Immersion as a Prerequisite of the Didactical Potential of Role-Playing

Popular Abstract - The article deals with the relation of immersion and the didactical potential of role-playing. It fathoms the extent to which role-playing games without a didactical goal still have didactical potential, as well as the extent to which this potential is being exploited. Along the lines of the concept of surplus reality, I specifically look into the subject of the role-playing game's alternative reality and demonstrate that the didactical potential of methodically applied role-playing can only unfold by means of the generation of an isomorphous model of a real subject matter. It can then be shown that recreational live role-playing indeed has an enormous didactical potential, just like the methodically applied kind. This potential unfolds just like in methodically applied role-playing, as live role-playing generates an isomorphous model of our reality.

On the basis of these explanations I conclude with the development of a process-oriented definition of immersion, which allows for an intermediary perspective on the phenomenon of immersion, instead of a purely subjective one.

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ABSTRACT

This article deals with the didactical potential of role-playing and with the concept of immersion, which is often regarded as problematic. It proposes the hypothesis that the possibility to experience immersion – and not the determination of a didactical goal – is the foundation of this didactical potential.

The article focusses on the existence of an alternative world (typical for live role-playing events) as the foundation for the didactical potential of role-playing. This alternative world functions as a kind of special reality in which the participants have the unique possibility to 'act as if'. The article then demonstrates that the didactical potential of methodically applied role-playing can usually be fully exploited by the purposeful generation of an isomorphous model of a real subject matter. With the help of Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action, and with reference to further pertinent research (e.g. frame analysis and hermeneutical approaches), the article then verifies whether the alternative reality of live role-playing generates a sufficiently complex model of reality to function as an isomorphous model of the usual reality. Subsequently, it can be shown that live role-playing indeed has the same didactical potential as methodically applied role-playing with a didactical goal – even though it does not itself feature such a goal.

Taking up the results regarding the comprehension of a live role-playing game's gameworld as an isomorphous model of the usual reality, a definition of immersion which does not refer to the respective subjective experience and emotions of the individual is presented. As other researchers have done before, the change of the interpretative frame is used as the argument's point of departure instead. The individual's interaction with its environment is then examined starting from this point. Thus, a process-oriented definition of immersion, allowing for an intermediary perspective on the phenomenon of immersion instead of a purely subjective one, is being developed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Especially in the research on live role-playing, the concept of immersion is controversial. It appears infeasible, and there are numerous heterogenous definitions. Holter (2007) even goes so far as to demand we: "stop saying 'immersion!' ". He deems the concept useless for the theory of communication, because immersion is experienced in a completely different way depending on who is experiencing it and can therefore merely have subjective validity.[1]

Even though the concept of immersion is so controversial in live role-playing research, it seems to designate precisely the feature of role-playing which makes it so unique: the possibility of attaining a state of consciousness "in which the person concerned experiences a diminution of self-awareness due to a captivating and challenging (artificial) environment. The concept of 'immersion' thus describes (…) the plunge into an artificial world in the context of virtual reality"(Wikipedia.de, "Immersion", 24.11.2009).[2] This plunge into another world, which Harviainen (2008, p.69) describes as "intentional evocation of artificial experiences through the use of fictional characters as masks / identities / personas"[3], and Lappi (2007, p.75) defines as "thinking of and perceiving the world as a character would if she was real", is what distinguishes role-playing games from other kinds of games.[4]

The concept of immersion is, however, not being used at all in the psychological and pedagogical research on methodically applied role-playing. This seems strange, for the aspect of plunging into another world is exactly what makes role-playing interesting to the fields of psychology and educational science. Precisely by this temporary plunge into another world the participant of a role-playing game is being enabled to try out and experiment with actions in a safe environment. According to some theorists, this very state of consciousness is the reason for a didactical role-playing game's participant's ability to implement his game experiences in everyday life; this state, of which the participants "say, they had been

'immersed' in the simulation, the consciousness of it being 'just' a game / an exercise had been severely diminished or partly lost" and that "during the simulation, they had had the same thoughts and emotions as in the real situation" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.390, oG)

Although the concept of immersion is – so far – merely being used in the research on recreational role-playing and digital games, what it describes appears to be decisive for the exact coverage of both forms of role-playing. The 'plunge into another world' seems, in a way, to also be at the basis of the immense didactical potential of methodically applied role-playing.

This is why I want to pursue the hypothesis that the possibility of immersion, and not the existence of a didactical goal, is indeed the prerequisite of role-playing's didactical potential. This article's first object will thus be to develop a theoretical model able to explain this hypothesis more clearly. To this end, I will first show that recreational role-playing without any didactical goal features enormous didactical potential, just like methodically applied role-playing (1. and 2.). I will then theoretically verify[5] to what extent this didactical potential of recreational role-playing can indeed be realized, even without a didactical goal (3. and 4.).

> ## How can it be possible for 'another' world, a different reality, to exist next to our own?

After dealing with immersion as the foundation of role-playing's didactical potential, I will finally turn to the problematic phenomenon of immersion itself (5.). The article's second object will then be to arrive at a functional definition of the concept of immersion, on the basis of the model developed and verified in the first four parts.

The prerequisite of immersion, and therefore of methodically applied role-playing's didactical potential, is the existence of another world, an

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[1] In this article, Holter also introduces a short list of different definitions of immersion in live role-playing and provides a good overview of the various views of and approaches to the notion.

[2] This and all future citations from originally German sources have been translated by the translator of this article. Such citations will, in the remainder of the text, be denoted by the abbreviation oG (originally German) attached to the publishing year.

[3] Harviainen does not refer to immersion at this point.

[4] Harviainen elsewhere even goes so far as to say: „*The key difference between role-playing games and other forms of role-playing is that in the former, a possibility for reality immersion exists.*"

[5] Based on a thorough investigation of this assumption in Balzer, 2009.

alternative reality. Therefore, we begin with the question:

How can it be possible for 'another' world, an alternative reality, to exist next to our own?

2. A DIFFERENT REALITY EMERGES…

The other world emerging in a role-playing game is called the *magic circle of gameplay* by Salen and Zimmerman (2004, pp. 93-99), and, following them, by Stenros (2008, p.9) and Montola et al. (2009, p. 10)[6]. The 'magic circle' of a game is "the space within which a game takes place" (Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p.99), and it is "set apart from ordinary life in locality and duration"(Stenros 2008, p.9). Salen and Zimmerman posit the existence of this magic circle for every kind of game and point out that "within the magic circle, the game`s rules create a special set of *meanings* for the players of a game […] [which] guide the play of the game"(Salen & Zimmerman 2004, p.99).

Following Moreno (1965), and regarding action-oriented methods and didactically used role-playing, van Ameln and Kramer (2007, p.391) call this kind of space a *surplus reality*. They comprehend the alternative reality of a role-playing game as a special reality, as an agreed upon illusory world (Sader 1991), which can exist next to our normal reality and in which we have the possibility to pretend, to 'act as if'.[7] On the basis of this possibility to 'act as if', a space of reality and possibility is constituted whose limits separate what happens during the role play from the context of reality. In its distinction from normal reality this surplus reality enables the participants to try out actions experimentally, as actions in this special reality do not entail the usual real consequences (cf. Bodenstein & Geise 1987, p.14). Goffman (1974, p.60), too, points out the unique character of 'acting as if', which consists in the doer's knowledge that there will be no practical consequences[8]. In the same vein, Stenros (2008, p.9) – following Salen and Zimmerman and referring to the magic circle of gameplay – highlights that "what happens within [a game] is interpreted playfully and has no direct effect on the ordinary world".

Both the concepts of 'magic circle of gameplay' and of 'surplus reality' thus designate a space distinct from reality, an alternative reality with its own rules, in whose frame actions do not entail the usual consequences. [8]

According to van Ameln and Kramer (2007, p.391) and corresponding constructivist concepts (Spencer Brown 1997), the surplus reality's existence is created as a social construction through a distinction from reality on four levels:

- **Temporally**, the distinction is made by the demarcation of a clear-cut beginning and ending of the experience.

- **Spatially**, a distinction between the space where the relevant surplus reality is in effect and the remaining environment is made.

- **Topically**, this special reality is – in accordance with Luhmann (1984, p.114) – distinguished from normal reality by a change of subject matter.

- **Socially**, the surplus reality is formed by the distinction of the real person and the role in the game.

Stenros (2008, p.9) also points out this fundamental separation of gameworld and reality and employs three of the four levels in doing so: "This removal from ordinary life is complete: spatially, temporally and socially the game is disconnected from everyday life."

Even though an 'alternative reality' can then exist next to the usual one, this does create a certain paradox (cf. van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.391): on one hand, the events of a role-playing game do not occur in the usual reality, but in an alternative reality, in the surplus reality. They occur in a different kind of reality, in which one can 'act as if', and in which actions do not entail consequences in the way they usually do. On the other hand, however, the events of a role-playing game *do* occur in our usual reality, because there is no way for them not to. Everything that happens during a role-playing game also happens within the

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[6] The concept has originally been introduced by Huizinga (2009).

[7] In this way, Bateson (1955, p.183) already asserts "that the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant".

[8] In Goffmans words, this kind of alternative reality is a 'modulation', that is: a temporally and spatially limited, purposeful transformation of a frame. The modulation consisting in 'acting as if' makes it possible to perform an action, which, for the participants, is the open imitation or execution of a less transformed action, while knowing, that it will not have any practical consequences.

boundaries of our reality, in which objects fall down and not up, in which water is wet, and in which no one – at least to our knowledge – is able to wield magically conjured and controlled fireballs.

Just like the distinction between reality and alternative reality is paradoxical because it simultaneously exists and cannot exist, the assertion that actions within this alternative reality do not entail consequences in the usual reality is fundamentally paradoxical. On one hand, the participants' 'as-if-actions' really don't entail the usual consequences, simply because these participants just 'act as if', because they just pretend. If, for example, a warrior slays someone with his sword during a larp event, the first player does not really kill and the other one does not really die. On the other hand, the 'death' of his character – which he might have grown to like a lot over the course of several years – at such an event does indeed have consequences for the player, as he will not be able to play this character anymore.

> **Even though paradoxical, live role-playing features an alternative reality, in which the participants can act as if.**

Even though somewhat paradoxical, however, the existence of an 'alternative reality' – understood as a social construct fabricated precisely by a distinction from usual reality – is no less possible. Now, what effect does this existence of an alternative reality have on the participants of a role-playing event?

3. THE EFFECT OF AN ALTERNATE REALITY

As we have seen, both forms of role-playing – recreational and didactically applied – feature a kind of special reality, distinct from the usual one. It is precisely this distinction of usual reality and alternative reality which does not only constitute the possibility of plunging into another world (and

thus the possibility of immersion), but also provides the basis for the didactical potential of action-oriented methods. This is due to the fact that the existence of an alternative reality makes it possible to purposefully experience a real subject matter by way of a simulation in the 'as if'-reality. This kind of learning on a model offers such didactical potential because the participants are being integrated into the physical, factual, scenic arrangement as agents; they are allowed to actively take part in the simulation's creation. Using the extensive possibilities of an alternative world, a real subject matter can thus be simulated in a way which does not solely rely on language, but can comprehensively represent relevant parts of reality (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.390).

The specific mechanisms and the didactical potential of action-oriented methods (and therefore of methodically applied role-playing) identified by van Ameln and Kramer can then emerge: by means of the simulation of a real subject matter a kind of *space of reality and possibility* develops in which realistic as well as fictitious scenarios and structures can be represented.[9] In this space, there is a possibility for the *deconstruction of existing realities*, as well as for the *construction of new reality*. Participants are thus enabled to "reflect their realities through observations of the second order, and contrast them with other possible realities" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.398, oG)[10]. Additionally, otherwise *abstract subject matter* can be represented in a *sensually experienceable* way. Content can then be staged in a way that *addresses cognition as well as emotion*, thereby improving the participants' ability to remember and process their experiences. By being actively engaged in situations, participants can autonomously *learn from experience* – what Dewey described as "learning by doing"[11]. Accordingly, "learning from experience always means relating the experienced to one's own self and one's own universe of meaning" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.394, oG). In the participants' learning from their own experience in practical situations and in their consequent comprehensive dealing with a subject

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[9] Thereby, the additional possibility to make mistakes without their usual consequences arises, which can lead to a sense of achievement even in making such mistakes. (cf. Vester, 1978, p.184)

[10] Henriksen (2008, p.159) agrees, when he argues that: "the game-provided experience becomes a tool for staging a reconstruction of the participants` conception of reality."

[11] Pertinent studies confirm that people generally learn more easily with experience-based methods (Blake, 1990), and that they can remember what they have learned better and for a longer time (Specht & Sandlin, 1991). As Lainema (2008, p.8) writes: "Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience."

matter their *bodies* – in the sense of "tacit knowledge"[12] (Polanyi 1985) – act *as a sounding board* for the experiences they have made, and the situations which present themselves to the participant become *individually and subjectively meaningful* (cf. Schick 2008). Furthermore, with the help of *alienation, distancing and imagery* latent parts of a system or a problematic subject matter, which would otherwise be very likely to encounter resistance and defensive mechanisms, can be staged (Stein 1998, pp.3-7).

Thus, *isomorphous models of reality* which do not show any immediate similarity with the real subject matter at hand, "but generate the same dynamics and relations on a deeper level" (Tuson 1994, p.60, oG) can be created. *Expectational patterns are foiled* (Schreyögg 1999, p.35), and the *combination of internal and external apperception* is enabled for difficult subjects as well. Because it takes place in an alternative reality, the simulation is situated in a kind of *secure space*, in which the participants can *playfully* deal with a subject without their actions entailing the usual real consequences. "In this way, a sanction-free field of experience emerges for the trying out of new strategies of thinking and acting" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.397, oG) regarding otherwise problematic subjects. In the participants' opportunity to playfully deal with the model of a real subject matter in an 'as-if-mode' most of the general positive effects of play take hold in action-oriented methods. This can then lead to experiences of success "which can radiate into 'real' life" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.402, oG). Furthermore, the first step in using an isomorphous model of reality in an alternative world is the purposeful reduction of complexity. "Reduction to a model, to the exemplary means reducing reality to basic relations, or to limit it to certain aspects and details" (Keim 1992, p.138, oG). An isomorphous model therefore adopts only the features of a real subject relevant to the creation of an equivalent structure and dynamic of content. It leaves aside everything insignificant and circumstantial, thus simplifying the participant's dealing with complex subject matter. At the same

time, however, the diversity and complexity of situations is also being increased by introducing new options and perspectives through the active participation in the simulation. Thus, the alternative world's frame allows for new leeway, which in turn allows for a particular way of learning: "learning means creating disorder and increasing diversity" (Weick &Westley 1996, zitiert nach Klabbers & Gust 2005, p. 2, oG).

> **"Reduction to a model, to the exemplary, means reducing reality to basic relations or to limit it to certain aspects and details."**

Interestingly, the above mentioned traits informing van Ameln and Kramer's description of the mechanisms of action-oriented methods are valid both for didactically applied role-playing and for the recreational role-playing game larp (Live Action Role-Playing): both feature an alternative reality, distinct from the usual one. In both forms of role-playing the simulation of events which are actually and physically staged, and in which the partipants are actively engaged in the creation of the simulation, takes place in this alternative reality in the form of 'acting as if'. Consequently, the constitutive difference between these two forms of role-playing consists in their respective goals: while recreational role-playing games are played solely for fun and therefore exhibit *all* of the characteristics of a regular game[13], role-playing games as an action-oriented method are conducted with a didactical goal and therefore exhibit only *most* of the characteristics of a game (cf. van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.401-402 and Balzer 2009, p.24).[14] In addition, the player's distance to his role and to the gameworld, usually very difficult to control in didactically applied role-playing (cf. Greenwood 1983; and, regarding the relevance of acceptance of a role: Schaller 2006), should be somewhat smaller in recreational role-playing, due to the intrinsic motivation of the participants, the usually more complex roles and the often much longer duration of such events (Zayas und Lewis 1986; Cierjacks

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[12]The concept of 'tacit knowledge' describes non-formal knowledge, meaning skills and abilities, which are not or cannot be explicitly formulated. The concept focusses on the process of skillfulness and emphasizes ist importance, as opposed to mere knowledge.

[13] For a comprehensive summary of the various definitions of play, and their respective elements, cf.: Weisler & McCall, 1976 and Salen und Zimmerman, 2004, p.79.

[14] It can thus be assumed that only live-roleplaying represents a truly aesthetic gaming activity, in the sense "that the perceived represents the intended state", whereas didactically applied role-playing 'only' represents a functional gaming activity, which – according to Krause-Pongratz – means, a non-successful activity, in which "the perceived does not represent the intended state" (Krause-Pongratz, 1999, p.210, oG).

2002). [15] It can thus be concluded that live role-playing does at least feature the same enormous didactical potential as didactically applied role-playing. [16]

This being said, methodically applied role-playing usually exploits its full didactical potential by purposefully designing an isomorphous model of a real subject matter in the frame of a surplus reality. This model may be superficially alienated, but will still exhibit the original subject's dynamics and mechanisms beneath the surface. Only in this way can the simulation provide a space for the same thoughts and emotions as in reality, and a real subject matter can be worked on in the form of a model.

The question is then: is it possible to let the didactical potential inherent in live role-playing unfold, even though there is no purposeful creation of an isomorphous model of a real subject matter based on a didactical goal?

4. INTERACTION OF INDIVIDUAL AND ENVIRONMENT

It is a constitutive feature of live role-playing in general that its alternative reality is made up of a comprehensive gameworld touching on every aspect of daily existence. Live role-playing thus might not create the model of a particular real subject matter, but it does create the model of a whole reality. This brings up the question whether this model of a reality is sufficiently complex to function as an isomorphous model of our usual reality. In order to clarify this point, I will now focus on the question of how an individual interacts with his/her usual surrounding reality. For this, I will draw on Jürgen Habermas's theory of action. In a further step, I will then be able to verify if an individual can interact with a larp's gameworld in the same way, and if a larp event's gameworld can indeed function as an isomorphous model of our reality.

According to Habermas, a communicatively acting individual – meaning someone who acts with the goal of understanding – relates to him-/herself and to his/her environment in accordance with his/her

lifeworld[17]. The lifeworld is to be understood as the "horizon of intersubjectively shared background assumptions, in which every communications process is antecedently embedded" (Habermas 1981a, p.228, oG). It functions as an intersubjectively shared resource of information we were born into and which we thus did not choose. It includes all of the preceding informations and interpretations that have 'always already' been the foundations of our communication; the concepts thus contains the core idea of modern hermeneutics (Reese-Schäfer 2001, p.60). As Harding (2007, p.27) puts it, with regard to hermeneutics: "Any text is interpreted by someone within a context, which composes the interpreter's horizon of understanding."

In its function as omnipresent resource of information, the lifeworld is basically the same thing that Goffman's frame-analysis calls the primary frame. Goffman himself (1974, p.31) posits the work hypothesis that the actions of everyday life are comprehensible due to one or more primary frames which bestow them with sense. While Goffman (1974, p.31), at this point[18], uses the classic realist distinction of object world (natural world) and social world in order to further concretize these primary frames and thus identifies two basic classes of primary frames, Habermas comprehends the lifeworld as wholly produced by man and providing interpretations for different aspects of the world. The three so-called 'worlds' the lifeworld provides interpretations for are:

- The *objective world*, defined as "the entirety of facts which exist or emerge, or are brought into being by directed interventions" (Habermas 1981a, p.130, oG)

- The *social world*, defined as consisting of "a normative context, determining which interactions belong to the entirety of legitimate interpersonal relations" (Habermas 1981a, p.132, oG).

- The *subjective world*, defined as an individual's ,interior world', comprising

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[15] As Schick (2008, p.193) puts it, regarding the willingness to break frame: "participants are much more likely to blur the boundaries between what they experience as play versus serious […] when they perform roles that are evaluated as a test, especially if it is a high-stakes test that will determine future employment."
[16] For a more thorough review of larp's didactical potential, cf.: Balzer, 2009, pp.51-55.
[17] Habermas takes up the concept of lifeworld as developed in Edmund Husserl's later works and introduced into sociology by Alfred Schütz.
[18] Realism asserts the existence of a reality outside of our consciousness. It claims that: „the conceptual universal is real ‚before' or ‚in the things', independent of human cognition" (Halder & Müller, 1988, p.256, oG).

his/her needs and wants, which are themselves to be further differentiated into a volitional part – the individual's likes, dislikes and wishes – and an intuitive part – his/her emotions and moods (Habermas 1981a, p.140).

The relation of individual and environment presents itself as a sort of circular process: on the one hand, the intersubjectively shared lifeworld is the frame for the agents' actions, necessary for their being able to come to an understanding. They are born into this frame without ever having a choice in the matter. It is the unsurmountable horizon of their thought and action, and its borders shift together with the observer. Consequently, communicative action can only address a small, limited section of the lifeworld, in the form of a situation. The lifeworld as a whole, however, understood "as the context constituting the horizon of communication processes, delimitates the situation of action and thus remains inaccessible to discourse" (Habermas 1995, p.590, oG). Because the lifeworld, being the frame of all questioning, remains unquestionable, the agent is, in a way, nothing but the result of his lifeworld. He is "the product of traditions, in which he lives, of solidary groups, to which he belongs, of processes of socialisation and learning, to which he is subjected" (Habermas 1995, p.593).

On the other hand, the lifeworld does not have any inherent, objective validity in itself. It assumes its validity only through the recognition of the agents referring to it. Only with a communicatively acting person who keeps relating to his environment in accordance with the lifeworld, only in being used as a mutual interpretative resource in processes of understanding, the lifeworld becomes valid as such a lifeworld and is constantly being reproduced. "The reproductive process connects new situations to the existing states of the lifeworld" (Habermas 1995, p.594). Thus, the participants actual communicative action in interactive situations additionally provides the cultural reproduction of knowledge and tradition, regarding the functional aspect of communication.

Therefore: "As a resource, the lifeworld is constitutive for processes of communication" (Habermas 1995, p.591). Inversely, the existence of communicatively acting agents referring to it and thus rendering it valid is just as constitutive for the lifeworld.

5. THE LARP GAMEWORLD AS AN ISOMORPHOUS MODEL OF REALITY

Now that we have clarified how an individual interacts with its environment in the usual reality, we can see whether an individual can interact with the gameworld of a larp event in the same way. To this end, we will first have to find out if a larp's gameworld is sufficiently complex to function as the model of a lifeworld.

As we already know, the lifeworld represents the intersubjectively shared interpretative resource for the people living in it. It provides interpretations for three worlds: the objective world, the subjective world and the social world. Now, the gameworld of a larp event also provides interpretations for those three worlds: on the level of the objective world, for example, it determines that a green 'person' with long ears and teeth is an orc, while someone uttering wild incantations and throwing something red at someone else is a wizard
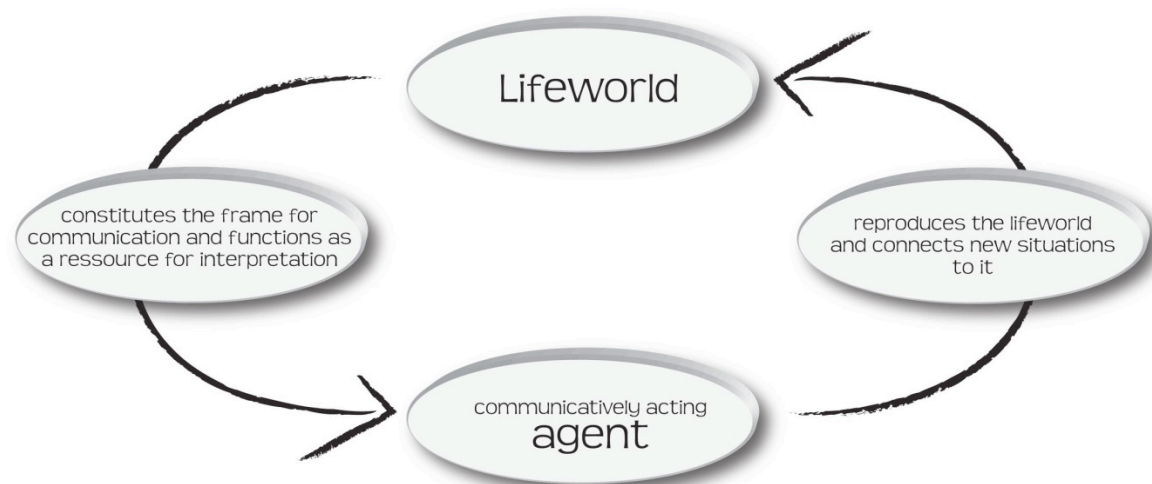

Figure 1 – The circular relation of individual and environment according to Habermas

conjuring fireballs. It also includes the interpretation to get lost as quickly as possible in such a case, so as not go up in flames. On the level of the social world it might determine that a stranger being introduced to you should not be greeted with "Hey, how are you", but, for example, with a hearty "Greetings, stranger"; or that it is well within the realm of possibility to get hit over the head by a drunk barbarian mercenary, if one were to make fun of the cute little fur tuft on his belt pouch and claimed the whole thing looked like a hostess's shoulder bag. Finally, the gameworld also includes interpretations for the subjective world: it determines that I am not Leonie, the nice, polite economics student, but indeed Lyra, the wild shaman, who should better not be provoked.

The larp's alternative world thus includes the character's objective, subjective and social world, just as the usual reality does for the participant. The gameworld functions as the character's resource for interpretation, in the same way the lifeworld does for the participant outside of the game. Only through knowledge and use of the gameworld as such an interpretative resource can the alternative reality's proceedings become accessible to the participant.

As the gameworld functions as the model of a lifeworld, the player can act communicatively in the gameworld in a model-like way. The participant in his role then refers to the three worlds around him, just like he would in his usual reality. In order to interpret whatever presents itself to him, however, he does not subconciously rely on the lifeworld he was born into, but consciously uses the gameworld as a resource for interpretation. Just like an individual reproduces its lifeworld and thus gives it validity again and

again by continously referring to it and connecting new situations to it, the gameworld only remains valid as long as the players keep referring to it, to use and to accept it as a resource for interpretation.

Therefore, the relation between individual and environment in live role-playing can also be represented as a circular process: on the one hand, the gameworld is the irreducible frame for the character's actions. It is constitutive for the participant's ability to form an image of what is before him/her, and to communicate about it with other participants. On the other hand, it is equally constitutive for the gameworld that the participants refer to it in their role, as this is the only way for it to have any validity.

As we have seen, a larp's gameworld does in fact represent a model of our usual reality: within the alternative reality, the gameworld functions as the model of a lifeworld. The players refer to it in the form of model-like communicative action, just like they refer to their lifeworld in their usual reality. In their roles, the players can act communicatively in a model-like way, interpreting what presents itself to them in the three worlds according to the gameworld and thereby giving it validity. Therefore, the gameworld of a larp event does indeed represent an isomorphous model of reality, insofar as it features the same structures as reality regarding the interaction of the individual with his environment. Even though they are superficially alienated they still generate the same relations and dynamics on a deeper level. Thus, an isomorphous model of a real subject matter is in fact created in live role-playing – and even an isomorphous model of reality as a whole, as has been shown above – and it appears to be possible for the enormous didactical potential which lies in live
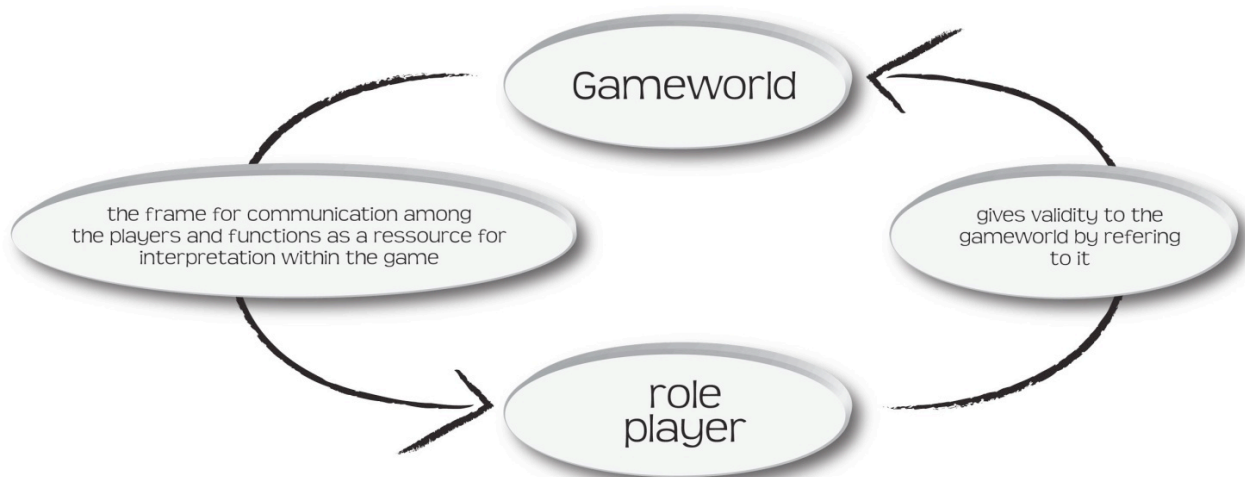

Figure 2 – The circular relation of the player and his gameworld

role-playing to unfold.[19]

There is, however, a further essential difference between an agent's communicative action in his/her usual reality, and an agent's virtually communicative action in the alternative reality: while the usual reality's lifeworld is merely continously *reproduced* by the communicative action of the individuals, because it was *always already* there anyway, the alternative reality's gameworld in larp has to be *produced* from scratch by the participants' virtually communicative action. Because of this – and in contrast to their usual reality – the participants do not have the choice to either act communicatively or not during the game. As an individual in its usual reality is simply reproducing its lifeworld by acting communicatively, this lifeworld does not instantly lose its validity and fall apart just because a single individual does not act communicatively in some situations. A larp event's gameworld, however, is not only reproduced by the participants' model-like communicative action. Because the gameworld – as a model of a lifeworld – has not always already been there but is valid only for the duration of the event, it has to be *produced* completely by the participants' model-like communicative action. If a player does not refer to it through model-like communicative action, it instantly loses its validity to the extent that he/she does not refer to it. Because of this, a larp event's gameworld as model of a lifeworld instantly disintegrates completely when the participants cease to refer to it. As soon as the gameworld loses its validity as model of a lifeworld, role-playing as we know it becomes impossible: without a valid gameworld, functioning as the model of a lifeworld, the playing participants cannot interpret the events and objects before them anymore, which consequently cease to make any sense. Furthermore, without the gameworld as the horizon of intersubjectively shared background assumptions, the participants can no longer communicate about what presents itself to them during the game. As the gameworld collapses, none of it makes sense anymore. Thus, the participants are forced to model-like communicative action, in order to secure the gameworld's validity.

6. A DEFINITION OF IMMERSION

We have seen that the gameworld can represent an isomorphous model of reality, and that larp's enormous didactical potential can indeed be brought to unfold. It has become clear that the basis for both existence and realization of role-playing's didactical potential is not the formulation of a didactical goal, but the possibility of 'plunging into an alternative reality' so deeply that the perception of one's real self is diminished. So what exactly does this mean? How does it happen, then, that someone feels like a shaman instead of like an economics student, or that someone 'sees' an orc in a person painted green, sporting glued-on latex ears and a dental prosthesis, instead of a strangely disguised human being?

> **How does it happen, then, that someone 'sees' an orc in a person painted green, sporting glued-on latex ears and a dental prosthesis, instead of a strangely disguised human being?**

Harding (2007, p.25) takes a hermeneutical perspective to further elucidate this phenomenon. He suggests "that larp can alternatively be understood as a change in how the player interprets the world". He therefore does not regard immersion as "a change of personality but [as] a change of interpretative framework". Representatives of frame-analysis (Stenros 2009, p. 24) also view immersion in a game as such a change of interpretative framework. Immersion then means, for example, that someone seeing a person painted green, sporting glued-on latex ears and a dental prosthesis does not think: *'There's a disguised man walking up to me, has he lost his mind? Well, let's see whiy he's dressed up so strangely and what he wants from me…'* Instead, he might think: *'Alright, there's an orc coming right at me… wonder if he's friendly or up to something bad?'*

In order to concretize the phenomenon of immersion in his own hermeneutical examination, Lappi follows Heidegger in introducing the additional concept of *everydayness*, which comes rather close to the concept of lifeworld.[20] Lappi (2007, p.76) defines everydayness as "the basis of every belief, value and behaviour pattern" and as "something we do not usually pay any attention to,

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[19] For a thorough comparison of didactically applied and recreational role-playing regarding their didactical potential, cf.: Balzer, 2009

[20] Both concepts have their origin in the phenomenological tradition.

not to mention doubting it". For Lappi (2007, p.75), immersion can thus be understood "as a transformation of everydayness". This means that it is no longer their usual 'world' that functions as the participants' everyday life, but the world of the game: "Immersion means that a player takes temporarily things included in (her) imagined space for a part of everydayness" (Lappi 2007, p. 77).

The above-mentioned theorists thus agree that immersion is not to be examined starting from the distinction of participant and character, but as a change of interpretative framework.[21] What is interesting about this starting point for a definition of immersion is, in my opinion, the fundamental acknowledgement of the gameworld's potential functionality as an alternative interpretative frame. Only if the gameworld features the same functions as the interpretative frame used in reality, the larp participant in his role can refer to it during the event in the same way he relates to his environment in reality. Only if the participants in their roles interact with the gameworld in the same way they interact with their environment in reality, the factually existing alternative reality they become a part of while experiencing immersion can emerge. "In other words, immersion is a subjective experience of being a *part* of an imagined reality instead of being only in *relation* to the imaged reality" (Lappi 2007, p.75). This is the only way for the phenomenon the participants of scientifically conducted role-playing with a didactical aim describe as 'immersion into the simulation' to develop; a phenomenon of which they report that "the consciousness of it being 'just' a game/an exercise had been severely diminished or partly lost; during the simulation, they had had the same thoughts and emotions as in the real situation" (van Ameln & Kramer 2007, p.390).

> **Immersion means, that a player plunges into the alternative world of live role-playing and experiences a decrease of self-awareness, because, for him, the gameworld functions as an isomorphous model of reality for the duration of the event.**

It has now become clear that it is precisely this existing isomorphous model of reality – or of a real subject matter –, this model in which we find the same structures we find in reality – and which

therefore generate the same relations and dynamics that exist in reality –, that makes immersion possible on the one hand and enables such an effective kind of learning with the help of a model on the other.

Immersion thus means that the players plunge into the alternative world of live role-playing and experience a decrease of self-awareness because the gameworld functions as an isomorphous model of reality for the duration of the event. During this experience, they interact with the gameworld in their role, in the same way they interact with their environment outside of the game. They interpret everything they experience according to the gameworld instead of according to their usual lifeworld.

7. SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK

On a theoretical level, this article has shown that it is not necessarily the didactical goal which determines whether or not role-playing has realizable didactical potential, but rather the act of 'plunging into an alternative reality' described by the concept of immersion. It is this experience of immersion which provides the opportunity to learn within an isomorphous model of a given subject matter and which thus establishes the basis for the numerous functions and mechanisms of role-playing. Recreational role-playing does not purposefully create the isomorphous model of a subject matter to be worked on. It does, however, create an isomorphous model of reality as a whole. This enables the participants of a recreational role-playing game to act communicatively in a model-like way, and therefore to exploit the didactical potential of role-playing even though there is no concrete didactical goal.

So far, however, the possibility to tap the didactical potential of communicative action in recreational role-playing without any didactical goal has only been shown theoretically. It has not been looked into the question to what extent a recreational role-playing game's gameworld is an isomorphous model of other aspects of reality.

Furthermore, the process-oriented definition of immersion is functional in a way, but still has a limited range. This definition's strong point consists in the possibility to leave behind a purely subjective perspective on the phenomenon of immersion in favor of an intermediary,

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[21] For a more thorough discussion of the exact way an individual interprets what it is confronted with, as opposed to the above explanation of the framework it interprets it in, cf.: Loponen & Montola, 2004

functionalistic one. This strong point, however, is also what reduces its range, as this definition does not allow for any insights into the participants' different personal dispositions regarding immersion (cf. Harviainen 2003).

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