around the room, I see solemn faces on most of the women. It's cold in this cavernous room. Thomas agrees that a party would lighten the mood. We've been talking about all the wonderful funny things that men used to do, he says. Maybe we could tell stories tonight. Across the room, my lovers are still enlisting others to the cause. I am making small talk with Thomas, his mother and his girlfriend. Did you have siblings? He asks. For a moment I cannot say anything. A younger brother, I force out. Thomas grabs my wrist. I'm so sorry, he says.

That small moment—the choked back tears and the sympathy of Thomas—represents one of the best moments of my experience with the larp *Mad About the Boy*. In that instant, I uniquely felt the emotions of my character merge with my own. The tears I blinked back were real, involuntary, and quite strong, rather than an act I was putting on for the other players around me. This moment of intense, real emotion is part of what draws players to Nordic larp.

In between psychological and physical examinations, the candidates passed the time by bonding over a casual game of cards. During debriefing, some players indicated these "down time" scenes as the most rewarding and immersive. Photo by Liz Rywelski

In Orange Connecticut at the beginning of October, 2012, I collaborated with a host of Americans—Sarah Miles, Jeramy Merritt, A.A. George, and Emily Care Boss—and backed by the U.S. company First Person Entertainment, we produced the Norwegian larp *Mad About the Boy*. We worked closely with the original Norwegian larpwrights—Margrete Raaum, Tor Kjetil Edland, and Trine Lise Lindahl to adapt the manuscript to the U.S. setting and compress and translate some Nordic techniques for the U.S. play culture.

The game—loosely inspired by the graphic novel *Y: The Last Man* by Brian K. Vaughan and Pia Guerra—was set in a dystopian future after all males died in a single day. The players portrayed women, organized into familial units of three, applying to the U.S. to be inseminated with sperm from a sperm bank as part of the government's pilot program to figure out how it would allocate this now-precious resource. Thirty-one players would sign up for the game, and the organizers wrote several new trios—notably including a trio of conservatives—to accommodate the crowd.

Nordic Larp

There's a lot of confusion in the U.S. about what the term "Nordic larp" means. "Nordic larp" sounds like it refers to larp that happens in the Nordic countries (Finland, Denmark, Sweden, and Norway). This is both true and misleading. The term "Nordic larp" specifically refers to a small but vibrant subculture of experimental and often artsy games that originated in the Nordic countries. The mainstream of larp in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden is much as it is in the U.S.—dominated by fantasy boffer games and vampire campaigns. The people interested in experimental stuff have joined together across national boarders under the banner "Nordic larp."

It's hard to talk about how Nordic larp is different from American larp because "Nordic larp" is a school of experimental larp, and "American larp" is larp that happens in America, and America is a big country with many smaller disparate scenes.

Nordic larp itself is a pretty diverse genre surrounded by a robust and decade-long tradition of academic scholarship. The scene resists definition because those sneaky designers like to push the boundaries of what's come before. Still, there are some common design principles that pop up over and over again.[1]

- ***Immersion***. Although there's a lot of academic debate around this word, basically, it means the feeling you get when roleplay flows naturally and you really, truly feel like your character. Creating immersion is one of the aims of Nordic larp.

- ***360 degree illusion***. The game scenography strives for realism. So a bouquet of flowers is represented by a bouquet of flowers, and not a card with "flowers" written on it. Part of the idea is that pretending a card is really a bouquet of flowers takes one out of the game world and inhibits immersion. Read more about 360 illusion on the Nordic Larp Wiki.

- ***Few mechanics.*** A long rule set for Nordic games is ten pages. Most games have far fewer. The idea is to introduce mechanics only when strictly necessary, only when the character and the player should experience things differently (as in, for example, combat). Mostly, the rule, tempered by common sense, is: if you can do it in real life, you can do it in game. And of course, you should only perform an action in game if it's probable that your character could also perform it. Part of the idea behind this is that lots of rules can interfere with immersion—if I have to whip out my character card to use my lockpick skill on the door in front of me, than I've been yanked out of the world of the game. Sometimes, mechanics include *metatechniques*—ways of breaking the flow of narrative to heighten the drama. Metatechniques include stuff like character monologues, or playing possible futures or pasts in a designated black box area.

- ***Artistic vision.*** Many Nordic larps have artistic aims, whether that means helping players explore particular emotions, both positive and negative, getting across a political point, or just experimenting with form for the sake of experiment. There have been games about refugee camps, prisons, AIDS, cancer, homelessness, gender relations and so on.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Watching the stand up comedy routine intended to lift everyone's spirits: Melissa from the Nuclear Family and Maria, the head of the Committee; characters walking through the woods to attend the vigil at the start of game, gradually fading into character as they walked; The Last Man posing before his entrance, bedecked in dirt and fake blood. Photos top and lower right by Liz Rywelski; photo lower left by John Stavropoulos.*

- ***Nordic games emphasize collaboration over competition***. The good of the overall story is often put above the individual aims of characters. Sure, my character might be likely to whip out her gun and shoot the last man, but I might not do it because it'd make the game less fun for everyone else. Another way of saying this is that in Nordic larp, players play for each other as much as they play for themselves. As Norwegian larper Erlend Eidsem Hansen put it, "It's more like singing in a choir than doing sports." Larper Johanna MacDonald explained how this idea affects the game to the *Mad About the Boy* Facebook group. She wrote, "We love to (sometimes) play to lose. The question is not necessarily whether my character will come out of this situation well, but what would make the most interesting story, and not just for me, but for others.[…] A scene where your character loses something important, loses status, is disappointed, has to own up to a mistake, or any of those other social horrors can be the best scene of the game sometimes."

1. The below qualities are excerpted and adapted from my blog over at LizzieStark.com

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *An intense family dynamic scene between the Three Generations Triad; The physician from the Muslim Sisterhood and the Committee's psychologist attempting to clothe, feed, and diagnose the Last Man; The Committee's gynecologist, Julie, questioning Linn about her medical history. Photos by Liz Rywelski*

- ***Plot is internal*** and emphasizes character growth. In contrast, in many American larps, plot is often external and goal-oriented—fighting goblins, figuring out how to launch the spaceship, etc. Nordic larp emphasizes character arc and emotion—the main plot is often something like "we are flawed humans struggling against ourselves and society to find happiness." As their main goal for the duration of the larp, characters might seek to find love, survive, give birth, or overcome personal failings, and consequently, game masters interject non-player characters into the game very very rarely. It may help to think of Nordic larp less as a game, and more as an improvised theatrical experience.

- ***Secrecy is not important.*** Because many U.S. games rely on external plot, and often rest on the thrill of "what happens next?!" secrecy is often a major part of the game. If a certain spell will unlock a portal into another world, spreading that knowledge might rob other players of the joy of discovery. But since Nordic larp revolves around character development and internal plotlines, secrecy isn't necessary. If my character has issues with infertility, better to shout it from the rooftops before the game—you might find a way to help push that issue for me in one of our scenes together.

- ***Metagaming encouraged.*** Stateside, we usually consider metagaming a bad thing. If I see where the GM hid that sword of awesome out of game and use that knowledge, then I've deprived other players of their chance to nab it. In Nordic larp, since the plot focuses on character development, and there are few mechanics, meta-interactions are encouraged. Instead of leaving the outcome of a brawl up to our stats, we might step out of game and talk—out of character—about whether it would make a better story for me to lose. Or if we are going to play a love scene, we might talk about whether we will play it awkward or tender, and whether you are comfortable with me putting my arm around you, or whether we prefer physical distance. By the same token, if you know what my character's buttons are ahead of time, you can push them and help me develop my character further and quicker. Metagaming around character development is encouraged because it furthers a player's emotional investment.

- ***Emotional intensity.*** Much American larp focuses on escapism and entertainment—and these are absolutely worthy goals—while Nordic larp often goes for intense emotion. Nordic theorists often talk about "bleed"—what happens when player and character emotions get mixed up. Many Nordic games intentionally produce bleed—if I am infertile in real life and play an infertile character in game, my personal emotions might bleed into my roleplay, and lessons that my character learns may stay with me. Players have some control over bleed—if I'm feeling really raw about my infertility, I might decide I don't want to play an infertile character, or I might decide to focus my game play away from that theme. And then too, I might try to play on it and use a safeword.

- ***Safewords.*** Many Nordic games use the safewords of "brake" and "cut." During a scene of emotional intensity, players can say "brake," which tells scene partners "this level of intensity is cool but please don't push it" or "cut" which stops game play and allows the players to walk away.

- ***Continuous immersion.*** In U.S. games, players frequently go in and out of character with hand signals—often a closed fist atop the head. But since Nordic larp has immersive aims, going out of game for minor clarifications is frowned on. If you don't know the answer, just make it up. And time spent out of game—metagaming about an upcoming love scene, for example, is often kept strictly focused on the task at hand, without discussion of that movie I saw last week. Frequently, there is an off-game area where players can go when they need a break before stepping back into the action. Often, you're expected to eat, breathe, and sleep your character.

- ***Workshops and debriefs.*** Usually, but not always, Nordic larps are one-shots rather than campaigns, often bracketed by workshops and debriefs, which are considered part of the game experience.

Steal-able Techniques

Of all the Nordic techniques and aesthetics that *Mad About the Boy* used and reflected—total transparency, 360 degree immersion, 24/7 immersion, emphasis on relationships, emotions, and setting over plot—the most instantly transportable to America are the workshop, the black box, and the after care.

The pre-game workshop is a pleasurable part of the game experience for many Nordic larpers. We wanted to reflect this in *Mad About the Boy*, and planned for a four-hour workshop on Friday night and a four-hour workshop on Saturday morning. The game began around Saturday noon and lasted approximately 24 hours. We did many things with the workshop time—let people know about logistics, played an ice-breaker, introduced ourselves to each other out of game, and taught the very minimal mechanics employed. We also used the time to deepen the relationships among the characters. For example, the trios tried out a hot seat technique—two people asked the third a lot of questions in character in rapid-fire. The player on the hot seat had to respond. The stuff you said on the hot seat didn't have to become canon, but it could help you think through your characters. We also split into small groups of six or so, and armed with a GM and a suggested set list Trine, Tor, and Margo had composed, we played out scenes from the characters' pasts.

For me, the most powerful part of the workshop came on Friday night, during a guided meditation where we imagined—as ourselves—where we were when all the men died. I imagined walking to my scientist husband's office several hours after the disaster hit and finding him dead on the ground, along with most of the men he worked with. This bodily emotional memory is what made me blink back tears at Thomas' question about my siblings—it provided emotional context for the character that heightened the experience.

Many players enjoyed the black box, and it was a favorite with me too. The black box is a room that exists out of time and place. It is a way of getting around the linear timeline of larp. We blacked out the windows of a room and furnished it with lights that could be turned on and off in varying combination, and a small set of speakers for playing songs if desired. Players arranged the settings according to their wishes, and used the room to play out scenes from the past and future, dreams and fantasies, and could even play out scenes multiple times from different players' perspectives. The extras in the scenes were played by people you grabbed or by a GM. Sometimes, others were invited to watch. I played a number of scenes in the black box—the abortion of one character; a fantasy sequence in which the perfect grandchild delivered not-so-perfect standup to her mother and grandmother; and one woman's dreams of love, which were brutally crushed.

If the mechanics make the game—give players lockpicks and they will pick locks, give them boffers and they'll fight—then giving players a black box allowed them to create emotional context that upped the stakes of the game. In something like a boffer campaign, this emotional resonance accumulates over time, as characters develop their relationships. A black box simply accelerates that accumulation, and is easy to set-up.

Most U.S. larpers have been to a debrief whether it's called that or not—it often takes the form of a post-game diner trip where people talk over what happened at the game. At *Mad About the Boy*, we structured it and made it mandatory. Over the course of three hours or so, we talked in big groups, small groups, and random trios about what we would take with us from this game and what we would leave behind. We talked about problematic scenes, great scenes, and ideas that had come to us during the game. Finally, we hooked people up with "de-roling buddies," or partners to discuss the experience with if needed afterward. Some people used them, and I suspect some did not, but the tool was there in case it was needed.

As Norwegian organizer Trine put it at the end of the game, "You might think we're silly and overstating how much we want you to talk now, but you may feel differently later this week." True to form, the day after the game ended, the player email list exploded with people reflecting on their intense feelings about the game.

To me, *Mad About the Boy* owes much of its success to these three techniques—the workshop, the black box, and the debrief, and I think these methods are easily adaptable to many one-shot and even campaign games. Pre-game workshops are infinitely variable—the exercises organizers choose depend on the relationships they want to create among the characters—and although they take time, they intensify immersion and emotion. A black box is an easy addition if you have two lamps, a computer with .mp3s on it, and a spare room. And the debrief is already happening, so structuring it—especially after games that are emotionally intense—would be a responsible move for organizers to take.

Lizzie with her husband George, who cooked for the whole ensemble most of the weekend while in drag. Photo by Liz Rywelski

The Controversy

Mad About the Boy is a game about women after all the men on earth die. So all the characters are women, save Thomas, the trans man, and Isak, the last biological man on earth, who showed up halfway through the game. In Norway, Trine, Margo, and Tor ran the game twice, once with an all-women cast, except for the last man, and once with a mixed-gender cast, all playing women. They felt that the first game focused on the game's intended topics—power, sexuality, femininity, relationships between women—while the second game ended up revolving more around cross-play. We decided to run an all-women game, and this caused all sorts of controversy.

Some people accused the game of sexism for excluding men. To me, this critique evidences a misunderstanding of what sexism is, which is gender bias enforced by a power structure that deferentially prefers one gender to another. I don't think running an all-women game is any more sexist than a girls' school, or a boys' school, and for the record, if someone wanted to run a larp for men only and had good reasons for doing so, I could get down with that. This larp was one larp, and its existence doesn't prevent others from running a mixed-gender version of *Mad About the Boy*, or an all-men version of some other game.

Some people accused the game of sexism for creating a scenario in which women were competing for the sperm of a single man, and for emphasizing the biological role of women's bodies. To me, this critique has more legs, but I still think it misunderstands the libretto of the game. The game's first act, which lasted twenty hours, takes place before the last man enters. Even after his entrance, the last man doesn't necessarily represent something the women will vie for; in our game, he represented a resource, a romantic interest, a moral hope for a heterosexual world, an ally, and, at least to one person, a threat (one woman screamed "kill it!" after he entered). To suggest that of course the women would compete for the affections of a lone man is to limit our conception of how women relate to men, and to degrade the plurality of needs and emotions that each woman might feel in such a situation. The critique commits the very sin it accused *Mad About the Boy* of—straitjacketing women and their desires.

In a world with no men, women by default fill every role, so the conflation of "woman" with "mother" becomes impossible—there are too many examples to the contrary. At the same time, this is a game about getting pregnant and having kids, potentially, and that is a valid topic of inquiry.

The issue of how to relate to and welcome trans women is something the organizers grappled with—how to present the scenario in terms that stayed true to the spirit of the scenario while honoring the concerns of trans people. The outcome was imperfect, but we did the best we could at the time.

We received some criticism of the language used to describe the scenario from some trans individuals who felt it was minimizing to them. For example, we talked about the "men" that died and the "women" that survived. This critique has legs, but we also felt that it communicated better to use "men" and "women" rather than "people with a y chromosome" and "people without a y chromosome," in part because of the culture we currently live in. We tried to welcome trans women players in other ways, by allowing players to self-select whether "woman" applied to them, by engaging in discussion around the language used, and by welcoming the gender-queer in our promotional materials, emphatically and explicitly.

By some measure we succeeded—a number of trans women attended the game, and afterward several talked about how welcome they felt in this women's space, and the transformative effect of that welcome. Several had complex emotions during the workshop, when we imagined as ourselves that all the men were dead. And we talked about it at length afterward, whether the problematic aspects of the game could have been resolved by tweaking the game's plot. For example, what if the plague killed people according, not to sex, but to gender? The Norwegian larpwrights considered this carefully while writing the game, concluding that such a plague would be more problematic, and not merely because the lines that determine gender are perhaps murkier than those of biological sex. If trans women survived the disaster, it's likely that the remaining cis women might enslave them as sperm producers. That dark, horrifying territory might be worth exploring, but it lay beyond the scope of the game's intended focus.

At core, I think these critiques respond to a deeply held belief among American gamers that all games should be open to all people, that all games should be for everyone. In general, I'd agree with this assessment—I think equal access is great in most circumstances. But in this particular circumstance, where we sought to explore relationships among women as women, I think we had good reason to break the rule. I also think that organizers and designers have a right to run the games they want to run. This game was about motherhood, power, and relationships—if those topics don't get you going, then it's probably not the game for you. I'd also say that the emotional intensity of Nordic larp isn't for everyone, just as games like Dungeons & Dragons aren't for me (Too much fighting! Not enough narrative!). That doesn't mean that D & D isn't a great game or that Nordic larp sucks, it means no more or less than this: different people have different preferences and there are games enough for all of us to enjoy.

What's Next

Mad About the Boy is the beginning of the story. It's proof—not the only proof, and not even the first proof[2]—that there is an audience in the U.S. for Nordic larp. Given the right atmosphere, we can trust each other to play hard-hitting games that address serious topics of enduring social and political concern. We can tackle emotionally difficult topics in larp and still live to tell the tale and thrive for the telling.

Decades ago, the Nordicans imported a U.S. pastime—Dungeons & Dragons—and morphed it to suit their communitarian local culture. Now they've tossed the football back to us in the form of Nordic larp, and it's up to us to transform it again and make it quintessentially American.

Lizzie Stark *is a journalist and the author of* Leaving Mundania *(2012), a narrative nonfiction book about larp. She holds an MS in journalism from Columbia University and an MFA in creative writing from Emerson College, where she founded the online literary journal* Fringe. *Her work has appeared in the* Daily Beast, Philadelphia Inquirer, Today.com, and elsewhere.
Lizzie.Stark@gmail.com

2. There's been some argument about whether *Mad About the Boy* is the first straight-up Nordic larp run in the U.S. But that depends on how you define "Nordic larp." Nordic freeform games, such as jeepform games, have been around in the states since the mid 2000s, but the Nordic scene considers those tabletop games, not larp. The American artist Brody Condon has run some stuff with help from Danish larpwrights—but does that count, since it's created by a half-American team? What's important, in my opinion, is that Nordic larp in general has come to the U.S. in the last half-decade. *Mad About the Boy* is simply the latest iteration of the Nordic invasion. *[Read Nat Budin's essay "Over Time", for more information about early Nordic larps run at Intercon—ed.]*

The game began with a ritualized vigil memorializing the loss of men from Earth. Photo by Liz Rywelski

Inside The Box, the United States Army's Taxpayer Funded Larp

by Aaron Vanek

The audio slideshow contained in this article contains sounds of gunfire, explosions, and graphic depictions of simulated wounds and death of role-players, including uniformed American soldiers.

The Army denied my request for interviews. This report is personal anecdote only and has not been approved by the U.S. military or any government entity.

Fort Irwin lies roughly 37 miles outside Barstow, in California's Mojave Desert. Although its military history began in 1844, the modern base started as an Anti-Aircraft testing range in 1940, just before America entered World War II. In 1951, during the U.S.-Korean War, the base took the name Camp Irwin and was used as an Armored Combat Training area. The post became a permanent installation in 1961 and renamed Fort Irwin.

On August 9, 1979, the Department of the Army selected Fort Irwin as the site for a National Training Center. "With over 1000 square miles for maneuver and ranges, an uncluttered electromagnetic spectrum, airspace restricted to military use, and its isolation from densely populated areas, Fort Irwin was an ideal site for a National Training Center. The National Training Center [NTC] was officially activated October 16, 1980 and Fort Irwin returned to active status on July 1, 1981" reads their Wikipedia entry. There are two similar training centers operating, one at Fort Polk Louisiana (JRTC), the other in Germany (JMRC).

The full community base is approximately 1,200 square miles in area, just under the size of Rhode Island. Roughly 24,000 people consisting of rotational soldiers, assigned military personnel, families, and a civilian workforce, populate it. Two thousand or so students study in the base's K-12 school system.

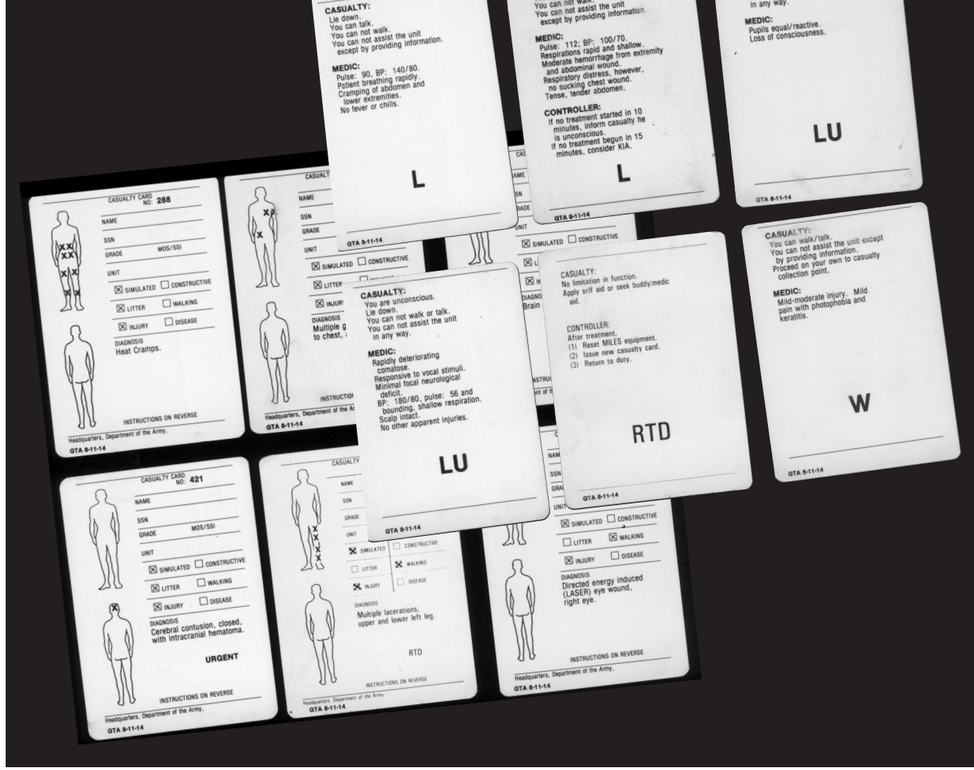
In 2004, the NTC began to feature role-playing as part of its training program. According to Brigadier General Terry Ferrell, the Commanding General of the NTC, "We knew how to operate in conventional [warfare], but not with counter-insurgency."

According to a timely article on David Petraeus in The *New Yorker*, "In the months leading up to the invasion of Iraq, many American military units travelled to the National Training Center, a sprawling patch of California desert. There they took part in enormous mock tank battles against a phony enemy, called the Kraznovians, that was meant to stand in for the Iraqi Army but had in fact been modelled on the Soviet military in an imaginary invasion of Western Europe." Once it became apparent to the U.S. commanders that they would be staying in Iraq and Afghanistan for many years, they needed to train their soldiers in the culture of the Middle East. The goal of the training, said Ferrell, is to ensure soldiers "experience nothing for the first time while in theater."

A typical unit's rotation is 28 days: one week of reception and classes, six days of STIX—simulated training exercises, or mods in larp patois, and eight days of 24-hour freeform play (called full spectrum ops) where the actions of one soldier can have repercussions later. The rotation concludes with a week at the unit's home base to prepare equipment before deployment overseas. Irwin can handle any size unit, from platoon to brigade, and have had special forces, National Guard, and foreign military groups run through their training area, which they call The Box.

Initially designed to replicate Iraq but now resembling Afghanistan, five small towns have been built from scratch in the same geographic region that contains the lowest and hottest spot in North America. The largest of these villages, originally called Medina Wasl (Iraq), is now Ertabat Shar (sp?) Afghanistan and features a two-story mosque, two-story hotel where visiting dignitaries and journalists can stay, working restaurant, newspaper, radio station, television broadcast, and merchant streets. "It's reflective of an actual Afghan town," said the town commander, a Captain. He notes the one thing they haven't exactly replicated is the smell.

To increase 360° immersion, approximately 350 hired role-players (and the Army calls them as such) play the parts of merchants, Afghan police officers, family members, security forces, imams, and insurgents or Taliban fighters. Some of these role-players are American soldiers who lost a limb or limbs in combat, but continue to serve as wounded NPCs. Many role-players are Iraqi and Afghan refugees who fled their war-torn countries. They speak in Persian or Pashto, pray to Mecca five times a day, and remain in character—with their own name, relations, friends, alliances, and goals—for a week while the soldiers freely play in the area. One role-player, an Afghani native portraying a government official, routinely contacted his relative, an actual official in Afghanistan,



TOP: *Front and back of six U.S. Army issue Casualty Cards*
BOTTOM*: A demonstration of the MILES harness*

for advice and ideas on his character. Designers constantly update their training scenarios to reflect the latest information from the front lines. All the combat trainers have experience in the field; many return for multiple tours, rotate back, and then update the NTC with their real-world data.

Their larp mechanics utilize MILES, essentially an elaborate laser tag system. Everyone who is in the simulation (in character, IC, in game) wears a harness with sensors that detect laser fire. All the weapons are real but fire blanks into a box that subsequently shoots a laser. Brass casings are ejected and need to be collected by troops. Each weapon has their own stats and, if explosive, damage radius. Shots can now penetrate walls, and even the vehicles are equipped with MILES and can be damaged from attacks. It's leaps beyond the original simulations—dropped sacks of flour. The NTC also employs Hollywood movie EFX technicians for explosions, wounds, etc.

The Gamemasters at Fort Irwin are called Combat Trainers, CTs, or "Critters". They used to be labeled OCs, or "Observer-Controllers", a term I wish larps would use instead of GMs, because I think it's more appropriate to be an Observer-Controller in a larp than a Game Master, because I don't believe all larps are games (though most are). The Critters wander the field, or "lane" as it is called during STIX mods, watching the soldiers and offering guidance as needed. One of the main things they look for is if the troopers correctly identify friend from foe, as well as follow proper safety procedures. They are also there to deal damage once the MILES system sounds off (or buzzes, indicating a

hit), accomplished by handing the wounded soldier a random card from the appropriate Casualty Deck.

The CTs have multiple decks, for gunshot wounds, shrapnel wounds, safety violations, etc. You can see some of these cards, which the military now gives away (they didn't for my first tour), in the above scanned image. These cards direct the PC (soldier, sorry) and also give indicators of the injury symptoms, down to blood pressure and heart rate. This allows the cleric healers—sorry, medics—to learn how to diagnose wounds and administer appropriate aid.

All the exercises are extensively videotaped, the communications monitored, the troops tracked, and the data fed into what Fort Irwin dubs the "Star Wars Building," a simple round structure that looks like a community auditorium. Inside, the data is crunched and evaluated. Later, the commanders have their After Action Review (AAR), which SoCal larpers refer to as AGP (After Game Party) or what Nordic larpers call a debrief. Not only are tactics and strategies discussed, but the psychological effects, intent, motives, morale, etc. The information goes back to the design teams who are also absorbing real world data; Team Lizard designs the overall goals and missions (ergo, they are Plot/GMs) and Team Dragon, who implement it in the field (the referees or assistant GMs, in larp terminology). In the case of my second trip to The Box, it was only a week after an American Chinook helicopter was shot down by Taliban insurgents. That loss worked its way into the training exercises.

The Box can be toured for free (cost of lunch not included, but subsidized food is exceptionally cheap and untaxed) if you make an advance reservation on the website. I have, twice.

Video recording is not allowed, but I took many still photos and brought a cheap audio recorder to capture the sounds. The audio slideshow below is a combination of pictures from the two visits and sounds from the second. It has poor aural quality, but hopefully you can imagine the experience as I did. If not, (or even if so) I highly recommend you tour the facility yourself. It's quite memorable.

Click on the image below to link to the YouTube audio slideshow.
Please note that the images and sounds may be disturbing, upsetting, or trigger PTSD to some.

Why is this important?

One of the officers who talked to us during my first visit described a STIX he commanded (played) where additional units were assigned to his squad. While executing a mundane procedure that took hours, one of the new company soldiers fell asleep away from the others. The vehicles left him behind, and he was captured by the enemy. That, the commander said, is grounds for firing if it had really happened. When his next term of duty in Iraq began, he made sure that every vehicle under his control had a small white board with the names of everyone who rode inside, and when they left an area, all names were checked off to account for all soldiers. The larp identified a problem that was solved before occurring in real life.

During my second visit, a few soldiers—part of a unit from the Pacific Northwest—collapsed from heat exhaustion during their STIX. They were carrying multiple pounds of gear in triple digit temperatures, something they were guaranteed to experience in Afghanistan. Foreknowledge of the importance of hydration is forearmed against disaster.

Filkins goes on to describe General Petraeus's counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq: "What distinguishes this method from other types of war-fighting is its focus: instead of concentrating on the enemy you want to kill, concentrate on the civilians you want to protect...He [Petraeus] put former Baathists on the payroll and spent millions on things like irrigation projects and new police. 'Money is ammunition,' he liked to say."

Petraeus shifted the very real war from a gamist approach—"we have these numbers and we need to reduce their numbers"—into an immersionist, character-persona driven one. The training at NTC turned as well, from crunchy tank battles to more situation-based experiences, where fluffy bits like trust, communication, relationships, religion, culture, and emotional ties are mightier than bullets. The characters the role-players portrayed were at least as important, if not more so, than the weapons they used.

Did larping help ease the American invasion and occupation of Iraq? I'm not informed nor impudent enough to make that call. But could it have, is it even remotely possible? I say yes. Moreover, I proffer that larp, at least some instances of larp, could have a significant impact on society, on humanity itself. No matter how much technology worms its wires into our lives, human minds are still the driving force of humanity. Live action role playing and its brethren RPGs, participatory interactive narratives, etc., are nothing but exercises in communal human narrative, possibly the greatest tools we have to experience all aspects of human nature in a (relatively) safe environment. The U.S. Army realized larp's potential beyond a hobby. Have you?

Footnotes

Dexter Filkins, "General Principles – How good was David Petraeus?" *The New Yorker*, December 17, 2012, 76-78

For More Information

The books *Fantasy Freaks and Gaming Geeks: An Epic Quest for reality Among Role Players, Online Gamers, and Other Dwellers of Imaginary Realms* by Ethan Gilsdorf (Lyons Press, 2009) and *Leaving Mundania: Inside the Transformative World of Live Action Role-Playing Games* by Lizzie Stark (Chicago Review Press, 2012) have very insightful chapters concerning military role-playing exercises.

The documentary movie *Full Battle Rattle* (2008), distributed by First Run Features, is focused entirely on the National Training Center at Fort Irwin. It is shown at every tour of the NTC and is available from Netflix.

A larper for 25 years and counting, ***Aaron Vanek*** *is the Executive Director of Seekers Unlimited, a nonprofit (501c3 pending) company that develops educational larps. He helped start Live Game Labs, an informal larpwright collective based in Southern California and wrote "Cooler Than You Think: Understanding Live Action Role Playing". He lives in Los Angeles with his wife Kirsten. They hooked up via a larp. A longer bio is here.*

Futurity and Larp

by Evan Torner

Permit me to use this forum to discuss two interrelated questions: "What is the future of larp as a hobby and a medium?" and "How is larp itself a *future-making* activity?" They are questions that – though absolutely pertinent to us as committed designers, gamemasters, players and theorists – are rarely posed on such an abstract level. Panels and Internet forum discussions and blogs alike tend to phrase the future of larp in terms of technology and increasing levels of larp organization and exposure. What I argue with this essay is that our particular conception and disposition toward the future – our *futurity*, if you will – both emerges from our very specific societal context and, at the same time, fundamentally affects the larps we design and play.

I

The impetus for this act of navel-gazing came from a DAAD-sponsored institute I attended at Cornell University in the summer of 2012 discussing "Futurity." Over the course of six weeks, we intensively researched and debated the essence of prognostic activities (from weather forecasts to political positioning), our cognition of the future and its relationship with past predictions, and the preclusion of an open future through our perception of the present's decline (i.e., science narratives of global warming and Christian narratives of apocalypse inciting feelings of mass helplessness and paranoia). Though these high-level discussions were primarily germane to my discipline of German studies, there were a couple of generally useful principles I gleaned as well.

First and foremost: we cannot "objectively" think about the future, but are *always caught up in our highly subjective affects of hope and fear*. The point appears obvious, but the subtext perhaps is not. Every occasion on which someone makes a prediction, whether it's FiveThirtyEight's pinpoint forecast of the 2012 American presidential election or a gamemaster estimating how many players will actually show up to their larp event, will elicit an emotional response from the predictor him or herself. When a person discusses what is "trending" in role-playing, that person by definition has some emotional stake in that trend having one effect or another, some inherent hope or fear about its outcome. There are no outside observers; we are all in this boat together. We all have to invest our time, money and attention *somewhere*, and hope the future bears fruit for those investments.

Second, the notion of progress – or the cliché phrase "moving forward" – is *a social construction*; a useful social fiction employed in the service of evaluating certain trends as "good" or "bad." Of course, history really only consists of political and class relations in messy incongruence (but coupled with disturbing continuities), and that doesn't always make for good narratives to tell ourselves in justification for our existence. So when we talk about the "progress" of the larp medium, for example, we are usually talking about A) the use of larps to treat topics not treated in previously recorded larp events, or B) the increasingly positive portrayal of niche larp culture in mainstream media. But A and B may or may not be diametrically opposed forces, as Tova Gerge (2012) found in the media circus surrounding *Just a Little Lovin'*, a 2011 Nordic larp inspired by the AIDS outbreak in 1982 New York. Gerge discovered that pushing the envelope in terms of taboo topics will likely incite a backlash from mainstream media forces, whose favor we are ostensibly trying to curry. Obviously an expanding field of quality larps offered to an increasing quantity and variety of ready-and-willing players appears desirable, but we always read this "progress" through our own deeply personal motives: "I'll be able to quit my day job and just run larps all day!" – "I can educate people with larp." – "Larp will change the world." We thus cannot abstract the prognostic speech act from the subjectivity of the speaker, nor speak precisely of the future without revealing what we value.

Finally, and most importantly, our ability to predict the future is *limited by our general lack of data.* That is to say: the quantity of larps run globally per year number in the hundreds, but each individual event is usually a fairly private affair, neither well-documented at the level of gameplay nor conveniently replayable. Every year, conventions and various Internet portals then hold discussions about the "future" of the role-playing game and what is to become of it given emerging trends and so forth (with this essay being no exception). Commentators in these discussions weigh probability, possibility and potentiality in a medium that otherwise generates this paltry data set from which to make accurate predictions. Like most other fields of human endeavor, precedent, rumor and gut feelings guide our thoughts about the future of larp, and thus we are caught off-guard just like all the rest of humanity when the future arrives unexpectedly on our doorstep. Therefore, we must acknowledge the inherent emotions, vague goals and scant empirical data that we bring to the table when talking about times to come.

II

Before I launch into some inferences about where we're headed and how to orient ourselves toward that destination, let me explicate my own position and stakes in the debate. I am a larp player and designer, as well as a participant in what one would call academic game studies. My approach to larps comes from extensive experience with tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs), particularly non-conventional mainstream titles (e.g. *Unknown Armies*, *Whispering Vault*) and the so-called "indie" role-playing games (e.g. *InSpectres*, *Mortal Coil, Apocalypse World*). Though I had been a TRPG convention gamemaster for many years and made aware of the larp medium, I only confronted the culture head-on as a student at Grinnell College in the early 00s. My participation in the boffer collective *Dagorhir* gave me sufficient nerd-networking capacity to discover the hidden world of invite-only larps on campus. Roy Huggins ('99) was gracious enough to grant me entrance to one of these events – a *Vampire* Camarilla one-shot centered on an art auction – and I suddenly found myself at a bizarre party filled with folks in black eye-makeup aggressively meta-gaming their way to advantage over their peers. I recall doing very little during my first evening as a costumed larp character, other than poison the drink of some Toreador who had made a snide remark about my gloves (and the poison failed, thanks to the rock-paper-scissors resolution mechanic). I participated in three different *Vampire* larps while at Grinnell, each one a largely incoherent mish-mash of gamemaster plotting, player-generated sub-fiction, and listless small talk among the socially marginal. During this time, the discourse at The Forge – the indie TRPG portal – had really taken off, so TRPGs became my focal point of interest, and I took and then taught a Grinnell Experimental College (ExCo) course on TRPG theory. Larp meanwhile faded from my consciousness.

And it returned all of a sudden at Dreamation 2008, when I played in Emily Care Boss' larp version of *Under My Skin*, her TRPG about polyamory that then won the prestigious Audience Award at Fastaval 2008 in Denmark. The game used so-called "jeepform" techniques – flashbacks, intensive scene framing, bird-in-your-ear whispering, monologs – and jeep co-founder Tobias Wrigstad stood as an observer to our late-night melodrama of relationships lost and formed in a modern-day urban community. To me, Emily's jeepform game was definitely larp – bodily movement, eye contact and gestures played a huge role in how the scenes would play out – but definitely tabletop as well, in its willingness to interrupt and intervene in the fiction. Structured "freeform," as it was called, helped me re-frame the hobby away from the one-upsmanship of *Vampire* and toward its use as a medium of complex expression. From that point on, I attended the European conventions Fastaval and mittelpunkt while on my Fulbright in 2010, discovered the game studies discipline, and went on to hold panels on role-playing theory and invite Nordic larp scholars to the United States (specifically Markus Montola and Annika Waern) to assist in the propagation of the sophisticated, streamlined new form of larp I was witnessing. By the same token, I began to run events at the Boston-based larp convention Intercon, such as my *Metropolis* larp – which has since been run around the world – and took notice of the many American innovations in the medium emerging from Intercon and WyrdCon. Though American larps had begun to deal with more mature material and clarified the litigious "social-climbing simulation" larps of yesteryear, such mature larps still often operate on the premise of the gamemaster-as-architect-and-puppetmaster, let alone utilize irritating card and puzzle task-resolution systems which directly compete with any given player's objective to stay in character or push forth the narrative. As a counter-balance to these systems, Emily and I, along with Kat Jones, Epidiah Ravachol and Julia Ellingboe, formed the Western Massachusetts Interactive Literature Society (WMILS) to recognize our commitment to alternate forms of larp creation that focus on transparency and player empowerment.

My personal stakes in the larp discourse should now be clear. The gamemaster and designer in me seeks to apply TRPG theory and praxis in larp creation, such that my hope is to deconstruct the latent "boundary" between tabletop, freeform and live-action role-playing games. Inspiration taken from international sources naturally prompts me to use larp cultures from abroad (e.g., Nordic larp culture) as models for change in the United States, while acknowledging the social limitations that prevent us from adopting those models. My participation in WMILS indicates a designer-activist approach: we write, organize and implement the kind

of games we'd like to see in the world, and we model our games off of what we see that works in other games. This is the "being the change" approach, so to speak. My academic positionality means that I have a vested interest in institutionalizing American larp design and discourse, but hopefully without sacrificing the crowdsourced, grassroots creative energy that keeps the movement vibrant. It would be somewhat disingenuous of me not to reveal such biases before I then launch into emotion-laden prognostication.

III

What is the future of larp as a hobby and a medium? I will now address this question with the *caveat* that my own evidence is anecdotal, my conclusions conjectural.

Earlier in 2012, Vincent Baker returned from PAX Prime with a revelation: there were certain design "problems" which TRPG game designers had to solve in order to attract larger audiences to their products. These problems were the *oppressive social footprint*, *counterproductive procedures of play*, and *opaque content* of most TRPGs. By "oppressive social footprint," Baker means the huge demands a game makes on the time, money, space and logistical know-how of a given group of players. Role-playing is a serious leisure activity and/or a resource-hungry hobby, especially as one proceeds through one's adult life. Most campaign larps collapse under the weight of their oppressive social footprint, as players' shifting lives prohibit their participation. Every larp effort requires semi-active engagement from its participants, and effective engagement requires the kind of attention perhaps better paid to one's job or one's kids. Larp's high overhead in terms of space and costumes, as well as the stigma of being a larper, all contribute to its social footprint. By "counterproductive procedures of play," Baker means the rules and rituals one has generated are overly complex and require continuous disciplining and training (i.e., gamemastering) of a player base in order to get the group to follow them. Unlike chess or duck-duck-goose, we routinely run games we could not possibly explain to our grandparents, and yet which somehow nevertheless lay claim to the universal accessibility of folk art. This is not to say our rules and rituals are bad; they are merely an obstacle between niche interest and mainstream interest. Games requiring large rulebooks, special cards, an expert player – these all engage to some degree in counterproductive procedures of play. By "opaque content," Baker means the subject matter of the game itself does not appeal to most people. Even to a world that is rapidly becoming more nerdly in every way, steampunk vampires or sci-fi intrigues do not draw in audiences the same way as, say, *Halo* or reality television series. This is not to say that larps should all find a way to be more like other media, but rather should be aware that most of their events are escapist fantasy that caters to the only marginally expanding market of nerd fandom. Finally, I would add the problem that larp is *physically demanding*. Either a larp requires specific human capacities (running, jumping, swimming) that not everyone has, or accommodations are made for different levels of player ability and disability that consequently put more rules on the table for players to digest. After playing in "The Solmukohta Plague," a larp by J. Tuomas Harviainen in which players are hunted down and killed by zombies ... and then explore what it's like to be a zombie before being gunned down oneself, I realized that players with difficulty running or climbing stairs were placed at an automatic disadvantage within the game's parameters. Sometimes, we subconsciously design with the healthy and the physically fit in mind – other times, we generate piles of rules to make an event accessible to everyone and make it *way too complex*. In effect, Baker found design constraints in the time/space/money investment, mediocre rules and genre-fiction preoccupations of most games for the market.

The future of larp is either to A) continue to overcome these problems bit by bit, or B) maintain the hobby as an insular activity among a small crowd who do not see Baker's "problems" as such. The actual future is likely to be a mixture of both innovation and stasis (apologies in advance). The oppressive social footprint, for example, has begun to meet its match in the growing movement toward parlor larps, the kind designed by groups like WMILS, Shifting Forest Storyworks, Interactivities Ink and Alleged Entertainment. Parlor larps that last one to four hours and require no costuming may bear close resemblance to improv theater, and are also noticeably less of a time commitment than the standard campus-based larps from the genesis years of the hobby. They are able to be successfully played by anyone with minimal gaming or theater background. The counterproductive procedures of play are being most acutely addressed by the Nordic larps or larps in dialog with the art or theater world, such as Brody Condon's *Level 5* (2010). To maintain the consistency of their real and imagined experiences and/or their immersion, players in such games usually resolve conflict by way of talking it out as players/characters, or performing tasks like staring, touching or dancing that do not seem too "game-y." Card mechanics with complex math or iPad puzzles often interpose themselves with the message "This art event with a first-person audience is, in fact, just a silly game." Though randomizers and emulations of "the world's physics" appear necessary in some larps (such as Starship Valkyrie), their shaky introduction by the event's coordinators can easily break anyone's much-coveted "flow." Similarly, if we take Eirik Fatland at his word that larp design is merely the anticipation of player behavior and provision of specific incentives within the affordances and constraints of any game, then our larp design itself might broadcast misleading signals to the players or reinforce the wrong behaviors at the wrong time. Witness the moment a Vampire larper shows up to a banquet in impressive full costume, only to whip out their character sheet and debate the merits of spending their Experience from their last time between Celerity or Potence. Opaque content – the silliness of the viral "lightning bolt" video, for example – is slowly being overcome through mash-up culture: larps featuring readily recognizable pop cultural icons and familiar literary figures. Rather than larps featuring highly personal characters in customized fantasy worlds (i.e., the cargo cult model), we are increasingly able to network with Cosplayers, actors and other "dress-up" enthusiasts to create personal experiences about fictions to which most have access; living fanfics with increasingly accessible rules and expectations. It is the "physically demanding" factor with which many larps will have to contend, a factor perhaps best addressed with the larps that explore *emotions* over *player-as-character movement*, exemplified by the games inspired by jeepform and its adherents.

So in terms of that thorny notion we call "progress," my hope is to recognize the above "problems" as mere design constraints, steadily diversify the kinds of larps on offer and improve their quality while expanding the player base from which we have to draw all the while. Hopefully, established campaigns such as NERO or One World By Night can learn lessons about gameplay from the innovative boom in small-scale larps, while the smaller larps can learn about organization and finance from the larger campaigns. My fear is, however, that the hobby/medium will age, become out-of-touch, and then suddenly some ambitious (likely white, American, middle-class, heterosexual) male will not only corporatize and monetize the whole operation, but will also claim historical credit for it all – erasing our histories as folk art craftspeople and eliding our past community accomplishments. To mitigate the fear by way of the hope, I do see further institutionalization in the future of the hobby, particularly by way of crowdsourced funding such as Kickstarter (which requires some cultural leverage for a project to get funded) or a lobby organization like in Denmark that advocates for our increased time/space requirements. Though geeks have more-or-less found themselves playing the role of the middle-class around the world, they must now use that political clout before the resources are otherwise hoovered up by the 1% as they shore up their fiefdoms against a world full of scarcity they themselves created. It is, indeed, time to step up and address the major challenges posed by the hobby head-on.

IV

The corollary question for me is then: how is larp itself a *future-making* activity? That is, how do larps make ourselves and future human beings more helpful and useful, and how do our larps themselves envision alternate ways of being that may allude to future organizational models?

Let's begin with the obvious. Larpers acquire skills by preparing for and participating in larps. They learn to sew, to dramatically adapt works of art, to design sets, and to fight. Sarah Lynne Bowman has convincingly argued the case that larps help humans acquire skills in the personal, interpersonal, cultural, cognitive and professional spheres (Bowman 2010, 85-103), such that the simulations run in military, corporate and government contexts differ very little from the medium which we use to act out tales of elves and robots. The 2012 Obama campaign stress-tested its electoral tracking system by way of a larp-like challenge. Various low-tech and high-tech skills co-mingle in a given larp's creation, as costume design, theatrical coordination, web design and mobile app design may be required in its execution. It is thus an activity that selects and incentivizes certain types of human behavior, identical in most ways to training, education and theater exercises. The Artorian Order of the Knights of Pendragon, for example, have their larpers train in real-life CPR or art classes to grant the fictional status of "healer" or "artist" on the character. Larpwrights in theory hold an intoxicating amount of power in their hands, a capacity to directly affect the future capabilities and experiences of all the players.

With regard to this *future-making* capacity, there are – interestingly enough – helpful lessons to learn from a small performance group in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. In an article titled "How Movies Move," Lesley Stern (2010) describes the formation of the Amakhosi, a group of Bulawayo kung fu fans in the 1970s and 80s from a poor black township that decided to practice karate and incorporate their martial arts into impromptu theater productions. They did not have the capital to direct their own kung fu films, but instead channeled their fandom into very avant-garde performance art. "Imagine Brecht meets Jackie Chan meets ingoma dance meets *Dirty Dancing*," Stern writes, "and you will begin to get the picture of the kind of theater." (Stern 2010, 192) This art form, which practiced "fighting without fighting" – as

Bruce Lee once put it – also enacted gender equality among its members and began to apply cultural-political pressure on Robert Mugabe in the 1990s and 00s. Its membership experienced crackdowns from the Mugabe government, but those members who survived have since become mainstays of the Zimbabwean theater scene, capable of producing meaningful, highly acrobatic works on the most minimal of funds. This humble-but-noble theater emerged from Hong Kong genre film fandom and became a folk art that could speak truth to power, an art that gave many of its practitioners skills, beliefs, and a sense of hope that might have otherwise been denied them in their social location. Against difficult economic odds, the Amakhosi autonomously paved the way to their own future through the teaching of specific skills (i.e., karate, dance, concealing political critique) and envisioning an alternate public-cultural sphere through which their voices could be heard over the long term. As the United States and the rest of the world face a protracted economic "crisis," our serious leisure communities constitute *real* communities imparting *real* skills within a political context. In the 19th Century, endangered American agricultural workers came together to form grange societies; in the 20th Century, workers formed unions. Their impact, spaces, and institutions can still be felt to this day. Jane McGonigal's *World Without Oil* or Trine Lise Lindahl's (2012) excursion to teach Nordic larp to populations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories are both examples of game design leveled at social change through incentivizing useful and necessary skills, as well as alternative models to neo-liberal, extractive capitalism that might employ those skills. Larp has "grown up" as it were, which means it is now time for it to clear itself a place of relevance in the future.

Or is this future-making perspective altogether too näíve? Annika Waern has expressed deep skepticism about Mike Pohjola's conjecture that "larp can change the world." After all, there is plenty of deep (white, class-based) privilege that keeps the hobby in motion. Social evolution meanwhile moves at a rate resembling geological time – only incrementally do we perceive profound changes in society, and its sluggish tectonics are bound to disappoint even the most idealistic person at some point. At the same time, our attention-based media economy requires us to constantly offer novelty and "the new" up for consumption in order for us to remain "relevant" (thereby securing the necessary eyeballs to keep operations running smoothly). In practice, this state of eternal novelty is detrimental to innovation, as old concepts are constantly re-packaged and re-fed to audiences with little reflection on what assumptions underlie them. Larp designers look to the next new technique or scenario idea which will earn them attention and approbation (thereby earning them a place in the "future" of the hobby). But those who do not know their history are doomed to repeat it; much re-inventing of the wheel has gone on in the larp hobby, and it has proved difficult enough to make the medium of the first-person audience a meaningful and/or enjoyable experience for all, let alone have it effect widespread reevaluations of deep-seated ideologies and beliefs in its players.

Perhaps a healthier attitude toward the future-making possibilities of larp can be found in Joshua Landy's 2012 literature study *How to Do Things with Fictions,* in which he passionately and engagingly argues that difficult literature is neither there to deliver a message, nor to get us to empathize more with humanity, nor to provide us with role model figures whom we should emulate. Rather, fiction "[clarifies] what we already believe, a process that is morally neutral" (Landy 2012: 9). Like literature, larps may "serve as simulation spaces, in which we may experiment with a variety of strategies without the costly consequences of adopting them in real life; they function as battlegrounds in which different ways of living, grounded in different belief systems, come into conflict... [They] raise questions to which they give no answers" (5). Landy's insight echoes the recently vogue idea of an active, playful reader; of a willing activation of pretense replacing the old "suspension of disbelief" model. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola (2010) formulate a like-minded taxonomy with regard to player agendas in larping: to escape, to explore, to expose, and to impose. To say larps are simply for escapism is to ignore the vast number of ways they might be used to interact with our own realities. Thus larps might usefully produce the future by clearly articulating the contradictions of the present, by laying out the embodied socio-psychological conflicts we all must face as human beings, whether we are playing steampunk raiders or squabbling divorcees. The best literature is, above all, true to the spirit of its source material. Delivering a "message" or encouraging empathy is perhaps beyond the pale of what the larp medium can do; firmly articulating the line between a character's social performance and own internal conflicts is an act fully within its grasp. The larps that will be remembered in posterity are likely not only those which deeply impact their participants, but the ones that present the larp medium *as* a medium, as a useful means of interrogating human reality without enacting judgment on said reality. When Aaron Vanek (2009) stakes a claim that larp is "a distinct, unique Art Form" (Vanek 2009, 5), I believe this is exactly what is meant. We are able to express and improvise with our bodies and voices in immersive secondary worlds of our own collective imagination. Shall we not use the medium to express their dilemmas as they are, so that posterity can accurately judge who and what we were?

V

To tie up many of the above threads in a sentence: larp as a medium *has a future* insofar as it pushes against the boundaries that constrain it, and *produces the future* by way of incentivizing certain skills and clearly (but fictionally) articulating the social, political and cultural strictures of the present. Touting new technologies, audiences or scenarios is our usual rhetorical recourse to talking about the future of larp, but this already expresses to some degree our emotional commitments to technological development as means of human liberty, bigger audiences as a means to better audiences, and emotional and ludic brinksmanship as a pathway to true aesthetic experience. In other words, it's mere ideology, just like anything else. What I suggest here is that designing larps that are easier for the layperson to access – with understandable rules and immediately accessible content that transparently lays out its own fictional premises – may be the paradoxical key to unlocking more highly visible and/or experimental designs in the art form. Our designs can always more elegantly meet our principles and goals behind them. Nicolas Bourriaud (2009) recently posed art as a "a mental expedition outside identitarian norms" (77), and it is precisely such "expeditions" that are required if we wish for the *Great Gatsby* or the *Citizen Kane* of the form. We have to take informed risks, but which are risks nonetheless. Bourriaud sees artists as skeptics who inhabit multiple global-local (dare I say "glocal") spaces, and who then harness their craft to comment on the truly alienating power of present-day relations: "Welcome to the disposable world: a world of customized destinies, governed by the inaccessible mechanism of an economy that, like science, is developing in a state of complete autonomy with respect to lived reality" (Bourriaud 2009, 80). The future feels a certain way to us, because of our specific sensitivity or numbness to the present, because of our attentiveness to the forces that move around us.

Truly inspirational are the larps that alter our futurity, the ones that force us to reevaluate the very apparatus with which we judge the state of things to come. Truly inspirational are the larpers who, by playing through our designs' affordances and constraints, create new ways to train and better themselves, to dream, to hope.

References

Bourriaud, Nicolas (2009). *The Radicant*. New York: Lukas and Sternberg. Print.

Bowman, Sarah Lynne (2010). *The Functions of Role-Playing Games*. Jefferson, North Carolina, and London: McFarland & Company, Inc. Print.

Gerge, Tova (2012). "Larp and Aesthetic Responsibility: When *Just a Little Lovin'* Became an Art Debate." In: *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*. Juhana Pettersson, ed. Helsinki, Finland: Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura: 42-47. Print.

Landy, Joshua (2012). *How to Do Things with Fictions*. New York: Oxford University Press. Print.

Lindahl, Trine Lise (2012). "Weddings and Anti-Condom Activists: Introducing Larp in Palestine." In: *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*. Juhana Pettersson, ed. Helsinki, Finland: Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura: 35-41. Print.

Stenros, Jaakko and Markus Montola, eds. (2010) *Nordic Larp.* Stockholm: Fëa Livia. Print.

Stern, Lesley (2010). "How Movies Move (Between Hong Kong and Bulawayo, Between Screen and Stage ...)." In: *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*. Natasa Durovicova and Kathleen Newman, eds. New York: Routledge: 186-216. Print.

Vanek, Aaron (2009). *Cooler than You Think: Understanding Live Action Role Playing*. Web. http://www.scribd.com/mobile/doc/33955116

Evan Torner *is a German film academic, game studies scholar and larpwright currently based out of western Massachusetts. He has written scenarios for Intercon and Fastaval, as well as articles for* Lejends *magazine,* Playground *magazine, and the Nodal Point (Knudepunkt/Solmukohta) convention books. With William J. White, he co-edited the book* Immersive Gameplay: Essays in Role-Playing and Participatory Media *(McFarland, 2012). His research interests include genre theory, critical race theory, Cold War film history, and incentive models in game and pedagogical design.*

Introduction to the Academic Section

Sarah Lynne Bowman

With great pleasure, I present to you the Academic Section of the 2012 *Wyrd Con Companion Book.* Now in its third year, Southern California's Wyrd Con features a range of larp activities, from boffer to theater style to freeform games. Inspired by Knutepunkt—the annual meeting dedicated to the discussion and innovation of Nordic larp—Wyrd Con offers panels for the practical and intellectual consideration of larp.

Since its inception, Wyrd Con has also followed the Knutepunkt tradition of releasing a book of companion articles each year. The first two volumes, *Journeys to Another World* and *Branches of Play*, were edited and designed by Amber Eagar. Eagar also maintains several other online resources, including the Larp Academia and International Larp Academia mailing lists, as well as the US Larp Wiki. The larp community owes Eagar our gratitude for establishing these public spaces for the intellectual and academic discussion of role-playing in America and beyond. We also owe our gratitude to Wyrd Con's founder Ira Ham, who has consistently raised the bar for intellectual inquiry into interactive storytelling with each convention.

Continuing this tradition of compiling a Companion Book for the convention, Aaron Vanek and I decided to model this volume loosely after the Knudepunkt books from 2011: *Do Larp*, which focuses on documentation for games, *Talk Larp*, which offers editorial articles, and *Think Larp*, which provides rigorous, academic articles from various disciplinary backgrounds. The journalistic section of *The WyrdCon Companion Book* follows in the spirit of *Talk* and *Do* by featuring editorial commentary, anecdotal histories, and documentation. Inspired by *Think*, I issued a general Call for Papers for submissions to the academic section. I originally intended to facilitate peer review for the papers; special thanks to the volunteers who initially offered their services in this capacity. Unfortunately, the low number of article submissions made peer review untenable. Hopefully, we can rectify this problem in future volumes.

America needs a regular publication channel for scholarly work in role-playing studies. Role-playing games have endured stigma and hostility from the mainstream for decades. Though this stigma has lessened somewhat in recent years due to the rise in solid scholarship on the benefits of game play and the popularity of RPG-based virtual games like *World of Warcraft*, many scholars still face derision in academic settings when attempting a serious study of role-playing. While some departments in the U.S. express openness toward research on role-playing games, they generally insist that such studies conform to their disciplinary paradigm. Applying a disciplinary lens to role-playing certainly helps us understand its various facets from alternate perspectives; unfortunately, the majority of the mentors helping scholars through the academic system have no experience with the actual practice of role-playing games, so their ability to provide guidance remains limited. In the meantime, role-playing theory has emerged from the ground up in various communities such as Knutepunkt, New England Interactive Literature, Wyrd Con, the LARP Alliance, the Forge, Story Games, and RPG.net. Our body of collective knowledge and theory pertaining to this unique practice is immense, but not yet codified in academic departments.

The challenge facing current role-playing scholars is three-fold. First, they must translate their experience into established, disciplinary language in order to pass review in their respective departments and journals. Second, they must successfully explain the terminology and "folk knowledge" already explored – and often disputed—within role-playing communities, avoiding excessive, game-based jargon. Third, they must establish and reference a canon for this new field of role-playing studies, which covers a large spectrum of topics arising from various disciplines, theoretical frameworks, game formats, and research methodologies.

I hope that *The Wyrd Con Companion Book* and similar academic volumes, such as the recent *Immersive Gameplay* volume edited by Evan Torner and William J. White and the *International Journal of Role-playing*, will continue to provide a venue for serious academic discussion on role-playing games. Though the essays contained within this current edition do reflect the authors' disciplinary backgrounds—including psychology, pedagogy, visual arts, and theater—each article also integrates the lived experience of players and useful theories arising from role-playing communities.

As much of the current research on role-playing emerges from game studies or sociology, this volume is unique in featuring four articles arising from psychological theories and methods. While game studies focuses upon play/design and sociology examines behavior in a group setting, psychology

emphasizes the subjectivity of individuals. At its core, role-playing is not just a game or a social interaction, but is a personal, subjective experience. These articles examine the nature of that subjective experience from a variety of angles.

Whitney "Strix" Beltrán's article, "Yearning for the Hero Within: Live Action Role-Playing as Engagement with Mythical Archetypes" applies a depth psychology approach to the experience of role-playing a character. Depth psychology and comparative religion, arising largely from the works of Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell, examine mythic structures across cultures in order to investigate how individuals make meaning and explore their identities through stories and ritual. Beltrán contextualizes depth psychology concepts, such as archetypes and individuation, in terms of role-playing games. She argues that with archetypal material within the game space fulfills the need for mythic enactment usually provided by regular, religious rituals. She also examines the relationship between the character and the player, suggesting the term "ego bleed" to explain the psychological transfer of contents between the two identities during play. Ultimately, Beltrán argues that the enactment of alternate identities in role-playing games can lead to greater personal and psychic growth if participants take care to establish boundaries and understand the deeper psychological forces at work.

Rafael Bienia offers a different take on the psychology of players, investigating motivation. Bienia examines various theories of player motivation arising from role-playing communities such as The Forge, RPG.net, and Wyrd Con. Drawing upon Rob McDiarmid's sixteen player motivations featured in last year's *Branches of Play* volume, Bienia collected quantitative data from over 250 German larpers on social media sites. Participants rated their motivations for play, some suggesting additional categories for motivation, which Bienia features in the article. Ultimately, the findings indicate that the German participants in the study felt most motivated by larp's social experiences, immersive aspects, and crafting of props and costuming. This emphasis upon Fellowship and other social motivations outweighed the desire for competition, a surprising finding for Bienia, as previous motivation models tend to deemphasize the communal factors of larp.

Along similar lines, Nathan Hook's "A Social Psychology Study of Immersion Among Live Action Role-players" examines the phenomenon of immersion from a psychological perspective. Drawing from ethnographic data gathered for his Master's thesis, Hook identifies instances of participants' use of the term "immersion" and analyzes their contexts. Like Bienia, Hook indicates immersion as a motivational goal for many players. He also examines the strange phenomenon of the character exerting influence over the player, which he terms "possession." Though scholars still contest the meaning of the word "immersion," analysis of the context in which players use the term may yield insights into the psychological mechanisms behind character enactment.

Switching gears, the last two articles in the volume examine the use of larp in classroom environments. Yaroslau I. Kot's "Educational Larp: Topics for Consideration" provides an introduction to educational larp (edu-larp) and guidelines for teaching with the method. Kot explains edu-larp's rich history in Russia, where advocates of educational innovation, such as Inokentiy Zhukov, promoted the use of role-playing games in the classroom as early as 1916-18. Next, the author lists several types of educational larps and details the specific functions of each permutation of the form. Drawing from his experience as a psychologist, he offers a series of tips for developing edu-larps, emphasizing cognitive, affective, and physical objectives. The author further suggests steps for creating an edu-larp game, including the operating phases. Kot strongly advocates a structured, "summing up" phase, similar to debriefing in the Nordic tradition. While he recognizes that not all students will find the larp format appealing, Kot emphasizes the flexibility of the form and the advantages inherent to engaging student imagination.

Finally, Neal McDonald and Alan Kreizenbeck provide documentation for their course on larp at the University of Maryland, Baltimore Country. "Larp in an Interdisciplinary University Course" offers a detailed explanation of the authors' Spring 2012 class in Visual Arts. The article provides a practical assessment of this experimental course. Designed by instructors from digital animation and drama, the class featured several freeform games, readings from the Knutepunkt books, and intensive theater exercises. McDonald and Kreizenbeck evaluate each exercise in terms of effectiveness and student engagement, offering suggestions for similar courses in the future. Ultimately, the authors propose that teaching the enactment of larp might require a separate course from the design of larp, particularly when working with inexperienced students.

Viewed as a whole, these articles offer insights into the psychology of larp enactment and its pedagogical potential in classroom environments. Though relatively recent in its current cultural form, live action role-playing stems from an inherent, human impulse: the reflexive examination of subjective states through the mechanism of play. The more we understand the psychological power of

role-playing as a form, the more we can harness its potential for use in other areas, including education and self-improvement. Hopefully, these articles will work to further this understanding and stimulate conversation on the nature of the role-playing experience.

Works Cited

Andresen, Lars, et al, eds. *Do Larp: Documentary Writings from KP2011.* Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2011. http://rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks/do_larp_web.pdf.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas, and Marinka Copier, et al, eds. *The International Journal of Role-playing*. 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://journalofroleplaying.org/.

Eager, Amber, ed. *Branches of Play: The 2011 WyrdCon Academic Companion.* 9 Jun. 2011. Web/PDF. 3 Dec. 2012. http://wyrdcon.com/2011/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/100-copies-AcademicBook.pdf.

Eager, Amber. "International Larp Academia: Mailing List for Those in the USA Who Want to Follow and Study Larp on a More Academic Basis Around the World." *Mortalisrpg.com.* N.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://mortalisrpg.com/mailman/listinfo/intllarpacademia_mortalisrpg.com.

Eager, Amber, ed. *Journeys to Another World: Articles on Live-Action Role-Playing compiled for the 2010 Larp Summit at WyrdCon.* 2010. Web. 12 Dec. 2012. http://www.mortalisrpg.com/?download=4

Eager, Amber. "Larp Academia: Mailing List for Those in the USA Who Want to Follow and Study Larp on a More Academic Basis." *Mortalisrpg.com.* N.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://mortalisrpg.com/mailman/listinfo/larpacademia_mortalisrpg.com.

Henriksen, Thomas Duus, et al, eds. *Think Larp: Academic Writings from KP2011.* Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2011. http://rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks/think_larp_web.pdf.

McDiarmid, Rob. "Analyzing Player Motives to Inform larp Design." *Branches of Play: The 2011 WyrdCon Academic Companion.* Ed. Amber Eagar. 9 Jun. 2011. PDF file. 3 Dec. 2012. 3–25. http://wyrdcon.com/2011/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/100-copies-AcademicBook.pdf.

Raasted, Claus, ed. *Talk Larp: Provocative Writings from KP2011.* Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2011. http://rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks/talk_larp_web.pdf.

Torner, Evan and William. J. White, eds. *Immersive Gameplay: Studies in Role-Playing and Media Immersion.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. Print.

Wyrd Con 4: Interactive Storytelling Convention. 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://wyrdcon.com/.

US Larp Wiki. N.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://larpwiki.mortalisrpg.com/index.php?title=Main_Page.

Sarah Lynne Bowman *received her Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Dallas in 2008. She also holds a B.S. and M.A. from the University of Texas at Austin in Radio-TV-Film. McFarland Press published her dissertation in 2010 as* The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity. *Her current research interests include examining social conflict within role-playing communities, applying Jungian theory to role-playing studies, studying the benefits of educational role-playing games, and contrasting the enactment of role-playing characters with other creative phenomena, such as drag. She teaches as an adjunct professor in English and Communications.*

Email contact: singingyoutoshipwreck@hotmail.com

Yearning for the Hero Within: Live Action Role-Playing as Engagement with Mythical Archetypes

Whitney "Strix" Beltrán

Abstract

This work examines the relationship between larp and depth psychology, explains how researchers can use depth psychology as starting point for describing what happens between players and their characters, and provides language to describe the outcomes of said interactions. The article briefly describes archetypal engagement in Western and non-Western environments and examines the rise of larp in the West in the context of the societal need for myth. The aim of this work is to illustrate how researchers can use depth psychology as a theoretical framework to evaluate certain functions of larp from a psychological perspective. This work draws on the ideas and research of academics across disciplines, including psychology, anthropology, game studies, and comparative mythology.

Keywords

Depth psychology, role-playing studies, myth, archetype, larp, individuation, character, ego bleed

1. Establishing a language for larp

Live action role-playing games are notoriously misunderstood. In its infancy, this genre of play faced the Satanic Panic of the 1980s and 90s. From there, larp struggled through to today, where in the United States at least, role-playing is mostly maligned as a fringe hobby for poorly adjusted nerds and *Lord of the Rings* aficionados. However, the international larp community is larger and more vibrant than ever. Real discourse about the function and meaning of larp is conducted all over the world, from the annual Knutepunkt conferences in the Nordic countries to Brazilian experimentation with adaption of larp techniques in education (Schmit, Martins, and Ferreira 75). Larp stands at the very cusp of the mainstream, already spilling over in some places. Nordic countries especially seem to be at the forefront of this trend, where arts funding is sometimes available for larp-related activities and academic research. As this genre of play begins to truly come into its own and to gain international recognition as a valuable participatory art, scholars must develop the vocabulary to articulate why larp is important and what exactly goes on when players engage in this activity.

Many scholars have begun to address larp as the community struggles toward carving out its own academic niche. As American scholars attempt to catch up with the international academic larp community as a whole, we will invariably find that we are going to stumble upon ground already covered. We also must write about what we know, and with that in mind, this article largely addresses the American larp audience and scene in its current state of self-knowledge and cultural milieu. Given the newness of the discipline, it is often difficult to know where to start. In our attempt to grasp larp, one of the most basic places to begin is the examination of the relationship between players and their characters. As articulated in a recent thesis on larp by the UK scholar Nathan Hook, some academics feel that larp is a new creature entirely separate from other performing arts and even other game paradigms when it comes to player/character dynamics. Scholars must put forward new theoretical models and research in order to better understand the psychological process occurring within a larp (Hook 7).

This paper examines basic principles of depth psychology as related to larp through mythic archetypal engagement, and intends to put forth an elementary framework for understanding the relationship between players and their characters through this lens. Depth psychological terminology and its interpretation of psychic structure is briefly unpacked. Then, archetypes—as well as engagement with archetypes across cultures—are examined, including a perceived lack of archetypal engagement in the modern West and the subsequent rise of larp to address a societal need for myth. A new term, *ego bleed*, is suggested, which is meant to describe mid- to long-term effects of mythic archetypal engagement as they relate to personality and personal development. Ego bleed is differentiated from the term *bleed*, which is characterized by more

immediate emotional responses to stimuli both in- and out-of-game. The concept of individuation is introduced as a positive outcome of mythic archetypal engagement and the ego bleed that ensues, but with due caution regarding stirring up the unconscious and engaging suppressed parts of the self, also known as the Shadow.

Depth psychology has its detractors, and has fallen out of favor within the greater psychological community. However, as academic progression of the understanding of larp advances, it has proven difficult to make any sort of measurement of functions of player/character relationships within larp using current scientific models such as cognitive, psychodynamic, or behavioral psychology. This difficulty greatly stalls the process of developing relevant, working theories. The situation lends itself to a more scientifically "outside of the box" approach to thinking about the issue.

2. Depth Psychology as a tool for understanding larp

In light of certain deficiencies in the ability to address larp using current models, approaching specific aspects of larp from a depth psychological perspective becomes a valuable tool for tackling its functions. This perspective is one tool of many, and in the fluid and rapidly evolving thought paradigms surrounding larp, it is essential to consider all avenues of inquiry and evaluation. Depth psychology specifically gives us a language and a means to interpret the relationship between players and the characters that they play. In addition, this theoretical model can help illuminate the reason why a player puts on the mask in the first place and what benefits are reaped as a result.

To fully understand larp in the context of depth psychology, a few concepts must be broken down. First, one must have a basic understanding of depth psychology itself. It began as a psychoanalytic approach to therapy based on the theories of Sigmund Freud, Alfred Adler, Carl Jung, and their ilk. Many branch theories grew from psychoanalysis, but the most notable and relevant to larp is the work of Carl Jung and, later, James Hillman, who developed Jungian psychology and Archetypal psychology respectively. Also notable in this context is the work of Joseph Campbell, a Jungian scholar of comparative religion.

Depth psychology presupposes that the human psyche is actually a process. This process is partly conscious, partly semi-conscious, and party unconscious (Jung, *Man and His Symbols,* 42). If, for example, we view the psyche as a body of water, then what is commonly considered our "self" lies near the top. This self is commonly called *the ego*. Deeper patterns of personality lie near the middle in what is known as the personal unconscious. Still lower are all the things that we repress, and in the dark depths lurk the collective and archetypal structures that connect us with the universal human experience, also known as the collective unconscious. There has been significant debate as to what exactly the collective unconscious is. Whether the collective unconscious is an actual shared psychic space, a fundamental knowledge genetically imprinted into all people, or something else entirely is beyond the scope of this paper.

The human psyche actively creates mythic symbolism and patterns. Therefore, the psyche is an engine of the metaphysical, giving itself a framework with which to work in attempting to understand the fundamental nature of being and of the world, as well as serving the base function of survival. The underlying importance is that all humans make myths, whether spiritual or non-spiritual, and our engagement with these myths is meaningful and important (Campbell, *The Power of Myth* 2). The archetypes found in myths are a reflection of structures hidden deep within every person. Myth itself is a vital medium of human symbolism and storytelling, not simply an ignorant explanation for natural events, as was so often thought around the turn of the twentieth century by most Western scholars of myth (Bulfinch ix), and sometimes still believed today. The scholarship of both myth and psychology has dramatically advanced since then, although, as previously discussed, a resistance to the depth psychological approach has evolved since Jung's time.

2.1 Archetypes

I will now address the idea of archetypes within the context of depth psychology. An archetype in the most basic terms is a personality pattern *(*Jung, *Man and His Symbols,* 58). Archetypes are models that appear repeatedly in mythological figures and images across cultures and throughout the human experience. There is an important distinction to be made, which often confuses those unfamiliar with Jung's terminology. Specific archetypal figures—for instance, the Femme Fatale, the Trickster, the Outcast, and the Great Mother—are not archetypes *as such*, but are considered to be particular archetypal images derived from what Jung calls "archaic remnants" or "primordial images." These archaic remnants are true archetypes, while particular archetypal figures are conscious representations of

them with variable traits (*Man and His Symbols* 57).

These archetypal figures should be immediately identifiable to most people. Archetypes often incarnate as gods, spirits, local legends, and cultural heroes. They can also be found in many Western media character tropes. Archetypes give context and clarity to human experience. As Jung explains, "All the most powerful ideas in history go back to archetypes... the central concepts of [religion,] science, philosophy and ethics are no exception to this rule" (Jung and Storr 16).

The use of these archetypes is varied, but the tendency to turn them inward makes them useful for larp studies. While a certain universality is understood, the archetypes embedded in one's own personal psychic landscape make them useful for unpacking the ongoing process of interaction between players and their characters. Though a large variety of archetypal figures exist, Jung emphasized a handful throughout his works, which I will address in brief later in this paper.

Much can be gained from pairing larp with the concept of mythic, archetypal exploration. Sarah Lynne Bowman, a scholar of role-playing games, puts it succinctly: "Human beings need fantasy for healthy psychic and social life. Regardless of time, space, or cultural background, the constraints of every day society offer limited roles for people to inhabit" (*Functions* 7). When a player chooses a character to enact in a larp, they typically have a role to fill, i.e. an archetypal figure to emulate. Examples include the group's healer, the lovable rogue, an anti-hero, or perhaps even a villain. Larp gives players access to roles they would not have the ability to occupy in everyday life, thus stimulating the development of their own internal archetypes. Instead of remaining defined and fenced in by a narrow identity, the psyche has a chance to examine experiences in other climes of mental and emotional space, allowing for an opportunity of expansion of the self (127).

In a later publication, Bowman elaborates upon how this process is possible and why a player's identity does not necessarily follow them into a larp ("Jungian Theory and Immersion"). Enacting characters supersedes the limits of players' everyday roles so that they may engage more directly with archetypes by relaxing their own egos. Bowman believes that to achieve this relaxed ego, players can and do enter into a "liminal state" together, meaning a state of consciousness that is "betwixt and between," evoking the Jungian concept of active imagination. Role-playing is a ritualistic space in which a "magic circle" is established, a collectively agreed upon protective frame around the liminal space that players occupy during a larp (32-37). This certain set of conditions must be present in order for players to evoke and engage archetypes; indeed, in rituals unrelated to larp, the same conditions manifest themselves when groups of people engage directly with myth.

3. Archetypal engagement across cultures

Here in the West, and especially in America, pervasive problems with identity and meaning have emerged. In many non-Western and indigenous cultures, rites, traditions, and strictures give form and sustenance to the human need for myth and archetypal engagement. As Campbell explains, "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward" (Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 10). The world is rich with living models in which people are given access to exploring and engaging archetypes. In Haiti, Voodoo practitioners dance and drum in rituals in which they become "possessed" by the Loa, their gods. Practitioners believe that they literally become an incarnated god, a personified archetype, for a short time (Deren 230). In her book on the subject, Maya Deren further expounds upon ethnic dances, a perspective that offers a unique illumination to larp:

> Since theatrical performance, in our culture, is necessarily a statement of virtuosity addressed to an audience, the ethnic dances (which are predicated on the collective participation, presume a common agreement and knowledge among the participants, and are addressed to divinity) can only be greatly and fundamentally distorted in theatrical presentation. In ritual dances the inevitable personalization of movements remains minimal and subtle in the extreme, since there is no audience to provoke their development and exaggeration. Courlander, in his notes to an album of Haitian recordings, states: "While Haitian dancing is packed with elements of drama, probably the most important thing about it is that it is primarily participative. Where there may be an audience, that audience is secondary, usually composed of resting participants... the prime reason for the dance is participation." (230)

Despite the fact that Deren's book was written before modern role-playing games existed, this passage hits upon an integral component of archetypal engagement in larp; namely, larp is participative and has only a first-person audience, which is key to forming the magic circle mentioned

earlier. This magic circle does not exist solely within larp, but in many other participative rituals as well.

Another example comes from the diaspora of Africa, where events known as masquerades are frequent religious and political happenings across many nations. Participants dress as embodiments of ideas, devils, spirits, and identities. An age-old tradition, masquerades are still relevant today. In a National Geographic article documenting masquerades entitled "African Masks," Cathy Newman writes:

> ...the mask is more than mere facade. It is utterly transformative. The man in the mask... may speak in a different voice, move differently, behave differently, because he is a different being. The mask is put on. The line between reality and illusion, god and man, life and death blurs. The masked man is not playing a role. He becomes the role. (Newman)

Again, we see the recurrence of two important themes: participation and the ability to engage directly in non-typical roles in a liminal space. There are volumes worth of further examples in the literature of comparative mythology and religious studies, such as James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, Wade Davis' *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, the works of Max Müller, Claude Lévi-Strauss, and others. However, these two examples provide an adequate representation for the points regarding larp. A common theme in cultures across the world is setting aside one's own identity for a time in order to take up another, more essential kind of role. The communal ritualization of this action is integral to the health and stability of a given community. Through this lens, larp can be seen as a newer vehicle of an ancient human tradition of archetypal engagement.

3.1 A lack of archetypal engagement in the West

In the post-modern West, these avenues for engaging myth have mostly been stamped out or rendered empty and meaningless. There are few, if any, equivalents in our culture to the ethnic dances of our non-Western counterparts. We have few cultural signals to know when individuals have come of age and sparse guideposts to tell us what it means to be a man, a woman, or how to deal with death. These cravings and questions may have contributed to the rise of role-playing games in the West. With no other outlet, a new type of archetypal engagement was spontaneously formed to address a real human need to get out of one's own skin. To some, this concept may seem backwards. Surely, we are better off than "primitive" people, who blamed unfavorable events on evil spirits, but as Jung puts it, "...the terrors that stem from our elaborate civilization may be far more threatening than those that primitive people attribute to demons" (*Man and His Symbols* 31).

Modern thought and science has supposedly expunged the irrational demons of old and the need for myth from the earth in a fit of light and reason. However, as we have come to learn, those old demons have only changed names:

> We can congratulate ourselves on having already reached such a pinnacle of clarity, imagining that we have left all these phantasmal gods behind. But what we have left behind are only verbal specters, not the psychic facts that were responsible for the birth of the gods. We are still as much possessed by autonomous psychic contents as if they were Olympians. Today they are called phobias, obsessions, and so forth; in a word, neurotic symptoms. (Jung, "Commentary" 37)

In short, we have the same old problems with new faces. We lack the old tools, though, and now we need ones that align with a decidedly unmagical, post-modern world.

We have coped, in part, by keeping our old myths alive in the ways that we could. Strong mythic archetypes occupy large swaths of territory in Western media. From movies to soap operas to reality TV, rich archetypes abound. George Lucas, in creating the *Star Wars* saga, specifically identified the growth of the character Luke Skywalker with Joseph Campbell's concept of the *monomyth*, or Hero Cycle, a supposed universal formula for a mythic journey or experience (*The Power of Myth* xiii). In turn, the story of Lucas' hero has shown near universal appeal and has become one of the most popular franchises ever. Though this story is consumed often by audiences, it does not seem to satiate consumers entirely. Consumption of media is missing two components that would make it a truly effective means of archetypal engagement: the activation of a participatory liminal space and the ability to directly interact with a character/archetype that is not one's self through active imagination.

Joseph Campbell's formula of the monomyth and its associated archetypes have consciously been applied to larp in the past, such as in Nathan Hook's article "Larp of a Thousand Faces." The title is an homage to Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, where Campbell writes about the hero's journey in depth. Hook asserts that each player enacts an archetypal hero's journey through their character. When speculating upon the relationship between characters and their players, Hook states:

> Should the players rather than their characters experience the internal changes and emotive power of the journey? I'm confident Campbell would say they should, that larp can be living myth with the same potential for personal transformation as mystery plays or religious rites. Campbell claimed the cinema had replaced temple mystery plays; shamans replaced not by [socially] ordained priests but by artists who seek personal insight. Greg Stafford (co-founder of Chaosium, author of the Pendragon tabletop RPG) took this further and claimed that role-playing offers a way for modern people to reconnect with myth in an active way in contrast to the passive nature of films. (38)

Hook also sees larp as a ritual space, acknowledging the magic circle as a transportive mechanism that allows players to engage directly with mythic archetypes. Again, we see the rise of larp as correlated to a deep need for such engagement left unfulfilled by other, more passive means commonly found in the West.

4. Engagement

Combined together, these two components of the magic circle and direct role engagement in a liminal space set larp apart from media consumption and other theatrical and gaming activities. Traditional theatre separates audience from performer, and so audience members are still left on the outside of the mythic experience. Though some have attempted crossover between larp and theatre, such efforts have proven problematic. Johanna MacDonald, a performance artist and larp enthusiast, states in her Nordic Larp Talk that past attempts at blending the two have met with failure, asserting that "there is a fundamental aesthetic conflict from performing arts to larp" (MacDonald).

Most other games do support some level of integration with a character, but not as fully as larp. In tabletop role-playing games, for example, a player would verbalize, "My character shoots an arrow at the enemy" rather than shooting arrows themselves. There is a significant barrier between the player and the character that they enact. The player conceptually understands the act of shooting arrows at enemies, but may have no previous visceral knowledge of experiencing such a moment of combat. Larp, while thankfully not allowing people to shoot actual arrows at each other, can afford a player something close to the experience of stringing a bow, feeling its taunt weight on their fingertips, aiming it at an enemy while under frantic pressure, and ultimately deciding whether or not to shoot by physically releasing the bowstring. By corporeally incarnating the role of "archer" through active imagination, the player gains much more insight into the role than by saying, "My character shoots an arrow." Physical participation is key to bridging the gap between "thinking" and "becoming," resulting in more successful physical and inner (psychic) immersion.

Larp is the West's solution to addressing the need to explore and connect with other roles and states of physical and emotional being—essentially, to "live" myth. Whether for an hour, an evening, or years of a story cycle, larp empowers players to seek out experiences they would never have in day to day life. Bowman states:

> Games and scenarios allow participants the opportunity to "try on different hats" of selfhood, experimenting with the adoption of personality characteristics that either amplify or contradict aspects of their primary identities. Role-playing environments provide a safe atmosphere for people to collectively enact new modes of self-expression and experience a sense of ego permeability while still maintaining their primary identity in the "real world." (Functions 127)

Again, we see the similarities in description between Bowman's explanation of role-playing games, Hook's application of the monomyth, and the previous passage by Deren describing ethnic dances.

In describing engagement itself, the language and theory structure of depth psychology becomes valuable in expounding upon the functions of larp. In the context of larp, archetypal engagement is a form of learning in which archetypal modes of thought and personality are experienced by a participant. Players who would not otherwise have access to these modes can absorb these archetypes, at some level, into their worldview and self-understanding.

4.1 Ego bleed

One of the processes of transference possible between player and character during engagement is ego bleed. In the larger academic larp community, a similar term exists, stated simply as "bleed." Bleed was first used academically in Markus Montola's "The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing." However, this specific idea of bleed centers around direct transference of emotions between player and character, such as two characters falling in love and their players developing feelings in real life as a result. The term "bleed" has become largely unspecific and relatively undefined since its

first use. Every scholar has a different take. For this reason, I suggest using the term "ego bleed" to more effectively differentiate what is meant by the phrase. Bleed in any form is not easily observed or measured and so it is a difficult subject to approach from an academic perspective. However, ego bleed is a real phenomenon that should not be ignored.

The term ego bleed is specific in that it pertains less to emotions and more to the transference of overall identity patterns during play both in immediacy and over time. An example of ego bleed might be a propensity for hedonism in a player to express itself through the same propensity emerging in the actions and thoughts of their character, and vice versa. Ego bleed is a two way channel in which fragments of personality are passed between the player and their character.

When a player enters into archetypal engagement during larp, it is therefore possible to experience ego bleed in which an archetypal characteristic inherent in a character type or role "rubs off" on a player. As a hypothetical example, consider a young female player who does not particularly like children in real life. Perhaps she cuts off the nurturing aspect of herself too much in her personal relationships with other adults in an attempt to maintain a consistent internal view of herself. If this woman were to play a character who evoked the Great Mother archetype, she would come to experience nurturing others without threatening her primary identity. On both a conscious and unconscious level, she would absorb the lessons learned from enacting the Great Mother and perhaps even begin to incorporate them into herself. She may even come to realize that she can nurture her loved ones while still not enjoying the company of children.

Ego bleed is an important concept to incorporate into the language of depth psychology in dealing with larp because, when addressed as a directional transference of traits from character to player, it gives a name to one of the mechanisms of individuation. When players actively engage an archetype, they directly experience modes of behavior, thought, and emotion from which their psyche can learn if it can successfully integrate these experiences.

4.2 Individuation

Individuation as a whole is a complex subject beyond the scope of this article, as are many other of the themes that have been addressed. In the depth psychological tradition, individuation is a form of psychological integration of the self, a process that can lead to personal expansion and better internal psychic balance. Jung originally linked individuation with dream interpretation (*Man and His Symbols* 3); he had never accounted for role-playing games, as they did not yet exist in their current form when he developed his theories. Jung did postulate that individuation was a natural process and that other forms of free association and active imagination could also provide avenues for individuation (*Symbols of Transformation* 62).

Bowman has thought along the same lines. When speaking of the effects of game play on the self after the dissolution of the magic circle, she states, "The Ego identity and persona must now come to terms with the content unearthed by the liminal moments of the game" ("Jungian" 13). This coming to terms is part of the integration of those experiences within the greater individuation process.

Jung felt that there were stages to individuation in which people engaged different types of archetypes depending on where they were in life and how far along they were in the individuation process already (*Man and His Symbols* 171). Among these archetypes are the Anima/Animus (feminine/masculine aspects of the self), the Trickster, the Hero, and the Shadow, which is the antithesis self, made up of all the suppressed parts of one's personality. The process of individuation is meant to integrate all of these selves into the whole of the personality over time. A parallel is shown in Bowman's "four stages" of character evolution as players and characters develop together over time. Additionally, she lists nine archetypal character types with which players may at some point engage as their experiences lead to continual psychic growth (*Functions* 157-178).

Worthy to note here is perhaps the most interesting and misunderstood of Jung's archetypes: the Shadow. By its very nature, it breaks conventions and plays with taboos. It takes an already somewhat individuated and experienced player to engage their Shadow in a way that is both meaningful and safe for themselves and other players within a larp setting. Engaging the Shadow can be rewarding, but too often, when the Shadow is engaged before it is appropriate, all manner of chaos and unintended emotional strife can ensue. Players who are less self aware may get in over their heads if they unleash a suppressed part of themselves that they are not ready to deal with yet or may not be able to control, thus unbalancing themselves too much and potentially causing emotional harm to those around them.

Anecdotally, games like *Vampire: the Masquerade* and *Call of Cthulhu* seem to engender engagement with the Shadow more often because of their darker themes and nature of play. While this engagement is not necessarily problematic, the more people involved with engaging the Shadow in a game, the more likely that one of them will have difficulty

coping maturely with exposure to that archetype. This causes problems both in- and outside of the game and undermines the cohesiveness of the larp community.

When a participant chronically plays over a long period of time, a certain level of ego bleed from the character to the player is inevitable; those traits that the player continually enacts as their character will eventually integrate at least partially into the player's understanding of self. Thus, playing a brave knight might help a player more truly understand what it is to be brave and incorporate that knowledge into the self. However, the same may be true for an evil, manipulative, vampire character played over the same amount of time. The phrase "you are what you eat" comes to mind. Ego bleed can be both a positive and negative force. Caution is always advised.

Bowman and Jung also agree that individuals engaged in these states should not lose sight of real life:

> ...Jung warned against dwelling too long in states of active imagination, for the psychosis of the unconscious could override the Ego and create an even greater imbalance. Thus, a return back to the mundane persona with proper integration of the material experienced in the liminal state must occur for the individuation process to be considered successful. ("Jungian" 14)

This is perhaps why in most non-Western cultures, mythic archetypal engagement occurs largely during specific ritualized events with a clear beginning and end. These rituals are generally supervised by a priest, shaman or other kind of designated leader. The process of individuation is beneficial, but needs healthy constraints.

As previously discussed, in many non-Western societies, opportunities for individuation through archetypal engagement are an integrated part of the culture. The West offers decidedly less avenues leading to the same destination. Viewing larp as a response to the need for mythic, archetypal engagement and, thus, resulting in individuation, begins to make sense. All people stand to gain from the benefits of individuation, a natural process derived at least in part from ego bleed resulting from archetypal engagement.

5. Looking Forward

After considering these concepts, the theoretical picture starts to come into view. When depth psychology is used as a tool to examine the processes and outcomes between players and their characters in larp, a rich subtext is then brought into focus. Archetypal engagement is a universal human activity across cultures, but because of the beliefs held in the post-modern West, it becomes difficult to find such avenues of engagement. Due to its specific qualities, larp has evolved as such an avenue, perhaps because of the inherent human need to experience myth. When players engage mythic archetypes through larp, they can experience ego bleed, a process by which fragments of personality are passed both ways between players and their characters with both immediate and long term outcomes. This exchange of personality characteristics with an archetypal character can lead to individuation, which, in the depth psychological tradition, is a form of integration of the self. This integration of self can have many benefits, such as personal and psychic growth and fulfillment; however, the path is not without its own dangers.

Future scholarship can expand specific elements within this article, including: larp's link with communal ritual, a more in-depth discussion of bleed, immersion, the work of James Hillman, and the differences between American and other larp cultures, as "the West" requires greater differentiation. However, this study sets a solid foundation for the blending of larp and depth psychology and, hopefully, the academic discussion of the mingling of these two ideas will continue.

Works Cited

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010. Print.

—. "Jungian Theory and Immersion in Role-playing Games." *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing. Ed. Evan Torner and William J. White.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 31-51. Print.

Bulfinch, Thomas. *Bullfinch's Age of Fable, or Beauties of Mythology.* Philadelphia: David McKay, 1898. Print.

Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004. Print.

—. *The Power of Myth.* New York: Anchor Books, 1988. Print.

Davis, Wade. *The Serpent and the Rainbow.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 1985. Print.

Deren, Maya. *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti.* New York: McPherson & Company, 2004. Print.

Frazer, James G. *The Golden Bough.* New York: Avenel Books, 1981. Print.

Hook, Nathan. *Identities at Play: An Ethnographic Study of the Psychological Experience of Recreational Role-Players Created and Being Recreated by Fictional Identities.* Thesis. The Open University, 2012. Web. Sept. 2012. http://www.lulu.com/shop/nathan-hook/identities-at-play/ebook/product-20328256.html.

—. "Larp of a Thousand Faces: Applying Mythic Structure to Larp." *Playing Reality.* Ed. Elge Larsson. Knutpunkt 2010. Stockholm, Sweden: Interacting Arts, 2010. 29-42. http://nordiclarpwiki.org/w/images/9/97/2010-Playing.Reality.pdf.

Jung, Carl G. and Anthony Storr. *The Essential Jung.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983. Print.

Jung, Carl G. "Commentary on the Secret of the Golden Flower." *Alchemical Studies, Collected Works, Vol. 13.* Trans. R. F. C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968. Print.

—. *Man and His Symbols.* London: Pan Books Ltd., 1978. Print.

—. *Symbols of Transformation: An Analysis of the Prelude to a Case of Schizophrenia, Vol. 2.* Trans. R. F. C. Hull. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962. Print.

MacDonald, Johanna. "From Performing Arts to Larp—Johanna MacDonald." *Nordic Larp Talks.* 11 Apr. 2012. Video/Web. 08 Nov. 2012. http://nordiclarptalks.org/post/20957946341/from-preforming-arts-to-larp-johanna-macdonald.

Montola, Markus. "The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing." Proceedings of *Nordic DiGRA 2010: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Player.* 2010. Web. Sept. 2012. http://www.digra.org/dl/db/10343.56524.pdf.

Newman, Cathy. "African Masks." *National Geographic.* National Geographic Society, 2012. Web. 25 Aug. 2012. http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/04/african-masks/newman-text.

Schmit, Wagner Luiz, João Batista Martins, and Thales Ferreira. "Role-playing Games and Education in Brazil: How We Do It." *Larp, the Universe, and Everything.* Ed. Matthijs Holter, Eirik Fatland, Even Tømte. Knutpunkt 2009. 75-96. Web. 1 Dec. 2012. http://knutepunkt.laiv.org/2009/book/RolePlayingGamesAndEducationInBrazil/kp09_RolePlayingGamesAndEducationInBrazil.pdf.

Whitney "Strix" Beltrán *is a writer, speaker, and mythologist who has studied myth, faerie tales, and folklore from around the world for most of her life. She is currently a doctoral student at Pacifica Graduate Institute, where she is pursuing a Ph.D. in Mythological Studies with an emphasis in Depth Psychology. Her research background is in Central and South American ritual and mythic systems, for which she has traveled extensively throughout Peru and Ecuador. However, she has an evolving interest in available modes of mythic archetypal engagement in the modern West. She also likes to larp.*

Email contact: Whitney.Beltran@pacifica.edu

Why Do Players Larp? Motivations for Larping in Germany

Rafael Bienia

Abstract

This article investigates player motivations for participating in live action role-playing (larp) games. Previous attempts to classify larp motivation led to several different typologies. This paper seeks to shed light on the prominent motivations of German larpers. In July 2011, the researcher started a discussion on social media sites to prioritize and modify the sixteen common larp motivations suggested by Rob McDiarmid in the last *Wyrd Con* book. The study used participatory observation to provide answers from the German larp community in order to correct or justify previous theories. The results of the study rank Fellowship, Embodiment, Flow, Catharsis, and Crafting as the top five motivations for larp. A discussion of the results is provided at the end of the article. A call for comparable studies shows the possibilities for future research.

Keywords

Motivation, larp, social psychology, role-playing studies, ethnography, quantitative, Germany, creative agenda

1. Introduction

This article seeks to investigate the motivations for larping. As larpers become more and more visible to society, their motivations are often reduced to two common stereotypes. First, larp is considered an activity primarily for fans of the fantastic genres, including fantasy, science fiction, and horror. Second, popular movies such as *Role Models* (2008) enforce the stereotype of the larper as a foolish character who serves the comedy genre. Other films follow the tradition of *Mazes and Monsters* (1982) in order to exploit a common fear that larpers are dissociative, troubled individuals trapped in their delusions of reality. Arising from the horror genre, this tradition goes back to Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), but misses the depth of this prominent example of fiction. Despite the pop cultural discourse, most people with whom I have discussed larp express curiosity, but have difficulties understanding the motivations that cause people to engage in this hobby.

This study asked larpers to provide an answer to the motivation question from the community itself. The first step to answering this question is to contextualize this study within previous attempts to understand role-playing motivation. In the second step, I show the results of a discussion with larpers regarding their motivations. The discussion started with an open, online survey with German larpers in the summer of 2011. The participants could choose from several categories of motivation based on Rob McDiarmid's list from *Branches of Play: The 2011 WyrdCon Academic Companion* (5-6). Participants were also allowed to add their own suggestions to the list. The third step of this article summarizes the results. Finally, the article interprets the results in terms of what drives larpers to participate.

2. Disclosure

This study is part of my dissertation project on role-playing games at Maastricht University, which I started in 2011. My research is part of the project *Narrative Fan Practices: A Key to Cultural Dynamics* funded by the Dutch organization for cultural research Nederlandse Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO). Before my work, I spent six years within the German larp community. I have participated in approximately forty events in the roles of player character, non-player character, and organizer. The genres included high and low fantasy (*Alcyon* X-XVI, 2006-2012; *Schwarzbernstein*, 2009), 1920s Cthulhu (*Das Vermächtnis*, 2008), and alternative reality (*Obscurus 2*, 2012).

The game types included mainly what are known in Germany as "adventure," "fest," "tavern," and "nightie" larps. Adventure is the most common larp format played during a weekend, including fighting, riddles, and diplomacy, often in the fantasy genre. Fest larp, is the abbreviation of "Schlachtenfest" and focuses on violent and diplomatic negotiations between hundreds (*Epic Empires*) and thousands of players (*Conquest of Mythodea*, *Drachenfest*), but allows for other sorts of typical role-playing activities. Tavern larps are single evening events focusing on social activities. They are easier to

organize as they are less expensive with regard to money and time. The organizers require comparably less decoration and preparation, as a pub is rented for one evening (*Smoker's Lounge*, 2012). Participants have the opportunity to larp, but still have the rest of the weekend free to spend outside of the game. For example, participants can spend this spare weekend time with a partner who might not play. "Nighties" is the jargon name for larps that are played during one night. Among fantasy larps, nighties are rare as they demand much preparation for a limited amount of players, space, and time (*BAM! From Dusk till Dawn*, 2010).

The amount of days of constant play ranges from one night to one week, with the weekend game as the most common format in Germany. The common play culture of larping in Germany emphasizes character immersion all day and night with some exceptions, such as when safety requires breaking character. In previous years, I have participated in one-shots and series of annual events, also known as "campaigns." Campaign games are played once or several times in the year. For example, *Alcyon* by the Fantasiewelten e.V. has run for more than sixteen years, though even older campaigns persist.

A challenge for me using participatory observation in larp is to balance three roles: me, the character I play, and my role as a researcher. If I choose to participate in playing, switching between the three roles is difficult. If I choose to observe as a researcher, distancing myself from my observations is necessary. One way to solve this problem is to compare my results with insights from other participants. Thus, I deploy other methods like qualitative interviews and simply talking with other larpers offline and online. This study is the result of an open discussion reflecting my findings on larp motivations.

3. Motivation

Previous research on motivation concentrated on tabletop, or "pen'n'paper," role-playing games. Especially among the first online communities, like newsgroups (rec.games.frp.advocacy) and forums (The Forge and RPG.net), several models emerged. For a detailed overview and links to most documents, I recommend John H. Kim's "RPG Theory" website (Kim). Additional research has examined online role-playing motivations, especially for Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORPGs) (Yee).

In order to find player motivations for live action role-playing, researchers often consult one of the original models, the GNS Theory, which was later integrated in the Big Model, developed largely by John Kim and Ron Edwards in the Forge community in 1999-2005 (Edwards). Edwards suggests three types of role-playing gamers: gamist, narrativist, and simulationist. The gamist is often associated with competitive play. Fighting, winning, and other ways to achieve predefined goals motivate the gamist to participate. The narrativist is interested in the development of the story, manifested in her character's background, motives, and/or the fictional setting. The simulationist is generally interested in the suspension of disbelief. She is motivated by the illusion of being "in another world." These three types influenced the emerging larp theory, which is loosely connected to pen'n'paper role-playing. In 2000, Finnish larper Mike Pohjola advocated for "immersion" as the most important category for live action role-playing. He made his ideas explicit in "The Manifesto of the Turku School," stressing the importance of immersion for role-playing in addition to the artistic expression (Pohjola).

These four categories help provide an initial orientation for what might drive role-players to participate, but they have difficulty reflecting different nuances. Simply adapting categories from pen'n'paper to live action games ignores their differences. Despite similarities, research has shown that, in the past, larp and other role-playing games have influenced each other, but do not necessarily have roots in the same origin. The fallacy of considering *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson) as the material prima of role-playing has been proven wrong by several publications. Markus Montola provides the most recent overview of the previous research in his dissertation chapter on the origins of tabletop and live action role-playing (Montola 108–111).

Rob McDiarmid's 2011 article offers an alternative list for categorizing motivations in larp. "Analyzing Player Motives to Inform Larp Design" reflects the perspective of a larp designer and illustrates different reasons to engage in this hobby (McDiarmid 3-25). The author attempts to find motivations in the typical narrative of larp itself; characters have to react to a threat, either forcing them to run or to overcome an obstacle. The players then decide upon further action, eventually surviving the threat. McDiarmid analyses players and provides sixteen categories. The description of each category is provided in Table 1 of the Results section of the current study.

McDiarmid's categorization does not follow an academic discipline, neither psychology, as the study of the individual, nor sociology, as the study of groups. Moreover, the design oriented article is not interested in evaluating the categories and does not provide a hierarchy. To complement this gap, I took the sixteen categories and started an online discussion combined with an open survey. The

resulting research does not aim to close the gap or give general answers. My intention is to show the potential of the question of motivation, explain how larpers reflect their motivations in a sample community, and inspire further research into this interesting and worthy topic.

4. Methods

On July 20, 2011, I posted an open thread with the title "Survey: Your motivation for larping" on larper.ning.com. At the time of the research, larper.ning was the largest larp social media community in Germany with 12,969 members as of August 31, 2011. The survey asked members in a short introductory text about their motivations to participate in larp and encouraged them to add new categories. Members could choose to give their answers in the larper.ning forum as a post or to follow a link leading to an online inquiry hosted on Facebook.com. This process tapped into two online communities, as not every larper is a member of larper.ning. Using the popular social networking site Facebook allowed me to find more participants and to lower barriers to entry for participation, as the poll on Facebook required a click, while the answers in larper.ning required writing a post in the forum.

The aim of the survey and discussion was to find out what motivations were important for larpers and what hierarchy could evolve from the sixteen categories. Furthermore, I wanted to test the categories by McDiarmid and provide greater insight into the motivations of larpers. In order to answer these questions, I took the following steps:

a) Rob McDiarmid's sixteen motivations were turned into a list and posted with an introductory text on larper.ning.com. The list was converted into a poll on Facebook containing all categories: Spectacle, Exhibition, Flow, Embodiment, Fellowship, Exercise, Exploration, Protagonist, Leadership, Audience, Catharsis, Versatility, Comprehension, Competition, Crafting, and Education. I kept the English terms and included a short German explanation for each category, which was translated for this article. I based these explanations on the extensive passages from McDiarmid's article, which I summarized into short sentences.

b) The poll was open, enabling participants to add further categories. In the larper.ning thread, it was possible to post one's answer. The Facebook poll used the standard poll software, allowing comments and further categories. Thus, participants had the possibility to self-identify with the categories or add new ones if they disagreed with the suggestions.

c) Participants were able to choose multiple categories, as the survey was not intended to result in one single motivation for every larper, but to find clusters of motivations.

d) The survey was open from July 20, 2011 through August 20, 2011.

As my intention was to engage as many people as possible, the survey served also as a structure to start and focus a discussion. This process was facilitated by providing the list of sixteen suggestions for motivation and encouraging people to discuss the categories in the introductory post.

Thus, the methodology follows the principles of ethnography by observing and engaging in the community of my study. Using the method of online participant observation (Hine, 63-65), I observed how German larpers related to the categories suggested by McDiarmid, how they evaluated them, and what modifications emerged from their discussion. During these observations, I made clear my position as researcher to the group both in my online profile and in my conversations with community members. I have participated in the larper.ning community since 2008 and have remained visible to the broader audience through my activities as an in-game photographer since 2007 and researcher since 2010. The participants of this survey were informed about my intentions to summarize the results and make them visible. Participants did not need to provide consent as no private data was necessary for this study. Thus, no names or nicknames are exposed in this paper. Also, online discussions were treated anonymously. The study follows our university's "Code of Conduct Scientific Research" ("Code").

5. Results

The first surprise after announcing the survey was the response rate. More than 250 larpers took part in the survey and/or discussion. Categories added by participants are marked below in bold letters. The result was 31 categories in total. Around 70 users further participated by commenting on the given categories. See the results from the Facebook survey and the larper.ning thread answers in Table 1.

Looking at the top categories, readers might be surprised to find "Fellowship" in first place. The fact that the survey was posted on social network sites might influence this response, as people active on

Table 1:
Motivations of German players for larping

Category	Description	Number of votes
Fellowship	Spend the time with your friends and meet new people	251
Embodiment	Play your character: think and play from your character	215
Flow	Immerse, dive into the atmosphere / "ambiance"	203
Catharsis	Experience emotions through your character	141
Crafting	Create real things like costumes or props	141
Spectacle	Experience the spectacle (costumes, props, locations, non-player characters)	139
Audience	Experience a great story	115
Exercise	Enjoy the physical exercise of fighting, walking around the location, making camp in nature	109
Exploration	Experience a fictional setting and explore the game world	92
Exhibition	Show your costumes, props, abilities (fighting, role-playing, playing an instrument)	92
Posing	Be a show off, so that "losing" a fight is great	**79**
Comprehension	Solve problems and riddles	67
Education	Learn something new through Larp (history, abilities) or by role-playing it	66
Support	Support other characters, improve ambiance	**44**
Humor	Don't take yourself serious and play funny characters and make hilarious scenes.	**44**
Transgression	Explore and transgress your limits (abilities)	**38**
Protagonist	Be important for the plot and have influence on the game world	32
Improve yourself	Learn about yourself and work on your strengths and weaknesses.	**21**
Create	Create and tell a story and evolve a believable setting	**18**
Leadership	Be important for the Larp event or the community	17
Competition	Compete with others and win fights, plot solving and role-playing	17
Frustration	Be frustrated by bad players and bad costumes ;)	**11**
Immerse	Explore and experience the world of a different (even a fictitious) person	**10**
No hero	Play the role of a simple peasant or a 'negative' role like a beggar and have fun	**5**
Versatility	Collect important things (spells, lore, benefits)	4
Antagonist	Be the evil overlord	**3**
Destruction	Destroy your enemies with burning dumplings	**3**
Robin of Sherwood		**3**
Cause and Effect	After Pen'n'paper, tabletop war games and card (Magic: The Gathering), larp is the logical consequence	**2**
Abscondence	Flee everyday life	**1**
Blaspheme	Gossip about nerds and noobs	**1**

such sites might be more likely to choose a social category. However, simply denying the status of fellowship in larp is problematic too, as larp is not a solitary activity. The ranking of "Fellowship" in this study shows the importance of out-of-game elements in an activity commonly attributed to immersion in a fictional world. This result also indicates that out-of-game motivations are not easily disconnected from in-game practices, which has an impact on game play. Despite embodying a different character, the character enactment of many players is influenced by out-of-game relations to other players. Game design for common Fantasy Adventure larps rarely tries to capitalize on these relations by enforcing, bending, or breaking them.

Another result is that McDiarmid's categories are found on the first ten ranks, thus proving the relevance of most of his categories for German larp in context of this study. The limit of the study is expressed in its method to test McDiarmid's sixteen categories by suggesting them. This method put emphasis on the categories as they inclined the voters to choose from given categories rather than putting effort into thinking of other categories and suggesting them. Alternately, the sixteen categories may have been enough to cover the motivations for larp and no further ones were needed.

However, only few votes were given to typical game elements like "Competition" (17), "Versatility" (4) or "Protagonist" (32) and "Leadership" (15). Additional categories, such as "Posing" (79), seem like a repetition of "Exhibition" (92), stressing the importance of "losing a fight" for the sake of the show or spectacle. Moreover, the category "Support" was added and chosen 44 times, stressing the motivation of supporting other players and the game. Therefore, the one-sided image of larp as a competitive type of role-playing needs revision, especially when one compares these results with common stereotypes, as shown in popular movies.

The fact that participants could add motivation types to the survey had the negative outcome of repetitive categories, such as "Immerse," which has the same meaning as "Embodiment," or "Posing" and "Exhibition." Similar to "Embodiment" is the category "Immerse" (10). Aside from discarding "Immerse" as part of the "Embodiment" category, the different descriptions might have led voters to identify with "explore and experience the world of a different (even a fictitious) person." In comparison to "play your character: think and play from your character," as for "Embodiment," the ten voters might show a motivation more in the exploratory practice than in the acting-out, as embodiment suggests.

The categories with a response rate of less than 10, including "Robin of Sherwood" or "Blaspheme," can be viewed as joking. The category "Humor" was chosen by 44 people and shows the importance of humor for some larpers. Humor can act also as a means to cope with fellow players, as the category "Frustration" might imply. For example, humor helps with fellow players who do not follow one's motivation for "Crafting."

Looking at the categories chosen over one hundred times, we get a more precise understanding of German larpers' main motivations. "Fellowship" (251) and "Spectacle" (139) are motivations which include experiences with other people, either as active participants or passive observers. "Embodiment" (215), "Flow" (203) and "Catharsis" (141) are psychological categories that define the core of role-playing as a form of an immersive game. Finally, "Crafting" (141) reflects the Do-It-Yourself culture prevalent in larp communities.

From evaluation of the top categories, I conclude that larp is a practice that includes game like and non-game like elements at the same time. The typical—but not exclusive—role-playing game elements ("Embodiment," "Flow," "Spectacle") connect the participants with one another in-game. Elements like Crafting connect the participants out-of-game with each other and with the larp as a whole. Examples include "how to make your costume" instructions, common on larper.ning as member blog entries. They illustrate meta-game activities that reach beyond the actual larp.

In addition, the motivations presented here are not reserved for larp. We find "Fellowship" with every social activity, be it soccer or another form of game. Larp is not only about visual elements like costumes and props, qualities that larp shares with cosplay. Some larps do not put emphasis on costumes, especially alternative reality settings or jeepform games. Larp is not only focused upon fighting with safety weapons, qualities that larp also shares with martial arts and sports. Many larps, such as the tavern larp type or the 1920s Cthulhu genre, feature minimal combat or no combat at all. Finally, larp is not simply a form of entertainment, a quality larp shares with other entertaining activities with role-play elements. Examples of larp-like entertainment activities include carnival-going or fan behavior at a soccer game, such as wearing fan clothing or changing one's behavior towards other adults.

Flexibility is typical for larp, because the form can include all of these elements. Players have the possibility of finding different satisfactions in one sophisticated form of play that aims at the embodiment of a character and immersion into a fictional setting. In order to satisfy people's differing needs and motivations, larp as a type of role-playing must remain open to alternative designs. Innovation

allows the integration of new forms of satisfying actions, which then motivate different people to join. Organizers can demonstrate this flexibility when they become aware of what motivations are addressable within the design of their event. Thus, organizers can to think about more innovative game designs, which are appealing to many groups of player types beyond gamists, narrativists, simulationists, and immersionists.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study is to determine what motivates people to larp from within the community. The results show that most German survey participants engaging in both the hobby and social media sites have chosen social categories and those associated with role-playing instead of competitive motivations, as earlier models have highlighted (GNS Model). In essence, this study has found that respondents most commonly seek the experience of embodiment of a character while being together with their fellows in a fictional world.

The results of this research support the idea that larp can be transported to other fields. Larp is not necessarily bound to the traditions of other role-playing games. Medieval fantasy settings might dominate the hobby, but experiencing the fantastic is not necessary the prime reason to engage in the activity. Larp should be considered as a tool for communities to engage with alternative realities together. Current examples, such as the jeepform type, concentrate on contemporary topics and new techniques in order to engage with alternative situations in secure surroundings. However, jeepform is also limited, despite its presence in academic and semi-academic research. First, few people are willing try alternative larps; no known jeepform group exists in Germany yet. Second, the game design of German larp is limited and rarely expands to include other forms. The most common systems are DragonSys, an adaptation of pen'n'paper role-playing, and the rule-free DKWDDK, the German abbreviation for "your character can do what you are able to do." A quick consultation of the current German larp calendar maintained by Thilo Wagner shows few alternatives styles of larp (Wagner).

Further research into other countries would allow researchers to collect more data and compare larp motivations internationally. I suggest testing McDiarmid's categories in the U.S., the Nordic countries, and Eastern Europe, which are currently the biggest regions for larp. For a quick overview of motivations on the international level, I recommend Lizzie Stark's blog entry "Why They Larp" (Stark). Here, several prominent larpers provide their insights in short text form.

Finally, I suggest abandoning the idea of larp as a form of tabletop role-playing, instead connecting larp insights and experiences with new possibilities of spatial activities. Some of the motivations to engage in larp are independent of fantasy, competition, or other traditional elements that have limited the scope of variety. With the rise of mobile computing and augmented reality technology, more possibilities for different ways of larping arise. Larp is a flexible system that can be combined with new possibilities beyond popular genres or the desire to immerse in fantastic settings. Without such innovations, larp will remain in its infancy.

Works Cited

"Code of Conduct Scientific Research." *Maastricht University.* 25 May 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. http://www.maastrichtuniversity.nl/web/Main/Research/ResearchTraining/CodeOfConduct.htm.

Edwards, Ron. "GNS and Other Matters of Roleplaying Theory." *The Forge.* 14 Oct. 2001. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. http://www.indie-rpgs.com/articles/1/.

Gygax, Gary, and Dave Arneson. *Dungeons & Dragons: Rules for Fantastic Medieval Wargames, Playable with Paper and Pencil and Miniature Figures.* Lake Geneva, WI: Tactical Studies Rules, 1974. Print.

Hine, Christine. *Virtual Ethnography.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000. Print.

Kim, John H. "RPG Theory." *Darkshire.net.* 27 Aug. 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. http://www.darkshire.net/jhkim/rpg/theory/.

"LARPers: Welcome to LARPers, the Largest Social Network for Live Action Role-Players." *Larper.ning.com.* 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. http://larper.ning.com/.

Mazes and Monsters. Dir. Steven Hilliard Stern. Perf. Tom Hanks, Wendy Crewson, David Wallace. McDermott Productions, 1982.

McDiarmid, Rob. "Analyzing Player Motives to Inform larp Design." *Branches of Play: The 2011 WyrdCon Academic Companion.* Ed. Amber Eagar. 9 Jun. 2011. PDF file. 3 Dec. 2012. 3–25. http://wyrdcon.com/2011/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/100-copies-AcademicBook.pdf.

Montola, Markus. "Historical Context." *On the Edge of the Magic Circle: Understanding Role-playing and Pervasive Games.* Diss. University of Tampere, 2012. 102-112. PDF file. 3. Dec. 2012. http://acta.uta.fi/pdf/978-951-44-8864-1.pdf.

Pohjola, Mike. "The Manifesto of the Turku School." *As Larp Grows Up: Theory and Methods in Larp.* Ed. Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander. 32-41. 2003. PDF file. http://www.liveforum.dk/kp03_book/classics/turku.pdf.

Role Models. Dir. David Wain. Perf. Paul Rudd, Seann William Scott, Elizabeth Banks. Universal, 2008. DVD.

Stark, Lizzie. "Why They Larp." *LizzieStark.com.* 26 Mar. 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. http://lizziestark.com/2012/03/26/why-they-larp/.

Stevenson, Robert Louis. [1886]. *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.* London, UK: Collins Clear-Type Press. PDF. http://ia600508.us.archive.org/11/items/drjekyllmrhyde00stevuoft/drjekyllmrhyde00stevuoft.pdf.

Wagner, Thilo. "Welcome to the German larp Calendar." *Larpkalender.* 3. Dec. 2012. Web. 3 Dec. 2012. www.larpkalender.de.

Yee, Nick. "Motivations of Play in MMORPGs: Results from a Factor Analysis Approach." *Nickyee.com.* 2005. PDF. 2 Dec. 2012. http://www.nickyee.com/daedalus/archives/pdf/3-2.pdf.

Rafael Bienia *is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Literature and Arts at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. In his dissertation, Bienia examines three types of role-playing games with regard to actor-network theory: pen'n'paper, MMORPG, and larp. Bienia also teaches for the University's Bachelor's and Master's programs.*

Email contact: rafael.bienia@maastrichtuniversity.nl

A Social Psychology Study of Immersion Among Live Action Role-players

Nathan Hook

Abstract

Though a term often used by members of the larp subculture, immersion remains an under-researched concept. This paper examines experiences of immersion and how participants use the term within the larp subculture. 42 live action role-playing participants from 9 different countries were interviewed by email questionnaire. Thematic analysis and template analysis were used to draw out key themes from the replies. Grounded theory methodology was also applied, as immersion was not the intended research topic. The results suggest that participants use the term immersion to refer to both outer, physical experiences and inner, psychological experiences. The study reveals a wide spectrum regarding frequency and depth of immersion amongst live action role-players, with a few speaking of experiences similar to a sort of "possession" by their character, even when not playing.

Keywords

Immersion, social psychology, role-playing studies, ethnography, qualitative, larp, creative agenda

1. Introduction

Immersion is a term often used by both mainstream and fringe role-players, yet is applied to many different contexts without consistent meaning. In their introduction to the *Immersive Gameplay* anthology, Evan Torner and William J. White discuss at length how immersion is a contested concept (Torner and White 3-11). The authors cite Matthijs Holter, who provides several different meanings for the term (Holter 20).

In some circles, immersion refers to acting and thinking like one's role-playing character. As Juhana Pettersson reports in the introduction to *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World*, "The Manifesto of the Turku School [1999], by Mike Pohjola... argued that immersion in the character was the purpose of role-playing, a view widely ridiculed at the time. Later, this idea has become almost conservative in Finnish larp discussion" (Pettersson 7).

Drawing on the work of Lewis Pulsipher, Gary Alan Fine suggests two player types: those that "want to play the games as a game" and those seeking "direct escapism through the abandonment of oneself to the flow of play," the latter of which Fine terms the "true role-player" (207). Fine recognizes that RPGs do not have winning as a defined goal and argues that "engrossment" in the game world is the dominant reason for playing (4). This concept compares well to Pohjola's "immersion," but is distinct in that Fine primarily refers to immersion/engrossment in setting, rather than in one's character. Engrossment into the setting also equates well to the "Simulationism" creative agenda in the GNS model originated by The Forge and described by Emily Care Boss (Boss 238). In 2003, Petter Bøckman adapted the GNS model to larp, replacing Simulationism with Immersionism, which he defined as playing to immerse in both role and situation (Bøckman 12-16).

MMORPG scholar Nick Yee used factor analytic methodology to analyze online role-players (Yee 1-13). Of the three agendas he identifies, Yee terms one "immersion," which confusingly includes: "Discovery," which is similar to GNS' Simulationism; "Role-playing," which similar to GNS's Narrativism, but also to Bøckman's Immersionism; "Customisation," which refers to controlling the visuals; and "escapism," which refers to relaxation from the real world, similar to Michelle Nephew's explanation for player motivation. Essentially, Yee uses "immersion" as a miscellaneous agenda to include everything outside of his model, failing to reference or analyze any of the tabletop or larp models. This example shows how confusingly people have applied the term, even academics.

In contrast, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman's do not address engrossment or immersion as goals in their 2004 book *Rules of Play*, as their view is slanted by a general game studies paradigm. The authors do discuss what they term "the immersive fallacy": the aspiration to make games feel completely "real" in the sense of the physical experience, indistinguishable from the outside world (Salen and Zimmerman 450-455). Salen and Zimmerman argue that that engagement comes "through play itself" and that the player needs to remain aware of the artificial nature of play.

Paradoxically, many larps have aspired to achieve this end and some claim to have done so. Nordic Larp—an international tradition of larp associated with the Knutepunkt conference—uses

the term "the 360 degree illusion" to describe this design agenda. For examples of such games, see Markus Montola's and Jaakko Stenros' *Nordic Larp* anthology.

This article will now discuss the methods of data collection and analysis.

2. Methodology

This paper arises from qualitative, exploratory research into the player-character relationship, as discussed by Sarah Lynne Bowman (163-178). The initial research also explored the nature of bleed, as first examined academically by Montola in "The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-playing" (Montola 2). During analysis, the term immersion emerged unexpectedly in the data without prompting and became a key theme in its own right. This paper covers this theme rather than the others that arose in the data analysis. My work on the other themes is available in the thesis *Identities at Play.*

This research follows the principles of ethnography, a complex term the meaning of which varies by subject and tradition. Within a British social psychology context, ethnographic research is defined not as a data collection method, but as "a set of tools" (Taylor and Smith 6). This position is consistent with the work several other prominent ethnographers, including Norman Denzin; Paul Willis and Mats Trondman; and Isabella Baszanger and Nicholas Dodier. Ethnography can be summarized as the study of systems of meaning with a cultural group.

I chose a qualitative approach since the psychological motivations and feelings that I was exploring are beyond quantification; in short, I examined the quality of motivations, rather than trying to place a quantified, numerical value to them. This approach is appropriate, as I was investigating larp as lived human experience, a point made explicit by Stenros in the article "Nordic Larp: Theatre, Art, and Game" (300). This method includes self-reflexivity and references to personal experiences as primary sources, but does not offer detailed accounts of past personal play. In epistemological terms, I recognize and respect the participants' subjective meaning contained within their statements. This approach is particularly relevant since role-playing and game-playing itself involves constructing subjective meaning.

2.1 Comparisons to methods used in previous research

In contrast to Fine's starting point as the seminal ethnographic work on the subject, I focused on psychology rather than emphasizing the sociology of the role-playing subculture, reflecting my own academic background. In contrast to Montola's (2010) natural experiment approach of interviewing participants about one particular play experience, I treated my participants as experts regarding the breath of their past experiences across larp play.

Relative to the more limited participant samples and demographics of Bowman and Nephew, I recruited as disparate and varied participants as possible. This sample is not intended to represent the community demographics, but is an attempt to maximize the potential for different, contrasting voices. This method also fulfils the ethnographic function of giving a voice to those normally unheard – mainstream live action role-players—rather than the fringe groups that other research has explored, such as Montola's examinations of the Nordic Larp community.

I choose a primarily interview-based approach, consistent with the previous studies by Daniel MacKay, Bowman, and Montola. I intended to try to recognize experienced practitioners within the subculture as "experts," even if their responses lack a theoretical underpinning and firm terminology. I considered an observation approach, such as directly observing play experiences, but decided against it; observation is unlikely to yield insights into participants' thoughts and experiences, instead producing a singular account of a unique event featuring multiple people. Such data might appear contrived and artificial like Philip Zimbardo's Stanford Prison Experiment; rather than drawing upon a range of participant experiences, the results of such research often reflect the way the event is observed and designed, rather than revealing any inherent or wider truth.

2.2 Email interviews

I conducted the interviews by email, which allowed me to obtain replies from geographically scattered participants. The replies were rich with detailed, reflective answers. From a practical viewpoint, this method also made a large data set more manageable by removing transcription. Judith McCoyd and Toba Kerson argue the merits of email interviews over telephone and face-to-face methods, stressing that email allows for the inclusion of isolated, dispersed, and/or stigmatised groups and the collection rich data (McCoyd and Kerson 390).

The original intention was to conduct a small number of follow up, semi-structured, webcam interviews to explore emerging points in more depth.

This proved unnecessary given the detailed and personally revealing replies to the email interviews. Speaking reflexively, my own experience as an interview subject with role-play researchers using webcams during this time caused me to understand firsthand live interview limitations. I felt more confident getting meaningful, considered information from email questions, where the participant could reflect and present their experiences, rather than a real-time situation with the participant put on the spot.

The email interview used closed, warm-up questions about the participant's background, then open questions regarding the following general topics: what characters they have played; how they or someone else designed /developed the characters; what their motives and reasons were; what it felt like while playing their character before, during, and after; and if they think their play has changed them as a person. The complete list of questions is featured in the Appendix to this paper.

After a pilot run, I added an extra section making hypothetical statements and asking the reader to respond with their opinions. Many of these statements derived from real opinions expressed on Internet forums over the years that provoked fierce debate, such as in-play references to real life religions. The term immersion was not used in the questions. One of the statements in the last section did use the phrase "immersed," but most references to immersion made by participants arose from answers to earlier questions.

2.3 Participant recruitment

For clarity, "participant" will be used in the academic sense to refer to "research participant" and "player" to mean someone who engages in role-playing. "Player" has a dual meaning, as it refers to both a game player and/or an actor. I focused exclusively on live action role-players as participants, though some participants also engage in computer and/or tabletop role-playing.

Interview participants were recruited through online contact with larp communities using message boards, blogs and social networking sites. Some participants informed me that they forwarded the participant call onto their local mailing boards, adding snowball sampling. 42 email interviews were returned completed. I considered whether or not to include participants connected to the academic study of game-playing or role-playing, deciding to include these individuals as a valid part of the subculture. Game scholars accounted for small part of the participant pool, with only one recognized game studies academic.

Practical limitations included the need for participants to confidently use the English language. No children were included due to increased consent issues and language barriers. Another limitation was the use of online channels, which excluded those who do not use such forums, but I do not feel this issue is significant, as the use of such channels is embraced by the larp community. While always a potential factor, I downplayed the influence on the data of my own presence in the community by using a diverse, international participant pool. I had played with four

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

Location	Code	Number of participants	
		Male	Female
Australiat	AU	0	1
Belarus	BL	1	0
Germany	GM	3	4
Netherlands	NL	2	1
Norway	NW	1	0
Sweden	SW	0	1
Switzerland	SZ	1	0
United Kingdom	UK	12	4
United States	US	6	5
Total		26	16

of the participants at the same event at some point over the years, but none were people with whom I played on a regular basis.

Participant ages ranged from 19 to 69 with a mean of 31.9 years. Unlike past research such as Bowman's and Nephew's, which largely focused on the 18-30 age range, 19 of my 42 participants were over 30. 26 of 42 participants had university level qualifications and 3 were current students. To maintain anonymity, I replaced participant names with tags consisting of a code for their location and an arbitrary reference number (see Table 1). Most participants identified with the nationality of their current location. Some American participants gave their ethnicity in answer to nationality.

2.4 Method of analysis

During the second stage of data analysis, I worked through the material, pulling out quality statements from the shorter replies, such as answers to warm-up questions. My third stage translated the data set into a thematic structure, organizing statements according to different broad themes. I initially focused on themes of identity construction and magic circle/bleed; the second category describes the separation between everyday life and play and examines the phenomenon of emotions "bleeding" in- and out-of-play, as described by Montola. However, as work progressed, the third major theme of immersion emerged. I applied a template analysis approach as described by King, a subtype of thematic analysis ("Template"). Further taking into account existing models, my overall analysis falls between the data-driven and theory-driven dichotomy described by Braun and Clarke (18).

This paper then follows the Grounded Theorizing approach to data analysis described by Glaser and Strauss as cited in Hammersley and Atkinson (158), which is heavily data-driven. Grounded theorizing rejects carrying out a prior literature review to ensure that codifying and theorizing is grounded in the data, rather than prior models.

Direct participant quotes are indicated by quotation marks. Ellipses are used where text has been cut out and [ ] to indicate words added for clarity. Minor spelling and grammar errors were edited to avoid confusion. When quoting participants, I avoided mentioning fictional character names to protect participant identity.

2.5 Ethics

As a graduate member of the British Psychological Society (BPS), I followed the BPS ethical code ("Code"), supplemented by the BPS guidelines for online research ("Report"). In the public invitation, participants were informed that the research intends to examine their community and activity. The introduction text explained the focus on identity and emotions around play. Since participants fully read the interview questions when replying, they were given a high level of information on which to base consent, another merit of email questionnaires as an interview style. The introduction made clear that all participants had the right to withdraw, including after submitting replies. None explicitly withdrew consent, though a small number did not return replies. All research data was held securely on a password protected PC, with a securely kept pen drive used for backup.

I considered the wider ethical implications that the research might have for the role-play community. Historically, negative media against role-playing has colored public perceptions (Cardwell 157). In contrast, research into role-playing has featured the positive aspects (Stackpole). On this basis, further research may help answer media attacks and is unlikely to damage members of the community. If dangers are inherent to role-playing, researchers have an ethical responsibility to understand those dangers for risk management purposes, enabling adults to make an informed choice to participate, as with dangerous sports. This need outweighs the ethical considerations with regard to damaging the subculture's reputation.

2.6 Research Relativity

I have participated in a wide variety of larps for over fifteen years, organizing games and writing non-academic articles about them. My tastes and "creative agenda" have grown and developed during that time as I have grown as a person. As a psychologist, I have become more interested in exploring the internal, mental life of characters. While working on this research, I wrote a self-reflective article about my developmental journey in larp and psychology in *Playground* magazine (Hook, "Culture" 45-47).

Although I have a great deal of personal play experience upon which to draw, I did not use such material extensively in this work, unlike other researchers such as Bowman. While I recognize that true objectivity is impossible and even undesirable, I attempted to explore a range of disparate personal experiences from different participants. Discussions on online forums and my play experiences are included as sources when thinking reflexively,

but were not the focus. I also recognize the ironic symmetry of this project; ethnography textbooks use the term immersion when describing data collection and analysis. A classical ethnographer spends time immersing within a culture to study it. Even outside of role-playing, the process of immersion is at the heart of ethnography.

3. Findings

Immersion is a term used by many participants in various ways, yet remains poorly defined. Examining participants' own words is characteristic of the ethnographic approach, and, in that tradition, I have provided one definition from one of my participants:

> Total immersion happens when you do not have to think about what your character would say at a specific moment, but when the character reacts before you had time to think about it... at such moments when the character is afraid to die, you get a much more intense feeling of fear for the character's life than you would in a book or movie. It is the perfect "suspension of disbelief." (GM2)

Here, the participant describes how immersion is a spontaneous emotional action/reaction, rather than an intellectual choice. Under this meaning, we might question how the participant would define immersion into an intellectual/rational character.

3.1 Immersion as a goal

Some participants view immersion as a goal to achieve. For example, one participant stated, "the whole point of role-playing (larp and tabletop) is to immerse yourself in your character and in another world/time... the ability to 'feel' the things my characters feel[s]" (UK3). In reply to the statement "live role-play is about becoming or immersing in your character," another participant affirmed, "Yes. I'd give a longer answer, but I feel like that's *exactly* what it is! ☺" (US10). These examples show how some players deliberately try to achieve a state of immersion.

This notion contrasts with the research of previous scholars such Zimbardo, Maslach, and Haney, who warn that immersion is a risk rather than a goal (5). Citing Robert Jay Lifton, the authors emphasize the following notion:

> Good people can be induced, seduced, initiated into behaving in evil (irrational, stupid, self-destructive, antisocial) ways by immersion in "total situations" that can transform human nature in ways that challenge our sense of the stability and consistency of individual personality, character, and morality (10).

One participant aspires to the goal of total immersion, but rarely attains it, also expressing "safety concerns":

> My ideal, which I achieve occasionally, is to "become" the character fully—I'm just a little background process watching out for OOC [out-of-character] safety concerns and interpreting OOC elements of the scene for [the characters], they are in the driver's seat; I feel their emotions, have their trains of thought and subconscious impulses, and they have direct control of what I am doing, subject only to veto. (UK9)

Similarly, another participant believes in limits on immersion as a goal, stating, "If you're fully immersed, but end up ignoring other players, organizers, etc. and end up spoiling their game, I think you're doing it wrong" (SZ1). This assertion directly opposes Pohjola's insistence at the start of his manifesto that "role-playing is immersion [ ] to an outside consciousness (a 'character') and interacting with its surroundings" (Pohjola 34).

Another participant advocates combining competitive play with character immersion, saying that "people want to win and this is a great way for people that do not have a competitive outlet to... compete... in an actual physical test of ability and speed" and "if you really get into your character, you own the character's emotions. You need to start thinking like the character, and when you feel the way they would, you have mastered that character" (US6). Note that the participant describes "thinking like the character" rather than "as the character," which connects to the next theme of first-person vs. third-person.

3.2 First-Person vs. Third-Person

Some participants claim to become their character by immersing in the first person. One participant states, "I function in the first person, and I definitely feel I become the character. That is one of the most appealing things about the hobby" (UK4). Another says, "I am fully becoming this character; mostly, I think about it in a first person view. Only in some unknown and very critical paths I have to imagine what the characters decision would be; mostly I can imagine it right away" (GM4). A third participant takes this notion further, adding that

"even after games, talking as my character, I would say 'I want to... 'I found it very jarring when I first met people who say, 'he wants to...' " (UK3).

In contrast, some participants make character decisions in the third person. For instance, one participant tells us, "Sometimes there are circumstances where I think, 'I know [my character] would do this or that now.' I would do the complete opposite, but that's what I'm supposed to be right now. Her not me" (GM3). This comment shows that the player "stays true" to their character's actions externally, but still maintains an internal third person train of thought about their character.

Another participant speaks of the contrast between first- and third-person as dependent on the medium of role-playing, stating, "When I'm larping, I think in the third person, even if I am at a game that I am not running. When I'm RPing on AOL, I sometimes slip into first person thought" (US10). This point contrasts sharply with Montola's participants, who stress the first-person nature of their play experience, despite not always speaking in the first-person as their character ("Positive," 2-7). While I recognize these differences in style, I avoid making any value judgment on which is "better" or "more immersive." We might liken this distinction to different methods used by actors, though a comparison between drama schools is beyond the scope of the current discussion.

3.3 Outer and inner immersion

Many participants use the term immersion in contradictory ways. I conclude that larpers use immersion to describe two overall categories of experience: outer, physical immersion and inner, psychological, character immersion. One participant uses the term to describe both categories, stating that immersion is "everything from their emotions to the mundane aspects, such as what it feels like to walk in armour, how carrying a weapon changes your motion, etc" (UK3).

Some participants state that outer experience deepens the inner immersion. One participant says, "The more WYSIWYG [What You See Is What You Get] the game is, the more involved with scenes related to my character's motivation, the easier it is to become the character" (SZ1). Another adds that outer immersion is "the key to immersion. Don't tell me what I smell or see. Show me" (US10).

Comparing larp to other role-play media, another participant makes this point implicitly: "The [immersion] level [of] a larp is much deeper due to the physical interaction with both other participants and the environment. I tend to test my own limitations, in respect to physical and mental one[s]" (GM5). Similarly, one participant favors larp to other media, stating, "I prefer Live role-play because it is a more sensory experience" (AU1). These participants identify physical immersion as a particularly strong point of larp.

This concept of outer immersion in the physical realness of the environment compares well to Fine's "engrossment" in the setting, though it differs by referring to a physically real rather than imagined experience. In the above quotes, some players seem to view having to imagine the setting as the opposite of immersion. Whether imagined or not, having a fixed, consistent setting is part of the creative agenda of Simulationism under the GNS model.

Interestingly, the idea of immersion as referring to the physical "realness" of the experience is not included in Holter's (2007) several different meanings for immersion. Since some participants openly aspire to the physical experience of "realness," they appear to follow what Salen and Zimmerman criticized as the "immersive fallacy" discussed above (450-455).

3.4 Immersion as strong emotion

Some participants equate "immersion" with experiencing strong emotions. One participant states, "If I'm really immersed in a character, I can actually start crying if they feel sad or completely change my view upon reality," but adds that "these emotions are gone at the moment I stop playing" (NL1). Another participant talks about how strong emotions keep him in-character: "One of the priestesses gave one heck of a pre-battle speech and the upwelling of energy after[ward] that... poured out of everyone really 'locked' me in character that entire battle" (NL3). Both of these participants are from the Netherlands, so these comments may reflect a distinct meaning among a particular group. Nevertheless, these examples do show a distinct usage of the term as reflective of strong emotional states.

3.5 Frequency of immersion

Compare these two quotes with regard to the frequency of emotion. One participant says, "I don't really become the character. It's more like 'riding' it. I am rarely fully immersed (and sometimes I am fully not-immersed), but I am sometimes, often for short periods (minutes)" (SZ1). In contrast, continuing the earlier quote, GM4 states, "Depending on the other players, I also [try] to not switch back to myself; only when I'm alone lying in my bed [do] I think about my personal [life], but only [for] short moments." These

examples demonstrate a massive spectrum in the frequency of experiencing self-defined immersion. Different players consider "becoming" their characters in play on a scale ranging from only a few minutes at most to constantly, with the exception of brief moments.

Another participant says, "It's always me playing it, but it's not I the character; it's I the player," which, combined with his other replies, show an overall lack of immersion (UK10). Thinking reflexively, I have seen this distinction on occasion on web forums before – experienced larpers who admit they are always themselves, have never experienced inner immersion, and experience confusion when other people discuss it. Thus, a massive personal difference in the frequency of experiencing self-defined character immersion appears to exist.

3.6 Descriptions of immersion as a sort of "possession"

Some participants describe exceptionally deep immersion. For example, one participant discusses a deep kind of immersion with one of his characters: "I am him in a sense, but it is very hard to play him without getting too far into the role... I have a way of snapping out of it and a safety word I say to myself in my head" (UK8). Another participant explains, "I sometimes have the feeling that, when everything is right, (atmosphere, emotions, the people around me) that the character starts to play me" (GM2).

One participant describes what I term a sort of "possession" by the character:

> I struggle to say I "identify" with [my characters], because much more than film characters, they are obviously their own people, complete unto themselves—I just let them borrow my body occasionally!... [my character] turned out to be particularly easy to "immerse" in—i.e. let her take over almost entirely, with just a small background safety thread. (UK9)

UK9 even describes this possession by her characters occurring when not larping:

> I usually try to keep the division of thoughts very clear, so I generally think about my characters in the third person, but they think about themselves in the first person, using my brain to do it. (Particularly strong characters can occasionally try to take control of me when I'm not larping... especially when I'm tired/being useless and they have things they want to get done or strengths that are appropriate to the situation... I try not to let them get away with it too often though, and find it quite disturbing when they try very hard to succeed against my wishes!)"

Speaking reflexively and frankly, I have experienced similar instances myself.

Under the ethnographic principles of this research I accept the subjective truth of the meaning of their experience as a sort of "possession"; doing so does not assert the objective existence of possession. Under this methodology, I avoid imposing an external meaning on the participant's internal experiences.

If I were to consider these instances from an external perspective, I would note that this notion compares well to the process of dissociation described in this context by Bowman (138-143). The "character" references here could be a label assigned to an existing identity within the player. The relationship between player and character among participants is discussed further in my thesis, *Identities at Play*.

Zimbardo describes the concept of deindividuation: a loss of self to the group collective (*Lucifer* 297). This mechanism of "possession" above compares to deindividuation, as both describe a loss of self, but differs in that the loss is not to a group, but to an abstract concept. This relates back to Brian Morton's comparison of larp to ancient shamanism (Morton 246) and J. Tuomas Harviainen's comparison of larp to post-modern magic (Harviainen 92). I should note that few participants report experiencing this loss of self.

We can consider the "possession" experiences described above as an exceptionally deep form of immersion. I recognize that this assumption may not hold true and I do not preclude that something different entirely may transpire in these moments. Most participants do not speak of such experiences and a predisposition to this depth of play may reflect a personal cognitive difference.

4. Summary

Four key points emerged from this study. First, some participants seek to achieve immersion during play as a goal. Second, immersion as a term is used to refer to both inner psychological experience and to outer "realism." The latter assists in achieving the former and helps players experience strong emotion during play. Third, the frequency of immersion into character is a point of personal difference, one that normally remains invisible. Players cannot casually tell how immersed another player is; like other thought processes, immersion remains hidden. Finally, a few participants experience exceptionally

strong immersion into their characters, which we might term a sort of "possession" that takes hold sometimes even while not playing.

In the expanded version of this work, I focused on the inner psychological meaning of the term immersion with regard to the wider data analysis (Hook, *Identities*). Immersion seems more likely to occur when playing archetypal characters as opposed to characters that are variants on the player's self. Examples of such archetypal play would include shamanic practice, which Morton compares to role-play (Morton 246). The stereotypical roles of "guard" and "prisoner" in the Stanford Prison Experiment provide a related example (Zimbardo, Maslach, and Haney 5). By stereotypical, I mean that a less well-defined, "shallow" role tends to lead to deeper immersion than a fully detailed, three dimensional character. This theory is consistent with life activities where people play self-suppressing roles—such as uniformed military servicepersons—or where they engage in public ceremonies. The role "transforms human nature," altering the player's feelings and behaviour (Zimbardo, Maslach, and Haney 10).

Finally, I will discuss the implications of these findings. In future research on role-playing, scholars should take care to understand participants' intended meaning when they say "immersion." Immersion could refer to inner immersion (psychological immersion), outer immersion (physical realism/engrossment), a feeling of strong emotion, a combination of meanings at once or something else entirely. When asking a question about "immersion," researchers could easily interpret participant responses in an unintended sense. For some players, the subjective experience of a sort of "possession" outside of play occurs. This experience demonstrates an example of a permanent, long-term change from play. Using Montola's term, this experience would reflect a "bleed-out" effect, where emotional effects pass from play into the everyday world (Montola 2). I hope this paper provides the groundwork for further ethnographic research into the phenomenon of immersion.

Works Cited

Baszanger, Isabella and Nicholas Dodier. "Ethnography: Relating the Part to the Whole." *Qualitative Research: Theory, Method and Practice.* 2nd Ed. Ed. David Silverman. London: Sage, 2004. 9-34. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://gspm.ehess.fr/docannexe.php?id=522.

Bøckman, Petter. "The Three Way Model: Revision of the Threefold Model." *When Larp Grows Up—Theory and Methods in Larp.* Ed. Morten Gade, Line Thorup, Mikkel Sander. Frederiksberg, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003.12-16. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://www.liveforum.dk/kp03_book/classics/three_way_model.pdf.

Boss, Emily Care. "Key Concepts in Forge Theory." *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games.* Ed. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2008. 237-242. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://2008.solmukohta.org/pub/Playground_Worlds_2008.pdf.

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

Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2 (2006): 77-101. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/11735/2/%3Cstrong%3Ethematic%3C/strong%3E_analysis_revised_-_final.pdf.

Cardwell, Paul. "The Attacks on Role-Playing Games." *Skeptical Inquirer* 18.2 (1994): 157-165. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://www.rpgstudies.net/cardwell/attacks.html.

Denzin, Norman K. *Interpretive Ethnography: Ethnographic Practices for the 21st Century.* Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997. Print.

Ethics Committee of the British Psychological Society. "Code of Ethics and Conduct: Guidance Published by the Ethics Committee of the British Psychological Society." *The British Psychological Society.* August 2009. Web/PDF. 8 Dec. 2012. http://www.bps.org.uk/system/files/documents/code_of_ethics_and_conduct.pdf.

Ethics Committee of the British Psychological Society. "Report of the Working Party on Conducting Research on the Internet: Guidelines for Ethical Practice in Psychological Research Online." *The British Psychological Society.* June 2007. Web/PDF. 8 Dec. 2012. http://www.bps.org.uk/sites/default/files/documents/conducting_research_on_the_internet-guidelines_for_ethical_practice_in_psychological_research_online.pdf.

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

Harviainen, J. Tuomas. "The Larping That is Not Larp." *Think Larp: Academic Writings from KP2011.* Ed. Thomas Duus Henriksen, et al. Copenhagen, Denmark: Rollespilsakademiet, 2011. 172-193. Web/PDF. http://rollespilsakademiet.dk/kpbooks/think_larp_web.pdf.

Holter, Matthijs. "Stop Saying Immersion." *Lifelike.* Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade and Line Thorup. Copenhagen: Projektgruppen KP07, 2007. Web. 8. Dec. 2012. http://www.liveforum.dk/kp07book/lifelike.pdf.

Hook, Nathan. "Culture Clash." *Playground: The New Wave in Roleplaying* 2 (2011): 45-47. Print.

Hook, Nathan. *Identities at Play: An Ethnographic Study of the Psychological Experience of Recreational Role-players Creating and Being Recreated by Fictional Identities.* Bristol, UK: Lulu, 2012. Print.

King, Nigel. "What is Template Analysis?" *Template Analysis.* University of Huddlesfield. 2011. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://hhs.hud.ac.uk/w2/research/template_analysis/whatis.htm.

Mackay, Daniel. *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001. Print.

McCoyd, Judith and Toba Kerson. "Conducting Intensive Interviews Using Email: A Serendipitous Comparative Opportunity" *Qualitative Social Work 5.3* (2006): 389-406. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://www.uk.sagepub.com/gray/Website%20material/Journals/qsw_mccoyd.pdf.

Montola, Markus. "The Positive Negative Experience in Extreme Role-Playing." Proceedings of *Nordic DiGRA 2010: Experiencing Games: Games, Play, and Player.* 2010. Web. Sept. 2012. http://www.digra.org/dl/db/10343.56524.pdf.

Morton, Brian. "Larps and Their Cousins Through the Ages." *Lifelike.* Ed. Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade & Line Thorup. Copenhagen: Projektgruppen KP07. 2007. Print. http://www.liveforum.dk/kp07book/lifelike_morton.pdf.

Nephew, Michelle. "Playing with Identity: Unconscious Desire and Role-playing Games." *Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games.* Ed. J. Patrick Williams, Sean Q. Hendricks, and W. Keith Winkler. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006. 120-139.

Pettersson, Juhana. "Introduction." *States of Play: Nordic Larp Around the World.* Ed. Juhana Pettersson. Helsinki, Finland: Pohjoismaisen roolipelaamisen seura, 2012. 7-9. http://www.nordicrpg.fi/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/states_of_play_pdf_version.pdf.

Pohjola, Mike. "The Manifesto of the Turku School." *As Larp Grows Up: Theory and Methods in Larp.* Ed. Morten Gade, Line Thorup, and Mikkel Sander. 32-41. 2003. Web/PDF. 8 Dec. 3012. http://www.liveforum.dk/kp03_book/classics/turku.pdf.

Salen, Katie and Eric Zimmerman. *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004. Print.

Stackpole, Michael. "The Pulling Report." *Adventurer's Guild: Dedicated to the Gamers of Pen & Paper RPGs.* 1990. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://limsk.tripod.com/pulling.htm.

Stenros, Jaakko. "Nordic Larp: Theatre, Art, and Game." *Nordic Larp.* Ed. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola. Stockholm, Sweden: Fëa Livia, 2010. Print. 300-313.

Stenros, Jaakko and Markus Montola, eds. *Nordic Larp.* Stockholm, Sweden: Fëa Livia, 2010. Print.

Taylor, Stephanie and Mark Smith. *D844 Ethnography Study Guide.* Milton Keynes, UK: The Open University Press, 2008. Print.

Torner, Evan and William. J. White. "Introduction." *Immersive Gameplay: Studies in Role-Playing and Media Immersion.* Ed. Evan Torner and William J. White, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 3-11. Print.

White, William J., Emily Care Boss, and J. Tuomas Harviainen. "Role-Playing Communities, Cultures of Play, and the Discourse of Immersion." *Immersive Gameplay: Studies in Role-Playing and Media Immersion.* Ed. Evan Torner and William J. White, Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012. 71-86. Print.

Willis, Paul, and Mats Trondman. "Manifesto for Ethnography." *Ethnography* 1.1 (2000): 5-16. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. https://www.dur.ac.uk/resources/anthropology/willis.pdf

Yee, Nick. "Motivations of Play in Online Games." *Journal of CyberPsychology and Behavior* 9 (2007): 772-775. 2007. Web. 7 Dec. 2012. http://www.nickyee.com/pubs/Yee%20-%20Motivations%20(2007).pdf.

Zimbardo, Philip. *The Lucifer Effect. Understanding How Good People Turn Evil.* New York: Random House. 2007. Print.

Zimbado, Philip, Christina Maslach, and Craig Haney. "Chapter 11: Reflections on the Stanford Prison Experiment: Genesis, Transformations, Consequences." *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm.* Ed. Thomas Blass, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2000. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://www.dfabricius.de/files/zimbardoPRISON.pdf.

Appendix: Email Interview Questions

Section 1: Personal Background

How old are you?

What gender do you identify yourself as?

What nationality or nationalities do you identify yourself as?

Where you do currently live (city and country)?

Do you have a university-level education? If so, in which subject(s)?

What is your current or most recent employment/job role?

Section 2: Interests

How long have you been live role-playing for?

How did you find out about it and start playing live role-play events?

Have you been involved in live role-play in other ways than as a player? If so, how?

Have or do you play tabletop ('pen and paper') role-play games? If so, how long for?

Do you like any particular tabletop role-play games?

What other leisure activities, hobbies or interests do you engage in?

What do you feel you get out of live role-play that you don't get from those other interests?

Section 3: Character

For this section, I'd like you to select a character that you have played in a live role-play event, and answer the following questions about it. This section is repeated, so you can talk about two different characters you have played. Choose a character that has stuck in your mind and that you are comfortable describing.

3a) First character

What is the character's name? What is their 'concept,' vocation, status or title?

Can you tell me a bit more about your character? What are their motivations?

Who made/wrote the character? Was it you, someone else, or a combination of sources? Was there a particular source of inspiration for the idea?

Assuming you choose to play this character, why do you think you choose it? Do you think your character is a reflection (or the opposite) of you in some way?

What is the character's personality? Does it differ from yours? If so, how?

What personality traits does it have in common with you?

Can you describe a particularly interesting scene, story, plot or intrigue involving this character?

What did you do to get ready to play the character?

Do you feel as if you identify with this character? Does that feel different to the way you might identify with a main character when watching a film?

3b) Second Character

What is the character's name? What is their 'concept,' vocation, status or title?

Can you tell me a bit more about your character? What are their motivations?

Who made/wrote the character? Was it you, someone else, or a combination of sources? Was there a particular source of inspiration for the idea?

Assuming you choose to play this character, why do you think you choose it? Do you think your character is a reflection (or the opposite) of you in some way?

What is the character's personality? Does it differ from yours? If so, how?

What personality traits does it have in common with you?

Can you describe a particularly interesting scene, story, plot or intrigue involving this character?

What did you do to get ready to play the character?

Do you feel as if you identify with this character? Does that feel different to the way you might identify with a main character when watching a film?

Section 4: Emotional Content

This section asks about your general live role-play experiences. You can draw upon the experiences playing the characters you have already described, or other play experiences.

When playing live role-play you feel that you 'become' the character you are playing in some sense? Do you think about your character in the first person ("I want to...") or third person ("he/she wants to ...")?

Can you tell me about a play experience when your character felt strong emotions?

When the play was finished, did you still feel those emotions? If so, how long for? Do you think any actions on your part affected how long you felt them for?

How did you feel towards the players of other characters involved in that play experience? Did you feel strong emotions towards them afterwards?

What if anything do you do after role-playing to "derole" or get out of character?

Looking at different characters you have played, do you think they have anything in common with each other?

Do you tend to play particular types of character? If so, why do you think that is?

Do you feel that taking part in live role-play has changed you in the long term? If so, how?

What skills if any have you gained as a result of taking part in live role-play?

Are there any negative ways in which taking part in live role-play has changed you?

I'd like you read the following hypothetical statements, and give a short answer to each one, saying if you agree or disagree, to what extent, and expand on your thoughts on the matter.

"Live role-play is a competitive game."

"Real-life personal growth can and does happen during live role-play."

"Live role-play is all about creating a good story."

"It's good for people to play a character close to their real selves."

"Experiencing strong emotions is a sign of a good role-play event."

"Live role-play is about becoming or immersing in your character."

"Real world religions shouldn't be mentioned during play."

"Some live role-play is an art form."

"Making offensive (e.g. negative comments about another's personal appearance) statements while in-character is ok, because it's not for real"

"Physically intimate actions shouldn't happen during live role-play."

"In live role-play, it's good if as much as possible is physically real."

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Nathan Hook *completed his MSc in Psychological Research Methods at the Open University with the thesis* Identities at Play, *a social psychology ethnographic study of live action role-players. He published a chapter in* Immersive Gameplay *reviewing classic psychological experiments from a games studies perspective. He worked as an organiser on the international larp* Dragonbane*, contributed to published material for* D&D *and* Ars Magica*, and has published freeform role-play scenarios that have been run in a number of countries. He lives in Bristol, UK.*

Email contact: hook_nathan@hotmail.com

Websites: http://www.lulu.com/spotlight/NathHook
http://www.nathanhook.netii.net

Educational Larp: Topics for Consideration

Yaraslau I. Kot

Abstract

This article is designed to provide an introduction and guidelines to individuals new to live action role-playing (larp) in education (edu-larp). The main advantage of the larp method in education is that larp may include any other pedagogical method or approach. This paper contains alternative approaches to education based on research published in both Russian and English. Also included is a short overview of the history of Russian edu-larp research, which dates back as far as 1916-18. The article features sections on the types and functions of edu-larp. Additional guidelines and advice for developing edu-larp games are covered.

Keywords

Pedagogy, larp, role-playing studies, theatre, Russia, methods, psychology, edu-larp, education

1. Introduction

Many different forms and functions of role-playing games exist, but this article will remain restricted to the analysis and structure of live action role-playing-based education (edu-larp). In the former U.S.S.R. territory, the empiric tradition of official and intensive larp application in educational processes both in and outside of schools has almost a hundred year history. I will discuss this history in brief detail in first section of this article. Working in education requires a great amount of responsibility, as the tools at our disposal are shaping a Person: a living being. Larp as an educative tool is no exception; larp has great potential for complex, multidimensional education, but, as with any tool, the results depend on the person who wields it. For that reason, some guidelines are essential to enhance the positive effects and minimize negative consequences. The main aim of this article is to provide a version of such guidelines. First, I will offer a short summary of edu-larp in the history of education in the U.S.S.R. Then, I will provide a short discussion on the types and functions of edu-larp, elaborating on the objectives and uses of this methodology. Following this discussion, the paper will offer tips for developing edu-larp games, with guidelines for establishing the following aspects: baselines; character descriptions; settings or preceding situations; character instruction; and managing the operating sequence. Finally, I will emphasize the conclusive "summing up" or debriefing stage, underlining its significance.

2. A short history of edu-larp in the USSR

To start, I will discuss the history of educational larps in the U.S.S.R. and Belarus. Even though role-playing has remained an object of the attention of Russian scholars for some time, as the works of Kapterev, Krapivka, and Karavaev in nineteenth century might suggest, the first conscious, official, documented application of the larp methodology in educational processes dates from 1916-18. This new wave was connected with the name of particular teacher, sculptor, poet, fiction writer, and visionary: Inokentiy Nikolaevich Zhukov (1875—1948). These innovations transpired during the fall of the Russian Empire and the formation of the U.S.S.R. Zhukov was the first to organize the movement and to place larp methodology as a cornerstone in the new educational system. His concepts of educational theater and long larp are still remembered. He was responsible for the invention of the Pioneer movement and many other fascinating ideas. Zhukov asserts:

> No one can deny that one of the main features of childhood is imitation. In a more vivid form, it is expressed with pre-school children—all of their games, whether it is playing with dolls for girls or a variety of games for boys—all of these games are in the nature of the imitation of adults. (Zhukov, Directions 2-3, my translation)

Zhukov also discussed the subject of role-playing games extensively:

> From the usual type of games, these games differ in that they are never accidental and short, but can be long-term or even permanent. In these games, play is serious, merging with life itself... there have been two main types of these great educative games.

> The first of them includes games that are based on the imitation of contemporary adult citizens. To this type of games belongs the School Republics and all kinds of Children's Clubs... where children play the School's Cabinet of Ministers and other elected officials to develop in young people a sense of responsibility for others and for the cause to which they serve, to develop public speaking and organizational skills, which are essential to a liberal democratic country... this type of organized education is based on the imitation of adults in their community activities.
>
> The organization of the second type... is based on the properties of imitative young souls as well, not on imitation of the adults and citizens in general, but on the imitation of the favorite heroes of youthful books, or rather a certain type of these heroes.
>
> The young soul at the age of 12 years is full of idealistic, romantic impulses. This soul craves... a feat coupled with risking his life, whether it is salvation from the water or anything else. It inevitably involves wandering life in primitive nature, the full moon, nights of poetry, camp life in the woods or on the shore of the deep river, crackling evening fire and fading voices of the night...
>
> ...As in this, and in other types of educational games—self-education and self-activity are basic principles, and the enormity of the game and its severity is a powerful stimulus of an educational nature.
>
> To conclude this article, repeat again: boring for students, our rationalist school should be rebuilt again! In the wide-open door to enter her initiative and self-education of young people, and not those poor education efforts that have been made of the rationalist school with negligible results. (2-3)

In 1918, Zhukov conducted the first of his "long-term larps," which included over seven hundred participants aged 12-14 from all the schools of Chita and was designed to last two and a half years. Such innovations were strongly supported at first by Nadejda Krupskaya (1869-1939), who was in charge of education at the dawn of the U.S.S.R. With the help of Zhukov's experience, a national youth organization called Pioneers was created, all instances of which were designed by Zhukov using his method of "permanent" larp. Unfortunately, the Communist party decided to use all these innovations as mighty ideological and political tools (Kot, *Zhukov*).

In addition, larps were examined in the works of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), for example, in his 1929 article "The Problem of the Cultural Development of the Child" (Vygotsky). However, the most prolific researcher of larp in the U.S.S.R. by all accounts is Daniil Elkonin (1904-1984). He published as many as thirty works on larp and his books on the topic are still unmatched; in particular, see *Artistic Role-playing Games of Preschool Children* and *Psychology of Playing*. Daniil published over a hundred works and some of his most prominent research publications in particular are on larp.

3. Types and functions of edu-larp

As the historical part of this article demonstrates, many prominent Russian educators comply with the notion that people acquire and develop most of their skills not through intellectual, cognitive awareness, but through action training. Educational live action role-playing games are one of the forms of role-playing that is often used as stimuli in the educational process (Zhukov, *Pedagogy*). Indeed, many other tools for education exist; take, as a comparison, virtual games, so well promoted by the research of Johanna Bluemink; Kurt Squire and Henry Jenkins; and others. If we keep in mind the fact that the environment of any game is a certain system of informational flows, in the case of larp, such a system is unique (Harviainen, "Informational Systems"; "Ritualistic Games"). Larp, having components of natural presence action play, as described by Geir Tore Brenne, uses the highest informational exchange range through the most possible transmission channels, therefore surpassing any virtual substitute.

Role-playing is central to the method of personal versatility and the ability to act. Such games prepare a person for forthcoming situations, providing an opportunity to test alternative actions and to choose the best options (Cherif and Somervill 28). For example, future employees of hotels can develop skills in handling customers, salespeople learn to sell their goods, future employees practice holding meetings and interviews, such as in MBA training modules, etc. As Sanne Harder explains:

> role-playing can be used as a tool for diverse forms of content; it is certainly not limited to any subject in particular. However, it seems to me that it particularly excels in areas that cover some of the more elusive elements of curriculum, such as developing competencies that relate to what kind of person or citizen you choose to be... (Harder 233)

Role-playing helps participants to distinguish between their own participation and the participation of others involved. "Trying on" different roles, participants develop an understanding of the motives and actions of others, also known as empathy. Even if participants have difficulty with acting, role-playing creates an adjustable environment that motivates individuals to take action. As U.S.S.R. experience demonstrates, sometimes educators can even use larps as a mighty ideological tool (Gorinevskiy, Marts, and Rodin). Nowadays, part of the necessary program for teachers in every national university in Belarus still includes the work of Elkonin; his contributions remain unsurpassed.

Most practicing educational psychologists and teachers in Belarus determine two main forms in which edu-larps are played: role-playing with authentic roles and distributed roles. Role-playing games with *authentic roles* simulate possible situations that the party will have to face in reality or that the person had already experienced. The participant adopts a role of his or her own making from experience. For example, in my courses with students, we practice a conversation with their parents, a meeting with a boss, taking an exam, having a difficult, "bad news" conversation with a friend, and many other situations. Most people can relate to authentic roles, as they go through similar real life situations. Role-playing games with *distributed roles* do not enact characters related to the specific experiences of participants or game situations. Each character is identified and developed by a coach/teacher. In this case, team members can communicate with each other's roles during the game, for example, if a participant is given the role of a boss or a policeman.

Educational role-playing games exist in different forms and are held for various purposes. I will divide these groups of objectives into psychological and pedagogical, further dividing types of games into subgroups organized according to these objectives. Role-playing games with *psychological* objectives focus on the treatment of psychosomatic disorders and their prevention. Games with the aim of achieving mental comfort should be conducted only under the guidance of a trained and qualified coach. It is essential for such a person to have certain amount of guided experience with this particular approach. As psychological larp methods aim toward stronger emotional penetration, an operating psychologist should oversee the process, as he or she would be able to take on full responsibility and have full knowledge of possible negative consequences.

The use of psychodramatic techniques in educational practice has many potential opportunities and can assist in solving urgent problems. Practitioners in the field of education can use psychodrama widely and actively, a highly efficient method for resolving complex situations and developing creative, new forms of work. Educators can use action role-playing in different lessons, group classes, and as a method of resolution for various conflicts (Bahr, Chappell, and Leigh 795). For example, many varieties of small larps exist about characters with conflicting aims, such as: sharing inheritance ("The Family Andersson"), newfound treasure, authority, guilt/blame ("The Tribunal"), or any other larp with communicational group conflict resolution ("Phoenix," "Shades," etc).

Role-playing games with *pedagogical* objectives are often conducted during lessons. The main goals are behavioral training, social development, personal development, the use of specific knowledge in a situation close to the practice, etc.

Specialists also distinguish such forms of edu-larps as *controlled* and *improvisational*. In a *controlled* game, the participants agree on the situation, specific roles, and the approximate course of action in a way similar to actor training. In *improvisational* games, freedom of choice plays a significant part in the allocation of roles and the description of the given situation. In this type of game, the availability of a free course of action is important.

Through a combination of different purposes and forms of role-playing, edu-larps can arise in various different forms:

Imitational didactic games: Larps primarily directed toward cognitive development, such as solving math and geometry problems in-character.

Business games: Larps used to improve the culture of interpersonal behavior in a company, to develop communication skills, to improve team work, and to enhance professional possibilities. Often used in business education. For example, "You belong to two creative teams for two competing advertising agencies. In two hours, you are expected to present your advertising strategy before the representatives of N company."

Organizational action games: Larps with action and movement as a priority, often directed toward team work and using competition as a stimuli. Often used to work with children during physical education classes and for training of practical skills.

Directorial games: Reenactment of a script written by a director, often with small, improvisational content. Often used during children's activities, traditional celebrations, or other cultural gatherings.

Stage games: Larps for spectators and an audience with some prior preparation, but mostly improvisation.

Military war games: Larps with a large emphasis on historical reconstruction and/or strategy. Often used during military training or as a historical venue and tourist attraction.

Socio-orienting games: Larps with the purpose of socialization or correction of behavior. Often used to help immigrants, children, and foreigners adjust to new social cultures and traditions.

Theatrical games: Staged games with predetermined plots, yet with the possibility of improvisation. Such larps usually include theatrical exaggeration and methods of expression.

Plot games: Replaying famous predetermined plots with the aim of providing an experience to the player with an educational purpose. Often used for teaching history, literature, as a social tradition, or during prisoner/hostage scenarios.

Folk games: Traditional, ritualistic larps presented locally and played on a regular basis in certain circumstances.

Games with simulation of social reality: Larps that model certain aspects of social reality in which particular virtues are demonstrated or learned.

Game dramatization: Any other game with the small addition of characters and conflict.

Game-based theoretical modeling: Larp with the minimum of illusion and with research or data collection as the main purpose.

Interactive theater: A mixture of Stage Games and Psychodrama. Used for group therapy and can work with big crowds, e.g. "Theater of the Oppressed," founded by Augusto Boal. Exists in forms of Forum Theater and Social Interactive Theater.

Psychological drama, or psychodrama: Method of therapy developed by Jacob L. Moreno. Mainly directed at one protagonist whose issues are reenacted and investigated during the session.

Role training of imagination: Larp mainly aimed at the development of imagination, with an emphasis on an imaginary world.

Sociodrama: Branch of psychodrama, but with several protagonists. Used for the same purposes but focused upon working with groups.

Many of these games are quite similar in essence, but were categorized by scholars for different purposes.

We can further divide the educative purposes of larps into three groups based on the area of effect. According to their main mechanisms, these three areas are symbolized as Mind, Heart and Body (see Table 1):

Mental objectives (of Mind): Cognitive, educational objectives aimed at improvement; development and correction of cognitive processes; analytical skills; and intellectual virtues.

Emotional objectives (of Heart): Affective education objectives aimed at improvement; development and correction of emotional processes; self-awareness; will management; imagination; creativity; moral conflict resolution; and other virtues of character.

Physical objectives (of Body): Psychosocial education objectives aimed at improvement; development and correction of behavioral processes; mechanisms of interpersonal communication; physical possibilities; and means to affect the material world (Kot, Sociodramatic 380-381).

4. Tips for developing educational live action role-playing games

Even though the level of excellence of any larp game is difficult to predict, "role-play, as an active learning pedagogy, should be more effective than traditional pedagogies such as lectures in achieving significant learning outcomes" (Brummel et al. 10). The authors continue:

> In the formative evaluations of the role-play sessions, most participants said that the sessions were worthwhile because they were engaged in the scenarios, and they valued a realistic learning experience. The participants stated clearly that the role-plays captured their attention better than lectures. Furthermore, the role-plays required greater personal investment than case studies. Within the same limited time, a lecture can cover more issues than a role-play, but our formative evaluations indicate that participants believe

Table 1: The Three Objectives of Edu-Larp

Cognitive education objectives	Affective education objectives	Physical education objectives
• Comprehension of theories • Comprehension of life's events • Gaining knowledge • Recognition of social processes • Personal orientation in organizations and systems • The development of personal strategies • Recognition of values • Recognition of the rules, norms, regulations and their understanding • Problem analysis • Determination of decision making processes • Acknowledgement of a conflict of interests • Recognition of power structures and hierarchies • Recognition of own capabilities and weaknesses • Reevaluation of the self-image/ image of others • "Immersion" in other people's roles and situations (empathy)	• The processing of unpleasant events • Detection of emotional components of action • Interpreting personal feelings and needs • The increase in personal flexibility • Conflict resolution • Recognition of own contradictions • Distancing from the situation • Maintaining personal independence and decision-making ability • Promoting sense of humor • Promotion of spontaneity and creativity • Promotion of tolerance and solidarity • Increasing sense of personal comfort • Promotion of group dynamics	• Role adequate behavior • Encouraging responsibility • Ability to cooperate • Training of confidence: the ability to work in a group • Conduct training (management, parents, etc.) • Public speaking • Linguistic training • Training of psychomotor tskills in professional education • Training of communication abilities (active listening, interviews, conversations, confrontational, interviews, presentation, etc.)

that role-plays promote deeper understanding of the ethical issues and greater appreciation of divergent perspectives. (Brummel et al. 10)

To determine that participants will use the role-playing properly and will carry out the game effectively, educators should ask the following questions:

- *Could this particular goal be most effectively achieved through a role-playing game?*
- *Does the chosen form of larp comply with the objectives of the event?*
- *Will participants be able to meet the necessary requirements?*
- *Is there danger of personal emotions becoming overexposed, which could cause discomfort, through the use of this particular role-playing game?*
- *Do the game instructions comply with the objectives of the game? Are they sufficiently comprehensive?*
- *Is the experience gained during the course of the game applicable to the lesson subject?*
- *Is the game master/host sufficiently qualified to deal with possible resistances and obstacles? This concern also depends upon the authority of the host, e.g. respected, not respected, avoided, disliked by children, etc. This condition further depends upon the specific features of the group, e.g. young offenders, disabled individuals, rape victims, hyperactive students, etc.*
- *What alternative advice can the host/game master offer to make the game more effective?*

Edu-larps are best developed in four stages, which I will describe below in more detail.

a) Baseline (Starting Situation)

To start, the initial situation is needed: a conversation related to sales, a complaint with an employee, a discussion with colleagues, etc. The selected situation should be familiar to the students (possible, close to practice), contain a conflict, and provide boundaries adequate to the objectives of this particular edu-larp. The last requirement is especially important because role-playing games are not easy to monitor and are always limited in some ways. You cannot play out the whole conflict situation, so the game should provide the facts preceding and provoking the conflict. Game designers can find the inspiration for the situation in daily work, in the stories of colleagues or friends, in books, etc. To have a stockpile of ideas, keep a record of your daily exploits; anything you hear or encounter may come handy.

b) Character description

With a Baseline ready, we still need characters that are likely to act in this situation. These characters must be imaginable. They should be realistic, sufficiently described, and have both positive and negative character traits. Apply the suggested four-step approach, which uses a business scenario as an example:

Personal Information: These aspects include name, age, ethnicity, social status, environment, housing, hobbies, background, etc.

Professional information: The character's area of expertise, acquired skills, years of experience working in the company, steps of career, current position, style of work, plans for the future, relationship with superiors, colleagues, customers, etc. Sometimes even more importantly, describe the skills the character lacks, etc.

Personal qualities: The main objectives, character traits, strengths, weaknesses, personal norms, and values that shape the character's behavior, qualities, etc.

Material requirements: Prerequisite individual props, costumes, makeup, etc.

Since imagining a character is sometimes quite difficult when it lives only on paper, you can gather features from friends and colleagues. Perhaps, you will find a reference point from a character in a TV show, book, etc. Nevertheless, keep in mind that participants might find playing a character similar to their own persona easier. As Sarah Lynne Bowman explains, "[though] experienced role-players dismiss the practice of enacting personas similar to the primary identity as amateurish... many players create a Doppelganger Self when new to the game and still learning the world, as playing someone similar to one's self is far easier." (264)

c) Preceding situation

Each situation is played out in a particular environment. Participants must pay attention to two levels. First of all, they must understand the *macro level* of situation: For whom does your character work? How long has the company existed? What has happened in world in this scenario? etc. All characters may commonly know this information. In addition, players must understand the basis of the *micro level* of situation: How did this situation occur? What is the immediate pre-history? Where and how did the action of the game commence? etc. Knowledge of this information could vary from character to character. Both macro and micro levels of information will become important for the players later in the game as a basis for situational behavior.

d) Character instruction

Providing instructions for playing the role of, for example, the Loving Father already gives specific guidance on suggested action, how the character should behave during a call, and to what purpose the character should aspire. These recommendations often begin with the words: "You've come to..."

Also, you may entrust the "game territory" to the participants. In this case, character instruction will sound something like, "You have been summoned to Big Boss..."

You might find the following points useful during the role-play. First, the more complex the dynamics of the game, the more it develops; the participants will improvise and continue playing. Second, the greater the risk of loss of control over the game, the less the game supervisor can control and predict the inner processes of each of the participants; e.g. "Everyone sees what they want to see."

From a psychological point of view, role-playing provides an integrated method in which, as never before in other forms of training, you can refer to a sensitive, emotional side of the process. The unique adjustability of this method offers the supervisor the possibility to manage and coordinate larp on the spot.

5. Willingness

The organizers cannot plan the willingness of students to participate in the game. Willingness will manifest itself only during the process, though methods exist to invoke it. Hence, some participants may reject role-playing as a method. For example, some people find the word "game" distasteful or do not feel passion for going through the stress of altering their own complex of psychological features and adapting/ transforming. Therefore, organizers must address the issue of voluntariness before the game, and, if any refuse to participate, organizers must remove them without pressure and criticism. For these students, you must have a different task on hand; for example, non-participants may observe the process of preparation for the game and analyze the larp as it unfolds.

Verbal detail and accuracy of the game instructions does not ensure that the participants will understand the game in the same way as the supervisor hoped. Good instructions for the game are a prerequisite for providing greater insight, the possibility of reaching the individual characteristics of participants, and accessing their specific experience of life and work (Zaharov).

Role-playing games can run normally, but the feelings and emotions of participants remain untouched. The reason may lie in the wording of the game manual or if the preparation process did not reach the sensuous consciousness of participants. In this situation, the supervisor should ask participants what they would like to change in order for the scenario to feel adequate. Therefore, the main idea of the game description/instruction should not represent something that the author of the game wants to say, but something that will help participants to understand and comprehend it.

Players, first of all, note what they can relate to in the proposed situation; e.g. what in their memory is associated with words such as family, the zoo, Sunday, walking, etc. Edu-larps should work with personal images. Learning about the participants' previous learning experiences and their expectations of this educational session may help.

Participants understand the instructions in accordance with their personal views about the whole process of learning and about the specific topic. If this situation is easily relatable and/or they feel comfortable with it, students will believe that they are able to influence the learning process due to the anticipation of control. One way or another, they will agree to participate.

Organizers should evaluate the instructions of the game for compliance with certain personal rules of behavior, because no one wants to feel ridiculed, embarrassed, or uncomfortable. All that happens in the larp should leave the impression of spontaneity, yet with a strong impression of credibility.

The participants should decide if they will use models of behavior well known, adopted, and tested by experience, or if they should use standard roles from life, television, theatre, books, etc. All of this information mixes with the objectives of the course and the assumptions that students have about the expectations of their supervisor, also known as the hidden agenda of the game master. This information manifests in the personal/hidden instructions of the specific character/player.

This process only lasts a few seconds, but is valuable to the participants. However, they often do not realize this importance, as the brain automatically checks the information before it comes into play. In this situation, the central concept is "Tele," "Moreno's term for what might variously be called "rapport" in its broadest sense" (Blatner). Moreno explains, "we use the words... telephone, television, etc., to express action at a distance, so to express the simplest unit of feeling transmitted from one individual towards another we use the term tele" (cited in Blatner). For example, tele often happens during the larp ritualistic improvisation when participants operate simultaneously without prior agreements. Thus, tele means the ability of emotional perception, an ability that relies upon the tangibility of mutual assessment. Tele applies to the main skills of the teacher/ supervisor, allowing the teacher to wordlessly tell to the participant: "I think you are able to play this role."

6. Operating sequence

Preferably, the supervisor should hold the edu-larp to a consistent *working order*, because this stability provokes an additional sense of confidence in the participants.

Action agreement: The coach/teacher and the players state what they want to achieve with this role-playing game and agree on the methods and structure of the game.

The creation of the "scene": The teacher must make clear that the situation in question is imaginary and should appoint a specific location to the game with specific boundaries, such as a classroom, a house, etc. As J. Tuomas Harviainen explains, boundaries give participants a sense of security and confidence. Players will feel free to act "in game" in certain places and can leave those areas to exit the game:

For liminal learning games and simulations...

attention should be paid to their boundary control measures and the way the games extend or avoid information uncertainty. This will not only make said simulation/ games more effective, but also more enjoyable to participants and more effective as knowledge anchors in the long run. (Harviainen, "Ritualistic" 16)

Making the "scene" work: In order to better relate to the situation, players must equip "the scene." The group must decide and agree upon props, such as tables and chairs; which items are still in place, for example, a plant in a pot; where the doors and windows are, etc.

The distribution of roles: For the success of educational role-playing games, organizers should give participants a short, but expressive and comprehensive description of roles. Also teachers should always ask participants if they have sufficient information about their roles: name, sex, age, origin, family, work situation, values, goals, interests, views, etc.

Managing the game: The supervisor—or teacher, game master, psychologist etc.—does not take part in the game. Thus, the teacher remains a neutral observer, and can intervene or interrupt the game at any time if necessary.

Precise lead-in and exit from the game: Players take roles voluntarily and should feel capable of exiting the game at all times. During the game, participants should use the names of the characters, not the players. Participants clearly signal when the role-playing game starts and when it ends.

Summing up: Related terms are "forum" and "sharing" (Boal) or "debriefing" in the Nordic tradition. After the role-playing game, the organizer should hold a discussion where all participants provide feedback on the main idea of the game. The discussion should focus on the goals, or Action agreement, and not other purposes.

7. Summing up

The "forum," or "sharing," is often organized in three steps.

The first step is Sharing one's own experience. Participants talk about their own feelings and experiences in the game; observers talk about what they saw. Participants and spectators relate the content to their personal experience (Zinkevich-Evstigneeva); e.g. "What did this situation remind me of?"

The second step is Analysis. When discussing reasons for appropriate behavior in the roles, participants share conclusions made about human relationships, talk about possible alternatives, and describe other models of role behavior.

The third step is Transfer. Transfer occurs when students compare the game to real life situations and can make general conclusions. During this step, students can discuss and agree upon succeeding action; for example, the group may decide to replay the game to try out another possible line of action.

Keep in mind that, unfortunately, no precise and generally accepted rules exist on how to express comments toward another person and positively affect the object of feedback. Therefore, many feel insecure when asked to comment on a particular situation or specific behavior.
In order for feedback after the role-playing game to remain effective for the person voicing the comment and for the person receiving it, players should distinguish three levels in their comments:

Player: In relation to the person, the player issuing a comment should have a positive attitude, such as "I like you for who you are."

Result: At this level, players comment upon in-game actions, such as:
"I am not quite satisfied with the results achieved in the game."
"I am satisfied/not satisfied with your success in sales."

Behavior: At this level, the participants talk about their perception of the behavior of another player, such as:
"I do not like it when you interrupt me." (Not: "You keep interrupting me").
"It was pleasure to chat with you in this game."

Unfortunately, especially in vocal comments, these levels are often mixed, leading to confusion after the comment. Therefore, no comments should feature advice, evaluative statements, or interpretation. Turning comments into questions often helps, giving the subject multiple options and freedom to express their opinions. Participants should avoid any comments that are not directed to the coordination of the process. Finally, the teacher leading the session should offer psychological support or approval for every insight offered.

In conclusion, I would like to note that specific

guidelines are present in edu-larp activities that make them relatively harmless. Every game host should remain aware of their responsibility and consciously accept it. We should remember that the more functions and effects of larps we determine, the greater the obligation we have to research the possible negative outcomes of each of them. Finally, the more we research larp, the further our horizons expand. Larp is even more diverse than life itself, limited only by our infinite imagination.

Works Cited

Bahr, Steven J., Chappell, C. Bradford, Leigh, Geoffrey K. "Age at Marriage, Role Enactment, Role Consensus, and Marital Satisfaction." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 45.4 (1983): 795- 803.

Bender, Tisha. "Role playing in Online Education: A Teaching Tool to Enhance Student Engagement and Sustained Learning." *Innovate* 1.4 (2005).

Blatner, Adam. "Tele: The Dynamics of Rapport." *Blatner.com.* 26 Feb. 2006. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/tele.htm.

Bluemink, Johanna. *Virtually Face to Face: Enriching Collaborative Learning through Multiplayer Games.* Dissertation. Oulu, Finland: University of Oulu, 2001.

Boal, Augusto. *The Theater of the Oppressed.* New York: Urizen Books, 1979. Print

Bowman, Sarah Lynne. *The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity.* Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. 2010.

Brenne, Geir Tore. *Making and Maintaining Frames: A Study of Metacommunication in Laiv Play.* Thesis. Oslo, Norway: University of Oslo, 2005. http://www.efatland.com/fate/Making_frames.pdf.

Breslav, G.E. *Psychological Correction of Childrens's and Teenager's Aggression.* St. Petersberg, Russia: Rech, 2007.

Brummel, Bradley J., Gunsalus, C. K., Anderson, Kerri L., & Loui, Michael C. "Development of Role-play Scenarios for Teaching Responsible Conduct of Research." *Sci Eng Ethics* 16 (2010): 573-589.

Cherif, Abour H. and Christine H. Somervill. "Maximizing Learning: Using Role Playing in the Classroom." *The American Biology Teacher* 57.1 (1995): 28-33.

Elkonin, Daniil. *Artistic Role-playing Games of Preschool Children.* Moskow, USSR: 1957.

Elkonin, Daniil. *Psychology of Playing.* Moskow, USSR: 1978.

Gorinevskiy V.V., Marts V.G., Rodin A.F. *Games and Entertainment.* 3rd edition. Moskow-Leningrad, USSR: Central Committie of Revolutionary Komsomol Union of Youth, 1922. Print.

Harder, Sanne. "Confessions of a Schoolteacher: Experiences with Role-playing in Education." *Lifelike.* Ed. Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, and Line Thorup. Copenhagen, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP07, 2007. 228-235.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas. "Information, Immersion, Identity. The Interplay of Multiple Selves During Live-action Role-play." *Journal of Interactive Drama* 1.2 (2007): 9-15. Print.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas. "Live-action, Role-playing Environments as Informational Systems: An Introduction." *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Conceptions of Library and Information Science—"Featuring the Future"* 12.4. October 2007. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://informationr.net/ir/12-4/colis/colis24.html.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas. "Ritualistic Games, Boundary Control and Information Uncertainty." *Simulation & Gaming* 43.4 (2012): 506-527. http://sag.sagepub.com/content/43/4/506.abstract.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas. *Systemic Perspectives on Information in Physically Performed Role-play.* Dissertation. Tampere University Press, 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://acta.uta.fi/pdf/978-951-44-8914-3.pdf.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas. "The Tribunal." *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying.* Ed. Martin E. Andresen. Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012. 70-79. http://www.lulu.com/shop/martin-eckhoff-andresen/playing-the-learning-game/paperback/product-20063701.html.

Kot, Yaraslau I. "Long-term Larp of Inokentiy Zhukov." Moskow. 2012. Print.

Kot, Yaraslau I. "Sociodramatic Tale Therapy (Live Action Role Playing) as a Method of Alternative Rehabilitation." *Alternative Rehabilitation.* Minsk, Belarus: RIVSH, 2012. 380-386. Print.

Nolemo, Åke and Röklander, Johan. "The Family Andersson: A Contemporary Drama with Time Pressure." *Playing the Learning Game: A Practical Introduction to Educational Roleplaying.* Ed. Martin E. Andresen. Oslo, Norway: Fantasiforbundet, 2012. 46-57.

Passov, E.I. *Communicational Method of Teaching Foreign Speaking.* Moskow, Russia: Prosveshchenie, 1985.

Shtutsenberger, A. A. "Drama of a Terminally Ill Person: Fifteen Years of Psychodrama with Cancer." *Psychodrama: Inspiration and Technique.* Ed. P. Holms, et al. Moskow, Russia: Klass, 1997. 217-245.

Squire, Kurt and Henry Jenkins. "Harnessing the Power of Games in Education." *InSight* 3 (2003): 7-33.

Vygotsky, Lev. "The Problem of the Cultural Development of the Child." *Marxists.org.* 1929. Web. http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/works/1929/cultural_development.htm.

Zaharov, A. I. *Games as a Means of Overcoming Childhood Neurosis.* St. Petersberg, Russia: Karo, 2006.

Zhukov, Inokentiy N. *The Job of Play in Pedagogy (Discussion).* Chita, USSR: 1921. Print.

Zhukov, Inokentiy N. *Two Directions for the Evolution of Education.* Chita, USSR: 1918. Print.

Zinkevich-Evstigneeva, Tatyana Dmitrievna. *Psychotherapy of Addictions: Method of Tale Therapy.* St. Petersberg, Russia: Rech, 2011.

Yaraslau I. Kot *studied Creative Writing, Drama, and Art at Yale University's Milford Academy in the US. He received his Masters in Law at Belarus State University. Kot then completed the Ph.D. level at the Academy of Management under the aegis of the President of the Republic of Belarus. Next, Kot received his B.A. in Management at the International Institute of Management LINK in Russia. Completing his MBA at the Open University in the United Kingdom, he further received his B.A. in Practical Psychology and Educational Science at the Academy of Postgraduate Education of the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Belarus. Kot is currently working on a research Masters in Psychology on larp at Belarus State University.*

Email contact: mr.kot@inbox.ru

Larp in an Interdisciplinary University Course

Neal McDonald
Alan Kreizenbeck

Abstract

We describe a class that we taught at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County in Spring of 2012. The class was jointly taught by a theater and a visual arts professor. Students read papers and played larps. The professors taught the class to learn about larp and to see how different game styles and mechanics work. We found that teaching larp was similar to teaching theater, and that taking one class did not enable students to both participate in larps and design larps. This paper describes preparations before the class started, activities during the semester, and ideas for improvements.

Keywords

Pedagogy, larp, role-playing studies, theatre, visual arts, higher education

1. Before starting: How to motivate professors

In Spring 2012 at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, Professor Neal McDonald and Dr. Alan Kreizenbeck taught a larp class. Neither of us had much experience in the form, but both had seen and read enough to feel the subject was worth investigation. A class that played the games seemed a good first step.

Neal McDonald is an Assistant Professor in UMBC's Animation and Interactive Media (AIM) concentration. Most of the art of animation involves making inanimate objects act, so McDonald has studied theater in one way or another for a decade.

Prof. McDonald's research focus is game development. While "game studies" is accepted as an academic field, much of its content is sociology, psychology, or literary criticism (Fine; Bogost; Raine, Mäyrä, and Suominen; Aarseth). The study of games *per se* by making them, even in 2012, can be problematic for some academics; Prof. McDonald's intuition is that larp's obvious links to performance and theater (Condon; Stenros and Montola 10) would make the form appealing to his more conservative colleagues.

He felt constrained by his own ignorance, and the introversion of his students, as they had roundly rebuffed actor's training on several occasions. For instance, Dr. Kreizenbeck had visited one of McDonald's animation classes in 2009 to introduce student animators to acting and movement exercises that might help make their creations seem more life-like, but several of the students were too inhibited to do simple movement exercises.

Dr. Kreizenbeck was intrigued by the possibility of working on a theatre piece—which was how he viewed larp events—with individuals who were, to him, physically and vocally inhibited young artists. The class also provided him with the opportunity to explore another unconventional method: engaging no-theatre artists in a theatrical creation.

Discussions between the two, starting in 2009, explored the overlaps between animation, game design, and theater. A chance meeting in November of 2011, a month after Prof. McDonald's first larp experience, led to the last-minute construction of a seminar class that would investigate larp, and especially Nordic larp, by playing the games.

2. Setting up the class

The professors divided the work of teaching the class into two parts. Dr. Kreizenbeck would teach acting and build the students up to the point that they could play the games and Prof. McDonald would present games and literature from the larp community.

Our goal was to see a wide variety of games in play. Pursuant to that, we chose games that differed in goals, design, genre, and emotional content. We knew that our players would lack experience, so we reserved the first third of the class for training and team-building.

2.1 Textual Resources

"Knutepunkt" is one of the names of the larp conference series that rotates between the Nordic countries; Knutpunkt, Knudepunkt and Solmukohta are the other names, depending on the language of the host nation. Since 2001, these conferences have published essay collections in concert with each event ("Knutepunkt"). The Knutepunkt public essays

became the central texts, as they were convenient, free, and easily available.

We made an effort to include American games. One company, called Shifting Forest, provided particularly appropriate works: a set of "conference games," intended for strangers to play in less than six hours ("Shifting"). We also looked at games from the "Game Chef" competitions (Walton), Game Poems (Majcher), Corvis ("Norwegian"), websites from conventions such as Intercon (New England), and innumerable message boards. An enormous amount of material is available.

All of the games that we played in-class had several characteristics in common. They were all freely downloadable in standard text-document formats. They all described the creative goals of their authors. They all contained hints for players beyond simple background and motivation. They gave run-time estimates. Several also included helpful notes on the timing of in-game events: "After the door is opened, A and B will argue."

For most of the games, we had never seen them run, and we had never met anyone who had run them. If you are game developer who wishes her game to survive, overdocument. "You had to have been there" is a taunt, not a description.

2.2 Physical resources

The class was scheduled to meet in a medium-sized classroom, full of desks and chairs. UMBC's Department of Visual Arts has control of one performance space, which we were able to occupy during class time for most of the semester. It contained scrap lumber and screens that we used to build a few simple sets.

Immersion is a goal of many larpwrights. Classically immersive larp productions take great pains with sets, embedding the players in an environment in which everything the player experiences is appropriate to the game world (Bøckman 12-13). We did not attempt an immersive experience until the last game. By the time we were familiar with some of the less resource-intensive strategies, the class was over.

2.3 The students

The students in the class were all from the Department of Visual Arts; no Theatre majors enrolled. There were nine students: four women and five men.

Animators are not generally extroverts; some choose their major specifically to avoid needing to perform. A few of the students were so shy that they were unable to participate even in classroom discussions. We expected this issue, and wrote a grading policy into the syllabus that specifically punished unapologetic introversion: 40 percent of the final grade was participation (McDonald).

Even the students who were there willingly were a different kind of player than is usual in larps. There were add/drop deadlines and full-time enrollment scholarship questions; players were not free to choose whether to participate in a given scene. And, of course, we were giving out grades.

Power imbalances are a fact of life in academia. One rarely gets to teach only the willing. Syllabi and frank, first-day discussions that set behavioral expectations and carefully explain grading criteria compensate students for their surrender of control.

The sexual content of many larps is inappropriate in a university setting. Students did not enroll in the class with the expectation of having to depict sexual situations. Again, we discussed the situation on the first day, making a distinction between depiction of a gender identity and participation in it—that is, it is possible for a man to act like a woman without kissing a man. We could require one, we said; the other, we could not.

One person (12% of enrollment) dropped the class after this discussion; we were prepared for 30%. By the end of the term, some, but not all, of the students were comfortable depicting sexual topics, without any pressure from the instructors to become so. This fact is probably the clearest indicator of the class's success.

Another difference: time outside of class was generally unavailable. All the students had full academic schedules and most of them had necessary part-time jobs. We declared on the first day that class activities would take up the weekend of May 5th, and that one other game would require meeting for a few hours beyond class time. All other class activities, aside from readings, were done during the scheduled class time. Much of Nordic larp uses long-term immersion to achieve its effects (Koljonen); these effects would remain unavailable to us, except perhaps at the end.

2.4 Similar classes

We had a specific experience in mind: short Freeform games, and a wide variety of other games, played briefly. The class is part of a game-design curriculum; seeing many mechanics in play seemed valuable. This strategy is cautious: we had not played any of these games, so we were disinclined to spend more than four classes on any particular work.

In America, the only other larp class of which we are aware is Ed Chang's at the University of Washington, which also ran in Spring 2012 (Chang). Its readings were more sociological, and the only game mentioned in the class syllabus is *Archaea*, a game that he designed. Also, Chang's was an 11-week class, whereas ours was 18 weeks. Professor Chang's class materials were not online when we were designing our class.

A general search of the Internet turned up no other classes. Prof. McDonald has seen emails and heard casual discussions of university classes on larp taught elsewhere, but he has no information on their goals or evidence that they actually happened.

3. Running the Class

We divided the class into thirds: three sets of five weeks. In the first third, we focused on readings and acting lessons. In the second third, we tried to run one short game every week or two. In the third part, we focused on one big, last game.

3.1 The first five weeks

We started with the assumption that the students would begin the class with no actors' training and no experience with role-playing games of any kind. This prediction was mostly accurate; one student had participated in one larp and one other student had some training as an actor.

3.1.1 Acting lessons

Acting sessions were carefully designed to prepare students to not only create and participate in larps, but to make them capable of doing so in a more meaningful, theatrical manner. The first acting classes were designed to release physical and vocal tension, to develop notions of how improvisation might work, and the possibilities of what might get discovered in that process. This latter work involved exercises in which students were asked to listen to their partners, create imaginary situations that were based on their interactions with others in the class, and make emotionally and physically expressive connections to what they created. Alan's belief was that the best larps are those that allow participants to experience and express themselves in ways not possible or acceptable in "non-larp" life, and to find those experiences and expressions through physical actions. This sort of acting work is based on the theory and practices of Constantin Stanislavsky, Mikhail Chekov, and Jerzy Grotowski; the practices of these men constitute—in one form or another—the basis for most actor training world-wide. Once initial embarrassment was overcome and the tendency to want to become monsters or ninjas in all the exercises was thwarted, the students made good progress; in fact, their progression differed little from a demanding, beginning acting class.

3.1.2 FATE *and Papers*

We started with readings that defined terms, detailed creative goals, and described the experience of playing games. The list of readings is given in the syllabus (McDonald). We tried to limit discussions of the readings to 10-20 minutes in order to prioritize the acting lessons.

The third week of class was taken up by a run of Evil Hat Productions' *FATE: Spirit of the Century* tabletop role-playing game. We chose to play *FATE* in order to contextualize larp, filling students in, in a visceral way, on what the activity was that gave rise to larping.

FATE met our needs well; a recent RPG, the rules for play are straightforward (as RPGs go), the rulebook is a free download, and the subject matter is innocuous and cheerfully silly. The game generates characters whose backstories are always intertwined; we referred to this element often for the rest of the semester. The game also elegantly incorporates character generation into game play. Though some were too shy to play, by the end of the session, everyone, at least, knew how to do so.

3.2 The second five weeks

3.2.1 Running Prayers

Prof. McDonald had participated in a run of J. Tuomas Harviainen's *Prayers on a Porcelain Altar (Demythologized Version), v.4.0* at the Nordic Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) 2011 run by Jaakko Stenros, so he chose it as the class's first larp. *Prayers* was run in Maryland as it was run at DiGRA: an authentic Nordic larp experience.

In many ways, *Prayers* is the perfect first larp. It is intended to run in 90 minutes, enough for one class period. *Prayers* does not require the players to develop a character and the characters are all college-aged. Its emotional range is disgust and anger, so nervous people can make jokes and stay sarcastic, good emotional distancing techniques for acting neophytes.

While the game's sexual content was ignored, the students did physically get into character and stay

in-character. Emotional interactions were muted, but present. Disgusting jokes were made: Green vomited into the refrigerator. Not all players participated equally; the shy ones just pretended to sleep or watched the whole time.

In the class following that first game, attempts to have a classroom discussion about the work or the performances met with blank stares and uncomfortable silence. We were taken aback. We moved on.

3.2.2 Running All Saint's Eve

The Shifting Forest games are designed to run at conferences, among strangers, with little time for preparation, in an amount of time comparable to a class period. The characters were of limited scope, but designed to interact and conflict. There were twelve games available online at the beginning of the semester, all using basically the same mechanic. These factors made them easy to compare, though the games tell many different stories. The students looked at several and went with *All Saints' Eve*; they liked the idea of a haunted house.

The game's run took one week. During the first class period, we went over character materials and discussed the game mechanics. Students discussed their characters with instructors and planned out costumes, which amounted to little more than relatively formal or informal dress for one class period. We borrowed a few prop weapons from the Theater department's collection. We built a set with four walls and a closet, with a locked door, two days before the game ran. We ran the game itself for only two hours—half the time that the instructions recommend. This time was sufficient to hit the planned plot points described in the libretto.

We found *All Saints' Eve* more difficult to play than *Prayers.* None of the students played as a person similar to themselves, though we did not cross gender-preference lines. The acting was tentative; life-or-death confrontations, which were liberally strewn throughout the text, fizzled into uncertainty or were ignored; relationships supposedly built over years were forgotten. We all ignored the game's system for resolving conflict.

Prof. McDonald played the role of the demon, forcing characters to act against their interests. This was a mistake; it clashed with the reluctance of the players to emotionally commit to the piece. Instructor meddling only increased the resistance.

However, on the whole, the game worked. The game's characters and situations force the players into conflict, one of the game's goals. The players felt the rising tensions that the work intended. Towards the end, character motivations began to supersede player preferences. Players shot and stabbed each other, wrestled for the gun, defiled the shrine, mourned their children, and died meaningless, pitiful deaths.

3.2.3 Running The Upgrade

For the next game, the students were allowed to choose between *Previous Occupants* and *The Upgrade*, two Nordic Freeform games. Both use cinematic techniques, like flashbacks, and "telegraphing," an improvisational method of adding character or environmental attributes during play by simply mentioning them as true. The students, being animators, quickly caught onto the idea of "timeline manipulation": a slightly more technically complex form of play. Telegraphing caught on after the professors demonstrated it a few times, but the technique is difficult; one must act, invent new information, integrate the invention with the scene, and convey one's invention to the other players, and they must be ready to understand it.

The game's conceit is that of a reality TV show, presented in a "Real Life" series of interviews, intercut with earlier scenes that are discussed in the interviews. The premise of the reality show is that couples, unsure of their desire to stay in a current relationship, travel to a resort island and swap partners on dates. Prize money and cross-purposes complicate relationships further. Two "producer" characters conduct the interviews, working to exaggerate drama and create conflict for the sake of sensationalism and ratings.

The game describes itself as being playable as a farce, though it does not recommend that interpretation. The students wanted to play it as a farce; farces have low emotional stakes. The first part of the game was sloppily comical, but, as the funny situations were generally funny at someone's expense, the mood darkened.

3.2.4 "And now for something completely different..."

After *The Upgrade*, we looked at other Freeform games and decided as a group that they were depressing: rape, molestation, murder, dead children, amoral hussies—let's do some comedy.

Whose Line Is It, Anyway? was a successful, skit-based, television program that ran in Britain and America ("Whose?"). Professor McDonald had looked at it before when researching actors' games; its format is drawn from "TheatreSports," an improvisational form that had some popularity in Britain in the late 80's (Leep 110). Actors would form teams and compete—but, as the show's motto said, "the points mean nothing."

The Wikipedia page for the show links to a list of all the games played in the 12 years that different versions of the show ran on radio and television in Britain and America ("List"). What a gold mine! For two weeks, the class got eaten by dinosaurs, broke up with hillbillies, or fought duels as Russian cowboy mimes.

Two weeks was more than enough; the games did not produce a wide variety of experiences. However, when *Whose Line Is It, Anyway?* was over, everyone was comfortable with the group; they had finally become performers.

Improv in this form is different from larp in goal, method, and duration. The only goal in comedy improv is to make an audience laugh. Though one could imagine larps in which characters are created and discarded every few minutes, generally larps go to the opposite extreme.

The similarities between the skills demanded for the two are therefore surprising: players, in character, embedded in a fictional situation, improvising. The contrasts discovered are similar to correlations between Bach's piano inventions and his concertos; both are music, but what a difference.

3.3 The last five weeks

3.3.1 Running Perilous Journey

This game is more of an exercise, one that Alan had run several times in the course of teaching actors. The exercise took four hours, more than planned (see below); it is doable in much less time. All of the students participated. The facilitators described the situation, established the path to follow, and created and placed some props. In it, players imagine themselves as medieval peasants conducting a religious pilgrimage, walking through a dangerous forest. There is a mansion filled with food two-thirds of the way along the trail, and, at the end, a shrine and a holy man. In many ways, this exercise—without the dire consequences if one fails to complete the journey—represents coming of age ceremonies present in many communal societies. In these rituals, a young male is sent out to survive in the world with only his accrued knowledge and a few supplies. He is allowed to return to the community after an allotted time. If he does, he is accepted as a full member of his unit. If he does not return, the tribe assumes that his skills and knowledge were not sufficient for survival. Even more analogous are pilgrimages practiced in nearly all, if not all, of the major world religions. This exercise is a melding of the two: the religious quest through a harsh environment.

We conducted the exercise in a state park; the "walk through the forest" was actually a walk through the forest. The mansion filled with food was a park shelter; in it were pictures of food. The shrine was another park shelter; Dr. Kreizenbeck placed fruit, water, and pictures of icons in this structure. Students were asked to think of themselves as poor, but devout people, whose journey to the shrine was the spiritual highlight of their lives. In fact, they could not expect to attain spiritual peace or enlightenment, ever, unless they completed this journey. Students were asked to walk at the pace that their character might walk, to engage with their surroundings, and to think what this journey meant to them—as their character and as themselves.

The exercise touches upon many issues that face actors. It lets them practice at staying in character for several hours. It is an opportunity to develop a physical presence for a character. It gives time for developing character responses to a variety of experiences. It develops imagination and focus. These goals are essentially the same for students in any acting class.

The park used was a 10-minute drive from UMBC. It is covered with trails, one of them paved. A paved trail follows the Patapsco River, which is crossable only at a few points— thus, we thought, getting lost was not an issue.

Liability law dictated that we had to have the students transport themselves to and from the venue. It took forty minutes for nine people to drive two miles.

The trail, unfortunately, was not as clearly marked as we thought, and all of the students ended up wandering, "lost," going off the main trail into what seemed like an endless forest. Fortunately, everyone was found well before nightfall. Not everyone found the shrine.

The experience of "being lost," even in this mild manner, left a deep impression. In the final project, replication of the emotional charge of being "lost in the forest" was a design goal for all of the students.

Between location scouting, going to the park, actually doing the exercise, and the postmortems, running this activity took two weeks; again, going off-site is difficult.

While getting lost caused many of the students to drop their character and become themselves, it also made them aware of the lack of safety and security they could experience; getting lost became a different, but meaningful larp. For example, students were confronted with the following: How did I act/think in that situation? Were my thoughts/actions in sync with the persona I usually present/like to present? What is the "me" when it loses basic controls? How is "lost" a metaphor for my life?

3.3.2 Running Shipwreck

The next week, Alan ran another actor's exercise called *Shipwreck*. It ran for one class period, approximately an hour and fifteen minutes. No previous preparation was required. All the students participated fully. The facilitator described the activities that the students performed. It used physical exhaustion to break down participants' resistance to suggestion and then manipulated them. The goal here is to create access to deeper feelings and ideas, those often hidden or kept at bay by the amazing effort it takes to navigate daily life. The exercise is often liberating for the participants and though they may be physically tired, they are also exalted: being tired in this way seems to release more energy. The exercise was conducted in a borrowed, empty dance studio.

The exercise features three phases: shipwreck, treasure, and return. During the shipwreck, Alan verbally described a shipwreck, swimming to shore on a deserted island, exploring the island, being chased by deadly enemies, and ultimately escaping into an underground cavern. In the second phase, the cavern was revealed to contain many treasures, none described in detail. Players found their "most precious thing," examined it, and put it back. In the third phase, players left the cavern, found a boat and returned home.

The initial phase involves intense physical activity. This phase is not emotionally loaded, initially, just tiring. Gradually, more and more unlikely activities are performed, breaking down interpersonal barriers and self-consciousness. The middle phase is intended to provoke introspection. Students found a wide variety of objects, though they did not have to discuss the objects in any more detail than miming how one would manipulate them. The third phase is less intimate, providing closure to the experience. The results of this exercise were as anticipated: students were tired, but exalted. They were in wonder at what they had discovered in the cave, and many felt great sadness that they had to return what they found to its place and leave it behind.

This took one class period.

3.3.3 Prep for the final

The original plan had been to have the students generate their own larps for a mid-term grade, run one of those larps, and then have the entire class generate and run the final game.

The class focus on learning to play and on experiences of play prevented the presentation of material on character development. We could not ethically evaluate students on material we had not presented and work that is not graded is never done.

A Shifting Forest or Jeep-scale larp is too large a writing assignment for an undergraduate class. UMBC has a screenwriting class that does nothing but produce scripts; a 20-page document is long for that class. With the mid-term writing gone, in-class generation of the final game was no longer a good idea.

We intended that a long-duration, immersion larp would become the final project, including an overnight stay somewhere. Unfortunately, the weekend set aside, that of May 5th, coincides with the beginning of camping season. All the campgrounds were booked! With little budget and no script, we curtailed the planned overnight activity and simply ran a day-long larp.

Alan and Neal met and hacked together a script from what they had. They modified *Perilous Journey*, adding game elements to compensate for the participants' lack of devotion to getting into character.

3.3.4 The game we designed: Spirit Walkers

We imagined *Spirit Walkers* as an inverted metaphor of a spiritual experience. We would return to the forest setting. We would use the forest path as a metaphor; the forest path would be a dream scene, with the characters visiting it throughout their lives. The players would walk about three miles, using events along the path as metaphorical input for their character's lives. Players' real bodies would become their characters' spiritual bodies; the real lives of the characters would occur on a different plane of existence.

The characters would have life challenges. We would represent these challenges in-game as rocks that the players would carry—real, heavy, muddy rocks. The characters would also have hopes and joys; these would be represented by water in paper cups. This page was borrowed from *Shipwreck*; exhaustion defeats emotional distance.

The characters would walk the path twice: down and back. Four judges would be strewn along the path; they would hear the player's stories, add or remove burdens, and fill or dash hopes.

Players would define a life's goal for their character. The judge at the path's end—the halfway point—would evaluate whether the character had achieved it or not, and award a prize if they had (again, a piece of fruit). Whether the prize was awarded or not, the path was only half-traveled: a midlife crisis! On the trip back, there are only two judges, and the last judge throws both rocks and water into a still pond, ending each character's game with a metaphorical death.

This was the mechanic into which we had to plug the characters. The class collaborated to choose a common setting (Victorian England) and to devise characters that had interconnected stories.

We used the Shifting Forest librettos as examples of how to interconnect characters and devise situations sure to produce conflict. Players were broken up into teams of four to six, and had to produce charts showing how characters had goals that would produce a balance of alliances and conflicts.

Keeping groups together was a concern; the game could easily turn into a second round of isolated strolling and daydreaming in the forest. The burdens were intended to be unmanageable by one player, making cooperation more likely and penalizing lone wolves.

3.3.5 The final game

Students were tasked with recruiting outside participants. Nine enrolled class members recruited 5 people; we should have made recruitment a grade. Preparation sessions held at night the week before were attended by 4 of the 14 players; character preparation for the new players mostly happened on-site in the half-hour minutes before the game.

Starting the game took 45 minutes; all the players had to tell their stories. Having to repeat the stories to all the judges punished those who were not coming up with new stories.

The rocks quickly reduced the emotional distance of the players. The day was warm and wet and the rocks made everyone filthy. The water took on extra significance as the cups disintegrated—it got muddy, or stayed clean enough to drink, or slowly leaked away. Hikers get thirsty; we gave out gallons of hope.

The final judge met each player, alone, next to a quiet pond in the forest. The end of each story was told, and hopes and burdens were taken away.

The group experienced euphoria at the end: a combination of fatigue, achievement, and after-test relief. The class met once more to discuss the experience and fill out the standard Visual Arts course evaluations. Students talked mostly about their characters and events along the trail.

4. Postmortem

4.1 What went right

We ran several larps fluently enough for everyone involved to at least see what the form can offer. That was the primary goal and we achieved it. We read and discussed material that described a wide variety of larp experiences.

Several animation students became much more comfortable with their bodies, becoming able to depict a range of movement styles other than their own. Sexual issues were discussed with mature frankness; though we worried about this factor more than anything else, sexuality was absolutely not an issue. Sexual roles and situations were depicted and manipulated in a rational, controlled, nonjudgmental manner.

We realized before mid-terms that we would have to drop the class goal of teaching how to generate larps and that the focus of the class would simply be learning competent enactment.

Student course evaluations were quite positive. They appreciated Dr. Kreizenbeck's confident expertise. Prof. McDonald's willingness to lead participation and chew scenery was reassuring. (He broke a toe kicking chairs during *The Upgrade*).

4.2 What went wrong

Most of what went wrong with the class is directly attributable to how it was put together at the last minute. Source material could not be evaluated thoroughly; key concepts were simply missed, though such issues are common in first runs of a class. Enrollment was not what it could have been.

A great deal of the class was devoted simply to getting introverts to buy-in. It is often observed that one person can ruin a larp for a whole group; we had three of those people. We could not get rid of them without cancelling the class and delaying graduation— for some students, indefinitely. This year, the university has offered many more special-topics classes; introverts will either participate or flunk. Also, we have done a better job of integration with the Theatre schedule; having seasoned actors in the mix will raise expectations.

The final project was a shadow of what it could have been. We did not reach out to the East Coast larp communities. We did not reach out to the Baltimore-area theater community.

4.3 What was, unfortunately, omitted

4.3.1 Boffering

Our students did not build weapons out of foam rubber and beat each other with them. "Artistic integrity" debates aside, early in the semester, when all of our non-actors were so sensitive to emotional

exposure, stage fighting would have offered a useful combination of physical action and emotional distance.

4.3.2 Pre-game exercises

Many larps use social/online media to involve players in offsite, pre-game character development. The importance of these activities did not become apparent to us until a few weeks before class was over—too late to incorporate into the class. This cost us a real opportunity to get students to bond with their characters and cost the students many creative opportunities. Online activities could have been easily added.

Character-building exercises are less well-documented than games proper. "Ars Amandi" exercises, for example, involve touching that would have been totally inappropriate in our context, but "Ars Ordo" involves shouting and staring, which would have been fine (Nordgren, 97).

4.3.3 Post-game evaluations

Larping was a strange experience for most of the class, and attempts to have the students critique the experiences were met with uncomfortable silences. Evaluation worksheets could have provided structured questions and lowered the social cost of offering tentative or untested opinions.

4.3.4 Better sets, props, and costumes

After attending the New England Larp Conference 2012 (NELCO), we were struck by the weight given to costume design. Cosplay is larp without the role-playing, and is fairly common; at UMBC, students attending classes in costume is not uncommon.

The class did not have access to a space in which we could leave sets and props for more than a few days at a time—not even storage space!

UMBC's Department of Visual Arts is totally unprepared to teach, support, or evaluate costumes; Theater maintains this expertise. This could provide another collaboration opportunity, with two classes running in a synchronized way, the costumers visiting the class and suiting people up. This class project could become feasible for students in costume design courses.

4.3.5 Improved contextualization

Course reading material was drawn from larp publications. While multiple essays by larpers draw links to other artistic practices, the course would have benefitted from readings taken more directly from those practices, such as Schechner's book of performance studies or Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics*.

No matter how intensive our course preparation was, it would only scratch the surface of the thirty years of worldwide experimentation and creativity in the larp community. Twenty years from now, we will still feel like beginners.

4.3.6 Looking forward

As Dr. Kreizenbeck has other teaching commitments, Prof. McDonald will teach the class again alone in the Spring. The course is fully integrated with the Theatre Department's schedule; this year, there will be actors in the class! We hope that Alan's schedule will be more flexible in the future or that other theatre instructors will become interested in the form.

5. Conclusion

When one teaches a class for the first time, expectations are always confounded. Getting students to larp was much more difficult than we anticipated, forcing players to overcome emotional inhibitions before difficulties with acting, improvisation, or implementing game mechanics could arise. We underestimated the difficulty of generating games, but performance issues had consumed the class before we could even address game writing. The first semester of larp is the teaching of acting.

Works Cited

Aarseth, Espen. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature.* Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997. Print.

Balsera, Leonard, et al. *Spirit of the Century.* Evil Hat Productions. 2003. Web/PDF. 13 Dec. 2012. http://www.evilhat.com/store/index.php?main_page=product_info&cPath=65_67&products_id=191.

Bøckman, Petter. "The Three Way Model: Revision of the Threefold Model." *When Larp Grows Up—Theory and Methods in Larp.* Ed. Morten Gade, Line Thorup, Mikkel Sander. Frederiksberg, Denmark: Projektgruppen KP03, 2003. 12-16. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://www.liveforum.dk/kp03_book/classics/three_way_model.pdf.

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005. Print.

Bourriaud, Nicolas. *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les Presses Du Reel, 2006. Print.

Chang, Ed. *CHID496D: Heroes & Monsters: Understanding Live-Action Role-Playing Games, Spring 2012. University of Washington.* 2012. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://staff.washington.edu/changed/496d/.

Chekov, Michael. *On the Technique of Acting.* New York: HarperCollins, 1991. Print.

Condon, Brody. "In the Studio with Brody Condon with Faye Hirsch-Bowman." *Art in America* 8 (October 2010): 110-117.

Crowley, Ed, et al. *All Saint's Eve.* Menlo Park, California: Shifting Forest Storyworks. http://www.shiftingforest.com.

Fine, Gary Alan. *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds.* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2002. Print.

Grotowski, Jerzy. *Towards a Poor Theatre.* New York: Routledge, 1968. Print.

Harviainen, J. Tuomas. *Prayers on a Porcelain Altar (Demythologized Version), v. 4.0.* 2007. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://pommesgabel.com/prayers/.

Jonsson, Ollie, Thorbiörn Fritzon, and Tobias Wrigstad. *The Upgrade.* 2006. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://jeepen.org/games/upgrade/.

"Knutepunkt." *Wikipedia.* N.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knutepunkt.

Koljonen, Johanna. "The Dragon Was the Least of It: Dragonbane and Larp as Ephemera and Ruin." *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games.* Ed. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2008. 33-52. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://2008.solmukohta.org/pub/Playground_Worlds_2008.pdf.

Leep, Jeanne. *Theatrical Improvisation.* New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008.

"List of Games from *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*" *Wikipedia.* N.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_games_from_Whose_Line_Is_It_Anyway%3F.

Majcher, Marc. *Game Poems.* http://gamepoems.gizmet.com.

McDonald, Neal. *Art 488 Home Page & Syllabus.* http://userpages.umbc.edu/~mcdo/488L/index.html.

McDonald, Neal and Alan Kriezenbeck. "Teaching Larp." *New England LARP Convention 2012.* Radisson Hotel and Suites, Chelmsford, MA: 21 July 2012.

New England Interactive Literature. *Intercon J Web Site.* 2010. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://www.interactiveliterature.org/J/Schedule.php?action=23.

Nordgren, Andie. "High-Resolution Larping: Enabling Subtlety at *Totem* and Beyond." *Playground Worlds: Creating and Evaluating Experiences of Role-Playing Games.* Ed. Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. Helsinki, Finland: Ropecon ry, 2008. 91-101. Web. 8 Dec. 2012. http://2008.solmukohta.org/pub/Playground_Worlds_2008.pdf

Norwegian Style: Norwegian Role-playing Games in English. N.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://norwegianstyle.wordpress.com.

Ostergaard, Frederik Berg, and Tobias Wrigstad. *Previous Occupants.* 2010. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://jeepen.org/games/previous.

Raine, Koskimaa, Frans Mäyrä, and Jaakko Suominen, eds. *Proceedings of DiGRA Nordic 2012 Conference: Local and Global – Games in Culture and Society.* June 2012. Tampere, Finland: University of Tampere. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://www.digra.org/dl/order_by_author?publication=Proceedings%20of%202012%20DiGRA%20Nordic.

Schechner, Richard. *Performance Studies: An Introduction.* New York: Routledge, 2006. Print.

Shifting Forest: Creative Interactive Live Gaming. 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://www.shiftingforest.com

Stanislavski, Constantin. *Building a Character.* New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Stenros, Jaakko, and Markus Montola. "Introduction." *Nordic Larp.* Ed. Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola. Stockholm, Sweden: Fëa Livia, 2010. 10-11.

Walton, Jonathan. *Game Chef.* 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://gamechef.wordpress.com.

"Whose Line Is It Anyway?" *Wikipedia.* N.d. Web. 13 Dec. 2012. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whose_line_is_it_anyway.

Neal McDonald *is an Assistant Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. His specialty is game development and the history of games. He has seven apps on the Apple App Store. His new-media and computer-animated works have been shown all over the world, including at SIGGRAPH 1995, ISEA 2012, the Corcoran Gallery, and the Wexner Center for the Arts.*
Email contact: mcdo@umbc.edu
Portfolio site: http://www.workly.com

Alan Kreizenbeck *is an Associate Professor of Theatre at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. He is primarily an acting teacher and theatre scholar. He has directed productions for university and professional theatres. Dissatisfaction with the limitations of both the process and performance practices of conventional theatre has led him to explore alternative methods for both: a Shakespearian play done with children's toys, a French classic done with multiple sets and casts performing simultaneously, and creating original plays with children and the developmentally disabled. The course described is his first foray into larp, but certainly not his last.*
Email contact: kreizenb@umbc.edu