International Journal of Role-Playing

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Editorial
Special Issue: Living Games

Welcome to Issue 7 of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*.

Legends in role-playing games are born in play. But others are created thanks to the confluence of ideas and people. The Living Games Conference 2016 is one such legend: a conference held in Austin, Texas on May 19-22, 2016. The 4-day series of lectures, experimental workshops, games, and exciting social events marked a watershed in live-action role-playing (larp) discourse. Experts, organizers, enthusiasts, and designers from around the world found common ground between them to advance more ambitious thinking and projects related to role-playing. Living Games was a place for different scenes and aesthetic ideals to co-mingle and find expression: for boffer larpers to collaborate with freeform role-players, for theatre-style players to exchange ideas with simulation experts. Dialogue between theorists and practitioners wishing to advocate for larp and innovate the form were particularly encouraged; *Sharing Insights* was indeed the theme of the conference. As a result, a body of correspondingly diverse scholarship has emerged from Living Games.

This special issue of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*, a publication dedicated to bringing together divergent threads of RPG scholarship, is devoted to the work collected and presented at the Living Games Conference 2016. These six papers represent many sub-disciplines, although virtually all use social science qualitative and quantitative methods. Rather than pursuing a laser-like focus, the field of role-playing studies instead expands in all directions at once. The articles do share a preoccupation with power dynamics, be they a player controlling their character, games marginalizing specific groups, or social interactions producing their own hierarchies.

Ryan Blackstock's essay "Origin Stories: The Phenomenological Relationship Between Players and their Characters" relies on a dozen personal interviews of *Vampire: The Masquerade* players to determine the uses they have for their characters. Applying a mental health framework, Blackstock paints a picture more nuanced than previous player motivation studies; players' ambiguous relationship with their characters, their flow, their freedom, and what they can learn from the character are fluid structures that help shape player experience. Psychology complicates our relationships with our characters, rather than explains them away.

In a similar vein, Diana J. Leonard's "Conflict and Change: Testing a Life-Cycle Derived Model of Larp Group Dynamics" puts psychology at the center of discussion, but this time group social psychology. Leonard analyzes data collected by the 2014 Larp Census to determine if socially competitive larps also produce gradual emotional disinvestment from the same. Her findings suggest the opposite: a quantitative scrubbing of 17,371 survey responses finds players who are attracted to intrigue and political play reporting greater overall satisfaction with their larp experiences. This ties into larger discussions about "positive negative" experiences in role-playing, as framed by scholars such as Markus Montola (2010).

Explicit discussions of power relations in larps have taken center stage with respect to design and consent. In "The Reality Code: Interpreting Aggregate Larp Rules as Code that Runs on Humans," Samara Hayley Steele takes a macro-level perspective on boffer larp. Steele argues that researchers can draw many analogies between computer programming languages — often seen as remote from larp — and the rules to which we attend when we larp. This offers an opening for critical code studies to integrate larps into their field of inquiry. The relationship of the programmer to the program, especially when humans are the "hardware," is always asymmetrical; Steele shows how such programming perpetuates specific social fantasies while also promising some revolutionary potential.

Similarly, Jason Giardino and Timothy Hutchings look at ludic power relations through a classic post-structural perspective in "Foucault's Heterotopias as Play Spaces." They define the "otherness" of the larp space, both in terms of its temporary quality, as well as the social norms it suspends or amplifies. Using the tabletop game *Dungeons & Dragons* and the Nordic larp *Just a Little Lovin'* as case studies — two RPGs that appear to have little to do with each other — Giardino and Hutchings highlight the societal tensions that different rules and play cultures evoke..

The Living Games 2016 essay collection offers us short works that reflect new ideas with respect to power, the social sciences, and RPGs. We should attend to not only the results, but the methodology and networks at play here. After all, many of these voices represent the coming generation of young RPG scholars, their interests, and their own disciplinary struggles within the field. We are enthusiastic to now present this material in a publicly accessible forum so that the rest of the world can witness this great expansion of issues and disciplinary approaches as well.

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Origin Stories: The Phenomenological Relationship between Players and their Characters

Popular abstract: Using a phenomenological research model, this study explores the question "How is a consciously embodied persona experienced through live action role-play?" Narrative accounts of twelve research participants were obtained via face-to-face interviews. Four themes emerged: 1. Continuum of personalization; 2. Stream of embodiment; 3. Freedom; and 4. Character as teacher. Four of Moustakas' universal structures are presented as phenomenological underpinnings of the experience: spatiality, causality, relationship to self, and relationship to others. Larp is a complex process, which offers the players opportunities to bend the rules of typical social engagement. Larp provides fun, excitement, social interaction, personal growth, and self-exploration. Some players described that risk was present as the boundaries between game and life were blurred, but the majority of participants found larp to be safe and personally enhancing.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2004, I began the segment of my dissertation that involved conducting personal interviews in order to understand the experience of consciously embodying persona through live action role-playing (larp). The following discussion briefly addresses relevant psychological literature, the specific methodology, and the findings of this research, which illuminate several psychological processes embedded within the experience.

2. PRE-EXISTING LITERATURE IN PSYCHOLOGY

In 2003, my dissertation committee determined larp was a viable subject, worthy of academic inquiry. During this process, I primarily researched the psychological literature on the subjects of role-playing, embodiment, and the nature of persona. Relatively little had been done in the specific area of larp. A majority of the studies were quantitative in nature. The minority were qualitative in design, and none had examined larp phenomenologically. The research fell into three main categories: quantitative studies that attempted to be diagnostic in nature, studies about the impact of role-playing, and role-playing's professional and therapeutic applications.

The quantitative studies all focused on measuring psychological traits of individuals that engaged in role-playing games. Only one study showed that gamers showed more introversion and less empathy than their control counterparts (Douse & McManus 1993). Other studies countered these assessments by establishing that there was no significant difference in personality traits such as depression, extraversion, neuroticism (Carter & Lester 1998) or antisocial behavior (Simon 1998) than either the norm or a control group composed of National Guardsmen (Rosenthal et. al 1998). Lastly, a study showed that gamers were relatively normal when compared to satanic dabblers in measuring traits like psychoticism and belief in the paranormal (Leeds 1995), hence dispelling a cultural myth that those who played games like *Dungeons & Dragons* were being primed to become future occultists.

The second section of the literature focused on the impact of role-playing games. A study by Ascherman (1993) found role-playing games were disruptive to adolescent clients on an inpatient psychiatric unit, in that he accounted for them affecting resistance to treatment modalities as well as normalizing violence. Studies by Hughes (1988) and Blackmon (1994) contended that role-playing games can be an avenue to more fully understanding the self by both creating catharsis as well as improving socialization skills. Shepard's (2002) research indicated that role-playing can have both positive and negative outcomes on an individual. Although he focused on using role-play as a teaching tool with his students, he found that adopting a role:

> like a gestalt experience, allows for the expression of feelings that ordinarily may be suppressed by psychological defenses. For counseling students, whose personality styles are soft-spoken nurturers, the role-play can become an opportunity to express feelings like anger and hostility in new, unfamiliar ways. (Shepard, 2002, 155).

Although Shepard's work was done in training counseling students, he discovered that being in a role often decreased one's inhibitions, which in turn allowed them to have new cognitive and emotional experiences (155).

The final section of the literature contained studies that indicated that role-playing had therapeutic effects as well as professional applications. Role-playing is utilized across disciplines to enhance clinical training sessions, English literature courses, and teach conflict resolution skills (Pomerantz 2003, Propper 1999, Proksch, Ross, & Estness 2002). Frank (1982) contends that role-play at any age can be socially therapeutic and may serve some kind of psycho-evolutionary purpose; Frank insists that games teach us survival skills and begin to scaffold other social skills that will be useful in society, which is an unwavering tenet in the discipline of Play Therapy.

The essence of the body of psychological literature was primarily focused on measurement of personality or the external outcomes of role-playing. The literature seemed bereft of any studies that focused on understanding the in-vivo experience of role playing as well as the internalized outcomes from a qualitative standpoint. This gap presented an important opportunity to discover what psychological aspects might be rooted within the individual.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data were derived from 12 face-to-face interviews that were conducted in 2005 in the United States. The participants were solicited from various chapters of The Camarilla, a larp club featuring World of Darkness games, and all players came from the *Vampire: The Masquerade* venue. The choice of Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological research model was made in an effort to not only identify thematic data -- known as "textures" -- but to also uncover the underpinnings of experience identified through the universal structures. A hallmark of the phenomenological method is that the researcher actively assumes a meditative position with the clear goal of abstaining from formulating any judgment about what is described by the research participant. This process, embedded in the research model, is referred to by Moustakas as *epoche* (Moustakas 1994, p. 33). Other than the theoretical aspects used to divide and understand experience -- i.e. textural and structural data -- there was no presupposition or hypothesis of what would be found in studying the experience of consciously embodying persona through live-action role-play. Through the active use

of *epoche*, the researcher is giving their full attention to understanding the experience as if it were brand new and in the here-and-now.

All the interviews were transcribed verbatim -- including pauses and non-verbal utterances, although ambient sounds were not described -- and printed out, serving as the basis for phenomenological analysis. In going over each transcript, the researcher again embraced their sense of *epoche* as they began the process of phenomenological reduction. This specific process of reduction was meant to present the experience as a phenomenon, then attempt to locate the pervasive existential qualities within the meaningful experience. The steps for this reduction process are known as: bracketing, delimiting, horizonalization, and clustering.

Moustakas (1988) explains that the phenomenological reduction consists of "choosing what is core and eliminating what is fringe or tangential" (111). As the researcher works with the transcripts, they look only for statements that are pertinent to answering the research question, and hence bracket this data. Any data that is not pertinent or that is repetitive is then delimited and removed from the analysis, which leads us to horizonalization. Horizonalization is an epistemological stance in which everything has equal value and meaning to the researcher, hence each statement has a uniform value. There is no better or worse material, no statements that are greater than any others. These are all ingredients within the experience and must be held with academic equanimity. These meaning units are then sorted by similarity until the data has been clustered and the textures, or themes, have emerged, which must explicitly relate to the experience described. These themes are brought to life by the researcher composing several individual and one composite textural description.

The second stage of the phenomenological approach is to identify and illuminate the structural elements in the experience. Going back to the bracketed and delimited transcripts, the researcher now focuses on locating the *universal structures.* The universal structures are comprised of seven elements that are believed to be inherent in any experience that can be richly described. They are identified as bodyhood, causality, spatiality, temporality, materiality, relationship to self, and relationship to other. Similar to the textural process, these structural elements are identified and eventually composed into several individual structural and one composite description.

The final element the researcher formulates is a textural-structural synthesis. This narrative attempts

to blend and illustrate how the textural and structural components are intermingled within the data. It becomes a full integration of the conscious-level themes and the subconscious framework of experience. In this project, the textures were identified and titled as: 1. Continuum of personalization, 2. Stream of embodiment, 3. Freedom, and 4. Character as teacher. These themes are presented in more detail, along with the structural elements, in the following section.

4. DISCUSSION

Each of the textures identified covered a range of experiences embedded in consciously embodying a persona through larp. The continuum represents how an individual fully creates and gives psychological birth to their character. Within the continuum of personalization, people described many aspects related to building the character that they would bring to life via larp. One participant describes the differences between himself and his character named Mack:

> There were a lot of situations like gunfights. I would never run into a gunfight ever. Bye, see ya, I don't care how many guns I have, I am not going to willingly throw myself into that situation, whereas Mack many times stood and drew both of his swords and started going to town. I think that was more the "what Jordan wouldn't do" and "what Mack would do." (Blackstock 2006, 120)

The continuum of personalization also involves "the duality of the relationship between the player and their creation, as well as negative consequences due to this sense of duality" (104). It is at times "I" and yet "not-I," which represents a macro-view of the origin and relationship of player to character. Larpers describe this phenomenon quite frequently, as often stories about their characters are told by interweaving the first-person and third-person. For example, although "I" have created Mr. Krieger, and "I" am (arguably) in control of the character, sometimes *he* does things that surprise me.

This concept overlaps with the relationship to self, others, and spatiality. It raises questions about how much of this character is me, and how much of the character relates to my own nascent or underdeveloped potentialities that might only be met with conditional regard in the "real" world. How do I explain it when a character takes on a life of their own? From where does that come? In terms of space, how will others react to my character? Although the physical game location space is for the characters

to interact, this space and the relationships formed at times transcend the game, for better and for worse.

The stream of embodiment takes a micro-view on the continuum, focusing directly on the role-players' psycho-kinesthetic experience. Many of the research participants discussed that embodiment takes time, and that they needed to play the character for an unspecified number of sessions to really reach their full stride as the character. As one becomes embodied, causality begins to emerge. Causality essentially looks at one's locus of control or agency of their character. In studying this phenomena, the character may choose to take a course of action that is clearly self-destructive, and yet is unmitigated by the player's knowledge. Another participant illuminated this concept in sharing:

> He shouted, "Hey, they're going to kill me." I remember jumping the couch and just to give you a description, I'm a big fat man. This is not something easily done. Jumping the couch, running up the stairs, finding the person I think was responsible, screaming at the top of my lungs, and this was just from a nice quiet conversation to SNAP! I was screaming at the top of my lungs and had more than one person turn their head. I was just gone; I was the character, literally. (Blackstock 2006)

Another aspect is that as one becomes more embodied, they may find it harder to both "get in" and "drop out" of character. Embodiment is also inherently connected to spatiality, in that the character has their own life and their own space that surpasses the physical limitations of the game. One participant revealed, "The longer you play a character, the more it becomes like a living breathing part of yourself. Playing a character for a short period of time kind of sucks because you don't really get to the personality or the motivations or anything like that, and that is what makes the character the character" (Blackstock 2006, 122).

Freedom was the third texture that emerged in the phenomenon. Research participants described the liberating experience of engaging in consciously embodied role-play. The initial discussions focused on how larping was a form of stress relief, but as they continued to talk, a deeper reality emerged. The conscious embodiment of persona allowed them to experience new existential realities. Through the character they can become anyone. They are not limited by laws, or morality, or any social or cultural norms. A participant shared, "If you ever wanted to be a computer hacker. You know what you are doing but you don't want to do the illegalities of it. You

don't really want to hack into some bank system because that is just wrong. Role-playing allows you to blur the lines of right and wrong" (123). For some, they are even free from the anxiety around death itself; what could be more liberating? This freedom is mainly known though through its relationship with others. Within these embodied transactions, players can experience personal, interpersonal, and social facets that they otherwise might never experience. They are free to be bitter adversaries with their best friends, or experience privileges -- or the lack thereof -- they would not have in the real world. Additionally, just as in life, freedom is two-sided. At times, the freedom that exists in the game affects the relationships outside of the game, sometimes quite painfully. Friendships have been known to bitterly end as a result of interactions within the game.

Character as teacher was the final texture. Initial descriptions focused on how adults reconnected with pure imaginative play. They remembered it as a child, and larp was often a surprising rediscovery of their inner landscape of creativity and improvisation. The deeper therapeutic value that emerged was from their relationships with others, both within and outside of larp. At times, they found their characters acting as a mirror that gave them insight into their own real-life experiences and motivations. One participant revealed:

> The only part of me that came out in that character was the need to be protected. That's what I loved about playing that character. I found the biggest, strongest character in the game and I got him to be my protector. It was a lot of fun because it fulfilled a need that I never really had. My parents were divorced and I lived with my mother most of the time. And it filled the need in me to have a male protector and it was really fun to play because it allowed me to experience something I couldn't experience. (Blackstock 2006)

In terms of spatiality, often lessons learned within the space of the game transferred to their lives outside of it. Many spoke of developing social confidence as well as conflict resolution skills through larp. Sometimes a character was made to directly experience certain issues such as what is it like to be easily manipulated by others or what it feels like to betray a friend. Often, participants described that having to deal with unforeseen circumstances in game helped them reflect on their own inner experiences, motivations, and behaviors in the space outside of the game.

5. CONCLUSION

For many individuals, conscious embodiment of persona through larp is a playful experience in that it recaptures the imaginative collaborative storytelling that naturally occurs in youth. When examined from a phenomenological lens, possibilities emerge that may suggest more is going on than we consciously perceive. In a number of cases, people are being directed through their character to their undiscovered potentialities. Over time and with reflection, they are growing into new forms of themselves. Sometimes, these characters are expressions of our ever lurking shadow-selves that are kept beneath the surface of the masks we wear in the real world. Conscious embodiment is quite literally a life-giving process. It taps into the phenomenological underpinnings of our lives and, when meditated upon, can bring into focus new truths about ourselves and our being-in-the-world.

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BIO

Over the past 20 years, Dr. **Ryan Blackstock** has worked in a variety of mental health settings, with a substantial emphasis on chemical dependency treatment across a wide range of milieus. He is a Certified Advanced Alcohol and Drug Counselor (State and International) and a Licensed Psychologist in Michigan. In 1999, he earned the Distinguished Service Award from the National Kidney Foundation for pioneering a substance abuse education program for individuals awaiting organ transplant. Blackstock received his BA in Psychology from Michigan State University. He holds a PsyD in Humanistic Clinical Psychology and Education and an MA in Humanistic Clinical Psychology from the Center for Humanistic Studies.

Foucault's Heterotopias as Play Spaces

Popular abstract: In larp and role-playing, players often have experiences of being in another space that is beyond just having a strong imagination. Michel Foucault (1986) was one of the first philosophers to seriously examine the substance of this "otherness" of certain spaces in a society, which he called "heterotopias," and this paper seeks to examine how the concept of heterotopias can provide both game designers and players with a valuable toolset in thinking about play spaces. We will begin by summarizing Foucault's six principles of heterotopias, exploring what might make a given play space a heterotopia, and finally reflect on the dangerous waters about heterotopias that require sensitivity and respect from game designers and players.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Certain spaces, both architectural and social, can project a feeling of "otherness." For example, when entering a cathedral, even for a secular individual, there is a sense of entering "another place." (Gutic, Caie, and Clegg 2010). Sometimes this "otherness" can be an entire subculture concealed within a larger social body. For instance, there are many who would regard their place of work as a space with its own boundaries and rules which are entirely different from the any other part of their life as described in Saloma-Akpedonu's (2006) study about the IT Industry in the Philippines.

In larp and role-playing, players often have experiences of being in another space that is beyond just having a strong imagination. In games where players must take a moment at the end of the game to "shake off" their character or reset their internal bearings to return to themselves and their usual world, there is a good chance that they have experienced this sense of having entered a different place during the span of the game.

Michel Foucault (1986) was one of the first philosophers to seriously examine the substance of this "otherness" of certain spaces in a society, which he called "heterotopias," and this paper seeks to examine how the concept of heterotopias can provide both game designers and players with a valuable toolset in thinking about play spaces. We will begin by summarizing Foucault's six principles of heterotopias, exploring what might make a given play space a heterotopia, and finally reflect on the dangerous waters about heterotopias that require sensitivity and respect from game designers and players.

2. DEFINITION OF A HETEROTOPIA

Before further examining the idea of heterotopias as a play spaces, it will helpful to define exactly what a heterotopia is. Foucault's most explicit definition of a heterotopia came in a lecture he gave to a group of architects in 1986 entitled "Of Other Spaces." He begins defining a utopia as an idealized or perfected society (or part of society) that lacks any real place in space and time. A utopia may have a direct analogy to the "real space of a Society," but they are ultimately an idea and are "fundamentally unreal spaces" (Foucault 1986). Heterotopias, on the other hand, are real places that are "a kind of effectively enacted utopia." It is a space where we can often identify a specific location of where it begins and ends, but they "are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about."

We find parallels between Foucault's concept of the heterotopia and the work of Johan Huizinga, specifically his concept of the Magic Circle (Huizinga 1955) which asserts that play spaces are defined by spatial, temporal, and social boundaries defined through ritual actions and agreements which create another form of self-delineated otherness that is taken on temporarily for play. We will see where the Magic Circle concept might fall short as a tool for the

examination of games in a contemporary milieu and where the heterotopia concept would serve better.

Foucault lays out six principles of heterotopias wherein he provides real world examples (1986):

First Principle. *All cultures (probably) have heterotopias, and these primarily fall into one of two main categories: heterotopias of crisis and heterotopias of deviation.* Heterotopias of crisis are reserved, privileged, or sacred spaces for members of society in "crisis" (crisis here means an involuntary state of being that is substantially different from what society regards as "normal"). Examples of members in crisis are adolescents, the elderly, and pregnant women. An example of a heterotopia of crisis is a nineteenth-century boarding school — a revered and wholly separate place for adolescents. Historically, these groups have been put into places that are separate, with their own norms of behavior, but still maintaining a connection to society at large.

Foucault acknowledges that the heterotopia of crisis type is disappearing in modern society and is largely being replaced by his second category, heterotopias of deviation: These are spaces set aside for members of society whose behavior deviates from "normal." Examples include retirement homes (which Foucault notes could be regarded as either a heterotopia of crisis or deviation) and psychiatric hospitals.

Second Principle. *Heterotopias have a specific function that is a reflection of the society in which they exist.* Foucault notes how the heterotopia of the cemetery has changed over time. Once placed at the heart of a city, cemeteries moved to the outskirts of cities as perceptions about death (namely, the idea of death as an "illness") evolved.

Third Principle. *Heterotopias are capable of bringing multiple, possibly incompatible, real spaces together into a single space.* An example is the cinema or theater, which creates various spaces on a stage or screen at one end of the room. Here we have an overlap with Huizinga, with his overlaying of imaginary play space onto a physical space.

Fourth Principle. *Heterotopias are often "linked to slices in time," and will often break with the traditional passage of time.* An example of this principle is the heterotopia of the museum or library, which are places that, in a very real way, attempt to "stop" or "accumulate" time. Another example at the opposite end of the spectrum is the heterotopia of the the festival, which can transform an empty field into a whirling display of activity then back to an empty field in a relatively tiny and temporary segment of time.

Fifth Principle. *Heterotopias have a system of how one enters and exits the space, both isolating the heterotopia and making it penetrable.* For example, a prison is a heterotopia that one enters under compulsion, where a sauna is a heterotopia that has a literal "purification" ritual, namely the act of showering before entering. For Huizinga (1955), crossing into the Magic Circle was itself a ritual and an acknowledgement of entering this othered space.

Sixth Principle. *Heterotopic spaces have a specific relationship with the space that remains, namely as a space of illusion or a space of compensation.* For instance, a brothel could be considered a space of illusion, while a nineteenth-century new world colony might be a heterotopia of compensation that seeks to have a "perfect" version of the member's original home country.

3. WHAT MAKES A PLAY SPACE A HETEROTOPIA?

First, it is important to define what we mean by a "play space." For the purposes of this paper, we are defining "play space" as a merging of both the imaginary world of the setting and game rules/norms with the physical, geographical, real world location in space and time that players occupy to play a game such as a kitchen table for a tabletop role-playing game or an event space set aside for an larp. It is this combination of ideas and imagination (e.g., rules and setting), a tangible space (e.g., a kitchen table with 5 chairs around it), and a particular slice of time (e.g., a Thursday evening where a group meets from 6pm to 10pm to play the game) that constitute a "play space."

Although our focus is on larp and role play, by this definition, we would recognize a pick-up game of soccer in the park as a "play space" as well. Before the game begins, the park is just a field of grass, available for any variety of purposes or for no purpose whatsoever. A group of friends gather with a soccer ball and agree on boundaries, locations of the goals, roles for each player, general rules of play, and a set length of time to play, and suddenly a "play space" is created in a specific real place for a specific length of time.

We might use this soccer example to show a point of difference between the application of Huizinga's Magic Circle and Foucault's heterotopia: Both

concepts easily engage with the soccer game in the park. However, if the game was set on the deck of an aircraft carrier, we might find Foucault better abled to address the significance of that setting through his interest in social and architectural spaces. A Magic Circle is created when players 'other' themselves for the purpose of a game, a heterotopia is created when 'others' find a space within a larger structure in order to engage their othered selves.

Using Foucault's principles we can examine various play spaces and ask if they can be considered a heterotopia. This question was explored explicitly with the play spaces of eurogames by Wilson (2015), who asked if the board game The Castles of Burgundy (2011) constitutes a heterotopia. Wilson concluded that if a player passed a "Foucauldian mirror test" — that is, if the act of playing the game caused the player a moment of meaningful self-reflection — then yes, a eurogame such as The Castles of Burgundy could be considered a heterotopia. For Wilson, the mechanic of bringing livestock tokens onto one's estate allowed him to conceptualize that these animals were being rescued, which reinforced his real life values as an ethical vegan.

4. IS *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* A HETEROTOPIA?

At first glance, a group of friends at a table role-playing through a classic fantasy dungeon may indeed seem to constitute a heterotopia. Playing a game of *Dungeons & Dragons* is a type of "deviant" behavior (first principle) in that the players are behaving in a way that is consistent with game play but not with their everyday lives. A classic fantasy dungeon game also juxtaposes multiple spaces into a single space (third principle) through the use of maps, miniatures, dice, storytelling, and imagination (sixth principle).

Continuing this examination, the *D&D* gaming table is most certainly linked to slices of time (fourth principle). In play, time is marked off in a very specific way for the characters of the fiction, be it a 5-second round of combat or a noting that the journey between towns takes two weeks. Additionally, most *D&D* games are scheduled for a very specific start and stop time. Not only is a time and place established for a game, but the players must undergo a "ritual" of creating a character and learning the rules of play to participate (meeting the fifth principle).

An area where the classic fantasy dungeon play space may fall short of being a heterotopia is the second principle, which we summarized above as

"Heterotopias have a specific function that is a reflection of the society in which they exist." However, if a player entered into a debate about the morality of how the city guard treats its goblin population, and that player reflected on our modern issues of the relationship between the police and minority populations, then we can find evidence of the second principle through Wilson's (2015) "Foucauldian mirror test."

A heterotopia exists within a larger architectural and social space but is apart from it. However, a heterotopia operates in reaction to this larger framework – it considers the world from the margins and found spaces between the controls and intentions of society as a whole. *Dungeons & Dragons* remains blissfully ignorant of the space which hosts it. It doesn't encourage the looking outward or looking inward – the self-awareness – of a heterotopic participant. *D&D* players tend to not occupy the margins of a space but colonize it, taking control then abandoning it when done. We have little need to reach beyond the boundaries of Huizinga's Magic Circle when we discuss *Dungeons & Dragons*.

5. THE PLAY SPACE OF *JUST A LITTLE LOVIN'* AS A HETEROTOPIA

In contrast, let us now turn to the play space for the larp *Just a Little Lovin'*, a Nordic larp about the AIDS crisis in the gay communities of New York City in the early 1980s (Edland & Grasmo 2011). The game is played over the course of five days – one for prep, workshopping techniques, three for actual play, and one for debriefing.

The play space easily meets all of six of Foucault's principles: it is both a heterotopia of deviance and crisis, the designers have a specific vision of the players to experience the themes of desire, friendship and fear of death (serving a specific societal function and passing the mirror test), multiple spaces both real and imagined are brought together in the play space, a key moment in time is captured (1982 to 1984), the players must undergo both training and a physical transformation via costume to play the game, and an illusion of time and space via in-game behavior and physical set design is created. The sensation of a "different" sense of time appears to be particularly profound in this larp, and Foucault himself describes it well when he states, "The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (1986).

A heterotopic examination of *Just a Little Lovin'* provides a richer and more nuanced result than

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Huizinga's Magic Circles. The setting of the game itself is a community of people often forced into the heterotopic margins of society, and the mechanics of the larp itself from prep to debrief are intended to heighten that feeling of investment in a social space that is best defined as a heterotopia of a heterotopia (Gronemann & Raasted 2013).

6. THE DANGEROUS WATERS OF HETEROTOPIAS

Foucault's (1986) lecture sought to define the word "heterotopia" beyond the realm of language and into the realm of architecture. Games, in a sense, are architecture as language. Words on a page, when acted on by a group of players, can become a heterotopic space. Where Le Corbusier once said "architecture is a machine for living," we can hold the jargon of games as a "machine for playing."

We can see from just a small sampling of play experiences from *Just a Little Lovin'* that heterotopic play spaces can have keen personal and emotional effects on the players who enter the space. Beyond just an academic exercise, we see great value to the game designer in using some of the definitions and tools outlined here to help recognize when their intended play space could become a heterotopia. When creating a heterotopic play space, we encourage the designer to recognize that their players will be entering, in a very real sense, a space that will have an acute sense of "otherness" to it.

Another noted effect of thinking about the play space as a heterotopia is that as a designer and as a player, it becomes more challenging to engage in mere emotional tourism or exploitation of the subject matter of the game. The designer is, in effect, asking the player to both physically and mentally enter the play space. In a non-heterotopic game of *Dungeons & Dragons*, a player can casually describe the actions of (to borrow the popular phrase) a "murder hobo" and have no regrets or particular insight into their own behavior. However, in a game of *Just a Little Lovin'*, a player is asked to recognize the reality and humanity of the people and places they are about to embody and enter.

In this sense, we can then learn to treat entering and exiting the heterotopia of a play space the same way we might treat entering and exiting the real world heterotopia of a hospital for mentally ill patients. When entering such a hospital, certain norms of behavior are expected, particularly those concerning the safety of the visitors and the patients. For a heterotopic play space, we would be wise to take into account the same considerations.

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BIOS

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Conflict and Change: Testing a Life-Cycle-Derived Model of Larp Group Dynamics

Popular abstract: This paper extends theoretical work on small group dynamics in live action role-play (larp; Leonard and Arango 2013), honing in on three challenges larps face that are anticipated by our unique integration of roleplay studies with small groups research. These challenges are: relative *group embeddedness*, which can cause splintering and unfavorable social comparison when a larp is situated in a dense network of other larp groups; *bleed* of relationship dynamics such that in-character conflicts can foster intragroup tension (Bowman 2013), especially under conditions of *zero-sum competition*; and *principled conflicts* in which players disagree on core values, ideas, and goals of the larp itself (Wheelan 1994). We analyzed 17,371 survey responses to explore the role of embeddedness, socially competitive play, and regional play-style "fit" in explaining larp satisfaction. We discuss implications of these hypothesis-driven analyses, both for their scholarly and practical value.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to investigate the nature of small group dynamics in live action roleplay (larp) communities. We examine which features of larps and larpers intensify three challenges anticipated by past integration of roleplay studies with small groups research (Leonard and Arango 2013). These challenges are: intragroup tension due to *zero-sum competition* (Bowman 2013); relative *group embeddedness*, when a larp is situated in a dense network of other larp groups; and *principled conflicts* in which players disagree on core values, ideas, and goals of the larp itself (Wheelan 1994).
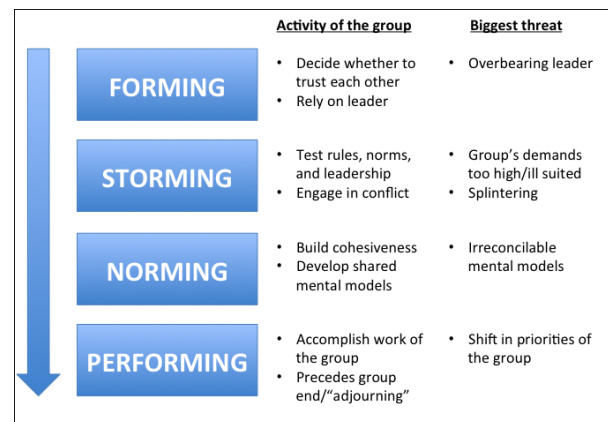
To explore these key challenges, we analyzed an anonymous survey of larpers (larpcensus.org). Our work is grounded in industrial/organizational and social psychology, and roleplaying studies. Beyond its scholarly contributions, we seek to offer advice for larpers and facilitators who seek to improve the health of their groups. Further, we hope to inspire a greater consideration of group dynamics in larp communities.

2. LARP GROUP DEVELOPMENT: A PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM MODEL

We argue that the focal challenges of competition, group embeddedness, and principled conflicts are inevitable "growing pains" experienced by larp groups at various stages of group life. According to organizational psychology research, groups mature over time and gradually progress through four stages: (1) forming, (2) storming, (3) norming,

(4) performing (Tuckman and Jensen 1977). As depicted in Figure 1A, groups are expected to transition linearly through stages in which the primary activities are (1) deciding whether or not to trust each other and the group leader; (2) testing rules, norms, and leadership; (3) building cohesiveness; and (4) accomplishing the work of the group.

Figure 1A: This model of group life has been validated in groups engaged in therapy and human resources training as well as task-oriented groups (i.e., software development teams).

	Activity of the group	Biggest threat
FORMING	• Decide whether to trust each other • Rely on leader	• Overbearing leader
STORMING	• Test rules, norms, and leadership • Engage in conflict	• Group's demands too high/ill suited • Splintering
NORMING	• Build cohesiveness • Develop shared mental models	• Irreconcilable mental models
PERFORMING	• Accomplish work of the group • Precedes group end/"adjourning"	• Shift in priorities of the group

However, larp communities pose a unique challenge for classic models of group development for several reasons (Leonard and Arango 2013). First, larps often blend the characteristics and activities of groups that classic group theorists assume are distinct types (e.g., task, therapy, and recreation groups). Second, they operate on multiple layers of reality that include immersive roleplaying as well as out of character interaction (e.g., Fine 1983), such that group dynamics operate on several levels.

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Finally, campaign larps are recursive in that players may retire characters and thus "reboot" their position in the social network, frequently reshuffling in- and out-of-game relationships. Thus, we view larps as more complex than the groups that have previously been studied by Tuckman (1965) and others, and their development is likely to be more complicated as a result.

Due to the multilayered and recursive social dynamics of larps, we argue that they likely experience punctuated equilibrium (Leonard and Arango 2013). This is an alternative trajectory of larp development described by Gersick (1988) in which the group cycles frequently between stages rather than experiencing uninterrupted flow towards group dissolution (e.g., Tuckman 1965; Tuckman and Jensen 1977; see Figure 1B for a depiction of this alternative model).

Figure 1B: Determining the correct life-cycle model that fits the complex dynamics of larp group is an important step toward pinpointing when and how social conflict and transitions are likely to occur in various larp communities.
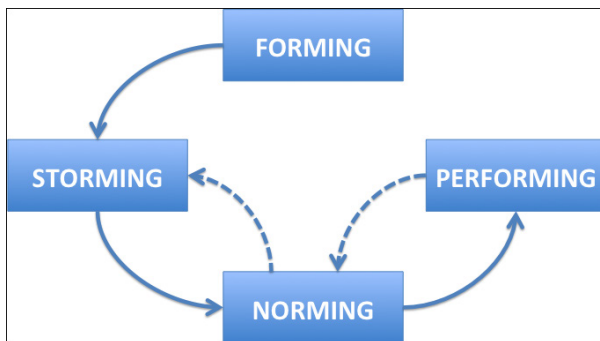
3. CHALLENGES FOR LARP GROUPS PREDICTED FROM GROUP DYNAMICS THEORY

How can group dynamics predict challenges for larps? First, group life may become unstable when the members are embedded within a larger community or organizational structure. Effects of may include the forming of bonds—and, thus, subgroups—by individuals who have played together in other contexts; upward or downward comparison with other larp groups that exist at different stages of development; and even split loyalties and defection to other groups in the broader community. Per McGrew, Bilotta, and Deeney (1999), external influence can disrupt or reverse the course of group development. *Hypothesis 1. The number and diversity of larps a player is involved in will negatively predict overall satisfaction with larp groups.*

Second, competition may also negatively affect larp group health by attracting destructive players and/ or fostering conflict in relationships. People who are interested in socially competitive play may be more inclined toward interpersonal conflict (Collier, Ryckman, Thornton and Gold 2010) and this could shape the tenor of a larp group. Also, in a phenomenon called bleed in which thoughts and feelings of the character and player crossover (Montola 2010), a spiteful in-character dynamic can generate hostile out of character interactions (Bowman 2013), which could be exacerbated by competitive play. *Hypothesis 2. Preference for a socially competitive play style will negatively predict overall satisfaction with larp groups.*

Finally, whether you enjoy conflict or not, you likely expect your groups to fulfill your needs. We propose that dissatisfaction will be higher when a player's motivations to larp are not consistent with the style of play available to them. For example, Nordic larp is classified as emotional play with high investment, whereas larp in US/Canada is often viewed as featuring a rules-governed "play to win" style that undercuts roleplay value (Hellstrom 2012). We take these stereotypes at face value to test *Hypothesis 3. Larpers who prefer achievement-based play will be more satisfied if they reside in US/Canada, and those who prefer heavy roleplay will be more satisfied if they reside in other regions.*

4. METHOD

4.1 Data Source and Participants

In order to investigate these hypotheses, we obtained data from a large-scale anonymous survey collected by Aaron Vanek and Ryan Paddy.[1] The survey was created in consultation with international larp scholars, but was not sponsored by a particular research group (Vanek 2015). It was collected online from October 1, 2014 to January 10, 2015, and invited participants to confidentially answer questions primarily pertaining to their demographic information, experience with larp, and motivations for larping.

From the initial sample of 29,751, we retained only those participants who answered our key criterion variable (satisfaction with larps) and reported that they were over 18 years old. The remaining participants (*N*=17,371) averaged between 25 and

[1] Vanek recently served as Executive Director of Seekers Unlimited, a nonprofit company located in Los Angeles, CA, that used larp for education. Paddy is a founding member of the New Zealand LARP Society.

34 years old.[2] The sample was 61.4% male, 36% female (2.6% declined to respond). Participants were from countries around the world[3] (see Table 1) also reported playing in a mix of single-event larps (52% had played) and long-term campaigns (76.5% had played) in the past year. Most participants (74.1%) had larped for five years or more.

Table 1
Number, percent, and cumulative percent of the top 15 countries sampled.

Country	n	Percent of sample	Cumulative Percent
1. United States	3911	22.5	90.8
2. Germany	2125	12.2	68.3
3. United Kingdom	2082	12	56.1
4. Russia	1769	10.2	44.1
5. France	919	5.3	33.9
6. Sweden	671	3.9	28.6
7. Denmark	670	3.9	24.7
8. Canada	662	3.8	20.8
9. Czech Republic	572	3.3	17
10. Italy	500	2.9	13.7
11. Belgium	456	2.6	10.8
12. Poland	430	2.5	8.2
13. Netherlands	426	2.5	5.7
14. Finland	337	1.9	3.2
15. Norway	233	1.3	1.3

Note: Remaining 32 countries represent 9.2% of sample.

4.2 Measures

The criterion variable for all of our hypotheses was a single-item measure of self-reported satisfaction. Participants responded to the question "how satisfied are you with the quality of the larps you have played in the last 12 months?" Responses ranged from dissatisfied to very satisfied. On average, participants were fairly satisfied with their larp groups (M= 3.328, SD= .676; where 3=satisfied).

For our first hypothesis, we looked at the number of larp events participants reported engaging in during the last 12 months as an index of social embeddedness. The average participant reported playing in 8-9 larps over the past year (M=8.877, SD=16.678). However, this is a non-specific measure of social embeddedness, since all of the events a player engages in could be from a single larp. To further examine this construct,

we assigned each participant two "diversity" scores based on the number of different themes[4] and combat styles[5] that they had experienced in the past year, respectively. The average participant had experienced about 2 different themes (M=1.990, SD=1.121) and slightly fewer combat styles (M=1.395, SD=.725).

For our second hypothesis, we indexed preference for socially competitive play via a single-item measure: "I enjoy larps that involve intrigue, scheming or political play." Participants' agreement with this statement ranged from 1-5, with the average player indicating agreement above the midpoint (M=3.705, SD=1.102).

For our final hypothesis, we looked for survey items that indexed preference for role-play and individual achievement. To obtain further clarity, we used a dimension reduction technique called a factor analysis on all items regarding participants' reasons for larping (see Table 2). This approach parses a list of variables into a few conceptual dimensions based on shared patterns of responses (Thompson 2004).[6]

We identified a 7-item scale related to enjoyment of role-play features like high drama and powerful emotions, and prioritizing good story and scenes. A second dimension appeared to pertain to individual achievement via preference for being a leader, gaining attention and having influence. Reliability analyses indicated that these scales had very good internal consistency (α =.823 and α =.722, respectively) and that dropping any items would not improve their reliability. Overall, participants reported a slight fondness for both play styles (Role-play M=3.739, SD=0.759; Achievement M=3.352, SD=0.839;mid-point at 3). Interestingly, these scales were moderately correlated with one another, which indicates that, for these participants, enjoying heavy role-play goes hand-in-hand with preferring larps

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[2] Age was measured with a series of four-year bins so the precise mean could not be determined. The 15-19 bin was dropped because it contained people under the age of consent by our ethical criterion.

[3] Respondents from Russia comprise about 10% of the sample, followed by those from the Czech Republic and Poland (5.8%). Each classically non-Western country like Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa each individually account for less than .01% of the sample.

[4] The five themes could indicate they had experienced were as follows: fantasy/mythological; set in the future/science fiction; historical; horror/supernatural; and modern ("between the year 2000 and today"). Thus a participant was assigned a score of 0-5 for this variable.

[5] The four combat styles participants could indicate they had experienced were as follows: live combat where participants hit each other with any kind of weapon; representational mechanics such as rock/paper/scissors, cards or comparing numbers; no mechanic or physical skill used; and combat was not an element. Thus a participant was assigned a score of 0-4 for this variable.

[6] Two other factors emerged which seemed to be related to (1) practical skills (i.e., enjoying making your own costumes and using your real physical skills); (2) presence or absence of clear rules; and (3) mundane reality (i.e., wearing everyday clothing, transparent setting), respectively.

Table 2

Factor loadings for preference role-play and achievement scales.

Factor	ROLE-PLAY 1	ACHIEVE-MENT 2	SKILL USE 3	RULES CLARITY 4	REALITY 5
Preference for role-play					
I enjoy participating in dramatic moments in which characters are very emotional.	**0.684**	0.216	0.161	-0.068	-0.038
I enjoy making major changes to my acting performance for different characters.	**0.666**	0.252	0.123	0.057	-0.008
Creating a good story is an extremely important aspect of larp for me.	**0.645**	0.277	0.172	0.081	0.012
I enjoy larps that give me a new perspective on the real world.	**0.629**	0.071	0.108	-0.011	0.290
I enjoy larps that affect my real world emotions, even if the emotions I feel are negative.	**0.617**	0.064	0.136	-0.089	0.102
I prefer to play characters who behave very differently than I would.	**0.612**	0.152	0.047	0.082	0.072
I sometimes deliberately have my character fail because it creates a better scene.	**0.606**	0.119	0.039	-0.299	0.039
Preference for achievement					
I enjoy playing characters who are leaders.	0.150	**0.795**	0.166	0.042	0.115
I enjoy playing influential characters.	0.252	**0.774**	0.098	0.084	0.106
I enjoy having lots of people pay attention to my character during larps.	0.292	**0.602**	0.160	-0.108	-0.001

Note: The factor analysis was conducted using varimax rotation on all measures indexing preference for play style (25 items). Factors 1-5 accounted for 52.2% of the variance.

that allow for individual achievement (see Table 3).

Table 3
Bi-variate correlations among variables included in analyses.

Measure	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Satisfaction	0.048*	0.014	0.000	-0.015	0.084*	0.044*
2. Preference - socially competitive play	-	0.014	0.051*	0.049*	0.495*	0.446*
3. Number of larp events	-	-	0.110*	0.078*	0.026†	0.074*
4. Diversity - theme	-	-	-	0.498*	0.150*	0.087*
5. Diversity - combat-style	-	-	-	-	0.145*	0.08*
6. Preference - role-play	-	-	-	-	-	0.524*
7. Preference - individual achievement	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Given the large sample size, conservative alphas are employed:
$* p < .001$; $†p < .01$; two-tailed.

5. RESULTS

Our first hypothesis was that social embeddedness would negatively predict overall satisfaction with larp groups. We used hierarchical linear regression to examine the extent to which a participant's satisfaction with the larps they play in is predicted by (1) the number of larps they have played in during the past year; and their diversity of play regarding (2) combat style and (3) theme (entered on Step 2), controlling for age and gender (entered on Step 1). Significant, negative coefficients across the board would show that (as expected) those who play in more larps and more diverse larps are less satisfied, possibly because of increased social embeddedness. Because of the large sample, we used a conservative cutoff for significance (alpha=.01) for all linear analyses.

Overall, the results offer a mixed view of the effect of social embeddedness on larp satisfaction (see Table 4). The predictors and covariates (age and gender) together accounted for only 0.2% of the variance, suggesting that other factors are likely influential. As predicted, we observed a significant negative coefficient for combat diversity such that the more combat styles a participants had experienced in

Table 4
Regression coefficients predicting satisfaction from social embeddedness.

Parameter	Unstandardized Estimate	Standard Error	p-value	Standardized Estimate
Number of larp events	0.001	0.000	0.040	0.016
Diversity - theme	0.008	0.005	0.137	0.013
Diversity - combat-style	-0.025	0.008	0.003	-0.027

Step	Adjusted R Square	F Change	p-value
1	0.001	7.683	<.001
2	0.001	4.266	0.005

Notes covariates entered at Step 1: age, gender.

their larping, the less satisfied they were with the larps they played in overall. In contrast, the coefficient for thematic diversity was non-significant; satisfaction did not depend on whether a player had engaged in larps with a range of themes. Finally, we observed a *positive* coefficient for number of larps such that the more larps players experienced during the past 12 months, the *more* satisfied they reported being with their larp groups. However, this effect was not significant at our conservative benchmark of p<.01.[7]

Our second hypothesis was that preference for socially competitive play style would negatively predict overall satisfaction with larp groups. We used hierarchical linear regression to examine the extent to which a participant's satisfaction with the larps they play in is predicted by level of preference for socially competitive play (entered on Step 2), controlling for age and gender (entered on Step 1). A significant, negative coefficient would show that (as expected) those who prefer "larps that involve intrigue, scheming or political play" are less satisfied overall in their groups.

Contrary to our predictions, we observed a *positive* coefficient such that the more a player reported preferring larps that involved intrigue, scheming, and political play the more satisfied they were (see Table 5). Although this effect was significant at our conservative benchmark, along with gender and age this variable accounted for only 0.3% of the variance suggesting that other factors are likely equally or more influential.

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[7] These effects remain consistent even when excluding participants with no combat experiences.

Table 5
Regression coefficient predicting satisfaction from preference for socially competitive play.

Parameter	Unstandardized Estimate	Standard Error	p-value	Standardized Estimate
Preference - socially competitive play	0.030	0.005	<.001	0.048
Step	Adjusted R Square	F Change	p-value	
1	0.001	8.306	<.001	
2	0.003	38.354	<.001	

Notes covariates entered at Step 1: age, gender.

Our third and final hypothesis was that satisfaction with larps would be greater when play style preference matched the kind of groups that are likely available in their region of the world. That is, we expected larpers who prefer achievement-based play would be more satisfied if they reside in US or Canada, whereas those who prefer heavy roleplay would be more satisfied elsewhere. To examine this hypothesis, we conducted a 2-way ANCOVA with satisfaction as the dependent variable. The independent variables were (1) preference for role-play style (high vs. low)[8] and (2) preference for achievement (high vs. low)[9] As in our previous analyses, the covariates were age and gender. This analysis included 4,346 US/Canadian residents and 12,159 players from other regions.

The overall statistics for the observed main effects and 2-way interactions are reported in Table 6. Achievement-oriented participants reported more satisfaction (M=3.358, SE=.007) than those low on this factor (M=3.320, SE=.011). As predicted, however, this effect was qualified by region. As shown in Table 7, participants from Canada/US were more satisfied if they had a high preference for achievement, compared to low.[10]

[8] We used a median-split procedure to assign participants a value of 1 if they were above the observed median (3.857) and a value of 0 in this factor if they were below the median, thus splitting our participants as HIGH or LOW in preference for role-play.

[9] As with preference for role-play, we dichotomized preference for achievement at the median observed for this variable (3.333333) such that participants above this score were assigned a value of 1 and participants below this score were assigned a value of 0.

[10] This interaction also fully explains the main effect of region we observed, $F(1, 16495)$=4.925, p=.026 that reveals that larpers in US/Canada are more satisfied with their larps (M=3.324, SE=.007) than players from other regions (M=3.354, SE=.012).

Table 6
Main effects and interaction mean square, F-statistic, and p-values.

Parameter	Mean Square	F-Statistic	p-value
Preference - achievement	3.642	8.031	0.005
Preference - role-play	25.536	56.308	<.001
Region: North America versus other	2.233	4.925	0.026
Achievement by region interaction	1.916	4.224	0.040
Role-play by region interaction	0.294	0.649	0.420

Note: Achievement and role-play are dichotomized at their median. For each variable, df = 1 and error = 16495.

For participants with from other regions, however, preference for achievement did not impact satisfaction. Finally, when examining the effect of preference for roleplay, the predicted interaction was not significant. Regardless of region, roleplay-oriented participants were more satisfied (M=3.390, SE=.011) than those who had a low preference for roleplay (M=3.288, SE=.008).

6. DISCUSSION

Given that larp groups are extremely complex, we argue that larps likely follow a punctuated equilibrium model of group life (Leonard and Arango 2013). Using a large data set of anonymous survey responses, we explored three core hypotheses derived from this work. Specifically, we set out to investigate challenges that larps may face due to such unique group dynamics: social embeddedness, competition, and principled conflicts.

First, we expected that players involved in more diverse larp styles would be less satisfied with their groups because greater social embeddedness may give rise to problems (such as adverse social comparisons). Although we found support for the claim that diverse combat mechanics can reduce satisfaction, the results for diverse themes and numeracy did not match our predictions. Perhaps exposure to diverse mechanics is a more reliable signal of social embeddedness. Alternatively, the direction of causality could be

This is because this effect of region on satisfaction is only significant (p<.001) for participants who are high in preference for achievement.

Table 7

Decomposing interaction of preference for achievement by region: means, standard error, and pairwise comparisons.

	(a)US/Canada	(b) Other	p-value comparing a and b
(c) Low	$M=3.321$	$M=3.319$	0.921
	$SE=0.02$	$SE=0.011$	
(d) High	$M=3.387$	$M=3.329$	<.001
	$SE=0.012$	$SE=0.008$	
p-value comparing c and d	0.005	0.420	

Note: Based on estimated marginal means with covariates (age and gender).

reversed: dissatisfaction might cause exposure to more combat styles (e.g., I am not satisfied with my larps, which leads me to experiment with other styles). Similarly, this direction of causality explains the observed (weak) association between satisfaction and numeracy: the more satisfied you are with your larps, the more events you attend. Overall, while these results are mixed, our review of group dynamics still warns that social embeddedness (e.g., group overlap) can be a harbinger of worsening group health.

Next, we found that greater preference for scheming, political play, and intrigue predicted greater satisfaction with larps, not less. One explanation for this unexpected result is that we may not have indexed zero-sum competition effectively since the measure we selected from the pre-made survey did not ask participants to specify whether the play they enjoy results in other player characters losing resources or status.

Finally, we wanted to examine the effect of play style fit on satisfaction. We capitalized on a common assumption about US and Canadian larps: that they promote achievement at the expense of roleplay value (Hellström 2012). As predicted, players who preferred individual achievement were more satisfied if they resided in US/Canada. However, this effect did not emerge for preference for roleplay, which partially contradicts the perspective that roleplay and achievement are mutually exclusive. These data also support our view that dissatisfaction can arise when there is a mismatch between a player's motivations and the goals of their larp groups. Since group health is tethered to *principled conflicts* (Wheelan 1994) and an inherent mismatch may drive player dissatisfaction, game runners may want to continually assess whether their community members feel their goals and mental models are shared by the group at large.

Overall, we found some evidence that social embeddedness and motivation-group mismatch may be detrimental to player satisfaction. However, since we were using previously collected data, internal validity of our study is uncertain. For example, we used many single-item measures because they were the best approximation of our variables of interests, but they may not adequately tap into the constructs we intended. Further, although the survey had a large international sample, its development and recruitment procedures (via social media, Vanek 2015) likely reveal a Western cultural bias. Finally, we are cautious about making causal claims from our non-experimental results. Despite these limitations, we hope this new quantitative analysis inspires further application of small groups research to the study and promotion of healthy group functioning in larp communities.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND NOTES

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BIO

Diana J. Leonard received a BA in Psychology from Northwestern University and a PhD in Psychology from UC Santa Barbara with an emphasis in college and university teaching. She is currently Assistant Professor of Psychology at Lewis & Clark College. Leonard's primary research examines the role of emotions and social identity in strategic intergroup communications.

Character Creation Diversity in Gaming Art

Popular abstract: The artwork for a role-playing game can be one of the most important aspects of the gaming experience. Artwork helps to give role-players an idea of what the world looks like in that game. It helps to inspire the kinds of characters players might want to create. Finally, art can serve as a method for determining what is and is not normal for a setting. *Dungeons & Dragons* was the first tabletop roleplaying game (RPG) created and as such serves as the foundation of the gaming hobby (Fine 1983; Tresca 2011; Peterson 2012). Is the artwork in *Dungeons & Dragons* racially imbalanced? How has the artwork changed since the beginning of the hobby? Wizards of the Coast is praised for the diversity of their new 5th Edition line, but is it truly diverse? This project seeks to find out by examining the artwork in the *Players Handbook* for each edition of the game. By using the theory of symbolic annihilation, I explore whether or not racial minorities are adequately represented in the artwork.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The artwork for a role playing game can be one of the most important aspects of the gaming experience. Artwork helps to give role-players an idea of what the world looks like in that game. It helps to inspire the kinds of characters players might want to create. Finally, art can serve as a method for determining what is and is not normal for a setting. *Dungeons & Dragons* was the first tabletop roleplaying game (RPG) created and as such serves as the foundation of the gaming hobby (Fine 1983; Tresca 2011; Peterson 2012). Is the artwork in *Dungeons & Dragons* racially imbalanced? How has the artwork changed since the beginning of the hobby? Wizards of the Coast is praised for the diversity of their new 5th Edition line, but is it truly diverse? This project seeks to find out by examining the artwork in the *Players Handbook* for each edition of the game. By using the theory of symbolic annihilation, I explore whether or not racial minorities are adequately represented in the artwork. *Dungeons & Dragons* was chosen not only because it is the first role-playing game, but because it has experienced the most exposure to non-gamers. In addition to having produced a gaming line, *Dungeons & Dragons* has also appeared in novels, video games, TV shows, and movies. During the 1980s, it even made media headlines when conservative Christians feared that the game may introduce vulnerable kids to the occult (Schnoebelen 1989).[1]This research thus seeks to fill a gap in the literature by using the theory of symbolic annihilation and applying it to role-playing games in order to answer the question: is the artwork of *Dungeons & Dragons* racially imbalanced? It will also serve as a starting point for initiating a conversation on whether or not role-playing game books show equal representation for minorities. This research will help inform other scholars who seek to have discussions on race representation in role-playing games. By creating a foundation from which future research can be done, it will also be possible to theorize about what representation in other games and settings might look like and thus be able to provide suggestions for game developers on how to increase diversity and representation within their own gaming products.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Mass media is the way in which many people learn their values and are socialized (Tuchman 78). Because of this socializing power, mass media can play a big role in the way people are influenced (Dubin 1987; Mou and Peng 2009). It is due to the mass media's influence on the way people think and interpret their world that stereotypes within mass media can become dangerous and harmful (Mou and Peng 2009; Glascock and Schreck 2004). Negative portrayals have been linked to lower self-esteem in blacks (Glascock and Schreck 2004) and women (Glascock and Schreck 2004; McCabe, Fairchild, Grauerholz, Pescosolido, and Tope 2011; Tuchman 1978), but can also lock targeted groups into stereotyped roles and stigmas (Tuchman 1978).

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[1] See "Character Creation: The Symbolic Annihilation of Race in *Dungeons & Dragons*," in *The Wyrd Con Companion Book 2015*, 129-144 (Los Angeles, CA: Wyrd Con) for an earlier and more extensive version of this study.

These negative portrayals and the overall lack of representation were termed symbolic annihilation by Gaye Tuchman (1978). Tuchman used symbolic annihilation to explain how exclusion of women in media portrayals can lead to damaging effects both for women and men. Thus, under symbolic annihilation, the use of media can also influence the way we perceive racial minority groups, oftentimes influencing how we think and feel about non-dominant groups (Klein and Shiffman 2009). This overall process can also be dehumanizing, as Merskin (1998) states when discussing the portrayal of Native Americans in media. This dehumanizing effect can reduce minorities to a collection of tropes and stereotypes, which furthers harms how people receive and interact with them.

Role-playing games are a unique form of mass media in that in they are a group experience and are co-created between the players and the game master (Tresca 2011). The fictional worlds created in gaming can serve as cultural representations (Fuist 2012) projecting the stereotypes, tropes, and expectations of those who play the game into them. While gaming may serve as a means to escape reality (Fine 1983; Nephew 2006) it can also serve as a space for alternate identity construction (Bowman 2010). These alternate identities can be a path for exploring different ideas, points of views, and experiences. Because of this, adequate racial minority representation becomes crucial in giving players a chance to explore and encounter ideas, concepts, and people that they may not have previously considered or encountered on their own.

3. METHODOLOGY

Dungeons & Dragons has been published by two gaming companies: first by TSR, where the game was created, then in 1997 by Wizards of the Coast, who are the current owners. For this study, I will be reviewing the artwork in the *Players Handbook* throughout the various editions of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Under TSR, the game had many reprints that would sometimes result in new artwork being commissioned. Only one book was chosen from each edition (see Table 1). In the case of the Wizards of the Coast run with *Dungeons & Dragons*, the artwork in the core books remains the same throughout the life of that edition. TSR was a different case, however, with reprints within an edition sometimes receiving a new set of artwork. Due to the difficulties of tracking down all variants from TSR's run with *Dungeons & Dragons*, I opted to select one book from each edition that they published to code.

Table 1: Number of Images and Characters

	Number of Images	Number of Characters
Basic Dungeons & Dragons	26	53
1st Edition AD&D	56	155
2nd Edition AD&D	47	111
Rules Cyclopedia	53	130
3rd Edition D&D	47	80
4th Edition D&D	63	144
5th Edition D&D	81	171
Total	375	644

I only used the artwork that depicted human or demi-human characters. Demi-humans were the fantasy character races -- such as dwarves, elves, and halflings -- that resembled humans, but were based in fantasy literature or mythos. Artwork was excluded that was mostly landscape pictures or pictures in which the humanoid characters were non-descript and thus part of a bigger picture. In addition, artwork that depicted only the monster races was excluded, since monsters were not the focus of this study. The demi-human races were included due to their close ties and resemblance to baseline humans, including at times displaying the same level of racial diversity and, in some cases, the possibility of cross breeding, such as with half-orcs and half-elves. While there are racial overtones and concerns involved with the monster races, an examination of them is deserving of its own study and thus beyond the scope of this current article.

The characters were coded along five variables; sex, race, stereotype, heroics, and edition. The edition variable coded as the edition of the game from which the artwork in question came. Sex was broken down into four categories: male, female, unknown, and non-applicable. For the purpose of this study, sex is to be understood as the apparent biological differences between individuals. Unknown was used in instances where the character's biological sex could not be determined; it is unknown if the artist purposely created sexually ambiguous characters.[2] Non-applicable only applied to monster races that appeared in the artwork alongside humans and demi-humans.

Race was broken down into a total of 24 categories ranging from human races (black, white, Arabic, Native American, and East Asian) to fantasy demi-humans (elves, dwarves, or halflings) to demi humans of color (such as black elves and dwarves). The stereotype variable measured whether the characters depicted were done so using tropes and stereotypes associated with their race. For example, the Asian

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[2] See the 5th Edition PHB page 9 for example: the armored dwarf leading the charge towards the dragon.

human on page 140 of the 5th Edition book was drawn wearing samurai armor as opposed to more European fantasy based armor that most other characters wore. Thus, the Asian human was counted as a racial stereotype.[3] Heroics were used to determine if the role of the character was heroic or villainous based on the context of the artwork, as player-characters are meant to be the heroes. Instances without an obvious villain character were coded as neutral.

Finally, each edition was compared to census data from the year closest to its publication. Symbolic annihilation was determined using a method similar to Klein and Shiffman (2009) in which they "consider a group to be underrepresented if its prevalence is less than half of that observed in the population at large, and we will consider it to be an example of symbolic annihilation if its prevalence is less than one quarter of that found in the society at large." Thus, each edition was compared to the population census to the closest year of publication (see Table 2).

Table 2: Edition and Census Data

	Year of Publication	Census Data
Basic Dungeons & Dragons	1974	1970
1st Edition AD&D	1977	1980
2nd Edition AD&D	1989	1990
Rules Cyclopedia	1991	1990
3rd Edition D&D	2000	2000
4th Edition D&D	2008	2010
5th Edition D&D	2015	2010

4. RESULTS

Over the lifetime of *Dungeons & Dragons*, people of color were depicted 4% of the time. By race, white humans appeared 38% of the time, while blacks, Asians, Native Americans, and Arabs were depicted 2%, 1%, .4% and .4% respectively. For comparison, elves represented 7% of the characters depicted while dwarves composed 6% and halflings 4%. Some of the demi-humans were able to gain parity and prominence equal to minorities in a much shorter time span. For example, tieflings, who were introduced as a playable race in 4th Edition, were depicted 2% of the time, comparable to blacks who were also depicted 2% of the time. Minorities were depicted in stereotyped fashion 43% of the time that they appeared in the artwork. Men of color were depicted more often than women of color.

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[3] For additional examples, see the two black characters depicted on page 215 of the *Rules Cyclopedia* or the Native American depicted on page 248 of the *Rules Cyclopedia*.

Table 3: Race of Artwork

	Total Sample
Human: Black	2.1%
Human: Asian	1.5%
Human: Arab	3%
Human: Native American	.4%
Human: White	38.4%
Human: Unknown	1.2%
Elf	6.8%
Elf: Black Non Drow	.2%
Elf: Drow	.9%
Elf: Other	1.1%
Dwarf	5.8%
Dwarf: Black	.4%
Dragon	1.4%
Monster	18.2%
Halfling	4.5%
Unknown	8.5%
Half Orc	1.2%
Half Elf	1.2%
Gnome	1.2%
Dragonborn	1.8%
Tiefling	2%
Eladrin	.7%
Halfling: Black	.1%

Finally, minorities were depicted as heroic 7.6% of time, neutral 5% of the time, and as villains .5% of the time.

Table 4: Heroic Depiction

	Heroic	Villainous	Neutral
Characters (All)	17%	21%	61%
Minorities (All)	7.6%	.5%	5%
Human (All)	55%	6%	52%
Black	27%	5%	66%
Asian	23%	0%	77%
Native American	66%	0%	33%
Arab	33%	0%	66%
White	21%	3%	76%

In *Basic*, all racial minorities were symbolically annihilated. In *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 1st Edition and 2nd Edition, blacks and Arabs were symbolically annihilated while Asians were not. No census data were available for Native Americans. In the *Rules Cyclopedia*, no minority groups were symbolically annihilated. In 3rd Edition, blacks, Arabs, and Native Americans were symbolically annihilated. For 4th Edition blacks, Arabs, Native Americans and whites were all symbolically annihilated. Symbolic annihilation for whites can be attributed to a large increase in the use of demi-humans, who made up 50% of the artwork. Finally, for 5th Edition, Asians and Native Americans were symbolically annihilated (see Appendix A for all tables).

5. DISCUSSION

This study helps to illustrate how *Dungeons & Dragons* has struggled with the representation of racial minority groups throughout the life of the

game, although the levels to which various racial minority groups were represented shifted between editions. In some editions of the game, Asians struggled to be represented, while in others, Asians were depicted at a rate on par with their population in the United States. Shifting art directions created shifting trends in the artwork presented by *Dungeons & Dragons*. An example is 4th Edition's attempt to be a more diverse game (Tresca 2011), resulting in the symbolic annihilation of even whites when the art direction attempted to diversify the game by including more demi-humans. In addition to symbolic annihilation, minorities in the artwork also received stereotyped portrayals. 43% of the time a minority was depicted, they were shown in a stereotyped fashion.

The depiction of demi-human races is also worth discussing. For the majority of *Dungeon & Dragons*' run, the fantasy races displayed in the artwork were from Eurocentric sources, owing to the games roots in feudal fantasy and the works of Tolkien (Fine 1983; Van Dyke 2008; Tresca 2011; Peterson 2012). Elves, dwarves, and halflings that have Eurocentric/white features are prominently depicted alongside their white human counterparts. Demi-humans of color are not featured as often as the whiter demi-humans, like elves and dwarves. Half-orcs make their first appearance in 1st Edition *AD&D* and then are sparsely used. When used, they are portrayed as less civilized and more barbaric than the whiter demi-human races, often embodying many racial tropes used to degenerate blacks (Van Dyke 2008).

Many of the non-white demi-humans, such as tieflings and dragonborn, lack the same level of culture and civilization that are oftentimes found in the white demi-human races such as elves and dwarves. Furthermore, as of 5th Edition, the non-white demi-humans were designated as an uncommon races, making them less numerous than the whiter demi-human races, the notable exception being the Drow who, despite being dark-skinned, have a culture and civilization all their own. The major difficulty with this singular representation of a demi-human race of color with a civilization all its own is that the Drow civilization is one based on slavery, subjugation, and matriarchally-based misandry. Thus, the Drow represent many evils against which white gamers games would feel compelled to fight wrapped up in the skin tone of a person of color. A full analysis of the Drow and their problematic depiction is deserving of its own separate study. Still, they are a notable exception that are, in the very least, worth mentioning.

The use of minorities and demi-humans supports what Hudson (2004) calls multicultural whiteness, a concept in which racial, cultural, and ethnic differences are moved into the general fabric of what it means to be white and, thus, American while obfuscating a history of racial and ethnic discrimination. In the same way various European ethnicities such as Jews and Irish were incorporated into the American culture and absorbed into whiteness while ignoring the history of racial discrimination that they experienced, minorities in fantasy settings are absorbed into white culture to represent human diversity while ignoring a history of racial discrimination, division, and separation. Additionally, demi-humans are incorporated into human kingdoms in the same way as a method to show how open and accepting humans -- and thus whiteness -- is.

This normalization of whiteness extends beyond fantasy settings and *Dungeons & Dragons*. White Wolf's World of Darkness, as an example, incorporates a similar pattern as well. While vampires, werewolves, and mages -- among their many supernatural groups -- can come from any ethnicity, many of the games' various supernatural organizations and mythos are based on American or European conceptions of horror elements. *Vampire: the Masquerade* is based on Western concepts of the vampire mythos. Many of the clans are European in origin and structure. While some may hail from minority groups, they tend to help support the idea of diversity as opposed to providing a unique perspective born from the experience of a minority group. In *Werewolf: the Apocalypse*, the mythos of the setting is based on Western concepts of earth and spirit worship. While the game features tribes that are non-European in nature and origin, they too are normalized into the behavior and institutions of the European/American counterparts who were mostly white. While *Mage: the Ascension* featured many magical traditions that were non-European in origin, the prevailing structure of the game and setting's magical understanding were based on European understandings of magic. This does not remove diversity per se, but it does normalize it against a more universal whiteness.

6. CONCLUSION

Diversity is a difficult topic. When considering what elements we add to games, we must also make sure that we do not fall prey to tokenism and cultural appropriation. As Shawl (2004) points out, portraying other cultures and minority group it is important to pay attention to things like the "setting, dialogue, action, and a host of other elements above and

beyond character." Furthermore, Shawl (2009) explains how research into different minority and ethnic groups is required to create a more diverse and inclusive set of games: not limited to just books, but also including interviewing, experiencing different cultures, and immersing oneself in these different cultures to gain deeper insights into their practices. It is important to move beyond just simply placing people of color into gaming settings. Publishers should strive to incorporate them into the gaming world itself, allowing their unique cultural contributions to be felt within the setting as opposed to being just window dressing. Furthermore, care must be given so that non-white representations are not relegated to inferior status within the setting. This is true even among fantasy settings that feature non-white demi-humans, who often lack the same cultural advancements and contributions that the white humans and demi-humans bring to their settings.

However, this article is not to say that no progress has been made in diversity in gaming. 5th Edition *Dungeon and Dragons* showed positive signs of growth in the realm of diversity (see Appendix). Paizo, the makers of *Pathfinder*, regularly hold discussions about diversity within their setting and solicit feedback from their players about how they are progressing with their goal of providing a diverse gaming experience. Furthermore, while the World of Darkness has made missteps in reinforcing multicultural whiteness and cultural appropriation, the game still strives to provide a diverse array of characters within their settings and games.

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BIO

TiMar Long has gamed since the age of 16, starting in the world of *Rifts* before moving onto other games such as White Wolf's *Mage: the Ascension*. TiMar earned his Bachelor's in Sociology at the University of Texas at Arlington, where he was a McNair scholar. Long is currently completing his Masters at the University of Houston. His areas of study include religion; Middle East studies; political sociology; and race and culture. Upon completing his Masters, Long intends to pursue a PhD degree. His Master's thesis studies black rpg gamers and whether or not they construct identities as black individuals. Long's thesis also explores whether or not gaming serves as a way for player's to explore their identities as black individuals.

APPENDIX A

Table 5: Basic *Dungeons & Dragons*	1970 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Populatio
Black	5.5%	3%	0%	11%
Asian	.35%	.17%	0%	.7%
Arab	-	-	0%	-
Native American	.2%	.1%	0%	.04%
White	43%	22%	60%	87%
Demi Human	-	-	21%	-

Table 6: *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 1st Edition	1980 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Populatio
Black	5.5%	3%	.6%	11%
Asian	.8%	.4%	1.3%	1.6%
Arab	.15%	.07%	0%	.3%
Native American	-	-	.6%	-
White	41%	20%	50%	83%
Demi Human	-	-	13%	-
Table: 5				

Table 7: *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* 2nd Edition	1990 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Populatio
Black	6%	3%	0%	12%
Asian	1.5%	.75%	2%	3%
Arab	.2%	.1%	0%	.4%
Native American	-	-	0%	-
White	40%	20%	43%	80%
Demi Human	-	-	9%	-

Table 8: *Rules Cyclopedia*	1990 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	6%	12%
Asian	1.5%	.75%	3%	3%
Arab	.2%	.1%	7%	.4%
Native American	-	-	1.5%	-
White	40%	20%	50%	80%
Demi Human	-	-	9%	-

Table 9: *Dungeons & Dragons* 3rd Edition	2000 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6%	3%	1.2%	12%
Asian	1.8%	.9%	1.2%	3.6%
Arab	.2%	.1%	0%	.4%
Native American	.7%	.35%	0%	1.4%
White	34%	17%	25%	69%
Demi Human	-	-	53%	-

Table 10: *Dungeons & Dragons* 4th Edition	2010 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6.5%	3.25%	.7% (4.1%)	13%
Asian	2.5%	1.25%	1.3%	5%
Arab	.25%	.1%	0%	.5%
Native American	.85%	.4%	0%	1.7%
White	36%	18%	14%	72%
Demi Humans	-	-	50%	-

Table 11: *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th Edition	2010 Census Data			
	Underrepresentation	Symbolic Annihilation	In Book Representation	Population
Black	6.5%	3.25%	4% (4.6%)	13%
Asian	2.5%	1.25%	1.1%	5%
Arab	.25%	1.1%	1.1%	.5%
Native American	.85%	.4%	0%	1.7%
White	36%	18%	26%	72%
Demi Humans	-	-	38%	-

The Reality Code: Interpreting Aggregate Larp Rules as Code that Runs on Humans

Popular abstract: Aggregate larp rules are a type of code that runs on humans. Code can be thought of as a linguistic form that is both declarative and imperative; it is both truth and command (Buswell 2009). In aggregate larp, elements of the game's *diegesis* are rendered codic, or playable, allowing players a degree of autonomy from game staff. Through the methodologies of Critical Code Studies (Marino 2006)—the reading of code (code as text) and the annotation of code (code as manuscript)—the interpretation of larp rules as "code that runs on humans" takes form, allowing us to read game encounters as programs, players and staff as programmers, rulebooks as programming languages, and rule structures as platforms. In larp code, a DBMS-style relational model lends the code depth and specificity. Aggregate larp rules descend from tabletop RPGs, which emerged in tandem with the workplace proliferation of DBMS in the 1970s. With larp code and computer code, the social practice of standardization plays a role in shaping the code. With both types of code we also see the emergence of proprietary code. Social apparatuses (Althusser 1970) ensure that larp code maintains its integrity as truth-command. The repeated reinforcement of social apparatuses lead players to experience a process of rules reification, leading the larp code to eventually take on a type of psychological reality. This phenomenon may have a neurological origin. The study of larp code provides a framework to approach "real world" reified power structures such as "gender," "race," and "capital."

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In autumn of 2003, I traveled eighty miles through the evergreen forests of Western Washington to a summer camp that had been overtaken for the weekend by dozens of people who called themselves live-action role-players, or "larpers." Specifically, this was the Seattle Chapter of the *New England Role Playing Organization* (NERO), now known as *Alliance Larp*. It was a sight to behold—the rubber elf ears, the "magic circle" of Christmas lights, the cafeteria they called "the tavern" where players lingered between battles with duct-tape-wrapped tubes they called "swords." Needless to say, I was a bit confused by the aesthetics.

Since 1996, I had taken part in gatherings such as cosplay, Renaissance Faires, SCA events, and historical reenactment—spaces in which people used lavish costumes and settings to help us imagine ourselves into the worlds we had learned to long for while watching television and playing video games. Mark Duffett theorizes that media fans rely upon a shared inner territory of emotional certainty, or "knowing field," to shape the phenomenology of participation within our fannish communities (Duffett 2013). I had grown accustomed to fan communities that used aesthetics to evoke our shared "knowing field." At this larp event, however, the phenomenology of participation was not centered around simulating the clothing or mannerisms of a time period or media genre. These larpers were using a very different methodology to approach the ideological. They had created an augmented sociality, a space in which people shouted commands at each other, and if executed properly, those commands

were obeyed unwaveringly as if they were part of the universe's laws. One larper might pelt another with a beanbag while shouting "I call forth a Dragon's Breath!" to which the victim would respond by flopping onto the forest floor, to which the victim's friend might react by tapping her on the shoulder with a beanbag and saying "I call upon the Earth to Cure Wounds," to which the victim jumps up and rejoins the fray. To facilitate interactions like this, players must memorize a lengthy book of rules. The rules provide the framework to allow a myriad of "un-real" or undesirable activities to become a fluid part of the game's sociality without people having to actually enact them—activities like casting love spells, being maimed, and forging magic weapons. The rules provide a logistical model of command and consequence, allowing larpers to swiftly resolve the occurrence of "un-real" events without any debate over "what just happened," and to do so with relative autonomy from the game's staff.

As I delved more deeply into the rules, first as a player then as a staff member, I came to understand that the rules were something far more complex than they appeared: that aggregate larp rules are a type of code that runs on humans.

Code is a linguistic form that is both declarative and imperative; it is simultaneously truth and command (Buswell 2009). It is a specific form of language in which the declaration of a statement simultaneously makes it true. The statement "I do" during a marriage ceremony may be thought of as a type of code. Codic languages, such as larp code and computer

languages, are quite rare and emerge only in situations with a specific type of captive audience.

Many varieties of larp have emerged globally in last three decades, falling under loose categories such as *campaign larp*, *freeform larp*, *secrets and powers larp*, and *pervasive larp*. The one consistent thing about this mode of leisure labor is that players interact with and within a story, and strive to physically enact as much of that story as is feasible/desirable. The story in a larp—which is to say, the series of events happening in the imaginary reality that players interact with and co-create as they play—can be called the game's *diegesis* (Montola 2013). In aggregate larps such as *Alliance*, elements of the *diegesis* have been rendered codic, or playable. In this type of larp, players use a *diegetic* language—the signs of which include beanbags, specific phrases, foam-covered tubes, codic slips of paper, and smears of face paint—to simultaneously declare the game's *diegesis* while exacting their will upon it. The *diegesis* includes all things that are said to be "happening in the game world" such as a character blasting someone with a glowing ball of ice magic, or someone ingesting a love potion and becoming twitterpated with the next character they see. The *diegesis* does not include the things used to represent those things: the beanbag and phrase "30 elemental ice" or the slip of paper representing the Love Potion code. Many types of larp do not have a codic system to allow players to deploy elements of the game's *diegesis*, and thus rely on an authorial (rather than aggregate) power structure to resolve the game's "un-real" events (Steele 2016b). Rather than relying on code, authorial larps offer models of *diegetic* deployment rooted in authorship, evoking a play dynamic rooted performativity and subjection (Butler 1998). While *most* aggregate larps also contain authorial encounters with game staff (for example, a staff member declaring, "fire is now raining from the sky," which then becomes *diegetic* fact), *all* aggregate larps contain a codic rule structure that facilitates a decentralized (Baran 1964) deployment of elements of the game's *diegesis*.

Through the methodologies of Critical Code Studies (Marino 2006, 2016)—the reading of code (code as text) and the annotation of code (code as manuscript)—the interpretation of larp rules as code that runs on humans takes form, allowing us to read game encounters as programs, players and staff as programmers, rulebooks as programming languages, and rule structures as platforms. Interpreting aggregate larp rules as code facilitates cross-larp, cross-platform, and cross-disciplinary study of larp code, which can be thought of as both as a means to achieve an interactive collective *diegesis*, and also as

an art form containing subtle flourishes unique to the code. The human coding that happens in larp is improvisational and takes place in real time, akin to a live coding musical performance, only rather than shaping sound, these larp coders shape an invisible mutually agreed upon reality. A video then of this type of coding should not be considered the program, but rather is a record of a program being run in the past. To facilitate a closer reading of larp code, I have annotated a troll battle that was coded in the *Alliance Larp* rule set around 2009 (Steele 2016a), as this is the system and version I am most fluent in and thus most prepared to annotate.

At a cursory glance we see that, with the exception of the Spell Shield, the *diegetic* effect of each of these codic commands is pending: players do not know if their code took effect until a few seconds later because other code exists that may allow the target to nullify or redirect the code. This creates moments of lag between the codic and *diegetic* aspects of the game.

In my annotation, I have underlined the subsystems of the code. Looking at the first line of code, we see that the seemingly small gesture of uttering the phrase "5 Silver" while hitting someone with a foam weapon evokes at least five separate rule subsystems: (1) how and when to utter the phrase; (2) how and where to swing the weapon; (3) how to ensure that a weapon has been correctly constructed and received approval from game authorities; (4) what it means for something to be a valid target; and (5) a "Body Point" subsystem that is used to determine various factors, such as whether a player can continue to stand up. Both the deployer and the receiver must have precise knowledge of all of these subsystems for this line of code to operate. Other code in this system is not as simple, as can be seen with the multistep process that underlies the deployment of a single Spell Shield.

Another way to discuss the rule subsets in this human coding language is to say that this type of language relies upon a type of relational meaning, mirroring the practice of relational DBMS, or Data Base Management Systems, in which *attributes* are sub-categorized under *entities* (Codd 1970). Perhaps it is no surprise that larp rules descend from those of tabletop RPGs (a similar type of story-based play in which the *diegesis* is likewise rendered codic, but tabletops lack the requirement for physical enactment), and that tabletop RPGs developed in conjunction with the workforce proliferation of DBMS in the 1970s. Humans are in a reflexive relationship without our technology; as we interact with our machines, our machines likewise interact with and influence our culture (Hayles 1999).

Figure 1: Larp Code Annotation, *Alliance Larp* troll battle (Steele 2016a)

Name of Program: Troll Battle
Authors: Alliance LARP Seattle Chapter players and staff
Year Performed: c. 2009
Programming Language: The Alliance LARP Rule Set
Requisite Hardware: Humans, foam weapons, beanbags, items of codic documentation
Video Record Available at: youtu.be/Tb-lgzSJg_s

"5 Silver" + weapon blow
Pending Diegetic Effect: Someone swings a sliver-coated blade and wounds someone else!
Codic Effect: Uttering this phrase while landing a successful blow with a qualifying foam-covered weapon causes a qualifying target to lose Body Points.

"6 Normal" + weapon blow
Pending Diegetic Effect: Someone swings a blade and wounds someone else!
Codic Effect: Uttering this phrase while landing a successful blow with a qualifying foam-covered weapon causes a qualifying target to lose Body Points.

"I Curse you with Weakness" + beanbag hit
Pending Diegetic Effect: A glowing ball of magic flies from someone's fingertips and hits someone else, rendering the victim exhausted and unable to fight.
Codic Effect: Uttering this phrase while landing a successful hit with a qualifying beanbag renders a qualifying target unable to fight for a specified amount of time. Following the battle, documentation should be provided to the target of this code to show that the certification for the one-time use of this code was properly obtained.

"Spell Shield"
Diegetic Effect: A spell hits a person, and a glowing magical shield appears around their body for a moment, deflects the attack, then vanishes.
Codic Effect: Prior to this moment, a qualifying player has uttered the phrase "I grant you a Spell Shield" while pressing a qualifying beanbag to a qualifying body part of the speaker and also has given them the appropriate documentation to maintain that this action has occurred. Now, by uttering the phrase "spell shield" the speaker renders a Magic/Spell-Qualifier that has successfully hit them within a qualifying timeframe to have had no effect. Following the battle, the player who deployed this code should give the documentation that shows they are certified for its one-time use to the player whose code was blocked.

"I Summon a Force to Disarm your Shield" + beanbag hit
Pending Diegetic Effect: A glowing ball of magic flies from someone's fingertips and hits someone else, blasting their shield away from them!
Codic Effect: Uttering this phrase while landing a successful hit with a qualifying beanbag forces a qualifying target to drop their shield and not touch it for a specified amount of time.

Neurologists might argue that the DBMS-style of relating to larp code only occurs at the superficial level (i.e., this model does not necessarily mirror the biological structure of the brain), but those who dabble in computer science might refute that DBMS likewise don't have anything to do with a computer's hardware: they are rather an abstraction that allows humans to interact with computers on our terms, not theirs. The use of DBMS-style relational systems in our interactions with larp code lets us fluidly organize and clarify what we mean with each deployment of the code, allowing us to set parameters that increase safety and mitigate out-of-game disadvantages. Relational DBMS gave us the Software Revolution and the RPG revolution as well.

As players develop fluency in the game's code, they increase their agency within the game's sociality. The rules can therefore then be thought of as a mode of power deployment; they are a means through which to make your will more effective than/upon others. As you develop fluency in the rules, the code

gradually loses its novelty and rather becomes a tool to create experiences. A seasoned larper designates her Character Stats like a banker, which is to say, like a software engineer. While a financial instrument interacts with and lends shape to the market, and whereas a line of code interacts with and lends shape to the behavior of a computer, Character Stats lend shape to the *diegesis* of the game. A player's Character Stats Sheet might be thought of as an artist's palate, but rather than paint, it contains the specific code they are able to deploy during gameplay. Like the creative constraints of the Oulipo writers, Character Stats provide limits to the code an individual larper can draw from during a game, facilitating the development of strategy and teamwork, while sometimes laying the groundwork for an undesirable type of hierarchy rooted in the accumulation of codic abilities.

To the larp designer, genre often plays a major role in influencing their choice over which elements of the game's sociality to render codic, and genre also influences the types of signifiers to be used as signs for those truth-commands. In a Tolkien-esque action genre larp like *Alliance*, a bulk of the truth-commands have been written to signify the things of epic fantasy battle, while the signs designated to represent those truth-commands include hand-held items and projectiles that are swung or thrown in gestures resembling combat. Alternatively, in drama genre larps such as *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Rein*Hagen 2000), a bulk of the rules are dedicated to rendering supernatural and social abilities codic, with the signs that signify them often resembling dramatic theatre gestures, evoking codic deployment that takes on a theatrical tempo.

The social practice of code standardization is the process by which one or more individuals dictate how code is to operate. The form this practice takes is ultimately going to affect the code's usability. The *Alliance LARP* standardization process parallels that of the C programming language in the 1980s, a process spanning many years during which representatives of that languages' community of speakers discussed and re-crafted the code based on their perception of its usage (Buswell 2010), a nebulous process which led to bulky code that can take new speakers years to gain fluency in. As the third generation of computer and larp coders emerged in the mid-2000s, we saw the rise of code designed for simplicity and rapid acquisition. In software during this time, design paradigms like "convention over configuration" guided the creation of Ruby on Rails, a platform that dramatically reduces the number of decisions a developer must make, laying the foundation for the Web 2.0 and the rise of social media. In larp, we saw design paradigms like "separate the core rules from setting," which led to the creation of dramatically shorter rulebooks that facilitate faster language acquisition and more fluid experiences deploying the game code, as explained by *Devia* developer Bryan Gregory in a phone conversation on May 2, 2016.

Propriety code—in which social models facilitate a system of leasing the code for profit—has emerged in both larp code and computer code. For example, in the latest edition of the *Alliance Rulebook*, we find a passage that resembles the end-user licensing agreements that accompany proprietary software (see Figure 2). Within our economic system, code itself becomes a type of commodity to be leased to others, allowing them to use it to program while it continues to generate profit for those invested in its creation and maintenance.

Since they are dealing with inanimate objects, computer programmers have an easy time keeping the truth-commands of their code veridical. Those who manipulate the market depend upon others (hopefully) to create and uphold the state and legal apparatuses that ensure that the codic tools of finance hold their form. When we run code on humans in larp, we must build and reinforce our own social systems to ensure that the code doesn't break down. Larpers have developed a variety of social apparatuses (Althusser 1970) to reproduce the conditions of play. These social apparatuses include Ideological Game Apparatuses (IGAs), which entail the player-to-player positive reinforcement of the rules, and Repressive Game Apparatuses (RGAs), the disciplinary actions that occur out-of-game, often via referees or "Rules Marshals," when a failure to follow the rules has occurred. The IGAs might be thought of as the culture surrounding the rules, both during game play and also when interacting with the code outside of the game, such as a group of larpers hanging out in a coffee shop talking about the modifications they plan to make to their Character Sheets. RGAs include those awkward twenty minutes when the game has been paused for a Rules Marshall to adjudicate a contested bit of code deployment. The ultimate punishment for breaking the rules is exclusion, either for a period of time or permanently from the game. When a game's rules are *diegetic* code, breaking them threatens the integrity of the story and the world of the game.

As seasoned larpers become fluent in their game's codic language, they come to understand and interpret the language's signs as story-elements occurring in real time, which is to say, the signs become

reified. Reification is a process by which social constructs come to be mistaken for facts of nature (Lukács 1923). The reification of larp code is upheld through the repeated social reinforcement of IGAs and RGAs. Seasoned players can tell you about the uncanny moment when the rules finally "clicked"—the beanbag starts to *feels like* a fireball, the game money takes on a kind of *weight*. You know it shouldn't be, but while the game is running, it is. Perhaps this psychological sensation can be explained by the evolutionary history of the human brain. Our species' capacity for language and tool making are believed to have developed simultaneously in Broca's Area of the brain (Uomini and Meyer 2013) through a gene-culture co-evolutionary dynamic (Morgan et al. 2014). Perhaps in reification, this neurological ubiquity between language and tool making creates a type of psychological optical illusion, a "toolification" of socially-reinforced fantasies that have been codified as language, lending them that canny sense of being "real."

In the world outside of the game, fantasies such as "capital," "gender," and "race" also undergo the social process of reification, allowing slips of paper to be mistaken for congealed labor, arbitrary assessments of one's genitals at birth to be mistaken for consent to a pre-determined set of lifelong activities, and persistent split-second assessments of the amount of melatonin in one's skin and/or the shape of features limited to their face to evoke a fantasy that someone is either an equal or needs to be punished/saved/appropriated/excluded. The process of reifying these "real world" fantasies is no different than that which makes a beanbag into a fireball in larp, but they are lacking a "game off" mechanism. Reified social values contain their limits within their origin, leading to ad-hoc systems of infinitely expanding modes of reiterating the reified without contributing any new value outside of the reification system's own self-containment. Could it be that larp represents a new cultural-evolutionary advancement: reification with an "off" switch? *The fireball gets to become a beanbag again.* Or was there always already an off-switch, and this is all really about power? Histories of oppression are being actively being held in place, eclipsed by the smooth surface of "race" "capital" and "gender." *Does the fireball only get to become a beanbag again because no one has power invested in keeping it that way?*

Returning to Duffett, we can turn the analysis of fandom back towards the "real world" and say that the phenomenology of participation in the "reality" of Late Capitalism is shaped by a shared "knowing field" rooted in oppressive fantasies like "race,"

"capital" and "gender." *Does the fireball only get to become a beanbag again because no one has power invested in keeping it that way?* Returning to Duffett, we can turn the analysis of fandom back towards the "real world" and say that the phenomenology of participation in the "reality" of Late Capitalism is shaped by a shared "knowing field" rooted in oppressive fantasies like "race," "gender," and "capital." Drawing from the Catarealist art movement, which posits itself as "below and against the real" (Trigger 2015), we find larp code operating within a type of revolutionary potentiality, as below and apart from what is "real." Larp's revolutionary potentiality does not, however, prevent the reified social fantasies of the out-of-game world from creeping into a larp's *deigesis*. Many larp rule systems, for example, contain "Racial Abilities" that reinforce out-of-game essentialist fantasies about "race." In *Alliance*, if a character has green skin, it changes the way their character sheet works, no matter their backstory may be. This creates a type of *race that is more than race*—the fallacy of bio-essentializing assumptions about culture has been written into the code that governs the universe of the game, making it impossible for the society within the game to ever dismantle "race." Should the rules be changed then, perhaps splitting base personhood and culture into separate subsystems? Or perhaps the term "race" could be replaced with something more apt in larp rulebooks, like "species"? Or perhaps such things should be done away with? These are questions for the next generation of larp designers as they contemplate their craft.

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BIO

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Actual Play at the Forge: A Rhetorical Approach

Popular abstract: This paper takes a rhetorical perspective to examine an "actual play" (AP) discussion thread from indie-rpgs.com, popularly known as "the Forge," an influential and controversial online forum for tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) design that was active primarily during the first decade of the 21st century. It describes the thread as constituting a skilled discursive performance applying the Forge's "Big Model" to a dialogical phenomenology of play that enabled interlocutors to diagnose game-related sources of frustration, unhappiness or dissatisfaction and offer potential solutions grounded in the aesthetic preferences of players. It suggests that this perspective can usefully augment more typical frame-based approaches to describing the "analog" game experience by emphasizing the lived experience of tabletop role-players in the space of the game.

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This paper examines a discussion thread at the Forge, the tabletop RPG design discussion site that operated between 2001 and 2012 (White 2015). The Forge was noted for developing an influential picture of RPG play known as the "Big Model," which asserted that satisfyingly "coherent" TRPG play depended on the extent to which a group's gameplay resonated with each individual player's preferences among three "Creative Agenda" (CA). Also known as GNS (for Gamism, Narrativism, and Simulationism, which served as labels for the different aesthetic agendas), a player's CA preferences were said to shape individual judgments about what counted as good or fun play (Edwards 2004). Despite a reputation for being a haven for abstract RPG theory talk, much of the conversation at the Forge was oriented toward unpacking "actual play": the social interactions and communicative experiences at the table that produced the fiction of the game.

The analytic approach employed in this examination is *rhetorical*; that is, interested in the persuasive force of discourse in the face of uncertainty, and concerned with the dialogical choices available to interlocutors under particular circumstances, given their ostensible intentions and the available means of persuasion (White 2008). Methodologically, rhetoric focuses on the purposive text as the site of inquiry and applies interpretive methods—the judgment of the analyst, in other words—as its fundamental mode of operation (Gross and Keith 1996). In this case, a rhetorical critique will (1) provide an orientation to the text (in this case a single *thread* or online conversation selected for its exemplification of a typical Forge speech genre, the attempt to diagnose the causes of unsatisfying "dysfunctional" play in terms of the Big Model) in order to identify the interlocutors, their roles, and apparent intentions, (2) reconstruct the arguments offered by interlocutors, and (3) assess what those arguments suggest about the interlocutors and the perspectives they bring to the encounter.

While space limitations prevent the presentation of a fully fleshed out reconstruction of the thread, it can be summarized here. The discussion began on April 18, 2006, when a new poster calling himself "Buzz" posted a message to the Actual Play forum asking for help "in order to get a better idea how to assess a given system from a Big Model/GNS perspective, hopefully with an aim toward application of theory in my own play" (Delsing 2006). The thread ultimately involved 9 participants who made a total of 66 posts between April 18 and May 14, 2006; those 66 posts comprised 53 turns (i.e., counting sequential posts by the same poster as a single turn). Of the nine people posting in the thread, three (Buzz, Ron, and Storn) account for 89% of the posts (87% of turns). Five of the other six make only one post each; the last (Caldis) makes two. The adjacency relationships among posters in terms of who posts before and after whom can be used to diagram the proximity of each poster to each other (see Figure 1).

Some explanation of Figure 1 maybe helpful. The size of the node representing each poster corresponds to the total number of turns taken by that individual; with Ron (that is, Ron Edwards, the co-founder and moderator of the site) taking the most (18 turns), Buzz next (17), and Storn third (11). Similarly, the thickness of the line between each pair of nodes indicates the average frequency with which the posters in each pair precede and follow each other. Each participant's total number of posts at the Forge during its lifetime is noted in order to provide a

Figure 1: Patterns of interaction in Forge thread exemplar. Nodes are participants; arrows connect participants who precede and follow each other in sequence.
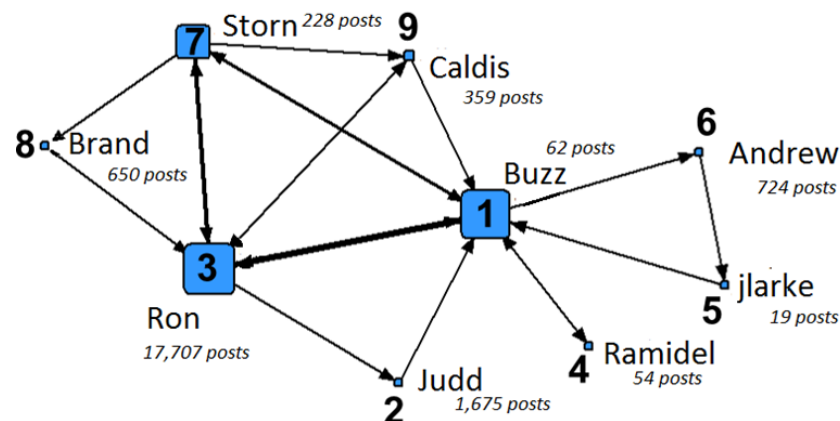
sense of their overall level of activity on the site. By this measure, too, Ron is very active, with over ten times as many posts as the next most active Forge poster participating in the thread (Judd).

The graph-theoretic visualization of the thread in Figure 1 is intended merely to orient us to the conversation taking place within it, showing that the bulk of the thread is occupied by a three-way discussion between Buzz, Ron, and Storn. It seems likely at this point that Ron is leading the discussion (given the authority implicit in his overwhelmingly high total post count and his status within the Forge community), with Buzz in the role of primary interlocutor. Storn's role is not yet clear; he enters late and seems to go back and forth with Ron, and with Buzz to a lesser extent. Given that he is well-known in gaming circles as an artist who draws superheroes, the structure of his participation implies that he is making suggestions or offering advice.

After some prefatory welcome messages in response to Buzz's first post, Ron tells Buzz that he has "about an hour of lecture" on a topic in which the latter is interested, the application of the Big Model to a superhero game called *Champions*, but that it would be more productive for Buzz to describe at least one of his actual play experiences, in order to "create the context in which we can not only make all sorts of Creative Agenda things clear as day, but also help get across" points related to understanding *Champions* in terms of Forge theory. Even though Ron rejects an earlier poster's framing of the Actual Play forum as an atheoretical space, he immediately positions himself not as lecturer on theory but as a potential co-participant with Buzz in a theoretically informed dialogue organized around actual play experiences.

In response to Ron, Buzz begins to describe a biweekly game in which he has been a player for about 3½ years. Immediately, his dissatisfaction with the game is made clear. Buzz notes that "outside of combat or issue dealing directly with powers, there's not much of any die-rolling." This meant that Buzz's high-intelligence super-scientist character, who had been designed with the understanding that in-game puzzles or problems that might be amenable to intellectual or scientific solutions would be able to be addressed by the *character* using abilities listed on the character sheet, was at a disadvantage.

"What I'm seeing in your description," Ron finally tells Buzz, "is a classic example, Drift-heavy Champions style, of incoherent play." In this case, "Drift-heavy" refers to the extent to which a GM alters the rules-as-written in order to satisfy his or her sense of how the game should work, and "incoherent play" refers to the particular sort of aimlessness associated with games in which it is not clear how players are to find enjoyment, satisfaction, or reward with the game. Ron adds, "Long experience leads me to think that you, right this minute, are at the cusp of realizing that somehow . . . everything seems to be becoming . . . repetitive." Notice how the theoretical language is deployed in the service of offering a candidate account of how the experience of play *feels* to the interlocutor, asking Buzz to reflect phenomenologically on his own thought process or experience of the world as an experience (see White 2014 for a discussion of the phenomenology of role-playing).

Ron goes on to challenge Buzz on an element of his description of his group's play, asking, "Are you really having a blast with each [moment of] spotlight [on your character]? You qualified it, when you said so." This motif of challenge recurs a number of times over the thread, with Ron in role of Socratic chief interlocutor identifying internal contradictions or pious hypocrisies employed by his conversational partner. For example, later in the thread Ron

challenges Buzz's characterization of the group. "So they're all good-natured and communicative, are they?" he says. "Is that why your [high intelligence] character with all those deductive and perceptual skills was ignored as such? Your solution to that situation was to rewrite the character without the skills. Is that 'communication'?"

In this earlier instance, Buzz acknowledges the truth of Ron's challenge, and accepts the diagnosis of the source of his dissatisfaction with the game as related to its incoherence. Ron asks Buzz, "Do you want to delve into what your group is doing *right now* in Big Model terms? Or do you want to talk about what you'd like to see, or get from play, and discuss that?"

It is at this point, two days and 18 hours after the beginning of the thread, that Storn enters the conversation, responding to Buzz's complaint about his high-intelligence character's skills being sidelined in play with a recommendation to use a "hero point" mechanism involving the expenditure of a limited resource to represent dealing with in-game obstacles or difficulties. Storn's contribution suggests that he is an experienced *Champions* player and that he is drawing upon that experience to offer a solution to Buzz's problem; the implication is that he is trying to cut to the heart of the issue and obviate the need for pointless further discussion.

However, Ron cautions Storn that while his enthusiasm is welcome, he should avoid assuming that the way that he plays *Champions* is automatically the "right way" to play the game. Storn ultimately defers to Ron; for his part, Ron thanks Storn for clarifying and observes that "our perceptions of [Buzz's] group differ a little," which influences their judgments about appropriate courses of action. The effect is to establish Storn as Ron's peer and colleague in the inquiry about the Champions-related play preferences of Buzz and his group, in that Ron acknowledges Storn's expertise but seeks to guide or channel it in the service of the didactic purpose of the thread. In doing so, Ron's persona is that of the cautious diagnostician not yet ready to issue a prescription. It is actually a rather skillful de-escalation of a potentially conflictual exchange.

Meanwhile, in talking to Buzz about his play preferences, Ron asks Buzz to engage in honest self-reflection and presentation. He then draws out from Buzz's description of a satisfying play experience the features of the game that seem to be what Buzz is looking for but not getting (character empowerment, player engagement, actions with consequences, adequate spotlight time, and satisfying long-term play). Buzz acknowledges his back-pedaling, admits

that he is in fact dissatisfied, and wonders what can be done about it. "How can I approach [*Champions*] in a way that incorporates what we've been talking about and what I've learned from the Forge?"

In reply, Ron links out to another Forge thread that argued that trying to subtly alter the Creative Agenda of a group by "sneaking up" on a new play style was almost certainly bound to fail. Other posters in the thread confirm this seemingly well-established assertion. In response, Buzz says, "I feel like I'm still waiting for practical advice with specific regard to [*Champions*]." Ron replies, "I thought of a good way to do it concretely." He directs Buzz to "make up a character" for a superheroic game using the *Champions* rules, explaining that then he'll show him how to prepare as a GM for a character-driven game. He invites Storn to do the same.

At this point, the conversation moves into its final main phase. Over the course of the next few days, Storn and Buzz post their respective creations. Ron criticizes them in game-mechanical terms, but also evaluates them conceptually, pointing to ways in which the characters can be tightened up thematically and tied to one another in interesting ways. This weaving together of character backstories allows the GM to focus the game on player agency rather than GM plot, Ron suggests. The remainder of the thread involves Ron reinforcing the points he was making about story-focused play while Storn and Buzz offer defenses of particular approaches they took in designing their sample characters for the thread. The thread wraps up with Buzz and Storn indicating their satisfaction with its outcome and Ron declaring the thread closed.

This reconstruction of a Forge actual play thread shows the work of the Forge being done, and highlights the theory-informed dialogic method that underlies that work. The Big Model is supposed to be deployed reflexively, it seems--that is, in an effort to make sense of one's own play style, game preferences, and experiences of play. One talks about one's own play, in other words, in order to interrogate the choices one is making at the table and in the fiction and understand what's going on in one's own head as the game is proceeding. Thus, the discourse of "actual play" at the Forge amounts to a kind of phenomenological dialogue, requiring a skilled discursive performance in order to engage in a theoretically informed metacommunicative practice.

This stands in contrast with other modes of recounting actual play. Certainly, it goes beyond the offer to "tell you about my character" of the unself-conscious *D&D*er (see, e.g., Barrowcliffe 2008). But it

also focuses attention on something different than is emphasized in other traditions of play. For example, the Nordic larp scene concerns itself with comprehensive photographic and procedural documentation as the most desirable mode of recording actual play (Petterson 2009; Stenros and Montola 2010). And while those Scandinavian accounts do pay attention to the psychological effects of play on the player, they are much less concerned than AP in the Forge tradition is with the metacommunicative intentionality of the account-- with, in other words, how the player's orientation to play shapes the experience of the game.

Furthermore, the Forge tradition of AP discussion as phenomenological dialogue has the potential to augment the Goffman-derived frame-analytic approach to the scholarly examination of play that has become almost the default method in the very small literature of tabletop role-playing, understanding phenomenology in the Husserlian sense of consciousness directed at itself rather than its surroundings (Smith and McIntyre 1982). That is, the dialogic interrogation of a player's intentionality in play, even retrospectively, can add robustness to ethnographic accounts of play experience. Too much can be made of this, to be sure, but as a methodological adjunct to more traditional interview methods it may hold some promise.

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BIO

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