

# Losing and Finding Oneself: Duo- and Autoethnographic Study of "Character" in the Larp *Superrealism*

**Abstract:** This article investigates the relationship between player, character, and game experience through a case study of *Superrealism* (Lukka 2022), a non-verbal, music-driven live-action role-playing game (larp). First, the work presents a brief overview of role-playing game studies theories that investigate the nature of the self-concepts of players and characters. Through duoethnography and autoethnography, the authors then share their personal accounts of the game: Lukka, from his perspective as a designer and a facilitator, and Bowman and Baird, from their experiences as players. Lukka's account reveals how the non-verbal, music-driven, allegorical narrative and vague characters encourage highly personal interpretations emerging from players projecting themselves to the game. Baird's account provides an example of one such experience, where she was able to surface and process experiences of repressed queer grief that might have otherwise remained unconscious. Whereas Lukka found the characters to be a rather minor part of the design, Baird's and Bowman's accounts reveal how the characters, even if vaguely described, acted as a touchstone for the game experience. Their character concepts emerged from personal history and belongings, narrative instructions, and the use of character sheets as a prop. Together, these accounts illuminate how larps can evoke personal, meaningful, and potentially transformative experiences by creating safe interpersonal spaces, where evocative music, non-verbal play, narrative, and characters allow for the processing of intimate personal content. The article also demonstrates how this process continues in later sense-making after the larp.

**Keywords:** Duoethnography, Autoethnography, Character, Game Experience

**Sarah Lynne Bowman**  
Department of Game Design,  
Uppsala University Campus  
Gotland, Sweden,  
[sarah.bowman@speldesign.uu.se](mailto:sarah.bowman@speldesign.uu.se)

**Lauri Lukka**  
Department of Neuroscience and  
Biomedical Engineering, School  
of Science, Aalto University,  
Espoo, Finland.  
[Lauri.lukka@aalto.fi](mailto:Lauri.lukka@aalto.fi), [lauri.m.lukka@gmail.com](mailto:lauri.m.lukka@gmail.com)

**Josephine Baird**  
Department of Game Design,  
Uppsala University Campus  
Gotland, Sweden,  
[josephine.baird@speldesign.uu.se](mailto:josephine.baird@speldesign.uu.se)

## 1. INTRODUCTION: PLAYER, CHARACTER, AND IDENTITY

*"Row, row, row your boat gently down the stream...  
Merrily, merrily, merrily, merrily...  
Life is but a dream."  
-- Eliphalet Oram Lyte (1881)*

One of the main precepts in most definitions of role-playing games is that players enact characters within a fictional world. For example, the working definition two of the authors have been using is "co-creative experiences in which participants immerse into fictional characters and realities for a bounded period of time and improvise through spontaneous, emergent playfulness" (qtd. in Bowman et al. 2024). The character and fiction create an *alibi* that can help players feel more safe enacting unusual or questionable actions (Montola 2010; Deterding 2018). From this perspective, character refers to an identity that is different from the player's self-concept, whether in subtle or radically different ways. Also central to the precept is this character enactment transpires in an agreed-upon fictional world that is upheld and co-created by the players. This fiction may be pre-established by canonical books, larp scripts, player instructions, or other documents that guide the facilitator and players toward building and maintaining a negotiated *pretensive shared reality* (Kapitany, Hampejs, and Goldstein 2022).

However, recent work in role-playing theory calls into question some of the facets of these central precepts—or at least complicates them. Theories in psychology and practices in counseling assert that one's self-concept (or multiple self-concepts) may not be stable, unified, or singular. Diakolambrianou and Bowman (2023) asset four different approaches to understanding identity synthesized from these perspectives:

- 1) Identity as a social construct defined by our roles and classifications;
- 2) Identity as narrative, comprised of the stories we and others tell about ourselves;
- 3) Identity as psychodynamic, made up of parts in dynamic interaction with one another; and
- 4) Identity as a mosaic, in which different parts are configured and reassembled based on environmental pressures.

Alternatively, from a cognitive psychology perspective, the player's identity cannot be measurably discerned from the character's identity; as the two share the same body, brain, and physiological responses (Lankoski and Järvelä 2012; Järvelä 2018). That being said, the phenomenological experience of "being someone else" is still a fundamental component of role-playing: a form of *mentalization* in which the player are able to conceptualize "one's own and others' mental states," permitting one "to affect and alter how one perceives, interprets and reacts to one's surroundings" (Lukka 2013). Mentalization allows players to immerse into their character's perspective and imaginings, which become the interpretive lens through which they temporarily view the world. This process likely includes adopting a *theory of mind* for another character and inhabiting it, which can be likened to a dissociative (Bowman 2010; Lukka 2014), or otherwise altered state.

Related to this question of locating the character is the concept of bleed, in which psychological contents spillover from player to character and vice versa (Bowman 2013). Such components can be emotional (Montola 2010; Waern 2010), physical (Hugaas 2019), ideological (Hugaas 2019), or contents of one's personality, or ego, itself (Beltrán 2012). Bleed effects can lead to experiences of emancipation, especially for players who experience marginalized social identities in daily life and can challenge those limitations or counter oppressive systems within RPGs (Kemper 2017, 2020). When multiple forms of bleed interweave in a player's consciousness, their identity itself can become altered (Hugaas 2024), a process that can be undertaken consciously; for example, a player can intentionally aim to use role-playing characters as methods of *wyrding the self* (Kemper 2022), transforming their self-concept. Such theories highlight the constructed nature of both the self-concept and the character-concept; indeed, bleed may always be happening on some level, but only perceptible at a certain threshold (Hugaas 2024).

Alongside the development of these theories, and sometimes informed by them, RPG designers have been experimenting with the idea of character, fiction, and indeed this notion of a shared pretensive reality. If role-players are each inhabiting and projecting a subjective diegesis (Montola 2003; 2012), in which their version of the narrative is what defines the experience, an RPG cannot be fully understood by only reading the game texts or even the facilitator's instructions. Instead, all experiences within the fiction should be considered as "the game," even if they vary wildly from each other.

This phenomenon becomes more obvious and fascinating in the case of non-verbal abstract games, which have grown in popularity in recent years, particularly within the black box and Nordic and American freeform scenes. The designer most known for exploring movement, abstraction, and non-verbal communication in larp is Nina Runa Essendrop (2018),

who is known for creating highly symbolic and profound experiences, often through the use of music, as well as limitations on physical movement and modes of interaction. Another particularly fascinating larp of this type is *Before and After Silence* (Hossmann and Holter 2013), which highlights subjective diegesis in an extreme sense. Players are given strips of paper with phrases like the following as their sole character sheet:

You and the others are memories from each others' lives. As you look at them, they come alive as you come alive when they look at you . . .

You and the others are children unable to speak because of the cruelty you have experienced. One of the other children you trust. Another you distrust. Try to act the same towards both of them. (Hossmann and Holter 2013)

Then, they interact for an hour non-verbally, each interpreting the story through these markedly different lenses. Such designs require co-creation to occur on a more intuitive level, relying upon attunement, interpretation, and adaptation with others without the benefits (and constraints) of verbal direction or clear social frames. Emergence is always present in larp narratives (Torner 2018), but especially potent in experimental games such as these. This makes these non-verbal, abstract larps a fruitful context for studying the relationship between player and character, and specifically how the game experience allows for an experience that is transformative for the player. However, this dynamic needs to be investigated from both game design and player perspective, which this case study aims to provide through duo- and autoethnographic accounts.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Study aim and overview

This article investigates the relationship between player, character, and game experience through a case study of Lauri Lukka's *Superrealism: A Music-driven Embodied Role-playing Experience of Losing and Finding Oneself* (Lukka 2022), which was specifically designed to explore conceptual and experiential questions around the nature of the character in RPGs through abstract play. Lukka and Sarah Lynne Bowman will employ duoethnography (Sawyer and Norris 2012), which transpired as a video conferencing conversation in early 2025 in which they compared Lauri's design/research intentions with how Sarah experienced the larp as a player/researcher. This work will be augmented by Josephine Baird's autoethnographic (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011) account of her own experience playing the larp, which highlights her own unique subjectivity. These methods aim to highlight the phenomenological nature of play through the distinct roles required in role-playing games, that is designer, facilitator, and player. They also emphasize how the interpretation of such games varies from player to player, while being influenced by the game design. Hereafter, we will toggle between last and first names in the paper to emphasize our unique subjectivities in this work as researchers and players.

### 2.2. The Evolution of Superrealism

Lauri described how *Superrealism* evolved from experiments in which he and co-designer Otso Saariluoma challenged the centrality of facilitator in guiding the experience. In many chamber larps and freeform games, the facilitator plays an active part in guiding the direction of play

(see e.g., Stark 2012), making the experience highly dependent on facilitator influence. Lukka and Saariluoma explored the degree to which they could supplant the facilitator through pre-recorded instructions and musical guidance in the larp *Club TPOW* (2016) that was set in New Year's Eve party (see Figure 1). However, it took six years until these early concepts matured into the *Superrealism* (2022), a name that nods to the 20th century Surrealist art movement that strived to express the unconscious.



Figure 1. Title image for *Club TPOW* (2016).

*Superrealism* focused on instructions and music as the primary drivers of the emotional journey, with a playlist intended to guide players through a specific trajectory moving from neutral, to deep diving, to heights, to deep diving, to neutral again. This dramatic trajectory was inspired, for instance, by the concept of the narrative arc and Gabrielle Roth's 5Rhythms (2025), a variant of ecstatic dance in which the music and short verbal instructions guide the dancers' journey and often shape the ways in which their bodies move. *Superrealism* adapts this notion to 19 scenes each of which are played non-verbally after a brief narrative read by the facilitator. Within the scenes, the game themes are reinforced with props, e.g., rocks, egg shakers, and blindfolds. The initial character sheet was highly simplified, including only a painting of a figure, a name, and three provocative words to further encourage players' psychological projection (Freud 1995). The game setting is described in the introduction of the scenario thusly:

*In a remote country house, you hesitate. The esoteric new-age self-development seminar is about to begin. Promptly, the escalating ceremony leaves your ego behind. Together, you look for the mystical Mountain across curious, associative, symbolic, and synesthetic planes. Do the participants ever meet the Blackbird? Do they find the present? (Lukka 2022)*

Indeed, the “you” in this description shifts in terms of character throughout the larp, from these initial seeds. In the workshop, players are asked to walk around the room and choose an intentionally vague character sheet which is their starting point in the game. During the game, the players are subsequently guided to pray to these initial characters, only to then see them disappear. The players are then asked to adopt other characters in an ambiguous manner; at various points, they are dwarven slaves working in the Mountain overseen by an evil overlord; life partners of advanced age experiencing end of life; and birds soaring above the Mountain. Later, the initial character reappears and the character sheet is furiously ripped apart (Figures 2–4).

Lauri has run the larp six times and has noticed several interesting things. First, while the instructions are often ambiguous, the players often appear to engage in roughly similar activities from run to run. However, these similar external behaviors appear to mask a more complex internal journey that remains unseen during the non-verbal game. Also, while the narrative is intentionally vague, from his perspective, it has a poignant journey, but Lukka has observed that the players often prioritize their own internal sense-making over the themes in the narrative.

These observations sparked the interest in Lukka and Bowman to explore these concepts in depth in this paper, where we decided to investigate these questions:

- 1) What comprises the “character” in *Superrealism*?
- 2) To what degree does the larp feature a coherent narrative journey for players?
- 3) Can this kind of a non-verbal game catalyze personal transformations in its players? If so, how?

### **2.3. Duo- and autoethnography**

The research questions were explored through excerpts from the duoethnographic conversation between Sarah and Lauri, as well as Josephine’s autoethnographic account of playing the larp. While these questions guide the work, this study remains exploratory in nature, meaning remaining in the inquiry rather than arriving at definitive answers. Furthermore, this data was collected in 2025, over two years after the play experiences described here. From that perspective, the accounts are considered memories and interpretations rather than phenomenologically accurate representations of experience in the game (Lukka et al. 2024); yet, nonetheless, this time has also allowed for sense-making on the experience itself. For Josephine, the game experience allowed for personal transformation connected to queerness and grieving, whereas for Sarah, the experience became more philosophical, encouraging her to reflect more deeply on the nature of self-concepts and how environmentally contextual they are in life and in larp.

Auto- and duo- ethnographic methods interrogate the researchers’ own experience(s) as the source of data to answer research questions that might be especially difficult to answer otherwise; perhaps by nature of the marginalised subject(ivity) of study and/or the precarity of seeking out such data otherwise (Allan and Percy 2005; Holman Jones and Harris 2018). As such, auto- and duo- ethnographic methodologies are particularly attractive to Feminist and

Queer theorists who note that the method highlights that all knowledge is partial (Adams 2024) and as such a rigorous consideration of one's own experience accounts for the social positioning of said knowledge (Ettorre 2016), makes especially visible potential biases of the author (McArthur 2019), and can alleviate some of the problems that can occur in trying to interpret the meaning and intentionality of others' testimony in interview, survey, or observational methods (Crawley 2012). In games research, auto- and duo- ethnography can be useful to counteract such issues of examining "retroactive third person" accounts of play (Väkevä, Mekler, and Lindqvist 2024). But more than that, duo-ethnographies specifically allow for the consideration of the positionality (Ahmed 2006) of the researchers' experience in relation to each other, demonstrating the plurality of play experience whilst allowing for the complex consideration of common themes between them (Del Negro, Formenti, and Luraschi 2019, Gao and Sai 2024).

In terms of reflexivity, all three authors research transformative role-playing game design in various ways and focus. All work with primarily qualitative data. Originally in the U.S. and now living in Sweden, Sarah is primarily an interdisciplinary researcher in the humanities and social sciences who conducts participant-observation research with interview data. Originally from the UK among other countries, now also living in Sweden, Josephine's work arises from a social psychology and gender studies approach to studying games. She particularly emphasizes the importance of auto- and duoethnography as methods to highlight and amplify the experiences of queer experiences that are often marginalized or suppressed. Lauri is a clinical psychologist from Finland who primarily researches the therapeutic potential of game-based digital therapeutics for mental disorders (Lukka 2024). All three are members of the Nordic larp community, as well as associated groups such as Nordic freeform communities, e.g., at the Stockholm Scenario Festival where *Superealism* was run. Among them, in the past, they have researched the phenomenon of role-playing from a variety of facets, including immersion, identity, and gender.

### 3. RESULTS

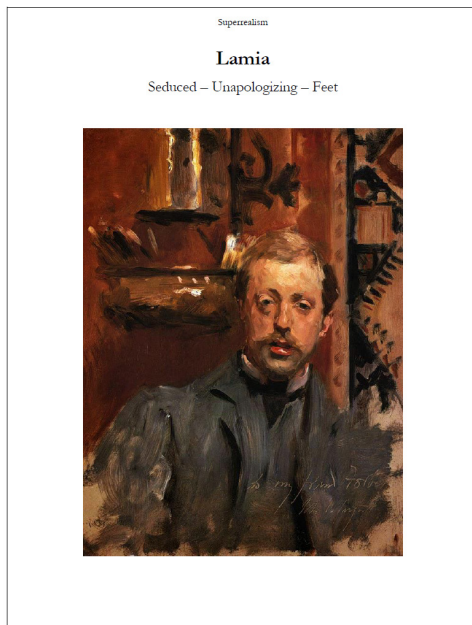
#### 3.1. Lauri and Sarah's Duoethnography

In the next section, Lauri and Sarah will discuss the design philosophy behind the larp, as well as Sarah's experience as a point of contrast. Sarah played an male character named Lamia (see Figure 2), whose keywords were Seduced, Unapologizing, and Feet. She chose the character because she and Josephine had been running a larp called *Euphoria* (Baird, Bowman, and Thejls 2022) that weekend at the festival, which was about gender expression/exploration, but in her facilitator role, she had not been exploring masculinity. Her embodiment of Lamia ended up being quite privileged and empowered, stomping his feet, but also easily seduced by the gaze of others and fixating on them.

\* \* \*

**Lauri:** *Superrealism* is like going into the depths and having different emotional experiences. Designing it, I started with both the music and writing the script. And the script starts with the players, and the characters, arriving into this self-improvement seminar in a secluded location, and then the game master only has this playlist. They press play. The game begins. The Game-master gives some instructions that are pre-written. And then the game flows from there.

And I had the feeling that there is something very substantial here, and I've now run it six times, I think. And while I'm quite highly critical of my work, but, I think this is one of the highlights of the games I have ever written in terms of its novelty and its ability to create something that is very unique in the field of these jeepform/chamber larp games. And now I would like to briefly describe the journey that this game creates.



**Figure 2.** Lamia's character sheet in *Superrealism*.

First, I'll start with a question of: is there a character? My aim for this game was also to question—this is a bit of a conceptual question: is there a character in role-playing games? Is it needed? And my argument is that: it's not necessary. We can just play, and now I am associating to contact improvisation, for instance, that can be an alternative immersive state that doesn't require a fictive environment. But if you create such an environment, it should spontaneously lead to some sort of role-playing game. So playing is the social process, not the fictive reality or the narrative itself. The narrative in *Superrealism* is, I could say, light. Or maybe a more precise way to say it is: it has themes, but it's open for interpretation.

In the first runs, some of the players were asking me, "Who am I?" And I started thinking, "Okay, well maybe this has to *appear* to be a role-playing game." So how do you appear to be a role-playing game? You give the player a character. I think that this is a minor detail from the perspective of design, but it's a detail that has a lot of power in defining what this is and defines this as a role-playing game. So I created characters. Actually, that was one of the last things I did. I chose free license old pictures, paintings, and added names that were enigmatic. And then I added three words to describe each chapter. For instance, one character is described as Cassandra that is characterized by compulsion, cleanliness, and poison. Or we have Aella, who is characterized by impatience, stimulants, and greed. So these characters were an important part in showing the players that experience is in the genre of role-playing games.

*Superrealism* consists of players enacting, without words, 20 scenes. And these scenes are paced with music. In the game, there are three important things that the players need to do when they create scenes: 1) You listen to others in the group, so you act together. You co-

create together. It's a group activity. 2) You interpret the game master's instructions. That is the pre-written narrative that is given between the scenes. And 3) You adapt to the music. So music is a key component; you should adapt. And through these three instructions, you create the game (see Figure 3).

But what this leads to is really interesting: an emerging narrative. First of all, I would say that there is a surprising similarity between the games. That the players do more or less the same things in different groups because the music and the instructions guide them. But, what appears to be, from the outside, a similar activity, there's considerable variance in the experience of the players. And this is, I think, really interesting because the game is played without any words. People are very free to interpret what occurs in the game.

And also the game is filled with allegories: it has a Mountain that you work toward. It's never explained what the Mountain is. Then you change positions, characters. There are dark themes, it's not very explained why the players are going anywhere, why they are doing the things they do. So this means that the players are free to interpret it together as a team. And even though you act as a team, you still end up with quite a bit of different interpretations. I think that is fascinating.



**Figure 3.** Image from a run of *Superrealism* from the designer's and facilitator's perspective. The facilitator controlled the music, lighting, and gave the participants instructions, which the participants then collectively enacted. August 2024.

And maybe as a final note, I would say that this also makes the game very powerful because it's implicit. It's not verbal. So you are more in touch with your feelings, emotions, on a level that is not available in games where there's a more verbal component. And this emotional level is emphasized through the music and the narrative, which means that this is a very, very deep experience for some of the players. I would say, using a word you use, it's transformative even. And whereas for others this is more of an interesting contact-improvisation-like-experience—

something occurs and I'm in the present moment enjoying it, but it is not that transformative. So there's a bit of a range. But that's my first thoughts on *Superrealism*.

**Sarah:** I have so many questions, but the first that I would like to ask is: you've written before about what you called mentalization, and that being a facet of immersion if I'm remembering correctly. This way that we create mental constructs in our mind, and that allows us to engage with the fiction, if that's a good enough summary. And so I'm curious what you think is being mentalized during the game, and that might very well vary for different people. But, as a designer, what components have you placed there that then become part of the interpretive framework?

**Lauri:** Yeah. What I'm thinking out loud now, is based mostly on—I try to create after the game a space where you [the players] are asked the questions: what do you think? How did you experience it? What do you think now? And I'm relying on what players tell me. And I think this would be a really interesting opportunity for interviewing every player and then contrasting these experiences. And then this could be contrasted with the videotaping of the game where they acted more or less the same things.

Okay. That said, there are three things that shape the experience. First are the metaphors and the pacing of the verbal narrative. I think the verbal narrative is meaningful to me. But practically no one from the six games I've run, no one has said anything like, "Whoa, I really enjoyed the story" or something along those lines. At most, some say that, "Well, I didn't even notice that there is something going on." This is really interesting to me—that essentially the verbal elements, they are not even secondary to the experience.

That's said, there is emotional power in the verbal instructions that the gamemaster gives. There's the Mountain to be pursued. There are themes of sadness, losing each other, anger, fear, these types of emotions. And this brings into the second part, which is the emotional tone in the music. Much of the game is based on the music itself, and that is something that kind of surpasses the verbal level, let's say the song "Nyepi" by Olafur Arnalds that is really touching. Well, then how is that very touching and lingering and evoking? It's so much harder to put in words, but it really talks directly to the player on the emotional level. And then there is the social setting where the players kind of reinforce each other. So, you kind of imitate emotions that exist in the group. When the group is feeling cheery and curious, you play around, then people kind of reinforce these feelings. And then when there's sadness, then that becomes reinforced in that group as well. So there's kind of layers to what is being processed in the game or being reacted to.

**Sarah:** That's really interesting. For me, the narrative, at least the parts that I caught, were very important for me. They were like touchstones. So one thing that we haven't mentioned is, I believe the characters start as sort of part of the spiritual cult, if I'm remembering correctly, or they're doing some sort of ritual? And that shaped for me a lot of my play because I was wearing a crystal around my neck. And so I was using this crystal as a prop, but also as sort of like almost like a magical foci (see Figure 4).

And then also [later] we were touching the rocks and we were in the ground and, you know, we were the hunted, and then we were the hunters at some point, basically? There was this distinct shift in perspective that kept happening, and they were really important, the verbal cues that you were giving. And I could be, you know, misremembering them because it felt very much like an altered state... But I recall having this very intimate, blindfolded interaction with a spouse or something like that? And then shifting to being like in an Orcish war party or something like that? So I don't know if any of that's really what happened, but

those parts were really important to my experience. And fascinating for me, because you have this sort of ambiguous character that you can project into.



**Figure 4.** Image from a run of *Superrealism*. The initial characters are attached to the wall (scene 3), making an altar. In the following scenes, these characters are left behind and the players adopt other characters.

I also remember tearing up who we were, which is super fascinating, like to do very early on in the larp, like we had the sheets and then we ripped them to shreds. So it's almost like a way on a meta level, of signaling to the players: this doesn't actually matter. Or does it? Really creating that tension. So there's this ambiguity, but there were also these hooks. And then for my friend who played... Josephine, she had a very clear linear narrative experience. And then I talked to [someone else]. And he was like, "I never have any kind of narrative experience when I play this." So it was really fascinating to me immediately that we had three roughly very different experiences.

So I definitely agree that interviews, like doing a run of it and then doing interviews, would be absolutely fascinating because I think we both share an interest in the phenomenology of play and what's actually happening in the minds of players as they're engaging. Because we know that there are these different creative agendas and all of that, but we also know there are different states of immersion, like some people can go deeply into bleed and others are very distanced from their character or think of their character more as a prop. So, this kind of goes into even a more basic primal phenomenological experience that I think other larps such as Nina Runa Essendrop's larps also steer towards. And that is really fascinating because then you don't have these constructs of very clear character and very clear narrative to fall back on when trying to figure out what to do. You have to rely mainly on instinct, I think, and also nonverbal interaction with others. Anyway, that's a lot of jumbled thoughts, but I'm curious what you think about all that.

**Lauri:** Yeah. I'm following you. I'll maybe clarify the narrative. For me, as a writer and game master, the verbal cues create a coherent narrative from the start. But for others, only some may see the whole. Some are just [saying], "Well, I'm just listening to the music and the group." And the third person might be [saying], "Well, I'm focusing on this aspect, this and this." This is also due to intentionally designing these metaphors in the game, which is, for instance, the characters: the characters are first given, then they are used as a prop to introduce yourself. Then, they are attached to a wall. Then they are being prayed to, then they somehow vanish from the game. The next time you meet them, you need to tear them apart. So what does this mean? Who is the character? Is the character the character? Is it a representation of something else? What do you project there? And that is the space I wanted to create, that the lack of clarity creates opportunities for projection and internal work to occur (see Figure 5).

### 3.2. Josephine's Authoethnography

We now transition to a concrete example of the form of projection (Freud 1995) Lauri is mentioning by focusing on Josephine's experience.



**Figure 5.** Post-larp picture of *Superrealism*. The picture exhibits traces of the emotional journey where the participants ripped their character sheets (scene 14) and unbound themselves from blindfolds (scene 18).

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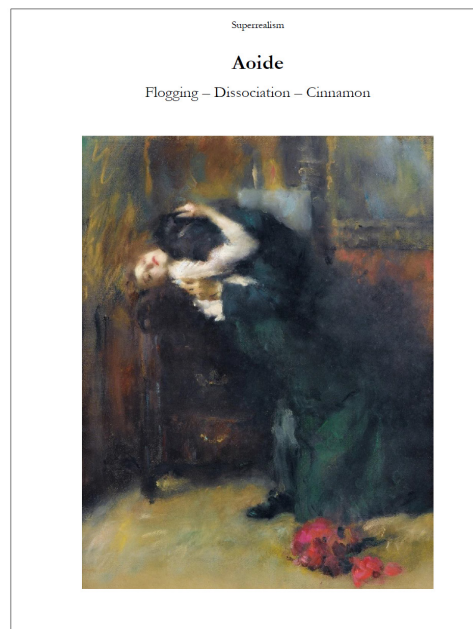
**Josephine:** *Superrealism* gave me a chance to do something that I couldn't quite describe I needed before I did it. And I still find it hard to put words to it. I suppose it is because the thing that I found myself embodying during that larp was an experience of grief that is recorded and communicated so rarely in wider society and even in the queer communities and relationships I have been in, namely the grief for the loss of a queer partner in a world in which queer relationships are erased and discounted.

Grief as a concept defies concise textual description in most any circumstance. As does any emotional condition. Nonetheless we record it and consider it and classify it (see e.g., Kubler-Ross and Kessler 2014). But for queer communities, we often find queer experiences are not included. Our relationships, and our selves by definition, aren't valid, so how can our grief be considered as such?

Growing up, I had no examples of queer relationships, nor the grief of losing them. I had many examples of straight ones however, from an early age and throughout my life. In popular culture of all kinds, the expression of grief and loss of the straight relationship is codified, so much so that there are rituals I am aware of, processes that have become common knowledge and parlance, and even an understanding of the unwritten rules of how heterosexual grief should and can be conveyed.

But I don't know how to do that as a queer person, who may have to hide the nature of that relationship and therefore the grief associated with it. Even within queer communities, I haven't found a conversation about it to be common. As if we are sometimes almost too afraid to consider it. Or for some of us, I know, there are those who, due to life expectancy in hostile social environments, assumed they would never get so far in life as to grieve that way. Or others still who have found they have had to grieve so often that they no longer want to talk about it. And what would you say anyway? How could one prepare for such a feeling when all the messages you receive are about grief in the most normative settings?

I didn't expect to find such an opportunity in *Superrealism*. At the beginning of the larp, I chose an image (named Aoide, Figure 6) primarily for the keywords which reflected something I recognized. A combination of personal features but also the word "dissociation" which stood out to me. A defense mechanism I am very well aware of in the queer communities I have been in.



**Figure 6.** Aoide's character sheet in *Superrealism*.

As I considered what I wanted to explore as part of the larp, I found I gravitated to a character I had recently written for a creative writing project: a woman whose partner of many years

had just passed away, living in a circumstance where her relationship was neither recognized nor understood by wider society.

As the larp began, with its focus on travel and going through depths and heights of emotion and experience, I found myself falling into my character's grief. Her sense of loss but also of voicelessness. That she couldn't reach out to anyone. The other participants in the larp made that feeling all the clearer as they moved around collectively, but in their own space and narratives, only coming into contact briefly and with no other direct communication. A crowd around the character I was embodying but no one who would comprehend what she might even say if she could.

The sensation was profound and devastating. The surreal soundtrack and abstract movement provided an opportunity to inhabit that which I could not name without having to try to put the feeling into words. As the larp continued and the emotive quality of the soundscape and instructions changed, I found I was processing my character's experience more and more without conceptual thought. Simply trying to feel what she was feeling and what journey such an emotion might take.

Would she ever stop feeling bereft? Would there ever be release from grief that could not be communicated with words to others? But even these questions are just an attempt to put into words the embodiment of the experience of them. Because I didn't "think" these questions, nor did I have answers. I merely "felt" the implication of them.

As the larp concluded, I still didn't have a cohesive or conscious "thought" of what I had experienced. But I did have a "feeling." A feeling that I had gone through something that I feared and could not name. But that I had also come out the other side of it. I had been able to "practice" something that I had no conscious sense I needed nor wanted to consider before I did.

I have no idea whether or not this pertains to any grief I or anyone I know might face in the future. But it has provided me the chance to reflect on something that is often wordless. Something that I am clearly thinking about on some level, having written the character, and then chose to embody her in this moment in free-fall role-playing expression.

My work, my research, very much falls into what is possible to explore as part of role-playing experiences. But in that research, I find I have to define what it is I am considering before engaging with the role-playing experience. In this case, I find that I am considering what transformation might be possible emotionally after such a role-playing experience.

*Sarah:* Would you say this was an emancipatory bleed experience?

*Josephine:* Perhaps so. Yes, I think so. It certainly has made me consider something and brought me clarity and a greater sense of, I hesitate to say comfort, but maybe familiarity with a topic I might not have touched in the same way otherwise. I am glad I found the words. I honestly think I might not have found the words if I tried to describe my experience closer to the time of the larp. But this is absolutely what I processed at the time without textual language.

#### 4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This duo- and autoethnographic study explored the relationship between player, their character, and game experience in the context of a non-verbal, music-driven larp, *Superrealism*. The study reveals how the designer's approach to creating the game emphasized the music-driven narrative journey with embodied expression, where the initial characters were only one late

addition to the whole. However, the players' accounts provided by Sarah and Josephine revealed that these initial characters significantly contributed to the game experience by providing a starting point and alibi (Montola 2010; Deterding 2018) for processing the unfolding narrative. However, the players did not only experience the game as characters, but also as themselves — as intended by the design and observed by Lukka, and illustrated specifically by Josephine's autoethnographic account. This player projection was intentionally reinforced by many game elements: the initial characters were vague and open for interpretation, the narrative was symbolic and invited the players to change characters, the game was music-driven evoking emotions, and the player interactions were non-verbal and embodied. Combined, these elements encouraged a form of bleed (Bowman 2013), where the player projected their own interpretive framework to the game. We encourage further empirical work to explore the variance in the player experiences and how the game elements contributed to them.

Methodologically, this study exhibited how designers' and players' perspectives can be explored through duoethnography and autoethnography to illuminate different facets of role-playing games. As a designer, Lauri described the design intentions, process, and elements for *Superrealism*, as well as his experience of running and observing the game from the outside. However, his account was limited in its ability to describe the players' internal journey. In contrast, Sarah's and Josephine's unique autoethnographies illuminated the game from the players' viewpoint: the personal context from which they interpreted the game, how they experienced it, how they later made sense of it, processing emotions emerging from the game, including this analysis two years after. However, their perspectives were influenced by attentional biases highlighting some design factors while neglecting others, which contributed to a highly personal account, not necessarily reflecting the game design as a whole. Thus, this study provides novel insights on how to bridge between the designer and player perspectives in the study of games.

Notably, as these experiences took place over two years ago, a certain degree of narrativization and post-larp revision of facts necessarily has taken place. This tendency could be considered the "post-larp lie" (Waern 2013), but it can also reflect a more crystallized perspective to the game after some time has passed. These *secondary revisions* are similar to the process Freud (2010) describes when a dreamer awakens. Many occurrences within this dream-like state have likely slipped into the unconscious, allowing a more linear narrativized experience to emerge, as in Josephine's account. Such revisions are just as important to analyze as the dream itself, because they make manifest what is otherwise latent in the unconscious mind (2010). However, Sarah's account makes clear how difficult constructing a cogent secondary revision can be when enacting larps based on surreal, abstract content and/or non-verbal interactions. In the case of *Superrealism*: does the story provide a linear-enough structure to do so? Does the genre itself defy such neat narrative categorizations, as role-playing narratives in general do (Giovannucci 2022), and abstract narratives even more so? Such questions are worth exploring in future work.

This study contributes to the study of the complex relationship between the player and the character, and informs the design and facilitation of intense and potentially transformative games in which metaphors enable player projection and emotional processing. However, the authors emphasize that such experiences need to be balanced with comprehensive pre-game workshoping creating psychological safety and establishing informed consent, while considering the potential for emerging, unpredictable experiences, which can also trigger unprocessed trauma. Thus, while running and playing *Superrealism* is rather uncomplicated, it is intended only for consenting and well-informed adults, and to be run only by experienced facilitators, and the game appears unsuitable for unfacilitated runs.

To conclude, this case study of *Superrealism* exhibits how metaphors, music, and non-verbal play can create emerging experiences facilitated by the psychological safety created by the alibi of the initial character and reinforced by group dynamics. This safety may allow some players to access and explore implicit experiences, emotions, and memories, which they can later explicitly make sense of through mentalization. Thus, abstract live-action role-playing games, such as *Superrealism*, can be a platform for personal transformation. We recommend further design work exploring abstract transformative play more intentionally.

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**Sarah Lynne Bowman** is an Associate Professor in Game Design at Uppsala University Campus Gotland. She formerly served as Coordinator for the Peace & Conflict Studies program at Austin Community College, where she teaches Humanities. Bowman is a founding member of the Transformative Play Initiative, who research analog role-playing games as vehicles for personal and social change. She co-edited *The Wyrld Companion Book* (2012–2015) and currently edits for the *International Journal of Role-Playing* and [NordicLarp.org](#). Bowman has co-organized several conferences, including Living Games (2014, 2016, 2018), Role-playing and Simulation and Education (2016, 2018), and the Transformative Play Initiative Seminar (2022, 2025).

**Lauri Lukka** is an entrepreneur, psychologist, and researcher. Since 2011, he has designed and organized numerous live-action role-playing games, including *Prelude*, *In Dependence*, *Superrealism*, and *Wonderworks*. As a licensed psychologist, he specializes in adult mental health. He holds a doctorate from Aalto University, Finland, where his research focuses on user-centered design of digital mental health interventions. He serves on the board of the International Society for Research on Internet Interventions (ISRII). Lauri is co-founder and Chief Psychology Officer (CPO) at Soihitu DTx Ltd. that develops game-based digital therapeutics for Major Depressive Disorder.

**Josephine Baird** is a Lecturer at the Uppsala University's Game Design Department and a Ph.D. candidate at the Game Research Lab at Tampere University. She is a game designer and game design consultant, as well as a writer and visual artist. Her work often relates the intersection between games, identity, gender, and sexualities. Her research and recent publications present the theoretical and methodological basis for her thesis that role-playing games provide a potent opportunity for people to explore their gender subjectivity in safer environments. She is also an actor, public speaker, and co-host of the podcast *It Is Complicated*.