Social Conflict in
Role-Playing Communities:
An Exploratory Qualitative Study

Popular abstract - Much of the current research in the field of role-playing studies focuses upon the positive impact that games can have on the lives of participants. Analysis of the more negative social interactions within role-playing communities becomes necessary in order to establish a more complete picture of the psychosocial effects of these games. This research describes potential problems within role-playing communities in order to aid groups experiencing cohesion difficulties.

This thematic, qualitative ethnography describes the types of social conflict occurring within role-playing groups and examines possible sources for their exacerbation. The study includes several types of role-playing from a phenomenological perspective, including tabletop, larp, and virtual gaming. Semi-structured interviews were collected from a selective sample of 30 international participants gathered from vastly different play cultures. While the types of games and methods of play contributed to conflict in some instances, striking similarities between the experiences of players across modes, cultures, and genres were observed.

Emergent themes for sources of conflict included general problems inherent to group behavior, such as schisms, Internet communication, and intimate relationships. Other sources of conflict unique to the role-playing experience included creative agenda differences, the game master/player power differential, and the phenomenon of bleed, both in- and out-of-game. Potentially conflict-inducing play styles included long-term immersion into character, campaign-style, and competitive play.

Sarah Lynne Bowman
University of Texas (Dallas)
singingyoutoshipwreck@hotmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, academic work on role-playing games has increased steadily. Much of the current research in the field focuses upon the positive impact that games can have on the lives of players, including community building, skill training, identity exploration, and increased empathy (Bowman, 2010; Müller, 2011; Meriläinen, 2012). This emphasis on the benefits of role-playing games has arisen, in part, as a response to decades of societal backlash since _Dungeons & Dragons_, working to debunk popular myths decrying the "evils" of the practice (Müller, 2011; Stark, 2012).

While the rise of scholarly work attempting to rehabilitate the image of role-playing in the eyes of the public is needed, analysis of the more negative social interactions within role-playing communities becomes necessary in order to establish a more complete picture of the psychosocial effects of these games. Ultimately, researchers must undertake any endeavor to analyze these problems with care not to generalize or overstate certain issues, as conflict arises within most groups given

enough time and complexity regardless of the context. Furthermore, strife within role-playing communities does not necessarily negate the positive qualities of game experiences.

This thematic, qualitative ethnography analyzes the types of social conflict occurring within role-playing communities and describes possible sources for their exacerbation. Emergent themes for these sources of conflict included general problems inherent to group behavior, such as schisms, Internet communication, and intimate relationships. Other sources of conflict emerged as specific and unique to the role-playing experience, including creative agenda differences, the game master/player power differential, and the phenomenon of _bleed_, both in- and out-of-game. In this study, bleed refers to the phenomenon of the thoughts, feelings, physical state, and relationship dynamics of the player affecting the character and visa versa (Jeepen, n.d.; Montola, 2010; Bowman, 2013). Potentially conflict-inducing play styles included long-term immersion into character, campaign-style, and competitive play. The paper

concludes with preliminary solutions for solving conflicts in role-playing communities.

Many players emphasize the intense emotional experiences gained within role-playing games as the most valuable component (Montola and Holopainen, 2012). Literary critics stress the importance of conflict as an inherent impetus to the progression of story and character evolution. This study seeks to untangle emotionally intense moments in games that players process later as positive from experiences that cause rifts in role-playing communities and lasting psychological distress.

Sources of conflict within role-playing communities have yet to receive comprehensive, scholarly attention. However, popular sources such as forums, blogs, and published articles address specific causes of conflict, often with the intention

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of providing advice to role-players experiencing these problems. In an opinion piece entitled "The Non-United Larp States of America," Aaron Vanek charts a trend in American larp communities toward splintering and fracturing (Vanek, 2011). Role-players have openly discussed issues arising from differing creative agendas amongst players for over fifteen years, resulting in various theories of player motivation (Kim, 1998; Pohjola, 1999; Edwards, 2001; Kim, 2003; Bøckman, 2003; Harviainen, 2003; McDiarmid, 2011; Bienia, 2012; Kim 2012).

Other recent discussions in the Nordic larp community focus upon psychological safety and bleed effects after intense role-play sessions (Bidslet and Schultz, 2011; Koljonen, Munthe-Kaas, Pedersen, and Stenros, 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Koljonen, 2013). With regard to personal relationships, Gordon Olmstead-Dean has described both the benefits and difficulties associated with intimacy in larp settings (2007). Additional articles advise role-players on how to interact maturely in-game with players they

dislike, an example of coping with "bleed-in" related conflicts (Kiernan, 2013).

Similar resources exist from other subcultures, such as "geek" and pagan groups, offering folk wisdom for dealing with common social conflicts such as ostracism and "trolling" (Suileabhain-Wilson, 2003; Eran, 2005). "Trolling" has become a common term in Internet vernacular and other subcultures as well; the popular warning "don't feed the trolls" refers to indulging the behavior of individuals who wish to cause strife for others within a community (Urban Dictionary, n.d.; Wikipedia, n.d.; Eran, 2005).

Alternately, academic researchers have studied social conflict in more general group populations. Social identity theory explains how members of communities divide into "in-group" versus "out-group" categories based on status (Ahmed, 2007). Johnson & Johnson's *Joining Together* covers various aspects of group dynamics, including teamwork, conflicts of interest, and controversy (1994). Organizational psychologists describe problems in group development, such as the "Storming" stage, where members challenge the norms and leadership of the team (Tuckman, 1965; Wheelan, 1994). Organizational development also emphasizes how to best manage groups through effective leadership (Balzac, 2011). In addition, researchers have emphasized strategies for negotiation and third-party intervention as key to resolving social conflicts (Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992).

This project aims to bridge the gap in the literature between folk wisdom regarding conflicts in role-playing communities and more general theories of conflict resolution in sociology and organizational psychology. The study gathers data from 30 participants in America and abroad, identifying possible problems within role-playing communities in various contexts. The initial questionnaire included general queries on conflict in role-playing groups, requesting examples of splintering, bleed-related effects, conflict-inducing games, and resolution strategies (See Appendix A). The interest in schisms within groups arose from personal experience and Vanek's assertions regarding their ubiquity (2011). The focus on bleed and resolution strategies was inspired by the current discourse in the Nordic larp and indie communities on psychological safety (Bindslet and

Schultz, 2011). However, the majority of the secondary literature for this study was consulted after data analysis in order to preserve the inductive approach, as described in the Method section.

In an attempt to remain inclusive, this ethnography examines many types of role-playing from a phenomenological perspective, including tabletop, larp, and virtual gaming. Participants were gathered from vastly different play cultures, including online play, boffer games, theater style larp, tabletop, freeform/jeepform, and Nordic larp. While the types of games and methods of play contributed to conflict in some instances, striking similarities between the experiences of players across modes, cultures, and genres emerged. As Bjarke Pedersen asserts, though theorists often consider larp a more immersive form than others, highly intense experiences can result from tabletop and virtual games as well (Pedersen, 2012). Therefore, this report will highlight general themes over multiple formats of play, with plans to expand the data in later work with specific details, contextual information, and examples.

This research aims to describe potential problems within role-playing communities in order to aid groups experiencing cohesion difficulties. As the ethnographic method requires small samples, this data should be regarded as a descriptive inventory of possible sources of conflict as reported by these respondents, not a large scale explanatory model for conflict in all role-playing communities. The survey questions were kept intentionally vague in order to elicit a wide range of spontaneous responses and cover many possibilities (See Appendix A). Therefore, the majority of the subthemes emerged independently from the survey questions and not all participants mentioned certain issues or broader categories. Numerical accounts should be viewed as points of potential interest, not as predictive of the rates of incidence within large-scale social dynamics, as further explained in the Method section. Ultimately, this work serves both an exploratory and pragmatic function.

2. METHOD

This exploratory study offers a thematic analysis of information garnered from 30 ethnographic interviews with international participants from February 2011 to January 2012. 20 participants hail from the United States, while 10 reside in Europe (see Table 1). Interviews were attained in the following ways: soliciting volunteers after a presentation on the topic at the Nordic larp conference Knudepunkt 2011; sending out general calls for interviews on Facebook and message boards such as Larp Academia and International Larp Academia; and approaching friends and acquaintances, several of whom suggested other participants. All interviews and transcripts are kept on the researcher's home computer with password protection; only the researcher has access to this data.

In terms of reflexivity, my personal interest in the topic stems from over nineteen years as a role-player in virtual, tabletop, and larp environments and over fifteen years conducting ethnographic research on the subculture. While my previous work emphasizes its social and psychological benefits (Bowman, 2010), personal experiences witnessing and taking part in intensive conflicts within role-playing communities led me to investigate their causes.

All participants provided written consent to allow the use of their real name in the research with the exception of five, who were assigned an alias. The use of real names allows researchers to distinguish between reports given by "average" players, experienced organizers, game designers, and "experts in the field." Due to the emerging nature of role-playing academia, this study will consider individuals "experts in the field" if they contribute to the body of subcultural knowledge via convention panels, popular writing, or scholarly publication. Along these lines, play accounts and opinion pieces from popular sources such as The Forge forum, the Knutepunkt books, and *Playground Magazine* will also receive brief consideration. Thus, the participant sample is considered selective rather than random (McCoyd and Kerson, 2006), as players with extensive experience and leadership within their communities were deliberately recruited.

My epistemological perspective to this ethnography was phenomenological in nature, as I view my participants as co-creators and experts in accurately reflecting upon their own experiences (Starks and Trinidad, 2007). My approach to the topic was mainly inductive, preferring to garner themes directly from the data without favoring an overarching theoretical framework to limit my perspective (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, initial theoretical conceptions of bleed influenced the questions (Jeepen, n.d.; Waern, 2010; Montola, 2010). Various theories of creative agenda were applied during the outlining process to serve as organizing principles (Kim, 1998; Pohjola, 1999; Edwards, 2001; Kim, 2003; Bøckman, 2003; Harviainen, 2003). More extensive secondary literature in role-playing studies and sociology was consulted after the construction of the analysis in order to illuminate possible explanations for mentioned phenomena.

I purposefully avoided including my personal experiences in the data to avoid the appearance of bias in the analysis. However, to a degree, the interests of the researcher are always present in the types of questions asked and the selection of data considered relevant to report. Complete removal of the researcher from the data is not possible or -- in the case of narrative and interpretive ethnographies -- even desirable (Denzin, 2000; Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Willis and Trondman, 2000; Van Maanen, 2011). The tension between the presence of the researcher's subjectivity in the interview and analysis process and the more "objective" data offered through participant responses is a conundrum all ethnographers encounter (Heath and Cowley, 2004; Walker and Myrick, 2011).

The style of interviews included email questionnaires (see Appendix A) with semi-structured follow-up questions; semi-structured Skype interviews with audio-only; Skype interviews with video; face-to-face interviews transpiring in the participants' homes; or some mixture of these styles. The compiled data corpus features 275 pages of densely packed, single spaced data. Though full transcription would have been preferable, only partial transcription was possible at the time of data analysis due to time constraints and a lack of funding. Partial transcription has

been noted as acceptable for thematic analysis, as the researcher can identify broad themes without recording all verbal and non-verbal cues (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2011).

Table 1: Demographic information of participants

Participant Name	Gender	Location	Role in Community
Olivier Artaud	M	France	P/E
Steven Balzac	M	Mass., USA	P/G/D/E
William Blackrose	M	Texas, USA	P/G
Adam Blatner	M	Texas, USA	P/D/E
Anne Standiford Brown	F	Texas, USA	P
Steven Carpenter	M	Ariz., USA	P/G/D
Tara Clapper	F	N.J., USA	P/G/E
D. David D'Guerra	M	Texas, USA	P/G/E
Brandi Dunn	F	Calif., USA	P/G
Jan Engman	M	Sweden	P
Flavio Faz	M	Texas, USA	P
Dain Geist	M	Texas, USA	P/G
Kirsten Hageleit	F	Calif., USA	P/G/D/E
Stephanie Howsare	F	Texas, USA	P/G
Carol Irving	F	Texas, USA	P/G
Gina Jensson	F	Sweden	P
Matias Kilpelä	M	Finland	P
Ben Mandall	M	Ariz., USA	P/G/E
Bill Maxwell	M	Calif. USA	P/G/D
Chris McClaren	M	Texas, USA	P/G/D
Karla Nylund	F	Sweden	P
Tore Olbert	M	Sweden	P
Frederik Berg Østergaard	M	Denmark	P/G/D/E
John Parker	M	U. K.	P
Michael Sawyer	M	Texas, USA	P
Elena Simon	F	Geor., USA	P/G
Pieti Toivonen	M	Finland	P
Even Tømte	M	Norway	P
Aaron Vanek	M	Calif., USA	P/G/D/E
Matthew Webb	M	Texas, USA	P/G/D
Total: 30	M = 21 F = 9	USA = 20 Europe = 10	P=30 G=18 D=11 E=10

Key for Role in Community: **P =** Player, **G =** Gamemaster/organizer, **D =** Game designer, **E =** Expert in the Field

After transcription, an outline was constructed containing the major themes emerging from the data. The data was then highlighted in Microsoft Word with color codes for each theme. Large sections of transcription were placed into the new

outline according to theme in order to map consistencies and distinctions within the data. Each account was mined for data extracts with specific subthemes and examples, which were then organized within a third outline structure. This structure provided a "skeleton" for mapping the most relevant aspects of the research.

Numbers of incidence of each subtheme were noted in this third outline with the names and aliases of participants included in shorthand form, e.g. "Conflict creating divisions between players/ drawing of battle lines: 7 (Ta)(Br)(Aa)(Da)(Bi)(St) (Stef)." Some accounts fit into multiple categories, as is common with thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The numerical instances provided are more of a rough estimate of the prevalence of themes than the sort of exact account provided by a method such as content analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). They offer a sense of the frequency of reports of similar phenomena in the data with the understanding that frequency does not necessarily indicate greater significance (Braun and Clarke, 2006; King, 2011). Similarly, a concept mentioned by only one participant does not lessen the value or explanatory power of that insight.

Using this skeleton outline, an initial draft of this document was produced. Many ethnographers assert that writing the "narrative" of the data in a streamlined fashion is the most important stage of the ethnographic process, one that relies upon the unique perspective of the researcher (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Van Maanen, 2011). In addition, the semi-structured interview depends upon the motivation level of the participant and the interpersonal dynamics between the researcher and subject. Thus, generalizability, reliability, and validity are not appropriate measurements with this method, as other social constraints may yield different results.

A major constraint of thematic analysis is the denseness of the data, themes, and subthemes. Some researchers construct lengthy inventories of the large range of themes noticed in the data, each of which may be important to the whole; others prefer to feature a few key case studies in order to illustrate larger concepts (Baszanger and Dodier, 2004; King 2011). As an exploratory work synthesizing concepts that are new to the academic study of role-playing, a certain comprehensiveness was necessary in this analysis, so each category does feature lengthy inventories. Important subthemes have been inventoried in Tables for ease of reading according to rate of incidence and alphabetical order. Short descriptions and quotes are interspersed throughout the text to highlight particular points, with more lengthy quotations and thick description reserved for later work (King, 2011).

3. RESULTS

3.1 Schisms

Interview questions focused upon experiences of disruption in the cohesion of role-playing communities and their causes. For the purposes of this paper, the term "schism" refers to conflicts leading to a community splintering into subgroups. See Table 2 for several examples of schisms.

7 participants reported factions developing within their role-playing communities that created a division between players in which "battle lines" were drawn in support of specific parties. 6 offered examples of players leaving the group as a result of these schisms and forming new games. Bill Maxwell described players who do not choose a side often acting as "loose connectors" or diplomats between the splintered groups. Michael Sawyer often found himself in this role, stating, "I constantly felt as if I was the one who was having to mend fences, bring people together, and make them have fun and ease their conflict." This conciliatory behavior serves the function of third party intervention, a common mediation technique (Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992).

Table 2: Examples of Schisms

Examples of Schisms	Incidence
Games dissolving completely as result of conflict	8
Factions developing within the group, "battle lines" drawn	7
Cliques forming, sometimes chasing off new players	6
"My Larp is Better than Your Larp" syndrome	6
Players leaving group, starting new games in protest	6
Strong, fair, and unbiased leadership as key to resolving conflicts	6
Belief that one's group role-plays better, is superior to others	5
Long term-grudges as sources of repeated strife	5
Strife as natural outgrowth of group dynamics	4
Campaigns constantly seeking new players due to schisms	3
Elitism and "diva" players	3
Forming new communities as a positive result of schisms	3
Schisms affecting finances, lawsuits over intellectual property	3
Student challenging or ousting mentor	3
Years in static group causing annoyance, "inbred" or "incestuous" player pools	3
Layering of roles confusing when participating in multiple activities together	2
Players not choosing a side, serving as diplomats	2

Organizational psychologist and game master Stephen Balzac described the large schism that occurred in the late '80s within the East Cost larp community the Society for Interactive Literature (SIL), which resulted in the formation of the Interactive Literature Foundation (ILF). Balzac suggested that in cases where two organizers lay claim to a gaming group, the players' decision to stay with the original group or join the new faction works to prove the perceived legitimacy of the leaders in question, especially if one group can "win the lawsuit and claim the name." 3 other participants mentioned schisms affecting financial relationships, especially within game companies and for-profit larps when lawsuits over intellectual property arise.

Schisms in gaming groups tend to affect most, if not all, members on some level. D. David D'Guerra lamented unresolved storylines resulting from groups dissolving before the narrative arc could complete. 2 participants stated that campaign-style games must constantly seek new players as the result of gamers leaving over unresolved conflict. New players may enter gaming groups unaware of past game history, problem players, or bad blood, which can blindside them later.

3 participants identified elitism and "diva" players as inherently problematic. 6 mentioned issues arising from cliques of friends operating within the community, including instances of cliques turning against outsiders or chasing off new players. Flavio Faz expressed feelings of exclusion when he began playing *Vampire*, where secrets were kept within the "inner circle" of players. When asked if this secrecy caused problems, he responded, "Oh, all the time. I mean, that's why I stopped playing."

Matthew Webb witnessed larps "poisoned" by interpersonal conflict and "dying a slow, deliberate death" due to bad attitudes on the part of certain players. Some participants insisted that communities must remove "problem players" from the gaming group. One suggested the "mechanisms of proper social ostracism" as a positive solution, working to "drive the problem player out to make him or her correct their behavior." Other participants felt that removing problem players was one of the responsibilities of the game master.

Schisms in gaming groups cause problems when players dissolve friendships or refuse to role-play with one another due to unresolved conflict. 5 participants mentioned long-term grudges as the source of strife. 8 participants reported games completely dissolving as the result of conflict, with stated reasons such as: organizers quitting; excessive in-character and out-of-character squabbling; fear of confrontation with problem players; lack of enthusiasm/interest; and rules disputes.

Several participants emphasized that groups lacking in substantial out-of-character socialization tend to induce feelings of alienation in individual players. D'Guerra suggested that without other shared activities to help diffuse tension, individuals locked in conflict have nothing else to bind them together. When groups lack social activities outside of game, their primary interaction occurs in-character, which can affect their interpretation of the "real life" personality traits and motivations of other players.

What might be dubbed the "My Larp is Better than Your Larp Syndrome" further intensifies divisions.

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5 participants witnessed the problematic belief that a player's own group role-plays better than others or that a player's favored game reigns supreme. Elena Simon mentioned an experience at a convention where a panel discussion devolved off-topic as the game masters subtly argued about whose game had a better system.

This elitist mentality extends to in-game dynamics as well when players enact characters and rules in a manner that others find "incorrect." 2 participants speculated that this reaction may result from human nature. Mandall suggested that "anyone becoming very invested in anything -- be it sports, politics, gaming, anything -- often become the least tolerant of minor deviations from what they understand the norm to be." This frustration is further explored in the section on Simulationism below.

Ultimately, 4 participants accepted social strife as a natural outgrowth of group dynamics. Balzac explained that conflicts typically occur during Stage Two, the Storming Phase of Tuckman's Model of Group Development. In the Storming phase, individuals become passionately invested in the group and must learn how to resolve disputes in a productive manner to avoid splintering (Tuckman, 1965; Wheelan, 1994). Balzac emphasized the need for leaders to keep calm, avoid escalation, and avoid perceiving conflict as a personal failing during this stage. Supporting this notion, 6 other participants mentioned strong, fair, and unbiased leadership as key to resolving conflicts and keeping gaming groups intact. In these circumstances, players want the leader to serve as a third party intervener in the conflict, either as mediator or arbitrator (Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992). Finally, 3 participants mentioned that groups splintering and creating new communities may contribute positively to the subculture by offering a plurality of styles and groups for players to explore.

3.2 Internet communication
Several participants mentioned Internet communication as a source of conflict, both in live action games with an online component and in text-based games on forums or IRC. 2 indicated the relative anonymity of online environments as inherently problematic, echoing critiques in scholarship on the subject (Alonzo and Aiken,

2004). Balzac mentioned the work of Bandura, identifying anonymity as a general license for less accountable behavior. 2 participants believed that impersonal online environments enable gamers to forget the player behind the character; Even Tømte used the psychological term "projection," indicating that players more easily project their own feelings onto other players online, whether interpreting them as enemies or friends.

6 participants claimed that face-to-face communication is more desirable than text. With text-based communication, individuals cannot easily read another's tone, cannot see facial expressions, may blow situations out of proportion, and are more willing to make disrespectful comments. 8 mentioned a greater readiness for aggressive communication, using the following words to describe emotional reactions online: witch hunts, arguments, flaming, bitching, trash-talking, forum stalking, angry, impulsive, and hateful behavior. 2 advised avoiding online discussion until emotions fade.

Alternately, 2 participants believed that online communication fosters resolution, providing opportunities for apologies and clearing up misunderstandings in between game sessions. Participants discussed both private and public resolution strategies in online environments. One participant preferred private, online discussion through email or Instant Messenger (IM) as less prone to create problems within the group dynamic. However, 2 cited incidents of email and IM confrontations as the source of conflict, indicating that disputes can escalate in private communication. D'Guerra advocated the use of group discussion on online forums, which may facilitate better airing out of problems, though he also admitted the possibility of escalation as more people get involved in public debates.

6 participants indicated that online play – including forums, emails, IMs, chat rooms, IRC, and other role-playing environments – encourages

a higher level of immersion and time investment. Stef Howsare, a game master for an active IRC *Vampire* game, explained that the format allows for continual play, stating that some players are immersed in character "most of the day, every day … we have had players who seem to be on the server 24 hours a day, with just an hour break here or there to sleep or eat." 2 participants insisted that extensive online play becomes exclusionary for players who desire less participation. 6 cited examples of extensive online play causing neglect for out-of-character responsibilities, a concern echoed in popular representations of role-players in *The Guild* and *Second Skin.* Thus, while such representations may seem sensationalistic to many gamers, some of my participants did echo societal concerns regarding excessive online immersion.

In some cases, the online format offers a convenient communication channel between the players and game masters during conflict resolution. Howsare admitted that she often avoids out-of-character discussion with players regarding her game, though she does resolve conflicts in private online rooms with other staff when necessary. Dain Geist and Brandi Dunn praised the Coordinator chain intervention strategy of the Mind's Eye Society (formerly the Camarilla organization), which involves email communication between the Coordinators and players. The Mind's Eye Society also refers players to their online Code of Conduct, which details expected etiquette procedures (Camarilla, n.d.). Both participants emphasized that Coordinators must remain active and available for these strategies to help.

Some participants acknowledged the Internet as an important vehicle for enhancing community rather than disrupting it. 3 praised the Internet for expanding friend groups and creating greater possibilities for international play. Others confided that they experienced greater comfort with online role-playing due to social anxiety. In addition, some participants mentioned players using forums to praise one another's role-playing and costuming. 4 encouraged online discussion during character creation and plot development. 4 described discussions with organizers over email as a positive contribution to the game. Overall, participants expressed ambivalent attitudes towards Internet communication with regard to its effects on group cohesion.

3.3 Intimate relationships
Several participants mentioned intimate relationships within gaming groups as potentially problematic. While players joining groups hoping to meet a mate and intra-group dating are practices hardly unique to role-playing, these behaviors can negatively impact the game as a whole. Ben Mandall observed various undesirable mating strategies within gaming groups, including the following: actively pursuing players in committed relationships, making unwanted sexual advances, and attempting to see how many players will fight for an individual's favor. 6 participants reported unrequited crushes as a source of discomfort both in-character and out-of-character.

2 observed individuals having multiple sexual partners within the group, with Mandall terming such behavior the "dating go round." Regardless of one's views on sexual morality, such behavior can cause problems for the group as a whole. 6 players described their role-playing group suffering as the result of break-ups, with Simon stating that break-ups cause an "immediate ripple effect within that subgroup at game." Reported issues included incidents of out-of-character break-ups negatively impacting in-character dynamics, players voluntarily leaving or being asked to leave after a painful split, and group schisms resulting from organizers breaking up.

Intimate relationships can affect the game in other potentially problematic ways. 2 participants described in-character dynamics mirroring the emotional state of out-of-character relationships. 2 mentioned players using out-of-character relationships in order manipulate the organizer for in-game benefits or other displays of favoritism. 6 witnessed jealousy when individuals in an out-of-game relationship developed in-character intimacy with others in the group. 3 reported that continual immersion into in-character intimate relationships can produce bleed-related feelings for the players, with at least one participant witnessing out-of-character break-ups as a result. Howsare shared the experience of a player threatening suicide when an

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[1] "Diegetic control" is who has the power or authority to enter things into the diegesis, i.e. "to make things true in the story."

in-character relationship ended due to his attachment to the dynamic between the characters.

To prevent such problems, 3 participants reported players establishing strict rules with their partners prohibiting in-character relationships. Tara Clapper emphatically stated, "I create personal boundaries to avoid [bleed]. For example, my characters DO NOT have intimate relationships in game at larps because I am married." Simon discontinued dating within her gaming group, enforcing this boundary upon herself both in-character and out-of-character. The potential for negative bleed due to intimate role-playing is further discussed in the Bleed section of this paper.

On a positive note, 6 participants reported examples of players meeting through role-playing and marrying later out-of-game. Simon noted the strange experience of watching teenagers join the long-running boffer larp where their parents initially met. Therefore, the potentially negative impacts of intimate relationships in games do not necessarily overshadow the positive interactions.

3.4 Creative agenda differences

Two general concepts in role-playing theory proved useful: play culture and creative agenda. Play culture establishes the expectations of the group in terms of game theme, enactment, level of immersion, boundaries, rules, and appropriate social behavior. Creative agenda refers to the orientation of the player's "stance" relative to the game, divided here into four categories: narrativism, gamism, simulationism, and immersionism (Kim, 1998; Pohjola, 1999; Edwards, 2001; Kim, 2003; Bøckman, 2003; Harviainen, 2003). Each term is briefly defined in the sections below for the purposes of this study.

While the universality of these terms remains controversial, they provide a convenient structure for organization of participant responses. Indeed, some participants used these categories by name when describing their experiences, indicating that they have a passing knowledge of the concepts and find their explanatory power useful. This paper utilizes these terms with the understanding that they do not delimit or encompass all play experiences; debate about the nature and comprehensiveness of these categories remains

beyond the scope of this study. However, 2 participants indicated that a gap in basic vocabulary contributes to confusion and disputes, while one participant noted that establishing a shared vocabulary was an early goal of the Nordic larp scene, a community that appears to function more cohesively than many American larp communities. Therefore, application of some vocabulary, however inadequate, remains useful to both scholarly and subcultural endeavors.

Participant accounts repeatedly noted differences in play culture and creative agenda as key sources of conflict. In important ways, the co-creative, self-generated content of role-playing games makes them unique cultural expressions. Player expectations shape their experiences and demands within these fictional spaces. Several participants stressed the need for game masters and individual players to establish play culture and creative agenda ahead of time. 3 stated that individuals often mistakenly assume that other players think the same way that they do and want the same types of experiences, which can cause problems when attempting to play within the game world. 6 explained that organizers cause problems by failing to detail their creative agenda in advance, though 4 admitted that players often do not wish to openly discuss their own preferences.

Several participants stated that conflict arises when players do not have the same goals or are not getting what they want from the game. 3 stressed that asymmetrical time commitment expectations between players can lead to conflicts. 2 mentioned that disputes arise when players believe that others have broken the implied social contract of the game. 5 insisted that games should attempt to adapt to multiple play styles on an organizational level and 5 criticized players who are unwilling to make such an adjustment. One participant mentioned that some creative agendas may remain entirely incompatible.

3.4.1 Narrativism

Narrativism as a creative agenda emphasizes the unfolding of the story as the most important focus of the game (Kim, 1998; Edwards, 2001; Kim 2003). While many players enjoy a well-expressed narrative, this style can cause conflicts. D'Guerra, a game master, shared frustration when characters "derailed" his well-crafted plot. To avoid this

situation occurring, game masters will often force a plot upon the characters, a process known as *railroading*.

5 participants expressed annoyance at situations when game masters did the following: imposed their narrative on the characters; overly protected the existence of their non-player characters (NPCs); overwhelmed the players with excessive story; or forced the players to "watch NPC theater" when the game master's characters take center stage or solve problems. 2 shared that these strategies showed a lack of trust for the players. 4 participants expressed a preference for games where creative control of the world and even of the NPCs was shared amongst the group. Vanek expressed frustration with a particular game master's narrativist style, describing the players as "pawns." Vanek explained, "It was really like he was trying to direct a movie without a script … he had the narrative control and he hung onto it tightly, extremely tightly." Mandall described a "class barrier" inherent within the power dynamics of game masters and players that provides the organizers with an imbalanced portion of the creative input. Conflict between game masters and players is further explored in a later section of this paper.

> **Individuals may come to view other players according to the parameters of the game world**

Some participants described narrativistic strategies on the part of players as well. One participant found it particularly problematic when players force their character's story onto the game world without the consent of others. Players often enjoy the "spotlight moments" where their character plays a central role in the story. When the story overly focuses on one character, others may feel neglected or ignored.

5 participants described *if-game thinking* taking place long after the fiction of the game has dissipated, such as the player plotting as if the characters and the game diegesis were still in existence. If-game thinking can also result from the gamist or immersionist stance. One participant

stated that hypothetical, if-game thinking and planning for the future are natural human impulses. However, if-game thinking can become detrimental when players have difficulty letting go of character and story motivations. These individuals may come to view other players according to the parameters of the game world, rather than as fellow members of a community engaged in the same creative activity.

3.4.2 Gamism

The gamist stance produced the largest variety of complications for groups as reported in the interview data. Gamism emphasizes rules, achievement, problem solving, and "winning" the scenario when possible (Kim, 1998; Edwards, 2001). Therefore, gamism often promotes an atmosphere of competition within the fiction, which can create off-game disputes. Geist stated that the gamist stance remained acceptable as long as the larger story is considered. However, 4 participants mentioned instances where rules disputes caused rifts in the community, with 2 describing players leaving the game or the breakdown of the entire group as a result.

Several participants explained that gamists become upset when a game master unfairly imposes or reinterprets a rule, as players with this orientation feel that these behaviors break the established social contract. 2 mentioned gamists arguing over badly written rules as problematic group behavior. Participants used several colloquial terms common within role-playing subcultures to describe various disruptive gamist strategies, including the following: loopholing, minmaxing, number crunching, munchkining, metagaming, and rules lawyering. Webb described such terms as pejorative, but expressed that a gamist always expecting to "win" also breaks the social contract. He also expressed annoyance when gamists overuse a rule to solve every in-game problem.

2 participants suggested that gamists need direction within the game to avoid becoming disruptive. 2 felt that excessive, mechanics-based challenges were disruptive to the immersion of the group unless performed in an engaging way. Tore Olbert explained the disconnection between the gamist stance and other modes of role-playing by stating, "I think that people who approach games from a gamist perspective have a harder time

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understanding the complexity of role-playing because of it. They think people are 'missing the point' of the 'scenario,' for example, or 'wasting time.'"

Alternately, Olbert stated that friendly competition in the game can enhance the experience. 6 participants suggested that individuals should preplan in-character conflicts before the game in order to encourage a spirit of cooperation and inter-immersion. Therefore, participant responses indicate that the gamist stance works best when co-creation and collaboration are emphasized.

3.4.3 Simulationism
For the purposes of this paper, the simulationist stance refers to the goal of maintaining a realistic external setting in terms of description, costuming, story, and character action (Kim, 1998; Edwards, 2001). In this context, realism refers to adherence to the established genre or fictional space and does not necessarily imply social realism.

> **During the group discussions many seemed to experience their first real, in-depth discussion on what they got out of role-playing games, but the prejudices held against other role-players also came to the fore.**

Debates over the perceived superiority of one person's interpretation of "proper" play sometimes reflect a simulationist agenda; some players feel jarred when others do not perform according to their expectations of realism. 3 shared experiences in *Vampire* games where certain players complained that a particular style of play was "inaccurate" according to their interpretation of the game canon. Participants explained that such players often memorize the game franchise's canonical works, insisting that their own their interpretation of the content and the rules represents the ultimate truth of the game world. 2 explained that anger arises when individuals not adhering to these interpretations are seen as hampering that player's style of game and breaking the implied social contract.

Along these lines, 3 participants received criticism from simulationists when their costuming did not conform to that player's interpretation of the genre or theme. Mandall shared an incident of a player yelling at him for using third-person instead of first-person to describe his character's actions at a larp, which apparently interfered with that player's immersion into the fictive reality.

Alternately, Webb explained that simulationists might object to the rules themselves when mechanics "do not pass the veracity test … what they usually say is, 'I don't believe in this rule because it does not duplicate what we're trying to duplicate.'" According to another participant, simulationists can also cause problems for the game as a whole when they expect a realistic cause-effect relationship to take place that might negatively impact a large group of players. Game masters and players alike must balance the needs of the group with the impulse toward realistic mimesis.

3.4.4 Immersionism
While the definition of immersion remains open to debate (Torner and White, 2012), for the purposes of this study, immersionism describes the player stance of focusing upon thinking and feeling "as the character" in the moment (Pohjola, 1999; Bøckman, 2003). Immersionism can cause problems when character-motivated actions disrupt the group dynamic, another individual's experience, or a player's out-of-game sense of acceptable behavior. Since one person cannot ever be sure of another's state of immersion, when a player defends character actions with the phrase, "it's what my character would do" or similar justifications, others may suspect an ulterior/player-driven motive, rightly or wrongly. For example, Mandall mentioned an altercation in which a fellow player refused to accept that Mandall's personal feelings and reactions were separate from that of his character.

Individuals who prefer higher immersion sometimes become annoyed when character attributes do not differ from those of their player or when a player replicates the same archetype or motivation in every setting. 5 participants indicated that players unwilling to diversify the personality facets of the characters that they choose to play can cause problems in group dynamics.

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Immersionist play also connects with "sandbox" style, where players are free to act as their characters with little interference from an overarching plot or game master. D'Guerra, who favors a narrativist stance, expressed initial frustration with sandbox-style games featuring no clear goal, though he later came to appreciate the freedom provided by such a platform. Balzac insisted that some direction must be provided in sandbox-style play in order for player-characters to know how to proceed.

Webb mentioned game designer John Wick's (2008) view that immersion into character is a selfish style of play if such immersion does not enhance the story or contribute to the enjoyment of others. 5 other participants also emphasized that enhancing the enjoyment of others is a positive quality for players to exhibit. While immersion into character does not necessarily disrupt involvement with the group dynamic, some character types -- such as the "loner" or "curmudgeon" -- do not encourage interaction with others. Overall, participants expressed the notion that each creative agenda should facilitate group play rather than focusing solely on personal enjoyment.

3.5 Game master/player conflict

Participants described several examples of conflict between game masters and players. This dialectic is most important in games where the game master/organizer controls the diegesis and/or handles conflict resolution, requiring a "negotiation" between the players and the game master (Fine, 1983). Balzac suggested that conflicts for dominance within the group are natural to human behavior, as individuals seek to test the boundaries of the fictive world and the leader's limits. Other participants described "alpha" or pack hierarchical behavior with regard to rules disputes and other contested areas within the game, resulting in leaders emerging and dominating play.

2 participants emphasized the role of the game master as the establisher of social boundaries both in- and out-of-game. Many game disputes arise from situations where the players do not feel that the game master has maintained proper boundaries. 6 mentioned game master favoritism as a problem when one player is shown preference over another in-game or out-of-game. Other

inappropriate game master behaviors mentioned included the following: unreasonable expectations, abuse, negligence, lack of availability, inappropriately "messing with" players, dictatorial styles of leadership, heavy-handed rules calls, territorialism, jealousy, and fixing the results of contests.

Alternately, participants offered a large array of conflict-producing player behaviors. 3 criticized player entitlement as a source of conflict. 4 described players complaining about rules to the game master, hoping to wear down the leader's resolve and gain advantage. As a game master, Howsare specifically avoids talking about the game with her players to forestall their complaining or feeling "pumped for information."

Some participants mentioned players specifically intending to wreck a plot or game. 2 described incidents of "hijacking" a game, where players intentionally derail the game master's plot in order to steer events in their preferred direction. Nordic larper Erlend Eidsem Hansen advocates the practice of players "hacking" larps in order to gain greater agency, though he states that "destructive" behavior takes attention away from the game and other players, interfering with others' ability to have positive experiences (Hansen, 2012).

3 participants described witnessing players arguing with, "flaming," or otherwise attacking game masters due to unpopular story or rules decisions. Bill Maxwell described an incident where a set of players assumed he had a conspiratorial vendetta against them as the game master based on a negative cause/effect in the game as the result of their characters' actions. 2 players mentioned the potential for "game master burnout"; in games that require a large amount of energy from game masters, organizers are likely to face exhaustion or feel underappreciated. Ultimately, even in situations where the game master is primarily responsible for adjudicating the boundaries of the game, many participants felt that players should also assume responsibility by exhibiting considerate behavior. 8 participants stressed maturity, cooperation, and respect as desirable player traits.

3.6 Bleed

During enactment, role-players enter a new social frame (Bateson, 2006; Goffman, 1986; 1974; Fine, 1983; MacKay, 2001), inhabiting a character that remains dissociated from their "real life" selves (Gonos, 1975; Bowman, 2010). The character provides an alibi for enacting behaviors inconsistent with the player's usual identity (Montola and Holopainen, 2012) and offers the perspective of "role-distance" (Gonos, 1975). Despite this distance, out-of-character emotions, thoughts, physical states, and relationships sometimes cross over, a phenomenon known as bleed.

Participants were asked specific questions about bleed with regard to conflicts in their communities. While earlier instances of the term bleed focused mainly on emotional responses (Jeepen, n.d.; Waern, 2010; Montola, 2010), for the purposes of this study, bleed was described as a person's emotions, relationships, and physical state outside of the game affecting them in the game and visa versa. Because emotions sometimes impact thought processes, the phenomenon of *metagaming*, for example, may sometimes result from emotional responses influencing rational decision making. More recent cognitive scholarship by Lankoski and Järvelä (2012) asserts that character immersion and bleed are natural consequences of how the brain works. Therefore, the emphasis on emotion in previous definitions of bleed may prove inadequate to explain the complexity of bleed experiences.

Participants were asked to identify situations where both bleed-in and bleed-out negatively impacted their lives or their group cohesion. Some participants were familiar with the term bleed, whereas others – particularly in America – expressed surprise that a term existed, corresponding with the aforementioned finding of a gap in basic vocabulary within gaming groups. 6 believed bleed is inevitable when immersing into a character; Olbert added that bleed emotions are central to the human experience, including loss, love, and exclusion. 2 shared that players are often shocked to learn that bleed exists. 2 explained that players are afraid to talk about bleed for fear of judgment, getting shunned by others, or finding out something is "wrong with them."

4 participants described bleed as valuable in its ability to present players with learning experiences, further suggesting that bleed emotions provide a useful mirror for self-analysis. Tømte, a player in the Nordic larp scene, described purposefully opening up emotionally in order to allow for game-induced bleed.

Kirsten Hageleit stated that ignoring bleed emotions can cause problems in the community and advocates for greater awareness of the phenomenon. She asserts, "I don't think we can expect human beings to role-play without taking on aspects of the character's emotional state, or entirely remove our own emotional state out of our portrayal of the character. I don't think this is a bad thing unless it is ignored." 4 other participants emphasized that characters are expressions of parts of the player and are inextricably linked with the player on some level; at least 2 shared that characters allow players to express aspects of themselves they never could out-of-character. With this concept in mind, role-players should feel less surprised when their out-of-character feelings and thoughts affect their in-character experience.

However, some individuals feel the need to reinforce their distance from the character with deflection statements such as "it's just a game." 3 participants in the study supported this line of thought, emphasizing the importance of laughing and not taking game events too seriously. Alternately, 6 expressed concern for players who use dismissiveness as an excuse not to deal with issues arising within the community as the result of in-character emotional intensity.

Below are some examples of bleed-in and bleed-out provided by participants, expanding upon the following definition by Montola (2010): "Bleed in occurs when … players' ordinary lives influence the game, while bleed out occurs when the game influences players despite the protective framing." Since the definition of the phenomenological experience of bleed is still in flux, data was organized according to the researcher's judgment and experiences that the participants self-define as "bleed." These accounts are not intended as absolute examples, but rather suggestions of possibilities open for later debate.

At times, emotional states during role-playing games are difficult to distinctly define. For example, 5 players described either witnessing or experiencing a psychological trigger from past trauma as a result of in-game events, which intensified the player's immediate emotional response to the situation. In some cases, these triggers carried over into post-larp depression. Examples such as these represent a sort of "bleed feedback loop," where emotional circuits become overwhelmed by both in-character and out-of-character information.

3.6.1 Bleed-in

Bleed-in occurs when out-of-game factors affect the player's experience. (See Table 3 for several examples). Hageleit described bleed-in from out-of-character relationships as a near-constant state. 3 participants discussed preferring to interact with people they know out-of-character or getting sought out by "real life" friends in-game, regardless of character motivations. Alternately, 8 shared a tendency to avoid, dislike, not trust, or attack a character in-game due to an out-of-character aversion. In one case, a situation like this almost came to blows; another resulted in actual violence while in-character. In the latter incident, the anger resulted from discovering an in-game secret affair that emotionally impacted both the player and character. The participant shared, "I actually punched [the player] for real, leaving a bruise that lasted for weeks after the game … it took several months to get rid of the feelings of betrayal and antipathy towards these two persons."

Maxwell once had to adjudicate a situation as game master where a player used downtime actions in their *Vampire* game to enact an unwelcome abuse fantasy on an ex-lover out of revenge; he ejected the offending player from the game, resulting in fifteen years of unresolved anger from other players, including Maxwell's brother. 8 other participants described examples of players taking out frustrations in the game, with 4 suspecting that these actions resulted from feelings of inadequacy with regard to the individual's out-of-character station or life situation.

Table 3: Examples of Bleed-in

Examples of Bleed-in	Incidence
Avoiding, mistrusting, attacking OOC enemies IC	8
Players taking out OOC frustrations IC	8
Pushing OOC desires into the game	6
OOC feelings affecting a character's mood IC	5
Talking out emotions IC when upset over OOC events	5
Intimate dynamics OOC replicating in IC interactions	4
OOC conflicts causing misinterpretation of intent IC	4
Suspicion that IC negative behavior results from of feelings of OOC inadequacy	4
"Trolling," targeting IC to produce OOC anger/pain	4
Enjoying the ability to play out OOC fantasies IC	3
Physical discomfort bleeding-in to IC emotions	3
Preferring to interact with OOC friends IC	3
Talking out OOC conflicts while IC to seek resolution	3
Using the game to flirt IC due to an OOC attraction	3
OOC enemies almost or actually hitting each other IC	2
Using the game as escape from OOC anger/depression	2
Feeling rejected OOC due to IC negative reactions to one's character traits	1
OOC conflicts amplifying IC emotions of characters	1
Using intense experiences IC to heal old OOC wounds	1

Key for Bleed-in: **IC** = in-character,
OOC = out-of-character

4 participants described "trolling" behavior, when an individual specifically targets another player ingame in order to produce an emotional reaction. 2 shared stories of "trolls" expressing disappointment when their in-character actions failed to provoke a negative reaction in the player.

Some players felt that bleed experiences offered them the potential for growth or emotional resolution. Previous research supports the notion that role-playing can help improve self-awareness and empathy (Bowman, 2010; Meriläinen, 2012). Overall, the experience of bleed-in was reported as both natural and inevitable by several participants.

3.6.2 Bleed-out

Participants shared many experiences that could be categorized as bleed-out (see Table 4). Intense in-character moments can leave a lasting emotional impact. While players often describe intense emotional moments as the best parts of the game after reflection -- the Golden Moments that keep them role-playing in the hopes of re-experiencing

something similar -- extreme emotional reactions sometimes have negative impacts on the community as a whole.

For example, 3 participants expressed devastation at the loss of an in-game relationship, which resulted in the loss of the associated friendship as well. 4 admitted to experiencing or witnessing post-larp depression. One participant reported a year of depression and grief following the death of his first character. Howsare described four extreme loss responses to character deaths in her IRC *Vampire* game: the loss of her own character resulting in weeks of crying; another player-character repeatedly falling in unrequited love with each of her future characters in order to try to replicate the emotional bond; one suicide threat by a depressed player after his character's death; and another suicide threat due to loss of an in-game relationship.

Table 4: Examples of Bleed-out

Examples of Bleed-out	Incidence
Long-term play creating strong attachment to character	14
Potential for competitive play to cause OOC conflicts	12
Crying IC as powerful, leaving lasting impact OOC	10
Games fostering IC negativity inherently problematic	10
Extreme anger reactions IC: violent threats, actual violence, throwing dice, leaving group permanently	7
Traumatic IC deaths, some leading to months of OOC depression	6
IC conflicts resulting in dissolution of the OOC friendship	5
Over-identification with the character causing conflict	5
Experiencing post-larp depression	4
IC competitive thinking carrying over to OOC attitudes toward other players	4
IC moments experienced as humiliating OOC	4
Any long-term investment in activity can cause conflict	3
OOC devastation over the loss of IC relationship	3
Realistic play, long-term immersion as more intense	3
Anger toward player/GM who killed their character	2
Jealousy over IC events leading to OOC pouting/ removing a player from the game	2
OOC death threats in response to IC actions	2
Creating another character to avenge the fallen one	1
Grief over the loss of first character lasting a year	1
High stress situations in games intensify emotions	1
Witnessing player leave the game to cry OOC for hours	1

Key for Bleed-out: **IC** = in-character
                          OOC = out-of-character

Participants provided examples of anger bleeding-out as well. Howsare described the fallout when her character staged a coup and became the vampire Prince:

> "I – not my character – I actually got death threats as a result of what my character did. I got to the point where I couldn't – I mean, I knew they were not serious. Because, I didn't know where these people were and they didn't know where I was… but when I first got it, I was literally in shock because I had never experienced anything like that in my life. I was just like, 'I can't do this. If this is what it means to be Prince, I can't play anymore.' And even now, just thinking about it upsets me."

Olivier Artaud called campaign play "dangerous," as bleed emotions may negatively impact the community long-term. 14 participants mentioned that long-term play creates a stronger attachment to the character and the desire to protect that character as an entity. As a result of this attachment, competitive, campaign-style play increases the chances of players reacting negatively to threats toward their character's existence or emotions. 12 cited competitive play's potential for provoking out-of-character conflicts.

10 participants mentioned games such as *Vampire: the Masquerade* that foster inter-character negativity as inherently problematic. Participants listed the following features of competitive games as potentially harmful to the group dynamic: cutthroat behavior, backstabbing, secrets, scheming, and the emphasis on in-game social hierarchies.

3 participants noted that any long-term investment in a social group can become conflict-ridden; one emphasized high stress situations as intensifying. However, when layering in-character and out-of-character roles, these conflicts can become more confused and problematic if care is not taken to diffuse them.

3.7 Preliminary solutions

When asked how to cope with negative affect as a result of game-related interactions, the study's participants provided several possible solutions. 11 suggested taking time away from game. 14 advised soliciting help from friends and other players; one suggested asking for support from non-players, while 16 advised requesting support or mediation from the organizers. In cases where another player is at fault, 10 suggested that the organizers remove the offending party from play, either temporarily or permanently.

14 participants advised getting to know players out-of-character in order to promote role distance. Sharing her early experiences in the Camarilla, Dunn explained:

> "I had a lot of preconceived notions that people were like their characters. And I think it's easy when that's all you know of them. So, I think it's important to meet people out-of-character, to be nice to people out-of-character, to say, 'if you have any questions, or if you don't understand something, or if you just want to hang out some time or get a cup of coffee…' Make it a human interaction, not a character interaction."

21 encouraged the practice of players in conflict talking out negative emotions out-of-character with one another, either in a formal or informal debriefs. Failure to confront these situations in a reasonable amount of time can result in lingering grudges and hard feelings. 4 suggested hugging, shaking hands, or smiling as ways of indicating friendliness and openness.

14 advised engaging in other non-game related socialization activities to help build community, including workshopping, attending parties, or having dinner as a group after game. 7 suggested resolving unfinished plots in a meaningful way to reduce long-term negative bleed effects. Overall, participants stressed the need for players to consider the group above the desires of the individual, regardless of the style or genre of play.

or mediation from the organizers. In cases where another player is at fault, 10 suggested that the organizers remove the offending party from play, either temporarily or permanently.

4. DISCUSSION

While role-playing experiences are generally processed as enjoyable by players, some pitfalls do exist when exploring the fantasy worlds of others in a group setting. Some of these problems arise from basic social dynamics, such as the fragmentation of groups, complications arising from intimate relationships, power dynamics between leaders and individuals, etc. Other issues arise from the act of role-playing in a fictional world and enacting a character, such as creative agenda differences, game master/player conflict, and bleed.

Corresponding with Vanek's assertion regarding the commonality of divisions within and between larp groups (2011), most participants in the study had experienced some form of schism within their gaming community, often as the result of the attitudes and behaviors of a relatively small amount of players. Disagreements regarding creative agenda, play culture, and creative control of the game may lead to interruptions in play and disruption of group cohesion. The resulting schisms include factions forming within an existing group, groups splitting into rival communities, or games dissolving altogether. Particularly problematic behaviors include the following: players routinely speaking ill about other players or game masters; excessive arguments over the rules and the game world; competitive behavior bleeding into "real life" interactions; and players "trolling" or targeting one another.

Overall, most participants felt that game masters should serve the function of mediator or adjudicator in these situations in order to solve social problems (Lewicki, Weiss, and Lewin, 1992). Sometimes, during mediation, collaboration between all parties remains impossible and the adjudicator must consider alternate solutions, such as the removal of one or more players, for the short- and long-term development of the group (Thomas, 1992). However, ostracism is often frowned upon in role-playing communities as non-inclusive, particularly in American groups; players

will allow problematic behavior to continue in the interests of inclusivity. This tendency corresponds with the first item listed in the popular article "Five Geek Social Fallacies," which claims that individuals within geek subcultures believe ostracizers to be "evil," as many self-identified geeks have felt rejected by society at some point in their lives (Suileabhain-Wilson, 2003). While not all role-players self-identify as geeks, many do (Bowman, 2010).

Another common source of conflict reported by participants arises from long-lasting grudges that result from negative experiences with other players in- and out-of-game. This finding corresponds with another assertion in the "Five Geek Social Fallacies," which states that individuals tend to avoid conflict and "let grudges brew longer than is healthy" (Suileabhain-Wilson, 2003). The majority of the participants emphasized the need for ongoing player communication as necessary to confront and resolve issues. Participants also stressed the need for out-of-game socialization to reinforce the boundary between the game and everyday life, which helps players perceive one another as creative collaborators rather than adversaries.

Several participants mentions issues of elitism further intensifying divisions. What might be dubbed the "My Larp is Better than Your Larp Syndrome" is an attitude corresponding with Stages 2 and 3 in indie game designer Mike Young's Five Stages of Larp Group Development: "Ours is the best larp" and "There are other larps out there, but I prefer this one" (cited in Vanek, 2011). Vanek (2011) believes that this latter view represents the opinions of the majority of U.S. larpers.

Social identity theory might help explain this tendency toward elitism regarding one's preferred game. Individuals attempt to assert their gaming group as superior, establishing themselves as part of the "in-group" versus members of the "out-group" (Ahmed, 2007). This tendency may also reinforce the "third-party hypothesis" that one's subcultural activity is somehow less aberrant than that of a hypothetical third party and, thus, less worthy of scorn from outsiders (Bowman, 2010). An example of this tendency is the popular Internet meme "The Geek Hierarchy," where

individuals from various subcultural activities are humorously ranked in a flow chart according to their perceived level of "geekiness," with virtual gamers and other role-playing gamers ranked as "less geeky" than larpers (Sjöberg, 2002). Ultimately, elitist beliefs intensify divisions between role-playing communities, impeding potential collaboration.

Participants repeatedly cited problems between players in intimate relationships affecting the game as a whole, particularly with regard to courtship, jealousy, and breakups. In-character romances sometimes induce bleed emotions towards other players, which might cause role confusion or disrupt existing relationships. Ultimately, the findings in this study do not indicate that all romantic relationships produce conflict, but that in-character and out-of-character intimacy may complicate social dynamics. Several participant reports resonate strongly with Gordon Olmstead-Dean's (2007) observations in his informal ethnography on relationships in larp communities, where the author refers to intimacy in games as "playing with fire."

> **Intimacy in games is seen by some participants as "playing with fire."**

As a counterpoint, participants mentioned long-term relationships forming as the result of players meeting in role-playing communities. These reports correlate with observations by *Vampire* game designer Mark Rein-Hagen, who receives daily emails of gratitude from long-term partners who met in-game (Rein-Hagen, 2013). Therefore, the potentially negative impacts of intimate relationships in games do not necessarily overshadow the positive interactions.

A specific feature of the role-playing experience is the phenomenon of bleed, when player emotions, thoughts, physical states, and relationships cross over to the character and visa versa. Most players take comfort in the "alibi" provided by the social contract of the game, which affords them the ability to experiment with feelings and behaviors they otherwise would not. However, this alibi does not always protect the players from lasting psychological distress. Tobias Bindslet and Pernille Shultz (2011) encourage players to give themselves

permission to admit to negative impact from emotional bleed and to develop the courage to share their experiences with others. Bjarke Pedersen (2012) calls the role-playing agreement of "what happens in larp stays in larp" a "lie," insisting that our experiences in games do affect us as people. Pedersen advocates displaying the "guts, trust, and cooperation to have a completely open dialogue about these things" (2012).

Nordic larp and jeepform organizers often design games to produce the "rich experience" of emotional bleed (Montola and Holopainen, 2012); some players within this community have even admitted to finding bleed experiences addictive (Nilsen, 2012). Others in this group criticize "bleedhunting" and the use of the alibi of character as enabling players to do "horrid stuff because 'it's just a game'" (Høgdall, 2012). Recently, the Nordic larp community has encouraged discussion surrounding strategies for increasing awareness and ensuring player safety in "extreme" larps (Bindslet and Schultz, 2011; Koljonen, Munthe-Kaas, Pedersen, and Stenros, 2012; Pedersen, 2012; Bowman, 2013; Koljonen, 2013).

The participants in this study describe numerous examples of negative bleed experiences that have impacted them or their community in significant ways. While a few examples arose from freeform, jeepform, and Nordic larp games intentionally designed to produce bleed in the participants, the majority emerged from more "mainstream" or genre-based styles of game. Why do players view some emotionally intense situations as "fun" after the game, whereas other situations are remembered as traumatic, inducing long-lasting negative impacts such as depression? Several participants attribute negative bleed to an over-identification with character, which results in a lack of shedding of the role, a phenomenon Fine calls "overinvolvement" (Fine, 1983). Participants explained that when overinvolved, the player assumes in-character interactions correlate with out-of-character personality traits and feelings. In addition, players may possess underlying psychological problems that events within the game world trigger or intensify.

Several participants stated that playing self-designed characters in long-term, competitive, campaign style games intensifies the potential for bleed and over-identification. Continual online play may also prove problematic. In spite of these problems, many of my participants continue to play in these types of games, expressing ongoing enjoyment from their involvement. Again, though these game features may have the potential to create bleed-related, negative interactions, such altercations do not necessarily outweigh the positive experiences that players gain. Understanding the potential pitfalls of involvement within role-playing communities and learning how to circumvent or cope with them will aid in communal cohesion and in the long-term sustainability of the subculture.

Efforts to expand this research are underway. A future paper will detail a cumulative list of pre-, during-, and post-game strategies that help diffuse social conflict, including workshopping, debriefing, and off-game socializing (Bindslet and Shultz, *Playground*, 2011; Bruun 2011; Koljonen, Munthe-Kaas, Pedersen, and Stenros, 2012). Another paper will further explore the effects of long-term, immersive involvement in competitive role-playing games. The researcher collected intensive focus group data on White Wolf larpers with sociologist Ian Mosley at the Atlanta by Night convention in 2012 and plans to follow up with Internet-based research on various forums. In addition, the researcher is helping develop a quantitative survey that will further measure the incidence of the above-listed issues in several countries. Headed by Michał Mochocki, the research team plans to launch this survey in mid-2013 with the text translated into multiple languages. Ultimately, these studies aim to help players understand the sources of conflict within their communities and find constructive solutions for social problem solving.

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APPENDIX A

Questions for Participants in the Social Conflict and Bleed in RPGs Ethnography:

1. What kinds of RPGs do you regularly play? (Include tabletop, LARP, and virtual if they apply).

2. What kinds of RPGs have you regularly played in the past but no longer play, such as long-term Chronicles/campaigns or one-shot immersive LARPs?

3. How often do you play with one particular group of people and in what context/genre? Be specific.

4. Do you consider yourself part of a role-playing community with the people in your RPG group(s)?

5. "Bleed-out" occurs when someone's emotions/relationships/physical state in the game affect them outside of the game. Describe examples of conflict you have experienced within RPGs that have "bled-out" to real life interactions. Use multiple examples if possible.

6. "Bleed-in" occurs when someone's emotions/relationships/physical state outside of the game affect them in the game. Describe examples of real life conflicts you have experienced that have "bled-in" to in-game interactions. Use multiple examples if possible.

7. What do you think were the main reasons behind the above mentioned conflicts? Reasons can be both explicit and unconscious.

8. How did these conflicts resolve? Examples include the dissolution of the game, the ousting of particular players, in-character resolution, out-of-character resolution, group resolution, personal resolution, intervention by organizers or other players, etc.

9. What do you think are the best strategies for dealing with interpersonal conflicts in RPGs?

10. Do you think certain types of games set the stage for more conflict than others?

11. Can you distinguish between "good" conflict and "bad" conflict? In other words, do you think some conflict is healthy for players and the group?

12. Bleed can sometimes be experienced as pleasurable or cathartic during game play. However, sometimes the intensity of the emotions experienced during game can cause lasting psychological distress after the game has finished. Do you have any suggestions for people experiencing negative bleed from the intensity of their experiences with role-playing games?

13. Can you describe player behaviors that enhance feelings of connection and community within the group and help resolve disputes?

14. Can you describe player behaviors that intensify conflict and cause splintering within the group, creating and escalating disputes?

15. Add any further comments/observations you would like to make.

Sarah Lynne Bowman (Ph.D.) teaches as adjunct faculty in English and Communication for several institutions including The University of Texas at Dallas. McFarland Press published her dissertation in 2010 as The Functions of Role-playing Games: How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems, and Explore Identity. Together with Aaron Vanek, Bowman co-edited The Wyrd Con Companion 2012, a collection of essays on larp and related phenomena. Along with her work on social conflict and bleed effects, her current research interests include applying Jungian theory to role-playing studies, studying the benefits of edu-larp, and comparing the enactment of role-playing characters with other creative phenomena such as drag performance.