

# THINK LARP

Academic Writings from KP2011

## Edited by

Thomas Duus Henriksen  
Christian Bierlich  
Kasper Friis Hansen  
Valdemar Kølbe





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**Editor-in-Chief**

Thomas Duus Henriksen

**Editors**

Christian Bierlich  
Kasper Friis Hansen  
Valdemar Kølle

**Layout**

Claus Raasted

**Cover Art**

Lars Munck

**Proofreading**

Claus Raasted  
Jonas Trier-Knudsen  
Nathan Hook  
Nicolai Paulsen  
Peter Michael Lintrup  
Robert Harry Evans  
Simon Rosell Holt  
Tobias Demediuk Bindstet

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Academic Writings from KP2011

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### Dedication

This book has been made as a part of Knudepunkt 2011 in Denmark.

Knudepunkt is an annual Nordic Larp conference organised by Bifrost, the Danish National Organisation that promotes roleplaying and other creative activities.

The conference, the book and all the other wonderful things happening in conjunction with the conference could not have been possible without the volunteers of the Knudepunkt 2011 team:

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Claus Raasted

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Sofie Falk  
Anna Emilie Groth  
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Kristoffer Thurøe  
Helene Willer

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Tobias Bindslet  
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Marie Holm-Andersen  
Bjarke Pedersen  
Nynne Søs Rasmussen

#### Books

Lars Andresen  
Christian Bierlich  
Tobias Bindslet  
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#### Fundraising

Troels Barkholt  
Christian Bierlich  
Jakob Givskud  
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#### Logistics

Troels Barkholt  
Kasper Sjøgren

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Troels Barkholt  
Tobias Bindslet  
Lars Munck  
Helene Willer

#### Economy

Troels Barkholt  
Pia Frederiksen  
Caroline Koren

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## *A diversity of studies for a diverse field*

This is the ninth of the anthologies published in conjunction with the annual Knudepunkt conference. In this book, you will find the academic contributions on larp theory, and as something new, these contributions have been placed in a separate book. Two other books are published alongside this *academic book*; a *playbook* titled 'Do Larp', which provides the blueprints for a range of interesting larps, and a *rantbook* titled 'Talk Larp', which provides a series of current opinions on and visions for Nordic larp.

The vision for this volume has been to allow academics to provide a diversity of academically founded approaches to understanding larp, not on basis of those theories and understandings already established as larp theory, but on basis of larp-external perspectives. It has been a long process of first calling for papers, then performing a double-blind peer review on each of the very different contributions, and finally assembling the 10 contributions which form the basis of this book.

The contributions have been divided into three chapters. The first concerns the cultural aspect of larp, the second is on how larp intermingles with other media, and the third is on the larp activity in itself. Together, the three chapters and 10 articles form this year's contribution to the ever accumulating body of larp theory, and by raising the bar this year, we hope that the articles will find a broader application.

## *Chapter 1 - The formation of culture, subculture and normativity*

### *Intro*

The first chapter consists of contributions that concern the formation of larp culture, both as a subculture and mainstream culture, as well as the development of certain kinds of normativity inside this culture.

### *Maya Müller*

Historian Maya Müller describes how larp culture is anything but static by describing how larp first established itself as a subculture, and then became a part of mainstream culture in Denmark. Müller describes how larp as subculture represented a threatening cultural phenomenon, which was often associated with decay, devil worship and even murder, and how this threatening nature of larp was gradually dismantled while becoming a part of the mainstream culture for youths in Denmark. In her article, Müller provides a view on the formation of the identity of the Danish larp community as a development from subculture to mainstream culture.

### *Bjørne-Ole Kamm*

In the following section, Bjørn-Ole Kamm turns the question of cultural development upside down while asking the question 'Why does Japan not larp?' In his study, Kamm analyses how larp fails to develop in a culture with a tradition for related phenomena. In his article, Kamm provides access to a wide variety of cultural phenomena, which have not spawned the development of a larp culture in Japan, but which are gradually becoming influential in European larp. One such particular phenomenon is cosplay, where participants dress up and interact as characters from cartoons, computer games or rock bands. Cosplay could be seen at the German larp *Conquest of Mythodea* (2010).

### *Jofrid Regitzesdatter*

Anthropologist Jofrid Regitzesdatter addresses the fictional barriers in Danish larp while using gender studies to ask why gender seemingly remains an area that cannot be altered through fiction. While a fictional contract allows for larpers to have their bodies re-fictionalised to fit into desired categories, e.g becoming accepted as the tallest dwarf or the smallest ogre, larpers seemingly refuse to accept a female body playing a male body, e.g. in the form of a Bretonian soldier in a *Warhammer* setting. From this perspective, Regitzesdatter notices how certain conceptualisations of bodies and values function as processes of exclusion, and impose a problematic hetero-normative discourse on participants. Though her analysis, Regitzesdatter asks the highly relevant question of why some issues should be excluded from re-fictionalisation, while others are not.

## Chapter 2 - Larp in media and media in larp

### Intro

The second chapter addresses larp as a multimodal phenomenon that seemingly evades the classic, spectator oriented approaches of media studies. As proposed by Haggren, Larsson, Nordwall and Widing in their *Deltagarkultur* from 2008, larp should be understood as a participatory, cultural phenomenon, and therefore as a media which imposes different uses and criteria on the media it intermingles with.

### Marjukka Lampo

In the first section of this chapter, Marjukka Lampo discusses the shortcomings of approaching larp from theatre studies while describing the benefits of shifting to the more participatory analytical frame offered by performance studies. In her analysis, Lampo describes how theatre studies imposes a spectator perspective on the analysis, and an understanding of larp on basis of passive perception, whereas studying larp on basis of performance studies allows for an understanding that emphasises active co-creation.

### Evan Torner

A similar problem is addressed in the second section by Evan Torner, who approaches larp on the basis of film studies. While larp uses film for various purposes, e.g. for cinematic trailers, documentation or in game features, film remains a spectator oriented media that must be adapted to the larp media to make the use meaningful.

Torner proposes that because larp is not an ideal form of film script, larpers often appear as bad actors when filmed, and for the film media to become able to represent the complex, social interaction of larp, the use of film constitutes a complex problem that must be thoroughly integrated when planning a larp.

### Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola

In the last section, Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola analyse the para-social interaction taking place when larp intermingles with other media in pervasive productions. In their case called *Sanningen om Marika*, media studies are not only applied to understanding larp. Instead, Stenros and Montola argue that larp theories allows us to both analyse and create better understandings of the relationship between different actors in other media productions, grasping the complexity of such relationships as they span from social to para-social.

## Chapter 3 - Role, larping, structure and boundaries

### Intro

The last chapter in this anthology addresses the larp activity, and in particular how the foundation for participation in a larp is established and understood. In this chapter, emphasis is placed on understanding the activity of larping, as well as its associated processes.

### Lauri Lukka

It is difficult to write a Knudepunkt book without some kind of elaboration on the concept of role, and in the first section of this chapter, Lauri Lukka uses social psychology to propose a new approach for understanding and creating roles. In his analysis, Lukka proposes a distinction between everyday roles, which are contextual and difficult to generalise to other situations, and creative roles, which are personality based and can be expressed in the form of everyday roles in several situations. While attempting to perform a conceptual closure, Lukka's dual-facetted model on roles provides a foundation for discussing the various transactions taking place between the personality of the role and its expression.

### J. Tuomas Harviainen

In the second section, Jituumas Harviainen elaborates on the distinction between larp and larping on basis of psychology and religion. Systematic analysis is used to describe how larping can be found in related activities like historical re-enactment, sadomasochism, bibliodrama and even post-modern magic, and how larping is thereby not something exclusive to larp.

In doing so, Harviainen begins a deconstruction the distinctions that larpers are currently using to establish and maintain larp as something unique. This analysis not only expands the field in which larping can be studied, but also provides the basis for understanding the various influences and desires that drive larping.

### Jesper Bruun

In his section, Jesper Bruun observes the tendency to use pre-larp workshops to prepare larp participants in Denmark. Bruun applies didactic theory to these workshops with a particular emphasis on how participants are taught to use the intimacy system *Ars Armandi*. He discusses how to constructively align the pre-larp workshop with the intentions of the subsequent larp. In doing so, he proposes a structuring framework for purposefully adapting such workshops to aid both participants and organisers in preparing the intended participation in the subsequent larp.

***Ari-Pekka Lappi***

Finally, philosopher Ari-Pekka Lappi proposes how Nietzsche's concept of nihilism can provide a framework for both understanding and establishing games that mix the displeasing and offending with the fun and pleasurable. Lappi proposes that a game navigates the processes of affirmation and negation, which in turn creates an experience of first being unburdened by certain higher values, then having negations imposed in the form of obstacles or unsolved conflicts. His analysis offers both an analytical framework and five archetypical examples of how participants might understand and experience, e.g. the bleed in a game like *Fat Man Down*. In this sense, Lappi provides a framework for understanding the establishment of certain boundaries, both in larp and in larp culture. He thereby provides a perspective for re-reading the cultural analysis of this book.

***Editors******Thomas Duus Henriksen (editor in Chief)***

(M.Sc. in Psychology, PhD, EBA in Business Administration) is an Assistant Professor at the Danish School of Education, Aarhus University. His main area of research is the use of games in adult education and organisational development. He has larped for almost 15 years and organised larps for about 7 years and is now spending his time designing learning games.

***Christian Bierlich (editor)***

(B.Sc. in Physics and Mathematics) has been larping for more than 10 years, designing and organizing games for both children and adults. He has been among the driving forces in 'The Larp Factory', and has both taught Larp at summer schools and youth schools, and used larp-like learning games for teaching science.

***Kasper Friis Hansen (editor)***

(B.A. in Communication from Roskilde University) has been larping since 1997 and is one of the founders of the Danish larp organization The Roleplaying Factory. He has organised larps for children and grown-ups alike.

***Valdemar Kølle (editor)***

(M.Sc. in Physical Education) graduated from the University of Copenhagen with a thesis on how larp can be used for motivating physical education. He is currently studying history while working as a high school teacher. Valdemar has been larping since he was 15 and has been taking part in numerous larps, both as a participant and as an organizer, as well as having organized numerous courses in larping for children and adults.

***Passing the torch***

Together, the 10 articles in this anthology provide very different, but complimenting views for understanding various aspects of larp. The articles stem from different, academic traditions, and uses the theories of these traditions to describe, analyse and understand larp, and introduces larp to these academic fields.

As noted by Elge Larsson in the 2010 introduction, larp is a continuously expanding field, in constant need of new analytic tools. However, this field does not merely occupy a vacuum, but as shown by Stenros and Montola in this volume, expands into existing academic practices while providing these practices with new, larp based tools for understanding non-larp problems.

By providing an anthology of peer-reviewed, academic articles, we hope to have facilitated this development. We also hope that you will enjoy reading it, but before you do so, we would like to thank Tobias Demediuk Bindset for doing a great job managing the becoming of these three books.

December 31st, 2010  
 Thomas Duus Henriksen  
 Christian Bierlich  
 Kasper Friis Hansen  
 Valdemar Kølle

## ***Introduction to the Academic 2011 Edition***

*Knudepunkt*<sup>1</sup> is an annual convention on larp (live action role-play) and role-play in general. The first convention was held, thanks to Erlend Eidsem, in Norway in 1997, since which it has been hosted in rotation by each of the Nordic countries. In 2003, a tradition was established of publishing an anthology of articles *as precedings* to each convention. In this 2011 edition, a separate edition has been produced containing academic papers, which can be seen as a continuation of an ongoing academisation of larp theory.

This section introduces the academisation as a gradual process which has been taking place since the first anthology was published in 2003, and which has led both to this publication and to the establishment of the International Journal of Role Play.

### ***2003: “As Larp Grows Up”***

In 2003, the first Knudepunkt (KP) anthology emerged as an attempt to expand the Knudepunkt audience by making its ideas available to a wider audience than the Knudepunkt participants. Although the first of its kind, it had already been preceded by a book (usually just referred to as ‘The Book’) which was handed to the participants to take home from Knutpunkt in Norway in 2001. The 2003 anthology, called *As Larp Grows Up – Theory and Methods in Larp*, was edited by Morten Gade, Line Thorup and Mikkel Sander. In its introduction, the editors stated that its purpose was to provide newbies to Knudepunkt with the opportunity to read classics like *the Three Way Model* (Bøckman, 2003), *the Dogma 99 Manifesto* (Fatland & Vingård, 1999/2003), and *the Turku Manifest* (Pohjola, 2000/2003), as well as number of newer articles like *the Meilahti Manifesto* (Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2003).

In 2003, these theories were important building blocks for establishing a shared understanding of larp. This is probably still true today, making the 2003 anthology an important book in its attempt to collect the available larp theories, and to ‘spawn creativity, innovation and ideas’ (Gade, Thorup, & Sander, 2003, p. 6). The 2011 edition is the ninth anthology in the series, so the 2003 edition must certainly be said to have succeeded in spawning an important tradition of continual creation.

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<sup>1</sup> The convention is called Knudepunkt in Danish, Knutepunkt in Norwegian, Knutpunkt in Swedish and Solmukohta in Finnish.

In many respects, the 2003 title, *As Larp Grows Up*, seems to have foreshadowed the development that larp theory has experienced during the years that have passed since, gradually developing from the creations of hobbyists and enthusiasts, into becoming the works of both professional practitioners and researchers today (see Montola & Stenros, 2008). In their introduction, the 2003 editors notice an important development, from what they describe as the very normative childhood of larp theory, and towards more descriptive tools and theories for understanding larp; from the normativity of the Turku Manifesto and the Dogma 99 Manifesto, which both impose norms for good larps and good larp behaviour, towards the more descriptive Threefold Model, which provides its reader with tools for understanding rather than opinions for selecting.

This step is to some degree comparable to the first step in Bloom’s (1974) taxonomy of educational objectives. The purpose of this taxonomy is to classify different academic contributions, and while the model sees descriptions (either in the form of larp description or referred theory) as the building blocks for academic writing, the aim is to climb up the ladder. In the 2003 book, the editors describe this step as an important one in the development of larp theory from ‘Knudepunkt magic’ (Gade, et al., 2003, p. 6) into a more academically sound theory.

### ***2004: “Beyond Role and Play”***

The 2004 book was called *Beyond Role and Play. Tools, toys and theory for harnessing the imagination*, and was edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros. The 2004 volume was a huge leap forward. The 2003 edition might have been a stepping stone, but the 2004 editors took what has become known as the KP book to a new level. As noted in the foreword by Professor Frans Mäyrä, *Beyond Role and Play* offered an insight into the becoming of an academic self-understanding for the larp community. Game studies was a discipline in the making, and together with the 2003 volume, the 2004 contributions meant that the “.. Nordic larp community [seemed] to be well on the way [to] providing us with something we all very much need: a language for the era of games and other interactive cultural forms.” (Mäyrä, 2004, p. IX).



## 2005: “*Dissecting Larp*”

The 2004 volume was divided into four sections; theory, practice, games and openings, using somewhat different categories than those employed by the 2003 book (Classics, That’s larp!, The real world, Just do it, and a dictionary). In their division, Montola & Stenros made a distinction between contributions that analysed role-playing from a particular academic perspective (e.g. semiotics, narratology, game studies or psychology), and contributions that sought to provide guidelines for creating larps (Montola & Stenros, 2004). While the latter sought to provide guidelines for the practitioner, thereby qualifying the creation of larp, the former sought to provide new means and tools for understanding larp.

In Bloom’s taxonomy of academisation, applied theory would rank just above the above-mentioned descriptive theory; while analytical theory can be seen as a step further up the taxonomy. While the contributions of both the theory and practice chapters seem to add to the establishment of an understanding of larp, a later chapter named ‘Openings’ provides a view on new areas or domains for larp to explore. In this sense, Montola & Stenros provide two important distinctions: first, the distinction between theories aimed at creating better larp and theories aimed at creating better understandings of larp; and second, the distinction between theories that are concerned with larp and theories that are concerned with larping in related contexts (e.g. pedagogical contexts) and with using larp in those contexts (e.g. drama or storytelling).

This kind of opening towards non-larpers is also noticed in the 2004 foreword, where Mäyrä asks “Who needs these pages of role-playing theory, methods, models or analyses?” (2004, p. IX), while noticing how larp theory can add to the growing academic interest in game studies. The KP books surely help in opening up Nordic larp to a wider, English-speaking audience, thereby allowing the theories of these books to influence game studies discussions. The continued publication of KP books also helps to make them an annual publication that people expect and look for, as well as making them a collected source of theory that can be mined once tapped into. This all helps to make Nordic larp theories more available, as well as making KP books an influential platform for publishing and discussing larp theory.

The 2005 book was named *Dissecting Larp*, edited by Petter Bøckman & Ragnhild Hutchison and published in Norway. As its title indicates, this volume emphasised analysis and understanding. In the introduction, as well as in the graphical layout, larp is presented as a body of knowledge that has been thoroughly examined by the book’s contributors, who report their findings in the 2005 volume. However, due to editorial problems, the 2005 book is generally considered messy and incomplete. Despite these problems, the book introduced a number of relevant contributions to the academisation of larp theory.

In this volume, contributions were divided between the chapters entitled Introduction (in which Erik Fatland provided a crash course on Knutepunkt and Nordic larp); Application; On larpers and the larp scene; Doing larp; and a few afterthoughts on magic by Elge Larsson. In their welcome, the editors put forward the process involved in ensuring the quality of the different contributions. Having stated that reviewing all the article proposals was too big a task for a small editorial staff, the editors turned to experimenting with peer review, a process that focuses on the quality assessment and assurance of academic writing.

Even though peer reviews were not carried out in compliance with strict academic standards (Bøckman & Hutchison, 2005, p. 7), the editors used the contributors to review each other’s texts in an informal manner. As noticed by the editors, larp theory was still a young discipline, which would probably not benefit from a strict reviewing process. In addition, larp theorists are often the best bid when trying to find peers for performing the reviews. As noted by the editors, there were hardly any larpers with a doctorate in larp (*ibid*), and even today, post.doc larpers are hard to find, which makes an academically sound peer-review process difficult.

However, the editors succeeded in making a significant contribution to the academisation of larp theory by making transparent the whole process of quality assurance. While critics might claim that the editors did not carry through this process completely, *Dissecting larp* did emphasise nonetheless the importance of quality assurance as well as providing a variety of tools for carrying it out.

### 2006: “*Role, Play, Art*”

The 2006 book, called *Role, Play, Art*, marked the 10th Knutpunkt convention and was edited by Thorbjörn Fritzon & Tobias Wrigstad. In their preface, the editors quote the call for papers, stating that “[t]he foremost goal of [this] book is to press ahead, to raise the bar of role-playing” (Fritzon & Wrigstad, 2006, p. iii), as well as calling for “Visions, and Goals for the Future” and “Techniques and Best-Practices” (ibid).

While ‘raising the bar’ in 2005 concerned the quality of role-play, the editors made an important contribution to improving the academic quality of that year’s harvest of larp theory by encouraging contributors to ‘.. stay clear of cryptic references and terms without providing a proper explanation’ (ibid), thus attempting to make larp theory easier to understand for the reader. Otherwise, this publication is rather slim and without the and without the categorisation of chapters that was seen in earlier KP books.

As you will see, the aim of the current volume has been to raise the bar even further, not in terms of visions or best practices, but in terms of academic quality. While Fritzon & Wrigstad sought to make the 2006 anthology readable for all Knutpunkt participants, this year’s volume is written for readers with an academic interest, although this has been done (hopefully) without the cryptic references and lack of proper explanations that would otherwise make it incomprehensible to anyone other than its authors.

### 2007: “*Lifelike*”

In 2007 the KP book was named *Lifelike*, and was edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade & Line Thorup. The book was in hard cover, black, square and held an unprecedented 30 contributions. These were divided into five chapters: Character (focusing on the relationship between role, participant, and character); Game (which is about interaction and larp as a whole); Scene (focusing on the people who do larp); Society (which looks at the application of larp in other fields); and finally Openings (which addresses the strengths, weaknesses and possible future of larp).

The preface of *Lifelike* focuses on the larp experience, proposing that larp is a symbolic representation of life – larp is magic to some, and art or plain entertainment to others. In the view of the 2007 editors, the 2003 volume was written in an attempt to make larp be taken seriously, and while the 2007 volume was written with the same seriousness in mind, it also rides on the development that started with the 2003 volume and has been carried on by the subsequent Finnish, Norwegian and Swedish additions. According to the editors, the 2007 volume does not attempt to document what larp is all about – instead, in the words of Jaakko Stenros, it seeks to explain very thoroughly what larp is all about (Donnis, Gade, & Thorup, 2007, pp. 7, 10).

The 2007 editors seem to have embarked on the same project as Montola & Stenros in 2004 when they asked professor Frans Mäyrä for his opinion on larp and larp theory. In the 2007 chapter called Openings, the editors interview a variety of interesting people and ask them to give their account of role-play, thereby providing accounts and opinions of role-play from both academic researchers and practitioners from relevant fields.

However, these accounts focus on role-play as a medium or activity, and by it less on those theories current available for understanding larp. While the 2005 edition used reviewers to assess and improve the quality of the theories employed for dissecting and understanding larp, the 2007 editors seem to have reviewed role-play and its applicability not by asking peers who were into role-play, but by inviting some very interesting outsiders to have an opinion about it.

### 2008: “*Playground Worlds*”

The 2008 book called *Playground Worlds* was edited by the returning editors Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, and was published at Solmukohta in Finland. This book ventured into the mechanics of larp with a view to discovering how issues like role, character and context were bound together to create an experience. In their introduction, the editors abandon the idea of larp as escapism.

Rather than seeing larp as a matter of trying to create or represent some idealised context and participation, larp should be seen as a methodology for creating experiences, e.g. of surviving a nuclear winter or the death of a God, or something as mundane as the everyday life of a hobo drifter. Phrased in the words of Deleuze, games create; they do not reflect (Henriksen, 2010), thereby framing larp as a technology of experience in its becoming. In this becoming of a discipline, Montola & Stenros notice how “.. larp discussions had evolved from inebriated opinion, photocopied fanzines and random presentations to an actual discourse” (Montola & Stenros, 2008, p. 5), but also how the community has moved in different directions.

While some had become professional or commercial practitioners, others had become academic researchers, making the semi-academic format inadequate for celebrating the diversity of interests of the larp community. As a consequence, the editors introduced different editorial principles for the different parts of the book, which in the academic part meant that the semi-academic format could be abandoned in favour of one that satisfied the academic ambition of the authors who wanted to perform proper studies of larp.

### **2009: “*Larp, the Universe and Everything*”**

The 2009 edition, edited by Matthijs Holter, Eirik Fatland & Even Tømte, bears the rather inclusive title *Larp, the Universe and Everything*. In this volume, the delimitations of Knutepunkt are addressed with particular attention to its exceptions, showing how larp cannot be seen as something exclusively Nordic, how the terminology of distincting larp and role-play cannot be seen as universally applicable, and how our current understanding cannot be expected to apply for coming generations of larpers.

Inside this inclusiveness, the various conflicts are shown not as a process of exclusion by which immersionists or others would exclude the larps of gamists from the larp category, but rather as a dynamic process evolving within the larp community.

This approach to deconstructing categorical distinctions is often seen within minority studies, from which any categorical inclusion implies distinction, and thereby exclusion, which is considered inappropriate. Rather than employing distinctions by dividing the book into chapters as seen in the previous books, the editors refrained from making such categorical distinctions that would, for instance, frame some chapters as theory, and consequently some as not.

Instead, the authors employed a descriptive feat that is often seen in Science and Technology Studies (STS) (see Latour, 2005), in which a multiplicity of descriptors are added to thicken a description, doing so in contrast to the closure that follows categorisation of the thing described. This is exemplified by the keywords associated with each of the chapters, e.g. associating ‘Documentation’ with Juhana Pettersson’s *Pix or didn’t happen*, or associating ‘Design, Scene and Statement’ with Andrea Castellani’s *The Vademecum of the Karstic Style*.

Another feat of the STS approach is the absence of selection. In their introduction, the authors state that “Though the Knutepunkt book is not a peer-reviewed academic journal, some of the articles in this book are written in the genre of the academic paper, with citations and reference list” (Holter, Fatland, & Tømte, 2009, p. 6), thereby framing the academic genre (and implicitly also the academic approach) as a possible (but not preferred or privileged) approach to describing or analysing larp.

### **2010: “*Playing Reality*”**

In 2010, the anthology *Playing Reality* was put together by Elge Larsson as the sole editor. In his introduction, Larsson builds a set of imaginary categories based on the ‘House that Larp Built’ metaphor, using the rooms or functions of this house to divide the different contributions into chapters. The imaginary rooms (workshop, assembly hall, tower, study and office) are provided with descriptions like ‘Tricks of the trade’ (workshop) or ‘Philosophical musing’ (study), thereby providing each room with a description.

This provided the different chapters with a pseudo-heading (trade, politics, visions, philosophy and business) which describes the directedness of the various contributions, rather than categorising them with regard to text genre or academic quality. While Larsson's introduction of larp as a description of a house that “.. is continually expanding in all directions” (p. 11) adds to the description of larp as a field in its becoming, his understanding of this expansion seems to reflect a more pragmatic understanding of larp than a domain interest; in line with the authors of the 2009 anthology, Larsson refrains from defining the basis of the various contributions or expansions.

Instead, he addresses their applicability by sorting them into different domains of practice. This reflects a shift from what Bloom (1974) would characterise as learning about larp on a descriptive and analytical level, to emphasising how and for what purpose this new knowledge can be put to use, thereby moving up the academic taxonomy. From this perspective, Larsson's encouragement to create new rooms in the house of larp should not be seen as an invitation to create new categories for sorting into different understandings, but an invitation to find new applications for existing theory instead.

***The 2011 call:  
“What if larp wasn't an academic discipline of its own?”***

The 2011 publication has been divided into three separate publications (a descriptive playbook, an analytical academic anthology, and a visionary rant book), each of which has its own editorial board. The academic anthology (this volume) was edited by Thomas Duus Henriksen, Christian Bierlich, Kasper Friis Hansen and Valdemar Kølle. The aim of this segregation of the academic contributions has been to avoid the limitations of a semi-academic format, something which does neither the academic nor the non-academic contributions any good. While Montola & Stenros proposed using different editorial principles for different sections of their book in 2008, the 2011 publication has divided such sections into separate volumes.

From the academic perspective, this separation frees the academic contributions from being published alongside contributions which might undermine their seriousness. By publishing the playbook descriptions, academic analysis and rant book in different volumes, they each gain the freedom to find a form that suits their individual content. In this anthology, this has resulted in a) a separate, closed call for papers, b) a double-blind review, and c) three object-related chapters. These are described below.

***Using a closed call for papers***

The different volumes of the 2011 publication had different calls for papers, and rather than having the customary, open call, a closed call was used. In the closed call for papers, we asked the question ‘What if larp wasn't an academic discipline of its own?’, thereby inviting authors not to try to describe, analyse and understand larp on the basis of its own theories (those already published in the KP books), but to try to study, describe and understand it on the basis of established academic traditions. In doing so, we invited analyses of larp that were carried out on the basis of an explicit academic tradition, e.g. history, gender studies or performance design.

The purpose of the call was to invite contributors to use their own academic background for the purpose of larp analysis. A key purpose of this was to open the field to new theories, as well as to provide a foundation for building closer ties between larp theory and other, well-established academic traditions. This would allow larp to be analysed on the basis of a wider variety of theoretical perspectives, as well as facilitating the introduction of larp into those traditions.

An example from this volume can be seen in the contribution of Jofrid Regitzesdatter (who applies gender studies to larp), or Jesper Bruun (who applies science didactics to larp). In this volume, the transition is in both cases from the external discipline and into larp, but as these two texts are returned to the respective academic domains of the authors concerned, larp is introduced as a domain for studying gendered behaviours or understanding pre-exercise workshops.

It is true that the KP books have called for papers in the past, but they have done so in a much more inclusive manner. For instance, Fritzon & Wrigstad (2006) call for papers that are “.. readable, inspiring and practically useful” (p. iii), which are all criteria for sound academic writing, but which make few restrictions on content. While many authors reacted positively to a closed call for papers, others protested with reference to the habits and traditions of the KP books. While this approach has excluded some contributions from the current volume, it has facilitated the production of ten very interesting contributions.

### *The peer-review process*

In order to comply with common academic standards, all the papers in this volume have been subjected to two kinds of double-blind peer review. The first part of the peer review was carried out by an expert (at post-doc level) within the theoretical field of the contribution concerned. For instance, a contribution based on the sociology of Habermas or Goffman was reviewed by an acknowledged expert within that theoretical field. The second part of the peer review was carried out by a member of the larp community, who had both insights into larp theory and larp tradition as well as holding a degree.

This meant raising the bar significantly as it meant that contributions could no longer be accepted because they were of a high academic standard or because they showed deep insights with regard to larp; to make the cut, they had to have both. A key purpose of going through this process was to qualify the contributions in this volume to a degree that earned the author academic merit. As stated by Bøckman & Hutchison (2005) ‘With this edition, I [sic] hope to have paved the way for establishing a lasting review system and perhaps a permanent board of reviewers. And with a little luck, the doctorates will be coming’, proposing that the KP books should be a launch pad for academic careers and doctoral studies. While the review system from the 2006 book does not seem to have become as established as it might, Bøckman & Hutchison seem to have been right about the latter. Of the 11 authors contributing to this book, six are currently undergoing doctoral studies.

### *Three main chapters*

The closed call for papers produced an extensive volume of article suggestions and abstracts, based on an almost equally diverse set of academic traditions. Rather than trying to sort the contributions into categories based on academic background or merit, Larsson’s (2010) pragmatic approach inspired a categorisation based on the analytical object of the various contributions. As introduced in the foreword, this resulted in three chapters: 1) The formation of culture, sub-culture and normativity, 2) Larp in media and media in larp, and 3) Role, larp structuration and boundaries.

### *Closing remarks*

The KP books have come a long way since ‘the book’ and the 2003 anthology were published. As shown in this introduction, larp theory has in many respects become academised, partly due to the accumulation of larp theory available, and partly due to the gradual professionalisation of the academics who perform the studies and write the theories. Despite this development, the question asked by Frans Mäyrä in the 2004 foreword still remains to be answered: who is the audience for KP books?

The foundation of the International Journal of Role Play makes available new opportunities for larp theorists. This development revitalises the questions concerning which audience future KP books should address and what purpose they should serve. With these questions, the book is passed to next year’s editors.

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# *Chapter 1*

*The formation of culture, subculture and normativity*

# From Subculture to Mainstream

*Maya Müller*

## *Keywords*

History of Development, LARP, Subculture & Society, Mainstream

This article describes the development of the Danish LARP milieu from a subculture into a mainstream child and youth culture. Historical sociological approaches to the concept of subcultures and child and youth culture serve as the theoretical foundation for the study. Based on the understanding of subcultures as responsive and critical towards the society in which they are created, the examination shows that the LARP milieu was a subculture in itself. Society's response to LARP was initially alienation and later on assimilation, which ultimately implied that LARP was integrated into the common culture. Alienation and assimilation is exemplified by the different periods of LARP in Denmark which aims to show that LARP in fact was a subculture, and that it has followed a typical pattern in its development in society. This leads to the conclusion as to where LARP from a historical sociological perspective is now and where it might be going.



## ***1 Introduction and Background***

This article investigates the history and development of the Danish live-action role-playing (LARP) milieu. The approach is mainly historical, implying that the sources used have undergone a historical source critical examination. Based on the hypothesis that LARP has undergone a transformation from a subculture into part of mainstream Danish culture, this article will focus on the theory posed by British sociologist Dick Hebdige.

The article shows that, as with other subcultures, LARP has been the subject of various neutralization attempts from society, which ultimately succeeded via commercialization and a change of discourse in and of the LARP milieu. This article is drawn from my master's thesis, 'An investigation of the rise and development of "live-action role-playing" in Denmark, from the late 1980s to the present' (Müller, 2009).

Though this article focuses on the history of Danish LARP, I believe it will be of interest to all LARPer. Further, I believe that parts of Hebdige's theory can easily be transferred to the LARP milieu in other countries.

It can be difficult to describe a milieu to its own members. Some members might feel that the description isn't just, is partly wrong, or is simply untrue. Others might be offended by parts of the description. The goals of this article are purely academic and, of course, not meant to offend anyone.

## ***2 Sources and Historical Source Criticism***

A part of a Danish historian's professional trademark is the method "historical source criticism", implying that sources at hand are always considered critically (Erslev, 1911, p. 8). Through different approaches all sources in this article have been evaluated, examined, tested and deconstructed in order to extract and render probable useful information.

The purpose of this method is to make the information gained by the sources more reliable. General problems regarding the sources are described below.

### ***2.1 Sources from the Danish LARP milieu***

As main issue in the study of the Danish LARP milieu is the sources and their lack of quality, especially those from LARP's early stages. These early sources are not publicly available; they have been found in old storage boxes, basements, and attics, which has prolonged the research process. There seem to be no written sources from the 1980s regarding Danish LARP. However, considering the oral tradition, it is likely that LARP did, in fact, exist in Denmark during the 1980s.

Written sources exist from the early 1990s, but they are of very poor quality, often small, confusing, undated flyers. Information provided by some of the 'grand old men' in the Danish LARP milieu has helped in the dating of the sources. In the mid- and late 1990s, the quality of the sources improves, the descriptions of scenarios get more adequate, and sources such as Knudepunkt, liveforum.dk, newsletters, and magazines emerge. It is noteworthy that the Danish LARP milieu during this period formed the foundation of a written tradition, with more easily available information sources. Both quantity and quality improved dramatically.

The main source of information during the last decade has been the Internet. However, information from the Internet is often imprecise and written in an informal language; and, since homepages emerge and disappear very quickly, it is difficult to maintain a basic information level regarding the sources. On the other hand, the Internet has provided the LARP milieu with a communicative voice; it is much easier to reach others across a country, which implies that it is no longer only small, exclusive conclaves who define the milieu's written identity and discourse.

### ***2.2 Qualitative interviews as a source***

The master's thesis from which this article is drawn involved several in-depth interviews. The respondents were members or former members of the LARP milieu and had been or were still working within it.

Since these respondents were closely related to LARP, they aren't objective; another problem might be the interviewers' influence on the interview (Bryman, 2004, pp. 284-285). Therefore, the respondents' answers are employed with a certain caution. These answers and explanations cannot, in general, be used as sources of exact knowledge about the milieu, but they can be used as valuable sources regarding how being a part (or a former part) of the LARP milieu is experienced. The respondents are anonymous in this article.

### *2.3 The media as a source*

Much information about the LARP milieu can be found in newspapers. This information is useful as long as the points of view expressed in newspapers are examined critically and cautiously. Newspapers can in particular be useful sources in exposing society's views of the LARP milieu.

## *3 A historical sociological approach*

Before looking at the LARP milieu, it is necessary to explain the terms 'culture', 'subculture', and 'child and youth culture'. The theoretical foundation for these is a combination of subculture studies and youth studies.

### *3.1 Culture*

The term 'culture' is complex and has different meanings. In this context, the term must be understood sociologically. That is, culture should be understood as the way in which a group of people coexist; it is the foundation on which rules of society and its inhabitants are based (Hebdige, 1979, p. 6). The sociologist Jonathon S. Epstein uses the term 'common culture', which is one culture amongst others, a group that also contains the 'parent culture'. The parent culture is crucial to the evolution of children and young people.

They interact with and reflect on the parent culture as they undergo the transformation from child to adult (Epstein, 1998, pp. 6-10).

### *3.2 Subculture*

'The word "subculture" is loaded down with mystery. It suggests secrecy, Masonic oaths, an Underworld'

(Hebdige, 1979, p. 4).

Hebdige begins his book on subcultural style with these words. As Hebdige focuses almost exclusively on subcultural style, many of his critics claim that he examines many elements of subcultures too casually. Although this criticism is valid, many elements of his study are still relevant to the examination of subcultures. One of Hebdige's major points is that society, or the common culture, is provoked by the visual impression of the subculture and that the interaction between society and the subculture is mutually provocative (1979, p. 18).

Epstein describes 'subculture' as the response of youth to the hegemony of the common culture and parent culture; the subculture is created within the framework of the common culture but differs from it in many ways (1998, pp. 10-11). In Epstein's theory, a subculture can simultaneously be part of the common culture and a counter culture. The term 'counter culture' refers to a culture that is in opposition to and contains elements of implicit or explicit criticism towards the common culture. The LARP milieu is, for example, part of the common culture, as it generates knowledge that the common culture finds valuable. On the other hand, LARP is a counter culture, as some scenarios include social criticism (e.g., within a historical framework).

The English professor Ken Gelder, who specializes in popular and subcultural studies, defines a subculture as a primarily 'social world' with different social aspects and expressions. A very important aspect of a social world is the narrative aspect; the social world defines itself and evolves through shared stories and history (Gelder, 2007, pp. 2-4). Raasted & Andersen describes LARP as a '[...] media to tell and to experience a history [...]' (2004, p. 10). This supports Gelder's thoughts about "social worlds" as places where to create and share narratives.

Society perceives a subculture in a two-sided way. According to Gelder, a subculture is, on one hand, perceived as being dangerous, nasty, repulsive, and ridiculous; and, on the other hand, as alluring, exciting, and fascinating (2007, pp. 7-17). Members of subcultures are, by definition, outsiders; they are essentially opposed to the common culture. The duality of the subculture is that it is both repulsive and fascinating, an idea that fragments the subculture from the common culture. This fragmentation creates energy towards both alienation and assimilation.

In Hebdige's theory, it is significant that the subculture opposes the common culture, as this is the major part of the subculture's identity. When society starts using tools to either alienate or assimilate the subculture, the outcome is clearly the death of the subculture (Hebdige, 1979, p. 19). The energy of fragmentation is vital to the subculture, and it is partly due to this energy that the subculture exists; the subculture is kept alive by its opposition to society. As an example of the fragmentation and alienation that the LARP milieu has experienced, E., a LARPer, explains, "The LARP milieu has indeed reacted to these expectations. Well, when you are finding me strange, I'll be as strange as possible; I'll give you fucking strange!"<sup>1</sup>

The individual members of the subculture may have many different motivations for participating in the subculture. Hebdige points out that the most common motivation is an urge for something else, something that the common culture can't provide. Another major part of the individual's motivation is the chance to escape from the common culture (Hebdige, 1979, p. 61). The element of escape is central to F., who describes LARP as 'escapism.'<sup>2</sup>

Society encounters the subculture in various places, including on the streets and through relationships, but the primary source is the media. The common culture confronts the subculture though the picture painted in the media. According to Hebdige, 'The emergence of a spectacular subculture is invariably accompanied by a wave of hysteria in the press. This hysteria is typically ambivalent: it fluctuates between dread and fascination, outrage and amusement' (1979, p. 92).

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1 E. 23:06

2 F. 04:21

Depending on the nature of the subculture, society's response in the media may differ. If the subculture seems very different, strange, and unintelligible, the discourse signal might be 'danger'; if the subculture seems harmless, childish, and intelligible, it is more likely to be portrayed positively. However, the common discourse signal in this case will often be 'ridicule'. The picture painted by the media is often very distorted, generating a dynamic that forces the subculture to reflect on and define itself.

### 3.3 Neutralization of the subculture

When the homogenous society feels threatened by the outsider/subculture, it must neutralize it through either alienation or assimilation—or, most often, both—in order to regain power, control, and the feeling of homogeneity. Hebdige suggests two different forms of neutralization: the commodity form and the ideological form (1979, p. 94).

The commodity form involves the consumption connected with the subculture, which often will move from homemade equipment towards traded equipment<sup>3</sup>. When the 'need' for equipment reaches a certain level, the process of commercialization begins; after all, commercialization is a matter of supply and demand. At first, members of the subculture will initiate the trade, but given the right market (meaning a profitable enough market), professionals will take over; in a relatively short period of time, the commercialization will drown the subculture. Hebdige also mentions that if a subculture suddenly becomes modern or trendy, it will mean the certain death of the subculture. If a subculture is mainstream, it is no longer a subculture (Hebdige, 1979, pp. 95-96).

The ideological form uses either trivialization or removal/displacement of meaning to neutralize the subculture (Hebdige, 1979, p. 97). Trivialization requires society to create a change in the common cultural discourse, with the main purpose of taming the subculture. Very often, adults who are close to the subculture and various professional experts are the ones who generate the change in discourse, aiming to create new narratives for the subculture, thereby beginning the neutralization process.

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5 Equipment: All sorts of visual effects connected with the subculture, such as special haircuts, tattoos, clothing, weapons, and gear in general.

The combination of newly imposed meaning and the familiar expression of the subculture dilutes the identity of the original subculture. By removing/displacing the meaning, society constructs a new or false meaning for the subculture, a meaning displayed in the media, a meaning filled with ridicule, stupidity, and/or violence. The subculture will be either annihilated through this method or mediated and neutralized over time through one of the other methods.

### 3.4 *Child and youth culture*

Child culture and youth culture exist in interaction with each other and with the common culture, parent culture, and society. Both of the cultures contain elements of subcultures, but it is difficult to place the whole common culture<sup>4</sup> of a generation into the category of subculture. Therefore, this article does not treat them as subcultures.

Child culture includes elements like cultural, physical, and social activities through which the culture of the older generations is processed. The main culture they see is often the parent culture, which children explore through play in order to learn the rules and boundaries.

Youth culture is in strong opposition to child culture and, in particular, parent culture. As opposed to child culture's investigation of rules and boundaries, youth culture breaks these on purpose in a search for identity or maybe in sheer provocation or denial of the rules' existence. Through this process, youth seek to establish a place to explore and define their identity in order to manage the difficult transformation from youth to adulthood.

### 3.5 *The making and repression of identity*

Epstein describes the tension in the transformation from youth to adult as a feeling of alienation from one's surroundings, or a feeling of not belonging anywhere. These feelings tend to make youth feel lonely and force them to seek their own identity. As Epstein says, 'It is through this process of identity formation that cliques and subcultures tend to flourish' (1998, p. 4).

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<sup>4</sup> "Common culture" is here understood as a shared culture of a generation, for example, the common child culture.

By exposing themselves to the reflections of other youth in the clique or subculture, young people find a foundation and framework in which they can create their own identity. A., for example, points out that the LARP milieu is a social world where young identity seekers can find a foundation and a framework; he finds that the LARP milieu is 'incredibly identity-creating'<sup>5</sup>

Subcultural communication is often invisible to third parties, but nonetheless important to the subculture's identity. Through communication, the subculture's identity is defined and debated, and the place/setting where this communication takes place is a sanctuary to the members of the subculture. Epstein points out, 'When youth do speak, the current generation, in particular, their voices generally emerge on the margins of society—in underground magazines, alternative music spheres, computer hacker clubs, and other subcultural sites' (1998, p. 24).

In recent years, the Internet has provided subculture members with an accessible communication place, and it has been easier for youth to get a feeling of belonging. Good examples of communicative meeting places are the Danish Internet sites [liveforum.dk](http://liveforum.dk) and [rollespil.dk](http://rollespil.dk).

## 4 *The History of Danish LARP*

Before applying the aforementioned sociological theories to the LARP milieu, consider the following description of the milieu's history.

### 4.1 *Historical background*

LARP is assumably based on a tradition of strategy and war games possibly starting back from the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AC) and *chess* that was likely developed in India during the sixth century BC. In the 1780s, war games with miniature armies and terrain were developed (Fine, 1983, p. 9). These games provide only superficial interaction with the fiction. In 1968, the first board-gamers began experimenting with combining narrative immersion with strategy and war games.

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<sup>5</sup> A. 10:54

During the early 1970s, these board-gamers developed the role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* which was published in 1974 and was being played by millions by the beginning of the 1980s (Fine, 1983, pp. 13-15).

#### 4.2 LARP

In Denmark, it is generally acknowledged that the role-playing milieu was the basis for LARP. A common understanding is that the idea of LARP was imported from England and that it began in the mid- or late 1980s. At this time, the Danish LARP milieu was so new and so young that it didn't produce any written sources; information about events and scenarios was passed on orally. It is believed that the number of Danish LARPers in the late 1980s was fewer than one thousand.<sup>6</sup>

Having no written sources, documented facts regarding LARP in the 1980s are scarce and care must be taken when basing new theories on oral sources, which may be flawed (Erslev, 1911, pp. 75-80). Since the information above is supported by several oral sources, it is likely correct, although there is no actual evidence to prove it.

It is a fact that the LARP milieu was well established by 1991, as the book *Rollespil*, a valid source from that year, mentions the phenomena. The authors describe LARP as an offspring of role-playing, a kind of live war game unfolding in Danish forests, on fields, and in primary and secondary schools (Johansen & Swiatek, 1991, pp. 92-93).

In the beginning of the 1990s, LARP began finding some structure. Associations were formed, the open games were systemized, and the scenario organizers began to put their mark on the milieu. The concept of LARPers interacting with the scenario organizers' fiction became very popular, and this has been the main way to engage in LARP in Denmark ever since. During this period, scenarios stretching over several days became more common.

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6 B. 12:47

A scenario style of game that became the framework for the more experimental and challenging LARP games that appeared later in Denmark. By the late 1990s, LARP associations were so well established that they began to look for new opportunities and challenges. A growing number of LARPers in Denmark made LARP more visible to the public as an investment opportunity<sup>7</sup>. LARPers began applying to public and private charitable pools and funds for resources and financial support; product sponsorships also became common during this period.

The financial support created a basis for more comprehensive and visually realistic settings. As a response to the increased focus on the settings, the LARP milieu required more authenticity and realism. During this period, LARP organizers moved some of their scenarios from the traditional settings to more realistic settings. This tendency continued in the LARP milieu after 2000.

However, in the new millennium the number of LARPers exploded as the junior players emerged. In 2004, research by Gallup showed that around twenty-seven thousand children between the ages of ten and fourteen did LARP in July (Gade, 2005, p. 84). In 2007, between fifty thousand and one hundred thousand children did LARP at least once a month (Grundtvig, 2007). The respondent C. explains the development as a consequence of the focus on the fantasy genre in popular child and youth cultures: 'We are noticing a minor decline now. After *Barda*<sup>8</sup>, *Harry Potter*, and *Lord of the Rings*, LARP boomed totally and now it is beginning to stabilize.'<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.3 LARP, a business

The first LARP equipment in Denmark was sold in 1998, until which the LARPers had produced their own equipment. After a few years, the market became a million-euro industry<sup>10</sup>. The stores that sold the equipment were, at first, already-established specialty stores that sold a combination of comic books, board games, card games, and role-playing games. Respondent D. is a self-employed shop owner, distributor, and production company owner who has been a major player in the industry for more than a decade.

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7 See later in this article.

8 A popular Danish LARP television show

9 C. 03:08

10 D. 08:02

During the interview, D. estimated the economic development of LARP equipment traded within the specialty-store industry from 2000 to 2008. According to D., the industry turned over less than a million Euros in 2000; during the next four years, the turnover rose slowly to around a million Euros; and from 2004 to 2006, the turnover increased to its highest level of four to five million Euros in 2006. From 2007 on, there was a market decrease, but then the market appeared to stabilize. D. estimates that the specialty-store industry from 2000 to 2008 had a turnover of more than fifteen million Euros. Beginning around 2004, toy stores and supermarkets began selling LARP equipment. This development surely exemplifies Hebdiges commodity form.

#### *4.4 Entertainment and business development*

In 1999, the first trendsetting LARPer-owned company used LARP as a business tool<sup>11</sup>. During the next few years, other LARPers saw opportunities to make money on their experiences through hobby-based businesses. The businesses had different profiles; while some focused on the entertainment industry<sup>12</sup>, others focused on the educational aspect of LARP or on business development<sup>13</sup>. It went well for some, but for many others, the leap from hobby to career was too difficult (Gade, 2003).

The development of the above mentioned LARP based businesses is another example on the commodity form, as well as the fact that this businesses have contributed to a change of discourse. This change supported the ongoing and later on described trivialization known from the ideological form.

### *5 LARP as Viewed by the Outside World*

Society's view of LARP is based primarily on the media's coverage of the phenomena, which has provided a picture of the discourse used in the common culture. As Hebdige points out, the media often focus on the fascinating and repulsive parts of a subculture. The earliest focus on LARP in Denmark treats LARP as violent, strange, and geeky.

Some private Christian organizations in Denmark have warned against role-playing. For example, Dialogcentret wrote an article in 1990 that stated:

The Bible does not deny that there exists an invisible world. Life is even more than what meets the eyes. But the Bible states clearly that there is an evil invisible world that belongs to Satan, God's adversary. It is this invisible world that you are trained in through the 'Dungeons and Dragons'.

(Andersen, 1990)

In 1994, a brutal murder in Sweden led the Danish newspaper BT to write about LARP as a dangerous activity:

In LARP the participants are living in a totally different world, their roles are often very violent; such as monsters, demons, persecuted or persecutor. In some cases one of the participants has to 'die' to make the game proceed. Thomas and the two brothers had been role-playing every weekend in the last several months. The police theory is that Thomas initially voluntarily played along in the belief that he only had to die for fun.

(Kiberg, 1994, p. 16)

Similar fatal cases from other countries have emerged now and then in the Danish media. In 1995, a thirteen-year-old Danish boy stabbed one of his friends non-fatally, and in the media, the case was linked to LARP by an associate psychology professor (Elle, 2005).

The focus on LARP in such cases is sensational, negative discourse in which LARP is portrayed as dangerous and repulsive. The image of LARP as dangerous and repulsive has alienated and fragmented the LARP milieu from the common culture and has forced the milieu into a defensive position.

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11 E.g., [www.zentropa.dk](http://www.zentropa.dk)

12 E.g., [www.mev.dk](http://www.mev.dk)

13 E.g., [www.zentropa.dk](http://www.zentropa.dk)

In an article in the Danish newspaper *Politiken*, ‘Let’s cut him into pieces’ from 1993, a journalist describes her meeting with LARPer:

It feels like you are talking to aliens when you talk to role-players. Every sentence is a display of homemade words and English phrases. But the role-players hate when others think they are strange or childish. ‘People think that we eat strange pills when we tell that we dress up as small, evil dwarfs. But I’m not ashamed of it; it has almost become a lifestyle,’ [...] Mads Ahola tells.

(Detlefsen, 1993, p. 4)

A similar article appeared in another Danish newspaper, *Ekstra Bladet*, in 1994:

200 Celts, knights, monks and elves gather in Hareskoven and fight ferocious battles with foam weapons. As a repulsive warning lies a detached head on the chopping block in a clearing in the woods. Next to the head the black elves are standing in their dark hooded robes with swords in their hands.

(Fleckner, 1994, pp. 4-5)

These examples, which are representative of the media coverage in the first half of the 1990s, portray LARP as a fascinating, geeky, and repulsive subculture, and it is clear that the discourse on LARP is filled with alienation. Thus society’s response to LARP fits well into Hebdiges theory of displacement/removal of meaning.

### 5.1 *The picture changes*

From the mid- to late 1990s, the discourse changed. In 1996, an article describing a scenario in a submarine focused on the positive sides of LARP.

The forty-eight-hour scenario was described as if the participants had been in a movie filled with action, drama, suspense, and historical cold-war creepiness (Kristensen, 1996). Beginning in the early 1990s, LARP had been used as a communication media (Garling, 1990); as the LARP discourse changed, it became more popular and common to use it as such. The mid-1990s brought about a big debate in the media about the usage of ‘realistic’ LARP as a communication media (Ankjærø, 1994; Berthelsen, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1994d; Josefsen, 1994). The debate didn’t stop the usage of LARP as a communication media, and it evolved afterwards.

When LARP came to Denmark, mostly teenagers participated. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, junior players came forth, forming a new group of LARPer. LARP became a very popular activity among children after the movie *The Lord of the Rings* (LOTR) in 2001. Interaction among the junior players and the older LARPer was almost nonexistent; the only contact they had was through the activities for which older LARPer earned money for arranging.

The media perceived LARP as part of the child culture in 2001, and here LARP was described as a good, healthy activity in which children could use their bodies and evolve their fantasies (Dalum, 2001). Since 2000, LARP has been seen almost exclusively as a children’s activity, and society has accepted it as part of the child culture. As LARP as an activity can, by many out standers, be perceived as a children activity, it is convenient for society to classify LARP as part of the children culture.

### 5.2 *LARP—An educational and pedagogical tool*

As mentioned, LARP has been used as a communication media. From the early 2000s, LARP has been used in primary schools and after-school activities and institutions<sup>14</sup>. Children have produced costumes and weapons in workshops, and they have engaged in LARP during their after-school activities.

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<sup>14</sup> In Danish: Fritidshjem, SFO og fritidsklubber

At this point, LARP became a popular activity, and the pedagogies were supportive of it:

When Philip and Nicolai are fighting hobbits and dangerous warriors and occupy unfamiliar territory in a LOTR inspired role-playing they are training their abilities to communicate and analyze while they get exercise and are developing their imagination. Such a situation is really a learning situation.

(Winther & Aarsland, 2004, p. 4).

Adult discourse about LARP in this case is very positive, and it is obvious that LARP is being compared to other activities like computer games. It might also be a criticism of the way Danish after-school institutions have handled gender:

Ever since the Red-room at the nursery the boys grew up in a world of caring, confidence and let's-sit-us-down-and-talk-about-it. Role Players <sup>[15]</sup> falls straight into that hole. The author Bertil Nordahl created enormous debate some years ago with a showdown against the enormous feminine youth clubs. Role Plays fills a void with the many weapons and play with the good struggle against the evil [...] Role Games can help to enrich the children by providing them with competencies.

(Børnene orker mere og mere, 2004, p. 24)

Not all share this view, but it seems reasonable to point out that during the 2000s, LARP has been viewed as a useful educational and pedagogical tool, and that the discourse among professionals has been positive. The LARP discourse has indeed been changed. By the 2000s LARP is no longer a threat to society, and the ideological form of trivialization seems to have done its work.

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15 LARPer are often referred to as Role Players, as in this case.

## 6 *The LARP Milieu as a Subculture?*

At the beginning, LARP was portrayed as fascinating, geeky, dangerous, and repulsive, and it seems obvious that society, through the media, expressed a wish to alienate and neutralize the LARP subculture. Since society's plan failed, other tools were needed. These tools included the commodity form and the ideological form, dating back to the late 1990s. The commodity form helped shape LARP equipment sales into a million-euro industry and gave rise to businesses that arranged LARP for money.

The two-sided ideological form, which uses trivialization or removal/displacement of meaning to neutralize the subculture, was also used as a tool. The removal/displacement of meaning can be seen in LARP's changing media image from negative to positive. The trivialization of the LARP subculture did, so to speak, win the battle. Professionals like teachers and psychologists portrayed LARP in the media as a healthy activity for children and youngsters. LARP was trivialized and tamed by this discourse, as the professionals transformed it from a subculture into a mainstream child and youth culture, implying that it was included in the common culture. LARP was no longer a threat to society; it had been neutralized.

LARP's positive and negative images exist simultaneously, but ever since the new millennium, the positive image has been dominant. These opposing mechanisms have been expressed through the media. The negative discourse can be seen as society's attempt to alienate, while the positive discourse can be seen as an attempt to assimilate.

## 7 *The Closing Stages*

Clearly, LARP has transitioned from a subculture into a mainstream child and youth culture. As the sources document, society's response to the LARP subculture was neutralization, at first through alienation and later through assimilation. This understanding of LARP from a historical sociological perspective can help improve understanding of why LARP has developed this way. Further, the understanding and findings may pave the way for a better understanding of the future development of the milieu.



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It would be interesting to see if LARP milieus in other countries have experienced or will experience the same movement from subculture to mainstream.

A historian's primary focus is the past, but an implicit understanding of the present as a response to the past is also necessary. Thus, to understand the present, one must understand the past, and to make qualified guesses about the future, one must understand the patterns of the past and the present.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the Danish LARP milieu is struggling to maintain its identity as a subculture, which seems to be a core value in the self-understanding of Danish LARPer. One reason for this struggle might be LARP's earlier clash with society, which forced the LARP subculture to form a strong identity. Letting go of this identity could cause the milieu to lose a major part of its self-understanding.

This struggle to maintain the feeling of a subculture is demonstrated by the fact that the milieu often uses a 'them and us' discourse and that the milieu feels exclusive<sup>16</sup>. This discourse clashes with one of the other strong tendencies in the LARP milieu: the movement towards assimilation through professional interaction with the common culture. It is probable that LARP's struggle to maintain its identity will continue for some years, but that eventually the milieu will perceive itself as being part of the common culture.

Surely the history of LARP hasn't fully unfolded yet. Where it will lead is for the future to tell.

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<sup>16</sup> Understood as: The milieu perceives itself as something special, and it doesn't want to include too many newbies.

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# Why Japan does not Larp

*Björn-Ole Kamm*

## *Keywords*

Japan, Larp, Qualitative Research, Symbolic Interactionsim, Uses & Gratifications

Even though similar practices like cosplay (masquerading as media characters) exist in Japan, larp is quite unheard of. The aim of this study is to understand why Japanese roleplayers do not see larp as an activity they can easily adopt. Instead of following a common, Western research perspective on Japan that repeats notions of Japanese uniqueness, an interactionist approach is adopted. This is done by engaging in actual exchange with the researched subjects, and through the introduction of a theoretical model for the process of experience evaluation in order to understand how former experiences form expectations. It shows the importance of individual ascriptions of meaning and their connection to the historical, discursive, societal and personal contexts that frame these meanings. Fieldwork and qualitative interviews were conducted and analyzed in respect to larp in Japan. The interviews were later contrasted with the interviewees' experience of a mini-larp. Most players expressed a desire to learn about larps and try them but felt uneasy regarding the space and time restrictions they experienced in Japan. These restrictions have influenced roleplaying tremendously and have formed the expectations towards what roleplaying encompasses — and what people deem possible. Especially the perceived non-availability of knowledge about larp and of space is of importance.

Japan's popular culture has spread all over the globe. Console games, and later comics (*manga*) and animations (*anime*), have become part of everyday media in many countries. Where Japanese anime characters go, *cosplaying* — dressing-up as said characters — inevitably seems to follow. At first glance, *cosplay* appears to share similarities with larp (live action role-play). Additionally, local roleplaying (RPG) and larping groups in Europe and the Americas often share a population with *cosplaying* communities to a certain extent.

Those familiar with both practices express surprise when they learn that larp is almost unheard of in Japan. Where there are larps or similar activities in Japan, they are almost always initiated by non-Japanese<sup>1</sup>. While conducting fieldwork and interviews in Japan for an ongoing Ph.D. research project on roleplaying in a global context, I increasingly wondered why the Japanese do not larp.

Questions regarding human behavior — especially in the context of different cultures — are easier asked than answered. Further, within the fields of social and cultural sciences, why-questions have often displayed the tendency to favor certain kinds of answers that ignore complexities and supply “others” with a uniform mentality, a shared purpose and genealogy (Becker, 1973, p. 9; Pickering, 2001, p. 150). This is especially the case for research on subcultures (Jenson, 2001) and on Japan (Clammer, 2001).

Bearing these pitfalls in mind, this article focuses on the active individual — on what people actually do and, even more so, how they make sense of it. This article's aim is to understand why roleplayers in Japan do not larp — or more precisely, why they have never interpreted larp as a possible activity. This differentiation is necessary because humans do not act towards things and other humans directly. Human action is based on the interpretations of these things and of the behavior of others (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). As I will show later, the ‘objective’ existence of space is irrelevant if not so interpreted, for example. For this article's purpose I introduce a framework to understand what people gain or expect to gain from roleplaying or larping based on their experiences and the evaluation of these experiences.

<sup>1</sup> See Castle Tintagel for an example: <http://www.castletintagel.com>. Reenactments exist, though: <http://portal.nifty.com/2009/04/14/a/>.

The outlined framework or model is a visual reference in order to picture this evaluation process. It offers a perspective that is not limited to the “game space” alone but includes the surrounding society as well as individual contexts. In this regard, it incorporates and goes beyond former frameworks like The Threefold Model (Kim, 2003), or GDS/GNS (Edwards, 2001) which classify player interests or desires as well as styles in three categories of game, drama/narration, and immersion/simulation.

The model at hand is integrative in regards to the historical, discursive, societal, personal and situational contexts that frame ascriptions and interpretations. It is based on an interactionist research perspective and a qualitative methodology of narrative interviews and fieldwork which are considerate towards individual ascriptions of meaning.

The interpretations of interest in this particular case are based on the roleplayers' experiences in Japan and thus, have to be situated within the historical development of (non-digital) roleplaying and the discourses on subcultures in Japan. The former builds the starting point of this article and is followed by an outline of the research perspective and process model. This section includes findings based on fieldwork and interviews conducted in Japan. These findings highlight the importance of “availability/accessibility”: You cannot do what you don't know. In more RPG-like terms: Experience counts.

## *1 Roleplaying or TRPGs in Japan*

Roleplaying arrived in Japan in the late 1970s. Fans of war games encountered *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D, 1974) around this time, which was sold in a few toy or model shops. With the increasing popularity of computer RPGs, computer magazines introduced pen & paper RPGs as the predecessors of games like *Ultima* (1980). Within the industry and the public discourse, the term RPG was exclusively appropriated for computer games. This spawned several attempts to distinguish pen & paper games from their digital variant — *tēburu-tōku* RPG (table-talk RPG, TRPG) was the one that earned the most traction and is used until today.

### 1.1 Pocketbooks and the Rise of Replays (1989 until early 1990s)

The most popular and successful TRPG was *Sword World RPG* (1989) by Group SNE. Three years earlier, the game studio had released the D&D replay series *Record of Lodoss War* in the game magazine *Comptiq* (Yasuda & GroupSNE, 1986). A replay is a complete transcript of a game session aiming at introducing new players to TRPGs and teaching them how to play. This market is the most successful of Japan's TRPG industry today. Replays became quite popular with non-players as a unique genre of serialized novellas.

*Record of Lodoss War* as a media-mix franchise of replays, novels, *manga*, and *anime* was the starting point of *Sword World RPG*. The game heralded the success of *bunkobon* releases (paperbacks or pocketbooks). Instead of expansive hardcovers, the rulebooks (and replays) were published in a cheap paperback format. Additionally, the system used six-sided dices instead of the hard-to-find multifaceted ones. The cheap price and the ease of access to game materials are still believed to be a major factor for the game's success.

### 1.2 The Time of Winter and beyond (late 1990s until today)

TRPG player numbers are said to have decreased rapidly in the late 1990s, a period called *Time of Winter* (Baba, 1997). Many game designers tried to revive the market with new ideas that were tailored to the conditions TRPG players faced in Japan (Takahashi, 2006). Japanese houses usually do not favor a basement, nor are apartments very large, which limited play to public spaces like community centers and their respective open and closing hours. The game studio F.E.A.R. favored a quick and dramatist game play that took inspirations from *anime*.

The game designer Tokita Yūsuke likened the development of TRPGs in Japan to the one of animation (personal interview). While many admired Disney, full-animation was just not financially possible, so people made the best out of limited animation, created new forms of expression and told stories with the resources they had.

In a similar manner, games encompassing huge amounts of books and supplements like D&D were beyond the scope of Japanese game studios, which favored the switch to paperback books in the late 1980s.

F.E.A.R. now began to include quick and easy steps for game masters to follow in order to plan and hold 4-hour sessions that could be played even on weeknights or at conventions. Instead of randomized dice roles, some games like the cyberpunk *Tokyo Nova* (1993) use trump cards and a system that is less random but incorporates resource management. Players fail on purpose in the earlier “scenes” during a session to get better cards for the “climax” or showdown at the end. A focus on dramatic, “cool” or enjoyable scenes is inherent to most F.E.A.R. games, which often explicitly reward enjoyable roleplay with hero points that are to be used in a session's final.

Other companies tried to mix board game elements with RPGs. This resulted in dungeon-like city adventures. Similar to the US, game studios are increasingly reaching out to young players and players of digital RPGs. F.E.A.R. at times attempts to completely reconstruct the game play of console games. Group SNE, on the other hand, recently released *Endbreaker!* (2010), which can be played “offline” and in an online environment for PBW (play-by-web).

### 1.3 Larping and Cosplaying

Larp — as in *life action* role-play (see Morton, 2007, p. 245) — has not many adherers in Japan. So-called *raibu* RPGs (live RPGs) exist as treasure-hunt-like sessions at events like the Japan Game Convention (JGC). 40 or more players are divided into groups, each with their own game master. In 90-minute sessions the groups explore different parts of a huge dungeon in a “classical” pen & paper manner. After each session, intelligence is shared and found items exchanged. In the end, all groups come together to fight a dragon or similar powerful monster. Large outdoor fantasy larps or urban larps are unknown. Two smaller ones with a horror setting have been initiated in the Tokyo area by foreigners and members of a mixi.jp (facebook-like) community around 2005.

As part of my fieldwork, however, I was able to observe and participate in the preparations and execution of a mini-larp in October 2010 (see below). Mystery games or *dasshutsu gēmu* (breakout games) recently gained some popularity in Japan, especially in the Kyōto area through the *scrap magazine* ([www.scrapmagazine.com](http://www.scrapmagazine.com)). The players have to solve puzzles in order to retrieve a key and leave the space where the game is held.

Participants told me that most players have no connection to TRPGs and that everyone participates as themselves, not as a character. The organizers or staff might “dress up”, players usually do not. *Cosplaying*, which focuses on dressing-up as a character, contrarily involves no game elements or plots.

*Cosplay* comes from “costume” and “play” (Aida, 2004, p. 112). It refers to the masquerading as a character from popular media or as a member of a visual rock band. *Cosplay* is said to have its roots at the Japan Science Fiction Convention of the 1970s. Following similar practices of US American SF Cons, a Costume Show for the masquerading as characters from science fiction TV series was established (Takeda, 2002, p. 102). Since 1977/1978 people started to base their costumes on *anime* characters as well and the practice spread to comic market (Japan’s largest, bi-annual amateur *manga* and game convention).

During the 1990s an industry for cosplay costumes emerged and the practice was “exported” overseas on the heels of *manga* and *anime* (Galbraith, 2009, p. 52). Galbraith also notes, that amateur stage acts, so called cos-plays, have become quite popular outside Japan. Besides the annual World Cosplay Summit in Nagoya, however, most cosplay events within Japan do not feature these on-stage dramatizations. In Japan, *cosplay* is linked to comic market where people are photographed in poses typical for their character. Fukuzawa Maki, editor of the magazine *Cosubon Fantasy*, estimates that a large number of *cosplayers* (about 100.000) are so-called *taku-kosu* who only dress-up at home and share photos online (talk at “Prof. Cosplay from next door”, Summer Comic Market 2009). *Cosplayers* at Comic Market number between 13 and 16 thousand (Ichikawa, 2009).

*Kan cosu* (complete cosplay) is an example for participants who try to emulate the chosen character as best as possible (Galbraith, 2009, p. 114) — mostly visually, as immersion into a character’s personality does not seem to be an aim of the practice. Many *cosplayers* enjoy the communication about shared likes and dislikes, earning praise for a well-done costume, spending a good time together, and exchanging photographs (Aida, 2004, p. 114). The game designer Okada Atsuhiko, who has *cosplay* experience, sees the main difference between roleplay and *cosplay* in the approach to the characters “played” (personal interview): A roleplayer wants to *act* like another character or at least wants to play the character in a story or game. The *cosplayer* wants to *look* like a chosen, usually pre-existing character instead. The number of individuals engaging in both is extremely limited.

## 2 Larp-less Japan

Because my research is concerned with individual ascriptions of meaning, I try to leave my own preconception behind. So instead of a closed survey, I chose a methodology of participant observations and qualitative interviews which is more applicable in this regard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I participated in the activities of a roleplayer circle in the larger Tokyo area and conducted 25 qualitative interviews within and outside Tokyo.

Each interview lasted for 2-3 hours and focused on the interviewees’ experiences as roleplayers. Larping was touched as well as learning effects through roleplaying. Seven of my interview partners were female, the rest male, with the youngest player being 18 and the oldest 41.

They come from many different social backgrounds including university students, shop clerks, programmers, *manga*-artists and game designers. All the people I have talked to expressed a pronounced interest in larping and were delighted to receive information about larp in Europe but in general deemed larp to be impossible in Japan. Only one of my interviewees had participated in a larp before the interview. Some of the other interviewees, however, participated in the mini-larp *CSI: Akihabara* (2010).

I could ask them afterwards for re-evaluations of their former statements. When prompted, my interviewees gave several interpretations for the lack of larp in Japan. These interpretations are, of course, not representative. They are retellings of individual experiences which provide an insight into the contexts that frame these interpretations. The *Role-play Uses & Gratifications* (RUG) model is used as a framework to understand the processes behind meaning ascription (Figure 1). Even though models do not represent reality completely, they are useful tools for analyzing processes that we perceive in or as reality.

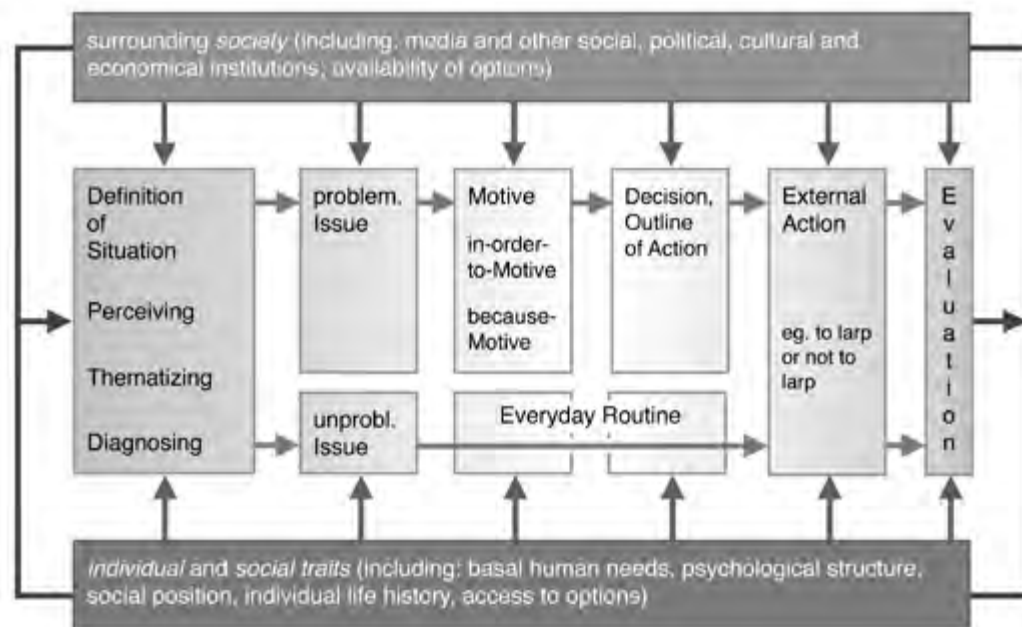


Figure 1: RUG Process Model (adopted from Renckstorf 1996:28)

## 2.1 A problematic issue: Larp knowledge

“We just do not know how to organize it, you know. It would be great to participate in a larp and, well, learn by doing. If someone would show us, how a larp can be done, we can learn and improve. The question is just where to start.” Kurokawa-san<sup>2</sup> is a 34 years old sales man with about 20 years of roleplaying experience. Like others, he has read about larps, “but reading is not the same as doing”. He and others are faced with a *problematic issue* when assessing the situation (see Figure 1).

Through experience we develop routines and habits, gain competence. The first basic concept of the RUG framework, *activity*, relates on one level to the selection process *before* we engage in an action. If we are faced with a situation that is new or unknown, this is a more or less conscious act. All decisions are based on former experiences: After several instances of repeated experiences a schema of expectations is formed resulting in habitual routines and a schema of what the action (roleplaying) consists of. This means, that a rational decision is no longer necessary (the “issue” becomes *unproblematic*).

This evaluation process, this *feedback* loop is at the heart of the RUG model and is the activity of main interest to the *uses and gratifications* perspective: the ascription of meaning during and after a given action. The uses and gratifications approach (Blumler & Katz, 1974), UGA for short, is a media use research tradition with roots in symbolic interactionism. A well-known example for an interactionist study is Fine’s research on fantasy roleplaying (1983). The premise of the interactionist perspective in general fits extremely well into conceptual ideas of roleplaying (Larsson, 2003; Lieberoth, 2006; and others).

Humans live in a symbolic world and thus, “... act towards things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). The meaning of such things arises out of former experiences with those things and social interactions with others and oneself. The process of interpretation is ongoing and constantly modifies these attached meanings.

<sup>2</sup> All names have been changed for anonymity.

Habits, routines, and shared meanings occur and seem fixed, but are shifting, flexible and “always open to reappraisal and further adjustment” (Plummer, 2000, p. 194). Interactionists share a constructivist perspective with poststructuralism and its focus on language (cf. Regitzesdatter in this book).

The evaluations of experiences change with every new engagement. Expectations change as well. We might encounter things that we did not expect, but we still evaluate positively, what might lead to an increased desire to engage in that action. However, if expectations are increasingly and repeatedly not met, this may lead to a decrease of engagement or even abandonment of the given activity.

Such experiences and expectations as well as other personal traits like biography, social status (eg. wealth) and connections form one half of what frames this evaluation and engagement process. History and society (norms, rules, institutions) form the other half.

## 2.2 Roleplaying as a Dramatic Game

Even though they want to try larp, many of my interviewees evaluated the overcoming of their problematic issue as a difficult endeavor. They were dazzled after a showing of videos from *Drachenfest* (2010) and other larps. “What systems to use? Do you really hit each other?” What kinds of larp game systems are used, was a major concern for most who had doubts that “trust” in the other players might actually work. Former experiences at the game table form people’s image of what roleplaying pertains and what is possible.

“Most people I have played with do not distinguish between themselves and their characters. ‘I’ refers to the player in the same way as to the figure on the map”, says Okawara-san, 39 years old ex-editor of a game magazine. He did not use the term gamist when he talked about his experiences with other players.

However, a large number of his acquaintances seem to enjoy the process of character building, rolling dice, forging strategies and leveling up – and expect just that when thinking of roleplaying. These activities correlate with needs for esteem, cognition and safety. “Because there is not much time, I try to help create a good story everyone likes. So I do not think too much about my character but more about the scene at hand and how I could improve it.”

Kurokawa-san prefers storytelling-like or dramatic games, which often involve meta-gaming (eg. failing on purpose). However, Kurokawa-san is a good actor, using different intonations for his characters. When asked about that, he laughed and replied: “Yeah, but it’s for the story, not for narikiri.” He enjoys the communication with his friends and the cognitive challenge.

*Narikiru*, to identify completely with someone or something, is the Japanese term for immersion. Almost all my interview partners know someone who “acts in character”, but these are mostly GMs trying to distinguish between different non-player characters. Saika-san, a 33 year old translator, who participated in a stage play group in her youth, made a huge distinction between acting and roleplaying games. “Acting and stage play mean to recite text from memory. Roleplaying is more about decisions on the spot”, she said. She is the one with larp experience. “It was interesting, but most of us acted according to their role – police man, gallerist – but did not change much in the way of speaking or mannerisms. The focus was on the game’s goals.” A couple of players mentioned, that those who enjoy the acting become real actors, referring me to Sanō Shirō, a famous movie actor and roleplayer (Kobayashi, 2007).

## 2.3 The meaning of limited Space

Space and time constraints have been major factors in the development of Japanese TRPG practices. In the case of larp, the concept of *availability* and *accessibility* refers not only to space but additionally to how easy it is to gain information about larps, to retrieve the necessary “tools” of the trade, the number of events, the distance to events.



This is on a personal level as well as on a societal or regional level. Dozens of larps each month, which would mean a high degree of availability on a societal level, are still experienced as low accessibility if you cannot afford to go there, do not have the time or live too far away (personal or situational level). Availability, however, is not so much the “objective” or concrete availability. The concept focuses on the perceived availability.

Survival games, known as airsoft as well, are quite popular in Japan. These games need large areas for the battles and players can rent designated sites near or in forests. Furthermore, some roleplayers and war game enthusiasts do participate in historical reenactments staged during regional festivals. “Objectively” speaking, there is space for fantasy larps, while Tokyo and other large cities might be any cyberpunk fan’s dreamscape for an urban larp. From this “objective” perspective, space might be available.

During my interviews I mentioned these possible larp sites and explained some urban larps I played in Germany. “Oh, that would not be possible in Japan. The police would come and at least ask a lot of questions if not arrest you.” Yamaoka-san, a 35 year old mechanic, explicated referring to the public misgivings towards activities associated with *otaku*, Japanese “nerds”. In 1989, Miyazaki Tsutomu killed four elementary school girls and was labeled *otaku* after the police found thousands of horror movies and amateur *manga* in his apartment (Ōtsuka, 2004). This dangerous image of people who are labeled *otaku* because of their appearance or interests in *manga* or games is similar to how the early larp subculture was portrayed in European media, for example in Denmark (cf. Müller in this book).

While the *otaku image* has changed to the better in recent years, an unfavorable media coverage of “non-productive”, escapist hobbies remains, and practitioners still tend to keep their interests and activities private, remaining more or less a subculture. Regardless of an identification with what is called *otaku* culture, not one of my interviewees would talk about roleplaying with someone who he or she did not perceive as like-minded.

Another example of this awareness of the public eye are the rules of comic market which state that you are not allowed to come dressed-up to the convention site (Comic Market, 2010). *Cosplayers* are only permitted within a designated area. Concordantly, Yamaoka-san and others interpret larping with its dress-up elements as problematic.

#### 2.4 Experience counts

The perceived non-availability of space and know-how as well as the experienced lack of acting by a large number of fellow players have led most of my interviewees and many professionals I talked with to the conclusion that larp is not possible in Japan. Many would like to larp, but express a profound uneasiness regarding their own and others’ competencies to actually do it. Most have come to associate roleplaying either with board game like strategy gaming or high-paced dramas, cut into scenes. Both styles of play were born out of space and time restrictions. Enjoying both or either one of these, people followed with their expectations. Those who like acting, on the other hand, have found other, more “accepted”, venues for such interests.

Many roleplayers in Japan have experienced a lack of private space. This influenced the mentioned styles of play, but relates to other contexts beyond the immediate game. Since similarly “nerdy” activities — *anime*, gaming in general or *cosplay* — have been targeted as escapist or deviant in unfavorable discourses, many are weary of the public reactions to larping. While it seems, that *cosplayers* have recently enjoyed more acceptance in the public eye – through marketing campaigns using cute, dressed-up girls – they are still pushed away from public spaces.

In accordance with the feedback loop of the RUG process model, former experiences with pen & paper RPGs as well as with the treatment of “escapist” activities are the basis for evaluations regarding larp. Additionally, a lack of available knowledge builds a wall that people in Japan experience as a hindrance to start larping. It is less the factual lack of space, for example, but more the evaluation of what this lack means that is important.

A crime scene investigation mini-larp held in October 2010 in Akihabara, Tokyo's major shopping area for electronic and pop-culture goods, gave me and my interviewees the chance to confront their former evaluations. The game had six organizers or non-player characters, including two Non-Japanese, me and the lead organizer, and twelve players of which more than half had been my interviewees or people I talked to about larp<sup>3</sup>. Within the five-hour game the players had to investigate several crime scenes in the area, report back, analyze clues and interrogate suspects. The game finished with a chase.

All players enjoyed the game, a handful immediately started to make plans for an own larp in the near future. Many were surprised at how complex the plot was and how easily everyone started to act in character. The physicality of a larp was interpreted as the main source for an increased level of acting. Additionally, the players did not experience any form of repercussions from non-participants. One player emphasized the fun of being part of something "secret" publicly. Another, however, offered a bit of critique regarding the system-less approach of the mini-larp. For some players this was a large step away from the very system-based meta-gaming play style of Japanese TRPGs, he remarked.

### 3 Summary

The aim of this article and the RUG model was to show how individual expectations towards roleplaying including larp are dependent on societal and historical contexts. These contexts frame in interdependence with personal experiences what people interpret as possible regarding roleplaying and larping. In the case of Japan, limited space and unfavorable public discourses have furthered a development of quick, dramatic games. Players engaging in these have come to expect this from a roleplaying game. Such interpretations, however, change over time. With a first larp experience the feedback loop regarding what pertains to roleplaying and larping started anew for the participants. What they evaluate as possible and expect from roleplaying changed and will change with each further experience.

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike the usual gender ratio of 0-3% women at TRPG conventions, one third of the mini-larp participants were female.

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# Doing Gender at Larp

*Jofrid Regitzedatter*

## *Keywords*

Bodies, Language, Post-Structuralist Feminism, Transformations

The present article is concerned with the connection between larp and gender. The article explores how our gender perceptions influence the design and execution of larps, and how larps, in turn, can influence how participants think about gender. The aim of the article is to display how a basic, post-structuralist, feminist analysis of the relationship between gender and larp can demonstrate a way of examining larp. But it also aims to offer new perspectives on how we knowingly/unknowingly incorporate notions of gender into the diegeses of larps and the consequences thereof. I have chosen two starting points for this analysis of gender and larp; language and bodies. This is with the intention of creating an analysis that can focus on both the relatively abstract; language and the materially concrete; bodies. By choosing these two elements, I am also able to display two much used elements of contemporary post-structuralist feminism. The article concludes with an examination of the transformative possibilities of larp in regards to gender. I put forth the notion that if larps question or change dominating gender perception by creating new or different gender roles within the fiction, then a larping experience can serve to expand, alter or liberate a participant in regards to a restrictive gender role both inside and outside the diegesis. The article draws on examples from Nordic larps over the last ten years.

## 1 Introduction

The purpose of this article is to apply gender research to an analysis of larp, in order to look at the relationship between larp and gender. The focus will be on two basic elements of contemporary post-structuralist feminist theory; language<sup>1</sup> and bodies, and how these influence gender perceptions within larps and also how they can be instrumental in transforming both larps and their participants.

For this paper I draw on the literature that surrounds the more talked about nordic larps of the last ten years. These are the larps that have been subject to articles in the *Knudepunkt* books and the topic of both formal and informal debates, both at conferences and online. I have chosen to focus on those who have included a conscious gender ethic in the planning and production of their larps, because they exemplify the practical aspects of the theory I wish to examine.

I will also draw on personal experiences from traditional, Danish fantasy larps because these larps represent the current Danish collision between old-school larps and new feminism, and therefore serves as a great example of what happens to traditional larps when we infuse them with ideas of equality. This empirical basis in no way constitutes actual empirical research, but anecdotes can be indicative of the themes that have influenced debates on larp and gender, and may therefore, hopefully, indicate issues of interest to the reader of this paper.

No tradition has been established for discussing gender and larp in an academic context, so this paper aims to contribute to this. I will therefore focus on a basic post-structuralist, feminist analysis of the gender/larp constellation to show the way in which it can be instrumental both in analysing larps and also in creating tools for furthering gender equality at larps.

Through post-structuralist feminism, this article seeks to address the relationship between larp and gender within this theoretical frame. I will also look at the transformative potential within larps in regards to creating gender equality that reaches outside of larps.

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<sup>1</sup> "Language". I use the term "language" in the common sense of the word as the verbal and written communication between people.

I have chosen two points of analysis that I see as significant throughout the larp process from development to evaluation: Language and bodies. Language<sup>1</sup> being our key tool for establishing meaning, creating stories and characters (Davies, 2003, 2007), and bodies the be-all and end-all tool for gender expression, both in our personal lives and within the scope of character creation.

## 2 Post-structuralist feminism explained

Post-structuralist feminism is, in short, poststructuralist theory applied to the area of gender. Post-structuralism is centered on the deconstruction of social phenomena. Deconstruction is the examination of how a phenomenon is infused with meaning, and how this meaning at the same time constitutes the very phenomenon that it aims to describe or capture. Meaning is produced within discourses (spheres of meaning and understanding) within which we constitute and reproduce values and identities (Rosenbeck, 1996).

The credo of post-structuralism is that there is no "truth" as such, which can be defined through analysis. We can only examine how we understand the world around us, and how that understanding shapes the world. Poststructuralist feminism adopts this theory in order to examine gender. One of the foremost thinkers of poststructuralist feminism is Judith Butler (2006), who presents the argument that both sex and gender are constructs, and the division of the worlds' population into women and men is completely arbitrary, and only supports a dichotomist and heterosexual world order, in which true equality can never exist.

Early post-structuralist feminism often left out bodies in their pursuit of the constructed nature of gender. In Butler's early work, the focus was on the arbitrary nature of gender, and since gender was outside bodily confines, bodies were left somewhat out of her early theories on gender roles (Lykke, 2008). Later theorists such as Elisabeth Grosz (1994, 2005) included bodies in their research, arguing that they display the gender norms contained within identity-shaping discourses.

But they also argued that bodies assert their materiality in ways that offer interference with the idea of a body that is nothing more than a cultural expression and establishes the body as a cultural phenomenon with a separate materiality. This makes bodies an interesting point of departure for a post-structuralist feminist analysis, since material interferences are often the traditional denoters of gender as is the case with the female pregnancy or the male ejaculation.

Looking at this materiality allows feminists such as Grosz to discuss gender not only as a construct, but also as a lived bodily experience influenced by the possibilities that are allowed the genders. Grosz' theory on bodies as a combination of culture and biological materiality will be the starting point for my later discussion of larp, gender and bodies.

The other key point of this analysis is language. This is because language has both constitutive, reproductive and transformative potential. When we use language we name and define the world around us, but we also limit that which is imaginable to what can be put into words. Language has a special place within post-structuralist feminism because of its defining qualities in regards to gender, but also because of its transformative potential (Lykke, 2008).

An example of this in a political aspect is the fight for gender-neutral job titles, the theory being that if we change foreman to foreperson it will be easier to imagine a person of any gender in the position. This strain of post-structuralism is referred to as *écriture féminine*, and it is on the basis of this theory that I will examine language, gender and larp in this article.

### *3 Larp and Gender*

Firstly, I will first look at the relationship between larp and gender. In order to look at larp and gender I must begin by defining the term larp. I define a larp as a roleplaying game (Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2003) where participants<sup>2</sup> are required to inhabit their character/role with their physical bodies, and where interaction with a material setting defines the game.

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2 "Participants". The people involved in a larp, both in the position of player and coordinator {see \ Hakkarainen, 2003 #614}

Gender is considered the deciding factor in determining the identity of another, within gender studies, and the basis of the most fundamental categorization (Bordieu, 1999; Judith Butler, 1990). This means that we<sup>3</sup> can not make sense of a social setting or the people within it without including gender. So how we interpret, shape and understand gender is therefore a pivotal part of how we understand and construct any social setting. This is relevant because larps are social settings in two ways. Firstly larps are social settings through the events that surround the actual games.

These gatherings, meetings and parties are places where we build what Bordieu (1999) describes as social capital. Social capital is the amount of connections we share with others and the amount of status that a person or group has within this network of connections. When we form intimate relations with others in the context of a shared interest we either gain or lose social capital through acceptable or unacceptable actions.

This means that many of the values that influence a larp in regards to gender are negotiated and established in social contexts outside of the actual game process. This is because the number of connections we share with others and our status within these relationships allow us access to larping experiences. In this way gender norms that constitute acceptable or unacceptable actions can flow into the larp, but also from the larp into other social settings.

Secondly, the diegetic world of any larp can be defined as a social setting in that it is a particular place where certain people interact within a set of norms regarding behavior. However, the fiction of a diegetic world is not a social setting separate from our regular lives. It is dependent on the same paradigm as the culture it springs from and, therefore, also contains the gender norms that are lodged within this paradigm.

So in creating a fiction or a character we bring with us the norms and gender perceptions from our daily lives (Davies, 2007). Because gender is a pivotal part of any person's identity, it is also a basic part of any character we create.

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3 "We". I begin by using "we" as describing people of a western culture and later the "we" ends up describing larpers within western culture.

Characters are vital parts of any larping fiction and so gender perceptions become a part of any diegetic world either because organizers wish to alter traditional gender and work specifically with creating new gender constellations within the game, or because (and this is the most prevalent condition within Danish larps) neither participants or organizers consider how their gender norms will influence the game, and how this will affect character creation or fiction.

This does not mean that we *can not* change how gender is perceived inside the frame of a game, but such change requires considerable effort, to recognize the effects that the gender norms of our culture has on our larps. In order to see how these effects are expressed and negotiated, I propose to focus on two phenomena that I think are especially relevant to an analysis of larp: Language and bodies.

### 3.1 Language, Gender and Larp

When we want to create a fiction or a character, we have to use the same language as in our regular lives in order to make sense of this abstract world (Davies, 2003). “Car” has to mean car, and “woman” has to mean woman in order for a text to be meaningful. This means that we carry with us the norms and understandings that are contained within our language. We understand the word woman because we have a lived experience of what that word means (Deleuze, 1993; Lykke, 2008).

Every time we write a presentation or a role for a larp we invoke these lived experiences and reproduce these values, either by refusing them or by confirming them in order to make ourselves understandable to other participants. Language affects gender norms, because language is how we makes sense of the abstract and therefore also gender.

This becomes particularly apparent when we look at expressions of value from everyday life. Consider the phrase “you`d have to have balls to do that!” Balls are distinctly male and the expression connects being brave with being male.

When we use phrases like these in larps, we carry the value system engraved in our language into the fiction, because we depend upon the same language in order to understand the diegetic world and this in turn confirms what we recognize as male or female qualities (Bordieu, 1999). One of the ways we can transfer the gender norms of our own lives onto larps is through the use of everyday terminology.

Let us say that we are participating in a larp about gangsters and we need to describe the character that the mafia boss uses to hurt people; the henchman. When we are filling out a character sheet, do we now imagine this role as a woman? Most likely not. Not just because men are more frequently associated with acts of brutality, but also because of the language, two elements with a reverse effect on each other.

For the larps *Hamlet* (2002) and *Carolus Rex* (1999), participant J. Koljonen describes how the organizers where forced to make all pre-written roles available to both genders in order to make it possible for the larp to be repeated several times over, without the organizers having to worry about getting the right combination of genders for each game (Koljonen, 2004). In order to incorporate two genders within a role, the language surrounding the role had to be “either-gendered”, meaning that a role could be named “*Cornelia/Cornelius*” (ibid, p. 196).

As Koljonen writes, this challenges our regular perceptions on gender because it removes a general from “naturally” being male and this, in turn, means that no gender has privileged acces to certain roles. This example shows how changing the language of a larp can create changes in gender perceptions of participants and new possibilities for play.

### 4 Bodies, Gender and Larp

What is the connection between bodies and gender? This question may seem redundant, but within post-structuralist feminism it still merits asking. According to Butler (2006), bodies are, via their reproductive qualities, the very basis of the binary, dichotomist, heterosexual gender matrix.

It is because of the penis and the vulva that people have been divided into the two traditional gender categories. Within the gender matrix the two genders are, according to Butler, performed via bodies. Bodies are disciplined, dressed and performed to fit the norms contained within the gender category that a person is denoted to. I work from this theoretical standpoint when dealing with the bodies of larp, but combine it with the work of Elisabeth Grosz (2005).

Grosz writes that bodies can only be understood, and given expression, through culture. Bodies are not biological entities influenced by culture. They are in their very existence a cultural material phenomenon that contains different sets of possibilities and limitations for different people (Grosz, 1994).

This means that within the scope of this paper, bodies are gendered juxtapositions of materiality and construct that are given meaning within the contemporary discourses on gender, and that exist in the concrete materiality of the individual. The theory presented, I will now move on to discussing bodies and larp.

#### 4.1 *Bodies and Larp*

How larps are shaped and given expression depends on physical reality. By this I mean that simple materiality such as logistics, money and opportunity influence the fictions we create, and shape our possibilities for playing in them. Just as the physical reality of the bodies of the people participating will influence a larp, so the fiction of a larp will influence the bodies of the participants. The Danish *Krigslive*<sup>4</sup> larps have repeatedly presented participants with bodies stemming from the *Warhammer* fiction and the drawings of male knights on pegasi contained therein.

This meant that the body that the participants viewed as ideal for the game, was a white, male body. At one time I participated in one of these larps. It centered on a war between the Empire and Brettonia.

I played on the Brettonian side, and wanted to take part in the war games, but was told that no women in Brettonia ever fought, so if I wanted to fight, I would have to either portray a woman disguised as a man and wear a moustache, or simply: play a man. My female body was clearly outside the body of an ideal participant.

The fiction offered no identity positions that could encompass my female body if I wanted to fight and therefore my body would have to be disciplined to “fit” the gender norms contained within the *Warhammer* fiction. This shows how abstract bodies and the norms contained in a diegetic world were expressed in the concrete body of a participant.

But why do we need bodies to fit a fiction? In order to make sense of an abstract fiction, we need concrete bodies to display the abstract values of the fiction and give it a corporeal expression (Regitzesdatter, 2010).

Because larps are dependent on a material setting (as stated in 3, “Larp and Gender”) the fiction must have a corporeal expression. If a fiction only presents a certain imaginary body, then participants and organizers will try to make their bodies “fit” this abstraction in order to make the game concrete.

In order to fit gendered bodies into a fiction, different genders must have positions of identity open to them. If the only way to participate in a larp, is to enter into a position that is outside the norm of one’s regular gender identity positions, and if the fiction has not been made to accommodate this, then the body of the participant must be disciplined to fit this abnormal position. Thus a fiction is expressed, and given meaning, through the bodies of participants.

In the next section I will look at what this means in regards to transforming both larps and participants.

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4 “Krigslive”. A Danish series of larps set in the Warhammer world. The focus of the larps are always fighting, with an emphasis on battle formations and cooperative fighting between two opposing sides. For the most current Krigslive see: [http://klvii.krigslive.dk/?page\\_id=108](http://klvii.krigslive.dk/?page_id=108) [28/9-2010]



## 5 Transformations in larps through language and bodies

“Roleplaying-games are also a tool for exposing, to make visible a nuclear war or the lowest rung of society. They can be used to study the subject or to experience things at first hand.”

(Montola & Stenros, 2008, p. 5, original emphasis).

In this quote Montola and Stenros make clear that larps can be a way to let people experience lives other than their own, at least for a while. These experiences carry into their personal lives, and in this way larps can be instrumental in creating changes within their participants through lived bodily experiences. Language and bodies both serve to display, shape and reproduce our ideas of gender. But because they are a tool to display immaterial discourses material consequences, they can also be tools for change. By displaying gender constellations other than the traditional, or sometimes in opposition to the traditional, language and bodies can be instrumental in making changes towards gender equality within larps. I will now describe why I think this is possible.

### 5.1 Language

Language contains transformative qualities as well as reproductive ones. By creating either-gendered roles (Koljonen, 2004) or by naming participants as female (as has been done by White Wolf in their series of roleplaying books about vampires, for instance *Vampire: The Masquerade* or some of the earlier KP-books) a larp can underline the diegetic agency of characters of both of the two traditional genders.

But an organizer or participant may also wish to change the terminology employed to describe good and bad qualities in regards to gender. I have on occasion portrayed different military leaders during larps. When addressing or scolding soldiers, I was often faced with a problem. How does one portray a gruff, hard-ass military leader in a way that is not offensive and exclusive towards the female gender or to people of non-heterosexual orientation?

Think of the drill sergeant in the movie *Full Metal Jacket*<sup>5</sup> as he insults his recruits by calling them ladies and by implying that they are gay. This defines the characters of Full Metal Jacket as something other than ladies and homosexuals, and excludes women and homosexuals from the group.

When larping, it can never be in anyone's interest to exclude certain genders or sexualities, as we would thereby exclude certain participants either from the larp itself or from parts of the experience of a game. So when I was portraying military leaders, I had to find something else to mock the soldiers with. I resolved it by calling them traitors and cowards. This is an example of how I had to make choices concerning language in order to fit myself and others into the fictions that rested on traditional views of the military as a very masculine institution.

By changing the language I also changed what players could be seen as part of the experience, who fit the fiction and who were excluded. The important part was that the people excluded via this terminology were participants who had chosen to play our opponents, not people of a gender that was outside the diegesis. Changing language can therefore change the possibilities for play within the diegetic worlds we create both before and during a game.

This is also exemplified in Koljonens text on *Hamlet* where she writes that the process of writing either-gendered roles created opportunities for same-sex relationships during the game, and thus expanded the game to include homosexuality (Koljonen, 2004).

### 5.2 Bodies

Larp affords us a unique opportunity to move outside the heterosexual gender matrix (J. Butler, 2006). Where gender is tied to reproduction in most societies, gender can be tied to anything within a larp. Gender could be connected to hair colour or to elements of one's personality as it was in the 2003 larp *Mellan Himmel och Hav* (Tidbeck, 2004; Wieslander, 2004).

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<sup>5</sup> To view the scene go to: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU3\\_15ASeC8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU3_15ASeC8) [29/9-2010]

At this larp, the gender of a role depended on whether players were “evening” or “morning” people, and you coupled with someone of the opposite persuasion. Even though this larp still included reproduction as a standard for creating families, it nevertheless exposed how we could abandon the idea of biological gender in favour of something different.

But it also exposes how difficult it can be to disregard the idea of the two genders when the organizers of a larp wish to incorporate reproduction in the fiction. When we leave behind the biological genders and the bodies denoted accordingly, we create the possibility of seeing people outside the qualities that are normally associated with their particular gender, and we set participants free to assume any role they may want.

Bodies are also tools for subversive acts (J. Butler, 2006). Subversive acts are when people perform their denoted gender in a way that expands, alters or challenges the norm surrounding that gender, an often used example of this are drag artists. In a larp context a subversive act could be a gender that performs outside the gender norms of the fiction, or it could be a participant who refuses the way a role ties them to their gender identity outside the larp.

When caught in a restrictive fiction, the concrete body of a participant can be instrumental in displaying alternative gender positions within the frame of a diegetic world. Within a fiction, women may not usually be the heads of states, but I would claim that if a female participant assumes such a role with a distinctly female body that refuses to be fitted to the fiction, then the game dynamic will have to include the possibility of a female president within the terminology in order for the players to create a cohesive understanding of what a woman is within the diegesis.

Bodies are (as described earlier) the concrete representation of imagined gender characteristics and therefore bodies can expand these imagined characteristics by performing in new ways. Just as bodies are disciplined and dressed in our daily life to display gender norms, so they are disciplined and dressed at larps.

But if we choose not to reproduce repressive norms through clothes, make-up or comportment then we see bodies that act different from those we see in everyday life. If the bodies of participants are concrete examples of a different gender discourse, it is my conviction that it will make participants think differently about gender within the diegesis and not just carry their regular gender perceptions into the game.

## **6 Conclusion**

When we think differently about gender in larps, we change not only our larps, but also our participants. To me, this is the most important result of examining the relationship between larp and gender because the way we construct larps resembles the way we construct gender in our daily lives.

A larping experience can serve as an example of possible change within the larp, but it can also facilitate change by allowing participants a concrete bodily experience different from, or outside, the norm.

This can allow participants to consider gender in a different way. I would claim that when we create larps with a gender equality ethic, we display not only a willingness to incorporate all genders and sexualities in our larps, but we also show participants that gender equality is possible both within and outside of the larp.

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## 8 Ludography

*Carolus Rex* (1999) Muammar, K. & Ericsson, M.

*Hamlet* (2002) Ericsson, M. and Sandberg, C.

*Mellan Himmel och Hav* (2003) Wieslander, E. and Björk, K.

# *Chapter 2*

*Larp in media and media in larp*

# Larp, Theatre and Performance

*Marjukka Lampo*

## *Keywords*

Larp, Performance, Performance Studies, Performatic, Theatre, Theatre Studies

In the recent years there have been several attempts to explore the nature of larping through Theatre Studies. For example improvisational theatre, Augusto Boal, psycho drama, and environmental theatre have all received their share of attention in the pursuit of a functional theory base for larping. Using theatre studies can help in mapping out the nature of larping by showing what it is not. But what can be done to locate the 'yesses'? To offer another theoretical framework for larps as performances, this paper suggests the use of Performance Studies. Therefore, this paper will discuss the matter of larps, theatre and performance by, first, analysing the problems included in applying Theatre Studies for the exploration of the performance nature of larping, and second, by providing the reader with an introduction to Performance Studies and its possible usage on depicting the activity. It will be suggested that larp, essentially, is not theatre because the latter emphasises perception whereas the former emphasises action. Instead, this paper proposes that larping could be more precisely described as transportative performatic behaviour.

## 1 The Problematization of the Theatre Connection

In the recent years there have been several attempts to explore the nature of larping through Theatre Studies. For example Commedia dell'arte, improvisational theatre, Augusto Boal, Jerzy Grotowski, psycho drama, and environmental theatre have all received their share of attention in the pursuit of a functional theory base for larping (see e.g. Choy, 2004; Fatland, 2006; Flood, 2006; Phillips, 2006). These openings have been crucial in explaining larps as performances for they have offered essential exploration on such fundamental characteristics of larping as the absence of an audience and the structure of interaction between the players.

However, using Theatre Studies in depicting the performance nature of larping may not be the most efficient strategy in the long run because larps, essentially, are not theatre. It might function as an interesting point of comparison for mapping out what larping is not. But what could be done to locate the 'yeses'? In this paper I will suggest the use of Performance Studies. It is a discipline that regards theatre as *just one* possible manifestation of performance with other examples including such diverse phenomena as rituals, play, sports, and games.

This paper seeks to explore the connection of larps to theatre and performance by, first, taking a look at the problematic relationship between larps and theatre and, after that, by demonstrating a way to theorize larps through Performance Studies. The first part of the paper will offer an overview on the meaning and the nature of theatre and explain why larps differ so greatly from it. This strategy has been chosen because of its capacity to explain many of the problematics there are in comparing larps to theatre.

In addition, some examples from the previous papers on larps and theatre will be dealt with. In the second part of the paper the focus will be on the contemplation of larps through the lens of Performance Studies. It will be suggested that larps as performances could be more precisely considered to be *transportative performatic behaviour*. Such a definition could serve as an opening for the exploration of the activity in a manner that does not exclude any of its unique characteristic nor seek to explain its nature solely through the 'noes'.

To get to the bottom of the problematics of 'larps as theatre', let me briefly explain the etymology of 'theatre'. It originates in the Greek word *theatron*, a 'place for looking'. As Christopher Balme, the author of *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Studies* (Balme, 2008), notes, this means that "originally, theatre referred to both a place as well as to a particular form of sense perception" (p. 1). This leads us to the first set of features that characterize theatre: (1) theatre is based on perception; and (2) this perception takes place in a special architectural structure that separates the perceiver from the perceived – the audience from the performers.

In addition to the etymological meaning of theatre, Balme notes that, today, theatre can also refer to a building, an activity, an institution and an art form (ibid.). Further, we can add three additional points to the set of features that characterize theatre: it is (3) a specific activity; (4) an institution; and (5) an art form<sup>1</sup>. In the following, I will take a look at Balme's points in relation to larping. The last two points (4-5), however, will be excluded from this analysis both because of their marginality for my arguments at hand and because of their complexity in relation to the matter. In essence, it would demand an entire discussion of its own to address the issues of larps as an institution and as an art form.

**1. Theatre is based on perception.** This means that, for something to become theatre, there needs to be someone watching. There needs to be an audience that frames the activity as theatre, or, as Balme puts it, a spectator whose "activity is the 'willing suspension of disbelief' and acceptance of the make-believe" (p. 2). This notion echoes a lot of what is going on in larps as well: a group of people agree to suspend disbelief and accept the presence of make-believe. However, this is different from theatre in the sense that in this group of larpers there is no separation between the actors and the spectators. Everybody is, at the same time, an actor and a spectator. Eric Bentley (1969) has explained the act of theatre in a simple formula: "A impersonates B while C looks on" (150). In larps, on the other hand, the formula would simply go as 'A impersonates B,' or, in fact, as: 'A impersonates B, while C impersonates D, while E impersonates F...' and so on. In larps, there is no external audience whose purpose is solely to look on. Thus, it could be said that where theatre emphasizes perception, larps emphasize action.

<sup>1</sup> The notion that theatre can also refer to a specific building has already been taken into account in point two (2).

**2. Theatre takes place in a special architectural structure.** It is ‘a place for looking.’ And as Balme mentions, today, theatre can also refer to a building. In these buildings one usually finds a stage and an auditorium: a specific place for the performers and a specific place for the audience. However, this may not always be the case. The director Peter Brook (1968) for example, has depicted the essence of theatre as follows: “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage.

A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged” (p. 9). In this description it becomes clear that there need not be a built stage and a built auditorium for something to be called theatre. The same goes for larping because they can take place anywhere: shopping malls, camping centres, conference rooms, homes, cellars, forests, parks, fields – literally in any empty space.

Such forms of theatre like environmental theatre and street theatre intentionally challenge the demand for a built stage and an auditorium. Nevertheless, although these forms tend to ignore the architectural structures of theatre buildings, most performances still maintain the division between performers and audience. In a sense, for the duration of the performance, they claim an ‘empty space and call it a bare stage,’ and while they perform, ‘someone else is watching.’ It could be said that in these performances there is a “mental stage” and a “mental auditorium” present. In larps, there is no such thing because there is no separation between the performers and the audience. Hence, it could be said that, in larps, everybody is “on stage.”

**3. Theatre is a specific activity.** To Balme, this can mean either ‘going to’ or ‘doing’ theatre. The first meaning is something quite specific: when someone goes to theatre, someone usually goes to a building or another location where the act of theatre takes place and where that someone assumes the role of a spectator. The other meaning, doing theatre, would indicate the act of playing a piece in theatre. A particular characteristic of this act, that separates it from the act of larp, is that in theatre, what is seen on stage is the only thing that is being performed about the drama.

The actors don’t perform their role characters behind the scenes and, thus, the audience sees everything that is being acted out in the piece. If there is something happening that the audience doesn’t see it rarely counts for a part of the piece. This is not the case in larps because, ideally, everybody acts all the time. A very simple example about this “acting behind the scenes” would be a thief character in a tavern larp: if the player of the thief sneaks into the room of a rich nobleman and steals something, isn’t it still a part of the performance even if no-one witnessed it? Hence, it could be said that where theatre is *linear* in the sense that the events of the piece usually take place one after another in a location that is constantly perceivable for the audience, larps are *simultaneous* because its events take place everywhere in the venue at the same time even if no-one was there to witness them.

Based on Balme, I have presented my arguments on why it can be problematic to compare larps to theatre. To further elaborate on the analysis, I would like to take a look at few issues related to these arguments raised up in the previous writings on larps. Perhaps the most commonly offered linkage for examining larps through theatre is the notion that the former could be regarded as the descendant or the subtype of the latter.

Brian David Phillips (2006) discusses larps as a form of Interactive Drama which, again, is a form of theatre. According to Phillips, “Interactive Drama is a new form of theatre which takes traditional forms and turns them on their head and inside out” (p. 57). He continues by explaining that “it has similarities to Environmental Theatre, Hyperdrama, and Psychodrama but is not a subtype of any of these” (ibid.). Similarly, Kristine Flood (2006) also draws a connection from Psychodrama. She explains that “the creation of the concept of role-play, as it is known today, came from the development of psychodrama” and that “the creation of psychodrama was cultivated from a theatre base” (p. 36). “Without ‘role-play,’” she notes, “there could be no ‘role-playing games’ and without theatre there could be no role-play” (p.37).

Eirik Fatland (2006) and Edward Choy (2004) also suggest the theatre connection. Fatland goes to propose that role-playing games could be considered to have succeeded in taking theatre to a next level.

## 2 Larps – Transportative Performatic Behaviour

### 2.1 What is Performance Studies?

One of the founders of the discipline, Richard Schechner (2006), depicts the extensiveness of the term ‘performance’ by claiming that it can occur in at least eight separate, but sometimes overlapping, situations: in everyday life (like cooking, socializing, and “just living”), in the arts, sports and other popular entertainments, in business, technology, sex, rituals (sacred and secular), and in play (p. 31). But “even this list,” he notes, “does not exhaust the possibilities” (ibid.). This is because ‘performance’ is such a diverse term that, according to Marvin Carlson (2004), it has at least three separate meanings to it: (1) the display of skills; (2) patterned behaviour; and (3) keeping up the standard (pp. 3-5).

The display of skills, Carlson clarifies, is something that in performing arts requires “the physical presence of trained or skilled human beings whose demonstration of their skills is the performance.” Such a performance could be, for example, playing a musical instrument or dancing ballet. The second meaning, patterned behaviour, creates “a certain distance between ‘self’ and behaviour.” Carlson notes that this is what Richard Schechner calls *restored behaviour* and it includes “any behaviour consciously separated from the person doing it – theatre and other role-playing, trances, shamanism, rituals.” The third meaning for performance according to Carlson is “the general success of the activity in light of some standard of achievement which may not itself be precisely articulated.” Examples of this use of the concept of performance could be “someone’s sexual performance or linguistic performance, or when we ask how well a child is performing in school.” (ibid.)

Performance Studies is a study of human behaviour. It explores “what people do in the activity of their doing it,” as put by Schechner (p. 1). The strength of the discipline is that it recognizes the ephemerality of performances. Texts can be written about them, photos and video clips taken, but whatever archival technique we may use, the fact is that the actual event does not remain. It disappears. “Performance’s being . . . becomes itself through disappearance,” as Peggy Phelan (1993) has put it (p. 146).

He writes: “During the last century or so, several avant-garde directors and theorists of the theatre have attempted to break through the barrier between ‘actors’ and ‘audience’” but “the establishment of interacting drama as a genuine alternative to the stage or film was first accomplished [...] by role-players in the 1970s” (p. 33). Choy, on the other hand, seeks to depict the theatricality of role-playing games, primarily tabletop RPGs, by suggesting that role-playing games could be regarded as the “‘Theatre of the Mind’s Eye’ because the performance happens only in our minds and not in front of our eyes” (p.54).

All of these notions about larps’ connection to theatre seem fairly reasonable: it might very well be that without theatre there wouldn’t be larping. Yet, I would question the efficiency of such a strategy to depict the specificities of the activity because it seems that the only way to map out the nature of larping through theatre is by pointing out their differences – especially the absence of an audience as proposed by all of the authors above. Phillips, for example, suggests that “Interactive Drama is a form of deconstructed drama which takes the Environmental Theatre paradigm of combining spaces for audience and performer and eliminates the difference between the two completely” (p. 58).

Flood, on the other hand, addresses the issue through the concept of catharsis, by noting that “role-play takes the theatre catharsis a step further” because “rather than being witness to the story unfolding, as an audience member, in role-play the story unfolds with you” (p. 40). These notions, however, contradict with the fundamental premises of theatre and theatricality, i.e. the emphasis of perception, and thus make it questionable if the actual manifestation of theatre is even anymore at stake in these arguments.

I would suggest that, if we cannot fit the pieces together, we might as well transcend the issue and look for a completely other theoretical framework for examining the performance nature of larping. As already mentioned in the beginning of this paper, I propose we turn our gaze to Performance Studies.



In the following, I will introduce my take on the player behaviour in larps. Yet, before going any further with my own contemplations, I need to make a note that studies on role-playing games as performances have been contributed already. Perhaps the most remarkable work is Daniel Mackay's *The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art* (2001) in which he extensively analyses role-playing games as a new performing art.

However, Mackay's concentration is on table-top RPGs and, thus, makes the study somewhat irrelevant to larps; after all larps are about the full embodiment of the characters whereas table-top RPGs are about the mere oral description of them. A good example of analysing larps as performance would be J. Tuomas Harviainen's *Kaprow's Scions* (2008) in which he analyses larp's relation to Allan Kaprow's Happenings. Because Kaprow's work has had such an important role in the development of Performance Studies (see e.g. Carlson, 2004 on the matter), it is only natural that the perspective on larps as performances presented in this paper might occasionally overlap with that of Harviainen's.

Nevertheless, because I have placed the focus of this paper at a slightly different angle – performance from the point of view of the player rather than from the structure of the whole activity – I have deliberately chosen to present the arguments independently from those of Harviainen.

## 2.2 *Depicting the Performatic*

All of the different aspects of performance, introduced by Carlson, can be found in larping: a character could be regarded as a standard or an ideal the player seeks to keep up, and the player might have a chance to display his or her skills in, for example, singing, dancing or playing an instrument during a game. Nevertheless, the focus of this paper is on the second aspect of performance, patterned or restored behaviour, because it is the aspect of performance that could be regarded as the most essential one for larping: role-playing, as Carlson points out, is patterned behaviour and, as Kristine Flood has suggested, without role-playing there could be no role-playing games.

Diana Taylor (2003) offers yet another expression for this patterned or restored aspect of performance: she calls it *performatic* as inspired by the Spanish usage for performance, *performático*. According to Taylor, 'performatic' seeks to "denote the adjectival form of the nondiscursive realm of performance" (p. 6). By this she refers to the problematics of the widely used word 'performative' which, according to her, is more a quality of discourse than performance. However, because 'performative' is such a widely used term, it is also often used in this nondiscursive sense. Thus, I seek to avoid such overlapping by keeping the division clear and calling larps *performatic behaviour*.

Based on this notion of 'larps as performatic behaviour' we could further explore the nature of the activity by taking a look at the basic premises of player performance in larps. What is it that the players do exactly when playing their characters? According to Victor Turner (1982), the etymology of the word *performance* "derives from Old French *parfournir*, 'to complete' or 'to carry out thoroughly'" (p. 13, italics orig.). In this sense, what players do during the event is that they *carry out* actions that signify the behaviour of their characters. Such behaviour, as Richard Schechner suggests, is always restored or *twice-behaved*: there is no single author who is the inventor of that behaviour (p. 35).

If it would seem that an individual has discovered a new pattern of behaviour, we cannot say that the individual is the author of that behaviour, but rather the creator of a new combination or edition of already practiced actions. "Restored behaviour," Schechner clarifies, "is living behaviour treated as a film director treats a strip of film" (p. 34).

Just like a film director organizes strips of film to compile the final story, role-players could be considered to be organizing *strips of behaviour*, as put by Schechner (p. 10), to create the final performance of the character. But how do we know that this behaviour carried out by the players is meant to signify that of their characters' and not that of their own?

According to Schechner performance is performance “when historical and social context, convention, usage, and tradition say it is” and “what ‘is’ or ‘is not’ performance does not depend on an event in itself but on how that event is received and placed” (p. 38). Another expression for this would be Erving Goffman’s (1974) *framing*, an organizing principle in which one sets apart arbitrary *strips of experience* “from the stream of ongoing activity” and makes sense out of its framework (p. 10).

Thus, in larps, the players alter their everyday social behaviour to that of their characters. In this way they signal each to other that they are now playing their characters and that the behaviour should, therefore, be framed as a performance. Other means can be used as well. The players could frame the event by, for example, temporal and spatial means: the game begins and ends at a certain time and it takes place in a certain area. This way the participants know that everything that happens during the agreed time and within the agreed venue is to be perceived as performance.

As discussed before, the specific characteristic of the performatic nature of larping is that there is no external audience to frame the players’ behaviour as a performance. This however, does not “disqualify” the player’s behaviour because, as Carlson points out, “performance is always performance for someone, some audience that recognizes and validates it as performance even when, as is occasionally the case, that *audience is the self*” (p. 5, italics added). Because of the lack of an audience, larps could be considered to be one of those occasions where the audience is in fact the ‘self’. No external verification for the players’ actions to be performatic is required; they are the judges of their own doings.

### 2.3 Adding the Transportative

To find an even more precise definition for larps as performances, I propose that larps as performatic behaviour are fundamentally *transportative* instead of transformative. This means that the performance does not permanently transform the player into his or her character but merely transports the player in it for the duration of the event.

The concepts of ‘transformation’ and ‘transportation’ as the characteristics of performance have been offered by Richard Schechner who drew his inspiration from Victor Turner’s (1982) concepts of *liminal* and *liminoid*. According to Turner (1969), ‘liminal’ is a phase of ritual<sup>2</sup> where the participant is “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (p. 89).

Because he sees this liminality as something that is fundamentally connected to compulsion, he ends up using the term liminoid to address voluntary playful human activities, such as arts and entertainment. “Liminoid”, he writes, “resembles without being identical with liminal” (Turner 1982, p. 32). It takes its participants to a “threshold”, an anti-structural state where the normative social constraints don’t prevail, but it does so only by free will.

According to Schechner, liminal rituals *transform* the participants whereas liminoid only *transport*. “Liminal rituals,” he writes, “are transformations, permanently changing who people are” (p. 72). Liminoid rituals, on the other hand, are transportations that effect “a temporary change” in which “one enters into the experience, is ‘moved’ or ‘touched’ . . . , and is then dropped off about where she or he entered” (ibid.). This means that the performatic behaviour does not permanently change the individual into that what has been performed, rather the individual is merely transported in it for the duration of the performance and then *dropped off about where she or he entered*.

Nevertheless, it is important to notice that liminoid can also lead to change, but not in the same manner as liminal. Players could, for example, learn new things or re-evaluate their values and manners through their experiences in larps. Such experiences, however, imply a different kind of transformation than the one the concepts of transformative and transportative suggest here. In essence, larps are transportative performatic behaviour because the nature of the activity suggests that performing one’s character occurs for the duration of the game after which the player ceases to carry out the behaviour framed as that of his or her character.

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<sup>2</sup> To explain the phenomenon of play (and through that the phenomenon of performance and theatre), Turner compared the activity of human play to rituals in, what he calls, the early agrarian societies.

### 3 Conclusions

In this paper I have argued that it is somewhat problematic to analyse larps through Theatre Studies. This is because larps are fundamentally different from theatre. First of all, theatre is based on perception and larps are not. In larps, there is no external audience that validates the performance of the players as a performance. Rather they validate it themselves. Secondly, there is no architectural structure in larps that would separate actors from audiences. In larps, everybody is “on stage.” And thirdly, the act of larp is simultaneous whereas, in this respect, the act of theatre is linear. This means that in larps the events take place everywhere in the venue at the same time, whereas in theatre the events usually take place one after another in a location that is constantly perceivable for the audience.

To offer a more suitable theoretical framework for the analysis of the performance nature of larps, this paper has proposed the use of Performance Studies and briefly examined larping through its lens. It has suggested that the performance nature of larps could be more precisely called transportative performatic behaviour which means that larps are the kind of performances where the players alter their everyday behaviour to that of their characters, thus creating a separation between the self and the behaviour. This performatic behaviour transports the players in their characters for the duration of the game and after that drops them off about where they entered.

Examining the transportative performatic behaviour of larps as above may not differ much from that what it would be if we would do similar analysis on theatre: acting could also be regarded as transportative performatic behaviour. However, using the Performance Studies framework in further theorization of larping instead of Theatre Studies might offer far more room to recognize and analyse those characteristics of the activity that separate it from theatre and are unique for its nature. For example, in this paper I have already offered Performance Studies based contemplation on the possibilities for framing the player’s performance without the presence of an external audience.

This introduction to larps as performances is but a tip of an iceberg; the possibilities for analysing the nature of activity through the Performance Studies lens are endless. We could, for example, make performance analyses on individual games or the entire activity in general. We could contemplate cultural, social and political issues related to larps and explore their manifestations in the performance.

Some possible research questions could be, for example: How do the players construct their characters in larps? What is the meaning of the venue, props and costumes in the performances of the players? And what sort of levels of time and space are present in the performance of larps? We could also ask questions like: In what sense do larps manifest global popular culture in their performances? To what extent do larps differ in their performances in different countries? And what are the effects of local cultures and traditions in the way the players perform?

These questions can be contemplated through other disciplines as well but the addition that Performance Studies can offer to their exploration is the recognition of ephemerality. Although larps, like other performances, can be recorded through texts, photos, video clips and such, this archival material is not the same as the event itself. The event disappears.

Thus, Performance Studies can provide us with possibilities for analysing that which may not have been otherwise taken into account, for example such challenging details to record as of the embodied behaviour of the players (expressions, gestures, attitudes, tones, etc.). This paper is but a brief opening to these possibilities. Hopefully further contemplation will take place in the future.

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# The Theory and Practice of Larp in Non-Fiction Film

*Evan Torner*

## *Keywords*

Aesthetics, Documentary, Film, Larp, Narrative, Role-playing

Documentaries recording the participatory art form of live-action role-playing (larp) for posterity have recently come into their own. In this article, I explore the relationship between larp and its representation within the medium of documentary/non-fiction film, paying particular attention to tropes that build sympathy with the viewer. After explaining certain aporias of larp film representation, I look into the history of this representation in film and classify distinct sub-genres of LARP filmmaking. Murray Smith's (see 1995) "structures of sympathy" apparatus is then employed to demonstrate how *Delirium: The Second State of Will* (dir. Viiij Nissinen, 2010) and *Darkon* (dir. Andrew Neel, Luke Meyer, 2006) responsibly deal with the core tensions suggested while attending to the tropes of their respective sub-genres. The article ends with a notion of a possible comparative larp non-fiction sub-genre that may prove the most useful in providing a clearer portrait of the hobby's internal dynamics.

Live-action role-play (larp) is an activity framed as much by its pre-game workshops and post-game documentation as it is during the actual act of larping itself. The act of structuring any event's core elements (e.g., foam weapon combat, costuming, emotional trauma, etc.) as well as how those elements are to be recorded for posterity (via character sheets, diaries, photographs, film, etc.) eventually structure the gameplay itself as it occurs.

This article is concerned with how the larp medium is (re-)presented specifically through the film medium, and the ways in which larpers might control the medium in order to depict what Jaako Stenros calls the "role-playing text" (Stenros, 2004) beyond the mere indexical record of players in-character. I historicize and classify the different genres of LARP film, and then use examples from films such as *Darkon* (2006) and *Delirium: The Second State of Will* (2010) to show where the tensions between larp and its own documentation lie. As larp scholarship partially relies on such documentation (Illieva, 2010); (Stenros, 2009), cognition of how non-fiction films align the audience with the presented material becomes crucial. Leveling a camera at any larp will also inevitably affect its text, and these texts prove most accessible when filmmakers' attend to audience's allegiances with its participants.

## 1 Larp as Film Subject

We film larp to frame it for posterity and for others to consume. Yet most films documenting the larp hobby do not adequately reflect its diverse goals and practices, tending instead toward either stereotypy or obscurity. Hjalmarsson frames this as a dilemma of filmic presentation to non-larpers:

“As LARP can only be experienced as it is being created, certain challenges become apparent in expressing what it is to an outsider who does not wish to try it directly.”

(Hjalmarsson, 2010).

Films about LARP are frequently amateurish, ridden with clichés about escapism and psychology, and unable to adequately comment upon a hobby largely interior to its participants' imaginations. The on-camera performance is noticeably incommensurate with the experience of LARPing as well.

As we globally shift from a spectator to a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2009); (Wark, 2007), see also Lampo in this book), however, negotiations about how newer, active media such as larp can be positively analyzed by older, passive media such as film and television are now underway.

According to Juel (2006), high-quality documentary films “inform, discuss, engage, enlighten, intervene, explore, express, disturb and commit - more so than to merely entertain, amuse, distract, conform or confirm (e.g. a religious or political community).” However, larp presents numerous practical and epistemic challenges to the documentary filmmaking mode (Nichols, 1991), to which I now refer to as non-fiction film (see Ponech, 1999).

Practical challenges include the equipment overhead, photogenic arrangement of LARP space and lighting, the necessity of an at least two-person film crew (see *Darkon*), the complex sound field generated by multiple uncoordinated speaking subjects and permission to film from both the proprietors of the larp location and the participants themselves. All affect the level of overall production values, resultant clarity and spectacle (defined as a marked visual departure from the “ordinary”) offered by the film, regulating its reception at film festivals and other distribution channels.

Epistemic questions persist as well: how do we know a film is “about” larp? How do we know what we know about LARP, and how can such knowledge be transmitted? How does staging events before a camera alter the LARP medium itself? How can an uninitiated viewer be persuaded of the value of an activity that transpires primarily in the mind of its participants, which Lieberoth describes as otherwise “just regular human behaviour as we see it down at the supermarket or around the office.” (Lieberoth, 2006)

Central issues specific to larp include the familiar topics of sub-cultural insularity, the effects of a camera on the event itself, protagonist sympathy, and the tension between commercialism and ritual, between ludic reality and cinephilia. larp documentarists must take a philosophical position within this field, and the medium of film often proves troublesome in persuasively expressing it.

Levelling a camera at a larp changes it from a mixed social-interior narrative to a recorded performance. Pre-game workshops may frame larp scenes according to film dramaturgical principles. Film documentation of larp then adds the oft-contradictory dimensions of pro-filmic spectacle and performance for a non-reciprocating audience to the mix.

Audiovisual records of a larper's body destroy the ephemeral nature of its performance. These epistemic problems emerge from the borders of both media - film and larp - as they grapple with each other's communicative limitations. Nevertheless, the inherent spectacle of humans in costumes in dynamic motion coupled with active interests in propagating (unlike tabletop role-playing, LARPs flourish with each added member) and documenting the hobby prompts us to pick up the camera and record.

### 1.1 A Larp Film History

Despite existing since the 1970s, the typically lower middle-class larping demographic in the United States and United Kingdom (Fine, 1983) has remained somewhat (video) camera shy until this last decade. Private home videos of LARP preparations or individual scenes remain in the private sphere. Even the upcoming film *Treasure Trapped* (2011) primarily relies on stills taken in the 1980s, rather than footage.

Historical reenactment groups such as that in Peter Watkins' *Culloden* (1964) or the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), whose interests in preserving historical material culture remain close to those of documentarists, aesthetically paved the way for non-fiction larp film in video-recording their costumes and movements.

*The 1900 House* (Channel 4, UK, 1999) became the first "living history" television show, in which the minimal scaffolding for larp documentation was also established. Living history shows offered the pleasurable tensions between humans in and out of costume (but not necessarily character), the articulation of the full character immersion experience, and *bleed*<sup>1</sup>, the increasing dissolution of the boundary between player and character.

Then a bold, satirical attempt at larp-as-fiction arrived in 2002: Matt Vancil's *The Gamers*. This no-budget cult film portrays a group of Dungeons & Dragons-playing tabletop gamers whose imaginary characters are played out in a parallel fictional diegesis in larp costume. The larp portions of the film capitalize on the aesthetic of the popular *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) trilogy, but also engage in an act of self-mockery. Plain-looking gamers dressing up as their characters intentionally blur the line between player and character to reveal the absurd logic of pawn stance (Edwards, 2001).

The film placed real role-playing issues such as the instrumentalisation of characters for players' personal gain at the heart of the film, so that its target audience could safely laugh at their own hobby without it being labelled childish or cultish. It also had the side effect of creating a symbiotic affinity between the tabletop imaginary and larp, with the latter signifying the "reality" of the diegesis. Nevertheless, larp as its own medium of expression is subordinated to the film requirements of a linear fictional story. This tabletop-imagines-larp strategy was then repeated in Gunnar B. Gudmundsson's *Astrópia* (2007) for a wider global audience.

2006 saw the larp non-fiction film ushered into existence with Andrew Neel and Luke Meyer's *Darkon*. Sponsored by the Independent Film Channel (IFC), the film depicts the long-lived Baltimore-area Darkon Wargaming Club at the height of a power struggle between two fictional factions: Mordom and Laconia. The film's simple narrative, beautiful execution and respect for larp practice showed prospective documentarists how self-parody and larp's general insularity could be navigated to produce a dignified, clever film about the hobby. A genre cycle was born.

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://jeepen.org/dict/#bleed> [3. Dec. 2010]

*Darkon* was accompanied and followed by a series of live-action game profiles: David M. Suter's short *Lord of the Larp* (2006) on the New Zealand fantasy battle scene, Florian Flicker's *No Name City* (2006) on professional cowboy reenactors near Vienna, Gary Hudston's *Changing Faces* (2007) on the EOS fantasy larp in the UK, and Cullen Hoback's *Monster Camp* (2007) on The Alliance Seattle fantasy larp.

These films all introduce the hobbies of larp or reenactment as positive forces in the lives of their participants and guide the viewer through the larpers' worlds using interviews and costume displays. Boundaries between fiction and reality itself are problematized more often than boundaries between player and character, between meta-game and game.

Corporate media and Hollywood have also capitalized on the popularity of larp in recent television and movies (Vanek, 2010). David Wain's feature comedy *Role Models* (2008) starring Paul Rudd and Seann William Scott incorporates larp – as enacted in part by *Darkon* participants – into a narrative about two unfortunate men who do community service as big brothers to two misfit kids, one of whom role-plays. Another feature film, Alexandre Franchi's Canadian thriller *The Wild Hunt* (2010), is set in the larp village Bicolline, though its image of larpers appears quite negative. Reality television has tapped the visual and conceptual possibilities of larp as sites of human exertion, challenge and geek empowerment.

Season four of *Beauty and the Geek* (2007) involved 10 episodes of beautiful women and geeky men exploring a larp together, while the Discovery Channel's *Wreckreation Nation* attended Dagorhir's 2008 *Battle of Badon Hill* event in Pennsylvania and subjected its host Dave Mordal to the punishment of foam sword fighting. The Company P's hybrid television broadcast and alternative reality game *Sanningen om Marika* (2007) pushed the boundaries of possible media collaborations (Denward & Waern, 2008); Stenros & Montola, in this volume). Such developments occur on a project-by-project basis, but help keep the hobby in the public eye despite the established media's ambivalence to the newer larp medium.

Larp has enjoyed a spike in both public media exposure and private video recordings. The practice of cutting private larp documentation into public trailers as advertisements on YouTube has become commonplace, even necessary for sustainable recruitment. Most larps recorded continue to be fantasy larps. Nevertheless, more avant-garde larp projects like *State of Will* (2010) or Brody Condon's *Level 5* (2010) are also being filmically documented, the former even incorporating its own documentation by way of a live feed for an audience. With the democratization of the media brought by the Internet and accumulation of cultural capital by geeks (Konzack, 2006), it is almost assured that the non-fictional coverage of the hobby will continue to exponentially increase, which is why an understanding of the mechanisms of both the larp and the non-fiction film are in order to continue high-quality documentation.

## 1.2 Larp Film Genres

Most larp non-fiction films fall into one of three genres – the *music video*, the *debriefing*, and the *introduction* – which (usually) connote target audience and intent. The music video, found most often in Internet distribution, sets the footage taken at one or more larps to non-diegetic music. Music videos highlight the visual, costumed bodies before the camera, as well as any dynamic body movements (e.g. fighting, dancing).

These are often used as idealised self-representation or advertisements for the larp, despite the music frequently serving to mask the footage's otherwise poor audio quality. A second genre is the *debriefing*, in which larpers announce directly to the camera what their character did during a larp after the event is over. The debriefing is often how more intimate, structured freeform games are documented. These are aimed at primarily an internal audience seeking information about a recent play experience. Many of the larp films since 2006 fall under the third genre, the *introduction*, in which non-larpers are provided a kind of overview of the larp hobby through interview, play and “everyday-life” footage of one specific, fantasy combat group. Pre-game scene framing proves integral to shaping the material.



## 2 *Imagining an Impossible Film*

Films like Ryan Pelham's *Weekend Warriors* (2008) or the UK documentaries *Changing Faces* (2007) and *Treasure Trapped* (2011) are preoccupied with re-framing the viewer's social perception of larp, but have the corollary effect of reaching out to gamers beyond the usual channels of Internet forums and word-of-mouth. In this fashion, introductory larp non-fiction film convincingly connects a positive self-presentation of a specific larp group with the philosophical and social self-awareness about the hobby in general.

Such self-presentation, however, must compete in the semantic field with the growing number of products that use fantasy larp as a spectacle to sell commercialized fiction or non-fiction to a wider audience. Film is always a document of its time of creation, and larpers are still to some degree "documented" in these productions, even though the rules and organizing principles are subsumed to the spectacles of costume, make-up, colour and motion the hobby provides. Films such as *Astrópia* or *The Gamers* use larp as a *stage*: a way of visually delineating between the intra-diegetic "real" space of a tabletop RPG with the "imaginary" space of a larp.

Larp is also used as a social *backdrop*, e.g. its usage in *Role Models*, where its primacy as a specific character's hobby becomes more illustrative of the character than of the hobby itself. Finally, films like *The Wild Hunt* (or most introductory films, for that matter) maintain larp as a *conflicting social field*, where its cultural practices and practitioners both come to the foreground, for good or for ill.

These film schemas all emphasize visibility over aurality, its in-game action over its pre- and post-game framework, and – with the exception of the debriefing – an anthropological gaze over a more ludocentric or player-specific approach. Limitations imposed by the above genres can be overcome only with an eye for how the film medium re-frames larp.

There is no such thing as a neutral position in film documentation of any kind, let alone in that of live-action role-playing. Richard Kilborn (2003) describes documentary as a purposive intervention in which the chroniclers' motives, the insistence of proper representation by the chronicled and narrative conventions of the genre all play a part. From the larp theory perspective, however, there are fundamental obstacles in giving the larpers' version of events. J. Tuomas Harviainen elaborates:

Role-playing is a form of heuristic fiction. It is a metamorphosis that creates simultaneously a selection of characters/figures and a transformation into a new state of temporary "true" being. In that new state, everything follows an internal ... system where everything works directly upon indexical and symbolic concepts, transforming basic representations into a fantasy reality.

(Harviainen, 2009)

A larper's transformative internal experience lies at the core of any role-playing text (Stenros, 2004), and this experience proves difficult to convey with the present film semiotic system used to convey interiority-as-story. In film, story is king (Mechner, 2007), while games and story are often seen as outright "antitheses" (Costikyan, 2000); (Brookey & Booth, 2006). In an ideal larp scenario, the story becomes an intrinsic extension of a player-character's reality, and the meta-game elements that make it so should fade into the background.

The non-fiction film is a notoriously suspicious medium of such internal realities: by only documenting performance and traces of performance, the larp non-fiction film routinely makes external truth-claims about the hobby that cannot be refuted by the internal fantasy-claims a larper routinely makes to build a rich, imaginary world in their mind. Whereas non-fiction film routinely relies on the protagonists' lack of perspective and viewers' lack of information to drive its narratives, the larp film must grapple with a narratively self-sufficient subject that needs no film to justify his/her openly fictional fictions.

All that remains of these difficult-to-document subjective realities is ephemera and ruin (Koljonen, 2008), which neither sells well nor educates. What needs communicating is a larp's structure, or "the underlying mechanics, the combination and interplay of the game's setting, rules, components and players' thought processes" (Wallis, 2007).

Such a network structure (Widing, 2008) is best documented via copious quantities of text and diagrams which are unfortunately the antithesis of the non-fiction film form. Indeed, an introductory larp documentary is normally interested in the gap between the indexical reality (e.g., normal people in costume as characters) and their fantasies of themselves, whereas larp protagonists are more typically engaged in an active process of self-protagonisation (Czege, 2007) (Kim, 2004) that requires no additional legitimation from the camera.

Both role-playing games and theatre fulfil escapist needs (Flood, 2006), but role-playing games need no external audience. In fact, of the four layers of larp articulated by Harviainen (2009), film can only capture layers 1 and 2: the exogenous level of the social actors in their environment and their meta-game dialogue. Thus the larp performance (Mackay, 2001; Lampo, in this volume) cannot possibly perform for the camera that which the medium offers its participants.

When recorded in-character verbatim, larpers thus appear to be bad actors or subjects uprooted from the indexical reality constructed by the documentary. The camera's gaze commodifies them. Murray Smith's influential paradigm in *Engaging Characters* (1995) articulates how a viewer usually transforms this dispassionate gaze into a so-called structure of sympathy between characters. The system he describes consists of three levels of engagement: recognition, alignment and allegiance. *Recognition* is when a viewer infers the presence of a character from audiovisual cues, *alignment* is when these cues align the world in congruence with the character, and *allegiance* happens when the viewer is offered an opportunity to evaluate the character. Sympathy and antipathy stem from this three-tiered structure.

Audiences – always composed of individual viewers – react to most film content according to this model, larp included. Larp documentaries in the music video genre are of the poetic non-fiction mode (see Nichols, 1991) and tend to disallow overt sympathy with the characters in them. Their bodies costumed, animated by music outside of all diegeses, and cut together based on rhythm over emotional attachments deny us perceptual data that would build sympathy for either the larpers or their characters.

The debriefing genre takes the easy way out by engaging in the participatory mode (ibid.) – meaning the direct engagement between filmed subjects and filmmakers. The viewer recognizes and aligns with both the chronicler and the chronicled in mutual dialog about the larp. Conversation can then easily allude to ludic aspects as well as their subjective experience of the game. The drawback, of course, is that the larp as medium only achieves representation through the audio unless the interviewee is both in-character and talking to the camera. However, such character by default signifies out-of-character interaction.

The introductory genre, with its typical mixture of participatory and observational modes, is the only one at present that can elicit sufficient allegiance to its select protagonists. This allegiance becomes the audience's value judgment of the hobby as a whole. Contrasting *Weekend Warriors* with *Changing Faces*, for example, we notice that the former establishes an unintentional detachment from the characters by the absence of a clear protagonist, whose perception we share nor a non-fiction space between its obviously dramatized versions of larp action and the space of the interview commentary.

*Changing Faces* picks a single protagonist – Pete "Jarn" Bridges – and uses him to elaborate on the thrill, the game mechanics, the process of dressing up as a character, and his position *vis-à-vis* Gary Hudston's camera (since Hudston himself later appears before it). Thus well-tread film genres that manage the attention economy of larp inscribe certain ways of looking at larp that may not be to the medium's benefit.

### 3 *Darkon and Delirium - Building Viewer Allegiance*

The award-winning introductory film *Darkon* resulted from the cross-pollination between two American fantasy combat larp groups. It also continues to set the bar in terms of eliciting the most allegiance toward larp and larping figures in the narrative, despite its open filmic critique of the hobby. Directors Andrew Neel and Luke Meyer were Dagorhir fighters when they discovered the existence of the self-contained combat LARP *Darkon*, which has existed since the 1980s. The film was fortunate enough to retain the financial backing of the IFC, which explains its high production values.

*Darkon* protagonises and allies the viewer with a figure whose erratic ambitions and follies form a suspense element. The film's narrative frames an overdetermined conflict between Laconia's stubborn leader Bannor (played by Skip Lipman) and the bureaucratic manager of the Greater Mordomian Co-Prosperity Sphere named Keldar (played by Kenyon Wells).

The all-American story of the "little guy taking on the Man" allegorises Skip's failed uprising against the numerically superior citizens of Mordom in relation to Skip's failures in life. Though Skip remarks at one point that *Darkon* allows you to play only an "aspect of yourself," the sympathy structure of the film guides the viewer into thinking the distance between Bannor and Skip is not so far indeed. A debate between Bannor and Keldar appears as in-character posturing of barely concealed player-character bleed. To be sure, this very bleed is what sells the film to the viewer.

But a viewer of *Darkon* also becomes cleverly allied with the immersive world of *Darkon*, with its invented languages, enchanting costumes and decades-old rituals. The opening sequence features a Lord of the Rings-style helicopter shot over the Baltimore suburbs, enchanting the viewer with Jonah Rapino's epic score. We cut to dark elves conducting a ritual in a forest at night. The flames reflecting off their make-up reconfigures their human physiognomy. Magical landscapes, unnatural beings – and then we introduce Skip/Bannor, our protagonist. The viewer has already been enchanted by the world that the *Darkon* larpers have created, such that the filmmakers can easily align us with Skip's obsession for the larp while maintaining a critical distance from his personal life.

The film insists on a perhaps simplistic epic quality for the sake of dignifying the world and complicated storyline that these individuals have created. Though many dimensions of the game's logic, its rules, and its history go by the wayside in favour of a psychological profile of a "warrior out of his time" (Skip), the non-fiction film gives the larpers' home realities and immersive equal weight throughout the narrative. The film succeeds in entertaining its viewers with the fantasy/reality dialectic while still dignifying the means by which one reaches that dialectic.

Another recent larp document is Viiij Nissinen's *Delirium: The Second State of Will*, a debriefing film about the eponymous August 2010 Finnish event portraying a 1950s insane asylum on a small island (Kuutsalo), per Martin Scorsese's *Shutter Island* (2010). The video shows documentation of the actual play with rudimentary "damaged film" post-production effects that at least nod toward the media history of the 1950s. Combining actual play footage with interviews of the player-characters during and after the larp, Nissinen both introduces the disturbing aspects of the scenario (e.g., violence against prisoners, physically restrained players, etc.) as well as their chipper extra-diegetic selves.

The film normalizes an activity usually considered quite experimental by letting the participants and mere snippets of the game speak for the whole. Though some pre-game footage would have helped align the viewer more with the game rules and other planning aspects of the larp, Nissinen's footage logs emotions that were felt, bleed that occurred, spectacles that awed the participants, and the disturbingly mundane reality of the institution as expressed through larping.

The *Darkon* model of protagonising and complicating the psychology of a primary protagonist and several secondary protagonists is sublimated by an egalitarian-if-fragmentary engagement with game and reality, psychosis and normalcy, chronicling and being chronicled.

#### 4 *Connecting Other Media Audiences with Larp*

Larp non-fiction film created within the community ascribes to depicting ludic and subjective realities to ever-expanding target audiences, despite the persistent problem that it can only indexically capture the incidental traces of a socially constructed mental model. How then might larp film documentation transcend well-tread film genres like the fantasy film or the reality docu-soap for a more nuanced portrait of the processes and premises that guide it as its own medium? How can such films issue a useful document for researchers, media historians, posterity, and the larpers' future selves?

First of all, Kilborn's notion of the documentary as an intervention and a series of truth-claims must be borne in mind. Active reflection on one's motivations for documenting the larp subject must accompany the impulse to shoot large quantities of footage. Pre-game workshops must consider filmable aspects of the larp, and ways to make it sympathetic as well. The presumption of an active audience for the film as well as for the larp will help frame an interactive engagement with the otherwise passive film medium. The filmmakers' enthusiasm and commitment to the material already frames the audience's perceptions surrounding the non-fiction film's subject matter: the hobby as a gestalt medium in of itself that has something to offer the general audience when its premises are taken seriously.

Larp on film has the potential to reach a general audience while attending to functional components that make for good play. A filmmaker who initiates his/her film as early as possible within a larp project, for example, has the opportunity to coordinate the larp's conception through pre-game workshops, realization through live play, and post-game interviews. Though excluding the pre-game dimension and its rules systems, *Delirium* presents the viewer with a general overview of the game in terms of the participants' experience.

The idea is not to present the players as self-sufficient subjects, but as socially constituted agents operating in a network of structures that the audience might grasp. Photogenic aesthetics will attract audiences, but ultimate interest lies in conveying the larp subjects' live reality as *Darkon* did.

Filmmakers can elicit allegiance to the player-characters, giving us both first- and third-person perspectives of their progress through a medium that is a negotiated social activity, a game and a fully realized internally realised heuristic fiction, clearly articulating these dimensions while suggesting the possibility of bleed between them.

In essence, a new larp non-fiction genre can move beyond the introductory mode toward a documentation of larp as an omni-present hobby grounded in historical and social forces. This genre, which I would call *comparative*, would dispense with the now-cliché contrasts between larpers' external lives and characters, the propensity to only film fantasy combat events (conflating those with the multi-faceted larp hobby), and the emphasis on in-game, pro-filmic events interspersed with out-of-game philosophising.

The genre would open the hood of multiple larps, showing the audience how they work both as coordinated social events and immersive ludic fictions. Not only would the hobby be introduced to outsiders, but insiders to the hobby would see how assorted international larps - from fantasy foam fighters in Baltimore, to Jeep players in Stockholm, to Viennese reenactors - are in dialog with each other in their larp praxis. A new form of larp documentation would present itself.

Hjalmarsson's forthcoming documentary *Play It Live!* just might open up such a critical perspective of a hobby in need of mature representation corresponding to its own coming-of-age in a globalized, digital society.

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# Parasocial Interaction in Pervasive Role-Play

*Jaakko Stenros & Markus Montola*

## *Keywords*

Character, Larp, Parasocial Interaction, Pervasive Game; Role-Playing;, Transmedia Storytelling

Media figures, from celebrities to cartoon characters, form parasocial relationships with audiences. Games and transmedia narratives allow for new kinds of parasocial relationships: unlike the unresponsive main character of a soap opera, game characters allow for different sorts of interaction. In this paper we look at Sanningen om Marika, a pervasive transmedia larp, analyzing the parasocial interaction between the main character Adrijanna and the audience. The analysis is complemented with philosopher Jean Baudrillard's ideas on hyperreal society, where real and represented become inseparable.

Spectators form *parasocial relationships* with people portrayed in media. The term was originally defined by Horton and Wohl (1956), based on the observations on how television actors sometimes address and pretend to relate to the audience directly. As parasocial relationships are not *reciprocal*; they involve little sense of obligation or responsibility. Yet, they can still maintain the illusions of warmth and intimacy.

During the last decades, the concept has broadened to include different kinds of mediated relationships between the audience and celebrities and fictional characters presented in all kinds of media from radio and television to books. The study of parasocial interaction has largely been done in the context of communication studies, even though Horton and Wohl issued a call to “learn in detail how these para-social interactions are integrated into the matrix of usual social activity”. Giles (2002), however, has written about parasocial interaction as a dimension of normal social behaviour. He has proposed that it is not disconnected from social interaction, but that a continuum of social-parasocial interaction exists:

In normal social interaction there may be a degree of PSI (e.g., a schoolboy develops a “crush” on a classmate with whom he has never directly interacted). In mediated interaction there are elements of direct interaction (for example, talking to a presenter or celebrity guest on a phone-in show).

(Giles, 2002)

In this paper, we look at parasocial relationships in *pervasive role-playing* (see Montola et al, 2009), using the model proposed by Giles to show the relevancy of the whole spectrum from social to parasocial. Furthermore, we contextualize hybrid forms of *alternate reality games* (Martin et al., 2006) and larps in relation to role-playing games and role-playing, and consider these events and experiences in a wider context of media culture. We exemplify these phenomena by focusing on the transmedia project *Sanningen om Marika*.

Through the study of the main protagonist Adriana Skarped's experiences (juxtaposed with similar examples from other projects), we illustrate how the understanding of role-play deepens our knowledge of transmedia games and parasocial relationships.

### *1 Fictional People in Transmedia*

The core of *Sanningen om Marika* was the titular television series by the Swedish national television (SVT) in 2007. The drama series told the story of Janna and her vanished friend Marika, where the main character ended up looking for where all the lost people in Sweden vanish.

The transmedia narrative running along the drama series started with the emergence of the character Adrijanna Klinga, who created a blog to accuse SVT of stealing and fictionalizing her life story for the drama series. According to her she had been the inspiration for Janna, and her vanished friend Maria the inspiration for Marika. SVT responded to Adrijanna in public, claiming that Adrijanna had made up the story, but conceded they had indeed used it. During the months leading to the drama series Adrijanna presented her side of the story in numerous places; she toured Swedish rock festivals in person, she was interviewed in talk shows along with real policemen and so on.

For an in-depth description, see Denward & Waern, 2008. The public spectacle of Adrijanna attacking SVT was also a staged part of the fiction. This created a complicated setup where SVT was playing both sides, as producers of the drama series, and as the creator of the transmedia narrative where Adrijanna accused them of stealing her life for *Sanningen om Marika*.

There were two layers of *transmedial storytelling* (Dena, 2009), taking place through two television series, an online *alternate reality game* with websites, newspapers, forums and puzzles and a pervasive live-action role-playing game (see Montola et al, 2009). Adrijanna Klinga had a web presence, it was possible to converse with her online, but she also took to the streets.



Her actress Adriana Skarped always stayed in character when in public, so even if the people she interacted with did not know about *Sanningen om Marika* (which was marked clearly as fiction online) they would still interact with a character rather than her actor.

As a media phenomenon, the case of Adrijanna Klinga is an extreme example, but far from unique. Bree Avery was the main character of the YouTube docu-soap *lonelygirl15* (2006-2008), originally framed as a video diary, but turning out to be a work of fiction. Bree was created by a small production team who performed her through videos, email, instant message services and other such sites. These kinds of character constructs a player can engage in role-play with are common, especially in *alternate reality games* (ARGs, see Martin et al., 2006; Montola et al., 2009; Dena, 2009), interactive and story-driven puzzle games played mostly online. Examples include Claire Bennet, a character in the television series *Heroes* and the online game *Heroes Evolutions* (2007-2008); Hazel Rose, the main character in the webgame *Dollplay* (2009), Cathy Vickers of the *Cathy's Book* (2006) transmedia book series, and the numerous characters of the ARG-larp *Conspiracy for Good* (2010)<sup>1</sup>.

Game designer Sean Stewart (2009) writes about his experiences with creating Laia Salla for *The Beast* (2001) alternate reality game, one of the earliest of these media figures:

[W]ithin twenty-four hours of posting a blog entry about her grandmother's death, the protagonist of *The Beast*, Laia Salla, received *hundreds* of condolence emails. Nobody writes to Madame Bovary or Anne of Green Gables. But Laia was different. Laia had a phone number you could call; she wrote you email and you could write back. She treated you as if you were just as real as the rest of her friends in the year 2142, and it was hard not to repay the favor. Laia admittedly lived in the 22nd century, but in many ways she was every bit as real as your cousin who lives in Cleveland; more real, actually, or at least polite enough to write you more often.

(Stewart, 2009)

The difference with these new types of fictional characters is that it is possible to *interact* with them and have what for all intents and purposes is a *social* relationship. These interactions require the participants to engage in *pretend play* (e.g. Lillard, 1993) to succeed. The audience communicates with the characters while pretending that they are real and the interaction is authentic. The production team is also pretending. In many of these games the act of pretending to believe, the ambivalence created by blurring the line between the game and the ordinary life, is a central source of pleasure (Montola et al, 2009).

This pretence play is a basic building-block of role-playing. The participants adopt fictional personas in a fictive context. The producers of these kinds of play situations have fully-developed characters and they define the fictional playground. The players can come up with characters of their own, but they can just as easily play fictional pretence-fuelled versions of themselves, versions that believe the game world and its inhabitants to be real. Furthermore, both the player-participants and the people playing the "lead roles" are able to view the events both as real (within the diegetic frame) and as fictions (as persons participating in this kind of activity (see Goffman, 1974; Fine, 1983; Stenros et al., 2007).

Such fictitious yet social media figures need not be created by the copyright holders. They can just as easily be the result of a grassroots campaign, a group of fans or even an anonymous individual. All the characters of the TV series *Mad Men* (2007-) have Twitter accounts, created and performed by fans of the show – without the permission of the production company (Caddell, 2009). The official Twitter stream of the oil company BP has 16,000 followers – and the anonymously-run satirical BP Twitter account is followed by 180,000 people (Kagan, 2010). The fans of *Alias* (2001-2006) created an entire *alternate reality game* for the series, which was impossible to distinguish from the original material (Örnebring, 2007).

<sup>1</sup> The fact that these characters tend to be young, lonely and pretty women who need help has quickly become a cliché.

## 2 Racting and Pervasive Role-Play

Due to the networked society and the rise of participatory media, the parasocial relationships that audiences can create today are fundamentally different from the ones that were possible in the times of Horton and Wohl. The company P, producer of the role-playing parts of *Sanningen om Marika*, *Dollplay* and *Conspiracy for Good*, calls their role-playing “interactive actors” *ractors*.

The ractors are similar to improv actors (Johnstone, 1979), as they must be able to improvise, adapt and invest significantly in their work. The differences are that in racting there is a strong need for game mastering, and the improvisation must stay within the strict confines of a coherent diegetic world and story; ractors are essentially role-playing with the audience.

To tap into this phenomenon, we interviewed Adriana Skarped, who racted Adrijanna Klinga almost continuously for two months, at festivals, parties, online and in one-on-one interactions. Though the experience of the player-participants is also interesting and worthy of study, in this paper we decided to concentrate on the angle afforded by game mastering, production and staging, more than on the co-creation and consumption.

Skarped played Klinga in a total manner, as even the name of the character was chosen for the similarity to her own in order to ease the seamless transition in social situations. In those areas where the character differed from her significantly, she had to go through extensive preparation; for example she learned the basics of computer programming in order to portray Adrijanna believably.

In the interviews she asserted that she did not step out of character in public, and thus the people who encountered her did not know that she inhabited a more fantastic world. She was playing a game on them and with them:

After a while it became so exhausting switching off and on that I just settled into Adrijanna mode, and stayed there most of the time. Or at least Adrijanna with the meta-perspective of also being a game master – that I could never turn that off as I knew I was always responsible for the game in that capacity. Practically, that meant always looking at, interpreting, the world through paranoid glasses, especially when it came to politics and media [...] In a sense, it was a bit psychotic, but to me, that was nothing unusual: I firmly believe that all good art changes you, that that is its very purpose, and I don't believe identity is a fixed thing. All of the parts I've played - on stage, TV, or in larps - have been part me, part something new and different, and all of them have rubbed off in some way or another.

Skarped's style of portraying Adrijanna was very detailed and intense – living *invisible theatre* (Boal, 1992) for months, in a sense. The idea was to create totally unaware participation, to the level of believability of candid camera: The people meeting her and talking with her were not supposed to understand that she was portraying fiction, even though later on they might realize that, based on her media appearances.

You're not on stage, and you're not larping. You have to be real. Less is usually more. Keep serious at all times, even when you wanna giggle and scream “oh my god I can't believe you're actually buying this”. [...] As a game character: Never go off-game in front of players. If there is a need to explain that this is just a game, let someone else explain it. Don't ever do it yourself as this will present the opportunity to “off game” with you at any moment. Being completely in game all the time will encourage them to take the world you've built seriously, force them to interact with you in game – as that is the only way to interact with you.

For Skarped the portraying of a character in an ARG-larp hybrid is not so much larping as being real. She draws from her larping and acting backgrounds to portray a believable person. In the process of interacting with outsiders, Adrijanna witnessed various phases of unaware participation, as her audience went through the various stages of understanding the fabrication (Goffman, 1974), as discussed in the *general interaction model for socially expanded pervasive larps* (Stenros et al, 2007). A few times it was unclear for her if she was being interpreted as her ordinary or fictional self.

I have this one (not very close) friend where I still don't know how much of what I told him he actually believed in and how much he was just playing right back at me. [...] With another friend I shared the story "in game" as Adrijanna, but – being a larper and knowing quite a bit of my previous work – he subtly called my bluff and offered to help "behind the scene", after which I gave him the "real deal".

The ideology used in *Sanningen om Marika*, blurring the boundary between ordinary and fictional, was pioneered in the production team's previous projects, *Proposopeia Bardo 1: Där Vi Föll* (Montola & Jonsson, 2006) and *Proposopeia Bardo 2: Momentum* (Stenros et al, 2007). The only times where Skarped remembers being confused about the identities, are with people she already knew: playing with strangers is easier, as the ordinary personality is not known. As the role-played performance of Adrijanna and her experiences should appear completely real to people she met, this places special demands on costuming, propping and so on. If Adrijanna wanted to sleep on someone's couch, she had to do it for real.

I hitch-hiked during the first period of the game [...] I slept on the couches, and in the tents, of a lot of strangers, but I've done that before. I also carved up my knuckles, arms and feet enough to make them bleed a bit, when the players were going to rescue me [...] I reasoned that while you can use fake blood on film you can't do it [when meeting people for real] as people will see that it washes away [...] I wanted it to be as real as possible, for them and for me.

The stories Adrijanna told to unaware participants were seemingly unbelievable, containing conspiracies, secret societies and occult occurrences, but many people believed in them: "People believed an emotion far more than they believed in logic when you were talking to them", she recalls. Interestingly, once she had shared her stories, the people she met would do the same:

After I had opened up the can of weird, people seemed to feel safe sharing their own stories about stuff that somehow didn't fit the pattern of reality as it should be. When that kid told me about his invisible friend I was shocked, but after a while it became normal. I never knew that so many "normal" looking people believed in, or had even experienced weird shit themselves. I got confessions like that from all kinds of people, truck drivers, academics, young, old, you name it. And it didn't feel like they were bragging or trying to impress me. It really felt like they had been keeping these secrets for years, knowing full well that no one would believe them.

After Adrijanna told her story the people she met would reciprocate and share their stories with her. It seems that they recognized her stories as unbelievable and would then share stories and experiences that they themselves considered unbelievable. Whether they believed her stories – or their own stories – cannot be determined, but they clearly did recognize that in that social situation it was permitted to invoke stories that questioned the "consensus reality".

I don't think I am a liar for doing stuff, I consider myself a storyteller, because that is what a good storyteller does. They make you believe in it, or at least they make you believe in it for as long as the story lasts.

One of the challenges of blurring the line between real and fictive is that an actor opens herself to criticism on a whole new level. Some players will try to track down her real identity, others will criticize her persona, performance or a rumour they have heard of these.

There was discussions concerning my “true” identity on Flashback and other sites though, and most people could mark me as a larper with just a minimum amount of digging. [...] There was one guy though who e-mailed me on Facebook just a few weeks ago who apparently knew everything about my “real identity” [...] Don’t know if I should be creeped out or amused that someone makes the effort, this long after the game is over. But in general, the people I’ve met [in real life] have all been very nice. On the net I’ve been trashed in all kinds of ways, both as character and as whatever they think is my “true self”. It got to me in the beginning, until I googled the comments of some of the celebrities that I admire, and found them to be equally full of crap.

Skarped’s extreme experiences resemble those of Jessica Rose, who played Bree (see Davis, 2006), and some ARG ractors. Playing a role like this requires a strong commitment from the ractor. The ractor also needs to be ready for the developing parasocial relationships.

As the performance becomes public, she is no longer the sole owner of the character: The members of the audience can recount it, speculate, lie, and opinionate. In a way the character becomes disconnected from the performer, and if that character is partly based on the actor – as is common with both ractors and celebrities – then that discontinuation can be alienating for the actor.

The art of racting requires a combination of storytelling skills, con artistry and game mastering. Double consciousness is essential: while the ractor must remain in character at all times, she must also maintain distance to the situation to be able to game master the game properly, based on the directions of the rest of the production team – especially when making independent decisions on the fly. When playing a central character in a complicated transmedia production, this requires a thorough understanding of all aspects of the project.

### 3 Role-Play in Transmedia

Montola (2008) defines role-playing through three *invisible rules*:

**World rule:** Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.

**Power rule:** The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.

**Character rule:** Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world. (Montola, 2008)

Judged against these criteria, *Sanningen om Marika* was not a full-blown role-playing game. It was possible to play it without a character, or to even just follow passively without partaking in the iterative definition of the game world. For example the online puzzles could be approached without a role-playing mindset.

However, parts of *Sanningen om Marika* resembled role-playing very much. The players were encouraged to take on roles both online and on the streets, and to step into the diegetic world of the game. This was particularly true with the parts where Adrijanna was present, as her actions and dialogue constantly reinforced the game world. The people she encountered became a part of the world and the process. Arguably some of them also developed fictionalized versions of themselves that were able to function following the logic of the fictional game world.

*Alternate reality games* are one of the places where role taking and pretence activities are connected with gaming outside the most traditional forms of role-playing games, and thus an area where the studies of role-playing games become relevant for a larger segment of game research and media studies. Simultaneously, these borderline cases can inform larps and role-playing games in general.

This particular case draws attention to three points:

First, *Sanningen om Marika* reaffirms in a tangible way, that playing is something that is done consciously and freely (see also Huizinga, 1938; Carse, 1986). The people Adrijanna encountered could not role-play if they did not know that something playful was happening. They may not have known precisely what was going on, but they could identify the playful nature of the interaction (see also Bateson, 1955; Goffman, 1974). Those who did not catch on that Adrijanna was playing felt hurt when they learned about that afterwards.

Secondly, the act of role-playing is intuitive. Montola's rules are "invisible", underlining the fact that they are implicit and need not be explained in detail for people to role-play successfully. *Sanningen om Marika* affirms that not only are these rules invisible, but they are also easy to pick up just by participating in an activity that may not even have been labelled as role-playing.

Thirdly, elements of role-playing find their ways easily into other forms of media, if there is a fictional world and a possibility for interaction or performance. There is a lot of promise in the hybrids of role-playing and traditional media.

#### ***4 Social and Parasocial Relationships***

Giles (2002) lists three central factors that shape the parasocial relationships between media figures and audiences: *Authenticity/realism* of the media figure is found to correlate with stronger relationship in many studies, and thus relationships with celebrities tend to be stronger than with cartoon characters. He hypothesizes that *representation across different media outlets*, or transmediality, should also correlate with the parasocial relationship, giving pop stars an advantage over newscasters, as the latter are usually only shown in their newscasts.

Finally, *user contexts* are likely to influence the relationships; the hypothesis is that co-viewing a television show should intensify the parasocial relationship.

Incidentally, *Sanningen om Marika* is strong in all three aspects. Adrijanna sought to be as realistic as possible, from representing scratches and bruises *indexically* (see Montola et al, 2009) to appearing in television talk shows with government officials appearing as themselves. She was portrayed across media, in staged physical events and even in accidental interactions on the streets. And she was to be interacted with in carefully defined contexts, such as through her website *Conspirare*, where player-spectators could mutually reinforce their parasocial relationships with Adrijanna.

The central play instruction of the transmedia game was that the audience was expected to *pretend that it is real*. Even though popup disclaimers made it clear that *Sanningen om Marika* was not real, the audience was supposed to act as if it was. Pretending together and thus socially strengthening the agreed-upon "reality" of the social frame (Goffman, 1974) and the roles of each participant is something that role-players have discussed with the term *inter-immersion* (Pohjola, 2004).

In his *Continuum of Social-Parasocial Interaction*, Giles (2002) lists three orders of parasocial interaction (e.g. cartoons, soap characters and news anchors) at one end, and *dyadic* and *small group* encounters at the other. Between these extremes are two categories, *large groups* and *encounters with media figure* which seem to be situated in a fairly gray area. *Sanningen om Marika*, however, spans almost the whole continuum.

The character of Adrijanna never retreated to the third order parasocial interaction, reserved for cartoons and other characters that do not have a physical embodiment through an actor. Other than that, it was possible to engage the character of Adrijanna on all other levels. The question, of course, is whether the relationships with Adrijanna were parasocial or social.

Consider the interactions with the following media figures:

- 1) With a film or a literary character, who factually does not react to the spectator.
- 2) With a celebrity, whose media secretary handles correspondence with fans with form letters that pretend to be personal replies.
- 3) With Alistair of *Dragon Age: Origins* digital game, who engages in very limited, prescribed interaction with the player (see Waern, 2010).
- 4) With Bree Avery (see Davis, 2005) or Laia Salla (see Stewart, 2009), whose scriptwriters produce personal email replies en masse.
- 5) With Adrijanna, who replies to a *Sanningen om Marika* related email from a player, but the player does not know that Skarped actually typed the message.
- 6) With Adrijanna, who casually chats with an unaware outsider at a rock festival.

The latter cases are no longer parasocial relationships. The relationships are just as social as a relationship with a non-fictional person.

According to Hinde,

An essential character of a relationship is that each interaction is influenced by other interactions in that relationship. [...] A relationship exists only when the probable course of future interactions between the participants differs from that between strangers.

(Hinde, 1997)

In the first two cases there is no relationship to speak of. The third one is more complex, as in one gaming instance the relationship can develop, even if that development is negated when a game is restarted (see Waern, 2010). In the fourth case, if the scriptwriters care about continuity, they will maintain a log about past interactions and thus the relationship has a history, like there is between *Mass Effect* and *Mass Effect 2*.

However, as Bree is performed in text and in videos by different actors, a player who runs into Bree on the street will fail to build on previous interactions. This is what makes case five different: Adrijanna was performed by the same person in all media. Finally, for the unaware participant, the sixth case is not different from any other social interaction.

However, the fictional nature of these characters does have an influence. If the participant is aware of the fictionality, then a conscious act of pretending, playing along is needed. If the participant is unaware of the fictional nature, then the interactions are undistinguished from everyday interactions – at least until the fictionality is revealed. Adrijanna's social relationships with the players were, at times, very intricate:

I told the story or if he just came into the group when I had finished it, [I started] talking to [him] there, I think he actually came in later. But I was hanging out with him for a couple of hours later in that night, and afterward he wrote me this [...] really hateful mail where he was like, oh, you should, you know, just, I mean, this is, this is just acting [...] And what became really obvious was that he was really pissed off that I didn't recognize him later when I met him, or that he had somehow tried to pick me up or something and had failed, and he was like, I mean, this is not even a real person.

The unaware participant is upset as he finds out that a relationship he considered real turned out to be dishonest. Finding out that the interaction was not social but parasocial hurt him.

## 5 Role-Playing and Baudrillardian Simulation

Yet the barrier from parasocial to social was not impossible to breach.

Adrijanna got a lot of mail, both in game and a few who questioned the “reality” of the whole thing, but no one found my civilian inbox during the game. I have been getting fanmail to community accounts [...] One of them I took out for coffee and we ended up being friends.

The player and the actor became friends and built a social relationship based on a parasocial interaction. This is in line with Giles’s (2002) continuum of parasocial interaction. However, despite mentioning the possibility of interacting with the actors of soap opera characters, he does not consider social interactions with fictional characters.

It seems that parasocial relationships always include an element of fantasy, of pretend play, of role-play. Imagining a relationship, pretending that there is intimacy is central to the experience. With celebrities and newscasters it is possible to imagine a connection or a meeting, however unlikely that might be. With fictional characters the imaginer needs to pretend that the character is real or she herself could step inside a fiction, or that at least a connection is possible.

This is similar to Sihvonen’s (1997) *role-playing contract*. For him, the beginning of role-play marks the discontinuation of self: other players are no longer entitled to draw conclusions regarding the player based on the character. Parasocial relationship need not be visible to outsiders, but if they are, they would seem to have a similar social contract. As long as a person is not serious about the (parasocial) relationship with a fictional character, all is well. If she actually seems to believe there is a connection, this can be perceived as delusional.

Approaching the interactions between player-spectators and interactive game characters as social and parasocial helps us understand what happens in that relationship between the involved parties. However, considering the same situation on a higher, more abstract level, changes the picture.

Once we bring in a wider context of players telling about their experiences, journalists writing about them – the remediation of the experience – then these singular interactions take on a life of their own. When pretence is further removed, it is more cumbersome to unravel the layers of meaning. In order to understand the wider implications of these kinds of media figures, we need to change our perspective into a looser framework of cultural criticism.

The postmodernist philosopher Jean Baudrillard (1983) discusses the contemporary Western reality as *hyperreal*. In his thinking, the postmodern society is organized around *simulation*. Instead of dealing with the reality as such, our reality is built out of mediated representations and representations of representations. Consider, for example, news about celebrities, since celebrities are mediated reproductions in the first place and their public appearances are largely staged as well. Or, consider the *NHL 11* (2010) console game, which is rather a representation of a televised ice-hockey match than an actual one, and even an actual ice-hockey match is a composite of representations ranging from sports media narratives and culturally produced sport stars to sponsor advertisements.

In a Baudrillardian reading, the fictional characters of pervasive games are a natural continuation of celebrities and sport stars; Baudrillardian *simulations*. Baudrillard (1983) discusses persons portrayed in media as hyperreal media phenomena that questions and blur the division between fiction and reality and at its height they become *simulacra*, where the division is rendered meaningless. The celebrities we know from media are constructs of media. A clear example of the simulacrum celebrity is the band *Gorillaz*, created by Damon Albarn and Jamie Hewlett, though all the four members of the band are cartoons.

Though Baudrillardian postmodernism is perhaps slightly unfashionable, thinkers such as De Zengotita (2005) follow the same track. He refers to our mediated postmodern environment affectionately as *the blob*: His argument is that while we are generally able to separate the real from the representation, we rarely do that. As an example he lists different kinds of unreal:

**Staged realistic:** Movies and TV shows like *The English Patient* and *NYPD*.

**Staged hyperreal:** Oliver Stone movies and *Malcolm in the Middle*.

**Overtly unreal realistic:** SUVs climbing up the sides of buildings. Digitized special effects ingeneral, except when they are more or less undetectable.

**Covertly unreal realistic:** The models' hair in shampoo ads. More or less undetectable digital effects, of which there are more and more every day.

**In-between overtly and covertly unreal realistic:** John Wayne in a contemporary beer ad (because you have to know he is dead in order to know he isn't "really" in the ad, whatever that means).

**Real unreal:** Robo-pets.

**Unreal real:** Strawberries that won't freeze because they have fish genes in them.

(De Zengotita, 2005)

As we are constantly bombarded with different levels of mediation and unreal-ness, we simply do not bother with the distinctions. It is easier to adopt an air of aloofness and just be like, whatever.

The character simulations such as Adrijanna and Claire are usually constructed and performed by a team of authors, having no unitary author or performer. In practice, the dramatic arc of Adrijanna was scripted by writers, but the portrayal was mostly improvised by the actor based on directions given by the production team – and at times improvised entirely, as she ended up in an unforeseen situation. Adrijanna's case is unusual; often there is a clearer division of labour between the actor and the writers and game designers. For example Bree was portrayed by actress Jessica Rose, but her dialogue and emails were written by the production team.

The presence of obviously fictional character simulations can be seen as reinforcing the idea of everyday social identity as stable, real and unplayful. Baudrillard (1983) has written that the clearly manufactured nature of Disneyland reinforces an idea that the rest of America is real. The fact that most fictional characters do not have MySpace pages underlines the value of Claire Bennet's site, as that contrast makes Claire appear more real.

However, Claire also serves the very same purpose: A comparison of her MySpace page with that of her *Heroes* actress Hayden Panettiere taps on the same contrast, as it is intuitively rooted in the assumption that Hayden is somehow more "real" than Claire – even though as a celebrity, the Hayden we know from media is just as much a simulation. In many ways it is *Claire* that is more real – we know more about her and, at least during the *Heroes alternate reality games*, she was perhaps more likely to reply to your email than Hayden.

On a practical level, interacting with a media figure while pretending to believe in the fiction she represented, showed the players that this was not only something that could be done, but something that was fairly easy to do. The question of realness of media representations is not only theoretical, but also practical. When it is not clear if a person is fictional or not – like Adrijanna for many people – then the simulations become true Baudrillardian simulacra. The distinction between real and unreal collapses. The role-playing contract fails, as it requires all participants to enter willingly.



Pretence becomes just being and game playing ceases, as play is by its very nature free. Comparably, larps are simulations that “mask the *absence* of basic reality” (Baudrillard, 1983), that reinforce the consensus reality, and their pervasive counterpart obliterates the distinction and crosses over to simulacra and hyperreality. For a Swedish fan of both *Heroes* and *Sanningen om Marika*, Adrijanna Klinga may appear more real than Hayden Panettiere. After all, Adrijanna was present in media debates, unlike the Hollywood celebrity, and the chances of meeting her live were also considerably higher.

Baudrillard anticipated that the remediation happening in the hyperreal society would lead to obfuscation of the border between performers and audiences. The simulations become further complicated when the player is integrated into the network of the fiction. Some transmedia projects have a pre-existing narrative that the player-spectators uncover. However, in the ones that can actually be played, the players can and do contribute to how the game and the narrative progresses. In the process the players – or simulated versions thereof – can become part of the fiction. The players perform their roles for the benefit of themselves and others. They become simulacras themselves.

[S]witching over from the panoptic apparatus of surveillance (of *Discipline and Punish*) to a system of deterrence, where the distinction between active and passive is abolished. [...] “YOU are news, you are involved, you can use your voice, etc.” A turnabout of affairs by which it becomes impossible to locate instances of the model, of power, of the gaze, of the medium itself, since you are always already on the other side. (Baudrillard, 1983)

Indeed, the same process is being seen in the pervasive gaming, where all borders are taken down in search of new media forms: Just like Skarped was larping in *Sanningen om Marika*, the people who saw her and interacted with her posted stories on forums, in turn becoming performers to other users (see Dena, 2008). A MySpace user friending Claire becomes a part of the *Heroes* game, if not actively, at least in the sense of promoting Claire’s realness. *Conspiracy for Good* took this one step further, videoing play as it was going on in order to create web videos in the style of reality television game shows.

And as the fan-created transmedia extensions of *Alias* and *Mad Men* illustrate, the “realness” of these representations does not rely on any kind of “official authorization”.

## Conclusion

The kind of embodied role-playing that is associated with live action role-playing games is not limited to larps. Role-playing can and does take place in numerous contexts and there are many game genres and emergent media forms that take advantage of larp-like role-playing. The angle afforded by larp can help us understand those forms of media better – just as casting a wider net helps us contextualize larp better.

The model where social and parasocial interaction are mapped on a continuum, as proposed by Giles in answer to Horton and Wohl’s call to integrate parasocial interaction with usual social activity fits well the kind of relations that larp-ARG hybrids offer. These transmedial spectacles show that a single work can span the whole continuum from social to parasocial. Characters like Adrijanna and Claire show that it is possible to slide back and forth on that continuum, to play with it. Adrijanna, Claire and their siblings have become a novel media phenomenon, creating new kinds of relationships with audiences.

In the increasingly complex media landscape they are situated somewhere close to gonzo journalists’ self-representations (Hunter S. Thompson), clearly fabricated media personalities (Borat Sagdiyev), implicitly fabricated celebrities, reality television stars and so on. As Baudrillardian simulations, they question stable identity and consensus reality. As media figures to be interacted with, they teach how to play with media and what an important part role-play and pretence play has in this concoction. They also show, how the difference between social and parasocial, once relatively clear, has started to rapidly blur. The possibilities opened by networked society, the recent rise of participatory media, and the dedication of performers in pervasive, transmedia spectacles have made it possible to not only move seamlessly from social to parasocial, but also to become an object of parasocial interaction yourself.

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# *Chapter 3*

*Role, larping, structure and boundaries*

# The Dual-Faceted Role

*Lauri Lukka*

## *Keywords*

Concept Analysis, Social Psychology, Roles, Role-Playing Games, Role-Play Theory, Role theory, Semantics

The concept of role has eluded decisive definition in literature and has often been used ambiguously. In order to clarify the concept of role, this article proposes an integrative view: the dual-faceted role model. This model combines social psychological and role-play theoretical literature and suggests that the concept of role is essentially divided into two semantically distinct meanings: 1) a person's part in an interaction and 2) an actor's part in a creative performance. The former definition is explored in this article from a social psychological viewpoint. Roles belonging to this category are called everyday roles. The latter category is examined from a role-play theoretical viewpoint. Roles that belong to this category are called creative roles or characters. The dual-faceted role model compares diegetic character to everyday personality – they both include several context-bound everyday roles.

## 1 Introduction

The concept of role is ambiguous. It can be used to describe a variety of functions such as a role-playing character or a father's role in the family. Maybe because of this variety, the concept has eluded precise definition in scientific literature. The concept of role has been at the core of social psychology for decades, and yet not even social psychologists can agree to a shared definition of role (Biddle, 1979; Deaux, Dane, Wrightsman & Sigelman, 1993).

Several different definitions for it can be found in scientific literature as well (see for instance Biddle, 1979). These various definitions can be explained through the theorists' different theoretical backgrounds, which may have led them to emphasize different aspects of the concept of role. Nevertheless, understanding and clearly defining the concept of role is crucial for scientific discussion on it, especially in the field of role-playing theory.

One of the first to study role-playing games and interaction in them was Fine (1983). He made a distinction between different frameworks – namely primary, game, and character networks – within a game. The active cognitive network affects the way a participant perceives his surroundings. Further, Fine views players as collections of identities and adds that the players constantly shift between these identities. Mackay (2001) has expanded Fine's view to five categories: primary, game, narrative, constative, and performative frame. Each of these frames is inhabited by a different persona or role. Researching live action role-playing games, larps, with frame analysis has proved to be fruitful.

For instance, Stenros (2008) has analysed frames in pervasive larps, and Brenne (2005) has analysed different levels, frames, and roles in larps. Generally, frames can be understood as intrapersonal ways to perceive and understand the world around us. In contrast, roles refer to interpersonal schemas that influence our behaviour and others' expectations when interacting. Frames and roles could therefore be said to coexist. However, this article focuses on the interpersonal schemas: roles.

In recent decades, there has been an increasing amount of theorising about role-playing games and the interaction within them. Some of the most prominent theories include the threefold model (Kim, 1997) and the Big Model (Edwards, 2004). Kim's model suggests that there are different paradigms of play and that each one has different goals and features. These paradigms are not analogous to roles but rather affect the quality of the interaction during a role-playing session and the social conventions of the gaming group.

Edwards, on the other hand, describes three different stances a player can take towards his character: actor, author, and director. Theoretically, these stances should correlate to the amount of immersion into the character. Harviainen (2006) suggests that there are not different "player types" in larps but different "playing styles". The playing style of a player adjusts to the game and the context, somewhat like roles do. However, this article focuses on interpersonal aspects of roles and interaction rather than a subjective perspective on role-playing.

Before this article delves further into the world of roles, I would like to ask the reader to keep in mind both the goals and the limitations of this article. How one interprets character (see for instance Lappi, 2004) or a view on games in general (see for instance Salen & Zimmerman, 2004) is beyond the scope of this article. For a thorough discussion about different perspectives and theories on the concept of role in the field of psychology and role-playing theory, I advise the reader to turn to Henriksen (2007). This article introduces a dual-faceted role model that has four goals:

- 1) to provide a way to understand all kinds of roles by categorising them into two distinct facets;
- 2) to clearly define and label these two facets;
- 3) to encourage the use of these labels in future publications in order to facilitate unambiguous discussion on the subject of roles and interaction during role-playing games;
- 4) to suggest a way of conceptualising interaction during role-playing games with the model.

## 2 *The dual-faceted role*

This article aims to clarify the meaning of the concept of role by dividing it into two distinct concepts. This division is based on the semantic meanings of role: Oxford dictionary of English (Soanes & Angus, 2003) describes the core sense of role as “an actor’s part in a play, film, etc.”, and the concept’s sub sense is defined as “the function assumed or part played by a person or thing in a particular situation”. I will refer to the core sense as creative role and the sub sense as everyday role. These different facets of role are analysed further in their corresponding scientific fields: I will analyse the creative role through a role-play theoretical viewpoint and the everyday role through a social psychological viewpoint. This distinction is made because, in my opinion, when role-play theorists refer to role they usually mean the core sense of role, whereas social psychologists refer to its sub sense. This distinction was first introduced in Lukka (2010).

### 2.1 *Everyday roles – Social psychological perspective*

Historically, one of the key figures in researching human interaction and roles is Erving Goffman. Goffman (1959/1971) compares everyday interactions to theatrical performances: all the world’s a stage. He sees theatre and everyday life as analogous and uses vocabulary from theatre when describing everyday interactions. As actors in the theatre, Goffman believes people constantly attempt to control the impression they give to others by controlling their behaviour, appearance, and gestures. Concurrently, others – the audience, observers – interpret this performance and gather information about the actor from it. In this chapter, Goffman’s analogy is followed, and the person performing a role is called the actor, while the person perceiving this performance the observer.

The reader should bear in mind that roles often exist in complementary pairs, for instance, teacher-learner; mother-child. Therefore, one is usually both an observer and an actor in a situation. Many theorists, such as Krech, Crutchfield, & Ballachey (1962) and Kelvin (1970) see that roles should be defined in respect to other roles and that roles depend on each other. Saaristo and Jokinen (2004) even argue that one cannot perform a role alone. Interaction is a defining factor in the concept of role.

While performing a role, the actor often conforms to audience expectations (Biddle, 1979), and his performance is interpreted through role expectations (Sarbin, 1954). Thus, through expectations, roles influence both the actor and the observer. In fact, the two concepts, role and expectation, are very close. Krech, Crutchfield and Ballachey (1962) even describe roles as families of expectations. These expectations have clear functions for both the actor and the observer. From the actor’s perspective he gets continuous feedback on his performance in the role (Saaristo & Jokinen, 2004), which further helps to shape his performance.

From the observer’s perspective they make the actor’s behaviour more predictable and thus make the interaction more fluent (Dewey & Humber, 1966). Expectations, in a way, model ideal interaction (Kelvin, 1970). Expectations are most clear in socially standardised and familiar situations. In this kind of situation people behave in a top-down way letting their expectations guide, and even restrain, their behaviour. Saaristo and Jokinen (2004) agree to this view and see roles as rules that guide behaviour.

Roles include obligations to behave in a certain, role prescribed way, but they also include rights (Biddle, 1979; Krech et al., 1962). In situations where the observer’s expectations are strong, Goffman (1959/1971) sees that the actor’s role is more prescribed with less opportunity to influence it. Goffman also argues that in this kind of situation one does not primarily display one’s personal characteristics, but the characteristics of the task at hand.

This is because observers consciously or unconsciously guide one towards expected behaviour. To summarise, in socially standardised situations we can perceive that roles are normative (Hollander 1967; Kelvin, 1970; Deaux, Dane, Wrightsman, & Sigelman, 1993; Sulkunen, 1998). Behaviour in accordance with the current role is given positive feedback, and breaking the role expectations is punished one way or another. In this way, the consequences of the role performance maintains the role. In contrast to familiar situations, people in new situations don’t have a clear role schema and act in more of a bottom-up way.

Goffman (1959/1971) sees that we usually want to maintain a positive image of ourselves in other people's minds. Although, sometimes it might be beneficial to maintain a harsh or even negative role or image. This process of impression management, according to Goffman, can be either conscious or unconscious. Even if impression management is present in situations where there are strong roles, impression management and roles do not go hand in hand. Impression management affects how people perceive us, that is, it aims to affect how people see our stable characteristics. It attempts to build a beneficial picture of the actor's self and personality – an image that is generalised over the actor's many roles.

In social psychology, roles are seen to be inseparably connected to the actor's social status (Biddle, 1979): the two always coexist. Just as people have numerous roles each day, people have multiple social statuses, and their roles change accordingly (Saaristo & Jokinen, 2004). However, it is important to make a clear distinction between the concepts of social status and role. Kelvin (1970) clarifies this difference: social status is a person's position within a group and a role is the behaviour in that status. He further explains that while stereotypes help us to understand the differences between groups, roles help us understand differences within the group.

Roles are critical to dyadic interaction, but they have important functions on a group level as well. By conforming to a certain role, one refreshes and reinforces group structure and morals (Goffman, 1959/1971). Sulkunen (1998) sees that norms are an interactive way of conforming to a group's behaviour and thinking. Thus, roles function as socialising agents. Roles also enable a group to function by clarifying each person's behaviour. Also, roles are learned in social interaction within groups through socialisation (Biddle, 1979; Sulkunen, 1998). Key social mechanisms for learning roles are feedback, modelling, and practicing (Biddle, 1979). In addition to having many group level functions, roles have an important function on an individual level: they lay the foundation for personality. Once a person has performed the same roles many times, he internalises them to form a personality, which is something rather stable at the core of the actor's self (Goffman, 1959/1971).

As the actor internalises his roles, others form a shared impression of the actor's personality and give him feedback on his performance. However, it is again important to make a clear distinction between the concepts of role and personality. Emmerich (1961) makes an insightful remark: the personality of a person is derived from one person's behaviour in several roles, whereas the concept of a role is deduced from a typical person's behaviour in a specific role.

To sum up, roles are defined from a social psychological perspective. Roles emerge spontaneously in interaction, especially in socially standardised situations. They are context-bound presets that manifest in a person's behaviour and guide it. Other people's expectations, group norms, and one's own perception of the role shape the role behaviour. Their function is to make interaction more predictable. Roles should be clearly distinguished from the concepts of personality, impression management, and social status. In essence, roles are “the function assumed or part played by a person or thing in a particular situation” (Soanes & Angus, 2003). This is what the dual-faceted role model dubs everyday roles.

## *2.2 Creative roles – Role-play theoretical perspective*

In order to understand creative roles we have to understand their context. In this chapter, I focus on creative roles in role-playing games, especially larps, but most of the observations made in this chapter apply to roles in theatre, television, and films as well. The concepts ‘creative role’ and ‘character’ are used interchangeably and synonymously.

To briefly touch the issue of games, Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p. 80) view a game as a “system, in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome”. In role-playing games, rules are used to simulate the diegetic events, and they act as diegetic norms in some cases. Diegesis refers to the reality within the game (Stenros & Hakkarainen, 2003). Larp is a special type of game. Fatland and Wingård (2003, p. 24) describe a larp as “a meeting between people, who through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world”.



Among others, Pohjola (2003), Koljonen (2003) and Castellani (2009) see that immersion into a character and interaction are essential to role-playing and larping. Pohjola (2004, p. 84) implies that self-suggestion is the key to immersion: “But more than *pretending to be* the character, the player *pretends to believe she is* the character” (original italics). Jarl (2009), however, finds that larping resembles acting more than playing. The definition of the Oxford dictionary semantically supports Jarl’s viewpoint by defining the fifth sub sense of ‘to act’ as: “[to] Perform a role in play, film, or television”. The connotations of the terms might have had quite an influence on their use: the term player may connote rivalry and competitiveness while the term actor could connote scripted action.

Role-playing is born in the interaction within diegesis (Copier, 2007; Gade, 2003). Therefore, larping alone is not possible (Stenros & Hakkarainen, 2003). The game is set in a certain time and place, which indicates to the participants that they are involved in a game. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) see this as a special safe haven separate from real life. According to them, reality of play has special qualities, creating what Huizinga (1950) describes as a magic circle. Within this magic circle roles are guided by the rules of the game, and act as norms within the diegesis and simulate the world and events in it. Pargman and Jakobsson (2006) later questioned the magical qualities of games. They argue that in games a person constantly changes his/her role and that this is quite natural for interaction.

According to Stenros and Hakkarainen (2003) both players and a game master are needed for role-playing. By these they mean the roles taken by the participants. This means that during a role-playing game people also take on roles outside the diegesis. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) also support this view and see that during a game, the consciousness of the player is divided into three: the character, the player, and the person within a larger social environment. Stenros and Hakkarainen (2003, p. 57) define a character as “a framework of roles through which the player interacts within the game, and for which she constructs an illusion of a continuous and fixed identity, a fictional ‘story of self’ binding the separate disconnected roles together”.

The dual-faceted role model agrees with this definition and sees a character as a collection of everyday roles that together form a personality. Therefore, it is misleading to talk about taking on a role or immersing into one. We should rather talk about immersing into the personality of a character. *This is the key point where immersing into a creative role in role-playing game differs from taking on a role within a normal social setting.* This does not mean that everyday roles within the diegesis and outside of it are different, but that everyday roles and creative roles differ.

One’s personality and the personality of the character one is playing are constantly in interaction and decisive distinction between them is impossible to make. The fact that the thoughts and emotions emerging during a game are most definitely real, can further blur the line between player and character. The process, in which thoughts and emotions that are born during a game have an effect on a player’s real personality, is called bleed. When bleed occurs, one is unable to sufficiently differentiate one’s real personality from that of the character’s. This blurring of the boundaries is one of the aims of pervasive games (Stenros, 2008).

Andreasen (2003) suggests that two rooms exist in role-playing games: diegetic and non-diegetic. While immersed, the participant is in both rooms and thus in a double diegetic state. Andreasen introduces the concept of Orwellian double think, which is the ability to keep two conflicting ideas active in one’s mind and believe in them both – which is exactly what happens during a game. Salen and Zimmerman (2004) discuss the same topic via the concept of metacommunication: during a game, a person can simultaneously send two conflicting messages – one to a player, one to a character. An example of this kind of a message could be: “I will kill you”. The character could interpret it as a grave threat, but the player knows he will not be harmed. Another way of describing the interplay between the character and the player is the adherence to rules. The rules must be constantly kept in mind for safety (Andreasen, 2003) and yet forgotten while immersed. Understanding the concepts of bleed, pervasive game, and Orwellian double think are important for the dual-faceted role model because they describe interaction between everyday and creative roles.

To sum up, creative roles are the fictional personalities, characters, into which an actor immerses himself during a creative performance, such as a role-playing game or a larp. Creative roles are analogous to a personality in an everyday environment. Character includes several everyday roles that change situationally. In the dual-faceted role model, the terms creative role and character are used synonymously, but the term creative role is used when stressing the difference from an everyday role.

### 2.3 The dual-faceted role model

In the previous section, I have presented two distinct facets of roles, in terms of the concepts of everyday and creative roles. These definitions form the key argument of the dual-faceted role model. The model argues that there is a clear difference between the role as a preset for interaction (everyday role) and as a personality organisation (creative role). The two concepts are in a hierarchical and overlapping interaction with one another in a role-playing context. Table 1 further summarises some of the differences and similarities between everyday and creative roles.

**Table 1. Descriptive comparison between everyday and creative roles**

Factor	Everyday role	Creative role / Character
The coverage of the role	Guides behaviour in a certain situation. Subordinate to personality.	Affects behaviour in all situations. Is subordinate to participant's real personality and forms a complete personality within the diegesis, which includes all the character's everyday roles.
The function of the role	To facilitate interaction.	For instance pleasure.
Consciousness of the role	Usually unconscious.	Usually first conscious, but becomes less conscious while immersion deepens.
Learning the role	Role is learned via social modelling, feedback etc.	Participant consciously tries to learn and understand the character's personality.
Role is guided by	Group norms and expectations.	Gamemaster's wishes, the rules of the game, the diegetic norms, the norms of the player group.
The autonomy of the role	Exists in interaction.	Exists in interaction.
Genuineness of the role	The person is his roles in non-diegetic situations, but diegetic roles are partly fictional.	Person is someone else than himself.
Commitment to the role	One takes on the role in interaction with the context for the duration of the situation.	One is committed to the role only for the duration of the creative event, such as game or performance.

Harviainen (2006) separates four different ways in which one's real personality and the character interact. First, a divisive view sees the two identities as completely disconnected – a player becomes his character via immersion. Second, a narrative view sees characters as social masks, roles. This perspective sees immersion as the taking on of an everyday role. Third, a perikhoretic view sees character and player as complete individual personalities that interact with each other. Fourth, a blended view sees that a combination of player traits, character background material and several frames combine to build the character.

The dual-faceted role model can be analysed through Harviainen's (2006) categories. The two personalities are seen to interact, in contrast to the divisive view. *Characters include social masks (everyday roles), but in essence, they are full personalities (creative roles), as in the perikhoretic view.* Thus, the dual-faceted role model reinterprets the narrative view while accepting the perikhoretic view. Moreover, character acquisition is affected by many variables, as suggested by the blended view.

Immersion and interaction in role-playing games can be conceptualised with the dual-faceted role model. *When immersing into a character/creative role the participant attempts to grasp the whole personality (creative role) rather than one specific (everyday) role of a different person (Table 2).*

However, the character's personality and one's own personality always overlap: during a game one is unable to completely forget about oneself following the Orwellian double-think principle (Andreasen, 2003), except for brief moments of what Csikszentmihalyi (1990) would describe as flow. Everyday roles are seen as hierarchically lower constructs than a personality, subordinate to it.

**Table 2. The dual-faceted role model**

Everyday roles and creative roles in diegesis and non-diegesis

Non-dieges	via immersion ->	Diegesis
Personality	<- bleed	Character (creative role)
Includes many everyday roles		Includes many everyday roles

The dual-faceted role model can be used to analyse communication and miscommunication, most efficiently in situations where there are multiple everyday and creative roles present. When communicating, it is possible that the other party misinterprets which everyday or creative role we are communicating from or which everyday or creative role we are communicating to.

Should this happen, it is likely that the message will be misinterpreted. However, there are many ways to avoid this confusion. For instance, in many larps there are conventions, such as holding one's hand on one's head, to indicate that one is out of character for a moment. By conceptualising and naming the active roles, interaction patterns can be clarified and analysed more thoroughly.

In larps and in pre-larp workshops (Bruun, 2011) the dual-faceted role model could be used to build deep, multifaceted characters that simulate a non-diegetic personality more precisely by acknowledging the situational changes in behaviour. The model also explains why especially larp-characters have lists of relations or descriptions of other characters. They exist to facilitate immersion into character by building diegetic everyday roles. Also, the model can be used as a tool when documenting larp interaction.

### 3 Conclusion

The concept of role has defied definition; therefore, it has often been used in an unclear way. The dual-faceted role model tackles this by dividing the concept of role into two. By acknowledging the conceptual differences between the two aspects of roles – everyday and creative roles – the subject can be discussed in a more unified way. Perhaps even a consensus on the definition of the concept of role could be reached.

This article suggests that the two aspects of roles should be acknowledged by using different terms for the two aspects: character (creative role) can be used to describe the diegetic personality and role (everyday role) can be used when referring to the minor constructs subordinate to the personality either outside or within diegesis. The goal of this distinction is not merely to avoid misunderstandings but to more precisely describe the complexities underlying the interaction within role-playing games and character acquisition.

### 4 Further perspectives

Further research should be done on this model and its implications as there are several important issues that have not yet been sufficiently discussed. Firstly, there is a possibility that everyday roles and creative roles include subcategories. For instance, Sulkunen (1998) separates (everyday) roles into three categories: 1) situational roles that are non-stable roles experienced in everyday situations, for example helper or customer; 2) roles related to a social status that can be achieved, for instance, doctor or minister; and 3) status roles that are ascribed involuntarily such as woman or adult. These three categories can be seen as mental schemas that are activated in different situations and shape our behaviour in them. Therefore, this categorisation is not in conflict with the sub sense of the concept of everyday role. The three categories could be subcategories of everyday role.

Secondly, it should be empirically studied, if there are any differences between diegetic and non-diegetic everyday roles. Thirdly, the conceptual differences and similarities between real-life personality and diegetic character should be researched. Finally, the dual-faceted role model should be assessed empirically to confirm its validity.

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# The Larping that is not Larp

*J. Tuomas Harviainen*

## *Keywords*

Bibliodrama, Chaos Magic, Live-Action Role-Playing, Re-Enactment, Sadomasochism

Through systematic analysis - deconstructive referencing - this article discusses the role-playing component of four forms of role-play considered siblings to larp. By doing so, it shows that larping exists in areas which are not larp, and that there is a need to start differentiating between 'larping', the act of physically playing a character, and 'larp', one of the best-known framings in which larping takes place. The role-playing parts of historical re-enactment, sadomasochism, bibliodrama and even post-modern magic are all examples of larping that is not normally seen as such, just similar to it. In all of them, people physically play fictional personas within fictional or temporarily altered realities. They do this in a manner identical to the larping done in larps. The activity context of each, however, is very different from larps. By examining such forms of larping, it is possible to understand much more of the activity itself, as well as the significance of the larping part to the various fields where it is practiced.

This article uses systematic analysis to show that the concept of “larping”, as we traditionally use it, is sorely limited. In reality, larping encompasses many of the so-called “sibling” activities as well. Through four widely documented examples, this paper examines whether larping actually takes place in contexts that are not larp. In doing so, it continues the vein of analyzing larp and its cousins, discussed before by researchers such as Morton (2007) and Ericsson (2004).

A key distinction in this article is that it treats *larp* as the singular event or series, which in turn contains the activity of *larping*. As will be shown, the two are not the same. Therefore, while this paper argues that certain other pretence activities may actually be larping in other guises, it does not say that they are larps. This is crucial: Two things set larp apart from the likes of sadomasochist role-playing, role-played military training exercises and bibliodrama.

Firstly, their framing is very different: Larp is an activity unto itself whereas the others are construed as role-played facets of other activities (see Harviainen, forthcoming, and Newmahr, in press, for examples). The second one, discussed below, is their different types of magic circle - the invisible border temporarily separating such activities from mundane reality (as per Huizinga, 1939 and Salen & Zimmerman, 2003). Larps rely on a non-porous magic circle (Harviainen & Lieberoth, forthcoming), the others on an intentionally perforated one.

This article approaches its subject through systematic analysis, the hermeneutic research methodology in which documents and sources (typically ideological or phenomenographical works) are deconstructed for their data content (see Harviainen, 2009, on applying hermeneutics to role-playing analysis). The documents in this case are empirical works on, and guidebooks to, the example sibling activities, as well as on larps and larping.

In systematic analysis, one takes the documented properties (or opinions) of a subject, in this case the supposed larping-like elements of certain other activities, and analytically condenses those in order to find their essence.

These parts are then compared to one another, in order to create a holistic understanding of the subject. The core essence of the method lies in systemic immanence, i.e. in that the subject document is analyzed through itself, not with external tools..

As the base material here consists of guidebooks and empirical works, it is possible to say something about the phenomenon of larping itself through them. The key problem with such an approach is that it deals with secondary empirics, analyzing the reports and opinions of others: This means that, for example, systematic analysis of Bowman (2010) does not truly provide information re-enactment as larp, but rather “Bowman’s view of re-enactment as larp” (as per Jolkkonen, 2007).

This problem can, however, be bypassed by the aforementioned combination of several targets of study, which moves the method towards structural analysis. Taken together, they form a critical mass of opinions on a subject, acceptable as sufficiently credible.

The purpose of this analysis is to show that despite possible claims to the contrary, larping is not limited to larps, and activities the practitioners of which deny a connection to larping actually are sometimes just that. This means that the study of larping has to expand its perspective when it speaks of the activity, or to discursively limit its subject to the larping done in larps.

In order to truly understand larping, we need to repeatedly ask ourselves what exactly is, or is not, larping - even though a precise definition may not be actually possible. Examining the borderlines between larping and activities similar to it, as well as larps and other physical role-playing environments, increases the general knowledge necessary for a more precise understanding of what the phenomenon contains.



## 1 Key criteria for what constitutes larping

As Morton (2007) has very clearly demonstrated, precisely defining larps and larping is extremely hard, and has more to do with ideologies of exclusion than anything else. Yet in discussing the limits of the phenomenon, some parameters are necessary. This paper uses three criteria as the mandatory core of the activity, all three of which need to be present for something to constitute larping:

- ◆ Role-playing in which a character, not just a social role, is played.
- ◆ The activity takes place in a fictional reality shared with others. Breaking that fictional reality is seen as a breach in the play itself.
- ◆ The physical presence of at least some of the players as their characters.

Note that there is no “game” or “scenario” component. The activity and its framed environment are, as noted above, two different things. Furthermore, these criteria are themselves, naturally, under debate. For example, Montola (2009) describes role-playing as:

- 1) Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.
- 2) The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.
- 3) Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.

(Montola, 2009, pp. 23-24.)

and Drachen & Hitchens (2009) a role-playing game as containing:

1. Game World
2. Participants
3. Characters
4. Game Master
5. Interaction
6. Narrative

In the case examples presented below, it is easy to see that while other factors get stretched to various directions in them, the presence of a character which the player physically portrays (or, possibly, immerses into; see Harviainen 2006 for variables) remains constant. Should there be no character to play, the role-playing component is immediately lost. Likewise, if the role is just a social one (say, “healer”, as documented by Copier, 2007, in online role-playing games) instead of a sufficiently complete character (“Moninga, the priestess, who acts as the healer of the group”), the nature of the activity changes to something else (as per Drachen & Hitchens, 2009).

## 2 Character complexity, integrity and fictional worlds

That clause of “sufficiently complete” is of utmost importance here. A person with just a name change is not role-playing, but as soon as he uses that different name as a basis for an activity choice - any activity choice of any depth - the lines blur. As Harviainen (2006) has documented, players may have extremely dissimilar relationships between their everyday persona and the fictional one.

Some seek to “become” the character as much as possible, some treat it as a social identity similar to the way a “home” self may be different from a “workplace” self. And some either blend the two, or appear to have them as “interlaced wholes”. The relationship is not stable, and players experience “bleed”, a leakage of information and emotions between the character and the player, to either direction (Montola, 2010).

A sufficiently complete character is therefore a fictional construct of sorts - summable as a *persona who could get by in the fictional environment on its own, were it somehow torn apart from the player*.

As for the fictional reality or world, the situation is likewise complex. Such a world may be a totally new one, a fictional space imposed upon a real place (as per Aarseth, 2000). It may, however, just as well be an altered or augmented version of the real world, as in the case of larps played amidst an unknowing public (Montola, Stenros & Waern, 2009).

The temporary reality is created through shared discourse (Ilieva, 2010), making it a re-signification zone where participants are able to work on at least equifinal interpretations of both present and imagined things (Loponen & Montola, 2004). The maintenance of such symbol systems as sufficiently functioning is a validation process based on a communicated assertion of what is temporarily accepted as “true” (as per Bankov, 2009).

In Caillois’ (1961) terms, these pretence activities are all fundamentally *ilinx*, in the sense of becoming-other. Playing with challenges (*agon*), the actual acts of pretence (*mimicry*), as well as a possibly desired control over the chance (*alea*) component are tools which people combine to assume that *ilinx*, through the experiential filter of the character. The combination levels are dependant of situational variables and player preferences, and what are generally called “player types” or “playing styles”, but all factors appear to be present to some extent in the participation of actually committed players (Harviainen, 2006).

This is a significant definitive concept, because not all pretence activities constitute role-playing, and not all role-playing fits even the broadest concepts of larp. For example, certain Albanian women (so-called “sworn virgins”) live their whole lives as socially men, and are treated by others as such (Young, 2000). This, however, is framed as a part of normal life in the local culture, not a temporary step beyond the mundane, and there is no competitive component to the activity. In larping, it is key that everyone agrees early on that they’re all doing pretence play (as per Heliö, 2004), not following a temporary social systems adjustment.

Furthermore, the interpretation given to an activity may define its pretence traits: The so-called ex-gays, for instance, can be seen as either non-pretenders fighting something they define as an unwelcome addiction, similar to alcoholism, or as people role-playing heterosexual versions of themselves (see Spitzer, 2003, for a more thorough description). Given that they rely on a peer-support system interpretable as an imposed temporary reality, it would be quite easy to construct a credible case of the whole phenomenon being just a strange kind of pervasive larp (as per Montola, Stenros & Waern, 2009 and Harviainen & Lieberoth, forthcoming).

It is also essential to note that none of the connections suggested in this article is in any way a new finding per se. On the contrary, anecdotal commentary of such similarities has probably existed as long as the act of larping has been identified as a separate phenomenon. Researchers have already provided data on many of the case examples here, as well as collected histories of shared grounding (see Morton, 2007, for a key example) The purpose of this article and the case examples is to provide further grounding for such arguments, by identifying more or less obvious connection, similarity and identity factors.

### ***3 First Case: Re-enactment***

An oft-cited sibling (or, in the case of Russia, offshoot; Kann & Rozkov, 2010) of larping is historical re-enactment (see Stallone, 2007, and Morton, 2007, for examples). Simply described, re-enactment is the temporary adoption of the crafts, customs and personas of some historical period of choice, or an idealization of those (Stallone, 2007).

Popular periods include Medieval and the American Civil War era (see Lee, 2005, and Hunt, 2004, for examples). Stallone (2007) lists re-enactment and role-playing games together as facets of the same thing. Building upon this, Bowman (2010) makes an argument to treat them as the same phenomenon. Yet they are in my opinion not, as re-enactment appears to also contain elements that are not at all larping - from instructions to crafts to discourse (Vartiainen, 2010). The similarity of those activities to preparations for a larp are obvious, but their purpose is different: for re-enactment, they are a fundamental part of the activity itself, not preparation for something else.

Hunt (2004) has shown that re-enactors place great importance on the authenticity of the illusory reality where the role-play part of the activity takes place. Yet the main emphasis, to many, seems to be on camaraderie and social contacts. These, in turn, are dealt with through lessening the integrity of the characters they portray. The social contract of re-enactment permits personas that may, determined by participant preferences, be as simple as only a period-appropriate name, or as complex as a larp character played for several years. (Lee, 2005).

My own personal observation, gathered over half a decade, is that a typical re-enactment persona is treated quite similar to a character of a long-term larp campaign played mostly for fun - as a social role enabling enjoyment, with occasional forays into deeper personality issues.

This lessening of character identity towards just a social role is what, if anything, truly separates re-enactment role-play from larping, including historical re-enactment larps. The lessening, however, is not so strong as to make them distinctively different activities: Role-players in larps, too, may play with shallow characters and have purposes other than total immersion in mind (Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2003; Harviainen, 2006).

Therefore what essential difference exists is in name, framing and character depth only, all of which are questions of scales and semantics, not distinguishing factors. Of these of special significance is framing - the placement of the role-play into the role of being a part of the more holistic activity, not the end-goal in itself. To understand the importance of framing for a form of role-play, we turn to pain-as-pleasure.

#### ***4 Second Case: Sadomasochist role-playing***

Another apparent sibling field, where such framing as a part of a wide variety of actions is the key, is sadomasochist role-playing (Harviainen, forthcoming). It too takes place as part of a larger framework, i.e. sadomasochism<sup>1</sup>. Role-play is a crucial part of most (but not all) sadomasochist encounters, also called “scenes” (Weinberg, Williams & Moser, 1984). That it takes place in a fictional reality has been noted by several scholars, such as Deleuze (1967), Gebhard (1969) and Weinberg (1978). Mains (1984) considers such scenes to be “ritual psychodrama”.

In sadomasochist scenarios, the participants take on roles appropriate to the scene’s fantasy framework, such as temporarily becoming a military officer and a captured spy in a fictional context of World War II. This is done for the purpose of seeking mutual pleasure through the scene, a pleasure which appropriate role-play heightens<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> This sub-chapter is based on Harviainen (forthcoming). For the reason of brevity, “sadomasochism” is used as an umbrella concept here, counting inside it activities the practitioners may themselves call with a different name, such as “BDSM” or “leather” (Mains, 1984).

The duration of play in such scenes can range from brief to constant (“24/7”, Dancer et al., 2006), but a strong, if sometimes subtle, role-playing component is nevertheless always present (Harviainen, forthcoming).

Sadomasochist role-play is heavily rule-bound, making it very game-like (as per Suits, 1978). In this way, sadomasochist scenarios are similar to (usually very tiny) larps. There is also a game-master function of sorts (see Harviainen, forthcoming, for details) as either the dominant (overtly) or the submissive partner (covertly, “topping from bottom”) defines what is acceptable and expected play (Moser & Madson, 1996).

Yet sadomasochist role-play, too, is but one - if significant - facet of a larger group of activities, as mentioned above (Mains, 1984). The context defines whether a pain or humiliation-containing activity within it is pleasurable or not (Ellis, 1903), and many types of sadomasochist play may well be experienced without characters, with the participants holding just social roles related to a situational or constant power exchange or dialectic (Harviainen, forthcoming). In some sadomasochist communities, role-playing beyond the basic dominant/submissive power exchange may even be a rare phenomenon (Newmahr, in press).

Several larps have also included sadomasochism as a central theme, but as Harviainen (forthcoming) notes, in those games the primary frame of reference was that of a larp, with the sadomasochist activity (both role-playing and non) then being performed inside the fiction of the games.

#### ***5 Third Case: Bibliodrama***

Whereas sadomasochist roleplay is viscerally escapist in tone, if not always purpose, others use role-play for analytic clarity. Bibliodrama, the interpretation of literary - usually biblical - passages through role-play is an offshoot of the psychodrama (a method of psychotherapy which uses dramatization, role playing and dramatic self-presentation to analyze one’s actions and life situations) developed by Moreno (1953).

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<sup>2</sup> Whether such pleasure is of a sexual nature or not is under constant debate (see Newmahr, 2010 for examples). For the purposes of this article, I consider it too to generally be a kind of ilinx (in the abovementioned sense of becoming-other; Caillois, 1961).

It is intended to create a connection between the biblical tradition and the experience of participants (Martin, 2001). It is also one of the most obvious siblings of larping, to the point where it is rather easy to see that there is no real difference beyond framing: Bibliodrama discusses its subject through the use of a staged scene, where people play characters, not just roles, and the event is treated as if it were a separate, temporary reality of its own (Räisänen, 2008).

As a form of larping, bibliodrama can be seen as closest to play in educational larps (or even as being de facto educational larp with just a different name) where the presence of the game master / teacher / expert facilitator is strong and the narratives are geared towards didactic purposes (as per Henriksen, 2004, 2009). It is furthermore quite close to jeepform, the mixed-method approach for creating story-intense games (see Wrigstad, 2008, for details) - itself, too, a descendant of sorts of both larp and Moreno's psychodrama. These are connections that bear further research, because several countries, such as Finland and Sweden, also have a history of larps organized by church groups.

### ***6 Fourth Case: Post-modern magic***

Religion and larp share more than one connection, however. One such instance is post-modern magic - magical schools of thought built on the idea that what matters for magical results is individual belief, not following age-old traditions (Woodman, 2003; Evans, 2007)<sup>3</sup>.

Post-modern magic includes several techniques where a god-like being - a possibly imagined one (as per Sherwin, 2005) - is invoked to become the magician's personality. This is typically done as a three-way process, by invoking said deity in the third, then second, then first person, until one "becomes" that deity (Hine, 1999). Effectively, the magician pretends to be the deity until a (supposed) possession is reached. This taking on of a role/character is identical to the way some players take on their larp characters, up to and including immersing into them (as per Harviainen, 2006). Similar role-taking may also take place in more traditional forms of magic.

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<sup>3</sup> The key concept in post-modern magic is the idea that various belief systems can create magical results, and that all such systems - religious or magical - contain fictional (or at least unverifiable) material. Therefore, according to post-modern magicians, even a fictional belief system should be able to create similar results, as long as the magician believes it to be true during the ritual. For what counts as post-modern magic, see Evans (2007).

For example, voodoo documentedly contains the same phenomenon, excluding the idea of practitioners accepting the deity as possibly fictional (Lovell, 2002).

Practitioners such as chaos magicians furthermore discuss certain kinds of magic as acting through the idea of a virtual world where change is possible (Dukes, 2001), and following loosely pre-planned paths in order to secure success in one's activities (Hine, 1999). Performing a chaos magic ritual is dependant on a 'temporary, yet total belief, in a belief system presumed to bring forth the desired result' (Evans, 2007). Hine (1999) further notes, just as Mains (1984) mentioned of sadomasochism, that the rituals of a chaos magician heavily resemble psychodrama. When they also include the aforementioned role-taking, they are very much like highly formalistic larps: The magicians pretend to be other persons or entities, inside a delineated, specially prepared pretence space suitable for that role-play, a space which is temporarily superimposed upon a real place. Questions of magic's veracity aside, there is form-wise nothing that separates a chaos magic invocation ritual from a larp.

The invocations of post-modern magic - be it chaos or other (see Grant, 1992, for a non-chaotic example) - appear to be constructed around the exactly same elements as larps are, just with a different twist. One would furthermore do them injustice, if one would disregard the playful attitude within their approach (Harviainen & Lieberoth, forthcoming), which further brings them close to larp in both form and spirit, if not function. Given that such phenomena exist also in more traditional forms of magic (Sørensen, 2006), we once more reach a point where larping appears to have brought forth a socio-cognitive mechanism which is elsewhere often ignored as just a part of being human.

Ana-Maria Rizzuto (1991), building upon Winnicott (1971), has suggested that pretence lies at the root of all human religious behavior. According to Rizzuto, the play-space a child constructs first by imposing fictions on a blanket corner grows into representations of superhuman entities, negotiated into formal imagined representation through contact with other people.

## 7 Discussion

Walton (1990) has argued a similar root for representative arts. This points towards there being a shared mechanism of some kind in both pretence and belief - both being “acting as if” (as per McCauley & Lawson, 2002), in contrast to visible and tangible reality. This is a mechanism absolutely necessary for what we call larping (for more on these connections, see Lieberoth & Harviainen, forthcoming).

Numerous other case examples exist, some closer to larping than others: Medical, military, negotiation and rescue training exercises, psychodrama, and so on (see Morton, 2007 and Crookall, Oxford & Saunders, 1987). Even at a glance, the similarity to children’s pretence is rather obvious, a connection which has been explored by researchers such as Lieberoth (2008) and Rognli (2008). Likewise, at least some overlap and shared techniques exist between larping and various forms of improvisational and experimental theatre (Flood, 2006, Morton, 2007, Harviainen, 2008).

In the case of each sibling activity to larps and larping, certain distinguishing factors can be noted. What especially stands out is that their magic circles appear, from a gaming perspective, to be intentionally “flawed”. This is because the forms of larping activity which take place in other contexts are meant to cause bleed - they are played as a part of something bigger, and are not the end-all of said activity even during play. Their interaction structure (as per Gade, 2003) is different from larps.

This goes well beyond the goal-orientation of educational or political larps: The re-enactor, the sadomasochist and the bibliodrama participant know they are doing formalized role-play, and not seeking total immersion. Their magic circles stay broken or porous, as things such as meta-level concerns, physical pain or intentional during-play reflection need to get through - as opposed to the information-blocking power of a larp’s or religious ritual’s magic circle (Harviainen & Lieberoth, forthcoming).

A post-modern magician, in turn, works with a more pronounced dual cognition, choosing to believe in a possibly fictional identity and reality interpretation while also maintaining their own (Evans, 2007).

All four activities’ character-participant relations variables fit easily within the different ways of playing characters in larps (as per Harviainen, 2006) and the dual-role requirement of role-playing (Lukka, 2011). It should furthermore be noted that a participant may treat the framings of such activities as “larps” even if that is not the case for others who are present. For instance, nothing prevents a re-enactor from secretly considering the Medieval feast a larp, but for it to be collectively treated as a larp (or become a de facto larp) requires community acceptance (as per Heliö, 2004).

Larp contexts, too, may have different framings for their larping. As Bruun (2011) shows, pre-larp workshops may contain larping done not for itself, but as practice and pre-construction for an upcoming larp. This is a clear example of larping that breaks the immediate larp frame, yet is done in a larp context. It may well be that larp-centered larping is not as unique a phenomenon as it at first glance appears.

The analysis of role-playing is already being distinguished from the analysis of role-playing games (Arjoranta, in review; see Drachen & Hitchens, 2009, and Montola, 2009, for examples). Identifying larping and larp as interconnected, yet actually separate things is a logical next step. Larps require larping in order to exist, but larping does not always require larps.

## 8 Conclusions

There is a need for a new perspective on larping, that of separating the activity from its framing. The two are not the same. Larping exists in various other activities besides larps. The confusion between the two has been the reason why research so far has been concentrating on similarities and not identity.

By analyzing the properties and function of the role-play component in sibling activities, we can gain new insight into what exactly larping is, where it possibly originates and, especially, how much more we could actually do with it.

Larping encompasses character-based play within fictional realities, in many environments and contexts besides just larps. In many of them - including our case examples of re-enactment, bibliodrama, sadomasochism and pretence-based magic - it takes place as a part of something wider. This is very different from larps, where larping usually is the whole of the activity.

By separating the study of larping and the study of larps, when necessary, it is possible to focus on facets of play, facets of the play environment, and facets of the play context. This permits more efficient application of ideas from one type of larping into others, and new design in play environments.

By giving up the unity of larp and larping, we gain a new unity of larping as a phenomenon far wider than thought before.

This calls for new approaches for study. Not only is it necessary to research the limits of larping when it is set inside varying framings, but also what makes each of these contexts special. This is particularly true of larping done in larps: It is not sufficient to just take larp as the baseline, as the done-for-itself framing of larping. We must understand what, if anything, makes it unique, and what to consider larping done during pre-larp workshops. We need to know where the lines between things such as educational larp and educational role-play in other contexts, or re-enactment larps and re-enactment, are - if such lines do exist.

After looking for siblings, it is now time to also look at all the differences more closely. By doing so, we will learn more about both larp and larping.

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# Pre-Larp Workshops as Learning Situations

*Jesper Bruun*

## *Keywords*

Analogy, Ars Armandi, Constructive Alignment, Larp, Pre-Larp, Workshop

This work explores the similarities between pre-larp workshops and teaching situations using constructive alignment as a design framework. The analogy between workshops and teaching is developed analyzing how participants and organizers work with the physical role-playing tool ars armandi in pre-larp workshops for the larp *Delirium* (2010). Some activities enacted during a pre-larp workshop are very similar to the teaching and learning activities in courses designed to model constructivist teaching. The notion of intended learning outcome is introduced as a way to structure activities. The analogy between the total larp experience and a teaching course is elaborated to inspire further use and development of learning theories in pre-larp workshop design. The discussion shows that pre-larp workshop structure lacks a concept analogous to intended learning outcomes and discusses whether intended learning outcomes may help planning and performing pre-larp workshops by matching intended outcome with workshop activities. It concludes that it seems reasonable to further explore how pre-larp workshops as a preparation for larps can benefit from educational research.

For organizers of live action role-playing games (larps) (Gade, 2003; Hitchen and Drachen, 2010), one of the major concerns is whether the participants will play the game according to the organizers' visions. This concern has been expressed and discussed with views ranging from organizers needing to respect the participants (Wrigstad, 2008) to participants needing to comply totally with the organizer's wishes (Pohjola, 2003).

In Denmark, the use of pre-larp workshops as a way of preparing participants for larps, have increased in the last decade (see for example, *System Danmarc* (2005), *Agerbørn* (2007), *Totem* (2007), *Bolværk* (2008), *Agerlund* (2009), *Babylon* (2009), *Delirium* (2010)).

This paper discusses pre-larp workshops as a structured way of disseminating the organizers' visions of how participants should play the game. Pre-larp workshops are viewed as teaching situations with clear goals for what the participants need to know and be able to do in order to participate in the game. The discussion is held primarily at the level of structure, where goals are defined and justified and where activities to support the goals are selected. The central argument is that aligning the activities in pre-larp workshops with clear goals may enhance the experience of larps.

As will be shown, pre-larp workshops allow the participants to work with different aspects of the larp, while also building relationships with each other as a group. These aspects range from getting to know the game world to building game characters and character relations. Pre-larp workshops can be seen as part of a whole set of experiences, involving signing up for the game, meetings, on-line discussions, presentations, instructions, and workshops surrounding a larp. They also involve the game itself, and both personal and collective forms of evaluation afterwards. This total set of experiences may be called 'the total larp experience'.

The overall goal with a pre-larp workshop is to facilitate a dialog between the organizing group and the participants. This dialog results in the creation of roles and relationships through group exercises and it has the purpose of conveying the visions of the

organizers to the participants. The workshop form, the personal dialog between organizer and player, convey messages more clearly than text-based communication. [...] Workshops can be used to create group dynamics, which we find essential to larping.

(organizer, *Delirium*, my translation).

This is consistent with what the organizers write in their booklet, *Workshophåndbogen* (Munthe-Kaas, P., Andreassen, P.S., Høgdall, R. & Thurøe, K., 2009), where they state that pre-larp workshops can be used to "quickly, clearly and effectively disseminate a lot of information [about the larp]" (p.3, my translation). If the goal of workshops is to disseminate knowledge - and indeed knowledge which can be used to create characters and relations fitting the organizers visions of the larp - then there is a point in looking towards research on the dissemination of knowledge. Such research may inform both the planning and execution of pre-larp workshops.

A total larp experience involving pre-larp workshops and the larp as a culminating activity are similar in some respects to university courses as described by Biggs & Tang (2007). Both organizers and course developers are at least somewhat in charge of what knowledge they want to disseminate, and they typically have some degree of control over the activities selected to actually accomplish this. Both organizers and course developers also, have control over the arena(s) where participants/students use their knowledge, within the context of the game/course. Thus, regarding the structure and planning, it may be fruitful to consider the field of university pedagogical research as a source for an analogy to the total larp experience. Such an analogy may help organizers of larps and pre-larp workshops reflect on and plan their dissemination knowledge about their larp.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss pre-larp workshops as a part of the total larp experience where participants develop their knowledge of the larp to be played. This discussion builds on the framework of constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007), and points to apparent similarities between constructivist teaching and the pre-larp workshop format.

In particular, the case of participants acquiring the ability to use the role-playing tool called *ars armandi* (Nordgren, 2008) in the larp experience surrounding the game *Delirium* (2010) is examined. *Ars armandi* is a tool for simulating intimate relations by touching hands and arms.

The paper begins with a reflection on the process leading to this work and on the methods used to investigate the pre-larp workshops of *Delirium* (2010). Section 2 gives an account of how and why pre-larp workshops may be viewed as teaching, situating Biggs & Tang's framework of constructive alignment in a theoretical frame. Section 3, discusses the problem of teaching the role-playing tool *ars armandi* from the perspective of learning theories, with elements from the constructive alignment design framework as the basis. In section 4, a more elaborate analogy between pre-larp workshops and a constructively aligned course is examined. Finally, Section 5 opens the discussion of how educational theory applied to pre-larp workshops may raise the total larp experience to a new level.

### ***1 Empirical foundation and methods***

While the central focus of this work is to explain an idea, the processes by which the idea of seeing pre-larp workshops as teaching didactic situations has been developed, may influence how it can be understood. The purpose of this section is to describe these processes and reflect on how the methods used to investigate the similarities between pre-larp workshops and teaching are related to the analysis.

The process of investigation can be described as a sequence of three sub-processes. The first of these was active participation in the larp *Delirium* (2010), the second consisted of three interviews with the four organizers present throughout the total larp experience and the third was a document study of texts on pre-larp workshops - written by the organizing team - with the purpose of finding similarities between their thoughts and constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007). This section describes the relation between process and idea, the nature of the data from the process, and how it relates to the analysis.

#### ***1.1 From participant to participant observer***

The idea of viewing workshops as teaching was created after attending the first pre-larp workshop of *Delirium* (2010). I took the role of the researcher in the meeting between me as a participant and what became the analytical object. Further, during the following workshops and the larp itself, I continuously shifted in and out of the role as participant and as researcher. This process can be viewed as a form of participant observation (Hasse, 2002), where the observation is focused on how a group of people organize the learning of others, seen from the perspective of these "others".

It is similar to Hasse's (2002) description of being an anthropologist learning the culture of physicists by enrolling as a physics student at the university and following the study of physics (almost) like everyone else. The main difference is that where Hasse's analyzes a culture by first becoming a participant and then stepping back to reflect on her own learning processes (Hasse, 2002, p. 22), I stepped back from a community in which I was already a participant to reflect on the structure of learning sequences.

In both cases, being embedded in the object of research has the benefit that some entities and structures are perceived which would not otherwise be observed. The main example in this paper is in section 3, where the development in use of *ars armandi* (Nordgren, 2008) is analyzed. The kinesthetic details of the exercises would not be admissible to a researcher in an interview (see below), because the interview is mainly verbal.

The drawback to participant observations is that this sort of empirical material is strongly biased by the researcher's interpretation (Hasse, 2002, pp. 18-20), because it is impossible from this study to assign an objective truth-value to what the researcher postulates. But the nature of the data does allow for idea generation and reflection. The role of participant observer has enabled the analysis of the learning sequences the participants of *Delirium* (2010) and the potential learning outcomes.

### 1.2 Interviewing the organizers

Elaborating on the idea of seeing pre-larp workshops as learning activities led to interviews with the four organizers, who were present throughout all the workshops. The dialogs were structured as interviews, but they quickly became more akin to conversations, guided by the themes through an interview guide (Kvale, 1997).

Before the interview, I explained the purpose of the current work, and during the interview, used didactic vocabulary to emphasize understanding of pre-larp workshops permeating this work. For example, one question probed what the *learning goals* of the workshop/activities in the workshops were. In order to further establish the connection, a rephrasing elaborated the question: “What did you want the players to gain from the workshop/activity?”.

Following the reasoning of Henriksen (2009), these interviews are not neutral methods (see Fontana and Frey, 2005). Rather, they may be seen as primarily creative and performative (Henriksen, 2009), in the sense that the intention was for interviewer and interviewee to produce knowledge during the interview. Henriksen reasons: “understanding knowledge as something created during the interview ... provides the opportunity for working with those answers during the interview”. This was exactly the intention here.

In this light, what the interviewees said cannot directly be taken as illustrative of how they thought when they planned the workshops. The interviews could perhaps be seen as a guided reflection on some of their methods and justifications. However, their thoughts may just as well have been unaffected by attempts to guide. Regardless, the interviews proved a valuable source of insight, producing knowledge about how goals and justifications may influence the planning of pre-larp workshops. In the analysis, the interviews served mainly for elaborating on key ideas and for illustrating the thinking behind workshop activities specific to *Delirium* (2010).

### 1.3 Studying a booklet as a document

The third process of investigation involved comparing the ideas and thoughts on pre-larp workshop structure described in *Workshophåndbogen* (The Workshop Handbook, TWH) (Munthe-Kaas et. al, 2009), with constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007) viewed as a didactic framework and with educational theory in general.

Since this process was chronologically the last of the three, it influenced the results by confirming some aspects of the other observations such as the structural similarities (see Section 4), and added to the refinement of how pre-larp workshops may be seen as teaching situations (see Section 2).

The Workshop Handbook is a guide produced by the team organizing *Delirium* (2010) in which they tried to “collect the most important experiences and perspectives on how one can work with workshops as a starting point for a larp” (TWH, p. 3, my translation).

For this particular study, the document is viewed as a reification (Wenger, 1998) of a certain practice, which the organizing team continuously negotiates. Stated in another way, the document can be seen as the written thoughts of the collective organizing team. It is what they could agree upon at a certain time for some purpose. Taking this view of the document emphasizes content, readiness, and intention, that is, a hermeneutic approach for analyzing the document (as discussed in Henriksen, 2009).

The document aids the analysis by providing examples of sources for similarities between the organizers’ thinking of workshops and teaching situations. The similarity between the structure of workshops as a creative process and a teaching situation is one example: The Workshop Handbook describes the mental and physical environment as part of this structure, and this is arguably similar to the teaching climate and classroom setup of a teaching situation.

Seen as a whole, the three processes show both how the idea has been developed chronologically and how each process has provided valuable insights into how pre-larp workshops may be seen as teaching situations; from the first participatory observations leading to the idea generation, to interviews and conversations leading to an elaboration of the idea, and finally to studying organizers writings for confirmation and refinements.

## 2 *Pre-larp workshops as teaching situations*

Thus, it is our claim that through workshops, where the spirit and goals of the larp are disseminated and where the participants are actively involved in the development of the larp, one can create a nice basis for almost every larp

(TWH, p. 3, my translation).

Insofar as creating a basis for a larp is to prepare participants (and to some extend probably also the organizers) for the larp, the *raison d'être* of pre-larp workshops seems to be to prepare a group of participants for a larp. As described by the organizing group in *The Workshop Handbook* and in interviews, the workshops consist of a number of activities each with particular goals. For example, the goals with the exercise *frozen moments* – described in *The Workshop Handbook* as a directed enactment of a defining moment in one or more character's background(s) - is to “create a physical memory in the character, to develop character background, and to find an shared acting language” (TWH, p. 17, my translation).

In the interviews, the organizers said that the intentions of the collected activities are for participants of the workshops to become able to interact with the scenography, the other players, and the stories to be enacted during the larp. *Frozen moments*, as a method, might help facilitate these intentions, but naturally, organizers should consider how and when to use it. It is striking that both pre-larp workshops and university courses share structural similarities in the level of course design, and this is the reason to place this study at this level.

For example, TWH (p. 4) mentions the knowledge to be disseminated to the participants, and this could be viewed much like the content of a university course. The design framework of Biggs & Tang (2007), called constructive alignment, is widely used in courses on university pedagogy. It is by many teacher educators acknowledged as *the* design framework for university courses and teaching. Biggs & Tang (2007) provide a complete and widely used framework for designing university courses.

While it would probably be possible to conduct thorough analyses of pre-larp workshops from other and more theoretical perspectives - for example using Lawson (2003) for a modern cognitive approach or Roth, Lee & Hsu (2009) for an approach based on activity theory - these would require a different and much more thorough set of data describing in more detail what went on during the workshops. Also, analyses focusing on individual learning processes (for example Kolb, 1984) or community learning processes (Lave & Wenger, 1991), do not in themselves call for a discussion of the justifications involved and the design of these learning processes. Biggs & Tang (2007) draw on a cognitive background, placing learning as something, which happens in the individual. This is in thread with, but much less extreme than, Lawson (2003), who theorizes learning as consisting of neurological changes and develops teaching strategies on that basis.

From another perspective, Roth, Lee & Hsu (2009) view learning (of science) from a cultural-historical activity theoretical perspective. Here, *activity systems* involving teachers, students, artifacts, rules, and relations to the surrounding world, collectively produce knowledge to be consumed by others. This view builds primarily on Engeström (1987). Roth et. al (2009) claim that learning should be understood holistically as the development of an activity system as a whole. For example actions, words and artifacts, used by students and teachers, could be developed. Viewing Biggs & Tang (2007) primarily as an approach to design leaves room for drawing on theoretical sources at places where such theories may help explain what thinking may lay behind the workshop activities. Depending on how one uses the design framework; both cognitive and socio-cultural theories could be used to inform the development of participant abilities.

As an example, consider activities involving *ars armandi* (Nordgren, 2008) throughout the workshops. In *Delirium* (2010), participants enacted pair relationships focusing mainly on intimacy. Since *ars armandi* was the tool for simulating intimate situations, it is interesting to examine in depth, how participants may have developed their use of this tool.

### 3 Working with *ars armandi*

In this section, the work with *ars armandi* in the pre-larp workshops of *Delirium* (2010) is addressed as a series of learning activities with specific intentions motivating their use. The facilitators/teachers have a task, namely to guide the participants/students to an understanding of *ars armandi* which enables the creation of a set of character-character relations.

#### 3.1 Introducing the experience

The basic experience of *ars armandi* is for two or more people to touch each others' arms. In the interviews the organizers agree that this in itself can be a challenge for participants' sense of personal space. To overcome this challenge, the facilitator uses the exercise "Kluddermor - Uden Mor" (Human Knot), where the participants stand in a circle, eyes closed, stretching their arms towards the middle. Each participant moves towards the middle, searching for two hands to hold, creating a large knot of arms. The goal is then to unwind into a circle again without letting go of any hands. This particular exercise involves cooperation and touching, and as the organizers say:

It (Human Knot) does two things. It breaks the physical borders (of the participants), since each has touched the arms of everyone else, because you end up all jumbled up. This leads to (an exercise where) participants touch each other's arms with an intimate relation as a goal. Also, the participants have to solve a task as a group

(organizer, *Delirium*, my translation).

The purpose of 'Human Knot' is to "overcome the anxiety related to touching" (TWH, p. 11, translation). According to Biggs & Tang (2007), in a constructively aligned course, the teacher prepares a set of *teaching and learning activities* (TLAs), each coordinated with an intended learning outcome for the students.

In this study, the TLA was 'Human Knot', and the intended learning outcome (ILO) could be formulated explicitly as: "to experience the feeling of touching other participants' arms thereby overcoming physical borders". Notice that the ILO contains an action and a goal to reach the action. This is to make sure that the participants engage with - in this case each other - in order to achieve a new state.

From a cognitive perspective, this state is individual to each participant who must either adapt a different mental structure or use an existing one (Lawson, 2003); whereas activity theorists (as in Roth et. al, 2009) would say that the new state reflects the development of the activity system, because the participants have gained new perspectives this shared event.

#### 3.2 Explore, compare, and contrast

The first activity, 'Human Knot', led into another activity where one of the tools of the larp was in focus. In this exercise the participants experienced the use of *ars armandi* (Nordgren, 2008). One set of mixed gender participants stood in a circle facing outwards, while another of equal in size and mixed gender faced the first set. The exercise consisted of simulating close relations with the person in front of you for a few moments using *ars armandi* and then moving on to the next person in the circle. The researcher engaged with the rest of the group in this activity.

The instructional learning objectives for this activity could have been: 'be able to perform *ars armandi* with different participants exploring different possibilities, and compare and contrast each experience'. Again, actions reified by verbs, namely *performing*, *comparing* and *contrasting* are connected to content (the object of the verb), *ars armandi*.

The ILO also has something to say about the extent of the action. Each experience is to be compared and contrasted, and participants need to explore *different possibilities*.

Note the progression from the ILO in Section 3.1 and how the activities try to match these outcomes. The ILO of this section is likely to be more demanding for the participants at both the level of personal barriers (as exemplified by the quote above) and at the level of use in role-play.

The researcher's experience here was that there indeed was room for experimentation in this exercise on how to use a specific tool. The group of participants did not seem to mindlessly touch each other's arms, but seemed to notice that each experience was a bit different. The participants needed to think about what they were doing and reflect on their experiences for further use in the game.

Experienced facilitators probably have acquired experienced based 'intuition' telling them whether comparing and contrasting is occurring, but the circle exercise does not have an element which explicitly lets the organizers know what comparing and contrasting transpires. Written notes or verbalizations of the experiences could serve this purpose. These might later serve as reifications (Wenger, 1998) around which participants could negotiate what meaning to ascribe to different experiences with *ars armandi*.

### 3.3 Creating character relations

In a later workshop, *ars armandi* was actively used in the development of pair relations. In one exercise, the facilitator asked the pairs to simulate intimate relations using *ars armandi* during three stages of their relationship. First, the first love, then the secure relationship and finally the end of the relationship were simulated. According to the organizers - as they described it both when introducing the exercise and when talking about it in interviews - this was not to role-play exactly how the relationship had or would transpire. Rather, the goal was to develop a feeling for how the two roles could relate to each other using this particular tool.

A way of formulating an ILO for this exercise could be: "Be able to use *ars armandi* to create scenes of intimacy illustrating the relationship between two roles and use these scenes to reflect further on this relationship". The demands on the participants from this ILO compared to earlier ones are far more advanced. It involves using the tool to create something new. Also, it involves reflection. Sitting in pairs and actually using *ars armandi* to create scenes of intimacy is a very direct translation of the ILO to a teaching and learning activity, TLA.

It is worth going deeper into the facilitation of this exercise, even though it stretches the inferential ability of the empirical material. This account draws almost exclusively on the researcher from a participant's perspective.

During the exercise we sat in pairs in a hall with plenty of room between the pairs. The facilitator first described what to do as mentioned above, but with a lot of rephrasing and in a mild tone of voice. Emphasis was clearly on the participants feeling safe enough to engage with *ars armandi* for developing pair relationships. Also, the experience built not only on our previous work with *ars armandi*, but also on our previous pair exercises, group exercises, and on social activities related to the workshop in general. The air was one of secure focus.

The actions taken by a teacher to shape the physical environment so as to facilitate the teaching situation he/she wants could be called the classroom setup. Here, the setup is the placing of participants in a hall with plenty of room and visibility. The effects of such measures are not discussed in Biggs & Tang (2007). In *The Workshop Handbook* this is part of the physical environment, and according to the organizing team, it "is a good idea to think through the exercises and activity forms, the participants are to go through before setting up the physical environment" (TWH, p. 6, my translation).

Biggs & Tang (2007) use the concept of teaching climate to distinguish between teaching that enables multiple ways for students to learn, and teaching which limits student learning possibilities.



They argue that a teacher facilitating a climate where students are trusted to make choices related to their own learning and by themselves engage sensibly with learning activities leads to students who learn more.

As seen from a cognitivist perspective, the exercise let the participants construct new mental schemata (Lawson, 2003), accommodating to the new use of *ars armandi*. Whereas *ars armandi* might before have been seen as just a way of simulating intimate relations, during the exercise it was also transformed into a character development tool. What drove the transformation would in activity theory be the very work we did with *ars armandi*.

The activity of working with *ars armandi* in a different way precedes the consciousness of having done it, analogous to Roth et. al's example of children being aware of what environmentalism is only after practicing environmentalism (Roth et. al, 2009, p. 159). When participants in a pre-larp workshop engage with physical exercises like *frozen moments* (TWH, p. 17) or the pair exercise discussed in this section, they may create a "physical memory" connection between their personality (Lukka, 2011) and their creative role.

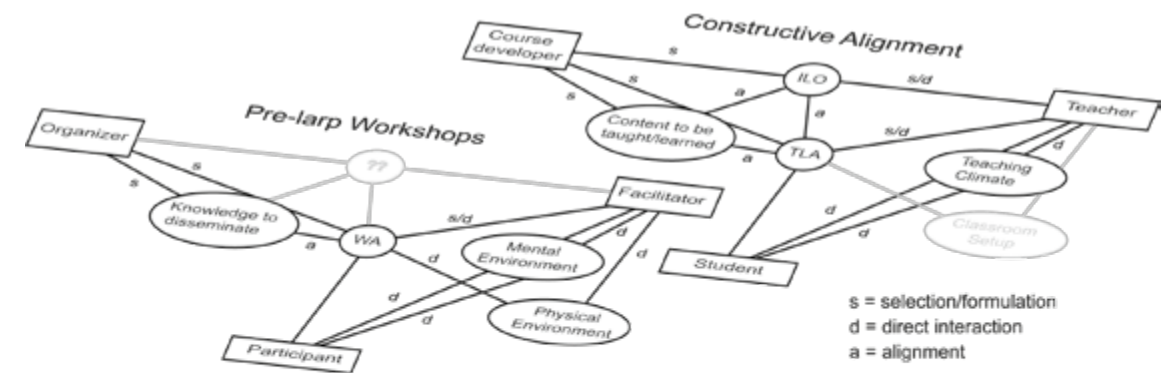
### 3.4 Summing up the development

It should be apparent that as a group the participants were expected to develop their ability to use *ars armandi*. After the circle exercise (section 3.2) it seemed feasible to the observing researcher that most participants would be able to use *ars armandi* actively in different role playing situations. During the pair-exercises (section 3.3) it seemed instrumental that each participant developed the ability to use *ars armandi* to create roles and relations and to reflect on their meaning in the larp.

While a single example is important to illustrate the use of the design framework, the analogy can be expanded further, also encompassing similarities in structure and the similarities between the teacher-student relationship and the facilitator-participant relationship.

## 4 Perspectives on an elaborate analogy

In the previous section, work with a single role-playing tool throughout a series of workshops was discussed using learning theories. However, other similarities can be seen between the way the *Delirium* (2010) organizers plan and perform workshops and how constructively aligned university teaching courses are structured. Consider Figure 1, where the two are represented as relational maps (as in Gentner & Gentner, 1983). The two systems are skewed to imply that the reader should try to overlay them in order to see the proposed similarities.



**Figure 1:** Comparing the organization of constructive alignment and pre-larp workshop

Overlaying the two structures provides a visual representation of how pre-larp workshops are similar to constructively aligned courses. The grayed out areas represent concepts which are explicitly mentioned in one framework, but not in the other. The letters on the lower right side represent the nature of the links between concepts.

First, in each system, notice the participant-facilitator-organizers and student-teacher-course developer triads. Figure 1 implies the possibility to view the facilitator-participant relation much as a teacher-student relation. Just as *The Workshop Handbook* mentions organizers and facilitators as two distinct roles, so is the course developer distinct from the teacher, although in both cases nothing prevents them from being the same person.

Second, similarities between (1) how the organizers of *Delirium* (2010) express themselves on *mental environments*, *knowledge to be disseminated* and *workshop activities* and (2) how one can conceptualize *teaching climate*, *content to be taught*, and *TAs* have already been pointed out.

Notice that a concept analogous to ILOs is grayed out in the relational structure of pre-larp workshops. In their booklet, Munthe-Kaas et. al (2009) list goals for their proposed activities (as shown for example in section 3.1), but these goals are general. They are by construction not aligned to activities of a *particular* pre-larp workshop. This is not to say that the organizers of *Delirium* (2010) did not consider goals of their activities, but probably not in the very precise way that ILOs are formulated. Also, I have grayed out classroom setup in the constructive alignment system. As mentioned, it does not seem to play a role in Biggs & Tang (2007).

Since the context of a total larp experience and a university course is very different, it seems obvious to ask, how closely organizers should follow the analogy. While it is not suggested that organizers blindly begin to implement constructive alignment, it seems that pre-larp workshop design could benefit from a didactical discussion. In the next section, this discussion is opened.

## 5 Discussion

Compared to the ideas surrounding constructive alignment, pre-larp workshops seem to lack something analogous to instructional learning objectives. While ILOs can be too rigidly formulated, and may in fact hinder creativity if followed too strictly (Andersen, 2010), planning and continuously evaluating the outcome of pre-larp workshops may have benefits.

One example is the placement of activities to support the continuing development of participant abilities, where Section 3 may serve as an example. However, it may also be crucial in character development how and when different tools are used.

The organizers stated during the interviews that they placed status methods involving the determination of status determination before characters had been developed. The purpose was to give the characters a “close to home feel.” In the dual-faceted role model (Lukka, 2011) the development of creative roles is influenced by the everyday role relations of the participants. One could argue that engaging with status exercises before character creation has begun may result in character relations similar to participant’s every day relationships. The placement of status exercises matters and this is a didactic choice, which influences the characters created.

Some of the activities in the workshops were exercises involving larping, such as frozen moments, the semi-directed scenes described in Section 2, where the facilitator cuts the scene when appropriate. However, the framing (Harviainen, 2011) of these events is not a larp. Rather, the framing can be described as workshops intending to both disseminate knowledge and build a community.

This framing only exists, however, because of the larp. From a didactical point of view, it would be interesting to analyze what the relations are between larping in pre-larp workshops and larping in the corresponding larp. Does pre-larp larping actually prepare the participants for the larp?

It seems also like a very interesting idea to explore what activities and elements in pre-larp workshops may help participant transvaluation (Lappi, 2011), thus minimizing participant stress related to being stuck in nihilistic archetypes. These archetypes relate to the motivation for playing the game, in situations where joy is overshadowed by other feelings.

## 6 Conclusion

This paper has explained how pre-larp workshops may be viewed as a series of teaching sequences. It has been argued that during pre-larp workshops, participants learn to play the larp. From here, one could argue that it would be wise for organizers to do a good teaching job. With the case in this paper, one particular example of this has been shown.

In university teaching, central points to consider are clear goals, the alignment of activities with goals, and knowledge about how students learn. Considering these points for pre-larp workshops may very well benefit from didactical considerations of how, when, and why to make these considerations in connection with knowledge dissemination.

Thus, it seems reasonable to explore further how pre-larp workshops as a preparation for larps can benefit from educational research. Research in larp preparation from this perspective may benefit both organizers, who can learn to better communicate their visions, and participants, who can learn to play the game.

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# Playing as a Form of Nihilism

*Ari-Pekka Lappi*

## *Keywords*

Game Analysis, Nihilism, Play Experience, Value theory

Why does and how does playing a game sometimes turn into something displeasing, offending, disgusting or meaningless? How does arbitrary rules and petty goals transform into something highly enjoyable and meaningful in the realm of play, but not in the workplace? Why – for instance – is punching the opponent enjoyable in a boxing ring, but not as much fun, or even acceptable, in everyday life, playgrounds aside? What makes playing a game something unique and different from all other forms of life? To answer these questions, I will apply the notion of nihilism to playing: I argue that the concept of nihilism significantly clarifies the structure of play and the relation between play and non-play. Enjoyment of play can be understood as overcoming the innate nihilism of play whereas displeasure in play is being stuck in its nihilism.

The structure of the paper reflects my initial definition for playing a game: *Playing a game is a form of nihilism. The joy of play is overcoming the nihilism, while the pain of play is suffering from it.*

- 1) In the chapter “Playing as a Form of Nihilism” I ask: What makes the act of playing a game something unique and different from all other forms of life? Even if we cannot define the essence of playing a game, we can specify relations between objectives of playing, rules and everyday life. In this chapter I also discuss Huizinga’s (1938) virtual boundary between the playful and the serious, the magic circle. Unlike Huizinga, I claim that the greyish everyday life and the playful life are mostly overlapping collections of the same potentials of life. The difference between the play and non-play is in the opposing value hierarchies.
- 2) In the chapter “Joy of Play as Overcoming Nihilism” I ask: What makes playing a game something enjoyable and meaningful? I claim that every game defines or fabricates its own unique conception of joy. A game is not something that can simply be consumed as fun. Rather it is a catalyst *for* fun. A later phase in the interpretation of a game or a character is an invention of the values that make playing worthy and meaningful.
- 3) In the chapter “Pain of Play as Being Stuck in Nihilism” I ask the question: Why and how does playing a game sometimes turn into something displeasing, offending, disgusting or meaningless? We should not confuse playing a game with enjoying the gameplay. Sometimes a game is a complete disappointment. However, even good games tend to have displeasing aspects. In chapters “Joy of Play as Overcoming Nihilism” and “Pain of Play as Being Stuck in Nihilism” I will generalize Suits’ (1978) definition of playing a game as “the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (p. 55). Unlike Suits, I claim that playing a game need not be voluntary.

Even if this text is a very theoretical one, I also have also practical goals. Firstly, to try and create a tool for self-reflection. Secondly, I try to help game designers make better, more stunning and more extreme play experiences (follow up to Montola, 2010) Thirdly, I try to create better tools for analyzing the styles of playing, which challenge the idea of a virtual boundary between play and non-play by blurring the difference between these two concepts (for game examples, see Montola, Stenros, & Waern, 2009; Wrigstad, 2008).

## 1 On Examples

Before diving into the concept of nihilism I shall introduce the games used as examples and summarize my motivation for choosing them.

The first two examples are *boxing* and *hide-and-seek*. I use these well-known games to clarify the basic concepts. *Boxing* is chosen because it is not obvious how *hitting the opponent and the risk of being bruised* becomes something enjoyable? *Hide-and-seek* is chosen because unlike *boxing*, it is innocent child’s play. But in what sense it is a form of nihilism, as I will claim? There’s nothing nihilistic about it at first glance.

The third example is Frederic Østergaard’s jeepform<sup>1</sup> game *Fat Man Down* (2009). To summarize the very idea of the game: In *Fat Man Down*, the fattest male player plays the Fat Man and the others mock him due his obesity during several fictive scenes.

For the sake of brevity, I focus on only one aspect in *Fat Man Down*: the role of the Fat Man. The focal point of my analysis is the value of “being overrun and wronged and taking it as a necessity”. How something initially painful turns into something enjoyable? I have chosen to use it as example for two main reasons: Firstly *Fat Man Down* (among many other jeepform games) tries to blur the boundary between the player and the character. This is called *bleed*. (Montola, 2010; Wrigstad, 2010) Secondly, *Fat Man Down* explicitly attempts to make players feel bad in order to produce a good, extreme play experience (see also Montola, 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Wrigstad condenses, that “[j]eeppom is a style of freeform role-playing that stresses the importance of meta-play, transparency and tailoring the techniques to emphasise the story” (2008, p. 124)

The player performing the role of the Fat Man feels bad because he is indeed fat, and his friends keep on pointing out the fact. Others feel bad because of the bad conscience from mocking their friend. (As per Østergaard in *Fat Man Down*, 2009.)

The last example is *Singstar*. I use it to clarify the typology of nihilism. I have tried to find very different kind of examples. For instance, *hide-and-seek* and *Singstar* represent light and benevolent games, while *boxing* and *Fat Man Down* are darker and even somewhat malign games. *Boxing* and *Singstar* are more or less competitive games, while the other two example games are collaborative fun rather than competitive.

## 2 Playing as a Form of Nihilism

‘Nihilism’<sup>2</sup> denotes *will to nothing* or *nothingness of will* as an opposite to *affirmation of life* and *joy of being*:

“[N]ihilism signifies the value of nil taken on by life, the fiction of higher values which give it this value and the will to nothingness which is expressed in these higher values.”

(Deleuze, 1962, p. 139)

It is crucial to understand that “nihilism” does not denote denial of all values. It is just a way of thought in which “life takes on a value of nil insofar as it is denied and depreciated” (Deleuze, 1962, p. 139). Firstly nihilism is something illusory that is opposed to life. Secondly nihilism raises the fictive values that are superior to life. In short, nihilism is the philosophy of illusion. Nihilism negates *this* world and *this* life for something supreme to them. (Deleuze, 1962; see also Dicken, 2009)

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<sup>2</sup> I discuss here Nietzsche’s concept of nihilism as Deleuze defines it. Nietzsche never defines the nihilism explicitly, concisely and clearly. At best, Nietzsche’s definitions are vague and metaphoric. Therefore, I cannot use Nietzsche’s “original” definition for it even if I would like to. The utilized definition for ‘nihilism’ is widely used in the continental tradition of philosophy. It is not so popular in the analytical philosophy. (Dicken, 2009.) I have chosen to use Deleuze’s definition (in the book *Nietzsche and the Philosophy*, 1962) since it is comprehensive, concise, relatively clear, elegant and focuses on individuals instead of society. For instance, Dicken’s (2009) definition is less elegant, less comprehensive and focuses on society.

### 2.1 The First Affirmation

Nihilism is a combination or a result of two elements: *the first affirmation* and *the negation*.

In the case of playing, the first affirmation is the initial interpretation of play as an interesting thing. To simplify a bit: the first affirmation is the objective of play or the commitment to it. The negation refers to constraints and limitations that make playing a game challenging and uneasy, but also something unique and different from other games and forms of life.

For Deleuze, ‘affirmation’ means *joy of being*, *becoming active* and *being something different from anything else*. To affirm (in this technical sense) is “to unburden: not to load life with the weight of higher values, but to create new values which are those of life, which makes life light and active (Deleuze, 1962, p. 174).

Playing a game produces new values which makes life light and active instead of loading life with the weight of “higher” values. For instance the first affirmation in *hide-and-seek* is *to find the best hiding place*. In *boxing*, the first affirmation is *to hit the opponent more often, harder and accurately than the opponent hits you*.

### 2.2 Negation and the Higher Values

*Negation* is the force of antagonism, non-resolved conflicts and limitations. The *essence* of negation is impossible to define. It is simply something opposed to the negated. Thus it is defined by the nature of the opposition. As opposed to the first affirmation, negation makes life heavy, hard, joyless or passive by limiting the potential of the active, affirmative forces. In other words, that what makes life light and active is denied and, due to this denial, fettered (Deleuze, 1962 Part 2: Active and Reactive).

The negation of play doesn't mean a negative, bad play experience. Rather, it is a prerequisite for a positive play experience in the form of a necessary structure of play. In the case of *all* games, the negation of play means that the rules of play become *higher values*. They are 'higher', because the rules are followed blindly only for the sake of themselves, and not because of some other values. Certainly, in most cases you can stop playing a game, but if you are going to play a game – instead of cheating or just pretending – you need to follow the rules blindly (Suits, 1978). As a consequence the everyday world and greyish daily life is negated by the rules.

Like Suits, I use the notion of 'rule' in a rather broad sense. The rules of play are simply a collection of norms that set constraints to play. They do not need to be written or fully shared (see Suits, 1978, chapter Ivan and Abdul). The very idea of the rules of play is to make playing somehow hard, uneasy or challenging; or – as Suits put it – “an attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (1978, p. 55).

The rules of play are just a catalyst for other negations of play. For instance, in *hide-and-seek* the game negates the conception of comfort: a good hiding place is often uncomfortable and the player needs to be there for a long time. *Boxing* negates a fairly common norm: to cease from hurting the other (see Lappi 2010). For the sake of clarity: I am not saying that the norm is a *moral* norm. The nature of the norm is not relevant in this example. For someone “to cease from hurting the other” may indeed be a moral norm. For someone else it might be just a convention. Generally speaking, it is not polite to hurt others.

### 2.3 Relation between Affirmation and Negation

Affirmation and negation exist as pairs. According to Deleuze (1962), the relation between them is not a causal one, nor is it symmetric:

Negation is *opposed* to affirmation but [the first] affirmation *differs* from negation. We cannot think of affirmation as 'being opposed' to negation: this would place the negative within it. Opposition is not only the relation of negation with affirmation but the essence of negative as such. Affirmation is the enjoyment and play of its own difference, just as negation is the suffering and labour of the opposition that belongs to it.

(Deleuze, 1962, p.178, author's emphasis)

'To differ from' implies 'to be something unique' and 'to have an identity'. 'To be opposed to' implies 'to have a conflict' and 'to not be something worthy'. The core of nihilism is unwillingness to face the emerged conflict and worthlessness (Dicken, 2009).

Thinking of play, this relation can be seen on many levels. Firstly, this is the relation between rules and objectives of game: Even if the written rules often describe the objective of play, the actual commitment to the game's objectives is something *different* from the rules. The rules make achieving the objectives harder and are in that sense *opposed* to the commitment.

Secondly, this is the relation between play and non-play: The objectives of play are different from ordinary everyday ones. In our daily lives we won't try to hide to make it harder to be found by one or more seekers. Still the objective of *hide-and-seek* is not quite opposed to the non-playful goals.

There is no conflict. It is just different. The rules of play define behavioural patterns and expectations that are opposed to the standards of everyday life. It would be very weird if I said on my workplace “Hey guys! Go and hide. I'm going to count to twenty and then I'll try to find you.”



I just cannot do that – except if I’m sure that they interpret this as an invitation to play. Thus the rules of play are *opposed* to everyday behavioural patterns and expectations.

On the other hand, our ordinary moral standards, behavioural patterns and expectations may conflict with the playful ones. This may be the case in *boxing*. The fairly common norm “not to bruise the other” cannot be applied during the boxing match. It is opposed to the objective of the game. (Lappi, 2010.) The objective of *boxing* (affirmation) is *not* opposed to the norm (negation), since it does not suggest being immoral or impolite. Again, the relation is asymmetric.

#### 2.4 Generalization of the Magic Circle

Nihilism of play is a more generic form of Huizinga’s (1938) ‘*magic circle*’. The *magic circle* differentiates the playful from the serious by drawing a virtual boundary between playing and everyday life (ibid.).

The nihilism of play nullifies an area of everyday life or the value of the area. By the nullification it excludes a portion of daily greyness from the act of play. This exclusion makes a game “playful” and everyday life “serious”.

The (unnecessary) distance between the joy of play and the labour of everyday life is a manifestation of nihilism. Our greyish everyday life is just a subset of its full potential and our playful life is another one. Even if they are somewhat different and even opposed forms of life, they are mostly overlapping collections of the same opportunities. Most of the time, everyday life is just not playful enough to be play.

### 3 Joy of Play as Overcoming Nihilism

Finding the best hiding place is not fun in and by itself. Why should I find the best hiding place? What do I get by doing so? The unnecessary obstacles set by the rules of *hide-and-seek* do not make the objective more desirable, quite the contrary. If I do not have any *rational* reason to want something, why and how would an unnecessary obstacle or an arbitrary limitation make it more appealing? Likewise, there is very little *intrinsic joy* in hitting the other more often, harder and more accurately than the other hits you. The rules of *boxing* hardly make the objective of play more enjoyable.

Playing a game per se is unnecessary work that is done within illusory constraints for fabricated goals (Suits, 1978, Chapter “Taking the Long Way Home”). We *could* see playing a game as an oppressive and unnecessary self-limitation and as an insane obsession for illusory ends. However, usually we do not because we re-evaluate the negation of play as a meaningful frame for freedom and joy.

A game becomes a meaningful frame for freedom and joy in two ways. Firstly we invent the value for the negation of play. I call this *transvaluation*. Secondly we affirm again the objective of play but in a different form. I call this *double affirmation*.

#### 3.1 Transvaluation

*Transvaluation* means a change in the elements, from which the values of values derive (Deleuze, 1962, chapter 5.9 Nihilism and Transmutation: the focal point).

It is a process in which “will to nothingness is converted and crossed over to the side of affirmation, it is related to a *power of affirming* which destroys reactive forces themselves” (Deleuze, 1962, p. 165, author’s emphasis).

The *transvaluation* creates new values that are justified for the sake of play and not for the sake of anything else. In games, the most common form of transvaluation is “insight of how and why playing this-and-this game is fun”.

If a person finds a game boring, he basically fails to *transvaluate* the objectives and the rules of play as something fun or otherwise enjoyable. Of course a well-written game text – e.g. the written rules or a character description – makes transvaluation significantly easier compared to vague ones. It is also possible to help players enjoy the game by means of such tools as pre-game workshops (see Bruun, in this volume).

Transvaluation need not be easy. The challenge in transvaluation is often part of the joy of play. In *Fat Man Down*, the transvaluation is made intentionally rather difficult, but once a player succeeds in doing so, he gets an extreme play experience (Montola, 2010). The more obtrusive impact of nihilism creates greater potential for re-evaluation of all values.

### 3.2 Double Affirmation

The *double affirmation* denotes affirmation of the first affirmation but in a different form (Deleuze, 1962 in Chapter 5.12: The Double Affirmation: Ariadne).

It is closely related to the transvaluation. Transvaluation is the negation of the negated. It completes the nihilism by annihilating the nihilism itself. Transvaluation of play asserts “this game is valuable”. The double affirmation is affirmation of affirmed. Effectively it breaks the alliance between the first affirmation and the negation as a *power of affirming*. Together they transform playing a game into something valuable in itself.

### 3.3 Origin of Joy

*Hide-and-seek* becomes fun after the player invents the value for *being in an uncomfortable hiding place* alone. The player could for example end up thinking that finding the best hiding place is a measurement of cunningness. The primordial objective of the play is affirmed again as a measurement for cunningness. This is what is meant by double affirmation.

The negation is no more *opposed* to the affirmation of play as something that limits or restricts. The objective of *hide-and-seek* can be seen as a measurement for cunningness only within the context of the rules. Double affirmation makes life light and active, but unlike the first affirmation it is not fettered by will to nothing or nothingness of will – i.e. (i) blind, dreadful obedience to rules for petty goals and (ii) oppressing awareness of the worthlessness of play when compared to something “serious” like work.

The logic behind the joy of *boxing* is similar: Firstly the player invents that the rules of *boxing* form a testimony for glory and courage (transvaluation). This invention makes the original objective interesting and worthy as a form of the testimony (double affirmation). The value of glory and courage does not follow from the objective of play, but rather from the restrictions that makes achieving it more challenging than necessary. The unnecessary obstacles themselves are not the source of joy. The origin of joy is the double affirmed objective of the play.

Double affirmation does not only mean re-affirmation of the newly found values; it also breaks the opposition between playing a game and living everyday life. For example, the double affirmation may transform the norm “not to bruise the other” into form “not to bruise the other without consent” or perhaps “not to bruise other except if it is mutually enjoyable”

As a consequence there is no more need to limit ourselves because of a non-playful higher value like morality and politeness. The opposition between the objectives of *boxing* and the non-playful higher values is resolved. *boxing* had become evidence of the consent allowing participants to bruise each other.

### 3.4 Enjoying the Role of the Fat Man

In *Fat Man Down*, the player of the Fat Man need to affirm that in the most acts in the game the Fat Man is weak. The Fat Man will be wronged by malevolent society, and he can do nothing about it. Thus the player must cease from maintaining the mask of a strong person. In other words, the game negates a common conception of being a strong person and the value of it.

Being a strong person can be energy consuming. Thus it can be relaxing if you need not to be strong all the time (transvaluation). Without transvaluation, the role of the Fat Man is weird and dreadful – even schizophrenic. How can the player enjoy in being weak and wronged?

*Fat Man Down* may invert the position of ‘being weak and wronged’ in the hierarchy of values. Suddenly, ‘being weak and wronged’ is no more an offence and unjust but *therapy*. Thus being weak inside a fictive game *can* – in fact – make life light and active (double affirmation). But it only ‘can’. The game is just a catalyst. The player makes his life light and active, not the game. If player fails in this, he has gotten stuck in the painful nihilism of play.

## 4 Pain of Play as Being Stuck in Nihilism

It is common to fail partially in the transvaluation and the double affirmation. Often the joy gained via partial success is bigger than the remaining pain of nihilism. If the nihilistic aspect of a game outweighs the joyful playfulness, we usually won’t play the game. However joy of play is not the only reason to play.

### 4.1 The Unwilling Boxer

Suits (1978) argues that the attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles needs to be voluntary. I argue that strictly speaking, it need not be *voluntary*. It does not need to be fun either. You can play a game, and hate it.

However, players need to see the objectives of a game as somehow valuable (*affirmation*) and its rules as necessary (*negation*). You can understand and commit to the rules and the objectives of a game without seeing anything desirable in them. The cases in which this is not voluntary are very rare. It is, however, possible to force one to play a game.

I take a fictive example: Sandra Saint hates violence. She especially hates *boxing*, since for her it is a manifestation of violence. Unfortunately she has a powerful foe, a local crime lord, Sally Sadist. Sally forces Sandra to participate in her latest vicious whim, “The Boxing Tournament for Saints”.

If Sandra refuses, Sally’s mobsters will kill her. Since Sally wants to ensure that the unwilling participants take the game seriously, she will cut off a finger from each participant who wins no matches during the tournament. Sandra chooses to participate, because she doesn’t want to die. She is only a saint, not a martyr. She doesn’t want to lose a finger either. Therefore, *she boxes to win*. Without a doubt, she won’t enjoy the game, and she won’t play it voluntarily, but she *plays*.

We must differentiate the values that make a particular game enjoyable from those that define what it means to play the game. During a *boxing* match, *hitting the opponent* has a higher value than *ceasing from hurting anyone intentionally*. It doesn’t really matter if you like doing this. If you are going to participate in a *boxing* match, you must commit to it.

### 4.2 Typology of Nihilism

In order to better understand why we don’t like a game or a particular feature in it, I apply Nietzsche’s typology of nihilism to games. The case of Sandra Saint was an extreme example. Suffering to play is a rather common and often ignored phenomenon. To illustrate the typology, I have made up a set of archetypes.

### 4.2.1 *Resentment*<sup>3</sup>

The first form of nihilism is *resentment*. Resentment refers to the value of deprivation over the values of affirmation, life, joy and being (Deleuze, 1962, chapter 4.4 Characteristic of Ressentiment; see also first essay in Nietzsche, 1887)

The key element in resentment is blame: The game was stupid because of some arbitrary rule that just did not make sense. Players don't enjoy it because of something external to them.

The most common manifestation of resentment is a Spoilsport (c.f. "plebeian" in Nietzsche, 1887), (see also chapter: Triflers, Cheaters and Spoilsports in Suits, 1978). The Spoilsport just does not understand what is fun in playing a game. The Spoilsport might claim for instance, that playing is supposed to be a fun pastime, and *Fat Man Down* is not. The logical fallacy is obvious. The Spoilsport is a *spirits of revenge claiming*: "I don't get the idea of the game, therefore it is worthless. Because I don't like the game, the ones who like it must be less sophisticated or cultivated than I am."

### 4.2.2 *Bad Conscience*

The second form of nihilism is *bad conscience*. It means that the subject himself feels bad because of the conflict caused by the illusory higher values. 'Bad conscience' means internalisation of the pain by changing direction of resentment (Deleuze, 1962, chapter: 4.8 Bad Conscience and Interiority).

For example I seldom play *Singstar*, because I am such a poor singer. I could *blame* the stupid rules of the game or the crappy microphone that captures my voice poorly, but I do not. Instead of the blame of resentment I internalize the pain of my insufficient singing skills: it is my fault that the game is not that fun. I could enjoy it a lot more if I only was a better singer. It is not easy to enjoy something you are not good at. It is often easier to be a Bore and not play at all. Certainly you could be even duller and become a Martyr:

You could spoil others' joy by playing and repeating over and over again that you don't like the game at all because you're such a bad player.

The third rather common manifestation of bad conscience is the Debtor (c.f. Second Essay in Nietzsche, 1887; see also "Bartholomew Drag" in Suits, 1978). The Debtor sees the game as a cost for something good, e.g. for the other's appreciation or the fame. For instance, I might play *Singstar* in a party, since I don't want to be Spoilsport, Bore or Martyr. The pleasure of being together with friends often overweighs the pain of play. As a Debtor, I owe others the play.

### 4.2.3 *Ascetic ideal*

The third form of nihilism is the *ascetic ideal*. *Ascetic ideal* means that the subject at first fully accepts the necessity of *resentment* and *bad conscience* and then adjusts his being accordingly (Nietzsche, 1887, The Third Essay: What Do Ascetic Ideals Mean?). Ascetic ideal means simply that the game starts to dictate what is good and what is bad. Nietzsche's favourite example is the Christian priest. Due the deceitful lure of the higher values and an inability to accept the world as it is, the priest strikes down the joy of life by declaring that this world is disgusting and its life vile (ibid.).

For example in *Fat Man Down* the rules of play may be regarded as a permission for cruelty, ruthless behaviour or immodesty. If player thinks that cruelty, ruthlessness and immodesty are *the fun* in *Fat Man Down*, he had fallen into the ascetic ideal. The negation itself becomes a higher value. Take *boxing* as another example. A good boxer is ruthless and cruel towards his opponent. Now the player could deduce that the joy in *boxing* must be *the ability to hurt others*. He learns to enjoy that and become a sadist.

I call this kind of person the Libertine (c.f. "Porphyryo Snake" in Suits, 1978). The Libertine is the exact opposite to the Spoilsport. Whereas Spoilsport depreciates the play because of non-play, Libertine depreciates the everyday life because of the play. The negation becomes the higher value.

<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche consistently used French word *ressentiment* instead of a German one. Conventionally, in philosophy, Nietzsche's concepts *ressentiment* is spelled in this way. For sake of readability and because of the request of editors, I use the word 'resentment' to refer Nietzsche's notion of *ressentiment*.

Another manifestation of the ascetic idea is the Last Man (c.f. “the Last Man” in Nietzsche, 1885). The Last Man is the dullest of the Bores and Martyrs. He fails to interpret the game as something valuable and fun, mainly because he is enchained by the fantasy of the glorious sacrifice. Actually, he hates the game. But saying ‘no’ is too painful for him. He rather tolerates the pain of play passively rather than quitting.

For instance the player acting as the Fat Man might fail to see the enjoyable side of the somewhat fictive self-pity. Instead of using the safe word to end the misery, he ceases all actions against the flow of game. Not because of the others, but because of the game. If he quits, he is a weak and bad player. If he does not, he is *still* a weak and bad player, but the sacrifice makes deceiving himself easier.

## 5 Conclusion

The nihilism of play raises from the oppositions (i) between the playful life and the everyday life and (ii) between the negation of play (e.g. the rules) and the affirmation of play (e.g. the objective of play). To enjoy playing is to overcome these oppositions. Thus, the nihilism of play is a necessary part of enjoyment. The player needs to *invent* the joy of play. To do this, he must first (i) transform the negative and inherently nihilistic structures of play into something valuable, and then (ii) perceive the game as a manifestation of these newly found values. A bad play experience is a failure in this – either partially or fully.

This paper is just an introduction to the full analysis of playing as a form of nihilism. For example, when discussing immersion, “the affirmation of alternative identity” and “the negation of self” are the key elements – not the objectives of play and the rules.

## 6 Acknowledgements

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Figure 1

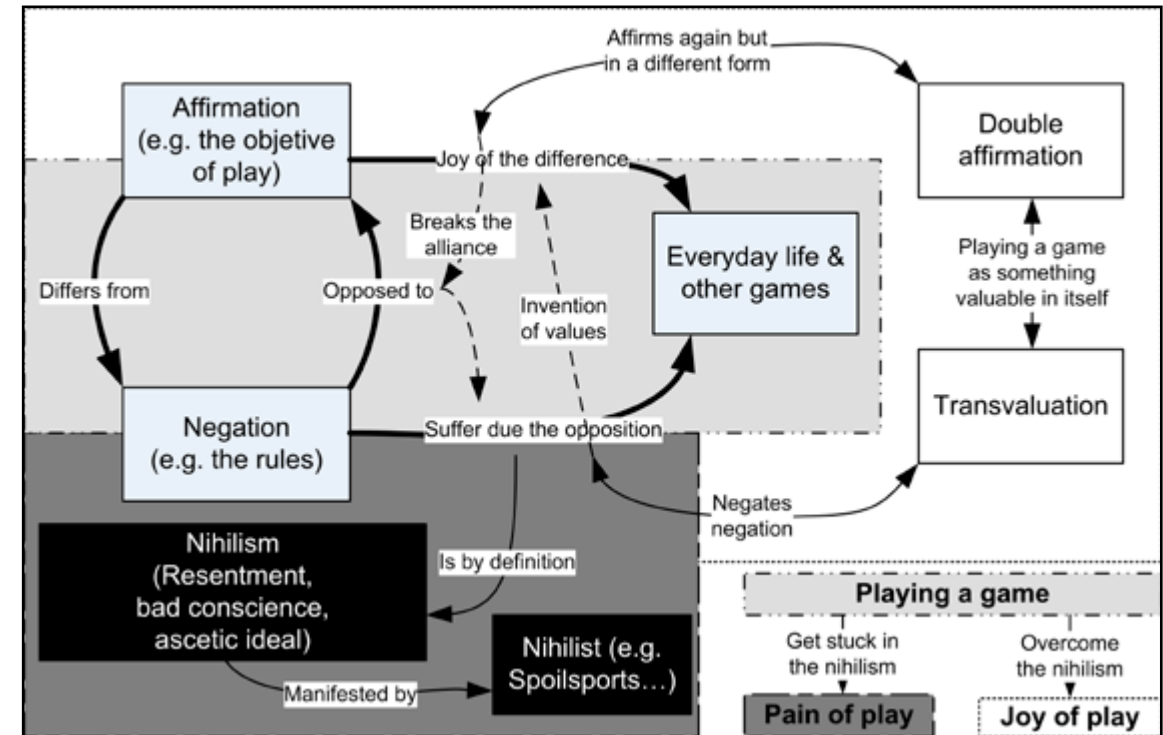


Figure 1 summarizes in what sense playing a game is a form of nihilism.

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## *Author Biographies*

**Maya Müller**, MA in History and Religion. Maya has a background in the market research industry and is currently working as a high school teacher. She has been larping for more than 15 years, and has been involved in several associations and has co-arranged a number of larps.

**Björn-Ole Kamm** majored in Japanese Studies and Communication & Media Studies at Leipzig University (Germany) and Ritsumeikan University Kyoto. Since 2009, he has been a doctoral student in Leipzig. His research focuses on 'common sense', popular culture, and learning effects through roleplaying. He enjoys GMing or larping whenever time permits.

**Jofrid Regitzesdatter** is a 30-year-old larper with an affinity for old school larps with swords and ogres. Graduated summer 2010 as MA in pedagogical anthropology from the Danish School of Education, specialised in gender research. She is also a kick-ass mother of a pair of two-year old twins.

**Marjukka Lampo** (MA) is currently working at the Centre for Practise as Research in Theatre at the University of Tampere. She has recently finished her Master's degree in Erasmus Mundus Master of Arts in International Performance Research programme at the University of Tampere and the University of Warwick. Her research interests include participatory performances, play and games.

**Evan Torner** is a Ph.D. candidate in German and Scandinavian Studies and Film Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he is writing his dissertation on race representation in East German cinema. In addition to film publications about Michael Haneke, Peter Brook, and Uwe Boll, he has written filmographies for the role-playing games *Mist-Robed Gate* and *Tales of the Fisherman's Wife*. He has been an avid role-player since he was eight years-old.

**Jaakko Stenros** (M.Soc.Sc.) is a game researcher and a doctoral candidate at Game Research Lab at the University of Tampere. He is an author of *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (2009), as well as an editor of three books on role-playing, *Nordic Larp* (2010), *Playground Worlds* (2008) and *Beyond Role and Play* (2004).

**Markus Montola** (M.Soc.Sc.) has worked as a game researcher at University of Tampere and at Nokia Research Center. He's an author of *Pervasive Games: Theory and Design* (2009), and an editor of three books on role-playing, *Nordic Larp* (2010), *Playground Worlds* (2008) and *Beyond Role and Play* (2004). He is currently finishing his dissertation on pervasive role-playing.

**Lauri Lukka** (Bachelor of Psychology) is currently writing his master's thesis at the University of Turku, Finland, and hopes to graduate in the spring of 2011. Besides clinical psychology and psychometrics, his interests lie in wide variety of games, including board games, role-playing games, larps and computer games.

**J. Tuomas Harviainen** (M.Th.) studies and designs larps in various capacities, from applying psychology of religion on understanding player experiences to the information-systems modelling of game environments. He is currently writing his doctoral dissertation, on information phenomena in live-action role-playing games, at the Department of Information Studies and Interactive Media, University of Tampere, Finland. Harviainen has also contributed to every Knudepunkt book published so far.

**Jesper Bruun** (M.Sc. in Physics) is a PhD. Fellow at the University of Copenhagen, Department of Science Education. His project, "Network Physics and Learning Physics", aims at understanding how students at different levels learn physics. The project involves both the professional area of physics and research on learning. Jesper has been role playing since 1996, and has both participated and organized larps as well as being an active contributor to debates on larp in Denmark and at Knudepunkt.

**Ari-Pekka Lappi** (M.Phil) graduated from the department of Theoretical Philosophy of University of Helsinki. He has role-played for almost 20 years and designed (mostly experimental) games for about 10 years.





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