

# International Journal of Role-Playing

The aim of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* is to act as a hybrid knowledge network, bringing together the varied interests in role-playing from its associated knowledge networks, e.g. academic research, games, creative industries, the arts, and role-playing communities.

## **Editorial Special Issue: Living Games Conference 2018**

This special issue contains four articles chosen from among those presented at the Living Games Conference at Northeastern University in Peabody, MA, on May 17-20, 2018.

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## **Legal Liability in Live Action Role-Playing: The Law is Dark and Full of Terrors**

This paper explores the legal liabilities and risks associated with running a live-action role-playing game (larp), including issues related to alcohol consumption, employee behavior, and personal injury.

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## **Bleed-out on the Brain: The Neuroscience of Character-to-Player Spillover in Larp**

This article pairs emerging neuroscience theory and research with classic psychological models of emotion and motivation to examine the causes and consequences of the important larp phenomenon of bleed-out.

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## **Developing a Framework of Larp Counseling**

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# Editorial

## Special Issue: Living Games Conference 2018

The 9th issue of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* offers selected, peer-reviewed articles from the 3rd biennial Living Games Conference, a North American global live-action role-play (larp) summit held in Peabody, MA, USA on May 17-20, 2018. Presenters were asked to submit short papers that were then reviewed and revised over the latter half of the year. This issue allows us the chance to look back at recent role-playing scholarship and the role Living Games has played in recent years to foster more of this important work.

The point is obvious, but it bears mentioning: 2014 – the year of the first Living Games Conference – is not 2018. The 2014 conference was convened at the New York University Game Center in Brooklyn, NY. Shoshana Kessock led the organization team; Eric Zimmerman sat in the audience; presenter Claus Raasted had recently sold tickets for the initial run of a larp called *College of Wizardry* (later a worldwide sensation); escape rooms had just started to open in the US and Canada; and Barack Obama was still president of the United States. The conference stood not only at the beginning of a viral new wave of blockbuster larp design, successful transnational cooperation, and larp theorizing. It also took place prior to the coming crises of western liberal democracy, which would sharpen debates about nation, class, race, and identity, as well as the global #Me-Too movement, which questioned the morality of a great many high-status organizers and artists. Times have changed, and we would like to think that Living Games accompanied that change.

The 2018 Living Games Conference struck a fundamentally different tone than its 2014 and 2016 predecessors. The two earlier conferences contended that larp could transform the world and urged its practitioners to take new risks with the medium. This year's conference, however, responded with tales of those risks taken: the thorny issues raised in the professionalization and expansion of larp across broader spheres. Such issues take center stage in this year's conference proceedings.

Russell Murdock explores in his article "Legal Liability in Live Action Role-playing: The Law is Dark and Full of Terrors" the murky legal territory in which larp exists and the potential for liability concerns to

dwarf the content of even the most humble of North American larps. Murdock uses the legal precedent around provision of alcohol to highlight a clear dichotomy between larp organizers as social vs. commercial facilitators. In fact, the alibi of being intoxicated and the alibi of larping are roughly equated on legal grounds. Furthermore, Murdock notes that the provision of alcohol at any larp event has the most related legal risks, as well as employing event staff who have a history of sexual harassment and predation. Alcohol is a social lubricant, but, in the American case, should be tightly controlled. The same goes, Murdock implies, for an organizer's larp staff.

Two further articles pick up on the thread of psychological complications from larping. Diana Leonard and Tessa Thurman in "Bleed-out on the Brain: The Neuroscience of Character-to-Player Spillover in Larp" address the oft-discussed phenomenon of bleed, or the conscious fluidity in the boundary between player and character. Leonard and Thurman review neuroscience research with respect to character emotion bleeding out into the player, and determine that not only is the phenomenon noticeable and measurable, but that the larp community' current move toward managing consent and emotional counseling constitutes a proper response.

On that topic, Brodie Atwater and Alex Rowland's "Developing a Framework of Larp Counseling" lays out the basic theory and praxis of in- and out-of-game emotional care in terms intelligible to both the larp and psychological counseling communities. Rowland and Atwater set aside the notion that in-game counseling is intended for therapeutic purposes; rather, it is intended to manage player emotion and to minimize unpleasant fallout from the same for the players and organizers.

Finally, Jason Cox in "Documenting Larp as an Art of Experience" deals with the pile of ephemera that larp generates and its legitimacy within larger frameworks of what we call "art." Using a website to document physical ephemera generated by players from the *New World Magischola* wizard-school larp, Cox demonstrates how future audiences may consume and analyze the traces of play experience through meaningful documentation.

The *International Journal of Role-Playing* has certainly played a substantive part in establishing larp scholarship on an international level. As larp now interacts with our world's complex systems, IJRP remains there to chronicle those challenges and affordances that emerge.

— Evan Torner, Ph.D.  
Coordinating Editor  
December 26, 2018  
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# Legal Liability in Live Action Role-Playing: The Law is Dark and Full of Terrors

**Abstract:** This paper explores the legal liabilities and risks associated with running a live-action role-playing game (larp). Because few cases directly involving the larp community have been litigated, this paper searches for corollaries from other types of events run mainly in the United States that may prove enlightening for larp organizers. While the legal concerns faced by larp organizers may seem novel to them, many similar issues of legal liability have been litigated in courts for more than a century. The legal principles of social host liability vs. commercial host liability will be analyzed in the context of larps, demonstrating some of the likely disparate treatment for-profit larp organizers will experience versus their non-commercial counterparts. These principles will provide the foundation to analyze liability regarding the furnishing of alcohol in contexts when alcohol is being sold by the larp's organizers, when it is given away by organizers, and when organizers provide alcohol to an underage minor. This paper also explores other liability concerns for larp organizers, including their responsibility resulting from criminal actions by participants; criminal or negligent acts by their employees and volunteers; and personal injury of a participant at a larp event. Finally, the paper will briefly explore the liability of the landowner of sites where larps take place. Where clear bright-line answers to legal questions prove impossible—as they all too often do—this paper seeks to provide a general foundation of knowledge from which larp organizers can begin to analyze their legal liabilities. This article is intended for informational purposes only and not for the purpose of providing legal advice.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Live action role-playing or larp is perhaps best considered as a fusion between a traditional tabletop role-playing game and improvisational theater. In the words of Lizzie Stark (2012), it is “similar to a theatrical play performed with no audience and no script” (Preface). In larp, the performers are in fact players in an immersive environment comprised of other players and a director or arbiter, often referred to as a game master. A game master “acts as the god of the game, guiding the story and making final determinations on the course of events, similar to a referee in a sports game” (Bowman 2010, 51). Yet despite the power of the game master, the outcomes of larps are most not often not set in stone, but rather dependent on the choices made by the players. While the dialogue and actions of each player remains in their own hands, the game master’s role as referee manifests when characters come into conflict, as they often do in competitive larps. Only the game master and their dictated rules are capable of deciding who wins the Old West shootout or which wizard’s magic spells proves more powerful (Stark 2012, Preface). Alternatively, collaborative larps tend to feature a co-creative form of adjudication among players, with the organizer role focused more on designing the setting and providing logistics.

The improvisational nature of larp, which is perhaps its greatest strength, can also lead to more conflict and ultimately risk than a traditional theatrical performance. For example, where a theatrical fight scene is meticulously scripted and practiced, a fight scene in a “boffer” larp, in which players swing foam swords at one another, is improvised and often done without knowing how the other player will attack. Indeed, the fact that both players are trying to win gives the scene both its excitement and an enhanced potential for danger.

The term “organizer” remains appropriate and, if anything, understates the roles many creators and administrators perform in bringing a larp to life. For some, larp is a hobby, but for others it is a business. International companies have formed and tapped into this market. Despite this, little has been written about the legal and business sides of larp. Presentations on larp and legality have focused primarily on issues such as dealing with the police (Wyrd Con 2014), franchising, and copyright (Living Games Conference 2016). These issues remain outside of the scope of this paper. Instead, the paper will explore the liabilities of larp organizers for instances when things do not go according to plan. What is legal liability? For the purposes of this paper, legal liability means an organizer’s responsibility, in the event of a lawsuit, to pay monetary damages to a victim when

something goes wrong. The grim truth is that if the threat of legal liability remains too high, the very existence of larp as a medium could be threatened. And ignorance offers no shield to liability.

## 2. A NOTE ON LEGAL JURISDICTION

It is important to note that the majority of the legal precedent analyzed in this paper will be American caselaw. Yet this restriction is not quite as limiting as it might appear at first blush. Many of the legal principles that formed the foundation of American law are in fact grounded in English Common Law, which is among the most widespread legal system in the world with approximately thirty percent of the world's population living under some variant of it (Mattison Public Relations 2018). While the laws of these various countries are by no means identical, their shared ancestral roots indicate common ground exists.

Even within a given country, local laws and judicial interpretations may vary. Larp organizers should always consult their local laws in order to make an informed decision. By analyzing caselaw from several jurisdictions, this paper intends to provide a general framework for organizers rather than a comprehensive analysis of all potentially applicable laws or judicial decisions. Ultimately, this article is intended for informational purposes only and not for the purpose of providing legal advice.

## 3. SOCIAL VS. COMMERCIAL HOST LIABILITY

Many people both inside and outside of the larp community may at first glance consider it too peculiar an activity to glean much insight from other, more mundane, activities. But when one strips away the magic wands and foam swords and instead focuses on the relationship between the larp organizer and their participating guests, as would a judge, suddenly much of the mystery disappears. In its place is a centuries-old area of law that is inclined to change an organizer's duties and obligations depending on whether the organizer's relationship to their guests is social or commercial in nature. The context in which this principle both has the most history and is most likely to become relevant to larp organizers is conveniently the same: alcohol.

Traditionally, under the common law, a host who supplied alcohol to a guest could not be held liable for the injurious actions of the guest who had grown intoxicated from the alcohol furnished them by the supplier (Johnson v. KFC Nat'l Management, 161). The idea behind this traditional view was that the person who caused harm to another is themselves

the proximate or most immediate cause of the harm (162). Many modern courts and legislatures<sup>1</sup> have, however, modified this traditional perspective by enacting so-called dram shop acts or doctrines that impose a duty on some commercial suppliers of alcohol. The basis for thrusting some liability upon these commercial suppliers is that "the public regulates and licenses commercial vendors to sell and distribute alcohol for profit. The public has a right to demand that a commercial vendor act more prudently and with greater duty towards minors than is asked of a private person who hosts a party" (Busby v. Quail Creek Golf & Country Club, 1331).

Why is this relevant to larp organizers? Many organizers offer alcohol during their events. Some sell alcohol at their events, some give it away, and others allow participants to bring their own alcoholic beverages. If one of these so-called dram shop acts is found to apply to a larp organizer, the organizer could find themselves personally liable if one of their participants who becomes intoxicated at the larp crashes into and kills a pedestrian on their way home. While for many organizers larp is a pastime or hobby, for others it is a commercial venture and their livelihood. For such a person, understanding their legal risk should be paramount.

The good news is that while some courts have held open the possibility for applying liability to social or non-profit hosts, most have proven hesitant or unwilling to do so (McGee v. Alexander). But such hesitancy does not necessarily protect for-profit larp organizers. A deeper look into the caselaw or jurisprudence of courts that have considered lawsuits in similar situations offers some hints into how they would be viewed in different contexts.

The Supreme Court of Oklahoma considered a case that involved an intoxicated driver who killed two people after drinking at an event hosted by a clinic that was a for-profit company (McGee v. Alexander). The relatives of the victims sued both the clinic that hosted the event as well as the golf club where the event took place and which held the liquor license used to serve the alcohol. The court would not extend liability to the clinic for the driver's actions despite its for-profit nature, but the court would not rule out doing so for the golf club because it was a licensed commercial vendor of alcohol (McGee v. Alexander). The court drew a line of sorts in helping to analyze liability when it stated that "[i]n our view, if a distinction between a social host and a commercial provider is to be made, the basis for that distinction is

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Tex. Alcoholic Beverage Code Ann. §2.01 et seq.; N.Y. General Obligations Law §11-100.

whether the provider sells or intends to make a profit from the sale of alcohol" (804).

In another case, a firefighter's association held a fundraiser where it sold drink tickets, which in turn were used by an individual to obtain several beers. These drinks were given to him even after he became obviously intoxicated (*Carlson v. Thompson*). This intoxicated individual killed one person and injured another with his vehicle. When the surviving victim sued the firefighter's association, the court decided that the association could be held liable for the victim's harm because they furnished alcohol to an intoxicated individual. The court's reasoning was that the selling of alcohol enriched the association, which had obtained a liquor license for the event (*Carlson v. Thompson*).

These cases offer valuable insight for commercial larp organizers who may have alcohol at their events. First, the mere fact a larp is for-profit does not mean it will be liable for the actions of its intoxicated participants. Second, if a larp is selling alcohol for profit at its events, it runs the risk of potentially ruinous legal liability for the actions of an intoxicated guest.

What if a larp organizer does not sell the alcohol but instead gives it away? Courts appear less willing to extend liability to those who furnish alcohol without payment. In 1889, the Supreme Court of Illinois found that a neighbor that provided a victim a drink out of "courtesy and politeness" was not liable when the intoxicated victim's horse later threw him off, which led to the victim's death even where the proximate cause was his intoxication (*Cruse v. Aden*). A different appellate court held its dram shop act was intended to regulate the business of selling alcohol for profit rather than to regulate the social drinking of a group (*Miller v Owens-Illinois Glass Co.*). This court refused to extend liability to a glass company that, without charge, served alcoholic beverages at a picnic to an employee who later caused harm due to the subsequent intoxication resulting from said alcohol. Larp organizers should not grow too comfortable, however, as some jurisdictions have laws that impose liability "against any person who knowingly provides alcoholic beverages to an obviously intoxicated person for any purpose, including acts of hospitality" (*Born v. Mayers*). Where such a law exists, even casual non-commercial larp organizers may face liability when they provide alcohol to an intoxicated person. Additionally, organizers who attempt to avoid the appearance of profit by "giving away" alcohol at their events after simply pricing it into the cost of admission may find that judges and plaintiff attorneys can see through such an attempt

to remove the appearance of profiting from alcohol sales.

Courts tend to be particularly willing to extend liability to organizers who provide alcohol to underage participants. A social host, who simply gives away the alcohol to a noticeably intoxicated person under the legal drinking age, can be liable to a third person injured due to the negligence of the intoxicated driver (*Sutter v. Hutchings*). The Third Circuit held that in Pennsylvania, while adult guests and those third parties whom they have injured have no cause of action against their social host, minors who are served alcohol and who in turn injure others maintain a cause of action against those who provided the minor with alcohol (*Fassett v. Delta Kappa Epsilon*). In this same case, the court allowed the potential to expand liability to several "accomplices" such as the fraternity president and the roommates who had tended the bar and whose apartment had been used for the party. In some jurisdictions, the parents of an underage participant can seek damages against anyone who provides alcohol to their child without their consent (*Eldridge v Aronson*). This liability is not endless, however. Courts have held that, for example, homeowners were not deemed to have "furnished" alcohol to the 15-year-old girlfriend of their son where the homeowners were not home when the girlfriend came to their house and where they were unaware that she would be coming to their house (*McNamee v. A.J.W.*).

Based on a review of the caselaw, organizers of commercial larps that sell alcohol face significant legal liability. But even larp organizers that do not sell alcohol at their events face significant liability if alcohol is provided to an intoxicated person or to a minor during one of their events.

#### 4. OTHER LIABILITY CONCERNS

While the liability concerns related to alcohol are among the most researched and litigated, other serious issues remain. Traditionally a person is only liable for their own actions. The paper already analyzed some limited exceptions in the context of one who furnishes alcohol to another. Another important exception for larp organizers to familiarize themselves with is vicarious liability, which is where a person is liable for the harm caused by another (*Dobbs 2000, § 333*). An employer, for example, is classically liable for the harm caused by their employee that is committed while the employee is acting "within the scope of [their] employment" (*American Law Institute 1965 Restatement of the law, Third, Agency 3d, § 1.01 cmt. c*). Organizers can even find themselves liable for the negligent actions of their volunteers,

particularly when the volunteer was acting on behalf of the organizer and when the organizer had the right to direct and control the conduct of the volunteer (cf. *Trinity Lutheran Church, Inc. v. Miller*, 1103). Perhaps even more alarming to some larp organizers is the fact that an employee's willful, malicious, and even criminal actions may be considered "within the scope of employment" when there is a relationship between the employee's position and the intentional, willful, or criminal conduct (cf. *Lisa M. v. Henry Mayo Newhall Memorial Hospital*, 961). For this liability to take effect, it is not necessary that the employer authorized or condoned the unlawful conduct of its employee. The standard instead hinges on whether the dispute or harmful act of the employee arises from the conduct of the employer's enterprise rather than a personal dispute or conflict of the employee.

In the context of a sexual assault, there is only liability for the employer when the assault is motivated by the employment activity rather than when the assault took place as a result of "only propinquity and lust" (*Lyon v. Carey*). It remains possible that similar vicarious liability for the criminal actions of volunteers could be imputed to organizers. Traditionally, organizers are not liable for criminal acts of third-party guests or participants, however, unless a special relationship exists between the perpetrator and the organizer or when the criminal act or harm was reasonably foreseeable by the organizer (American Law Institute 1965. *Restatement of the law, Second, Torts 2d*. § 315). It is the opinion of the author that such a "special relationship" could be found to exist between a volunteer and an organizer.

Organizers owe participants and guests a number of duties to protect them from harm on the premises of the larp. Larp organizers must exercise reasonable affirmative care to see that a site is safe for the participants or, alternatively, give the guests sufficient warning to allow the guests to decide for themselves whether or not to accept the invitation or to protect themselves from any danger present on the site (American Law Institute 1965. *Restatement of the law, Second, Torts 2d*. § 343). As a result, organizers are liable to participants who have been injured by any hidden dangerous conditions that the organizer should have known about (*Towles v. Cox*, 721).

Some may question whether a person in a larp, while portraying a character different from themselves, could be held legally liable for their actions. Role-playing, after all, involves "role-players temporarily identify[ing] with a character whose personality traits and choices often differ from their own" (Bowman 2010, 57). This offers little defense in most legal contexts. In a Texas case,

a man was convicted of sexual abuse of a child that took place, in part, during role-playing games in which they depicted vampires and werewolves (*McDonald v. State*). Despite the fact that the child victim portrayed an adult woman, the offender's in-character sexual touching of the child was still considered sexual abuse.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Larp organizers face serious legal risk any time they host an event. All larp organizers should consider a few key points before undertaking a new venture. First, organizers of all types should think long and hard before providing alcohol at their events, particularly if they intend to sell it. When it is not possible to avoid alcohol altogether, organizers must create strict guidelines that prohibit the furnishing of alcohol to underage participants or those who are intoxicated. Second, organizers must carefully vet their employees and volunteers before allowing them to help with the running of the larp. Organizers should not under any circumstances allow "broken stairs" (Brown 2017) or those suspected of past sexual predation to serve in any capacity at their events. Failure to vet volunteers and staff not only puts their guests at risk of harm, but ultimately puts organizers themselves at risk of legal liability for the negligent and even criminal acts of the perpetrator. The failure of larp organizers to properly analyze their legal liability and take affirmative steps to mitigate it threatens not only their own events, but the very existence of larp as a medium.

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# Bleed-out on the Brain: The Neuroscience of Character-to-Player Spillover in Larp

**Abstract:** This paper investigates the psychology of bleed-out, in which in-character dynamics spill over into out-of-character thoughts and feelings (Montola, 2011). We pair emerging neuroscience theory and research with classic models of emotion and motivation to examine the causes and consequences of this important larp phenomenon. Regarding positive bleed, hormones associated with trust and love may promote social bonding between players through shared in-character experiences (Kosfeld et al. 2005). Negative interpersonal dynamics could also develop, however, during antagonistic character interaction via “neural alarm bells” -- increased activation in brain areas associated with social rejection (Eisenberger, Leiberman, and Williams 2003). Such neural activity could in turn set off defensive aggression or social withdrawal (Twenge et al. 2001), behaviors that could bleed over into out-of-game interactions. The impact of these and other neuropsychological reactions on players’ behavior may be determined by the degree to which the line between self and character becomes blurred during play. According to Lankoski and Järvelä (2012), however, such blurring is a baked-in feature of human embodied cognition. Therefore, we propose that compartmentalizing “in-character” reactions requires immense self-regulatory control – a limited resource which is known to be depleted through many activities common to larp, e.g., effortful decision making and self-presentation (Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005; Vohs et al. 2014). Connecting self-regulatory resource models with bleed in this way is especially important since negative bleed-out can be a source of conflict in player communities (Bowman 2013). As such, we offer proactive solutions for those players or designers who wish to tailor a particular larp experience in order to avoid bleed-out, building on pre-existing best practices: informed consent, safe-spaces, and debriefing (Burns 2014; Atwater 2016; Brown 2016; Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017).

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to investigate the neuropsychological components of *bleed-out*, when in-character dynamics spill over into out-of-character thoughts, feelings and actions (Montola, 2011; Bowman, 2013). This paper specifically focuses on the interpersonal consequences of bleed-out for relationships between players. Whereas positive interpersonal bleed-out can create and strengthen relationships within a larp community, negative bleed-out can be a source of conflict. Additionally, players’ goals for their role-play experience may differ, with some players choosing to embrace some or all types of bleed-out, while others seek to compartmentalize their in- and out-of-character experiences. To further our understanding of this phenomenon, we pair emerging literature on larp bleed with neuroscience theory and research. We hope that this work will inspire more interest in the neuropsychological aspects of larp.

## 2. INTERPERSONAL BLEED-OUT IN THE BRAIN

This section highlights a few of the neural components that are likely central to experiences of bleed-out.

First, we discuss attachment-mediating processes that likely characterize positive bleed-out via the release of hormones that heighten trust and reinforce rewarding behaviors. Next, we address antipathy-mediating processes that likely characterize negative bleed-out via social pain. These processes are fundamental, biological, and often outside of conscious awareness and control, which likely makes direct influence over bleed-out a fleeting or even illusory concept. This is consistent with Lankoski and Järvelä’s (2012) view that player/character blurring is a baked-in feature of human embodied cognition. Here we view the character as the narrative entity which is personified and inhabited by the player (Montola 2008).

### 2.1 Attachment-Mediating Processes

A majority of recent research on the neuroscience of human attachment has investigated the role of oxytocin, also known as the “cuddle hormone” (Pappas 2015). Oxytocin is implicated in adult-adult bonding and mother-infant attachment for human and non-human animals. For example, in one study (Kosfeld et al. 2005), oxytocin was administered to male participants via an intranasal spray. Those who

received oxytocin (vs. a placebo) showed an increase in trust, specifically willingness to accept social risk for others.

Particular larp experiences may make these attachment-mediating effects of oxytocin more likely. In particular, oxytocin is likely released as a protective response to acute stress (Heinrichs et al. 2003). Thus, working with other characters under stressful conditions (e.g., a simulated battle or high stakes puzzle) in common larp experiences may activate a prosocial orientation of heightened trust and sharing motivation via this neurohormone (Von Dawans et al. 2012). Since it is likely impossible to intentionally down regulate the neural chemical cocktail that underpins prosocial connection, those attachments may spill out to shape feelings about the player as well.

Finally, any in-character experience that repeatedly links pleasure and positive affect with other characters will likely activate the reward system. This system is mostly housed in the nucleus accumbens and centers on a neurochemical known as dopamine. For example, oxytocin exposure has been shown to increase activity in this reward network of the brain in men viewing photographs of their romantic partners (Scheele et al. 2013) and mothers viewing videos of their own (vs. other) infants (Atzil et al. 2017). Learning and habituation likely encourages reinforcement of in-character liking even under conditions of mere exposure (Montoya et al. 2017). Without careful reflection on the distinction between in-character and out-of-character experience, such unconscious learning may readily bleed-out into everyday player interactions.

## 2.2 Antipathy-Mediating Processes

A focal experience of bleed-out that likely encourages antipathy between players is in-character social rejection. According to social pain theory (MacDonald and Leary 2005), social rejection generates a potent neuropsychological response that enables humans to identify and respond proactively to cues of social exclusion. For example, in one study by Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams (2003), participants were invited to play a ball toss game with others over intranet. In reality, the “other players” were a computer program calibrated to exclude the participant from the game after a few turns. Rejection was associated with greater activity in the anterior cingulate cortex (ACC), an area of the brain that reacts to the distressing emotional component of physical pain – like when you almost bump your knee and get a sudden jolt despite no actual harm. As

a result, Eisenberger, Lieberman, and Williams (2003) and others suggest that the human social attachment system recruited this “neural alarm” over the course of human evolution, as this was an adaptive response to the threat to survival and reproductive capacity posed by rejection.

An ironic consequence of social rejection is defensive aggression – lashing out in response to cues of rejection that can often precede social withdrawal. This response may protect the individual’s psychological well-being and social status (Twenge et al. 2001), but may also create conflict in larp communities. For example, in an ethnography by Bowman (2013), player-identified features that promote schisms in larp groups included players refusing to role-play with one another after recurring conflict and, relatedly, lack of opportunity to smooth over in-character tension via out-of-game social events. She argues “when groups lack social activities outside of game, their primary interaction occurs in-character, which can affect their interpretation of the ‘real life’ personality traits and motivations of other players” (Bowman 2013, 6). Thus, defensive aggression may cause interpersonal bleed-out to spread into community-wide tension, and consequently shut off opportunities to smooth over this tension going forward.

## 2.3 Integration of Neuropsychology and Experience

The foregoing section suggests that varied neural processes such as the reward system and the social pain network likely facilitate bonding or antipathy between players, respectively. However, prevailing theories of emotion suggest that an intervening step is required between these neural responses and interpersonal outcomes: interpretation. For example, the two-factor theory of emotion (Schachter and Singer 1962) describes emotional experience (e.g., “I am afraid”) as the integration of biofeedback (e.g., “my heart is racing”) with concurrent appraisal of relevant cues (the interpretation, e.g., “there is a bear in front of me”). This interpretation can sometimes misfire, however, resulting in misattribution and false associations.

In one telling study, male participants were more likely to phone a female experimenter they encountered on a rickety bridge than a safe one (Dutton and Aron 1974). The researchers concluded that participants had mislabeled their emotional experience (“I fancy this person”) due to the flawed connection of their physical state (“my heart is racing”) with the woman in front of them rather than the real source of arousal

(the scary bridge). The individual's interpretation is key to their emotional experience, and in turn, determines the corresponding reaction to a social target.

According to this classic model of misattribution, the most significant bleed-out experiences would occur when players interpret that their feelings of attachment or antipathy are connected to the other players in the mix rather than the characters they are role-playing in that scene. This can occur because, as Andreasen (2003) argues, the player exists in a double diegetic state such that they are simultaneously present in the out-of-character play space as well as in the game universe. Thus, neurophysiological reactions to in-character experiences could become paired with the players, and thus cause the diegetic experience to leak out. Repeatedly linking such experiences with another player could result in habitualized, abstract representations of the out-of-character relationship via activation of reward/cost expectancy reinforced by dopamine release (Cacioppo et al. 2013). Due to this sequence of events, the larper may begin to view those out-of-character relationships as having emergent properties such as "love" or even "hate," and become motivationally driven to persist in the interpersonal dynamic.

To a degree, a player may be able to reduce bleed-out if they consistently and carefully label their experiences as solely due to in-character dynamics. However, as such interpretations are often constructed collaboratively (e.g., during post-event debriefs) and shaped by unconscious learned associations, such deliberate control may be beyond reach. Further, checking these unconscious associations likely requires players to exert conscious control over thoughts, feelings, and impulses (Baumeister, Gailliot, and Oaten 2006). Such *self-regulation* requires cognitive resources that have been experimentally shown to dissipate over the course of the day following activities requiring cognitive control. Thus, players may be more prone to bleed-out if they have had to choose between alternatives (Vohs et al. 2014), regulate their emotions (Schmeichel, Vohs, and Baumeister 2003), suppress unwanted thoughts (Baumeister, et al. 1998; Muraven, Tice, and Baumeister 1998), present themselves a certain way (Vohs, Baumeister, and Ciarocco 2005), or experience a drop in blood glucose levels (Gailliot et al. 2007) – all frequent experiences in larp.

Not only are activities that deplete self-regulatory resources common in larp, they are often intentional design features. Burns (2014) points out that Nordic larp incorporates features of psychodrama in order

to prompt exploration of the space between player and character. Further, Kessock (2013) points to players' inability to always immediately disengage from triggering content as a possible source of psychological and emotional discomfort in larp. Thus, the importance of managing bleed-out is especially paramount when larp designers and players purposefully engage with intense themes. Next, we turn to possible applications of the link between neuroscience, emotion, and bleed.

### 3. POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS

There has recently been a call for larp organizers and players alike to engage in ethical management of content (Kessock 2013; Brown 2016), safe spaces during play, and debriefing (Burns 2014; Atwater 2016), largely to avoid or mitigate unwanted psychological and emotional fallout of immersive roleplay. These community best practices all bear links to the key features discussed in this paper that can support management of bleed-out: preservation of regulatory resources, maintenance of the line between player and character, and careful interpretation of in-character experience.

First and foremost, Järvelä (2012) argues that larpers need to be informed of what they are going to experience in order to give consent. In non-academic writing on this theme, Kessock (2013) has called for *ongoing* transparency from game designers and organizers given that larps evolve during play. This transparency may include providing a script or content warnings in advance of an event, and avoiding undue deviation from those expectations during play. Player-to-player consent can also be navigated, such as via the opt-in/opt-out system discussed by Koljonen (2016) whereby a series of gestures can be used to communicate comfort levels and negotiate consent during an ongoing scene without disrupting immersion.

Informed consent practices such as these can help players to manage bleed-out since they can set intentions in advance for interpreting and compartmentalizing in-character experiences. This can work by creating a contingency for a likely event, e.g. "as soon as situation *y* occurs, I will initiate goal-directed behavior *x*" (Webb and Sheeran 2003, 280). Indeed, setting implementation intentions like this has been shown to lessen the self-regulatory resource depletion from tasks requiring inhibition and self-control (Webb and Sheeran 2003). Thus, when the situations that arise in play are accurately described up front and carefully navigated during events, players can handle impactful emotional

role-play in a way that preserves self-regulatory resources. However, such preparation and steering (taking in-character actions for out-of-game reasons; Montola, Stenros, and Saitta 2015) may be viewed as detrimental to organic role-play and immersion, and therefore may not be desired by all players. As a compromise, players may choose to fully embrace some in-character emotions in order to free up the self-control needed to regulate emotions at other times during an event (Tice and Bratslavsky 2000).

Next, out-of-character safe spaces have become de rigueur recently as a place for players to retreat to during events; these should allow players to opt-out of resource depleting scenes and activities. To capitalize on these practices, larp organizers can intentionally build safe spaces that offer opportunities to not just halt the depletion of self-regulatory resources, but to restore them as well. For example, they can induce positive mood through humorous activities or surprise gifts (Tice et al. 2007); provide snacks and sugar-containing beverages to replenish glucose (Gailliot et al. 2007); and facilitate mindfulness meditation (Friese, Messner, and Schaffner 2012) – all of which have been shown to restore self-regulatory control. However, safe spaces should be used wisely since the very act of shedding immersion may deplete self-regulatory resources, as has been shown with various types of mindset switching such as alternating between concrete and abstract frames or swapping back and forth between two different languages (Hamilton et al. 2011). For example, despite the fact that self-regulatory resource depletion can subjectively feel like fatigue, encouraging players to catch up on sleep may not be an effective way to help them replenish self-control (Vohs et al. 2011).

Given that shedding and regaining immersion costs precious self-regulatory resources, we echo the call by Bowman et al. (2017) for immersive counselors in larp (see also Atwater and Rowland in this volume). Such diegetically embedded staff members can help players to navigate their in-character experiences such as to mitigate unwanted bleed-out. After an event, they might guide careful debriefing (Atwater 2016) and de-roling (using techniques to set the character aside (Gualeni, Vella, and Harrington 2017), which are vital post-event activities for managing bleed-out. We would add then that such counselors might want to encourage player cooperation during de-roling activities in order to restore trust among players who have had tricky in-character interactions (via oxytocin release; Gordon and Berson 2018). Additionally, they or other larp safety team members could communicate and model best practices of

conceptualizing character experiences that make it clearer when things are experiences of the character versus those of the player. This would help reduce spontaneous, collaborative reframing of in-character experiences following events (e.g., during after-game parties) which may be especially prone to blending in-and out-of-character experiences.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The fundamental neural processes that promote antipathy and attachment likely limit players' ability to control their experiences of interpersonal bleed-out. In response to this challenge, the current paper highlights practices that may sustain or restore the self-regulatory resources required to navigate those boundaries. We view this work as a stepping off point for future research on approaches to managing bleed. For example, it is likely that informed consent, safe spaces, and debriefing operate on multiple levels and have many psychological and emotional benefits and drawbacks that have yet to be fully explored. Further research into their mechanisms will point to improvements in the intentional use of these and other emerging best practices in larp. Further, ego bleed and its management likely apply to many other immersive activities (e.g., method acting). As such, the results of this scholarship are widely applicable.

Finally, one frequently offered piece of advice for managing bleed is that practice makes perfect. To a certain extent, research on self-regulatory control agrees: it appears you can train yourself to have greater self-control over time and these gains can spill over into other domains (Baumeister, Gailliot, and Oaten 2006). Thus, larpers who routinely manage bleed in general may experience easier self-control in other areas such as diet, exercise, and financial planning (Oaten and Cheng 2007). Whether these potential gains are worth the effort of practicing careful bleed management will be up to the individual larper. However, given the broader impacts of interpersonal bleed-out (Bowman 2013), the benefits of optimizing its management likely scale up at the community level. Thus, the neuropsychology of bleed-out and its management has serious, long term implications that go beyond any particular game, larper, or event.

#### 5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND NOTES

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# Developing a Framework of Larp Counseling

**Abstract:** Within live-action role-playing (larp), there is growing discourse about providing structural caregiving for players through an embedded role known as a larp counselor. We outline the purpose and challenges of the role in order to discuss the need for standardization due to liabilities and expectations of care. Our solution is a training guide, which we propose in three parts: a code of ethics, procedures, and best practices. The code of ethics is presented in the Appendix of this article. The goal of this work is to help organizers, scholars, players, and caregivers better understand the motivations and boundaries of the role while providing an initial entry into an interdisciplinary and emerging practice.

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## 1. OVERVIEW

Larp counseling is the practice of dedicating a staff member to overseeing participant well-being at a live-action role-play (larp) event. Most practice under the explicit title has taken place during three-day weekend games, whether as single events or ongoing campaigns. Authorities and critics have compared the role to mental health counseling, affecting both best practices and ethical boundaries in how a larp counselor provides role-specific care (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017). We defend the title as evocative of a camp counselor: a supervisory role meant to connect the player with the intended fun of an event, rather than suggesting therapeutic intent.

At the time of this writing, authorities suggest that counselors perform this role in pairs who have diegetic involvement through non-player characters (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017). Through play, counselors make themselves visible and interactable while remaining accessible to address players' out-of-game distress. In these moments, players seek counselor support for stressful out-of-game circumstances that keep them from feeling engaged with play. A counselor primarily responds with listening skills, aiming to give reflective understanding of the player's situation as a first order of involvement. From there, a counselor must select a resolution vector, i.e., whether to apply larp epistemology or "helping" skills to resolve or mitigate the presenting concerns. They may proceed by talking through options with the intent to help a player reunite with play. If the counselor has the means to solve a small problem, they may offer their resources directly (Living Games Conference, 2018). For example, if a

player reveals that they have had a hard time finding the energy for play because they cannot eat the food provided by the game, a counselor may be able to navigate the structural channels that a player cannot access to find them food. Similarly, if another player is having trouble meeting their expectations for their game to a degree that it is causing them distress, a counselor may choose to provide them with a scene that helps recontextualize or otherwise advance play.

## 2. PURPOSE

The purpose of this role is to provide structural support to players unable to engage with play due to miscellaneous distress. It is the authors' opinion that, per Benedetto's (2017) framework of experiential risk, ideal game design accounts for the primary risks of a game by designing explicit safety functions for players to manage that risk. Therefore, counselors are best implemented in situations that are extraneous to the designed risks of play but still compromise one's emotional composure, e.g. losing one's medication, panic attacks, etc. This is not to say that a counselor would be a detrimental safety feature at a high-risk game, but that, in theory, such a game would be designed to account for its main axis of risk through workshoping and safety techniques.

## 3. FUNCTION

The counselor role has the benefit of directing a player's issues of well-being to an enthusiastic and qualified referee rather than leaving players to fend for themselves or seek organizer support. This allows the game's organizers, whether untrained or simply busy running the game, to focus on their primary duties instead, letting players defer to counselors



as the default authority for any wellness issues. A further potential benefit is in the perception of a safer game structure. Providing a counselor may emphasize an atmosphere of safety by designing for reliable help. However, this potential is based upon accurate player expectations and competent staff who will meet those expectations.

### 3. RAPPORT

These considerations are for the structural role of a counselor who takes care of player well-being, but we believe that the role is amplified by the counselor's diegetic engagement. Engaging with the game gives counselors insight into the happenings of play while building relationships with players through character interactions. We can consider this *rapport*: a friendly and trusting familiarity with both players and the social reality of play itself. Rapport is recognized as the basis of a good helping relationship in many contexts (Joe, Simpson, Dansereau, and Rowan-Szal 2001) and is considered to have the same benefit in larp. Rapport in its traditional sense -- the interpersonal engagement with players -- is helpful for creating a general awareness of the counselors. It is expected that, even if only some players have direct engagement with a counselor, they will be able to extend that trusting engagement and recommend the counselor to others should the need arise.

### 4. FAMILIARITY WITH IN-GAME EVENTS

Beyond interpersonal rapport is another form: a familiarity with the events unfolding from within the perspective of the fiction. A counselor embedded within play has a vantage on the tone and tempo of play. If a player needs to talk about a scenario, it is likely that information about a scene will have already reached the counselor, as they will have seen its effects on the fiction and characters within it. They may have even been present, as a diegetic engagement allows for non-obtrusive observation. These twin strengths allow for a harmonious awareness of not only potential stressors arising from play, but also the fluency to help repair breaks from engagement.

### 5. CHALLENGES

If an organization is providing this role and it is intended to meet the above benefits, then challenges fall on how the persons acting as counselors engage with the role. When considered that a counselor is often with people at their most vulnerable and accruing information that is best kept confidential, the anticipated consequences of mistakes in practice become more serious. It is hard to imagine anyone

coming into the role with the express intent of causing harm. It is much easier to encounter what is informally known as "helper syndrome," characterized by a provider's desire to be perceived as helpful motivating them to volunteer for caregiving regardless of competence. Competence is also conditional, as a trained counselor can encounter personal issues -- such as compassion fatigue -- that can compromise their ability to provide care (Thompson, Amatea, and Thompson 2014). Incorrect practice inverts the function of this attempted care from helping to harmful, however, as removing this safety net could potentially cause more distress than if none was offered in the first place due to players' expectations of support.

Due to the diegetic implications of the role, there is also the possibility for a counselor to have undue influence on the fiction of a game in service of their work. Counselors' primary duties are to serve the wellness of a community rather than pursue or affect play, and as such, they are often given both structural and diegetic privileges (Bowman, Brown, Atwater, and Rowland 2017). We believe that there is risk in misusing this power to pursue personal satisfaction at the expense of player agency by unduly influencing players' decisions. Diegetic involvement also risks failing to prioritize availability to players' wellness needs by physically or situationally occupying a counselor, such as being away in the woods for several hours or at the center of a dramatic battle. Furthermore, there is opportunity for negative in-character actions to reflect on the approachability of a counselor, either due to bleed (i.e. a counselor is role-playing that their character is mean or incompetent) or diegetic consistency (i.e. if a counselor character chooses a faction opposed to a player's, so their characters are not enemies).

Given the recent conceptualization of the role, inconsistency in training is a foundational consideration to its practice. Larp counseling's lack of precedent means that counselors can only come to understand it through other experiences in providing caregiving. From that inconsistency, organizers cannot set boundaries, players cannot have standard expectations of care, counselors cannot measure their competencies against a standard, and discourse cannot progress because the terms are not set.

### 6. THE GUIDE

In response to this lack, the authors of this work have begun composing a guide for larp counseling. Guides are standardized and provide a cornerstone for dialogic interaction with a practice, whether

from those following its writings or those providing concrete objection. A common text cites best practices and provides a disprovable standard, so that progress can be measured as the practice continues to be studied. This guide seeks to introduce the boundaries, terms, liabilities, and ethical values necessary to provide care with predictability and competence.

## 7. CODE OF ETHICS

We think that foundational beliefs inform the reasoning behind procedures and will prepare counselors for how to behave when using judgement in marginal cases. While larp counseling is not mental health counseling, the privileges and responsibilities bear similar themes. The ethical code of the American Counseling Association (2014) most heavily informed our work of a Code of Ethics (see Appendix A). The values and intentions from this code cover three sections regarding responsibilities of the role, offering guidelines for engaging with a counselor's contextualizing factors. These contexts include players, the academic canon of counseling knowledge, game organizers, cultures of play, regional legality, and a counselor's own competency. Perhaps most importantly, the code of ethics sets boundaries. These include boundaries around confidentiality, relationships with players, and degrees of responsibility in cases when a player seeking help has needs beyond what is reasonable for a larp counselor to provide. This code extends into behavior within play as well. Psychologist Elizabeth Fein's (2015) repurposing of *Star Trek's* Prime Directive in her paper "Making Meaningful Worlds: Role-Playing Subcultures and the Autism Spectrum" provides a useful contextual allegory for this process. She compares the famous creed from *Star Trek*, where interstellar explorers vow "not to interfere with social development of the societies they encounter" to her capacity as a researcher in a larp environment. Likewise, the Code of Ethics purposes that counselors do not engage characters or the diegesis in such a way as to alter its established course or to do so in ways that minimize any rippling effect.

## 8. RECOMMENDED PROCEDURES

These are methods for uniting ethics with practice that are informed by the typical structure of weekend games. They are heuristics – meant to operationalize behavior in important circumstances based on existing practices. For instance, since a counselor at a game is likely to encounter moments of intense distress, this section includes SAFER-R

Crisis Response Technique. The guide includes this particular framework over others due to its use by mental health paraprofessionals rather than those models used by crisis clinicians. We chose the SAFER-R model because it relies upon knowing one's limits of care and referring a person in crisis to more capable help, a value which reinforces the role of a larp counselor as means of support rather than a mental health practitioner (Yeager 2015).

The recommended procedures section includes entries on larp debrief (Atwater 2016); reporting; composing and executing a referral list (Yeager 2015); and shift-taking. Whereas these procedures are firmly suggested as the best ways to execute counseling, they are not mandatory. Instead, we intended the section for mutable engagement and practices that may change over time with research.

## 9. EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES

Beyond morals and methods are particular experiences based more heavily on intuition. The contents of this section are considered best practices by the authors because they are experientially effective, rather than evidence-informed. They are ways of preparing future counselors by offering proxy experience and advice if one is starting without a point of reference. These are the areas of greatest subjectivity, meant to exist as part of an ensemble of opinions as more come to the practice. They include frameworks of ethical character creation, such as how to create playfulness for oneself without taking the focus of play, and self-evaluation, in order to bring scrutiny to the qualities that can impair the helpfulness of new and experienced counselors. We have dedicated a large section for example counseling scenarios and outcomes. Should a new counselor want to know what to expect, these examples show common requests for care and how they have been handled by the authors. These cases demonstrate how and when to use diegetic tools, mediate conflict, create a plan of action, and refer once a situation has escalated beyond the responsibility of a counselor.

## 10. ONGOING DIALOGUE

To achieve the expected benefits of a larp counselor, there must be some common expectations. The proposed framework of a guide aims to help counselors rise to a level of competency, set boundaries that protect themselves and others, and steer judgement in outlying situations --provided it works. Though this guide suggests standardized behavior for counselors, there are not yet any organizers or players who have interacted with

its outcomes. We do not intend for it to end the discussion on this work so much as promote a wave of discourse in reaction to its definitions and claims. Whether aesthetic or foundational, external feedback will continue to affect both public and expert opinion about how the role should develop. Additionally, claims for best practices and ethical engagement currently come from presumptions about the counselor's efficacy based on anecdote, intuition, and generalized research. As practitioners continue to add their contributions to the field, best practices will require more research on effectiveness, which will include developing frameworks for evaluating efficacy in the pursuit of standardization outside of this singular guide.

## 11. CONCLUSION

Larp as a field is actively gaining language that transforms the implicit and instinctual into something explicit and subject to scrutiny. So, too, are larpers becoming more accountable to their own behaviors. This role of caregiving is not a new one, as issues of distress have certainly existed before a formal role was meant to help with them. Some larps have created similar characters, such as in-game bartenders who are also staff members, but the counselor role has yet to be codified on a wide scale." Continuing to develop this role with rigor, curiosity, and structural enthusiasm will invite more questions but provide stronger solutions through experience and dialogue.

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## APPENDIX A

### I. LARP COUNSELOR CODE OF ETHICS

Larp counseling is a unique personal / professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals and groups to pursue their own conceptions of mental health, wellness, exploration, and fun through play. Larp counseling is the practice of dedicating a staff member to overseeing participant well-being at a live-action role-play (larp) event. We defend the title as evocative of a camp counselor: a supervisory role meant to connect the player with the intended fun of an event, rather than suggesting therapeutic intent. Ideally, the event should financially support individuals in these roles, who operate outside of the logistical organizational staff.

Larp counselors have a unique definition of and relationship to professionalism. Firstly, play is usually not the intended mode of player interaction and most conceptions of professionalism do not account for it as setting or mode. Conceptions of professionalism shared across various helping professions do not account for scenarios in which, within the lifetime of the player-counselor relationship, multiple personas / realities exist, and diegetic role reversal is expected.

Classic conceptions of professionalism also fail us by assuming the nature of the counselor / player relationship is purely professional and not of a different foundation that is more likely to be fostered in organized play. Due to the privilege and authority inherent to the larp counselor role, there are still strict standards to which to adhere and lines which never should be crossed.

Standardized values are an important way of living out an ethical commitment. The following are core values of larp counseling:

1. enhancing human development;
2. honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts;
3. promoting social justice;
4. safeguarding the integrity of the counselor–player relationship; and
5. practicing in a competent and ethical manner.

These values provide a conceptual basis for the ethical principles enumerated below. These principles are the foundation for ethical behavior and decision making. The fundamental principles of ethical behavior are:

- *autonomy*, or fostering the right to control the direction of one’s life;
- *nonmaleficence*, or avoiding actions that cause harm;
- *beneficence*, or working for the good of the individual and society by promoting mental health and well-being;
- *justice*, or treating individuals equitably and fostering fairness and equality;
- *fidelity*, or honoring commitments and keeping promises, including fulfilling one’s responsibilities of trust in our ethical relationships; and

- *veracity*, or dealing truthfully with individuals with whom counselors come into professional contact.

## II. LARP COUNSELOR CODE OF ETHICS PURPOSE

- The *Code* sets forth the ethical obligations of larp counselors and provides guidance intended to inform the ethical practice of larp counselors.
- The *Code* identifies ethical considerations relevant to larp counselors and larp counselors-in-training.
- The *Code* enables the community to clarify for current and prospective counselors, and for those served by the community, the nature of the ethical responsibilities held in common by its members.
- The *Code* serves as an ethical guide designed to assist the larp counselors in constructing a course of action that best serves those utilizing counseling services and establishes expectations of conduct with a primary emphasis on the role of the larp counselor.
- The *Code* helps to support the mission of fighting for social justice and fostering safe play.

## III. PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

- a. It is always necessary to act in good faith, and without coercion or misrepresentation. Larp counselors must know and stay within the laws of the country in which they are practicing.
- b. It is good, ethical practice for larp counselors to be clear with players about their professional status and training.
- c. Larp counselors must be aware at all times that they are not mental health professionals and should NEVER attempt to perform psychotherapeutic interventions beyond valuable micro-skills.
- d. Larp counselors use their professional work to benefit players and not primarily to satisfy their own needs.
- e. Larp counselors seek ways of increasing

their personal and professional awareness and development.

- f. Larp counselors must maintain standards of practice by monitoring and reviewing their work alone, with peers, and by seeking supervision when necessary.
- g. Larp counselors must openly and clearly explain the possible presence of observers, recorders, and auxiliary-ego co-therapists. They must make any limits of confidentiality aware to the players being helped.
- h. It is not the decision of a larp counselor to decide if players are (i) fit to play and (ii) fit for the specific group in which it is proposed to place them. If they are perceived as not fit, the counselor must indicate that to the player and may suggest alternative courses of action, but they must not prevent someone from engaging in play for this reason.
- i. In order to be fit to practice, larp counselors should maintain an adequate balance of emotional and physical health. This standard should be maintained as a model for other colleagues and trainees. They should not knowingly practice if their mental or physical poor health is liable to have a detrimental effect on their players. This includes the misuse of substances that may be detrimental to professional practice. Notions of health are both personal and cultural, and such connotations should be heavily weighted in this assessment.
- j. Larp counselors should be aware of and respect the cultural expectations of the community in which they work.
- k. Larp counselors should be aware of and respect the cultural mores of their players, trainees, and colleagues.

#### IV. RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PLAYER

- a. Counselors' guarantees on confidentiality extend as far as themselves. While counselors should always be expected to maintain confidentiality in almost all cases, if other players, organizers, or bystanders are present for counseling, there can be no guarantee of privacy. It is a larp counselor's duty to inform all parties of any limitations to

confidentiality. Diegetic encounters between counselor and player character-selves are assumed to be part of play and thus have no promise of confidentiality or privacy.

- b. Larp counselors shall treat as private all information received from the player whether this is during a session or during other situations when they might be communicating delicate non-diegetic information; unless the player specifically agrees that this information is generally communicable. Comment: For best practices please see the Reporting chapter.
- c. Larp counselors must not use information received in the course of their relationship with players or trainees for personal gain.
- d. Larp counselors undertake to set out clearly and without prejudice a verbal contract with players before play begins and to reiterate relevant facets (i.e., confidentiality or the limits thereof) during play. They must almost remember that consent is an ongoing process.
- e. Larp counselors will give attention to the physical environment in which they work with players in order to provide a safe and secure space for play.
- f. Larp counselors should be aware of the professional boundaries with players and trainees. Larp counselors should be aware of the possibilities of role confusion, which can damage the interpersonal and/or training relationship. It is the duty of the counselor to maintain an understanding of the power dynamic, from their own point of view, as well as the players, both diegetically and out-of-character.
- g. At no time should a larp counselor enter into a sexual and or romantic relationship with a player or organizer during the course of play. Pre-existing relationships of this kind between counselors and players/organizers should be bracketed. If possible, counselors should avoid moderating conflicts or engaging in sessions with these individuals, but not at the expense of anyone's safety. Comment: For best practices, please see the Dual Relationships/Conflicts of Interest Section in our forthcoming guide book.

- h. Larp counselors should inform players of the use of videotape or other recording systems, where it is possible such a factor could upset the nature of the confidential relationship. At all times, the counselor is obliged to obtain clear, informed consent from all participants involved in any recording and to inform them that they have a right to withdraw their consent at any time.

## V. RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIETY

- a. When dealing with sensitive intimate issues that arise in play, larp counselors should treat them with appropriate caution. The use of diegetic techniques should be carefully considered in order to minimize the possibility of compounding the abuse.
- b. When approached by organizers for work or consultation, larp counselors should present a clear unambiguous statement of intention of the services they offer.
- c. Larp counselors have the responsibility to acknowledge research undertaken during an event and, where appropriate, initiate, assist, or participate in the process of informing and seeking the consent of players when they are involved. Players used as research subjects should give informed consent to participating in the nature of the research being undertaken.
- d. Larp counselors have an educative role in the larp community as well as a helping one and should seek to continue their own education. Larp counselors have the responsibility to continue their own development by being an active member of the larp safety community.
- e. Larp counselors subscribe to the principles of anti-discriminatory practice, freedom of speech, and human rights; they should take positive steps to promote them.

## VI. RELATIONSHIP WITH PLAY

- a. Character immersion should never be prioritized over the counselor's vigilance. Counselors acknowledge that their imbedded role is explicitly for the benefit of players and always follow the Prime Directive. Counselors forgo intensive immersion in favor of a perspective that

prioritizes their ability to vigilantly perform their duties. Comment: The Prime Directive refers to the counselor's responsibility to the well-being of players, and the limitations of their involvement within the diegesis: *No intentional interference with the development of plot. No protracted relationship with a player-character.*

- b. A larp counselor's character self should exhibit characteristics and behavior becoming of a counselor. Players should always feel comfortable engaging with counselor characters.
- c. Larp counselors only disrupt another's immersion for the express purpose of resolving issues relevant to their position.
- d. Larp counselors always consider the culture of play in which they exist before acting. However, such considerations should never jeopardize the well-being of players. Counselors are always assessing and reassessing their notions of "well-being" in the context of the players and environment.
- e. Larp counselors should always reserve the ability to stop/ start and relocate play as well as declare in-game areas as temporarily out-of-game to facilitate their duties. Caution should be used when exercising these abilities; counselors should consider the impact upon player experience as well as the urgency of the situation.
- f. If organizers have agreed to allow counselors the authority to use diegetic devices, counselors may do so within the context of the Prime Directive (i.e., directive abilities should never affect the plot beyond a single or small group of characters).
- g. Diegetic devices are to be used only when the counselor believes they will have a positive impact on the player's experience and well-being.
- h. If a larp counselor's character-self is a psychotherapist or an adjacent position, they may role-play psychological interventions. Caution should be taken to ensure these interactions stay within the realm of fiction and fulfill the needs of play.

- i. Counselors should take care to explicitly articulate when play ends and begins.

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# Documenting Larp as an Art of Experience

**Abstract:** Larp documentation and representation has proven difficult for a variety of reasons. I contend that one way to meet this challenge is to foreground player experiences over the narrative created by the designers. Player-created artifacts from larps utilize a range of senses to create a kind of assemblage of documentation that more closely approximates both the feel and the meaning of the experience, providing a more complete picture of what the larp was and what it felt like. They can represent the collaboration between the players, the context, and the system, through an amalgam of the “memories, stories, photographs and old props now serving as souvenirs from alternate realities” (Stenros, Montola, & Belarbi 2010). These artifacts become social objects (Engeström 2005, cited in Simon 2010) that describe experiences from multiple perspectives, with the intent of surrounding the experience (Sullivan 2010) to allow for an examination of relationships that are simultaneously immediate and distant. The realizations that emerge from this engagement evoke Art-educator Elliot Eisner’s (2002) dictum that “meaning is not limited to what words can express” (p.230).

Some may argue that this approach constitutes the musealization of larp, but the movement towards the model described by Museum Director and scholar Nina Simon in *The Participatory Museum* (2010) would not only be a more accurate rendering of larp experiences, but also would encourage an audience to engage with the material “as cultural participants, not passive consumers.” Participants are encouraged to use the social objects as a locus point around which they can create, share, and connect to one another. In effect, the exhibit communicates experience by being an interactive-experience that considers physical, social, and personal contexts at play (Falk and Dierking 2016). These concepts are given form in The Magischola Museum (Cox 2017) website that I designed to house artifacts from Learn Larp LLC’s *New World Magischola* series.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Larps are embodied, experiential, ephemeral, and notoriously difficult to document and portray in a way that allows others to have an authentic sense of that experience. As noted in *Nordic Larp* (Stenros and Montola 2010), because larps “cease to exist the moment they become complete” and during them “each player in a larp undergoes a unique, personal journey” (p.10), their documentation is problematic. Stenros and Montola (2011) further identify five attributes that make larps so difficult to document, in that they are: subjective, co-creative, aimed at a first-person audience, ephemeral, and have a loosely defined purpose. I confront these challenges by framing larps through collections of player-created artifacts that are connected to the games -- such as planning notes, props, costumes, and/or reflective artworks -- to foreground player experiences. These comprise a form of visual data that feels more authentic than current methods and that supports Juhana Pettersson’s (2017) conception of larps as an “art of experience” (p.79). Describing larp documentation that uses this approach requires some discussion of the challenges the media presents, a consideration of larps as “embodied experiences” (Leavy 2015), and an analysis of the value of visual anthropology in their documentation.

Current documentation practices include collections of written testimony or video documentation by larp organizers, which generally do not address all of these difficulties. Too often, documentation, whether in personal narrative or in video, focuses on what “happened,” which is not an effective way to document a larp. In this approach, the emphasis is placed on plot more than on the experience, stemming from a too rigid focus on larps as stories. Written reflections of these journeys feel disconnected from the experiences, as Lizzie Stark (2012) observes when she notes that larps “can’t be relived, and the anecdotes gamers tell each other afterward sound like inside jokes to anyone who wasn’t there” (xiii). This is because written accounts primarily address events an individual went through without attempting to convey a sense of the experience. Video documentation of larps often portray a grand narrative that is focused on what it looked like in a mimetic sense rather than what it felt like. Videos tend to rely on a linear narrative that serve either as an object of consumption or as a commercial draw for potential future players (Torner 2011). This may establish a sense of the co-created whole, but by their very nature, documentation videos create a singular message of what the larp is “about,” and de-emphasize the interpretive qualities that support



the other attributes. While personal reflection and advertisement are not negative in and of themselves, they do not effectively convey the communal and highly individualized embodied experiences that are integral to this aspect of larps.

*The Magischola Museum* (Cox 2017) is my first prototype for a new form of documentation that uses player-created artifacts to document a larp and its visual culture. It is a website that documents Learn Larp LLC's blockbuster larp series *New World Magischola*, which I chose to use because it has a stable fan base; operates in a diegetic world that I know well and that is not inaccessible to others; and includes numerous artifacts suitable for my purposes. The initial concept for the site (and this paper) was inspired by my realization that almost every character carries a wand of some description, and that while players had put some thought into the story behind that item, they rarely had the opportunity to share their creative efforts. As discourse around the subject proceeded, the immense amount of meaning invested in player-created artifacts became more and more apparent to me, and I resolved to provide a venue to explore that area of inquiry.

## 2. TALES OF EMBODIED EXPERIENCES

Embodiment is perhaps the most essential component of a larp, the "live-action" that defines the experience for the players. However, the specific lived quality of a larp can be difficult to nail down. Larps are similar to other embodied experiences in that: 1) practitioners are simultaneously the medium and the artwork; 2) sensory output and input mirror social phenomena that intersect with culture, identity, and the flow of power; and 3) they must be experienced to be in existence, and once completed, they exist only as a memory (Leavy 2015). Theater is probably the form of experience that larp is most often compared to, as it can be used to generate data, provide analysis, and represent concepts in a similar fashion to larps (Leavy 2015, 174). This is especially true in terms of improv and playbuilding research, which produce and perform pieces evocative of topics, issues, and/or problems (Barone 1990, Leavy 2015, Norris 2000, 2009). However, theatrical performances are explicitly oriented towards an external audience rather than towards participants. In larps, roles are "not only performed, but created and experienced first-hand" (Stenros 2010) allowing for the liminal participant/audience view called the "first-person audience" (Sandberg 2004). Effectively, the goal in theater is to be taken as a character by others, while in a larp the goal is to play the character in pursuit of that same experience (Suits 1978).

Much in the same way that larp must be considered as separate from theater, the experiences that emerge from a larp are distinct from traditional narratives. Citing Labov (2006, 38), Leavy (2015) tells us that "when we talk about narrative we are really talking about the telling of stories and the writing of stories" (41). Narratologists James Phelan and Peter Rabinowitz (2012) further state that narrative "is somebody telling somebody else, on some occasion, and for some purposes, that something happened to someone or something" (3). Therefore, calling the larp itself a story is inaccurate in rhetorical terms because it is (at least partially) emergent through co-creation rather than conveyed from one person to another. However, Henry Jenkins (2004) has also said that games can contain a "narrative architecture." This means that while larps are not considered stories in rhetorical narratology, they are creative fantasies that draw on diegetic elements: an imagined world that provides shared themes, concepts, and references that players can draw upon to co-create an experience.

The distinction between larps and traditional narratives is important because it allows for a flexibility of experience that is specific to the media. However, attempts to recreate the experience for others after the conclusion of the experience most definitely *are* stories. Play scholar James Hans (1981) suggests that play is actually only separated into the sensuous and the rational after an experience of play rather than during it. Therefore, the telling of stories about larp experiences is important because it provides a space in which players construct aesthetic meaning, a reflective form of understanding that is specifically linked to how the "interpenetration of self [with] the world of objects and events" (Dewey 1934, p, 246) is dissected, described, and interpreted. Typically, these reflections are arranged linearly in an attempt at a mimetic representation of a larp event, but doing so fails to capture the polyphonic (Clifford, as cited in Stenros and Montola 2011; Mienczakowski and Morgan, as cited in Saldaña 2005) lived experience of the games because they establish the organizer's "plot" as a leading voice. A more effective framing to capture an emergent diegetic world can be found in co-creative narrative theories such as David Herman's (2012) narrative theory of mind. This theory treats narrative as a multifaceted co-construction, and its use here is further invigorated when the discourse is not limited to written and spoken language.

*The Magischola Museum* (Cox 2017) is the product of co-construction because of the acquisition of artifacts, the way it represents the world of *New World Magischola*, and the experience it creates for viewers.

I acquired images of the items through Facebook postings and conversations. I asked players who chose to submit images of their items to provide the name of the character, the runs of the games that the item had been in, an in-game history of the item, and an out-of-game history that included where it had come from and any personal meaning that it had. The website presents these items as a collection in a grid pattern, and any given object can be selected to access the details provided by the players. Because the asynchronous timelines between characters that appear in different runs of *New World Magischola* can create a significant amount of confusion, the museum acts as an asset for players that want to know how that world has emerged and changed through a varied set of experiences.

### 3. SOCIAL OBJECTS

In order to best capture the complex weave of experiences that occur in a larp, I propose we look to the artifacts that players create. This proposition views larp as an experience rather than a narrative, representing the collaboration between the players, the context, and the system, through an amalgam of the “memories, stories, photographs and old props now serving as souvenirs from alternate realities” (Stenros, Montola, & Belarbi 2010). Collections of these artifacts become social objects (Engeström 2005, cited in Simon 2010) that describe experiences from multiple perspectives, with the intent of surrounding the experience (Sullivan 2010) to allow for an examination of relationships that are simultaneously personal and communal. The realizations that emerge from this engagement evoke Art-educator Elliot Eisner’s (2002) dictum that “meaning is not limited to what words can express” (230). They reflect more than a single moment, concept, or memory, and encourage connection and interpretation from viewers on a visceral level.

These artifacts are not always “made” by the players who use them, and may instead be purchased by, commissioned for, or given to the player or character. The important thing is how they are made special through their use in the game by the players. “Participant-made art as data” (Leavy 2015) has had a history of success in arts-based research because it allows subjective interrelated experiences to be presented in a way that supports individual narratives and emergent patterns. Arts professor Sarah Ganz Blythe (2013) describes the connection between tale-telling, meaning-making, and physical objects when she states:

One way to start to derive meaning from what we see is to assign language to form, to

name what is visually apparent, exercising observational skills. To describe is to begin to know. Interestingly, the act of describing can prompt related prior information, references, and personal experience into consciousness (125).

In essence, the meaning of an object is not defined solely by its form, but by the discourse it generates via connections made by the viewer/handler of the object. This understanding suggests that the acts of sensing, making, and doing art are all intertwined into a complex, and ultimately subjective, artistic event. In a larp, these artifacts can additionally connect with personal lives, pre-diegetic experiences, the game itself, and post-diegetic reflections.

When I created *The Magischola Museum* (Cox 2017), I chose artifact categories for the website that focus on items players commonly made, were given, or collected for the games: wands, apparel, accessories, and ephemera. Wands are a near universal item that hold space within the lore of the game and were easy to tailor to the personalities players envisioned for their characters. Apparel includes items that were strongly associated with the character, such as Professor Montana Styles’ signature cowboy hat. Accessories is a catch-all term that includes a wide variety of props such as journals, newsletters, and magical items that lend realism to the world of *New World Magischola*. The Ephemera section contains files that players can customize to create additional elements for the game. I also added an area for video lectures and links, with the intent of allowing contributions that broadened the communal aspects of the site.

### 4. PRAXIS, POIESIS, AND AISTHESIS

Because the connections an artifact has to places, people, and contexts are relational, three interlinked ideas are useful for understanding them: praxis, poiesis, and aisthesis (Jagodinski and Wallin 2013). The artifacts players make or collect in relation to a game form a central role in focusing these concepts into a meaningful account of the larp. In this framework, *praxis* is creation as an exercise of intent, *poiesis* is the visceral experience of making, and *aisthesis* is the sensorial experience one has through an encounter with an artifact. Together, these three concepts form a framework that is differentiated from aesthetic understandings produced in traditional documentaries because it focuses on meaning made through lived experience, rather than on accounts and reflections of that experience. It operates with the understanding that objects are encountered rather than recognized (Jagodinski and Wallin 2013),

meaning that the artifacts exist in an individualized relationship with each person who experiences them even while they share commonalities, such as referring to the same larp event.

An example of this can be found in the *Wyrd Con Companion Book* article "How I Became an Accidental Artist Through Larp" (2015) by larper Quinn D, wherein she discusses how sculptures she had created in-character "were not always just props, or even art. Sometimes they were story, experiences, and feeling too" (31). Praxis is a concept tied to acts of will in pursuit of transformation, a conscious attempt to reshape the world. In Quinn's article, the sculptures she makes intervene both in the diegetic realm and in the lived experiences of players as representations of their thoughts and experiences. Poiesis speaks to the metamorphic process of unveiling unforeseen and unplanned truths during artistic encounters. Encounters with Quinn's sculptures provoke poietic interpretation and reinterpretation of previous conclusions because the events have been literally reformed in the artifact. The provocations of artifacts are first encountered aesthetically, which is to say as a visceral effect on a person's perceptions and senses, rather than as objects to be analyzed. The feel of the metal, the way the light plays on the surface, and the context in which the works are seen are all at play when players encounter Quinn's pieces.

## 5. LARP IN THE MUSEUM

There are some who may argue that approaching games through the player-made artifacts constitutes the musealization of larp, but several current museum philosophies support a vibrant engagement with artifacts that is ideal for larp. Firstly, the community-centric model described by Museum director Nina Simon in *The Participatory Museum* (2010) creates not only a more accurate rendering of larp experiences, but also encourages an audience to engage with the material "as cultural participants, not passive consumers." In this model, participants are encouraged to use the social objects as a locus point around which they can create, share, and connect to one another. John Falk and Lynn Dierking (2016) contribute an additional concept to apply into larp documentation with their Interactive Experience Model in their book *The Museum Experience*. Where previous models of exhibit design had considered the experience as secondary to information, in their model, fluctuating interactions between a user's personal, social, and physical contexts are understood to coalesce to form a unique perspective of their experience. Lastly, Rhode Island School of Design professor Sarah Ganz Blythe (2011) maintains

that sharing museum spaces in public "recreates the museum as a dynamic reflection of the creative process and generative site for questioning and dialogue" (135). In effect, the exhibit *communicates* experience by *being* an interactive-experience through discourse with participants.

Applying these concepts comprehensively to a collection of larp objects will create a sense of the game's Visual Culture, which "reflects and contributes to the construction of identity, knowledge, history, sense of place, notions of citizenship and agency, and quality of life" (Boughton et al. 2012, 1, cited in Smith-Shank and Soganci 2011). Because the negotiation of roles and boundaries is integral to games and game play (Copier 2009), these aspects are neither separate from game play nor from the Visual Culture. This means that a game's Visual Culture can extend outside of the limits of in-character play to include extra-diegetic encounters that occur as an aesthetic (sensory) experience, such as during game preparation, post-game reflection, and reunions. These encounters transverse through space and time to generate thoughts and experiences that exist separately (but related to) the work of art.

By emphasizing the player experience over that of the designers, *The Magischola Museum* (2017) site foregrounds the subjective and co-creative nature, as well as the flexible focus, that larps have. I designed the website to follow the style of the school by echoing its color scheme of gray and yellow. I wrote introductions to each section of the website that describe the category diegetically, in the voice of my *New World Magischola* character, and non-diegetically, in my own voice as an academic. These qualities help link the experience of the website to the games they reference while still allowing it to exist as an independent construct. While the website lacks the visceral quality of engaging with work in person, the mediating space of the internet allows for a wider range of contributors and makes the collection accessible.

## 6. OTHER EXAMPLES

Using player-created artifacts to document experiences is not yet common in larp academia, but efforts have been made to utilize them. Stenros and Montola (2011) stress that for *Nordic Larp* (2010), they felt larp documentation should recognize the intertwined nature of the design, player experience, and subcultural understandings of larp. They document thirty different games by describing them in-text with visual documentation. Each section of the book addresses

the form (of larp in general and the individual differences), the events (a narrativization of what happened, as remembered afterwards), the expressive techniques (what tools and rules were used), the structure (when, where, by how many people), the first-hand experience (what it felt like to be there), and the meaning that players and game organizers have attached to the event. (5-6)

They collect participant data to create a polyphonic narrative that focuses on the diegetic experience, and attempts to highlight personal revelations, but it becomes slightly homogenized through this process. Their assessment is comprehensive, but places primacy on organizers as creators on the basis that “the game designers create the prediegesis, and each player contributes” (7). This again reflects the mimetic desires of a rhetorical narrative approach, resulting in a grand narrative, rather than one focused on a description of the communal experience.

For my dissertation, *Educational Communities, Arts-Based Inquiry, & Role-playing: An American Freeform Exploration with Professional and Pre-Service Educators* (Cox 2015), I worked with participants over several sessions to construct an imagined educational community, populated by students, teachers, parents, and administrators that were played by the participants. In my writing, I detail how participants created artifacts in-between sessions to provide aesthetic data that represents the intersubjective relationships of the research. I did so in order to acquire multiple views of participant experiences, and to explore changes between sessions in how they see the world (Stone-Mediatore 2003, cited in Hunter, Emerald, and Martin 2013, 96). This data is aesthetic in the sense that, though channeled in a physical form, it represents a sense-based representation of the relationships between the players, the characters, and the multiple realities to which they are connected. This effect is reciprocal, meaning that as the character is defined, so too is a participant and their view of the world around them. Over a series of experiences, the artifacts evolve as cross-referential works, connected through themes, imagery, ad media, and experience, so that each represents a new perspective on the experience of the research as a whole. Additionally, sharing artifacts at the beginning of sessions becomes a communal event that allows participants to focus on their own interpretations of the games, the discourse around which develops understanding between colleagues. This methodology provides valuable data and insight into the value of making extra-diegetic reflections, but is disconnected from the fluid nature of social objects that have impact before, during, and

after diegetic periods, which I am aiming for through this article.

Jonaya Kemper’s (2017) auto-ethnographic process includes a series of self-curated collections that are specific to her characters. While these are for her own use, she often shares them publicly and several images of the ephemera feature prominently in her research. In “The Battle of Primrose Park: Playing for Emancipatory Bleed in *Fortune & Felicity*,” Kemper describes her process of creation and curation before, during, and after in-character experiences: 1) she first prepared for the larp by building a playlist of songs, creating a costume specific to the character, and developing the character’s mental space through a series of diary entries; 2) she kept in-character diaries during the game and collected artifacts given to her by other characters; 3) she catalogs and classifies the artifacts, applying her analysis of them to examine emergent themes. While in many ways Kemper’s process is the embodiment of the form of larp documentation for which I am advocating, it is specifically focused on the singular experience of the researcher for autoethnographic purposes rather than for documentation of a larp in total.

## 7. NEXT STEPS

In working to create authentic larp documentation, it is imperative that we remember the fluidity of experiences. No single method will ever completely contain what it meant to be a person co-creating the experience of a particular game, but through the creation of media that are co-created experiences themselves, we can shift our perspectives and gain new insight on what it might have been like to “be there.” Furthermore, these collaborative constructions are themselves always works in progress. While I am proud of what I achieved in *The Magischola Museum*, it does have significant flaws. The current iteration of the site gives me absolute power of curation, which allows me to ensure a consistent visual theme, but restricts the degree of community engagement necessary to support the site as a space for discourse and emergent thought. In its current configuration, it is also difficult for me to ascertain the website’s impact other than the participant investment and support in creating the collection, so the next iteration will need to have some form of comments section. The thing I most wish to see emerge however is how other scholars integrate the concepts laid out in this paper in their own attempts to document larps, as the artistic discourse between the experiences that we make produces the greatest effect.

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