Cultural Languages of Role-Playing

Popular Abstract - Role-play interaction in live role-playing games is also language interaction. Role-playing language is different from everyday language, because the worlds created in role-play are not just a reflection or extension of everyday life. We examine three examples of interaction in live action role-playing games. In all three, players rely on shared cultural knowledge. In the first example, two players employ the cultural conventions about the meanings of colors, objects and space as well as materials borrowed from myth and folklore in order to enact an encounter between a mage and a dragon. In the second, the organizers enact scenes from literary classics in order to construct the game plot. In the third, the players employ cultural stereotypes of personalities and behavior in order to present characters of diverse age and social status.

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore the links between live action role-playing games as cultural systems and the cultural context in which they exist, by analyzing the materials employed in the process of role-play interaction: the functions and uses of cultural codes, cultural memory, and cultural concepts of identities. Three cases of specific larp communicative interactions (named *Scenes*) are analyzed from different perspectives. In the first Scene, the players use cultural codes and conventions in the semiotic construction of an imaginary event: an encounter with a Dragon. The participants reach for diverse cultural segments which contain interpretations of the theme to borrow semiotic materials, therefore the role-play becomes a medium for active reproduction and transformation of cultural information, identified as belonging to different cultural systems. Live role-playing also is a means of utilizing 'stable formations' of cultural memory, as discussed in the second Scene's analysis. Fragments of literary classics are not only reread and rewritten in the collaborative interpretative endeavor, but are also internalized, and become part of personal biographic experiences. The communicative interaction in a role-playing session is based on cultural stereotypes of speech and behavior that project personalities and roles; that is the focus of analysis in the third Scene. Regarded as abstract systems, cultural codes, cultural memory, and cultural concepts of identities constitute the cultural languages of role-play.

1.INTRODUCTION

Game studies examine games as interactive environments; games are interactive to the degree that it is a tautology to use the expression 'interactive games' (Mayra 2008, p. 6). Playing happens through communication: no interaction is possible without the exchange of information, be it direct or mediated by a technology, synchronous or asynchronous, among players or between a player and an interface. Depending on the type and design of the game, interaction may be rich or relatively limited (see e.g. Manninen 2003), respectively building upon communication that is complex and multi-channel or simplified. Inasmuch as the nature of interaction and the particularities of the communication it is based on describe the specifics of the concept of 'medium,' they can also define the various forms of playing in the system of role-playing games.

> **The communicative interaction in a role-playing session is based on cultural stereotypes of speech and behavior that project personalities and roles**

Live role-playing games (tabletop and live action) involve collaboration between players through face-to-face social activity, relying on direct and synchronous communication. In tabletop role-playing games, the interaction is mostly verbal, and the prevalent communication tool is natural oral language[2]. It was Gary Alan Fine who first (1983) pointed out, "Because gaming fantasy is based in shared experience, it must be constructed through communication" (p. 3). In the communicative process of the game, participants have the opportunity to mobilize all real-life tools for verbal expression of thoughts, emotions and images during the collective enactment of their 'shared fantasy.' Sean Q. Hendricks (2006) argues that language is a tool for both creating the imaginary game world and involving the participants in it. He explores various 'incorporative discourse strategies': the use of first person pronoun as a strategy for blending the player entity with the character entity; the use of popular culture references as a strategy for strengthening the shared vision of the game world and narrowing its possible variations; and the use of world-specific language forms as a strategy for

securing players' involvement by claiming the language of the fantasy world as their own. A comparative study by Tychsen et al. (2006) demonstrates that the need to visualize the fictional world through language communication encourages role-playing in tabletop (pen-and-paper) games, and they appear to be more engaging or immersive than computer role-playing games, where the players distance themselves from the virtual world.

On a more abstract level, Montola (2008) distinguishes between 'game world' as a collective construction and 'diegesis' as the subjective reading and interpretation of the game world, complemented by internal ideas and feelings which remain implicit. Thus, he introduces the subtle yet important distinction between *inter*subjective and *intra*subjective aspects in the creative process of role-playing. He then conceptualizes the interconnection between the two sides in the communicative system, the interpersonal and the personal one, as a loop of three basic activities: interpretation, adjustment, and communication. Thus, "the fictional world or *the truth* about what exists in a fictional world" (Montola 2003, p. 82) is not a clear and stable entity, but an (at least partly) shared understanding, achieved in an uneven and complicated process of negotiation and (dis)agreement. As Kristian Bankov (2008) points out, truth is not part of things per se; truth requires assertion, which is a discourse. The game world and the diegeses are not only discursively constructed; they are subjected to transformations due to the discursive activity of the players.

This study concentrates on the *inter*personal aspects of arguably the most complicated and hardest to generalize and analyze game interaction: the one in live action role-playing games (larp). In larp, communication is heterogeneous; interaction is multimedial. Visual messages comprised of shapes and colors supplement verbal and paralinguistic (i.e. through intonation, volume or pitch) interaction. Players may communicate only with gestures, or express themselves through song and dance (see e.g. Fedoseev and Kurguzova 2012). The design of the space, sets and props and their interpretation and usage are also part of the communicative exchange. The engendered messages (or *texts*) are not only verbal; they are also to be seen in the broad semiotic sense of the term: gestures and body postures, exclamations, songs, music and dance, costumes, images,

different kinds of objects and their usage. Lotman (1980) would say that they form a *semiotic ensemble*.

In this complicated communicative process, language is not merely an interaction tool. The language of role-playing is not an external layer on top of the essence of role-play; every role-play interaction in its communicative form is language interaction. Yet role-playing language is different from everyday language, because the worlds created in role-play are not merely a reflection or extension of everyday life; they are *fictional*. The essence of role-playing lies in the endeavor to be someone else, and/or at another place, and/or at another time, and quite often that necessitates a simulation of a world very different from the everyday one; the knowledge of that world is outside the range of the individual live memory and is unavailable to players' biographic experience. In a process of discursive construction of fictional entities, everyday language is not sufficient. If larps are temporary worlds superimposed on the everyday world (Stenros 2010, p. 300), their discursive manifestation must employ semiotic superstructures built upon natural language.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Numerous researchers who have studied role-playing games discuss the tendency of players to incorporate into the interaction process elements or materials borrowed from various cultural systems. In his seminal work *Shared Fantasy*, Gary Alan Fine (1983) notes, "Each gaming group interprets, defines, and transforms cultural elements in its sphere of knowledge into the cultural framework of an imagined society" (p. 2). Players do not create fantasy worlds entirely from their imagination; rather, they shape and add an additional level of meaning to cultural materials derived from their background knowledge. The members of a group *use* culture to imbue the events in their world with meaning and to create newly meaningful events; thus every gaming group is an interpreter of the larger culture of society within the context of which the group exists (pp. 238-239). Daniel Mackay (2001) argues that such cultural elements are the building blocks of the role-playing performance. Everything, from day-to-day interaction with others who leave impressions on the players, to memorable images culled from the players' experience with art, can be used to create their characters. Famous lines, quotable postures, vivid

traces from literary passages or film scenes are stored in the players' memory as decontextualized 'fictive blocks.' Every player's performance can be a conscious manipulation of tropes and conventions or an unconscious replay of fictive blocks to which players have been exposed. Once divorced from their context, fictive blocks function as strips of imaginary behavior—nonreal behavior that takes place in an imaginary environment—and are the very substance of play (pp. 76-79). Similarly, Sarah Lynne Bowman (2010) observes that the content of role-playing game narratives "often emerges from deep, archetypal symbols cultivated from the wells of collective human experience" (p. 13).

This study elaborates on the notion of a link between the role-playing game as a cultural system and the cultural context in which it exists, by analyzing the cultural materials employed in the process of role-play interaction. Studying concrete examples, we will discuss the incorporation of diverse 'cultural elements' into larp communication. We will examine them as abstract systems of elements and rules for their usage in the communication process, i.e. as languages. Our focus will be not so much on the elements themselves or their origin, but on their interpretation within the specific communicative situation, their semantic interlinking in the creation of new meanings. The slipperiness inherent in such a discussion stems from the character of the analysis: it examines not exclusively verbal elements, but the entire multimediality of role-play interaction. To borrow from Frans Mayra (2008): "In the context of game studies, it is just as important to think about meaning that is related to actions, or images, as it is to find meanings in words" (p. 13).

3. KEY CONCEPTS AND METHODS

Influenced by the works of Danish linguist Louis Hjelmslev about primary (literal, 'denotative') and secondary (figurative, metaphorical, 'connotative') uses of words and expressions, Roland Barthes (1972) and Juri Lotman (1970), arguably independently of each other, elaborated the notion of secondary semiotic systems. According to it, on top of natural language—the basic semiotic system through which we communicate—we build additional, more or less conventional systems of meaning, serving to organize and express our social experience. In his conclusion to *Mythologies*,

Barthes defines myth as a *second-order semiological system* (in French, *système sémiologique second*), where different raw materials (the language itself, photography, painting, posters, rituals, objects, etc.) are used as a secondary language for the expression of additional, ideological meanings.

This notion also permeates Juri Lotman's works of cultural semiotics. Lotman views the entire culture as information, collected, stored and transferred in every human society, from one generation to the next. Culture is an aggregate of texts, wherewith collective memory is stored; culture is a system of communication where texts are exchanged via diverse channels; culture is a mechanism of text-creations, and texts are the realization of culture (Lotman and Uspensky 1978). All of culture's texts could be read and comprehended with the assistance of cultural codes, which are the bases of different cultural 'languages.' Each cultural text can be considered a single text with a single code and simultaneously an aggregate of texts with a corresponding aggregate of codes (Lotman 1967). Lotman pays particular attention to art and the 'languages' of literature, theater, cinema, fine arts, music as systems for communicating specific artistic information, which are similar to natural language, but much more complex, since they are constructed upon it and serve as *secondary modeling systems* (Lotman 1970, 2002).

However, 'language' and 'code' are not synonymous:

> "The term 'code' carries with it the idea of an artificial, newly created structure, introduced by instantaneous agreement. A code does not imply history, that is, psychologically it orients us towards artificial language, which is also, in general, assumed to be an ideal model of language. 'Language,' albeit unconsciously, awakes in us an image of the historical reach of existence. Language—is a code plus its history." (Lotman 2009, p. 4)

If a language consists of a code and its history, the discussion of 'cultural' languages must involve the idea of culture as *memory*. In their seminal work "On the Semiotic Mechanism of Culture" (1978), Lotman and Uspensky define culture as *the nonhereditary memory of the community* (p. 213). Culture is a mechanism for preserving information in the consciousness of the community. The longevity of texts forms a hierarchy within the culture, one usually identified with the hierarchy of values. The texts considered most valuable are those of maximum longevity: the panchronic texts. Aleida Assmann (2008) subsequently distinguishes between two forms of memory: a more active one, the institutions of which preserve the *past as present*, and a more passive one, which treats the *past as past*. She refers to the actively circulated memory as the *canon* and to the passively stored memory as the *archive*. Jan Assmann (1995, 2008) introduces another distinction in his works—between two different ways of remembering: communicative memory and cultural memory, which he illustrates with his metaphor of the 'liquid' and 'solid' states of the collective memory. Communicative memory is not formalized and stabilized by any forms of material symbolization; it is diffuse and lives in everyday interaction. Cultural memory is characterized by its distance from the everyday; it is mediated through texts, icons, dances, rituals and performances of various kinds; it has 'stable' formations to guarantee the objectivation or crystallization of communicated meanings.

Live role-playing constitutes a second-order semiological system due to the very nature of "playing make-believe." It borrows a wide gamut of raw semiotic materials (words and phrases, postures and gestures, rhythms and melodies, symbols and images) and *models* them, assigns an additional, secondary meaning to them in the act of playing a role. This system is characterized by fusing two features: 'theatricality' and 'interactivity'. Theatricality is a fundamental semiotic feature of dramatic performances; its definition is based on the observation that all theatrical signs function as *signs of signs*. On the stage, the crown and the ring are not symbols of royal power; they are signs of the symbols of royal power, to the same degree as the regal gestures of the actor performing the role of the King. Theatrical signs show *mobility* (i.e. they are mutually substitutable), and *polyfunctionality*. For example, the rain could be indicated by sound, props or words: with the noise of falling rain drops, with an open umbrella or merely saying, "It's raining"; a chair can be used not only as a sign of a chair, but as a sign of a mountain, staircase, car, or sleeping child. Every theater sign can perform multiple functions to create a wide variety of meanings (see Fisher-Lichte 1992, pp. 129-141). Just like in a theatrical performance, in live action role-play, "every object in the physical space and every act performed is a sign" (Loponen and Montola 2004, p. 42); but the crucial difference here is that

they are involved in "a cycle of creation and consumption" (Sandberg 2004, p. 276), i.e. in a meaning-generating process of direct interaction. The participants in a larp event more often assume the active roles of interlocutors than the positions of performers/audience. The meaning of every message in larp is produced by the communication among participants *in acting together* in a particular situation.

> **every object in the physical space and every act performed is a sign**

Interpreting role-playing as a secondary modeling system allows us to avoid two potentially reductive notions. The first one holds that the inclusion of diverse cultural materials in the communication process is a mere reference, 'quoting,' which preserves their original meaning intact. Viewing role-play as a modeling system lets us regard the cultural elements in it as a *language*, an abstract set of signs whose use is sometimes partly unintentional, often improvised and spurred by the concrete situation, and whose meaning has not been pre-established but is created jointly by the participants in the role-play discourse. The second notion claims that the origin of these elements should be sought only in certain texts and genres of popular culture, such as Dungeons and Dragons, fantasy literature or sci-fi films. The borrowing of elements that may serve as codes in the role-play interaction can, in fact, happen across a large variety of sign systems to which the players have *access*, so we are going to discuss them under the general umbrella of *cultural codes*, *cultural memory* and *cultural notions* of identities.

The cases that we will examine, called Scenes, have been extracted from Bulgarian larp games. They have been documented during field work through qualitative ethnographic methods such as participant observation, audio and video recording. The approach is based on ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967) and ethnography of speaking (Hymes 1974) and their interest in how people interact and maintain social contacts; how they use language to create and sustain realities. A methodological disclaimer is necessary here: although the interpretation has generally been verified in post-game discussions with participants in the relevant larp event (particularly in Scene 2), it still remains a largely subjective interpretation of the researcher. Other interpretations are possible for anyone else who is a native speaker and is familiar with the peculiarities of Bulgarian larp culture.

The analysis of the three chosen cases will be performed on different levels; the analytic approach is based on the extensive research of Teun A. van Dijk on discursive *macrostructures*: the higher-level semantic or conceptual structures that organize the local microstructures of discourse, interaction, and their cognitive processing (see e.g. Van Dijk 1980). In the first scene, an interaction between two role-players will be discussed as a sequence of communicative acts, i.e. as a narrative macrostructure (Van Dijk 1976). In the second scene, a whole larp session will be viewed as a global communicative event inasmuch as the two sides of the communicative process are two groups (macro participants): that of the organizers and that of the players. In the third scene, we will go down to the level of conversational analysis but will bring into consideration another concept: that of *context models* as subjective representations of social situations (Van Dijk 2007):

"Context models strategically control discourse processing, in such a way that a discourse is produced or understood as *appropriate* in a given communicative situation. This means that anything that can vary in discourse may thus become controlled by the context model, such as deictic expressions, politeness formulas, style, rhetorical structures, speech acts, and so on" (p. 7, original emphasis).

4. SCENE ONE: MAGE AND DRAGON

At the periphery of the gaming area, in a dank wooded section, a party of players comes across a single NPC. The NPC wears a bright-red dress, with beads and ribbons, just as brightly red. She is hostile and tries to scare the party off; she spits and hisses. Only when confronted by one member of the party, carrying a staff and wearing pendants made of leather, wood and seashell, does she calm down. The beginning of the encounter acts as an introduction: the two introduce themselves as a Mage and a Dragon. The Dragon speaks in cadences and with odd syntax, reminiscent of poetry. The Mage divulges his aims: he must cross the Gates of the Otherworld, but for that he needs a scroll of magic runes. The Dragon admits she holds the scroll, but is only inclined to give it up if the

[2] The Asckolt Affair 2008: Ertan Musov et al. The 28th of June, Varna, Bulgaria. Field notes.

Mage tells her more about the world of humans or if he finds a way to divert her. The Mage accepts the challenge and decides to sing a folk song to the Dragon. The Dragon approves of the song and the performance, and gives the scroll to the Mage. The Mage thanks her, the Dragon wishes him success and both take their leave[2].

Eirik Fatland (2006) writes about "a vast array of cultural ideas," learned from personal experience, from books, from playing games or watching films, which serves as a pool of knowledge from which role-players draw improvisational patterns. Fatland defines these patterns as "interaction codes" and systematizes some of them into two types: codes of convention (conventions of genre and reference, conventions by situation, conventions of larp scenes), and codes of design (spoken language, body language, stereotypical characters and stories, etiquette and social rituals). In the scene described above, we can identify some of the cited codes of interaction, e.g. the rule that only mages can speak with dragons, which is a convention of "high" fantasy familiar from Ursula LeGuin's *Earthsea* novels; the meeting between the participants begins with an introduction and ends with farewells, two mandatory features of social etiquette; the party's insistence to communicate with the dragon is necessitated by conventions within the Bulgarian larp scene that NPCs are meant to serve players, as a source of information and items.

Before verbal interaction has even begun, the two players, through codes of color, objects and behavior, have signaled to each other what they are. The freshly created visual text has an entirely fictional denotatum: one player recognizes the other only by the force of cultural convention: red symbolizes fire and dragons are creatures of fire; they are serpents, hence the hissing and spitting; a staff and pendants are the paraphernalia of mages and so on. Within the players' verbal interaction, a specific "singsong" language is established: on the one hand, the Dragon's odd speech, rhythmical, characteristic of the magic creatures in Bulgarian fairy-tales (Parpoulova 1978); on the other hand, the Mage's choice of song with which to "tell the tale" about the world of humans. The text emerging from this "singsong" language is itself a complex sign: a sign for an uncommon kind of communication, a magical interaction. It is based on shared mythological conceptions; we could say that this interaction's presupposition is the mythological code, according to which one needs

magic to cross over to the Beyond and creatures like the Dragon inhabit the margins of the human world. In that remote space, the Dragon guards the gates to the Otherworld; she is alien to people and they to her, and that is why she needs to be told a tale about them, which the Mage does in his capacity of mediator, of intermediary between the world of humans and mythical beings. The narrative follows a familiar storyline. It is subjected to the narrative code of the fairy-tale: the Dragon is a magical helper and grants a magic item to the hero, but first she must test him; the Mage has to fulfill the task and pass the test to earn the magic item: functions XII, XIII and XIV according to Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folktale* (1968).

The role-playing game transforms into a milieu for the existence and recreation of inherited cultural information

The participants reach complete agreement: the interaction is successful. Separate elements are combined eclectically: semiotic material of diverse provenance is freely borrowed and structured. The borrowing is not arbitrary but follows the theme "*encounter with a Dragon*": the interlocutors reach out for every cultural segment they can think of that contains interpretations on the theme: fantasy literature, role-playing games, mythology, and folklore. The role-playing game transforms into a milieu for the existence and recreation of inherited cultural information, known for its different cultural origins but shared by all participants in that particular communicative event. Communication takes place on two levels: on the specific one, between interlocutors, and on the abstract, between various texts within a culture and between different cultures—"different" in the sense given by Lotman about the typology of cultures: remote either in time or in space. The mosaic's every and any element is acceptable, from the viewpoint of the participants trying to achieve their aims—if it is comprehensible to the interlocutor. What is more, because of the tension in each created syntagmatic bond, the communication is guaranteed to take place *here and now*, as a dialogue spontaneously and jointly creating new meanings, and not as a set of monologues fitted to one another to create meanings in a premeditated manner.

The interaction between the two players is completely impromptu, and their participation is spontaneous, a direct response to the partner's actions. The genre of the narrative jointly created by them can easily be recognized as fantasy, and that is probably why it contains the archetypes foregrounded by folktales and mythology (see also Bowman 2010, pp. 143 – 154). Equally easily, it can be recognized as part of Bulgarian larp culture, not only because of the natural language of the interaction, but also because of the inclusion of elements from local folklore. By actively drawing in heterogeneous cultural information and binding it together to produce meanings, larp players situate their micro-culture along the borders of the cultural semiosphere (as per Lotman 2005), an area of enhanced meaning generation. A global phenomenon, which has incorporated the traditions of popular literary genres like fantasy and also the features of the North American gaming culture, meets, absorbs and is realized through the texts and codes of the local culture, "forming a kind of creolisation of semiotic structures" (p. 211). Using the foundations laid by Lotman, we are aware that this binding cannot take place mechanically; it is always an interpretation giving birth to new meanings. Building imaginary worlds is possible only in interpretation, because even the most fantastical worlds have always been mediated through languages very similar to ours.

5. SCENE TWO: MASKS AND RIDDLES

The hall is festively lit, a string orchestra plays. At the end of the hall, the ball's host, Don Delgado, sits. Two of his mysterious companions stand at his sides: a tall man in a top-hat and a beautiful girl. The third companion stands at the hall's door and asks all guests to present their invitations and tell their name and title. After that he loudly announces their arrival. The guests enter the hall and patiently wait for their turn to introduce themselves to the host. All are in evening-dress, all are masked. Don Delgado bids them welcome, kisses the ladies' hands, but does not stand from his chair even for a moment. His tall companion repeats the same compliment over and over: "We're delighted", "The Don is delighted", "She is delighted", "We all are delighted"[2].

To fans of Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* who took part in the larp game "The

Spring Ball of Don Delgado", the beginning of which is described above, these compliments along with the three mysterious companions' names—Azazelo, Korovieva and Behemoth—are enough to make them exercise extreme caution and avoid interaction with those who play the aforementioned parts. Less than pleasant things befall the others.

About two hours after the start, the host Delgado announces a small performance—a puppet show—for his guests' entertainment, which lovers of *Hamlet* follow with particular attention. In verse, the puppet play tells of how once upon a time poor young Delgado, very much like the Dumas character, the Count of Monte Cristo, was accused and convicted so that his fiancée could be taken from him. The show causes angry reactions from the guests depicted in it.

During the game everyone's life depends on whether or not they will discover that their cordial host has sold his soul to the Prince of Darkness—whether or not they will manage to follow the dialogue between two texts: Bulgakov's novel and Goethe's *Faust*—and also if, with the help of a special cipher, they can find and destroy the blood-bound covenant. To acquire the cipher, comprised of Bible references, however, they have to answer a riddle: "What is this which is so high, yet so low?"

The larp game's design includes elements from works within the European literary *canon*. Each element is intended to carry a particular meaning, inciting a particular reaction in the players. Together these elements form a specific *literary code*, comprised of signs that, in the spirit of the game, we will call *masks*. In this case the creators rely mostly on the participants' skill to build associative connections, to *associate*, which is the loosest form of encoding. The ensuing decoding sets going interpretative processes that move in too many different directions, causing players to have a number of mutually contradictory expectations.

The social-romantic collision, or the mask "The Count of Monte Cristo," is associatively connected with the expectation of *revenge*, but at the same time it excludes the presence of "supernatural" characters and events. To recognize that the three mysterious companions are *demons*, or the mask "The Master and Margarita," creates expectations of a Good vs. Evil type of conflict, entailing an ethical choice (or affiliation); but the public revelation of past sins, being *exposed* in verse, or the mask "Hamlet," introduces a hesitation whether

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[3] The Spring Ball of Don Delgado 2010: Lyubomira Stoyanova et al. The 17th of April, Sofia, Bulgaria. Field notes and video record.

dividing lines in the conflict are clean-cut. The literary code brings with it a web of (con)textual connections: each element is interpreted not only in the game's context, but also within the text from which it is taken. The choice of these works is not arbitrary: classics are overinterpreted and in them each element is a sign rich with connotations.

Literary associations are "the riddle's components," whose solving makes up the *gaming aspect* of this larp event, initially proclaimed to be a "social gathering." The game is one of wits: for the creators, it is about posing "riddles," and for the players, it is about finding all the answers, which are deliberately complex, resistant to simple and unambiguous interpretation. The multiplicity of readings, the way they contradict one another, the interpretative uncertainty cause and keep the suspense, until the "masks fall" and the sides become clear. In other words, the loose system of encoding and the weak congruency ensure the game's tension. Making sense of the literary *masks* becomes a basis for the agonistic relationship between creators and participants. What makes "The Spring Ball of Don Delgado" a *game* is the game of interpreting literary code. The solution does not follow a linear logic; on the contrary, different interpretations of the literary references undermine, cancel out and even contradict one another. The result, however, is a coherent role-playing text (as per Stenros 2004). A reconstruction of the *text* must include an intertextual mosaic of literary works, amalgamated within the dynamics of discursive interaction and (re)written in a collaborative interpretative endeavor. For the larp-session's limited duration, parts of these classics have stopped existing as fossilized text and are brought to life in the pragmatics of immediate interaction.

> **Experiencing classic works first hand destroys the vertical gaps in culture**

If we turn to Jan Assmann's terminology, we could say that we are witnessing a transformation of cultural memory into communicative memory. Textual elements from stable, "objectified" forms of cultural memory, carrying "crystallized" meanings, are brought into and reconstructed inside a particular context. They, however, are not interpreted as *canon*; after their *liquefying*, the players are *immersed* in them, experience them *first*

hand, as if they were a part of mundane everyday reality. Particularly, we see fragments of classics incorporated into the personal biographic experience of the participants.

Both Aleida Assmann's (2008) notion of *canon* and Jan Assmann's (2008) descriptive definition of cultural memory refer predominantly to texts, symbols and practices attributed to "high" or elitist culture. The hierarchy of values established through the panchronic texts of the canon and the participation structure of cultural memory, which is never strictly egalitarian, entail somewhat distant, cultivated, and ritualized modes of reception and interpretation. Experiencing classic works *first hand* destroys the vertical gaps in culture and, on a more abstract level, we see how during this larp session, "high" culture is assimilated into popular culture. The *canon* is articulated in the formal languages of role-playing; its characters and dramatic collisions are subsumed under the semantic and pragmatic macrostructures of a *game* event, and thereby (high) cultural memory and popular cultural memory (as per Kukkonen 2008) are mingled and utilized in a collectively created experience.

6. SCENE THREE: VILLAGERS AND SAMODIVA

Player A: And h-h-have you l-l-learned about animals?
Player C: Pardon?
Player A: Animals. Have you learned about them?
Player C: I've learned about people, but it is the same principle …
Player B: So you know about frogs.
Player C: About frogs—no.
Players A and B (Sharing a look.): No? Nooo …
Player C (Studying a piece of paper.): I know about rams … about…
Player A: Who knows about froooogs?
Player C (Stroking his nose and chin.): The village beggar, maybe.
Players A and B (Sharing another look.): The beggar? The beeeggaar …
Player C: The beggar often eats frogs, so I think he knows them best of all.
Players A and B, together: Thank you! We thank you!
Players A and B run away.

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[4] Legend of Taermonn 2010: The Order of the Eights. The 17th of July, Sofia, Bulgaria. Video record.

Player C: Don't mention it. *(Sits by the table, where his items are arranged, and turns to Player X, who sits opposite him.)* Please, give me your hand.

Opens a jar and with a pair of wooden pliers takes out an object which he lays upon Player X's wrist. Player D approaches and says something that's unintelligible on the recording.

Player C: In a minute, please, I'm with a patient right now, as you can see. *(To Player X.)* Where are you from?

Player X: The local woods.

Player C: The only village around here is this one, Taermonn, and I've been living here long enough to know you're not local. *(Pours some of the liquid from the jar into a small glass.)*

Player X: I'm not from a village. Who would want to live in your villages? In your woods there's more space to live than you think.

Player C: You won't disappear again, will you, like you did before with the priest? *(Using the wooden pliers, he plucks the object off from Player X's wrist and dips in into the glass.)*

Player X: Ouch![4]

Michael Silverstein (2004) argues that cultural concepts or stereotypes of identities inform specific interactional events with an apparent scheme of social differentiation: "As receiver, one always has an 'Aha!' of recognition: 'So-and-so talks like a – !' (fill in the category of identity). And one always endeavors to project a self-identifying intersection of categorial alignments for others to discover about oneself as sender." (p. 638) The communicative interaction in a role-playing session is based on cultural stereotypes of speech and behavior that project personalities and roles. The final goal and essence of the performance is to achieve a shared perspective of "so and so speaks like so and so." It *does not* mean that role-play is stereotypical; it does mean role-play utilizes cultural stereotypes of "kinds of people" as tools in the performance.

Player A asks the question "And have you learned about animals?" timidly, stuttering. Player A and Player B constantly change places as communicative partners of Player C, and their actions reach a level of synchronization where they speak and gesture simultaneously and identically. These coordinated acts include odd logical connections (you have learned about people, *ergo* you know about frogs), a series of affective reactions (interest—disappointment—surprise—joy), and unhampered expressiveness. The

semantic content of that verbal interaction develops the theme of the erudition of Player C's character and his competence in the field of biological species. Through gestural and speech etiquette, Player C presents his character as a well-mannered man, very busy, but nonetheless responsive to Players A and B's persistence. Player C even starts "speaking" their language by demonstrating a kind of similar logic (the beggar eats frogs, *ergo* he knows about them).

Players A and B perform the parts of two *children*, 13-year-old Clara and her best friend Eleanor, respectively, and Player C, the part of *the doctor*, Alexander Romuald. In the scene at hand, we can conclude that the shared behavioral notions of Players A, B and C reveal the "child-like" identity by typifying attributes such as "timid, respectful, expressive, illogical," and that of the "doctor," by attributes such as "educated, well-mannered, condescending, busy." The participants construct these notions together, by observing the principle of cooperation, and verbal and paralinguistic expression is not necessarily bound by a common purpose: for example, in the first line of Player A, the manner of speech codifies her own identity, and its content, the identity of the interlocutor.

In the scene's second part, during the interaction between Players C and X, the context model is established by the participants as a certain social situation: "a visit to the doctor." The social roles are strictly defined (one is explicitly named by Player C: "patient"); behavior is also strictly defined: Player C performs a complex manipulation which Player X endures, even simulating pain; verbal interaction proceeds within the strictures of situational etiquette, including the polite form of address[5], which Player C fails to observe in only one of his lines (a behavioral lapse). The conversation's pragmatic direction is entirely towards revealing Player X's character's identity. The theme is introduced by Player C, and his questions and comments contain the following implicature: *you are a stranger* ("I know you're not local", "you won't disappear, will you"). The subtext of Player X's answers is: *I am different* ("I'm from the local woods", "who would want to live in your villages"). The player whom we have called X on purpose, performs the part of one of the game's personified enigmas: the *samodiva*, a woodland fairy from Bulgarian folklore. Both communicative partners construct together the "different, strange"

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[5] In Bulgarian, the second person singular pronoun, coupled with verbs in the singular, is a stylistic mark of informal interaction between people who are close. Formal interaction imposes a "polite form of address," which is the use of second person plural, coupled with verbs and participles in the plural.

identity of Player X's character without directly invoking his imaginary essence.

When we think about larp communication, we have to bear in mind its twofold character, the combination of pragmatic goals and artistic sense and its possible realization as language-play (Ilieva 2010). Closely following Player C's reactions, we can discover certain characteristic acts scattered throughout the interaction's subtexts, which cannot be read and understood exclusively through the conventions of the "doctor" identity. For example, in the interaction's first part, he emphatically denies that he knows about frogs, despite the claim he has "learned about people" and "knows about rams" and that "the principle (whatever it is) is the same." Then follows an improvised if confident statement about the beggar's dietary habits. In the second part of the interaction, he inadvertently breaks behavioral etiquette by switching from the formal second person plural to the informal second person singular while addressing the presumably unfamiliar "patient." If we have to point out the utterance's subject in these cases, it would be the *playing* subject, the player having fun, and the *social* subject, the participant having a conversation with a friend and a gaming partner. The recognition of these roles is again derived from a cultural notion that brings together "playing" and "joking" or from the social convention that defines the interaction between close friends as informal.

Kristian Bankov (2004) holds the view that our identity is our "social interface" through which we communicate with others, and for this reason it is largely a function of our social networking. But the identity network in a live action role-playing event is further mediated through the theatricality: it is composed of signs of signs of identity. Cultural notions (or stereotypes) are expressed in the discursive structures as behavioral (including speech) codes, which in the process of performance are identified and recognized by both the participants and by the observers who share the same notions. Identifying the subjects of communication, answering the questions "Who am I?" and "Who are you?" takes place simultaneously with the process of communication itself; it is accomplished in communication and is sometimes its ultimate aim.

In computer role-playing games, player characters are simplified simulations, models created through a careful choice of features. The limited possibilities accentuate gender and race as *difference*; however, there are a number of different gender or race

models (Corneliussen 2008). Game developers use ethnocultural stereotypes of familiarity and otherness to design menu-driven identities (Langer 2008). But the social worlds of live action role-playing are more resistant to design; the identities presented in its discursive structures are more spontaneous, yet much more complex. The improvised performance of roles in a socially regulated environment presupposes a mobilization of the social subject, the playing subject and the fictional subject (the character), which coexist at the same time in the interactive process; they are always available as options for the player. The choice and the recognition of the different roles depend on mutual clarification and articulation on the interlocutors' part. The role-playing subject is *a figure of discursive interaction*, an image created in communication, a complex sign meant to be perceived and interpreted in a particular way.

7. CONCLUSION

In the three Scenes above, we observed the integration of diverse cultural elements into the role-play interaction. In all three cases, the elements are no oblique remarks or references; they form the basis of the communication. In the first scene, the participants employed the cultural conventions about the meanings of colors, objects and space as well as materials borrowed from myth and folklore in order to enact an encounter between a mage and a dragon. In the second scene, the organizers made use of scenes and motifs drawn from the canon of cultural memory (literary classics and the Bible) in order to weave a web of puzzles whose solving forms the game aspect of the larp event. The participants in the third scene, consciously or not, employed social stereotypes of identities in the role-playing of their fictional characters. Regarded as abstract systems of codes and conventions, these elements and materials constitute the cultural languages of role-play.

Role-play is a type of cultural bricolage

Role-play is a type of cultural *bricolage* (as per Genette 1982). Every text—both as a mode of expression and as a carrier of meaning—is created ad hoc, in a collaborative process of analysis: extracting elements from various already-constituted wholes; and synthesis: combining these heterogeneous elements into a new whole where none of them retains its original meaning and

function. The extracted sign-elements are reconfigured into new dynamic structures which are also conventional (sign) structures: the player's speech and gestures represent the character's speech and gestures; the player's props and costumes represent the character's appearance; fragments of physical space represent fictional space, etc. The difference or deviance from the original structures' form and sense are *figures of interpretation.* The study of interpretation is one possible approach to the study of larp culture. If we adopt the view of culture as *a system of meaning* (see e.g. Mayra 2008, p. 13), then it is precisely interpretations and the making of new meanings

> **The study of interpretation is one possible approach to the study of larp culture.**

that constitute the specifics of each larp culture. Even if we assume that the communicated explicit meanings are a particular case of meaning-making and much of the meaning or significance remains implicit or only indirectly apparent for an external observer (ibid., p. 14), studying the interpersonal aspects of the process is still worth the researcher's efforts, since it is they that make the fantasy *shared.*

Examining role-playing games as cultural systems (as per Fine 1983) implies that we should always place them within webs of cultural relations, in which each system element leads to other systems, other cultures, and other discourses. Nowadays, no-one takes for granted the homogeneity of a culture or the existence of a single language in which it is created, yet Ferdinand de Saussure's classical notion of systems is still useful, to remind us that nothing in culture exists separately, for itself only. Almost a century after the publication of *Cours de linguistique générale* (1916), linguistics still holds the view that meaning can exist only within a system, yet in the meantime, researchers have arrived at the conclusion that a system can exist only in relation to other systems, and that each discourse in the contemporary world is always a bricolage of discourses (see e.g. Collins 1989, pp. 65 – 89). In the postmodern information world, the relation of one cultural system or discourse to others is never clear in advance, or even predictable. In a mediated world where *access* is a key concept, the notion of boundaries is often reduced to an analytical tool. Larp cultures could completely obliterate existing boundaries and

distances between texts, genres and media, to turn into a bridge between or a common ground for different cultures. Natural languages probably serve to distinguish larp cultures from one another most clearly. Larp cultures, however, are a lot more closely connected by cultural languages. By studying their similarities and differences, we could discover whether there exist universal codes of larp cultures and where they originate: maybe from modern everyday life and social relationships, maybe from the Dungeons and Dragons gaming system, maybe from *The Lord of the Rings*, or literary classics, or mythology, or fairy-tales. It does not matter whether they function as perfect languages or break down into regional dialects; if we learn to identify them, we could peer at the horizons of imagination, shared within and across cultures.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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