Between Game Facilitation and Performance:
Interactive Actors and Non-Player Characters in Larps

Popular Abstract - The challenge of combining narrative and gameplay in live action role-playing games (larps) has been successfully negotiated with the use of runtime game mastering and interactive actors (ractors) performing non-player characters (NPC). Based on expert interviews six functions for the interactive actors (facilitating, content creation, character portrayal, entertaining, playing, safeguarding) are identified and explored. The paper also reviews existing literature on NPCs in larps, and goes on to offer design insights for runtime game mastering. In addition, certain practical aspects of separating non-player characters from the actors who perform them in pervasive games are considered.

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1.INTRODUCTION

Larps are a form of embodied and physical role-play, one where the participants pretend to be characters within a predefined context which is different from the everyday life.[2] There is a power structure in place that helps determine what is true within the fiction of the larp. Usually the larp organizers and their game masters have more control over the diegetic world. (Montola, 2012; Harviainen, 2012b; Brenne, 2005; Stenros, 2010; Mackay, 2001; Hakkarainen & Stenros, 2003).

Live action role-playing games (larps) combine narratives with gameplay. In these events the participants want to feel that they have an effect on how the events (i.e. the "story") unfold, yet they also want the resulting sequence of events to form a satisfying narrative. For the game designers, there is friction between crafting a satisfactory plot and ensuring player agency in narrative participatory fiction as the more closely a production follows pre-planned story structure, the less agency the player has (Peinado & Gervás, 2004; Jonsson et al., 2007; Jonsson & Waern, 2008). Although so called non-player character and interactive actors are common in larps, usually they are only discussed in passing in existing research literature. This study hopes to shed light on the matter.

In this paper the narrative challenges particular to larp are reviewed, and the possibilities offered by the use of interactive actors who perform non-player characters as part of runtime game

mastering are explored. The paper is primarily an interview study with interactive actors who have participated in one of two works of the Sweden-based The Company P that specializes in "participatory dramas". The paper offers possible design solutions based on the interviews, as well as observation, design evaluation and related literature. Six functions for the interactive actors are identified and explored. In addition, certain practical aspects of separating non-player characters from the actors who perform them in pervasive games are considered.

Janet H. Murray (1997, p.151) has postulated that "[p]erhaps the most successful model of combining player agency with narrative coherence is a well-run larp game." The analysis in this paper on the functions of ractors is not just documentation of a particular genre, but it has implications and relevance for helping to untangle some of the design challenges of narrative ludic events by exploring ways of negotiating story and game play, charting the experience of interactive actors, and helping understand how players negotiate the boundary between play and non-play by viewing events simultaneously as both.

First, previous research on this and closely related topics are discussed in order to frame the study. This is followed by a description of the methods and data used in the interview study. The heart of the article is the analysis of the functions of interactive actors based on the interviews, followed by an exploration of the boundary between the interactive actor and the non-player character performed. In the discussion section, the implications of the study are debated and contextualized to larps and games in general. Finally, the conclusions summarize the findings.

2. BACKGROUND

A common way to negotiate the challenge of balancing player agency and satisfactory narrative coherence is by limiting the options available to the players, and by fostering a false sense of agency. In digital games this is sometimes achieved through the use of a *forking path* the player may take through the game, or by providing an *open world* where the player can either pick her way through the forking paths of the plot by selecting missions, or explore the game world.[2] The problem with adapting the forking path approach to larps is that there is more than one player. Creating a net of interconnected forking paths for each player is

extremely difficult – unless the players are effectively treated as a single hive mind progressing though the game, as is common in alternate reality games (McGonigal, 2003), i.e ARGs (e.g. Martin et al., 2006; Montola et al., 2009, pp. 37-40), or by removing the interlinking of the forking paths and sacrificing game world coherence, as is common in MMORPGs.

Navigating the task of leaving certain events up to the players (either as a group or as interlinked individuals) and fostering a sense of agency in larp is slightly different. One way to overcome the challenge is to use *fate play* (Fatland, 2005). In fate play the player is instructed on how to act at one or a few specific times (e.g. after the dinner you confront your father, or declare your love to your fiancée when the woman in the blue dress leaves the room) and these fates form a net that drives the plot. Outside of them the character can do as she pleases, in the confines of the setting, the rules, and the character itself.

Weaving a web of fates is a complicated task, and it makes the structure partially visible to the players. It also means that the number of characters is set; if a character is removed the web may collapse and additional characters not tied to the web may feel disconnected from the game. Goals written into pre-created characters, even if they are not absolute commands in the form of fates, also form a net and thus any larp where characters have been created by the game organizers can be seen as a lighter version of fate play.

The challenge with the open world approach is more nuanced. A digital game is colloquially termed an open world or a sandbox fairly liberally; providing a little bit more world to explore and giving the players the freedom of choice regarding the order of carrying out missions is sometimes called a sandbox, whereas from the point of view of larps this just seems like a thematic amusement park. As said, in a larp the players can do anything not prohibited by the rules, setting, or character, and thus have much more affordances than in digital games, where all but the social inter-player affordances need to be implemented through code. In digital games open worlds tend to be just elaborate forking paths, whereas even non-pervasive larps require limitations for a coherent designer-initiated narrative to emerge. Thus if the game organizers do not want to use fate play or

pre-create characters, the alternative is very work intensive: *runtime game mastering*.

> "In order to perform runtime game mastering, three things are needed: a system for tracking and monitoring player activities and the events in their vicinity, a processing system which helps the game masters keep track of the input information and construct an overall picture of the ongoing event, and an actuating system which enables them to influence player activity." (Jonsson et al., 2006)

Though it is possible to use technology to aid with these tasks, it is usually much easier, faster, and robust for the game masters to use human agents (see e.g. Jonsson et al, 2006; 2007; Montola et al., 2009, Stenros et al., 2007a; Bichard & Waern, 2008).[3] In addition to the three requirements listed above, some form of narrative structure is also needed to help guide the situation. Even in special cases where a narrative is not the aim, rules that create a coherent world are needed.

2.1 NPCs and Ractors

The human agents that interact with players as part of runtime game mastering have been called non-player characters, instructed players, actors and interactive actors. All of the terms are problematic: Actor refers not just to one who does, but also to a person performing for an audience; non-player character refers to a diegetic role not inhabited by a player, yet they are usually portrayed by players – though with less agency; interactive actor and instructed player are both tautologous, as all actors are interactive and all players receive some

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instructions. These terms are understandable only in relation to an unnamed standard, an implied player or a normal actor.

The term non-player character originates in tabletop role-playing games. There it is used to refer to characters portrayed by the game master. It has since migrated to both digital games, where it denoted characters controlled by the game program,[4] and to larp, where it is used to refer to characters with less agency (i.e. controlled more by the game masters) than characters portrayed by average players.

NPC is thus, especially in larp, a relational term. All player characters receive instructions from the game organizers and unless the NPC is played by a game master there is player influence in its portrayal. The specific meaning of the term also varies between different larp cultures. For example some UK larpers consider all characters not created by the player herself as NPCs.[5] Often the distinction between a player character and an NPC is economic; playing an NPC can be cheaper than playing a PC. At times players also need to put in hours as an NPC; they play their primary character for most of the larp, but take a break at some point to play an adversarial NPC for the benefit of other players (cf. Stark, 2012).

Poor though these terms are, in this article I shall use the terms *ractor* (short for interactive actor) to refer to the person performing the function and playing, and *non-player character* (NPC) when referring to the position they hold within the diegesis on the game world. The term ractor was used by the production team at The Company P, and probably originates in Neal Stephenson's cyberpunk novel *The Diamond Age* (Murray, 1997, p.121)

2.2 Different aesthetics

Runtime game masters are a subset of game *facilitators*, which are common in numerous, especially non-digital, games (see Björk & Holopainen, 2005, pp.23-24; Stenros & Sotamaa, 2009). From the person who acts as the bank in *Monopoly* to croupiers and referees, maintaining the game system is an important task. Also, in simulations and simulation-like games there are people who are responsible for running the event (sometimes called *operators*, see Crookall et al., 1987). However, the ractor's job is different from these two facilitator functions in two ways: First, the ractor is not just following a set on instructions. Reducing her job to a simple flow chart would miss central elements, mostly because the ractor needs to respond to unexpected player contributions in a way that is logical and believable within the diegetic frame, and that keeps the game on the

right track. Second, the ractor is not only responsible for maintaining the game system and responding in a set way to the players' action, but she is supposed to provide believability, coherence and colour as well. The facilitator function is thus hidden inside a character, an independent part of the game world. In many cases there is also an aesthetic dimension to this, as the facilitating is made in a way that is invisible to the players, or in a way that the players can easily explain within the diegetic frame without having to resort to extra-diegetic motivations.

Similarly *actors* and *performers* are an integral part of participatory performances and theatre. A particularly relevant point of comparison can be found from the "cultural performances" staged in "living history" museums, such as Plimoth Plantation, where actor/historians portray historical figures (the "pilgrims" who escaped religious persecution in Europe and settled in what would one day become Massachusetts) in an everyday setting for the education and

> **The interview lengths varied from 30 to 100 minutes, averaging just below the 60 minute mark.**

entertainment of museum visitors (Snow, 1993; also Schechner, 1985, pp.79-91). However, there is a difference in comparison to the portrayal of non-player characters in larps, as in most performances there is an implicit assumption that it is *for* an audience. Even participatory theatre usually has severe limitations on what forms the player/viewer contributions can take. There is a major aesthetic difference between viewing the performance of the actors as the main thing – and awarding the players that status in a participatory experience (cf. Lancaster, 1999, pp.106-110; Stenros, 2010).[6] Even the pilgrims at Plimoth Plantation, whose portrayal involves a strong role-play component, are performed for an audience that is not part of the staged fiction.

In a rough way it is possible to differentiate between the core of a performance (what is represented and how skilfully), a narrative (the partially pre-planned sequence of events that form a satisfying whole) and play (the activity of playing, competing, collaborating and co-creating).

Though these are crude caricatures, they do communicate some of the expectations a participant has towards her experience.

Though conflicting, *Nordic larps* (Stenros & Montola, 2010) have found ways to successfully combine these three aesthetics, using for example first person audience to marry immersion, inter-immersion and performances that are partly only enacted for the self (Stenros, 2010), by using fate play and strong themes to guide plots (Fatland, 2005), by framing both winning and losing as successful play, for example though positive negative experiences (Montola, 2010; Hopeametsä, 2008) and so on. Managing player expectations and knowledge of the tradition help negotiate the friction between the varying expectations of performance, narrative and game. However, these techniques require that the player-participant is actively involved in the negotiation process. When a work is aimed at a more general audience, as is the case with the games analyzed below, audience members often have an expectation that more of the work is carried by the event organizers. Managing these expectations is part of what the ractors do.

3. METHODS AND DATA

This paper is primarily based on interviews with six people who have performed as interactive actors in larp/ARG hybrid *Conspiracy For Good*. These expert-interviews were conducted in four face-to-face settings. The interview lengths varied from 30 to 100 minutes, averaging just below the 60 minute mark.

The interviewees were chosen by the researcher based on their visibility to the players (the seven most prominent ractors were targeted, and all but one were interviewed successfully) and their self-identified expert backgrounds (two from each: larp/role-play, theatre, and neither). Two of the interviewees were women, four were men, and they hailed from the United States, United Kingdom, Jamaica and Sweden.

In addition, one ractor interview from larp/ARG hybrid *Sanningen om Marika* (Denward, 2011) was included in the sample (interview 7, female, Swedish). This interview, conducted for previous research (Stenros & Montola, 2011a) first via email and later in person, acted as the original impetus for this line of questioning. *Sanningen om Marika* was co-created by The Company P, which has a

history of using Nordic larp derived methods in works aimed at a larger audience. Once they announced a new project using similar ractor techniques, *Conspiracy For Good*, ractors were identified as a topic of interest in the its research. This paper concentrates on this one aspect of *CFG*, others have been explores previously elsewhere (Stenros et al., 2011; also Stenros & Montola, 2010b).

All interviews, aside from the one email interview, were semi-structured, and later transcribed by a professional agency. The interview topics, as well as the interpretation of the interviews, were influenced by the researcher's long-term experiences with participatory studies of pervasive larps. For example *CFG* was studied by a team that followed the production and running of the game, conducted participatory observation, played the game, and conducted interviews and an online survey with the players (Stenros et al., 2011). The author has also previously participated in a pervasive larp called *Momentum* as a character that helped runtime game mastering (see Stenros et al., 2007a).

This study is exploratory in nature. Mentions relating to interactive acting and game mastering were identified in the resulting text documents, and these mentions were sorted with open coding. The interviews, rich in data partially due to the variance in the tasks performed, are analyzed qualitatively to produce a picture of how ractors are used by this particular production company and in this particular gaming culture. Seven interviews and two productions are not enough to make sweeping general claims. However, when data from other sources support the findings, this is pointed out. It should be noted that as an ARG/larp hybrid *CFG* is *not* a typical larp in terms of, for example, production, financing, player base, employed technology, or advertising. Most importantly for the current discussion, it targeted a more mainstream audience and employed ractors with no background in role-playing. While this makes it a particularly interesting target for this kind of investigation due to the spectrum it provides (how different approaches employed by ractors worked, how to manage player expectations when numerous players are unfamiliar with the game genre etc.), these very differences mark it apart from, for example, a more typical Nordic larp production.

4. FUNCTIONS OF AN INTERACTIVE ACTOR

Ractors who perform non-player characters may be called upon to carry out numerous different tasks as demanded by the actions of the live, co-present group of players who contribute and even co-create – and as demanded by the game design and the runtime game mastering. The core of their work is to portray a character (or at least a caricature or a role) that serves a narrative or ludic purpose, and that task cannot be completely disconnected from facilitating, content creation, entertaining and playing. Not all ractors perform all of these functions, but this is the scope of their possible functions.

> "The big difference between being a ractor and being just a normal stage or movie actor is that you are constantly exposed to your audience, and they are always going to push and pull the story in directions that you can never fully control. Nor should you control them: A great part of the charm of interactive drama is that the players feel like they are making the decisions - even when they are not. So being a ractor on the field is actually a lot more like being a table top game master, softly trying to manipulate the players to follow the adventure track you have laid out for them." (Ractor 7, email interview)

In the following these different facets of the work the ractor may be asked to perform are identified. The division presented here emerged in the coding. Some of the functions have been discussed elsewhere previously, while others are less typical in literature. Notice how the functions of a ractor as a content creator, entertainer and as a safeguard are grounded in the division between performers and an audience, whereas the functions of playing and facilitating are more grounded in a view of playing together. Character portrayal is torn between the two.

4.1 Facilitating

A major function of the ractor is to facilitate playing through *runtime game mastering*. They do their best to ensure that players find the relevant clues, stay on track, do not get bogged down with irrelevant details, keep the time-table, do not start fighting amongst themselves (more than is entertainingly dramatic), ensure that relevant

technology is working, and come up with workarounds if it is not, stay in contact with the game mastering headquarters and so on.

> [I]f you have 85 to 100 people on the roof of a building and you're trying to tell a story that everybody can understand but also participate in, you need to have people on the ground floor saying this isn't working, this is working, here's how fast we can get people from point A to point B. And if nothing else, you have timing. It's more of a choreographer than it is game mastering. (Ractor 2)

Runtime game mastering, at least for a large group of players, is usually carried on by a team, and task division is important. *Pacing*, timing the game events, came up as an important facet of the ractors

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task list in the interviews, confirming earlier research (e.g. Bichard & Waern, 2008; Jonsson et al., 2007). The ractor is the eyes, ears and hands of the game mastering team, but she usually lacks the bird's eye view. When the playing is at its most active, the ractor usually cannot contact the headquarters (due to e.g. lack of time or restriction on breaking character); she is on her own and must make the relevant decision based on the game design (cf. Crabtree et al., 2004).

NPCs often *mentor* the players. They teach game mechanics, facts about the game world, and exemplify the story logic relevant for the experience, and lead by example. In essence the mentor characters show instead of just telling. They set the tone of the game, established the limits of expected and tolerated behaviour, and provide a social alibi by doing possibly embarrassing tasks as an example.[7]

> "[The ractor character] was doing the same journey as the participants, but he knew slightly more, so if someone didn't follow the story completely, he would be there to help them. (Ractor 1)

> Remember that most people are really, really genuinely afraid of behaving weird in public places, and in the presence of strangers […]. So you need to lead by example. What you do is usually what they perceive is the "limit" of allowed behavior in game. The more you do, the more they dare to do. But don't take over. Find some excuse to leave as soon as you think them competent to handle the situation." (Ractor 7, email)

Kurt Lancaster (1999, pp.33-41) has documented that in a US-based larp from 1990 the game master could, in addition to using NPCs, narrate events and mentor extra-diegetically. In *CFG* all mentoring and example setting were done diegetically, even the instructions on how to play the game and how the game mechanics functioned were given by NPCs in accordance with the diegetic world.

> "Know your mythos, and know your character inside and out. When you're in the field, there is no one there to give you your line if your mind goes blank when someone asks you what your mother's maiden name was, or in what psychiatric clinic your friend was locked up, or whatever it is that people might think to ask you. But keep in mind that you only need to know the stuff that your character *would* know, and that most of that stuff isn't important, as long as you stick to the same story every time you tell it. Don't be afraid to improvise, leave stuff open so you can fill it in as you go." (Ractor 7, email, emphasis in original)

Knowing the game design thoroughly (the mythos, the plot, the character, the mechanics, the timetable etc.) is imperative, if the ractor is portraying a central character (cf. Snow, 1993, pp.124-132). A well-prepared ractor may even change element of the game design on the fly, if unforeseen player actions prompt her. However, this is hardly a requirement for all NPCs; some NPCs are more like functions. They only carry out tasks given by the game masters, like pointing the player-characters in the right direction.

One of the challenges is unforeseen player ideas. The ractor needs to be able to think on her feet and steer the game. Sometimes this means coaxing the players towards certain outcomes, teaching how to

use certain hardware, or even making sly changes in the overall story.

> "The hardest part has been answering up to questioning, when people come up with a greater plan than the one you had already. And you can't really let them go through with it." (Ractor 1)

Sometimes when a player presents an unforeseen elegant solution to a problem, the ractor can adopt it and act accordingly. However, at times incorporating player initiatives simply is not feasible. Rejecting those ideas while maintaining believability is one of the hardest challenges a ractor meets.

Managing expectations and communicating the logic of the game and its genre are also key issues in guiding player contributions towards ideas that are easier to incorporate. However, if a work welcomes player contributions there is a risk of getting some contributions that do not fit the whole.

Ractors may also be *undercover*. Though usually the non-player characters are relatively easy to spot even if they are not announced in any way, it is also possible to use ractors as *plants*, to have ractors who pretend to be just "normal players" and use them to steer the game. Finally, ractors perform seemingly menial *supporting tasks* (repair the technology, cook food) that are important for the running of the game and the well-being of the players. Also, sometimes ractors simply report what the players are doing to the game mastering headquarters (Stenros et al., 2007a). Though not proper ractors unless they portray characters, such members of the support staff do share the facilitation function on the ground level.

4.2 Content creator

In production terms the ractor *creates content* for the participants. Portraying a character online is very much a performance in *writing*, however in face-to-face real-time interactions the ractor is usually not performing her character based on a strict script with pre-written dialogue. *Improvisation* takes over. Even when the same person is portraying the same character both online and offline (i.e. produces both the character's bodily presence and her textual output) these are very different functions.

> "In the game design, I consider that it's about realizing what will take people time,

what will let people have fun, what makes it dynamic and pervasive, what can you interact with and just not consume. As a writer, you're good at writing stuff that people can read afterwards that is slightly less interactive, I think." (Ractor 1)

Though some games have used a relatively strict pre-written scrip also for the live action events (e.g. Bichard & Waern, 2008), *CFG* opted for a less structured approach. Script can be helpful even when there is less structure; it is possible to write pieces of dialogue, standard utterances for a character, or monologues that hopefully can be delivered organically when a moment arises. However, the importance of listening and reacting to player action is paramount.

> "As far as interacting with other people, improvisation becomes hard when you don't listen and when you don't hear what's being said to you, because then, if you're busy trying to think about what you're going to say back. You can't write a conversation that's happening. You need to have the conversation." (Ractor 2)

> "Even if it's scripted it's still freestyling." (Ractor 6)

A central factor is the choice of media, or rather, stage. Online the NPCs can have blogs and videoblogs, use various web forums, Twitter, Facebook and IRC, be available through email, instant messenger and Skype.[8] Some of these are asynchronous channels, others work in real-time. If the portrayal of a character is divided, it is not uncommon to do it along the line of synchronous/ asynchronous – and it is possible to have a team that puts together a character's responses (cf. Stenros & Montola, 2011a). However, in live street events (and video calls) the ractor must improvise. When a ractor performs a character without the safety net of the rest of the production team, the work changes:

> "It has been very different though when I've been at the events and when I've been online. Online I've felt a lot more that I've been game mastering and trying to keep the continuity of everything. But at the events I've very much been feeling that I've been playing as much as I have been game mastering." (Ractor 1)

It must also be stressed, that the sheer physicality of the ractors in a live situation adds an element not present online. Online play is more cerebral, centring on mental or social puzzles, and although there is a physical element for example in mastering a digital game such as the mobile phone games used in *CFG*, the difference to interacting with an intimidating representative of a security team is different.

> "As a gaming experience for them, I think there's something really exciting for [the players] to be involved in a game where they're actually having a physical duel with a performer in a way, rather than an intellectual one." (Ractor 3)

Some of the ractors reported witnessing visceral player reactions (e.g. sweating, shaking). A game does not need to be physical to have a physical effect on its player (see Montola, 2010), but visceral gameplay and perceived physical threat certainly can help achieve it. The co-presence of another human being has an effect in itself. The players seem less distances and less critical when faced with an actual human being.

4.3 Character

The interviewed ractors also drive the narrative. Facilitation, content creation and character portrayal are all part of the narrative project, but the character – due to its diegetic nature – sits at the core. The character a ractor portrays is built around the functional needs identifies by the game masters.

The ractors in *CFG* can roughly be divided into two groups based on how they constructed their experiences: those who had an acting background and those who had a background in (live action) role-playing games.[9] Role-players approached the character as a totality with an inner life, goals, hopes and personal quirks. Inhabiting the character was seen as important and the character was usually built (or tailored) around the ractor's own personality. For them, understanding the fictional world, its history, and logic (i.e. the mythos) was also important, as that helps them improvise in a situation as they will be able to understand and anticipate how their actions fit in the larger picture.

> "Yeah, I mean it is kind of blurry in the sense that I think you spend hours with people, and you'd be online or then now in

person, that no matter how much of a character you are, you're not going to stop being you. It could be a layer on a layer on a layer, but there's still the core of who you are." (Ractor 2)

> "The only way to deal with [players coming up with unexpected ideas] is to really know your mythos like the back of your hand, so that you feel free to improvise and invent new stuff at the drop of a hat." (Ractor 7, email interview)

The theatre ractors emphasized methods of acting and built a performance conceived of as judged by the player-audience. A consistent portrayal of a character, or its inner life was not important. Too much knowledge – even about the character they are portraying – will hinder the improvisation.

> "I think it's important that we don't get briefed too much. If you become briefed too much, then when you're confronted with an improvised scenario, it becomes very difficult to break out of the brief. [… S]ome of it's part-scripted, some of it's part-improvised, and often the improvised bits are more liberating in some way, as long as you're disciplined within the scenario." (Ractor 3)

The ractors with an improvisation background tended to consider themselves as performing tasks and fulfilling functions. Ractor 3 noted: "We were given a brief, and we just follow it as though it's an order from the boss." Role-players are more accustomed to thinking about the game design, whereas improvisational actors are more focused on the experience of the player-audience present in that moment. For them it is not a problem that the character they portray is one thing for one viewer and another for someone else, as long as the resulting scenes are good. From a role-playing point of view this is abhorrent, as it is possible that the players will discuss the character and discover a discontinuity. Indeed, larpwright Eirik Fatland (2012) has noted that one of the fundamentals of larp is that "[p]layers can be separated from each other, and still maintain the same fiction when they meet again."

Also, the role is important for the role-player. It can be tweaked on the fly, but the essence should not change.[10] For the improviser a strict character is a

hindrance which may prevent ideas from being used. Obviously even the ractors with an improvisation background had structure ("the scenario").

There was a third group of ractors as well; those who had neither a background in role-playing nor in improvisational theatre. They played characters that were basically fictionalized versions of their everyday personas. See below for more on this group.

As finding a person who is both an accomplished improvisational actor and has an eye towards game mastering is difficult, a division of NPC types and the matching ractor profiles developed. The role-players were cast in roles that required game mastering skills, understand what can and cannot be done, what can and cannot be changed on the fly, whereas the improvisational actors were cast in roles that sought to entertain.

> "You need a large (-) and extensive improvisation acting background, I think. Also, it would have been very hard to do if I hadn't been so deeply involved in the project and in the creation of the project that I always had the mandate to change things on the fly. I couldn't really have, even if I hired an actor who could do the job, that actor couldn't have had the mandate at the time to change the things that I've been changing continuously throughout the process." (Ractor 1)

> "And we tried to look for another actress, but then eventually we realized that there's nobody else who can do this, there's nobody else who is so much, I mean, tuned into this whole story." (Ractor 7)

Understanding the production, its limits, genre, scope and logic, is very important. Bringing in an actor not familiar with the project to play a role that requires game mastering is difficult and requires a lot of briefing. This has a tendency to lead to a number of the game designers playing pivotal NPC roles.

> "And more importantly it saved us time, because we didn't have to brief somebody on the in-depth back story on who they are and why they know things, and why they don't know certain things." (Ractor 2)

The downside is that using people who are already involved in the project add to the already large workload, these people are rarely trained actors and they cannot be chosen for a specific character (e.g. have the correct accent), but it is more common to build a character around them.

Finally, there is the issue of breaking character. Though most ractors perform non-player characters continuously and do not address game participants as anything other than as their characters, players – especially if they do not have clear characters to play – may attempt to move the ractor from the diegetic *frame* (Goffman, 1974, pp. 40-82; Fine, 1983, pp.181-204; Stenros et al., 2007b) to the frame of gameplay. Sometimes this is done just to test the ractor, to see if she is able to

> **In some cases the ractors have made a conscious choice to not know too much about the missions they are on, in order to be on equal footing with the players – and in order to play**

maintain character (cf. Snow, 1993, p.71), but it can also be done accidentally. After all, the characters fill numerous functions, and these functions operate on different levels (e.g. within the diegesis, on the level on game facilitation).

> "Yeah, they tried to break character, quite a few people tried to do that. If it was on a low level, I would usually just stay in character, and I would try to ignore out-of-character comments or out of game comments. And that worked really well, people caught on to that very fast and they stopped using out of character things. But at the same time, when people had serious questions that my character couldn't answer and I realized it was important, then I would tell them, I would tell people things that was out of my character. Like for example where should I leave my phone back or whatever." (Ractor 1)

> "In game time, the players, really hardcore players stay in-game the whole time, in character. But there are some people who are new to this, realize this is a game, and will snap in and out of character. And they'll come up to you and ask you a question that's a very much out of

character question. But the brilliant thing is we can give this broad answer that fits for both our real life and for our character. The characters are modelled after us. We don't have to break game to talk to people who do break game." (Ractor 6)

The design ideal is that a ractor never breaks character. If the only way to address a character is by doing so with the fictional framework, this contributes to the shared pretend play:[11]

> "As a game character: *Never go off game in front of players*. If there is a need to explain that this is just a game, let someone else explain it. Don't ever do it yourself as this will present the opportunity to "off game" with you at any moment. Being completely in game all the time will encourage them to take the world you've built seriously, force them to interact with you in game - as that is the *only* way to interact with you." (Ractor 7, email, emphasis in original)

In practice ractors do sometimes break character, or experience moments where they are unsure if they have broken character (cf. Snow, 1993, p.223, note 3). Lack of clear, articulated boundaries of play can make this particularly difficult.

4.4 Entertainer
The ractor entertains the players. By playing parts that would not be enjoyable or meaningful for a player, and parts required by the game design but which cannot be given to players, she provides structure. The supporting roles are usually mostly functional, but portraying key characters, e.g. the antagonists, provides a site for outrageous performances. In the production meetings it was noted again and again that players love a good villain.

As *CFG* was aimed at a relatively general audience, many participants (especially in the earlier live events) did not so much role-play than just play a game. For those participants the ractors were very much like the aforementioned actor/historians at Plimoth Plantation (Snow, 1993), performers who facilitated their playing and entertained them. Such participants embraced a position more as an audience than as fully participating players.

In addition, if there are breaks in the game in some way, for example a story beat needs to be pushed back, or the technology breaks down, someone needs to keep the players engaged and entertained. The goal is to foster the community of players, with possibly providing new content or add simple game design elements.

> "[T]here was like two weeks when I didn't have much story to tell, so I basically attempted to maintain the people we had hooked from the beginning with, simple leads in the chat room, videos and telling little bits of stories and giving clues, which people I think are just now starting to be like oh, you actually said something that was pertinent." (Ractor 2)

4.5 Player
The ractor employs dual vision while playing and performing (cf. Fine 1983; Mackay 2001, pp.63-118). She is aware both of the events within the diegesis, but also considers the implications of the events of the game design and the project overall.

> "So, during most of the time I was just, you know, in [character] mode. Of course I mean, I was a game master too, so I did all of that stuff. But I was still in that mindspace where I interpreted everything that came to me in the way that [the character] would've." (Ractor 7)

The players, especially the ones who understand this type of games and have played them before, also have this kind of a dual vision, viewing events both as part of a game and from an external point of view. However, the ractor is attempting to not just see the situation in two lights, but to construct it on two levels.

The game mastering part is covered above, but the element of play within the diegesis should not be forgotten either. Though ractors are mostly concerned with facilitating the experience of others, they also get (and should get) carried away by the playing.

> "[Performing my character is] like the most fun game of dress-up you can imagine. It's, I mean, the only thing that's cooler than that is actually I guess going undercover and being somebody else, and having nobody know you're somebody and just

believing you, because this gives you the caveat where people, you get a little bit of leeway." (Ractor 2)

In some cases the ractors have made a conscious choice to not know too much about the missions they are on, in order to be on equal footing with the players – and in order to play. Obviously there are cases where such an attitude does not work, but in a large production not everyone needs to know the intricacies of each task.

"And he says "The whole time we were trying to figure out the puzzle, you knew, didn't you? You were standing there and you knew." […] Half the time I'm like yeah, I was just waiting for you guys to find it. Or the version where I'm like actually it was just true some of the time, actually I make it a point to not know some of the things as far the answers. I know what the puzzles are going to going to be, I don't know how they're solved. So if I actually get involved and they say can you help, I most certainly will try to help." (Ractor 2)

This has parallels with how researchers participate in games as players. If a researcher has access to the game production, she can easily have deeper knowledge about a game's design than a player. Staying silent and trying not to guide the playing in any relevant way is important, as a participant observer is not researching her own play (see Stenros et al., 2012). Yet the experience of play can be very important for her in understanding not just the game but also the experiences reported by the players. Thus choosing to not know everything in advance can be a relevant course of action also for a researcher.

4.6 Safeguard

The questions of authenticity and believability are complex when dealing with a piece of genre fiction played physically in a public space. The ractors need to track numerous variables in all interactions with the players: Does the interaction feel authentic? Does it fit the expectations of the genre? Does it serve the game? Is the character I am portraying internally consistent? However, these game experience questions need to be weighted against issues of safety. Is the activity safe for the participants? How will the interaction be perceived

by the bystanders? How to stop situations from escalating out of control?

"There were certain boundaries put in place obviously, and talk of escalation, because it's a public arena. On one level you prepare as you would any kind of performance work, but it's got to be more open-ended. You can't start asking yourself psychological questions, like, well, this guy comes to me, my character would do that, stuff like that. That cannot happen. So, preparation is more preparing yourself as a human being rather than as a character. […Y]ou make your own decisions based on safety and appropriate behaviour. […] So what we do, because we have a background in martial arts as well, so there was a confluence between what we can do physically and appropriate behaviour for those particular young people. So we dealt with them physically, safely but also in an exciting way." (Ractor 3)

The organizers of pervasive larps cannot guarantee the safety of the players (Montola et al., 2009), but that does not mean that they should ignore safety either. Especially in commercial productions such as *CFG* there is also the ever looming issue of liability, usually negotiated with wordy legal waivers players must sign before play commences.

"Depends what city you're in, but some towns have higher restrictions of health and safety. And health and safety can kill a project like this." (Ractor 3)

In *CFG* the ractors with a background in improvisation de-prioritized the internal coherence of their characters, but that still left numerous other interconnected and conflicting considerations. The players wanted a believable experience, but a safe one. It is possible to stage a situation where a security guard threatens players in a way that is believable on the surface, but where no actual threat to the players exists. However, doing that in a way that communicates the lack of threat also to the bystanders is very hard, at least unless the game is not marked clearly as a game or a performance. This was not done is *CFG*, and many bystanders mistook the fictional security guards for real ones.

"And I found the perception of us [private security guard characters], especially over the last two events, their perception actually became us. So all the security guards around here thought we were security guards. The drug dealers thought we were undercover police. [My co-ractor] and I apprehended one of the players, he was an Asian guy, started looking through his bag. And several of the Asian restaurant owners came, come and search us, don't you dare, they thought we were undercover police. "(Ractor 4)

At one point in the game actual police did show up. The security guard ractors took off their mirror shades and walked up to the police. They explained the situation (the production had all the relevant permissions for putting on a game-performance in that area), but in a way that for those who did not hear their discussion, it seemed like a standard situation of guards chatting with cops (cf. Goffman, 1963, esp. p.91, 178). This they did in order to ensure authenticity – also, they did not want to look like clownish pretend-rent-a-cops in the eyes of the bystanders who mistook them for real security personnel.

The ractors were also conscious of the trapping of the power they pretended to have and mention this as yet another thing one need to be mindful of. In one of the events bystanders had complained to actual security guards about the number of security personnel in the area.

"What they were complaining about, and what they weren't pleased about was they didn't like the police presence in the area. They found it intimidating, the police presence, which was us. Not one person said there's two guys running around upsetting people. They said they don't like these police presence, we don't know who these people are, but it's making us all feel very uncomfortable. So we really were whatever we were supposed to be, which is very shady as it is, for the whole time we were around here." (Ractor 4)

On the one hand this shows, as Ractor 3 noted in the interview, that pervasive games highlight the frictions and problems in a society. On the other hand it can be questioned if it is acceptable to stage these kinds of games in a public setting if it upsets

the bystanders. As *CFG* was produced by Nokia, everything was done in adherence to laws and regulations, and the bystanders were not harassed in any direct way, but the game did seem to make numerous bystanders uneasy. Striking the correct balance is a challenge.

5. CHARACTERS AND ACTORS

Two additional issues relating to the boundary between ractors and the NPCs they perform emerged in the interviews. These boundary issues do not fit under general functions of ractors, but relate to the specific situation of portraying a character inspired by the actor and to the ownership of the NPC. For a game designer NPCs are design tools, created to fill functional needs.

"My character came about I think just maybe three weeks before the launch […] when we realized that we needed one of us that could always be online. […] And it was, (-) realized that it would be impossible to hire someone from the outside to work on those basis." (Ractor 1)

The game designer identifies the functions a character needs to fill and, with perhaps an eye towards who will play the character, fleshes out the NPC. Role-player ractors use detailed characters whereas improvisational ractors prefer character sketches. Although the persona of a character may be just filling to keep the functional parts together, as play takes over, these parts may acquire a larger importance. It is in play that the character becomes.

5.1 Playing yourself

In pervasive games that blur the line between the fictional story world and the real world, it is not uncommon to create characters based on their actors, to the point that the characters and the actors have the same name and background. In *CFG* there were two such characters and in *Sanningen om Marika* there was one (Stenros & Montola, 2011a; 2011b). The reasoning behind this design choice is believability and the resulting seamless experience. Though seemingly these actors are playing themselves, they are always fictionalized versions with characteristics added that their players do not associate with themselves (e.g. braver, more outgoing, able to code, single).

"It's definitely a separate character. My character's a lot bolder and a lot more confrontational and not as careful as my

real-life character is. […] But my character, I definitely feel there's more of a different (-) here that's between my character and my actual self. For example, my character definitely wouldn't be married. She never mentions a husband and travels much." (Ractor 6)

Having "fictionalized real people" adds an interesting flavour to a production. It does enhance the seamlessness when it is possible for a player to go online and read up on a character on a "real" website. However, playing yourself means you need to be more mindful of setting limits for the playing, as the limits created by a character are missing in some senses.

"Know what the goal is, know what the limits are, I mean what are you willing to do, what are you not willing to do. Decide that beforehand. And most importantly, know when it ends. I mean, set the boundaries beforehand. Because once you get sucked into it, it's very easy to just let everything go." (Ractor 7)

A further complication is created if the gameplay is recorded. Whilst the participants who are present at an event are aware that a game is played and thus regular rules and norms are transformed, once the proceedings are filmed, they can become recontextualized in a way that the original playful framing is lost.

"I was just playing me and I refused to change [laughs]. I was like no way am I doing this scene like this, no. I wouldn't do it, and the character [has my name]. You know what I mean? And my friends will watch this. It's hard to follow the story obviously just in these blogs and they're like "What are you doing?"" (Ractor 5)

In addition to having fictionalized real people, these games also feature fictional characters one can have a real relationship with. All these *simulacrum people* make parasocial relationship more complex and possibly more interesting (cf. Stenros & Montola, 2011a).

5.2 Character ownership
It is not uncommon for a simulacrum person to not be controlled by a single person. The character's actions can be plotted by game designers and the

asynchronous communication written by a writer, while video messages and live events are handled by an actor. However, sometimes key characters are given to specific persons, mostly to ensure that someone is intimately familiar with that character's backstory – and everything that has happened to her – even if that means that the character cannot be available 24 hours a day.

"It was finding the balance between the cool thing in interacting with a character at the same time as keeping up the availability of the character." (Ractor 1)

As the online part of *CFG* started to gather more players from around the world, characters owned and portrayed by Europe-based ractors were not enough. Ractors needed to be recruited from other time zones as well. In *CFG* numerous key characters were handled by specific performers, as that was perceived as a cool feature, one that fosters the believability and authenticity of the experience. Indeed, when players who have interacted with a character online first meet a character face-to-face, it is not uncommon for the players to 'test' actors, to find out if the seams of the production show.

"It's like when certain people first meet you, like the ones that I've been seeing online, they test you a little bit. They give you that little side-eye, and when they talk to you and you respond in character, they all sort of start to smile. And so you know they're kind, and then they'll ask you some questions, but they won't do it in character, they'll test you to see if you know, kind of thing." (Ractor 2)

Ensuring character ownership can be cumbersome, yet it does help in fostering parasocial relationship between player and characters. Although fostering individual connections between NPCs and players can be time-consuming, it is a key aspect of the form of pervasive larp. Obviously such connections cannot be established with all players. However, the players pulled in by the game can be harnessed as sort of *ambassadors*, expert players who navigate between new incoming player and the game organizers.

6. DISCUSSION
Players are aware that they are playing a game and that they are interacting with actors (to the point

that they sometimes mistake other players for interactive actors, see Stenros et al., 2011). They may not comprehend the total game design, but they are willing to play not just the game, but with the design and the game organizers, trying the limits of the game and the ractors. Trying to pinpoint the boundaries of a game can become a game in itself.

The players are aware of the friction between narrative and agency. Part of learning to play these kinds of games is to understand what parts the players can influence and what they cannot. Yet some players want to push those boundaries – and the game organizers often also wish to craft an experience that gives players a much larger sense of agency than what they actually have. The task of the ractor – and the runtime game masters – is usually to take the player from story point A to story point B in a way that seems organic, logical, and unforced – while keeping the game moving, the player entertained, the world coherent and the player safe.

However, the task of negotiating the friction between narrative and agency does not rest on just

> **Part of learning to play these kinds of games is to understand what parts the players can influence and what they cannot.**

the ractors' shoulders. The players do their part. A central consideration in larps and similar embodied, participatory and co-creative endeavours is the difference between *aesthetics of spectating* and *aesthetics of action* (Stenros, 2010; MacDonald, 2012). As participants are not just an audience expecting to be entertained, the dynamic between the event creator and the participant changes. In doing the participant becomes co-creator, and what she appreciates is not just what she perceive as being performed, but what she herself contributes. And as has been shown repeatedly, many players actively try to work towards fostering a coherent, shared encounter – even when there are obvious discontinuities or technological problems (e.g. Drozd et al., 2001; see also Aylett & Louchart, 2003). However, the participant needs to understand her role in the proceedings for this to work. Clear rules and clearly articulated line between play and non-play help (cf. Murray, 1997, p.106). Otherwise the player

can be confused – or preoccupied with finding the border.

As *CFG* was not targeted on role-players, as typical larps are, but on a more general audience, participants adopted positions in relation to the ractors. Some approached the ractors as actors who entertained and performed for them, but avoiding direct interaction as that was expected to happen in accordance with the fiction, while others adopted a more ludic position, challenging the game, addressing the NPCs in a diegetically coherent fashion, and even role-playing (cf. Stenros et al., 2011b). Though the ractors were instructed to treat all participants in the same manner, the participants' option of partaking as an audience member who also plays, or as a player-contributor effectively positions *CFG* in an interesting intersection between participatory theatre and larping (cf. Snow, 1993).

The friction between player agency to affect the story and the game organizer goal of creating a satisfactory narrative in larps can be addressed in practice with interactive actors and the non-player characters that they perform. The ractor functions

> **The friction between player agency to affect the story and the game organizer goal of creating a satisfactory narrative in larps can be addressed in practice with interactive actors and the non-player characters that they perform.**

identified in this paper, especially if they can be further confirmed in other, more typical, larps, can help understand not only gameplay/story dilemma, but help in making the continuum of co-creation more visible.

Players and game organizers both wield power to determine what takes place in a role-playing game, how the co-creation works, but this power in not evenly distributed. For example Montola (2012) and Mackay (2001) have offered theoretical models on this power structure. The functions identified in this paper as belonging to the ractors offer a concrete view of how that power is used in practise. The ractors are one of the concrete ways in which the runtime game masters direct larps (cf. Jonsson et al., 2006). However, the players – especially more experienced players – can also

employ all of these functions while participating. Instead of highlighting the difference between player participants and ractors we can look at this as a continuum. The player participants also are aware of the larp on number of levels (i.e. see it in different frames), can see how a storyline is developing and guess how it could be improved, improvise their character portrayals and new plots, entertain fellow players and are aware of safety considerations (e.g. Hansen 2010; Harviainen 2012a; Pohjola, 2011). By concentrating on ractors, who de-prioritize the playing of the game to facilitating it, strategies that all players can use have been rendered visible.

Larps are different from many other types of story-oriented games in that they offer more agency to the player. The human controlled facilitation of playing that runtime game mastering offers enables dynamic story changes. Though the findings in this paper relate to larp, they can help in contextualizing similar challenges in other types of role-playing games, MMOGs, and other story-oriented games.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has explored using interactive actors in non-player character roles in a live action role-playing game as a solution to negotiating the friction between crafting a satisfactory, pre-designed dramatic arc, and the agency of the co-creative player-participant. The functions a ractor needs to be able to fill and some of the challenges of performing and playing an NPC were explored through a qualitative interview study of interactive actors.

Six types of functions were identified: facilitation, content creation, character work, entertaining, playing and safeguarding. All ractors need not perform all of these roles, and indeed characters are tailored not just for the tasks needed, but also with an eye towards the performer. These functions can be broken down to sub-classes; for example facilitation includes runtime game mastering, mentoring and support work. The background of a ractor has a big impact on the way these functions are filled: ractors with a role-playing background for example tend to do their character work in a role-play paradigm, whereas ractors with a background in improvisational theatre see the character more as a shell and a vessel than a fully-fledged persona. Role-playing paradigm is also associated with the game mastering function,

whereas theatre background is a good fit for entertaining. The context where a character is performed is also important; content creation for a character online is a writing task whereas similar work in a live physical game event is based on improvising.

Finally, the article discussed the border between play and non-play by considering the relationship between the ractor and the character she plays. It was noted that the players also contribute to upholding the coherence of the game world and their experience.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Often the context, or setting, is fantastic, speculative or historical. Even larps that take place in the here and now differ in that within the diegetic setting the participants are not who they usually are.

[2] For a discussion of digital games and narratives, and the procedurality thereof, see Murray (1997, pp.65-94).

[3] In digital theatre runtime game masters have been called *drama managers* (Lancaster, 1999, p.117; Aylett & Louchart, 2003).

[4] When discussing digital games the functions of NPCs can be similar to embodied and performed NPCs (cf. Pinchbeck, 2009; Bartle, 2003; Lankoski & Björk, 2007; Lankoski, 2010), but it is more common that it is the technical implementation of NPCs (such as models of behaviour and artificial intelligence) that is scrutinized (e.g. Johansson et al., 2011).

[5] I am indebted to Nathan Hook for this observation.

[6] Grotowski's paratheatre (cf. Schechner, 1985) and certain types of applied theatre (cf. Blatner & Wiener, 2007), such as fully participatory murder mysteries (Curtis & Hensley, 2007), are an exception. They have been staged just for the participants.

[7] See Mackay (2001, pp.92-98) for an analysis of how game masters wield power in tabletop role-playing games. It is not directly applicable to larp/ARG hybrids as Mackay is aware (Note 57), but provides an interesting perspective.

[8] Obviously there are numerous other channels on the internet as well, but sticking to the more official ones and shying away from sites such as the anonymous imageboard 4chan lowers the risk of *game-jacking*.

[9] Obviously there are numerous traditions of role-playing and acting, and this is a broad generalization. The role-players interviewed mostly had a background in Nordic larp and the actors were London-based and schooled in a particular strand of improvisation. Other acting traditions, such as the actor/historians at Plimoth Plantation, would probably adopt a strategy closer to the role-players (cf. Snow, 1993), as might Stanislavskian method actors.

[10] There are schools of though on how important the absolute coherence of a character is (for an extreme view, see Pohjola 2000). Even with the role-player rhetoric the NPC is primarily a game design tool and seemingly incongruous behaviour can usually be rationalized and explained later.

[11] It is interesting to compare this to the ideal in classic theatre to not to acknowledge the audience in any way (e.g. Howell, 2000).

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