



# Beyond Role and Play

tools, toys and theory for harnessing the imagination

edited by  
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foreword by  
Frans Mäyrä

## **Beyond Role and Play**



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tools, toys and theory for harnessing  
the imagination

Edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros

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**Beyond Role and Play – Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination.**  
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# Foreword

Writing the Foreword for this book is an interesting task, not least because one has to, first of all, ask whom one is addressing. Who needs these pages of role-playing theory, methods, models or analyses? For an outsider, the subject might seem marginal or esoteric to demand – or be worthy of – extended, analytical treatises. This is all about adult people playing children's games, right? The stereotypical perception may be changing, but still an extra effort must be taken to underline the significance of larp and role-playing – as art, as popular culture, as something that not only the small core group of the initiated, but a much wider audience can learn and profit from. This is an important book, indeed.

The previous Knudepunkt/Solmukohta book, *As Larp Grows Up – Theory and Methods of Larp* (eds. Gade, Thorup & Sander 2003) was a fascinating collection of texts, and with this recent addition, the power of Nordic larp community seems to be well on the way of providing us with something we all very much need: a language for the era of games and other interactive cultural forms.

Game studies is a discipline in the making, and compared to the history of, for example, literary studies or film studies, it will no doubt take its proper time for us to accurately understand what these new ways of interacting in storytelling, in online environments, interactive television shows, and elsewhere are actually contributing to our culture and society. Studying role-playing is justifiable for many reasons, but one of them is that in it, we are confronting a phenomenon that is both ancient, and something very topical for the rupture our way of life is currently going through. Last couple of years have seen a powerful rise in the publication, curriculum and research activities related to games, but these have particularly started from the study and design of digital games. The media-independent research into tabletop RPG and larp in its multiple important forms is still lagging behind in the academic world.

*Beyond Role and Play – Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination* is a document of a certain point in the self-understanding of the larp community. As such, it inevitably sounds polyphonic, can appear uneven from some angle, and is no doubt open for the larp-theoretical self-criticism that some authors present also within these pages. But there is no easy way out: traditional academic research is slowly coming along, and trying out ways to document, describe and fit larp among the phenomena already mapped by science. However, the qualitative understanding of role-playing, how it is experienced, why it is practiced in certain ways and what are its potentials, demand such expertise that can only be found by being a role-player or a larper oneself.

The geographic scope of the writers in this anthology match the variety of approaches, disciplinary discourses and practical considerations they explore in their contributions. Particularly delightful is the opening up of Nordic larp and role-playing theorisation to the discussions that have been going on the English-language discussion lists, fanzines and other publications elsewhere. Only by such a dialogue between the

different centres or sub-cultures where role-playing is practiced and constantly re-invented and redefined, can this field progress in any long-lasting manner.

Such dialogue is obviously needed between the various artists, innovators and researchers of larp, too. I think that there would be some benefits from more clear division of roles between game innovator and game researcher, too, but currently there are not any “departments of role-playing studies”. In this kind of institutions it would be possible to do large, long-term research projects that would be dedicated to collecting and analysing substantial and representative records from different types of actual players, larp organiser groups or role-playing communities. At the moment, our understanding is based on our individual larp and RPG histories, and thereby necessarily partial. However, this book is also evidence of how this situation is in the process of changing, and more ambitious and rigorous research is constantly devised and conducted.

One can only sincerely thank Ropecon ry., as well as Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros, who have done an enormous job (on their free time) while preparing not only a significant event, but also a book that no doubt will retain its value as reference for the future creation and criticism, whether in the areas of role-playing theory or practise, or in some of the many applied fields that are also appearing and profiting from the multiple, surprising opportunities opened by role-play.

January 18, 2004, Tampere

Frans Mäyrä

# Preface

The book project for the Nordic role-playing convention Solmukohta 2004 was motivated by both the desire to archive the discussion on role-playing that has made all the seven earlier conventions so captivating and intriguing, and the wish to create further discussion by offering an attractive forum. As we look on the resulting texts, we can say we are impressed.

As the readers of this book are as diverse as the contributors, we have divided the texts into four sections: Theory, Practice, Games and Openings. Of course, the division is at times arbitrary. These sections are framed with articles, which put role-playing into a historical and anthropological context: The first one is a critical look at the first 25 years of Anglo-American role-playing studies and the second traces the history of larp-like practices of several different cultures. The book concludes with a view from the outside as role-playing is approached as a subculture and a neotribe.

The *Theory* section covers role-playing from the point of view of semiotics, theatre studies, narratology, game studies, cultural text analysis, post-modern identity theory, communication studies, psychology, pedagogy, philosophy and textual analysis. These articles should interest especially role-play researchers. *Practice* offers tools for character and narrative design, a model for conceptualising the chaotic nature of role-playing games, basic typologies to aid the communication of the game master's vision, a new way of simulating amorous relations and a method for implementing the body language of a character. This section is useful for game masters, players and theorist. The section on *Games* takes a look at three very important larps played in the Nordic region in the past few years. The articles are provided to both inspire game organisers and to increase the methodological consciousness of the reader. *Openings* charts new paths with discussion on using role-playing as an educational tool, reclaiming drama from tragedy, a normative manifesto for narrativist role-playing, a controversial look at story and finally Genesi, the wonderful spark of larp.

During the selection of the texts for this book, three major themes emerged: a narrativist view on role-playing, the role-playing revolution, and the core process of role-playing games.

Satu Heliö, John H. Kim, Erling Rognli and Aksel Westlund all see role-playing as a device for storytelling even though they have no shared view on what a story is. Markus Montola tries to construct a model on how the role-played plots emerge chaotically, while Juhana Pettersson counters the narrativism, claiming that role-playing stories are merely the birth pangs of a new form of expression.

Martin Ericsson, Tova Gerge, Elge Larsson, Mike Pohjola, Christopher Sandberg, Gabriel Widing and Emma Wieslander all see role-playing as an instrument for change in society. Both their approaches and conclusions are different, but the common connecting thread is that role-playing can and will change reality.

Edward Choy, Satu Heliö, John H. Kim, Ari-Pekka Lappi, Mika Loponen, Markus Montola, Christopher Sandberg and Jaakko Stenros all attempt to find the core essence of the role-playing medium; to understand in what way role-playing differs, and does not differ, from other forms of art or expression. The focus on the process of interpretation in role-playing is a common factor among many of these texts.

## A Few Technical Notes

Within the fragmented scene of role-players most terms are considered normative by some group. We have chosen *role-playing* as an umbrella term, including the various forms of traditional pen and paper and live-action role-playing; it is also applicable for computer-mediated role-playing in multi-user digital environments, ranging from IRC to complicated virtual realities.

The term *live-action role-playing*, or *larping*, includes also the various forms and styles of live role-playing and indrama, just like the term *tabletop role-playing* includes the various forms of pen and paper role-playing. The freeform tradition lies between these two. These terms have been chosen because they are in widespread use in the Nordic countries, despite the fact that action, pens, papers and tables are all irrelevant or contested requirements for the role-playing expression.

Regardless their differences the various forms of role-playing have a lot to offer each other at both the theoretical and methodological level. All the papers included are applicable to larping, while most of them can also be applied for tabletop role-playing and computer-mediated role-playing.

We ask the readers to notice that the articles of the book are based on various scientific disciplines, represent several genres of writing and were written in eight different countries. Reader discretion is – as always – advised.

## Acknowledgements

As the editors we want to thank all the contributors for making this project reality. We are also indebted for Projectgruppen KP03 for showing us the path with their publication at Knudepunkt 03, as well as for their support in the making of this book. Also, this project couldn't have been done without the diligence and ambition of all the people who have been organising the Finnish role-playing convention Ropecon since 1994.

Special thanks go to Solmukohta 2004 head organiser Mikko Pervilä for trusting us with the book, and to Henri Hakkarainen for perspective and perseverance.

Markus wants to thank all his test subjects and inspiring fellow game masters during the 15 years of role-playing; including but not limited to Pekka Hänninen, Simo Järvelä, Jukka Koskelin, Tuomas Nurmela, Topi Pitkänen, Mikki Rautalahti and Janne Vuorenmaa.

Jaakko would especially like to thank all the participants of his tabletop campaign *Lobkeileva kynsilakka* (Cracking Nail Varnish) for the fun times and for enthusiastically picking apart all the half-baked methodological trials he has kept throwing at them. A better ensemble is hard to imagine.

January 31, 2004, Helsinki

Markus Montola  
Jaakko Stenros







# In Search of the Self

## A Survey of the First 25 Years of Anglo-American Role-Playing Game Theory

*This paper summarises major English-language strands in thought about role-playing from the 1970s onward, taking an archaeology approach to the development of ideas. Starting from the highly structured initial form of the game, it will proceed to elaborate the crude but influential 'Fourfold Way', a taxonomy of player motivation, and further note theories of 'frames' and 'stances', as well as the 'storytelling' of the White Wolf games, all attempts to represent the multi-level nature of the player-character relationship with a variety of metaphorical devices. A number of other theories will be mentioned to show the diversity of approaches, including Tolkienian subcreation and writing on Mask Theory. Finally pointers to currently active sources of role-playing thought are offered.*

One of the difficulties in attempting to compile even such a brief, provisional introduction to role-playing game theory as this is the ambiguity surrounding the nature of the activity. In the context of this book, perhaps the most important ambiguity concerns the distinction between so-called 'tabletop'<sup>1</sup> and live-action role-playing. But this is by no means the first ambiguity encountered in attempting to trace any history of the hobby.

Almost any attempt to record the early history of role-playing gets mired in the agenda of the historian. While the usual custom is to point to the 1974 publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* by Tactical Studies Rules as the 'beginning' of role-playing, that game did not contain the words 'role-playing game'. Moreover, the antecedents of the game were obvious. It was a direct descendent of wargames (its cover said 'rules for fantastic medieval wargames'), and thus wargamers who wish to argue that role-playing is little more than the bastard offspring of their hobby have plenty of ammunition. There are other antecedents of role-playing which may be called upon to support one or other view of the true nature of role-playing. For example, in the early 1980s I encountered the claims of one David Palter to have been playing what he called a 'Talking Game' in the late sixties. While it undoubtedly had affinities with role-playing games, it had affinities with many other forms of shared spoken entertainment, so it is difficult to claim it as the 'first' role-playing game.

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<sup>1</sup> Known here in Japan by the more inventive term 'tabletalk'.

Similarly, the celebrated world of *Tékumel*, created by Professor M. A. R. Barker<sup>2</sup>, existed for decades before the publication of *Empire of the Petal Throne* by TSR in 1975. To what extent the imaginative exploitation of the world by Barker and his friends constituted role-playing is highly debatable.

Rather than begin what will in any case be a contentious overview (because of the selection) with an argument, I propose to simply regard the publication of the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974 as a 'year zero' for role-playing. The game's antecedents are clearly discoverable in the early theory, in any case.

This paper also limits itself to English-language theory, primarily that published in the US and UK. This is not because of an absence of theory elsewhere. Far from it: it is because the linguistic and geographical distances involved led to non-English speaking countries developing very different and imaginative approaches of their own. Some of these approaches finally trickled into the English-speaking world through the actions of interested parties; others still await an introduction.

## The First Five Years: Fireballs

*Dungeons & Dragons* was not an instant hit. In the first year it sold little more than 1000 copies (Fine 1983, 15). It took a couple of years for word-of-mouth to spread news of the game, and generate increasing sales and a body of players. That formative period, though barely documented, is significant. The original *Dungeons & Dragons* rules were a mess. They assumed that readers were already wargamers, and moreover left far more unexplained than explained. As a result, the first few years of *Dungeons & Dragons* saw a multitude of interpretations of the game. The period, and the limitations of that first edition, also led directly to the wave of games which followed D&D<sup>3</sup>.

Gary Gygax, the editor of first edition D&D who subsequently claimed authorship of the game, expended considerable space in the pages of *The Dragon* (the house magazine of the publishers of *Dungeons & Dragons* during the late 1970s and early 1980s) asserting the importance of players following a standardised, 'authorised' set of rules – specifically the rules published by his company. He berated fanzines for 'propagating material which is generally detrimental to the campaign.' (quoted in Fine 1983, 256). Yet ironically the fanzines emerged to a large extent as a result of players' desires for a consistent game that worked – a need not fulfilled by original D&D. This was certainly the case with one of the earliest, and most influential fanzines, *Alarums & Excursions*, as its editor Lee Gold has explained (quoted in Fine 1983, 32).

These early tabletop role-playing experiences did not stray all that far from their wargames origins. Many of the tropes that subsequently became embedded in the genre,

<sup>2</sup> Details of this remarkable creation can be found at [www.tekumel.com](http://www.tekumel.com) (22.12.2003)

<sup>3</sup> Ed Simbalist, author of *Chivalry & Sorcery* has stated on numerous occasions that the game was originally conceived as a 'supplement' for D&D and became a game in its own right partly because of TSR's lack of interest in publishing it, and partly because the D&D rule superstructure wasn't up to supporting the historicity desired.

and in derivative genres such as computer RPGs and even larps, can be traced either to skirmish wargaming or to the improvisations of early D&D players. Thus while 'character classes' and 'prime requisites' were a particularly tenacious legacy of the original D&D game, resolution of conflict through an abstract rules simulation was derived from wargaming, and 'spell points' one of many ideas originated by fans.

Initially, writing about role-playing games (or 'D&D' as all games were genericised in the early days) was resolutely technical. The game experience mainly consisted of pretending to be a character who would descend into a subterranean cave complex (to which the word 'dungeon' was somewhat inappropriately affixed), fight monsters, and recover treasure. Part of the appeal of the game was this structure and simplicity in the core activity, a simplicity which subsequently found more accomplished expression in the field of video games. While other activities were present from early on (the 'bar room brawl' being a popular, if apparently anachronistic, alternative to dungeon exploration) the central activity remained relatively unquestioned, at least within the D&D fraternity (other games such as *Chivalry & Sorcery* and *Traveller* were establishing other possibilities). Thus writing generally fell into three broad categories:

- 1 Expansion. Additional monsters, spells, items, character classes, and rules generally.
- 2 Expression. Scenarios and write-ups of adventures.
- 3 Interpretation. Debate over the correct way to interpret rules issues.

Rules disagreements generated what would now seem an almost incredible level of conflict. Arguments over interpretations of the D&D spell Fireball, for example, raged over several issues of the fanzine *Alarums & Excursions*.

From the category of interpretation, some theory started to emerge as writers began to consider procedural issues arising from the rules, but going beyond them in implication. These would probably strike current role-players as quaint. For example, in the early days it was suggested that players act as a 'party' and their intentions and actions be relayed to the 'Dungeon Master' (as the referee was invariably known) by one member designated a 'caller'. The pros and cons of this system received much attention in print, and the argument shaded into the wider issue of whether or not players were best served by toeing the TSR line in all things. That Gary Gygax's attempts to mould role-playing in his own image were ultimately unsuccessful is demonstrated in many places, with the disappearance of the 'caller' as a game procedure being but one.

This also marks an important point in the transition of perceptions of role-playing from skirmish wargaming (in which participants 'identify' with their characters, but ultimately are players moving tokens) to more immersive role-playing. The levels of immersion and identification which are taken for granted now were considered somewhat extreme in the late 1970s.

Most analysis of the role of the referee was phrased in quite specific language which sometimes concealed the real issue being addressed. From early on it was evident

that although the 'Dungeon Master' was modelled on the referee of a wargame, the correspondence was inexact. Because the players tended towards co-operation rather than conflict, the role-playing referee had to provide opposition, a task somewhat at odds with the more impartial activities expected of a wargaming referee (such as rules arbitration and handling the 'fog of war'). In a game which was still approached more as a skirmish wargame than as a story-generator, this created an obvious source of tension. It was expressed in discussion comparing the extremes of referee behaviour, labelled 'Killer Dungeon' on the one hand and 'Monty Haul' on the other (this discussion appeared in most professional and amateur publications of the period, and can also be found in Fine, 1983). The former stressed the conflict between the referee and players taken to extremes: referees would kill player characters more-or-less arbitrarily. 'Monty Haul' was a joke derived from a US TV gameshow host; in this style the referee was constantly trying to please players by distributing treasure and items within the game. While most treatment of the topic advocated a middle ground, it took some years before it was widely recognised that the problem was an inevitable result of confusion in the goals of the game. As a pure conflict game, D&D was nonsensical (and was often derided as such by wargamers) since the referee had access to limitless resources to counter the highly limited powers of the player characters. Only when more overtly story-oriented approaches emerged widely during the 1980s was this contradiction overcome, and the role of the referee subjected to more detailed scrutiny.

Thus much of the early effort went into rules. Only when these had been taken to greater levels of sophistication would it be possible to start exploring implications beyond the established structure. Much work on developing new rules and settings was done in fanzines. Parts of *Runequest*, for example, a hugely influential game both in its rules and setting, originally appeared in the fanzines *Alarums & Excursions* and *The Wild Hunt*.

## Development

The late 1970s and early 80s saw the beginnings of a more theoretical approach to role-playing games. As yet, cases of genuine academic engagement were highly infrequent, and generally met with incomprehension at best, and derision at worst. But the Chaosium's *Different Worlds* magazine, which first appeared in 1979, presented a professional forum for more thoughtful material.

By far the most frequently covered topic in role-playing publications both professional and amateur at the time was a debate concerning the relative merits of realism and playability. Typically, the two were regarded as mutually exclusive, extremes of a continuum. The discussion can be seen to derive from the concerns of wargames: with the primary goal of simulating a real or close-to-real situation, the issue becomes the extent to which compromises can be made in rules to simplify the procedure of play. Again, perhaps because a wargaming paradigm was being applied to altered

circumstances, the debate rarely rose above the level of a slanging match, but in it can be found the seeds of later thought on the nature of the imaginary experience, styles of play and so on.

During this period more creativity was applied to settings for games. The initial D&D dungeon was characterised as a 'zoo', full of monsters and treasure placed somewhat arbitrarily. This phantasmagoric assemblage became increasingly unsatisfactory to many players, who developed what they referred to as 'living dungeons'. These fascinating compromises enabled gamers to retain the underground labyrinth (or in some cases, castle) as the mainstay of their gaming experience, while applying some measure of logic: the 'dungeons' were conceived to be functioning communities. The idea quickly spilled over into the commercial field, with TSR publishing the G series of modules (adventures) starting with G1 *Steading of the Hill Giant Chief* in 1978.

The natural extension of this movement, however, was to remove the focus of the game from the dungeon altogether, and for the action to take place in a 'world'. At this point, especially in the UK, many writers derived inspiration from J. R. R. Tolkien's essay *On Fairy Stories*, which they saw as explaining the means by which he had created Middle-earth – the process he termed 'subcreation'. British fanzines published by older gamers (such as Pete Tamlyn's *The Acolyte* and Pete Lindsay's *Drunk & Disorderly*) increasingly featured material on the features, physical and cultural, of imaginary worlds. In this period the elaboration of a fantasy setting often took precedence over the expression of a role. One of the original appeals of D&D other than combat had been exploration; the discovery of, and engrossment in, a world outside the dungeon enabled this aspect to be taken to sometimes extreme lengths.

The most significant development in analysis of the player experience came in the form of the *Fourfold Way* taxonomy (Blacow 1980) by which player motivation was categorised as 'wargamer', 'powergamer', 'storyteller' or 'role-player'. Despite the inevitable disagreements (many of which seemed to stem from a desire to privilege one or another approach), the notion quickly caught on. After an initial article in *Different Worlds* the Fourfold Way was developed in an eponymous article in the subsequent issue by a different author. It was subsequently invoked and refined in a number of forums.

The principal justification for such analysis appeared to be that by identifying your preferences in terms of the fourfold way, you could avoid misunderstandings and style clashes with other players. As yet, there was still relatively little thought being applied to what constituted the act of role-playing itself. In one example of fanzine debate on the topic, a dichotomy was established between two ways of role-playing: 'playing from' and 'playing to' a character (Walker 1985). The former referred to a more immersive, unconscious approach (akin to method acting) while the latter described a consciously crafted simulation of personality through player choice. As with many such discussions, it petered out without leading very far beyond the original idea. Such discussions were generally bedevilled by political concerns: in many cases it seemed writers established categories in order to privilege their own approach. In some cases virulent arguments broke out, with at least one writer for *Alarums & Excursions*

withdrawing from the magazine over a claim that only ‘playing from’ a character (though this specific terminology was not used, the idea was the same) could be considered ‘true’ role-playing.

## The Plot Thickens

The withdrawal from the dungeon created huge potential problems. Originally, players had been provided with a large measure of freedom. Once their characters had entered a dungeon, it was up to them to decide how they proceeded, and which direction they could explore. The referee had a detailed map and description of the contents of the dungeon. Although Herculean attempts were made, such detailed specifications were impossible once the game activity extended into an entire fantasy world. The ambiguous role of the referee once again took centre stage.

The solution was to move away from the freedom of the wargaming style, and look for inspiration from other genres. Since role-players had always been inclined to derive their material from literary and cinematic sources (the debt D&D owed Tolkien, even after explicit references were expunged, is obvious), they now started to think more about methodology. In books and films, the author crafted a plot. Why, therefore, shouldn’t the referee of a role-playing game also craft a plot? Instead of designing an environment, within which player characters would be free to ‘play’, the referee planned a story which would happen to the player characters, more or less irrespective of their actions.

This idea did not suddenly emerge, of course. Elements appeared in D&D from quite early on. But it was in the 1980s that articles explicitly advocated that referees start to view themselves as *auteurs* and, more influentially, scenarios started to be written this way. Perhaps because this enabled role-playing to be compared directly to other media, it quickly spread in popularity. Little thought was expended on its implications for the act of role-playing itself.

## Going Live

The ambiguity surrounding the origins of role-playing has already been described. Initially, the activity was viewed as a branch of wargaming. Similarly, live-action role-playing was not initially regarded as a discrete category. Indeed, in the public imagination in the 1980s, D&D (ie. role-playing) *was* live-action role-playing. This ambiguity can be seen in media portrayals of the hobby, especially in the early Tom Hanks film *Mazes & Monsters* (1982) and to a lesser extent in the Spanish film *El Corazón del Guerrero* (2000).

For many, live-action was a natural extension of the tabletop activity, and legends sprung up of ‘steam tunnels’ underneath university campuses, in which D&Ders would

enact their games. The case of James Dallas Egbert, who went missing, believed by some to have 'lost himself' in a live-action D&D game, attracted unwelcome publicity to the concept (Dear 1991).

However there were established precedents which pre-dated D&D. The Society for Creative Anachronism is a medieval re-enactment society founded in 1966. Like similar organisations elsewhere in the world (such as the UK's Sealed Knot) the primary purpose is re-enactment and recreation of the period. However this inevitably shaded into role-playing when participants took on identities. The SCA directly influenced role-playing (the Runequest rules, in particular were inspired by findings from re-enacted combat) and traffic also flowed the other way. While one might expect the combat orientation of such enactment societies to fuel the preference for combat within role-playing, in practice the SCA was instrumental in generating interest in more political live-action role-playing.

The undifferentiated nature of the hobby was possible because so little detailed thought had been given to what actually constituted the act of role-playing. A perception of separation only started to emerge along with such thought. In the UK, this coincided with the establishment of Treasure Trap, a commercial operation based in a genuine castle. Treasure Trap reproduced all the tropes of D&D for live-action play, including character classes and dungeon exploration. Having game mechanics whose only purpose was to compensate for the lack of live-action ported over into a live-action experience made their contradictions all the more evident. Those who had moved on from D&D now derided this commercial form of live-action, and argued that while undeniably adrenalinising, it nevertheless represented a more limited form of role-playing, as players were constrained by their physical abilities as well as their mental ones. This argument was trumped in turn by those arguing for postal role-playing, who declared that the 'distance' from the actions of the character, the opportunity to think hard about actions, enabled a 'purer' form of role-playing.

Much of this debate, like others before and since, was primarily political arguments seeking to establish the superiority of one form or approach over another. It did have some positive consequences, however, in focusing attention on the relationship between the player and character. The rules intervene in order to make it possible for the character to achieve feats of which the player is incapable. But if this logic is followed to its conclusion, then the player would do nothing at all, since even making a decision is an expression of a person's abilities. Perhaps inevitably, at the same time as experiments with live-action role-playing were bearing fruit, many players were also trying out diceless and even ruleless (which is to say, fully referee-adjudicated) games. Others were integrating character personality more into the rules (in other words, taking elements of it out of the hands of the player). Chaosium's *Pendragon* (1985) expressed this idea in commercial form with its personality traits, though the 'character point' approach to character design pioneered by *Champions* and continued by *GURPS* could also be said to do the same, if in a more rule-intensive environment.

The form of larp called a 'Freeform' is claimed as an Australian invention<sup>4</sup> though since similar activities were taking place in the UK and USA, perhaps the invention actually consists only of the name. Freeforms moved away from the combat orientation that had characterised *Treasure Trap* and its successors. The publication of *The Freeform Book*, and simultaneous experimentation with freeforms in the UK, particularly by those connected with the highly regarded British fanzine *Aslan*, helped to establish the form in its own right, paving the way for far deeper and more sophisticated contemporary expressions. At its origins, however, it was entwined with the tabletop form. *Aslan* reported on the integration of live-action sequences into a predominantly tabletop *Ars Magica* game at Warwick University.

## Authorised Sources

The 1980s marked the commercial peak of Dungeons & Dragons. Inevitably, therefore, interest was sparked outside the 'industry'. 1982 saw the publication of two books on role-playing in the UK, the first from the Puffin imprint of Penguin, by three schoolboys (Butterfield et al 1982) and the second from Ian Livingstone (a founder of Games Workshop, the company which first imported Dungeons & Dragons into the UK, and which later went on to global success in the field of fantasy wargaming). Because of the target audience, and the limitations of the authors (Livingstone was a boardgamer at heart, and a money-maker first and foremost, as his subsequent success with *Tomb Raider* at Eidos demonstrates) neither of these books had anything to contribute to role-playing theory. At best, they offered a simple introduction to the D&D side of the hobby, with all its clichés.

The subsequent year saw the publication of *Shared Fantasy: Role-playing Games as Social Worlds* (Fine 1983), a sociological study of the hobby which nevertheless managed to present far more useful theory than the works by supposed practitioners. Most influential was the invocation of Erving Goffman's 'frame analysis' as a means of examining how role-players switch between levels of identity. Fine explored how role-playing saw frame-switching far more rapid than that described by other social theorists, and related it to 'engrossment' (which may be seen as synonymous with immersion). These ideas were influential, especially on later work in the short-lived journal *Interactive Fantasy*, and appear elsewhere in the present collection.

Towards the end of the decade, Gary Gygax burst into print with the portentously titled *Role-Playing Mastery* (1989). Sadly, the book was marked only by a hissing aversion to just about every development from Gygax's original conception of dungeon delving. The 'mastery' of the title, it transpired, consisted of learning the rules thoroughly, and co-operating with other players in order to efficiently dispose of monsters and maximise treasure gained. Players who distracted from this goal by making some effort to 'act'

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<sup>4</sup> 'The world's first freeform was run by Peter Quinton at Octocon in Canberra, October 1982. The next was run at Cancon '83 and involved nearly 150 players.' (Chapman et al. 1993)

their characters were labelled problems. 'Plot' was no part of the Gygaxian picture. Gygax had left TSR in 1985, and this book did nothing to restore his place in the role-playing pantheon.

## The Future In The Past

Though at the time it seemed like rather a minor game, 1988's *Ars Magica* was extremely important in finally releasing into the commercial sphere ideas which had hitherto been the province only of gaming groups of an experimental bent. Its authors went on to fame elsewhere, with Jonathan Tweet co-authoring the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* 12 years later and Mark Rein•Hagen being the head storyteller for *White Wolf* (of whom more anon). It is significant that both authors, along with Robin Laws who was to become one of the most significant figures of the fin de siècle – contributed to *Alarums & Excursions*, where their ideas could be subjected to intense scrutiny from highly experienced theorists.

*Ars Magica* concerned itself explicitly with the creation of a story by the gaming group. At the same time, however, it tackled very practically many of the problems that could emerge. The game background provided a relatively limited setting (the magical 'covenant') which could be detailed, while other places could be prepared as required. The character types were made not as artificially 'equalized' classes, but in order to support the shared model of gaming that came to be known as 'troupe' play. In this, the authorial power of the referee could be mitigated by rotating referee duties. Thus an *Ars Magica* game took place in a genuinely shared setting. Players would also be able to reduce the gaming trope of the 'adventuring party' by taking over other, shared, characters (known as 'grogs', perhaps as a deliberate jibe at wargamers) when their own main character was not involved in the current plot thread.

These were not completely new ideas (perhaps because of the intensely subcreated nature of the setting, *Tékumel* groups had also been rotating referee in a shared setting for many years) but this was their first expression in the commercial field.

The emphasis on storytelling continued with the publication of *Vampire: The Masquerade* in 1991. This was significant for at least two reasons. It was another example of the way in which strands of role-playing diverge and then retwine. *Vampire* came from a successful live-action group, and the live-action sensibility informed the tabletop game. For many, this represented the (suitably bloody) final severing of the umbilical cord that connected wargaming and role-playing. A second key point was that *Vampire* and its successors took role-playing out of its core constituency (which could perhaps be pithily, if unkindly, be described as *Lord of the Rings*-reading social inadequates) and established an alternative fief – in this case that of undead-obsessed 'goths'.

## At Last?

One of the most frustrating aspects of role-playing games for those who had been playing for a while was the impermanence of theoretical developments. As this paper itself demonstrates, most of the writing on role-playing appeared in ephemeral publications with very low print runs. As a result the ideas were only weakly disseminated. As new magazines emerged, the same ideas (particularly 'realism and playability') were continually gone over. For many it felt like the hobby was marching on the spot.

In 1994, therefore, James Wallis of Hogshead Games teamed up with Andrew Rilstone, editor of *Aslan*, to publish *Interactive Fantasy*<sup>5</sup>, a 'journal of role-playing and story-making systems.' While the project attracted much of the derision that the English-speaking role-playing hobby has always heaped on any attempt at thought, it nevertheless offered, for its brief span (the poorly thought-out business model on which it was predicated meant that only four issues were published) an eclectic blend of ideas about what had been done and what could be done.

Inevitably, old obsessions reared their heads. Taxonomy cropped up in the very first issue as Greg Porter attempted to fit role-playing to a deterministic historical progression of 'generations'. One excellent feature of the journal was, however, the debate it engendered; Porter's analysis was subjected to heavy critical scrutiny from Pete Tamlyn two issues later. Moreover, the view of role-playing was resolutely inclusive: live-action and freeforming were represented, as were computer role-playing and the use of role-playing in educational and therapeutic contexts.

In only four issues the journal had little opportunity to develop strong, coherent positions, but it did bring together a number of fascinating strands. For example, though unable to avoid the taxonomic urge, James Wallis pointed many readers in the direction of Keith Johnstone's seminal *Impro*. Wallis attempted to identify four ways of role-playing: puppet-play (the manipulation of a character primarily as a puzzle-solver or token), type-play (the manipulation character as a representative of a role which includes those role-plays used in business and other fields), personality-play (the creation of a fictional character) and finally, mask play. The latter was a putative style of play inspired by Johnstone's identification of the trance state induced by wearing Masks in improvisational acting (Johnstone 1981, 143–200). Wallis picked up on *Impro* on the recommendation of Dave Morris who, sadly, had never written about most of these ideas. Wallis went on to champion more social games, and never returned to Mask Theory; *Interactive Fantasy* ceased publication.

Another of the perennial concerns of role-playing, expressed frequently in *Interactive Fantasy* as well as elsewhere, is the quest to be recognised as 'art'. Robin Laws, who designed some of the most critically applauded games of the last few years (including *Feng Shui*, *Dying Earth* and *Hero Wars*) staked his claim in the pages of *Interactive Fantasy* and true to form, the claim was rebutted two issues later by Brian

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<sup>5</sup> The first issue was called *Inter\*Action* but following legal threats from a computer games company, the name was changed.

Duguid. Laws at least had a useful reason for his assertion: that art demanded a critical framework<sup>6</sup>. Other demands for role-playing to be regarded as art were transparently motivated by a desire for social acceptance, the idea being that the status of art might provide this. Few writers seemed to notice that video games had emerged from their ghetto to full mainstream acceptance with few accompanying pretensions to the status of art.

## Advocacy and Diversity

As the popularity of tabletop role-playing waned during the 1990s, fan activity shifted to the Internet. Prior to the inception of web-based forums such as *rpg.net*, the newsgroups of Usenet<sup>7</sup> were the obvious location. A number sprung up concerned with role-playing games, with *rec.games.frp.misc* attracting most of the general discussion. Unfortunately this newsgroup also attracted a number of highly abusive posters, and anyone attempting to conduct a serious discussion would quickly be drowned out in trivia and rage. The alternative of *rec.games.frp.advocacy* was created as a place for advocates of one system over another to argue their case; ironically it developed into one of the few sites of critical discourse on role-playing.

The discussion on *rec.games.frp.advocacy* is too rarefied for many Usenet users, and too abusive for others (it *is* still Usenet, after all). While it tends towards the taxonomic, it nevertheless remains probably the single most significant source of Anglo-American role-playing theory that is available. While sifting through the archives on Google is not made all that easy by the interface (which assumes you know what you are looking for) if you can find a way of skimming it from the beginning you will discover an abundance of fascinating threads. Because of the tendency of Usenet towards irrelevance and abuse, however, probably a better solution is to browse the pages of John H. Kim, one of the most significant contributors to the newsgroup, who has collected a wealth of material on his website<sup>8</sup>.

Consistent with the history of role-playing game theory in the English-speaking world, one of the first things that writers attempted to do was to classify different player motivations. On *rec.games.frp.advocacy* the taxonomy of choice was the ‘Threefold Way’ (a term coined by Mary Kuhner in a post in July 1997), which emerged from a wide-ranging discussion. In the course of the discussion participants attempted to define various aspects of role-playing on appropriate axes. One suggestion, which provoked thought for a while but dropped out of use, suggested ‘Preparation, Diagesis [sic], and

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<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately Laws’s personal dislike for semiology (Laws 1994, 95) apparently blinded him to modern critical theory’s critique of auteur-theory, and he was unable in his article to devote sufficient attention to the application of the latter to role-playing to avoid the impression that, as a writer of role-playing games, he was chasing auteur status for himself.

<sup>7</sup> Usenet uses the news protocol rather than http. It is unknown to most new users of the Internet, despite being a mainstay from the days before the Web.

<sup>8</sup> [www.darkshire.net/~jhkim/rpg](http://www.darkshire.net/~jhkim/rpg)

Metagame' as axes on which games/campaigns could be classified. But the most long-lived result came from the identification of 'stances' describing the relationship of the player to the game. The three stances of the 'Threefold Way' were based on the values of 'game', 'simulation' and 'drama'<sup>9</sup>. Despite inevitable disagreement over definitions, this identification of stances subsequently proved useful, both in allowing participants to state their own preferences, and in describing how different aspects of games might be approached from the different stances. For example, the question of whether the referee should prepare a plot prior to a game could be addressed in terms of the stances, with it being evident that a simulationist approach (in other worlds, one in which meta-game causes did not have in-game effects) would preclude such a practice.

## Beyond 25 Years

Overall, the main characteristics of English role-playing game thought over the 25 years following the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* have been dichotomy (realism vs playability, fun vs. seriousness) and taxonomy (the Three-/Fourfold Ways etc). It is interesting to note how these correspond to structural elements of the D&D game itself. Neither this, nor the persistent aversion of many English-speaking role-players to theory, has entirely succeeded in stifling advances in understanding of the phenomenon, yet the mainstream acceptance which many theorists crave seems no closer. It may be that despite role-playing's origins in the English-language culture sphere, it is only outside that environment that it can be properly examined.

In 2001 two books on role-playing theory were published. One, an academic tract, analysed role-playing primarily from a performance art perspective (Mackay 2001), while the other expressed the ideas on role-playing of a game designer, ideas which had previously been accessible only within his games, or by reading the fanzine *Alarums & Excursions* to which he contributed (Laws 2001). Both of these works will repay the interested student, and both feature content too dense and controversial to be tackled here. While the most remarkable thing about the first 25 years of role-playing theory is probably its published paucity, it is nevertheless reassuring to note that some works are trickling out.

This is especially true as the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (published in 2000) represented a conscious retreat to the values and principles of the original game. Sufficient time had elapsed since the initial thrill for nostalgia to be a powerful drive even for those who have pioneered commercial advances in the field.

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<sup>9</sup> These ideas are further developed at the website *The Forge* ([www.indie-rpgs.com](http://www.indie-rpgs.com)), a site which provides an excellent current source of discussion on tabletop role-playing theory.

## A Note on Sources

The overwhelming majority of sources for role-playing theory are ephemeral. Prior to the arrival of the Internet as a widespread means of exchange, most discussion took place in fanzines. Only a very few of these can still be obtained. Lee Gold maintains some back issues of *Alarums & Excursions* going back to the early 80s, which can be had from her. The author of this paper obtained an ISSN number for his fanzine, which means it is deposited with the British Library and therefore theoretically available. The derision which he received for doing this says something about general attitudes to the preservation of role-playing thought (or perhaps something about the quality of his fanzine). Because of the unavailability of sources, the majority of references are to books and journals which interested parties have at least a chance of obtaining.

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## Play to Love

### Reading Victor Turner's "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual; An Essay in Comparative Symbolology"

*This text is a set of extended marginal notes attempting to draw conclusions and make observations regarding some of the core aspects of live-action role-playing from the perspective of performance studies in general and by looking at Victor Turner's (1920–1983) wild brand of cultural anthropology in particular. For many years, my mental picture of what role-playing is all about has been heavily influenced by models linking ritual behaviour, human creativity and social transformation, this is a first attempt to gather a few threads of these thoughts in writing. What I hope to gain by presenting the present musings on some interesting texts is to introduce a number of useful terms and models from performance studies that I find relevant to the study of live-action role-playing and stress the far-ranging implications of making the connections that I do.*

Renowned anthropologist Victor Turner's body of work spans detailed statistical analysis of marriage patterns in the villages of northwestern Zambia and ambitious attempts to find the origins of the human activities of performance and play. Moving gradually away from traditional ethnography, his later work includes the physical re-enactment of ritual with student groups and studies of the ubiquitous performative structures of everyday western society. It is naturally these later projects that made me interested in reading his stuff. The main question Turner addresses in his study *From Ritual to Theatre; The Seriousness of Human Play* (Turner 1982) is how social action is related to aesthetics. He tries to explain the links between small- and large-scale social dramas (a divorce and Watergate) and aesthetic dramas found in ritual, theatre and literature. My reading will touch upon this core question, but it is not here that I find the most nutritious food for thought in relation to live action role-playing. It is exclusively the book's opening essay, *Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual; An Essay in Comparative Symbolology* (ibid, 20–60), that is the subject of this paper. If the reader finds work of Turner and the other performance theorists referred to in this text interesting, I refer them back to the original works which hold a much broader and better developed scope of ideas than those referred to here.

A coherent theory of play would assert that play and ritual are complimentary, ethnologically based behaviours which in humans continue undiminished through life;

that play creates its own (permeable) boundaries and realms: multiple realities that are slippery porous, and full of creative lying and deceit; that play is dangerous and, because it is, players need to feel secure in order to begin playing; that the perils of playing are often masked or disguised by saying that play is “fun”, “voluntary,” a “leisure activity,” or “ephemeral” – when in fact the fun of playing, when there is fun, is in playing with fire, going in over one’s head, inverting accepted procedures and hierarchies; that play is performative, involving players, directors, spectators and commentators in a quadrilogical exchange that, because each kind of participant often has her or his own passionately pursued goals, is frequently at cross purposes. (Schechner 1993, 26–27)

## Larp Theory and Performance Studies

During the last few years, larp theories have tried to define our nascent art form; the theories have attempted to create borders and definitions for what role-playing is – or in many cases, what good role-playing is. This quest for definition has thus far led to the birth of a number of strict and fairly unforgiving descriptive models, useful as tools for defining the uniqueness of role-playing in relation to other performative genres such as dance, sports, re-enactment, stage theatre and child’s play. It is tempting, but perhaps unfair, to see this struggle to find a unique and separate identity as a continuation of the role-playing community’s tendency to revel in its own marginalisation. The *Dogma 99* (Fatland & Wingård 1999) movement actively attempts to remove influence from non-larp forms, and the Turku school (Pohjola 2003) glorifies the one trait that is seen as uniquely ours – the holy grail of immersion. It may be argued that role-playing is not performance because it lacks a conventional audience, but so do the coming of age rites of the Ndembu, the events at Tiananmen Square and chicken-races on a dark Texas highway, all of which have been subjects of performance studies<sup>1</sup>. New York based professor Richard Schechner, one of the giants of the field, goes as far as stating that “Everything and anything can be studied” as “a performance” (Schechner 2004).

Naturally the insights we gain from looking at larp from this angle are very different from applying something like feminist or Marxist theory, but that’s a given. The fact remains that the body of larp theory has so far been largely self-referential and dominated by grand gestures and provoking poses rather than a serious attempt to make use of and comment on the large body of existing performance theory concerning play and participation on and off stage.

The practices and writings of Victor Turner, Richard Schechner and Jerzy Grotowski are of particular relevance to the role-playing community. What this boils down to is that these guys wrote some seriously provocative stuff and extended their ideas of performance far beyond the bounds of stage theatre and into the realms of religious ritual, sacred acting, child’s play and participatory drama. Had Nordic-style live-action role-playing been around in New York in the sixties, it would have been the natural focus for their studies and would have been hailed as the key, the missing link,

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<sup>1</sup> Essays on these subjects can be found in Schechner 1993.

in their quest to understand humanity's constant creation of performances. This is the greater picture in which role-playing theory is but the latest stroke of the brush, even if it has, to continue the metaphor, striking similarities to some of the very first charcoal sketches. There is a lot to learn from studying fields of performance outside the micro-culture of Nordic role-players and it's immediate sphere of reference.

In later years, a small number of games have consciously used some degree of understanding of performance theory as a part of the design process, the two most renowned being *Hamlet* and *Mellan himmel och hav*. The latter of these is a case of very special importance because of its effective use of methods drawn from religious performance, physical acting and writing based on solid ethnographical thinking. The game was not only something as rare as a genuine novel larp experience but also an extraordinary showcase of what can be gained from studying the roots and branches of human community, belief and performance. In games like this, role-play is getting closer and closer to something potent and primal.

## The First Art?

Open almost any book on theatre history, and you'll find the romantic theory that the origins of theatrical performance lie in rituals. Most of the field still seems to support this stance, backed up by modern observations from history, anthropology and ethnography. Whether the blame for Greek tragedy is put on the ecstatic rites of Dionysus or sombre worship of dead chieftains<sup>2</sup> matters little. The gist is that it looks bloody likely that stage theatre arose from practices where no clear distinction can be made between performer and spectator; from processions, magic rites, feasts and initiations. One of the earliest written records of dramatic performance is a sketchy description by I-kher-nefert of his participation in the great passion play to the glory of dismembered Osiris at the cult-centre at Abydos somewhere around 1800BC. This guy was the chief treasurer of Khekure, the Pharaoh known to history as Senusret III. He did pretty much the kind of job a megalomaniac larp organiser would do with a few thousand slaves and unlimited resources, instead of a guy with a van and a loan from the local role-playing guild.

I acted as beloved son of Osiris-Khentyamentiu. I embellished his great barque of eternity; I made for it a shrine which displays the beauties of Khentyamentiu, in gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, bronze, sesnedjem-wood and cedar[?]. I fashioned the gods in his train. I made their shrines anew. I caused the temple priesthood to do their duties, I caused them to know the custom of every day, the festival of the Head-of-the-Year. (Breasted, Henry James 1907)

From the sound of I-Kher-Nefert's report he had a busy game at the absolute centre of the plot. On his stele is written:

I organised the going forth of Wepwawet when he proceeded to avenge his father; I drove away the rebels from the neshmet-barque; I overthrew the enemies of Osiris; I celebrated

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<sup>2</sup> As claimed in Ridgeway 1915.

the great going forth. I followed the god at his going, and caused the ship to sail, Thoth steering the sailing. [...] I avenged Wennefer that day of the great fight; I overthrew all his enemies upon the sandbanks of Nedyt; I caused him to proceed into the great barque. It raised up his beauties, I making glad the people/tomb owners of the Eastern Desert, creating joy amongst the people/tomb owners of the Western Desert; they saw the beauties of the neshmet-barque when it touched land at Abydos, when it brought Osiris-Khentyamentiu to his palace; I followed the god to his house, I carried out his purification and extended his seat and solved the problems of his residence [...and amongst] his entourage. (ibid)

We have no real way of knowing exactly how pre-scripted these ritual plays were. Our scant sources hint that they were set up a bit like a mix between Hamlet and *Futuredrome*, with a scripted core cast at the centre of a violently ecstatic crowd. Herodotos, in his *Histories*<sup>3</sup>, tells us most of what we know about the game at Abydos, a weeklong affair re-enacting the battle between Osiris and Seth. The Pharaoh and a statue acted as the hero-god, and it is likely that it was not seen as pretence or art when he rode his gilded divine wagon through the streets followed by thousands of common citizens who took an active part in the action as the armies and feasting worshippers of the conflicting forces. The Greek historian reports with some horror the battles were being fought on the stairs to the temple.

The few then who have been left about the image, draw a wain with four wheels, which bears the shrine and the image that is within the shrine, and the other priests standing in the gateway try to prevent it from entering, and the men who are under a vow come to the assistance of the god and strike them, while the others defend themselves. Then there comes to be a hard fight with staves, and they break one another's heads, and I am of opinion that many even die of the wounds they receive; the Egyptians however told me that no one died. (Herodotos [2001])

The roots of the senseless boffer-war climax run deep indeed. The game must be considered quite hard core, not only for the heavy blunt-weapon fighting – the game ended with the Osiris-pharaoh slaying a live hippopotamus acting the part of Seth and a feast of hippo-cake and copious amounts of beer. The games at Abydos were not the first participatory dramas and they were not the last. Through the ages and across the globe we find similar spectacles of serious role-taking creating phenomena ranging from intimate initiatory rites to sprawling carnivals. A couple of examples that have continued into modern times would be the Waehma deerdance of the Yaqi Indians (Schechner 1993, 94–129) and the Ramlila of Ramnagar (ibid, 131–183).

The structural similarities between ritual drama and live action role-play are quite evident, even if one cannot claim an unbroken lineage of any sort – hardly a lipstick trace<sup>4</sup> – connecting our art causally to these dawn times of drama. Still it seems clear that current larp-practices share more traits with dramatic ritual than with any

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<sup>3</sup> (Herodotos, [2001]) Found on *Project Gutenberg*, see reference below.

<sup>4</sup> A term adopted from Greil Marcu's *Lipstick Traces, A Secret History of the 20th Century* (Harvard, Harvard University Press 1990), a work attempting to tracing the lineage of punk rock back to the situationist international, the Dadaists and beyond.

other form of human behaviour. Some of the models constructed to understand ritual and the emergence of performative art can be applicable to larps and help understand why they feel so important to players and, ultimately, why they are.

## The Rites of Role-Playing

Like all tactical academics, Arnold Van Gennep went down in history by coining a phrase. The term *rites des passage* (rites of passage) is highly successful and used by academics and laymen worldwide if a bit too often. Although Van Gennep intended the term to be used for rituals accompanying both individual and larger scale social status changes as well as rites marking an agrarian society's progression through the seasons, it has come to be used almost exclusively in connection to "life crises rites" (Gennep 1909). In our industrialised western world we have pale reflections of rites des passage in our baptisms, student examinations, university initiation pranks, our marriages and burials, all rites concerned with an individuals journey from one social role to another.

Turner tries to revert to the earlier meaning in his essay; that all rites have the character of a "passage" between different conditions and asks himself what this means. My question is a bit different; I'm looking for traces of role-playing structures, similarities and hints to enrich our art. Gennep divides a rite of passage into three phases; *separation, transition and incorporation*. It is possible to follow Turner and Gennep and apply the stages of ritual on larps. In this process one finds numerous signs pointing towards the conclusion that there exists a fundamental similarity between larp and liminal rite.

## Dead to the World

"The first phase of *separation*," Turner writes, "clearly demarcates sacred space and time." (Turner 1982, 24) This phase is well known and highly developed, at least in Swedish larp culture; it includes all the preparations players and organisers deem necessary to perform before they are ready to enter into a game. Most larp events are set in clearly defined spaces for a set period of time and while the game is active special rules apply within the game area. To the players, the game area is no longer a part of everyday reality, but it becomes a site hallowed to the game. Breach of this sanctity results in confusion and anger among the celebrants. To mark the space as a sacred ritual site the participants prepare buildings, paths, costumes, decorations and symbols in correspondence with symbolic world of the game. While physical separation must be considered a hallmark trait of live action role-playing, it is not the only (and perhaps not the most important) aspect of the separation-phase in a larp. Turner continues:

It includes symbolic behaviour – especially symbols of reversal and inversion of things, relationships and processes secular – which represent the detachment of the ritual

subjects (novices, candidates, neophytes or “initiands”) from their previous social statuses. (ibid, 24 )

The very act of playing a character is the most important separation made by players from their everyday social position. It is a trait that role-playing shares with many other ritual systems but this form is unique in placing at the centre of the whole experience. By putting their societal roles aside (visible through the practice of costuming, physical acting etc.) and accepting new ones the participants make ready to cross into the main part of the role-playing rite, the *liminal* or transitional phase. These preparations can be compared with the ritual washing and donning of ritual robes found in many strands of western esotericism or the elaborate costuming and mask practices of West African Yoruba-culture.

Many players find great enjoyment in this first step of the journey between worlds. The manufacture of costume, character behaviour and props of all kinds are fuelled by anticipation and charged with the will to transform. If role-players are to follow the ritual model, making the players shed their former selves along with their entire socio-moral luggage before entering the game should be the primary goal. Currently there seems to be a lot of hesitation among players and organisers about going into games naked and head over heels, yet the game will touch deeper if one gives oneself up to it completely and enters the liminoid space as a humble initiate rather than a headstrong actor.

## Lurking at the Threshold

During the intervening phase of transition, called by Gennep “marigin” or “limen” (meaning threshold in latin), the ritual subjects pass through a period and an area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo which has few (though these are sometimes the most crucial) of the attributes of either the preceding or subsequent profane social statuses or cultural states. (Ibid, 24)

Sounds a lot like a larp. It’s in liminality that Turner finds the roots to human culture and performance. This state of ritual between-ness that larpers know so well, of being “dead to the social world but alive to the asocial world” (Ibid, 27), is where elements of the culture performing the rite are mixed and mingled until it finally, after centuries, gives rise to myth, dance, play and epic. The initiates of a liminal rite are outsiders; they are compared with ghosts, gods and ancestors and often act out dramas involving these kinds of figures.

“[T]he liminal initiands are considered to be dark, invisible, like the sun or the moon in eclipse or the moon between phases[...]they are associated with such general oppositions as life and death, male and female, food and excrement, since they are at once dying from or dead to their former status and life,[...]” (Ibid, 26) This is our spiritual heritage, and looking at the themes of a typical game, role-players seem to have adopted it just fine. The duration of a larp is a very prolonged limens-like state. Role-players have a lot to learn from how the tribal pioneers transported and still transport

their players into the realms of human imagination. Turner's list of the defining elements found within liminality and their functions reads like a veritable checklist for larp organisers.

[...]ordeals, myths, maskings, mumming, the presentation of sacred icons to novices, secret languages, food and behavioural taboos, create a weird domain in the seclusion camp in which ordinary regularities of kinship, the residential setting, tribal law and custom are set aside, where the bizarre becomes the normal, and where through the loosening of connections between elements customarily bound together in certain combinations, their scrambling and recombining in monstrous, fantastic, unnatural shapes, the novices are induced to think, and think hard, about cultural experiences they had hitherto taken for granted. (Ibid, 42)

While role-players may feel pride and wonder in the connections between rite and role-play, they must still remember that the aim of a truly liminal rite is to ensure the stability and continuation of established norm patterns and to teach the initiates the mythological deep structure underlying those patterns. These are mandatory activities that must be performed by every member of society at preordained times during their life to make sure society stays the same for generation after generation. There is nothing revolutionary or romantic about limens-rites, as they are in function just tools of governmental oppression of an age before television, money and parliament. Yet, in the liminal phase of ritual, Turner (1982, 45) sees “[...] a kind of institutional capsule or pocket which contains the germ of future social developments, of societal change, in a way that the central tendencies can never quite succeed in being [...]”

The liminal phases of tribal society invert but do not usually subvert the *status quo*, the structural form, of society; reversal underlines to the members of a community that chaos is the alternative to cosmos, so they better stick to the cosmos, i.e., the traditional order of culture, though they can for a brief while have a whale of a good time being chaotic. (Ibid, 41)

This is the social function of the carnivals and feast-days found in the cyclic agrarian calendar of almost any culture as well as the initiation and growth-rites of tribal society. It is tempting to view role-playing games as this type of liminal events. Many role-players state that their reason for playing is to “blow off steam”, to take a deep breath of magical air before they plunge back under the ice floes of the mundane. From that kind of player perspective, the game has become something akin to a medieval May fest where the poorest peasants are elevated to the top of the societal ladder for a few days before going back to the grind. This use of role-playing seems limited and wasteful. Larps are not strictly liminal phenomena despite their uncanny resemblances to these first human zones of imagination. Turner introduces the concept of *Liminoid* forms. In this term he includes all arts and entertainments that have risen from ritual liminal practices, basically meaning all of them. In stark contrast to its origin, choice, personal expression and division from the social norm are seen as the hallmarks of the liminoid arts. (Ibid, 52–55) Larp must be seen as sharing the defining traits of ritual liminality,

but since it has been developed within a modern complex society it has all the freedom of expression of liminoid arts. So even if there is much to gain from treating larp like a limens-rite, to create powerful game-structures players should not be fooled into believing that the essence of live role-playing art is normative. In fact, Turner's writing implies the opposite.

## Antistruktur

The integration phase of Van Gennep's rites des passage model and its relation to live action role-playing is quite tricky. Role-players are notoriously bad at letting their liminoid experiences change them, or at least admitting to being changed by them. In a tribal society there is no going back to the state you were in before the separation phase; you were a girl – now you are a woman. You will be treated as transformed by everyone in your village and you are expected to conform to the new social code of conduct – a new character in the game of the real.

Larpers have the option to let themselves be affected deeply, to use games as personal rites of passage and change, as signposts on an ever-changing journey towards death; to grab traits from the characters, learn new attitudes and ways to form social bonds. But according to Turner, it is not as isolated human beings that we have access to the true payoff of liminoid exploration: rather, the benefit is to the social group bonded by the performance and, in the end, human culture as a whole. Per definition, the playful state of liminality creates a structure inverse to that of everyday reality: an antistruktur as Turner calls it. Even while the liminal rites of passage strive to foster tribal citizens, they provide them with access to a field of play where the boundaries of normal behaviour and thinking are extended or even dissolved. The threshold stage, especially when prolonged into a “[...]tunnel’ where the liminal becomes the ‘cunicular’[...]” (Ibid, 41) becomes a repository for ground-breaking ideas and methods of organization. Turner quotes anthropologist Brian Sutton-Smith's definition of his own term.

The normative structure represents the working equilibrium, the “antistruktur” represents the latent system of potential alternatives from which novelty will arise when contingencies in the normative system require it. We might more correctly call this second system the *protostructural* system (he says) because it is the precursor of innovative normative forms. It is the source of new culture. (Ibid, 28)

Comparing this with the Marxist “superstructure”, the lump of non-essential culture that is generated by the fundamental means of production and ownership, yields a heretically simple explanation. Where Marx sees all social change as coming from changes in the modes of production, Turner sees societal development as a continuous interplay between structure and “antistruktur”; the child of liminality – the product of role-playing.

Antistructure, in fact, can generate and store a plurality of alternative models for living, from utopias to programs, which are capable of influencing the behaviour of those in mainstream social and political roles (whether authoritative or dependent, in control or rebelling against it) in the direction of radical change, just as much as they can serve as instruments of political control. (Ibid, 33)

For what is live action role-playing if not a constant construction of alternative structures of being alive as a humanoid creature? While inside a game, role-players relate to each other in manners completely different from their everyday state – and not just due to the obvious change of character enacted. Participants are required to leave the whole social role complex they consider to be their “selves” at the door and enter into alien mental and relational configurations, adopting cultures often opposed or vastly different to their own in terms of value-systems and structural composition. But far more important than in-game changes of social structure, that often are not that impressive, is that they are required to change their primary role to that of player and co-creator, a task that requires every ounce of concentration and skill they can muster. The ideal player must become a *Liminaut* – a free explorer of the threshold realm – and abandon all illusions of being an individual defined by the fetters of her mundane prison of self. The equation is as simple as it is potent: *to truly play one must be truly free*.

## Communitas

I have used the term “anti-structure,” (sic) mainly with reference to tribal and agrarian societies, to describe both liminality and what I have called “communitas.” I mean by it not a structural reversal, a mirror imaging of “profane” workday socioeconomic structure, or a fantasy-rejection of structural “necessities,” but the liberation of human capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc. , from the normative constraints incumbent upon occupying a sequence of social statuses, enacting a multiplicity of social roles, and being acutely conscious of membership in some corporate group such as family, lineage, clan, nation, etc., or of affiliation with some pervasive social category such as class, caste, sex or age division. (Ibid, 44)

Here Turner approaches his most important, and from the role-playing point of view, his most stunning conclusion. Liminality ultimately requires its participants to meet each other on a being-level free from the ego-mongering and constant role-playing of society; be it the capitalist cycle of hard work and guilty leisure or the never-changing agrarian cycle of harvest and planting. Communitas is the experience of moving beyond and outside our prison-selves, of choosing to believe in a dream together, and in doing so suddenly seeing each other not as targets of transactions to benefit our own ambitions, but as a part of an *Essential We*, as parts of a communitas. Turner writes:

What then *is* communitas? Has it any base or is it a persistent fantasy of mankind, a sort of collective return to the womb? I have described this way by which persons see, understand, and act towards one another (in *The Ritual Process*) as essentially “an unmediated relationship between historical, idiosyncratic, concrete individuals.” (Ibid, 45)

This is the hard-caught experience that makes role-players return to the forests and cellars of larpdom year after year. Immersion is but one of the tools to reach it – it is the individual's way to approach this collective state of grace, but it is an empty sacrament without the company of other celebrants. Turner finds his word for immersion in “flow”, a term for a state of untroubled creative mind that comes from mastering an activity within a set framework (acting in character, for instance), coined by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi<sup>5</sup>.

“Flow denotes the holistic sensation present when we act with total involvement,” and is “a state in which action follows action according to an internal logic which seems to need no conscious intervention on our part...we experience it as a unified flowing from one moment to the next, in which we feel in control of our actions, and in which there is little distinction between self and environment; between stimulus and response; or between past, present and future”. (Ibid, 55–56)

One of the key effects of “flow” states is a pleasurable sense of “loss of self”. This may hold the key to what character immersion really is in psychological terms, but it should be the subject for future explorations and should not distract us from the wonder of *communitas*.

Again, “flow” is experienced within an individual, whereas *communitas* at its inception is evidently between or among individuals – it is what all of us believe we share and its outputs emerge from dialogue, using both words and non-verbal means of communication, such as understanding smiles, jerks of the head, and so on. (Ibid, 58)

So where can we find *communitas* in the order of modern society? Where are the places where we may create “[...]an interval, however brief, of *margin* or *limen*, when the past is momentarily negated, suspended, or abrogated, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance.” (Ibid, 44)

Performance began as mandatory participation and live-action for the good of the community but it has turned into the highly personalised business of art and entertainment to be bought with money and leisure time. Turner views this shift from *Liminal* to *Liminoid* mainly as a process of liberation and diversification (Ibid, 52–55), but there is also a fundamental shift in the relationship between the role of audience. Turner does not focus his attention on this area specifically, but it is telling that he considers ritual liminality to be the primal and perhaps most effective way of creating *communitas*, while the liminoid diversions of modern times offer a wider range of choice.

In tribal societies and other pre-industrial social formations, liminality provides a propitious setting for the development of these direct, immediate, and total confrontations of human identities. In industrialised societies, it is within leisure, and sometimes aided by the projections of art that this way of experiencing one's fellows can be portrayed, grasped, and sometimes realised. (Ibid, 46)

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted extensively by Turner, reference to original work (Csikszentmihalyi 1974) found below.

Larp, as stated before, shares the traits of liminal and liminoid. Participation and co-creation are the bridge between the intensity of grand ritual drama and the freedom of modern art. Others have started down this path before, the “environmental theatre” of Richard Schechner and Grotowski’s “paratheatre” both explored ritual, participation and quested *communitas*. When he left the stage to pursue the project that later became known as *Holiday*, Jerzy Grotowski made this statement at a conference in New York;

Am I talking about a way of life, a kind of existence, rather than about theatre? Without a doubt. I think at this point we are faced with a choice...The quest for what is most essential in life. Different names have been invented for it; in the past these names usually had a religious sound. (Schechner, Wolford 1997, 232)

But this quest for a form where “the terms “spectator” and “actor” lose their divisive significance and both the action and the creation become a collective responsibility” (ibid, 232) was met with massive critique and lack of understanding from a theatre world that needed to see how the Polish directors’ methods could be applied to the stage (ibid, 5). The heritage of Grotowski lives on, but it is almost invisible in the shadow of the mainstream. Schechner gradually tempered and finally gave up his experiments in participatory theatre because he concluded it destroyed the aesthetic value of his work (Schechner 1973, 40–86). The fire of *communitas* in performing arts died down to a flickering ember. But it was only waiting, biding it’s time to flare up in the most unlikely of places.

## Play to Love

Here we have a loving union of the structurally damned pronouncing judgment on normative structure and providing alternative models for structure. (Turner 1982, 51)

Who today can claim to be the initiated masters of the threshold realm, priestesses of the cunicular realms of phantasmagoria and poets of heart-to-heart? Who today can compare to the thousands of fanatical role-players as they wield the first art of man in ways never before dreamed of? We discovered it, almost as if by accident with our childhood friends, drawing labyrinths in pen and paper, conjuring it in our long-running table-top campaigns and in the furious invention of radical freeform, we feel it when the vision is strong and shared, when the village sleeps and breathes at night, as tears flow and the undiscovered country of the future is in our collective hands. We set our souls aflame with it when trembling fingers touch and the black eyes facing us do not reflect but truly see and feel. This is inter-immersion, this is Genesis, this is the fire of *communitas* and it is as old as mankind itself.

Liminality is both more creative and more destructive than the structural norm. In either case it raises basic problems for social structural man, invites him to speculation and criticism. But where it is socially positive it presents, directly or by implication, a model

of human society as a homogenous, unstructured *communitas*, whose boundaries are ideally coterminous with those of the human species. When even two people believe that they experience unity, all people are felt by those two, even if only for a flash, to be one. (Ibid, 47)

There we have it. Through the game of love and the love of the game, we have discovered that the structure that binds us is just another set of rules, as false and as real as the ones we create for pleasure. Performance theorists have stated this for a long time, but we active larpers have never been good at taking ourselves or the implications of our art seriously. Turner's model of *communitas* gives us a tool and a positive vision to strive for rather than the general sense of doing something that feels important.

Within our liminoid games, we are starting to discover ways of acting and being together that are ultimately more human and humane than the order that surrounds us. Play itself is becoming a valid ideology as a vision of constantly renewable co-creation of meaning is emerging. I can't help feeling something big is about to happen. I hear it whispered at conventions, see it embedded in the structures and stories of our games, hinted to on discussion-boards, and witness it confessed in the slow grey hours when one game has ended and another one has yet to begin.

## Games

Futuredrome (2002) by Henrik Wallgren & Staffan Sörenson et al., Sweden.

Hamlet (2002) by Martin Ericsson, Anna Ericson, Christopher Sandberg and Martin Brodén et al., Interaktiva Uppsättningar, Sweden.

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander and Katarina Björk et al., Ars Amandi, Sweden.

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# Theory



# Immersive Story

## A View of Role-Played Drama

*Within role-playing game theory, there is often perceived to be a clash over the concept of story. One type of play, known as immersionism, tends to be characterised by terms like immersion, simulation, and realism. The other type, known as dramatism, tends to be characterised by terms like drama, story, and performance. This split has been discussed in the Threefold Model (Kim 1997) and its revised form, the Three Way Model (Bøckman 2001). To the dramatist, the immersionist may seem to be rejecting story as a goal. However, immersionist play will produce a series of fictional events – often with deep characters and intricate interactions. Is this not a story? I think that it should be regarded as such, though there are also important distinctions between immersively role-played story and story in static media such as books and film.*

A useful analogy to role-playing is a live puppet show. Puppets are capable of some amazingly expressive acting, but there are some inherent limitations. In Western puppetry, the puppeteer is generally above or below the puppet and hidden by a screen so the audience cannot see. Because of this limitation, puppets are strictly limited in their action. This furthers the illusion, but it limits the type of stories which can be told.

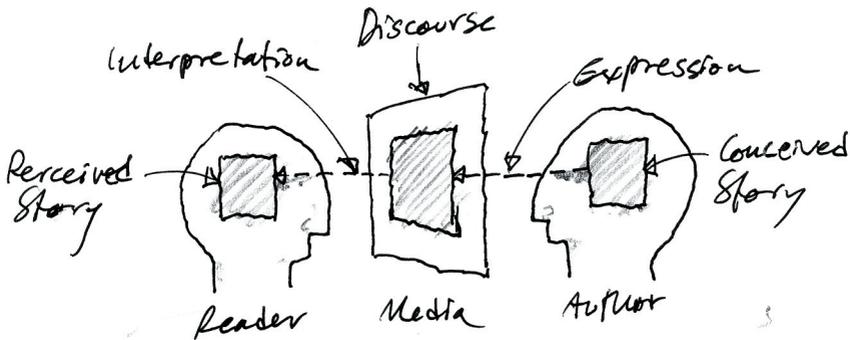
In the Japanese tradition of bunraku, the puppeteers are visible to the audience. This permits a greater range of action for the puppet, which can allow much deeper performances. However, the experience for the audience is arguably lessened by having the illusion broken. I would say that neither style is inherently better. Greater expression allows better stories, but the distraction of visible manipulators detracts from the story.

In role-playing, there is no exactly parallel split. There are puppets, but they are psychological rather than physical. However, there are related trade-offs between possibilities for story and visible breaking of the illusion. In an immersionist play, the player thinks only about the in-game reality of her character. This means that the experience of story is more encompassing. However, it also means that it is difficult to arrange for events to achieve closure or fit into a distinct theme. To look deeper into this, though, we need to consider what story is.

# Traditional Story

In books and film – what I call “static media” – the author creates a product in a fixed physical form that is later viewed by an audience. The author creates the work in relative isolation from the reader, and the reader views it without direct contact with the author. In the formalist view of theorists like Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette, there are two parts to this work: *story* and *discourse* (Martin 1986, 100–102). A story is the imaginary sequence of events involving the characters and the setting. It is a mental construct within the imagination of a person, i.e. a picture in the mind’s eye of what is happening. A discourse is the expression of that story: words and images which attempt to represent the events. The story begins in the mind of the author, and is then expressed into a discourse which is contained in the medium. By viewing this medium, the reader then forms a mental construct of that story within her own mind. This can be visualised as follows:

Illustration 1: Story as transmitted in static narrative



This is over-simplified in many ways, given the variety of narrative forms. However, I think it is important to understand this simple, traditional model first. To formalise the elements:

*Conceived Story*: A mental construct within the mind of the author, consisting of a sequence of imaginary events. Within this simple model, the conceived story is pre-verbal and is independent of the expression of that story. An author might express the same story in different ways – a book and a film, for example.

*Perceived Story*: A mental construct within the mind of the reader. Like the conceived story, it is a non-verbal depiction of events. For example, a filmgoer might express through words the story of a film which she just saw. However, she will refer to the events which happened rather than describing the images on the screen.

*Medium:* The physical means of communication between the author and the reader, such as book, film, or voice. Within this model, the medium is a blank slate which does not include any expression of story.

*Discourse:* The discourse is a particular expression of the story. In simplest terms, the story is the what in the narrative that is depicted, discourse is the how. Some theorists would break this down further into the concrete product or “text”, and the inferred process of expression or “narration”.

So to reiterate: the story is not the expression itself – i.e. the text of the book, or the print of the movie. Rather, the story is an imaginary construct: a mental image or model. Through the tool of the medium, an author tries to convey the story as she conceives it to the reader. After viewing the medium, the reader then has another imaginary construct in his head – the perceived story – which may be different than the author’s conception.

Often, it is considered good art if the perceived story matches the imagined story. Artistic technique covers how to express the story vividly and clearly, so that the reader has a definite mental image. However, there are reasons to vary from this. In other words, there are reasons to describe events less completely.

For example, a technique of horror fiction is to only hint at the monster rather than show it. The reader then imagines what is most horrific to her, even if it is different than what the author had pictured. Another example would be setting your story in a fictional generic location, like Smallville or Metropolis. This encourages readers to imagine the setting as being similar to their hometown or city. By encouraging the reader to fill in details with his own imagination, the perceived story becomes more personally relevant. This is often related to the concept of “transference” in psychology – i.e. the displacement of unresolved conflicts, dependencies, and aggressions onto a substitute object. The reader displaces her own associations onto the substitute of a fictional object.

This model does not cover role-playing games. Film, novels, theatre, storytelling, and other narrative forms all share this common structure, where there is separate author(s) and audience. The only difference is the means by which the authors communicate with the audience, i.e. the medium. Note that a role-playing game is not a medium – voice, for example, is a medium. A medium is simply a physical means of communication. The medium of voice can be used in many different contexts and to communicate different content (i.e. song, lecture, story). A role-playing game can be considered *a structure* which can be implemented using different media, such as tabletop play using voice or online IRC play using computers or larp using bodily expression. It could be considered a format, a relation of author and audience. Alternatively, it can be considered a method of expression, like a writing technique. Really, though, it does not fit in this model since it does not have separate audience and author.

# Protagonism

Traditional stories also tend to have a protagonist. In classical dramatic theory, the protagonist is a single focus character with whom the audience emotionally identifies. That character's decisions and changes then draw the audience through a range of emotions. As Lajos Egri describes it, "The first step is to make your reader or viewer identify your character as someone he knows. Step two – if the author can make the audience imagine that what is happening can happen to him, the situation will be permeated with aroused emotion and the viewer will experience a sensation so great that he will feel not as a spectator but as the participant of an exciting drama before him." (Egri 1965, 18–19)

In the view of theorists like Egri, the work of a dramatic story is an emotional reaction. The end product of an author is not simply text, but the mental state of the reader. In the terminology used above, the end product is the perceived story. This is the sum of what the reader feels and imagines upon reading the story, not simply an objective interpretation of the statements. The protagonist is a tool to achieve this emotional involvement, through audience identification (or "transference") to the fictional character.

Now, there is more to fiction than classical dramatic theory. However, classical drama is an important structure, and the concept of a protagonist is an important parallel to the emotional impact of a player character in a role-playing game. The important thing to note is that the end product is a personal imagining.

As Egri describes, identifying with the protagonist produces an illusionary feeling of involvement. Within the viewer's imagination, the protagonist may take on characteristics which are personal to the viewer. For example, if the protagonist's age is not described, the viewer may imagine it as being close to her own. The viewer's imagination will fill in many details about the protagonist as part of identification. Within classical drama, this is intended and indeed necessary. Each viewer will have an emotional reaction that is personal and based on their own issues. Thus, their perceived story is unique and personal.

## Story in Role-Playing Games

Based on this understanding of traditional story, the question becomes what story is in role-playing games – and in particular what an immersive story means. Role-playing games do not have a separate author and audience, nor is it even clear what the discourse would be. Lisa Padol ponders this question in her essay on collaborative storytelling in RPGs:

There is nothing to prevent the video taping of a game session; however, the tape is not the text. The text is the session itself. It is, therefore, transitory, existing only for the duration of the session.

[...]

Anything which reaches the interface between the GM and the players is part of the text. Anything which does not reach the interface, and, therefore, does not affect both the GM and the players, is not part of the text.

[...]

Matthew Porter, who proposed the earlier definition, suggested that the term 'interface' be re-defined so that it includes "any interaction between two or more gamers". (Porter, Personal Interview) The interaction may be between all the players and the GM, between at least two players, or between the GM and at least one player. In short, the text is defined by the interface between or interaction of at least two gamers. (Padol 1996)

This is a useful definition of what the text, or discourse, of play is. However, this does not define what a story is. For traditional static media, the discourse is the interaction between the conceived story of the author and the perceived story of the audience. But in a RPG, the author and the audience are the same.

One approach is to say that a role-player is acting in two capacities. As author, a player has a conceived story which is his imagination of what his character is thinking, among other things. By speaking and acting, he communicates this conceived story to the other players. As audience, the player also has a perceived story which is his interpretation of the actions of other players, which becomes his imagination of what happens elsewhere in the game-world.

However, these two stories are constantly interacting. The conceived story will be revised by what is perceived and vice-versa. Indeed, it is questionable whether they should really be considered as separate entities. I will continue with this as an analogy.

## **Role-Playing as a Performance**

Based on this analogy, we can conceive of role-playing as a performing art. It is a format unique from other arts, in that it is directed solely at other performers and that each is simultaneously audience and actor. This view and relation to theatrical theory is analysed by Daniel Mackay in his book describing RPG as "a new performing art" (Mackay 2001). In our analogy, the player would be acting as an author in performing the character, and also acting as audience by watching other players.

Following classical dramatic theory, the player should strive to make the internal emotions of the character visible. This corresponds essentially to what has been characterised as the dramatist point of view in models such as the Threefold Model (Kim 1997). In this analogy, the player is entertained by the performances of other players, and in turn actively entertains via her own performance.

## PC as a Protagonist

I would argue that the performance analogy fails to capture a vital element of most role-playing, however. In a RPG, the player emotionally identifies most with his own player character. So the center of the story in his view is not how the other characters are portrayed, but the emotions and decisions of his own character. This fits perfectly with what Egri (1965, 18–19) says about the purpose of the protagonist in traditional fiction: “The viewer will experience a sensation so great that he will feel not as a spectator but as the participant of an exciting drama before him.”

So emotionally, the player character has the function of a protagonist. This means that in a game, there are actually as many different protagonists as there are players. Each player sees a slightly different story, one where their PC is the protagonist. The actions of other characters may be interesting and relevant, but they are not where the power of the story lies.

This view has far-reaching consequences. In traditional stories, the audience is drawn into emotional reaction by identification with the visible description of the protagonist. In a RPG, the player is drawn to emotional reaction by the thoughts and emotions of her own character. These thoughts are not necessarily expressed visibly to other players, however. In other words, they may be conceived story rather than perceived story. This is similar to the ideas expressed by Markus Montola in his essay on subjective diegeses. As he puts it “most of the feelings and thoughts experienced by the other participants are never announced” (Montola 2001, 82–84). He suggests that the imagined facts of the game are different (i.e. each player has a different subjective diegesis). I go further and say that these differences can be essential to the emotional power of the game.

This makes the act of role-playing self-centered in a sense. Because each player identifies most with her own PC, that means the performance of that character matters most the player herself. While other players will enjoy the portrayal, they do not have the same degree of emotional identification with that character. This also breaks the analogy of theatre. The player does not derive emotional impact primarily from the performances of others, but rather from her own performance.

## Supporting Immersive Story

This picture of PC-as-protagonist is what I will call immersive story. It is very different view than traditional story. A traditional author will try to illuminate the inner emotions of the protagonist in order to get the audience to identify with that character. However, in many ways the challenge of traditional drama is inherently solved in a RPG. The player already is an active participant in the narrative.

In a RPG supporting immersive story, the protagonist is not external to the player. Thus, one is not trying to make the player emotionally identify with an external

character in the game. The external game should provide the antagonist, background, and conflict for the character's inner struggle. However, that inner struggle need not be externalised in the same way as a classical dramatic story. For the organizers (of a larp) or the GM (of a tabletop game), this means that each PC should have internal conflict that forms the core of the emotional story. Each PC should also have a stake in conflict. On the other hand, the organizers are not responsible for how that story plays out. The organizers are not the authors of the story, and indeed they will never directly experience what the real story is.

For the player, there are personal responsibilities as well as social responsibilities. For the player to have emotional engagement, he *has to* delve into the personal issues of his own character. This does not mean mentally contemplating the character; it means taking actions which are personally meaningful to the character. By playing through the consequences of choices made, the story develops meaning for the player.

Every player is also a participant in other players' stories. However, this is not projecting his story to them. Rather, pieces of one player's story are the background and supporting pieces to other players' stories.

This hopefully sheds some light on the perceived split between immersion and story. Novels, theater, film, and many other narrative forms treat externalisation of internal conflicts as the most important thing. RPGs often try to imitate this, but that is not necessary and can be counterproductive. In immersive story, the emotional power comes from identification with the player's own character, which does not require externalizing of all issues. The character is an aspect of the player's personality which includes both external display (what the character says and does during game sessions) as well as internal thoughts, reactions, and motivations (which may never be seen by other players).

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# A Semiotic View on Diegesis Construction

*Semiotics is a scientific method used to analyse the construction, sharing and evolution of signs and sign systems – of concepts, concept frameworks and the meanings of the concepts. As we believe that role-playing consists essentially of the construction of imaginary frameworks (diegeses) made in interaction with other participants, semiotics seems to provide a fruitful way of understanding how interaction works in role-playing games. The purpose of this article is to present the core ideas of pragmatic semiotics and to explain their applications on role-playing in order to provide tools for players and game writers, and to advance the earlier model proposed by Montola (2003).*

As there are many conflicting semiotic models, we have limited this article to the tools and theories based on the Peircean model of semiotics, concentrating on ideas based on Charles S. Peirce's second trichotomy (e.g. Peirce 1966, Chandler 1995), which offers many useful tools for understanding how players' diegeses (see below and Montola 2003) are constructed during the game.

Peirce's second trichotomy explains how signs are related to their dynamical objects. Peirce divides signs into three distinct categories: iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs. Icons are linked to their objects by being similar to them, while indices stand in a real relation to their objects (either by being affected by them or by being meant to refer to them). Symbols are related to their objects by habit or convention.

Icons acquire their signhood directly through their own properties and direct similarities with their dynamical objects. It is important to note that an icon is a potential sign of everything that possesses the same attributes as the sign itself: for example, a photo of a young man is an icon of the young man, but at the same time an icon of a photo, an icon of the young man's identical brother and an icon of the clothes the young man wears in the photo.

Indices acquire their signhood through a relation to their dynamic object. A moving weather vane is an index of wind; a high temperature on a thermometer is an index of fever.

Symbols acquire their signhood through habit or convention, with no real link or relation to their dynamic objects. Words are perfect examples of symbolic signs: except for a few onomatopoeic words, no word shares a real link to its meaning. Other examples of symbols include traffic signs and alarm sounds.

However, it is important to note that signs are never exclusively iconic, indexical, or symbolic: every sign has features from all three classes. Thus, when speaking of indexical signs, we mean signs that are predominantly indexical. For example, a wedding photo is an icon of the wedded pair and an index of the wedding, but the bride's wedding dress and rings are basically symbols dictated by convention, while acting as icons of rings and a wedding dress in the photo.

In addition to using Peirce's second trichotomy, we delve a little deeper into icons, applying Peirce's further division to images, diagrams and metaphors. These concepts are particularly useful tools in analysing tabletop role-playing, though they can be applied to larps as well.

## Constructing Diegeses by Communication

Montola's (2003) basic idea on role-playing can be summarised by saying that the core process of role-playing is the creation and interaction of diegeses by all participants. In this, role-playing differs from the other forms of art; for example, Bacon (2000, 47) explains that as a movie provides the watcher with only parts of the story and the imaginary world of movie, the watcher uses her earlier information on conventions of narration and movies to construct a fictitious world – a diegesis. According to Montola, role-playing is different from traditional, 'static' media of expression, as role-playing consists of the interaction of several diegeses instead of only one, subjective diegesis. It is important to notice that in this article the concept of diegesis differs somewhat from those used by Andreasen (2003), Gade (2003), Hakkarainen & Stenros (2002) or Pohjola (1999).

In tabletop role-playing, the creation of meanings is mostly verbal and predominantly symbolic. Interpreting the symbols is based on understanding of the codes, genres and contexts of the sign use. Codes are systems of signs, enabling us to understand the connection of the sign and its object – languages, alphabets and heraldic systems are examples of codes. There are several definitions to genre, but for the sake of simplicity, we can define genres as classes of communication content used to correctly decode the encoded meanings, such as "fact", "fiction", "science fiction" or "film noir" (read more from Chandler 1997; see also Stenros 2004 and Kim 2003 who have applied the concept on role-playing).

Practically all communication theories imply that communication is never perfect. As there are never two identical contexts for interpretation, the message is always twisted as it is transmitted. Montola (2003) discusses this further, concluding that there can never be a common diegesis shared by more than one person. However, the objective of communication is usually transmitting the content as exactly as possible; this could be held as the definition of good role-playing communication.

As we state that every player's diegesis is different by definition, we must explain how meaningful role-playing is possible. In the best possible situation the diegeses are

*equifinal*. Two interpretations are equifinal when they are similar enough to cause indistinguishable consequences. Equifinality is easiest to achieve if all participants have a good understanding of the genre, style and the world of the game.

When the diegeses are found to be non-equifinal, they are *arbitrated*. Arbitration is a process in which the users of a sign implicitly or explicitly negotiate the meaning of the sign. If the game master of a tabletop game states that there is a rock in the middle of a field and a player declares that his character tries to lift it, the GM and player arbitrate the size of the rock and the character's strength. Arbitration continues until they have a clear and apparently equifinal understanding on whether the character is strong enough to lift that given rock. Arbitration is a constant process in all communication.

Problems arise when the players' diegeses appear to be equifinal, but are in fact very different. When the character approaches the rock, the diegeses can be thought to be equifinal – until the player who planned to hide behind the rock realises that in the game master's diegesis the rock would be far too small to hide behind.

It is important to notice that the emphasis of this paper is in the 'first level' of interpretation, the process where signs are interpreted as parts of the diegetic reality. For example, we argue on behalf of equifinal interpretation only in the case of first interpretation. After the physical object has become a diegetic object through interpretation, the further interpretations need not be equifinal. For instance, when a character draws a sword, it is important that everyone understands what a sword is and what it does. However, while one character might also see the weapon as a scary instrument of death, another could consider it a handy tool keeping highwaymen at bay.

## From Larp to Tabletop

Tabletop role-playing and larping can be analysed through the same semiotic theories and both can benefit from the same tools. However, from a Peircean point of view, they have one major difference in the way they construct the diegetic reality.

While tabletop games use predominantly symbols (describing events through words) and varying degrees of icons (facial expressions, pictures of characters) with only some rare indices (diegetic dialogue, players' coffee mugs can be used to refer to characters' coffee mugs), larps (especially in the Nordic tradition) tend to prefer indices (real extradiegetic swords used as diegetic swords) and icons (latex swords used as diegetic swords), while limiting symbols (weapon cards symbolising diegetic swords, fate cards symbolising magical effects) to the minimum. The more a larp relies on indices in representing the diegetic world, the more "pure" it can be considered (see diagram 1).

As every action and every object in reality can be interpreted as a sign, this is basically an elaboration of Montola's (2003) claim that "larp is role-playing, where

Diagram 1: Positioning Game Styles



physical reality is used to construct diegeses, in addition to communication, both directly and arbitrarily”.

## The Cacophony of Signs - Larp

As interpreting text forms the meanings, we can see that in tabletop role-play, text is everything the players say and do, and even things that exist in the space inhabited by the players (see Padol 1996). For larps, this is even more true, as the physical reality – affecting all five senses – is used directly to construct the diegeses (Montola 2003). In larp, every object in the physical space and every act performed is a sign. While tabletop interaction is based mostly on symbols, larp uses icons and indices as well. It can be said that the more the diegeses are constructed through icons and indices, the more larp-like a game is.

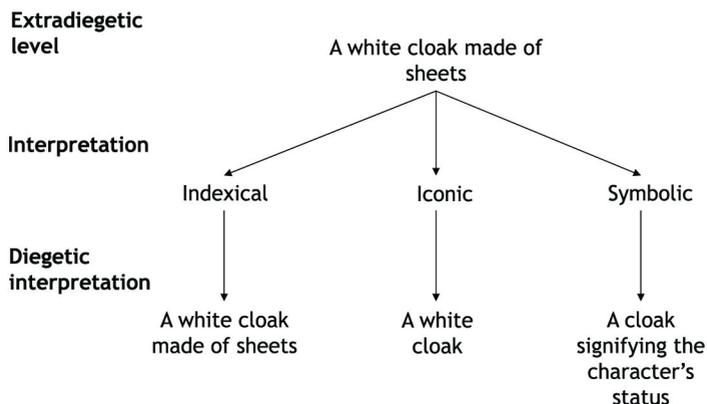
In larp, the interesting interpretation happens when a player takes a sign from her surroundings and interprets it as a part of her diegesis. Indices are the same in the real world and within the diegeses. Icons acquire their meaning through direct similarities and by resembling their meanings inside the diegeses. Symbols have only arbitrated meanings within the diegeses. The following examples clarify the ways of propping:

When a player walks in the forest in a larp, the forest is mostly indexical. The forest in the diegetic world is identical to the forest in the real world. A boffer sword is mostly iconic, though vaguely; it resembles a sword. Gestures relating to rules are symbolic. A floor is indexical in the sense it functions as a diegetic floor, but it is as well iconic in the sense that it often only resembles the diegetic floor. These genre-related signs are interpreted contextually by using the codes of the game: in the genre of science fiction, the player interprets a soldier’s styrofoam armour as cybernetic armour through the codes of science fiction boffer larping.

The problems arise when players are confused as to whether to interpret a sign as an iconic, indexical or symbolic sign. Taking an example from a fantasy larp, let’s take a situation in which a player sees another player wearing a white cloak made from white cloth closely resembling a piece of white sheets. This example of bad propping can be interpreted as having an indexical relationship to her character’s clothing; meaning that her character has, for some reason, decided to dress in sheets. Alternatively, it can be interpreted iconically, seeing that the character is wearing a generic white cloak that slightly resembles the poorly made prop. Or it can be read symbolically, probably meaning that the character is a good-aligned priest or wizard. Whichever interpretation

the player chooses, the possibility for misinterpreting the sign is obvious (see diagram 2).

Diagram 2: Interpreting a Visual Sign



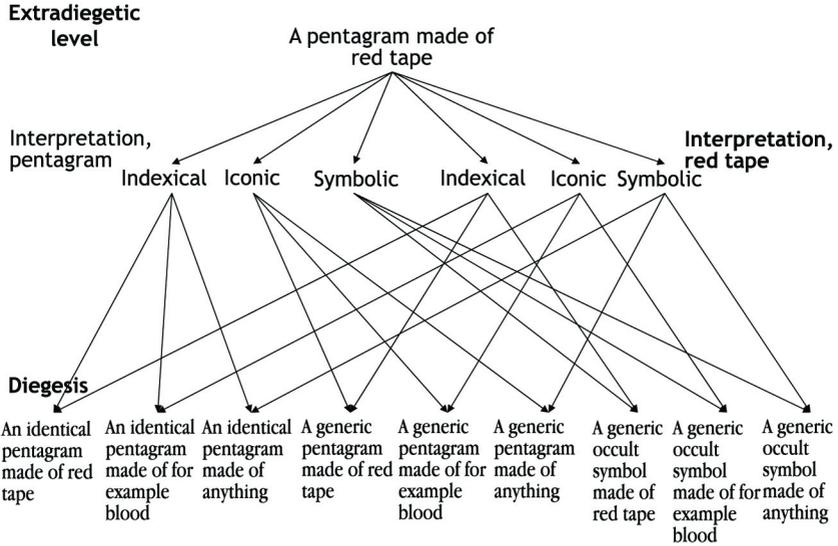
These three core choices offer the player a multitude of opportunities for further misinterpretation within the diegetic context. For example, an indexical reading probably leads the character to wonder why the other character has such a bad-looking white cloak. Or she may be wondering what strange material the cloak is made of? Or, perhaps, whether the cloak's cleanness denotes its bearer's high status?

Unfortunately, almost all larp props contain numerous qualities providing the basis for multiple interpretations. The example of the white cloak made of bed sheets contained only one level of interpretation, but similar items can easily contain additional interpretable levels. For example, with two levels of interpretation, the players' potential of reading the sign incorrectly rises significantly (see diagram 3).

As the example demonstrates, the players' potential for misreading the sign is extremely high even when a sign only contains two levels of interpretation. As many signs can easily contain numerous additional qualities, interpreting a sign correctly can become nearly impossible; for example, a white cloak made of sheets containing a badly drawn crest would be nearly impossible to interpret. Is the cloak's material symbolic, iconic or indexical? What about the cloak's cut? Is the badly drawn crest meant to be badly drawn within the diegetic framework? Does the crest refer indexically to a diegetic noble family or is it only a symbol denoting that the character is a noble? Is the crest indexically painted to the cloak or is it an icon of a stitched crest?

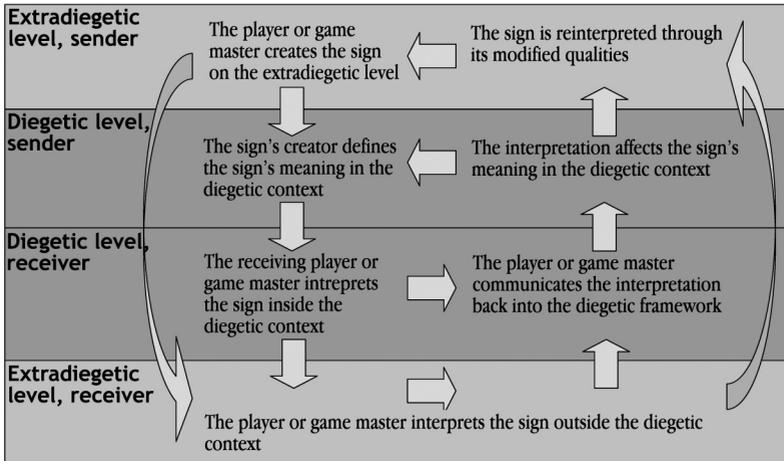
However, even this is not enough: practically, the number of false interpretations of a given sign is multiplied as every sign is at first created as an extradiegetic sign, from which it is interpreted into the diegetic framework through which the receiving players interpret it through the characters' points of view. This interpretation, in turn,

Diagram 3: Interpreting a Visual Sign



is reinterpreted extradiegetically by the receiving players, who in turn communicate the extradiegetic interpretation back into the diegetic framework through which it affects and changes the original sign's interpretation by other players. As demonstrated in the following example, even the simplest signs are interpreted multiple times, with each time changing the player's or game master's reading of the sign.

Diagram 4: The Interpretation Layers



As diagram 4 shows, each sign undergoes numerous interpretations and reinterpretations while being conveyed from the sender to the receiver. There are two ways signs are conveyed into role-playing games.

Firstly, signs can be conveyed through both extradiegetic and diegetic levels:

- 1 From the sender's extradiegetic level to the sender's diegetic level; for example, the sender interprets a white polyester cloak iconically as a generic white cloak inside the diegesis.
- 2 From the sender's diegetic level to the receiver's diegetic level; for example, the receiver interprets the polyester cloak – interpreted by the sender as a generic white cloak – as an oddly shiny cloak made of a strange fabric.
- 3 From the receiver's diegetic level to the receiver's extradiegetic level; for example, the receiver tries to interpret whether the cloak is meant to be a generic cloak or whether the odd choice of material is meant to signify something.
- 4 From the receiver's extradiegetic level to the receiver's diegetic level; for example, the receiver may decide to interpret the polyester cloak as a diegetic cloak made of an exotic material.
- 5 From the receiver's diegetic level to the sender's diegetic level; for example, the receiver may demand to know how the sender – a poor farmer – has acquired such an exotic and expensive cloak.
- 6 From the sender's diegetic level to the sender's extradiegetic level; for example, the sender can try to interpret why the receiver has interpreted the cloak as expensive and exotic, and understand that this is because of the cloak's material.

Secondly, signs can be conveyed directly through the extradiegetic levels:

- 1 From the sender's extradiegetic level to the receiver's extradiegetic level; for example – to continue the previous example – after understanding that the polyester cloak has been interpreted incorrectly, the sender can pass the diegetic levels and inform the other player that “Off-game, the cloak is in fact just a generic cloak, sorry.”
- 2 From the receiver's extradiegetic level to the sender's extradiegetic level; for example, after hearing that on the diegetic level, the cloak is just a normal cloak, the receiver can acknowledge the new information and inform the sender that in that case, the question about the cloak's odd material was never asked.

In essence, the first method, in which signs are interpreted through the diegetic levels, is used for most signs and communication within a game, while the second method, in which the diegetic levels are bypassed, is used mainly for clarifications and for the utilisation of rule systems, with only the results interpreted from the extradiegetic level to the diegetic level.

These two methods are commonly used in parallel in the majority of games. In the examples above, after the interpretation of the cloak has been conveyed from the receiver's diegetic level to the receiver's extradiegetic level, the receiver can pass the diegetic levels and ask the sender extradiegetic questions about the cloak before reinterpreting it from the extradiegetic level to the diegetic level.

In a nutshell, the second method – extradiegetic communication – is required when the first method fails.

Although creating and interpreting each sign always requires some extradiegetic processing, it could be said that the more extradiegetic communication is required, the less "pure" a role-playing game is; as extradiegetic communication forces a player to recreate and reinterpret her diegesis, the more explicit arbitration is needed to interpret the communication from the game master and the other players, the less certain a player can be that she can correctly interpret the signs within a game without assistance.

There are several ways to reduce the amount of extradiegetic communication in role-playing games, which are both based on players having shared, correct tools for decoding signs.

The first way is to use only indices in a game, as they are the least arbitrary signs. The more a game is based on indices, the less chance there is for misinterpretation, and the less need for extradiegetic communication. As each character sees or hears exactly the same indices the player sees or hears, the players need to make fewer extradiegetic interpretations.

However, there are problems in using only indices in a game. The main problem is the limitations this places on the game types and genres that can be used: for example, most fantasy and science fiction games could not be played with only indices. It could even be argued that games placed in the recent past could not be played with only indices. For example, it is difficult for the player to interpret an old mobile phone indexically as a modern, state of the art phone, as for the player it would be an index of an old, unwieldy phone. In a game depicting the IT-boom of the nineties, the players' nostalgic or ironic interpretations of the signs would be misinterpretations; instead, the immersionist player should get *authentically* excited about old mobile phones, computers and stock options.

Even with indices every interpretation is unique. In a Victorian larp, one player could interpret a Victorian dress as just a fancy garment, while another would see hidden meanings in the colours and cutting of the dress. In short, the creator of an index can never rely on the players to make the intended interpretation.

In addition, the player's body can seldom be a true index of his character's body. A modern player's body can't be a realistic index of a medieval peasant's body, a physically ill or crippled person's body, a more muscular body and so on. Furthermore, indexical presentation of wounds would require indexical violence – hardly recommendable in any game.

Ideal immersion could be seen as a state in which the player interprets signs identically within her diegetic and extradiegetic frameworks. From the semiotic

perspective, this is impossible to achieve in any game using non-indexical signs for props, and the problems with using nothing but indices make the concept of complete immersion impossible in any game – unless all props are indices and all players are identical with their characters.

The problem with extradiegetic communication is especially bad in larps that include many icons and symbols: the player has to be able to create an extradiegetic interpretation about how the sign seen by the character differs from the sign seen by the player, and what was the sign's intended meaning both within diegesis and outside it.

The second way of decreasing extradiegetic interpretation is pre-game communication. It is important to provide the players with tools for interpreting signs correctly within the game before the game starts, so that each player may interpret the signs correctly within their individual diegeses. This pre-game arbitration ranges from clarifying the genre and the style of the game to clarifying the correct reading of specific signs (a specific rune could denote a sense of eeriness, while another would be just an indexical rune).

Although even thorough pre-game arbitration can never result in identical diegetic frameworks for the players, it can help to prevent the players from misreading – for example – indices as icons.

These problems exist mainly in larps: as tabletop games rely on symbols, the players presume every sign to be a symbol unless told otherwise. In addition, the smaller numbers of players and the different tools of iconisation allow for much smoother arbitration than in larps, and the game master – the final judge in all explicit arbitration – is present at all times.

## The World of Symbols - Tabletop Role-Play

Basically, tabletop role-playing works in exactly the same way as larping. However, as tabletop playing consists primarily of symbolic communication, we delve a bit deeper in Peirce's division of symbols. When symbols are interpreted, they often produce iconised meanings through three methods: *imaginisation*, *diagrammatisation* and *allegorisation* (elaborated by Johansen 2001 among others). Symbols are interpreted with these three methods both in larps and tabletop games, but as symbols are not predominant in larps, this part of the model is more important in analysing tabletop games.

Imaginisation is a process where symbols are iconised through imagination. When reading about Rivendell, the readers try to visualise the buildings and the atmosphere by filling in the details left out of the writer's description. All imaginisation is not visual; we can "visualise" auditory, olfactory, gustatory and somatosensory feelings as well. Even the feelings of the characters in a book can be imaginised.

In diagrammatisation the receiver iconises the signs by their abstractive, systematic and logical attributes. Where an imaginiser fills the holes left by the text with

her imagination, a diagrammatiser tries to discover the qualities in a more objective manner, trying not to add anything to the meanings. A painter would read Tolkien's description of Rivendell diagrammatically, to correctly depict the facts (measures, proportions etc.) implied in the text.

The third method of iconisation is allegorisation; reading the text searching for deeper meanings, allegories and analogies. An allegoriser ignores the obvious levels of the text, trying to instead read it as a metaphor. It has been said that Rivendell is Tolkien's metaphor of Oxford, a place in which he (Bilbo) stays while his son (Frodo) goes to war. Allegorically, Rivendell is the safe haven endangered only if the war on the eastern front is lost. In his work, Tolkien uses Frodo's departure to depict all the sons leaving to war.

The three modes of iconisation can be used to create a crude divide on the speech of tabletop role-play. The discussions covering the game mechanics or numeric facts about the diegetic world are diagrammatised, while in-character discussion and the GM's descriptions are imaginised. In role-playing games dreams and visions are almost always played with little diagrammatisation, while combat is (at least traditionally) played with heavy diagrammatic emphasis.

Understanding this distinction becomes especially important during an attempt to clarify what is important to communicate during a game. In some cases the accuracy of factual information is of utmost importance, while sometimes conveying the moods and feelings takes precedence. In a tight firefight most players consider the equifinality of factual information the most important thing, whereas describing some character's memory of her father would be better done with vague imaginisation than strict diagrammatisation.

Of course, the precedence of these methods gives us a useful tool as well. Toying with the methods of descriptions can have dramatic changes on the way situations are played. A player of a newbie gunslinger would get a far better understanding of her character's feelings with imaginised or even allegorised description of a gunfight, while an old veteran might have the nerves of steel required for doing accurate diagrammatic observations on her surroundings.

This division of iconisation methods offers an interesting perspective on the progress of role-playing cultures since the beginning of the hobby; early Dungeons & Dragons games focusing on combat simulation and wargaming relied heavily on diagrammatisation. The focus was on the "facts" about the diegesis, which were more important than the atmosphere, the visual scenes or the "message" of the game. The communication tried to answer questions like "which orc is my character facing, and what kind of weapon does he have?" It seems to us that lately imaginisation has replaced a lot of diagrammatisation; even in descriptions of violence it is more important to know how a character feels than to know how many hit points the opponent has lost.

Probably the most often used allegoric symbols in tabletop games are the background music and the non-diegetic lighting. The interpretation of music has been an enduring theoretical problem when building models on diegetic and non-diegetic

game elements. Andreasen (2003, 79) gives an unsatisfactory answer that background music (music from non-diegetic hidden ghetto blaster in a larp) exists outside the diegesis, but does not exist within it. Our model offers a more elaborate answer: though the extradiegetic background music is not indexically present in diegetic framework, its allegorised interpretations affect the feelings of the characters and the mood of the diegetic world. Indeed, even the playing locale of a tabletop game can be used in various ways; playing outside on a beautiful day affects the diegeses quite differently than playing in a nearly empty subway train moving underground with people and places passing by.

## Conclusions

The problem encapsulated by viewing role-playing games through a semiotic lens is the basic problem of communication; how to encode a meaning in a way that can be decoded correctly. In contrast to real-world communication, role-playing has one additional obstacle disturbing the communication process; the diegetic level. In addition to the usual codes used in everyday communication, in a role-playing game both the sender and the recipient must understand how the diegeses work in order to communicate successfully. In addition to understanding the Christian conception that white implies holiness, both the sender and the recipient must understand what implies holiness in the diegetic world, and how to create a diegetic sign so that it is decoded as holiness. Additionally, we must understand what holiness means in the diegetic culture and religion, and how it differs from the Christian meaning.

We do not claim that increasing the authenticity of propping would always increase the chances of communicating successfully. Though authenticity is one good way of finding a common code on using diegetic signs, very vague propping may serve just as well. Using cardboard silhouettes for props would combine iconic, indexical and symbolic propping in a successful way; the vagueness of the signs actually leads to equifinality, as the core messages are indisputable, simple and obvious. A gun cut out of thick cardboard leaves no questions, while communicating in the elegant language of Victorian-era clothing can be extremely difficult. Though everyone iconises a cardboard gun differently, everyone recognises its most essential attributes.

Multiple options of interpretation can work as an empowering mechanism for the participants of a game. Usually the players are supposed to make their diegetic definitions according to their characters' personalities. In the process of diegesis construction, the players can actively choose which meanings to interpret into their diegeses. A player of a socially incompetent anti-hero trying to hit on a girl is able to interpret all her actions the way his character misinterprets them, enabling the anti-hero to act logically and consistently within the diegesis.

There has been a lengthy discussion on whether role-playing can be seen as a form of art. From the semiotic point of view, it is interesting to note that while allegorisation

is heavily used in practically every other form of art – indeed, it is seen as one central ingredient in turning entertainment into art – role-playing games tend to use extremely limited allegorical communication.

There are, however, several exceptions to this rule, such as *inside:outside* and *Hamlet*. *Inside:outside* is an example of a whole role-playing game being an allegory, while *Hamlet* used a new technique, “Inner monologue”, to enhance the playing experience. Inner monologues were excerpts from the Shakespeare’s text read aloud at crucial points of the game. The players were supposed to treat the texts as analogies of their characters’ inner conflicts and feelings, and to interpret them as parts of their diegeses via allegorisation.

In conclusion, we’d like to point out that the models treating the process of diegesis creation less elaborately (Montola 2003, Gade 2003, Andreassen 2003, Hakkarainen & Stenros 2002, Pohjola 1999) make relatively clear distinctions on what is diegetic and what is not. Andreassen offers the best answers by dividing the possible states of diegetic presence in four categories: an object may be present in the diegeses, in the extradiegetic reality, or in both of them. If the object is present in both, it may be either identical (homogenous diegetic presence) or different (heterogenous diegetic presence) within and outside of the diegeses. The semiotic model makes these lines fuzzier: as we automatically interpret every sign we encounter, we have to understand how signs are interpreted and how we decide how to construct them into our diegeses. This model is meant to shed light to these questions.

## Games

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# Tilting at Windmills

## The Theatricality of Role-Playing Games

*It is apparent to most role-players that role-playing games involve performance. But can we go one step further and posit that they can be considered a form of theatre as well? This paper analyses the player's role as both an actor and a spectator, based on the works of Augusto Boal and Erving Goffman.*

The figure of Don Quixote<sup>1</sup> charging towards a group of windmills, lance in hand, is an enduring literary image. Quixote is the quintessential escapist – dissatisfied with the mundane ‘real’ world, he decides to reinterpret, and in doing so, reinvent reality for himself. It is my opinion that theatre does much the same for its audience. Given the difficulties of providing an answer to the question of ‘What is theatre?’ perhaps it would suit this paper to instead identify the elements that serve to designate something as theatre. Alain Rey offers a succinct definition:

It is precisely in the relationship between the tangible reality of speaking and acting human bodies, such reality produced by a performance construction, and a fiction thus *represented*, that what is specific to the theatrical phenomenon lies. (Pavis 1998, 397, italics in original)

Thus, for Rey, theatre is the presentation of fiction through the interaction of actors, or simply put, stories told through the performances of actors. By studying various forms of theatre, it is not difficult to find parallels with the traits manifest in role-playing games, such that the games can themselves be considered theatre. The aim of this essay is showing that role-playing games are a form of theatre is to examine the significance of this similarity for the understanding and practice of both RPGs and more traditional forms of theatre.

## Playing Role-Playing Games

In theatre, actors take on different personas depending on the roles assigned. Similarly, a role-player can play a German sniper officer on one day and a mafia Don the next

<sup>1</sup> The use of the protagonist of Cervantes's *Don Quixote* throughout this paper is testament to my personal belief that the character's spirit lives on in the RPG players of today, quite separate from the social commentary that was Cervantes's novel. I write as if he actually existed, but only insofar as the characters in any RPG can be said to exist.

day in another game. Stephen Lortz's simple and accurate definition of a RPG as "any game which allows a number of players to assume the roles of imaginary characters and operate with some degree of freedom in an imaginary environment" (Lortz 1979, 36) broadly sums up what gamers do when playing a RPG, as well as what Cervantes's Quixote was going through as he traipsed across Cervantes's version of Spain. In fact, there are numerous parallels between the documented exploits of Quixote and what gamers regularly encounter in their games.

From Lortz's general definition above, one finds that just as in theatre, the possibilities for characters in role-playing games are essentially endless: the options are theoretically infinite, limited only by one's imagination and interpretation of the rules of character creation in a given RPG. The persona assumed by a role-player is called a player-character. It is important to note that the word is hyphenated – the player and the character form a composite identity. Thus, players often take great care when creating their characters; the characters are extensions of them.

The participants of a role-playing game work to weave an illusion together through the use of their imaginations, creating fantasy scenes through the interaction between the participants. How then, can RPGs be called theatre, and what is the appeal of this theatre?

## The Theatre of the Mind's Eye

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. (Brook 1990.)

Bear with me for a moment, and follow what I ask you to do. Visualise an empty space. Now visualise a man walking across this space.

Was that theatre?

I think there is reason to doubt that that little sequence could have been anything but a simple exercise of the imagination. Yet, there is lingering doubt: when one considers that you could add another man to the image, then another, then another, then visualise them dressed in suits of armour on a plateau surrounding a gigantic red-scaled dragon, which then proceeds to engulf the lot of them with gouts of fiery breath, it becomes much easier to see how role-playing works. RPGs engage the imagination, and it is the imagination that is the key to the appeal of the RPG. I propose the name 'Theatre of the Mind's Eye'<sup>2</sup> because the performance happens only in our minds and not in front of our eyes. The RPG is entirely dependent on the vividness of the imagination.

While conventional (naturalistic) theatre does engage the imagination of the audience, when actors meet onstage, it is the playwright's and the director's imagination

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<sup>2</sup> The subsidiary of White Wolf publishing calls the larp version of *Vampire: The Masquerade Mind's Eye Theatre*. Needless to say, it was the source and the inspiration for the name I have chosen for role-playing games.

at work, interacting with itself. Though it is through the actor's imagination that a character is presented, the actor's imagination is supposed to be invisible. What is made visible is the interpretation of the script, the work done in rehearsals, and thus it is the director's and the playwright's imagination that the audience engages with. But there is no direct interaction – the audience is passive, the audience watches, the audience does not participate. The audience cannot participate. The audience can only receive, and is either entertained or not. This is elaborated in the section on Boal.

A character is not defined by the character sheet alone. Any character, whether in theatre or role-play, is defined by its interaction with other characters. In the conventional theatre, we often know how these interactions are going to turn out because we may be familiar with the script, or the plot may just be very predictable. But in RPGs, one can never predict the outcome – its uncertainty is omnipresent. Though the conventional actor could conceivably play a German sniper in one performance and a Mafia Don in another, it is wholly unlikely that the actor would do so because the actor is limited by the script. The actor has to adhere to and memorise the script. The actor thus appears onstage with pre-determined meaning and intent. The best the actor can do is obfuscate this knowledge and perform: aiming for psychological realism, weaving an illusion of ignorance. This is especially vital if the audience already knows the script. An audience already familiar with the script cannot be surprised by the plot, and is restricted to deriving pleasure from the actors' interpretations and performances. But in the theatre of the mind's eye, the audience can only expect to be surprised. The lack of a script results in unpredictability that sets apart RPGs from conventional theatre, and this genuine unpredictability can be more appealing than the patterns we have become familiar with in the stories told onstage and onscreen.

The appeal of role-playing is not limited to its freedom from the script. There is also the interaction factor. R.D. Laing writes:

*Your experience of me is invisible to me and my experience of you is invisible to you [...] We are both invisible men. All men are invisible to one another. Experience is man's invisibility to man. (Laing 1967, 16, italics in original)*

Laing calls this invisibility the 'no-thing' (ibid, 34). This no-thing is the gap in our understanding of the experience of others and vice versa. Laing posits that when we interact, we do so because of our inability to experience what others experience. There is a need to fill this gap in understanding. Hence, it is the no-thing that motivates interaction. This is absent when watching conventional theatre because the audience-performer relationship is neither dyadic nor dynamic. The audience is resigned to the fact that there can be no interaction between audience and actors that can be used to fill any gaps in understanding, and thus the audience's interpretation must be taken as is. However, in the theatre of the mind's eye the players can fulfil their need to close the gap in experience through directly interacting with the imaginations of others. Players are not only allowed to so, they are required to do so – the role-playing experience is defined by the interactions between the players' imaginations.

I have offered arguments as to why role-playing can be classified as a form of theatre, though quite separate from conventional theatre. RPGs are performances, but these performances are created through the interaction of imaginations, and acted out on the stage of the mind's eye. Having no script, and non-professional actors, RPGs are a sort of everyman's theatre, where even the layman has the opportunity to undergo the experience of living as another. The appeal of this vicarious experience is part of the basic human need for interaction, a need that the theatre of the mind's eye can fulfil.

## Boal and Role-Playing Games

Theatricality is this capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity (Boal 1995).

For Boal (1995), the actor exists in all of us. Boal's theories are influenced in large part by his own belief that power belongs in the hands of the people, the majority, rather than the privileged few. Boal asserts that theatre can be created or is created as long as there is an actor. He believes the dichotomy between actor and spectator to be false, an artificial creation forged and reinforced in the very conception of a stage. Where there is a stage, a platform, or any space set aside for a performance, there is a clear division between actor and spectator: between the one who acts and the one who observes. Where there is a stage, the actor part of every member of the audience is de-activated and suppressed. The audience is aware that they are there as spectators, not as actors.

Given this, one could perhaps argue that many theatre performances involve a great amount of audience interaction, blurring the division between actors and audience. Boal would probably reply that interaction enhances the division instead of diminishing it – the audience is very much aware that the interaction is initiated only by the performers, and participation is often minimal because the audience is used to watching passively. As long as there is a performance space, there is a division. Boal seeks to defeat this division, and argues that theatre can exist without stage or spectator. To reiterate, as long as the actor is present, there can be theatre. Hence his reasoning makes all people actors and equates actors with theatre:

Theatre does not exist in the objectivity of bricks and mortar, sets and costumes, but in the subjectivity of those who practise it [...] It needs neither stage nor audience; the actor will suffice. With the actor is born the theatre. The actor is theatre. We are all actors: we are theatre! (Boal 1995, 19)

But awareness that one can be an actor is insufficient. There must be the ability to see the self in action as well. Boal's ideal of the 'spect-actor' is not a simple synthesis of the spectator and the actor: the concept of the actor as the one who acts remains, but the spectator is transformed. Boal believes that all of us can see ourselves acting, but that is passive watching – we are only spectators, unable to change the course of action, even

when it is our own. When we become spect-actors, we are empowered because we are able not only to see the course of action, but guide it and change it if necessary. The spect-actor is active, not passive. Through this transformation, Boal hopes that when people *see* a problem, they will also *act* to solve it. Forum theatre achieves this by allowing people to see that the outcome of a performance does not have to be fixed and can be changed, which is analogous to social activism.

Generally, Forum theatre works like this: a short play is staged once, and at the end of this first performance the audience is encouraged to offer their opinions on how they disagreed with the protagonist. From here on, Forum theatre becomes almost entirely improvisational. The performance can be restaged with the actor playing the protagonist taking into account the opinions offered, or if audience members are dissatisfied with the actors' interpretation they can take over the role of the protagonist and act out their reactions to the antagonists and the decisions the audience would have made. The latter is what Boal hopes to achieve: by allowing people to act out their opinions and disagreements, not only the one(s) who took over the protagonist's role but all of the audience members can see that common people can be actors rather than just spectators. This realisation helps them to become spect-actors.

In role-playing games, players create characters that are often entirely different from themselves. A gamer is able to experience as another, while viewing the character in the mind because there is a duality of player and character. The character may be called a creation or an extension of the player, but is never the player proper. RPGs are thus mirrors that reflect a fantastic self to the player, a self that is controlled and can be watched by the player. In a way, it also closes the gap of Laing's no-thing by allowing players the experience of living and acting as another being, albeit in a dimension of reality separate from our own – the player is actor and spectator simultaneously. RPGs make possible this transformation without all the seriousness of the social injustices typical of the plots in Forum theatre, and without the active awareness of the need to defeat the actor-audience dichotomy. This is because the experience of the self in the RPG is distinct from the mundane. Even the simplest RPG creates a game world where players are spect-actors from the outset: the players observe themselves as their characters and are aware that they are able to affect the game world and change it.

RPGs can seem to make spect-actors out of people with much less effort than that required by Forum theatre, yet most gamers remain generally apathetic with regard to social issues. The reason for this is probably the frame of presentation. The archetypes and patterns in the stories told through RPGs are more identifiable with fantasy rather than reality. Traditional storytelling places the hero in a domain where nothing is predictable, and society in a state of flux:

Plot [...] exposes the daily order of our lives to chaos. Communal structures are of no avail to a hero who is alone and face to face with forces he cannot control or comprehend. (Roemer 1995, 47)

The institutions that fail society in turn elevate the common man to greatness as he or she steps forward to confront the unknown – he or she becomes a hero in our construction of mythology. Though this parallels what Boal seeks to achieve through the transformation into the spect-actor, Boal's work is located in cultural and political contexts specific to every audience that receives the performance. Boal's work is real, it is immediate, and it is easily identifiable with reality and the tribulations of the audiences' everyday existences. In our construction of fantasy and myth, our cultural unconscious invariably discounts the relevance of something that can be readily identified with fiction, thereby relegating its significance to our own lives. This is why the stories we tell through RPGs do not actually convert the players into true spect-actors: the action is often too far divorced from reality for the players to take seriously.

However, role-playing based on our primary frame (the real world, as it were) and with a high degree of emphasis on simulation and realism is an entirely different prospect. In these games, I propose that not only can the players all become spect-actors, they probably do so completely unconscious of the fact. The game master is probably unaware that the game he runs for them is actually akin to a session of Forum, and similarly, the Forum Theatre facilitators are probably unaware that they are running a larp. It is not so much a thin grey line between the two; more of them being two sides of the same coin.

## Engrossment in Role-Playing and Theatre

Goffman's *Frame Analysis* (1974) introduces the concept of 'frames' of meaning in which individuals operate – Goffman's theory posits that one action can have different meanings depending on the 'frame' within which it occurs:

Actions framed entirely in terms of a primary framework are said to be real or actual [...] [but] these actions performed, say, onstage provides us with something that is not literal or real or actually occurring. (Goffman 1974, 47)

Goffman's conception of the frame as a sort of bracketing tool shows how an action can be recognised as something other than its literal manifestation: in that it can show the nature and purpose of an action and consequently, how the action is supposed to be interpreted. The primary frame of meaning refers to the 'real world', the reality in which we exist. Accordingly, everything in the primary frame is taken for real. All other frames of meaning exist within and in relation to the primary frame, through 'keyings' (ibid, 45). The 'key' is defined as 'the set of conventions by which a given activity, one already meaningful in terms of some primary framework, is transformed into something patterned on this activity but seen by the participants to be something quite else.' (ibid, 43–44) The concept of the frame and the key together inform us how people derive meaning from actions. For example, the phrase 'I'm going to kill you' means impending harm in the primary framework but is understood as harmless when keyed as a

statement made by a friend in jest. The frame in which an action is interpreted can be 'miskeyed', or understood in a different frame than was intended. These miskeyings are either 'upkeyings' or 'downkeyings'. Upkeying happens when something is taken less seriously than it ought to be, that is, to be attributed layers of meaning that diminish its true seriousness of intent. Downkeying is the opposite. The example of the phrase above can be said to be upkeyed if understood as a joke when there is indeed deadly intent, or conversely, downkeyed when interpreted as intent to harm when spoken in jest.

A theatrical performance is understood to be an event that is 'bracketed' in reality. It is as if performances are created within parentheses that inform us of the difference in frame. Within this frame, everything that happens is upkeyed – when we talk of something as theatrical, its meaning is upkeyed because it is dissociated from reality. Hence, the frame of meaning through which we interpret any performance is upkeyed, allowing us to understand that what happens on stage is not real.

But frames do more than just organise meaning, they organise the degree of engrossment. Engrossment is essential for the stability of the theatrical frame. Most performances are created with the aim of providing an engrossing experience in mind.<sup>3</sup> We normally call the maintenance of the theatrical frame's stability the suspension of disbelief. This happens when the upkeying is concealed such that the frame of the performance seems real enough for the audience to accept the reality of the theatrical frame. The theatrical frame itself remains upkeyed, otherwise audience members may rush onstage to intervene. However, things that can remind the audience of the primary framework are purposely hidden. For example, only the actors are lit so that the rest of the audience cannot distract individual audience members. The audience is also prohibited from speaking, so that the only speech audible is the actors'. In this way, while the audience is aware that the performance is keyed differently from the primary frame, they are able to access it as they access their primary frame because it is the only frame available to them. This is the reason for theatre etiquette: rules of etiquette render any actions taken by the audience in the primary frame entirely separate from the theatrical frame to be breaches of protocol. For example, to talk during a performance is rude because it is distracting, but to cheer and laugh at a particularly entertaining bit of a show is acceptable.

The frame of meaning in RPGs is somewhat different. In Cervantes's story, Don Quixote is a man whose primary frame is entirely different from everyone else's: Quixote's is populated by fantastic monsters and governed by the code of chivalry. Thus, Quixote's primary frame is the fantasy frame. It is the fantasy frame rather than the theatrical frame that gamers upkey to when they play. Yet, etiquette still applies. For example, it is rude to interrupt when the referee is describing the setting or when players are interacting in-character except if the interruption is relevant to the fantasy frame, or involves critical occurrences in the primary frame.

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<sup>3</sup> Non-naturalistic theatre usually seeks to break the stability of the theatrical frame, downkeying instead of upkeying for effect. This is typical of Brecht's concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* and the genuine terror often evoked by Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

Larping is an extraordinary example of how close to the primary frame a game can become. Because larp is a version of RPG that is acted out rather than described, players interact in a manner that could easily be miskeyed as the primary frame – instead of saying ‘I scream at him’, players actually do scream at other players. Larp participants have to be aware that the line between the performance frame and the primary frame is extremely thin, and actions done in-character could be downkeyed and taken seriously instead. Frame analysis offers us a unique perspective on how meanings can change with the frame presented. What we see onstage is usually upkeyed to prevent us from taking it too seriously, yet this upkeying is concealed so that it appears to be real, or occurring in the primary frame. The stability of the performance frame depends on the engrossment of the audience, which in turn depends on how adept the illusion of the upkeyed frame is as the primary frame. Downkeying, whether by the audience or actors, can disrupt the engrossment and in turn the stability of the frame. This is true of both RPGs and conventional theatre, and conventions of etiquette are necessary in both forms of performance to maintain the engrossment of those who are participating and watching.

Engrossment is essential to the suspension of disbelief, and larp is the RPG type that promotes the greatest degree of engrossment. There is less of the sense of vicariousness typical of tabletop in larp – players do not merely create their characters in their minds, they actually act as their characters. And just as engrossment is vital to the stability of the theatrical frame, engrossment is also vital to the stability of the larp frame. When one player is observed to switch frames or break from character, the effect often seems to multiply itself across the larp area: players tend to relax visibly, and start to talk as themselves, rather than as their characters. Quite simply, when a character you are interacting with addresses you as a fellow player, rather than as a character, it is impossible to do anything but answer out-of-character. This multiplying effect is also true of theatre audiences. It is difficult or even embarrassing to take a show seriously when the rest of the audience fails to do so. But when players are in-character, interpreting everything in the performance frame of the larp, they have effectively achieved Stanislavski’s psychological realism – they are living as their characters. This is also possible in tabletop, but much easier to achieve in larp because there is greater ease of engrossment due to protocols of etiquette and conventions of behaviour and costuming.

## Goffman on Performance

In Frame Analysis, Goffman offers his definition of performance:

A performance [...] is that arrangement which transforms an individual into a stage performer [...] an object that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense [...] by persons in an ‘audience’ role. (Goffman 1974, 124)

Like Boal, Goffman notes the division between performer and audience:

A line is ordinarily maintained between a staging area where the performance proper occurs and [...] where the watchers are located. The central understanding is that the audience has neither the right nor the obligation to participate directly in the dramatic action occurring on the stage. (Goffman 1974, 124–125)

Unlike Boal, however, Goffman does not lament the inability of the audiences to participate in the performance. This makes his definition appear somewhat more neutral than Boal's – Goffman has no vested interest in theatre, as it were. Focusing on the first part of the definition, we find that RPGs are performances, yet not directly so – because of the fluidity of the roles taken on by the referee and the players, it is difficult to pin down exactly when one is audience and when one is actor in a RPG. What is clear however is that in RPGs, there are 'object(s) that can be looked at in the round and at length without offense by persons in an 'audience' role.' RPGs thus fulfil Goffman's definition of performance because players are constantly observing or being observed.

Goffman goes on to distinguish performances in a unique manner: according to the 'purity' of the performance. This refers to the 'exclusiveness of the claim of the watchers on the activity they watch.' (Goffman 1974, 125) A 'pure' performance then, would be one entirely dependent on the presence of an audience – if there is no one watching, there can be no performance. Goffman ranks various types of performances on their purity:

- A conventional theatrical performance would be considered pure. These are intended for the entertainment of the audience, and if there is no audience, one might as well cancel the show.
  - Next would be contests or matches, where the contestants involved perform not just to entertain the audience, but for some greater prize or title. This is less pure because some matches can be held without audience, though the presence of a paying audience often justifies the existence of a contest.
  - Slightly less pure are personal ceremonies, like weddings and funerals. Audience here are usually invited guests, not paying watchers. While the above are ostensibly entertainment, as the performance becomes less pure, it also becomes more serious.
  - Work performances, actual work like the construction of a building or a rehearsal by theatre students ignoring the fact that they are being watched openly, are most impure. This is due to the open disregard for the dramatic elements of their labour by the 'performers'.
- (Goffman 1974, 125–126)

Goffman's theory is a formalising of society's attitude towards 'work' and 'play' in that it serves to distinguish between entertainment and work performances. Goffman's normative theory establishes that pure entertainment is 'play' thereby detracting from

its value – play is associated with lack of seriousness, seriousness being a positive value. Work is serious; hence it is valued over anything that is play. Society assigns value to performance based on its usefulness. Work performances are useful, hence valued over entertainment (play), which is not perceived to have any usefulness. But this judgment of utility is based on the assumption of the value of seriousness, and work is always assumed to be more serious than play – this is blatantly circular reasoning.

Purity was intended as a study of the relationship between the roles of audience and actor, but when the roles are combined, we discover that there is no work/play distinction in role-playing. The common perception of role-playing games is as play, a condemnation of the RPG because entertainment is the primary motivation of most gamers. But RPGs are impure because the actors function independent of the need for an audience. Impure performances are work performances, according to Goffman's theory. But role-playing games are not work, nor can RPGs be generally considered serious. All this raises questions about Goffman's formalisation of social attitudes toward performance – purity's work/play dichotomy fails to provide an account of RPGs as performance, and serves to show the fallacies in society's attitudes towards work and play.

Looking at role-playing in light of structural relations casts light on the attitudes of people to performance that theorists have attempted to formalise. For example, Boal merges the actor and spectator for a social function while RPGs merge the roles for a purely personal imaginative function. Goffman's theory reveals why RPGs are seen as irrelevant and play while at the same time showing society's attitude towards pure entertainment as being irrelevant and dismissed as play. The RPG exposes the vulnerabilities of these theories and establishes its unique position in helping us understand theatre and performance.

## Conclusion

In this study, I have offered role-playing as a form of theatre that has so far been overlooked. I believe that the theatrical aspects of RPGs warrant its consideration as a form of theatre in itself, and that the recognition of this opens new corridors of research for theatre academics and practitioners alike.

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## Role-Playing: A Narrative Experience and a Mindset

*The author introduces arguments about the relationship between games and narratives, and goes on to discuss their implications for role-playing games. Her main argument is that role-playing games present a particular type of games with strong narrative aspirations, as the games are being 'narrativised' in various ways. This leads to the idea of role-playing as a mindset that can be imported into playing other types of games as well.*

In the beginning of the 1990s it would have been unbelievable to say that one could be studying popular games in academia, at least in any other sense than sociological study. But due to the research in digital arts and cultures, and growing interest in hypertext and other interactive narratives, more and more game-like texts and even papers about games began to make appearances in international conferences. In 2001, Norwegian professor of literature and the author of the book *Cybertext*, Espen Aarseth launched a scientific journal called *Game Studies*<sup>1</sup> with his international colleagues, and it, with some conferences, was a beginning for game studies as a discipline. Their research agenda has been to study games as games, mainly focusing in digital games, due to the history of game studies and the fact that digital games are the most rapidly growing entertainment form in the world, with very little research available.

Role-playing games are obviously making their way to the academia and into critical discussions, but the actual amount of papers has been even smaller than regarding digital games at the moment. It's somewhat odd because role-playing games were the starting point for computer games as well<sup>2</sup>, so it could be imagined that there should be more studies of them. Maybe the lack of study is due to the fact that digital games are a bigger business and nowadays their image is maybe also less nerdy. Within the last few years there has been a wildly growing interest to study role-playing games as well – especially in the Nordic countries (where game studies also started a few years ago).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.gamestudies.org](http://www.gamestudies.org)

<sup>2</sup> See Brad King and John Borland (ed) (2003): *Dungeons and Dreamers: The Rise of Computer Game Culture from Geek to Chick*.

# Defining a Game

The term 'role-playing game' has the word game in it. What, then, makes a role-playing game a game, or is it a form of game at all? In game studies, there have been several more and more specific models for defining a game:

[A game is] an interactive structure of endogenous meaning that requires players to struggle toward a goal. (Costikyan 2002.)

A game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome. (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 80.)

A game is a closed formal system that subjectively represents subset of reality. (Crawford 1982.)

In addition, French anthropologist Roger Caillois (1961, 6–7) describes the pleasure of game play as follows:

The game consists of the need to find or continue at once a response *which is free within the limits set by the rules*. This latitude of the player, this margin accorded to his action is essential to the game and partly explains the pleasure which it excites.

Most definitions of 'game' have rules, temporal structures, winning conditions, conflict, and goals as their central building blocks. All of these, except winning conditions, can be easily found from role-playing games, so role-playing games would seem to qualify as games by definition. I will divide role-playing games into a number of forms of role-playing that all have several traits in common: They all are games, which consist of strategic and simulation-based actions in a fictitious world, where structures of conflict are strongly both encouraged and supported by the design of the game, i.e. the game master and/or the game system. (On means to support conflict through character design, see Lankoski & Heliö 2002 and Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2003.) Players play these games usually through a point of view of a character, whose life they are supposed to immerse themselves into. The conflict in a game can be internal or external, i.e. character-based or group-based opposed to world-based, and it can be used as a starting point, motivator or dynamic element in the game.

Role-playing games are usually divided into three categories: First, there are tabletop (or pen and paper) role-playing games, which are usually played around the table where players perform their characters in a more or less immersed manner. Second, there are live-action role-playing games, where players dress up as their characters and act them out in surroundings simulating the game world. Finally, there are computer and video role-playing games where the medium is the digital game. In these, the core of the role-playing is often similar to the tabletop type, and sometimes more restricted due to the communicational forms of the game. These last ones are the only ones where there is a single player role-playing, as paradoxical as this arrangement sometimes is.

In the family of role-playing games there are also a whole bunch of other game types and game-like activities that can be included or excluded, like the collectible card games (such as *Magic: The Gathering*) and board and strategy games (like *Warhammer 40.000*), or different forms of theatrical and larp-like combinations, such as fate-play. The action of role-playing is usually somehow present in these game forms, but the focus can be more either in the competitive nature of the game (MtG, Warhammer), or in the immersive performance (as in fate-play), than in role-playing itself.

Some game theorists claim that role-playing games shouldn't be classified as games at all, due to the fact that most of them lack the winning condition or fixed rules. Game scholar Jesper Juul and game designers Eric Zimmerman and Katie Salen comment that these games could be seen as "limit case" games, or borderline cases (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, 81–82; Juul 2003, 39). In any case, they are not considered 'proper' games. Still, role-playing games continue to maintain their ambivalent position and great variety in styles of playing. To really understand the phenomena, we must see how they function and what traits they have in common with other games, and what makes them special. Now that we know that role-playing game as a category is a very strongly game-oriented borderline case, we should examine, what is the role of their supposed narrativity. Are role-playing games stories, and if so, then what kind of stories are they?

## Telling Stories?

Theories on interactive narratives and their relationship to games have often romanticised the subject. The same attitude can be found also in some of the theories regarding role-playing games. For example, Murray (1999, 152) writes: "Perhaps the next Shakespeare of this world will be a great live-action role-playing GM who is also an expert computer scientist" (see also Mackay 2001).

To counter-argument this romanticism, Danish game researcher Jesper Juul has examined some of the fallacies regarding games and narratives in his article *Games Telling Stories?* Juul presents an approach that within game studies has been called 'ludology'. The term was originally coined by another game researcher and designer, Uruguyan Gonzalo Frasca. The essence of this approach was to study games as games, on their own merits, and to question the efforts to interpret games as narrative, cinematic, etc. (see Frasca 2000).

I find this ludological approach very refreshing and lucid. According to Juul, there are at least three common arguments for seeing games and narratives as equals: 1) We use narratives for everything. 2) Most games feature narrative introductions and backstories. 3) Games share some traits with narratives. Juul then explores three important reasons for understanding games as non-narrative phenomena: 1) Games are not a part of the narrative media ecology formed by movies, novels, and theatre. 2) Time in games works differently than in narratives. 3) The relation between the reader or the viewer

and the story world is different than the relation between the player and the game world. (Juul 2001.)

To get to the roots of the games vs. narratives debate, one should look into the study of narratives and narration. This discipline is called narratology, and under its wings, literature and film scholars have established a number of definitions for the key concepts. For instance, 'story' has been defined like this:

Story is the event and characters "Text" is a spoken or written discourse, which undertakes the telling. Text is what we read.

Since the text is spoken or written it implies someone who speaks or writes it. The act or process of production is the third aspect – "narration". (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 3.)

To sum up: narration always requires a narrator and someone for whom the story is narrated. In games this is not the case. But in role-playing games it could be said that all players participate in the action of the narration, and also form the audience at the same time. A theorist on interactive narratives, Janet Murray writes:

Role-playing games are theatrical in a non-traditional but thrilling way. Players are both actors and audience for one another, and the events they portray have the immediacy of personal experience. (Murray 1999, 42.)

This does not, however, turn the game into a story, much less a narrative. In role-playing games the players have the plot elements, the actions forming the story, the game master's power guiding the game and the written background materials in a way of a scriptwriter. However, the actual actions of a game do not make it a story. We can tell stories about life, but that does not make our lives, as they happen, stories as such: the story of one's life is always subordinate to the life actually lived. (Cf. Juul 2001.)

## Narrative Experiences

In role-playing games the narrator and the narratee are both quite lacking: there is no one for whom the story is told to, and neither is there a storyteller. We can of course assume that the game master and the players reconstruct the story by playing the game – which is even partially true. Still, we must note that there is no actual story in the game of the role-playing game, though there are events, characters and structures of narrativity giving the players the basis for interpreting it *as* a narrative. We have many partially open structures that we may fulfil with our imagination during the course of the game – within its limitations. We also have the ability to follow different kinds of narrative premises and structures as well as imitate them for ourselves to create more authentic and suitable narrative experiences. We have the 'narrative desire' to make pieces we interpret to relate to each other fit in, to construct the plot from recurring and parallel elements (Brooks 1984). This effort in games has been discussed as a form of 'intrigue', a secret plot with several different possible outcomes (Aarseth 1997, 112).

As I have argued before, the narrative desire can be 'fed' with specific game design solutions: e.g., ideas of dramatic writing can be used as a basis for character design (Lankoski & Heliö 2002). Also, it is possible to guide the player's interpretations with similar means (Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2003).

It now seems obvious that games aren't stories, and that they only share some similar elements. However, the careful structure of the process of role-playing and the silent intention of narration, as well as the intention to create narrative experiences for the players, are what makes role-playing games so interesting.

This makes us realise how important it is for us to interpret sequences of events as stories, and tell in them about things we consider important. The narrative desire becomes evident at these moments. It doesn't make the games themselves stories, nor does it make the events in them stories. It is our interpretations and experiences that can be strongly narrative seeking, and this becomes even more evident in the way we put the experiences into words after having played. In Finnish larps, the debrief session offers opportunities for the individual players to 'narrativise' their experiences in the game. By verbalising their actions in the game, the players make a story out of the game.

This is my core point here. Role-playing game is a specific type of game with strong narrative aspirations, which implicate telling stories and creating narrative experiences out of games. So in a sense, role-playing games constitute a type of narrative games, but the theoretical standpoint is different from the ones where most games and story-like experiences are considered alike.

Role-playing games rely on communication. Due to this fact we start making up stories, we start verbalising, and thus narrativising the experience. There are some strong structures in these games that support narrativity and make it possible to experience these games as narratives. Also, a strong terminological background exists to support our narrativised "readings" of the games. For instance, terms like 'drama points' and 'a storyteller' are often used creating the feeling of a story emerging during the game (see, e.g., *Vampire: The Masquerade*).

Usually it is the aim of a role-playing game to produce a narrative experience, or an interpretation of the game's events. These turn into an emotional experience that can vary from a lighter "Yey, we had ourselves an adventure!" to the more serious "Oh, now I understand what a complex phenomenon war is". The typical position from which to attain these kinds of experiences is the character that one plays, i.e. the one the player identifies with, and her point of view to the events. However, the immersion giving birth to the emotional experience is not restricted to the player's own character, the other characters and their behaviour, other players' emotions and experiences, the game world, and the game events and outcomes affect an individual player's experience and serve as its point of origin.

All role-playing games have in common also the use of popular culture and especially certain of its genres. For instance, fantasy genre is very strongly linked to all role-playing games due to the fact that the first role-playing games were developed with J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth in mind. Nowadays, not only epics and fantasy short

stories influence the structures of role-playing games, but the story formats familiar from television series and serials give shape to games (see, e.g., *Buffy the Vampire Slayer Roleplaying Game*) and influence the ways they are interpreted and experienced. For instance, exploration and combat are themes found in epics and in present-day television drama, organised into episodes – and similar themes and structures can be found in role-playing campaigns. (On the usage of pop culture in role-playing games, see Mackay 2001, 29–33.) Recognizable pop-cultural and genre elements and structures have also been argued of being useful in maintaining a coherent diegesis of the game (see Montola 2003, 80–87, Stenros 2004 and Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003, 56–63).

Petri Lankoski (2003, 15–19) writes about narrative interpretations and the ways of using our narrative schemes to support the interpretations. I see these kinds of actions (introductions of settings and characters, initiating events, outcomes, etc.) as vital for role-playing, as in this way we can truly start building the narrative experience out of what we have played and experienced, performed and felt during the role-playing session. Lankoski uses ideas from film studies (Edward Brannigan) and cognitive psychology (Jean Matter Mandler). With the help of these theories he creates a model where the operation of these kinds of schemes is explained, and goes on to discuss how narrative interpretations can be supported by adopting certain scriptwriting solutions.

## The Mindset

In addition, role-playing games are interesting in the sense that even though it is a game genre, and has its own subgenres, it can also be considered as a manner of playing that can be adapted to playing any kind of game. All games require the players to make a certain kind of contract with the game – to submit to the rules and to play along. Moreover, all games require the use of imagination, and especially in role-playing games the existence of a make-believe world and the shared use of imagination are emphasised. Naturally, an off-game object does not actually transform into the object it is imagined as being in-game: for instance, if an airplane in the sky becomes a dragon in some larpers' imaginations, it does not actually turn into a dragon – and even the players do not actually think so. The group of players have a common contract stating how to behave in the situation, because they willingly share the game's make-believe world. In order to sustain the agreed immersion, the 'dragon's' airplaneness' should not in any case be directly voiced aloud.

As this kind of method of using one's imagination for dramatic and playful purposes is at the heart of role-playing practices, it is possible to adopt a similar attitude into playing other kinds of games. For example, this mindset allows the player to perceive seemingly insignificant events significant for the sake of narrative. With narrative desire, throwing dice (a device bringing randomness to the game) can be perceived as a meaningful, dramatic event. This mindset can be used in role-playing games to achieve

better immersion, but it does not equal an immersive playing technique per se, as it can be taken advantage in relation to other kinds of game play as well.

So, one may role-play strategy games and roulette as well as shoot 'em up video games. Even football can be played with this mindset; it doesn't necessarily constitute a role-playing game if the players take the roles of famous footballers, but if the player roles are complemented with role-specific rules, the shift towards role-playing game has begun. In role-played football there could be rules concerning the chances of different players to score in different situations.

It is crucial to know the mechanics of the mindset and have the will to use one's imagination. Even if a game does not support active role-playing, as most of the massive multi-player online role-playing games fail to do (*Dark Age of Camelot* and others), experienced role-players may adopt the mindset and take advantage of the game's communication functionalities, and start to role-play. This, however, requires the willing support or at least acceptance of the other players – any one of us can act like a prince, but if the others won't play along, it does not constitute role-playing. In order for role-playing game to emerge, the role should have some relation to the game's rules. Often these relationships might exist only as implied ones, but the player should at least be able to verbalise them.

The benefit of the role-playing attitude and mindset is that it can be used to renew experiences of playing other games by attaching a promise of narrative experience alongside them. Even if the mindset can be taken advantage of in playing games, I argue that a game becomes a role-playing game only when it qualifies with some of the traits an RPG should, by definition, have. These include a rule set, multiple players with characters, and a game master.

## Conclusions

My point in introducing this model is to define role-playing games in a fashion that would highlight the variety that exists in concrete forms of role-playing games, and to understand them better. Games can be more "game-like", more action-oriented or more narrative-oriented, which depends on the participants and the game system itself. It is possible to expand role-playing to other kinds of games, and to gain narrative experiences through the role-playing mindset, even with seemingly non-role-play games. Role-playing games function according to the storytelling principle, where the premise of the narrative experience is written into the game concept as a starting point for the game master, and as motivation for the players to play the game.

As a summary: the role-playing mindset can be used when the player wants to embed narrative motives into game play, no matter what kind of a game is being played. However, this mindset does not change the game into a role-playing game, because they have, by definition, also formal traits that should be shared among the players before the game counts as a role-playing game. These traits include such things as a rule set

that is, first, used to structure the game itself, and, second, used to simulate the game world. This rule set gets activated within the game's shared diegesis by the players and the game master, and the degree to which the rule set gets negotiated depends on the flexibility of the game system – for instance, digital game systems usually do not allow such negotiation regarding either rules or game mechanics, and to my experience this varies considerably with human-driven game systems as well.

Third, the game also requires that the players play the game, in order for it to function. Therefore, in role-playing games there should be two or more independent entities. One of them is a game system that varies from a human game master to game engines in digital role-playing games, and to rule sets in one-player book-based adventures. The number of the other entities equal the number of players taking part in the game: the maximum number of participants varies from one to the approximately one to ten in table-top games, possibly expanding to tens or hundreds in larps, and thousands in MMORPGS.

Role-playing games themselves are different from other types of games in the sense that they pursue narrative experiences and storytelling. Mostly this gets actualised after the game has been played, as players verbalise their actions in informal or formal manner. Formal practices include larp debrief sessions, where typically every player has few minutes to summarise their character's actions. Game reports or diaries are another practice, used in long campaigns, where players brief the game masters about their actions so that they stay informed of the game's events. An example of the more informal practice is the usual post-game discussion about game events and character actions.

These forms of verbalisation support the narrativity in role-playing games and also the implied storytelling surrounding them. The need to narrativise played-out actions is a fundamental structure of role-playing games. It is a trait that makes role-playing games particular when compared to other games: RPGs are games that offer implied motivation for creating narrative experiences and encouraging players to tell stories about them.

I consider this kind of model necessary because for me role-playing games are not just about simulations of possible worlds or about calculating experience points, neither are they all about storytelling communities or creating narratives. I want to see role-playing as a way of playing games that can be adapted into various kinds of games and gaming concepts. The role-playing dimension can also be analysed, developed and designed in several different ways depending on one's motives. In my view, exclusive definitions of role-playing that consider it either as a form of storytelling or just a game, do not give the form the credit it deserves as a diverse and complex set of phenomena. I hope this model introduces a perspective to role-playing games that is useful when developing theories of role-playing games.

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## Notes on Role-Playing Texts

*The analysis of role-playing games is often muddled by a failure to assess the basic ontological question: what is being analysed when we speak of analysing a role-playing game? Producing a valid analysis of a role-playing game requires that the analyst clearly defines the object under scrutiny. Role-playing games can be approached from a number of perspectives, but all methods cannot be used in all situations. Thus, it is imperative to explicate what is here called the role-playing text, and its various aspects. I will here attempt to formulate six different ways of conceiving role-playing games, gaming, and closely related phenomena.*

The Meilahti Model defines a role-playing game as that which “is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework” (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003). The end result of the process of role-playing is the *role-playing text*<sup>1</sup>. The term ‘text’ is here used as in semiotics – that is, it does not refer only to written text, but any form of expression or a body of work that can be analysed. Thus a picture, a film or a role-playing game can be seen as a text that can then be read and interpreted. Lisa Padol’s (1996) definition of the role-playing text as game-related “interaction of at least two gamers” is similar to this one. She also stresses the transitory nature of the role-playing text:

But what is the story? What is the text of a role-playing session? If a supplement is used, is that the text? But what if the GM has made changes to the supplement? What if the GM is working from notes, or from improvisation alone? [...] The GM’s notes do not constitute the text either. They may be more tailored to the group than a commercial supplement, but they do not dictate how the session will go. Like the material in a supplement, the material in the GM’s notes will be modified, or even ignored, depending on what happens during the session. Neither the GM’s notes nor the commercial supplement is the text. Neither is a transcription of the session the text, any more than a film is the screenplay. The film itself is the text. Similarly, the session itself is the text of the session. However, the comparison between game and film must not be taken too far. One can watch a film over and over again. There is nothing to prevent the video taping of a game session; however, the tape is not the text. The text is the session itself. It is, therefore, transitory, existing only for the duration of the session. (Padol 1996)

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<sup>1</sup> The term ‘role-playing text’ is used to denote one specific kind of text associated with role-playing. It is not the only text that can be read in regards to role-playing games, but it is the most important and specific. It should not be confused with the other textual types introduced in this article.

It is important to note that the role-playing text contains all the diegetic elements, from the back-story to the experiences of individual characters. This role-playing text is a theoretical construct, almost an abstract Platonic idea of this particular role-playing game, or series of games. The role-playing text is comprised of elements that are somehow transmitted via symbols, so that they can be read. There is nothing in the role-playing text that at least one of the participants does not know, but in practice usually no one knows the entire role-playing text.

A role-playing session produces the diegesis, the role-playing text, and the experiences of the various participants. The diegesis is all of that which is true within the game (Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2003). The same background material will thus produce various role-playing texts, because the author of the role-playing text comprises of all the individuals participating in the gaming experience. The content of the role-playing text is very similar to the notion of diegesis, but it also includes some extradiegetic elements that are in direct symbolic relation to the diegesis (such as background music which can be used, for example, as a symbol for a mood – for an exploration on semiotic relations in role-playing games, see Loponen & Montola 2004). Thus, the role-playing text includes not only the what (diegesis), but also the how (methods). The third product of role-playing is the experiences of the participants, which include, along with the role-playing text, extradiegetic events that do not directly relate to role-playing (such as off-game gossip) but which would contribute to an ethnographic study of the game.

## Reading the Game

Each participant produces a *reading* of the role-playing text. This reading constitutes the game for that particular individual. Markus Montola calls the combination of these readings and the internal processes of the participant *subjective diegeses* (Montola 2003) and defines role-playing as the co-operative interaction between various diegeses. I would say these readings compete for the hegemonic position as the explicated diegetic truth. Participants create these readings as the game progresses. They also constantly re-evaluate and adjust their readings. From a practical point of view, these readings are the role-playing game for the participants, but although direct and complete access to the abstract role-playing text eludes the participant, to deny its existence (or to ignore it) would suggest that each participant is reading a separate text.

Often the reading by the game master is seen as a special case, as she has the final word on what is true within the diegetic frame. Nonetheless, her reading is constructed in the same way as the ones created by the other participants, despite the fact that she might have more control over and information regarding the diegetic frame than the other participants.

Of these three starting points, the first and foremost is the *role-playing text*. The *reading done by a participant*, and the special case of a *reading done by the game master*, are the second most common starting-points of analyses of role-playing games.

Note that the term ‘reading’ is here used to denote the participants’ initial take on the events in the process of role-playing, and ‘interpretation’ is used to denote the further development of this initial reading.

Readings can also be constructed from the story of the game, but it is important to note that role-playing games do not have stories (Heliö 2004). Thus these readings are always based on a *narrativisation* of the game events. This narrativisation is constructed after the fact in communication between the participants or when a participant is narrativising the events to some one else, interpreting her reading.

## Additional Aspects

It is possible to conceive other aspects of a role-playing as texts. One such is a *scenario*. Even though it is not possible to produce the same role-playing game twice, it is possible to organise a number of games based on exactly the same background material and associated paraphernalia (props, the gaming location, etc.). The scenario is a collection of the pre-created material for a game or series of games. The reading of the background material produces the scenario. Thus, a scenario can exist even if a game has never been played. Running “the same” live-action role-playing game twice produces different role-playing texts, just as various tabletop role-playing games based on the same adventure modules are never identical. Still, it is possible to see these different end products as based on the same text, the scenario.

The material making up the scenario can be divided into smaller parts. For example, character descriptions as well as background world guides can always be read and interpreted separately from the rest of the scenario.

Another aspect of role-playing is comprised of the methodologies that are used for abstraction and simulation – the *rules*. Rules are understood here as shared systems both for encoding/decoding information, and of specific norms. For example, rules decode what rolling a six on a die means, how a latex sword is supposed to be understood and how a participant should communicate that she is feeling uncomfortable in a game situation. They also include norms like “a participant should not leave the larp area when the game is in progress”. Padol (1996) sees rules as a meta-text, though she only defines them as a mechanism for solving disputes. Because rules are usually read with a practical goal in mind, the reading of rules in itself produces one type of role-playing related text. The rules include the preconceptions the reader has about role-playing.

Also, from an ethnographic point of view, the gaming *session* can be seen as a type of text. A session is the temporal window where the participants convene, play, eat, chitchat and generally socialise, until they finally disperse. As such, a session includes not only the social process of role-playing and meta-gaming, but also all the actions not directly relating to the game that take place during the time between the beginning and the end of a session. Padol (ibid) sees no difference between the text of the session and the role-playing text, but still states that a session “can [be] transcribed, summarized, or

videotaped and shown to those who did not participate in the session. However, once this has happened, we no longer have the [role-playing] text itself. We have a new text, and a new audience.” In the end she only recognizes one type of text in relation to role-playing games, the role-playing text, even if she does point out that *source books* and other published material can, of course, be read as text in the manner of any publication. Still, as I have here attempted to demonstrate, more specific distinctions than this are necessary in order to thoroughly dissect what role-playing in fact is. If the goal is to produce coherent readings of role-playing games, then it is important to explicate what is actually being read.

Currently, discussion regarding these six different aspects is conducted in different contexts. Most analyses on games that are published (on mailing lists, discussion forums and in fanzines such as *Larppaaja* and *Fëa Livia*), are based either on the role-playing text (often the readings of the participant or the game master) or on the text that is produced after narrativising the events of the game into a story. Often, no divisions are made between these types of texts and readings, which creates confusion as the authors vary between telling what happened to their characters and what the game seemed to be about as a whole.

Analyses on scenarios often tie into role-playing text and narrativisation, but they are also reviewed in role-playing publications alongside source books and rules. The distinctions between the three aspects of gaming are sometimes muddled because the exact same physical material can be approached from all three points of view – even if the rules usually bring in unvoiced notions about the gaming process. Sessions are rarely analysed outside the peer review of the participants of the game.

## Conclusion

These six aspects of role-playing can all be conceived as different types of texts. The primary type is what is here called the role-playing text itself, the transient product of role-playing. It includes some elements of most of the other aspects as well, namely that role-playing is conducted in a session, that it is to some extent based on a scenario, that some rules are employed and that the participants have used source material in preparation to the game. These four additional subservient aspects of role-playing also contain elements which are not present in the role-playing text and which can also be read separately. On the other hand, narrativised story of the game is not a part of the role-playing text but a result of narrativisation done to a reading based on it.

Searching for meaning in role-playing games is a worthwhile process, but it is important to enunciate properly what it is exactly that is being analysed. Scrutinising the different aspect of role-playing yields different information only if the point of view is clearly understood by both the analyst and her audience.

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## Autonomous Identities

### Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering and Emancipating Identities

*The concept of immersion has been one of the hot potatoes in Nordic role-playing discussion. In this paper I question the necessity of character for immersion and argue that interaction is a trivial concept in defining role-playing. I compare the Turku, Meilahti and Post-Bjorneborgian Schools in regards to the concept of character and immersion. I explore the impact of perceived realities in achieving immersion and the effect of immersion on gaming reality. I also compare larps with Temporary Autonomous Zones, and attempt to see what is necessary for the two to become one.*

The character immersion that role-players in general, and the Turku School in particular, have been trying to achieve is impossible. It is an ideal based on a faulty premise of character that originates with traditional fiction and that cannot be applied to immersive, immediated artforms like role-playing. Likewise, the emphasis on interactivity is trivial and unnecessary.

Role-players like to think they can be their characters and that their characters are individuals independent from the players. Yet they can never achieve “complete immersion” and feel inferior for this inability to perform. The problem is seeing the character as another person instead of a method for accessing the larp.

This essay is written partly as an attempt to update and post-modernise the ideas of the *Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 1999), specifically those concerning character and immersion. When the Turku Manifesto is mentioned, it should be read in this light. This article will hopefully help explain the original Turku Manifesto and develop the ideas presented there, as well as those presented in other articles I’ve written and the two “opposing” schools; the Meilahti School and their model (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003), and the multi-tier immersion theory by the Post-Bjorneborgian School (Harviainen 2003). This article is in part an attempt at a synthesis between these three different schools of thought and an attempt to elaborate the potentially revolutionary nature of role-playing.

## Immersion

According to the *Meilabti Model*, the relationship between the player and the character is very simple: “A player is a participant who assumes said roles [that form the character] within the diegetic frame.” The internal processes and interpretations of the player are irrelevant for the game as a whole until they are expressed and become part of the diegetic frame. Before that they are merely “individual narrative readings” (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003.)

Compared to the Meilahti Model, the Manifesto of the Turku School presents a very modernist view of character and immersion. Stuart Hall (1996) argues that seeing self as narrative is the essential part of identity creation. The Turku Manifesto saw this the opposite way: that character identity can be created by seeing the narrative as the self. In other words, a player can become the character after reading the character’s written description.

The Turku Manifesto focuses on the process of immersion, or internally becoming a character. “Role-playing is immersion (“eläytyminen”) to an outside consciousness (“character”) and interacting with its surroundings.” According to the Turku Manifesto, it is precisely immersion, coupled with interactivity, that defines role-playing. (Pohjola 1999.)

Every participant shares what happens, using immersion and interpretation to create an entirely unique portrayal of the events for themselves – a subjective diegesis. Markus Montola writes:

Many people, such as Pohjola (1999) and Hakkarainen and Stenros (2002), use diegesis to mean an objective truth of the game world. I believe that understanding a diegesis as a subjective truth proves more accurate and fruitful. Every participant constructs his or her diegesis when playing, the crucial process of role-playing being the interaction of these diegeses. The difference of players’ diegeses is essentially larger than the difference of different interpretations of a movie diegesis.

[...]

The contents of a role-playing diegesis and a movie diegesis are different. When it comes to role-playing, it’s important to understand that a diegesis is much more than a fictional world with characters running around. There is a lot happening in the heads of the participants constructing the diegeses. A lot of what we imagine into our diegeses never comes up; single character’s personal plans or well-hidden emotions for example. They exist only in the diegesis of that player, though the he may communicate them to others’ diegeses, either by diegetic or non-diegetic means. (Montola 2003)

## Hamlet’s Monologues

The larp *Hamlet* employed some experimental methods. Perhaps the most important of these was the use of monologues to convey the mood to the characters and players. This method made brilliant use of the subjective diegeses of a larp.

The traditional role-playing would halt, and the characters (not just the players!) would gather around a stage and observe one of the key characters, like Hamlet or Claudius, speaking to themselves. This was used to represent each character's inner monologue. It worked to set the mood of the game, and also to illustrate the inner workings of each characters minds. The characters had been constructed in such a way that each monologue was relevant for every character, but in completely different ways.

The most famous monologue, Hamlet's "To be or not to be", often understood to deal with Hamlet's pondering between life and death or action and inaction, was brought to life by dozens of simultaneous interpretations.

When Pelle, who plays the evil king Claudius' unswervingly loyal servant, hears the "to be or not to be" monologue, it speaks of the difficulty of being a good servant for an evil master. For the aging diva Perdita it becomes a reminder of how short life is, and drives her to drunken dissipations with a one-eyed apothecarist. (Hamlet, the larp)

The event is the same for all the participants, but is interpreted in completely different ways. This, of course, happens with all art. With larps it is made different, and perhaps more focused, through characters that give the context for the interpretation.

## The Many Faces of Immersion

Larps contain four aspects: the characters, the setting, the events, and the mechanics (Pohjola 2003c). This is roughly analogous to the four way model presented in the Manifesto of the Turku School, where the players are divided respectively into immersionists, simulationists, dramatists and gamists (Pohjola 1999). The classic *Threefold Model* (see Kim 1998) and the later *Three Way Model* (Bøckman 2003) were similar with one lacking immersionists and the other simulationists.

J. Tuomas Harviainen provides another way to look at things by proposing that there are three kinds of immersion: Character Immersion, Reality Immersion and Narrative Immersion. According to him, every role-player can be divided into one of eight categories according to how they immerse. Not immersing on any level would make the role-player a Powergamer, immersing in the Narrative only would make one an Actor-Player, and so on (Harviainen 2003). These two categories are more or less similar with what the Turku Manifesto calls Gamist and Dramatist.

The Fundament Player (Character and Reality Immersion) is both the Immersionist and the Simulationist of the Turku Manifesto. Of the five other categories Harviainen sees two (only Reality Immersion, or no Reality Immersion) as transitory phases. The three that remain are the Simulator (Reality and Narrative Immersion), the Escapist (only Character Immersion), and the Extension player (all kinds of simulation).

Harviainen's division is very useful for game masters, but differs from the Turku Manifesto in not condemning Narrative Immersion. In Harviainen's terms, the Turku School propagates the importance of Reality Immersion and Character Immersion.

However, the Turku School still admits to two kinds of role-playing, immersionist and simulationist. The theory is that the immersionist experiences what the character experiences, while the simulationist only pretends to, logically deducing what the character would do next. In another article, I introduce another way to deal with these two kinds of playing with Aristotle's concepts of *ekstatikoi* and *euplastoi*:

What is translated here as "a strain of madness" actually means an ability to be taken over by your work, to immerse yourself into it... to "eläytyä". "Taking the mould of any character" was originally the Greek word *euplastoi*, and means thinking logically about the characters and situations, and thus simulating the outcome. "Lifted out of his proper self", on the other hand is *ekstatikoi*, which is writing spontaneously, in inspiration. (Pohjola 2001b.)

To make it short, immersion is inspired and natural, simulation is conscious and forced. However, something greater can emerge from both, as I will show later.

## Pretending to Believe to Remember

Immersion is often defined as being in character or becoming the character. This is a very simplistic way of putting it. By immersing into the reality of another person, the player willingly changes her own reality. The player pretends to be somebody else.

But more than *pretending to be* the character, the player *pretends to believe she is* the character. It is this self-induced state which makes it all so cool.

The longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to really believe. To more she pretends to remember, the more she starts to really remember. The more she pretends to believe to remember, the more she starts to really believe to remember, and really remember to believe, and really remember and really believe. And she pretends to forget she is just pretending. This is what Richard Schechner (2002) calls "pretending belief". The need to immerse in fictitious realities is what Jane McGonigal calls the Pinocchio Effect:

Players were given an opportunity to reflect on the longing of the virtual to be real. The generation of this desire, and the concomitant consciousness of the impossibility of its ever being achieved, is what I call the "Pinocchio Effect." Pervasive games, at their heart, are the dream of the virtual to be real. And if pervasive games are the dream of the virtual to be real, then they are also the dream of the players for the real to be virtual. [...]

I would like to propose that this drive to discover real life problems in direct correspondence to fictional play is not strange or delusional, but rather a perfect illustration of what digital theorist Pierre Levy identifies as a fundamental aspect of our experience of contemporary virtuality. (McGonigal 2003b.)

By understanding a character as diegetic roles, the diegesis as the character's perception of the reality of the game world, and the player as the participant of the role-playing game, immersion can be defined like this: *Immersion is the player assuming the identity*

*of the character by pretending to believe her identity only consists of the diegetic roles* (See Stuart Hall (1996) for more exact definitions of identity and role).

The relationship of the character and the diegetic frame is an interesting one. It is impossible to define if a character exists within the diegetic frame or whether the diegetic frame only exists within the diegesis that is created by the character. The question is related to that of reality existing without an intelligence to perceive it. In other words, by immersing the player loses some of her own roles and assumes some new ones, leaving her only roles that can exist within the diegetic frame. In effect, the player transforms into the character. This process of immersion takes the player from the assumed objective reality into the diegetic frame, or conversely takes reality from the player into the character. Often the role of the player is not immediately lost, but diminishes and eventually disappears as immersion deepens.

Note that the kind of immersion the Manifesto of the Turku School promotes, “to think, experience and feel through the character” is made meaningless by further study, as it assumes that behind a character, an objective identity uses the character as a context, a lens to see the game through.

## Interaction

The Meilahti Model (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003) claims that it is impossible to role-play alone. The Turku Manifesto argues that it is entirely possible. The argument for both is that role-playing should include interactivity. The Meilahti Model does not count interaction with the environment – the implication is that the diegesis exists only when transmitted through other players. The Turku Manifesto says the opposite – anything the character senses is part of the diegesis, and therefore it is possible to interact with it. And thus, in larps where no game master is present, it is possible and even commonplace to larp alone.

Both theories hold interaction as a key element in defining role-playing. The Turku Manifesto says role-playing is immersion into character and interacting with the character's surroundings. The Meilahti Model says that “a role-playing game is what is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and gamemaster(s) within a specified diegetic framework”. The character's surroundings are practically synonymous to the specified diegetic framework. The two main differences are the lack of immersion in Meilahti and the lack of the necessity of the other players in Turku. Both say interaction is essential. However, it is not.

Interaction is not defined in either of these articles. Greg Costikyan explains interactivity in relation to game design by saying a game is interactive by its nature: “The outcome of the game will differ depending on your decision. The game interacts with the players (and the players with each other), changing state as they play. [...] That's true of every game. If it isn't interactive, it's a puzzle, not a game” (Costikyan 2002). This makes sense in sentences like “games are an interactive medium,” because that is a simple

way to explain the difference between a computer game and a computer animation, or indeed any passive medium. Interactive media interact with and are interpreted by the audience while passive media are merely interpreted by the audience. Active media like theatre or music are difficult to define in this regard. I will later explain on the concept of mediation in relation to this.

Costikyian sees a game as something that exists separately from the players and can interact with them. This definition of interactivity does not fit role-playing, however, as a role-playing game is not an object that can exist without players. Interactivity is a useful term when talking about the plot structure of role-playing games, which is why they are often called “interactive dramas”.

The difference between interaction and interpretation is difficult to pinpoint. However, any theatre performance is automatically interactive. The audience interacts with the actors, the actors with each other, the audience members with each other, the actors with the props, and so on. In some big theatre houses, the feeling of interactivity might not be present for the audience, but the potential is always there. Any member can at any time comment loudly on anything happening on the stage, and the actors will have to react to this, even if that reaction is pretending not to have heard it. Simply by experiencing a live performance the audience interacts with it – an indifferent audience affects the performers differently from an excited audience, and as a result physically sees a different performance. This is similar with all active media where the art is performed live. With passive media, like literature or cinema, the audience reaction does not affect the actual media product, except contextually.

A human being cannot choose whether to be interactive or not; A human being is interactive by default. It is pointless, then, to say that a role-playing game participant must interact for the game to be interactive. As long as the role-playing game has even a single human being, it has interaction. Similarly, a character (assuming it is relatively human) is automatically interactive and in interaction with its reality, i.e. the diegesis of the game.

A computer game might be called an “interactive drama” if the player gets to make some choices in the narrative, usually by selecting her own path through a story tree. Sometimes a computer game has an open-ended story-world, in which there is a practically infinite amount of randomly generated events the player can keep encountering for as long as she likes. In these cases, the difference between interaction and interpretation is the clear: manipulating sensory information (reading, seeing, and hearing the words, images and sounds shown by the computer) versus the interpretation of that information in the players mind. For example, the different shapes of *Tetris* would be information resulting from interaction, but the player seeing New York skyline in them would be interpretation.

Such a clear difference does not exist in role-playing games as the diegesis is entirely subjective. Sensory information is first interpreted by the character to form the subjective diegesis, and only then are both the diegesis and the sensory information interpreted by the player to form the interpretation. If the player achieves full immersion

and suspension of disbelief, the player will only interpret the diegesis and leave the interpretation of sensory information to the character.

## Immediacy

Role-playing games are often falsely called an interactive medium or interactive art. While not untrue as such, it is a trivial concept since all art and all media are interactive – not necessarily when they are perceived or experienced, but definitely when they are created. If role-playing games could be recorded or observed from the outside without participation, there obviously would be nothing interactive about them. What sets them apart is precisely that they can only be experienced as they are created. Creation of any form of art is a constant circle of action, interpretation and reaction, being interactive, interpretational and expressive at the same time.

Media can be divided into three loose categories: passive, active and interactive. Passive media are recorded, and the audience cannot affect the media product as such, only the context and the interpretation. Passive media include cinema, literature, recorded music and the like. Active media are sometimes called live arts and include theatre performances, poetry recitations, and concerts. In active media, the experience is less mediated, and the audience has theoretical possibilities of interacting with the performers – sometimes so much that the division to performers and audience can be hazy, like in karaoke. Interactive media are media in which the audience must take part in the performance for it to continue, such as a computer game or hypertext.

The fourth, transcendent category is “immediate art”, art that is direct in that it is experienced as it is created and has no use for the division between performers and audience. Role-playing games are definitely immediate, but the definition can also encompass parties, communal storytelling and even improvised music jams.

An outside audience cannot understand a role-playing game, although it can seem like an interesting performance. Role-playing games take place in the present moment and are transmitted directly from person to person. This makes them immediate:

All experience is mediated – by the mechanisms of sense perception, mentation, language, etc. – & certainly all art consists of some further mediation of experience. However, mediation takes place by degrees. Some experiences (taste, smell, sexual pleasure) are less mediated than others (reading a book, looking through a telescope, listening to a record). Some media, especially “live” arts such as dance, theater, musical or bardic performances, are less mediated than others, such as TV, CDs, Virtual Reality. [...] Therefore, as artists & “cultural workers” who have no intention of giving up activity in our chosen media, we nevertheless demand of ourselves an extreme awareness of *immediacy*, as well as the mastering of some direct means of implementing this awareness as play, immediately (at once) & immediately (without mediation). (Bey 1994.)

That is to say, the interactivity of role-playing games is not relevant, but their immediacy is. I have written briefly about larp as an immediate medium in another article:

Live-action role-playing games as events lack aspects of traditional media, although characters, through which the expression happens, can be considered media. Live-action role-playing games are also bodily and all-encompassing works, in which each movement, sound, taste, smell, touch and even thought are part of the work. However, immediatism's understanding of play is even larger. Whereas free time is an emptiness that must be filled with entertainment, play is its opposite – a self-fulfilling and self-rewarding thing. Play is anarchy, while free time, entertainment and art are societal. (Pohjola 2003c)

## Role-Playing

Since there is no use saying role-playing is interactive, the definition needs to be revised. Simply taking interactivity out of the definitions, or replacing it with immediatism, would not work. According to the Meilahti Model, immersion without interaction (“alone”) is daydreaming. According to the *Dogma 99*, “larp is action, not literature” (Fatland & Wingård 2003). In a way, both are right. Immersion without action is daydreaming and can result in or be the result of a narrative.

This is where the surroundings, or the diegetic frame, come back in the picture. The role-player must immerse, or take on the roles that exist within the diegetic frame. This means that for the duration of the role-playing game, the character must exist within the diegetic frame. The character will automatically sense and be sensed by the diegetic frame. The diegetic frame can contain other characters, or it can sense and be sensed as unintelligent or inanimate surroundings. (In this case the sensory process can be simpler, like grass bending when a weight is put on it.) The diegetic frame and the character(s) can be presented physically with live-action role-playing methods, verbally with tabletop role-playing methods, or with several other methods like text, drawing, puppets, miniatures or digital avatars.

It is also conceivable to role-play in a diegetic frame that is strictly personal, that takes place inside the role-player's head. The Meilahti Model labels this daydreaming, even though the required “interaction” is there – between the character and the diegetic frame, both existing inside the player's imagination. There is also nothing stopping the same role-player from creating several different characters that interact together within the diegetic frame. This method is often used by writers and tabletop role-playing game masters:

Sometimes, when you play a character long enough, explore the character's feelings and attitudes and memories, that character becomes a “real” individual, a new role inside your head. [...] When writing a scene with many characters in drama or prose, or when gamemastering a tabletop role-playing game, the same phenomenon occurs in an exaggerated form. All the characters, or the NPCs start to live inside your head. (Pohjola 2001b)

Most likely the character's presence in the diegetic frame is not only about sensing, although it can be. Even unconscious, the character is present in the diegetic frame and

interacts with it. Of course, the role-playing game often becomes more interesting when the character's actions become more meaningful.

Theoretically, a player does not know when her character is communicating with a character played by another player and when simply with a previously created part of the diegetic frame. In larps, the players' characters usually stand out, but not always. If a character is listening to voices in a protected space in a dark room, it is impossible to know whether the voices are coming from other characters or a pre-recorded tape. For this reason, other characters are simply a part of the diegetic frame, and interaction with them is no more valuable or "real" than interaction with a computer or a tree, although often more interesting.

Considering that existing (and as a result, interaction) within the diegetic frame is a part of immersion, I define role-playing like this: *Role-playing is immediated character immersion.*

## Inter-Immersion

Pretending to believe leads to real belief. Pretending to believe you are someone else leads to immersion, to believing you are someone else. How exactly it leads there happens when the diegesis enhances this belief instead of the feeling of pretence. This is what I call inter-immersion:

"Another important difference is the relationship between immersion and interaction. For Dogmatists the interaction, what happens during the game, is "the reality of the LARP." For Turkuists, that reality exists only inside the head of each player. Of the thesis and anti-thesis can be formulated a synthesis: The reality of LARP comes from the collective experience of immersion shared and strengthened through interaction. The reality of LARP comes from inter-immersion!" (Pohjola 2001a)

Back then, I defined inter-immersion as a state achieved when one or more immersed players interact with each other and their surroundings. In the term, interaction is seen as happening between players as well as between the surroundings, in short, interaction between the character and the diegetic frame. Thus, inter-immersion can be explained without mentioning interaction. Inter-immersion is a phenomenon strengthening the identity of the character (as opposed to the identity of the player), which occurs when the player is immersed inside a believable diegesis. Inter-immersion can also help a simulating player to become immersive, and the lack of it can lead an immersive player to become simulative. The chances for inter-immersion can be enhanced by anything from good propping to exciting events.

Inter-immersion is the recursive cycle of immersion: staying in character helps the player to stay in character. Seeing other characters, acting within the diegetic frame, observing diegetic reactions, experiencing the environment, these all help in enhancing the player's immersion. (They can also be considered as tools for constructing subjective diegeses (Montola 2003)). When everything a character does enhances the believability

of the diegetic frame, and everything in the diegetic frame enhances the identity of the character (as opposed to that of the player), the player enters the positive feedback loop known as inter-immersion.

Usually beginning on the second day of multi-day larps, a player's memory starts helping inter-immersion. At that point, the memory is full of things done as the character, things pertaining to the fiction of the larp. When the character sits by idly and the mind starts to wander, it does not stumble into things outside the fiction, as it only finds memories that enhance the immersion.

As the player reaches the inter-immersive state, she starts to forget she is just pretending to believe it is all real. She acts as if she really believes the diegesis, and when everybody else does the same and reacts to each other's beliefs (instead of the pretensions), they forget they are just pretending and start to really believe.

## Temporariness

The realities of larp, the diegetic frames, are not only limited physically to be within the "objective reality", but they are temporary as well. They are called into existence at the beginning of the larp and are put back at the end. Therefore, the diegeses of a larp are temporary realities.

Characters share and do not share this problem. Characters are temporary identities that the players assume for the duration of the larp. Without a character, a player cannot access the diegesis. Yet, a typical character is a part of the player, a part of the player's identity. According to the Meilahti School, a character contains some but rarely all of the roles the player's assumed objective identity contains:

There is no need to differentiate between the roles the player assumes within the diegetic frame and the roles assumed outside of it (in fact "player" is a role as well). [...] A character is 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. (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003)

Sometimes a player participates in a larp but does not want to or is not able to play her character as written, but to form a diegesis of the larp, to participate, the player needs some diegetic roles to identify with. Juhana Pettersson comments on poorly designed larps:

In these games, the character [description] provides in-game context but little more. Often the only way to go is ignoring the character as written. But if I'm not playing the character [as written], or being myself, then who am I? In a genre game, the answer is easy, because I've acquired a set of mannerisms suitable for the style. It may not be a character [designed by the game masters], but it looks like one, if you haven't seen me play too often. (Pettersson 2003)

Pettersson has a selection of archetypal roles which allow him to play in most larps. This is true with most role-players, who default in playing one of very few characters archetypal to them if not given enough incentive to do otherwise. Typecasting often enhances these archetypes.

In this way a player can exist within the diegetic frame through small changes in her identity. The opposite can also happen; The character can exist outside the diegetic frame, in the “objective reality”, through small changes in the way reality is perceived. When the player conjures up her character’s identity and enters gaming reality, she starts to see the “objective reality” as a diegetic frame, even if not the diegetic frame indigenous to the character. In this state, which is often briefly induced subconsciously, the character will start to think of the “objective reality” in terms of the game: “If vampires exist, then that means the invasion of Iraq is an Assamite plot!” This phenomenon is what Jane McGonigal describes as gaming reality:

Elsewhere, I have described in detail the phenomenon I call “gaming reality”, in which fans of pervasive play approach real life problems such as unsolved crimes, the prevention of terrorism and political graft as if it were an immersive game. (McGonigal 2003b)

She refers to her earlier article *This is not a game*, in which she writes:

It is far from clear at this early point in the genre that the astonishing effectiveness of immersive gamers in a collective play environment can transfer to the real world as successfully as their game-play mindset. The objective impact of immersive play, we might say, has not yet caught up with the subjective changes produced by immersive aesthetics.” (McGonigal 2003a)

In short, gaming reality takes place when the roles of the character are invoked consciously or subconsciously outside the diegetic frame. Often the identities of the character and the player exist simultaneously in these situations and can even have internal dialogue.

## Making Up Rules

All games are played according to some kind of structure, typically rules (Costikyan 2002). The players agree to act in a certain way within the limits of the game and expect the others to do the same. These rules differ from the rules existing in the players’ everyday lives in the sense that they are temporary. The players start to follow the rules when the game begins, and when the game ends, they stop following the rules. If all goes well, they do not have to think about the rules or that it is just a game, because it is so interesting that they do not want to.

Ice hockey is a good example of this. Grown men skating as fast as they can to move a piece of plastic to a specific area. Seems pointless, yet it is immensely popular. This is because the players and the audience do not concentrate on the fact that it is a

game but on the reality within the game – whichever team gets the puck to the other team's goal the most times wins. Wilful suspension of disbelief makes the game feel relevant even if it is not. But when it feels relevant, it becomes relevant.

In real life, people are expected to always follow the rules, and even when they break some of them, they follow some larger rules that deal with breaking the rules. The matrix of these rules makes up our society. Most of them are arbitrary, but still necessary.

According to McGonigal's ideas about gaming reality, when a player learns a new set of rules, it is natural to want to apply it to other things than what it is intended for. The difference between live-action role-playing games and other games is that they make gaming reality work. Hockey sticks will not be of much help on a first date or in a political debate, but one can experience and rehearse both situations in a live-action role-playing game. I touched this subject in Panclou:

Shamanistic ritual is LARP applied to religion. We have characters inside our heads. New ones join when we read a good character description and play the character for a while. They are not physical people, nor are they spirits. They are individuals inside our heads. Usually, for those that the modern world considers to be sane, those individuals are not as dominant as what we consider to be our true selves. Sometimes they step up, though, and we get a glimpse of what a character of ours would do in our place. (Pohjola 2001b)

In live-action role-playing games, the game master makes up rules for the society. She can decide on a new language, new style of clothing, or change the laws entirely. She temporarily changes one set of arbitrary rules to another.

This can be compared with Hakim Bey's anarchistic concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ): In a TAZ, willing participants agree on a new set of rules that are in effect within the Zone. The Zone is independent of any outside state or law, and is supposedly dissolved as soon as it is discovered by the establishment:

The TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, *before* the State can crush it.

[...]

And because the TAZ is a microcosm of that "anarchist dream" of a free culture, I can think of no better tactic by which to work toward that goal while at the same time experiencing some of its benefits here and now. (Bey 1985)

Since live-action role-playing games are so similar to the Temporary Autonomous Zones, creating larp societies enables and empowers us to comment on real-life societies and even change them. Larpers are not doomed to play in temporary pocket realities (no matter how autonomous) inside the "objective reality", but they can change their reality for good. Identities can change and so can realities. I will elaborate on this further when I talk about the nature of diegeses.

## Learning from History

There is a pattern in the history of games that helps understand gaming reality. Modern role-playing games evolved from *Dungeons & Dragons*, which evolved from complex strategy games, which in turn evolved from simple strategy games.

There is a pattern, and a very clear one when you know where to look. Each new generation of games is less abstract. Where *Go* is about capturing and re-capturing land, *Chess* is about a war between two nations, *Chainmail* is about commanding armies in battle and *Dungeons & Dragons* is about directing a singular adventurer in a dungeon, modern role-playing games are about acting as any individuals in any setting.

Where the chessboard with its 64 squares abstractly represent a battlefield, in *Chainmail* the players use a miniaturized version of an actual battlefield. Where in *Dungeons & Dragons* the players use a dungeon to provide a very limited environment for action, in modern role-playing games the players can use any environment they want to. The games seem to become less abstract all the time.

The same development can be seen in computer games. When using the computer as a platform has more or less reached its limitations, the games will move off that platform (such as pervasive reality games) or will start to include that platform (such as games where the computer is just the character's interface to the game world, like in *Alpha Centauri* or *In Memoriam*).

It is "gaming reality" taking place in reverse. Players accept the rules and reality of the game, and subsequently start to see their own reality in the same terms. Perceiving reality as a game and game as reality is very difficult when the game is so abstract that game actions are simply not applicable to real-life situations. As an episode of *Futurama* phrased it: "Not all things can be solved with chess, Deep Blue, and one day you will learn that."

It is entirely possible, even easy, to see "objective reality" as a role-playing game. Making the games more complex and less abstract has made gaming reality stronger and more fulfilling. The next logical step is to lose the barrier separating games and reality once and for all.

## Diegesis: A Temporary Reality

As pretended belief becomes real belief, subjective diegesis turns into subjective reality. This is only temporary, however, as after the larp, a participant first stops pretending to believe and then stops believing. The subjective reality returns close to what it was before, and the diegetic frame returns from being reality to being fiction again.

In role-playing games, the diegesis is temporarily the participant's reality and the character her identity. Role-playing provides a way for a participant to lose some of her roles and to adopt new ones.

Larps provide their participants with a chance to be independent of their everyday identity and the social expectations reflected on that identity. Similarly, larps provide their participants with a chance to be independent of their everyday reality by providing methods for creating other realities inside and on top of the assumed objective reality.

As larps grow less abstract and more complex, they start to resemble not just fictitious realities, but also possible realities. They become Temporary Autonomous Zones in which the participants willingly live a different life. If the same happens with characters, they will start to resemble not just a fictitious identity but also a possible identity – perhaps like the player living in the TAZ.

I propose that all that is necessary for a Temporary Autonomous Zone to be created is for the participants to take on a *Temporary Autonomous Identity*. And what, indeed, are characters if not Temporary Autonomous Identities?

Characters and diegetic frames are temporary in the sense that they are not present all the time. However, gaming reality makes the lines between reality and game, character and player, fuzzier all the time. Though Bey says a TAZ must have a clear beginning and a clear end, I say we can carry the TAI (and the TAZ) with us all the time in our heads. More to the point, once we have immersed in the characters, we cannot get rid of them. Instead, we always have a Temporary Autonomous Identity with us, and that will set us free.

## Conclusion

In role-playing games, the subjective diegeses are created through immersed interpretation. Pretending to believe that this diegesis is “real” becomes inter-immersion and hence enhances immersion. Inter-immersion and the diegesis together with the Pinocchio Effect make diegesis turn into objective reality, i.e. reality that is the game becomes temporarily real for the player that is the character.

Perceiving the subjective diegesis of a role-playing game as reality makes it increasingly easy to perceive reality as a subjective diegesis of a role-playing game. Reality becomes gaming reality. It is possible to act in the “objective reality” as one would in a larp.

Since it is possible to perceive reality as a larp, it is also possible to apply methods of larp creation into molding reality. Thus Temporary Autonomous Zones can be created, i.e. we can larp that our reality is different. Our character for a TAZ is a Temporary Autonomous Identity, one that lives with different rules than we are expected to.

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# The Character Interpretation

## The Process Before the Immersion and the Game

*The interpretation of the character is the most common way of creating a clear and sharp image on one's character in role-playing games. Until this has been done, it is impossible to think of costumes, mannerisms or actions for a character. This image also determines to a great extent how much you will get from your character during the game.*

Usually players form a mental image of a character by interpreting a character document. A character document is usually a story<sup>1</sup> or a character sheet<sup>2</sup>, but it can be also a video, a piece of fine art, a list of facts, a collection of music – anything that conveys the necessary information, really. However, this article only concentrates on the most typical formats of the document: a story and a character sheet.

The interpretation of a character starts before a player has even seen a character document. It begins when a player sees the cover of a role-playing book or an announcement for a larp. An interpretation and a reading of a character are two different things, although an interpretation often also contains a reading. Two players could make very similar interpretations of a character based on two very different readings of the character document and vice versa. When a player merely reads a character document, she knows what it says – but when she interprets it, she is prepared to continue the character, because she learns *why* the document says what it says.

In this article I try to show that the medium of a character has great relevance when a player interprets a character. It is extremely unlikely that the character the player uncovers from the character document ends up being the one she plays in the game.

If the player merely understands what a character document says, things can be problematic, as he may be unable to explain the character's motivations and reasoning. For example, if the character document states that the character is egoistic, the player has no problem understanding what this means. But egoists act in different ways, so the character's way of acting egoistically is left unclear. It is impossible to explain every detail in a character document, and obviously the player has to improvise, but the actual process of constructing a character from the character document is less obvious.

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<sup>1</sup> A short story, an article, a report, a psychological analysis etc.

<sup>2</sup> The format of a character sheet depends on the rule system. A typical character sheet contains fields for the information (weight, age, merits, dark secrets, strength et cetera) about character.

Every role-player has interpreted a character. Now I will attempt to make that process transparent.

## A Definition of the Character

A character is not only a thing on a paper. A character is born from a character document if, and only if, it is interpreted as a character. To become a character is more than just being a part of a story. For example, it is doubtful that reading a short newscast about the governor of Kigali will lead the reader to perceive him as a character. Most people in newscasts and in our lives just float by us – we see them, but we don't understand them.

A character is something that we understand in a certain way. It is still a very blurred concept and I don't even want to define it accurately or objectively, but I don't want to speak of every character-like part in stories, in news or in our life as characters either. A character is something of which we can ask, "what would she do in a certain situation?"

If that question is not voiced, we are dealing with an individual part of a story or a person, not a character. Particularly, if this question has not been voiced about a role-playing character, we have not yet fully understood the character. In role-playing games, one doesn't need to know the answer to every possible question about the character – it is enough that one knows everything that is relevant. The rest can be made up.

A character is *not* just a static, unchangeable collection of facts. Every character is an individual, and most characters are also persons – but not vice versa. Only some individuals and persons are also characters.

This light definition is not the only way to conceptualise a character, or even a common one. In many games, the characters are defined as persons who act in certain way in the game world, or who have a role in a game (session). In some games the character is defined as a protagonist, an imaginary person, similar to those found in fiction<sup>3</sup>, and in many role-playing games the character is simply the hero of a story and so on. The problem with all of these definitions is the same: Very little can be said about a character in the role-playing games using them.

### The Media of the Character

How do the interpretations of Neo in *The Matrix* (1999) and Vladimir Lenin in real history differ, and what relevance does that difference have? Though the facts about Neo are very different from the facts about Lenin, we might want to argue that the deep structure of the two characters is the same. Both of them can be interpreted as characters. Still, the seeming similarity can prove deceptive in a deeper analysis. The most significant questions to be asked here why and how certain facts about their lives are told.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> see e.g. *Vampire: The Masquerade Introductory Kit*.

The facts about Neo mostly concern fighting – only a few facts about his personal history are revealed. Essentially, Neo seems to be an active, aggressive and violent character. Could Lenin be acting like Neo or Neo acting like Lenin? Would Lenin be running on walls and shooting an Uzi? What would possess Neo to give a speech on the theory of the dialectic or the unfairness of capitalism? Imagine a Matrix-like movie with Lenin as the hero. If that Lenin-Matrix were our only source of information about Lenin, the character of Lenin would probably be radically different. We perceive Neo visually as a set of movements, while Lenin consists of a set of historical facts related to a certain ideology.

Thus, the medium has great influence on the character. The conclusion is basically the same as Marshall McLuhan's in his book *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (1964).

Different media are used to convey different messages. In television, there is no space for a deep, analytic discussion just as books are unable to create the collective feeling radio is capable of. (McLuhan 1964.)

When we normally talk of a medium in the context of role-playing games, the medium can be understood as the format of the meaningful content. We can judge whether the format of meaningful content fits a character. For example, if we converted Lenin to the *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* rule system<sup>5</sup>, the meaningful content given by the character sheet would be misleading. The skills and attributes in *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* reflect Lenin's abilities quite poorly. Of course, we could use other media to convey additional meaningful content regarding the character.

However, in some cases the medium of a character is not a format of a meaningful content. For example, music certainly has one kind of meaningful content, as it usually tries to express something. Songs in particular have some meaning. It's hard to say how music actually describes a character, even though it's easy to agree that it carries meanings, because the format is unclear.

The medium of a character is a tool or a technology<sup>6</sup>, that makes it possible to know something about the character, but at the same time the medium itself as a tool or as a technology determines the content of the character.<sup>7</sup>

It is impossible to express what Lenin is within a Matrix-like medium just as it is impossible to describe Neo's character the way we are shown the meaningful content of Lenin. We should pay some attention to how we interpret and create our characters. As

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<sup>4</sup> What I'm going to do here is exactly the same as Husserl and Wittgenstein did in epistemology in the 20th-century. They argued that the classical definition of knowledge being true, justified belief (Plato, Theaetetus) fails – it isn't relevant to ask what knowledge is; but how something becomes knowledge (Wittgenstein 1953, Husserl 1907). In this article I argue that it isn't very relevant to ask what a character is. It is more important to ask how a character becomes what she is.

<sup>5</sup> See Mike Pondsmith et al.: *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0.* Talsorian games.

<sup>6</sup> Here technology is understood as a system or system of a system, not as only a machine or an apparatus. More on the concept from Airaksinen (2003) and Heidegger (1964).

every medium does not fit every character, it is important to think which medium does justice to the character we are creating.

### Relevant Facets of a Character

Petri Lankoski and Satu Heliö have argued that one way of creating good characters is to sketch their physical, social and psychological aspects.<sup>8</sup> The three-dimensional model they have developed is a very good tool for a game master, and their thoughts on conflict are likewise useful. On a practical level, there is no major conflict between their work and my view. Martin Enghoff (2003) has also written about this subject on a basic level, though I find Lankoski and Heliö (2002, 2003) both clearer and bolder.

While I agree that Lankoski and Heliö's list is quite practical, I'm afraid that the form of the list has been caused by the rigidity of our thinking. For example, our present day Western mindset may prove to be anachronistic when studying historical characters. Europeans often perceive people through the three aspects that Lankoski and Heliö write about – it is not a coincidence that that the three-dimensional model contains just those aspects, Lankoski and Heliö both being European.

As the mind-body dualism is a very old phenomenon in the European way of thought, it is not unexpected that the physical and mental aspects of our existence have been divided in the three-dimensional model. In some Asian cultures the distinction is not as strict. The three-dimensional model also further divides the mental aspect to the psychological and the social aspects. This distinction, caused by individualism, is also a fairly new phenomenon. In ancient Greece, man didn't see himself as separate from society. Plato wrote that the good and the justice in a state are exactly the same as the good and the justice in men.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, if we write a character by describing her physical, social or psychological attributes, we often end up with a character thinking the way we do.

On the other hand, it has been argued that we can't really play a character drastically different from ourselves. Many players seem to understand a character the same way they understand themselves. They don't even seriously try to play characters that are very different from them. For them, describing a character in the same format as they would describe themselves is not limiting. Personally, I think we shouldn't be afraid

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<sup>7</sup> See McLuhan (1964) for a more general definition. The fact the medium determines the content does not mean that there couldn't be other, more significant causes that influence them even more. Determinism means only that everything has a cause; that nothing is really random. If something determines a state of being, there can be another thing that neutralises the first one and said state never exists. There probably isn't any individual cause, but rather a set of causes (see Airaksinen 2003 for meaning of determinism).

<sup>8</sup> Heliö & Lankoski 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman 2003. The three-dimensional model of characters was not originally invented by Lankoski and Heliö, though they have developed it. I refer to the three-dimensional model of a character as it has been presented in their research. Some of their research focuses on computer games, but most of their arguments also fit role-playing games.

<sup>9</sup> Plato, *The Republic*.

to play different characters, and that in order to do so, we must not limit ourselves to only the most familiar descriptive methods and the easiest ways to interpret characters.

## The Paradox of Interpretation

If the character is very different from the player, how does the player understand the facts about the character and the character's way of conceptualising the world? If the character is written from the player's point of view, how does the player grasp the character's way of thinking? This is the paradox of interpretation.

This is a general paradox, not limited to role-playing. We face the same problem when we try to find out who our fellow man really is. When we say, "Anton acted really egoistically", we are only guessing at his motivations. The proposition is merely our way of conceptualising his behaviour. Anton may have the reasons we have postulated, but he can also have a set of perfectly altruistic reasons that we are oblivious to. So it is possible that Anton had actually acted really altruistically.

There are two parts in the interpretation that cannot be properly separated from each other. In texts, there are both hints on how to interpret the text and facts we can find from the text. Both can be implicit or explicit. Furthermore, some facts are meant to be more relevant than others. Even ordinary texts (articles, novels, newscasts etc.) can be problematic, despite the analytical tools we have for understanding them.

It's not uncommon for role-players to underestimate the problems that can occur during the interpretation of a character document. In the theatre directors helps actors find good interpretations of their characters in order to create marvellous roles. In role-playing games the players usually have to interpret their characters all by themselves. Are role-players generally so much more talented than educated actors, since most of them think they don't need a director to help them to find a good interpretation?

In theatre, one can discuss the interpretation of an actor or the interpretation of a director. Role-playing and theatre are two different forms of expression, but does that explain why an interpretation of a player or a game master sounds odd to most role-players? In role-playing the meaning of interpretation has often been almost forgotten. Sometimes it seems a game master even expects that a player to play the character exactly as written. This doesn't seem feasible even in theory.

### Trying to Resolve the Paradox

The problem is that it is impossible to strictly separate the medium from the content. Still, we should be able to do this if we want to know what a character essentially is, not how she is expressed in this format.

If the character the player is interpreting is similar enough to the player, the hermeneutic circle<sup>10</sup> is powerful enough a tool to help separate the medium from the message to a sufficient degree: the player reads the character once, corrects her

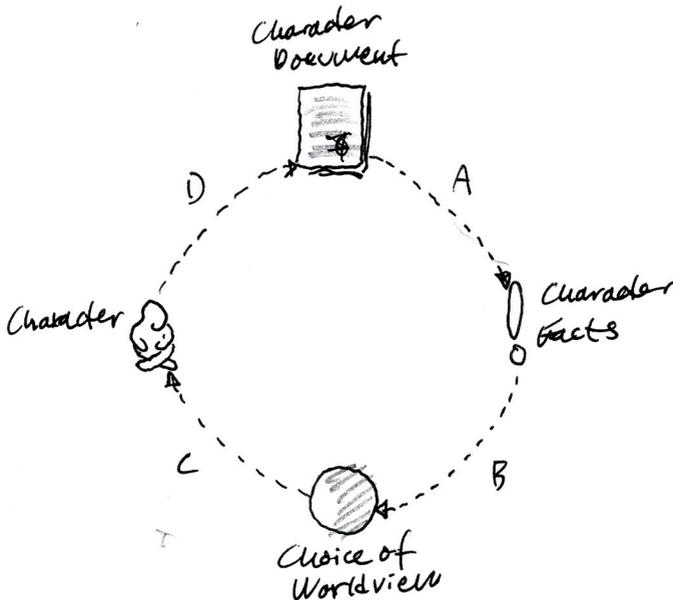
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<sup>10</sup> See Gadamer 1956 for hermeneutic circle.

background suppositions and rereads the text. This is repeated until the message is clear.

However, in a broader context the hermeneutic circle can only be used to construct a different history and set of abilities for oneself. It is not good enough if we really want to interpret the character, as it does nothing to reveal the underlying causes or structures. The character's world view does not emerge from the circle. Immediately after any view of the world has been postulated, the reasons behind the facts about the character become visible. If we notice that some other world view fits the character better, we can always change it (see ill. 1).

Illustration 1: The Process of Character Interpretation



- A A player reads the character and discovers facts about her.
- B If the player already postulated a world view, she tests whether the facts fit the world view. Otherwise the player tries to find a world view that is most suitable for the character.
- C A player postulates a world view, resulting in the character.
- D After a player had postulated a world view she should be able to explain why the character is described as she is. If she cannot explain that, she has to choose another world view.

I find it easier to postulate the world view first and then read the character document. I can then correct the world view and read it again. Many players read the character

first and then postulate the world view. The starting point of the process has very little significance.

I argue that it is possible to get more out of role-playing games and characters if one first creates the frame of interpretation, the world view and only then the content. For example, it is certainly true that when interpreting a Catholic monk, one should be familiar with Christianity and monkhood. Generally speaking, one has to know the context of the character – otherwise, she will be misinterpreted. However, this is only the most basic level of this method. The information about Christianity and monks is generalised, but there is no reason why the character should be exactly like the monks in books.

This idea is very similar to Hegel's and Fichte's dialectics. First we interpret a character without context (thesis or I), then we interpret the character with the context (antithesis or non-I). At the next phase, we combine thesis and antithesis, and the result is a synthesis or restricted I: A new interpretation that combines the good sides of both interpretations. In the case of the Catholic monk, the synthesis combines the features that are typical to only the character and the meaning of the community the monk lives in. The synthesis cannot be achieved through the hermeneutic circle, because the synthesis is more than the sum of its parts.

## Black Boxes and Glass Boxes

Characters made through different kinds of media are distinct. In role-playing games characters are typically glass boxes, which is a very rare feature among characters in any media. In most media, a character is a black box. We know how she has acted and what she has said, but we can only guess at why she did so. One does not have direct access to the character's true motivations.

A role-playing character is a glass box, meaning that it is not always known what the character has actually said or how she has acted. What is known is *why* she says something or acts in a certain way. In role-playing games one has direct access to the character's opinions, beliefs and desires, but not to what has really happened. A common source of conflict is that different characters have a very different image of what has happened in the diegetic history<sup>11</sup>.

To a large extent, the medium dictates what is known about a character. If the character is a black box, the facts are known as they are, but the reason behind them is unclear. If the character is a glass box, we know the reason to any possible fact about the character, but we lack the facts themselves.

When role-playing a character, only acts of the mind can be truly certain, but when interpreting a character, the variety of possible certain things increase exponentially. Most players I know interpret their characters in a dogmatic manner: what has been said in the character document has to be true. For them, the thought of

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<sup>11</sup> See also Montola 2003.

the game master lying about their character is impossible. That is why they don't read a character critically.

A character can be known either from an internal or external point of view, so the knowledge (and interpretation) of a character has a direction. Usually we interpret simultaneously both towards and outwards, but the dominating direction is clear.

For example, a character document might state that "Anton is an egoist" and "Anton helped an old lady, although he did not benefit from that personally." If we interpret Anton as a black box, we probably read that Anton actually wasn't a complete egoist – sometimes he acts altruistically or, perhaps, on some barely conscious level he believes that he will benefit by helping the old lady. If there is a conflict between the facts, a compromise will be made. However the fact what Anton is, is external, viewed from the outside, the direction of the interpretation is toward Anton from the external facts.

If we interpret Anton as a glass box, no compromises need to be made. Instead, we try to find something that could be the reason, why the narrator states that Anton is an egoist but still acts altruistically sometimes. A possible reason to the contradiction is the moral code Anton follows. Whatever it is, somehow we find an internal fact that explains why Anton is described as he is. Thus, the direction of the interpretation is outward from Anton to the description or the external facts.

A player doesn't role-play by facts but by reasons. In role-playing, there is no use for the character's past thoughts, unless she thinks them again and again. A player has to know how a character thinks.

### Incoherence between Media

A character as a document is a black box. A character in a story is usually interpreted inwards, even if the narrator of the story describes the character's thoughts and feelings. The motivations behind feelings and thoughts are usually unimportant in stories. In a role-playing game, great importance is placed on how and why the character's thoughts, feelings and motivations are born. Therefore, it is vital to see beyond the description, no matter how it has been written. A character document states only what a character is, whereas in a game one needs to know how a character became what she now is.

Of course, the distinction between the black box and the glass box is not a binary system, but a continuum between the two extremes.

For example, when one interprets a fairy tale, one certainly postulates a cause behind the description "the king was old and very wise". One may conclude that the king was very wise because he was old and hence very experienced.

In role-playing games the manner in which the king is wise has great importance. It is impossible to play a wise king who acts stupidly in the game all the time. In a fairy tale this is possible – we could have a story about the wise king's very bad day.

The problem with this is that when one gets a character, one usually interprets it as a black box, even if one plays the character as a glass box. I argue that this incoherence between the described character and the actualised character is the reason why many fail to immerse, or "get into" character.

In the beginning of the article I demonstrated how the medium of the character has great significance. I showed that a set of historical facts doesn't do justice to Neo, and that Matrix-Lenin is an odd way to describe Lenin. Here we have a similar problem: can a written document do justice to a played character or vice versa?

## Conclusion

In role-playing games one tries to combine very different kinds of media, usually written documents and constructed selves and world views, or in Wittgenstein's terms, forms of life.<sup>12</sup> This article is meant to show that the problem exists rather than to solve it.

I have tried to give some tools to help conceptualise the problem and hopefully some theoretical methods to aid in the interpretation of the character.

I have tried to show the meaning of a character as a medium. I have concentrated on the character interpretation and sketched the paradox of interpretation. One cannot know only by reading a character document which part of it is the actual content, and which is just a characteristic of the medium. Last, in closing, I scratched the surface of the special quality of characters in role-playing games – in them, one understands a character from an internal point of view, whereas in most other media a character is understood from an external point of view.

I am indebted to Juho Itkonen, as he has used the methods of improvisation and theatre while I have used my own analytical methods of approaching character creation and interpretation. With this article I hope to raise discussion on the meaning of character interpretation, and on how we should interpret a character.

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# On the Transmutation of Educational Role-Play

## A Critical Reframing to the Role-Play in Order to Meet the Educational Demands

*The use of educational role-play is slowly starting to regain its former foothold in Denmark. Role-play is becoming a less uncommon phenomenon within the Danish educational system, and has for some time been used within the field of supplementary education. Its use has, however, met mistrust and lack of acknowledgment, making implementation an uphill battle. The aim of this article is to contribute to public acceptance of using role-play as a supplementary educational tool. Creating a solid theoretical foundation for the practice is seen as the means to achieve this.*

This article is motivated by the diverse reactions to my previous article *Learning by Fiction* (Henriksen 2003), as some critics have claimed that we should beware theoretical exploration without supplying practice with proper tools. This attitude towards theoretical exploration raises the spectre of practice removing itself from theoretical work simply because of theoretical work no longer being read. In order to counter this risk, this article seeks to point out the learning potential to be exploited by practice, but without abandoning the necessary critical perspective.

In order to avoid pointless justification of its use, the article seeks to ask *how* role-play can be used as an educational tool, instead of merely asking *if*. This focus is used to further the acceptance of educational role-play by qualifying practice. The combination of role-play and learning is analysed from a social psychological perspective, focusing on the meeting between the individual and the structure, and to the way our experience of the world is shaped. The learning potential of role-play is explored and discussed on the basis of three presented models of role-play, which are analysed based on relevant theories of learning.

This article presents a comprehensive theoretical framework, not in order to tire the reader, but in order to equip the practitioner with a selection of analytic tools for educational role-play. It is sometimes said that there is nothing as practical as a good theory. That may be true, but on the other hand nothing is as impractical as too much theory. Because of the extent of this framework, the article is divided into two sections:

a theoretical section and an applied section, giving the reader an opportunity to focus his effort.

## Theoretical Perspectives

This article does not seek to provide the reader with a comprehensive understanding of role-play as a whole; instead it presents three views relevant to educational role-play, in order to apply a learning perspective to the role-play phenomenon. As the focus for the educational use of role-play is participant progress at a specific topic and level, rather than entertainment, the focus is somewhat different from the usual perspective (for other understandings of the role-play phenomenon, see Yardley-Matwiejczuk 1997, Sørensen 2001, Gade & al. 2003).

Within the hobbyist use of role-play, a sharp distinction is often made between tabletop and larp. Within the educational use, rather than make this distinction, a hybrid form of the two is used (Molbech 2001). This is due to the purpose of use, as it is not driven by a desire for a medium or an activity, but used in order to meet a developmental need in the best possible way, making the need determine the means, and not vice versa. My personal use of educational role-play though, resembles larp as in many ways it is, as I argue below, easier for the non-skilled role-player to participate in. Usually a combination is used, with the proverbial table as the primary frame, but including bodily factors (see Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003) as appropriate.

The applied insight is illustrated by defining role-play as: "...a medium where a person, through immersion into a role and the world of this role, is given the opportunity to participate in, and interact with the contents of this world, and its participants." (Henriksen 2002, 54; 2003, 110). By defining role-play as such, the perspective maintains the focus of the Turku school on immersion (Pohjola 2000), combining it with the creation of a fictional world from *Dogme 99* (Fatland & Wingård 1999), as well as the element of interaction from both. A special emphasis is put on Dogme's focus on placing a fictional world at the participants' disposal. Finally, the definition is inspired by, but contrasts with, Meilahti (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2002), in order to remove the game master from play, thereby leaving the interaction to take place between the participants and the objects of the fictional frame. The simplicity of this definition is sought in order to make role-play a clearly recognisable phenomenon for the analysis below.

Another central part of the insight is the element of fiction, mentioned by Dogme 99, but understood in the terms of Ryan (1991). According to Ryan, fiction is not to be seen as a contrast with reality, as such a perspective would categorise fictional discourse together with, for example, lies and faults. Fiction is characterised by its explicit distinction from reality, compared to the latter, as they attempt to illustrate the real world. Accepting the fictional contract (see Ryan 1991, Molbech 2001) implies accepting an interpretation, based on an invalidated discourse, which may seem less reasonable than those usually applied. However, a central part of educational use of role-play

implies that only the perspectives of this fictional contract are accepted for a limited period of time.

### Fictional and Structural Recentering

The structural recentering model examines the relation, and thereby the experience and action created, of the meeting between the individual and the given structure. The process of recentering refers to moving one's perception from being in the centre of one situation, to take the centre in another situation.

The way we experience the world is a complex matter, but is also a relevant issue, as we use the element of fiction in role-play to alter this experience. Through the development of academic methods of thought in the western world, our perception of objects has evolved from the medieval lack of distinction between the object and the subjective experience of it, rendering whatever is experienced as truthful (Sørensen 1997), to a modern separation of subjective experience from the object itself. This attempt at separation had some luck, but it also led to the realisation that objective access to an object cannot be achieved, due to the subject perceiving it. From the social constructivist point of view, the perspectives used to interpret our perception are weighted heavier than the object itself (e.g. Burr 1995). It is interesting that the stories surrounding an object are more influential on our experience than the object itself. This perspective is interesting, as the role-play is created as a story, surrounding an object.

From this perspective, the fictional element becomes a social construction, resting on an invalidated discourse, which is accepted for a limited period of time, in order to shape the experience of our perception (Henriksen 2002). The role-play must therefore be able to create a social discourse to shape our experience of the object.

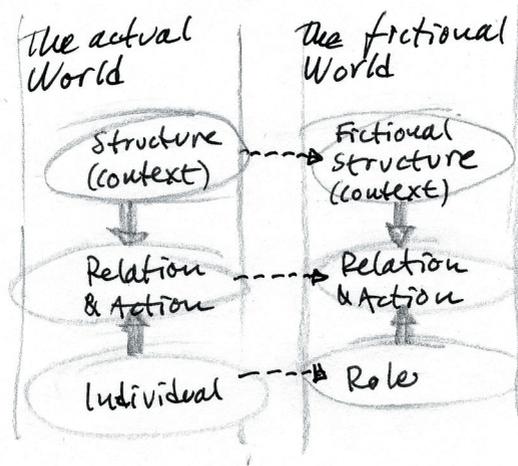
The creation of a social discourse is equally a theoretically complex matter, but can be grasped through a minimalist approach. Bruno Latour's (1993) theory on actant networks is such an attempt to go beyond the modern distinction between subject and object, in order to acknowledge them both as legitimate sources for experience-shaping. Any relationship which influences a given practice can be seen as an actant. The actants are organised in a network of connections – the more influential the actant, the stronger and more numerous the connections to the remainder of the network. The experience of the network is determined by the influence of every actant, weighted according to the network, and is easily compared to the processing of a neural network.

A relevant contribution to this approach comes from Sørensen (1997), who uses the theory to examine the foundation of an action. In order to do this, she divides actants into three loosely overlapping categories: personal, local and decentral actants, in order to focus our attention on where to look for influential actants.

To create a discourse for perception shaping, the game designer must be able to identify and alter relevant actants and connections for creating a new experience for the participant. In order to do this, the role-play must generate a fictional recentering for the participant, thereby creating a new relationship between the individual and the structure.

The structural recentering model attempts to illustrate this process, using the social psychological framework in order to demonstrate three levels of attention: a structural, an individual, and a relation level.

Illustration 1: The Structural Recentering Model



The model illustrates the process of fictional recentering (see Ryan 1991) on three separate levels, enabling the role-play to place its participant in a given structure, in a given role, and in a given relation between the two (Henriksen 2000; 2002). The recentering of each level is illustrated with an example from the educational role-play *Magasinspillet*, designed as a supplement for teaching business economics in Danish high schools (see Henriksen 2002; 2003, Henriksen & Andersen 2003).

*Structural* recentering creates the context for the role-play by altering the influential decentral actants. This level of attention includes the sociological, anthropological and historical perspectives (and eventually time, technology and laws of nature etc.). The structural recentering enables the role-play to place its participant in a specific context. It is important to notice that the other participants are part of this structure, as they reproduce the game discourse to the individual participant.

Contextual recentering changes the experience of the contextual frame, consisting of the classroom, interior, discourses and such, from being part of a high school classroom, to being experienced as a simulated version of business – simulated with the discourses of this simulated business.

*Individual* recentering includes those conditions under which the participant participates by altering the influential personal actants. This level includes the

psychological perspective, and enables the role-play to place its participant in the role-play with a specific perspective, which usually varies among participants.

The individual recentering changes the experience of the participant from being a student in a business economics learning process, to being an employee, working in a department in the specific business.

*Relation* recentering includes the relation between the individual and the context, and alters the influential local actants. This level includes the social psychological perspective, and cannot be clearly separated from either the structural or individual levels. The relative recentering enables the role-play to create conflict, and thereby action, by creating a specific relation between the individual and the contextual level.

The relation recentering process changes the relation from being a student in a learning context, surrounded by other students, to being part of a working process within the business, surrounded by colleagues.

The role-play uses three agents to facilitate this fictional recentering: actualisation, attraction and interactivity. The agents are interrelated, and therefore able to enhance the effect of each other.

The *actualisation* agent seeks to make the *content* of the role-play seem immediate to the participant. This process is relevant in the process of making the participant experience the content as relevant, and the problems significant.

The attractivity agent seeks to make the role-play *interesting* to participate in. This process is meant to motivate the participant by offering an interesting social position within the role-play. This agent draws on Vygotsky's (1978) theory about frustrated child's play based on compensation. The role-play can therefore motivate participation by offering an interesting or attractive role, which is not normally available to the participant.

The process of interactivity refers to the role-play's capacity to respond to the participant's interpretation and actions, thereby letting the participant influence the course of the game. To make the game interactive, interpretive degrees of freedom are implemented (a contrast to the degree of linearity), and the participant allowed to choose between different interpretations and actions.

As mentioned above, the effects of the agents are interrelated, and are used to facilitate the participant's fictional recentering and character identification (the concept of character is dealt with below).

### The Interpretative Model

To participate in a role-play, it is necessary to accept the fictional contract, and thereby the discourses used by the game to shape the participant's experience. The participant

must therefore ignore certain personal aspects (secondary fiction), and temporarily replace them with the fictional discourses of the game (primary fiction).

The interactive element arises from the interpretative degrees of freedom, which the participant is offered to choose between and react upon. This opportunity to interpret can be seen as a consequence of the separation of subject from object. Role-play is a game of communication, and the foremost consequence of the separation of the object and the surrounding discourse, is Luhmann's distinction between information and symbol (see e.g. Moe 1994).

Whereas the symbol is used to communicate complexity and to speed up the process, the information delivers accurate knowledge, which is used to interpret the symbol. The discourse for seeing the symbol-based object is, in other words, embedded in the information, describing how to frame the symbol (note that the conceptual framework of Luhmann is somewhat different from Peirce's – a relevant note for further pursuit of this topic (see Lopenen & Montola 2004)). This ongoing interpretation creates an uncertainty in the communication, which must be handled in order to prevent 'dogs barking' – a non-communication between two one-way communicators. The most common way to handle this contingency is by creating what Luhmann (1984) saw as a social system in which a shared set of information focii is used to handle the world's vast complexity. In creating a role-play, a social system is created, in which the participants communicate on the basis of a shared set of signs for interpretation of objects. This discourse must be accepted in order to participate – you must see the fiction to be able to be a part of it. For further discussion of the perception of the object, see Lopenen & Montola (2004).

By looking at the structural recentering model, three interpretative processes are revealed: the objects of the structure, the role, and the relation between the two, presented in the interpretative model below.

On the left side of the model, the relations between participant, character and role are displayed. In the right side, the information (discourse) and symbol (object) are communicated to the center of the model, where the action of the role-play takes place. The elements are understood as follows.

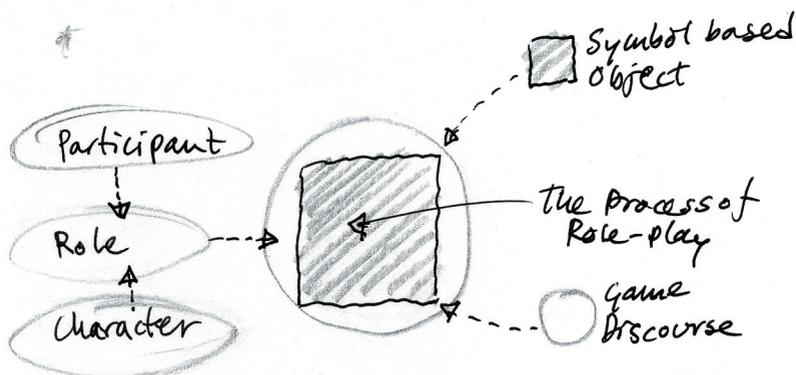
### **The Individual Perspective**

The *participant* is the person who enters the role-play, and all the knowledge and perspectives he brings with himself.

The *character* contains the perspectives on which the participation is to take place. The fictive perspectives of the character are of both primary and secondary nature, in order to remove and replace relevant perspectives from the participant. In order to facilitate the fictional recentering, the character only consists of those perspectives which are to be altered.

The *role* is the participant's interpretation of the character, and therefore a combination of the two.

## Illustration 2: The Interpretative Model



It is important to notice that the player does not play the character, but the role, and that the role is an interpretation of the character, seen from the participant's perspective. An important factor in the character's influence on the role is the participant's ability to role-play. The novice player will only be able to integrate a few elements, whereas an experienced player will be able to cope with a more extensive proposition (Henriksen 1999). The interpretation is furthermore influenced by the participant's motivation, and by the participant's ability to integrate his own perspectives with those of the character, a perspective seen as somewhat different from that of Hakkarainen & Stenros (2003).

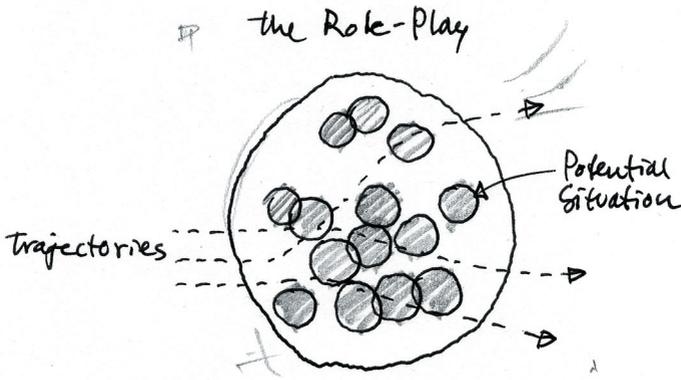
### Creating Structure

The *symbol* refers accordingly to Luhmann's framework, to the object involved in the role-play, the one which is subject to interpretation. Physical circumstances, and the other participants of the game, are symbolic, and are to be interpreted on the basis of the discourse in order to make the content of the game meaningful.

The *sign* contains the discourse, from which the object of the game is to be understood. The sign-based communication is not to be questioned, as it contains the key to understanding the fictional frame of the game. Through interpretation of the objects of the game, the game is placed in a frame, which becomes meaningful to the roles. Adding to the amount of physical objects increases the degree of bodylines, which pushes the game towards becoming a larp (Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2002).

The third interpretative process arises when the interpreted character enters the interpreted frame of the game, and plays the game by interpreting the game from the perspective of the role. This is often too much for the role-playing novices who participate in developmental role-play. The use must therefore maintain a balance, including enough objects to make the fiction seem immediate, but at the same time avoiding overburdening the participant's cognitive capacity.

## Illustration 2: The Circle Model



### The Circle Model

After having placed the participant in the fictional framework, and having equipped him with a perspective, it is time to take a look at the action taking place within the frame.

The action taking place in a role-play is far too complex to be grasped from a single perspective. As the interpretative model showed, a role-play is capable of producing a unique experience for each participant, as the observing perspective is a combination of both personal and character perspectives. This results in a unique experience for each participant, even if they shared the same perception. But that is not the case, especially not in a larp. Due to the degrees of freedom, the role is able to choose between different object experiences, and between different situations in the role-play. Rather than seeing the role-play as a linear theatre, it is seen as a field of opportunities, containing a number of potential situations, determined by the degrees of freedom and the content of the fictional recentering. Enabling the participant to choose between different situations, and being able to react upon the choice, is what makes the role-play interactive. Action then becomes a product of the individual experience, and the choices made on the basis of this. The personal experience of a role-play is best illustrated as a personal trajectory across the context of the role-play. This personal trajectory creates potential situations in which other participants eventually take part. This view on role-play is illustrated as the circle model.

The model directs our attention to two interesting areas: the factors determining the outcome of the personal trajectory, and more striking, the number of unrealised situations. The factors for determining the personal trajectory were thoroughly introduced above, but it is relevant to bear in mind that a minor change in the actant-network can cause dramatic changes to the action within the game, e.g. by replacing a participant. The number of unused situations is a direct consequence, or function, of the degrees of freedom. Due to the element of interactivity, the participant is not dragged through every single possible situation, but is allowed to choose the most relevant or

interesting ones. The model resembles Montola's (2004) chaos model, which thoroughly explores the issue of shaping the course of the game through the use of attractors. See also Hansen (2003) on the issue of trajectories and starting points.

The ability of the role-play to create participation in specific situations, and allow the participant to experiment within the frame, is interesting from the learning perspective presented below.

## Learning From a Theoretical Perspective

The question is now, *how* this phenomenon can aid a learning process. If we merely asked *if* role-play could be used as an educational tool, it would not take long to find sufficient argument for a positive answer, and thereby legitimate its use. But that would probably harm the process of achieving recognition more than it would help, a point that I will return to below. As role-play was widely used as an educational tool in Denmark during the 1960s and 70s (see Høyrup 1975, Haslebo & Nielsen 1998), there is sufficient argument for assuming that it can be helpful, in order to turn the focus towards asking how.

In order to explore the learning potential of role-play, the exploration must be founded in an understanding of the learning phenomenon capable of containing the described phenomenon. A remarkable feature of role-play is that the participant must explore the embedded points. This point makes it sensible to explore the potential of role-play from an inductive-orientated perspective on learning. The learning perspective is therefore based accordingly.

From this part of the theoretical field, Lave's (1997) theory on practice-orientated learning processes seems to be of particular interest, as it manages to grasp role-play as a participation in a simulated practice (Henriksen 2000). One of the key points in Lave's theory is that even though learning is often seen as something that happens in a school, learning takes place elsewhere, and we evolve according to the activities we participate in during our everyday life. In order to explore role-play as a practice of learning from which the participant can evolve accordingly, perspectives from Lave's perspective on learning will be presented as a part of the theoretical foundation.

### Lave's Perspectives on Learning

According to Lave, learning consists of three elements, a direction for the development, or a *teleos*, a *practice* for the process, and those *pedagogical principles through which we assume that learning takes place*. These perspectives will be used as the basis for our understanding of the learning potential of role-play.

#### Teleos

The concept of teleos is used to direct the learning process, not necessarily towards a goal, but in a direction for change (Lave 1997). This perspective is based upon Lewin's

idea that facilitating a learning process which is unrelated to an external orientation is a pure waste of the participant's time and effort (Lewin, in Høyrup 1975). The concept of teleos can be used to ask what purpose the developmental process is to serve, what it tries to facilitate. What are we actually trying to help the participant to achieve?

Looking at the developmental and educational process from a sociological point of view, the main aim is to qualify individual participation and contribution to contemporary society (Mørch 1995). This overall objective implies developing a participation in contemporary society, based on a comprehensive use of the individual's personal gallery in a broad variety of social situations. A more concrete aim is provided by Dreier (1997), who sees development as a means to achieve *participation in a certain practice, to evolve one's personal participation in the current practice, and to evolve the current practice*. This developmental process is, according to Ileris (2000), founded in the development of relevant professional and personal qualifications. Looking at the developmental process from the presented view on the formation of our experience, learning becomes a matter of evolving the discourse that we apply to the object. The concept of learning is therefore seen as "The acquisition of perspectives, developing the subject's experience of an object, [to] such [a] degree, that it qualifies the subject's ability to interact with the object" (Henriksen 2002, 54; 2003, 111). This perspective can be illustrated as a maths problem, in which the teacher equips the student with a relevant perspective, enabling the student to interact with the problem.

Seeing learning as the development of a new perspective which opens new means for interacting with the object seems to meet both the above criteria of Lewin and Dreier, and is furthermore interesting, as it shares the perspective focus with the role-play phenomenon.

### **Practice**

Lave uses the attention to practice to discuss the relationship between the subject and the social practice's reproduction of the world surrounding it (Lave 1997). This directs our attention to a distinction and relation between learning practice and professional practice. School teaching is the most widespread form of education in Denmark, whereas only a small part of the formal education is done through learning in professional practice. The point is to draw a distinction between whether learning takes place in the practice of utilisation, or takes place in a practice separated from this.

To meet Lewin's criteria, the separated learning process must therefore aim at providing the participant with perspectives that reach beyond the learning practice. To do this, the process must help the participant to use the knowledge across contexts, in order to make the perspectives available in the utilisation practice. The point here is that the learning transfer from one context to another is not automatic, but must be facilitated in order to have effect (Lave 1988). This process is referred to as *decontextualisation*. Another important point is that practice compensates for eventual consequences of the learning process. Most learning contexts manage to protect the pupil or student (and

the rest of the world) from the negative consequences of the learning process through mediation (see e.g. Lave & Wenger 1991).

### **The Pedagogical Principles**

Hidden under Lave's tricky way of putting it, there is an interesting point. Lave is not saying that we do not know how learning takes place, but rather that we cannot merely assume that learning takes place just because we teach something, or because a given perspective is available in practice. Nor can we, based on Luhmann's concept of contingency, assume that the learning process is automatically orientated according to teleos, or that the perspectives are available to be used in practice.

This makes the organisation and preparation of a learning process a tricky job. Lave's major point here is to stress that the learning process, or the process of decontextualisation, does not happen automatically, but must be facilitated and actively implemented into the learning programme. To further these processes, Høyrup (1975) recommends, on the basis of Lewin, to look upon the student as a whole. Instead of merely focussing on transferring knowledge, motivational factors and the integration of perspectives must be seen as a key part of the process.

In order to make the participant take part in the learning process, it is necessary to motivate him. This can be done in several ways, either by goal-orientation towards an attractive participation, by a disconfirmation of the participant's perceived self-efficacy, or by the mere fun of the activities involved in the process. Using disconfirmation usually requires a lot of skill, but creates a lasting motivation grounded in the participant. The motivation is, however, the means essential to make the participant take part in the process.

Perspective integration is seen as an important part of making a perspective usable, and in order to make it usable across contexts. This integrative perspective acknowledges the participant's precious knowledge as one of the most important factors in order to make the learning process work properly.

Focused exercises are crafted to make a perspective fit a specific problem – the discourse is sufficient to cover the object. These exercises are widely used to aid the learning process, but they often produce modularised knowledge which is only available when confronted with the specific problem (Lave 1988). In order to facilitate cross-contextual usage, the new (and eventually effective) perspective must be trained in a manner which challenges the participant's existing perspective. The integrating exercise equips the participant with a discourse too short to cover the object, calling for the existing knowledge, in order to make the participant test both perspectives on the object. If successful, this method creates cognitive bindings between the old and new perspectives, facilitating associations with the new knowledge when the existing knowledge is triggered.

Integrative exercises are hard to use, but are especially interesting when trying to facilitate *theory-practice transfers* and *relearning processes*. Several factors influence this integrative process, as the knowledge must be compatible with the participant's

existing knowledge. If the perspective is rejected, the existing knowledge will be cemented, and if the perspective is unrelated to previous knowledge, the benefit becomes modularised.

## **Role-Play from the Perspective of Learning**

In order to analyse how role-play can contribute to a learning process, the perspectives on learning which have been presented are applied to the three presented models on role-play, after which the motivational issues are addressed. As each model both points out potential contributions and critical drawbacks, the potential is presented first, followed by the critical issues for each model.

### **The Structural Recentering Model Revisited**

Seeing the model from a learning perspective, role-play seems relevant for creating a simulated practice for a learning process. The fictional recentering is interesting from a learning perspective, as it enables a specific perspective to be used to analyse and interact with a relevant problem or object. Using the structural recentering model to establish a fictional contract has great potential for placing a participant in a situation, relevant on all three levels of recentering. Fictional recentering can thereby be used to place a participant under circumstances in a practice not normally available to him, using fiction to create simulated practice (Henriksen 2000).

Looking at the role-play phenomenon from a practice-oriented learning perspective (see Lave 1997), role-play can be used as a ground for an inductively-based learning process. According to this perspective, we evolve according to the activities we take part in, and as a role-play enables us to interact with a specific problem from a specific perspective, the role-play potentially enables us to evolve accordingly. Accepting this premise, fictional recentering can be used in determining the content of the learning practice by setting up a meeting between perspective and object.

The relation to a teleos is implemented through perspective and object recentering: if we want to create a practice-orientated learning process about business economics, business economic perspectives and problems are implemented in the fictional recentering. As the learning process takes part in a fictional world (Ryan 1991), negative consequences of the learning process can be contained within, thereby creating a mediating effect.

### **Critical Perspectives Raised by the Model**

The model equally raises numerous problems associated with the use of fictional recentering as grounds for a learning process. A central problem connected to the use of a practice-oriented learning process is the problem of using the benefit in a cross-contextual manner. The perspectives learned in practice are, according to Lave, closely

related to the specific object of the practice (Henriksen 2002). This limits the validity of the acquired perspectives to the learning practice.

Turning our attention towards the nature of learning practice, it is evident that the true object for the process is situated elsewhere: when the learning process ends, the simulated practice is terminated, rendering useless whatever perspectives are only associated with the fictional world. Decontextualising initiatives are therefore essential for the facilitated perspectives, in order to make them available to problems outside the learning practice. The demand for facilitation of cross-contextual learning through decontextualising has two areas of attention: as mentioned above, the facilitated perspectives must be available to problem-solving outside the learning practice, but they must also be of relevance to the world they seek to interact with. As the learning process seeks to qualify the participant's ability to interact with its surroundings, the learning process must facilitate perspectives which are valid and applicable to the world outside the role-play.

This problem is mainly associated with the fact that role-play only simulates practice. Like any social system, the simulation has a focus on certain acknowledged perspectives and is indifferent to others (Moe 1994). The fictional simulation of the role-play is therefore a simplification of the reality it attempts to represent for the participant to explore. This simplified image is often distorted further by the use of game mechanics, used to make the game playable. Even though the distorted image is based in fiction, and thereby explicit about the aberration from the practice it attempts to simulate, the use of an invalid image as grounds for a learning process constitutes a difficult problem, which is addressed below.

### The Interpretative Model Revisited

By changing perspective from fictional recentering to seeing role-play from the interpretative view, new perspectives on how role-play can aid the learning process evolve.

Seen from the interpretation view, participation in a role-play allows for working with a specific perspective by applying it to a prepared problem. If the perspective is valid for the object, the role-play becomes a room for training the application of that specific perspective. The positive feedback produced by the successful application of a perspective to a problem furthers the establishment of a cognitive association between the two. This application aids the participant in the process of transforming static, modularised knowledge into action, thereby enabling the participant to use the acquired perspective. The experience of the role-play can also be used to frame a shared experience of a problem, serving as a foundation for further theoretical exploration of a topic.

In practice-oriented thinking, role-play seems beneficial for both facilitating the association, and to make the application of the perspective routine. Of particular interest is the possibility of using role-play as an integrating exercise, thereby offering an alternative to the extensive use of focused exercises. Whereas a skilled role-player

might be able to adopt his character's perspective in place of his own, the typical participant in an educational role-play is a novice, and thereby more likely to involve his own perspectives in the formation of the role. Issuing a 'short' discourse, an insufficient perspective for interacting with the object, can help this (issuing the participant with a short character has other advantages, e.g. limiting the stress on the participant's cognitive capacity).

By using role-play as an integrative exercise, the participant is asked to use a combination of his own and his character's perspectives. This can be used to facilitate a learning process in two ways: through the cognitive association of the new and existing perspectives for interacting with the particular problem, and for facilitating a reflective process on the perspective itself.

A learning process facilitating a combination of existing perspectives with those of the character, allows the participant to test the validity of the two (or more) perspectives' ability to interact meaningfully with the object. This allows for a new discourse to be created, either by an assimilative or accommodative integration (see e.g. Eysenck & Keane 1995), and for the process of ownership to take place. By achieving ownership of the acquired perspective, the associative relation between the problem and the perspective is enhanced, increasing the tendency to use the perspective outside the learning practice.

Another benefit demonstrated is the facilitation of a reflection on the applied perspectives, thereby putting an extra loop in the learning process (Argyris, in Illeris 2000). This is interesting from an overall perspective, as it encourages an ongoing reflection on the effectiveness of applied perspectives, which in contemporary society is a sought-after qualification (Illeris 2000).

The interpretative model seems to suggest an area for further investigation: the multi-layer interpretative process. As mentioned above, the role is based on the participant's interpretation of the character, but a similar process seems to be embedded in the other end of the process. This seems useful for directing the participant's attention towards the content, proportions and effect of applied discourse, but I currently have no empirical grounds for stating such a claim. This is, as mentioned, an area for further exploration.

### **Critical Perspectives Raised by the Model**

Even though the benefits pointed out by the interpretative model are of great value, they can easily be spoiled if we remain ignorant of the risks and limitations which the model also raises.

The model points at the risk of the participant losing perspective. Though the above might seem like praising the ability of role-play to host the integrating exercise, the benefit is available at a risk. By letting the participant's personal perspectives influence the participation, a risk of letting the participant's own perspectives become a dominant part of the role becomes present (similar to using off-game perspectives). By becoming dominated by the off-game perspective, the participation loses its

orientation towards the planned teleos, as it is hard to host a meeting between an object and an absent perspective. A learning process might be facilitated anyhow, but as the orientation to teleos disappears, the process a waste of time. The most likely result of an off-track learning process is a cementation of the off-game perspective, regardless of which perspective is the better.

Another relevant disadvantage related to the interpretative process is based on Luhmann's contribution on how our experience is constructed, namely the issue of the double contingency. In order to communicate our experience, we use symbols speeding up the process, opening our communication to the risk of misinterpretation (see Moe 1994). Seeing role-play as an interpretative process, encouraging our participant to draw upon his own perspectives during the game, creates a risk, not of misinterpretation, but of the participant interpreting *differently*, thereby creating a different experience than planned. The teleos of the learning process is therefore put at risk, stressing the need for implementing cues in the game that facilitates the planned experience for the participant.

This risk of letting the learning process lose its orientation to teleos is seen as the main reason why it is a rarely used activity within the Danish educational system. A similar popularity is met within the field of supplementary training, mainly due to the risk of feeling exposed on one's personal perspectives.

### The Circle Model Revisited

Seeing the learning potential of the phenomenon illustrated by the circle model, our attention turns to the beneficial complexity that a role-play is able to represent, but also to the embedded mechanisms which can be used for facilitation.

As previously pointed out, the use of simulation as an educative tool implies a simplification of the presented object, creating a demand for methods capable of simulating a complex field of practice. Looking at the circle model, the interrelated situations form a complex pattern, enabling the role-play to represent a broad illustration of a complex, socially distributed problem. This enables the role-play, through proper game design, to simulate complex social situations. These complex situations can be achieved through a minimalist approach to the game design by creating multiple layers in the game, thereby making the role-play relevant from a broad learning perspective.

The ability to function as a simulation is based upon the ongoing feedback that the participant receives as reaction to his interpretation and action. Using this feedback in creating a new interpretation, resulting in new action, creates the interaction of the game, and presents an opportunity for implementing rational consequences to the participant's actions. By choosing an interpretation and acting upon it, the participant affects the course of the personal trajectory, determining the enactment of the potential situations of the game. This feedback system, consisting of implemented consequences to the participant's decisions, allows for experimentation on perspectives.

An important point of the model is that the trajectories of participation go beyond the game, indicating that the participation has a beginning and an end, but that the effect

must reach beyond the game. As teleos is oriented beyond the game, it is important that the game leaves an impression on the participating mind in order to reach beyond the game context. Another point demonstrated by the model is that the participant must actively participate in choosing between interpretations and actions, thereby actively forming a trajectory across the potential situations of the game. This active exploration forms the foundation of an explorative learning process, enabling the participant to pursue the particular situations which seem the most relevant to his participation. This potential is created by increasing the degrees of freedom (and as a direct consequence lowering the degree of linearity). This directs our attention towards the mechanisms embedded in role-play, which can be used for creating a learning process.

According to the circle model, the participant's trajectory across several different situations, enacted as the participant sees fit, points out the potential for creating an explorative-orientated practice of learning. This process is grounded in the presence of relevant feedback, in order to let the participant experience a consequence of his experimental action. Using short discourse allows for the reflective process on the effectiveness of perspectives to take place, using the fiction as a mediator to create space for this reflective process.

The explorative view encourages the participant to take responsibility for the learning process, but is also an acknowledgement of the participant's ability to intelligently use and benefit from the learning arrangement. Inside the role-play, a number of possible situations are enacted by the participant's action. This can, as previously mentioned, be used as a practice-oriented learning process by allowing situations to host a meeting between a relevant object and perspective. The educational role of the role-play must therefore be seen as a laboratory, in which the participant is allowed to experiment with the effectiveness of different perspectives on an object, owing to its ability to produce an immediate feedback on a given combination. This gives role-play an opportunity to create a mutual learning process, enabling students to learn from each other, instead of being locked in the teacher-pupil relation (see Larsson 2004). Mutually-based learning processes are not very common, as students, during their learning process, lack the ability to give qualified feedback on each others' solutions (Nissen 1996). Methods for creating mutual learning processes are much sought after, which points at a potential role for role-play within the educational system, due to its ability to create feedback according to a specific teleos.

### **Critical Perspectives Raised by the Model**

In the same manner as the previous models, the circle model points our attention to both beneficial potential and to noticeable problems that must be considered.

When viewed from a critical perspective, the sheer quantity of unrealised situations is striking. These situations are unrealised because of the interactive element of the game, in whereby the participant only experiences a few of the potential situations. As the choice of what situations the participant chooses to realise is founded in the role's interpretation of the game object, a serious reliability issue of the method appears. How

can we be certain that the situations enacted are sufficient to form a learning process, and be oriented towards teleos?

Another reliability issue arises due to player-player conflict used in order to create action within the game. Giving different perspectives to the participants, and thereby creating different trajectories across the situations of the game, different experiences are facilitated. Due to a democratic perspective on learning, the third vow of chastity from Dogme 99 becomes relevant, as it states, “No character shall only be a supportive part” (Fatland & Wingård 1999, 20). Each participant must be offered an equally beneficial trajectory in the game. This reliability issue worsens as the degree of bodiliness increases; as the role-play resembles a larp, the trajectories become physically separated, thereby limiting the participant’s choice of situations. He can no longer take part in all the enacted situations of the game, a point which Elge Larsson (personal discussion) sees as one of the simulative advantages of larp, as it produces a more valid presentation of a social practice. The reliability issues on this matter are considered below.

Another problem is the enacting of potential situations that are harmful to the game, to the teleos orientation, or to the integration of the participant into contemporary society. The use of educational role-play must therefore be attentive to whatever points are created, and which are not. Ensuring that specific relevant situations are enacted by the participant during the game place considerable demands on the game design.

### Motivational Issues

A tempting reason to use role-play in an educational manner is attempting to use the motivational effect of play in motivating the activities of the learning process. Using role-play with an educational intent, the practitioner must bear in mind that the average participant is not a role-player, but an ordinary person, who does not share role-players’ interests. The aim is not to entertain, but to educate, meaning that the role-play should be interesting and beneficial rather than fun, as participation is driven by factors other than the desire to role-play.

As mentioned previously, role-play makes use of three agents in order to facilitate the fictional recentering. These three factors are interesting points for considering the motivational issues; actualisation of the content facilitates the fictional recentering by making the content seem more immediate to the participant. The harder it gets to do the recentering, the more demand for participant motivation. Using a banana as a handgun could easily have an inhibiting effect, as the participation would require two sets of discourses: one for turning the banana into a representation of a handgun, another for it to become effectual. This could be eased by e.g. using a cardboard dummy instead (see Lopenen & Montola 2004 for further reflection on the actualisation process). The attractivity process refers to the process of creating motivation by making participation interesting. This process of attractivity can either be rooted personally (emotionally, intellectually) or socially, by letting the successful handling of the game object lead to a satisfaction of the participant’s need for e.g. social recognition.

The use of personal deconfirmation is intimately related to the attractivity agent, as it deconfirms the participant's self-efficacy within the specific area. By leaving the participant without sufficient (existing) perspective to successfully handle the object, the deconfirmation drives the participant into further exploration, in order to find the proper means (see Lewin, in Høyrup 1975). This is a risky process, which should not be used without proper caution. The interactivity agent is also interesting from the motivational perspective, as the reactive feedback both works as a motivator and is supportive to the process of actualisation.

### **Critical Perspectives on the Motivational Issue**

There are some motivational problems connected to the use of educational role-play which must be addressed for proper use.

Using role-play as an educational tool demands, like all inductively-based learning processes, active participation, requiring the participant to be active, take the initiative, and think for himself. This motivation is not a priori present, as the tool is oriented towards non-role-players. It is tempting to facilitate participation by making the game fun, but that would be a bad idea if role-play were to be acknowledged as an educational tool. It is a common misunderstanding that learning should be fun – the learning process should rather put pressure on the pupil in order to build up his stamina against frustration. If the pupil does not possess the stamina to cope with his frustration when problem-solving gets tough, he will not be able to take on harder problems. There is no reason in educating someone to quit as soon as something stops being fun to do (see Illeris 2000; Henriksen 2002)

The educational use of role-play is hampered within the field of supplementary training, due to a widespread anxiety about exhibiting one's own limitations. A similar situation inhibits use within the high school, as the students here attempt to rid themselves of the childish image associated with play, and the slightly geeky image connected with the phenomenon of role-play (e.g. Fatland & Wingård 1999).

Only by establishing a proper mediation of consequences within a secure frame, and by focusing on avoiding an exhibition of personal limitations, can role-play be used within these two areas. The practitioner should therefore be aware of any resistance towards the use of role-play. The establishment of motivation is a central challenge within these fields, which can be achieved through thorough use of the attractivity agent.

## **The Difficult Problems**

Part of the main critique concerns the issues of validity and reliability of the method, which are seen as the difficult problems for practice to handle. The validity issue concerns the usability and correctness of the facilitated perspectives; the reliability issue whether we can expect the learning process to take place at all.

## Validity Issues

The main concern of validity is about the orientation towards teleos; can role-play be used to facilitate knowledge and perspectives of relevance outside the learning practice, and can this benefit become available outside the game context?

Learning how to manipulate one's way around a problem, or simply moving the problem by basing the interaction on a cardboard gun might not be the most appropriate benefit. It might be valid entertainment in the game, but not in the real world. Though problematic, due to the use of the simplifying simulation, the role-play must be able to develop perspectives valid in the outside world. If this is not achieved, the role played by the medium is reduced to mere entertainment.

This also stresses the need for the actual presence of an educational payload, of something to learn inside the role-play (such as perspectives on business economics), and the acknowledgement of the fact that just because something is present in a practice, the participant does not necessarily learn any of it. Seeing role-play from the perspective of the interpretative model, limitations are set on what topics can be effectively learned through role-play. Due to the interpretative element, the method seems awful for teaching hard knowledge (information) to the participant (Henriksen 2003), but relevant in presenting complex problems, such as social or humanistic problems.

The other part of the validity issue is the cross-contextual use of the benefit. As previously mentioned, the benefit of the inductively-based learning process must be decontextualised, in order to make it transferable and consciously applicable to other contexts. As the non-decontextualised perspectives only have limited effect in other contexts, actions must be taken in order to decontextualise the benefit.

An important tool for both qualifying the use, and facilitating the cross-contextual use of the facilitated perspectives, is by using the role-play as a supplementary in a 1-2-1 model, beginning with a theoretical exploration, followed by the practical experiences facilitated through role-play, and then returning to the theoretical exploration of the points and shared experience of the role-play. By giving the participant theoretical knowledge about the problem and the problem context prior to the role-play, the participation is qualified. By returning to the classroom in order to address the points of the role-play afterwards, an important step towards decontextualisation is taken. By addressing the points from a theoretical perspective, cross-contextual use is facilitated; by addressing them in (inductive) practice, a thorough understanding of the perspective applied to a specific object is facilitated. Such use of a combination of inductive and deductive learning processes has proved successful within the Danish health sector (see Akre & Ludvigsen 1999). In spite of the use of the 1-2-1 model, as education cannot build on relations alone, firm points are needed as well, making the validity issues important to consider in the game design.

## Reliability Issues

The main concern about reliability is the ability to attain a developmental goal; in order to start in the fifth year, the pupil must first achieve the goals of the previous year. This

system requires the availability of stable methods, enabling the teacher to plan and meet criteria for the learning process. The use of role-play must accept the evaluation criteria for this system, in order to become a supplementary part of it.

From the point of view of the critical issues of the circle model, role-play generally shows very little reliability, due to interactive and interpretative perspectives, allowing the participant to enact only the perspectives relevant to him. This issue can to a certain degree be countered by the use of a good game design and game mechanics, which unfortunately puts the validity at risk. It can be argued that this is the case for almost any learning process, which deprives the teacher of the ability to directly and consistently dictate the perspective of the participant (Davydov 1989), but without undermining the need for addressing the issue of reliability. This problem arises both as a part of the role-creating process, in the interpretation of the object, and during the interaction between participants, as this alters the course of the action. By increasing the degree of linearity at the expense of the degree of freedom, the reliability of the method is improved, pointing out a need for balancing the two.

Another critical part of the issue is the use of conflict in order to construct action in the role-play. By placing the participants in conflicting perspectives, different stimuli are offered to the different perspectives, creating grounds for different experiences and different benefits. This presents a problem within the established educational system, as the sheer number of students forces the system to focus collectively, especially during primary education.

The issue of different perspectives can in some respects be turned into an advantage to use, as it holds a potential for a subsequent shared reflection on different views on a case or object, thereby facilitating a reflective stance to the difference of perspectives. On further reflection on balancing the degree of linearity vs. the degrees of freedom, see Montola (2004).

### Other Problems to be Addressed

The validity and reliability issues both represent significant problems in using role-play in order to facilitate a specific benefit for the participant, but there are other problems associated with use as well.

The general attitude in Denmark towards role-play is clouded by certain unfortunate events, which occurred between 1960 and 1980. Long before role-play became a means of entertainment it was a widely used educational tool, especially within the popular T-training and sensitivity training (see Høytrup 1975). These programmes were designed in order to evolve the participant, especially towards a higher level of social, cooperative, motivational, attentional and emotional behaviour. At the beginning of the 1960s the practice was well founded theoretically, but as the popularity of its use increased, the practice outran the theoretical exploration, leaving the practice undermined in the 1970s. The popularity had created a large demand for the practice, encouraging a very diversely skilled group to undertake it. Slowly the practice deteriorated, modularising itself from the theoretical foundation. Though Høytrup (in

1972 and 1975) expressed the need for the licensing of practitioners, the warning was ignored until 1980, when a group of sceptical journalists forced the balloon to collapse (Haslebo & Nielsen 1998). The market died, and the acknowledgement of role-play as an educational tool died with it.

This widespread understanding and attitude towards the educational use of role-play causes the work of getting the practice acknowledged as a serious educational tool to be an uphill effort. The project is somewhat hindered, as part of the current Danish practice refuses to consider the theoretical foundation in order to quality their practice, thereby reproducing the conditions for the unfortunate events of the 1960s to 70s.

One major obstacle to the availability of educational role-play the historic events, another is the difference of interests in the projects initiated to design such material. There is an increased interest in initiating design projects, but unfortunately only a few of them seem to survive beyond the first customer, often failing to publish any material useful to others. Observing such initiatives during the last five years, a major problem seems to be a lack of project co-ordination. This conclusion is based on the tendency of such initiatives to die out after using up all the resources of the project group on the initial project, leaving the group without the strength to go any further.

Another tendency is the lack of clarity between project partners about the goal of the project; a commonly seen example of this is the widespread joint-venture between a social or educational institution and a group of role-players. While the institution merely seeks something that can serve as a break from their regular activities, and which doesn't reach further than the initiating project, the role-player often sees this as an opportunity for both career and big business, leaving the partners with quite incompatible goals. Some attention to the diversity of goals might save practice some trouble, and thereby free resources for a reflective attitude towards the use of role-play.

Though including non-role-players in the design process is sometimes problematic, the validity of the role-play requires the design team to include both people skilled in role-play and people educated in the craft the teleos is orientated towards.

## Concluding Remarks

As mentioned earlier, role-play is an awful method for delivering hard knowledge (information) to the participant, but if properly used, it seems relevant in order to reflect on the complexity of social or humanistic practice, and thus has potential for facilitating learning processes within these fields. But it is necessary to stress that role-play is a medium, and that any medium must contain a payload in order to have an educational effect.

Educational role-play seems to have potential of great relevance to both the established educational system, and to supplementary training not in order to replace the current approach, but in order to supplement it by making the learned perspectives easier to use outside school. The method also holds potential for the theoretical

exploration of a topic, as role-play provides the participants with a shared example for the process. Practice is advised to deal with the fact that the participant is a novice, through the use of a minimalist approach to the game design, prioritising the maximum immediacy of the delivery of content to the participant.

However, in order to meet this potentially great demand for educational role-play, the practice is advised to ground its use theoretically, both in order to benefit both practice, as well as to achieve general acknowledgement for the medium.

While an ignorant attitude towards the complications associated with the educational use of role-play might turn out hazardous to both the benefit facilitated and to acknowledgement for the medium, a reflective stance not only improves the potential of creating a successful learning programme, it also points out areas requiring attention, allowing the practice to develop the effectiveness of the medium. The difficult problems are not to be ignored.

During this analysis, I have applied a few aspects of one major theory about learning, supplemented by a handful of other perspectives on the phenomenon of role-play. The value of this application is obvious, but it indicates that there is still much to be done in order to create a comprehensive understanding of the educational use of role-play.

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# Deconstructing Larp Analysis

## Or, “Let’s Recognize a Bias Where There Is One”

*The last few years have seen a marked increase in both general role-playing and specific larp analysis. The major problem, as this provocation will show you, is no longer in the quantity or skill of willing analysts, but in their limited fields of study. Personal issues, most commonly represented by whether or not an analysis follows a theoretical or a utilitarian template, further complicate the situation.*

**D**espite the situation being the product of a long-term evolution, I have chosen most of my examples from the 2003 book *As Larp Grows Up* due to its easy accessibility online. It also serves as a demonstration on what is supposedly most up-to-date research of the subject. Furthermore, it symbolizes my (very subjective) opinion that currently practically all valuable larp analysis of any kind is done within, or at least in tight connection to, the Nordic larp scene.<sup>1</sup> Some of my footnotes have been left intentionally vague due to the fact that the articles they refer to must be analysed in their entirety, and thus the results I refer to cannot be pointed out by textual samples. I strongly suggest re-reading them with a critical eye before making any comments about the validity of this deconstruction.

Welcome to the quagmire.

### First, the Feet. Agenda.

Even a quick glance at the best-known larp-applicable theories and “theories” such as the *Threefold Model* displays a phenomenon common to low-quality science: the interference of personal agendas on objectivity. While it’s quite easy to point at several examples that recognize this problem and deal with it, it is also clearly observable that those are practically all “manifestoes for improvement” or “vows of chastity” concerning their creator’s own work, not scientific studies or attempts at objective analysis. They are representations of what their writers want larps – or at least their own larps – to be. And, as a result, too limited to be considered as phenomenologically explanatory.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Readers desiring a cultural comparison should have a look at Young (ed.), *The Book of Larp*. (Interactivities Ink Ltd 2003). It exemplarily displays that while Nordic-centred larp literature currently concentrates on issues of “what” and “why”, the North American scene is (still) very much tied to the issue of “how”.

When one does go for actual analysis, it is invariably driven by an agenda. The analyst intentionally creates either a theoretical model or a utilitarian one, only rarely mixing those two together. The end result is thus of very limited use, being either a descriptive hypothesis with no recommended applications or a bunch of helpful hints with no real information content to back it up<sup>2</sup> Only the general context therefore makes the results usable, not any innate quality of the studies themselves.

It can be argued that creating theories for their own sake is a valuable contribution, in this context pure academic speculation is actually harmful to the subject at hand. Likewise, while a “how-to” guide does provide occasional observable changes (called “improvements” but not necessarily qualifiable as such) to games, without a concept-bound frame of interpretation it is impossible to convey the real value of those changes.

## Knees In. Vorverständnis.

A far more insidious danger is created by unscientific presumptions.<sup>4</sup> The findings of larp analysts correspond alarmingly well with what they themselves claim they set out to find.<sup>5</sup> This partially correlates with the selection of methods. It is nevertheless primarily a product of the researcher’s own attitude towards larp and larping as a phenomenon, made possible by the diversity of game participants and the unmeasurability of their game experiences. The same can be said of all role-playing studies, though.

An analyst interested in immersion is likelier to observe factors that result in an immersionism-supportive conclusion.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, one seeking correlation with theatrical expression has a higher probability of finding it. At the very least, they will both find indicators interpretable as supporting their initial assumptions. Given the nature of the subject and variables like the immersion/simulation split, the same indicators can even be presumed to support mutually exclusive viewpoints.

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<sup>2</sup> A clear exception to this is the Meilahti model, which presents analytic observations on the phenomenon of larp but is not actual analysis in itself. As an application of available data it is a far superior work to most similar manifestoes. It fails on the “isolation” criterion, though, due to drawing most arguments from the works of the authors themselves or their close associates.

<sup>3</sup> For an example of pure-form theory see Gade, 2003. For an example of essentially contextual item application see Salomonsen, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> I’ve borrowed the German word “Vorverständnis” (literally “pre-understanding”) which Biblical scholars use to describe this problem from hermeneutic theory, as the phenomenon at hand is essentially the same. The difference with an agenda or a pre-existing theory later supported by finding suitable facts is that Vorverständnis is a primarily subconscious element, an obstruction the researcher is not herself aware of.

<sup>5</sup> For example, in *The Two Faces of Immersion* (in Panclou, issue 7, 2003) Montola categorically states that “[The character] is the lens through which the player reflects the fictional situation, and a safeguard protecting the player from the diegetic framework”, then proceeds to essentially prove that very point as key in Montola, 2003 while seemingly analyzing interaction. Note that the Panclou article in question has been written far earlier than its publication date would suggest.

<sup>6</sup> Best realized by referencing anything Mike Pohjola has written.

The problem gets complicated further by the *Vorverständnis* containing fixed elements, significant by negation-oriented expectations such as “X is a bad thing” or “Y doesn’t exist” and/or blanket statements like “games of type X are better”.<sup>7</sup> By introducing such factors into the equation the analyst completely disrupts the validity of her work, making its use solely dependant on the adaptability of any suggestions it contains.

Recognizing one’s own *Vorverständnis* is much harder than it initially seems. It is not a singular factor that can be eliminated, but a set of varying dispositions complicated by personal gaming preferences. For example, a typical Nordic *Vorverständnis* includes the view on whether a player is an immersionist or a simulationist, and a feeling of value based on that assumption. It is possible to at least partially eliminate pre-understanding by public trend analysis, which is presumably one of the key purposes of this entire book.

## Waist Deep. Scientific Background.

The fragmentation of the field, as stated above, is connected to the forms of analysis used. This is a direct result of the analysts being either non-paid volunteers applying their own areas of expertise to the subject, or, very rarely, professional academics using larp-study as material for their own projects. Either way, this results in a very limited view of the concept of larp, bound by the requirements and limitations of the chosen methodology.<sup>8</sup> In the case of project-oriented research, it also locks the results very firmly to another pre-existing subject, such as media or drama studies.

The positive side of this effect is that professionals well versed in the techniques they are using study larps and larping. Unfortunately it also renders their findings practically unusable to most other larp researchers, let alone the layman public. Some well-explained exceptions do of course exist, but even those are more tied to the material handled, not the intent of the researcher.<sup>9</sup> This, in my opinion, is the real key to the current semi-futility of all larp research, a question I will return to below.

A secondary benefit that must be noted is that this native-field approach occasionally raises external awareness of larp analysis, bringing in new analytic talent by showing that in a given context (such as media studies) game analysis can be considered valid scientific research.

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<sup>7</sup> This is commonly observable in the analysis of persons responsible for larp manifestoes or guides (my own works included). By semantics-based ideology categorization, a text explaining an aspect of role-playing using descriptive language is a “theory”, a text using normative language a “manifesto”, a text using absolute language a “model” and a text using hortative language a “guide”. Each of these categories can be the result of either an agenda, *Vorverständnis* or – typically – both.

<sup>8</sup> A phenomenon one notices easily by simply looking at the academic credits of the writers of this book and comparing them to their articles’ information content.

<sup>9</sup> Andreasen, 2003 is an excellent example. While representing the “pure-form theory” template, it has been constructed in an easily interpretable form even though no clear applications are given in it.

## Up to the Neck. Isolation.

Understandably not satisfied with just the limits created by their background, larp analysts end up gathering in small cliques of like-minded people. Being outside such a cell results in one's research being more or less ignored by that group. This is not due to academic snubbing or social one-upmanship, but rather a simple case of information not reaching its intended target audience. Furthermore, without those interpersonal relations to explain one's views even a received message gets easily distorted.<sup>10</sup>

This has led to a degenerative state where it's normal practice to completely ignore larp theories that one is not personally connected to. Even the works of one's close associates more often than not get a polite nod, nothing more.<sup>11</sup> The sole exception are the so-called "classics", which are – correspondingly – almost mandatory to reference.

This is a practice that would be completely anathema to any self-respecting field of academia or hard science, but in larp studies it has become nearly normative. The phrase "recent trends in larp research" has sadly become synonymous with "*my* most recent ideas".

Unlike the other targets of criticism here, this problem has actually been addressed to a limited degree. Recent years have seen a marked effort to create a universal system of terminology all larp researchers could use. At the same time, by affixing key words with a limited meaning the analytic community has restricted their use.<sup>12</sup> The end results of such progression remain to be seen.

## Drowning. Gleeful Abandonment.

Compounded together, these isolated minor problems produce a bigger handicap: A gap has formed between research and application. Not only within the research itself, but in how the findings get treated. As the ignorance and impracticality increase step by step (the way I state above), the products themselves fall by the wayside. A theory becomes "valid" by getting publicized and then ignored, not by any process of actual verification.

The best one can hope for after creating a theory and finding corresponding evidence to support it (typically in this order) is to get a few critical responses from friends, possibly even a handful of postings on some supposedly analytical list or forum. But that is the utmost limit.

In direct opposition to normal sciences, no outside test-runs are made. Theories remain personal pets of their owners, eventually resulting in manifestoes about a "school

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<sup>10</sup> As displayed most prominently in Petter Bøckman's Dictionary at the end of *As Larp Grows Up*.

<sup>11</sup> Montola, 2003 is an excellent example of this practice. It creates an appearance of continuity while actually staying isolated.

of thought". But what are these, essentially? Not theories seeking a holistic view of the hobby/lifestyle/medium/art form. They are, intents aside, purely trade marks. Regardless of original intent, they, and the theories behind them, degenerate into customer advice on what one can expect from a specified group of game designers.

Any suggestions to the contrary meet with exceptional amounts of resistance, formulated into value-statements equating "you're simply wrong, and I don't want to waste my time on your bad idea" or, at best, into "that's just not *my* design style". For analysis, this is catastrophic. We have several decades' worth of published research (with a few exceptions, most of it from within the last couple of years, though), and the only things that get taken into general game design account are *direct* improvement hints paraphrased from (mis)understanding that research, and a couple of convenient pieces of jargon.

## Lifelines?

I will give no corrective assistance, just a few possibly helpful suggestions. The only real way out is by determined avoidance of the pitfalls I have listed above. Avoidance. Because as soon as one yields to one of these dangers, the slow descent into complete loss of functionality inevitably begins.

A possible start to a better direction might be the willingness of game writers and organizers to utilize the research provided in recent years. This may or may not involve the same people who do the analysis, something that does not even matter, because the important thing would be to use theories provided by others in planning one's own games. That would both test the theories and create an idea that studying the subject field actually matters. This is the final obstacle: lack of external reception keeps the research under. Fixing all of the internal problems will not help if the findings, flawed as they may be, are ignored by those who actually arrange games.

At the moment we're on the level of academic masturbation. Let us move on to intercourse.

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# Practice



# Character Design Fundamentals for Role-Playing Games

*Careful character design is a way to strengthen a role-playing game experience. Well-defined characters that are consistently communicated to players are an important ingredient in a potentially successful game. In this paper I will explore the important aspects in a character, those that support and make character immersion possible. My starting point is that in a role-playing game posing as somebody else is elementary to the game. This is close to arguments that character immersion is a key element of a role-playing. The pleasurable role-playing experience thus requires a player to be able to present a character and (to some extent) experience what the character is experiencing.*

Pleasure in role-playing games, however, has double logic. On the one hand, it requires character immersion but on the other hand it always requires simultaneous knowledge that one is playing a game.<sup>1</sup> Control of the situations (as a player of a game) and knowledge that events in a game have no real consequences can make even unpleasant events and failures of a character pleasurable for a player. The player's actions, nevertheless, make it possible to break a game and ruin the illusion for both oneself and other players; a player can play a game as they like or even choose not to play. So, it is evident that immersion is at risk when players act. How then, should games be designed, in order to support acting as a character, or character immersion?

In this paper I discuss the importance of character-based writing in role-playing game design and highlight some theories behind my approach. I ground my design methods in psychology (especially emotion theory), sociology, game design, and drama writing methods. My aim is to provide conceptual tools that could be used in role-playing game (including both tabletop and live-action role-playing games) design and to analyse and evaluate design. These are not to be seen as the rules of game writing, but they can be useful tools for (thinking) design. Every aspect covered in my approach is not necessarily present in every situation; sometimes breaking design rules can be beneficial. I also want to point out that even if I use concepts from dramatic writing in this paper, I do not believe that role-playing games are drama. I do, however, believe that the concepts brought out in this paper, when combined with game design methods, are usable in the context of games. In many situations they can help making the writing process more controlled and, perhaps, easy.

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<sup>1</sup> Game critic Steven Poole has presented similar arguments in the context of video games in his book *Trigger Happy* (Poole 2000).

# Goals, Habitus, and Emotions

For understanding a gaming experience it is important to understand how player experiences a game and interprets events in it. One important part of an experience is emotion, which many models consider intertwined with having goals. If (and only if) an event is relevant in relation to the goals, emotions occur (Oatley & Jenkins 1996, 95–106). In more general terms Oatley and Jenkins conclude that:

Emotions, then, mark the junctures in our actions. Something has happened that is important to us. Emotions then are the processes that allow us to focus on any problem that has arisen, and to change course if necessary. And if we ask what the readiness is about, or what the plans are about, for most part they concern other people. (ibid, 106)

To conclude, goals and plans are very important for the emotional processes. Hence, I would argue that goals or plans by necessity are part of a good role-playing game character. Goals are the very basis of character immersion and emotional experience. As a player evaluates the character's goals meaningfully and takes them as hers in the game, she is able to experience “shared emotions” – to feel what the character would feel in the situation.

How willing the players are to adopt the character's goals depends on how reasonable they seem in light of the character. Basically, accepting the character's goals is one of the failsafe ways for the player to achieve meaningful action in a game. Similarly, I have earlier pointed out the significance of action and challenges in (computer) games and highlighted the importance of clearly defined goals in that context (Lankoski & Heliö 2002).<sup>2</sup> So, even if people are not necessarily aware of their goals in a given situation, goals are still a functional way to sketch a character to a player within a game.

Goals, even if important, are not the only way to describe a character. Bourdieu (1991) argues that human beings interpret their surroundings and act from basis of their habitus, which is basically a framework for understanding events and decision-making:

[H]abitus which have been constructed by different modes of generation, that is, by conditions of existence, which, in imposing different definitions of impossible, and the probable, cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa. (Bourdieu 1991, 78)

Habitus, then, affects how people go about achieving their goals and how they define their purposes. Every character has an individual behaviour and way of coping with the situation he gets into that are based on his habitus. Thus, a goal is a plan to cope with or exploit a situation. When a goal can be defined in a straightforward way, and thus should be easy to adopt, a character's habitus is more complex to construct. Therefore it is also

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<sup>2</sup>When one starts to play a (role-playing) game “it is reasonable to expect that there will be action and the player can make decisions, or in another words: play it” (Lankoski & Heliö 2002).

more challenging to adopt than goals. Adopting character's habitus requires a player to take into account very different aspects of the character, even something that might be totally alien to their own habitus. Sometimes this can be problematic. Past player experiences heavily affect the interpretation of events in a game and its characters. Information about a character and game world only work as a loose framework for understanding events and formulations of emotions in a game.<sup>3</sup>

To mention an example: I once organized a larp campaign that took place in a *Dune*-like game world where etiquette is very important in the spins of society. The importance of etiquette was pointed out in the material and the rules of good behaviour (the use of correct titles when addressing someone) were simple and described in the game material. However, most players didn't use titles – or if they did, did not pay attention to people not doing so. This made the whole etiquette-structure meaningless to the game as one could not e.g. insult anyone by leaving out the usage of titles as would have happened in a real situation. It is reasonable to believe that this happened because the introduced etiquette and the definitions of impossible and possible behaviour weren't personal enough and were thus ignored or forgotten. Past experiences, in this example those of living in a society without strict use of titles, affected the players' behaviour and their ability to behave according to unfamiliar and strange social rules. The character's habitus was simply run over by the player's habitus.

To conclude, well-designed goals should be derived from the nature of the character and be reactions to situations. Vice versa, goals can be used to describe a character to a player. Without goals or ambitions the player will have no means to interpret and evaluate situations as seen by the eyes of the character. The situation can only be meaningful if the player is able to evaluate their character's attitude towards the situation: is this a situation where I am (as a player) good or bad and what could I achieve in this situation? If the goals of a character are not presented clearly to a player it is possible that a player will come up with their own goals or agendas that are not derived from the nature of a character. Or alternatively the game design goes wasted as the most intricately planned situations are judged as irrelevant by the players as they don't know what the character is supposed to strive for. This does not mean that goals should always be explicit: goals can also be interpreted from game material – if there is enough information about character and his ambitions.

## Character Design

Meaningful action requires understanding of the character a person is playing. The character has to be presented to the player so that they can understand the needs and ambitions lying behind the action. How then, can a habitus be designed?

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<sup>3</sup> For a framework of understanding refer to *Outline of a Theory of Practice* by Bourdieu (1991) and regarding affects of interpretation to emotions *Understanding Emotions* by Oatley & Jenkins (1995).

## The Dramatic Personae

Scriptwriter Robert Berman lists six important aspects of dramatic personae, which can be applied to the design of game characters, as well:

- Dramatic need provides a purpose, focus and direction of story; it is the reason why the protagonist is in the story
- Point of view explains how the character sees the situation(s)
- Attitude explains the stance the character takes to the situation(s)
- Change makes the character intriguing and realistic
- Weakness/negative trait makes the character realistic and is also a convenient way of building obstacles. This is also perhaps the aspect that the character will be able to change in her/himself.
- Mannerism/habits Identifiable parts of the character that differentiate it from other (Berman 1997, 51–53)

These aspects are important parts of game design, but they work differently in games as in drama. Dramatic need, in a game, is crucial in order to give the character a good reason to be involved. Unless there is dramatic need, the most logical choice for the player/character would in many situations be to leave the situation or the place to avoid conflict between other characters or just go and do something more relevant. This is in line with the previous chapter on goals.

Every character needs a point of view and attitude. These are the ones that make people act. When writing a game, outlining these can be useful for the writer to sketch out the nature of a character. Similarly the character's weakness or negative trait is a usable way of guiding the player towards a certain type of action. If something is clearly lethal or impossible to achieve, a player will most probably try other options to solve the problem. Disadvantages are also useful for making actions sufficiently difficult. They can also make characters more interesting than characters without flaws (Superman would be incredibly boring without his weakness, kryptonite).

Mannerisms and habits are good ways of giving a player concrete tools to express some aspects of the character. They are also a good means of differentiating the character's behaviour from the other characters and the players' own mannerisms. One has to be careful, though; if overused, playing out mannerisms can be overwhelming, requiring too much attention from the player.

Deliberate dramatic change can be difficult to implement in a game, especially in a larp. But introducing a need for change can give interesting input for playing. This can be done e.g. by contesting the goals or beliefs of a character during the progression of a game. To give an example stolen from the TV: a character might start out as a secret agent for the government. In the beginning the character will believe that the organisation is on the side of good guys but at some points of the game or campaign some information will compromise this belief. The new point of view will then raise

problems for the character (and the player) and they will have to decide what to believe and how to cope the new situation.

### Writing Functional Characters

I will now present a method of writing characters making use of the views I have expressed in earlier chapters. The method is adapted from playwright and director Lajos Egri's methodology for writing dramatic personae. Egri (1960) describes the character as the sum of physical, psychological and sociological qualities. I believe that this division of qualities is usable in the context of role-playing games as well. It brings the focus on the conflict that rises from the personality and the goals of the characters in the story. This approach is analogous to building conflict between the characters in the game.

Egri has presented an outline, a "bone structure", for building what he calls a three-dimensional character. These dimensions are presented in table 1, with additions and modifications made by Lankoski, Heliö and Ekman (2003). By defining the aspects of this bone structure, one should be able to build well-defined and believable characters.

Table 1: Bone structure

(Lankoski, Heliö & Ekman 2003, based on Egri 1960, 32–43).

<i>Physiology</i>	<i>Sociology</i>	<i>Psychology</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sex</li> <li>• Age</li> <li>• Height and weight</li> <li>• Colour of hair, eyes, skin</li> <li>• Posture</li> <li>• Appearance and distinct features (tattoos, birth marks, etc.)</li> <li>• Defects (deformities, abnormalities, diseases)</li> <li>• Heredity features</li> <li>• Physique</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Class</li> <li>• Occupation</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Family life</li> <li>• Religion</li> <li>• Race, nationality</li> <li>• Place/standing in community (i.e. social status among friends, clubs, sports)</li> <li>• Political affiliations</li> <li>• Amusements, hobbies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moral standards, sex life</li> <li>• Goals, ambitions</li> <li>• Frustrations, disappointments</li> <li>• Temperament</li> <li>• Attitude toward life</li> <li>• Complexes, obsessions</li> <li>• Imagination, judgement, wisdom, taste, poise</li> <li>• Extrovert, introvert, ambivert</li> <li>• Intelligence</li> </ul>

Every item listed in the table is not needed for a character. For example, a small child would have very little formal education. Also, the list is not even meant to be exhaustive; its function is only to be a checklist containing things that the writer of a character should consider. The checklist also presents important points to consider when designing non-human character like elves or aliens, even though their dimensions might differ from human characters. But when a designer knows the differences, it is easier to create believable non-human characters, avoiding the writing of races that are just humans with strange ears.

It is important to note that every aspect of a character should be dealt with in the light of the rest of the character and that the aspects are in line with each other. This way, one aspect of a character, like skills or abilities, should reflect the bone structure and affect other aspects as well.<sup>4</sup> A gang member is likely to have different skills and abilities than a rich playboy, even if their physiological and psychological profiles were identical.

## From Character to Game

As argued earlier, the goals are a functional way to bring structures to the game that relates to emotional process. In game design studies it is often stated that achieving a goal too easily will render it uninteresting and that struggling toward a goal actually is what makes a game interesting (e.g. Costikyan 2002; Crawford 1982). Conflict is also an important concept for methods of dramatic writing, where it means creating an interesting situation for a story by using conflicting goals or natures between protagonist and antagonist (see e.g. Berman 1997 or Egri 1960). Likewise, characters and their goals can be used to create struggle in role-playing games.<sup>5</sup>

The starting point in the design is that every character should behave in an individual way; a way, which is defined by the character's three dimensions. By selecting these dimensions according to the desired goal of a game (or goal of the actions of a single character) it is possible to create characters that work according to the main goal of the game. Conflict and action in the game then arouse from the qualities of the characters it is made up of.<sup>6</sup> For some games, including many tabletop role-playing games, it is usually enough to create a character and specify that they are part of a certain social environment. A game master can then introduce goals, e.g. by letting a non-player character introduce them to the player in question, or by creating a situation that implies a certain goal (or task). The issue is now to create a suitable set of non-player characters and events that will cause conflict for the players as they act as a part of a social group.

Egri uses the word orchestration to define a process of selecting characters for a drama in order to create a starting point with dramatic potential. By this, he refers to a situation in which there is tension that will eventually lead to a full blown-out conflict.

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed the relations between game structures and interpretation of character in the paper *Characters in Computer Games* (Lankoski, Heliö, Ekman 2003). The methods for affecting a player's actions presented in the context of computer games are to some extent exploitable in role-playing games too. They are the following: building predefined functions (e.g. frenzy rules in *Vampire the Masquerade*), setting goals, choosing and implanting possible and impossible actions (e.g. with rules and skill system) and characterisation, which means designing observable parts of a character.

<sup>5</sup> I have earlier discussed the similarities between computer games and role-playing games in the paper *Approaches to Computer Game Design* (Lankoski & Heliö 2002).

<sup>6</sup> In my experience a conflict originated from opposing goals requires less from a player than a conflict based on the opposing natures of characters.

I like to use the same term of building a balanced situation for a game: in a game that means creating a starting point that will require the players to act. In role-playing games orchestration also includes timed events like new characters entering the game at a certain predefined moment.

For orchestration, two useful concepts of design are the point of attack and the unity of opposites (Egri 1960). The point of attack means that in the beginning, every character will have something important to gain or lose. The unity of opposites is a guarantee that no-one will give up: the things at stake are so important that there is no turning back (ibid, 118–124 & 182–191). Orchestrating with these things in mind will help to ensure that the conflict keeps escalating believably and consistently until the game reaches its climax. Like a play, a game should begin at a point in which every character has something important at the stake and they should not be given any back doors out of where the action is. With well-defined goals the conflict should continue to escalate towards its climax.<sup>7</sup>

An important aspect in orchestration is creating balance between different aspects of a game. Mostly this means balancing characters and their possibilities to act against each other. Just like in drama, unbalanced conflict doesn't usually create interesting action (Egri 1960, 126–136). If the outcome is obvious from the very beginning of a game or if a character has no possibilities to change the flow of events, the game tends to end very quickly (at least for that character). There is of course always the possibility that the game will be a very intense experience for players struggling in very disadvantageous positions. These kinds of situations tend to shorten the climax-phase of the conflict.

However, if one wants to play in disadvantageous position, a working solution is to create a point of attack that seems to be very uneven, but the disadvantageous side has ways to strengthen its position, e.g. by recruiting allies. This approach will also require that one consider what reasons the character with the stronger position has not to act rapidly. An example of this would be a situation where the advantageous side is not aware of the conflict in the beginning of the game.

## Orchestration Illustrated

In this chapter I will go through some fundamental structures for orchestration. These are building blocks that I myself have found useful in game writing.<sup>8</sup> They are basic situations, which can be varied in a thousand ways to create conflicts for different kinds of games.

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<sup>7</sup> However, I do not believe that models for progression of drama, like Fraytag's model (cf. Laurel 1993, 82–83), are usable for role-playing games as player choices affects progression of a game and each player character can have different kind of progression with or without climaxes.

<sup>8</sup> This chapter is based on workshop *Habmoläbttöisen kirjoittamisen tekniikoista* [Methods for Character-Based Writing] I co-organized with Satu Heliö at Ropecon 2003. Material is available at [www.uta.fi/~petri.lankoski/pelitutkimus/ropecon2003.pdf](http://www.uta.fi/~petri.lankoski/pelitutkimus/ropecon2003.pdf) (December 2003).

To begin with, there are several different ways of creating conflict. One way is to create conflict between two characters with opposing goals. Alternatively, if a goal is such that only one can achieve it (e.g. a nomination to a post or getting the girl), there can be two or more characters having the same goal. It is also possible for the character to have an inner conflict, which is a conflict between goals, beliefs or ethics of a character. With an inner conflict there should always be something at stake: a character will have to make sacrifices and the outcome of the conflict must have consequences. Otherwise it will hardly affect the game.

By linking conflicts to each other one can make an intriguing mess for the characters of a game. For example, a triangular drama is a good structure for creating basis for conflict that has no easy way out. In its classical form it will include three characters, whose goals that are positioned so that no-one's goal is directly against another one's. However, there is no way that all goals can be realised. Basically the idea is to build a chain of conflict. So person A's goal is conflicted by the goals of person B, whose goals are conflicted by the goals of C, whose goals, again, are conflicted by the goals of A. The simplest example is that of A loving B loving C loving A and A hating C hating B hating A.

Finally, with conflict built, one can manipulate the way characters relate to each other in a game. Introducing a threat from outside can be used to unify a group of characters that would normally have nothing to do with each other. A powerful enough threat can help bringing characters together even if they otherwise have conflicting interests and unison would be unthinkable in a normal situation. A threat from outside can be efficient way to slow down progress of conflict between two characters of groups. Another way of create co-operation in a game is to introduce a common goal, in some cases this is the same as the previous, i.e. beating as a common nemesis.

The final situation can then be a combination of all the above-mentioned types. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is a good example, where there are two kids who love each other, wanting to get married. Alas, there is a lot of bad blood between their families. This is the basis of the conflicts in the story. Fundamentally the situation is a sum of the following: there is a threat from outside (the couple's love is at risk because of the hatred between families), a common goal (Romeo and Juliet want to get married) and an inner conflict (Juliet's obedience to his father and love for Romeo).

## Conclusion

Characters are important when designing emotionally rich role-playing experiences. In order to create a functioning game, one has to take into account that there are several aspects affecting character interpretation. Most importantly, character interpretation requires character understanding, thus careful design of characters is important in order to provide a rich gaming experience. It is especially important that the goal of the

character be well-defined and motivated as the goal is what provides the player with a link to his character and the game itself.

Dramatic writing can be applied in order to write functioning characters with well-defined goals and clear agendas – the cornerstones of emotional immersion in a role-playing game. This paper demonstrates the use of one method, that of Egri's three-dimensional character, which I have applied successfully in many games. Just writing a lot of interesting characters will not do, however. It is also important to understand the balancing of powers, playing the opposite forces against each other, giving the players something to do throughout the game.

The design guidelines presented are meant to be generic ideas, usable in both tabletop and live-action role-playing games. The game style, however, will put its limitations on what means the game master has to realise these ideas and describe the character to the players. For instance, characters can usually be guided more easily with tabletops than is the case in live-action role-playing games. The type of game and the purpose of characters also affect the way characters should be written. In a larp it is usually valuable to make a character involved in more than one conflict to reduce the damage if some players don't appear to the event or if somebody plays rogue. Nonetheless, the main aspects of a character stay the same throughout the different forms of role-playing games.

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## Narrative Function

### A Larpwright's Tool

*Narrative function is a method aimed at helping larpwrights create involving larps. I believe that one of the main attractions of larping is the possibility for participating in interesting and moving tales. I also believe that ensuring that all attending players are essential participants (instead of just extras) should be the larpwright's primary concern. True immersion in the character, on the other hand, is primarily a private affair and furthermore not attainable, nor desired, by all larpers. On the basis of that, I believe that facilitating immersion shouldn't be a major priority of the larpwrights in the construction of a larp, as the potential for immersion depends much more on the individual players. Ensuring that each player has a part in the story is something that, on the contrary, will benefit all players, and is largely dependent on the larpwrights.*

The method at hand is a narrativistic one, in that it facilitates narrativist play, but it does not necessarily prohibit other playing styles. As I am outlining a narrativistic method, I also feel compelled to make a few remarks on what in my opinion is the greatest pitfall of narrativistic larp; the dominant type of story in our culture. It is important to remember that larp, as any other medium, makes certain demands on the stories to be told. Because the experience of participation is so important, telling linear stories with a main character and a supporting cast (as most films and books do) is fundamentally wrong. In the craft of the larpwright, it is important to be aware of the nature of mainstream storytelling, and its incompatibility with our medium.

By simple habit larpwrights will often conjure stories that revolve around main characters and central storylines, just as the players by the very same habit will search for and attempt to identify the main narrative. They will label this story as the important one, and its participants as the main characters. The result is the all too familiar situation where the players are divided into three groups, the ones who are part of the main plot, the ones who are trying to get into the main plot, and those who never got the opportunity. In these larps, the experience of participation is reserved for a select few.

A larp should contain a multiplicity of stories, a spectrum of individual experiences that together tell the story of a place, a situation and the people there. It shouldn't be about the few main characters and their important story, in which the other players are used as a backdrop or supporting cast. The challenge, then, is to break the

bonds of cultural habit and create a different kind of story; one that is equally important and interesting from all points of view.

## The Method

The core concept of the method is that of deconstructing the larpwright's vision, breaking it down into its essential narrative elements, and formulating narrative functions based on them. A narrative function is a task, a responsibility to the larp as a whole, which is used as the basis of a character and communicated openly to the player in question. In this way, each character supplies the larp with a needed narrative element; the characters being created to meet the needs of the larp rather than the opposite.

It is important to note, however, that narrative function is not the same as the character's motivation. Narrative functions aren't real within the larp as fictional reality, only within the larp as a story. The difference might be subtle to some, but it is nevertheless important and distinct.

### 1. Defining the Vision

The first step is to define the initial idea of the game into a vision. Having a general idea about a larp is not the same as having a Vision. The idea must be explored, as must the intentions and expectations of the larpwright. If the larp is to have a message, whether in the form of a statement or a question, this must be established. Things such as levels of realism, freedom accorded the players and ambitions as art must also be decided. Other common points to clarify would be the scale of the project, ambitions of innovation and the use of such things as genre.

Time and effort must be expended to ensure that the whole group of larpwrights share the same Vision, and everyone involved must be aware of and agree on how much time and effort it will take to realise it.

It is vital to not get too specific at this point. Visions are not very detailed; they are about the *whats*, not the *hows*. The final Vision should be a clearly formulated summary, in writing, of what the larp should be as a coherent whole.

### 2. Analysing the Vision

When the larpwright knows what he wants, it's time to consider how to achieve it. Analyzing the Vision is perhaps the most crucial stage of the process. In aiming to deconstruct the vision, the larpwright should carefully pick apart the coherent idea and see what it is made of, or rather; what it *could* be made of. After all, there are several possible ways of interpreting any given Vision, several conceivable constellations of narrative elements that might bring about the same general result. The process of breaking down the vision into separate narrative elements will probably result in the vision being refined and maybe slightly changed. This is not a problem.

The larpwright should remember that the larp at the end of the process is the actual goal, not adherence to a specific method. It might be useful to start with the grand lines of the vision, the central themes and moods, the main conflicts and the message, if present.

Central questions should be identified. Which worldviews must be represented? Which symbols are essential? Are violence and fear present? Love and hope? Revolution? Fanaticism? Are there specific themes that must resound throughout the game and need repeating on many levels of play?

Conflicts, as these are essential to driving the game forwards, should be identified as well. The larpwright should consider the moods he wished to convey, and whether contrasting moods are needed to make them stand out. Starting with the big picture, and working downwards, without regard for the players' part in this yet, is a good strategy. This is still an abstract and structural overview.

### 3. Separating the Setting and the Characters

The characters are not the only bearers of meaning within the larp. Other parts of the game can also represent necessary narrative elements, and at least some of them should do so. Some narrative elements are difficult to bring into the game by characters, and are better represented by non-player structures.

A larpwright should by now have a list of necessary narrative elements. He then divides this list in two by picking out those elements he wants to be brought to the game by players, leaving the rest to be introduced through the setting. With this in mind, he can start shaping the setting of the larp. Everything in the setting doesn't have to represent a specific narrative element. In fact, this might make the purpose of its construction so blatantly visible that it feels less real and believable. There is nothing wrong with including elements in the setting that are quite unrelated to the larp's overall themes, simply for flavour and diversion. Generally, it's a good idea to let the central elements of the setting be part of the narrative structure of the larp, and include other elements for added depth and scope. Of course, it is also important that these elements aren't counterproductive. They should elaborate, embellish and improve the story, but never diminish its narrative strength. Take care to ensure that the setting doesn't accidentally contradict itself thematically, as this will greatly weaken the narrative structure of the larp.

### 4. Formulating Narrative Functions

Taking the list of narrative elements chosen for the players, a larpwright can start creating the narrative functions that will ensure the presence of those elements in the larp. This is accomplished simply by transforming the required elements into clearly defined tasks for players to handle. Each player is given a clear and specific obligation to the whole of the larp, making clear what *his* essential contribution to the story is supposed to be.

Once this is done, the functions should be committed to paper. Writing them down in as short and concise a form as possible is recommended, as there will be time to elaborate later. It's important that the narrative function is firm enough to build a good character on and around. It should be a sentence or two, not half a page of prose.

## 5. Creating the Characters

With the recently formulated narrative functions in hand, a larpwright can start working out the characters and their internal relationships. The methods that can be employed in character creation are legion, and choosing one or a few is largely a matter of personal taste. The essential point is that the character should logically follow from its assigned narrative function. It should be created so that simply playing true to the character equals fulfilling its function. This is extremely important if the player in question is a dedicated immersionist, because it is hard to consider the needs of the story while immersing.

## Elaborations and Complications

There are many kinds of narrative functions, but they can be roughly divided into three groups: *structure-building*, *conflict-driving* and *mood-setting*. There is, of course, considerable overlap between the groups. Creating functions that do not fit neatly into any of them is also possible. These groups might be called meta-functions, as they describe the general purpose of a function belonging to them. They are dependent on context, in that a given narrative function could be mood-setting in one larp, but conflict-driving in another. For example, 'being the angry man' can be conflict-driving in a larp about the conflicts arising from newcomers arriving in a peaceful village where anger is taboo, but mood-setting in a larp about finding friends and building trust in a hostile environment.

**Structure-building** functions create and maintain structures in the story. These can take many forms, the structures being open or secret, formal or informal. A structure could be an organization or just a single character; it could also be tradition, work-routines or procedures for handling situations. The structures of the larp are the solids of the story, the bones of the tale. Structures can be challenged and overthrown, or be the unchallengeable absolutes of the narrative. They can be helpers or obstacles, or both, depending on the perspective. Examples of typical structure-building functions are:

- Making the town militia work, maintaining harsh law and order.
- Being the local rumour-monger, making sure that keeping secrets is nearly impossible.
- Keeping religiousness and Christian Duty at the front of everyone's mind as the preacher of a small frontier town in Arizona.

- Personifying some arch- or stereotype, like the wise old woman, the impressionable youngster, or the glib seller of second-hand cars.

**Conflict-driving** functions are about wanting something, or very much *not* wanting something. A story needs conflict to drive it forward, although this doesn't necessarily mean violence, or even enmity. There are many classic conflicts, like dynamics vs. stasis, good vs. evil, order vs. chaos and so on. Conflicts in a larp shouldn't be entirely abstract; a conflict of ideas should be represented by something more worldly and concrete, because this creates more emotion and play than debating on an abstract level does. Conflict-driving functions will usually need to be balanced carefully against an opposition, usually another conflict-driving or a structure-building function. Balancing is important to avoid a single conflict dominating and streamlining the narrative, which is usually undesirable. Remember to take into account the individual players' style of play, force of personality, and social skills, when balancing the conflicts of the larp. Examples follow:

- As a schoolmistress, speaking out for reason, science and atheism in the frontier town of Arizona.
- Opposing the chief of the village at every turn.
- Being egoistic and greedy, trying to profit from every relation, having rapidly built power to threaten the other vampires of the city.
- Introducing the concept of private property in a communitarian society, by refusing to share and attempting to buy goods from others.

**Mood-setting** functions are extremely important, and challenging for a player to fulfil. Setting the mood of the game is vital, as this colours the whole experience for everybody. It is of particular importance to be specific and clear when formulating these, as they deal with less tangible things than conflicts and structures. Moods can be set by actions bringing out emotions in others, or by exhibiting emotions yourself. The use of symbols and symbolic actions can be helpful, but clichés should be avoided at all costs, as these will detract from the mood. Making use of contrasts can be very effective. Examples below:

- Bringing in feelings of despair and madness, and the fear of succumbing to them, by slowly losing your sanity.
- Evoking a mixture of pity and laughter, being a crippled clown.
- Randomly abusing and punishing the servants, making their work environment feel hostile.
- Creating a mood of urgency and effectiveness in the office.

## The Hidden Structure

While the narrative function should always be communicated clearly to the player, it's not necessarily a good idea to reveal the entire narrative structure of the larp. If the 'mechanic' structures that shape the story become too obvious, the magic and impact of the narrative tends to fade. On the other hand, some narrative functions are impossible to maintain without the direct support of other players. This means that the distribution of information about the narrative structure is something every larpwright must consider carefully, handing out enough information to the right players to make it work, while maintaining the surprises and the magic that participating in a good story should bring. One should remember, however, that it's always better to hand out a bit too much information, than handing out a bit less than needed. Overlooking things one knows is easy; knowing things one doesn't is not.

## Active and Reactive Functions

A narrative function should usually be of an active nature, meaning that it should be possible for the player to actively attempt to fill it within the game. On the other hand, one could also make functions that are reactive; the player responding in specific ways to certain events, rather than initiating play. Grandfather Grump could, for example, fiercely oppose any and all attempts to change the ways things have always been done, but without actively working to maintain them. A special use of reactive functions could be called the 'mob-function'. By including the same reactive function in an appropriate number of characters, detailing a specific behaviour in response to a certain kind of trigger action, the reactions in the larp can be shaped as a community. The most obvious purpose is the creation of spontaneous mobs of people, reacting to something in a way that fits the story – to, for instance, ensure that the farmers become the bloodthirsty lynch mob they should when someone claims to have found a witch. Farmers in larps often fail horribly in doing this, usually because of the players' contemporary morals, and not due to their characters high regard for the right to a fair trial.

## Supporting Functions

A player could have a narrative function intended to support another player's ability to fulfil a demanding narrative function. It is important that such supporting functions are not mere repetitions or weaker copies of the supported function, but interesting in their own right. If they're not, they should at least not be a player's primary function.

As an example, the wicked Countess Impuna has the narrative function 'personifying the oppressive nobility of the country'. Her right-hand man and oppressive iron fist, Captain Bragg, has a supportive function. By behaving like the brutish lieutenant of an oppressive Countess, beating up farmers who bend knee too slowly, bringing less than willing young men and women to the Countess' bedchamber and generally being a bastard wherever he goes, he can reinforce the image of the Countess as an evil oppressor. A supporting function could also work by contrast; the cowardly sidekick of the valiant hero is the classic example of this.

## Multiple Functions

There is nothing wrong with giving a character more than one function. A character should usually have one primary function, but there is no reason not to give it one or more secondary functions, although it's not necessarily a requirement. Secondary functions may be functions of a supportive or reactive nature, or something completely different. For example, the aforementioned Captain Bragg could have 'portraying a traitor to his class, the farmers', as his secondary function. This would give the villagers' enmity towards him an extra dimension, and introduce the divide-and-conquer tactics employed by the nobility.

## Group Functions

Instead of basing each character on a narrative function, one could give a whole group of players a narrative function to fulfil. The characters will then act as a group in the game, but this group doesn't necessarily have to be of an overt nature. One could, for example, give each of the members of the 'Secret n'Evil Society' the secondary function 'to spread fear and suspicion in the village as a group'. The players will then be doing this in addition to maintaining the narrative functions their characters fill in their daytime personas. Group functions can be particularly useful in larps of a greater scope, where the larpwrights deal in factions of characters rather than in individual ones.

## Narrative Functions and Practical Responsibilities

One should always keep in mind that practical responsibilities and narrative functions are two different things. Giving a player practical tasks such as cooking is not the same as basing the player's character on an narrative function essential to the larp, although the practical function might be just as essential in its own way. This is not to say that the two may not be successfully combined, and even intermeshed. Care should be taken to ensure that players with extensive practical responsibilities also have the opportunity to fulfil their narrative function. Assigning reactive functions to these players will often work well. Whichever measures are used to avoid potential problems, one should always keep in mind that giving a player practical things to do is no reason to deny her or him a part in the story.

## Conclusion

Narrative functions are a tool and as such shouldn't be used as a purpose in itself, or pursued to an extreme. One will never make a larp fit perfectly into any method or theory, at least not without the larp suffering in quality. The ability to simply make the game work, without getting too caught up in method, theory, or ideology, is essential to larpwrights; the players are not the only ones in need of improvisational skills. As in all things creative, theory is one thing and practice is another; although hopefully not entirely. When a larpwright has decided to employ a method, it might be a good idea

to make an effort to stick to it. This article is intended to be a method for constructing the basic narrative structure of a larp in a way that will ensure that no player is an extra or irrelevant to the whole, and to ensure that all players participate in the same larp. Which, to me, are the most basic obligations of a larpwright.

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# Chaotic Role-Playing

## Applying the Chaos Model of Organisations for Role-Playing

*One of the common pitfalls of game mastering is the assumption that games could or should be controlled. Writing stories is a tempting but usually unsuccessful way of creating games. One key to successful game mastering is understanding the chaotic nature of role-playing and understanding how a game can be guided despite its chaotic nature.*

**D**uring the last decade, the metaphor of chaotic system has become one of the most attractive perspectives in organisation studies (e.g. Morgan 1997). The dynamic model gives an enlightening contrast to the older models comparing an organisation to a machine, an organism or a culture. The dynamic model emphasises the constant change and unpredictability of the social dynamics of a group of people.

This text applies the chaos model from organisations to groups of role-players in order to describe the progress of a role-playing game or a larp. Indeed, many definitions of organisation can actually be used to define the players of a game as a micro-organisation. Although several researchers have used the chaos-model, this article is based on Aula's (1999, 1996, 2000)<sup>1</sup> model, which includes the concepts of integrative and dissipative communication to the chaos model of organisation.

My approach is also close to Hansen's (2003) idea of using the relation theory in explaining a larp. He claims that role-play is an emergent phenomenon arising from individual players' interaction with each other. In Hansen's approach, the role of the larpwright is only to provide the starting points and vectors of the characters; The game will emerge from the starting situation by itself. His conclusions are quite compatible with mine. The chaotic model shares features with the circle model presented by Henriksen (2004) as well.

As a very brief definition, in this article, role-playing game denotes a game formed by several participants constructing fictive worlds (diegeses) in interaction with each

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<sup>1</sup> Pribram (1996, v–vii) categorises the social scientist applications of chaos theory to rigorous applications of analysed data and to intuitive applications using the vocabulary of chaos theory as a metaphor. According to Pribram, Aula's (1996) work belongs to the latter category. Obviously, this paper follows Aula's footsteps. Aula (1996, 204), too, states that empirical research is needed to verify the chaotic behaviour of organisations in physical reality, and to determine what kinds of communication systems are chaotic.

other. In larp, physical reality is also used as a basis of constructing the diegetic realities. (See Montola 2003, also Loponen & Montola 2004 for more accurate definitions.)

## Chaotic System: The Basics

A chaotic system is an unpredictable but non-random system. The unpredictability is based on three properties, which are used to define the chaotic systems. These are *nonlinearity*, *recursivity* and *dynamism* (Aula 1996, 197, also Aula 1999).

Nonlinearity means that the changes in the beginning are not linearly transferred to the end result. Think about a pinball game; If no-one touches the bats, the tension applied to the string before launching the ball determines the time the ball will stay on the playing field. However, neither increasing nor decreasing the power launching the ball unambiguously increases the time it takes for the ball to reach the bottom of the field. There's no linear dependency between the power and the time. In the context of tabletop role-playing, the dice (for an example) are used to generate feeling of randomness by nondiegetic nonlinearity; As the way the dice are thrown has no predictable effect on the end result, the dice are used to bring more chaos to the game.

Recursivity means that the end result of the first situation is used as the beginning of the next one. When applied to social sciences, this property sounds trivial as it practically denotes that future is a consequence of the past. In the context of role-playing, it means that the diegeses constructed by role-playing are used as the basis for further role-playing (see Montola 2003).

Dynamism means that the way the system changes is subject to change as the system changes. In role-playing, the way the characters act changes when the characters change themselves. Hansen (2003, 72) claims that all communication changes social relationships, so in role-playing the social relationships change constantly.

The result of nonlinearity, recursivity and dynamism is that over time the system becomes increasingly difficult to predict as the (non-random) changes accumulate. Completely insignificant-seeming minute changes in the starting point may have a radical effect in the end. The best-known chaotic system is the weather system, which is quite impossible to accurately predict a week forward. It is said that the flap of the wing of a butterfly can cause a sequence of accumulating changes to cause a tornado some weeks later on the other side of the globe<sup>2</sup>. The circle of interpretation of signs (presented in Loponen & Montola 2004)<sup>3</sup> going on during the role-play could be seen as a similar sequence of non-random unpredictable changes.<sup>4</sup>

## Predicting the Unpredictable

Even though they are unpredictable, the chaotic systems tend to follow *attractors*. Attractor is a dynamic pattern of behaviour the chaotic system tries to follow. If the state

of the system changes too far from the attractor, the system acquires a new attractor. For example, racing cars try to follow the track; Their position vary over the race, but generally they try to stay on the track. If a car strives too far from the attractor, it picks a new one leading to the forest. A pendulum follows its swinging attractor quite closely; If it is disturbed briefly, it returns to the swinging movement. As Hansen (2003, 70–71) points out, while the organisers can generally predict the next step a role-play is going to take, no-one can predict how the game will end.

In role-playing context, the idea of an attractor is very important. Instead of writing stories or scripts, the game masters have to understand that they can write attractors at best. When a mysterious wizard gives the character a mission, an attractor is created leading to the dragon's cave and back again. In larp, the initial attractors are formed when the players are briefed about their characters and groups. As the game progresses, players themselves decide whether to follow their attractors or pick new ones as they go.

The mathematicians call the important crossroads of attractors *bifurcation points*. They are the critical points where the system decides whether to follow one attractor or another. The character might decline the mysterious stranger's offer, or the dice might make the character unable to sneak into the dragon's cave.

Many taboos of role-playing are similar in that they remove the chaos from the game. Some examples are the game master overruling the actions of player characters, or the gaming group overwriting some past events. Eric Wujick's *Amber: Diceless Role-Playing* was a revolutionary system when it was published in 1991<sup>5</sup>, because eliminating

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<sup>2</sup> Two examples of minute changes in role-playing environment: In larp, the positions where players stand when they begin their game affects the order in which they meet the other characters, potentially affecting the emerging of every relationship in the game. In tabletop western game, the game master's meticulously complex description of the details of a saloon interior may turn out to affect the game vastly as it serves to allow improvising weapons in an unpredicted bar fight.

Not every minute change affects the outcome radically, though some do. The definition of a 'minute' change is of course up to debate; In this article it's a minor detail that has no understood significance in the starting point, though when it begins to affect the attractors, no-one probably considers it minute any more. Some minute changes are non-diegetic; For example, the dice are thrown differently depending on where they were placed the last time they were thrown.

<sup>3</sup> Loponen and Montola (2004) present the semiotic view on diegesis construction, explaining how interpretations evolve and provoke further interpretations. The semiotic communication system could be seen as recursive and dynamic in the sense that symbolic systems evolve as the result of communication, and that communication is always based on both earlier communication and earlier conventions created by communication. From the social psychological perspective the process of interpreting could be seen as nonlinear as well, as the results of interpreting signs are not linearly dependant on the signs interpreted (see also Aula's criticism on linear models of communication in Aula 1996, 194–195).

<sup>4</sup> Aula (1996, 203–204) states that organisation's behaviour can be predicted with enough information to some extent, but long-time predictions can't be made. Respectively, Hansen (2003, 70–71) claims that as an larp is an emergent phenomenon, it can be predicted on short but not on long time scales.

<sup>5</sup> *Amber* was the first commercial diceless role-playing game, according to Mackay (2001, 41).

the dices was thought to eliminate unpredictability and chaos from the play. It took quite a while for role-players to understand that removing dice does not make the play controllable or predictable as long as there is true interaction in the play.

Another taboo was broken when Eirik Fatland and others introduced the Play of Fate in 1998 (Fatland 1998, 16–18). In fate-play, the larpwrights write the characters some instructions they are obliged to follow in certain important points of the game. The fateful actions following each other in a carefully developed pattern efficiently force the play to proceed along pre-determined attractors. Fate-play loses some or all of its recursivity and dynamism. In fate-play, the decisions made are not always direct consequences of the past events, but determined by the fates (defined before the game). Fate-play is not dynamic, because its pre-determined nature prevents the true changing of the system. Perhaps these are the reasons why fate-play is still less accepted than diceless role-playing.

## Integrative and Dissipative

Easier than controlling how a role-play proceeds is controlling how strong the attractors are – controlling how chaotic or orderly the game will be. In a completely orderly game, the attractors would be solid and unchangeable; There wouldn't be uncertainty, collaboration or interaction – the players couldn't affect the plots constructed by the game master at all. In an absolutely chaotic game, there wouldn't be anything tying the game together; There wouldn't be characters nor any kinds of attractors. Hence, all the role-plays must be somewhere between the two extremes.

Aula (1999, 144–146) speaks of *integrative* and *dissipative* communication in the context of organisation, where integrative communication shifts the organisation towards the order and dissipative communication shifts it towards the chaos. These concepts are easily adaptable to role-playing.

Integrative role-playing takes the game towards order. In integrative playing the players try to go along the attractors, making good stories and allowing themselves to be guided by the game master or the larpwrights. An integratively playing GM or larpwright seeks to provide the players with attractors and story seeds and ensuring that by following them, the players get to have a good game.

Dissipative role-playing takes the game towards chaos. Dissipatively playing players try to forge their fortunes themselves, creating their own attractors and enjoying their freedom within the world of the game. A dissipative GM or larpwright facilitates this progress by providing the players and characters with interesting options and ensuring that there's a meaningful play whatever the players choose to do.

There are many of methods of playing, game mastering and larpwrighting that can be used to increase dissipative or integrative role-playing. (See table 1.)

## Table 1: Integrative and Dissipative Methods

### *Examples of integrative methods for game masters and larpwrights*

- Choose the focus of the game properly. When all characters are SWAT-officers, the GM can concentrate on running SWAT operations instead of pondering whether some random people have the guts to attack the terrorists hijacking their plane.
- Define and communicate the play's genre and style well. Everyone should know whether the western is *Fistful of Dollars* or *Shanghai Noon*.
- Fill the characters' backgrounds with 'triggers'. If orcs killed the character's mother, you can predict the effects of bringing orcs to the stage.
- Manage time and cut the game. Instead of finding out whether the strange wizard's offer is enough for the poor halfling, start the game right from the scene where the poor sod's already heading far away with a dozen dwarves.

### *Examples of integrative methods for players*

- Do what you think is best for the story or what you guess your GM expects you to do. Give up your freedom for the epic story.
- Eat all the plot hooks you encounter.
- Include other characters to your plans; avoid secrets and encourage collectivism.

### *Examples of dissipative methods for game masters and larpwrights*

- Create a lot of personal plots for the characters and encourage conflict between them. When every character tugs the web of intrigue to his own direction, chaos ensues.
- Give players 'irrelevant' information about the game world. The more they know, the more options they have.
- Use supporting cast played by players (tabletop). Instead of the GM playing every NPC, handing an ex-girlfriend to some player produces unpredictable but working results.
- Use plot points (as in *Theatrix*), fate chips (as in *Deadlands*) et cetera (tabletop). Players using out-of-character options to affect the attractors usually increase chaos – unless they choose to use them to follow the pre-set plots. Nothing gives a stronger twist to an attractor than cavalry summoned by player's plot option at the last minute.
- Portray the world as a realistic, rational whole. Characters are people in the world just like all the NPC:s. There is no plot, just six billion entities to interact with.
- Give players a right to control the diegetic world with true statements (tabletop). Instead of player asking GM whether there's a café on the street, the player has the right just to declare that his character goes to the comfy French café on the other side of the road.

### *Examples of dissipative methods for players*

- Be a Turkuist immersionist; forget the drama and larpwrights' intentions.
- Write a heap of interesting background for your character if the game master allows. Making your character secretly a closeted homosexual turns social relationships around.
- Talk about 'nonessential' things; religion, movies, politics – anything goes.

When both the game master and the players play integratively, the game becomes very orderly – the players try to keep on the trails the game master pushes them to. As a consequence, the dramatic story progresses fairly quickly. The result may be what the Threefold Model<sup>6</sup> calls ‘dramatist’ playing: a game focusing on story instead of immersion, simulation or winning.

If both the game master and the players play dissipatively, the result is a chaotic game focusing on the characters’ relationships and personalities instead of plots. The simulationist playing of the Threefold Model can usually be seen as rather chaotic.

In addition to these basic cases, there are two special cases (usually found only in tabletop) worth some extra attention; *a direction-seeking game* and *a rebelling game*. A direction-seeking game emerges when players play integratively and game master plays dissipatively. The GM provides no direction to players, who would play a well-prepared story instead of everyday life in a chaotic world. A rebelling game is the opposite of the direction-seeking game. In a rebelling game, the players refuse to play the ready-made plots of the GM, dissipating the play instead. Usually both direction-seeking and rebelling can be considered as problems caused by participants’ different expectations on the game.

In the ‘good’ games, the order and chaos are almost always balanced in some working way. The game master gives players proper freedom and guidance, which the players use appropriately. Still, striking the right balance depends on the GM’s vision and the themes of the play. A larp telling about military life is probably very orderly compared to one about Machiavellian intrigue. In addition to recognising that military larp is orderly, the larpwright should use this model to analyse how much power over attractors the different participants have to ensure a properly balanced game.

In all games, both integrative and dissipative role-playing is present. In a role-playing game devoid of integration, there might be some characters, but they would exist in different genres and universes and would not have anything to do with each other – probably there wouldn’t be any character interaction at all. Even the existence of sentient characters can be questioned. On the other hand, a game without any dissipation would not be interactive at all.

On the scale from dissipative to integrative, taboo breaking techniques (overruling player actions, fate-play, rewriting diegetic history) can be considered over-integrative. They integrate the game, but as they remove interaction, dynamism or recursivity, they also change the core of role-playing essentially.

## Conclusions

The first main strength of the chaos model of role-playing is that it addresses the emergence of the plot of the game, which is usually left relatively untouched (e.g. Gade

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<sup>6</sup> John H. Kim’s website explains the birth of Threefold Model (or ‘GNS-model’) in 1997 and provides a faq as well. [www.darkshire.net/~jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold](http://www.darkshire.net/~jhkim/rpg/theory/threefold) (December 2003)

2003, 64–65; Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003; Montola 2003; Mackay 2001, 4–10; Fatland & Wingård 1999, 23–25; Pohjola 1999, 34–35), except in normatively written dramatist models. The second strength is that the ideas of an attractor as well as dissipative and integrative playing are useful on the practical level of game design and analysis. On the other hand, the chaos model is quite vague in treating the game itself, which means that the essence of the play is quite difficult to see from the perspective of this model.

The model has been criticised by a claim that as the game master is the supreme authority within the diegetic reality (see Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003, 56, 58–59), a tabletop role-playing game can never be considered chaotic. I have previously commented the power of the game master (Montola 2003), arguing that as it is impossible for any participant to understand the whole of every diegesis constructed during the game, no-one can have absolute control on what the participants consider diegetic. If the GM defines the whole diegetic reality by himself, the game loses its interactivity and turns to storytelling. Also, many definitions require chaotic systems to be at least partially deterministic, an issue belonging to philosophers and neuroscientists instead of social scientists.

This application of chaotic thinking created a lot of discussion in Finland when it was first presented in Finnish Ropecon 2002. Though an often-heard argument (based on issues of nonlinearity and determinism) claims that chaos theory cannot be validly applied on social behaviour of human beings, I consider this model at least a valuable thinking tool, which can be fruitfully applied in design and analysis of almost any role-playing game.

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# Genre, Style, Method and Focus

## Typologies for Role-Playing Games

*The purpose of this text is to attempt to create a basic typology for role-playing games. It is intended as a tool for the game master, so that she can better understand what various approaches can be taken in RPGs and to better be able to communicate her vision of the game to the player. It is important to bear in mind that this typology is based on social constructions, metaphors. The divisions are not discovered or divined, but created. This model should be seen as a tool. Its usefulness will be dictated by its applications and validity.*

This text takes as given that role-playing is a medium and a valid form of expression. Role-playing is communication and it has the potential to be art. Also, organising a game requires a vision and fulfilling that vision requires tools. This model is aimed at being such a tool. Role-playing is defined according to the Meilahti School. Role-playing is what is created in the interaction between a game master and a player or between players in a defined diegetic frame (Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003) and as such this model is seen as fitting both the traditional tabletop role-playing as well as live-action role-playing.

The model will explore four of the various dimensions defining a role-playing text. These dimensions are method, genre, style and focus. Method is used to differentiate between different ways of interacting between the game master and the players or between the players such as live-action role-playing and tabletop role-playing. Genre is the collection of expectations that in a cultural context organizes different texts, such as fantasy and cyberpunk. Style is the genetic interpretation, the way that the game is played, such as soap opera and realism. Focus is a dimension for differentiating between various collective approaches of the participants to the game, such as chaotic and orderly (more on which later). It should be noted that the approach that this text takes is based on cultural studies and film studies.

### Method

Role-playing is often divided to two categories, *live-action role-playing* and traditional *tabletop role-playing*. Sometimes these two methods are even seen as distinctively different forms of expression. That point of view uses a very narrow definition of role-

playing, where physicality and the physical configuration of participants are seen as instrumental. The underlying structure of role-playing is the same in both forms of gaming. (See for example Hakkarainen & Stenros 2003, Loponen & Montola 2004.)

Live-action and tabletop are two forms of role-playing, methods of interaction between the participants. Most role-playing games employ methods of both live-action and tabletop role-playing; thus it is difficult to create clear-cut categories. Role-playing games usually fall somewhere between the ideal tabletop and live-action games. As such these categories are useful mostly as communicating the expectations that a game master has of her players.

Tabletop games are usually played in a confined area where the participants sit down, possibly around a table (hence the name). The actions in the game are described, and the physical configuration of the room, the props or the player do not represent those that are found in the diegetic frame. Tabletop role-playing games also often have a lot of rules and systems for deciding what happens in the game. Dice or other random generators are often employed.

In larps the physical configuration of the place where the game is played as well as the props and the exterior of a participant has a lot more weight. The so-called real world represents the game world and the players represent their characters not just mentally but physically as well (see for example Sihvonen 1997). Rule systems are often also lighter and more geared up to create safety as well as the perception of diegetic believability.

In an idealized tabletop game a participant would only describe the actions of her character in third person without trying to act or physically represent the character. "My character opens the door wearing a tuxedo. She spreads her wings and says hesitantly: 'Er, can I help you.'" In a pure live-action game the participant would open the door wearing a tuxedo, spread her wings and say, "Er, can I help you" acting hesitantly. These are extreme examples, ideals, and most games fall somewhere between. In most tabletop games the participants, if nothing else, talk as their characters, using first person pronouns and punctuating the speech as it is delivered with pauses and different facial expressions while looking at the participant whose character her character is talking to. Participants in tabletop games can act out whole scenes, get away from the metaphorical table and then go back to third person descriptions when they feel like it. Also, sometimes the game master can give a prop, a handout, to a participant that is a physical representation of something in the game world. A map is a good example of this. In a pure tabletop game the map would only be described.

In the same manner, most larps employ tabletop-like methods. Sometimes actions are described instead of played out, for example when they are impossible to perform, such as flying or spreading one's wings. Often also the gaming area doesn't look exactly like the diegetic place it is supposed to represent, and the participants are often wearing clothes that are symbols for the clothes in the game world instead of being identical replicas of the diegetic clothes.

Thus the categories of tabletop and larp are far from absolute. They are useful when a game master wants to communicate some of her expectations to the participants. Larps usually last longer and the participants are expected to show up with costumes and props for their characters, they are expected to look the part. In tabletop games a lot less preliminary work is expected, often the participant just needs to know her character and the setting – but sometimes one can show up completely unprepared to a tabletop game.

As the spectrum between pure live-action and pure tabletop is so varied, sometimes game masters want to be more precise. For example, in the live-action end of the spectrum the subcategories include the division to *photorealistic* and *symbolic*. In a photorealistic game the game area and the players aim for perfect simulation where every object represents an identical object in the game world. In an ideal photo realistic game there are no wigs, no make-up or no contact lenses that are not present in the diegetic frame as well. Symbolic games are less strict. For example even if the participant has long hair the character can still have short hair or vice versa and clothes that are not visible need not correspond with the diegetic frame. Symbolic games are often referred to as low ambition games and photo realistic games are also known as high ambition games. These names, however, do not take into account that a symbolic game can be very ambitious as well (see the film *Dogville* (2003) as an example from a different medium).

The contents of these categories are gaming culture specific even if the same labels are used in many parts of the world. The examples listed above are from the Nordic countries. In North America larps often use less elaborate symbols for props, for example. A piece of paper with the word 'book' written on it can be used as a prop in a larp, and such symbols can replace all 'real' props in a game. In the Nordic countries such purely symbolic props are seldom used and a game using only such symbols would be labelled experimental and avant-garde – or badly propped.

Live-action, tabletop and the spectrum between are not the only methods available: *digital role-playing games* are also emerging. In digital role-playing games the game world is created with the aid of computers and the characters have some kind of presence, an avatar, in the diegetic frame. A pure virtual role-playing game would be very close to a pure larp in the way that the participant sees everything exactly as it is in the game world. The difference there would be how the movements of the participant are transferred to become the movements of the avatar-character.

Today few virtual games fit into the description of a role-playing game and the ones that do are closer to tabletop than to live-action. Obviously text based online gaming, play-by-email or playing through chat or irc, is basically tabletop gaming with text replacing speech, and even the most elaborate realistic games are still limited to the computer screen. Still, virtual role-playing games are one more method for the game master. *Neverwinter Nights* is an example of computer-mediated role-playing and there have been live-action games that have used computer games to simulate combat between battle mechas (*Destination Unknown* used *Heavy Gear II*) and tabletop games

that have used computers to simulate the shifting of political power in a galaxy (see for example the computer game *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* and the role-playing source book it inspired, *GURPS Alpha Centauri*).

## Genre

Genre is a cultural convention, which strives to build some kind of an organisation to the huge amount of texts and meanings, which are recycled in our culture by agreement of both the producers and the audiences (Fiske 1987). This means that certain kinds of collections of themes, settings, stereotypes, behavioural patterns and stories form classes that the game masters and other participants of role-playing games recognize. In role-playing games most recognised genres are probably fantasy, cyberpunk and vampire. The participants have clear preconceptions and expectations regarding a game that is branded as "fantasy". The game master can use these preconceptions to her advantage when communicating what kind of game she is organising. Still, there is always a possibility for interpreting and conflicting readings.

Fantasy, for example, for most people suggests the presence of elves, dwarfs, magic and some sort of pseudo medieval feudal society. The literary works of J. R. R. Tolkien, David Eddings, Margaret Weiss and Tracy Hickman (among others) have had a major influence on the fantasy genre in role-playing games. If all the participants are familiar with a certain genre, then the game master need not work as hard when communicating her vision of the game world, she can take as given that everyone knows that dwarfs are short, have beards, live in the mountains and hate elves. Popular culture in general has had a tremendous effect on role-playing genres (see for example Mackay 2001).

The strength and weakness of genres is that even if most participants have very similar conceptions of a certain genre, they are never the same. This means that just branding a game fantasy doesn't really mean much as fantasy has a wide variety of different sub-genres. If no further information is given, then most participants will use the most stereotypical reading of fantasy available to them and the game may run the risk of being rather bland. Genre can be a very fast way of communicating an impression of the type of the game, but at the same time generic descriptions produce generic games.

For example fantasy can be divided to high fantasy (powerful magic, dragons, elves), low fantasy (little or no magic, no races besides humans, shamans instead of mages), SCA-like historical fantasy (historical world that is clean and most people are nobles etc.), historical fantasy (inspired by Viking mythology, *Kalevala*, *Beowulf*) and so on. Using sub-genres helps, but the more precise the genre, the more probable it is that not everyone is familiar with it.

Role-playing games can of course also combine or change genre halfway. These kinds of *slipstream* games can even be created as a surprise to the players. For example a

game that starts as a simulation of a corporate conference in the wilderness can become a lovecraftian horror game if a monster shows up during evening festivities. From the point of view of the players, the game has then gone from a realistic game to a horror game. The game masters may view the game as a horror game from the beginning, as one of the conventions of the horror genre is the surprise emergence of a supernatural threat in a confined space.

The genre need not be the same for all players either – some characters might have more information than others. For example if the monster is exchanged to a few hidden vampires in the corporate conference in the wilderness game, then for most participants the game is a real life game but a few would be playing a vampire game.

Many successful games have also been genre hybrids. Describing a game as a horror western can be a very economical way of communicating a lot of information. It is good to note that even if role-playing games have a lot of genre conventions and characteristics that are only applicable to role-playing games, most genres do transcend the borders of medium. Even if none of the participants have taken part in a western game before, they still know what westerns are like in films, books and comics.

Using well-known works done for other mediums as common reference points for the players is also a fast way of communicating a crude vision (see also *ibid*). For example the Danish game *Zombie – A Night of Terrors* is quite clearly set in the horror subgenre of zombie fiction, but additional reference points could be first person shooter computer games and the film *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) or the Swedish game *Carolus Rex* might be sold as 50's Hollywood sci-fi, with elements from the films *Das Boot* (1981) and – again – *Full Metal Jacket*. These brief descriptions can be powerful, but if the potential participant has never watched any war films or played FPS-games then the descriptions mean nothing. Genre and common reference points are fast ways of explaining the core of a game, but they cannot replace a more thorough description of the setting of a game.

John H. Kim (2003) has also divided genre conventions into three categories, *World conventions* (what is the world like), *Character conventions* (what kind of protagonists are chosen) and *Story conventions* (what is possible in the story). Such detailed divisions may indeed be helpful when communicating the genre of a game. The concept of Story convention bears similarities to what I call the style of play.

## Style

Style of playing refers to the way the character is expected to act and react within the genre of the game to ensure the desired end result, a game along the lines of the game master's vision. As such style is always an interpretation of the genre. It is a tool for the game master and an instruction for a player.

Different styles include for example realism, dramatic, surrealism and soap opera. The styles are in many ways similar to genres as they too are cultural conventions, they

help understand texts and meanings and they are recycled in our culture by agreement, but they are also both broader and more specific. Style helps build the structure of a text, it determines actions within a genre to ensure certain kind of dramatic curve or pacing. On the other hand styles are not genre specific, but they can be applied to any setting.

This means that even if the genre of a role-playing game doesn't change, the stylistically most probable effect of a unified cause can change if the style changes. For example if a person is hit by an arrow in a fantasy game, then in a realistic game that would be very painful, and the injury would most probably get infected with possibly deadly results. If the style is dramatic, then a hero might not feel the pain until she has been able to complete her mission and then she might die from all the damage done to her in the heat of the battle. In a surreal fantasy the arrow might turn into singing yeast that exhales French cheese and shame. In a soap opera the arrow might be deadly but not before the heroine has been able to confess her long hidden love for the king and that she has actually been a spy for the king's evil brother's lover. Note that soap opera can be seen both a genre and a style.

The style of play is clearly communicated to the players more seldom than the genre. This means that often in the beginning of the game the style is being negotiated in the interaction of the players and usually the game will end up being played in a realistic or a dramatic manner. If the game master desires to have the game played in a different style, she needs to communicate this clearly.

The style of gaming seldom changes in the middle of a game, but that doesn't mean that it cannot change. For example a realistic game can become surreal if a game includes dream sequences or hallucinations.

## Focus

The terms integrative and dissipative gaming are lifted from Markus Montola's model that applies chaos theory, as it is understood in the context of organisational communication, to role-playing. Montola's model breaks role-playing into a series of decisions where a participant chooses a certain action in order to work towards (or against) a certain plotline. These plot points are called *attractors*. Thus every time a participant makes a decision, she either tries to steer the game to an orderly or a chaotic direction. (Montola 2004.)

In practise this division between integrative and dissipative gaming forms the basis for the focus of the game; either the game is more geared up to build a coherent drama with an emphasis on a story (*integrative*, orderly) or a game is more akin to a world simulation, where the individuals act without a responsibility towards a story (*dissipative*, chaotic).

A pure chaotic game is aimless, random, free and focused on the moment. In a chaotic game the character is an actor who is moving in a complete world exactly

according to her wishes. The player's only responsibility is to be true to the character. A pure orderly game is balanced, controlled, and holistic, and produces a coherent story. The overall role-playing text is more important than an individual character and the player has a responsibility towards the bigger story and the stories of other characters. Again, these idealised extremes are seldom if ever encountered in actual games. Striking a good balance between the extremes is often integral to the success of a game.

The game master has a number of methods that she can use to steer the games towards order or chaos. Dissipative methods include a complete and functioning world, rational individuals with personal agendas, briefing the players even on unnecessary background knowledge, players coming up with their own characters, secrets and individual plots and immersion as defined by the Turku schools (Pohjola 2000). Integrative methods include characters written by the game master, clearly defined genre and style, rationalising character motives, dramatic playing, fate-play (Fatland 1998), the game master as the world pushing events in certain directions, putting emphasis on loyalty and team spirit, creating characters as groups, controlling the time and prewritten scenes. (Montola 2002)

Both of these collective approaches to gaming can be used fruitfully and neither one is preferable to the other. Different games and different visions require different approaches and the game master can use this division to better understand how to reach her goals. It is also easy to start creating subcategories in which the same division to chaotic and orderly focus can be observed. For example one can define the focus of the diegetic frame, the character creation, the rule system and the character dynamics.

## Practice

It should be noted that all of these categories as well as their contents are but tools and examples. The divisions can be continued and endless lists of sub-categories can be created. These four dimensions should not be seen as the only ones that can be used in categorizing games. A number of different distinctions, categories if you will, can be proposed. For example Emma Wieslander has divided games based on the motivation of the player to backdrops for larger than life drama, social events, fulfilling artistic ambitions and showcases for handcrafts and equipment.

The purpose of these categories is to help the game master to communicate her vision to the participants by creating a shared framework for the role-playing process. It can also be used to categorise and interpret old games and as a springboard for new ideas.

For example *PanoptiCorp* was a game that used almost exclusively live action methods. The genre of the game is more difficult to define. The game was firmly rooted in reality (in role-playing games real life games are a genre), in this case set in an advertising agency, but it used a number of external reference points. *PanoptiCorp* was a social criticism in the vein of Naomi Klein's *No Logo* with more than a hint of George

Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thrown in. The style of gaming was based on realism with shades of satire. The focus of the game was closer to orderly than chaotic, the framework of the game was somewhere in the middle but the players were instructed to play towards a common goal in an integrative fashion.

On the other hand *Helsingin kronikka* (The Chronicle of Helsinki) uses both live-action and tabletop methods in creating the game. The genre is vampire, mostly in the sub-genre of official by-the-book White Wolf World of Darkness. The style of the game has varied (the game has been played for almost ten years), but mostly it has been dramatic or soap operatic. The focus on the game is closer to chaotic as even if there are a number of grand stories and some heavy railroading done by the game masters, the sheer number of individual characters with individual goals and motivations, some of them as old as the game, pull the game to a more dissipative direction.

Randomly combining elements from the various categories can help think outside the mainstream of role-playing. What kind of a game would be a live action with some tabletop methods thrown in to simulate combat (with miniatures, for example), set in a fantasy of the 1970's in the vein of the film *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), played in a realistic fashion that makes way for surrealism from time to time and all of this as a chaotic character study?

Of course, if these categories start limiting the imagination, this tool has ceased to do its job.

*This text is based on a number of presentations I have given in various places over the years. The seeds were sown in 2000 in Ropecon, Finland, but since then the typology has become more comprehensive, and these later versions have been presented in Knutpunkt 2002 in Stockholm, Sweden and Knudepunkt 2003 in Copenhagen, Denmark. I am in debt to a number of people who have commented on these thoughts through the years, especially to Markus Montola, Henri Hakkarainen and Satu Heliö.*

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# On the Importance of Body Language in Live-Action Role-play

*Every now and then the same discussion appears on the larp mailing lists and discussion forums: acting versus immersion. Usually some participants in the discussion see these two as opposites that would rule out each other, as if there has to be a choice between them when the player is getting into character. This can seem very confusing, as they could also be seen as parts of one whole – inseparably dependent on each other.<sup>1</sup>*

Only 7% of human face-to-face communication consists of the abstract meaning of words. The tone and modulation of voice is 23% and body language 70%. Thus, a chimpanzee can theoretically communicate 93% of what a human being can.<sup>2</sup> The difference is in the IQ – the chimpanzee's maximum IQ is around that of a 12 year old child – and abstractions, which are impossible to communicate without words. Therefore, human beings have quantum physics and TV shopping, while chimpanzees do not.

Like those adorable cousins of ours, we also produce and interpret body language mostly on an unconscious level of the mind. If body language and words are contradictory, the listener automatically believes the former. As this process is usually unconscious, the result can be just a vague feeling that the speaker is being less than honest. Body language also works when we are silent. One threatening step towards a shy person might make her escape.

This also applies to role-playing. When a player's approach towards the character concentrates primarily on the character's thoughts and feelings, the physical output – body language and use of voice – might become contradictory or suppressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Although, with references, this text could become academic, such an endeavour does not interest me. The vague fact-like things in this article are from numerous sources read during three decades. My reading consists mostly of everything by Desmond Morris I have been able to lay my hands on, a few bookshelves of psychology and psychiatry and two NLP courses related to my studies. After a decade of larp I do, however, feel justified to speak with the voice of empirical experience. The reader should be warned that under the fact-like surface, this is actually an educated opinion.

<sup>2</sup> The reader might have seen slightly different percentages elsewhere, but the estimates differ only by few percentage points.

## Contradiction Between Body and Mind

If the character and the player are not identical, there will appear a contradiction in expression. Other players will automatically react to the body language of the character, if it contradicts the words the character uses. Thus, other players give the original player different feedback than would be expected in the situation. The player then reacts to this feedback, other players react again and a vicious circle is formed. The game situation will develop in an entirely different direction than the characters' personalities would suggest.

A contradiction between body language and verbal output can also give the other players a feeling that the character has mental problems. As this is probably not what the player intended to express, it could lead into another vicious circle of action and reaction.

In some situations, suspension of disbelief is stretched to the limit. A typical situation would be a tough gang leader portrayed by a player with a fearful and shy body language. Such a gang leader is not very good at getting people to obey, unless the other players note the situation on the meta-level and correct their behaviour accordingly. For some players, the need for a meta-level correction might limit the depth of their experience of their own character.

When the character's body language and use of voice stay unchanged, the player's own experience is also affected. If body language and voice remain unchanged, the difference between the player and the character is only 7% – and, therefore, the immersion experienced is also only 7% of its whole potential. This raises a question of how believable such a character is to the player herself.

## Playing With Body Language

Players who are young or new to the hobby often suppress their body language in varying degrees when getting into character. The character's body language can become minimalistic, and the use of voice very neutral, even monotonic. Some medical conditions and disorders, such as Parkinson's disease and autism, can cause this kind of flattening of physical expression. The player is sending a signal to the other players that there is something seriously wrong with the character. The other players again react to the body language and voice instead of the words, and another vicious circle is formed. Alternatively, they note the situation on the meta-level, correct their own behaviour, and perhaps limit their own experience of the game.

On the other hand, monotonic body language can be used as a part of character creation. It should certainly have some effects, as there is a very strong two-way feedback loop between body and mind: Thoughts and feelings affect human physical expression, but the physical expression can also affect thoughts and feelings. For example, it has been shown that a fake smile can make one feel better in minutes. This is also applicable

to other feelings – take, for example, aggression. By consciously changing posture one's body, it is possible to produce a genuine fight-or-flight reaction, complete with an adrenaline rush.

When getting ready to fight, we narrow our eyes to protect them from damage. Breathing becomes shallow and fast and the muscles tense. Hands can curl into fists and weight shifts to the balls of the feet. Taking this 'action position' produces effects very quickly: the pulse quickens and the stomach crunches, as digestion stops and adrenaline enters circulation. In seconds the body language changes even more, as the initially faked body stance gets more natural and one will begin to feel real aggression. These measures help complete the immersion in the character is, and make the character believable to others. Other players get a strong signal that one is ready and willing to fight. As body language is interpreted mostly on the unconscious level, the opponent automatically recognises a potential danger. Thus her reactions fit the situation and the aggressing characters intention.<sup>3</sup>

## Getting in Character

Getting in character is a matter of temperament. Some people might get easily in character by just by concentrating on it, and their body language changes accordingly with no extra effort. However, if one pays as much attention to both mind and body and considers them an inseparable whole, it would be natural to get in character by using physical expression. Observing different types of people helps when constructing a character. One can also make faces at the mirror and try out how different types of body languages feel.<sup>4</sup>

This illustrates a major difference between live-action and tabletop role-playing. It can be hard for some players to get in character while sitting at a table throwing dice. The 30% of expression that the use of voice and abstract meaning of words alone give might not be enough for the immersion to succeed. For this reason costumes and other

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<sup>3</sup> Another, although a much more difficult example, is being drunk. Personally, I have so far managed to do this only once, but the experience was very rewarding. After acting out all the signs of a developing inebriation for an hour and a half, I really did get into a state of mind that was very hard to distinguish from really being drunk. The more 'vodka' (water) I drank, the more drunken I became. The amount of water was about three times what vodka would have been needed, which was an extra bonus, as it simulated the diuretic effect of alcohol very convincingly. The only difference to really being drunk was that I could snap out of the state if I wanted. Transferring drunkenness from the physical to the mental level took a lot longer than transferring aggression. But then again, it also takes more time to get drunk than to get angry in real life too.

<sup>4</sup> I get into character through physical expression. It takes me up to an hour and a half to slip into the mental state of the character after changing my physical expression, but sometimes the whole process takes only fifteen minutes. In this process I naturally also use the thoughts and feelings of the character, but if I tried to get into character by just using them alone, the process would take hours or fail entirely.

props can also be considered to be much more than just the outer appearance of the character. Costume, hairdo, jewellery and other props strongly affect body language. The most obvious example of this is how the height of the heel affects the way one walks.

Parodies and humorous games are an exception from this holistic way of getting into character. These games concentrate on keeping up a certain genre of comedy, and the most important goal is the communal attempt to create humour, instead of experiencing the character or maintaining consistency or believability.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is a method used for many different purposes, from therapy to leadership training.<sup>5</sup> One of NLP methods, modelling, is a suitable tool for larps. Roughly speaking, the principle of modelling is that if one person can do something, it is possible to model it and teach it to others. Sales or leadership skills and successful sports performances are typical abilities that can be modelled. Modelling includes thought strategies, beliefs and values, physiology and the frame of reference the modelled person is acting in.

Modelling a larp character is somewhat easier, because most likely only the physiology – body language and the use of voice – need to be modelled from other people. Other aspects can usually be found in the character description, if the character is well-written. When the player pays attention to all four aspects, the character should become an experience in full immersion, as well as convincing to the other players. Along with personalities, emotional states can also be modelled. It is also possible to model personality types and characters without noticing.<sup>6</sup>

## The Meta-Level

It is not possible for a person with a normal psyche to completely forget the real world, or get ‘stuck’ in a character. The meta-level is always present. It is, however, possible that the player either does not have the necessary introspective skills to notice the meta-level, or has tricked herself into ignoring it.

If the meta-level was not present at all times, the player could not discontinue a traumatic event in the game or shout ‘hold’<sup>7</sup> in a dangerous situation. Without the meta-level the player would so completely believe the illusion of the game that shouting ‘hold’

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<sup>5</sup> To keep this text manageably short, I will not tell much about NLP itself. *Google* finds over 29 600 hits with NLP, so anyone wishing for more information can find it easily on the Internet.

<sup>6</sup> I can single out two characters during my ten years of larp which have been especially strong immersion experiences and also received a lot of praise from other players. These were both very old women, so I have probably modelled the body language of an old woman without noticing it myself.

<sup>7</sup> The ‘hold’ rule is quite widespread in Finland. If something dangerous is about to happen in a game, any participant who notices the potential danger is supposed to shout ‘hold’ and discontinue playing. Everyone who hears the shout should do the same, stop playing and spread the message by repeating the shout.

would not even be a possibility. (After all, one would not use it to try to avoid danger in real life.)

Thus, it is the player's own choice whether she pays any attention to the meta-level, and if so, how much. Developing introspective skills and reflective intelligence is the key to noticing meta-level or coping with it. Meditation and other spiritual practices can be of great help in noticing the observer inside. Finding that internal observer, the meta-level, is actually one goal on many spiritual paths and philosophies. The meta-level exists at all times in real world too, whether one notices it or not. This can be of great help in getting rid of unwanted automatic reactions and habits. It is a useful tool for personal growth, not just something needed in live-action role-playing.

According to some brands of psychodrama, it is impossible for a person to experience any emotion or aspect of personality, not already existing in her. Of course, that aspect or emotion can be minimal or suppressed from the conscious self. It is, however, possible to change the inner balance of emotions and aspects of personality, thus giving the player a chance to experience a mental state radically different from the usual. This is the basis of experiencing a character different from the player. The mind is a mixing table, behind which the meta-level sits observing the situation and adjusting the mix of parts of personality and emotions as needed.

## Taking Other Players into Consideration

A player must be able to follow the events on the meta-level even when it threatens the unity of her own game experience. When the player has learned that meta-level exists at all times anyway, and when she has learned not to let it disturb the game, the unity of the experience does not need to break down.

The meta-level is of course necessary. Safety reasons alone require it; a player who is unable to follow the game on the meta-level would be too dangerous to be let into any larps at all. Fortunately, the meta-level is ever-present, whether the player notices it or not.

It is not just allowed, but even preferable to act noticeably – to be physical, if such activity is not contradictory with the character's personality. Some people are louder and more noticeable in the real life, so such behaviour is acceptable in larp worlds as well. Even stereotypical characters can be natural, because some people are caricatures of themselves in real life, or constantly play a role. Humans are pack animals, and our experience of the surrounding world consists very much of the people around us. The situation in larp is not that different. Colourless or non-existent acting will make the game world colourless too.

Another way to utilise the meta-level is taking into consideration beginners and shy players. With one's own actions a player can create hooks, which others can catch if they want to in order to engage themselves in the game. Thus they can achieve more action and have stronger experiences than they otherwise would.

Again, the presupposition is that such an action is not contradictory with the character – a strongly introverted character would not engage another in conversation just like that. The simplest example of helping other players is starting a conversation with another character, however trivial the subject might be.

At its best, larp is a kind of social dance where players take each other into consideration on the meta-level without their own experience suffering from it. Solipsism, which does not take anything or anyone into consideration, is not that different from those “I could not get out of character after the game ended” claims. The meta-level is always present – it is up to the player to decide whether or not to use it.

## Conclusions

- 1 A human being is a psychophysical whole, where the feedback loop between mind and body works both ways. As people are different, the process of getting in character can move from mental to physical, or vice versa. It is essential for getting in character to ensure that both parts are present for the gaming experience to be holistic and the character believable to other players.
- 2 The meta-level is always present, and a player cannot get stuck in a character by mistake. The player chooses whether she makes deep enough an acquaintance with herself to be able to notice the meta-level and not to be disturbed by its presence. Solipsism and denying the presence of the meta-level indicate mental laziness and indifference towards other players.
- 3 The players' method of forming their characters and their characters actions and reactions towards other characters is an essential part of the larp. Larp is social co-operation where every player's responsibility is to help and enrich other players' experiences, whenever such action is not contradictory with his or her character.

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## Rules of Engagement

*In most larps there is, strangely enough, a far higher risk of the character getting killed than making love. It seems that amorous interaction such as lovemaking, cuddling, bugging or just holding hands in a sensual or sexual manner, is quite taboo. Many seem to believe that it might be difficult to separate between the player's and the character's feelings and that the risk of someone trying to take advantage of the situation or getting hurt is too big. During most games this is unfortunately probably true.*

Typically “rules” are all about portraying physical situations that one doesn’t want the player to experience the same way as the character does and vice versa. A magician throwing a fireball or a blade hitting the character both require methods that make the events playable. It seems like the first genre of larp, just as the first genre of tabletop role-playing, was the typical hack ‘n’ slash in which the only methods needed would be those that simulate violence.

Since then role-playing themes have diversified and the methods have changed accordingly. Still, it is somewhat surprising how little the methodologies and thematic structures have changed. Perhaps there has been no demand for dramas without terror as primus motor and therefore there has been no need for methods unrelated to aggression – or maybe since there have been no effective methods, enacting other kinds of dramas have been too difficult.

### Building the Stage

While drafting an agreement on what kind of interaction is to be expected, one in effect creates a safety net, or a stage, which will work as the frame of the game. By deciding beforehand what reactions are possible, it is easier for the players to experiment within their own limits and reach character emotions that they otherwise might feel too insecure to aim for. For example a common agreement is, regardless of rule-system, that no one will be stabbed by a real blade. This makes it possible for the opposing fighting units to clash and although the characters might experience fear of dying (a risk that they are apparently ready to take), the player won’t have to evaluate it quite as seriously. This keeps the fighting within the diegesis.

Obviously, these agreements should be general, applying to all such interaction since each player isn’t capable of communicating with all others beforehand on a one-to-one basis. Also, remembering who is comfortable with what can be difficult. It is simply

more straightforward to state what methods are to be used and then let the players decide if they want to take part in that when they sign up for the game.

When it comes to other strong emotions than aggression there haven't been such general agreements traditionally. Some might even ban amorous interaction altogether. The general strategy, however, seems to be open to the idea that if players want to act on strong emotions together they should work something out between them beforehand. This would, in comparison with building a stage together, be like pointing players to a pile of boards and nails.

This *laissez-faire* strategy is rather counterproductive from a safety point of view as it leaves much room for group pressure and miscommunication. Neither does it cover situations that arise during the game, i.e. situations that have not been prepared for. It also puts a big part of the interaction outside the diegesis, as it requires for the players to communicate borders and limits as the situation proceeds. That makes it virtually impossible for them to relax and for the character to fully experience the moment.

### The discussion

Two of the strongest peaks of the human scale of emotions are aggression and lust. Whereas most people agree that the unleashed display of aggression would be a bad thing, even a discussion about the deployment of lust seems to be avoided. In its limited existence the discussion on acting out love on larps has, on most occasions, been banal. A typical example of the discussion is available as late as in December 2003 at the G-punkt forum<sup>1</sup> (author's summary):

In the thread *Sex och lajv* the issue of sex in larps was approached. The question was put forward as "Is it possible?" Not only was the poster thinking about doing a larp on prostitution and therefore might be perceived as quite ignorant in asking about sex, but the discussion also soon amounted to a typical debate on contraceptives and STDs. The discussion showed quite clearly that sex is understood as heterosexual, vaginal (pregnancy) and penetrative (STDs), limiting the possibilities of methods. It also shows that no general understanding has been reached (as it has been when it comes to violence).

The main schism lay in "in token" versus "in true". Tokenism was seen as using rules and thereby the debaters missed that both tokenism and "true" are possible methods (rules). Several of the posts also suggested that sex that isn't intercourse is either not sex or a simulation of sex. The only alternative to a token rules solution that was initially presented was clearly defining personal limits and responsibility.

The *positive power drama* strategy was formed partly as a counterpoint to this kind of reasoning (read more about that strategy in the other article by the author in this book) and has since then been a tool to bring the discussion to a more sensible level. The point being to be able to discuss the enacting of amorous (i.e. loving, sensual or sexual) situations in a way that allows participants to distinguish between player and character and to remove the uneasiness that seem to accompany the theme in many other discussions.

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<sup>1</sup> *G-punkt* (eng. G-spot [sic]) hosts the Galadrim web forum at [www.larp.com/galadrim/debatt/](http://www.larp.com/galadrim/debatt/)

## Methods at hand

Although few larps have had any general agreement on deployment of methods for amorous situations, there have been methods available for those who wanted to play such scenes. Historically there seem to have been a couple of main “schools”:

- **WYSIWYG:** What you see is what you get. The participant acts out everything that the character does. There is no distinction between the player's and the character's actions, although there might be differences in how the player and the character interpret these actions and the reactions they provoke. Whether this means that it is acceptable for the participant to have intercourse as a character or the belief that a participant can in fact have intercourse completely in character are the main themes of discussion in this school. Deciding how far one wants to go is up to the individual.
- **Massage:** One participant gives a back massage to another participant who then groans to give players nearby something to react to. This line of thinking implies that sexual interaction can be normalised as something not mutual.
- **Conversation:** Participants talk through what happens – a fusion of larp and storytelling.
- **Clothes On:** The way of simulating intercourse where parties grind against each other with their clothes on. Quite often the mood is ironic or at least distanced rather than amorous. This seems to have been a quite common way of simulating a “harmless” version of rape in orc games in the past.

Still, the method that seems to have been most common (at least in Sweden), is where players that know in advance that their characters might have amorous encounters during the game talk through what areas of their respective bodies they are willing to let the other player touch – and then stick with that within the WYSIWYG method. Also, in games where safe words (such as *cut* and *brems*<sup>2</sup>) are used, these can be employed as possible safety net.

## Hand-to-Hand Love Making

The most recent lovemaking method was created within the project *Mellan himmel och hav* (Between Heaven and Sea). It is both a very limiting and enabling method. The lovers restrict themselves to touching only each other's hands, arms, shoulders and necks as part of the lovemaking. Above armpit and below earlobes is permitted. To make

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<sup>2</sup> Cut and brems are Norwegian expressions for cut and brake. Using brems means that the scene is progressing toward uneasy ground and the player told to brems should steer the situation in a different direction. Cut stops the game; participants leave the game area and talk through what just happened in the game.

this exciting they use eye contact, a lot of focus and vary the touch in sensual, rough or playful manners. Variations can be made where different usage might translate into different types of amorous interaction, but this has to be agreed on within the specific game.

Since the hands are very sensitive, most of the emotions that can be present in an amorous situation can be conveyed in this fashion. Only the hands, arms and neck are to be used in touching the other person. If mouth, tongue or teeth are employed it could easily get too intimate for the player/character distinction to be made. Sound, breathing and other body language communication is however possible means of amplifying the experience.

### Using the Method

The *Ars Amandi method*<sup>3</sup> has been used as the general agreement at two larps so far, Mellan himmel och hav and *Ringblomman* (The Marigold). It was also tested in an unfinished form at *Futuredrome*. The two larps that have used it were very different in themes and in their deployment of the method as well. Mellan himmel och hav was a science fiction game set in an alternative world and had seventy players. Ringblomman was a social game exploring communal living in 1978 with approximately thirty players.

There are basically two ways to use a method. Either it's a diegetic method (this is how the characters does it, e.g. Mellan himmel och hav) or it is a player method (this is what the player does to simulate something that the character experiences, e.g. Ringblomman). In the diegesis of Mellan himmel och hav intercourse was considered to be something very unpleasant that one only subjected oneself to in order to produce children. It was basically seen as the uncomfortable necessity; no sane person would ever think that having intercourse was something they did for pleasure. Instead, people made love using the *Ars Amandi* method and the main erogenous zones where simply diegetically placed there (hands, arms, neck).

This made it possible not only for the lovemaking to be gender-blind, but also for a diegetic distinction between those the characters could and would produce offspring with and those they only felt loving lust for. The hands, although highly eroticised, were of course also used for everyday things but the diegetic way to make love made a random touch of another's hand much more tantalising.

Ringblomman, being a historical game, had no such elements in its diegetic frame. The characters that made love during Ringblomman had sex the way most humans do, some by caressing and some by penetrative intercourse. The players, however, only touched the areas of the *Ars Amandi* method. This requires a tad more of the players' imagination and some might choose to translate touches into their different counterparts. Whether this is done by verbal communication, in the respective players imagination or by other means is left open to the players in that specific situation.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ars Amandi* means the art of lovemaking and is the name of the organizers' collective that produced both *Ringblomman* and *Mellan himmel och hav*.

The point of using the method here is to allow for the parties to explore and devote themselves to the situation without player interaction suddenly substituting character interaction.

The real challenge of using the method as a symbol for diegetic action is the shift between WYSIWYG interaction and method interaction. This worked very well in the game and also other sensual interaction like kissing could be worked in with touching cheek to cheek. During Ringblomman the method was used to enact everything from innocent teen love to dramatic games of dominance. This rather extensive testing of the method shows that it is very flexible since it works equally well in amorous situations that are sensual and esthetical as well as in other types of interaction.

## Amorous and Not

The term *amorous* is an all-encompassing term for describing loving un-platonic interaction. It encompasses everything from suggestive eye contact to full blown sexual activity. In order for interaction to be amorous it has to be loving. That means that not all sexual, or even sensual, interaction can be seen as amorous. Both Ringblomman and Mellan himmel och hav were games produced within the positive power drama and the method was used exclusively to enact mutual interaction, even when used in a rougher fashion. It is however possible to use the method in more negatively coloured events and even in situations where the characters aren't necessarily consenting.

The method, being created for use within the positive power drama, is mainly intended to enable the making of amorous situations. It is however flexible enough to be used in other sexual or close to sexual interaction. It might also be even more important for the negative drama to use methods that separate the players' and characters' experiences. In the case of molestation or sexual abuse the areas of the method work just as well as the genital and breast areas. When a prostitute performs it is easy to interact without the spark and eye contact and to just stretch the arms forward inanimately. Using the method would in all likeliness enhance the experience of degradation and stop such interaction from being romanticized or done mindlessly.

Possibly the method could be used even in non-drama larps such as mainstream fantasy, generic cyberpunk games or costumes larps. A possible variation of the method might be to limit it to encompass only the arms (not hands and neck) in order to prevent it from being too powerful. The notion might sound strange to someone who hasn't tried the method, but it really should be considered in games where maximum intensity isn't a top priority.

## Conclusions

A powerful method to enact amorous situation was greatly needed. Although the Ars Amandi method is a neat tool, it isn't everything one might wish for. There is definitely room for other methods that serve similar purposes just as there are several different systems for fighting. It seems to have worked rather well during the events it's been used in so far. What is especially striking is its flexibility. The downside of the method is however that it requires both concentration and, in the player method version, some imagination of the players using it.

One possible scenario is to expand the method into a larger system of methods (like the latex system is not one method but several disciplines of how to make weapons and use them). The cheek-to-cheek kissing is one such addition. Possible general area or touch "translations" might become available, usable in games where the difference between types of sexual interaction is important. Crossover versions usable in tabletop role-playing might evolve as well as lighter versions for non-drama larps. Another scenario is of course that the making of one such system inspires others to create other systems that are better suited for other types of interaction or that would be attractive to other types of gaming than the ones that the method has been used in so far.

The bottom-line of working with the Ars Amandi method is that it has proved very useful, both in diegetical and in player versions. The magic of making love without the involvement of any of the areas that are generally perceived as the parts involved in lovemaking is impossible to convey through text. What can be described are merely the why and the clinical how. The emotional impact is, like reactions to other amorous interaction, so individual that it is impossible to generalize. That is probably where the real virtue of the method lies; it truly begins in the people, not the frame, making them, rather than the method, the focus and simply letting them love and be loved.

## Games

Futuredrome (2002) by Henrik Wallgren, Staffan Sörensson et al., Sweden

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk et al., Sweden

Ringblomman (2004) by Karin Tidbeck et al., Sweden





# Games



# “I Could a Tale Unfold Whose Lightest Word Would Harrow up Thy Soul”

## Lessons from Hamlet

*In the spring of 2002, larpwrights Martin Ericsson and Christopher Sandberg and their team produced the last three acts of William Shakespeare's Hamlet as a three-day larp in Stockholm. The game was massive, intense, beautiful, tragic, life-changing. It is, even today, a top contender for the greatest larp of all time. Yet, we are losing Hamlet. The evanescence of the art form is furthered in this case by the vow of silence taken by the players: that they would only discuss the game in detail with other participants of the game. Actually, although we who were there tended to seek each other's company over the following summer, we did not speak much about the game. I think we were in grief, over mankind, over the court at Elsinore, over a world that was now lost to us.*

At a lecture at the Ropecon convention, Ericsson spoke of larp as alchemy, as the process of turning crude matter into gold within a hermetically sealed space. This idea is bound to make practitioners of both role-playing games and magic intensely uncomfortable. But think of it as an allegory: the practical implications are down-to-earth and useful. This Hamlet set of methods is what I will describe, reducing out of necessity a great artwork to rules and logistics. It doesn't do the game justice, but it's a sort of legacy, I guess, to deepen the magical daydreams of others.

## There Was Elsinore

The organisers' political reading of the tragedy, though not in vogue today, is in the respectable tradition of Marxist literary criticism. To emphasise the political aspects, the action of the Shakespeare play was moved from one fictive historical setting to another. They imagined a Europe where the bourgeois French Revolution was unsuccessful and the twentieth century was met by a world of industrialised feudal societies. The socialist revolution would then have been aimed at monarchies and at the nobility controlling much of the industries. The game was set in a parallel thirties, during the Spanish civil war and an escalating armed conflict between red Fortinbras and the Danish Empire. The echoes of the Russian revolutions 1905–1917 are obvious, but many of the issues

concerning the use and transfer of power are probably universal. Today we might have thought of other conflicts; at that time we found decisions of the desperate Elsinore government to strangely mirror the war in Afghanistan and the new changes to the makeup of American society.

Everybody knows about Hamlet's question: to be or not, to live or not, to end it all or stay on and fight? In the play, this question is intimately related to the idea of the body politic, and the concept of an unsuitable head of state being like a cancer in the body of the nation. Shakespeare emphasises this in the text through dozens of images related to illness and at the end of the play it is made quite clear that the reason everyone has to die is to quell the corruption and make way for new, and saner rule under Fortinbras.

The end of the game was given, of course, although not everybody expected Fortinbras to charge in that impressively, guns blazing, with a war-torn band of rebels and red flags. The dramatic tension was constructed instead around Hamlet's question, which was put to every player about every character. As the game begins, the court and a random assortment of citizens have been evacuated from the castle to the bomb shelter below. Not all of them are bad, but none of them are innocent, and the weeks in the cave until the end are spent in debauchery and denial. Now, many would be killed during the second and third act through acts of treachery or desperation, but for those who were still alive at the end, Ericsson and Sandberg left a decision to make. When Fortinbras enters, they said, he will fire at the crowd, and your character will die unless you believe he really deserves to live.

And so depressing was this portrait of humanity that very few remained. The game was played twice; only a scattered handful of characters survived. Maybe eight, maybe five out of seventy or eighty. We did not feel at the beginning that our characters were all that evil and they did not, of course, even believe their lives were threatened until they sometime in the second act could hear the riots in the streets above them. But over these few days, a couple of weeks in game-time, we players became convinced that our characters were selfish, brutal, inhumane. That the war waged by the government, sequestered with us, was utterly unjust.

We signed up for Hamlet because Ericsson and Sandberg are great entertainers, because they had promised that there would be a fantastic party and that this larp would push every imaginable limit of the art form. They are. There was. We did. But when we left the game, we were grieving, and thinking of it makes my heart ache still.

## **A Sealed and Complete Space**

The tabletop game master, in theory, has complete control of the in-game reality (but he can choose to cede some of this power to the players). Although every player's mental imagery will of course differ, the constant presence of a game master can control discrepancies before they become conflicting enough to threaten diegetic logic. In a larp the game master typically gives almost all control over physical reality to the players at

the start of the game. Illogical or bad settings or props will, without a GM to adjust them, have to be ignored or played around. The mechanism is exactly the same as the one used for playing to begin with – a form of active self-deception: “This is real, I did not hear a car just then and I am indeed the lizard king.”

In the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, which deals extensively with the problems of immersion, this inner machine is referred to as the imaginator. If we are required to play around too many distractions, or sort out too many conflicting diegeses, the imaginator will overload and break, distancing us from the fiction. That’s a good thing too – the imaginator safety system enables us to enjoy complex stories without the risk of waking up one morning in the firm belief that we are Napoleon, or Gandalf, or Buffy.

Another simple illustration of these complex processes would be a fantasy muscle. It can carry only so much, but what *kind* of weight, what kind of errors one needs to re-imagine doesn’t really matter. If the amount of distraction in the physical environment is reduced, we can spend much more muscle on accepting the diegesis as true, and on not being embarrassed about, well, chanting, or dancing, or fighting with toy weapons.

The Ericsson-Sandberg approach is just that. Ericsson has said that the larpmaker should strive to control (or at least include) every aspect of the game location much the same way a tabletop GM does. Why ask the player to work against things that he could work with? These can include the feel of linen on the skin; the chemical taste of science fiction food or the faint sound of gunshots in the distance. But they should also include the smell, the light, the temperature of the place; the time of day; the weather. We used to joke, when we were younger, about the game master-as-god. Ericsson and Sandberg see no reason for a larpmaker to abdicate that power. Immersion is a physical act, they argue; in a larp literally everything should be a part of the story.

Hamlet was played in an old underground fire-engine garage beneath a city park. The space was shaped rather like a cogwheel with a big circular space in the middle and small rooms opening out like spokes on each side. On an upper level was a long, low room, lined on one side with cupboards that were equipped for the game with metal toilet buckets and washstands. All walls were stone or concrete; the game was entirely lit with candles and some oil lamps. The rooms were decorated to look like a castle basement. The furniture was beautiful, old but very shabby (stage antiques bought off the theatre relatively cheaply).

A sort of throne room was set up in the middle, the King’s office and private bedroom in one of the rooms, couches and tables and chairs in another, an extempore cinema rigged in a third. It would show, at this debauched court, both newsreels from the war and period pornography. There was a piano, and massive mahogany tables and chairs for the government to work at, and at one side was the kitchen, which fed the court royally at the beginning of the game and very strangely later on, as supplies and morale dwindled. There were gramophones and hookahs and pillows and paintings; there were games and some books and huge amounts of china – the champagne was Bollinger and Pommery, and poured in shoes and bosoms and a gigantic champagne tower. This was not, in any sense of the word, a cheap environment.

A lot of the wardrobe originated from the theatre as well. We were instructed to dress in those clothes, or our own findings, in looks no younger than the '40s and preferably worn, torn, eclectic. Although some outfits were spectacular, this created an overall effect of a culture stuck in a shabby past. Even the fashionable young wore flapper outfits, at that time (in our sense of dress history) already a dated look. Since flamboyant key pieces were lent out by the larpmakers, the quality of the visual illusion was ensured. Inspired by this level of ambition, many players never the less spent a lot of money on period props and outfits of their own.

The space, the food, the furniture, the clothes, even the chill temperature and the soft half light; the live music and the records and the music on the prop radios; all this combined to create a complex illusion of a court in isolation from the world. And then the larpwrights decided to add a universe.

## A War on the World

Like horror movies, a lot of larps are set in isolated places. One logical conflict (“why don’t everybody just leave?”) is replaced by another one (“they really can’t”). These uncrossable borders again require active re-imagining, and limit the potential scope of the action. In a stage play, by contrast, even if the action might play out in a single living room set, the surrounding world will have an air of completeness. New characters knock on the door, newspapers are read, letters will arrive.

In the movement of advanced Swedish larpmakers that Ericsson and Sandberg are a part of, this total environment has become almost a standard requirement. There are basically two ways of achieving it: setting the game in a reality close enough to ours for cars and Jell-O and Nietzsche, or by setting it in an insulated environment and controlling all information the exits and enters the game. Now, the organisers had raised the bar on this method before. At *Carolus Rex*, Ericsson’s retro-futuristic space opera larp staged on a stationary Russian submarine, movement and space battle were simulated through the “ship’s communication system and AI” – computers hooked to the gamemasters on duty. This, combined with a surround sound system and smoke effects for everything – the sound of torpedoes loading, damage to the hull – would have been impressive enough. But after our Royal Swedish battleship engaged in battle with a Danish vessel, we realised that we could dock to a rescue pod among the debris. Opening the hatch of the *Carolus Rex*, a lot of thoughts flashed through the minds of us players. What would we find in the pod? A clue, maybe. A monster. Nobody expected eight Danish crewmen in full uniform, played by eight Danish larppers, smuggled by the GMs to the game location and kept hidden until this turning point in the game.

Nothing less would be expected from Hamlet as Ericsson and Sandberg set out to build a world. Four old military telephones were hooked up from the game area to the GM room. One was the king’s private line, another kept in a booth upstairs where lines formed as the war advanced and characters tried to reach their homes and loved ones.

One was used by the Secretary of War to run the war, in accordance with the decisions made by the bickering and selfish government, and the king, to the extent he could be bothered with it. This being Hamlet, after all, Claudius too deteriorates as the story advances.

Every player had filled in an information slip on each person that his character might think of phoning during the game. The routine was simple: crank the phone, state your name and to whom you wish to be connected, and make small talk to the operator or wait. Meanwhile, outside, the operator would look you and your contacts up in their files, and holler for the person who played that contact last. The operators were a big bunch of the greatest tabletop GM's in the Stockholm area, working in shifts. Sometimes you could reach your contact, sometimes you couldn't. Unless the building you were calling had been bombed or abandoned, you would usually get somebody on the line. A housekeeper, maybe. Somebody's brother. Another teller at your bank. People you didn't know existed in this world, but whom, once established, you could call again. If we needed to call somebody we had not foreseen we could do just that; we were just asked before the game to give the person at the other end something, anything, to work with when we did. The operator doubled as a telegraph central.

Calling the military HQ was always especially harrowing, since both the one giving and the one receiving the orders often knew that they were pointless. At the start of the third act, when things were getting right grim, I called HQ once and I swear the person on the other end was crying when he gave me reports on our losses.

The GM operators worked at all hours, playing hundreds of characters, sending telegraphs about. Our outside communication gave them a very good idea of what was going on down there, enabling them to call us back with timely (dis)information or news of the war, which was of course carefully simulated by the GMs.

Once the riots started in the streets nobody wanted to leave the shelter, but some characters had to, and for a while communications were kept up to the largely empty "castle above". We got fresh foodstuffs, for a while (Sandberg was the in-character chef, cooking for the duration). We got newsreels, previously compiled by Ericsson from authentic period news footage. The actual projector was modern and hooked up to a laptop, but they were hidden and the person running them was one of the GM operators. We wouldn't have known if it hadn't presented us with error messages once or twice, putting our fantasy muscle to work for a moment in order to erase that memory.

The game's first act – Shakespeare's third – ends with Hamlet being banished from England. It is unclear from the text how long he is gone, but here it was established that our four-hour break moved the plot about two weeks forward. What happened "outside" in the meantime was established, in part, by these newsreel movies (no pirates in this reading, but what appeared to be a rogue submarine).

Hamlet's return in time for Ophelia's lit-de-parade (replacing the burial scene) and Fortinbras' at the end were not the only instances where characters entering the space was used for dramatic effect. Ophelia's brother Laertes, too, exploded down the driveway in a white-hot fury, returning from Spain as a revolutionary, to find his father

murdered and sister insane, and ultimately committing treachery to his cause through aligning himself with Claudius to spite and later kill his best friend, Hamlet. Oh, and in one of the two performances of the larp, Laertes was also a girl.

## Character And Text

All of the Hamlet larp goes back to the text, back to the fact that this is a play that you can read ten or fifteen times and still find new depths in. That is how the game was conceived too, by whittling out the universe between the lines. Finding characters to pick up and flesh out, people who are in Shakespeare only glimpsed as mentions or as functions – somebody to carry the message, fill the hall, prepare the food.

A game as production-heavy<sup>1</sup> as *Carolus Rex* or *Hamlet* has to be performed several times for the budget to add up (actually, they tend to become financial losses anyway). A positive side effect of the logistics involved is a pretty radical gender policy. Since it is difficult to foresee the gender ratio of the players, especially if certain characters require certain player qualities, character sex is simply removed as a factor. They're not gender neutral, necessarily, just either-gendered. As in *Carolus Rex*, gamers of either sex could play all Hamlet characters – a “Cornelia” in one cast might be a “Cornelius” in the next. This method makes it more likely that women be cast as Secretaries of State, army generals, or sleazy ageing nightclub owners. Above all, if we're creating alternate realities anyway, either-gender characters are a logical way of challenging our preconceptions on what a world is like. Sometimes this method randomly creates homosexual relationships between characters. If that is at all logical in the game world, there is of course no reason to do anything about it.

Apart from the actual players, *Hamlet* also included a cast of “text characters” or, as parallel terminology would have it, “non-player characters” or “instructed players”. These were the main characters of the original play: Hamlet, Ophelia, Claudius,

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<sup>1</sup> The team behind *Hamlet* is fairly large. Martin Ericsson (larpwright, concept design, handouts, lead writer, films, music selection, mixing, props), Christopher Sandberg (larpwright, concept design, additional writing, production lead, gastronomy lead, in-game chef, sanitation, lightning, bartending, props, set design), Anna Ericsson (larpwright, additional writing, live music co-ordination, costume lead, phone, telegraph) and Martin Brodén (larpwright, alternate history, lead ghost-story writer, additional writing, ghost effect director, phone, telegraph) with , Olle Jonsson (handout design, writing, phone, telegraph), Daniel Krauklis (original concept design, character writing, money design), Holger Jacobsson (original concept design, characters writing), Johanna Koljonen (additional writing), Craig Lindley (original film footage), Partic Erikson (original illustrations, handouts), Martin Olsson (original music, sound effects), Henrik Summanen (ghost effects), Pia Niemi (live music co-ordination, phone, telegraph), Jonas Lindh (cutlery and glassware), Karl Bergström (firearms and banners), Margarete Raum (firearms and costumes), Johnny Hjortor Kim (transportation), NCID (on-site production and rigging), Tobias Wrigstad (phone and telegraph team lead), Karin Tidbeck (phone, telegraph), Tova Gerge (phone, telegraph) and Adriana Skarped (phone, telegraph). Costumes, props and furniture from Riksteatern. Additional props from Svarta Katten HB. Produced by Interaktiva Uppsättningar and Riksteatern JAM.

Gertrude, Polonius, Laertes, Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, Horatio, Fortinbras and the British Ambassador. They were special in that they were, of course, “fated”, expected to do certain things, kill or leave or fight or die, at certain points in the story.

One of the most common misconceptions about the game is that these characters were “leads”. The action at court was naturally structured around royal need and whim, but the text characters were central only in the sense that walls are central to having rooms. They were mostly cast with very experienced players, although exceptions were made for people who seemed particularly motivated. Again, gender was no issue, but the kings, queens, princes and Ophelias were cast according to the text because nobody thought of reversing them for one of the games. But there was indeed a girl Laertes, still a soldier with blood and grime on her pants and guns – and what guns we had; you would not believe the safety distances on these flame-breathing babies – and still a sister to Ophelia. In some aspects she was so much gendered a man that had Ophelia by slip-of-tongue said “she is my brother” nobody would have thought twice of it.

The newest and most exciting narrative method of Hamlet was the use of freeze-action soliloquy. At the agreed signal, a bell tolling, all action would stop and the players gather around the central circle. A text character player would get up and read the relevant soliloquy, or in some cases perform a short piece of dialog or even just weep, as Gertrude did over Ophelia’s body at the end of the second act. Although outsiders voiced criticism to that end, this was not intended to be plot exposition for a cast of “stars”. Nobody actually participating in the game thought of it that way, given how painstakingly the organisers explained what they were trying to achieve.

There is a traditional way of reading of the play in which “all the characters are Hamlet”, meaning that they all grapple with the same issues. Even browsing through the text quite casually one cannot miss the themes of spying and doubling. The characters observe each other secretly and openly, and everything mirrors something else – there are two Hamlets, Hamlet has two fathers, Laertes and Hamlet mirroring each other in one way and Hamlet and young Fortinbras in another, the play-within-the-play mirrors the plot. It is not illogical, in this context, to take all characters at Elsinore and tell them they are Hamlet, and Claudius, and Gertrude. That every word spoken during the soliloquy breaks is every character’s inner monologue, a reflection of the mental state of everyone at court.

It worked. Nobody knew if it would, but it did. We gathered around the circle and heard those words, Claudius cursing God or Hamlet contemplating suicide, and we listened attentively and mirrored it in what was going on with our characters, and then the bell would toll again and return us to whatever we were doing just before. The general ambience of each act had been prescribed – first act: party at the end of history, second act: intrigue, third act: despair – and the “theatrical sampling” of the soliloquies provided nuances to this player direction.

The two performances had different text casts, which made different readings possible on a few more levels. Hamlet’s age isn’t actually defined in the play – it depends on which level his education in Wittenberg was, and on how long Yorick the jester has



been dead (if we accept that “I knew him well, Horatio”). He would seem to be either around 16 or closer to thirty. The two casts reflected this, with one Hamlet-Ophelia couple playing at puppy love gone awry and the other being the world-weary older lovers, bored, fleshier and rather frayed around the edges.

All game characters were so-called “written characters”. They were created by the larpmakers and presented to the players as fragments of literary fiction. Every player also had pre-game access to his GM/writer, and the opportunity to further develop the character together with him and other players in the group. Since the game was cast by the larpmakers (based on player wishes, of course), a “group” here only indicates characters that know each other. Some of the players would typically meet for the first time at preparatory meetings.

A centrally written game this big requires a lot of plot. Some of the noble houses might have found their predicaments strangely reminiscent of *Dune* or *Elric*. Ericsson and Sandberg’s largest debt, apart from Shakespeare, would still seem to be to Bertolt Brecht. The political madness at their Elsinore is never far from the tragicomedy of *Mother Courage* or the underworld court of a Mr. Peachum.<sup>2</sup>

## Rock and Role-Playing Safety

The rules of Hamlet were quite simple: Don’t be stupid. Be respectful. Do not break things or people – if you have to fight, it’s full contact, low impact, and try not to be seen in a conflict until the second act. The outcome of any fight or violence, including poisoning, was tied to the dramatic structure. In the first act, you would hardly be affected; in the second you could be seriously wounded but would die only if you chose to; in the third act any hint of violence would lead to an untimely and spectacular death. Would you by chance survive the third act, it was up to you to decide whether your character deserved to live.

And the most referred to rule was the first rule of Fight Club – “you do not talk about Fight Club”. Actually, this rule is also a trust rule at swinger parties, and one of the ambitions of the game was to create an atmosphere of limitless trust. A playroom for consenting adults, so to speak, outside a merely sexual framework. The rules of conduct were fixed instead at the level of Swedish law, so that although the depraved nobles mostly drank real alcohol (non-alcoholic options were available for teetotaller players), illegal substances were simulated normally – powdered sugar for cocaine and so on. In the spirit of the game it was still snorted for real, in rolled up in-game bills off the cracked chinoiserie tables.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that *Hamlet* was the director’s cut of the touring four-hour larp *Hamlet Inifrån* produced in close collaboration with Riksteatern JAM, the youth division of the Swedish National Theatre. The basic reading, characters and concept were modified and expanded but are closely based on this game. *Hamlet Inifrån* was created by Martin Ericsson, Holger Jacobsson, Daniel Krauklis, Mattias Gullbrandsson and Carl Heath. Produced by Anders Wendin and Patrik Liljegen.

All players were adults and mostly felt quite safe within this sealed universe. It is no secret anymore that some non-simulated sexual acts took place – and this has been criticised, again by people who were not there. Having witnessed much of the goings-on I can only say that grown-ups were making informed choices and that every player knew going in that such scenes might play out, and that one was, at all times, free to walk away from things one did not wish to see. The majority of players, I must add, did probably not even see anyone in the nude. The vow of secrecy created trust; the love of the larpmakers for their project inspired it, and the level of commitment everybody had for the project was its reward.

A word of caution is in place – most of the trustwork is done during the casting process. It worked here, but it is the most fragile element in making a larp of this intensity. The need to fill the game, or the difficulties in turning down a pal, do put pressure on the larpmakers to gamble on players of whose abilities and maturity they are not entirely sure. One should not think lightly of the risk involved.

The larpmakers did err on one point in the casting and assumed that a few flamboyantly gamist power-players would meld into the general hubbub of Elsinore madness. They didn't, interestingly. It has been suggested that there is no "wrong" way of larping. On the contrary, I would say that there are several that are wrong for every kind of game and that a bad listener, although he might be a great performer, will with great probability be an absolutely useless role-player in any serious game. On a more general level, Hamlet did blur the lines between the immersionist and gamist styles of play. Every character would logically go for the cool scene anyway, and the completeness of the milieu made it very easy to leave the outside self behind.

Another difficult issue, on which I think Hamlet failed, is the debriefing process. I think we all underestimated the effect the game would have on us. We needed to talk, all of us, not only about sex and despair – we covered that – but about politics and love and deception and all kind of stuff we learned along the way. We didn't, really. I won't make much of it here, since groundbreaking work on the creation and debriefing of larp ensembles for intensive games has been done since then, especially by Emma Wieslander on the milestone *Mellan himmel och hav* project.

## Then Everybody Died

The third act is a killer. It starts in tears with Ophelia dead and laid out and goes downhill from there. The characters have been isolated together for weeks and the smell is getting aggressive. Then the submarine corps defect to the Fortinbras side and nothing can stem the invading tide; the war is essentially lost and there is shooting on the floors above. The duel between Hamlet and Laertes is to take place at six. We wait. We wait, and we die; probably every third glass of wine is poisoned; there are duels and literal backstabbing and suicides when we cannot stand it anymore. The corpses were pushed out in Polonius' old wheelchair, or carried out, one by one.

And now I'm dead. I could not do it again, could not give another order when my entire house has committed high treason. I am innocent, but I will be executed, surely; I cannot wait for it a moment longer in that bunker, will not. I get out a big and beautifully inlaid silver snuffbox and take more drugs than I ever have. I overdose gorgeously at the desk, drooling on my letter of resignation, my apology for the failure and especially for the Junior Brigades. They're dead now, most of them. They were really just boy scouts. I'm so sorry. Good-bye.

And I'm carted out, and here I am, in a control room, with coffee and fast food and GM-operators (looking almost as bad as I do) working the phones. I have to be silent. Do I want to hang around or go outside? The others are outside, just up the stairs. Take a bottle of champagne with you! Take some bread, they might be hungry. A blanket. Is it cold? They laugh. No, to sit on.

Outside are a street and cars and people wearing J Lindeberg and H&M looking at me strangely over strollers and ice cream. I climb the stairs into the park. The lawn is gorgeous, hilly: there's a church on top, and the bell tolls all the time it seems, for us. The sky is very blue. We're wearing torn fur, dirty flapper dresses, black tie with shirts gone yellow with sweat and grime. We laugh and cry a lot and drink champagne. We look like we've been to a three-week party and every once in a while another one walks up that hill into this heaven. People stare.

At five minutes to six somebody comes for us. Ready? We walk down to the door again, to the street. At six o'clock the church bell starts, and we open the door and we can hear the signal bell down there. We walk down in single file, the dead, to take our places one last time around that circle. All the candles light the centre stage now. There is a duel, carefully choreographed but very convincing. The thing with the rapiers, the poison, the drink. Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes and Hamlet, it happens very fast, we are standing very silently but we are all in tears. This happens in all of us even when we are dead. Horatio will live, and here are the rebels, Fortinbras' men firing. There are not many left now. They speak, the Englishman speaks. It is over. I miss the last bit, I cry too hard.

Somebody cues the theme music – we heard it at the start of the game, at every act break, I cannot take that song anymore – and we put out the candles and stand there, in the darkness. Minutes pass, electrical lights, laughter: It is over.

And it will never be over.

## Games

Carolus Rex (1999) by Martin Ericsson, Karim Muammar, Henrik Summanen, Thomas Walsh and Emma Wieslander, Sweden.

Hamlet (2002) by Martin Ericsson, Anna Ericson, Christopher Sandberg, Martin Brodén et al, Interaktiva Uppsättningar, Sweden.

Hamlet Inifrån (2000) by Martin Ericsson, Holger Jacobsson, Daniel Krauklis et al., Sweden.

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk et al., Ars Amandi, Sweden.



## Post Panopticon

*Analysing live-action role-playing has always been problematic. The subjectivity of every experience makes the personal reflection a lame weapon for an analysis. We need to find new ways of writing about the phenomenon. Any attempt to go farther than a diary from character/player perspective or “the food was very bad” is welcome.*

This article is an attempt to use and introduce post-structuralism as a tool for looking at role-playing. It is about how signs and symbols are used and created. It is about positions and perspectives. It is about power.

The post-structural theory has been developed in many scientific fields. Some examples are Foucault's historian writings on social thoughts, Barthes' analysis of media, Lacan's neopschoanalysis and Derrida's philosophy of signs. It has also been a crucial element in contemporary feminist theory underlined by writers like Weedon.

I will use the poststructuralist approach to deconstruct the Norwegian contemporary scenario *Panopticornp*, by Irene Tanke.<sup>1</sup> I will read the “text” *Panopticornp*, and view it as a frame for the interaction. *Panopticornp* was a story about an international advertising agency. Real life agencies like *Panopticornp* work with the production of meaning in the media environment and everyday life. The scenario made great use of language to construct identities, divisions and the illusion of something different than everyday life. The conscious way of creating the frames for this scenario made it one of the most interesting and dangerous events in the year 2003.

### Taking the Job

The participants of *Panopticornp* enrolled as the employees of a multinational corporation with the same name as the event itself. The registration for the event was an on-line employment form for people going to the newly started *Panopticornp* Oslo Unit. This way of enlisting brought the fiction close to “the real world” and challenged the traditional agreement of live-action role-playing to never let fiction and reality meet. The participants were put in the position of a character, but without the context of the enactment.

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<sup>1</sup> *Panopticornp* was played in Oslo, Norway between the 17th – 20th of July in 2003. The genre of the game was contemporary political realism. There were circa 30 participants. The game was arranged by Irene Tanke, Jared Elgvin, Eirik Fatland, Kaisa Lindahl, Cath Røsselund, Espen Nodeland, Rune Haugen, Trine Lindahl and Erling Rognli.

Only one thing was given to the participants in printed media: The corporate dictionary, CorpDic. The contents of this folder framed the whole event, putting focus on certain perspectives while marginalizing others. It presented dozens of concepts, transforming language and the usage of it:

CorpSpeak – The ‘slang’ of Corpers. Since CorpSpeak embodies PanoptiCorps CorpFil and organisational structure, mastering CorpSpeak is not just a question of ‘fitting in’ but a measure of ones understanding of how PanoptiCorp works. (PanoptiCorp CorpDic, 2002)

Language is a way of positioning. The dictionary most certainly structured the character interpretation and expression in certain patterns. In most role-playing events, the organisers define and state an agreement with terms and rules that everybody must obey. As a participant one can chose to accept those terms, or just avoid signing up for the event. This is very important in order to make the medium function. But participants must be conscious about that they are surrendering a lot of power to the organisers. Sometimes the organisers define the participants’ life conditions for days.

## Living the Job

CorpFil – The Corporate Philosophy of PanoptiCorp. Reflected in our way of life and work. The core of our CorpFil is that optimum (NexSec) CreaProd is achieved through the creation of functional MemeFields within horizontal, competitive, organisational structures. Because of our emphasis on MemeFields over formal structure, CorpSpeak is not just ‘office slang’ but an embodiment of our corporate identity. (CorpDic)

Abandoning one’s own language transforms one’s way of thinking, which is a method for immersing into the character and the surrounding setting. All the characters at PanoptiCorp had clearly defined roles, different classes and functions at the agency. Those roles had new concepts attached to them; carders, dozers, spotters, divers, suits and more. The participants did not have any pre-understanding of these words, which made it possible for the organisers to maintain total control of the definitions.

The PanoptiCorp unit was the life of the characters. They ate at the agency, they slept at the agency and they even shagged at the agency. During the days of the event the PanoptiCorp agency was the one and only reality for both participants and their characters.

The agency had new concepts for the relation to time. “Now” was never good enough. The characters strived for being “NexSec”, trying to guess their way towards the next upcoming hot ideas, brands or persons. Saying something that became interpreted as “LasSec” ruined one’s social status for hours or even days.

Since PanoptiCorp was a contemporary, realistic scenario, there was an unexplored possibility to let “real people” without characters enter the event, without even knowing that it was a fiction. Would this be an offensive act, degenerating their

reality, or would it be an invitation to take part in our reality? I still wait for scenarios with the courage to explore these possibilities.

## Decentralized Hierarchy

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary; that this architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers. (Michel Foucault, Panopticism)

The panopticon theory, which inspired the name of the event, was written by Jeremy Bentham in the late 18th century. Imagine panopticon as a cylinder with prison cells all around. The cells have one open wall, only covered with bars, as transparent as the fourth wall of a theatre stage. In the middle of the cylinder there is a tower with windows black as sunglasses. From the tower, all prisoners can be watched. The people in the tower cannot look at all prisoners at the same time, but the prisoners do not now when they are under surveillance, only the fact that they are. PanoptiCorp was somewhat different.

Take away the tower, so the prisoners can see each other, and give the prisoners reason (shorter sentence for example) to report on each other – then you have PanoptiCorp. The corporation had a flat structure, with no bosses or certain demands from owners (except profit, of course). There was no board of directors. Still, the characters were strictly put in a dynamic but hierarchic order. This was visualised through the HotNot-system:

HotNot – The standard PanoptiCorp system of rating performance, HotNot votes occur at least daily at any Unit. Unlike the rating systems of more LasSec agencies, where the Human Resources director performs the rating, PanoptiCorps HotNot is democratic, giving all co-workers an equal vote in HotNot ratings. (CorpDic)

Depending on your status in the hotnot, you were assigned different roles on projects of different importance. It visualized the current hierarchies within the agency. It is evident that the repression that used to originate from the top of the hierarchy can actually be distributed and shared by all.



## An Illusion of Power?

Live-action role-playing is generally far more democratic than most other media. It decentralizes the power of stimuli creation, breaking down the traditional mass communicational idea of a few producers sending stimuli to many consumers. But since live-action role-playing claims to be an anti-authoritarian medium it is very important to be aware what kinds of power structures are created. One should not be content with the conclusion that the medial structures are far more democratic than TV. Exactly what are the functions and positions of organisers, writers, participants and others in relation to the project?

One authoritarian position is stated in *The Manifesto of the Turku School* by Mike Pohjola:

The role-playing game is the game masters creation, to which he lets the player enter. The game world is the game master's, the scenario is the game master's, the characters (being a part of the game world) are the game master's. The players' part is to get inside their character's head in the situation where the game begins and by eläytyminen try to simulate it's actions. (Pohjola 1999)

The turkuists consider the organiser to be an artist in a very modernist sense of the word. The organiser is a genius and God. The participants should be grateful that they are allowed into the brilliant artistic work that the organiser has set up. The participants are the puppets of a content puppet master. This approach is honest, but hardly desirable. I want to consider live-action role-playing as a fellow-creating process. The organiser must be ready to lose control of the event.

Another view is represented by the Norwegian manifesto *Dogma 99*, written by Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård. They claim that the organisers should not in any way manipulate or direct the story:

5. After the event has begun, the playwrights are not allowed to influence it. [...] As organisers take control during a LARP, the players become passive. This leads to players learning to expect organiser control, even demanding it. Only a LARP entirely without organiser influence will place the real initiative in the hands of players, where it belongs. As we learn how to makeLARPs work independent of organiser control and influence, it will become possible to develop more constructive and activating methods of organiser interaction. (Fatland & Wingård 1999)

Participants will never be free from the control of the organisers, but they should be aware of when and how they are manipulated. *Dogma 99* wants to give the power over the event to the participants. But the organiser still defines the themes and agendas. The participants have freedom, but only within the framework defined by the organisers.

There is a difference between control before and after the event has begun. If the organisers are communicative and give input during the enactment, they become part of the process. If they only set the frames, they do not partake in the development of the actual event. I prefer organisers that dare to be fellow-creators of their own event. And

I prefer to be participating in setting the frames of an event, even if my only function during the enactment is to play my character.

The participants of live-action role-playing events are often denied the possibility to partake in the designing of the milieu, rule system and dramaturgy of an event. Panopticon took this even further. The participants became deeply manipulated by the clever organisers as they gave away their language and thus their thoughts. After just a day many participants were thinking like binary machines: hot/not, lassec/nexsec, upcard/downcard, always judging co-workers as effective or worthless. It took weeks for me to erase the thinking of dividing people into useful or non-useful out of my mind.

This is not a matter of morals. The organisers of Panopticon made their point very clear. It was a brilliant mind-fuck and an indispensable learning experience. Unfortunately the structures of Panopticon are not just fiction, they are real. Dr. Meredith Belbin is one of the profilers in the teamwork company that bears his name:

Over the years many people have been interested in the team role theory expounded in my book *Management Teams Why They Succeed or Fail* first printed in 1981. More and more jobs involve people working together and here the roles individuals play are very important. With our new online version of team role feedback, we aim to give individuals a fuller insight into their own behaviour in the workplace by taking account of how they are seen by others. The reports include advice on developing a personal management style suited to your team role profile. (Belbin, on his website.)

This is scary. Role-playing could be a great defence against the assigning of roles from the surroundings, but only if we are not blind to our own processes. Participants should be part of the pre-process. Organisers should partake in the story. Both participants and organisers should refuse *their* assigned roles as participants or organisers.

## Games

Panopticon (2003) by Irene Tanke et al., Norway.

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# Temporary Utopias

## The Political Reality of Fiction

*The participants of the Swedish larp Mellan himmel och hav (Between Heaven and Sea) spent months in preparation for exploring subjects such as silence, love, friendship and empathy in a society far away from earth as well as modern and post-modern society. This contrasts greatly to the worlds of oppression and revolution that larps such as the post-apocalyptic, party-revolutionary Futuredrome or the commonplace fantasy-scenarios have presented the last few years. This article uses the larp Mellan himmel och hav to look at how themes and dramatic structures correspond with political focus.*

**M**ellan himmel och hav was a larp for approximately 70 participants. The preparations included three mandatory weekend-long workshops focusing on building an ensemble and mediating the artistic vision. For the actual three days of the game, Riksteatern (Sweden's Nationwide Theatre) put one of their black-box stages in Stockholm at the disposal of the project.

The fictive place of the game was a small biosphere in a world distantly related to ours. The people of this world had advanced technology that worked, but they had mostly forgotten how it worked. They travelled in space but had extremely strict religious ideas on the cosmic balance of the elements in the universal processes. The moon, the sun, the heaven, the sea and the land all corresponded to aspects of human relations. Although direct violence and other methods of gaining power were taboo, essentialism and outspoken hierarchies permeated the society. All families had their special functions, and all the functions had various cultural features and social restrictions. The fictive time did not correspond with the standard 24 hour-periods, instead, the diurnal cycle lasted 18 hours, so that three days became four.

The essential categories of normal social identity were the Morning people and the Evening people; groups that organised the lives of the characters like male and female roles do in our society. The cultural attitudes were more dogmatic, however – queer theory was an impossible thought in this world. The traits of these groups were not translatable into terms of female and male. In short, Morning people woke up early in the morning, had the power over the private space and were the sensual subjects, while Evening people liked to be awake at night, had the power over the public space and the language, but were the objects of sensuality. Sensual desire was reorganised so that the Morning people and the Evening people desired each other, while biological

sex was a relevant factor only concerning reproduction. All gendered pronouns had therefore been replaced with new words. The sensuality in this society was not monogamous, or even restricted to the four-person-marriages. But on the other hand, one married into a family and was bound for the rest of her life and death, which meant the relations between the spouses were really important. Marriages were planned and discussed every waking hour – making four people match is not an easy thing.

In the diegetic culture, the individual received respect and love through accepting and acting in line with the role the society had distributed. Two social groups had the freedom and responsibility to move outside the norms. The first group, Sunnivas, was a mixture of children, walking psychiatrists and the clergy, functioning as a valve for forbidden emotions by playing with people and listening to them. The second group, the dead, escaped the society's pressure by choosing cultural death. The culturally dead of this world were freed from the daily responsibilities (such as cooking or cleaning), but had a duty to watch over the social processes and intervene if they took a bad turn. Being dead also meant only being able to communicate directly with other dead people or Sunnivas, as paying attention to the dead was a taboo.

The centre of the story was a marriage between four young people, three of them leaving their families, all of them leaving their childhood. It was a controversial marriage in the sense that the spouses came from different classes: One of the spouses came from the seventh house (low social standing), while the others came from the third house and the second house (high social standing). The fear of the marriage being a disaster and the sadness of leaving the dearest ones were mixed with high hopes for the future. Mellan himmel och hav told the story of love across the borders in the hour of parting, about new friends and the slow transforming of traditions. Simultaneously, it transformed a piece of the world; three or four days of 70 people's lives.

## Political Symbols

“Political larping” is not a self-evident set of words in Sweden. According to Jonas Nelson's (1996) text *Projekt H – historien of laju*, Swedish larping had its origin in war games, didactic scout-plays and parties inspired by the Middle Ages. Organisers have started to organise events with an open political agenda only quite recently. Mellan himmel och hav is one of these larps. Starting with the three workshops that were held before the game to sum up the basics in feministic identity discourse, the event marked all information directed to players as ideological.

Outspoken ideology seldom builds an entire game. Lights, music, stage design and poetry were all a part of Mellan himmel och hav. The fact that the language lacked male and female pronouns gendered pronouns had the visible effect that other aspects of personality became more important. The consequences of other changes are more difficult to evaluate. The creation of this fictive world included linguistic and spatial changes that were related to the perception of death, birth, sexuality, economics,

history, place, space and time. Symbols such as white walls, strange food or an 18-hour diurnal cycle were used to create a certain atmosphere.

Symbols interact and create meaning, but in a larp, it is impossible to foresee exactly what meaning, since symbols do not only interact with each other, but also with the players. Yet, games that have a conscious agenda and aim for conscious change are considered more political than others.<sup>1</sup> But through the interaction of symbols, new meanings and hidden political messages emerge – with other words, a scenario with the most apolitical intentions could turn into propaganda. Larp as a form has an aspect of secrecy and unpredictability to it that makes it possible to interpret any role-playing event as antisocial.<sup>2</sup> Secret places and conversations are forbidden in the age of reality-soaps and documentary entertainment; that is why media loves to portray role-players as scary or threatening to society. But what happens when the game ends? Are role-players still a part of an anti-social movement? According to an essentialist view of identity, they are – once an identity thief, always an identity thief, just a well-hidden and well-integrated thief.

## Broken Hallelujah

In the case of *Mellan himmel och hav*, the ideological consequences for the participants of the larp greatly varied, but the issue of gender, that was so much a topic during the preparations, was not a focus of great interest after the larp finished. Instead, another discussion emerged: Whether political isolationism or political confrontation is the most effective tool in the ambition to utopia. The partly utopian, partly strictly traditional society portrayed in the game obviously created a strong isolationist or even sectarian will.<sup>3</sup>

Often, larpers are left without any method of completing their characters' stories. Larps do not have a Hollywood ending with punishment or enlightenment; they just end, in the middle of something or nothing. With an outspoken message, the dramatic structure tends to look more like a classic orgasmic peak, if not on a personal level, then at least in the very centre of the story. The public (diegetic) protests by the 1000 characters living in the post-apocalyptic brave new world of consumption in *Futuredrome*, grew every day of the game, to finally explode and the social structure.

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<sup>1</sup> The meaning of conscious is here intentional, not some vague opposite of unconscious. It is possible to mess with behaviour and reality perception without actually intending to, but that is not exactly the same thing as being conscious. I do not think that the effect of a rebellious act against any given system is proportional to how fucked up one is while performing it. It is only a question of how the individual relates to the norm of the given system.

<sup>2</sup> "Antisocial" as it is used in *Fabrenbeit 451* (Bradbury 1953). Against society, something subversive.

<sup>3</sup> One of the participants is seriously thinking about buying a big farm in the countryside and settling there to create some sort of utopian zone.

The orgasm/revolution re-established the new age subject-centred anarchistic order that was the ideological base of the story.

Mellan himmel och hav could possibly be considered to have an orgasmic structure, too. All the other stories were built around the frame of wedding, one of the ceremonies marking a happy, ideologically normalising end in the Hollywood tradition. But in the case of Mellan himmel och hav the wedding was not at all romantically ideal, neither was it a miserable mistake. The order established through the ceremony was the order of an oppressive society, far from a traditionally correct wedding with a happy bride and a happy groom. No death, no victory, no Aristotelian catharsis – a really strange orgasm for a group used to Christianity's dualistic view of the world. Less strange is that the wish for a happy ending – or just any ending – combined with a group identification built on mutual strong experience, leads to sectarian dreams. Social bondage then becomes the reason to continue the anti-social line of thinking.

## Immersive Storytelling

Larp manifestos over the years have presented different ways of creating and experiencing games. Pohjola (2002) refers to two of the more known normative larp manifestos, Finnish Turku-school and Norwegian *Dogma 99*: "For Dogmatists the interaction, what happens during the game, is 'the reality of the LARP.' For Turkuists, that reality exists only inside the head of each player". *The Manifest Sunday* from Sweden has yet another view on what is important in a larp. "LARP is collective storytelling. Storytelling happens through interaction between participants" (Boss et al. 2001). Depending on whether an organiser chooses to focus on the mental processes of the player, the interaction between the characters or the interaction between the players, the methods used to create drama will differ. Sometimes, a cigar might be a wand (how Freudian), or a player may be an archetype in the subconscious mind of the one and only character (how Jungian). Mellan himmel och hav did not take a definite position in this discussion; neither did the players have a unified way of seeing it.

Bertolt Brecht, the director and playwright who wanted to alienate his spectators and actors from strong identification with the characters (Brecht 1966, 49), is an interesting person in this context. He was not too fond of the Aristotelian drama, but instead he argued that distance is necessary to remain politically and intellectually "free" in relationship to the artistic work (Brecht 1966, 32). To be able to see the construct of fiction, he also said, the spectator or actor need to be moved out of the condition of identification. It is very difficult to move a person who never identified with the play and the characters in the first place, out of the identification. "The events must not imperceptibly follow upon each other, but one must be able to get in between with the opinion" [my translation], he writes (Brecht 1966, 45).

This means that the awareness of illusion occurs when one is pulled into and out of illusion. In that sense, Mellan himmel och hav was a Brechtian larp. The constantly

present music changed from being a part of the fiction with sounds of waves from the sea, to being more like film music for interaction, useful for enhancing or projecting feelings. The fact that the fictional biosphere was placed in a black box at one of the biggest Swedish drama institutions also gave a taste of Brechtian aesthetics. Staging a society on an actual stage is a rare thing to do for a larper, and the difference always creates a certain level of consciousness. Yet another thing that made Mellan himmel och hav a structurally less Aristotelian larp was the group playing dead people. They were not seen by the other characters (though maybe discreetly noticed), but functioned in a way as directors with the possibility to send subtle signals or outspoken wishes considering the development of the game or, from a character point of view, the future. But players could ignore them and characters could choose to rebel against their whispers – the space of action was still technically wide open.

## A Therapeutic Dilemma

Unlike Brecht's ensemble, larpers are not giving life to the world and vision of a director, but to their own world built on human meetings. In exchange for this freedom, they do not have the possibility to redo a show. Organising a game consists largely of guessing what input will give what outcome. There was a general agreement articulated during the preceding workshops to avoid melancholy and search for joyful presence – positive power drama (see Wieslander 2004) instead of Oedipal patriarchy and heaps of dead fathers. No Aristotle, no cry; that was the deal. Still, halfway through the game, people were drowning in tears. Diegetic farewells turned into black holes of abandonment. Families quarrelled; lovers turned the back on each other, deadly illnesses occurred out of nowhere. As for the people behind the characters, several groups and individuals were so sad and shaken by what was happening to the characters, and by the non-fictional questions these events raised, that they found it necessary to cut the game to be able to fight against the spreading sorrow.

One of the reasons why this development occurred is simple and structural: It is hard to be really happy in a society oppressing its inhabitants. Own choices may be just as terrible as the choices others make you, but this world was not the place for choosing much at all. It was built on arranged marriages, systematically broken families and a strict class and gender system. On top of that, the characters were expected to feel, or at least act, happy. Since it was possible to hear everything the neighbours were whispering, conflicts were not solved easily, but became just as time-consuming and slow as love or any other feeling. In the silence, it was possible to hear minds move. The time before the game that was spent on building an ensemble that listened to each other, made feelings contagious and radiant, no matter what these feelings were. My conclusion is that it is easier to make larping positive with structures that are predominantly positive for the individuals of the fictional group.



Another aspect of the problem is more fundamental. Before the game the players agreed that love would be the core theme of the game. But love is a gigantic word and it includes some really nasty addictive, destructive behaviour – limitless, symbiotic love may be twice as lonely as being alone. The agreement said everyone would give everything they had and give it honestly. But receiving may be just as hard as giving. Every human being has had to face rejection, and some people have hardly done anything else.<sup>4</sup> Once paranoid, or unprepared, or just a little shaky, the dream of meeting on common ground may turn into mutual emotional disaster. And then, all love in the world cannot fix what has already been broken a long time ago.

The agreement of honest affection means stripping down to the core, where love and disaster lie entangled. The author who inspired the fiction of Mellan himmel och hav, Ursula K. Le Guin, has written many stories about giving name to disaster. In *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968) the young boy Ged travels around the world being chased by his shadow. In *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971) a psychiatrist unleashes hell as he tries to create world peace. Despite this, in the long preparation period of this project, the potential abysses of human interaction were never up for discussion. This meant that Mellan himmel och hav moved on a risky psychological level. People were freefalling into despair, not just in character, but in all kinds of ways. And there were not people enough to catch them, at least not while the game was still going.

In Sweden, there is no tradition of bringing in any other social support in the off-game area than the organisers. With the amount of mental breakthroughs this scenario raised, some peaceful Zen masters without any personal attachment to the creation maybe would have been useful. I want to believe that if there had been a vivid conversation around how to relate to old and new pain earlier on in the process, the risks would not have been so great. But it is also possible that the opposite is true – the more safety net, the more awareness of the therapeutic aspect of larp – the greater the number of people allowing themselves to feel things that are forbidden in everyday life. The question then is if it is possible or even desirable to avoid moving in the therapeutic area of human emotions when larping. And that in turn depends on political goals and tools.

## Personal Politics

Mellan himmel och hav is an example of a larp with a strong political agenda, but defining identity as the battle arena rather than society. While feminists in the 60's looked on personal relationships and pointed out behaviour in private space as a consequence of society, Mellan himmel och hav invented a set of new identities and hoped it would echo into reality. Concrete poetry tried to distort the way language control our perception. Many other different art forms have tried to change or renew the tools of building identity. Larps, unlike books or films with this theme, have the

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<sup>4</sup> Break another little piece of my heart now, baby – just because it makes you feel good.

possibility to play in first person with the very symbols that sum up identity. In that sense, the very theme of the larp medium is post-essential interaction between liquid egos. To put that theme in focus for a larp means stretching the identity shift outside the explicit gaming time and area.

Mellan himmel och hav did this in both chronological directions. Months of intellectual and physical, rather than just practical<sup>5</sup>, preparation became new months of discussions, evaluations and personal crises after the actual gaming experience had ended. This is a good example of the development political larping has taken in the past few years. Role-players are slowly deconstructing the wall between reality and game, letting larp become “radiant” instead of a closed space for play (no matter if that play is political or escapist). The revolutionary satisfaction<sup>6</sup> or the ideological hopelessness we often find in a game with a specific political agenda woven into the *story* differs greatly from a process that begins and continues *outside* the space of the story. There is no strict line between these fields, but Mellan himmel och hav definitely falls into the second category.

To define larping as a possible threat to firm identity equally means that society will view larp as threatening. To me, that is not the greatest problem. Instead, I worry about how role-players deal with the authoritarian networks they manage to build among themselves when becoming collective and process-oriented. It is easy to agree or disagree with a message that is mainly intellectually told in all its interactivity; you come, you leave, you analyse alone, no matter if the dramatic structure is Brechtian or Aristotelian. But when the ideology becomes bodily experience or social relations, the obstruction to whatever the message is becomes more complicated. Where does ideology begin and where does identity end? I believe that what we chose to answer to that question is decisive for how future radical larping will look.

## Games

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Katarina Björkman and Emma Wieslander et al., Sweden.

[www.ars-amandi.nu/mhoh](http://www.ars-amandi.nu/mhoh)

Futuredrome (2003) by Henrik Wallgren & al., Sweden. <http://old.futuredrome.com>

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<sup>5</sup> Practical vs. intellectual/physical as in sitting alone sewing an extremely advanced costume vs. doing improvised dancing and drama exercises together in a black box.

<sup>6</sup> “Wow, we managed to create democracy out of dictatorship again!”

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## Infinite Possibilities

### Mellan Himmel och Hav From a Science Fiction Point of View

*Where the fantasy genre has been mauled, violated and worn out over the years, science fiction is still virgin grounds for most Swedish larpers. Mellan himmel och hav not only worked with gender and social structures – it also took larping where no one has gone before.*

The majority of larps in Sweden are set in the fantasy genre, usually with few modifications. The only exceptions are contemporary (20<sup>th</sup> century) larps and a few surrealist events. The number of sci-fi larps arranged in the last decade amounts to a handful. One would think this means the genre isn't popular, but on the contrary: people are always whining about how there are too few events. The focus of this article is partly to discuss why this is so and at the same time look at the most recent Swedish sci-fi larp, Mellan himmel och hav.

### Four-Sexed, Cannibalistic Quadrupeds

One great advantage of setting a larp in the sci-fi genre that cannot be stressed enough is that there are no rules. Sci-fi can mean anything from our world in a near future, to bizarre alien cultures in a distant galaxy. The term itself – *science* fiction – is no longer really accurate, since science doesn't necessarily come into it. It has not only come to mean explorations in space, or technological discoveries; books classed as sci-fi have a range of subjects and milieus. The term allows for very generous interpretation.

Until now, Swedish sci-fi larping has to an extent been about cinematic adventure: outlandish settings, space opera intrigue (or cyberpunk *film noir*) and props that go “beep”. In short, like a great night at the movies – pleasing to the eye and the adrenal gland, but still purely entertainment. This is one of the big differences between fantasy and sci-fi larping: where fantasy larps almost always refer to literary works such as J.R.R. Tolkien or games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, sci-fi larps point to film. The effect of this is a process starting at the visual level (“Let's do a *Mad Max* thing!”) and *then* moving on to the story (“So who're we going to put in the scenery?”). Both of these ways have their problems. The problem of the very filmness of sci-fi larping is that if a player wants more than cool special effects, she seldom finds it.

MHOH worked the other way around. There were several concepts, one to tell stories with love as the driving force; another to experiment with gender. These concepts were then put in a sci-fi setting, with Ursula K. Le Guin's stories about the fictional world of O as an inspiration. This is how good film and literature works – first a story, then the environment in which the story is told. Done this way, the story can be put in any setting and still work. Doing MHOH in a sci-fi world removed the players from the distracting dogmas of known history and facilitated the experiment. This made the concepts come through with even more force than had it been set in our time and world.

The fantasy drama still utilises most of the rules present in our reality and history. Because most fantasy larps really are fairy tale versions of the middle ages, some elements are very hard to get rid of (the feudal system and inequality among others). Whether consciously or not, players look to history for information when they prepare for a fantasy larp. Doing so, the concept of what fantasy is becomes more and more cemented in people's minds. Sci-fi on the other hand is based on hopes, dreams and theories of how or what a world could be, here or elsewhere. It is possible to make a larp where humans are four-sexed, cannibalistic quadrupeds travelling between the stars on water skis.

Sci-fi in literature has throughout modern history been an ideal arena for asking questions about the society we live in. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century writers like George Orwell, Karin Boye and Aldous Huxley built future societies with radically different norms and theorized about what humans might become. Later on, women writers like Tanith Lee, Mary Doria Russell and Le Guin used the genre to pose questions about gender. Lee envisioned a hypocritical utopia where no one had to work, one could change sex at a whim and those who didn't agree with the order of things were ostracized. Russell wrote about our first encounter with aliens who had a view of gender that was different than ours, and humanity's struggle to understand how anything other than our norms could even function. Le Guin wondered what would happen when factors other than biology decided what a person's gender would be, and created the world of O where being a morning or evening person decides one's role in family and community. All these works do the same thing; they make visible the norms and rules of our own society and question them.

The reason sci-fi is such a great tool for social experiments is this: One can remove the conditions we exist under and replace them with a set of others, be they physical, mental or social. In anthropological terms this would probably be called bringing the player to a liminal state. In an alien environment the "cues" for normal reasoning and behaviour aren't there all the time and it's easier for the player to adopt a character with a very different mode of thought. For the record, an historical or fantasy environment is *not* alien – people already know how to behave and think should they end up there.

When it comes to Mellan himmel och hav, this theory worked very well. Most players said afterward that the new social rules (like the deconstruction and reconstruction of gender: a man isn't a man but a morning or evening person, and should behave like one)

very quickly felt natural. This transition in a familiar environment would have been very hard, be it because of clothing, associations or other.

## Theory and Practice

Larping in a sci-fi setting allows for anything to happen. The obvious disadvantage is that nothing is a given. With a larp in a fantasy setting, for example, the players have a concept of how to behave, to dress and what to expect since fantasy has very much in common with mediaeval culture. In a historical or contemporary setting the limit is one's patience for studying facts. But unless the larp is based on a developed concept, such as *Star Wars* (1977), sci-fi has a problem in that everything has to be created from scratch. It's not until you find yourself in the setting that you realise how spoiled fantasy larpers are (because there are concepts for most things). Everything has to be made up, from how to go to the toilet to what the cities look like and to what gases make up the atmosphere. There's no common concept of that particular reality. This means the creator either must give the players free rein to make things up as they go along, or be very thorough and school the players into this new world.

MHOH didn't present the players with a lot of information. Rather, the players were encouraged to improvise and come up with their own solutions of what Ki'O, and their colony Gilaa, was like. Much of the information about the planet and its history was created in the interaction between players and writers. The advantage was that everyone had a part in creating the world, which lead to some amazing solutions and stories about the colony and its inhabitants. Entire traditions, customs and modes of poetry were invented as well as weird gadgets and artefacts.

Speaking of gadgets, we arrive at a new advantage of the "story first" -method. An enormous amount of work was spent on creating the environments of Gilaa, but the aim was first and foremost create a calm, meditative atmosphere that would allow the players to focus on their stories. Props were kept at minimum cost – the players were told to rummage through wardrobes and thrift shops rather than make spectacular costumes, and most of the interior decoration was bought at Ikea (happened to have lots of streamlined plastic stuff). For once, props were actually props – representations – and not creations to show off the players' economic means. This is a complete opposite to all the sci-fi larps I have ever visited, where you're no one unless you're wearing a customized teflon exo-skeleton. All the energy that would normally have gone into making elaborate clothing and cool thingies could be poured into creating an ensemble. Even though this saved a lot of time, several problems came up that came along with creating a new world and showed how much in our day-to-day life we take for granted.

The drawbacks of the co-creation process were that there never seemed to be enough information, and that sometimes the existing information was contradictory. Of course, this is what happens when some like one solution better than the other. An interesting thing is that during the game, many players became nervous when confronted



with a situation they didn't have enough information to handle easily. This could mean having to name a tool or a vehicle, or dealing with a situation they hadn't imagined coming up. This can be a nuisance when trying to concentrate on other aspects of the game, but at the same time it says some important things about how people function.

The nervousness seemed to be based on a feeling of being afraid to invent a solution, because there surely was a "true" solution, a rule, somewhere. In a world where no such thing is guaranteed, the player finds herself in a void – there is not much that can be associated to a society she is used to, which means that she will have to improvise. On the other hand that kind of improvisation is discouraged in our own society, where we are brought up to follow a myriad of rules and laws. This was a kind of meta-effect I as a co-creator didn't expect, but one that says much about how we function. That impulse is after all the one we were trying to deal with: that voice in our heads that tells us to follow the written and unwritten laws of society, no matter if they are healthy or destructive.

## Conclusion

Sci-fi is a genre that offers enormous possibilities for social experiments, utopian thinking and innovation. Unfortunately it's not as popular in larping as it should and could be, for several possible reasons. One is that sci-fi isn't, like fantasy, easily placed – it's a collection of many genres. Another is that many larpers like to think they have to make tons of new props and weird outfits. Yet another is that outlandish venues can be more difficult to find, if that's what one is looking for. Concerning all of these problems, I think that we can learn a lot from MHOH. Sci-fi larping isn't just about über-tech, dystopias or cool weapons; it can also be a slowly told story about love in the desert.

## Games

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk & al., Sweden.

## Recommended Reading

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Huxley, Aldous (1932): Brave New World.

Lee, Tanith (1977): Biting the Sun.

Le Guin, Ursula K (1969): The Left Hand of Darkness.

Le Guin, Ursula K (2002): The Birthday of the World (a collection of short stories).

Orwell, George (1949): Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Russell, Mary Doria (1996): The Sparrow.



## Creating Music for Live-Action Role-Play

*In the winter of 2002, work started with the audio environment – the soundtrack – for Mellan himmel och hav (Between Heaven and Sea). It would become a seventy-two hours long composition based on assumptions about how to affect the players through sound. After the game, the general opinion seems to be that the soundscape was a success. This article is a description of the creative process that led to the creation of the soundscape.*

**I**n 1999, we started experimenting with music and larpers in *Knappnålshuvudet* (The Head of a Pin). The game featured guardian angels, who needed a place where they could hear the “voice of God”. The solution was to set up a concert sound and light system inside a large hall to create the backdrop as the players entered and acted in a tent set up inside the hall. The sound artists were outside the tent together with the role-writers, orchestrating messages given by God via sound and light. Before the game, each character had been assigned a specific musical theme written specifically for the character (each angel represented one of twelve feelings such as anger or despair), and they were expected to recognise their own theme and to react to it. They could also interact with God as the music controllers could hear what the characters were saying and monitored the characters’ actions with a camera. Afterwards, most of the angels said they had truly appreciated the place as they felt that they could get more energy there to transmit to the other non-angelic characters. They also said they had recognised their own themes, but communication had often been on a level of basic emotions such as “God is angry”, “God is happy” or “God is really mad”.

The key seemed to be in creating the soundscape before the game. In the case of *Knappnålshuvudet*, basic abstract communication was attempted on an instrumental level. This meant that a lot of preparatory work had to be done with the players before the game – in many cases even months in advance. The players were also involved in the creation of the sounds, i.e. as contributors of voices. During the training of the angels (who among other things needed to learn a specific way of walking), the sounds were tested to find out if they could invoke the feelings the angels represented. There were a lot of comments on the lines of “I feel this gives a feeling of...” and so on, and hence a lot of stereotypical sounds.

The process of creating an audio environment for *Mellan himmel och hav* started with short discussions at the kitchen table. The game required a soundscape that combined the methods and sounds from the electro-acoustic art music area in order

to create an environment that sounded futuristic. This was done with tools that are used at an unconscious level in movie soundtracks to set the emotional pitch at any given time. Experiences from Knappnålshuvudet had already demonstrated the impact of sound milieu on people in character. However, this time we had the possibility to put the whole game under controlled technical circumstances at the studio stage of Riksteatern, making the creation of the audio environment a lot easier than it had been in Knappnålshuvudet. The offer was impossible to refuse.

We decided that the characters would not hear the game music as we hoped that a totally new audio environment would enhance the feeling of the otherworldliness of the setting. The thematic structures were created to operate on an unconscious level, which means that the players should not be able to recognise any specific sounds during the game, but to merely register the sounds as abstract feelings of “something being different in the morning than during the night” (one example among many). In addition, there were diegetic sounds such as waves of water, which were blended with the abstract audio.

## A Generative Method of Composing

A brief overview of the task revealed several key points for which new methods were needed. The game would last for seventy-two hours, and so would the soundtrack. The huge amount of work involved in creating this much music made it unavoidable to make use of some sort of a sound generator.

MHOH head organiser Emma Wieslander made a schedule of the intended development for the three main groups at the event: the Morning people, the Evening people and the Sunnivas. Along with this, we made a curve describing the dramatic envelope (i.e. a graphic representation of the linear proceeding of the dramatic structure) of the game. The schedule and the curve were transcribed into values that were divided into eleven one hour-long tracks combining all main features events of each specific hour. The values were used as the backbone of the MIDI files – the audio control system files – in each track. As a whole, the soundtrack reflected the intended progress of the game based on the expected dramatic curves of the characters and the main storylines. Each hour made up a micro-representation of the dramatic development of the game as a whole.

The tracks were converted into mp3 files and set up in a play list on a laptop, altering the tracks according to the predestined schedule. In the end, the main soundtrack was mixed with the sounds of waves and water.

## Art and Effect, Recording and Mixing

Depending on the game organisers' ambition and how much work they are willing to invest in the project, creating an audio environment can take up as much time as allowed. Knappnålshuvudet had shown that a lot of work and effort can be worthwhile. The effect of a well-produced audio milieu should not be underestimated.

In MHOH, one of the main tasks was to create a feeling of otherworldliness that would pervade the game. Because of the altered rhythm of day and night (a cycle lasted for 18 hours) and the different sleeping patterns of the Morning and Evening people, the soundtrack needed to manifest the early hours of the constructed day as belonging to one group and the late hours as belonging to another. Not intended to be recognised by the attendants, three main themes were put in use for this purpose: the Morning people were saluted by sounds of dry glass bottles, the Evening people by shattered synthetic sounds that were richly processed, and the Sunnivas by rather natural sounds of voices and primitive woodwind instruments of different kinds.

After coming up with the ideas for the "core sounds" for the various fictional factions, it was time to record them in a studio. Several recordings were done during spring 2003, and the composition work went on parallel to this. Most of the recording and processing of the sounds was done at the Electroacoustic Music Studio (EMS) in Stockholm, but mixing the music would have taken too much studio time. The way to generate whole tracks in an audio program is usually called "bouncing", which means rendering a track in real time. In the case of MHOH, bouncing would consist of about 13 hours of just waiting – if all bounces succeeded on the first try. In the end there were about 30 hours of bouncing. Since this was done outside a studio environment, most of the bouncing was done by night.

The process of making larp music differs only slightly from making film music. The music should not take the centre stage in the game, but at the same time it needs to work as an affective. Riksteatern had an 8-channel professional concert system, which meant extensive possibilities to do exactly what was needed. Usually that kind of equipment is not available for a larp. A lot of work was done with long looped dull sounds and high frequency iterative sounds as these had worked well in Knappnålshuvudet. However, in MHOH the audio environment was a constantly proceeding "scene" in the background, and the sounds needed to be less conspicuous. All high frequencies were mixed down, while low frequencies were left untouched, as low sounds do not attract attention while still heavily affecting the listeners. Frequencies around 3000 hertz were dumped as they can actually hurt when played loudly. And, of course, the music needed to fit the rest of the setting.



## Programs and Technical Stuff

To make music or audio mixes on a home computer, the composer generally needs a multi-track mixer that manages hard disc recording. Many of these are made for the Virtual Studio Technique (VSTi), or the DirectX compatible counterpart. Most professionals prefer Logic (mainly for Mac nowadays), but ProTools, Cubase (PC and Mac) or even the open source project Ardour for most Linux-distributions should be fine for creating music for a game. A midi keyboard and any of the previously mentioned programs should be enough to make any kind of music, as each program contains all necessary tools and functions. In MHOH, we used audio processing program Wavelab (SoundForge would have been fine as well) with Kontakt, a software sampler. The USB midi keyboard was made by Evolution. The PC used was a rather slow 755 MHz Athlon with 256 MB RAM. At least 2 GB of hard-drive space was needed.

When processing audio on a computer, the common way of working is with a multi-track recorder and a mixing system (like Logic) that constitutes the working space. Here one controls all sounds, loaded in a software sampler, with MIDI data, not very different from self-playing piano rolls of times past. The sounds that are to be played are prepared in an audio processing program (like Wavelab) and loaded into the software sampler, after which the sounds are returned to the multi-track recorder where additional effects like reverb or flanger can be used. In layman's terms this means that the composer plays on the midi-keyboard, that plays on the MIDI multi-track mixer, that plays on the software sampler, that plays through the effects and down onto the recording hard disc. After this, most musicians/technicians do a mastering, which means setting all sound levels to positions that sound nice in hi-fi stereo systems. Most audio processing programs can perform mastering.

## The Museum for Sound

After the actual game, the final part of the project was to abridge the music of Mellan himmel och hav to CD length. The CD compilation consists of five tracks representing the different main parts of the musical environment of the game. The CD starts out with the sounds of night (track 1). Components from the thematic material are reduced and separated in time, creating a fragmented landscape in which Morning, Evening and Sunniva themes are calling from a distance.

The second track is taken from a part where the Sunnivas were prominent in the drama and the chaotic, event-rich and dense atmosphere urged for things to happen. In the third part, the soft morning sounds appear solitarily, as they would otherwise drown in other, more demanding, sounds. The fourth part invokes the Morning, Evening and Sunniva themes mixed up with the sounds of tides – a very important dramatic feature in the play. At last, as a coda (track 5), night returns accompanied by the sounds of flowing water.

The dull, low registered sounds work well in a concert situation, but in a home stereo system the music would not be done justice. Therefore, the single-CD soundtrack for *Mellan himmel och hav* included a substantial measure of remixing and mastering, providing. This allowed the CD to provide a better picture of the soundscape when experienced at home or in radio, although it is in no way comparable to the original version, which could be experienced only through a controlled sound performance system.

On reflection, the composition shows the strength of the sounds themselves. In many cases, the tracks were not at all composed as sounds were just placed into an existing structure. When listened to, there was often very little that had to be done before the track could be used as a completed piece. In some cases it could even be said that the sounds “found their places” – a situation that resembles the interaction between characters in live-action role-playing.

## Games

*Knappnålshuvudet* (1999) by Daniel Krauklis, Martin Ericsson, Susanne Gräslund & al., Sweden.  
*Mellan himmel och hav* (2003) by Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk & al., Sweden





# Openings



## Positive Power Drama

### A Theoretical and Practical Approach on Emotive Larping

*Positive power drama is really an awareness raising campaign. The strategy was born out of frustration about the fact that almost each and every game had focused exclusively on the negative feelings in life. If themes such as friendship, love or partnership were used it was either within the background story, motivation for the terror the character experienced or inflicted, or in the context of a twisted or perverted version of the relationship not generating any of the positive experiences it could have.*

**W**hat we perceive as possible will forever influence what we are willing to try. The methods we create for ourselves are therefore imperative, not only to the experience but also to the whole concept of theme. Desire to achieve what we dream is the reason for having methods to begin with. Although this is an article on methodology, it should definitely be understood from the perspective of wanting magical things to happen.

Larp, larping and role-playing in general can be seen from various angles and perspectives. This article focuses on two main areas: the method and the theme. The method can be described as the “How” and the theme as the “What”.

In the making of a larp a great number of methods are employed. Most of these are used without reflection, out of habit, or because thinking too much about the How can seem to draw energy from the What. These methods include everything from how the participants interact with each other and with the organisers before the event to how the characters are generated and the rules used in the game.

Apart from distinguishing between organisational methods and different kinds of rules, it is possible to differentiate the rule types more specifically depending on whether it is the player or the character that performs the action and abides with the rule. These can be categorized as diegetic (character) and simulation (player) rules. For example in *Knappnålsbuvudet* there were angels in the diegesis, the players were instructed to disregard them and the invisibility was a simulation just as the latex sword is used as a simulation for a real sword in most fantasy larps. In the diegesis of *Mellan himmel och hav* death was not primarily a physical event rather than a social state. The characters were taught to disregard the dead people and the invisibility was a rule within the diegesis, just as one could create a world where latex swords are as deadly

to its inhabitants as metal blades are in our world, and that then would be a diegetical rule.

The theme is quite often understood in a limited fashion as the genre or the diegetic frame of a game. In this article the term is used in a broader sense to also include some of the less visible Whats, such as the dramatic curve, mood phases and emotional aims of the production.

Positive power drama is neither a method nor a theme but rather a system of thought, or a perspective, that aims to increase awareness about the methods and themes chosen.

### Using Methods

Method, as defined here, encompasses all the different strategies and possibilities of action. This means that, whichever way something is carried out, a method is always employed implicitly or explicitly. Most games are created without giving much thought to the majority of the methods used. In general there will be a decision on what methods (rule systems) will be used for aggression and negativity. Methods for other types of interaction are typically left up to the individual players. (See Wieslander 2004).

To declare the use of methods is to communicate what is to be expected from the game. The safe word methods (words that seems foreign in the characters normal language and that holds other meanings to the players such as cool down, stop the game or I'm ok. e.g. cut, brems, hold) are a brilliant example of how an agreement has enabled players to engage in situations that might have been, or perceived to have been, too risky to enact without a method. Possibly, having any method at all is better than not having one from the perspective of creating an environment in which the player feels comfortable enough to let the character take risks. As *Futuredrome* clearly demonstrated, the setting means nothing if the participants haven't reached an agreement on what will be done by which means. *Futuredrome* was a multi-art project that used a cyberpunk end-of-the-world party as a setting. Although everyone attending were supposed to be in character while in the game area not everybody present chose to participate in the game. As a result of this the different expectations lead both to hurt feelings and to physical damage. The organisers hadn't communicated any methods regarding diegesis other than how the world was perceived from a character perspective. Methods for interaction was left up to the individual players, which led to difficult inter-group interaction as well as to a clash between drunken concertgoers not involved in the game and players playing challenging characters.

## Positive Power Drama

Positive power drama was originally introduced at Knutpunkt 2002. Since then it has formed into a theoretical viewpoint for discussing themes and methods within larps. The intention of the discussion is simply to argue that organizers do have a choice with

regards to both methods and themes, and that the possibilities are much greater than what has been explored so far. In 2003 it was given a cousin in the *Humane strategy* (Gunnerud & Wieslander 2003) focusing not on the diegetic aspects as much as on the equality and collegial spirit in organizing larps.

### Drama?

The term drama has, in the larp discourse, to a certain degree become synonymous with the concept of tragedy only. From that point of view it might seem obvious to question any existence of a positive drama. Drama, the way it is interpreted here, is rather used to describe dynamics, conflicting interests, and more importantly, changes in tempo, emotional states and in story direction. Whether it is tragic or not is not necessarily implied.

That the word positive is used should not be mistaken for cosiness or general feelgood. The concept simply means that dramaturgy primarily focuses on the feelings we generally attribute as "good". Just as the negative dramas sometimes use good things such as love and friendship as motivators it is not strange, in order to achieve dynamics, to use the death of a loved one, jealousy or other negative emotions as contrasts in the positive drama. What is important, however, is that the theme in the greater sense is not aimed at sending a message of hopelessness and perishableness of life and happiness but rather that there is in fact both beauty and hope.

### The Agenda

All larps have agendas. Some strive to entertain, some leave the agenda up to individual players, while others kindle a more ambitious political idea. The more defined the agenda gets, the more important is the awareness of the implications of the chosen methods. The different larps that can be described as drama larps (e.g. *De tusen rosornas väg*, *OB 7*, *Europa*, *Hamlet*) have, in spite of the difference in genre, all chosen methods emphasising the negative twist on their stories.

Unfortunately very few larps, even among the drama larps, have an openly communicated agenda. Even fewer seem to be aware of (or care about) the effects the larp might have on the lives and opinions of the participants. By not communicating the plan and the theme of the larp, the organizers limit the participants' possibilities to be fellow creators. The unawareness and lack of openly discussed themes make the outcomes less predictable, an unwanted variable if some kind of statement is wanted to be made with the event.

### The Full Monty

Regardless of reasons, limiting an entire form of dramatised production to either aimless entertainment or to tragedy seems wasteful. There are many areas in society where an ambition to go further than before seems to be in opposition with expanding and exploring the possibilities. Tabloids, for example, weekly feature articles on how to reach various sorts of orgasms, but in that process the smaller things are lost. We are left

with a public medium that has gone “as far as possible”, while having actually explored a very limited area. Rather than expanding media in a way to make the explicitly sexual possible as well as other eroticism, it’s been done in an excluding manner implying that change is something linear.

These tendencies can be seen though out the mainstream western society, influencing the very perception of sex and sensuality to the extent that any discussion, even in larp methodology, focuses on the extreme expressions as the main points of the issue. Possibilities are limited, not because we weren’t able to perceive and be strongly touched by them, but because people, in one way, are desensitised, or numbed, as it becomes explicit rather than mystical.

Showing “everything” has become just another way to only show a piece of the puzzle, although the piece is now different. Reclaiming the full process gives us room for drama. Within any small portion of anything there is very little room for dramatic changes, and therefore also for dramaturgy. Just as all-aggression larps (as opposed to ones exploring the full scale of negative emotions) make boring drama, the use of only the penetrative aspects of sexuality or only the cuddly elements of love are dramaturgically uninteresting. In the escalation of intensity there is always a risk of numbness. It’s to avoid having to constantly escalate stimuli in order to reach intensity, the concept of expanding and exploring rather than border-breaking that becomes such an interesting, although difficult, enterprise.

### The Power of Choice

Luckily there is always Choice! There are as many strategies to face lack of feelings as there are potential strategists. So far the dominant strategy, in order to make things emotionally strong, seems to be making it hurt more. Positive power drama is a strategy that favours intensity in areas other than hurt and humiliation. The key words are awareness, respect and room for emotional growth.

Positive power drama focuses on emotional rather than intellectual analysis. This process of creating sensitive drama could therefore be summed up as an emotive selection process. As any goal can’t be truly reached with means incoherent with it, the emotive selection process will not only be conscious but also inter-subjectively collective.

This basically means that the intended feeling pervades the project as a whole, rather than being seen as a goal possible to reach through a non-feeling process. Within the positive power drama this emotive process is humanly possible. Of course it can be argued that since there’s never any empirical basis for decisions in larp-making, choices are always emotive, and the issue is just what we call them. As this strategy is based on the idea that how we describe things defines them, the difference is vast and the definition therefore becomes essential as to how the process is conducted.

# The Case

Mellan himmel och hav was a project with a very explicit agenda that definitely focused on the more positive emotions and inter-human relations. That made it suitable as a test case for some of these ideas and consequently the project itself made the development of new tools imperative.

## Agenda and Theme

MHOH had a well-expressed agenda that consisted of four main goals. The idea was to create means for the positive power drama. The goals as stipulated in the project description were to:

- Create methods for love-oriented drama in larp.
- Through a fictitious reality comment on gender and equality.
- Expand larp as a medium by exploring new ways of working with characters and their expressions.
- Integrate artistic music, light and performance to a joint co-created art experience.

Action focusing on love and trust calls for love and trust to be present. Situations leading up to uncomplicated amorous interaction requires that everyone involved feels secure with such interaction (see Wieslander 2004). In order to create the atmosphere of trust, off-game methods were needed, and an ensemble was created which together could take on the task of realising the final event.

Within the fiction gender, as we know it, was non-existent and sex was irrelevant. Instead, new genders, not related to the sex, were created. In addition one of the fundamentals in our gender system, the hetero-normativity, was removed. The construction of genders enabled participants to experience how masculinity and femininity are constructs rather than innate attributes. The basic equality issues were addressed by analysing the abilities of subject and object as well as how these are created and perceived.

The characters were able to grow into existence rather than being written or created in a “top down” fashion or “individualistic” fashion. Partly this was because of the work with the ensemble, and partly it was managed by new methods of character creation. Very little of the material was written down, but rather passed on by exercises and storytelling. This was essential to the results reached but not something that fits with every player and certainly not with most larps.

Music and light installations and the performance together created the out-of-this-world science fiction feel for the whole event. By employing this multi-disciplinary approach to building the setting the intention of being very low key yet highly intense was reached. Light made the eighteen-hour cycle possible and the sound helped create the mood and also to enable players to be silent (see also Summanen 2004). To a

certain extent they also worked as décor. The crossover concept was imperative to the functioning of the positive power drama.

### Methods - Tools

In the making of MHOH a number of methods were employed, both in the final event and during the rest of the project. Quite a few of them are traditional organizational tools, some are commonly used in the making of larps and some are completely new. The methods can be broken down into three categories: First the structure of organisation, the backbone of the project; second the tools of the process leading up to the event within which the fiction and characters were created; and third the tools for game-mastering and character interaction during the game itself.

The organisation of Ars Amandi –group was a *circular hierarchic* structure with three main focuses: administration, fiction and production. Each area had a group of it's own. This structure mainly kept to traditional methods such as *meetings, email lists* and *decision-making by consent*.

In the beginning of the project the initiators made up only the Whats, while the Hows were created by the ensemble. For example the bipolar gender structure consisting of Morning and Evening people was set by the initiators, but what a Morning person was like was not. The initiators chose to *view participants as fellow creators* very early on in the production, enabling them to be a part of the emotive process. In order to create a process rather than an event several methods such as *participant seminars, email lists, web forum, pre-larp, de-rolling, character developers, de-briefing follow-up* and *participant-initiated meetings* were used. Within this process, methods of character-building were used as well, including *drama exercises*, some created for the project. Among others we used *walking and motion exercises* to de-gender players expressions (such as *“The Lionesses”* to create a sensual new body language), *Frozen Moments* to create character memories and expressions, *value exercises* to think through the characters positioning and views, *trust and comfort exercises* to create the feeling of living together and of course *the “rules” were rehearsed*.

In order to facilitate the intended drama, the *music and lighting* were instrumental game mastering methods, especially since they were the basis in the *altered day cycle*, a way of creating better dramatic intervals. There were also two groups of *pecially informed* (rather than instructed) *players* whom had both diegetic and extradiegetic methods at hand in order to influence the drama. The first group, the dead, were *socially invisible* to the characters and they had possibilities to take players to a temple (the Heart) to *play out dreams* and strange encounters. The site contained an *off-game room* that was a core in administrating what happened to players and to drama. In order to enable challenging interaction a *safe word method* (cut/brems) was employed, as were *the Ars Amandi method* for lovemaking. *Colour-coded clothing including headgear* and *restrictions regarding body hair* were used to put less emphasis on sex and to visualize the new genders and the social statuses instead. *Language alterations* were used to make the diegesis work and implement the new genders and *visualization*

*techniques* were used to enable the Sunnivas (the clergy) to see the characters' spiritual needs. Even the *specially designed food* was part of the theme to create an off this world feeling.

### Conclusions from Mellan Himmel och Hav

All in all MHOH showed that being consistent in choosing an agenda and sticking with it through the process pays off. The methods used were a big part of how the project turned out, regarding both to the total impact of the project and to the dramaturgy of the game. It also showed that it is indeed possible to maintain a game that is extremely intense and still very subtle.

MHOH was also an example of how the role-playing medium can be used, not only as art, but as political art with a message – not trying to subterfuge an agenda in with the entertainment but to honestly have a point and communicate it openly throughout the experience. The gender de-construction and re-construction could not have been done by a single artist or group; it was so vividly put across because the event had no passive spectators, only fellow creators. That makes the utilisation of larp as a tool of change and awareness very powerful. By handling the agenda and method openly during the whole process, the participants could and had to work with themselves relating to it. Whether it was to get the idea of social constructivism proved wrong or right, to be a part of the art work or to be an agent of change learning new methods. That choice was made possible by gaining awareness.

The event resulted in a multitude of different emotions being played and felt. It was not the cuddly love feast some feared that it might be, although it could have gone that way if the elements of individualism and “larp democracy” had been able to override the aim for drama. As it were, enough room was made within the different aspects of love to create very dramatic changes in the characters minds. Still, it was not a total success. Whether it is that the larpers still prefer to feel miserable, or tiredness, or just that the negative is safer to play when a player wants to make an impact, the fact remains that during the third diegetic day things looked quite depressing. In the end though, the urge to do what was intended won. This proved that tragedy could be used as a backdrop for positive drama just as well as the positive can function as a background for tragedy, too.

## The Challenge

With Mellan himmel och hav the mitten was thrown and hopefully the future will hold more larps that are conscious, not only with regards to the agenda and the methods, but also of the fact that we can indeed change the way we perceive things with larp as a tool to do so. By pretending, putting on a different set of spectacles, we might very well see things in a way that also enables us to do something about it. This does not mean that all larps from now on should be serious political art events, but the thought of positive

power drama has through MHOH shown that the possibility exists. Thus it has, as it set out to, already expanded our concept of the medium.

Other events like *Ringblomman* show similarly that the means communicate the message. There the important concept was togetherness and consequently the larp was also constructed with an unusually high amount of co-creativity. Positive power drama will continue to be a strategy, one of many, and as such it will hopefully not only inspire more larps with positive agendas but also other strategies to be formulated and communicated. That would really change the world.

## Games

Europa (2001) by Eirik Fatland, Irene Tanke et al., Weltschmerz, Norway.

Futuredrome (2002) by Henrik Wallgren, Staffan Sörenson et al., Sweden.

Hamlet (2002) by Martin Ericsson, Anna Ericson, Christopher Sandberg, Martin Brodén et al., Interaktiva Uppsättningar, Sweden.

Knappnålshuvudet (1999), by Daniel Krauklis, Martin Eriksson, Susanne Gräslund et al., Interaktiva uppsättningar, Sweden.

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander, Katarina Björk et al., Ars Amandi, Sweden.

OB 7 (2001) by Per Wetterstrand, Carl Heath et al., Sweden

Ringblomman (2004) by Karin Tidbeck et al., Ars Amandi, Sweden.

De tusen rosornas väg (2000) Emil Boss, Johnny Hjortter, Staffan Johnsson et al., Sisyfos, Sweden.

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# Participatory Education

## What and Why

*Participatory forms of expression do not have to be limited to more or less artful narratives in larps and other kinds of role-playing games. What effects can role-playing have when used in education? This paper discusses possible effects of pedagogic role-playing and proposes some explanations to why role-playing is not used in schools.*

**P**articipatory education is mostly utilised as diverse forms of role-playing. One usual method is to make students' research opinions and goals for different nations or ethnic groups and then put them together in a conference where representatives for different parties may argue for their point of view. Likewise, the students can role-play different problems that businesses or organizations may meet. This kind of pedagogic role-playing is often called "simulation", since the participants try to re-enact situations or circumstances that are impossible to recreate in the classroom. The relevant parts of the situation are "simulated", while the rest is left out.

It is not far from true to say that role-playing is the primal way of learning, and that all higher education should start from there. The age-old system with master and apprentice is more a case of learning by simulating the master than learning by instruction; that is, the apprentice is trying on the master's role until she has reached the master's level herself. Children as well first try role models they get from the caretakers, moving on to roles they get from other interesting people and things they meet. This kind of learning is based on curiosity, which is hard-wired into our system. Children are learning machines, but anyone who has seen knowledge-hungry first-graders turn into despairing fourth-graders has also seen how the traditional school quenches that curiosity.

Contrary to this kind of learning, most traditional forms of education – on all levels – are built to deliver pre-packaged knowledge, not to further eager searching and self-made discoveries. It should be unnecessary to point out that simulation is a marvellous tool for awakening the pupils' interest for learning in general, but strangely enough it does not seem to be self-evident. The experience of being an active, responsible subject in a realistic situation of importance almost always enhances the students' motivation by personalizing the subject matter.

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<sup>1</sup> The words "pupil" and "student" are used synonymously, regardless of the level of education, from kindergarten to university.

## Effects of Role-Playing on Learning

Simulation helps the students ask relevant and thoughtful questions, e.g. when they want to get more information about the models determining the choice of controlling elements in the simulation. For example, what parallels to the simulation are there in reality? How can and should communication in the situation be organised? What are the problems presented in the simulation and how can they be mastered?

It is not unusual for a simulation to lead into critical analysis, which can motivate the students to develop their own theoretical models. Perhaps the strongest learning effect occurs when the students make their own simulations; in these cases the students have to make a thorough research of the situation in question to decide which elements are necessary and relevant, what the underlying causes are, and what forces control the development of the situation.

Simulations may help the students construct a more holistic picture of different circumstances affecting human behaviour. A well-made role-play should give a relatively realistic image of the political, social, historical, cultural and economic factors having an impact on the characters' lives. Thus, a simulation can give convincing experiences of different social systems. In addition, a simulation can give insight into the ways social or cultural capital influences chances for education and career, or about the impact of technology on human interaction and the interaction between human beings and social institutions. This allows the students to integrate their pre-existing concepts and information into meaningful wholes.

## Social and Psychological Effects

Besides knowledge in specific subject matters, simulations can provide insights and skills in decision-making, resource allocation, communication, and methods of persuasion as well as capacity to understand and resist forms of persuasion. At the same time, the students get to experience the rational and emotional factors making up these kinds of processes. This happens on a general level, demonstrating that people are driven by a far from optimal mix of common sense and feelings, and likewise how they disguise emotion-based motivations by rational reasoning. On a personal level they may discover how these behaviours work in their own case. The view of mankind all of us internalise as we grow up, a view given by our primary group and then by our society and subculture, can thus be deconstructed. This allows the students to get a chance to develop their own conceptions of man, based more on personal experience than on tradition.

This kind of personal understanding can influence attitudes to underlying social structures. Examples include enhanced insight and empathy for the difficulties that decision makers face in the real world, a feeling that life is much more complicated than could be ever imagined and that nothing is fundamentally binary black-and-white, or a

conviction that the participators really have a possibility to influence their own life or the future of the world.

Other insights include explicit, concrete and bodily experienced perceptions of constructs, concepts and terms describing human behaviour. Everyone has some kind of a psychological or sociological world view, which can be tested against reality through simulation. Simulation can also show how context dependent such world views are, and what their importance for an individual's identity is. The classical training exercise in which two parties argue for the opponents' standpoints is always very fruitful; the exercise can be extended to include not only arguments but also identities.

Much of our knowledge is not formulated on a conscious level. Besides the silent knowledge (such as biking or cooking) we obtain in various ways, there is also knowledge we seldom realise we have until it shows up in actual circumstances. Since simulations are open-structured and can lead to unexpected chains of events, they can present opportunities to discover, identify and formulate such knowledge.

Behind every model used for simulation there are a lot of circumstances that are not presented explicitly. For example a role-play about business problems, economic transactions or management will also give knowledge about different kind of external and internal relations and factors that influence the market, while a role-play about international justice sheds light upon the connection between the satisfaction of various political groups and the likelihood for political leaders to remain in power.

One of the most important effects of simulations is their impact on the social context of the school. Being forced to abandon the classroom arrangement of traditional education, the control of the classroom moves from the teacher to the structure of the simulation. This leads into more relaxed relations between teachers and pupils. If the teachers accept the situation, the change may even remain. The involvement in the simulation may even decrease posing and status-seeking attitudes between the students, creating a better ambience in the classroom even in the long run.

Learning by simulation also forces the students to be more active and encourages them to question and even challenge the teachers – which is not always regarded as a good thing in a traditional school context.

Participatory arts have a positive impact on individual development, and pedagogic simulation is no exception. In short, these effects present a clearer view on how other people perceive the students, insights in the students' own capabilities, strengths and weaknesses, and fears and barriers the students had not been aware of. Not the least of the effects is the possibility to express intimacy, resentment or indifference without risking dire consequences.

## **Why Is Participatory Education Not Used?**

There are many reasons for participatory methods not being used in education. Besides the tradition of education through one-way stimuli, there are purely ideological reasons

such as the domination of the spectator paradigm going through every sector of society. This shows up in a fixation to bookish learning and a corresponding devaluation of practical hands-on knowledge.

The traditional classroom is organised to suit the spectator paradigm. In front of the blackboard stands the lectern, in front of which the little desks are aligned towards the lectern. The classroom may also have an overhead projector or a TV set, which likewise levels and coordinates all eye movements. The teacher (or the machine) is the one producing the stimuli, while the pupils' task is to receive them.

There is a certain amount of stimuli going from the pupils to the teacher, primarily in order to elicit more stimuli from the teacher, or to prove that the pupils have received enough educative stimuli. The rules that restrict the students' action space are unspoken, but they are running the show nonetheless. There is no proper dialogue going on in the classroom, especially not aimed at a mutual search for knowledge. The spectator paradigm also presupposes a unitary, non-ambiguous message, in this case embodied in the teacher as the channel for the total body of transmitted knowledge.

## The Lack of Competent Teachers

The previous paragraphs provide some general explanations why simulation is rarely used in institutionalised education. Moreover, there are a number of factual barriers, one of them being that there is no education in how to create simulations. This is a field with a lot of room for basic research: how can the curriculum of schools be framed in a way that makes the learning so pleasurable that it becomes almost automatic? How can facts and circumstances be dramatised and placed in believable contexts? Especially regarding abstract reasoning and far-reaching arguments – how to turn them into living experiences? The current teacher education does not cover these kinds of questions<sup>2</sup>.

Simulation includes a lot of interdisciplinary activities. Understanding the different aspects of an ethnic conflict requires knowledge about historical, geographical, political, social, economical and religious circumstances, and thus, co-operation between many of teachers – something not encouraged in the teachers' education and working situations.

The material needs to be presented in a way that engages the pupils, which requires a certain creative capability in addition to the basic pedagogical competence. To realise the elements that can lead to dramatically interesting and learning-promoting plots for the simulation, the teacher needs to have some insights about dramatic enactment. Since teacher training is not geared towards such enactment, that kind of knowledge is perforce excluded. Ideally the pupils should research the subject

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<sup>2</sup> Years ago the Swedish author Sven Lindqvist put forward a modest proposition on how to make mathematics and social studies more realistic by having the students make all sorts of statistics and estimates on living conditions and production terms at a big South American farm. He was heavily ridiculed for his naïve idealism.

themselves, but even in these cases the teachers must be able to help the students identify relevant and redundant information.

It is possible that the open structure used in simulations can be experienced as a threat to the teachers' authority. For a person trained for a career in the service of the spectator paradigm, secure in the faith that the students' duty is to act as grateful receivers for the fountain of erudition streaming from the teacher (an exact parallel to the myth of the singular artist), it might be difficult to switch thinking modes and begin a dialogue on the same terms as the other participants.

A simulation contains no more correct answers than life itself. Instead, a simulation consists of experiences that can provide opportunities to choose standpoints and opinions rather than getting pre-packaged solutions. Since in a simulation the chain of events often goes its own way, a simulation may even result in getting a "wrong" answer: a simulation of an ethnic conflict may reveal racism not expected by the participants, or a simulated business enterprise may choose to put profit margins before environmental protection. Seen from the traditional school perspective this makes for low grades, while it in fact means that the students get first hand experiences instead of second hand opinions. What better way of learning is there?

## Conclusion

The biggest barrier for participatory education might be the hidden agenda of the school system. The real task of the current educational system is not to help students find their own place and role in life; instead, it aims to turn them into functionalities required by the economy. In this way, the school is an integrated part of the society's consciousness industry, geared to make the students *fit in*. That is a goal suited to traditional education, while participatory education might (note: *might*) provide a bigger action repertoire and a wider range of options to handle life with. The school system is always ten years late: just as generals are always preparing for the previous war instead of the next one, school teaches the students things they needed to know yesterday instead of what they need to know tomorrow.



## The Storyteller's Manifesto

*The Storyteller's Manifesto is an attempt to create a more concrete model for making narrativist larps. While other papers on the subject exist, I wanted to create a more radical model, one that borrows heavily from film and theatre as well as from "realistic" literature. With the manifesto, I seek to depart from gamist and immersionist larping, laying the foundations for larps with a clear story and a strong message. Larps that speak to us and challenge us and change our ways of thinking. I want larps people either love or hate, larps that mean something. When reading the manifesto, one might get the idea that I abhor all other forms of larping. This is not true; I see that gamist and immersionist techniques suit some larps, but I view both as weak techniques when it comes to telling stories.*

Given that, the Storyteller's Manifesto is rather geometrically opposed to the hallmark of immersionism, *The Manifesto of the Turku School* by Mike Pohjola (1999). Where Turku cries for total character immersion and liberation from dramatism, the Storyteller's Manifesto sees immersionism as a potential obstacle in the telling of a story, and drama techniques and meta-considerations as necessary to making the larp function. Where Dogma 99 (by Eirik Fatland and Lars Wingård 1999) outlaws secrecy and forbids the organisers to influence play, both are desirable when trying to tell a moving story. The biggest difference between the Storyteller's Manifesto and earlier works is that it does not see character immersion as the highest goal; immersion in the story and fiction is paramount, and the characters are acted out as much as they are *lived*. By setting a "new" goal for larping, I hope to inspire the creation of new larps.

### Story?

What constitutes a story to me differs from the narrativist view of a story and a narrative. While books and films deal with stories in their completed state, the Storyteller's Manifesto deals with the seeds of stories: beginnings, ends and vague paths towards the goals – frameworks of stories, but not stories already told. The "feel" and theme of the story can be set without writing the story. The process is somewhat like musical improvisation over a series of chords; The chords set the boundaries and influence the result, but the result is still not given but created through playing.

The ideal of writing games with only important characters has been very problematic to attain so far. My guideline is stripping the game to the bone: Start with an idea, the seeds of the story and the theme. Throw away all other ideas but the theme, and start wrapping the elements of the larp around it. Does the theme require a specific

setting (e.g. historical, sci-fi or fantasy)? If not, stick with a contemporary setting. Write out the premises of the story, adding on characters as they become necessary – and only when they become necessary. If this means ending up with only ten characters, all the better. Flesh out the character relations, intrigues and plots, again only including plots that are tied to the theme. When making the characters, concentrate only on their function in relation to the story.

The characters' backgrounds and personalities should be added when you know who is going to play the character. After this, write a story to fit the theme with as few words as possible. Reduce the story to its most basic components and find out where it ends. Write the ending and start implementing the plots and intrigues into the skeleton of the story. Fate-play is a good technique for attaching the skeleton to the larp, but the number of "fate nodes" should be kept to a bare minimum; The more freedom the players get, the more they can contribute. When you feel you have the larp quite ready, but before you go out recruiting players, you should look over it a last time and try to weed out all that is not needed, not sparing any unnecessary character or idea. By stripping away all unnecessary fluff, the essence of the idea is found, and it will become much stronger for it.

Employ heavy casting. Match each character to player, and write the backgrounds and personalities to suit the players. Get the players involved in the creation process, get them just as engaged in the larp as you are. You should choose the costumes, location and other things according to the needs of the story. Make sure that all parts of the scenery have something to do with the story; no part of the scenography should be irrelevant. Make sure all the little details add up to something bigger.

Last, but not least: Find a story that rocks your bones. Without a really good story, the Storyteller's Manifesto is useless, and you should probably do something else instead.

## A Model for Narrative Larps

The Storyteller's Manifesto is a manifesto for narrativist larping. It stems from two main concepts: collective artistic expression and a good story. The manifesto views larp as an art form equal to music and theatre, and the players as artists. However, the manifesto wishes to lessen the differences between the makers of the larp and the players. This will be achieved by a clear focus on collective storytelling. The larp should be centred on a story with a clear theme and a strong message. The larp should intrigue and pull the players into the story, and at the same time it should lead to contemplation and new thoughts and ideas about the theme or the message that is told through the story. The manifesto recognises the former works in the area of narrativist larp (The Sestiamovement<sup>1</sup> and the Manifest Sunday (2001)) while trying to narrow its focus to include

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<sup>1</sup> See [www.interactingarts.org/ia1quick\\_revised.html](http://www.interactingarts.org/ia1quick_revised.html) (December 2003)

only larps and to create a concrete and radical model for creating narrativist larps – something none of the earlier works tried to do.

### Definitions

“A larp is a meeting between persons who through characters relate to each other in a fictional world” (Fatland & Wingård 1999). I would like to add physical boundaries as a necessary element to the definition of larp.

A narrativist larp (Bøckman 2003) is a larp that bases itself on the telling of a story and communicating a message in collaboration with the players.

Narrativist playing places its main focus on extroverted playing. This means playing the characters to increase and strengthen the fiction and the other players’ experiences of the fiction, as opposed to focusing on solving plots or becoming “one with the character”.

In this text the word ‘fiction’ means “the total sum of everything that is real within the larp”, the larp’s diegesis, the game universe (Andreasen 2003), the story’s foundation, the setting where the story is played out. This includes written background material, character descriptions, props, scenery etc.

In this text the word ‘story’ means the story that the larprawrights, and the players, are attempting to tell. The story is built on the fiction, and is both a part of the fiction and a separate entity. The story is not a story in the traditional sense, i.e. something that has already happened, but the seeds of a story: a framework or an idea, yet to be fleshed out.

### The Strengths of Narrativist Larp

Larping is a collective experience. By aiming the focus of the larp outwards instead of inwards, towards the common good instead of the individual player’s good, one will be able to benefit from all the players’ resources. This will strengthen the larp as a whole as well as the players’ involvement in both the story and the fiction of the larp.

There are few experiences that can engage people like a well-told story. Since the dawn of mankind, stories have been a central part of human culture both as a way of teaching and as a way of remembering the past. By letting players be a part of the telling of a story, a larp may achieve engagement and immersion in a story like no other media. This makes larp ideal both in telling a story and in conveying a message, and thus both entertaining and enlightening to the participants.

A gamist (Bøckman 2003) style of play is at a disadvantage because it requires competition, and competition requires a loser. By dividing the larp into winners and losers, the players will turn their focus to winning and thus away from the larp itself. This will weaken the larp as a whole. Larping is not a well-suited medium for problem solving in any case; computer games and table-top role-playing games are much better suited to this purpose since they can achieve objectivity and fairness more easily; in a tabletop role-playing game or a computer game, game mechanics can be easily employed to achieve a balance between the players.

An immersionist (Bøckman 2003) style of play turns the focus inwards into the character's mind and seeks the fusion of player and character. Despite the fact that an immersionist style of play leads to a situation where the characters indirectly strengthen the fiction through being "true" or "realistic", the style focuses mainly on an individual player's experience, not the larp as a whole. In addition, a great degree of inner conflicts and introverted play pull the focus away from the story or the message, if the inner conflicts are not in direct relevance to the theme and story. A certain degree of meta-considerations is inevitable in any larp. Since utilizing meta-considerations go against the principles of immersionist play, the narrativist method is better suited to handle such problems. The players' meta-considerations (concerning the needs of the story and the larp as a whole) strengthen the larp and are a necessity for the larp to function.

### Principles

The larp seeks to tell a story with a theme and a message. Without this, the larp is without value, fit only for entertainment without substance or meaning.

The makers of the larp will decide the beginning and the end of the story; the players will fill the space between these points.

The fiction, and thus all written material, will be constructed around the story, not the other way around.

Use of pre-written material or copying from secondary sources (for instance history books) should be avoided if the material is not critical in telling the story. Using ready-made material or secondary sources for their own sake is patching up a weak story with trappings of originality and authenticity, forcing the focus away from the story.

Any form of staging<sup>2</sup> used merely to make the larp more entertaining or interesting should be avoided. Larping is about working together to tell a story, not about standing by while people play out constructed events doing nothing for the story except serving as entertainment.

Game mechanics should be avoided. Situations where they might be considered necessary (fights, magic etc.) should be solved by improvising according to the needs of the story.

All written material has to be made available for the players after the larp is over, making it easier for the players to reflect over the story and their parts in it.

All characters must be relevant, invaluable parts of the story (see Rognli 2003). Characters that exist only to fill a function not directly linked to the story, or whose place is to fill blank spaces in the fiction, should be avoided. No character should be a bystander or an "extra".

Each character's written background has to have parallels to the story, the theme, and the message of the larp. Letting the story be seen through the eyes of the characters

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<sup>2</sup> Petter Bøckman defines this Norwegian term as "a short event conducted by specially instructed players, monsters or the organisers themselves during a LARP. These usually connected to a plot, and serve to steer the game, introduce new information or reinforce the theme of the game" in Gade, M., Thorup, L. & Sander, M. (ed) (2003): *As Larp Grows Up. Theory and Methods in Larp.*

increases the players' identification with the story. The theme of the story must be depicted in all conflicts of the character's past.

All intrigues, plots and fates must mirror the story or advance it. Intrigues for the sake of having intrigues or plots that exist only to be solved take the focus away from the story. It should be possible to draw parallels between the characters' conflicts and the conflicts of the story. The theme of the story should saturate the larp.

Every character's function in the larp takes precedence over their background and personality. The characters' personalities and backgrounds should be written around the characters' functions, not vice versa.

Each character should be written for a specific player. If the character changes hands after it has been written, it should be revised to suit the new player, thus making sure the player suits the character's appearance and presence.

The players' abilities should not be critical to the choice of character. Any holes in the players' skills can be filled through collective improvisation. The larpwright, on the other hand, should keep the players' physical attributes in mind when assigning and writing characters; lacking abilities can be covered up by good acting, but fooling the eyes is more difficult. A character's appearance should match the character's inner being to some extent.

Any incident or conflict written into a character must be made with the clear intent of surfacing during play. Incidents or conflicts made only to exist solely inside the characters head are worthless since they do not benefit the larp as a whole. All drama written into a character should at some point be shared with the other players.

The larpwright should avoid having too many characters in the larp. Too many characters complicate the making of the larp and fragment the story. The larp should contain only the characters the story needs to function, no more.

The players are free to decide and influence the path to the end of the story, but not the end itself. The road towards the goal is as important as the goal itself. The point of a larp is to tell a story together, not to make one from scratch.

No character is more important than the larp as a whole. Characters may be killed to serve the story. Good stories do not require happy endings.

Character immersion should not be a goal in itself, but a means to achieve immersion in the story. The players should give up their sense of self to a certain degree, and be one with the story. By seeing their characters through the eyes of the story, the players are able to see how their characters' actions might best benefit the story. The characters are not isolated individuals, but pieces of a larger puzzle. By achieving unity with the fiction of the larp, the story and the message will creep under the players' skin, since the fiction will reflect the story and message. Too great degree of character immersion draws the focus away from the theme and the message of the larp.

Costumes, props and other visual effects are used to strengthen the story as a whole. Realism should not be sought after for its own sake. A good costume tells the others something about the character. Realism, authenticity and historical accuracy are not important.

The organisers have the final say in all matters in the larp. Though they hold absolute power over the game, they should seek to use it as little as possible and allow the players to influence the game as much as the organisers. Narrativist larp is about collective storytelling and collective art, not players carrying out the artistic ambitions of the organisers to the letter.

The players shall not use any concept of logic or realism other than what the organisers give them. For the artificial reality to function, it must be embraced without hesitation or doubt.

## The Pledge of Allegiance

As a participant of a larp made after the tenets of the Storyteller's Manifesto, I hereby pledge:

- To respect larp as an art form and to see the organisers and the players involved in the larp as artists. I shall view the larp as a work of art I have created in collaboration with all the other artists, and I will take full responsibility for any flaws in the larp as a whole, sharing the responsibility fully with all the other participants.

By recognising larp as an art form, and by viewing themselves as artists on equal terms with the organisers, the players leaves the classic relationship between artist and audience and between artist and performer behind; the classic way of viewing art cannot be applied to larp. The game should strive towards being more like jazz improvisation, where several artists create music together spontaneously, than a symphony, where a single artist uses the performers as tools of her own expression.

- To further the story and the larp as a whole instead of focusing on my own experience.

Focusing on personal experience leads easily to memorable situations for the individual, but will not necessarily strengthen the larp as a whole. By playing outwards, the players' experiences of the larp will even out as everybody will be pulling everybody else up.

- To see my character, as well as the reason for her existence, as a part of the story and the fiction. I shall try to view my character objectively, not subjectively.

By viewing a character as a part of a greater whole, it is easier to see how the character's actions can best strengthen and improve that whole. By keeping an objective eye on the character, it is easier to avoid losing sight of the collective experience and the larp as a whole.

- To strive to express all aspects of my character so that others can participate in the unique story that is my character.

In a narrativist larp all aspects of a character are there for a reason, inseparably tied to the story and message, and should thus all be acted out. By acting out all aspects of their characters, the players will achieve a greater understanding of the characters, and thereby a greater understanding of the theme and message that are the foundations of the story as well as a better understanding about the foundations of their characters. This also means that all the other players will, directly or indirectly, be able to participate in the player's reflections of the character and the story. Striving to express your character fully builds a clear image of the character for the other players. This makes sure that no character will seem like an extra.

- To contemplate my character and her place in the story and fiction, both before and after the larp, as well as the story and fiction in itself.  
During a larp, reflection on the fiction, theme and story can easily drown in personal experiences. It is therefore important to thoroughly contemplate your character before a larp. An understanding of a larp's themes enables the player to feel like an irreplaceable part of the whole.
- To thoroughly purge myself of any concepts of realism, authenticity, political correctness and preconceptions on what constitutes good taste or a good larp. Instead, I will give myself mindlessly over to the reality of the larp.  
Larp is an art form, and for art to be of any value, it must be free. All groundbreaking art is made where creativity smashes the boundaries of conservative society. Cemented notions of right and wrong, good and bad (et cetera) get in the way of free artistic expression, and can distort a larp beyond recognition. The theme and the message of a larp should not be quelled in bourgeois political correctness, and conservative notions on what constitutes "good" larping or art should not destroy its form. The players should accept reality as it is given by the organisers, and contribute to it with an open, creative mind free of prejudices.
- To play out the total degradation, defeat and decay of my character with the same joy and zeal as her greatest victories. Victory and loss are equal.  
Many of the greatest and most moving stories end in tragedy. As much understanding and value can be gleaned from the depths of tragedy as from the heights of bliss. The players should not seek personal gain for the character to fulfil their own need for success.
- To give fully of myself, and to expect others to do the same.  
All true art requires engagement. Good stories engage and rouse us. The players should enter the larp with the intention of giving all they can and knowing that the other players will do the same.
- To willingly share my experiences from the larp with others so that they too can benefit from my experiences.  
Larp is a fragile medium. There are few methods of preserving a larp after it is complete; Playing the same game again would not yield the same result. This is why it is important that the larp is shared with those who did not participate and

that the contemplation about the themes and messages do not end when the larp does. The best stories live by the word of mouth; the best larps should do the same.

### Acknowledgements

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## Battle Against Primitivism

*A hundred years ago, film producers often made their movies by placing a fixed camera in front of a theatre play. Looking at such a film now is horrible. It barely seems like cinema at all. A good movie can have theatre sets and a fixed camera, but a full use of the medium requires editing, a moving camera, close-ups, post-production and all the other innovations that have been made since the time of Lumière. Stories are to role-playing as theatre is to cinema. As long as the endless talk about narratives continues, the camera will never move.*

**T**he film director Aki Kaurismäki has complained that no interesting films have been made after the cinema of the sixties, since that period marked the medium's last spasm of formal innovation. After the sixties, the conventions of film settled down, making Gus van Sant's *Elephant* (2003) as fresh as Stuart Gordon's *Re-Animator* (1985). In a sense, the role-player of today is lucky. He's able to literally invent new techniques and strategies of expression to every game, since it's all uncharted territory. Nothing's been set in stone yet, so there's nothing to prevent him from making the language of role-playing his own.

The flipside is that no one can claim to understand the medium now. It's young, unexplored and unfamiliar. There is precious little authority on which to build. The basic techniques of role-playing, the conventions and the mechanisms, are still being determined. Role-playing is about thirty years old now, and throughout most of that time has been as close to the real thing as a moving picture flipbook is to Kieslowski. The 19th century man didn't see much potential in flipbooks, and the same holds true of the modern *Dungeons & Dragons* player, who tends to resist all attempts to make his diversion into art.

Cultural evolution and development is impossible without the will to progress, and an important part of all growth is discarding the antiquated tools borrowed from other mediums. The camera started to move and the histrionic acting of the stage was replaced with the endless eyebrow wiggling of the silent era. In role-playing, the story is the relic, and no amount of creative back-peddalling or academic exploration can make it relevant.

### Leftovers

The concept of a story or narrative holds a central position in the conceptual iconography of role-playing, but it hasn't always done so. I don't consider the original *Dungeons &*

Dragons to be role-playing at all, merely a tactical simulation spiced with a descriptive gloss, but for historical reasons it has to be included. Besides, right or wrong, it is the historical progenitor of the entire medium. Dungeons & Dragons has no pretensions, towards storytelling or anything else.

The concept of a storytelling game, a role-playing game using a story as its central formal metaphor, was popularised by the revolutionary games published by White Wolf, the first being *Vampire: the Masquerade*. Vampire broadened the scope of role-playing and brought a number of essential elements to the fore, especially social interaction. It did this, however, at the cost of introducing a lot of concepts like story and narrative, concepts foreign to actual role-playing.

Vampire was first published in 1991, and it and its sister games did a great service to the medium by giving alternatives to the old-school rape 'n' pillage games. Reading *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*, the second in White Wolf's series of Storyteller games, while still in my teens was a revelation. Some of my players adapted better than others. One made a werewolf biker killing-machine modelled after Antonio Banderas in the Robert Rodriguez film *Desperado* (1995). Another made a depressed, gay mystical kung-fu wizard who had just escaped from an orphanage where he had been raped, the trauma releasing his magic powers.

I can pretty much thank Vampire for being able to play the games I do today. However, today's quality games can usually be recognised by a distinct lack of kung-fu wizards, and by the same token, the very idea of a storytelling game is now merely a relic from a transitory era.

Yet now, almost fifteen years after the advent of Vampire, stories still infest the medium. Many tabletop GMs see themselves as storytellers, despite the fact that these two crafts have little in common besides the similar way you can use a funny voice to make comic characters. In larps, the idea of using stories is even more preposterous, since the medium doesn't even superficially support the concept.

Stories also infest the supporting material of the games, from the annoying trend to write little character-oriented short stories instead of designing playable roles to the mandatory pieces of fiction that seem to open almost every modern role-playing book. A gamer would describe a traditional game as "The story of my character", or a larp as "The story of a small village", despite the obvious fact that a role-playing game is neither.

Using stories in RPGs is very natural. People are constantly fictionalising their lives and other real-world events, and it's easy to use the same tools for seeing role-playing games in terms of a narrative. Stories are not a foreign concept to role-playing, but neither are they an integral one.

The individual experience of the player is at the centre of the role-playing medium. The player often forces his experience into a story as he struggles to make sense of the game, but in terms of the experience itself, the role-playing itself, the story is irrelevant and peripheral. Trying to tell stories through role-playing is fighting against the very grain of the medium, trying to force an essentially interactive and unpredictable

process into a stifling harness. It's like shooting yourself in the foot and then trying to run the marathon.

Role-playing exists in the now, in the moment of the game. It exists in the now even more so than a theatre performance or a concert, because there is no objective way to truly understand the totality of the game. Every participating individual reads and experiences the game differently. The most obvious difference is the character through which the player participates in the game: every character is different. After that come the differences in player expectations, taste, understanding and off-game issues.

These are the good parts. These are the issues of concern, the terms through which it's relevant to understand the medium.

## Clogging the Drain

Role-playing games tend to produce stupid stories. Even the most ridiculous game can work brilliantly, because it doesn't matter if it's full of wereleopards and mutant monsters from *Druuna* as long as it makes sense as an experience. What on paper looks silly, and sounds silly when explained afterwards, may still be an extremely meaningful experience. It is a stupid story – and a good game. The story doesn't carry the impact of the game because the impact of the game doesn't fit into narratives, a phenomenon one can witness at public larp debriefs, in which people often misguidedly believe that stories of their personal experiences in the game might actually interest someone.

I don't really understand why people often want to know the “real story” behind a game they participated in. Generally these explanations are banal and uninteresting, irrelevant to the game experience. If it wasn't apparent in the player's game experience, it wasn't in the game at all except as an abstract matter of GM technique. An actor may imagine he's killing his wife as he strangles another character on the stage, but that's irrelevant from the point of view of the audience. If the GM has ninja snipers shadowing the characters the whole game, but the players never realise they're there, they don't exist in the game at all. They're a game mastering tool that never actualised.

Obviously, if the game experience is incomplete without extra information of this kind, the game probably has a design flaw, much like a movie you can't understand without a commentary from the director.

Simulation seems to be the other popular way of thinking about a role-playing game. Imagining a world that runs like a clockwork, and then inserting the player characters into it. However, building a detailed, running environment is a useful tool in creating a believable world, but nothing more. Sacrificing things like pacing, atmosphere or the themes of the game to the integrity of the simulation is pointless from the perspective of creating good role-playing. As long as the game environment seems plausible, there is no reason to have details unknown to the players cast in iron until they're brought into play.

Railroading means, at the most basic level, forcing your game to follow a certain route, to conform to a story. When the GM says “You fall in love with the girl at the bar”, “The phone doesn’t work so you can’t call the cops”, or “You can’t attack the orc camp before they have completed their rituals”, she may be railroading. Usually, railroading occurs when the GM sacrifices the logic of the in-game environment or takes away the free will of the player character to keep the story of the game on the tracks.

The easiest way to avoid railroading is to avoid having a story in the game. This is a good idea, because railroading is the most grotesque and harmful manifestation of the malignant influence of the idea of a story. Railroading sidelines the player entirely, making him a spectator to something in which he should be an active participant. In essence, railroading makes the role-playing game stop being a role-playing game, reducing it into a storytelling session.

It’s possible to force the player’s hand or have the in-game environment behave in an inexplicable manner properly as a stylistic device, although this is very rare. The difference is in the details and in the motivation. If the GM believes that techniques like these will ultimately benefit the player’s experience, perhaps taking advantage of the player’s assumption that this is railroading, to goad him into something unexpected, then they’re justified.

If the game is about sacrifice, the GM might attempt to drive the game towards a situation in which the player characters have to experience sacrifice. Superficially, this process may resemble railroading, especially in a traditional role-playing game where the GM has more opportunities to influence the game while it’s running. However, engineering the game so that it will probably go in a certain direction is not railroading as long as it’s not following a pre-set story. A competent GM can make a reasonable guess about the direction the game is going and may introduce elements he thinks will direct the game events towards the sort of thing he thinks would create the best role-playing.

This is not railroading as long as the logic of the game environment holds true, the PCs have total freedom of action, and the GM-introduced elements have intrinsic value of their own, other than their function as signposts and direction signs. Most importantly, if the player experience is supreme instead of a story, the GM can be much more flexible in running the game. Instead of the characters sacrificing their love lives for the benefit of their careers, they end up sacrificing their moral integrity on the altar of success. Entirely different game events, yet the core is the same.

## You Can Be Clean

Losing the story angle is just a matter of perspective. Forget narratives, forget how the game might appear or sound later. The player experience is the only relevant thing. You can include a sense of narrative in that experience, though this has been done to death in the games of the nineties and the subject has passed it’s expiration date. You

can go back to it in a ten years time, because by then you should be safe from regressive contamination.

No fate-play. No heroic sagas. No subtle narratives.

Think what are the experiences you want the players to have, what are the perspectives you want them to take, and what are the characters you want them to employ, and proceed from there. Talking about role-playing in terms of stories is not just regressive and near-sighted – it's embarrassing.



## Genesi

### Larp Art, Basic Theories

*This paper will take the reader through my early theories on larp, and the forming of the idea of "Genesi". The first part of the text concerns communicating a fantasy. This I believe is the base level of understanding any larper may attain, with the goal to communicate a homogenous piece to a heterogenic audience. The second part pertains to making the participants inhabit Fantasia. The larper who reaches this understanding has identified the complexity of the individualized context and begun to see that it is about "being there". In the last part of the text I vision about another possible way of thinking about larp. This afterword talks about the fundamentals of delivering the fantastic.*

This is a rather lengthy treatise on a rather long time of larping. Following the chronology in which the theories evolved I will show how I ended up, after ten years of research, in my own taboo Gray Field, with a radically different perspective.

Allow me to backtrack briefly to when my brother, my cousin and I set out hunting trolls in the Stockholm archipelago. As a troll hunting child ninja I came to meet the forest and my compadres, within our collective imagination. A swamp became an ancient marshland, filled with the grassy heads of hatching trolls. My friends were true-to-life heroes. Sometimes this hindered me from seeing things for what they were, but more often it enabled me to see the world more clearly. From a theatre perspective Keith Johnstone<sup>1</sup> describes a similar experience, when an environment becomes truly visible only after he renamed every object, colour and element in it. However, I know now that this was more than just maturing in my perception of reality, casting off preconceptions. This was the beginning of my search.

It is my task in this paper to present the arguments behind my methods and it is sometimes a bit more theoretical than the topic deserves. By no means I expect my formulas and graphs to be used in meticulous analysis of the living dreams. But they will be useful for design, preparations and review. And they do give us tools for starting to decode the enigmatic core of our art.

Although all art has a presence, a "something" quality, larp is defined by the fact that it *only* exists in this vibrant moment of living dreams. Being too preoccupied with

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<sup>1</sup> *Impro: Improvisation and Theatre* (1981) theatre theory book by Keith Johnstone, originally published by Eyre Methuen Ltd.

the splendour of all the related arts involved in the omni larp piece, we have yet to understand our own qualitative heart.

And most importantly, while this text is in a way an ontology of larp, the standpoint I give here is less about mastering the life force of larp, and more about using larp to understand the force of life. What is it that gives us energy and what makes inanimate things come to life?

I would like to thank Elge Larsson and Gabriel Sandberg, for their invaluable comments and other feedback.

## Communicating the Fantasy

It is a natural thing to want to communicate the fantasy to the invited, when one sets out to make a larp in the world of choice. Lit inside by a fire only the first power of creation can give, the larper starts to plan. How to make people feel the drama? How to explain the subtleties of the culture? How to enact the magic? Posed with these divine questions it's only natural that she wants to create a coherent image. This is the origin of the so-called "First Letter"<sup>2</sup> sent out in most larps.

Some Swedes continue to call it the first letter, although today it is more often not some sheets of paper in the mail, but instead a printed book or a dynamic web site. Still, the prevalent source material has inherited this primal urge to communicate the inner world of the author.

My original work was about categorising this written material, and specifically to clarify what portion of the text should be implicit, respectively explicit in mode.<sup>3</sup> In traditional fantasy larp the writers tend to mix old and poetic linguistic usage with contemporary prose. The models clarify the effect of this tendency.

The elements of a larp can be defined along a Horizontal range, from "In" to "Out". Source material is classified as In if it pertains to or exists inside the Larp Space, that is within the duration, area and idea of the diegesis<sup>4</sup> of the larp. An example could be a handwritten spellbook. Out elements are those that exist in the mundane space, the non-diegetic reality, outside the Larp Space. This could for example be a printout with spell hit-points (see ill. 1).

The Horizontal range division in the Simple Balance Model is important to larpers, because they create an imagined reality that is to be open to the participants, instead of a finished piece of fiction. Material that deals with the fictive (such as the wardrobe, food

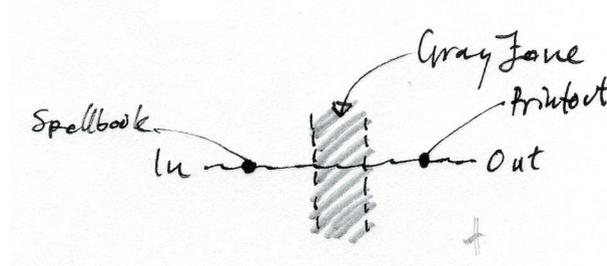
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<sup>2</sup> The First Letter, Practice initially held by Swedish larpers around the Stockholm suburb of Sollentuna. The first big mail out before a larp is called "The First Letter" and the second one is predominantly called the "World Letter", containing world and rules description, followed traditionally by "The Group Letter" containing character specific source material.

<sup>3</sup> My models of simple and complex balance emerged during the production of *Trenne Byar* (1992 – 1994) and was presented at Knutpunkt 98, an international larp convention held in Stockholm, Sweden, February 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Diegesis, the story world.

## Illustration 1: Simple Balance



and music) gives the participants driving emotions. Correspondingly material that deals with the reality of the event gives them direction (rules, planning, dramatic function). In balance they help author and participant unite around a common goal.

This simplified model divide the written material, and also identifies a “Grey Zone”, where the text is liable to fail to convey the content in the effective way. Text in the Grey would for example be anachronistically phrased directives such as:

*“Take thee via omnibus XII yonder to the yellow M to find the magical realm”,*  
instead of *“Take bus 12 to McDonalds, where you will find the larp area”.*

Having a fruitful balance in the source material would help communicate the fantasy. The theorem of Simple Balance for larp production read: “The norm should be to avoid the Gray Zone and to have equal amount to the left and the right of it, balancing emotive and directive source material”.

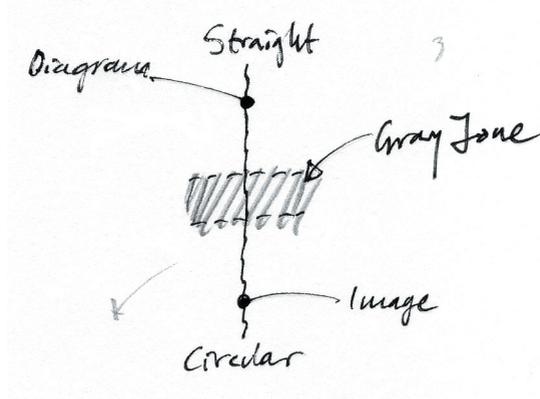
This normative division ensures equal proportions of text (or indeed any applicable source material), where the emotive material is given tangible directions, *and* the directives are given emotional depth. Any ambiguous, and potentially damaging misinformation is effectively avoided. This balance may then be deliberately tilted, should it suit the subject matter or message.

Additionally the elements of a larp may be defined along a vertical line, ranging from “Straight” to “Circular”. Straight elements work directly, getting straight to the point. An example would be an information diagram. Circular elements work indirectly, taking the long way around. Here an example would be a non-figurative image. Because it is more complex than merely “stated or understated”, they have not been labelled Explicit and Implicit.

This is a simplification but gives usable tools (see ill. 2).

The Grey Zone of the Vertical range represents the vaguely phrased. Of course the instructions in the example above, on how to go by bus to the larp, was not only a mix of old and modern language, but also vague and unclear. Distinction between the two ranges, when it comes to the directness of communication, is not fruitful, and indeed the Vertical range was never used alone. Instead, combining the two scales formulates the Complex Balance Model (see ill. 3), an easy-to-use tool for identifying the suitable mode of the source material, for the purpose of communicating a specific message.

Illustration 2: The Vertical range

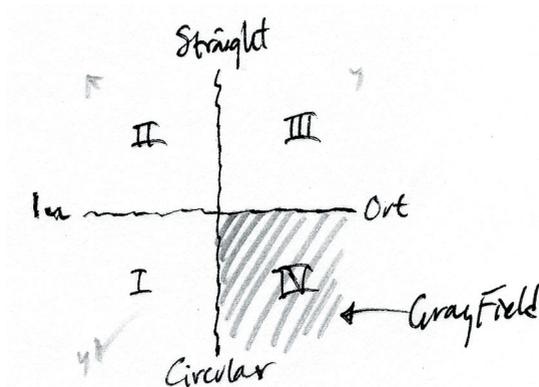


The first quarter (I) of the matrix is the “Emotive Field”. The model classifies as Emotive all In-Circular material, pertaining to the diegesis and communicating indirectly. An example could be a fantasy culture’s cuisine. Rather than stating or clarifying the fiction, this material sets the mood and stirs emotions.

The second quarter (II) of the matrix is the “Connective Field”. The model classifies as Connective all In-Straight material, pertaining to the diegesis and communicating directly. An example could be a background story on how the cooking evolved. Here the material still acts within the Larp Space, but with a direct modus, so that it explains the nature of the fiction.

The third quarter (III) of the matrix is the “Directive Field”. The model classifies as Directive all Out-Straight material, pertaining to the non-diegetic and communicating directly. An example could be rules on lighting a fire for safe outdoor cooking. This

Illustration 3: Complex Balance



kind of source material helps defining the realities of the larp, setting the frame with no uncertain terms.

The last quarter (IV) of the matrix is the “Gray Field”. The model classifies as Gray all Out-Circular material, pertaining to the non-diegetic, but communicating indirectly. An example could be the rule described in verse. The original gray zones of the two scales are replaced by this Gray Field. One could maintain that there must be a gray zone on the borders along the two axes. For the purpose of making a clear and potent model this distinction in detail within the four fields has been omitted.

Based on the Complex Balance Model it is clear that descriptive directions should be conveyed in a direct and straight manner. It also shows that emotive material works poorly on the Out issues, and vice versa that a direct mode is inappropriate for emotive communication. This is, of course, still simplistic but it clarifies the base mechanics of the source material for a traditional larp. The model applies equally to the overall body of text, as to its smallest building blocks, such as a sentence or its clauses. For example:

(A) *“A fire bolt throws the target to the ground, stealing a piece of the life force.”*

What does it really mean? It is clearly written as In text, not a bit of it breaking the fantasy of the Larp Space, still it is also clearly a rule text. The first part of the sentence is Straight “bolt throws the target”, whereas the latter is Circular “stealing a piece of the life force”. Here is the example normalised:

(B) *“A Fire Bolt spell brings down the target, causing the deduction of one hitpoint.”*

If the codes of the text are universally known by the participants (i.e. a piece of life force equals one hitpoint), then the sentence is less ambiguous, but otherwise it is in the Gray Field. The insight here could of course be to name rule elements so that they can exist in a diegetic context (rename “hitpoint” to “life force”). Experience however has shown that participants tend to misuse this. When it is easy to have game rule discussions without directly disturbing the game, acting tends to decline. Instead of playing out a staredown, participants simply say: *“Noble knight, what is your life force?”* This reduces the larp to talking heads, or a re-enacted game. A better solution would then be to keep in this case magic in the Emotive. An example sentence could be:

(C) *“Fire thrusts into the hero like a battering ram, almost crushing him as he is thrown to the ground.”*

This sentence gives little rules but all the emotions a role-player would need to act out the effect of the spell.

I would propose that the insight taught here is to write in a mode suited for the purpose – direct for rules and poetic for tales. In the examples above maybe an edited version of B (Directive) and C (Emotive) plus a Connective sentence would be best:

(D) *“The Fire Bolt is a dangerous spell, that like a flaming battering ram throws the target bleeding to the ground (deduct one hitpoint).”*

Thus a new theorem of Complex Balance can be deducted:

The norm should be to avoid the Gray Field and to have equal amount in the first, second and third field, balancing emotive, connective and directive source material.

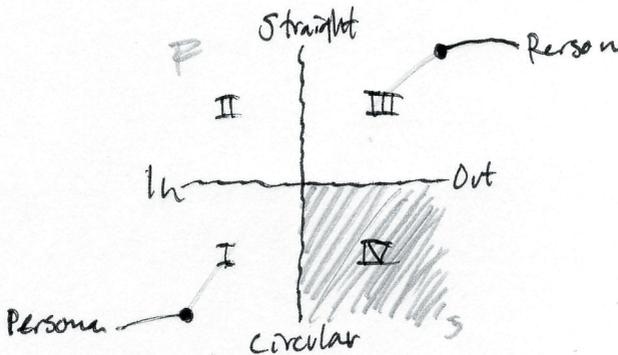
The model promotes an equilibrium between such source material that informs the participants on the framework of the event, and that, which creates feelings and understanding of the fiction. Historically, the common division in source material for Swedish larps follows roughly the Complex Balance Model. The participant typically gets a written description of the world, containing inspirational lyrics and pictures, descriptive prose and rules. As a rule of thumb, the more material in the Grey Field, where the text is multi-modal or ill-phrased for its purpose, the less quality the larp. A balanced First Letter would include a Fascination section (quarter I, inspiring the feel of the drama), a Fiction section (II, outlining the story and world) and a Framework section (III, setting the form and rules of the larp). When applied on a participant's personal information we might get a poem on the heroine (I, the image and self-image), a background description (II, the history and story) and a set of functions throughout the game (III, the roles and purpose).

As with the Simple Balance, diverging from the norm, as long as it is deliberate, may potentially be very interesting depending on the project.

### Person and Persona

To better understand the mechanics of larp communication we need to add the concepts of "Person" and "Persona". Person is the role-playing individual herself – placed in the Directive field of the matrix. It represents the most concrete and real part of the larp for the participant. The Persona is the alter ego, the fictive person within the Larp Space, placed in the Emotive field of the matrix. Traditionally the terms "role-player" and "character" are used, but that represents a subdivision, and mechanisms within

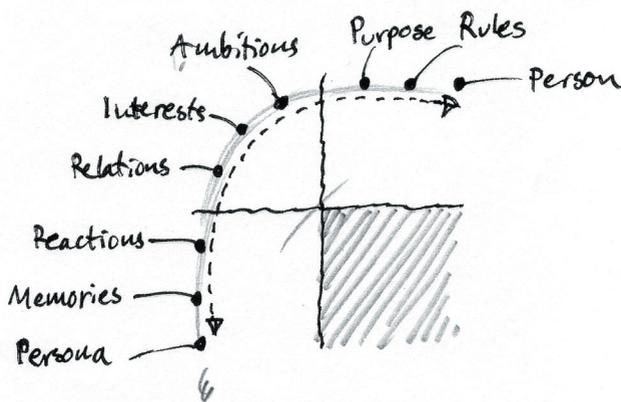
Illustration 4: You and you as the Heroine



the Person and Persona, as will be described below. For now the important thing is the division between the participant and what she plays (see ill. 4).

Using the theorem of the Complex Balance Model the Persona is conveyed in the source material with equal amounts of Emotive material (such as memories, reactions), Connective material (relations, interests, ambitions) and Directive material (purpose, rules). This forms an emotional and intellectual link between the Person and the Persona, and the same applies for the connection between the Person and the game world. In an ideal situation an equal amount of source material in each field would make for a perfect connection between the participant and the fictive heroine and her world (see ill. 5).

Illustration 5: The Link



In any communication there is a sender-receiver relationship, although in a collective piece such as larp the responsibilities may shift. The Balance models and the concept of The Link could be seen as a contribution to the debate on Auteur and Audience in larp. Larpers have always taken great pride in the fact that they have no “audience”, but saying there is no originator of a fantasy is a sure way for no one to take responsibility for it. Also, it seems that the co-authorship of the participant is mostly selfish (costume, intrigues, living quarters), and not for the whole larp. I’m a strong believer of the co-creating audience in larp – just in a totally different way than we are used to from non-participatory art.

Constructing the source material as outlined above will effectively communicate the world to the participants. As stated in the opening, this is the base level of understanding larp mechanics. Limiting the thinking to “communication” is an attitude that causes many problems in larp.

# Inhabiting Fantasia

The world is at the participants' feet, and now they need to journey into it, assimilate with the culture, feel at home. Again the author starts to plan, this time quickened by the will to guide others into the land of Fantasia. What really triggers the participants' commitment? How can they learn to become natives? What makes them immerse? How may the mechanics of the rules help?

First one must look at what layers of creative human expression make up the larp art. Knowing that is knowing what governs the participants' transformation.

Over the years no larp debate in Sweden has been more persistent than the one about Props versus Acting. The fanzines *Fëa Livia* and *StrapatS*<sup>5</sup> became this polarisation personified. The mainstream of larp originated from a will to enact the games and fictions loved by that type of role-players. For them the play of rules and the contest of skill with a padded sword was the inspiration. Fancy acting was not a pre-requisite. They would be called "Gamists" today according to the *Three Way Model*<sup>6</sup>, with *StrapatS* as their forum at that time. Alongside them were the thespians, alive with the will to explore alternate forms of play and improvisation. They claimed that a larp could be held without a fantasy prop in sight – that the drama was the key. The fanzine *Fëa Livia* was founded by this crowd and has remained a channel for the drama and art oriented larp debate. In the Three Way Model the story-oriented larpers are divided into Immersionists and Dramatists.

The real picture of larp style is more complex. Larpers of any grouping praise acting, props or rules as important for engaging with the experience, but the debate polarised into these two camps. Pages up and pages down argued for "the joy of play without the yoke of drama practice", against writings on "the art of live acting over the dumb rubber sword swashbuckling".

Approaching the debate from the *Genesour's* point of view yields a new theorem:

The fully participatory larp piece, which only exists in the shared fantasy, has an inherent craft at the core, making all other disciplines external.

Perhaps the foremost element in the nature of larp, that elevates it above other participatory art forms is the fact that the participation *is* the piece, and that it truly exists in the collective moment when the play and fantasy is shared (although it touches on expressions outside the larp). This means that the fiction is inseparable from the expression, and that the impression is inseparable from the narrative. It all exists

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<sup>5</sup> *Fëa Livia*, Swedish larp fanzine with a circulation of up to a 1000 copies, first published by the founders (Samir Belarbi and others) in 1993. *StrapatS* is another Swedish larp fanzine, edited and published all through the years of its existence (1992–97) by the founder Jonas Nelson.

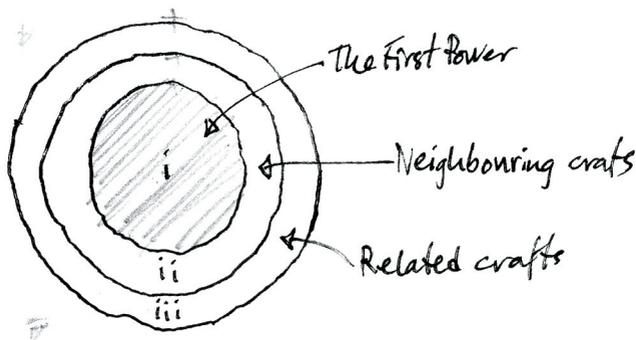
<sup>6</sup> *The Three Way Model: Revision of the Threefold Model* (2003), by Petter Bøckman in the Knudepunkt 2003 book *As Larp Grows Up – Theory and Methods in Larp*, published Projektgruppen KP03.

in a singular point where the consumption of the message becomes the message. Elge Larsson theorises that “*In larp the ‘form’ and the ‘content’ switch places*”.

As an example the stage version of *Hamlet* is content to the “theatre form”, whereas the participatory *Hamlet*<sup>7</sup> can be seen as a form for the “larp content”, an arena for the moment of unity. Since larpers can borrow methods for packaging larp in game-like, theatrical, novelistic or cinematic experiences, but lack the methods for the larp heart, it seldom rises above physical gaming, improvisational theatre or simulation. It becomes “darp”; dead action role-play.

Instead of weighing acting, drama, involvement, rules, props and milieu against each other they should be seen within concentric layers around the core (see ill. 6).

Illustration 6: The Concentric Model



Starting from the outside in, the Concentric Model classifies as Related crafts (layer iii) all those disciplines necessary to pull off the event, but largely independent of the larp form. The layer includes event administration, logistics, safety and sanitation, e-learning and information technology, engineering, and economy and private and public funding. Perhaps the best book written for larp on the topic of production is *Saga Mot Verklighet*<sup>8</sup>. And make no mistake, whether it is as a committed participant or a serious author, the larper needs to be a bit of a renaissance man, apt in many related vocations.

The second layer (ii), the Neighbouring crafts, includes such cultural and societal activities that exist within the omni-form of larp. That is, because we create a snippet of an imagined reality, we are forced to represent and animate all relevant elements of it. For a more re-enactment-oriented larp this would entail contextual expertise for

<sup>7</sup> *Hamlet*, a participatory version of the Shakespearean play, including theatre, film and larp elements. Turn of the century furniture, antique and theatre costumes, fictive news-reels, food and drink and written roles was prepared for the participants. The event was held in a large cave under a church in Stockholm.

<sup>8</sup> *Saga Mot Verklighet – Att Arrangera Levande Rollspel* (1998) (*Saga Against Reality: To Produce Live Action Role-Play*) Swedish book on larp production by Henrik Summanen and Thomas Walch, published by Natur och Kultur.

a truthful “representation” of the setting (such as history, languages, design, politics). For any type of larp this layer also includes the means of “animating” the historic or fictitious setting. Because larp is tactile and alive this includes adapting acting, costume, and production design of music and choreography, food, objects, buildings and nature. Again, whether it is the authors’ ambition to get the participants to commit, or the participants’ will to connect, everybody needs to work with all building blocks to reach a full-fledged larp.

The name of the first layer (i), The First Power, aims at the core of the Genesee concept – to give life, and more specifically to set that life free. Therefore The First Power is the inherent force that the Geneseeur aims at mastering. Disciplines within this layer are such elements of advanced Live Ludology<sup>9</sup> as an understanding of intimacy and shared fantasy, the asymmetry and unpredictability in complex heterogenic and decentralised experiences, object oriented narrative systems, self-organising social structures, rules of interaction and the gestalts of play.<sup>10</sup>

There is an interdependence between the layers, so that failing in one will diminish the larp. However the nature of the three layers varies. Anybody with good knowledge of the Related crafts, but only minimal knowledge of larp, can perform well in the third layer (iii). Someone with good competence in Neighbouring crafts needs additional experience in larping to be useful in the second layer (ii). Finally a participant or author focusing on the First Power (i) will be able to perform wonders without any greater understanding of the outer layers.<sup>11</sup> Again, a full-fledged larp needs attention to all three layers and a good Geneseeur is a jack-of-all-trades.

The Concentric Model tells us that producing and enacting a larp is about skills in many fields. It also defines an inherent core that may exist beyond other art forms. The rest of this paper will focus on this First Power (layer i), the unique craft of larping. That is, I will assume that anybody who wants to know about organising and producing an multi-player event looks into relevant industries (layer iii), and those interested in design and performance studies the adequate professions (layer ii).

### First Person Audience

Using The Link one only starts to negotiate the defection from reality, by communicating the new world. The next step is to focus on the participants and their relationship to Fantasia. They have been shown something, now they need to enter it. Again these thoughts apply equally to the ambitious participant as to the author.

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<sup>9</sup> Ludology, the theory of games and play. Live Ludology, larp Ludology.

<sup>10</sup> *Game Taxonomies: A High Level Framework for Game Analysis and Design* (2003), by Craig Lindley. Published online by Gamasutra.

<sup>11</sup> The best contemporary exponent of a Geneseeur solely focused on the First Power is Emma Wieslander with the larp *Mellan himmel och hav* (a sci-fi utopian larp on genus). The preparatory workshops dealt mainly with gender and intimacy, which was the themes of the larp. Without much work on acting or design and milieu, the larp still managed to become an outstandingly capturing and emotive art piece.

The larp piece only exists in the shared fantasy, which means that the larp is both a mental and physical form of human expression that can only be realised in unity. This unity is a cycle of creation and consumption. Thus the notion of “no audience” doesn’t ring true:

It’s not that larp lacks an audience and has no use for an audience theory, in fact it has a radically different audience situation, but so far lacks a tailored theory.

In literature, fine arts, film and theatre, where the concept of consumer/audience is more clear, the connection with the text is a secondary identification with, for example, the protagonist. That is about recognition, suspension of disbelief and sense of wonder. Because in larp participants create the fantasy *and* inhabit Fantasia it is easy to think that there is no bystander. Everybody is the heroine. Sometimes there is also talk about the “inner scene”, a much too egocentric and exclusive description of the larper experience. Consequently many larps are merely a forum for the selfish lust to be grand, to experience being the heroine – far from the vision of shared fantasy.

In fact every participant is a sort of a spectator. This however is not through a passive and personal secondary identification, but by the means of active and collective direct identification with the Personas and their world. The larp “audienceship” therefore depends on *both* a personal connection *and* a collective commitment. The mechanisms of the larp audience, and its relationship to the piece, are based on two principles. The first one is the *Feedforward Principle* of collective commitment:

Larp is a recursively reinforced, shared and enacted fantasy.

The easiest way to understand the principle of Feedforward is to think of larp as a relationship. “What you put in is what you get out”, is half the truth. Whatever the participants invest will be the larp. Regardless of if it is sewing clothes before the larp or singing a campfire song during it, it is important to remember that this is not about nice props, acting et cetera, but about the energy that a participant personally invests. Nothing seasons a meal better than catching and preparing the fish yourself. The other half of the truth is that whatever one participant reflects will feed or drain the other. A team in unity will grow and the total will be greater than the sum of the parts. The collective side of the larp audienceship is especially apparent when it comes to enacting status. Regardless of how into the act the King is, there will be no supremacy if there are no humble subjects. If the King’s authority is reflected in the adoration and fear of the people, then he will be crowned. The other participants’ presence is a larper’s personal game manoeuvrability, and what she projects back will be the fuel of their fantasy.

The second principle is the *Heroine’s Gaze* of the diegetic view:

To see the living Fantasia the participant must become an intimate part of it.

The principle of the Heroine’s Gaze states that every participant must enter the diegesis as much as any other element of the larp. If you don’t become a part of the fairytale,

you won't see the fairies; the Magician will remain some guy waving his arms; your lost love will continue to be the girl from school, whom you might not even like. But if you connect, if you become a native, then your friends may do that too. And beware, for you will fall in love!

The way to relate to Fantasia (thinking, touching, looking, listening, tasting), must be as a "Fantasian". It helps to think of it as child's play. For the believer the fir cones with needle legs are small livestock!

This dictates a radically different audience perspective than that in mass media and non-participatory art. In larp there is a perspective of collective active gaze, instead of that of individual passive spectatorship. The piece is not merely "finished" in the spectators' mind, it is created by the participants that can only fully meet the piece they help create, by becoming an intricate part of it. This active and direct position for the participants is a network of first person views. Together the two principles form the basis for the theorem of the *First Person Audience* (FPA):

The mundane and private spectator must become an active part of a first person audience – an intimate part of the Larp Space – looking together through the eyes of fantasy heroes.

The task is of course not as simple as communicating the fantasy effectively. It is about making the participants feed into each other, fully entering the larp world. How the author makes them live the idea will be the impact of the piece.

To understand the mechanisms of making a participant become a heroine, one needs to look closer at the concept of game personality. The Link for communicating the fictive Persona to the real Person requires no subdivision of the two, whereas the act of participation does.

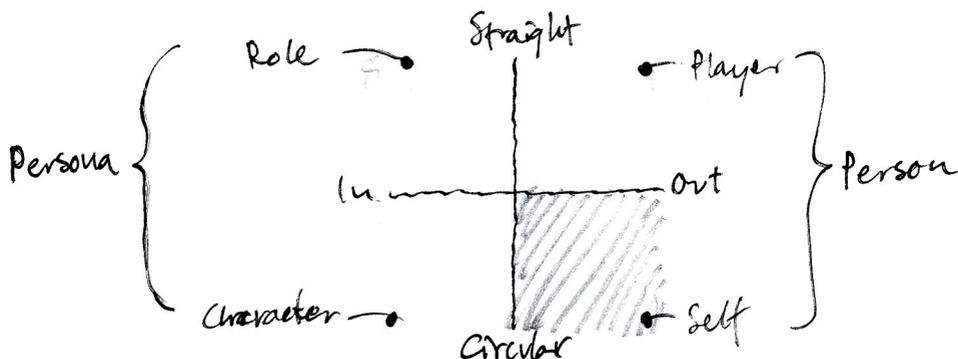
There are parts of the human psyche that lay in the open and others that elude introspection. The concept of Person is thus divided into "Player" as the Straight part and "Self" as the Circular. The Player can be described as "the active will to play", the articulated part of an individual that has decided to partake in a larp. In one perspective the Player is a role that the Person takes on when she becomes a participant – a role necessary for the migration to a FPA. The Self of that individual can be understood as "the inner mechanisms of the participants' ability to participate". In other words it is that which is not directly under control of the will. To become a collective participant, the larper must exercise a will to partake, overcoming her inner constraints. Such things as personal history, situation and personality traits affect the competence to larp.

Likewise, the fictive Persona is made up by concrete results of underlying processes. I divide the Persona into the Straight "Role" and the Circular "Character". Put in various situations the Persona will (like a real individual) take on different Roles. Consequently a Persona will have many Roles in a larp but only one Character. The Character represents the innermost mechanism of the diegetic Persona. It is the "internal machine for role selection", corresponding to the game context. Since this

has been mostly an ad-hoc and non-articulated response by the Person (and not of the Persona as it should), the Character is defined with certainty only in retrospect. As source material the Character has been that which lies between the expressed elements of the personal drama. It is the cause and effect of the goals, relations, intrigues, function and background. The “Character-Role” relationship works like a simpler version of the “Self-Player” relationship. In other words it is the implicit identity of the fictive person, dictating how she acts and reacts, and consequently which Roles she takes on in different situations.

Note that I use Role as described by The Meilahti School – as a “subject position within a set discourse”.<sup>12</sup> The Meilahti School however defines Character as “a framework of roles”, whereas I use it as a Role selector. My term Persona is perhaps synonymous with Character according to the Meilahti School, a distinction however that needs a closer look at the underlying theories of identity in both approaches (see ill. 7).

Illustration 7: Person-Persona subdivisions



By these internal subdivisions of Person and Persona, we see respectively how the Self influences the Player and Character influences the Roles. And more importantly, we may now look at the cross-dependencies of the “Role-Player” and the “Character-Self”. The Role-Player is an individual that is exercising her active will to play the Role suitable for the specific larp situation. In a perfect larp situation (and those occur) there is no difference between the fictive heroine’s role and the real person’s role. The Role-Player is as much an expression of the heroine as one of the larper. The Meilahti School describes Roles as “an artificial closure articulating the player within the diegetic frame of the game or in a real-life situation. [...] in fact player is a role as well”.

The Character-Self is the inner mechanisms governing *both* the fictitious and the real expression of the individual.

<sup>12</sup> The *Meilahti Model* (2003), by Jaakko Stenros and Henri Hakkarainen, published in the KP03 book by Projektgruppen KP03.

To make your participants change to First Person is an inner journey from Role-Player to Character-Self and back again. This cycle with no start or end, where one element influences the other, is the *Moebius Cycle*. The Player negotiates with the Self, and the Character negotiates with the Role, and the object is for the Player and the Role to merge. Then the choice is no longer whether to play a part in a larp, but what part to play in Fantasia. And eventually this is as little a choice as it is in mundane life – the role becomes nature, a matter of relating and reacting. The Self and the Character is one, and there is only one expression of the individual at a given moment (the Role-Player). Instead of an inner relationship between Character and Role in the Persona, corresponding to the Self-Player relationship in the Person, we have a Character-Self governing the Role-Player. Because the Role-Player is FPA, the role the individual takes on (when she is in the larp situation) is synonymous with that which the heroine takes on (in the specific situation in the larp).

One major factor in the FPA process is the diversity of play modes (specifically from more rule oriented to more narrative), or *Larp Gestalt*. The assimilation of participants into Larp Space is influenced by the individual nature of the participant, the various game situations, and the general game structure. Craig Lindley<sup>10</sup> describes this in computer games, defining the concept of game gestalt, and Bøckman touches on it for larp in the Three Way model. First there is various “participant attitude”, or different styles of experiencing the larp. Predominantly the beginners tend to be Gameists and the older larpers Dramatists or Immersionists. A serious author needs to design a larp that achieves a balance between the rule oriented and the narrative oriented Larp Gestalt. Managing the Larp Gestalt, the way the participants engage, is about more than managing participant attitude; it also includes controlling different game situations. Typically the larp will shift gestalts for most participants during the game. The mornings can be low on acting and the night high on fighting. Likewise the beginning of a larp is typically weak in acting, and the end heavy on fighting. The location will also prompt gestalt shifts, from dramatic in the social areas, such as the tavern, to more rule and skill related in places of conflict, such as the crossroads and keeps. Why does a larp follow these patterns and how may we control the change of gestalt for a more coherent and effective larp?

Lindley writes that “Good game design achieves better integration of the gameplay and narrative structures of the game”. He talks about how engagement in one pattern of gaming limits the ability to engage in others:

[T]he apprehension of an experience as a narrative requires the cognitive construction of a narrative gestalt, a cognitive structure or pattern allowing the perception and understanding of an unfolding sequence of phenomena as a unified narrative. [...] Within the range of effort required for immersion and engagement, if gameplay consumes most of the player's available cognitive resources, there will be little scope left for perceiving complex narrative patterns [...] Conversely, focusing on the development of the sense of narrative [...] reduces the player's need and capacity for a highly engaging gameplay gestalt. (Lindley 2003)

Translated to larp this means that the ability to perform in the game (create and experience the larp) is a negotiation between rule and story for the participants' attention. If the larp is poorly designed, so that the game situations don't deal with the participants' attitudes, the game will fail. In the ontology of larp one needs to attend to the dynamics between playing the structure of the larp and playing the narrative of the larp. In larp the equivalence of "gameplay" could be said to be such elements as the direct activities of boffer fighting (damage and hitpoints) and magic (ability and effect), but also more complex rule bound activities such as negotiations (contracts and conflicting interests). The narrative elements in larp are such activities as intrigues (relations and agendas), or missions and larger turn of events. As in a screen-based computer RPG, the larp event entails both gaming and narrative. A larp narrative can be both a dynamic turn of events (story) or a static experience of a setting (exposé).

All narration requires rules and all rules must impact on the continuation of the narrative.

Boffer fights without real consequence, with the same yrchs attacking every dawn, are very disturbing. Likewise, negotiations become idiotic when none of the participants know how to measure power or determine veto. This falls back to the simple idea of "The Constant Currency" that *Trenne byar*<sup>15</sup> organisers formulated – all services and objects in a larp are measured against the available meals.

This follows the logic of Maslow's pyramid, but for a lifestyle instead of a lifestyle. Who cares about a magic parchment scroll when there is mead and wild bore to be had? The answer is of course: "not a single starved person, but every hungry hero!" Only when the game mechanisms and game narrative are equal will the scroll become important. As Lindley phrases it:

Notice, however, that at the lowest level of the dramatic structure of a game, the conflict within the detail of the gameplay experience is never actually one of the player-character's survival, but one involving tradeoffs within cognitive, emotive, and performative effort. (Lindley 2003)

Of course, the scroll will only become magical to the participants who have entered the diegesis wholeheartedly.<sup>14</sup> A capturing fantasy is not as simple as rules (Gameism), or engagement in the experience (Immersionism), devotion to the story (Dramatism) or meticulously coffee-stained paper (Simulationism).

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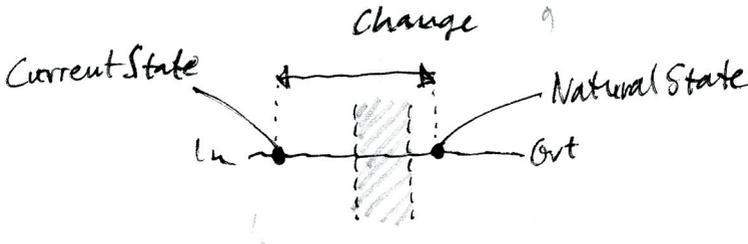
<sup>15</sup> *Trenne byar*, (Three Villages), A one week long fantasy larp in Sweden, in the summer of 1994, with 1000 plus participants from Scandinavia and some international participants. Three villages were constructed and the "off-live rune" was introduced as a means of demarking Out elements within the larp area. About ten thousand copper and tin coins were hand hammered and several languages constructed, with words, grammar and runes. The larp was a rather chaotic mix of many fantasy concepts, packaged in a unique Swedish flavour. Although much didn't work out as planned it is perhaps one of the most important milestones in Scandinavian larp, bringing a higher standard of rules, acting, costume, houses and role material.

## State and Force

For the purpose of analysing and steering the modes of play within a larp, the concepts of *Larp State* and *Larp Force* are defined.

Using the Simple Balance model one can see that an element takes a synchronous position as having a state of more or less In or Out, at a given place and time in the larp. This is true for inanimate elements (concrete ones such as a jacket, or abstract ones such as an intrigue) and the live participants themselves. The position also changes revealing a diachronic image of the element's Larp State (see ill. 8).

### Illustration 8: Larp State



Instead of perceiving varying Larp State as a change in the position of the objects, they can be seen as static quantum objects, around which the participant is forced to change state. As stated above, the natural position may be more In or Out. A naturally In element in a fantasy larp could be a chain mail. An element with a naturally Out Larp State could be, for example, a telephone wire.

Every element has a Larp Force. If nothing influences them the Force will be a pull from the Current State to the Natural State, much like a stretched rubber band's will to contract. If put in the hands of a larper before the event a chain mail will have a strong Force back to its Normal State of In. As for a telephone wire in the middle of Fantasia, it will pull heavily to its natural Out State.

The First Person Audience is an In Game State. FPA has been reached by an expressed and inner will to participate. This will has different expressions (Larp Gestalts) and is influenced by external game elements. To become first person the participant has to generate a Force that starts a change from Out to In. A participant needs to overcome any Outwards Forces of all larp elements to reach the In Game State

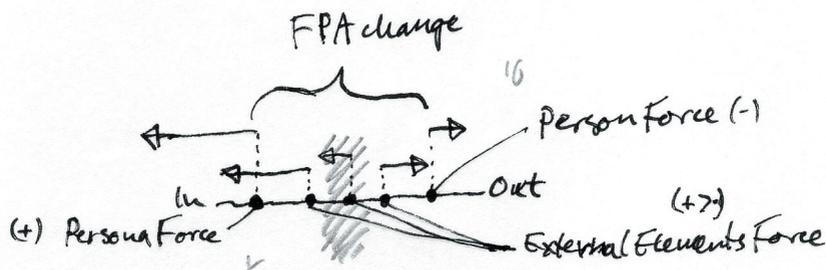
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<sup>14</sup> On the fourth grade my class set up a fictive economy and a friend and me got to design the bills. For a semester we could all trade stuff and use our own "Tjatteran" currency. The teachers sold notebooks, erasers and pens. After some time I had thick bundles of money while all of my classmates had piles of school utensils. When the experiment ended and everybody else had hard currency I wondered if I had made the right choice. Now the handmade childhood bills are an invaluable treasure in my collection of magic money from numerous larps. I doubt that any of my former classmates fiddle with dreamy eyes through their collection of standard orange erasers.

of FPA. Elements with an In Game State and/or an Inwards Force will assist the journey. These elements can be external (such as the chain mail or the telephone wire), but also internal (Role, Player, Character, Self). Summing up the effort to achieve a desired change against the Forces of all elements at a given moment reveals the cost of “getting into character”. Negotiating between Self and Player takes effort. Changing Roles takes effort. Merging the Character and Self takes effort. And relating to the environment and story helps or hinders.

I believe that a human being has a natural Force towards the fantastic. It is our inherent affinity to dream, love and fantasize. In our society though we have a contextual Force pulling us to a subjective perspective dictated by our culture. We need additional energy to change view. I also believe that the world has a natural State – that reality is not a viewpoint. I do however believe that this reality is transforming and without boundaries. Changing State therefore takes effort, and is not about immersing into a fantasy, but exploring the fantastic world (see ill. 9).

Illustration 9: State and Force



In the example above the effort for the change to FPA is equal to the sum of the Forces of the internal and external elements.

Looking closer the real Force required for a participant to become FPA (to reach Fantasia) in a given larp situation, is a complex sum of the internal and external elements in the Moebius Cycle.

Firstly, the Forces in the Person-Persona process depends on the four internal interconnected elements:

- 1 The Self to Player relationship is a negotiation between the natural Self and the expressed Player will to larp. This negotiation is continuous in the Moebius Cycle and results in a more or less negative (Outwards) or positive (Inwards) Self to Player Force. The Force of the Self-Player relationship, equals the Self Force plus the Player Force. If either the ability to play is high or the will to play is strong the Self to Player Force will be positive. A non-enthusiastic larper will have a negative.

- 2 The Character-Self merger is a battle of energies. The natural state of the participant is Out and to maintain an In Game State takes dedication. Depending on the nature of the participant (the Self Force above), and the validity and attraction of her overall function in the game (the Character Force), this will result in a more or less strong Character-Self Force. It is my belief that all people have an ability to play (resulting in a positive Force), but that a non-inspiring larp or disturbing life situation can hinder the merger.
- 3 The changing of Roles is demanding. Every time the Character needs to change Role it is an active achievement, where the Force of the Character is weighed against that of the Role. If the Character to Role relationship is good, one feeding the other, the process will generate an Inwards Character to Role Force.
- 4 The fourth internal element is the Forces for maintaining the Role-Player relationship. Although the unified role (the same for the heroine and the participant) is an effect of the other elements in the process there is a tension between what we perceive as the “real” endeavour to play, and the heroine’s “fake” striving to take a certain stand. In fact there is no difference between a Role in the larp and a role in mundane life. So far no larp has been designed to facilitate this. One way to tackle the problem is to merge the fictive Role and the role as a Player in the source material – i.e. the participants will expressively be taking on the heroine’s Roles themselves in the larp world (as in Narnia, real people will be heroes of Fantasia)

Secondly, in the transformation to FPA during the Moebius Cycle the internal elements of the participants are influenced by the external elements of the larp (the chain mail and the telephone wire). All external elements have a Larp Force, pulling more or less negatively or positively.

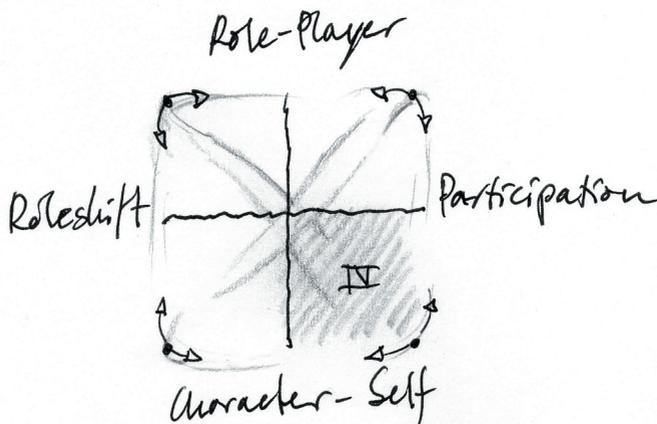
And finally, the negotiation between Forces is not a perfect one, and there is an energy loss. The constant negotiation between the elements Forces drains the participants, which leads to loss of Force, and consequently to a more and more Out Larp State.

Thus the real Larp Force of a situation, or its power to create the fantastic, its *Genesi* is the sum of the Force in the Moebius Cycle of all participants (i.e. the FPA), weighed against the Force of all external elements (i.e. the rest of the larp). See ill. 10.

The foremost implications of these theories lie in the understanding of larping as an ongoing State Change process of conflicting elements, involving the entire larp (*both* the participants and the rest of the larp). The inner struggle to become FPA is conjoint with the State Change of the external elements. Therefore larp is more than a collective activity of the participants, it is a holistic event, affecting the nature of reality on a larger scale.

Additionally the energy cost of the Moebius Cycle is perhaps *the* most important factor when endeavouring to maintain a predominantly In State of a larp.

## Illustration 10: The Moebius Cycle



Analysing these axioms shows that certain elements have more impact on the larp becoming In, than others. The energy loss is constant and therefore the participants eventually need to be refilled. In some larps the solution has been to arrange an off-game area, for recuperation. This has however often been a spartan place, under the faulty rational that a comfortable off game area would only encourage participants not to immerse wholeheartedly. In Hamlet several longer breaks were arranged in the event, for the participants to gain energy. The food was also designed so that it would be heavy on sugar in different segments. A larper may not ignore the entropy of the larp.

The strain of Roleshift is another important factor, as constantly having to shift from “happy farmer to distraught survivor of the yrch attacks” is draining. Hamlet was designed so that there would be general characteristics every participant could take on in the different acts. There were in a way only three Roles in the larp, corresponding with the themes (Decadent, Intriguing, Homicidal).

Also, it is the Character/Character-Self that negotiates the potentially very draining Roleshifts, and that the Player is working against the potentially very negative Self Force. Two generic tools created by Ministeriet – Interaktiv Utveckling<sup>15</sup> to address this are *The Portal* and *The Bridge*.

The Portal is a clearly defined passage over the border between the mundane and the Larp Space. The idea is that every participant gets a kick in the first moment and on the first step into the larp. In other words, it helps the Player-Self relationship of the Persons. Many larps use a trumpet signal and a road from an off-area as the Portal.

<sup>15</sup> Ministeriet – Interaktiv Utveckling HB (1995–97), (The Ministry of Interactive Development), a Swedish corporation using larp as a method for learning and team building. Notable customers where The Swedish UN, Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Kulturhuset (the national Culture House in Stockholm).

Another, perhaps even more frequently used, Portal is “the morning after a nights sleep”. The agreement then is that when a participant wakes up, she is “in character” and the larp is on. Whatever Portal is used, the key is to have a clear code that is commonly known and agreed upon by every participant. Its purpose is to be a singular time and place where the participants know they are in Fantasia.

The Bridge is a complementary method that starts when the Portal is passed. This is to help the Character-Self relationship and limit the strain on the Character from Roleshifts. The idea is to let the participants have a period of less extrovert and more reflective larping in the difficult first moments of the event. “Performer and spectators” is a useful bridge tool. The participants get to be spectators of a speech or perhaps a stage play in the beginning of the larp. Instead of enacting their full Persona, their task is limited to praise, indifference or dislike of the performance, such as applause or the throwing of tomatoes. This way they are not forced to interact or change Roles dramatically, which is too much effort while establishing a Character-Self.

The Genesi formula also puts the idea of gestalt and the theory of Narrative Structure into constructive perspective. The amount of Force required to maintain First Person Audience (or Character-Self or an In Game state) is too large for rapid change of gaming style and Roles, without assistance of positive larp elements. Moreover it clarifies somewhat the dumbness of larpers. It is not uncommon for a participant to go numb when she enters Fantasia. During Trenne Byar and Hamlet, simply giving the participants the recourse to prepare food wasn't sufficient, meals often had to be served in ready-to-eat hot portions. People are simply too occupied with the ongoing Moebius Cycle, leaving little energy for other things. This is why a good Narrative Structure is imperative, otherwise either the gamist, dramatic, immersionistic Larp Gestalt, or the plain function of the larpers take second chair.

The larp craft is having an understanding of the art on several levels. In the first part of this paper I've shown you my thinking on the base communication and in the latter, my ideas on First Person Audience. Underneath these theories there is a third way of thinking, one that I am currently working to uncover. In the afterword I will abandon the auteur and the participant and instead take sides for the fantastic destination.

## **Delivering the Fantastic**

A true larp demands from the creators, the authors and participants, not only a fluent communication and a willingness to travel into the dream world. This dream world also demands to be set free. Having told the invited about the vision, and assisted them on the long journey into it the auteur now must deliver the fantastic. Again she must concentrate her creativity on ephemeral tasks. Can she make the magical herbs blossom? Will the things buried turn out to be treasures unveiled? This is the enigma that lies in the heart of the First Power, and what every Genesour must strive to understand.

The Moebius Cycle shows that larping is not a Cartesian process, separating body and soul, larper and larp. In fact the process is a unified feed, where one reinforces the other. That which happens in the participant, influences that which happens in her surroundings and in the other participants. Equally, all that which happens in other things and people, affect her. It is not many separate fantasies, division between inanimate and animate, but a unified dreaming where the attitude and commitment of the one governs the whole, and the whole governs the one. Larp is a meta-entity.

The concept of Role – the mundane Player and the diegetic ones of the Heroine – tells us that the change is real in the participant. What one expresses in Fantasia is what one expresses, period. The change of State in any element is a true change, not merely a shift in perception. Instead of looking at objects as quantum elements around which participants shift, they should be seen as shifting entities. The world we create in a larp, can be more real than merely the enactment of a figment of our imagination.

The term *Genesi*<sup>16</sup>, comes not from the Biblical creation of the world, but from the biological term “partenogenes”, when a higher biological life form spawns a new one by division, instead of reproduction. This is what larpers do, they split a fantasy from themselves, seeing this fantastic thing continue to live, have self-life. And that is *Genesi*, a self motivated living fantasy.

The anthropologist Victor Turner<sup>17</sup> talks about the power of liminoid states. He describes human Flow, when identity is lost and actions takes place seemingly autonomously. In the liminoid states a *Communitas*, a collective Flow, has been reached through rituals that brings the participants out of the cultural dogma. Another relevant thinker, awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1927, is Henri Bergson.<sup>18</sup> Bergson talks about the memory of matter, how a place or an object can get its own will, filled with the memory of a powerful event. Then we have Marco Pogagnic<sup>19</sup>, who describes how a landscape has an intelligence and how this may be healed using what he calls “lithopuncture”, an acupuncture of the earth. All these thoughts are building blocks of what could be the reality of the fantastic.

The *Communitas* of the First Person Audience and the memory of objects in the Force and State of an element are synonymous to what truly defines the *Genesi*. It is the play of intelligence in a larger system. This is why the aforementioned fish tastes so good – it has truly changed. The same is true for all participants; investing in the larp changes

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<sup>16</sup> In Autumn of 2003 I wrote on the idea of *Genesi* and how it relates to larp. The text was written in one non-stop draft and was later published, virtually unedited, at *Interacting Arts Magazine* (an online channel for the Society of Interacting Arts at [www.interactingarts.org](http://www.interactingarts.org)). It contains the very essence of this article.

<sup>17</sup> *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (1982), by Victor Turner. Published by PAJ Publications.

<sup>18</sup> *Matter and Memory* (1896), by Henri Bergson. Published recently by Zone Books. Henri Luis Bergson (1859-1941) was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1927. His works include *Time and Free Will*, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, *Creative Evolution*, and *The Creative Mind*.

<sup>19</sup> *Nature Spirits and Elemental Beings: Working With the Intelligence of Nature* (1997), by Marco Pogagnic. Published by Findhorn Press.

you. Eventually the costume *will* become the hero's wardrobe and the intrigues will grow to vibrant relationships.

Genesi is perhaps either the result of the unpredictability of complex systems (chaos theory), or the triggering of the innate energy of any element of reality (animism). Larpwright Martin Ericsson would assume that the freedom of play enables the individual to see through the illusions of reality and take control. I think that the freedom of play makes us better equipped to understand the unlimited reality. Both positions say that contemporary cultural dogma blinds and shackles us – but does the path of participation give us the power to dictate the truth or does the truth empower us? Perhaps there is no truth, only being in touch and touching beings. I don't think there is a mystical supernatural that we can reach by engaging, but I'm convinced that there is a clarity, flexibility and independency to be reached in abstract as well as concrete, inanimate as well as animate things. My standpoint is firmly set in the position that giving, sharing and meeting life is the only fruitful guiding light for our art.

So, to conclude, what about the Gray Field?

I've shown above that the change to a merged Role-Player is a real change. Knowing that the Role-Player is governed by the Character-Self, the fourth field of the Complex Balance Model cannot be ignored. In fact it has overwhelming importance. Equally, inanimate things may be rendered alive, with a momentum, a will, by investing Force and changing the State. That is not a process at the fictive In, but one of fundamental change in the real Out! The ultimate task of the Geneseurs is then *not* to communicate the fictive out to the player, or taking the player into the fictive, but to change the soul of reality, delivering the fantastic.

The Circular Out part of a larp, that portion which corresponds to the Emotive Field of the diegesis, is what makes the larp dream real. You must change the nature of the participant, and mould reality. As Plutarch said: "The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled".

*Fully aware that this will irritate all those patient enough to read this far, I have decided to change the name of the Gray Field into the "Red Field". It is there the quickening force of Genesi must first be sought.*

## Games

Hamlet (2002) by Martin Ericsson and Christopher Sandberg in collaboration with the Swedish Nationwide Theatre JAM. Sweden.

Mellan himmel och hav (2003) by Emma Wieslander and Katarina Björk, Sweden.

Trenne byar (1994) by Ett Glas; Christopher Sandberg, Alexander Graff, Gabriel Walldén, Aigars Grins, Joakim Skog, Berta Angerbjörn, Gabriel Sandberg and Martin Ericsson, Victoria Henriksson and Jonas Henriksson and others. Sweden.





## About the Community of Role-Players

*As a folklorist, I look at role-playing games as a special form of new tradition (folklore), which can be grouped into various subgroups such as fantasy, future, and horror games, or larping and tabletop games. Following this, playing the game can be seen at the same time as a reproducible act with specific rules (written and non-written) guiding the situation. On the other hand, the game itself can be seen as a one-shot event that can never be repeated identically. Furthermore, as an anthropologically oriented folklorist, I do not focus on occasional units of folklore but am interested in the wholeness, including the use of this folklore and the community carrying it.*

I do not play role-playing games myself, and my interest in them is purely academic. I have studied Finnish role-playing for at least seven years by observing, interviewing, reading, making questionnaires, and collecting theme writings. I have written several academic theses on playing role-playing games. The latest is my licentiate thesis (2002), on which this article is mostly based.

### Communities and Networks

Tribes can be divided into functional and symbolic ones. In a group, the feeling of solidarity can be based on concrete and continuing interaction. Pre-modern tribes and clans were these kinds of functional groups. As each member had their own place, status and duties that had to be fulfilled in order to get food and refuge for the tribe, an individual could not stay outside a pre-modern community. Unlike pre-modern tribes, post-modern tribes are based on free will. The new, post-modern *neotribes* (Maffesoli 1995) are more symbolic than functional communities. The concrete interaction is mostly ruled by the feeling of belonging, based on shared interests and experiences. Belonging to a group is a choice rather than a practical necessity.

Being a part of a group of role-players usually involves other hobbies and subjects of interest as well. Role-playing is often a part of a larger network of hobbies, which may include playing tabletop role-playing games, live-action role-playing games, or both. In addition, there may be interest in fantasy literature, movies and comics, which quite often includes producing own texts or drawings. There is often interest in history – most usually Middle Ages – that helps in preparing historical costumes and other requisites for the games and other events. Interest in science fiction is often a part of the hobby network, and it can be linked to interest in natural sciences such as astronomy and

geography. Lately, Japanese animation (anime) has become quite popular in Finland. This can be linked with role-playing and a wider interest in Japan and its history. These hobbies function as important sources of information. The network of hobbies and activities are an important part of the role-players' communication network. They also diffuse new ideas and images, which can be used as a material for new games.

How intensely an individual belongs to a group can vary. In "light" groups, individuals may be committed to the group only partially, and it is easy to leave the group. On the other hand, there are groups that demand a firm commitment from their members. Such groups can expect their members to dress in a certain way and can restrict the time a member can use for other activities. Groups that do not allow leaving the group – and punish anyone doing so (like criminal gangs) – can be seen as an ultimate form (Lähteenmaa 2000). The groups of role-players seem easy to leave. The activities in the group may be regarded as hobbies, and a player often plays in more than one group, leaving and returning time after time. On the other hand, some players talk about role-playing games as a lifestyle. In my material, some people told they feel a strong commitment to the group even if not playing role-playing games any longer (Leppälähti 2002).

## Weird People with Many Lives

Role-playing games are played in temporary or fixed groups, with players often playing in several different groups at a time. The game groups and players moving from one group to another are the most central parts in the role-players' communication network. Initiation to the tribe of role-players happens in the game groups, in which the beginners learn from the others the ways of playing the games and how to be a role-player.

I noticed in my research that many role-players, when telling about themselves, pointed out that role-players or role-playing is or is not *normal*. Some of the participants of the inquiry emphasised that they were completely ordinary people despite of playing role-playing games. Some of these answers emphasised partying, success in studies, or having hobbies anyone else (a non-role-player) could have. "Normality" was also seen from the opposite angle; some portrayed, with humour, role-playing games as a hobby of loonies, and role-players as weird.

Sheldon Ungar, an American sociologist, has argued that people nowadays do not necessarily need to present themselves in a positive light, but can instead describe themselves in a way that is meant to be funny. The usual way to do this is to tell about a mistake or an embarrassing situation from one's past, or (over)emphasise a characteristic or trait seen as negative. Humorous description of a person's weaknesses can actually be a way of emphasising "good" characteristics (Ungar 1992). In spite of saying they are peculiar, weird, or odd, the descriptions in fact have the meaning: we are different from the masses in a positive way. The American role-players researched by Gary Alan Fine repeatedly pointed out that "the average Joe from the street" does not play role-playing

games, but instead gains his experiences through passive means like watching television (Fine 1983). Also, some Finnish role-players claim that playing role-playing games is a part of *wanting to be something else than stiff-mannered, eight-to-four-working guy, who is ageing too soon* (male informant, 25, in Leppälähti 2002). To be weird is seen as a positive thing. It is an individual way of distinguishing oneself from the mundane people (the ones who do not play role-playing games) although this difference can be humorously depicted as negative.

Choosing and playing different characters, an essential part of role-playing games, is often compared to living many lives. According to many respondents, this gives the player a diverse and extensive view to the world. When taking a character, the player has to become someone else for a while, making the player understand differences and, as a result, become more tolerant. Sometimes it is said that the players in role-playing games (both in larp and in tabletop games) can immerse in the character so deep they can't get off it. Many players think that this couldn't happen to them: just the continuing repetition of changing the character makes it easy to separate out of one character for taking another.

## Mundane Attitudes

Playing role-playing games is quite unknown to those who do not personally know any role-players. Because the outsiders do not know exactly what is going on in role-playing games, there are some prejudices concerning them. Perhaps this is not very surprising, as searching for 'role-playing games' in Finnish libraries will probably result in only finding (in addition to some games) the book of Pat Pulling (1989), in which she connects role-playing games to Satan worshipping. Among role-players, the outsiders' negative attitudes can be seen as either disturbing or ridiculous. The players can sometimes joke about the imagined relation between role-playing games and Satan worshipping. This may be an attempt to break free from the ordinary and to distance the players from the conventions of everyday life. In addition, the dark gothic appearance (with the occult signs and accessories) favoured by the players of *Vampire* games sets role-players startlingly apart from the "ordinary" world.

According to my research (Leppälähti 2002), the role-players' assessments of the outsiders' attitudes towards tabletop role-playing games and live-action role-playing games varied depending on the focus of their own interests. Players of tabletop role-playing games estimated the attitudes towards larps to be quite positive but supposed that the "mundanes" have prejudices towards tabletop role-playing. This was thought to be based on the positive publicity of fantasy larps in media and the possibility to compare larps with amateur theatre. Tabletop games were thought to be unknown and hard to understand and therefore dubious in nature. In comparison, larpers thought that tabletop role-playing is seen as more harmless and that there were heavy prejudices towards larping. This was said to be based partly on the larpers' dark frocks and other

odd clothes and partly on the possibility of too complete identification and following remaining the character while larping.

## Laughing Together

The humour of role-playing games can be seen characteristically as insider humour, an essential part of a group's sense of belonging together. Usually, the humour of role-players requires knowledge of fantasy novels and role-playing games in general, sometimes also requiring specific information about a certain game or game world. This humour can create kinship even between role-players who do not know each other and distinguish them from the outsiders, the mundane people. According to Michel Maffesoli, laughing together (or to the same things) can be seen as the kind of emotional cohesion that creates the sense of associating together. (Maffesoli 1995.) In addition, Ted Cohen argues that telling jokes that require specific background information to be understood creates deep feelings of kinship. Knowing the background information unites those who understand the joke and separates them from the others (Cohen 1993). A role-player can display belonging to the tribe by wearing humorous badges, which can tell about participation in specific games and events or contain signs pointing to role-playing, fantasy or science fiction.

Laughing together is an important part of the fun of role-playing games. Sometimes the point is a certain incident that happened in a game, making the joke understandable only to those who were playing the same game. The same sense of humour can be seen as to connect players who play specific types of role-playing games. For example, black humour – laughing at death and the seriousness of life – is said to be typical to those playing vampire games.

Spoken language has an important role in supporting the sense of community. For example, in Finland, Airi Mäki-Kulmala has studied youth groups and described the use of language within those groups. She has noticed that the groups can have words and expressions that were avoided in the presence of outsiders while some were used on purpose in public, and the group members took delight in the outsiders' confusion or misunderstandings (Mäki-Kulmala 1994). The latter case was also often mentioned by my informants as humorous incidents. Knowing and using special inside expressions strengthens the sense of belonging to the group. The feeling of tribal kinship can develop between people who play similar games even if they do not know each other personally. The constructs and clichés of a familiar game system form a frame for an unending supply of shared topics of conversation and jokes.

## Conclusion

Constructing post-modern clans or tribes (neotribes) is a very typical method of making communities in our days. These kinds of communities have some connecting features but no specific rational grounding. They are based on choice and the desire to be with people who are supposed to think the same way and who have the same lifestyle.

People belonging to the tribe of role-players share some special interests, and the community is grounded on a network of hobbies linked to role-playing games. Shared hobbies can keep a person in a group of role-players even if she does not actually play often. Playing role-playing games is regarded as a special pastime and is regarded very differently than e.g. playing football or collecting stamps. Playing role-playing games can be considered a part of a certain lifestyle.

The members of the tribe have a feeling of belonging to the group. A role-player can show this belonging to the tribe in her external appearance by wearing humorous badges or by favouring exterior gothic features. A role-player also shares images about role-players as unusually tolerant individuals without mundane seriousness and with an extraordinary sense of humour. In addition, role-players share the conception of the outsiders' negative attitudes towards them. They also know and use group specific language and inside humour. These features make it possible to call the subculture of role-players a neotribe.

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# Contributors

Edward Choy is currently finishing honours at the National University of Singapore. He is a part-time card gamer, a part-time role-player, a part-time actor and an aspiring theatre academic. He hails from sunny and humid Singapore.

Martin Ericsson is a fully employed larp-artist and researcher. He is currently working at the Zero-Game Studio of the Interactive Institute, Gotland, Sweden. His larp credits include organising twenty-odd games including *Carolus Rex* and *Hamlet*, co-organizing *Trenne byar* and working as leading writer for *Knappnålsbuvudet*. He has presented at several conferences, including a paper at the 2003 *Computer Games and Digital Cultures* conference in Utrecht, and was guest of honour at *Ropecon* in the same year.

Tova Gerge is a student of theatre as well as other humanistic and aesthetic subjects at the University of Stockholm, Sweden. After joining the larp movement in 1996, she has been writing fiction for and organising several larps, amongst others *Mellan himmel och hav* and *Futuredrome*. She is also one of the editors of the Swedish larp magazine *Fäa Livia*. Whenever she is not busy studying, she writes articles or makes feministic counter-art out of dusty literature from the 16th century.

J. Tuomas Harviainen has studied textual analysis for over a decade and works as a librarian-in-chief in Turku, Finland. As a side job, he is a game theorist and designer. He is responsible for several provocations against the larp community, chief among them creating of the Post-Bjorneborgan game writing style.

Satu Heliö is an avid gamer and researcher from the Game Research lab at the University of Tampere Hypermedialab, in Finland. Her day job is studying digital games. She has been playing role-playing games starting 1990 and participated in larps as a player and a game-writer since 1996. Her co-written game theory articles have been published at several conferences. Her background is in media and literary studies and she is currently writing her master's thesis on the narrativity in computer games.

Thomas Duus Henriksen is a cand. Psych from the University of Copenhagen, majoring industrial and organisational psychology, specialised in educational role-play. Thomas has been larping since 1992 and organizing games since 1997, both as a volunteer and as a professional, and is devoted to the scientific exploration of larp. He has been engaged with the Danish Ministry of Education for some years, and is currently privately employed as a developmental consultant.

**John H. Kim** has been role-playing since 1978. He got a PhD in physics from Columbia University, and did two years of post-doctoral work before leaving academia for a programming career. He currently lives in the San Francisco Bay area with his wife and 3-year old son. He was active in the newsgroup *rec.games.frp.advocacy* from 1992 to 1998, and wrote the *Threefold Model FAQ*. He maintains an extensive website on RPGs and RPG theory, which was started in 1994. He is currently active on *The Forge* bulletin board and in some Bay area gaming conventions. [www.darksbire.net/~jbkim/rpg/](http://www.darksbire.net/~jbkim/rpg/)

**Johanna Koljonen** is a working journalist, film critic and television game-show host, and the founder of the provocative larp fanzine *Panclou*. She is an expert on the Scandinavian larp avant-garde and has written about interactive culture in media ranging from the Knudebook *As Larp Grows Up to Elle*. She has not presented a larp of her own since 2001, but has contributed modest amounts of text to recent high-profile games including *Hamlet*. She has studied journalism and general literature, and is wrapping up a five-year stint in Stockholm, Sweden to move on to Oxford University this fall.

**Petri Lankoski** works as an assistant professor at the Hypermedia Laboratory at the University of Tampere, Finland, where he has held various positions since 1999. He holds a Master of Arts degree in New Media. His master's thesis explored issues of game design for interactive television. His research interests include game design, experience design, multiplayer games and new game forms (e.g. pervasive games and mobile games). He has authored and co-authored several larps and been an active tabletop player and game master for the most of his life.

**Ari-Pekka Lappi** studies philosophy, computer science, mathematics and physics at the University of Helsinki, Finland. For now, his major interest is philosophy of language, especially David Bohm's holistic philosophy. He has played role-playing games for ten years, and thinks that there is no relevant difference between tabletop role-playing games and larps.

**Elge Larsson** is an academic scholar with wide interests in most forms of humanistic and behavioral studies. He lives in Stockholm, Sweden. A translator by profession and a larper by interest, he divides his life between books and larping, which he's been doing since 1994. He looks at larping with an analytic mind, and considers it the noblest of arts. He is in the process of writing a book on participatory arts with Gabriel Widing.

**Merja Leppälahti** (Ph.L.) works as a researcher at the Department of Cultural Studies, University of Turku, Finland. Her licentiate thesis (2002) was an ethnographical study on playing role-playing games, and her doctoral thesis will deal with fantasy as folklore.

**Mika Lopenon** is a Finnish documentation specialist and a student at the University of Helsinki, Finland. So far, he has studied English, aesthetics, semiotics, cinema and television research, literature, and comparative religions. He has co-written several games, including the award-winning *Imperium* series, and participated in the manifesto spree by authoring the *Roibuwuori Manifesto*.

**Paul Mason** is a lecturer at Nanzan Junior College, Nagoya, Japan. He started role-playing (having previously wargamed) in 1978, and was soon published in both amateur and professional publications. His own fanzine, *Imazine*, started in 1983 and has been off-and-on ever since (currently off). After a brief stint on the editorial team of *White Dwarf* magazine he wrote a number of fantasy gamebooks, and was production manager of Games International and Strategy Plus magazines. Since moving to Japan in 2001 he has failed to make any progress with his historical Chinese tabletop role-playing game, *Outlaws of the Water Margin*.

**Markus Montola** is a Master of Social Sciences from the University of Helsinki, Finland. He majored in communication in 2003, writing a thesis on the organisations and communities in cyberspace. He's been role-playing since 1987 and larping since 1995, organising a number of tabletop campaigns and larps. Before editing the book for Solmukohta 04, he has published articles and essays in the Knudebook 2003, *Panclou* and Finnish *Magus* among others. Currently he works as the information officer of the Finnish national shipping enterprise.

**Frans Mäyrä** (PhD) works as a Research Director at the University of Tampere, Finland. He has studied the relationship of culture and technology, specialising in conflicting and heterogeneous elements in culture. He has published on topics that range from science fiction and fantasy to the demonic tradition, identity and role-playing games. Currently he teaches and heads research projects in the development and examination of games, new media and digital culture. He is the President of Digital Games Research Association. Publications include *Koneihminen* (Man-Machine; ed., 1997), *Demonic Texts and Textual Demons* (1999), *Jobdatus digitaaliseen kulttuuriin* (Introduction to Digital Culture; ed., 1999), *CGDC Conference Proceedings* (ed., 2002).

**Juhana Pettersson** is a Finnish freelance journalist and media artist. His controversial column *No Good*, about experimental role-playing for dummies, is featured at *rpg.net*. He has participated in the production of a number of entertainment and experimental larps, although the main body of his work in role-playing has been in tabletop. He currently lives in Lille, France and studies and works at Studio national des arts contemporains le Fresnoy.

**Mike Pohjola** is a larpwright, an author, a poet and a playwright. He is widely known as the author of the *Manifesto of the Turku School*, recently re-published in *As Larp*

*Grows Up*. His RPG-related writings have also been published in *Panclou*, *rpg.net*, *Magus*, *Larppaaja*, *Kosmoskynä*, *The Larper*, *The Book of LARP* and *Fëa Livia*. His better known larps include *File Not Found* (2003), *inside:outside* (2001–2002), *Jaitos* (1997), and the *Myrskyn aika* campaign (1997–2001) which spawned a book by Johnny Kniga Publishing, 2003. He lives in Turku, Finland.

Erling Rognli is a student of folk art and metalcraft, living in Rauland, Norway. He sometimes finds time for larping between his studies and raising his two year old daughter.

Christopher Sandberg has been active in participatory arts productions and new media start-ups for more than a decade. His larp projects include *Trenne byar* (1992–1994) and *Hamlet* (2002), as well as one year at the national board of Sverok. He has been founding member in the following companies: Ministeriet (larp team building), Kramgo (marketing firm), Skeppsakademin (school) and Namni (game company). During 2002 he founded the participative DTV channel Mediteve and produced the location-based computer game *Visby Under*. Currently he is Acting Studio Manager at Zero-Game Studio. In his spare time he is active in *Payasos sin Fronteras* Sweden.

Jaakko Stenros has never organized a larp. Instead he has spent his energy studying and writing about the various side-products and cultural fallout of role-playing games, both tabletop and live-action. He has been the co-editor of *Panclou* since 1998, and his texts have also appeared in *As Larp Grows Up*, *Larppaaja*, *Magus*, *The Larper*, *Fëa Livia* and *Interacting Arts Magazine* among others. He studies sociology and communication at the University of Helsinki, Finland, and works as a technical trainer and a film critic.

Henrik Summanen, a larp-organiser since 1990, has recently been involved in *Nyteg*, *Carolus Rex*, *Knappnålsbuvudet* and *Futuredrome*, and an author of the larp-organising handbook *Saga mot verklighet* (1998), together with Tomas Walch. He is active at the Electroacoustic Music Studio in Stockholm, and is the secretary of the Society for Electro Acoustic Music in Sweden (SEAMS). In 2003 he created the music for *Mellan himmel och bav*. He works as a project manager at the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, Sweden.

Terhi Säilä is an entrepreneur co-ordinating a large network of translators living in Helsinki, Finland. She will soon graduate as BBA in international business. She has larped since 1993; her other hobbies include Bujinkan Budo Taijutsu and singing. During the 1990s she was more active in Finnish larpdom as a member of the board of SuoLi, gamemaster in *Wanderer* projects and was also one of the organisers of *Solmukobta 2000*.

**Karin Tidbeck** is a writer living in Stockholm, Sweden. She has been involved in role-playing and larping for about ten years, during which she has become specialised in writing fiction and characters for larps. Recently she worked with developing characters for *Mellan Himmel och Hav* and organised the 70s larp *Ringblomman*.

**Aksel Westlund** studies music in Norway. He has been larping since 2000, and playing tabletop role-playing games since he was 10 years old. He has organised two larps. At the moment he is working on another few games, including *Dragonbane*. His interests in larpmaking veer towards narrativism and sestia. He is a member of Elysium, a young larp-group based in Oslo, Norway.

**Gabriel Widing** is an old organiser and a theorist from Stockholm, Sweden, studying contemporary aesthetics and media/communication studies. He is currently experimenting with different ways of applying live role-playing methods to reality games and activism. He is co-editor at *Interacting Arts Magazine* and in the process of writing a book on participatory arts with Elge Larsson.

<http://interactingarts.org>

**Emma Wieslander** works as a management and organizational consultant, focusing mainly on NGO/NPIsh organisations. In this area she has published several articles and two books, *Med idén i centrum* and *Mönster för ledarskap*. She has been active in role-playing since 1989 both as participant and as organizer and administrator. During 1993–1999 she was heavily involved in Sverok, a Swedish organisation for role-players, three years as the chairperson of the national organization. She's been head organizer of two major gaming conventions and a number of smaller larps. Recently she did *Mellan bimmel och hav* with Katarina Björk.



# Solmukohta•04

Solmukohta 2004 is a Nordic role-playing convention, with a strong emphasis on live-action role-playing. It is a meeting place for people and ideas. The convention, organised for the 8th time, brings together role-playing game organisers, researchers, and players for a week of lectures, debates, games, workshops, and parties.

Solmukohta was first organised in Oslo, Norway, in 1997 under the name Knutepunkt. Since then the convention has been held in Stockholm, Copenhagen and Helsinki.

This book is published as part of the Solmukohta project.

Solmukohta 2004 is organised by Mikko Pervilä, Henri Hakkarainen, Taika Helola, Heidi Hopeametsä, Kalle Kivimaa, Irrette Melakoski, Markus Montola, Timo Multamäki, Heiko Romu, Jukka Seppänen, Jaakko Stenros and Anni Tolvanen, under the banner of Ropecon ry.

*[www.ropecon.fi/solmukohta/](http://www.ropecon.fi/solmukohta/)*

Beyond Role and Play - Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination is a collection of articles by researchers and role-playing game enthusiasts from seven countries. This book offers practical tools, analytical viewpoints, inspirational game reviews and fresh methodological ideas for all who take role-playing seriously. The book covers both tabletop and live-action role-playing as an artform, a political tool, an educational method and as great entertainment.

The THEORY section consists of articles that are mostly of interest to researchers, PRACTICE includes tried and true tools for both game designers and players. GAMES holds descriptive reviews of completed projects and analyses of a number of Nordic larps, and finally OPENINGS provokes with radical new ideas that are of equal interest to both researchers and game masters.

“[E]xtra effort must be taken to underline the significance of larp and role-playing - as art, as popular culture, as something that not only the small core group of the initiated, but a much wider audience can learn and profit from. This is an important book, indeed.”

Frans Mäyrä, in his Foreword

**Solmukohta•04**

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