

Role-playing the Self: Trans Self-Expression, Exploration, and Embodiment in (Live Action) Role-playing Games

Abstract: Accounts of trans people using role-playing games (RPGs) as a safer space to “try out” another way to be gendered can be found in numerous sites – from the memetic, to the anecdotal, to the academic. Using autoethnography and post-structuralist queer theory of performativity in combination with scholarly perspectives of RPGs as sites for potentially transformative experiences, I consider the ways in which live-action role-playing games (larps) might help trans people express, explore, and embody their subjectivity. I argue that despite there being a relatively small (though growing) number of larps designed to encourage players to consider gender and sexuality norms in society, there remains no larp that intentionally allows trans people (or those questioning their gender) to consider their gender subjectivity therein.

Scholarly perspectives on larps suggest that they might provide a site for the simulation of complex socio-cultural dynamics, a space to adopt different social roles, and the alibi and scaffolding to do so in a way that is validating with a community of like-minded role-players (Deterding 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2021). I present examples of larps that, either by design or not, seem to have provided opportunities for gender role-play and transformative experiences for some trans players. I consider the possible limitations the embodied experience of larps -- as opposed to digital and table-top RPGs (TRPGs) -- might have in allowing such exploration for some trans players, particularly in potentially transphobic play environments. I argue however, that the embodied nature of larps might also provide an opportunity to explore gender role-play in such a way that allows for the validation of more diverse physical and social gender presentations, as well as the rehearsal thereof in a safer space. I present accounts of trans people -- including my own autoethnography -- using role-playing games, larps, and other activities/ environments not necessarily consciously designed for the purpose of gender exploration as the basis for how this might be designed for intentionally in larps. I conclude by proposing to design a larp that could provide an opportunity to express, explore, and embody non-normative gender, and I pose a series of questions that I believe such a design should seek to answer.

Keywords: trans, role-play, larp, emancipatory bleed, autoethnography

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1. INTRODUCTION

Figure 1: Tweet by @SuperMichelleHD, March 7, 2021



The above is a post on *Twitter* by my friend Michelle Belcher, who amongst her other qualities is a game event coordinator, a game player, and a trans woman. The image she created, suggesting that role-playing as a woman in a game was an important part of some trans women's experience, quickly went viral, garnering a mass of replies and retweets expressing empathy and recognition from other trans role-players.

The now popular meme represents a narrative that I recognise in many personal stories of trans players – such as in conversations with other role-players (e.g., at the Knutepunkt 2021 conference, which included a roundtable on “Designing for Gender Exploration” in live-action role-playing games, hosted by Carnelian King), posts on social media (including other virally-shared memes suggesting similar experiences), auto-ethnographies in blogs or journalistic articles (e.g., Moriarity 2019; Constantine 2021), and accounts in role-playing scholarly work (e.g., Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). It is also a narrative that I recognise in myself – as a trans woman who often role-played my gender in digital and tabletop role-playing games prior to feeling able to embody it in everyday life; and even thereafter as I continued to seek out role-playing experiences in games, stage and film performance, social spaces, and finally in scholarly work and live-action role-playing games (larps). In each space, I realise in hindsight, I was looking for opportunities that allowed me to explore, experiment, and embody my gender in a way that was not allowed and/or unsafe in the wider social environment I was in.

I argue that the apparent ubiquity of this experience suggests that role-playing games might provide an opportunity for (trans) people to explore their gender. It is this possibility that I consider in the following paper, as well as making the argument that larps, intentionally designed with this in mind, might be particularly well-suited for such an endeavour.

Below, I present an autoethnography of role-playing in two different senses. Drawing from theories of gender performativities and social roles (Butler 1990, 1993; Goffman 1956, 1963, 1986), I firstly discuss the experience of being cast in a (gender) role from birth and then being required to play it by society whether it is concordant with the sense of self or not. Secondly, and in contradistinction to this, I present my experiences with role-playing games as one of the few ways I was able to express myself, which had been hindered by this other version of enforced social role performance. I will suggest that LGBTQIA+ people have a long history of doing this in different spaces, most not initially designed for such a purpose, and this includes role-playing games – from digital, to tabletop, to larp.

I will show how consideration and analysis of this phenomena is an emerging area in games studies including in larp studies – which especially shares a significant overlap with queer theoretical traditions considering social roles and performativities. I will highlight how scholarly approaches to the study of larps suggest they can be a site to model and challenge problematic social norms by providing participants the opportunity to experience them in a safer and intentional container of play. I will also discuss a number of larps which appear to provide an opportunity for gender role-play, and I will draw out which elements of their designs seem to allow for it. However, I will also present the potential barriers to gender exploration in larps, in part because larps are also artefacts of society and as such can reproduce discriminatory structures and experiences for trans people. I will note how the embodied nature of larps can especially exacerbate any issues that might arise from this, a concern that might be less of an immediate problem in digital or tabletop games.

I will argue, however, that it is precisely the embodied nature of larps that might provide for a particularly important aspect of gender exploration in role-playing environments, because it includes the physical element of gender experience. However, since there are no larps that are currently intentionally designed for this purpose, I present another autoethnographic narrative of my experiences in LGBTQIA+ social spaces as a source for potential design principles that could allow for such a safer larp play container. I will conclude that these considerations might best be tested through design: namely, the attempt to intentionally develop a larp that would allow participants to express, explore, and

embody non-normative gender. Finally, I pose a series of guiding questions that I believe such a design should seek to answer.

2. EVERYDAY PERFORMATIVITY AND THE OPPORTUNITY FOR FANTASY ROLE-PLAY

I grew up for the most part in England in the 1980s and '90s, a culture and time that seemed to me to be replete with rigid social structures: some overt, but most unspoken and just to be “understood” and “obeyed.” Even in this context, as a child, I was certain that I was a girl. But I was also certain that it was not a good idea to talk about that fact. I knew it was much safer to pretend to be a boy – to role-play, mask – and try to pass for a normatively gendered person by following the rules of the environment I was in. And I knew all of this without needing to be explicitly told.

Judith Butler (1990, 1993), one of the scholars (along with theorists like de Lauretis 1991 and Sedgwick 1991) credited with being formative of the post-structuralist perspective of socio-cultural processes, might characterise this as an example of “gender performativity.” Butler argues that gender norms as we know them exist and are perpetuated through their performance in everyday life (1990, 24-25). We are taught our roles from birth through a myriad of different discursive forms, most so subtle and constant as to be almost imperceptible and thus become “naturalised” in everyday understanding. These include observing and copying the performance of gender roles by others, and the enforcement of norms if they are broken by others as well. In the contemporary Western society within which she developed her theory, Butler argues, this creates a socio-cultural discourse that gender is binary, immutable, natural, and normal in origin, and thus undeniable. The fact that gender needs to be so firmly policed (for example by school-yard bullying, social roles enforced by law, mockery in media, homophobic/transphobic assaults, etc.) immediately demonstrates that this is not the case. Nonetheless, a very specific gender (binary) is conceptualised as an immutable natural function through this continual role-performance and policing.

The result of this process for me was that I had no way to express my subjectivity as I felt it to be. I didn't even know the word “trans” existed for most of my early years. The closest that I got to knowing anything about there being a “trans” way to be when I was younger were whispers and innuendo, communicated through the regular social policing of gender performance. For example, comments made when someone strayed away from prescribed gender norms were ubiquitous to the point that they were often uttered without consideration for the implications they actually have: “you throw like a girl,” “take it like a man,” “man up,” “boys don't cry.” All of this contains the thinly veiled implication that playing the role incorrectly was against the (social) rules and would lead to an unspeakable state of being which was inherently wrong, dangerous, and liable to be severely punished in some form or another.

This enforced social role felt “fake” in relation to the sense of gendered self that I didn't really have access to yet – because the culture I lived in did not discursively allow for it. This notion of gender performativity being inherently “artificial” is central to many discourses, and even critiques, of the Butlerian perspective. I find that a common epistemic slip when considering post-structuralism and gender performativities is to presume that just because one's subjectivity is expressed through, and impacted upon by, social circumstance that there does not exist any subjectivity beyond that. This is certainly a criticism that has been levied at post-structuralist (queer) theorists, including Butler. Jay Prosser (1998) for example, argued that Butler's earlier theory could be interpreted as denying a (trans) subjectivity by positioning it strategically as the basis for her post-structuralist argument about discursive gender reality, and by implication negated any sense of self or embodied subjectivity. In this view, the argument is that if gender is entirely performative, then all gendered subjectivity is somehow false including trans subjectivity.

Judith Butler herself argues against such misreading of her work that would negate an embodied (gendered) subjectivity, especially by those who might use it to for anti-trans political ends:

One problem with that view of social construction is that it suggests that what trans people feel about what their gender is, and should be, is itself “constructed” and, therefore, not real . . . I oppose this use of social construction absolutely, and consider it to be a false, misleading, and oppressive use of the theory. (Butler in interview by Williams 2015)

Where the phenomenological line between subjectivity and the performative role begins and ends is beyond the scope of this paper. However, I do present the consideration of gender performativities in this way as a useful theoretical framework to consider why role-play is such a useful site for trans subjective exploration. The friction between subjectivity and the roles that we are required to play in everyday life has been a critical consideration not only for queer/gender theory but also for role-play theory. For example, Erving Goffman’s work on how we sociologically present ourselves performatively in everyday life as a form of game theory – in which interactions could be seen in terms of “rules” and “moves” which people could invoke and play out in order to navigate their roles (1956, 1963, 1969, 1986) – is regularly cited by theorists as a way to explore the functions of social roles and how they can be (re-)enacted, impacted upon and/or altered through role-playing (Mason 2004; Choy 2004; Deterding 2018; Bowman and Hugaas 2021).

I suggest therefore, that Butler’s work -- like Goffman’s -- provides a useful starting point to consider wider social role performativities and role-play as both representations and responses thereof, whilst retaining an understanding that these processes do not negate the existence of gendered subjectivity, which can be expressed *through* role-play. Indeed, it is the potential for a conception of social role performativities and role-playing games to allow for the exploration of gendered selves that I find so compelling.

To put this in terms of my autoethnography, as a young person growing up in such a rigid social structure, I would seek out any chance to play another role despite the certain yet nebulous threat of gender policing. Opportunities were few and far between, but most often I would find them in games. I found one such opportunity playing the iconic digital role-playing game (RPG), *Final Fantasy VII*, and specifically its equally iconic, especially amongst many trans players (Henley 2020), scene in which the cis male protagonist, Cloud, must disguise himself as a woman in order to complete an objective.

I remember my heart seeming to leap with a combination of panic and excitement at the prospect of enacting the taboo which I could not do in my everyday life. But I had an *alibi* in this case – it was a game. I was not going to present as a woman so authentically that others around me would recognise me as such. No, it was *Cloud* who would do that -- the role I was playing. And the rules of the game dictated that I should play along. That, in fact, I must play along to advance the narrative. And so, I did. With tremendous joy. I played the role of my character, presenting and being acknowledged as a woman. And in that moment, there was recognition and reflection. And I didn’t want it to end. So, for far longer than the designers intended I have no doubt, I walked around the fictitious environment avoiding the action that would advance the plot, playing my make-believe game in a role that felt true to myself. I made sure to save the game at that point, so I could revisit the moment and play it from there again, whenever I should choose. Because it was an opportunity to inhabit a self that I was otherwise denied – a chance to explore and learn in a *safer* space, where the consequences of my everyday environment did not exist, although I wouldn’t have put it in those terms at the time. Rather I did this almost instinctively, trying to find a way to exist, even if briefly, in another *space* – where I could transform, be and be seen as a person closer to something that felt true and real to me.

Figure 2: *Final Fantasy VII* (1997)

Final Fantasy VII offered me a glimpse of an identity that was both parallel to my own, yet also completely distant. It was frustratingly limited however. I could not go further in the story without losing this precious moment and I could not stray from the script either. The only thing I could do was linger in that digital world by myself, which in a way had some advantages. It was safe from the possibility that others might question why I was lingering and thus question my alibi. But it gave me little other opportunity to express or explore. Nonetheless, that moment of recognition and fictitious verification from the non-player characters (NPCs) in a safer space had such an impact that I would never forget it, and years later I eagerly sought out *Final Fantasy VII Remake* (2020) – which as the title suggests is a modern remake of the original game – just to see how that scene played out and to experience that moment of recognition again (cf. Vincent 2021). This experience demonstrates both the problematic gender social roles that society can impose, and also some of the opportunity that role-playing could provide. It is also an example of what Edmund Y. Chang (2017) calls *queergaming*.

3. "ROLE-PLAYING HAS ALWAYS BEEN QUEER..."

Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) note that a queer approach to games and role-play studies is still an emerging field. An initial concern for queer game studies has been the representation of LGBTQIA+ people, themes, and issues (and the significant lack thereof) in games (Shaw 2014; Shaw and Friesam 2016; Ruberg 2019, 2020). Despite a general lack of such representation, there are those that examine how LGBTQIA+ players interact with games in such a way as to incorporate themselves regardless. Chang (2017, 20) coined the term *queergaming* to describe the act of LGBTQIA+ players "borrowing, appropriating, and repurposing" games that otherwise do not overtly include us.

One version of this can be found in what Ruberg (2017, 2019) describes as "queering 'straight' games." Ruberg (2019) examine games that on the surface do not suggest a queer understanding, but nonetheless, could be seen to have queer readings and potential impact on the player. For example, Ruberg reads the digital game, *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (2014), as an analogy of queer embodiment and passing (2019, 84). In *Octodad*, the player assumes the role of an octopus who has somehow found their way into a circumstance where they must pretend to be a husband and father to a suburban family

by reproducing a series of stereotypically normative behaviours. Ruberg (2019, 85) suggests that in the game, “[p]layers quite literally play at heteronormativity, attempting to convincingly perform the role of the straight cisgender, masculine father.” And as such, it “can be understood as a video game about ‘passing’” (85).

Figure 3: *Octodad: Dadliest Catch* (2014)



Passing in this sense, is the presentation of the self in such a way that can be recognised and perceived as normative in the established socio-cultural gender discourse. Passing, as a term, often refers to the impulse or need to appear to be cis-gender for trans people in order to navigate our environments in safer ways (Spade 2006). But it can also refer to one’s gender subjectivity being recognised, if that gender is comprehensible in normative terms – for example a trans man being “read” as a man. Passing as a notion, therefore, encompasses a number of different experiences – which can have both negative and/or positive connotations for the individual. In this context, I posit, it demonstrates the way in which engagements with gender might be represented through gameplay. In the case of *Octodad* (2014) for example, the game can be read as a navigation of gender performativity for a character attempting to pass for normatively gendered in a social world. Interestingly, however, it is never suggested throughout the game that the octopus does not consider this normative gender to be reflective of their gender subjectivity.

Yet, this is still an example where such a reading must be placed onto a game which does not contain overt queer codification (Ruberg 2019). There remain few mainstream overt engagements with (trans) gender diversity within digital or non-digital games. However, there are more examples emerging in independent game design. Ruberg (2020) presents a series of interviews with queer (predominantly digital) game designers, who are a part of a very recent movement of what they term the *queer games avant-garde*. This is made up of games designed usually outside of the mainstream games industry and “engage with queer perspective” (2020, 3). Ruberg notes these games tend to explore queerness beyond just representation or attempts to create empathy for queer people per se, and present queer identity as complicated, multiple, politicized, and intersectional (2020, 14-22).

Stenros and Sihvonon (2019) find, however, that even within queer games studies as an emergent discipline, there is perhaps even less study of non-digital games and role-play. Stenros and Sihvonon (2019, 2015) in their recent works on the subject have found that there remain few examples of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs) or larps featuring overt LGBTQIA+ representation or themes. However, similar to Chang (2017) and Ruberg (2019) in their studies of predominantly digital games,

Stenros and Sihvonen (2015) find that in non-digital games, “queer role-play has been possible since the beginning regardless of whether there were cues for it or not.” They go on to suggest that due to their co-creative nature, tabletop RPGs and larps potentially provide significant opportunities for players to incorporate queer themes. Furthermore, in an examination of responses by queer larp players in a digital forum, Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) found that many participants experienced role-playing as a space for transformative self-exploration.

This is something that I also recognise from my own experience. Around the same time that I discovered *Final Fantasy VII*, I joined a high school *Dungeons & Dragons* group within which I had managed to pluck up the courage to role-play a woman character. In hindsight, I realise that none of the group really knew the rules of the game that well, nor was anyone particularly keen to run the game as game master. And so, the campaign we attempted was rather doomed to fail. However, I recall that we did all enjoy very much creating our characters and simply having them exist in another world.

I couldn't say if it was the same for the other players – I would have never had the courage to ask or suggest – but for me, it felt like an opportunity to explore a different way of being. I was a teenager in a strict British school – which meant gender-prescribed uniforms and rules for every form of behaviour. In hindsight, I realise I was under tremendous strain. I was trying my best to fulfil the requirements of my supposed gender and follow what even then felt like absurd rigidly-enforced ritual, rule and custom. I was old enough to have realised more consciously just how I was different. This was in part courtesy of a daytime talk-show where I had learned the word “transsexual” whilst watching a trans woman speak about her life whilst silhouetted and with a voice changer. It had been both a revelation and a horror to realise that being trans was possible, but it was also so dangerous that we had to be anonymised simply to speak publicly about it. Confronted with this, I simply had no idea what I was going to do.

However, the game gave me a chance to consider a different “kind of me.” In my mind and on the character sheet I created a role to play. In fantasy terms, she might actually have been considered quite plain. She didn't have special powers nor have a mythological origin or form. She was born in a village, a human fighter with a thoroughly unenchanted sword and sensible armour. She was strong and confident though – that was very important, I had decided – and she was practically-minded with a Neutral Good worldview. In hindsight, she could be defined as quite “boring” by *Dungeons & Dragons* standards. She was perfect however for a teenager who was trying to find herself by tentatively trying out being who she really was. As our party of adventurers awkwardly tried to find their way to an actual adventure, I was able to play out being her in fictional everyday environments by having conversations with other characters as her. I could play out scenarios and imagine and feel out how it might be to be this person – who seemed so much closer to a self that felt like me.

Here again, the game provided me the alibi to enact the taboo, but for me, *Dungeons & Dragons* seemed to give a different opportunity than the one I had found in *Final Fantasy VII*. Here I wasn't playing a character that had been handed to me. Rather, I could make my own. And the character didn't have to be a man pretending to be a woman. She could just be a woman. The game space was made up through our improvisation, our dialogue, and conversation, acted out collaboratively both in our imagination but also in the moment between us. It felt like the game gave me a chance to explore this character more comprehensively. I was able to “be” the role and perform it socially, and have that role validated and reflected back at me by people who were there and were not simply reproducing a script. And that play felt natural, real, and safer in our common interpersonal fiction.

The problem was that I had to do all that still under the guise of being a cis-boy. I felt like a double-agent somehow. Playing a role whilst playing another role. And even the stolen moments of being able to enact my subjectivity was short-lived, because the ruleset was complicated and none us seemed inclined to follow them properly. So, shortly the adventure just faltered. The game was not

designed for what we wanted it to do and that friction was obvious, especially for me. But I couldn't share that either.

Nonetheless, the game had provided a very important moment in allowing me to be myself. And this opportunity had an impact not only on me then but in my life following, because I had glimpsed something that was possible and I wanted to find a way to have that experience more, in-game and out of it. I have found similar themes in accounts in both popular and scholarly literature on role-playing and the possible transformative impacts it can have on a person's perspective and life.

4. TRANS(FORMATIVE) ROLE-PLAY

My life has been transformed, in no small part because of what I learned from my character in a role-playing game. (Moriarity 2019)

In Joan Moriarity's (2019) autoethnographically-based article, she describes an exploration of a trans character that she created in a tabletop RPG prior to her coming out as trans herself. She emphasises how transformative the experience was for her personally, as she was able to perform and inhabit a subjectivity that felt more authentic – something she did instinctively at the time but analyses in hindsight via theories of role-play. Moriarity cites Sarah Lynne Bowman's (2013) definitions of role-play *bleed* as one of the reasons her role-playing had such an impact on her sense of self; bleed here is described as the process by which emotions and experiences of a character role-played may affect or impact on the player's "real life" outside of the game, and vice versa (Stenros and Bowman 2018, 421). Moriarity (2019) locates her ability to explore and embody herself in the opportunity role-play provided for her. And as a result, she was able to experience the bleed between her sense of self and the character that she role-played.

Moriarity narrows down the specific type of bleed she experienced in terms of what Jonaya Kemper (2017, 2020) calls *emancipatory bleed*. Kemper (2017) in her visual autoethnography, defines emancipatory bleed as "the idea that bleed can be steered and used for emancipatory purposes by players who live with complex marginalizations." Kemper (2020) suggests that role-play, highlighting larp specifically, provides the possibility to explore "selves" that we might otherwise have been denied in other aspects of our lives. Kemper (2017) notes that especially those who live their everyday lives with "a double consciousness" or a "fractured identity" due to marginalisation can use larp and emancipatory bleed in this way. She (2020) suggests that emancipatory bleed can be intentionally sought through "navigational play": consciously seeking out opportunities before, throughout, and after a role-play to consider how enacting an alternative to marginalisation can lead to a change in how we might live in our everyday lives.

Both Moriarity (2019) and Kemper (2017, 2020) describe transformative experiences from role-playing in terms of the emancipatory bleed that can result from explorations therein, allowing us to access another sense of self beyond the roles we are otherwise asked to play in everyday life. Bowman and Hugaas (2021) outline the transformative potential of role-playing, and highlight the impact it can have on identity exploration by "adopting alternate identities in fictional worlds." They argue for intentionally designing larps with this transformative potential in mind, proposing we see role-playing space as a *transformational container* within which we might explore and experiment (2021). Bowman (2010) and Bowman and Hugaas (2021) have argued that larp as such a transformational container allows for participants to experiment with different selfhoods, and perhaps especially explore those characteristics of self that we have been excluded from in our everyday lives, which reflects the observations of Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) and Kemper (2017, 2020). In my case, I chose "self-compassion" as that aspect and as we played through the game, I was deeply touched by the opportunity

to express something that I had felt was possible, but in many ways, out of reach in my everyday life. It is an oft-overlooked aspect of being marginalised that there are many complex and intersectional issues that follow, most especially in areas of adverse effects on mental health from living in a society that marginalises your difference (cf. Hunter, Butler and Cooper 2021). One of those aspects for myself, is a reduced capacity for self-compassion. This larp provided an opportunity to embody a self who had that capacity and I have taken that with me out of the game. From playing this larp, I was keen to explore what it was that allowed me to have such an experience, and what potential it might offer to my own project.

I was struck by the similarities the larp had to other impactful moments of role-playing I have had. For example, like my experiences with *Final Fantasy VII* and *Dungeons & Dragons*, the larp had provided me the safer space and alibi to express a different version of myself, both aspects of a transformational play container as described by Bowman and Hugaas (2021). They place great emphasis on the safety that such containers must incorporate, precisely because of the exclusion players might feel elsewhere in their lives. For the authors, this safety is considered in a number of ways, such as for example, the security that the alibi of the larp being “a game” provides for a player to experiment more freely within themselves (Deterding 2018). Bowman and Hugaas note that a transformational play container is a potential opportunity for the temporary suspension of normative roles and rules (2021). Paradoxically, this very mechanism of alibi can also inhibit the ability for the player to incorporate something from in-game into their selfhood outside of the game -- the bleed between the two -- because the alibi can include an aspect of *role distancing*. In this way, the role that is played in-game can be considered significantly different and critically separate to the self out of the game, or the playful space itself feels impossible to experience or reproduce in another way outside of the larp.

This problem is reflected in some of the responses that Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) received in their questions to queer larp players in a dedicated Facebook forum the researchers set up to discuss these experiences. In these cases, some players reported that though they were able to explore gender and their sexual orientation more freely within the game space, they could not extend that self-exploration out of it. Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) do not analyse in great detail which factors might encourage a queer player to be able to experience the bleed between an in-game exploration and an out-of-game one. However, they suggest that certain community-based factors may have a significant impact according to their respondents. They specifically note that many respondents who were exploring selfhood in larp environments mentioned the importance of their interactions with other players. Citing Pohjola's (2004, 89) notion of *inter-immersion* – the process by which the fictional world and all the characters within it are established by the participation and cooperation of all the players – they suggest that what was especially important for those engaging with this kind of self-exploration was to have those roles “reflected back at them” by others in the larp. They found that by being validated in the role they were playing, respondents felt seen and affirmed.

This kind of affirmation can be critically important for those trying to find a way to express their subjectivity in the wider world outside of safer spaces like a game environment. For example, such validation is found to be vital to the mental health and well-being of trans people in therapeutic environments (Turban 2017, de Vries et al. 2020). More generally, this validation is understood to be a critical aspect of wider identity theory within social psychology, which argues that identity verification occurs when individuals perceive “that others see them in a situation in the same way they see themselves” (Stets and Serpe 2013, 35). This identity verification has a significant impact on forming a cohesive sense of self in a social environment.

Maio-Aether (2021) advocates for such verification being used in affirmative therapy being applied specifically through the use of tabletop RPGs in clinical therapeutic environments, which he conducts with queer and questioning clients. Using games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Vampire*:

The Masquerade, he introduces opportunities for his clients to engage with affirmative environments within which they can explore gender and sexuality in the relatively safer fictions of the game. In Maio-Aether's (2021) examples, he seems to advocate for players "rehearsing desires through characters." This reflects Stenros and Bowman's (2018) argument that one of the ways to design specifically for bleed in larps is to encourage players to "enact *thin characters*, or Doppleganger Selves" (422), which are characters that are very similar to selves experienced outside of the game (Bowman, 2010, 167).

Similar themes regarding the importance of co-creation, role validation, and role distance are often cited in relation to three larps that contain overt themes relating to gender and sexuality: *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003), *Mad About the Boy* (2010) and *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011). One of *Mellan himmel och hav*'s (2003) designers, Eliot Wieslander (2011) describes the larp as intentionally designed to allow players to enact a different form of love, affection, and intimacy as well as to engage with gender in a more metaphorical way. Gender in the game is still binary, but instead of being related to any specific physiological formation, people are either categorised as Morning or Evening people. This binary is still prescriptive with certain roles and values being considered immutable depending on the gender assigned (Gerge 2004, 209). Sexuality too continues to be coded in a "normative" function, in that there is a religious taboo cited that requires there only be sexual contact between Morning and Evening people (and that "homosexuality" or queerness in this sense is prohibited).

Wieslander (2011) notes that there is no explicit learning outcome that was presumed in the making of the larp, but rather it was designed to give players the opportunity to explore and question the stereotypes of gender and sexuality that they know in their everyday lives. Tovanen and MacDonald (2020) suggest that the ensemble focus of *Mellan himmel och hav* is an integral part of its functioning as an exploration of complex social roles and intersections. They see the larp as a co-creative effort by the players, facilitated by structured discussions, workshops, and dynamics (meta-techniques), which were engaged with prior and in-between play sessions, and could then play out during the larp. Gerge (2004) notes that the experience of *Mellan himmel och hav* was particularly impactful because of its prescriptive and rigid (gender) roles. She found that "several groups and individuals were so sad and shaken by what was happening to the characters, and by the nonfictional questions these events raised, that they found it necessary to cut the game to be able to fight against the spreading sorrow" (2004, 213).

One of *Mad About the Boy*'s (2010) designers, Tor Kjetil Edland (2011), similarly describes the larp as being designed in direct opposition to stereotype – in this case, the common media (and larp) narrative that women characters are often seen as accessories to men in many storylines. Interestingly, like Wieslander (2011), Edland (2011) suggests the larp functioned in part as "an experiment" with no clear pedagogical goal for the participants, rather presenting it as an opportunity to explore a different form of gendered formation. Turkington (2016) describes the larp's narrative as a near-future story in which all men have died and women have formed a new society. Turkington (2016) describes several runs of the larp, finding that though there were some issues in the ways in which gender was defined in the structure of the game, it allowed players the opportunity for "self-engagement" and "intentional identity practice" (2016, 96). She highlights the account of a trans woman player who had not yet begun to socially present herself as a woman, who was able to use the opportunity to role-play in this game to explore the "emotional impact of that transition" (2016, 96). This was not the explicit goal of the game, but the fiction of the larp as well as the explicitly open definition of gender by the designers allowed for this to occur.

The designers behind *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011) similarly report accounts of players finding opportunities to explore their subjectivities within their larp. *Just a Little Lovin'* is focused on the impact of the 1980s AIDS crisis on a community of predominantly queer characters in New York. Paisley (2016) presents an autoethnographic account of how his role-play within *Just a Little Lovin'* allowed him to explore non-heterosexual desire and sexualities. He advocates for larps to be designed

like *Just a Little Lovin'* specifically because of its overt queer focus. The alternative, he notes from his own experience, is playing in larps that struggle to allow for difference and instead make him feel like he was “imposing [his] queer agenda on the game” by being asked to be included (2016, 171).

Edland and Grasmø (2021) report that, though anecdotal, they have significant evidence from player accounts that their larp has had a transformative impact on participants' lives: notably, “trans and gender non-conforming people expressed their gender publicly at *Just a Little Lovin'*, and some transitioned after the larp” (2021, 21). Curiously however, there is only one canonically trans character in the larp script (Groth et al. 2021), and even though certain themes like homophobia and racism are explicitly discouraged or disallowed as a theme in the game's rules, transphobia is explicitly allowed for (Groth et al. 2021, 134). This suggests that (trans) gender exploration is not an explicit goal or theme for the larp, and yet it still does allow for it.

The reasons for this perhaps relate to the reflective emphasis of the larp, which functions throughout the game. Bowman (2015) highlights the intersection and interplay between both in- and out-of-game activities in *Just a Little Lovin'* and how that contributes to “strong moments of catharsis” for the players (2015). She notes how the larp incorporates workshops, Act breaks, and metatechniques that emphasize reflection and consideration throughout the playtime of the larp. Bowman (2013) conducted interviews with role-players and found that by going in and out of character this way and with such regular engagements, they were able to shed “social roles,” don and perform “new identities,” and then return to the previous self with some measure of change socially and individually from the experience – but also with a greater sense of community with the other players. Larps, in the perspective, offer transformational opportunities including for trans players seeking space to explore and embody their subjectivities.

In each of these examples, the common theme of the communal aspect of larp is highlighted as one of the reasons for their transformative function. Also, the opportunity for the character being played (or rehearsed) to be potentially “thin” in relation to the subjectivity being explored is emphasised, as well the potential for that character to be validated and reflected back to the player. This presumes however that the community of the game is one that allows for this process to occur unimpeded by the socio-cultural aspects that might be hostile in any other aspect of society. Stenros and Sihvonen (2019) note, for example, that particularly for trans larp players, “transphobic co-players are a particular anxiety for many.” Kemper, Saitta and Koljonen (2020) similarly note that larp exists within the wider socio-cultural context, so those factors can pervade even into the fictions that are supposedly operating on different social rules. They describe how players from marginalised groups have to *steer* their character's behaviour and interactions specifically around this. Or worse, if they are not able to, this can lead to what van der Heij (2021) describes as “very bad bleed situations” specifically because larp is an embodied experience. She notes that, like any social environment, larp can reproduce appearance-based prejudice, which means that the “thin” nature of the character play that might lead to transformation can instead be particularly precarious.

This notion might suggest that a role-playing game that does not involve embodied play could be safer in terms of its play container. This certainly removes some of the fear that might be encountered in terms of appearance-based prejudice. For example, in my own cases that I described above, it was because *Final Fantasy VII* was a single-player digital role-playing game that I could first dare to enact the role in the first place. In terms of larp theory, I was able to play the role and have a transformative experience because I was given sufficient alibi by the character. The role (at the time) was sufficiently “thin” enough and I even received some of the reflection and validation in the role from the automated interaction with NPCs. I was able to do this *because* I was by myself. But, as noted, each of these elements was significantly limited. I could not leave that moment in the fiction; much of the character's agency and attributes were out of my control; and I felt no real sense of interaction. However, I found

much more of that freedom in *Dungeons & Dragons*. The tabletop game provided sufficient alibi, but more so, I could create and enact the character myself. The reflection of the character's subjectivity and her validation was more under my control and interactive with my co-players. The character in many ways could be "thinner" in that regard, but also crucially for me at the time, I did not in any way have to embody her. The environment in which I was living most certainly contained the appearance-based prejudice van der Heij (2021) describes and I felt tremendous fear of being exposed in any way. The tabletop game allowed me to express myself in a veiled way without needing to embody my subjectivity.

However, embodying my subjectivity was precisely what I ultimately wanted to do. Digital and tabletop role-playing gave me an opportunity to express a part of my subjectivity, to rehearse an aspect of my difference as Turkington (2016) might put it. But gender is (as noted above) performative, and located in and on the body. It can, and is, expressed in any number of subjective, interpersonal and physical ways – including through manner, language, dress, and more (cf. Goffman 1979). As such, the embodied nature of larps might provide an important opportunity for physically rehearsing that aspect of ourselves as well.

Cazeneuve (2018) notes that larp is a mimetic activity and as such it has both the potential to reference and reproduce our socio-cultural reality and challenge it. As such, Cazeneuve advises caution, for "performing sex (or gender), whether it is in 'real life' or within larp contexts, runs the risk of reproducing social norms and stereotypes, while at the same time offering opportunities to rework and subvert them." Therefore, they place the responsibility on the larp designer to be aware of these considerations and, with that knowledge, intentionally subvert problematic norms in every aspect of their games – from in-game content and themes, rules, meta-techniques, accessibility, communications about the game, and all other design decisions (2018).

There are role-playing environments this notion reminds me of, which I believe exhibit a number of the features of a safer transformative role-playing container and attempt to do so in the way Cazeneuve (2018) argues for: queer performance clubs.

5. QUEER PERFORMANCE SPACES AS TRANSFORMATIONAL CONTAINERS

In 2003, after I had moved to the big city and managed to find my way into a university, I started to come out awkwardly in my everyday life. In those formative years, I was lucky enough to come across some very special places that encouraged everyone who attended to be whomever, whatever, and however they felt they wanted to be in the space that was collectively created. One of those spaces was called *Club Wotever* (which still continues to run as a weekly event in London called *Bar Wotever* and a regular event called *Wotever Malmö* in the south of Sweden).

I have tried to find the exact words to explain what it feels like to walk from the "outside" world into a little club where the social rules are just different. For a start, you suddenly aren't the minority anymore. Even if you think and feel differently from all others present, there is still a common experience of being the odd one out everywhere else. For me, I was so used to hiding in everyday life, and even when I had just months before plucked up the courage to come out, I still felt like I was the only one in my environment who was like me. Walking into *Wotever* on the opening night in 2003 was genuinely scary at first.

But I slowly got used to it and started to see it as a joyful play-space. The club was also a performance venue but it wasn't just that. It seemed like people were performing on- and off- the stage. It was like people were able to come into a safer space, and present a different version of themselves than the one they might have felt comfortable sharing elsewhere -- often brighter, louder, and joyous. I would eventually begin my career as a performer in that club. I was an enthusiastic but amateur contemporary

dancer when I started going to *Wotever*. But I was introduced to the promoter as a budding performer by my friends that first night and was asked to perform for the next month's event. I honestly could not tell you why I agreed. I was terrified. But I am so glad that I did. When the next *Wotever* came around I performed a dance piece as a character that was "myself." I wanted to play an "authentic" role, to try to express something that I just couldn't anywhere else. The piece I performed that night was about being trans in everyday life. I will never forget how special it felt to perform something so real to an audience who seemed to recognise it and celebrated my attempt to perform it.

Figure 4: Performing at *Club Wotever* in 2003. Photo by Verena Radulovic.



It is no exaggeration to say that performance changed my life. Firstly, it directly led to my career as a performer and actor, but perhaps more profoundly, I realised that I had a safe space to explore myself. To put it in the terms that I have mentioned above, *Wotever* was a transformational container (Bowman and Hugaas 2021) that allowed myself and others to perform and (role-)play both on- and off- stage.

In hindsight, I realise that we were trying to make a space where people could explore and experiment, but also take some of that with them when they left. Not long into *Wotever*'s existence, different activities began to be run in the space, one of which was called The Dressing-up Corner. The premise was simple in a way – anyone who came to the club would find at the entrance a large friendly sign reading The Dressing-up Corner, a clothes rail, and a station with make-up and accessories. The Dressing-up Corner was run by one of our regulars who made it a point to welcome everyone enthusiastically but also gently to ask them to consider trying on something new for the night. The visitor could then choose any item of clothing and/or make-up combination. They were encouraged to be creative -- maybe be a different self -- just for the night. *Wotever* was more established then and we had made sure that the environment was welcoming and encouraging for self-expression. At the end of the evening, the person who had changed into something else for the night was encouraged to take the clothing home with them if they wanted, though they certainly were under no obligation to do so. If

they did, however, they would also be asked if they would like to leave something else behind – perhaps for the next person who might like to try it.

We did not consider it consciously, but The Dressing-up Corner was designed to be a transformational container inside the larger *Wotever* container. The person enters the space, which has a clearly defined boundary at the door. They are then given an opportunity to engage with this exploration or not. The *alibi* was that they were entering into a club and did not necessarily come for this specifically, and of course, a nightclub (especially a queer one) is a place for flamboyance and expression, which could always after the fact be dismissed as simply getting into the spirit of it. Should the person engage, however, they were received as they were now presenting by the organiser of The Dressing-up Corner, the organisers of *Wotever* as a whole, and invariably also by the rest of the patrons. They were validated and verified in the role that they had chosen for the night. This was a role that they could *remove* at the end of the evening when passing the Dressing-up Corner on the way out. But they were also encouraged to consider taking something of the experience with them in a very tangible way, a form of *bleed* that was offered in terms of the clothing they had worn for the evening. The notion was to give that person something that they could take away with them if they wanted to, that perhaps would give them a chance to retain and continue to explore something they had been able to inhabit that night. And in turn also they were given the chance to leave behind something, the thought here being that perhaps they might let go of an aspect of another role that they no longer wanted. But whatever they chose to do, there was always the border of the door that allowed them to leave it all safely within the *container* that was *Wotever* if they could not, or chose not, to bring it with them.

Wotever was not a fictional place, but it did contain performance and space where one could present a different and heightened sense of self on- and off- stage. This environment, in a way, presents something slightly different to a larp, in that there is potentially an inherent point of bleed there already for anyone who is exploring a different sense of self. This process does not really allow for the role-distancing noted by Stenros and Sihvonen (2019), but it could also mean there is less *alibi* for those who might feel especially anxious about the implications of experimenting in the space.

6. CONCLUSION

These last examples from *Wotever* are not larps. They are, however, I argue, descriptions of people trying to find their way to a space that allows for the experimentation, exploration, and embodiment of their subjectivities in the context of existing within a potentially hostile socio-cultural environment. They are instinctive attempts to enact what the larp theorists I have described above define as the critical features of a potentially transformational container, which is a safer, co-created, validating space that facilitates bleed. *Wotever*, like many of the games I have described (and some of my experiences playing them) was not intentionally designed for this purpose but sought for it regardless. It was not an intentionally designed container, though it is an instinctive one, I argue. It did not provide an overt fiction to aid the *alibi*. It is not consciously held with a clear social contract for exploration and play in a way that a larp might be. Rather it is an established part of a party culture which involves all the aspects thereof, including alcohol.

Nonetheless, I believe *Wotever* was an embodied space in which transformative role-play might occur within the parameters that were set. I present my experiences with *Wotever*, role-playing games, and larps in the context of a researcher and a designer who is considering what kind of playful arena could allow someone to explore themselves freely enough that they could find out, on their own terms, what their gendered subjectivity might be.

I have not found a larp designed intentionally for this purpose. I have found games that allow for exploration in spite of the possible intention of the designers. I have found games that explore aspects

of queer or gendered experience. I have not found a game that is explicitly designed to fulfil a function that I see trans people searching for in the interviews and autoethnographies that I describe above.

As such, I propose to begin a design for such a game on the basis of the theoretical work I have cited above, beginning with the questions that my analysis and my own experiences raise:

- What kind of alibi would a game need, such that it would include someone who is perhaps questioning their gender and is fearful of exploring that notion because of the social circumstances they live in? How can we encourage someone to inhabit a character that might be close enough to their potential subjectivity so that they can benefit from experiencing a “thin character”?
- How can a game allow for a player to steer for the bleed that they are comfortable with experiencing?
- How can we encourage a player to take away something from the role-play safely into the rest of their life and perhaps leave behind an aspect of the role that they currently play, but fits them poorly?
- How can we make sure that the space is fictionalised enough to give the player the distance that they need, but not so unreal as to be impossible to be incorporated into their everyday life?
- How might we design a game that is flexible enough to allow for a breadth of experience – including those questioning their gender identity and those who are more certain?
- How might we make such a game safer, so that the players feel comfortable sharing an aspect of themselves that they may have hidden for so long and are taking a risk – even in such a space – in exposing?
- And how might we create a community for such a game -- one that can reflect back to each of its participants that the subjectivities they might just be starting to express through play are valid and welcome?

These are the questions I ask myself now as I have carefully considered my own explorations and the opportunities I hope to facilitate for others. I cannot say yet if they will work or falter, but I believe the way to know is to research through design based on the theory and considerations I have outlined here. From personal experience, I know how important it is to have a chance to express the self in an embodied, playful environment, safe from a hostile world that would deem such an act as dangerous and worthy of assault. I believe I have argued for why a larp specifically might be a suitable space to do that in – and how it might provide for the communal, co-creative, safer, validating, transformational play container for which I instinctively looked in my past, and will now try to intentionally design.

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