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.