

International Journal of Role-Playing

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Editorial

The Social Epistemology of Analog Role-Playing Game Studies

Welcome to Issue 12 of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*. Social epistemology refers to knowledge production within groups of human beings, “each working on a more or less well-defined body of knowledge and each equipped with roughly the same imperfect cognitive capacities, albeit with varying degrees of access to each other’s activities” (Fuller 1988, 3). This multidisciplinary field (Solomon 2008, 242; Collin 2020) seemed the best way for us to unite the disparate threads of this year’s five peer-reviewed articles, each of which draws heavily on specific communities of knowledge and practice.

Our field is interdisciplinary and heterogeneous, and the editors of the *International Journal of Role-Playing* acknowledge that a unifying narrative for a given issue is difficult to find. Nevertheless, this difficulty allows us to introspect about the nature of knowledge produced about role-playing and those who would produce it. Neither can be separated from the other, it turns out. Anecdotally, in the Role-play Theory Study Group on Facebook, leadership scholar Joe Lasley has referred to the study of role-playing games as *antidisciplinary*, in that attempts to define or confine the practice through any particular disciplinary lens prove elusive.

Otherwise, how are we to make sense of the diverse set of articles and authors that comprise this issue of the *International Journal of Role-Playing*? The five articles cover a sprawling territory that includes using “character sheets” in the classroom, race and identity in *D&D*, the articulation of genre in *Call of Cthulhu*, sexual play in Nordic larp, and the state of the analog role-playing scene as well as its study in Brazil. The authors—besides being international in their academic traditions emerging from Brazil, French Canada, America, Norway, Finland, and Sweden—represent such scholarly traditions as academic librarianship; rhetoric and composition; comparative literature; sexology; and communication as well as game studies. They also speak from various points on the aca/fan spectrum, with some identifying themselves as larpwrights or Dungeon Masters, and others adopting a more studied academic voice in their writing.

The question of interdisciplinarity is of great interest within the academy generally (Aboelela et al. 2007) and within the field of game studies in particular—and notice that to implicitly position this journal as part of game studies as we have just done is in itself a claim about interdisciplinarity—where there has recently emerged a small corpus of literature interrogating the constitution of the field (Deterding 2017, Gekker 2021, Phillips 2020), generally concluding that there are some problems in its self-understanding that will shape it as it moves forward. Gekker (2021), for example, suggests that the focus on *digital* games that characterized the early history of game studies has become supererogatory, were it ever necessary, and anticipates an increased focus on the idea of *play* as an organizing principle for the field. The study of role-playing games would seem to fit more easily under that rubric than within a field narrowly focused on *digital* forms of play.

But, to a certain extent, every individual act of scholarship in a field like ours can be treated as a kind of attempt at *interdisciplinary interpenetration* (Fuller 1993, 33-65), connecting some configuration of claims by the scholar to the intellectual and disciplinary interests of the particular scholarly audience being addressed. So one way of looking at the articles we are presenting in this issue is to examine what sorts of positions they take.

To gloss Fuller (1993) as briefly as possible, he suggests that four ideal-type contingencies emerge from thinking about interdisciplinary positions as the product of, first, the scholar's "trade strategy" (*import*, or testing ideas from another field in the addressed field, and *export*, or applying ideas from the addressed field to another one), and, second, their "rhetorical aim" (difference-minimizing *persuasion* or difference-maximizing *dialectic*). The resulting categories of interpenetration are thus (1) *incorporation* (showing how certain ideas are consistent with or relevant to the addressed field), (2) *excavation* (showing how certain ideas correct inconsistencies in or solve problems for the addressed field), (3) *sublimation* (showing how ideas from the addressed field bear upon problems in which others are interested), and (4) *reflexion* (showing how constitutive ideas from the addressed field are themselves a problem).

Applying this scheme to the five articles in this issue, we think that most are pretty straightforward cases of incorporation. Grasmø and Stenros combine game scholarship with larpwriting, while incorporating ideas from sexuality studies to understand how sexual themes and content have been infused into Nordic larp design in a way that tries to balance intensely adult and even transgressive play experiences with safety and ludic boundaries; in doing so, they underscore the connection between the erotic and the playful. Baker, an academic writing instructor with experience as a D&D Dungeon Master and a background in rhetoric and composition, reads a multi-disciplinary literature (including scholarship from digital game studies, media studies, communication, and feminist studies as well as gaming news and commentary) on race, diversity, and representation in D&D, treating it as a discursive formation that has implications for gamers' conceptualizations of race and enactments of identity. Mehrstam, a scholar of comparative literature, takes a social cybernetic approach, à la Niklas Luhmann, to *Call of Cthulhu*, showing how it reconfigured elements from different media forms (including colonialist pulp fiction and fantasy role-playing) to articulate an instance of the "horror role-playing" genre in a way that spoke to Reagan-era geopolitical fears.

Martinolli, who is an academic librarian and instructor, seems on the other hand, to represent an instance of sublimation. He describes the use of a "scholarly character sheet" in a graduate student seminar on library skills, borrowing conventions and techniques from tabletop role-playing games to frame the course content, allowing students to engage in self-assessment, and create a playful space within the classroom.

Finally, Iuama and Falcão combine larpwriting with communication scholarship in their discussion of analog role-playing games and game studies in Brazil. Their approach seems to us to be engaging in *reflexion* in offering their national analog gaming scene as a challenge to the disciplinary self-concept of *analog role-playing game studies*, belying its pretensions to universality and the unilaterality of its global address.

The thing that links these articles, therefore, is how they represent individual scholarly efforts to solve the problem of interdisciplinarity, or of interdisciplinary interpenetration, one question at a time. We look forward to similarly thoughtful and engaging submissions as we help the broader field of game studies come to grips with the question of play.

—William J. White, Evan Torner, and Sarah Lynne Bowman
October 3, 2022

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Analog Role-Playing Game Studies: A Brazilian Overview

Abstract: This paper aims to present an overview of analog role-playing games in Brazil. For this, it uses a mixed method that includes bibliographic research and document analysis in an autoethnographic perspective. The results from these different methodological approaches, which are evocative rather than exhaustive, are divided into two aspects: first, they present a brief history of both publications and the idiosyncrasies of the practice of larps and tabletop role-playing games in Brazil; second, they seek to synthesize the academic perspectives observed in the field of analog role-playing game studies, privileging the main disciplines of study, as well as themes, addressed by Brazilian research. Thus, this paper seeks to serve as a summary of the Brazilian framework, to facilitate future dialogues. In this sense, it is more of a signal for international dialogue than an exhaustive mapping of Brazilian intellectual production regarding studies of analog role-playing games.

This survey shows that several of the issues that permeate the Brazilian scene are common to other parts of the world and that, sometimes, because our intellectual production is available in Portuguese, we isolate ourselves from broader discussions. There are also problematic, endogenous patterns regarding the practice of analog role-playing games: there is a lack of documentation, which makes the sources for research scarce. Regarding the research itself, it is inferred that there is a lack of articulation among Brazilian researchers who, isolated, do not exchange knowledge among themselves.

Keywords: analog role-playing games, role-playing game studies, Brazil, scholarship, tabletop, larp

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1. INTRODUCTION

This study aims to provide an overview of analog role-playing games¹ in Brazil.² For the purposes of this paper, we understand analog RPGs as a macro-category that mainly encompasses TRPGs (tabletop role-playing games) and larps (live-action role-playing games), but which also evokes other forms that escape from our deeper knowledge, such as the CYOA (Choose Your Own Adventure). When placed in dialogue with game studies, analog RPGs receive a double exclusion.

First, game studies “is a new field of study focusing on games, particularly in their different digital forms” (Mäyrä 2008, 1). Therefore, the theoretical-methodological framework itself is sometimes inadequate, since, unlike the rigid programming that supports digital games, in analog games “each social situation is unique and gives way to different negotiations” (Fernández-Vara 2015, 26) so that the research of analog games is “closer to anthropological research” (Fernández-Vara 2015, 26).

In addition to being excluded because they are analog games, role-playing games are also excluded from game studies by the role-playing element. In the usual definitions of what would be a game used by the field, role-playing games fail to meet all the requirements to be considered a game. We highlight two examples, both from seminal works in the area. For Salen and Zimmerman (2012a, 95),

1 A previous version of this paper was submitted in Portuguese as a book chapter.

2 The international academic community chose to adopt the term analog as a differentiating feature in relation to digital games, which dominate academic production referred to as game studies (Torner, Trammell, and Waldron 2016). The adoption of the term “analog” here refers to this current, which we align ourselves with, which brings such problematization to the fore. At the same time, we consider it pertinent to problematize the need for adjectives for such games, since this practice contributes to the normalization of the digital game as a synonym for game.

“a game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict, defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome.” From this definition, the authors point out that:

Role-playing games clearly embody every component of our definition of game, except one: a quantifiable outcome. As an RPG player, you move through game-stories, following the rules, overcoming obstacles, accomplishing tasks, and generally increasing the abilities of your character. What is usually lacking, however, is a single endpoint to the game. Role-playing games are structured like serial narratives that grow and evolve from session to session. Sometimes they end; sometimes they do not. Even if a character dies, a player can rejoin as a different character. In other words, there is no single goal toward which all players strive during a role-playing game. If a game does end, it does not do so quantifiably, with players winning or losing or receiving a score. (Salen and Zimmerman 2012a, 97)

Therefore, Salen and Zimmerman consider RPGs a *limit case* for the definition of games they propose. Juul, in turn, defines:

a game as a rule-based system with a variable and quantifiable outcome, where different outcomes are assigned different values, the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome, the player feels emotionally connected to the outcome, and the consequences of the activity are negotiable. (2019, 45)

Thus, “pen and paper role-playing games are not classic games because, having a human game master, their rules are not fixed beyond discussion” (Juul 2019, 50). Thus, Juul considers RPGs as *borderline cases*. Interestingly, even among authors who exclude RPGs from their definitions, there is no consensus: for Salen and Zimmerman, the rules are there; as for Juul, there is a quantifiable result.

The issue is also presented in other terms. On the one hand, “analog games are designed to bring friends together around a table.”³ Encouraging interaction among players⁴ is critical to their design and should be the foremost concern in the minds of those who create board games, card games, and tabletop RPGs” (Breault 2020, 77). On the other hand, while in most games the narrative (when present) is at the service of gameplay, in RPGs these roles are reversed, since:

In these games, story takes top billing. Players are there to see how the story develops around them, to take their character from humble beginnings to great glory, to achieve some ultimate goal. In RPGs, gameplay serves as the vehicle that conveys the player character (and player) from plot point to plot point in an engaging story. The game-play still needs to satisfy the player’s need for action and excitement, but the allure of an RPG is more the story than the gameplay. (Breault 2020, 82)

In summary, analog RPGs are oriented both to the relationship between players and to the creation of narratives. In other words, they “are quite explicit story-creation systems, designed to facilitate the

3 It is noteworthy that “around a table” can be extended to interactions among players in other contexts, such as larps, in which the interaction among players takes place through their character’s embodiment.

4 Unlike Breault (2020, 77), who argues that “analog games were not made for solo players,” we understand their existence and pertinence – like solo RPGs. Even so, we assume that even these have a relational aspect, since the openness to negotiation of rules makes the intersubjective aspect overcome the objectivity found in digital games.

structured, collaborative authorship of narrative play” (Salen and Zimmerman 2012b, 126).

As a result of these idiosyncrasies, we highlight two international movements. The first is the reinvention of analog game studies (Torner, Trammell, and Waldron 2016), which rescued the tradition of studying analog games after the colonization of the concept *game* by digital games. The second is the defense of RPG studies as “a small but established and lively scholarly community with a diverse and growing body of organizations, conferences, journals, and monographs” (Deterding and Zagal 2018, 11). According to Deterding and Zagal:

RPGs sit at the intersection of four phenomena – roles, play, games, and media culture. . . They take a fundamental form of play – make-believe – and a fundamental aspect of social reality and identity – roles – and give them the structured form of a game. They arose from and sit at the heart of much of contemporary fandom, “geek,” and, increasingly, mainstream media culture. (2018, 2)

It is worth noting that the double adjective that differentiates the analog role-playing games studies (Schmit and Moro 2016) from game studies – with the addition of role-playing (Deterding and Zagal 2018) and analog (Torner, Trammell and Waldron 2016) – does not aim at a break in the dialogue between them. An example of this is the work of Janet Murray (2003), one of the cornerstones within game studies, which discusses larp at various times. Differentiation, on the contrary, only aims to highlight the specificities of such games, as well as any inadequacies and insufficiencies of the usual repertoire of game studies when placed in relation to analog RPGs studies.

This text seeks to dialogue with this context presented. Since no Brazilian author appears in the writing of the RPG studies cornerstone⁵ – although a book by Augusto Boal and an article by Carlos Klimick, Eliane Bettocchi, and Rian Rezende appear as cited references – the overview of RPGs in Brazil is not evidenced, being only mentioned passing through on two occasions: as one of the “many countries with strong local traditions of TRPGs” (White et al. 2018, 83); and “in Brazil, TRPGs became more popular than board games after *D&D* was published in 1993” (Healy 2015, as cited in Torner 2018, 196) – a statement open to challenge only in recent times, with the expansion of board game market (Sommadosi 2019; Battaglia 2020).

Thus, our proposal is to look at analog RPGs in Brazil in order to fill this gap. Our goal is by no means to exhaust the topic, so we opted for an evocative rather than an exhaustive approach: many phenomena will be left out, in order to merely summarize, in general terms, a perspective on RPG studies in Brazil. It is important to recognize in advance that our view is biased on our familiarity with these games being designers, researchers, players, and producers: in short, participants (Haggren, Larsson, Nordwall and Widing 2021) of both larps and tabletop RPGs. In this sense, we explicitly recognize that the role-playing games scene in Brazil is diverse. Our view is biased by our own repertoire, which in no way – despite the attempt to reach tabletop RPGs and larps (and their respective research) that are not of our daily life – minimally corresponds to the breadth of the Brazilian scene. Instead, our expectation is, by pointing out this specific bias, to provoke future reflections from researchers located in other paradigms.

To carry out this proposal, we chose to use bibliographic research (Stumpf 2010), i.e. consulting written sources on the subject, and document analysis (Moreira 2010), such as consulting pertinent

⁵ We consider it pertinent to highlight a parallel issue, which concerns the “easily accessible” expression, used by Deterding and Zagal (2018, 12) to designate part of their goals with the publication of the book. Given the exorbitant price of the book (about half the Brazilian monthly minimum wage), we stress the use of this adjective, especially in the context of a country that flirts with (re-)entering the hunger map.

magazines and audiovisual records. These materials are organized in an autoethnographic perspective, that is, “studies where the author provides insight into a culture they belong to” (MacCallum-Stewart and Trammell 2018, 368). The results of this process, presented in the present text, are divided into a brief history of the practice of tabletop and larp RPGs in Brazil, followed by an exploratory overview of the main researched themes about these same ludo-narrative phenomena.

2. (PART OF THE) HISTORY OF ANALOG RPGS IN BRAZIL

This topic is a tributary of previous research. Regarding TRPGs, our descriptions perform a mosaic of surveys carried out by other researchers (Miranda 2005; Serbena 2006; Schmit 2008; Vasques 2008; Oliveira 2012) – updating them for the last decade – such as the series of interviews conducted by Vasques.⁶ Regarding larps, we rely mainly on previously elaborated text (Falcão 2014). From these previous research sources, duly updated, we aim to put them in dialogue. The intention with this is to show, simultaneously, ruptures and continuities between tabletop RPGs and larps in Brazil.

As soon as they began to be released, most notably with *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974, commercial TRPGs began to come to Brazil. According to Vasques (2008), before the 1990s, the dynamic consisted primarily of students, or their families, who traveled abroad and brought such materials with them. TRPGs were then disseminated through photocopies, which is why this first generation of gamers became largely known as the *xerox generation* (Benatti 1995). The practice of role-playing still lacked popularity, being limited mainly to university circles and elite colleges.

In the early 1990s, the first publications started to take place in the national territory (Schmit 2008; Vasques 2008; Chagas 2015a). The *Fighting Fantasy* (Aventuras Fantásticas) gamebooks and the *GURPS* TRPG basic set mark the beginning of the translations of foreign material, while the TRPGs *Tagmar* and *Desafio dos Bandeirantes* (Editora GSA) mark the first national productions. These first publications were followed by the translation of the *Dungeons & Dragons* black box (Editora Grow). The practice started to gain popularity, so that in 1993, the first Encontro Internacional de RPG took place (Benatti 1994a; Peixoto Filho and Albuquerque 2018), which at one point would become the second largest event of its kind in the world, after Gen Con in the U.S. (Serbena 2006).

In 1994, Brazil had both the translation of *Vampire: The Masquerade* (Vampiro: a Máscara) and the beginning of the publication of the magazine *Dragão Brasil* (initially *Dragon*, inspired by the homonymous magazine). Regarding the magazine, it is pertinent to state that it consolidates the subculture (Fine 1983) of TRPG players in Brazil, as it:

- 1) sets the standard for criticism of TRPGs,
- 2) announces releases,
- 3) establishes a lexicon, such as *RPGista* (Cassaro 1995) and *advogado de regras* (Cassaro 1996), respectively meaning role-player and the player's attitude of invoking rules to favor his character,
- 4) orbits related interests, and
- 5) creates identifications between groups of readers and players.

In 1995, *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* was translated by Editora Abril (one of the major Brazilian publishers at the time). Devir consolidated its hegemony in the TRPG market since it had the most played RPGs in Brazil; *GURPS* and *Vampire* (in addition to later the rest of the White Wolf line), by the

⁶ The playlist for interviews conducted by Vasques about the History of RPG in Brazil are available at: <https://cutt.ly/5QLypmw>.

end of the decade, would also be responsible for the publication of *Dungeons & Dragons* (previously Editora Abril's right).

The heating up in the TRPGs market also motivated the publication of new national titles by Trama (*Dragão Brasil*'s publisher at the time), such as *Defensores de Tóquio*, *Arkanun*, and *Trevas*. However, it is important to emphasize that the TRPG ecosystem at the time was not a monopoly. On the contrary, the heated market favored new releases, and both Devir (through their *Encontros Internacionais*) and *Dragão Brasil* were celebrating new publications from other publishers. At that time, the translation of *Shadowrun* (Ediouro) and new national titles such as *Demos Corporation* (Venture), *Millenia* (GSA) and *Era do Caos* (Akritó), among others, flourished. The *Arkanun-Trevas* line would detach itself from Trama, emerging as a new publisher (Daemon).

The launch of *Vampire* also marks the arrival of larps in Brazil (Benatti 1994a; 1994b). In this *first wave* (Falcão, 2014), larp was understood merely as a way to play TRPG (Benatti 1994b), and it went through a boom in popularity. The larps of *Vampire's One World by Night* had a legion of supporters (Del Debbio 1996), with some encounters in the big capitals that comprised a few hundred players simultaneously. At the same time that *Vampire* larps spread across countless cities in Brazil (not only in large cities, but also in the countryside and even remote corners), larps of this or other themes proliferated in RPG conventions, either promoted through individual groups, or by groups that were consolidated from this practice, such as Confraria das Ideias and Megacorp (Falcão 2013). At the turn of the 2000s, the boffer larp, which has the Graal group (in partnership with Confraria das Ideias) as one of its pioneers in national territory (Saladino 2000; Graal 2014; Vasques and Godoy 2021), began to gain popularity a short time later, no longer brought by printed books physically distributed in the national territory, but by foreign videos and websites accessed over the internet.

Early in the 2000s, the Brazilian analog RPG went through a significant setback. Between 2001 and 2005, murders in Teresópolis, Ouro Preto, and Guarapari were sensationally (and erroneously) associated with the practice of RPGs (Vasques 2008, Fiori 2012) – a phenomenon of persecution known as moral panic, which had already occurred in relation to RPGs in the United States of the 1970s (Laycock 2015). In comparison with the moral panic in the U.S., it can be said that the allegations made by Brazilian moral entrepreneurs mixed the rhetoric of super-predators with anxiety about the existence of satanic cults, which indicates an importation of the allegations present in the context of the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s (Laycock 2015). As immediate consequences, in addition to a suspicious perception of the practice by society, the establishment of the rating system in TRPG books (Ministério 2002), which was imposed after the repercussion of these cases, attributed to many of them the classification of 18 years (over the age of a significant portion of the public). Their sale was even prohibited in some cities such as Guarapari (2005), where the legislation is still in force.

Some publishers slowed down the pace of publications, although the moral panic associated with RPGs were not the only factor in the phenomenon. At least three other elements contributed to this. The first is the popularization of the internet, which allowed for easier access to foreign materials and original Brazilian productions, either through traditional trade or through piracy, which made *Dragão Brasil*, the only Brazilian magazine at the time to survive more than 4 editions, lose its strength and relevance. The second is the publication of the 3rd edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, which carried the OGL (Open Game License). The third factor, less directly associated with TRPGs, was the crisis in the printed distribution on the national territory – a market controlled almost exclusively by DINAP, a company linked to Editora Abril, which went bankrupt at that time (Vasques and Del Debbio 2017b). With the compatibility to the hegemonic *D&D* rules authorized, the publication of d20 material became a less commercially risky option. Within the scope of national TRPGs, the big star is *Tormenta* – commercially, the most successful Brazilian TRPG (Tancini 2018) – which was initially a scenario created in *Dragão Brasil* magazine to be played using other systems (*AD&D*, *GURPS* or *3D&T*), and

later migrating to another publisher (Jambô) and also being converted for d20.

Larp, in turn, entered the *second wave* (Falcão 2014), with the practice being recognized as a public cultural activity. In addition to inhabiting the private spaces of circles of friends, larps were now part of the cultural agenda of cities (whose most notorious example is the city of São Paulo), with some government funding for their production. The themes were diversified, distancing them from the predominance of fantasy seen in TRPGs. In this context, since 2007, Confraria das Ideias has become an NGO dedicated to using larp as a tool to develop critical thinking and promote social inclusion (Iuama and Miklos 2019a).

Influenced by the discussions of The Forge – recently documented by White (2020) – and responding to the market’s saturation of d20 releases, space was opened for independent productions, which gained strength in the 2010s. A profusion of titles moved from the mainstream to the marginal production, such as *Mighty Blade* (Coisinha Verde), which circulated mainly through social media, in frank dialogue with those entitled *storytelling* games, such as *Violentina* (Secular Games), the first to be released through crowdfunding in Brazil (Jovem 2011), and *Pulse* (Encho Indie Studio).

Simultaneously, Brazilian larps entered their *third wave* (Falcão 2014), characterized by aesthetic and technical concerns, as well as an interest in the artistic exploration of language. The sibling groups Boi Voador (productive arm) and NpLarp (investigative arm) were the great catalysts for this movement, which moved Brazil beyond the U.S. sphere of influence towards the avant-garde discussion of larp (at the time, especially the Nordic production).

In the mid-2010s, TRPGs introduced new changes. On the one hand, new publishers willing to bring foreign material were starting to emerge. In this sense, the arrival of titles such as *Savage Worlds* (Retropunk), *Numenera* (New Order), *Mutant: Ano Zero* (Pensamento Coletivo) and *Fate* (Solar) was highlighted. At the same time, a new crop of national games began to present itself as commercially viable, having as some of its representatives *Old Dragon* (RedBox – today, Buró) – which although a retroclone of *D&D* and part of the OSR (Old School Renaissance) movement, has all its own technical and creative production carried out by Brazilians – and *Delóyal* (Lampiã Game Studio). On the other hand, a movement similar – albeit in significantly smaller proportions – to the d20 fever of the previous decade began to take shape, with the profusion of several Powered by the Apocalypse (PbtA) – the TRPG design framework originated with *Apocalypse World* (published in Brazil by Secular Games) – releases. Finally, at the turn of the 2020s, a new editorial force enters the scene in the Brazilian market; coming from the board games market, Galápagos Jogos currently holds the publishing rights in Brazil for the 5th editions of both *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Vampire: The Masquerade* – historically, two of the most commercially successful TRPG franchises.

Brazilian larp, since the mid-2010s, has been experimenting with a format of diffusion that has been little explored until then (scripts, manuals) and has begun to experiment with alternative forms of circulation (periodical events, clubs, curatorships) (Prado 2014). At the same time, part of the production advocates for its own identity, as proposed in the “Jeitinho Brasileiro Manifesto” (Iuama, Prado and Falcão 2018).

However, it is important not to reduce the Brazilian history of analog RPGs to the history of publications. A factor that stands out when this type of mapping is carried out concerns the dynamics of distribution in Brazil. On the TRPGs side, there has always been a different marketing circuit from the traditional publishing market:

- in the first decades, the practice of photocopying;
- in the 1990s, the distribution of games on newsstands;
- in the 2000s, the availability of fan made material on publishers’ websites, whose most

famous national example is Editora Daemon's netbooks;⁷ (Vasques and Del Debbio 2017a) and virtual piracy (Chagas, Rosa and Junges 2021);

- in the 2010s, both virtual piracy and crowdfunding.

On the larp side, adherence with cultural practice starts to guarantee funding by the cultural sector, so that the practice of larps in libraries, cultural calendar events, and institutions such as SESC⁸ becomes recurrent. Furthermore, the availability of one of the world's largest larp repositories,⁹ all free of charge, makes the practice exist outside the logic of commodification, since a significant part of Brazilian larps are free to play. Even when outside the more institutional spaces, larp moves from the logic under which TRPGs are practiced and starts to be organized also underground, in more or less temporary groupings, with the formation of more or less regular groups or longer lasting communities.¹⁰

In addition, the ecosystem of RPGs in Brazil involves a profusion of events. In addition to the aforementioned Encontro Internacional de RPG, events such as Lab Jogos, RPGCon, World RPG Fest, and Diversão Offline, as well as a profusion of regional events, demonstrate the diversity of the scene: while some focus on creating a space for games occur, others promote discussion about game design. Contests, like the *Faça Você Mesmo* (Chagas 2015b), also promote the dialogue, visibility, and incursion of game designers. In recent times, podcasts, such as *Botequim dos Jogos*, and Facebook groups, such as Larp Brasil and Indie RPG, configure an important aspect of the circulation of ideas.

An aggregating phenomenon that can also be observed regarding TRPGs is the wide dissemination of RPG streaming: sessions recorded and made available in an edited or full form on the internet, either in audio or video format, in some cases more spontaneous, in some others, somewhat staged. Following in the wake of international phenomena, some channels dedicated to this type of content ended up gathering many loyal followers and resulted in by-products – new lines of TRPGs or other types of publications – or are themselves by-products of successful franchises (such as TRPG *Tormenta* and the Jovem Nerd multimedia channel) or even both. One of the greatest examples of this statement is the channel¹¹ of the YouTuber Rafael Lange, better known by the pseudonym Cellbit, which has more than two million followers. In addition to the game session videos, a huge network of channels also plays a role in attracting new players, presenting news to existing players, and circulating ideas through the network. So far, nothing similar has been observed with larp.

Finally, we emphasize that the circulation of ideas between a scene is a central factor for this same scene to occur. In this sense, the emphasis on importance for practice would be more in these events and dialogues between participants than in the publications themselves – the movements of the latter being, to a large extent, a reflection of the movements of the former. However, following the trajectory of analog RPGs through publications configures a less arid methodological path, given that there is no consolidated tradition in Brazil in documentation, or even dissemination, of events. Many of the ideas that ferment in some of the events end up restricted to the people who participated in them.

7 Still available at <https://cutt.ly/qIYcH1f>.

8 Social Service of Commerce, a Brazilian institution dedicated to social welfare.

9 The Larp Brasil portal, available at: <https://cutt.ly/qQLG9vq>.

10 Examples of this statement are groups such as Saturnália (<https://cutt.ly/0OjvoPU>) and the application of larps during 2018's Brain Awareness Week (<https://cutt.ly/rOjvdrk>).

11 Available at: <https://cutt.ly/COjl7RQ>.

3. OUTLINE OF AN EXPLORATORY OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH INVOLVING RPGS IN BRAZIL

The first Brazilian research involving the subject dates back to the 1990s (Miranda 2005; Vasques 2008). However, the main criticism – with which we agree – to this pioneering research is the lack of familiarity that the researchers themselves sometimes had with RPGs, as pointed out by Vasques (2008). In some cases, in these early years, the individual who weaves the research does not understand the topic, which leads him to make mistakes, sometimes gross.

In the 1990s, one of the main characteristics of analog RPG studies in Brazil was established: research in the field of education. 92 results appear for the expression *role-playing game*¹² in exploratory research carried out on August 29, 2021, in the CAPES¹³ Theses & Dissertations Catalog. Of these, 36 are registered with Education or Teaching as an evaluation area. Furthermore, research appears in areas such as Chemistry, Physics, History, Geography, Biological Sciences, Mathematics and Letters – in short, each of the subjects that make up the Brazilian school curriculum. This means that, even when grounded in graduate programs in other areas, some of the research has the interface between RPGs and Education as a theme. Even in those evaluated in other areas, the obvious reference to the educational aspect of the research is recurrent, explained in titles that orbit a synthesized formula such as: The use of RPG as a tool/guide/methodology in the teaching of (discipline in question). Some examples of this statement can be seen in Coelho (2017), Silva et al. (2018), Machado et al. (2019), Lopes and Cunha (2020), and Carneiro (2021).

One thermometer of this profusion of educational research is that in 2002, in the city of São Paulo, the 1st Simpósio RPG & Educação was held, promoted by Ludus Culturalis in partnership with Editora Devir, the Terramédia store, APEOESP and SINPEEM.¹⁴ Subsequently, the transcription of the audio recordings of the events would be released in the form of event's proceedings (Zanini 2004), in order to document what happened. In the same year of publication of the proceedings also appears *SIMPLES – Initial System for Master Teachers Teaching through a Motivating Strategy* (Riyis 2004), a manual for the use of RPGs in the classroom. A possible justification for this proximity between Brazilian RPG studies and education is that “some old gamers here say that RPGs and education were related from the beginning in Brazil, because role-playing games were used by English professors in the mid-eighties” (Schmit, Martins, and Ferreira 2009, 78).

It should be stressed that there is fruitful research in other spheres beyond educational potentials and applications, such as: Anthropology (Fiori 2014), Communication (Iuama 2021), Design (Rezende, Araújo, and Portinari 2018), Performance Studies (Santos 2020), Philosophy (Bastos 2021), Psychology (Schmit 2017), Psychiatry (Von Sucro 2015), and Theater (Sarturi 2012). A total of 906 scholars are listed by *Plataforma Lattes*¹⁵ (research carried out on August 29, 2021) when searching for *role-playing games* as a theme. Adding the filter so that only doctors appear, there are still 389 scholars.¹⁶ From this

12 We understand that other research articles exist that are not indexed using this term. However, as throughout this text, the intention is not to exhaust the issue, but to adopt an evocative character.

13 Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel, a Brazilian government's institution that oversees graduate programs.

14 Both APEOESP and SINPEEM are teachers' unions.

15 A Brazilian standardized system of scholars' resumes and publications.

16 As a comparison criterion to providing orders of magnitude, we also carried out a search for *video games* as a

The first is the lack of dialogue and some kind of core identity between these researchers. Almost a thousand researchers (of these nearly four hundred doctors) could point to an ecosystem of construction and active exchange of knowledge, which is not the case. With a few exceptions, at most there is a room in a subdivision of a scientific event dedicated to RPG research. Most of the time, however, these researchers are solitary voices in the midst of events in their respective areas, with a lack of skilled dialogue for the subject.

The second, arising from the first, is the feeling of *(re)invention of the wheel*, present in the overwhelming majority of research on RPGs. In theses and dissertations, there is the presence of a chapter (re)presenting RPG, its history and origins, its arrival in Brazil, an (attempt at) definition, examples – in short, everything that is expected when there is novelty about a theme. If this is not a problem in a dissertation or a thesis (in fact, we consider it healthy), the situation is different in the production of scientific papers. These papers are usually delimited in terms of length, using part of this space to (re)explain the theme, as if (still) it was something exotic, alien to Brazilian scientific production, often undermining the very development of the argument pertaining to the paper. Some examples of this statement can be seen in the following papers, all of which have received requests for an explanation of what larp is in the peer review process: these explanations took up 2 of the 13 pages of the paper (Iuama and Miklos 2019a), 2 of the 8 pages of the paper (Iuama and Miklos 2019b), and 5 of the 15 pages of the paper (Miklos and Iuama 2020).

The third inference concerns the condition in which RPGs appear in research. In several (especially those willing to present an educational use), RPG is relegated and restricted to the condition of an object and not a theme, which sometimes makes the search for references from role-playing game studies to be perceived as secondary, or even unnecessary. We emphasize that this is not a problem in itself, but given that RPGs are (still) treated with an air of exoticism, confining them to the condition of an object can reinforce a supposed theoretical irrelevance on the theme, which is not the case.

Fourthly, in the overlap of the other three, it is clear that there is no competent literature review in a significant part of the research. It is possible to infer that this is due to the academic structure itself, in which supervisors invite the review of the theoretical-methodological contribution, and consider the description of the object (sometimes superficial) as satisfactory. But there is also a lack of identity for RPG researchers: it seems easier to imagine someone claiming to be a researcher in some other field, than an RPG researcher – and that, therefore, they should review the literature produced by these peers.

Finally, there is a lack of consensus. This statement is different from saying that there is dissent – something healthy and necessary for dialogues to broaden the field's reflections. To state that there is a lack of consensus is to point to the lack of common ground, the minimum space of familiarity between different positions, which would allow for dialogue. In this sense, part of the justification for this text is to point to such a situation, inviting dialogue in order to collectively seek our points of contact and identification.

We reinforce that this ghettoization of knowledge resulting from the lack of consensus operates in several spheres: not only do the areas of knowledge not dialogue with each other, but also within the same area there is often no attempt at convergence; different forms of roleplaying (such as TRPG and larp) are also often fenced; sometimes (despite being, for the most part, all players), RPG scholars and designers do not seek the interface between theory and practice.

It is worth remembering that there are attempts to solve this problem. The Facebook group Estudos sobre RPG is one of these, providing a fertile place for discussions and exchanges. *Mais*

theme, resulting in 1,865 researchers, 910 of which had PhDs. These numbers represent any researcher – Brazilian or foreigner producing from Brazil – who, at some point on their resume, mentioned the researched theme. Therefore, they do not serve as an absolute number, but rather as an indication of the volume of discussion on a given topic.

Dados, a scientific journal active for some years (and whose content, at the time of writing this text, is inaccessible on the networks), is another pertinent example: it presented a place where research on the subject could find interlocution, a posture similar to that adopted in recent years by *REVEL* (Journal of Ludic Studies), promoted by *REBEL* (Brazilian Network of Ludic Studies). We also cite the *RPG and Education Bibliography*,¹⁷ a blog post that seeks to act as an aggregator of research on the topic. However, with the number of researchers who feed their respective *Lattes*¹⁸ resumes with information about RPG, it seems pertinent that there is a more active and systematized effort on their part.

4. CONCLUSION

We reinforce our main point: we do not intend, with this research, to exhaust the topic. On the contrary: our objective is more in the sense of taking a step in the construction of a systematized panorama about the characteristics of analog RPG studies in Brazil. Thus, the search for patterns that make the disparate commune constituted the horizon of the process, and we understand that our own reach is limited (or even biased).

That said, we infer that the history of the practice of RPGs in Brazil is guided, as far as publications are concerned, by a logic of marginal distribution, schematized by the trajectory: *photocopies* > *newsstands* > *PDFs* > *crowdfunding*. This is not to say that the more traditional publishing market does not exist, but that the dissemination of RPGs to the point of constituting an ecosystem would possibly not exist without the help of such dynamics. The most obvious justification that arises due to such history is the economic imperative, since a country so marked by inequality(ies) and misery(ies), as in the case of Brazil, needs a different market dynamic from the traditional model: the book (often, with a colored core, the hardcover, the high-quality paper, and all the other components that make the cost less affordable) sold on the shelves. This audience certainly exists: otherwise, there would not be a group of publishers specialized in RPGs. But our argument is more towards the diffusion of the practice and, in this sense, we consider it reasonable to state that the history of RPGs in Brazil goes beyond the history of the publication of RPGs in Brazil. For this reason, a front that opens up for future investigations is the need for documentation about the practice – a problem that was present even in the search for sources for this research – since RPGs take place in games, and not in publications.

Regarding the academic aspect, there is a predominance of studies on educational aspects. But, contrary to what the volume of this production would lead us to believe, the result is, at times, insipid. The recurrence of works with similar proposals (under the aegis of the formula *the use of RPG as an educational tool in a given discipline*) indicates the lack of literature review and contact between peers, so that such works sometimes result in the reaching conclusions that other researchers have already reached and not presenting significant advances in knowledge. At the same time, this reflects a need to (re)present RPGs shrouded in an air of originality and exoticism – which is shown to be untrue, as 906 scholars announce role-playing games as a theme in their *Lattes* resumes. This number, close to a thousand, points out that the topic is no longer new to the Academy. Perhaps it still is exotic, but in this case also due to the lack of dialogue on the part of researchers themselves, who often need to discover for themselves a road that others may have already taken. In this sense, there is an urgent need for initiatives to bring together different perspectives, in order to bring individuals with common thematic interests into dialogue.

Regarding the dialogue with the international community, there is a unilaterality: whether in

17 Available in: <https://cutt.ly/CWfKc6X>.

18 The main instrument for mapping researchers in Brazil.

games or in theoretical production, we consume and absorb international production, but it is rare that a larp or TRPG, or a study on analog RPGs, is taken out of our territory. It should be noted here that this movement is not exclusive to RPGs, as it is very similar to what happens both with other cultural productions and with other academic productions.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Caue Reigota Pacheco for the careful review of the English text.

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An Analysis of the Literature Surrounding the Intersection of Role-Playing Games, Race, and Identity

Abstract: Some of the most popular role-playing games (RPGs) limit the potential for diversity among player characters, link character abilities with their racial backgrounds, and provide platforms for real-life racism. This critical literature review examines a body of multidisciplinary scholarship and popular sources discussing race in fantasy RPGs such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *World of Warcraft*. Integrating interdisciplinary literature on the topic of race in RPGs provides an opportunity for exploring race, games, and identity discourse from a critical perspective. This article's analysis engages with power dynamics in games and provides a framework for positioning future scholarship. While progress toward correcting racial misrepresentation and under-representation in existing RPGs are slow, that progress is meaningful and it can pave the way for more significant changes in new RPGs. Fantasy games have a great potential to step outside the issues of real life and engage with topics such as race in a way that undermines stereotypes and encourages nuanced representations. Though there is not always a clear parallel between a real-world race and a fantasy race, the notion of "otherness" connects the two ideas.

RPGs are one of the most popular genres of game and fantasy RPGs impact real-world discourse. It is vital that scholars continue the work of the authors discussed in this paper by encouraging nuanced diversity of representation in games and advocating for "own voices" game designers. Only then can the positive potential of fantasy RPGs be more fully realized. As existing RPGs and new games work to reduce and correct racial stereotypes in digital and tabletop RPGs, scholars, designers, and players can work together to move toward more nuanced, diverse representations and discourse surrounding RPGs.

Keywords: role-playing games, race, media representation, *Dungeons & Dragons*, *World of Warcraft*, discourse analysis, literature review

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1. INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, Wizards of the Coast released a statement regarding diversity in their tabletop role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D). As part of the design team's goal to show "humanity in all its beautiful diversity by depicting characters who represent an array of ethnicities, gender identities, sexual orientations, and beliefs," they announced a new book that offers alternate rules for handling the topic of race in D&D 5th edition (Wizards 2020, para. 2). *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* (released November 17, 2020) offers players and game masters the option to decouple in-game race from ability scores and character traits (Whitbrook 2020).

As the first fantasy RPG, D&D laid the foundation for all the tabletop and digital RPGs that followed (Meadows 2016). D&D also has a history of racism and representational issues that still influence tabletop and digital RPGs. In this paper, I review and examine a body of multidisciplinary scholarship on race in fantasy RPGs such as D&D and *World of Warcraft*. This critical literature review analyzes discourse surrounding power dynamics in games and provides a framework for positioning future scholarship. While progress toward correcting racial misrepresentation and under-representation in existing RPGs is slow, that progress is meaningful and it can pave the way for more significant changes in new RPGs.

2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Articulating the researcher's standpoint is key to critical discourse analysis (Mullet 2018) and to providing the transparency needed for a rigorous literature review (Snyder 2019). I am a new scholar in the field of Rhetoric and Composition, a professional writer, and an experienced *D&D* player and Dungeon Master (the game master responsible for hosting and running a *D&D* game). While there has not been much racial diversity among my own play groups, modern conversations about race in real-life culture and the publication of *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* turned my attention to the subject of race in fantasy RPGs. In these games, players can (typically) choose how they portray race within the game world. Fantasy games have a great potential to step outside the issues of real life and engage with topics like race in a way that undermines stereotypes and encourages nuanced representations. However, that potential is not yet fully realized.

As I approach this topic from a multidisciplinary perspective, definition of key terms is necessary to clarify my perspective on the topics of race, identity, and RPGs. In this article, *identity* refers to the player's self-conception in real and in-game worlds. I use the words *character* and *avatar* interchangeably to refer to a player's representation of their in-game persona, echoing a choice made by other scholars cited in this article. *Role-playing games* refer to tabletop and digital games in which players have the option to customize characters and take on the role of that character within a game world, typically a fantasy world.

Race refers both to real-world concepts of race based on skin tone as well as in-game concepts of race as a character's species (e.g. human, dwarf, elf). In his book *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity*, Ben Isaac (in Goldenberg 2009) defines racism as "an attitude toward individuals and groups of people which posits a direct and linear connection between physical and mental qualities" (3). Goldenberg (2009) builds on that definition to make a distinction between racism based on cultural prejudices (e.g. an ethnicity-based assumption about someone's personality traits and morality) and color-based racism (e.g. an association of "blackness" with negative traits). Furthermore, Goldberg (2009) identifies visible "otherness" as "a crucial element" to hostility toward dark-skinned races in the real world (3). Observable differences between racial groups are something that fantasy engages with explicitly; there is no mistaking a hulking Orc for an agile elf or a purple-skinned Draenei for a diminutive gnome. Though there is not always a clear parallel between a real-world race and a fantasy race, this notion of "otherness" connects the two ideas.

3. METHODOLOGY AND ORGANIZATION

This article uses literature review as a methodology and analyzes the included articles through a critical discourse lens. When conducting the literature review, search keywords included various combinations of "race in role-playing games," "racism in RPGs," and "diversity and identity in RPGs." I excluded results published earlier than the year 2000. I take a multidisciplinary perspective and include articles from a variety of scholars in media studies and the social sciences, as well as popular sources which comment on racial representation in gaming. While the focus of this paper is on race, I also cite articles that examine identity in role-playing games to provide broader context for the discussion of racial identity (e.g. Nielsen 2015 and Filiciak 2003). To ensure that my discourse analysis includes a diverse perspective on racial representation in gaming, I also include select articles that address race and gaming in general rather than in RPGs specifically (e.g. Jansen 2018 and Beer 2020).

As a research methodology, literature reviews are useful for crafting an overview of interdisciplinary scholarship on a specific issue (Snyder 2019, 333-34). Integrating interdisciplinary literature on the topic of race in RPGs provides an opportunity for exploring race, games, and identity discourse from a critical perspective. When analyzing and integrating the literature on race in RPGs, critical discourse analysis provides a guiding methodology for examining expressions of language which perpetuate power imbalances. Critical discourse analysis is a framework which “emphasizes transdisciplinary work” and holds that “expressions of language are never neutral” (Mullet 2018, 117, 118). By using a mixed methodology, my discourse analysis grounds the literature review in critical engagement with power dynamics inherent in a discussion of race in RPGs. Finally, as a critical literature review, this article provides readers with a comprehensive framework to draw on when positioning their arguments in future scholarship.

Within the collected scholarly and popular sources, I have identified four core themes that lend themselves to critical discourse analysis. I begin with the topic of how “Game Developer Choices May Limit or Promote Character Diversity.” While RPGs often allow for a wide range of diverse characters, options provided by developers have a significant impact on the racial makeup of an in-game world. In addition, the fantasy setting of games like *D&D* means that “Grappling with Racism in RPGs’ History” is an essential step in understanding the discourse employed by game studies scholars. With those points established, it becomes possible to examine how “Options for Presenting the Self In-Game Relate to the Real World.” Finally, I explore research related to “The Positive Potential of Self-Created Identity in a Virtual World” and consider how recent changes in the ways certain RPGs handle race may influence the genre.

4. GAME DEVELOPER CHOICES MAY LIMIT OR PROMOTE CHARACTER DIVERSITY

The choices RPG developers make determine what type of in-game world the characters inhabit and how players can interact with that world. In relation to race, developer choices determine the racial makeup of non-player characters in the game as well as the options players have for creating their characters. This is particularly true of digital RPGs. David R. Dietrich’s “Avatars of Whiteness: Racial Expression in Video Game Characters” (2013) revealed the limitations built into 65 massively multiplayer online RPGs (MMORPGs) released between 2000 and 2010. His study found that “only four. . . had the ability to create a ‘black’ character” (95). The visual rhetoric of a virtual world where non-white people cannot exist has profound implications for how players conceptualize their own real worlds (Higgin 2009, 12). When only four games passed Dietrich’s (2013) test, he expanded his criteria to include games that allow for non-white skin, but not the “darkest skin tones” (95). This change increased his list to eight games, though *EVE Online* and *Vanguard: Saga of Heroes* “restrict black-looking characters to specific in-game races” and for *EVE Online*, that race is one “of former slaves” (Dietrich 2013, 95, 90). As of ten years ago, limits built-in to player character creation options effectively created MMORPG worlds where “non-whites simply do not exist” (Dietrich 2013, 95). If players wanted their characters to live in a diverse virtual society, their gaming options were extremely limited.

Perhaps most significantly, this lack of diversity was found among even the most popular RPGs. Of the 10 million people playing *World of Warcraft* (WoW) in 2012, none had “the capability to make a racially non-white character” (Dietrich 2013, 95). This necessarily

meant the in-game world was one that could not promote character diversity that mimicked the real world. Lack of diversity in *WoW* is finally changing with the addition of “Asian and Black facial options” in the *Shadowlands* expansion (Williams 2019), but for most of the game’s history the only representation of dark-skinned characters came from the Horde races such as Tauren and Trolls (Higgin 2009, 9). That does not, however, mean such representation is wholly negative. For Indigenous game designers and scholars Elizabeth LaPensée and Maize Longboat, playing an orc in *Ultima Online* and a Tauren in *WoW* marked the first times they were able to play a character they could recognize as Indigenous (Beer 2020). Though the “trope-y” representations in these games are deeply flawed, fantasy MMORPGs were the only games where young LaPensée and Longboat found game designers who had made some effort to present players with diverse character options.

WoW’s portrayal of dark-skinned Horde races can be seen as deconstructing colonial narratives rather than perpetuating vilification of dark-skinned peoples. However, some argue that the question of representation distracts from the larger issue that “there is no existence of non-European humanity in Warcraft lore whatsoever” (Lastowka 2006, qtd. in Higgin 2009, 9). Other races might be identifiable as corresponding to real-world non-white peoples, but the fantasy version of a *human* race is still whitewashed. Despite ongoing conversations regarding this issue, players creating a human character in *WoW* were restricted to light-skin options until the end of 2020. Players who raised the issue of darker skin tones on Blizzard’s public *WoW* forums (Tsaifeng 2020) were mocked for bringing “that insanity” into the game (Kyriè 2020). This example illustrates that resistance to more diverse character options comes through player-to-player discourse as well as from the developers. While Dietrich (2013) found no evidence of “explicit racist intent” on the part of the game developers (98), the lack of diversity, particularly among the characters coded as “human,” is still a direct result of designers’ choices. Those choices influence not only the visual rhetoric of in-game worlds, but also the discourse used by players toward other players who want more diverse character options.

Even in tabletop RPGs, where players are not constrained by the limits of available computer graphics and customization options, designer choices still place limits on diversity. Instead of choosing the visual appearance of a character based on presets programed into the game, players of tabletop RPGs fill-out character sheets with information such as character race, background, and physical appearance. In an article on characterology in tabletop RPGs, Lars Konzack (2013) states that these “character sheets are not neutral, but allow for a certain range of player behavior,” and the space that designers allot each aspect of character creation highlights what the designers deem most important (86). Players are free to fill-out these sheets however they want, but only within the limits allowed by the game design and agreements between game masters and players. There is room for customization, but none of the academic or popular sources I located during my literature review examined the extent to which players and game masters in RPGs alter the existing framework for dealing with race and identity in-game. Critical discourse analysis of real-life conversations between game masters and players regarding race would be an intriguing subject for future research on tabletop RPGs.

Another game developer choice that affects the amount of diversity encouraged in tabletop RPGs is the artwork used in rulebooks. In “Character Creation Diversity in Gaming Art,” TiMar Long (2016) examines artwork depicting humans and demi-humans in various editions of the *Dungeons & Dragons Players Handbook*. This study reveals that *D&D* struggles to represent racial minorities. Similarly, Mylie Brennan’s (2020) “A Visual Rhetorical Critique” of the first edition of *The Dungeon Master’s Guide* points out that the artwork borrows from

“old caricatures of the ‘negroid’ race” when portraying a monster, but uses classical white masculinity tropes when portraying heroes (231). Despite that problematic history, Long (2016) notes positive changes in more recent editions of *D&D*. By comparing representation of characters in artwork with U.S. census data from the year closest to each handbook’s publication date, Long (2016) determines that *D&D* symbolically annihilated “all racial minorities” in the 1st edition. There is improved representation in artwork for the current 5th edition, where “Asians and Native Americans” are the only groups “symbolically annihilated” (Long 2016, 25). While the issue has not yet been solved, the change is significant. Similar to Dietrich’s (2013) observations when discussing the visual rhetoric of white-dominated spaces in digital games, Long (2016) notes that “art can serve as a method for determining what is and is not normal for a setting” (23). Artwork in core rule books such as the *D&D Players Handbook* influences how players conceptualize characters. Representations of dark-skinned characters in *D&D* 5th edition challenges player conceptions of a whitewashed fantasy world. However, increased representation in character artwork has not solved all the problems highlighted by authors such as Higgin (2009) and Trammell (2016).

As visual representation increases, scholarly discourse shifts from the lack of representation to quality and effects of representation. In “Blackless Fantasy: The Disappearance of Race in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games,” media studies scholar Tanner Higgin (2009) suggests that offering black character options is not enough. Game designers also ought to provide “a default Black race,” which “structurally encourages a Black presence” and may help counter the disappearance of blackness in RPG spaces (16). Presenting a playable default-black race could also help move players away from linking “black” with “evil” — an association deeply rooted in cultures around the world (Goldenberg 2009, 4). Including a dark-skinned race almost happens in modern *D&D*, but the concept is not fully realized. In the 5th edition *Player’s Handbook* (2014), the human race is represented by artwork of a black woman (29) and several ethnicities are described as having “brown skin,” “dusky skin,” or “dark mahogany skin” (30-31). By linking darker skin tone with specific ethnic groups that have their own cultures, the *Player’s Handbook* (2014) encourages players to create more nuanced, meaningful representations rather than presenting blackness as an “exterior painting of the body equivalent to an aesthetic choice” (Higgin 2009, 18). However, the one race that is described as having brown skin by default, dwarves, is represented by artwork of a pale-skinned female with red hair (*Player’s Handbook* 2014, 18). The text encourages players to create dwarves with skin tones ranging from deep brown, to earth tones, to “a paler hue tinged with red” (*Player’s Handbook* 2014, 18). However, the artwork showing what is “normal” (Long 2016, 23) for dwarves in the *D&D* setting depicts a near-white character, putting the textual and visual rhetoric of the *Player’s Handbook* at odds. Though representation in official *D&D* artwork is improving, the symbolic annihilation of certain racial minorities and artwork that lightens characters described as having darker skin results in a visual rhetoric of the in-game world that does not match the level of diversity in the real world and perpetuates ideas that “heroic” figures are rarely dark-skinned.

Whether or not game developers choose to promote in-game diversity is not a neutral issue; it is a rhetorical choice that directly affects players and their discourse. Real people are constructing identities within these virtual and imaginary spaces and engaging in real conversations. Being directly involved in character creation makes it easy for players to see their online “hyperidentities” as very real (Filiciak 2003, 91), which also means that “the racialized structuring of virtual worlds” is very real (Dietrich 2013, 85). Player characters in RPGs are not just computer code or paper character sheets; there are real people behind each

avatar and they are affected by the design choices of game developers and other players. The flexibility and customization opportunities inherent in tabletop games such as *D&D*—which allows players and game master to change rules or customize their own character artwork in a way that digital games cannot—come close to allowing players freedom to create diverse characters, but even for tabletop games constraints of time, rules “and the fantasy genre limit players” (Nielsen 2015, 48). Games need structure, which necessitates a certain level of constraint. How and why those constraints resist or encourage diversity hints at racial power dynamics at play in RPGs and lends itself to critical academic scrutiny.

Danielle Nielsen (2015) offers one example of scrutiny from a rhetoric scholar’s perspective when she notes that RPGs make use of “feminist game design strategies” to offer options for those who want to play characters that model identities outside of the “straight, white, male” gamer stereotype (47). While she does not claim that RPGs have achieved a perfect level of diversity, she is more optimistic than Dietrich (2013). Compared to many other types of video games, she suggests, “In MMORPGs players generally have more choices. For example, players begin the game by choosing a race ... clothing, accessories, hair, and skin tone” (Nielsen 2015, 49). It is important to clarify here, as Nielsen does, that “race” in the context of fantasy RPGs does not have the same meaning most people ascribe to it in the real world. Instead, “it means a different species, leaving the player to determine the specific physical appearance of their character outside of (or within) the confines of race or ethnicity” (Nielsen 2015, 49). This does not, however, mean real-world races are never layered onto player characters nor that racism cannot become a problem in-game (as Lisa Nakamura [2009] notes in “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*”). Part of the racism in RPGs arises from choices made by game developers regarding how to present non-white character options (if there are any at all), and part comes from the players themselves as they interact with the game and bring their real-world perspectives and discourse into the fictional world. Both designer and player perspectives on race are also deeply influenced by the history of RPGs, particularly games in the fantasy genre.

5. GRAPPLING WITH RACISM IN RPG’S HISTORY

Fantasy RPGs exist within a larger genre of literature which intersects with our culture in a variety of ways that multidisciplinary scholars are only beginning to explore. This history plays a key role in how modern RPGs engage with the issue of race. In a paper presented at an Authors & Digital Games Research Association conference, English literature lecturer Christopher Warnes (2005) argues that scholars must look to the novels and history informing the fantasy genre if we want to understand race in RPGs. Warnes (2005) shows that the “insistence on race as determinant of character” within fantasy games is connected to a long history of fantasy literature (5). From romantic literature to J.R.R. Tolkien to *Baldur’s Gate*, both race and setting are presented “as innocently escapist, harmlessly entertaining” (Warnes 2005, 5). However, when we put these fantasy races like “elves, dark elves, gnolls, dwarves, halflings and gnomes” within their historical context, Warnes (2005) argues that their existence depends on “colonial encounters with otherness” (5). The idea that fantasy races are directly connected to colonialism and “the other” is a tantalizing possibility that could have profound implications for how scholars conceptualize the way games engage with race. Scholarship on this topic is sparse (Vorhees 2009), but independent game designers are beginning to undercut the colonial fantasy narrative with texts such as the upcoming *Coyote & Crow* game, which exists in “an uncolonized North America” (Hall 2021). Perhaps this movement among indie

game developers will spark increased popular and scholarly discourse on nuanced racial representation in games.

Though scholarship confronting “ways that MMORPG rules and culture intersect to structure the representation [of] racial and ethnic identity” is rare, Higgin’s (2009) “Blackless Fantasy” offers one example (Vorhees 2009, para. 6). Higgin argues that because “blackness” is not seen as part of Eurocentric heroic fantasy, portrayals of black characters in MMORPGs are either non-existent or heavily influenced by harmful stereotypes. These stereotypes may be masked as fantasy “archetypes,” which is the word that *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything* (2020) uses when referring to in-game “cultural assumptions” (such as “dwarf heroes in *D&D* are often exceptionally tough”) (7). The new rule system allows players to ignore these archetypes to develop more diverse characters not constrained by fantasy genre assumptions (*Tasha’s* 2020, 7). This change attempts to correct historic issues in fantasy archetypes (such as the ones Higgin [2009] points out) but does little to disrupt the established fantasy world or encourage change in racial representation. Any real changes that emerge will have to come from players and game masters using the alternate rules to disrupt stereotypes and create more nuanced characters.

Fantasy games create a new world, but that world is inextricably tied to our own. This link can have both positive and negative implications for how fantasy RPGs discuss racism. Dennis Jansen (2018), a media studies scholar, points out that because fantasy games often include “race-based societies” (para. 2), the games could allow for a nuanced discussion of race in our own world. However, Jansen (2018) also argues that fantasy RPGs are likely to handle race so indirectly that players can “avoid confronting the actual racism behind” prejudices and stereotypes (para. 3). *The Elder Scrolls*, for example, contains racist language against players who choose to play as Dunmer, but there are no in-game consequences for playing as that race. By not engaging directly with the implications of in-game racism, “*Skyrim* runs the risk of turning its depiction of racism into little more than narrative window dressing” (Jansen 2018, para. 9). It also encourages players to gloss-over racism as normal and thus inconsequential to the structure of society or character experience in-game. In this case, the game side-steps discourse about the impact of living as a racial minority.

When fantasy games treat racism as a normal part of the world that has no implications for how player characters live in the game, that game encourages players to ignore racism in the real world as well. Games can also encourage players to see race as something that is no more than an aesthetic choice, typically one made within a world that’s mostly white by default. While game designers may intend for skin tone options within one otherwise homogenous human race to “communicate the constructed and biologically dubious nature of racial distinction,” in many cases European fantasy is presented as default and characters with darker skin tones as exotic variations rather than as a “nuanced, meaningful representation of blackness” that is “supported by proper contextual game environments” (Higgin 2009, 16, 18, 20). For positive change in representations of all races within RPGs and fantasy games to occur, games must provide options to create nuanced representations of non-white and non-European characters. A fantasy setting can support such nuanced representation so long as designers purposefully engage with issues of race and power in their games and create culturally rich worlds.

Though a more culturally rich setting is ideal, some researchers point out that attempts at multiculturalism in tabletop RPGs can unintentionally introduce stereotypes and exploitation of minority groups. One example of this scholarly perspective is Aaron Trammell’s “How *Dungeons & Dragons* Appropriated the Orient” (2016), which observes that *D&D*’s history

with Asian culture is problematically connected to Orientalism. Focusing on the 1985 and 2001 *D&D* supplements titled *Oriental Adventures*, Trammell (2016) argues that although the mechanics introduced in this supplement “are presented with an earnest multiculturalist ethic of appreciation, this ethic often surreptitiously produces a problematic and fictitious exotic, Oriental figure” (para. 4). Though 4th and 5th editions of *D&D* do not include *Oriental Adventures* supplements, Trammell (2016) contends that these problematic representations persist into 5th edition *Dungeons & Dragons* (2014) with pervasive “overtones of orientalism” including illustrations of “an East Asian warlock, a female samurai, an Arabian princess, an Arab warrior, and a Moor in battle” (para. 4). Not only are *D&D*’s portrayals of Asians affected by the game’s problematic history of Orientalism, but the inclusion of such illustrations still does not provide enough representation of Asians in *D&D* 5th edition to prevent the symbolic annihilation of this racial minority (Long 2016). The game needs more multicultural artwork as well as better-executed representation. Multiculturalism is not itself the issue—*D&D* is far richer and more accessible to diverse players for the inclusion of non-white character art in the *Player’s Handbook* (2014). However, the inclusion of racist stereotypes does not contribute to nuanced representation and must not be accepted as a “good enough” attempt at creating a multicultural fantasy setting.

In “Representation and Discrimination in Role-Playing Games,” Trammell (2018) expands his criticism of *D&D* beyond Orientalism. He notes, “the *D&D* rules model race as a fixed biological species with fundamental bodily differences” that “reproduces an essentialist understanding of race found in eugenics” (444). The choice to compare *D&D*’s presentation of race to eugenics pushes Trammell’s audience to identify race in RPGs as highly problematic. While Trammell (2018) acknowledges that the physical distinctions between races in *D&D* come from the game’s roots in the works of writers like J.R.R. Tolkien and the rules mechanics of wargames, he also maintains that *D&D*’s presentation of racial fantasy tropes as “‘meaningful choice’ in character creation overlooks how these rules reinforce outmoded notions of race” (444). For Trammell (2016; 2018), racism in RPG’s history cannot be decoupled from “race” as a fantasy concept. This perspective hints that it may be impossible for discourse surrounding fantasy races not to also include elements of racism.

Though other scholars acknowledge racist influences in RPGs like *D&D*, not all are as harsh as Trammell (2018). Rather than seeing fantasy portrayals of race as inherently problematic, some scholars highlight the potential for fantasy to start more nuanced conversations about race and push-back against racism (Dennis 2018; Higgin 2009; Nielsen 2015). Antero Garcia (2017) also interrogates the history of *D&D* by tracing how the system of play has changed over 40 years in relation to race, gender, and power. Even though “Racism is built into the *D&D* system,” Garcia (2017) argues that “Race, racism, and the cultural lessons that *D&D* teaches about innate feelings of distrust for individuals different from oneself are complicated” (240) and they have changed since *D&D*’s first publication in 1974. Early in *D&D*’s history, criticism that the game system reinforced superiority of one race (humans) was valid—other races were far more limited in what the game mechanics allowed them to do and become (Garcia 2017). Now, though, the most recent edition of *D&D* encourages ethnic and cultural diversity within the human race (Garcia 2017, 241). In 5th edition, all playable races have equal opportunity to level up, choose any character class, and develop useful abilities (*Player’s Handbook* 2014). With the release of *Tasha’s Cauldron of Everything* (2020), players also have the option to say that their characters’ abilities are not determined by race at all. Players are no longer forced to conform to fantasy stereotypes which might reinforce ideas of racial superiority or racial limitations. The stereotypes have not disappeared, but they are no longer

enforced and the game encourages more nuanced portrayals of character race.

Trammell (2016; 2018), Long (2016), Higgin (2009), and Garcia (2017) demonstrate a tension inherent to scholarly discourse surrounding race in games. On the one hand, these authors agree that a whitewashed game space where racial minorities and non-Western cultures cannot exist is undesirable. If game scholars, designers, and players wish games to be an inclusive space where people of all races, backgrounds, and identities can be represented and celebrated, then games must include options for players to create characters with diverse races and ethnicities. On the other hand, scholars, designers, and players must also beware of inadvertently perpetuating harmful tropes. As Bowman and Schrier (2018) point out, “racial diversity still remains problematic in many role-playing spaces,” partly because so many are “overwhelmingly white” and partly because in many games “character enactment and representation are connected to cultural appropriation or stereotyping” (407). It is not enough to add non-white options for character creation. Games also ought to push-back against the proliferation of stereotypes and build nuanced representation into the structure of the games.

Given the potential pitfalls, the question of increasing diversity must be balanced with the realization that “these representations require a certain degree of sensitivity and research” (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 407). In other words, *how* a game chooses to include and represent non-white characters is just as important as whether such characters are included in the first place. Game designers must go beyond putting people of color in games and “incorporate them into the gaming world itself, allowing their unique cultural contributions to be felt within the setting as opposed to being just window dressing” (Long 2016, 27). Learning from the problematic history of RPGs and then revising such games can help create nuanced racial representation in these games. As Garcia (2017) states, *D&D* does have a racist history, but “it is also a promising reminder that like people, cultural constructions, and systems change” (242).

6. OPTIONS FOR PRESENTING THE SELF IN-GAME RELATE TO THE REAL WORLD

Available character choices, including race, do not simply affect fantasy RPG players during the moment of character creation; they affect the entire game experience. The presence or absence of characters of color determines the visual rhetoric of the game world. Options (or lack thereof) for creating diverse characters also change the way players interact with the game. In many cases, in-game diversity also reflects developers’ and players’ perspectives on real world diversity.

In his article “The Character of Difference: Procedurality, Rhetoric, and Roleplaying Games,” Gerald Voorhees (2009) argues that representation in RPGs is rhetorical and that character creation options deeply affect player experience. He uses *Final Fantasy*’s shift from diversity to homogenization to illustrate this point. Rather than encouraging players to work with diverse parties of characters (as earlier *Final Fantasy* games do), *Final Fantasy X* and *Final Fantasy XII* cast “the differences that initially distinguish characters” as “an obstacle to be overcome” (paras. 51-52). No longer do the games present a “multicultural procedural rhetoric” that encourages players to find strength in diversity (para. 52). Now, the series “incentivizes homogeneity and sameness” (para. 56).

Voorhees’s (2009) observation is also supported by Dietrich’s (2013) research. He found that the skin tone variations offered in *Final Fantasy XI* are so subtle they wouldn’t be noticeable if not for the fact that one color “is attached to a preset that includes a ‘cornrow’ hairstyle and somewhat African facial features” (Dietrich 2013, 89-90). The lack of diversity in

Final Fantasy affects how the game world looks and changes how the game is played. As part of his analysis, Voorhees (2009) states, “When every representation is in some way ideological it is not possible to speak about representation without also considering it rhetorical” (para. 9). The character options that game designers offer players affect the entire game. Voorhees (2009) demonstrates that each new installment of *Final Fantasy* changed how players interacted with cultural diversity and how advantageous it is for players to create a party with diverse traits. When game designers change the way they present diversity, they guide the players (whether by intent or accident) to see diversity as either a detriment or an advantage.

RPGs link character appearance with abilities in a way that is near-impossible to uncouple. As is the case in *Final Fantasy*’s evolution, in-game links between race and ability deeply affect game play. While most games try to offer balanced advantages and disadvantages to choosing any in-game race, character options provided to players contribute to racial and, in some cases, racist discourse. In *EVE Online*, racialization comes from within the game as the only “race with non-white skin colors” is the “Minmatar, a race of former slaves” (Dietrich 2013, 90). In other games racialization may come from player response, as is the case in *WoW* where “the player class of female dwarf was tainted by its association with Chinese gold farmers, and thus became an ‘unplayable’ class” due to hostility toward players characterized as Asian (Nakamura 2009, 138). Whether the players learned to stereotype and vilify certain types of characters from the real world or from in-game discourse and design would be nearly impossible to determine. Unfortunately, both worlds provide examples of racism and racist discourse that players can imitate and perpetuate. We see examples of racism and poor representation in games coming from both an industry perspective and an in-game player perspective.

Character options presented in RPGs carry an implicit visual and narrative rhetoric in relation to race and identity that shapes storytelling, gameplay experience, and the appearance of virtual worlds. Though it is unreasonable to “map” every aspect of fiction to something in our own world, it would be equally unreasonable to assume that fiction does not draw from and inform reality (Voorhees 2009). Indeed, because the players exist both in the real world and within the game as their avatars, “interactions within virtual worlds have the power to shape the lives of players far beyond” the imagined, fictional space (Dietrich 2013, 85). These games shape a large number of real people’s lives. For example, over 117 million people currently subscribe to *WoW* and an estimated 1.1 million subscribers play daily (MMO Populations n.d.). RPGs do not influence a small handful of individuals, but a vast community of diverse players.

In her article “Do You Identify as a Gamer? Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Gamer Identity,” communications professor Adrienne Shaw (2012) argues that game developers need to realize their audience is already diverse. As we have seen, non-white characters are underrepresented in digital RPG options for character creation. Though the lack of character diversity in RPGs and video games has attracted scholarly and media attention, Shaw (2012) points out that this has not been enough to sway the bulk of the video game industry. In fact, the industry seems disinterested “in the racial makeup of its audience,” as evidenced by Entertainment Software Association’s statistics, which only track audience demographics related to age and gender (Shaw 2012, 37). Race isn’t something game designers, companies, and trade associations care about in their audience, which results in “a form of ‘symbolic annihilation’ ... that exists beyond game texts themselves” (Gerbner and Gross; Tuchman qtd. in Shaw 2012, 37). Even the long-running Daedalus project, which studied MMO players for

6 years (Yee 2009) did not pay attention to race (Higgin 2009, 22). This “lack of statistical data on race reinforces ... that race continues to be considered a non-issue within cyberspace and gaming” (Higgin 2009, 23). Gamers of color exist, but historically, the game industry does not notice or care (Shaw 2012; Higgin 2009). This lack of interest persists today even though recent studies indicate that African American and Latinx players are more active in gaming communities, play more games, and spend more time playing compared to white gamers (Packwood 2018).

While statistics related to player race are rare, particularly from an industry perspective, there is demographic information available for game developers. The International Game Developers Association’s “Developer Satisfaction Survey 2019 Summary Report” revealed that 81% of the survey respondents selected “white/Caucasian/European” as part of their answers to the Race/Ethnicity/Ancestry question (13). The survey allowed multiple choices in this category, and 69% of respondents selected white/Caucasian/European as their only answer. Only 2% of the developers in this survey identified as Black/African-American/African/Afro-Caribbean. Though these statistics “suggest a large overrepresentation of people identifying as white” (International Game Developers Association 2019, 13), there is very little effort within the industry to promote diversity and inclusion. The “State of the Game Industry 2020” from Game Developers Conference shows that 28% of game studios put no effort at all into inclusion and diversity initiatives (23). Only 22% reported putting “a lot” or “a great deal” of effort into promoting diversity and inclusion, with the remaining studios reporting “a moderate amount” or “a little” effort toward more diverse representation among developers (Game Developers Conference 2020, 23). This lack of diversity and disinterest in promoting inclusivity is particularly significant because scholars and game designers agree that diversity among the people making games must increase for representation within games to improve (Jansen 2018; Beer 2020).

Shaw’s (2012) explanation of the overall disinterest the gaming industry continues to show toward race boils down to this: “In a culture in which games are not taken seriously, representation in games is viewed as inconsequential and fewer people are invested in demanding diversity in the texts” (39). The idea that something is “just” a game results in many players resisting “the idea that video games are morally consequential media” even though scholars have identified them as “powerful vehicles for specific racial discourses, ideologies, and structures of feeling” (Nakamura 2019, 129). Yet despite public and industry resistance to the idea of games’ influence, progress has been made toward more nuanced racial representation since the publication of Shaw’s article in 2012. As Lisa Nakamura (2019) points out in her examination of “Gender and Race in the Gaming World,” highly regarded games including *Journey* (2012), *The Last of Us* (2013), and *Overwatch* (2016) “engage directly with race, gender, sexuality, and emotion” (128, 133). Slowly but surely, discussing games as if they matter and taking that discourse beyond academic journals into a larger cultural conversation is leading to designers and players taking the lack of diversity in games more seriously. This is particularly visible in independent game companies like the creators of *Journey*. However, none of the games that Nakamura identifies as displaying these positive changes are RPGs.

Another discourse situation deserving close academic scrutiny is when racism is brought into RPGs from the real world. One example comes from Eastwick and Gardner’s research, which found that “dark-skinned avatars were treated more negatively in social interactions than light-skinned avatars” on *There.com* (qtd. in Dietrich 2013, 85). Potential for this sort of negative interaction can also be found in tabletop games. For example, the 5th edition of *D&D* designates “non-white demi-humans” such as the dark elf variant Drow as

“uncommon races” (Long 2016, 26). Not only are these races less numerous than the light-skinned default races, but the Drow “civilization is one based on slavery, subjugation, and matriarchally-based misogyny” (Long 2016, 26). While Long (2016) does not present examples from gameplay of discrimination against the Drow, he suggests that they “represent many evils against which white gamers ... would feel compelled to fight wrapped up in the skin tone of a person of color” (26). The depiction of Drow as both evil and dark-skinned may also perpetuate historic and modern views of black as the “color of ill omen” (Goldenberg 2009, 5). When games encourage players to associate negative cultural and personal traits with in-game races that are always dark-skinned, it offers opportunities for gaming systems to reinforce real-world racism. It also creates opportunities for players to participate in racist discourse that feels permissible within the game world since it is directed against “evil” characters.

Nakamura (2009) examines another example of discrimination brought into the game world in her article, “Don’t Hate the Player, Hate the Game: The Racialization of Labor in *World of Warcraft*.” In this article, she examines “anti-Asian racial discourse” (141) that emerges in how certain players talk about unwanted “farmers,” who may be targeted for bullying, racial slurs, and “even virtual death” (133). In this context, the term “farmer” refers to those who play in order to “produce and sell virtual goods” in exchange for real-world money (Nakamura 2009, 130). These farmers are “worker” rather than “leisure” players. Many, though not all, come from “poorer nations such as China and Korea,” and insults aimed at farmers have taken on “a decidedly anti-Asian flavor” to the point that calling someone “Chinese” in-game is an insult (Nakamura 2009, 130). Though this discourse employs the use of racial slurs, the players perpetuating it insist their language is not an indication of real-world racism. However, rather than simply focusing on a critique of the behavior that farmer players engage in (which is often considered cheating [Nakamura 2009]), anti-farmer discourse turns into attacks on gamers of a certain nationality. Whether or not the anti-farmer players view themselves as racist, the language they use to criticize farmers leans heavily on racist discourse.

Remember that *WoW* is one of the games Dietrich (2013) identified as having a whitewashed game world, and that updates bringing Asian and Black characters to *WoW* had not yet gone into effect at the time of Nakamura’s writing (Nakamura 2009; Williams 2019). Asian players could not create characters visually identifiable as Asian. Even if that possibility existed, players are still hidden behind avatars and no one can “detect other players’ races by looking at their physical bodies” (Nakamura 2009, 133). That did not stop certain players from “racializing” avatars, however, nor from sharing strategies for profiling Chinese players based on criteria such as “broken” English or quickly harvesting game prizes (Nakamura 2009, 133, 140). This racialization of characters is not an isolated occurrence. Speaking of RPGs in more general terms, Nielson (2015) says players “may create overtly racialized or even racist identities in the gameworld because the words, images, and actions gamers use to create an identity can be, and are, racialized” (49). RPGs present players with a wide range of possibilities including, unfortunately, the option to bring racism into gameplay. In some cases, designer choices that make characters of color rare, non-existent, or evil may even encourage racist gameplay.

The anti-farmer discourse from certain players in *WoW* is not the only racial narrative connected to the game. Characters in this game come from different fantasy races, and the “background story includes a race war in which players participate” (Nielsen 2015, 54). While Nielsen (2015) suggests that examining themes of racial tension inside games can have a positive effect, Nakamura’s (2009) research indicates that is not always the case. I am not suggesting game developers intend for players to bring racism into the in-game world. However, the

visual rhetoric of whitewashed worlds and the choice to have players participate in race wars may accidentally encourage a lack of tolerance on the part of the players.

Digital and tabletop RPGs often limit the potential for diversity among characters, link character abilities with their racial backgrounds, and provide platforms for real-life racism to emerge. So long as that continues, game studies scholars and socially conscious players must continue to turn a critical eye to the discourse happening within and around games, keeping in mind that “ultimately, on-screen representation is only as helpful as who puts it there” (Beer 2020, para. 48). RPGs are one of the most popular genres of game (Nielsen 2015), and fantasy RPGs impact real-world discourse. It is vital that scholars continue the work of the authors discussed in this paper by encouraging nuanced diversity of representation in games and advocating for “own voices” game designers. Only then can the positive potential of fantasy RPGs be more fully realized.

7. THE POSITIVE POTENTIAL OF SELF-CREATED IDENTITY IN A VIRTUAL WORLD

Thus far, this paper has focused on the negative aspects of racial representation and race-based discourse in RPGs. However, many scholars also speak of a positive effect that can accompany created identity inside virtual worlds like those of digital and tabletop RPGs. In “Hyperidentities: Postmodern Identity Patterns in Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games” cultural anthropologist Mirosław Filiciak (2003) suggests that MMORPGs are the “most complete way” to “realize the postulates of postmodern identity creation” (88). Even with the limits placed on character design in certain games, Filiciak (2003) believes that MMORPGs provide a compelling argument against the idea that video games are “a medium that alienates people” and instead argues that they are a “medium in which to communicate” (88). The notion of MMORPGs as a communication medium firmly situates these games within the purview of discourse analysis. Moreover, it suggests that MMORPGs have the potential to connect people rather than alienate them from each other. This fits seamlessly with an observation Dietrich (2013) makes that “interactions within virtual worlds have the power to shape the lives of players far beyond the confines of the online space” (85). Long (2016) also notes that “alternate identities can be a path for exploring different ideas, points of views, and experiences” (24). This is one of the main reasons Long (2016) gives when arguing “adequate racial minority representation” is a crucial topic because it offers “players a chance to explore and encounter ideas, concepts, and people that they may not have previously considered or encountered on their own” (24). The ability for players to create their own chosen identity within a virtual world and then interact with others’ identities opens the possibility for personal identity exploration. It can also prompt deeper thought and discussion about the implications that in-game interactions between diverse people may have for real-world interactions.

Adding to the discourse surrounding identity in RPGs, Sarah Lynne Bowman and Karen Schrier’s “Players and Their Characters in Role-Playing Games” (2018) points out that player-character relationships are both psychological and sociological. Within RPGs, players can adapt and transform their identities and personalities, trying on different perspectives and exploring notions of gender, race, and sexuality (Bowman and Schrier 2018). With imagination and a character sheet, or a few mouse-clicks on a computer, players can “painlessly manipulate. . . identity, to create situations that they could never experience in the real world because of social, sex-, or race-related restrictions” (Filiciak 2003, 90). RPGs where players have the opportunity to generate a wide variety of different characters with backgrounds, appearances, and skills that are not possible in the real world give players new ways to think

about identity as a concept and explore their personal sense of self.

Though some criticize players who spend large amounts of time within RPG worlds, Filiciak (2003) suggests that rather than seeing this sort of game as “escapist” we should view avatars in RPGs as “a longed-for chance of expressing ourselves beyond physical limitations” (100). Indeed, interviews with “intensive role-players in MMORPGs,” many of them from marginalized groups, show that extensive playing “increased their sociability and self-expression” (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 398). At their best, RPGs let players engage in positive social experiences, express themselves, and “enact different races, ethnicities, nationalities, sexualities, and even species, depending on the game” (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 406). On a personal level for individual players, the opportunities that fantasy RPGs present for exploring identity can open doors to try on different perspectives and see what it’s like to play as a character who looks and acts differently from themselves. In keeping with Voorhees’s (2009) observation that representation in RPGs is rhetorical, the possibility of trying on different identities has profound implications for the purpose behind representation built into RPGs. Game designers’ choices can limit or encourage the players’ ability to experience life from a different perspective. When identity exploration is supported with nuanced representation, games also offer players a potentially deeper appreciation for diverse perspectives.

RPGs that provide opportunities for players to create diverse avatars allow for the possibility of interacting with a wide variety of diverse identities. Nielson (2015) points out that “Newer roleplaying games subvert the traditional stereotypes” (51). She also says that games which let players “interact with others who portray a different identity ... [allow] gamers to develop what Alexander (2009) calls ‘multicultural’ and ‘critical literacies,’” which can prompt players to “interrogate assumptions” that create real-world racism (51). When games allow for and encourage diversity, the potential for positive impact on players increases dramatically. Nielson (2015) also sees potential for social improvement in games that seem problematic in their narrative and design. For example, she suggests in-game racial conflicts that allow players to engage with questions of race and diversity offer positive effects. For Nielson (2015), “When players examine the race wars in RPGs. . . gamers may consider why racial tension and racism happens, and what actions must be taken in the offline world to move forward” (55). While in-game race wars can give players a new venue for racist discourse (Nakamura 2009), games that directly engage with interracial conflict may also provide players with a chance to examine biases and conflicts in the real world and ponder solutions. The opportunities for personal identity exploration and for interaction with diverse player groups suggested by Filiciak (2003), Nielsen (2015), and Bowman and Schrier (2018) indicate the possibility of a more hopeful future for RPGs than some of the other sources in this critical literature review might suggest.

8. CONCLUSIONS

Scholars analyzing tabletop and digital RPGs’ presentations of race reveal that RPGs profoundly engage with identity. This engagement has meaningful implications for how players conceptualize race and respond to racism. Fantasy RPGs allow for a vast array of character options and, when they enable diverse representation, they help foster discourse about real-world diversity. Some have a more problematic side, though. When diversity is limited, the visual rhetoric of a virtual world where non-white people cannot exist has the potential to spill-over into the real-world in negative ways. Given these two extremes in the positive and negative potential of RPGs, representation in these games contributes significantly

to discourse surrounding race and racism. There is purpose behind and consequences to the diversity (or lack thereof) which is allowed or encouraged within RPGs, even if the designers did not explicitly embed such purposes and consequences.

Though the history of RPGs and race is problematic, changes such as the *World of Warcraft Shadowlands* expansion and *Dungeons & Dragons'* publication of *Tasha's Cauldron of Everything* represent efforts toward removing racism in game design. While there is still progress that needs to be made (as the recent controversy over Wizards of the Coast's portrayal of "primitive frog people" shows [Carter 2021]), these are steps in the right direction. As existing RPGs and new games such as the Native-designed *Coyote & Crow* (Hall 2021) work to reduce and correct racial stereotypes in digital and tabletop RPGs, scholars, designers, and players can work together to move toward more nuanced, diverse representations and discourse surrounding RPGs.

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A Scholarly Character Sheet to Frame Learning Activities and Improve Engagement

Abstract: Character sheets are an essential element of game design for tabletop role-playing games. They can be adapted to frame a series of learning activities and to improve participants' engagement. In this study, they are used at the beginning of a five-session graduate seminar on library instruction to assess the participants' knowledge and present the curriculum. They are also used as wrap-up at the end of the final session to measure the participants' progress. Besides providing a better assessment of the group by the instructor, the character sheet activity improves comprehension of the content and offers an engaging opportunity to start the seminar and create a personal connection with the students. Through objectivation, a theoretical framework, I argue that character sheets can support metacognitive abilities like self-authorship, self-determination, and a growth mindset. By framing and matching the content with the participants' personal journey, character sheets provide gamified syllabi to improve motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes in a series of workshop activities.

Keywords: Active learning; game-based learning; tabletop role-playing game; character sheet; engagement; framed learning; self-assessment; self-authorship; self-determination; growth mindset

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Gamification in Library Instruction

Games have been used as teaching tools for a long time. Since the 2010s, the concept of gamification has been increasingly popular in all kinds of learning environments, including library instruction. Most of the time, it consists in using game mechanics or a playful attitude to enhance an educational activity. The main functions of gamification are increasing motivation and engagement in the activity and offering a more pleasant learning experience (Haasio, Madge, and Harviainen 2021). Games can be used in non-traditional settings like public libraries or, in the case of the activity presented in this paper, in research libraries (Nicholson 2015, 141).

Some activities constitute a completely framing immersive activity; for example, escape rooms in the library (Pinard 2020). In the case of the scholarly character sheet (SCS) activity described in this paper, the frame is simpler because there are few emotions at play, and also there is no experience of liminality or separation with the real, mundane world. Contrary to other role-playing in the classroom, this activity does not use emblematic and projective identities (also defined as *avatars*, like mage or healer) or an external badging system (Sanchez, Young, and Jouneau-Sion 2017).

We can identify three kind of selves at play in the SCS activity. First, a *current self*, which is the one assessed during the activity. Second, an *ideal self*, which can be imagined as the current self through the bullet points, check boxes and publications fully checked. It can be compared to the Idealized Self in Bowman's "Nine Types of Player-Characters" (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 403). Finally, a *prescribed self*, which is proposed by the instructor. In this prescribed self, the participants can have choices of development. Some parts are mandatory and some parts are optional.

The design of the SCS activity could be defined as *roleplayification*, a narrower form of gamification using specific features of role-playing like the act of taking on a social role (Hammer et al. 2018, 288–89). In the SCS activity, the participants are invited to curate their researcher online identity, to develop their information literacy skills and to define their role in the academic publishing ecosystem.

1.2 Role-playing Yourself for Learning

Many active learning activities are *role-taking*, where students assume a role to make strategic choices without playing a personality or intense social interaction (Hammer et al. 2018, 288–89). These games answer the need for purely technical simulations or functional professional situations. For example, most escape rooms, despite the stressful time management involved, are classified in this category. In this sense, the SCS activity is a role-taking activity.

Within this category, *role-play* is a more specific type of activity. It involves immersive self-play with a personality, where students have to apply cognitive knowledge in an emotional situation. For example, there is abundant literature on simulated patients or standardized patients in health education (Hallinger and Wang 2020). Role-play can also be used in oral communication lessons, such as negotiation or law courses. Under this definition, the SCS activity is a low-emotional role-playing activity.

In some role-playing activities, students play other characters with different abilities, social roles or personalities. *Reacting to the Past* is an activity replaying true or pseudo-historical scenes (Carnes 2014). Some activities consist in playing *ludic tabletop role-playing games* in or out of the classroom, focusing their goals on language learning or oral expression, for example (Lépinard and Vaquiéri 2019), or focusing on psychotherapeutic interventions to develop psycho-social skills like listening, empathy, self-reflection, etc. (Daniau 2016). In this regard, the SCS is not any of these activities.

A final category consists of active learning activities using *tabletop role-playing game devices*. For instance, dice are used to explain symmetry in chemistry (Grafton 2011) or dragons are used to explain phylogenetics in anthropology (Cruz 2017). There is no role at play. The SCS activity belongs to this kind of active learning activities. Furthermore, there is not much literature on this use of character sheets in educational contexts, which makes the SCS activity a unique contribution and approach to active learning.

1.3 History of Character Sheet Designs

Objective and explicit recordings of achievements and status were in use long before the creation of character sheets. The first historical use of a numbered score to quantify a skill may have been in the Imperial Chinese examinations at the time of the Song Dynasty (Magone 2014). The Boy Scouts, meanwhile, reused and gamified a military design: the collection of badges as marks of achievement (Jang, Johnson, and Kim 2012). Furthermore, since the 19th century, wargaming exercises have employed record tables to track the ability and status of military units in the field (Vego 2012).

In 1974, Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson authored *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, a fantasy game that evolved from miniature wargames and two proto-megagames named *Braunstein* (Wesely 1968) and *Blackmoor Campaign* (Arneson 1971). *D&D* was the first of an ever-growing family of games named tabletop role-playing games. Oddly enough, neither the first editions

of *D&D* nor *Braunstein* nor *Blackmoor* provided any personal character sheets to players (Boggs 2020). The need for such a device soon became important, however, and the player community quickly created and published the first character sheets. Tinkering to improve the original designs of the game was very common. These sheets combined the game design elements of quantification of skills, badge collection and resource tracking (Peterson 2012, sec. 5.9.1). Thereby, they centered gameplay around the characters and their possible evolution.

With *Bunnies & Burrows* (1976) and the more popular *RuneQuest* (1978), character sheets started to include a long list of precise skills, ranked with percentages. This game design approach lasted for decades, sometimes developing into extremely precise calculations like the careers of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* (1986), the labyrinthine Optional Skills Laws of *Rolemaster Companion II* (1987), or the network tree of the Skill Web in *Shadowrun* 2nd ed. (1992). Some games innovated by creating group sheets (*Ars Magica* 1987) or designing complete notebooks in which players could write down every detail of a character's journey (*The Sailor Moon Role-Playing Game and Resource Book* 2000). Notably, the character sheet became an iconic and staple item of most tabletop role-playing game. Its popularity even extended to the character panels of video games and to personalized sports training sheets.

The main function of a character sheet is to record key information by quantifying the character and tracking abilities, resources, powers, flaws, etc. It can serve as well as list assets and relations; collected treasures; and heroic achievements of the player's character. Its elements structure the activity and the keys to solving it (Beattie 2016; Konzack 2013; Morningstar 2014). The character sheet is also a paratext of an activity, as defined by Gérard Genette (1987, 7–10), acting as a companion document to enhance, comment on or frame the activity (Jara 2013). An indie practice of designing "character keepers" was recently described and contextualized by Hermann and Reininghaus (2021).

1.4 Scholarly Character Sheet

The scholarly character sheet used and discussed in this paper is based on role-taking. It is not strictly qualified as a role-playing activity because it lacks emotion, decision-making, and social interaction. However, it invites participants to reflect on the challenges posed to their *current self*, their *ideal self*, and a *prescribed self* that is proposed by the instructor and the SCS (Bowman and Schrier 2018, 401, 405). In feedback, one participant shared that the SCS inspired them "to complete it and score a lot of publications."

A similar character sheet, nicknamed "Data & Devices," is also used in a data science workshop at the Brookens Library, University of Illinois Springfield (Barber 2020). It uses the layout of a *D&D* 5th edition character sheet, sorts 22 skills into 6 categories, and offers text boxes for Goals, Badges and Reflection. Another, lighter sheet is used for the purpose of tracking progress in a Library and Information Science tabletop game at The University of Western Ontario (VanderSchans, Mayhew, and Cornwell 2020). For describing the player, not the character played, the Larper: The Pretense character sheet is also an interesting tool to help in self-assessing strengths and weaknesses as a live-action role-playing game practitioner (Montola 2020).

1.5 Copy, Combine, Transform

Taking inspiration from tabletop role-playing game designers, most of the elements of the ludic character sheet were recombined to help introduce a series of workshops about library instruction (Illingworth and Wake 2021). Nicknamed “Scholarly Character Sheet” (SCS), this activity was introduced in Fall 2017 in my seminar *PLU6058 – Rechercher et exploiter la documentation*.¹ The seminar consists of five workshops lasting five weeks (three hours per week) and aims at upgrading graduate students’ skills and knowledge about searching, assessing, citing, and organizing their lectures. Since 2006, the seminar has been held two or three times per year, with 20 to 40 students each time.

My first purpose was to design a short and fun introductory activity to alleviate the banality of the syllabus. The syllabus aims at matching the students’ needs to the course content and also at establishing a form of contract. The SCS is a kind of passport into the seminar (Rient 2014). If a syllabus is written and presented in a warm and friendly tone, the students gain the impression that the instructor is motivated and approachable, and that the learning activity will be easier (Harnish and Bridges 2011). To produce more fun, I reused some iconic existing elements of game layout from *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) to describe the abilities, and of the Sanity track of *Call of Cthulhu* (1981).

The objectives of the seminar are very heterogeneous (e.g., theoretical knowledge, good practices, methods, know-how) and an activity was needed to frame them. Although the seminar is scripted from the basic to the most advanced notions, and from the general notion to the specific ones, it needed a frame that would turn a discrete series of sub-activities and teaching elements into a continuous path (Beattie 2016).

Another purpose was to assess the students’ prior knowledge and skills. For a practical seminar, with a lot of methodology and software manipulation, it was very important to identify individual strengths or weaknesses and also have an idea of the general level of the group.

A final purpose was to create a connection with the students. With the SCS, the instructor and the students discover who they are and where they are, and enjoy an engaging and safe icebreaker activity.

2. DESIGN INTENTIONS

2.1 Explicit Skills in a Framework

2.1.1 Listing Learning Goals for Objectivation

Sometimes learning objective achievements are too elusive or too distant (Northcraft, Schmidt, and Ashford 2011). The SCS clarifies the learning goals and the success criteria. The seminar comprises many small and sometimes very diverse learning objectives. With the SCS, it is possible to list more than 50 heterogeneous items with check boxes, rankings, etc. The SCSs layout is visually appealing and enjoins students to mark boxes while reminding them of key notions to be acquired. This series of teasers is meant to spark curiosity and excitement, but also set high expectations. More broadly, these explicit assessments and progress are based on objectivation. This is an education concept that explicitly identifies, names and encodes the notions to be remembered. It is a selective and orderly ranking process based on semantic

1 Translation: “Searching for and Managing Documentation.” <https://bib.umontreal.ca/multidisciplinaire/plu6058>

memory, instead of emotional or procedural memory (Bissonnette and Richard 2001, 76–77).

Visualizing all the objectives should allow the students to gauge the global framework of the seminar, manage their time and measure progress. Also, they should be able to easily match and pair their own personal profile and needs to the learning journey (Daniau 2016). Through this feeling of control, the intention is to boost their intrinsic motivation and autonomy as well as to stimulate a critical-thinking attitude toward the curriculum (Bélair 2015). I noted that, with the SCS, the students asked more questions about the content of the seminar than before, when they tended to ask more questions about the evaluation and the mandatory assignments.

2.1.2 From Metacognition to Growth Mindset

The SCS is a guided self-assessment activity designed to challenge perceived identity and ideal identity. Because it is very specific and objective, students are supposed to have less opportunity to deny that they do not know a concept or to overestimate their skills, which is a common learning problem, especially for information literacy and information retrieval (Mahmood 2016). The activity is conducted in a playful tone in the expectation of helping students see and accept their learning gaps. This process is a self-reflection and an ordering exercise, allowing a possible personal narrative to emerge (Murray 2015, 114–15). Thus, by role-playing themselves, the students have the opportunity to create links and build a sense of self-authorship on their learning journey (Baxter Magolda 2009; King and Siddiqui 2011, 9–11). Because it encourages metacognitive reflection on the seminar, the SCS activity is meant to push the students to frame the knowledge to be learned, the practices to be developed and the ethical values to be updated. It helps them to better engage with the content and choose how to absorb it. These are theoretical assumptions and expectations that are not backed by solid evidence. Thereby, the SCS activity could be considered as an act of creative exploration and identification with another version of oneself. The intent is that, by underscoring students' current shortcomings, the activity will provide them with an ideal near-future self to be attained, at their own pace and with their own priorities.

These learning values are rooted in a more general value of a growth mindset: a belief that abilities and skills can be improved with time, practice and hard work (Barnes, Fives, and Coombs 2018, 51). A growth mindset can be developed by monitoring and assessing performance to identify how one can improve the next time. This is currently a debated concept, but one key point consists in creating an environment to support the mindset (Porter et al. 2021). In this regard, the design and implementation of the SCS activity are intended to encourage a growth mindset. Furthermore, the gameplay of many tabletop role-playing games follows the same growth-mindset value. Usually a group of player characters plays together over several sessions, following a narrative campaign and growing in powers and abilities. This dynamic is written in most of the rulebooks and it is also a type of gameplay that became naturally dominant in the hobby.

These learning values are also rooted in another, broader learning value: self-determination. This is the belief that each person has the ability to make choices and manage their own life (Wehmeyer et al. 2017, 4, 9). Interestingly, the gameplay of a lot of tabletop role-playing games follows the same self-determination value. As demonstrated in adventure gamebooks of the 1970s and '80s, this value seems to have been linked to a "cultural ascent. . . of the notions of agency, liberty, subjectivity and selfhood" (Cook 2021).

2.2 Gamified Journey

2.2.1 Curating the Elements to Boost Engagement

As an active learning activity, the SCS provides an immediate positive outcome and offers clear, authentic and relevant challenges. Focused on assessment, the SCS offers rich content with plenty of small tasks, a little uncertainty, and rapid feedback. These features are designed to increase students' engagement by sending a positive and gamified motivational message. The instructor's facilitation role is essential to this activity and, as explained above, has been designed to foster student choices and a growth mindset.

The Publications part of the SCS is autonomous and self-managed (see Box G in Figure 1). It is designed that way because not all students have the same publication goals. Since recording of achievements is self-managed, underlining the importance of student autonomy over publication processes or research-related choices, the students are expected to be more positively engaged (Cardador, Northcraft, and Whicker 2017).

2.2.2 Forecasting, Planning and Checking the Learning Activities

The SCS activity is also designed to sequence the ensuing workshops and assignments. It keeps track of each step and provides a "scaffold" for learning by building on different "bricks," or layers, of knowledge acquired during the five weeks. For some students, the SCS may be used as the front page of their research notebook, portfolio, or collection of work, thoughts and questions.

While the character sheet helps verify skill or mastery and acknowledges prior learning, one of its other goals is validation of non-traditional skills or experiences that are not present in the regular school curriculum (O'Brien and Jacobson 2018, 81, 91). Moreover, it accommodates some details that are too specific or too precise to be listed in a classic lesson plan: Wikipedia contributions, software installations and settings, etc.

Information can be described with aspects (using controlled keywords), written descriptions (uncontrolled vocabulary) or numbered items (e.g., rankings, check boxes, progress bars). The controlled vocabulary of some chosen keywords allows the instructor to expose the learners to key concepts of the seminar (e.g., "Predatory publishers," "Boolean operators"). The intention is to help the students decode the notions instructed by establishing a common language. The SCS becomes a primer and an index of notions that will be explained later. Interestingly, during the last 50 years of game design innovations, tabletop role-playing games have adopted an increasingly controlled vocabulary. In the case of *D&D*, this occurred mainly after the buyout by the company that published *Magic: The Gathering*, a card game heavily reliant on controlled vocabulary (Hartlage 2020).

2.3 Seeking Connection

2.3.1 A Passport for the Learning Journey and a Mirror

The SCS is also a way for me to initiate a relationship with students, based on a common self-assessment and on the learning promises of the instructor to answer their information needs.

Figure 1: Scholarly Character Sheet

My name : A My supervisor : My liaison librarian : <input type="checkbox"/> Mentoring program	<input type="checkbox"/> OrCID : B <input type="checkbox"/> Profil Google Scholar <input type="checkbox"/> BASE Search : <input type="checkbox"/> LinkedIn <input type="checkbox"/> ResearchGate <input type="checkbox"/> Academia
Field of study : _____ Specialization : _____ Research subject : C	

Abilities <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> Information research D Boolean operators ○○○○○ Interfaces ○○○○○ Catalog & databases ○○○○○ Note-taking techniques ○○○○○ Document types ○○○○○ </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> Writing & Information management Zotero (or Endnote) ○○○○○ Word processing ○○○○○ Alerts ○○○○○ Research Data Management ○○○○○ </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> Source assessment & publication Peer review process ○○○○○ Bibliometrics ○○○○○ Copyright for researchers ○○○○○ Citation ethics ○○○○○ Open access ○○○○○ Predatory publishers ○○○○○ Critical thinking ○○○○○ </div>	Assets <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Student ID <input type="checkbox"/> BCi card E <input type="checkbox"/> Proxy set up </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> Browser dedicated <input type="checkbox"/> Extensions <input type="checkbox"/> Bookmarks <input type="checkbox"/> Search box </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Software set up <input type="checkbox"/> Citation style : _____ </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> dotx template FESP <input type="checkbox"/> @email dedicated to alerts <input type="checkbox"/> RSS reader </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Cloud set up </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> ILL (interlib. loan) <input type="checkbox"/> Doc. Delivery UdeM <input type="checkbox"/> Book scanner </div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px;"> <input type="checkbox"/> Writing retreat Thèse-vous? <input type="checkbox"/> Writing group </div>	Current research stage F <input type="checkbox"/> Initiation <input type="checkbox"/> Topic exploration <input type="checkbox"/> Comprehensive document research <input type="checkbox"/> Experiment, analysis, field work <input type="checkbox"/> Writing <input type="checkbox"/> Editing, correcting <input type="checkbox"/> Employment/program applications My publications Research blog since : G Conference presentations □ □ □ □ □ □ □ Book reviews published □ □ □ □ □ Micro-publications in repositories □ □ □ □ □ Magazine articles □ □ □ □ □ Chapters in collective books □ □ □ Master thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D. thesis <input type="checkbox"/> Peer reviewed articles <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <th style="text-align: left; width: 33%;">Submitted</th> <th style="text-align: left; width: 33%;">Forthcoming</th> <th style="text-align: left; width: 33%;">Published</th> </tr> <tr> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> <tr> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> <td>_____</td> </tr> </table>	Submitted	Forthcoming	Published	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
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Wikipédia : 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36
 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50* 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62 63 64 65 66 67 68 69 70 71 72
 73 74 75 76 77 78 79 80 81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96 97 98 99 100 H
 I am a "keeper" of the pages : _____ & _____

Translated by Jennifer AW Stubbs — version 1.18.1 — https://github.com/pmartinoli/TM_SchoCharSheet/ - Pascal Martinoli, U de Montréal, CC-BY.

Like a ludic character sheet, it prompts questions such as “What is the sheet offering to play with me?” and “Does it inspire me to play?” (Cendrones, Willem, and Globo 2021).

The SCS itself is designed to encourage connection. The header reminds the students how their program institution (research advisor) is connected to the library (liaison librarian) (see Figure 1, Box A). The instructor suggests that each participant book at least one appointment with their liaison librarian with the SCS in hand, to see at a glance their abilities and needs.

Then, the SCS prompts them to curate their researcher permanent identifiers and social

media profiles (see Figure 1, Box B). The explanation of why and how they should pay careful attention to their young researcher e-reputation is the heart of the lesson. Providing that explanation at that moment is meant to grant meaning and concreteness to an activity that could otherwise have been purely metacognitive and too abstract.

2.3.2 Being Welcomed in a Hospitable Activity

The purpose of the activity is deeply linked to students' personal identity and abilities. Embedding it in their personal journey can be uncomfortable to some students. According to the rules of hospitality, a host (the instructor) cannot ask too much of their guest (the students) the first time they meet (Stratman 2015). To reduce the stress of this initial activity, I present my own SCS and display "I am not perfect" in all the points. I present it online one week before the first workshop and then in person. The intent in having the instructor complete and show their own SCS is to color the teacher-student relationship with a new dimension of "being-with" (Stratman 2015). This in turn allows the relationship to transition from a difference in identity to a difference in roles, like the roles of host and guest. This dynamic helps mitigate the instructor's Imposter Syndrome and frame them as a provider of good practices, useful methods, and research tips. It is also intended to leave space for the students to share more their own novel ideas, routines, and techniques (Martinolli 2019).

In other words, the SCS allows the instructor to craft an adaptable persona to "wear" during a short-term public-speaking activity. The main functions of this crafting are to present an interesting self, focus more on content than charisma, and build a relationship based on a common assessment (Davis 2012). Finally, the SCS helps display gaps in the instructor's knowledge in a professional way (Goffman 1959, 200). Carefully selected so as not to lose expertise authority, this willingness to be vulnerable enhances the potential for authentic connection; otherwise, like Gressel (2022), I believe the students could feel the instructor is protected or masked by the persona.

I also avoid calling on students personally. This is a group activity and everybody is answering for themselves, without sharing with others. Finally, at the break, when I invite the students to share their SCS, I state explicitly that this is not mandatory. On a broader level, the design of this activity makes recognition and hospitality central to the pedagogy of the seminar. The content of the workshop is essentially methodological and ethical, so it could easily slip into uniform, boring, streamlined, and dry delivery of content.

Thus, the SCS activity can be qualified as a brief threshold space, "a space where we can act as hosts who help usher students into this academic geography, while honoring their worlds and creating a bridge to ours" (Jacobs 2008). Recognizing students through the SCS activity, acknowledging their previous skills and their research is meant to create a hospitable space where change can take place (Nouwen 1986, 71).

3. METHODS

3.1 Before the Workshops

One week before the first workshop of the seminar, I post my own character sheet on the course webspace. Students can see my research interests, my achievements and also the admission

that I am not perfect in all of the abilities. The rules of hospitality suggest that a host should not ask guests to describe themselves until the host does so first. A new host-teacher, who is in a power role, should be mindful that some students might feel threatened by “being known” by a stranger (Stratman 2015).

3.2 First Workshop

I distribute a blank SCS at the very beginning of the first workshop.² I ask the students to complete it using a light color because we will revise it in dark ink during the final workshop. I then display slides describing each element of the SCS, and comment on each slide.

First, the participants indicate their disciplines and topics as well as the current stage of their research project (see Figure 1, boxes A, C and F).

Then, the instructor lectures on how to curate one’s online identity (with permanent identifiers like ORCID, or online profiles like Google Scholar) (see Figure 1, Box B). This is a well-developed portion of the workshop that lasts 15–20 minutes because it describes a concept that is completely new to most of the participants.

This is followed by the heart of the activity: the participants assess their prior skills and those they will develop in the series of workshops (see Figure 1, Box D). For each skill, the instructor displays a slide show presenting the meaning of each bullet. The instructor does not precisely describe the five-bullet-point skills and asks participants to mark the bullet that seems to correspond to their strongest level or the one they understand. For each skill per slide, the instructor indicates which workshop will cover it.

Finally, the workshop reviews a selection of best practices: software installation, settings, etc. (see Figure 1, Box E). The instructor asks the students to check off how many accomplishments they have in terms of disseminating their research: number of conference presentations, published articles, research blogs, etc. (see Figure 1, boxes G and H). This provides an opportunity to introduce two “side quests” that will not be developed in the seminar but may interest the students: become a Wikipedian³ or start a blog about their research topic.⁴ Both side quests are completely autonomous, but they are structured and documented, and the instructor can provide help for those in need of advice.

The overall activity lasts 35 minutes. A break follows, during which I collect and photocopy the SCSs of those students who agree to share them (approximately 80%–90% do). I suggest that sharing will help me to assess their needs and have a better idea of their research.

The sheet is not used during the next three workshops. The only visual cue to the SCS activity is the first slide of each lesson during the workshops.

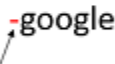
2 The Scholarly Character Sheet and the slides are available in open access at https://github.com/pmartinolli/TM_SchoCharSheet.

3 <https://github.com/pmartinolli/TM-Wikipedibus>

4 <https://github.com/pmartinolli/TM-incubablog>

Figure 2: Example of slide: the Boolean operators skill.

Boolean operators : I often use...

●○○	Minimum of words with <space> or AND truncation*
●●○	"exact expression between quotation marks" NOT 
●●●	(OR) ADJ NEAR SAME wildcards ! ?

1

Note: In the 2021 French instance of the SCS, the number of bullet points was reduced from 5 to 3.

3.3 Last Workshop

At the very end of the final workshop (the fifth), I ask the students to use black or darker ink to complete their character sheet. In updating what was learned, we only go through the Abilities. When they have finished, I ask if I can photocopy their updated SCSs. I exit the teaching lab for five minutes and bulk-scan the SCSs in color. When I return, I hand the SCSs back, ask for some direct feedback on the activity, and then conclude the workshop, wishing them a fruitful career and achievements in or outside academia.

The purpose of this last activity is to wrap up the seminar and send the students off. It lasts 15 to 20 minutes and functions like a debriefing, in which the students measure their progress and identify the gaps remaining to achieve deeper learning reflection and retention (Taras 2008). This self-assessment is facilitated and guided in a safe way because it is not evaluated and the students are free to share their SCS or not (Atwater 2016; Wickers 2010). It helps them to keep sight of the big picture of the seminar and point to what is important and why.

3.4 Assessment of the SCS Activity

The SCS activity was assessed once in January 2022 with an e-survey sent to most of the seminar participants since January 1998. The e-mails of the participants were collected from the previous seminar attendance lists. At the Université de Montréal, this kind of survey does not require an ethic review or an ethical approval when it is used for assessment and/or

improvement purpose.⁵ About the consent process, the participants were informed that: the information gathered will be used and published in a research paper assessing the activity; the information was gathered anonymously; the e-survey was not mandatory and it has no influence on the evaluation; and there will be no other email sent regarding this e-survey. The administrative person in charge of the seminars has been informed of the e-survey. To guarantee the confidentiality of the participants, the e-survey used a secure form software of the university. To my knowledge, no IP address was collected by the software and I cannot identify the participants.

The assessment consisted in three closed-ended questions and one open-ended question. The first closed-ended question asked if the participant remembered the SCS activity. If not, the assessment ended. The other two closed-ended questions were presenting randomly multiple choices about positive and negative statements on the SCS activity. The last open-ended question was collecting the participant comments. None of the questions were mandatory.

Out of the 217 surveys sent, 6 e-mails bounced back.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Since its inception in 2017, 276 students have used the SCS. Approximately 80% of them have shared their SCS with the instructor.

The analysis of the students' overall evaluation of the seminar is independently assessed by staff in the Université de Montréal Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies department. Since the introduction of the character sheets, we have observed a modest decrease in participant dissatisfaction regarding the objectives of the course and whether it matches their needs. We also observe that fewer students reply "moderately satisfied," while more reply "completely satisfied" with the overall structure of the workshops and say that the seminar matched their needs.

The student drop-out rate between the first workshop and subsequent workshops in the seminar has never been recorded. It was lower in the years after the implementation of the SCS activity, but this may be because of the improvement in the overall quality of the seminar. Thus, it is very difficult to isolate the effect of the character sheet on learning.

After the e-survey was sent, 55 participants replied, among whom 41 recalled the SCS activity and 13 did not.

The 41 participants who remembered the activity selected the following positive and negative statements (multiple choices were possible):

In the qualitative feedback obtained via the survey, one student mentioned, "It was very designed. I reused the sheet to get to know my students when I became a junior librarian." Another said, "More than identifying my gaps, this sheet made me realize that I already knew a lot more than I thought. So, I found it very useful. I also think that we can continue to use it even after the end of the seminar." Some participants mentioned they kept using the character

5 "Research that does not require an ethic approval": <https://recherche.umontreal.ca/responsabilite-en-recherche/ethique-humaine/evaluation-ethique/#c56745> following the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans – TCPS 2 (2018), art. 2.5 https://ethics.gc.ca/fra/tcps2-eptc2_2018_chapter2-chapitre2.html "Quality assurance and quality improvement studies, program evaluation activities, and performance reviews, or testing within normal educational requirements when used exclusively for assessment, management or improvement purposes, do not constitute research for the purposes of this Policy, and do not fall within the scope of REB review."

Table 1: Student responses to the Scholarly Character Sheet activity.

Positive statements		Negative statements	
I discovered the gaps I had	31	The sheet was not used during the seminar	9
I realized it is important to curate my e-profiles	27	I see the interest but the activity was not appealing to me	6
I saw that I was making progress	23	The activity took too much time	4
I had the feeling I knew where I was going during the seminar	20	It was not interesting, I was bored during the activity	3
I acknowledge the previous skills I already had	19	The sheet made me more confused	2
It helped me better understand the seminar	19	The activity didn't motivate me especially for the seminar	2
At the end of the seminar, I took stock of what I learned	15	I didn't especially connect with the instructor or the library personnel or the other participants	1
It made me more critically engaged toward the seminar	10	I was uncomfortable during the activity	1
I had the feeling the seminar was less confused	10	The activity didn't spark any curiosity for the seminar	1
I had the feeling of having more control on the seminar	7	I didn't see the interest of this activity	0
I wanted to check a lot of publications and achievements on the sheet	3		

sheet for themselves long after the seminar; one said "Extremely relevant to get an overview and get to know ME better. I've kept this sheet since the seminar!" and another said "I am

still using it after the course to check if I am on the right track with my knowledge and online profiles.” Finally, I discovered the SCS touched a tabletop role-play gamer who shared “I am a great fan of to-do lists (and of *D&D*), the sheet was useful to see where we were going during the seminar and to assess quickly what was missing in my researcher apprenticeship.”

Therefore, students appreciate the activity not only for its exciting and promising aspect, but also for its usefulness and the feedback obtained on their learning. By better assessing their skills, learners may gain a better sense of self-efficacy with regard to their information skills over the longer term. Self-efficacy is one of the main benefits of educational role-playing games, particularly in health simulations: knowing that we are doing something well has an influence on the quality of what we do (Maddux and Kleiman 2016, 8).

The character sheet in its current design is used during all subsequent workshops in the seminar as the introductory slide for each workshop. The SCS is revised and redesigned every year with an eye to clarifying and simplifying its content.

The SCS activity takes up some 6% (35 minutes + 20 minutes) of the total seminar time of 15 hours. The seminar is very dense, but this activity is well embedded and is not a “waste of time,” especially since the insertion of a 20-minute presentation that teaches how to manage researcher e-reputation. That e-reputation presentation gives coherence and substance to the SCS activity and helps to reduce a biased perception on the part of students of active learning activities in general, as they can be seen as less efficient than classic instruction (Deslauriers et al. 2019).

4.1 Additional Designs

Tangentially, the reader is invited to explore a completely different style of SCS that helps students to plan a path of library skill self-study. This one is based on the skill tree of *Shadowrun* and the more recent talent trees of *Edge of the Empire* (2013). It is a modular self-study program designed to organize the various teaching materials available in open access on the library website. It is available at <https://bib.umontreal.ca/parcours> (see Figure 3).

This self-study program was designed to guide students through most of the libraries’ educational resources. Given that the libraries website hosted a lot of heterogeneous information, we built index tools to structure its content, and this is one of them. Each item points to a section of the website that presents the resources in multiple formats, e.g., short videos, in-person workshops or online webinars, checklists, library guides, tutorials. The self-study program also helps the librarians to prescribe learning activities for the students they are following up.

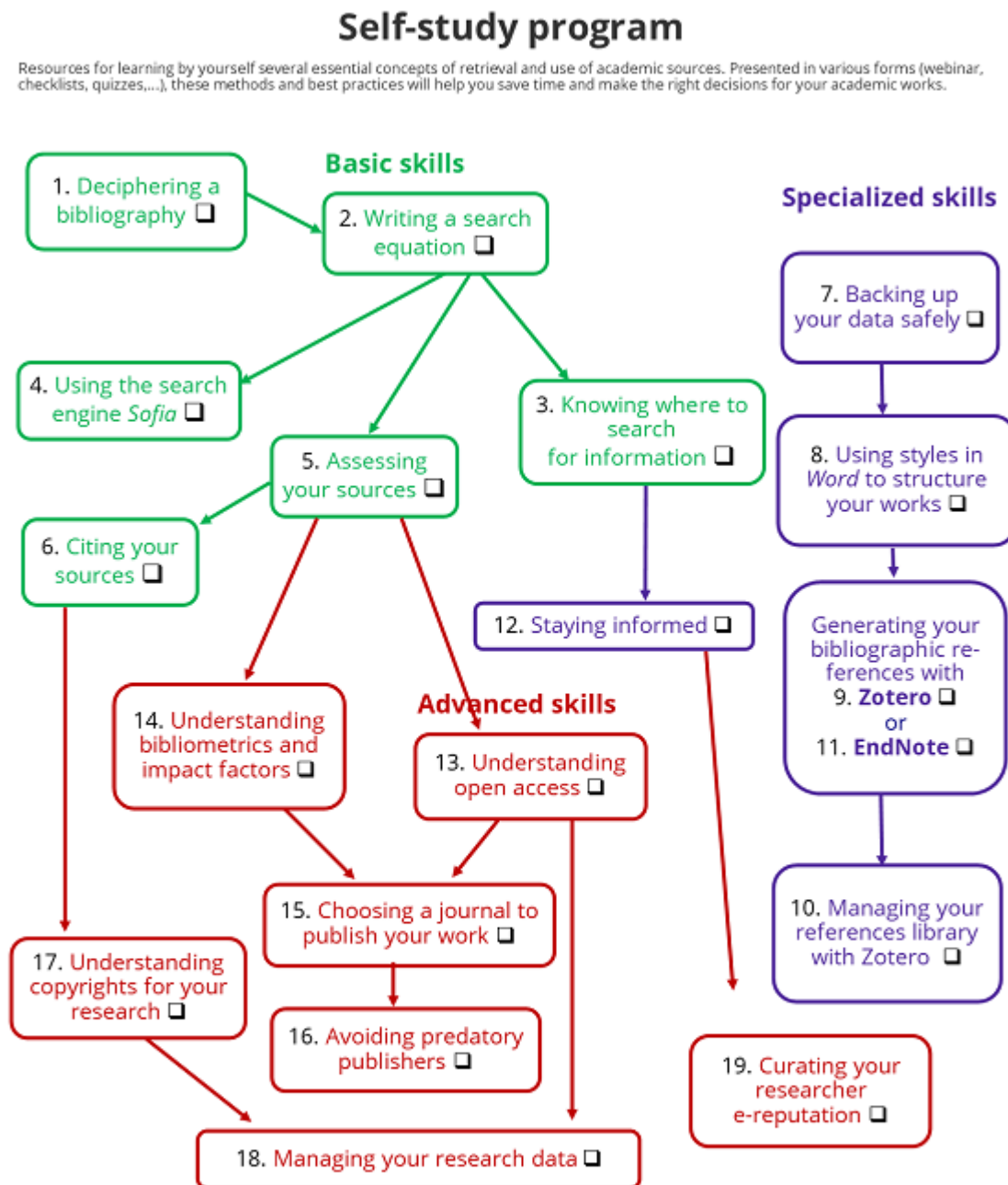
Another teaching material based on the SCS is currently under construction. It consists of a portfolio of research processes aimed at guiding students in their learning but also at documenting all of the information sources they use along the way. One possible model for the portfolio is the character diary used by players of *Castle Falkenstein* to record the details of their adventures.

4.2 The SCS Activity In-Person and Online

During the pandemic of 2020–21, the seminars were given twice in online-only format and once in hybrid format. In online only format, the SCS activity was conducted differently: the

instructor presented slides of the SCS boxes while students responded anonymously in polls

Figure 3: Self-study program for basic skills, specialized skills, and advanced skills.



or via chat. The purpose of the activity was primarily an icebreaker, to understand the content of the seminar and broadly assess the level of the group.

However, I did notice a limitation when the seminar was given in hybrid format, in person and online at the same time: reduced engagement due to the lack of a common activity done in the same way by everyone. In my own experience, I think that having two separate groups reduced the dimensions of welcome, integration, and hospitality. In addition, the fact that the sheet was virtual took away an element of materiality that I liked about the previous face-to-face workshops.

4.3 Limitations

Research on student self-assessment is growing. As stated earlier, one of the main findings is that students are overconfident in assessing their skills, especially in information literacy (Mahmood 2016). To moderate this issue, the activity is guided by the instructor, and the skills assessed are very specific and context-bound. More important, the SCS does not assess the perceived level of skills, but the precise mastery of a method. For example, the evaluations hinge on simple, binary questions: “Do I know this concept?” “Do I apply this technique?” “Do I understand what that means?” Finally, the self-assessment is completely separate from the evaluation of the seminar. No research was conducted, however, to verify whether these moderations were effective in reducing overconfidence.

Moreover, no thorough evaluation has been conducted to assess the impact of the SCS on student engagement, motivation, and learning. Except the 2022 e-survey, no post-seminar follow-up has been performed to measure the long-term impact of the SCS on these aspects.

5. CONCLUSION

As Féasson (2017) has written, tabletop role-playing is “a hobby about meta”: a naturally framing activity that, like a story frame, allows one to structure sub-activities in a very effective and engaging way. The role-playing character sheet has the same framing attributes. By structuring time and content, it marks out a beginning and an end and it defines a stable, hospitable temporary space. When applied to learning, it gives meaning to a training course by ordering and prioritizing a sequence of activities. Like in tabletop role-playing games, the character sheet activity is facilitated by a teacher, a master or a host, who ensures it runs smoothly.

Thus, the character sheet can be used as a program of gamified activities in addition to the lesson plan to improve motivation and engagement in a series of learning activities. It has a low technical and cognitive cost and it does not last too long. Through its framing and personalized mapping effect between content and participants, the induced motivation could lead to better engagement in the workshops. It is possible that, through the metacognitive skills of self-authorship, self-determination and a growth mindset, the SCS could improve the learning outcomes of the workshops. Further research and evidence need to be conducted to support these claims.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author is grateful to Jennifer AW Stubbs, who translated and used this device in library instruction workshops at New York University at Shanghai, and also copy-edited and gave valuable feedback on this paper. He also thanks Cynthia Gagné, Benjamin Constantineau, Indiana Delsart and Hélène Tardif, who implemented and used this device in Université de Montréal library instruction workshops.

7. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has no actual or potential conflicts of interest relating to the content of this presentation.

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Nordic Erotic Larp: Designing for Sexual Playfulness

Abstract: Erotic larp is an emerging trend in the Nordic countries. Sexuality and socio-dramatic play have been combined in numerous ways in the past; what is new about this concentration of erotic embodied adult pretend play is that it is emerging from a culture of reflexive, critical, and bespoke design, as a tradition of art games. By studying 25 design abstracts of Nordic art larps from the last decade, this article seeks not only to map, classify, organize, and understand the phenomena of erotic larp design, but to discuss how norms of sexuality are reflected in the Nordic larp community through looking at how sexuality is thematised, described, signalled, and designed. The analysis in this article is rooted in game studies and informed by sexuality studies. In the design abstracts, we uncover how sexuality is thematised by the designers and signalled to the players, as well as how larp rules, mechanics, and expectations are designed for erotic role-play interactions. The article shows that a Nordic tradition of larps with design for erotic and sexual play has emerged during the 2010s, how new larp mechanics scaffold erotic role-play in ways that give room for sexual arousal through layered alibis, and that these form of larps are inclusive of people of marginalised genders and sexualities, as well as of sexual kinks. The discussion also addresses the tension between liberation and oppression of sexuality in erotic larp design, as well as tensions around player agency and compelling game mechanics.

Keywords: Role-play, larp, sexual arousal, design, design abstract, Nordic larp, sex in games, queer games, alibi, make-believe oppression Nordic larp, marketing

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1. INTRODUCTION

His tongue slid slowly up his stepbrother's neck.

– I don't understand why I'm doing this... It is like there is something wrong with this place.

There was a small pause in his movements and a scared look in his eyes as he stared longingly at his stepbrother's body. Then he continued almost like something was forcing him... (*House of Craving*)

In larps, players live in imaginary worlds for hours or days at a time, embodying fictional characters, creating meaningful experiences and narratives in interaction with other players. These players may engage in erotic and amorous play, in-character, in different ways (Brown and Stenros 2018). The opening quote is part of the *design abstract* of the larp *House of Craving*. This is a way for the designers to show what kind of stories they envision for their players, enabling the potential player to make informed choices about participating (Edland, Pedersen and Gyldenstrøm 2021).

This article addresses the design of make-believe sex in live action role-playing games. The goal of this research is to map Nordic *erotic larp design*: What is regarded as erotic, who is invited to play, how is the erotic brought into play? We address these questions through a study of a decade's worth of design abstracts.

An interesting artistic tradition of erotic larps has been emerging in the Nordics during the last decade, as discussed in this article; some have eroticism as the main theme, while other designs offer possibilities for erotic pretend play even if that is not the main focus of the design. Larps in the Nordic tradition tend to be reflexive and critical, reflecting and

commenting on the world around them (see e.g. Stenros and Montola 2010; Kangas, Lopenen and Särkijärvi 2016; Pettersson 2014; 2021) and feature bespoke design, building each work as a coherent, self-sustained whole (Koljonen et.al. 2019). These Nordic larps with erotic design are discussed here as a specific tradition of *art games*: “actual games – analog, digital, or both – that are developed by individuals or small teams of independent game designers, and tend to have noncommercial or even anti-commercialist philosophies behind them” (Ensslin 2014, p 4; see also Sharp 2015). This article seeks not only to understand the phenomena of erotic larp design, but to discuss how norms of sexuality are reflected in the Nordic larp community through looking at how sexuality is thematised, described, signalled, and designed.

Rooted in game studies and sexuality studies, this study maps, organizes, and analyses the design elements that foster and regulate erotic play and sexual arousal at larps through a review of 25 design abstracts published as larp websites. Play is here recognized as being meaningful in itself, not only as a vehicle for an external goal. These design abstracts will be approached as literary–ludic texts (Ensslin 2014).

The article will show that a Nordic erotic larp tradition has emerged during the 2010s, and that this tradition is quite inclusive of people of marginalised genders and sexualities, as well as of sexual kinks (fetishes, BDSM). Larps discussed are either clearly positioned as erotic in their design abstract or they include sexuality/eroticism as a theme/component in the design abstract, and they have a way to play out sexual content. The numerous ways in which design abstracts communicate simulation mechanics for erotic play are mapped and analysed, uncovering how there is a tension at the heart of erotic larp design abstracts: Larps with erotic design are simultaneously transgressive, adult, emotionally heavy, even shocking; and they are also rulebound, safe to play, mindful of safety, repeatedly re-negotiated, and it is always possible to exit playing. The article describes plural erotic play practices designed for consenting adults; some of the content is transgressive, for example relating to play on sexual violence and oppression. Sometimes the setting of the larp does not read as erotic, and just parts of the larp have sexual content. Finally, the article does not pass judgement on the erotic larps designs, but describes the emerging field.

The article opens with a background discussion of amorous and erotic role-play, then explains the data and methods used. The Results section explains how the design abstracts discuss larps with erotic themes, what game mechanics are used to safely role-play sexual content, and how erotic larp has been designed to be inclusive regarding sexuality, gender, and relationship structures, while paying less attention to inclusivity regarding other marginalized people. This is followed by a discussion of the emerging erotic Nordic larping, the tension between oppression and liberation, the limits of inclusivity, and how alibi is used to enable transgressive play.

2. BACKGROUND

Amorous and erotic role-play has a history in and out of larp. Sexuality and socio-dramatic play have been combined in multiple ways; there are numerous traditions for these hybrids, from digital single-player role-playing games to games used in sexual education, and from BDSM group play to erotic and non-erotic larp (see Grasmø 2019; 2020). Furthermore, larp is part of a wider field of immersive play, from immersive theatre to virtual reality, where erotic subject matter is explored. This article looks specifically at *embodied erotic role-play*, focusing on co-located physical play between players enacting characters in a coherent shared fictional

setting that invokes sensual and sexual themes.¹ The focus is on the design: how the erotic in larps is signalled, and how role-play is guided through metatechniques for simulating or representing erotic activity. In larps, sexual activity is nearly always simulated to some degree. While erotic role-play can be entirely participant-defined (as in Brown 2015) – such as player’s own erotic fantasies, inter-player attraction, the adrenaline rush felt when scared – this article is concerned with sexual play as encouraged by larp design.

3. THE EROTIC HISTORY OF NORDIC LARP

Larping started to emerge around the Nordic countries during the 1980s (Harviainen et al. 2018). Sexual themes have been incorporated in larps in the Nordics at least since the early 1990s. To understand the background of the development of contemporary Nordic larp, it is useful to look at the different methods for representing sexual and amorous interactions that have been used over the years. An early account of the methods used to portray sex in Norwegian larps in the 1990s comes from Hanne Grasmø:

Sex may be simulated on many levels: . . . saying “Now I am doing this to you.” The most common is to use massage for intercourse [or] to close the door and let the sex sounds escape out . . . It will be most real if sex is simulated with making out, moans and dry-humping, but with clothes on. Most larpers don’t do that. (Grasmø 1998, 69, translated by the author).

Larp mechanics at the time were often designed to avoid sexual arousal, due to safety concerns and shame, to the point that even cuddling or holding hands in a sexual manner was quite taboo (Wieslander 2004). Even so, there were exemptions, such as the Norwegian *Moiras Vev* (2003) the Finnish kinky larp-series *Pehomydin* (Harviainen 2010) and the Swedish *Hamlet* (2003). *Hamlet* also included non-simulated sexual content (see Koljonen 2004; Bergström 2010). Johanna Koljonen (2004) described *Hamlet* as a sealed space akin to a swingers’ club; her concern was the lack of structured debriefing after the larp, not the sex.

Historically, erotic play in larps has mostly been sporadic, with the role-play activity in the center, “without the games delving too deeply into only the sexual aspects” (Harviainen 2010). Even so, while erotic play was scarce, the theme of sexuality was early on identified as a typical theme in Nordic larp (Stenros and Montola 2010, 22-23).

During the 2010s, as this article will show, larps with erotic themes have been growing in number. The para-academic discussion in the Nordic larp tradition about erotic larping has also increased. Articles, panel discussions, and workshops presented at Nordic Knutepunkt conferences have shifted from barely talking about sexual play in larps at all (2001–2012), and how to simulate amorous situations in a way that allows participants to distinguish between player and character (Wieslander 2004, see also Waern and Stenros 2015 about amorous role-play), to “how to play erotic larps” (Edland and Fischer 2020), “creating more bleed” (Anderson and Meland 2020), “be aroused in character” (Grasmø 2020) and “portray sexual content in your design” (Lindegren 2019).

Although there are more erotic scenes in larps, and more larps with mainly erotic

¹ Neighbouring areas can be found, on one side, in descriptive and mediated online erotic role-play (Brown 2015) that has similar character constructs, rules, and expectations of fictional coherence; and on another side in BDSM (bondage-discipline/dominance-submission/sado-masochism) group-play (Frank 2013; Weiss 2011; Harviainen 2011) that also has roles and fictional setting, but where the emphasis is more on the unmediated shared sexual activity.

themes, embodied erotic role-play and arousal has not been addressed in research. This is indicative of game studies more generally where discussion of sex has been called “immature” (Harviainen, Brown and Suominen 2016), and is often limited to online games. Furthermore, sexuality is often sidelined as “deviant” behaviour. It has been shown that larps inspired by sadomasochism and exploring kink themes are numerous (Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020), and that there are clear connections between larp and BDSM in relation to immersion, embodiment, and power redistribution (Harviainen 2003; 2011), as well as the creating of fictional role-play activity for erotic pleasure (Mosher 1980).

This article centers on embodied erotic role-play, and the investigation focuses on the designed methods for expressing sexual content and for adjusting the level of embodied eroticism in play. Embodied erotic role-play is defined as sexual content played out in a corporal manner, while immersed into a character in a shared fiction. In earlier research there has been discussion of *amorous role-play* (Brown and Stenros 2018), and Jaakko Stenros (2013) has divided larp sex mechanics into four categories:

- *establishing events*, where the players verbally agree what happened between them,
- *outcome resolution systems*, for instance with rolling dice (“did I manage to force you?” “did I got an STD?”),
- *expressive and symbolic methods*, where the bodies are interacting in some ways but it might be abstract (massaging shoulders), and
- *adjusting to the level of sexuality* – where the action is partly sexual or erotic (but for instance fondling instead of intercourse, or whipping lightly instead of real pain).

The first two categories of *amorous role-play*, establishing events and outcome resolution, fall outside the scope of embodied erotic role-play, and of this study. Note that this tighter delimitation does not exclude methods that are solitary; role-play can happen both between bodies and within the individual body, and both may evoke sexual arousal.

4. PLAYING WITH OPPRESSION

A key theme in Nordic erotic larp design, as will become apparent later, is the tension between liberation and oppression. Generally, negative, oppressive, or abusive content is common in sexual fantasies (Morin 2012; see also Von 2020). Indeed, sexual play can be transgressive of norms. Transgression can function as raising arousal (Apter 1991; Morin 2012; see also Frank 2013) and deepening engagement (see Masek and Stenros 2021), and the play activity of larp is recognized and treated by the design and the community as bracketed from reality. There is some safety in playing with dark themes. Of course, larp is not “not-real,” but actions carried out while larping can have a different meaning in comparison to the same actions performed out of larp (Stenros and Montola 2019).

In order to play around liberation, oppression is needed. Larp is *inter-immersive* (Stenros and MacDonald 2020; Pohjola 2004): a player does not just pretend that they are their character, they also pretend that everyone else is a character. There are no prisoners without jailors, no freedom fighters without oppressors. Oppression is needed structurally to address themes of liberation, but it can also function as raising arousal. When it comes to non-normative sexual desires and interactions in role-play, the erotic landscape is more complex to navigate: To role-play negative sexual transgressions, like violence, torture, and rape, may be meaningful (Montola 2010; see also Rivers 2020), but not necessarily pleasurable or erotic.

But for some it is: Role-playing a prisoner abused by a guard can be a meaningful exploration of societal power structures, but it can also be a kink, a fetish, or sexual preference. When for instance a larp is about dominance and submission, it may signal eroticism for some players, while others are more interested in impactful emotional play, without any sexual arousal.² The societal norms that lead to shame and oppression of sexual pleasure, both on individual and societal level, might be questioned and transformed (Bowman and Hugaas 2019) through erotic larp, but shame and inequality can as well be used as triggers for strong emotional impact which may consolidate power imbalances (Weiss 2011).

Similarly, playing with *non-normative sexuality and genders*³ can also have a double function. On the one hand, they serve as meaningful reflections of players' out-of-game sexual and gender identities. On the other hand, such depictions also function to fuel exploration, and enable fluid sexuality and erotic (inter)actions – and they can function as a trigger for oppression.

5. THE TENSION OF SEXUAL ROLE-PLAY

According to Susanna Paasonen (2018) *pleasure* is the key purpose of both sex and play (see also Medico 2019). Sexual play is a pleasurable and playful activity, rather than goal oriented. This view is common in playfulness research, emphasising spontaneity, curiosity, willingness to engage, and zest for variation (Masek and Stenros 2021). Play is seen as a site for openness and exploration.

In discourse about larps and role-playing games the bracketed *non-real reality* and the *non-consequentiality* of play is valued highly (see Masek and Stenros 2021). Larp discourse underlines the separation of the player and the character, and also the fictionality and boundedness of the play (e.g., Lukka 2014; Bowman 2018; Sihvonen 1997). Consequences are not denied, but they are seen as negotiable (see also Caillois 1958; Juul 2005). Play is idealised as safe and disconnected from everyday life. This is one aspect of the *magic circle of play* (Huizinga 1938; Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Stenros 2014), a socially recognized boundary and a metaphor for the bounded play space. These are also common views in playfulness research, emphasising engagement with reality that is knowingly false and without an expected outcome (Masek and Stenros 2021).

Toni Sihvonen (1997) has described the *role-play agreement*, which is a social contract that enables larping: the participants are not supposed to draw conclusions about the players based on the characters, or vice versa. While the player and the character inhabit the same body, they are socially treated as separate. This polite fiction allows a participant to play the villain and do reprehensible things without facing social condemnation. The character (and the fictional setting) is an *alibi* for the player, something that enables and allows the player to transgress what is acceptable out-of-game (Montola and Holopainen 2012; also Stenros 2013; Stenros and Bowman 2018; Deterding 2017).

Alibi can enable players to engage in embodied erotic role-play and allow them to playfully and pleasurably explore identities and concepts of sexuality in society (see Paasonen 2018); to give room for emotional impactful or complex experiences (Koulu 2020); to “step

² Playing on oppressive subject matter may or may not be erotic for the player. Correspondingly, playing erotic scenes as a character may or may not be erotic for the player. This article concentrates on the design; player studies are needed to find out what playing these scenes is like.

³ We use this term to refer to all non-conforming genders and sexual identities beyond the binary, monogamy, heteronormativity, including categories and concepts such as queer, lesbian, homosexual, trans, non-binary, poly.

inside the shoes of another” (Bowman 2015); and possibly even to explore and transform themselves (Bowman and Hugaas 2019; also Kontula 2021; Beltrán 2021). On the other hand, since the fictional character also works as an alibi to bypass the hindrances of society (Montola 2010; also Frank 2013), it might be used as an excuse for unethical behaviour (Brown 2021; see also Bowman 2013; Harder 2021).⁴

Simultaneously, from sexology we know that play-acting a character can allow playing with sexual content, while sexual *desires* sometimes can be the alibi for engaging in role-play (Kontula 2021). Here role-play is in service of arousal. Indeed, when sexual arousal moves between player and character, the polite fiction of the player/character division unravels and the dynamic between player and character is crucial to investigate when it comes to erotic larp. These two literatures—the literature of sexual play and the literature of larp play—are at odds. Arousal and the pleasure of sexual play cut through from the character to the player sharing the same body.

While this separation of the player and the character is socially, culturally, and contextually useful, there are numerous concepts larp studies uses to bridge these disconnected parts. For example, *bleed* (Boss 2007; see also Montola and Holopainen 2012; Bowman 2013) is a concept used to describe the flow of emotions between the player and the character—and a method to mend the gap between the two. They are still conceived of as separate, the physical states of the player affecting the character and vice versa (Montola 2010). Bowman (2013; 2018) calls it “the spillover” from one to the other. Alibi and bleed are elaborated and designed to establish an understanding of “constructed safety” (Waern 2015) for the player. When arousal bleeds from the character to the player (or in the other direction), the boundedness of play is threatened. Sexual arousal is a complex phenomenon (Morin 1996/2012; Komisaruk et al. 2006; Kontula 2021) that can be regard as an emotion, consisting of three subcomponents: feelings, expressions, and physiological states (Järvelä et al. 2016; see also Panksepp and Biven 2012). Following this, the sexual play in embodied erotic role-play can be designed to be physically expressed, give emotional experience, and eventually give a sexually aroused physical state. Sexual arousal in a player portraying a character can manifest as one or more of these subcomponents: In that sense, sexual arousal is just like other emotions players regularly experience in larps, such as fear, sorrow, or happiness. However, culturally navigating arousal may be more stigmatized (Medico 2019; Kontula 2021), and engaging in make-believe sexual emotions will in many cases be transgressive (Stenros and Bowman 2018).

Of course, the sexual emotions of the player may or may not correspond to those of the character in the fiction. There are numerous traditions in navigating the mapping between the player and the character. It is possible to just perform an emotion, without feeling it. However, in Nordic larp, immersion into character is a norm (Harviainen et al. 2018); ideally the emotions of the character are also present in the player. “Immersion” has been described in many ways, for example, as “the psychological experience of heightened attention while participating in a fictional game reality by enacting a role” (Bowman 2018), and “the subjective feeling of becoming one’s character and temporarily forgetting oneself” (Järvelä 2019). Here we follow Simo Järvelä (2019) who conceives of immersion as an attention process in the brain: We are ourselves and the character simultaneously. When we experience things in the body – even when we know them to be fictional – it affects the mind (Järvelä and Lankoski 2012). Interestingly, sexologists have described sexual arousal also as an attention process

4 An early critique of the concept of alibi described how designers may reproduce unwanted patriarchal norms and suppression structures from society, forming bodily memories without players observing this (Gerge and Widing 2006; see also Weiss 2011).

(Medico 2019), and erotic role-play in a relationship as enhancing this process (Kontula 2021).

This is what is at stake in erotic larp design: How to ensure that the playing is seen as safe enough (its consequences are negotiable) with a distinction between the player and the character, the fictional worlds and the everyday life, while simultaneously allowing for sexual arousal and playful sexual exploration.

6. METHOD

A larp is a collaborative embodied role-play performance, where the designers create the foundation, and the player-participants embody and bring to life the fiction, the stories, and the characters of the designed larp. Once larpwrights have created the *design* of the larp, they need to recruit the player-participants. Today this is commonly done through a webpage. This webpage is the prime interface between the designers and the possible player. The central elements of the larp and its design can be read and understood through this site: It contains a distillation of the fiction (themes, setting, genre, story elements), the structure (number of players, length, temporal ordering) and production details (where, when, how to sign-up/casting, what is included in the price). We call this document the *design abstract* of the larp, an invitation to the larp which summarises the theme, story, and visions for the larp as well as production details. Since the sign-ups often are posted a long time before the actual larp event, it may ignite the imagination process and preparations for the players many months before the larp starts.

Most Nordic larp design abstracts will explain how the larp will be played, the play style the designers aim for, what will be provided in workshops, metatechniques, character creation and player support. In larps that aim for transparency, there can also be links to full character descriptions, or even the whole larp script (e.g., Groth and Grasmö and Edland 2021). The design abstract communicates the vision of the designers to potential players, to other designers, and to the larp playing and designing community. It also functions as a recruitment tool for players; in practice this often means that potential participants can sign-up for the larp through the webpage.⁵

To explore how larp design guides embodied erotic role-play, we have analysed 25 design abstracts of Nordic larps with erotic or sexual content, from the time period 2011–2021 (see Appendix A, Table 1). The larps lasted from four hours to five days, and had 10 to 130 participants. A few of the design abstracts had only a single page with an invitation (3 larps), but commonly there are a multitude of pages. In the data corpus there are also included design abstracts with access to full larp scripts with workshop design, background stories, full character descriptions, play mechanics, and other design elements (5 larps).

In order to identify larps with an explicit goal to include or focus on erotic themes, designers and players were asked directly in three domain-relevant Facebook-groups: “How many Nordic Erotic Larps have been run the last decade?” A total of 39 people participated in the discussion, and they suggested 32 different larps. Six further larps the authors were aware of were added to the corpus, and their designers were contacted directly.⁶

⁵ The design abstracts are a kind of *paratext* (Genette and Macksey 1997), texts around and about the primary text of the runtime of the larp. However, they are integral to the creation of the larp, and do not have a clear analogue in literature, but can be read as literary–ludic texts as in video games (Ensslin 2014).

⁶ Three erotic larps planned for 2021 (*The Future is Straight, Pleasing Women*, and *Redemption: Salvation through Sin*) were announced too late in 2021 to be included in the analysis, but are discussed in the overview.

The included larps needed to fulfil two requirements: As the focus of this study is in understanding erotic and sexual design, the selected larps had to mention sexuality or eroticism in the design abstract as an element, and had to feature a physical and specified method for playing out sexual scenes. Larps with less than 10 players or lasting less than four hours were excluded from data gathering as the focus is here on larps and not larp-like erotic role-play scenarios. However, this means most festival larps and chamber larps were also excluded.⁷ Only larps played out in the Nordic countries or designed by Nordic designers were included. The delimitations are done to limit the scope for the research, and make it possible to discuss larps that are more alike. All of the larps are made within the Nordic Larp tradition (Stenros and Montola 2010). English language larps are likely overrepresented in the data due to queries in English language contexts. However, it seems that larps with erotic content often do target international audiences and are played in English. In total nine suggested larps were excluded from the data set as not fitting the criteria.

The included design abstracts were coded and analysed. If the larp websites were no longer electronically accessible, they are not included in the review, except in four cases where electronically-published larp scripts were available. With full larp scripts, only selected parts were coded. For some larps we have contacted the designers for more information, especially about workshop scripts and mechanics for erotic play.

The qualitative textual analysis is done with a thematic approach, with a mix of data-driven development of categories and predefined categories. The reading of the design abstracts is informed by a literary–ludic approach; in Astrid Ensslin’s *Literary Gaming* (2014) she proposes a way of understanding digital art games with both playerly and readerly characteristics that is useful also for understanding analog Nordic larps, even when we just read the text and imagine how it is meant to be played. She places different games on a *literary–ludic spectrum* (p. 43) in which interactive drama is placed as the middle ground, meaning that we will look for both the literary (narrative, story, characters) and the ludic (game mechanics, design choices) to understand how these larps deal with sexuality, sexual pleasure, and sexual oppression. The visual content on the websites was not systematically analysed, and it is only referenced when it obviously adds value to the literary–ludic text analysis.

Both authors of the article have been part of the scene they study since it coalesced some 25 years ago. Both also work against the stigma related to sex and adult play in academia and activism. One author co-designed two of the larps in the data corpus. These larps, *Just a little Lovin’* and *Kink and Coffee*, were designed years ago, not as a researcher but as artistic works. They are not research *through* design, but research *after* design (Wilson 2012, 36-38).

7. RESULTS

The number of international Nordic style larps with explicit sexual content has grown considerably in the last years. Table 1 includes the long scenarios designed and played in the Nordic countries and/or by Nordic designers during the last decade that this study discovered. In this chapter we present the results of our analysis on these 25 design abstracts. The analysis is divided into three parts: signalling eroticism, mechanics for erotic larping, and non-normative amorous play.

⁷ Researchers in the field of emotions have shown that a higher number of participants do impact the emotions to different degrees and infuse the inter-immersion process (Järvelä et al. 2016). Furthermore, in a group with 10 persons or more, there will be more of an audience (other than first person) for erotic scenes, and players without intimate knowledge of each other will interact.

7.1 Signalling Eroticism

The design abstracts clearly communicate if the larp has an erotic theme or sexual content. The erotic theme is signalled in a way that enables a player to make informed decisions about participating, and manages players' expectations. We divide sexual content into the following categories, as a product of analysis of the coded data: explanatory texts (descriptions), visual content (imagery), and fictional text pieces (prose). These are sometimes supported by character descriptions (characters), content descriptions or warnings (ingredients), and by explaining how sexual scenes will be played out (mechanics).

7.2 Descriptions

Larp website descriptions clearly outline erotic, extreme, and otherwise emotional impactful play, while balancing that with clear statements that play will take place in a safe manner, with respect for others, and usually also in an inclusive and queer-friendly way (see also Sihvonen and Stenros 2019). Indeed, every one of the larps in the dataset tried to strike a balance between igniting players' playful sexual fantasies while simultaneously assuring them that a larp is totally safe. The player can, the sites assure, always opt-out, tap-out, negotiate off-game, or de-escalate.

Follow My Lead is a non-verbal larp about kink exploration and kink negotiation that gives participants the alibi and tools to artistically play with submission and domination . . . This experience can be deeply emotional, sensual and transformational. Negotiation, consent and safety are paramount. (*Follow My Lead*)

Most larps in the dataset outline how sexual content is supposed to be played out. Sometimes the descriptions take the form of invitations, such as this one from *Inside Hamlet*: "All genders, sexualities and bodies are invited to act wicked and be beautiful at this larp. During play you are likely to become witness to nudity, public displays of affection and sexuality, simulated but realistic-looking sex, and violence." It is not worded as a content warning, but as an invitation to erotic play, as well as an instruction for players to view others as attractive.

Almost identical formulations appear at *Libertines*, *House of Craving*, *The Forbidden History*, *Baphomet*, and *3 AM Forever*, reflecting what seems to be an emerging norm in Nordic larp culture: framing these larps as accessible and inclusive, but also explicit and transgressive. The trend of erotic larp is evolving, and they reference not just films, literature, and music as inspiration, but also other well-known larps: "Libertines is inspired by several other larps, . . . like *St. Croix* as well as larps like *Baphomet* with its . . . physical and decadent style" (*Libertines*).

A key function of the design abstract is to work as an advertisement in attracting the players, but also to do expectation management: what kind of actions will take place at the larp. In order to attract the right player group, it is common to include a requirement for the minimum comfort level needed for participation:

be able to hug a stranger tightly and maybe kiss them on the mouth. But whether gentle intimacy, portrayed lust or pretend violence, you will always have full control of your own body and of the story you are telling. You always choose who to touch and control who touches you. (*House of Craving*)

Of course, just the name of the larp (e.g. *Screwing the Crew*, *Kink and Coffee*, *Libertines*, *Disgraceful Proposals*) or the setting (e.g. brothel, occult possession, “Vintage era,” lawless jail) can inspire larpers looking for erotic content to sign-up, according to their personal tastes in role-play. However, larp websites have become more explicit and clear in their communication of erotic play during the period investigated. The website of *Kapo* (2011) was much more coy than the more recent larps, when it read: “Players will be introduced to an environment of bizarre social norms and values.” Some of the newest larps in the corpus include an affirming attitude to breaking norms:

[The larp] is a delightful high-octane nonsense, a silly romp into decadent flirting and sensuality in a carnivalistic light hearted adult fairytale. It is set in a rococo punk reality with magic and meringue and frivolous frolicking, it is explicitly queer and intentionally totally camp. (*Disgraceful Proposals*)⁸

This description explicitly explains how the larp is meant to be carnivalistic, and thereby gives room for sexual content as part of the game.

7.3 Imagery

Photographs, drawing, video, and other *imagery* is used on the websites to further signal erotic content. Specifically creating drawings (e.g., *Libertines*, *Spellbound*) or photographs (e.g., *Vedergällningen*, *Asylen*, *Kapo*) for the websites is common. For example, *Finding Tom*, a larp exploring the life and works of Tom of Finland, uses a drawing (Figure 1) made by one of the designers to communicate that in this larp the concept of Tom’s Men (masc leather gay men) is meant to include all bodies and genders. Evocative images can let the players envision scenes they want to play (as discussed by Paisley 2021), but they also help players make the choice of not participating, as in the case of the rather extreme and abusive scenes displayed from *Kapo*, *Asylen*, and *Gården* (Figure 2).

In addition to bespoke images created to advertise and communicate the vision of a larp, it is common to use thematically relevant pictures from other sources (e.g. *Nocturne*) as well as existing artwork that evokes eroticism (e.g. *Baphomet*, *Pan*). The most honest depiction of the larp is communicated with pictures from an earlier run of the larp (e.g. *Inside Hamlet*, *The Forbidden History*, and *A Nice Evening with the Family*). *Just a Little Lovin’* has been run so many times that there are galleries of photos online for potential participants to browse (Figure 3). Video is also sometimes used. Both *End of the Line* and *Kapo* had a trailer specifically made to advertise the larp. The *Kapo* video displayed much more clearly the possibilities for (heteronormative) sexual content in the larp, in comparison to the website texts.

7.4 Ingredients

It is increasingly common that larp websites contain “an ingredient list.” This is a list of elements that the playing of the larp will contain. While ingredient lists have been partially inspired by trigger and content warnings, this more neutral and descriptive ingredient formulation

8 The international run of *Disgraceful Proposals* was cancelled due to Covid-19 after the sign-up. However, versions of the larp have been run twice in Finnish previously and the larp will be run again soon.

seems much more common.⁹ Here is a partial ingredient list from the larp *Baphomet*, which is advertised with the themes of terror, lust, desire, power, and loss of control:

- Possession, which means non-consensual character actions. . .
- Sensual and sexual play across genders
- Alcohol
- Bathing in dark water
- Erotic relationships
- Bullying
- Very physical play, including theatre style sex simulation (dry humping)
- Violent outbursts, face slapping
- Nakedness
- Play on abortion and impregnation . . . (*Baphomet*)¹⁰

In the larps explored for this article there is no uniform idea of what counts as an ingredient that should be described. An ingredient list is a relatively open form of description. In our data corpus, ingredients relating to erotic larping can include:

- *themes*, such as “romance and forbidden affairs” (*The Forbidden History*), “explore magic, seduction and the battle for free will” (*Spellbound*), “questions about monogamy, open relationships and sexual relations” (*Screwing the Crew*),
- *examples of play*, such as “lightly touching hands, arms and shoulders of all other present players, and to lead a blindfolded person, and to be led” (*Follow My Lead*), and “[h]omosexual sex, homosexual history, homosexual men, homosexual love, cruising, . . . discrimination” (*Finding Tom*), and
- *instructions for erotic play-style*: “nudity, public displays of affection and sexuality, or simulated but realistic-looking sex” (*Inside Hamlet, Pan, Baphomet*), “Play with other people like they were exotic animals: touch, turn, poke, measure and smell them. Try to teach them tricks” (one of many decadence suggestions for *Disgraceful Proposals*) and “Physicality and debauchery” (*Libertines*). “You have to be able to accept other players’ limits for play on real sex and violence.” (*Gården*, translated by the authors).

Many larps in the dataset feature oppressive and disgusting content – such as historical slavery (*St. Croix*), institutional abuse (*Kapo, Gården, Asylen*), incest (*A Nice Evening, Inside Hamlet, House of Craving*), and rape (*Vedergällningen, St. Croix, Asylen*). Larp designers may or may not describe their larps as erotic when they feature abuse or sexual violence. However, players who are into BDSM or extreme play may read or experience such content as erotic. For these players a content warning (a part of the *ingredient*) for extreme play can also be a clue for sexual content. Sometimes the warning is written in the form of a paragraph:

At interrogations you can expect to be pressured psychologically and physically, though of course within your own limits. The game itself is about losing [sic] yourself

⁹ The concept of an *ingredient list* was pioneered by the larp designer Karin Edman, who wanted to include all of the ingredients of the larp: Food, sleep and locations, not only warnings and content.

¹⁰ Note that actions are non-consensual for characters, not for the players.

and your humanity and might have heavy emotional effects. (*Kapo*)

Often abusive content is flagged on the website: “Abuse of power and authority, both social and physical.” (*Nocturne*); “. . . experience vulnerability, helplessness, abuse and violence” (*Asylen*, translated by the author); and “Mind control of character” (*House of Craving, 3 AM Forever, Pan, Baphomet*). Similarly, topics are regarded as taboo, heavy, or potentially triggering, such as “topics like patriarchy, power, . . . sex, infidelity and pedophilia” (*A Nice Evening with the Family*). Sometimes ingredient lists also communicate limits very explicitly: “In-game racism: Yes. Off-game racism or joking about the theme: No” (*St. Croix*, website, translated by the author).¹¹

Playing on dark themes does not mean trivialising the issues being explored – unless one considers play to be inherently trivial or trivialising (see Sutton-Smith 1997). However, play on oppression and violence targeting marginalised people has been criticised as having the potential to be akin to dark tourism and as contributing to marginalisation, while also having a potential for increasing shared narratives and understanding of marginalisation (Leonard, Janjetovic and Usman 2020). The design abstracts attempt to allow potential players to self-select if they feel comfortable participating.

7.5 Prose

The design abstracts in the sample include diegetic content to different degrees. Fictional text, *prose*, is used to set the mood (setting, genre, time period, character persona). For example, “Gården,” a correctional institution in a dystopian future where (gender and sexuality) norm breakers are forcefully sent, is evoked with prose:

. . . right, you know her from earlier, lived together it says here. Were you actually sexually involved? Well, then you have seen her naked before, so what are you staring at, really? My colleague is going to do a body visitation, for safety measures, to ensure she doesn’t bring any object that may hurt him, or you, or herself. Just keep staring, this will be nice . . . (*Gården*, translated by the author)

¹¹ The design abstract of *St. Croix* did not position the larp as an erotic one, but as an attempt to address the forgotten history of Denmark-Norway as a colonial power:

St. Croix is a larp that aims to explore how people adjust to extreme living conditions. Finding hope amidst injustice. How we excuse treating other people as less than human. How easily the abnormal becomes normal - “just the way it is.” But also how love, joy and pride are kept alive. Staying human in an inhumane society.

The role of the Scandinavian countries in the transatlantic slave trade is less known and well-documented than that of USA and the UK. The larp is set in the Danish-Norwegian Colony of St. Croix in the Danish West Indies, Caribbean. (*St. Croix*)

The larp is included in this dataset as it features sexual encounters, both voluntary and abusive, and has mechanics of playing them out. According to its design abstract, *St. Croix* is not a destination for people to role-play their erotic racialized fantasies for sexual pleasure. While such events exist (e.g., Weiss 2012), we are not aware of such events in the Nordic larp tradition. To make scenes featuring sexuality less erotic, the designers forbade “dry humping” at the larp and insisted on the use of abstracting method for playing on sexual content. Scarfs were used to signal character ethnicity. To enhance safety, all scenes with violence or sex required the players to go off-game and negotiate. Whether we can find racial iconography, “treating race as both a technology of domination and a technology of pleasure” (Nash 2014) within Nordic erotic larp design needs further studies to entangle.

This can be read both as an abusive situation or an erotic situation. When the websites use prose, they intentionally leave room for player interpretations.

There is also clear and explicit sexuality-affirming prose: The website of the hunter-gatherer larp *KoiKoi* contains a “cultural compendium,” a repository of stories told by and for Ankoi (the people). Some of these stories that praise love and sex:

Some only have one lover. Which
is simple.
Some have more than one. Which
is not simple.
Love is a wroth kwath
I knew a wom who had three
lovers. But one lover did not want
her to be with the two others. He
said they were lazy lovers and
only thought of themselves.
When wom heard this, she said to the two:
“Your faces have been lost
I will not be with you.” (*KoiKoi*, translated by the designer Eirik Fatland)

Since *KoiKoi* had a universe with norms very different from our own regarding sexuality, gender, family, and time, to tell a story instead of providing descriptions or instructions may have more impact.

7.6 Characters

Another way of fostering a shared understanding of the fictional world is through *characters*. How the sexual content is unveiled through characters differs, but most include both desires and relations. This is how the character descriptions in *Screwing the Crew* go right to the core of the theme – sex in poly-relations:

A has wanted an open relationship for a while, mostly because C has made it sound attractive. B has been sceptical, but when B finally gave in, it's (s)he who gets laid and not A. A might not have had too much sex during the years which is why (s)he wanted the open relationship, but is shy and insecure and doesn't really know how to score. It's no secret that X is B's lover.

A: “I'm just more picky, that's all!”

B: “It's not my fault (s)he doesn't get laid. It was his/her idea.” (*Screwing the Crew*; access to character descriptions on the web page)

It is common to include short descriptions of all the characters in the design abstract. This fosters transparency and enables players to choose their favourite characters to play (e.g., *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Kink* and *Coffee*, *Nocturne*, *Inside Hamlet*, *Vedergällningen*). The descriptions are concise:

Holly: Member of the Indigo house co-housing family. A modern-day priestess of Dionysus, in her home there is enough for everyone: sex, wine, food, passion, and drama. . . (*Just a Little Lovin'*)

By prioritising among the characters, a player can influence what kind of play they are in for. The characters, as the key interface into the larp for a player, vary as players are different. The "Völva" Svanlaug Warydottir is not for the faint-of-heart:

Lover of Thorve and Hrefna. Making eyes at Ingirun. Svanlaug loves the extreme temperatures and to switch between them. Hot stones on her body, playing with flames or rolling around in the snow. (*Vedergällningen*)

At the same time, players reading about Svanlaug will probably understand that sexuality in this larp is something positive, queer, and physical. Comparably, at *Inside Hamlet*, the sexuality of the characters is as depraved as the rest of the story: Lydia, the mother of Bassani, who conspired and killed her husband, is described as manipulative, very dangerous, and enjoying an incestuous relationship with her son. Some larps also let all players read the full versions of all characters by linking to a Google folder, going for full transparency, but this usually happens later in the process and these full characters are seldom part of the design abstract.

The settings and the themes for the larps, and to what extent they are erotic vary, but the design abstracts clearly favour transparency. As one of the criteria for inclusion in the dataset was signalling that a larp has sexual content, this is not surprising, and it is possible that there are larps with erotic play that do not signal this as part of the design abstract. Even so, there is a wealth of larps where the players are not going to be surprised with erotic or oppressive content as its presence is clearly signaled in the five ways discussed so far: description, imagery, ingredient lists, prose, and characters. The sixth category, game mechanics, requires a longer discussion.

7.7 Mechanics for Erotic Larping

There will be extensive preparations onsite before we start playing, where we will workshop culture, relations, playing techniques, and hopefully create trust between the players. (*St. Croix*)

During the last three decades, a wide selection of larp mechanics have been developed in the Nordic tradition (Koljonen 2019). These play mechanics and simulation methods are often described in the design abstracts and then rehearsed in workshops lasting from one hour to a whole day before the runtime of the larp begins.¹² This section reviews larp mechanics

¹² At times the mechanics for portraying erotic interactions are not fully outlined in the design abstract, but explained only in handouts to the players or in the pre-larp workshop -- and possibly later described in a documentary article about the larp or a published larp script. When mechanics are not described on the website, we have used other methods to find out how they worked (publications, contacting the organizers). At times the design abstracts explicitly move the details of mechanics to the workshop:

We have a rule about sexual scenes and violent scenes. Those involved must go "off game" to negotiate before playing it. . . This applies to playing on sex with and without consent, violence with sexual content and other kinds of violence. We will provide meta techniques that we hope will make people feel safe . . . We will explain

designed to regulate and simulate erotic encounters in-game, giving players control over their experience and expression while strengthening the alibi to address sexual themes in a ludic manner. How the erotic interactions and the sexual expressions are designed can show how sexual playfulness, pleasure, liberation, and oppression are dealt with, and give indications about norms for shame and sexual arousal for the player-character.

Numerous mechanics for playing out amorous, erotic, and sexual content in larps were found in the dataset, enabling us to construct a new typology of sex mechanics currently in use in erotic larp design. The following five categories (see Table 2) are based on the earlier typologies discussed in the Background section, but adapted, updated, and expanded based on the current data. The first category is *agreeing* on diegetic narrative. We regard this here as erotic story-telling and it is not in focus in this article, even though it might be a part of some of the mechanics in use. The next two are enabling embodied erotic role-play through design: *abstracting* sexual expressions and *adjusting* sexual play level. We also have two new categories:

- 1) *calibrating* player-to-player interactions (includes negotiations in- and off-game and (de-escalating), and
- 2) *compelling* mechanics that push or pull players into erotic play, often diegetically against the character's will.

This last category is different from the others, since it deals directly with creating alibi for engaging in sexual content, not on how to portray it. The categories are analytical; in practice larp designs can and do employ mechanics from multiple categories.

Before diving deeper into the categories, it is important to note that in this review of contemporary larps, all of them include opting-out solutions. Players are always able to step out of the scene and stop playing, to momentarily stop in-character interaction between players, or stop the larp as a whole. These rules are typically implemented by non-diegetic stop words, safe words, or hand signals, but are in a few examples included in the in-game story world. The archetypal formulation of this design ideal is *The Law of Two Feet*:

If at any time during the game you find yourself in a position where you are neither entertained nor contributing, use your two feet, leave the game. (*Kapo*)

A common way to establish safety around intimate and other aspects of role-play is to include ways to momentarily stop in-character interaction between players. These rules are typically implemented by non-diegetic stop words, but are in a few examples included in the in-game story world. One such example is the "Korrigeringshandboken" (*Asylen*), another the diegetic safety poster in the game *Kink and Coffee*, which implements safety words both in- and out of game.

* * * * *

and practise this during the workshop. Sexual scenes will not be played out with so-called theatre sex/dry humping. (*St. Croix*, translated by the authors).

Table 2: Erotic Role-Play Mechanics: A typology of game mechanics for sexual content in larps, for interpreting erotic larp design.

EMBODIED EROTIC ROLE-PLAY:

1. *Abstracting sexual content and play*

- Focus on expressiveness of amorous activities.
- The body of the player expresses their character's emotions and erotic actions in a visual but not realistic way, sometimes with props. The action is not traditionally erotic, but acts as an expressive or symbolic replacement for erotic action.
- Examples of games that are abstracting embodied erotic role-play: *Roxanne*, *St. Croix*, *KoiKoi*, *A Nice Evening*, *Finding Tom*, *Vadergällingen* (intercourse), *Future is Straight*.

2. *Adjusting sexual play intensity*

- Focus on controlled feelings of sexual arousal.
- The sex mechanics adjust the level of expressed sexuality down, while keeping the erotic content realistic. The adjustment is guided by the larp design, not active negotiation between players. It allows for mirroring (toned down) real erotic scenes, while prohibits actual sexual interaction.
- Examples of games that feature adjusting embodied erotic role-play: *Kapo*, *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Forbidden History*, *End of the Line*, *Vadergällingen* (BDSM), *Libertines*.

3. *Calibrating player-to-player dynamics and its meaning*

- Focus on player agency in negotiating sexual states.
- Players, both diegetically and non-diegetically, negotiate what they want to engage in with a specific co-player at a specific moment, and what does it express of their characters. The sex mechanics in this group include escalating/de-escalating and all kinds of negotiations in- and off-game. In very few cases the players are allowed to calibrate up to engagement in "real sex."
- Examples of games that feature calibrated embodied erotic role-play: *Inside Hamlet*, *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Kink & Coffee*, *Pan*, *3AM Forever*, *Redemption*, *Pleasing Women*.

4. *Compelling erotic engagement*

- Focus on alibi for playing out sexual content.
- The game mechanics push players to play out sexual content. Through characters with

dominating powers, possession mechanics, or scripted scenes, the player-characters are pushed and pulled into erotic scenes. Often the only way to refuse compelled erotic larping, is to exit the scene (sometimes this means stopping role-playing for a while). This gives a strong alibi for playing out (transgressive) sexual content. Compelling mechanics are combined with other types of mechanics for erotic play.

- Examples of games that compel erotic engagement: *Baphomet*, *House of Craving*, *Pan, Follow My Lead* (scripted scenes), *Redemption*.

STORY-TELLING EROTIC ROLE-PLAY:

5. Agreeing on diegetic narrative.

- Focus is on the story, not embodied experience or performance.
- The players go out of the larp to decide what happens. The narrative is either just verbally agreed on, or helped by outcome resolution systems (like using dice). It can also be a monologue that decides the story of one of the characters in the scene.
-
- Examples of games that include story-telling erotic role-play: *A Nice Evening*, *Screwing the Crew* (monologue), *Just a Little Lovin'* (monologue).

* * * * *

7.8 Abstracting Erotic Play

When a sex mechanic has an *abstracting* function, it might not visually look like an erotic interaction, but the design may still give room for immersion into sexual emotions. The mechanics used for abstraction of sexual expression makes the playstyle expressive, stylized, thematically appropriate, or immersive. For example, *Finding Tom* uses balloon-animal balloons as expressive and humorous phalluses.

In the non-verbal short-form larps *Follow My Lead*, *Roxanne*, and *Spellbound*, abstracted action is the only way to conduct sexual expressions. Here is an example of a thoroughly specified, but not necessarily erotic, game mechanic:

When the Undergrounders bind a human, they also use a ribbon for this. When bound a human must obey the leading of their Undergrounder. Each Undergrounder has three ribbons and can therefore bind three different humans, or perhaps bind the same human several times, to underline the severity of the binding. To bind a human the Undergrounder must get the human to either: – Dance with them, – Eat or drink their food or wine, or – Accept a gift. (*Spellbound*)

Some long-form larps also use abstract, yet physical, ways of representing sexual scenes. For example, in *St. Croix*, a historical larp about Danish slave-owners in the Caribbean, the most powerful character holds another in a neck-grip from behind, while silently counting to 10 (in the tempo chosen), then pushes the subordinate to the ground (Stamnestrø 2018). The mechanic highlights power dynamics over the erotic, due to the theme of the larp.

An early and influential method for abstracting sex mechanic is *Ars Amandi* (Brown and Stenros 2018), developed for *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003, not part of the dataset):

The core of the *Ars Amandi* method involves limiting the body area that the players touch and use in physical interaction to hands, arms, shoulders . . . and the neck . . . In some instances the interaction has been restricted to only include hands and arms. Touching the permitted areas, combined with eye contact and breath and moans constitutes the A to Z of *Ars Amandi*. (Wieslander 2014)

A few larps in our sample (e.g. *Screwing the Crew*) still used it. Also, as it is relatively well known, it can be introduced to a larp by players during a workshop (e.g. in *Kapo*, see Nordic Larp Wiki 2019).

Ars Amandi has also been modified in ways that suit a larp better. The closest to the original design, to cater for intimacy and sensuality, was seen in the four-gendered alternative world of *Reborn* (2018), where it is called “soulsex,” and includes closed eyes, touching of the face, and kissing. An example of more significant modifications is found in the hunter-gatherer larp *KoiKoi* (2014), where *Ars Amandi* was extended into a rhythmic sound and harmony ritual (Eirik Fatland, email to the designer, August 19, 2021). Rituals for (sex) magic and sexual arousal were also used in *Vedergällningen* and *Spellbound*.

The abstracting mechanics used for portraying power, pain, and dominance vary from symbolic (e.g. *Spellbound*) to more corporeal (e.g., *Finding Tom*) – obviously always with the possibility to opt out. Even when the narrative does not have clear “top” and “bottom” characters (as in BDSM), the power-play may be present in the method used for acting out sexual content. In the onsite player handout for *A Nice Evening with the Family*, a larp built on classic Nordic bourgeois theatre plays like *Hedda Gabler* and the Danish movie *Festen*, it is explicitly stated that sex in this larp is about power, potency, and control. The in-game technique, inspired by *Ars Amandi*, emphasises the theme and refers to “dominant” and “submissive” even if this game is not about BDSM:

With the dominant on top and the submissive lying down you are both allowed to use your hands . . . on the other player’s hands and lower arms. You should not touch anywhere else. These touches can be gentle, or rough, ecstatic or bored, etc.

The dominant character then sets the tone by uttering a word or a short sentence . . . This is met with a word from the submissive. You then take turns sharing words that represent your character’s state of mind during the act. (*A Nice Evening with the Family*)

Even if the method is more abstractive when it comes to portraying sexual intercourse, it may be viewed as an adjusting mechanic for erotic power-play, designed for both physical interactions and strong emotions. For example, touching hands while looking another in the eyes and breathing heavily, as in *Ars Amandi*, is physical and can be emotional but it is abstract compared to actual lovemaking. The categories discussed here are analytical; in practice the mechanics can be understood in multiple categories. For example, using props as phalluses can be abstract (as with balloons in *Finding Tom*), or adjusting (placing a dildo near one’s crotch in *Just a Little Lovin’*).

7.9 Adjusting the Level of Sexual Intensity

Several of the larps in the dataset use bespoke metatechniques for playing sexual content to tie in with the theme, setting, and play style of the larps. Mechanics meant to *adjust* the level of intensity and physical interaction, usually to lower it, are common (see also Stenros 2013). This kind of design renders the play style less abstractive, more sexual, and possibly more immersive. A particularly widespread simulation technique is called either *theatre style* or *dry humping*. While interpretations of “theatre style sex” vary, usually this means a visually recognizable dry humping with clothes that may or may not involve physical contact. The sexual intensity is adjusted so that no nudity or actual penetration take place, and the individual players can adjust the physicality so genitals do or do not come in touch through their clothes. In some larps, methods of acting out sex are just named shortly in the sign-up, with no elaboration: “very physical play, including theatre style sex simulation ‘dry humping’” (*Pan*). Both mutual and loving erotic scenes, as well as sexual transgression, can be played out with this technique. *Just a Little Lovin’* included a detailed, non-heteronormative bespoke method for sex: *the phallus method*. This was a way to make sexual play fit narratively with the overarching theme, and its focus on male gay sexuality:

Find one (or more) phallus. At least one of the participants must have a phallus. It can also be a stick, a candle or a vegetable, if you cannot get hold of one of the in-game props. . . Keep your clothes on. Have a phallus ready.

- a. The phallus is gender-free, everyone can use one. The prop . . . symbolizes sexual assertiveness and penetrative sex in one form or another. It will simulate hetero sex and lesbian sex as well as gay sex. . .
- b. Before you start, be aware of what kind of emotions you wish your character to explore in the scene.
- c. The sex scene shall be as visual and emotional real as possible.
- d. And even if your character is not having fun, you should! . . . End the scene: [by reciting an] “Inner Monologue” [out loud]. (*Just a Little Lovin’*)

Säädyttömiä Aikeita used an optional seashell method, inspired by the phallus method, but modified to be less oriented towards male sexuality and also more abstract (Teerilahti 2021). Mechanics of adjusting can be close to out-of-game erotic interaction, and the player-character physical experience and emotions can be indistinguishable. The *inner monologue* from the character mentioned above means verbalising thoughts out loud, words the other player(s) can hear, but not the characters. This is not to foster agreement on the narrative, but a metatechnique to focus back on the fictional character and narrative – and simulate the intimacy created in sex. Another way to stress the performative aspect is to invite audience to a sex scene as in *House of Craving*, where if the player tells someone “I need some alone time,” it is an invitation to watch a masturbation scene (Koulu 2020). Clothes are on while “masturbating” is performed.

Out of the 25 larps with sexual themes, two (*Gården* and *Asylen*) were open to physical interaction with genitals and other erogenous zones, but even those included a choice of adjusting the level of sexual intensity to pretend-play instead of “real sex.”¹³

¹³ *Baphomet*, *Pan*, and *Inside Hamlet* hint towards it, e.g. “Participants are allowed to take physical interactions of a sensual nature – flirting, touching, kissing and so on – as far as they mutually choose.” (*Inside Hamlet*).

The eight larps that include BDSM scenes also provide adjustment when it comes to a combination of playing out pain or bondage (e.g., stipulate that all binding should be escapable). It is common that within the same larp, players can choose between levels provided by the larp design (e.g., in *Just a Little Lovin'* using the phallus on their arm or close to genitals), or even an in-built part of the mechanics, like the simulation levels one is supposed to whisper in the other's ear before a BDSM session is started:

1. **SiM (simulating):** Faked pain, theatrical sex without much body contact, and simulated bondage without real knots.
2. **Semi-SiM:** Some pain (with exaggeration through acting), simulated sex with clothes on, easily escapable bondage.
3. **Realistic (but some SiM):** Close to a real level of pain, simulated sex with pants on, bondage with knots (still with exaggeration through acting). (*Kink* and *Coffee*)

This means that there is a combination of adjustment (different designer established levels of interaction) and negotiation (players choosing during runtime how to play).

7.10 Calibrating Player-to-Player Dynamics

To decide their common limits for play and intimacy, players may calibrate before or during an erotic larp scene, as exhibited by several larps in the dataset. Calibrating the player-to-player dynamics influences what the players physically engage in and what happens between the characters. This is a specific type of sexual mechanic for larps, which has not been included in typologies before. In recent years there has been increasing discussion about in-game playstyle calibration between players. According to Johanna Koljonen, mechanics for playstyle calibration

allow players to fluidly keep a scene in line with everyone's personal boundaries, while telling very nuanced stories together even on difficult topics. Depending on the content of your larp, calibration may be needed for physical consent (what can happen with my body), narrative consent (what kinds of stories can I participate in at this time), and playstyle intensity (what kinds of behaviours can I be part of or subjected to at this time). (Koljonen 2020)

Another way to think about this is to consider what is acceptable for the player and what is acceptable for the character, how the magic circle is drawn between the two, and how to keep the play within everyone's personal boundaries. Calibrating the player-to-player dynamic takes into account that the player and the character are the same.

The methods for negotiation and aftercare align with earlier research (Stenros 2013; also Grasmø 2019): Nordic larps have incorporated methods from BDSM subcultures (Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020) to increase senses of safety and security, while acknowledging sexual arousal as a factor. Our data again confirms this finding.

In *End of the Line* (2016) sexuality was negotiated in advance and represented by a range of methods, ranging from verbal descriptions to dry-humping. *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011) has mandatory negotiating before every erotic scene. Larps from the company Participation

Design Agency (*Pan, Baphomet, Inside Hamlet, 3 AM Forever*, see PDA 2021) use theatre style sex as default, and include escalation/de-escalating methods and tapping-out (like in wrestling matches) for physical interaction and sexual content. The escalation and de-escalation methods are diegetic: *Inside Hamlet* uses the code-word “rotten” to invite more intensity to (sexual) action, while “pure” is used to signal de-escalation. From 2019 on, *Baphomet* has used scratching to invite escalation. The calibrating mechanics are motivated “to enable us to interact fluidly and respectfully” and “continuously negotiate” (*Inside Hamlet*), and it is mandatory to workshop the three interaction methods pre-game:

1. **Stepping it up!** You use a distinct code phrase to signal that you would like to step up the intensity of play directed at you.
2. **Taking the offer.** When someone uses the code phrase you’re getting an invitation to increase the level of intensity. If you are NOT comfortable with stepping up you decline by shaking your head and continue playing as before.
3. **Tapping out.** If someone comes on too strong in their play, just tap them twice, as gently or roughly as is needed to get their attention. . . any participant can choose to leave the situation. (*Inside Hamlet*)

Calibrating between players while being in character is a newer method developed for larps with erotic content, while negotiating off-game before the larp or before a scene have a longer history in Nordic larp (see Grasmø 1998).

7.11 Compelling Erotic Engagement

A multitude of mechanics and designs are developed for Nordic larps to safely engage players in erotic larping. In what seems like a contrast, some larps push players to play out sexual content. The *compelling mechanics* are not described in erotic larping typology before; by designing characters with dominating powers, possession mechanics, specific spaces for erotic play, or loosely scripted scenes, the player-characters are pushed and pulled into erotic scenes.

Power play, or loss of control, is obviously a common theme in BDSM role-play, but it is often also a focus in larps which enable erotic larping. In this data corpus we find domination done by therapists (*Asylen*); officers (*Gården*); slave owners and gentry (*St. Croix, Inside Hamlet, Libertines*); supernatural beings (*End of the Line, Spellbound, 3 AM Forever*); ghosts (*House of Craving*); gods and demons (*Pan, Baphomet, Vedergällningen*); elders (*Kapo, Vedergällningen, The Forbidden History*); computer/invisible guards (*Kapo*); and BDSM practitioners (*Just a Little Lovin’, Kink and Coffee, Follow My Lead*).

We demand from our players that you feel comfortable around the vision and setting of this event. You will experience vulnerability, loss of control, abuse and violence. (*Asylen, translated by author*)

Larp mechanics are used to compel in-game sex scenes, both nice and perverted ones, although there is often a connection to oppressive themes. In connection to compelling mechanics, the design abstracts stress not only the use of opt-out mechanics but also the players’ responsibility in this: “You need to feel confident in use of stop words and maintain a good communication with your co-players.” (*Asylen, similar in Gården, translated by author*)

While mechanics for compelling erotic content have precursors in larp design (for example, as love potions, see Grasmo 1998), they seem to have entered larp design discourse when the possession mechanic was introduced for *Pan* in 2013:

A big part of PAN is the possession mechanic. Your character will be possessed by the aspects of the Great God Pan. These aspects are lust, desire, pleasure and selfish indulgence; gluttony, sleep, sex, passion, closeness, control, curiosity, the twisted, and the weird. (*Pan*, similar text also in *Baphomet*)

When a player receives the necklace of the Pan or Baphomet, they are possessed, and they can command every player-character around them. Similarly, in *House of Craving*, half of the players play ghosts who have the power to physically force the living characters into twisted erotic encounters: “A house that will make them enact its perverted fantasies” (*House of Craving*), and the other players are told to obey.

Finally, player-characters may be compelled into erotic larping by loosely scripted scenes (*Roxanne*, *Spellbound*, *Follow My lead*, *Finding Tom*). This method implies a break out-of-game where the runtime gamemasters of the larp instruct what is going to happen in next scene, for instance engaging in anonymous sex in a dark park (*Finding Tom*) or for all humans to be bound by the Undergrounders (*Spellbound*).

In the four groups of mechanics for erotic larping studied, the aim is for the player to feel safe and free to consent to erotic action, even if the compelling mechanics may imply stepping out of the game for a while, if the player do not consent. For more immersive or erotic playstyles, the larp designs include negotiation and calibration, in-game and off-game. In addition to the safety mechanics embedded in sex mechanics there is a wide range of other safety measures. Some larps present several pages of rules, mechanics, and precautions, not only for erotic and sexual play, but to ensure the wellbeing of all players in all kinds of interactions. These fall outside the frame of this article, and are not discussed here.

7.12 Non-Normative Amorous Play and Queer Design

Our dataset strongly shows that larp scenarios have become more inclusive and representative regarding genders, sexualities, non-monogamy, and kink, just during one decade (cf. Stenros 2021; see also Stenros and Sihvonen 2019; Sihvonen and Harviainen 2020). This chapter is divided to inclusivity for *sexual orientation*, *gender*, *kink*, and *relationship structure*, even if these often overlap.

Many larps in the data corpus set out to signal inclusiveness. There are different strategies in how to openly communicate this. One way is to replace heteronormative language with more neutral terminology and, for example, not to mention either sexual orientation or gender identity (“(s)he”, “Tom/Tracey”, “their spouse”).¹⁴ A different path is to be explicitly open: “You as a participant can choose the sexual preference and gender identity of your character. The characters will be adjusted to your preferences.” (*Baphomet*)

The design abstract for *Vedergällningen* is particularly clear as it explicitly calls out for “[h]eavy lesbian representation” in order to challenge the norms of both sexuality and gender. Portrayal of the Völva characters is clearly instructed:

¹⁴ Note that open language or gender-neutral design can imply extra affective labour for queer players (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019).

Sexual lust makes you whole and strong. Sexual rituals strengthen the group, and yourself . . . The sexual norm is being non-monogamous, love is normally reserved for other women or alternative genders. Men are of occasional use for sexual pleasure, and for breeding . . . Völvas are encouraged to find their own sexual paths . . . (*Vedergällningen*)

Every Völva is given a specific kink in their character (e.g. blood-play, strangulation, ice/fire-play, drowning), so this is a larp that communicates inclusivity both in kink, gender, and relationship-structure.

7.13 Sexual Orientations

All larps in the dataset are receptive to queer play, queer players, and/or queer characters. Only five larps clearly position themselves as hetero-leaning, meaning that the narrative and the promotion material are framed as heteronormative. Even these larps may include gay men or lesbians among their characters; *A Nice Evening with the Family* has the token queer couple (as was more common in earlier larp design, see Sihvonen and Stenros 2019). *Roxanne* is playable for every gender and couples can be of any combination, but the only mention of coupling on the website is heteronormative: “He wants you. She wants me. The thought strikes like lightning. The dance, the body, closeness.” On the other hand, even if the narrative of the larp *Gården* portrays a society with strong binary norms, it can be read as critique or an interesting normative background, and the narrative for each character may be very queer.¹⁵

As many as half of the larps in our sample clearly signal that they are inclusive when it comes to sexual orientation and gender. This is a significant change that has taken place during a decade. Some of the larps are explicitly queer in that they center on queer people, queer aesthetics, or queer themes (e.g., *Vedergällningen*, *Disgraceful Proposals*, *Finding Tom*) or they stage runs of the larp centering on queer people (*Screwing the Crew* all male/female runs). Sometimes erotic larps do not even give players a chance to escape the gayness: “. . . if you as a male larper have no interest in playing a gay or bisexual character this might not be the game for you. We expect . . . physical intimacy between many of the characters.” (*Just a Little Lovin'*). Indeed, some designers use queer content (as for instance the opening quote of this article) as a litmus test (Pedersen in Edland, Pedersen and Gyldenstrøm 2021); players who have a problem with queer sexuality on the website probably will not enjoy the larp and should not sign up.

The most common way of including queer elements in a larp is by including queer characters. Including queer characters in contemporary larps is easy. When a larp is set in a historical period, at a time when contemporary queer identities would be ahistorical, it is still possible to find ways to include those characters, as was done in *Vedergällningen*, *Inside Hamlet*, and *Libertines*.

There will be characters of a diverse set of sexualities present at *Libertines*. In 1795, sexual identity as such was not a concept – sexuality was something you did . . . That means that judging someone over their sexuality was not really a thing. There are acts that are frowned upon, but they will not be very relevant at the larp . . .” (*Libertines*)

¹⁵ This is particularly true for the queer larp *The Future is Straight* (2021), about a gay conversion camp.

Just a Little Lovin' (2011) and *Finding Tom* (2021) are both stories about homosexual men, but include other identities. The former tells the story of how HIV/AIDS hit the gay community in the 1980s: "How gay is this larp? . . . pretty gay but not exclusively so..." (*Just a Little Lovin'*). *Finding Tom* is a scenario created to commemorate the artist and gay leather man Tom of Finland, and states that "Every adult is welcome to take part in this story regardless of their gender or sexual identity. Anyone can find Tom." (*Finding Tom*)

When the larps have couple sign-up (e.g. *Pan* 2013, *Baphomet* 2015, *Roxanne*), it is up to the players to form queer or hetero couples. The queerness need not be coded into the character (either by being designed as queer or by letting the player choose), but can have a queer-inclusive narrative. Pan, the deity that possesses characters both in *Pan* (2013) and *Baphomet* (2015) "doesn't care who they are interacting with, as long as there is passion and drive. Pan is inherently queer, ignoring norms, personal sexual identity and morals" (*Pan*). The possession game mechanic, also found in *House of Craving*, strongly encourages erotic interaction outside of heteronormativity.

7.14 Gender Inclusion

This section discusses characters of non-normative gender, inclusion of more than two genders in the fiction, and whether players are allowed to play characters of any gender. The two common ways of addressing gender are to either connect the gender of the character to the gender identity of the player (*Nocturne*, *Asylen*), or to disconnect the two so that players can choose the gender of their characters (e.g. *Libertines*, *Finding Tom*, *Reborn*). Playing a character that has a different gender from the player is called *crossplay*. The term "your identified gender" and/or the phrasing "every gender is welcome" are included in all design abstracts since 2015 in the dataset, showing that the larp designers are aware of genders outside the cis-norm.

The genders of the characters are addressed in multiple ways. For example, *House of Craving* explicitly "strive[s] for a balanced representation of various gender identities" and thus has two out of 24 characters written as non-binary. At *The Forbidden History's* sign-up, the players can choose between their gender as female, male, non-binary, or other (with explanation field). In the non-verbal scenarios (*Spellbound*, *Follow My Lead*) gender is not mentioned in characters nor fictions, and are eventually up to players imagination. *Inside Hamlet* and *Kink and Coffee* have both gendered characters (in the latter also non-binary characters) and characters whose gender is up to the player.

Two of the erotic larp designs reinvent gender. In *KoiKoi* (2014) children were gender-free, and choose their gendered ritual when they grow up, either as man, wom, or the third gender "nuk." *Reborn* (2014) created soul-genders built on the four elements:

The ideal case is to only be attracted to the "soul-opposite" gender of your own. . . : Water – Fire. Earth – Air. This means that polyamorous groups with several different genders involved are common, even if the ideal might be one with only two genders in the group. (*Reborn*)

7.15 Kinky Variations

Follow My Lead is a non-verbal larp about kink exploration and kink negotiation that gives participants the alibi and tools to artistically play with submission and

domination. (*Follow My Lead*)

Erotic larps engage with kink¹⁶ in several ways. Again, there are characters that have defined kinks, larps that explore kinky themes, and larps featuring kink-related locations. For example, both *Kink and Coffee* and *Follow My Lead* are set at a BDSM-club, *Just a Little Lovin'* includes a dark room, and in *Vedergällningen* all the völvas are kinky.

In other scenarios, playing transgressive scenes of domination (e.g., *Spellbound*, *End of the Line*, *3 AM Forever*, *Kapo*), sexual abuse (e.g. *Libertines*, *Asylen*, *St. Croix*), and punishment (e.g. *Gården*, *St. Croix*) may be regarded as kink-inclusive play, but they may also strengthen the view of kink-practice as deviant behavior. Kinks mentioned in the larps' design abstracts include sadomasochism, puppy-play, pony-play, restraints, drowning/waterboarding, humiliation, leather fetish, foot fetish, crossdressing, scarification, strangulation, sacrificing ritual, whipping, bondage, tantra, diaper, wetsex, soft touch domination, sex with objects, master and slave, group sex, and anonymous sex.

There are also sexual practices depicted in larps with erotic content that we label as extreme role-playing. If, for instance, sexual violence is part of the fictional world, that is not kink-play, but violence. However, if some characters engage in "rape-play" as part of their sexuality, then it is regarded as kink. This distinction, however, is not always clear in the design abstracts.

7.16 Open Relationships

Finally, erotic larp designs portray sexual encounters and relationships between more than two people. The norm of the committed relationship between two people is challenged, for example, through characters described to be in open relationships (e.g. *Just a Little Lovin'*, *Kink and Coffee*, *KoiKoi*, *3 AM Forever*, *Disgraceful Proposals*), but also through mentions of threesomes, swinger clubs, and group sex. Furthermore, *Screwing the Crew*, *Vedergällningen*, and *Reborn* were specifically designed around polyamorous relationship structures, while cult settings (e.g. *End of the Line*, *Pan*, *Baphomet*, and *House of Craving*) open up for wild sex and orgies.

This sample of larps shows few examples of exclusive heteronormativity, and a broad inclusiveness regarding non-normative sexual orientation, gender, sexual preferences, and relationship structure. A significant change in larp content, themes, and player preferences has taken place during the last decade.

8. DISCUSSION

Numerous Nordic larps have sexual content, and the trend is getting stronger. The 25 different erotic larps and larps with sexual content under scrutiny have been run approximately 100 times altogether, and roughly half of these runs have been produced since 2017. In total more than 50 Nordic designers have been part of creating larps for embodied erotic role-play over the last ten years. In their article about intimacy and trust in larps, Waern and Stenros wrote in 2015: "Playing on physical intimacy and sex is less common, both in the sense that fewer larps include any way to represent physical intimacy and that in most that do, players still tend not to play extensively on sex." This study shows that much has changed over the course of just

¹⁶ Kink is understood as both as non-conformative and as "sexual deviance" as Ariane Cruz (2016) explains in an affirmative manner in her *Politics of Perversion*.

six years when it comes to playing out intimate scenes. Even if many larps still do not include erotic themes or a specific way to enact sex, themes of sex and intimacy have become more accepted, erotic larps have become established, and ways to enact sex are a more integral part of the larp designs.

Erotic larp design in our data corpus invite players to play with sexual arousal but without relief: no orgasms, no fondling of genitals or sexual penetrative action. The design, as shown in the design abstracts, is meant to bracket and steer erotic interaction, most of the time containing and taming it. Even so, the norms related to erotic conduct seem to be individualized (see Weiss 2011): It is up to each player individually where the limits go, instead of common rules of play for all. Ultimately, the players are instructed to calibrate and negotiate how intimate the erotic content will be played out – sometimes up to and including unsimulated sex. This implies that an erotic larp both can be an arena for players to explore their sexual identities as well as erotic emotions, and can also be regarded as sexual play in itself (see Paasonen 2018).

The mechanics available to represent sexual acts have also expanded and become more physical. Simultaneously, the clear separation between player and character has become increasingly challenged (e.g. Järvelä 2019), so the need for other and/or stronger alibis for play seems present. In recent years, in addition to a rise of erotic larp, there has been stronger influence from liberal, queer, and kinky designers and players, fostering an understanding of sexuality as more queer and more playful than the traditional and backward-looking heterosexual procreation of fantasy larps 10–20 years ago.

In this discussion, we address two themes that emerge from reading the design abstracts as literary–ludic texts. First, we notice that the tension between the separation of the player and the character and the simultaneous arousal of both remains an issue, especially as players can individually carefully craft and calibrate their erotic play experiences to suit their desires. Larps have definitely become more sex-positive in their varied portrayals and mechanics, yet we must question the signalling in the design abstract, as many larps seem to have structures to remove player agency through compelling mechanics. Second, we need to address the inclusivity of these larps. Who can participate in these larps? The design abstracts are written in an inclusive manner, yet there are structures in place that put limits on this inclusion. The design abstracts also encourage self-selection on part of potential players – signalling that these larps are not, in fact, for everyone.

8.1 Layers of Alibi

In the Background section we identified that there is a tension at the core of erotic larp design: Separating the player and the character is key in constructing the alibi for play; yet sexual arousal, a key driver in an erotic larp, viscerally underlines that the player and the character are the same body. It seems that the structure of the alibi for play is different here.

First of all, the design abstracts in our dataset present erotic larping as a serious playful adult activity, that is a well-produced and worthwhile pastime.¹⁷ It is possible to see the

¹⁷ Playing, even without a sexual component, threatens the adult responsible identity, and novel and improvisational free play is a potential source of embarrassment for adults (Deterding 2017). Larping is an activity that in many social contexts is seen as particularly embarrassing as it contains pretend play, acting “as if.” While rarely openly ridiculed in the Nordic context today, it is still a significantly less established form of adult play than, say, playing digital games or *tennis*. Furthermore, sexual play may evoke embarrassment by itself, and even shame (Kontula 2021; see also Frank 2013; Stenros and Bowman 2018).

discussion relating to framing larp as art (e.g. Stenros 2010a) as part of the struggle for alibi. Engaging in art is a possible alibi for adult play. This is an attempt to render participation in (erotic) larps as a worthwhile endeavour.

Second, while the player–character division is questioned, it is still an aspect of alibi creation together with the overall narrative and fictional context. Erotic larp designs often employ *thick characters*, where a character’s history, interests, sexuality, and relations are outlined. This creates a stronger alibi for playing out erotic content than when players create the characters themselves, or the characters are very similar to the players (aka *thin characters*). The alibi logic here follows the roleplay agreement: “It was not me, it was the character someone else created.” Even when players choose characters based on short descriptions, it is the long description that provides alibi.

Third, larp design also works to strengthen alibi in numerous ways. *Spatial design* can enable erotic play by providing spaces for where sexual or erotic events can take place. These spaces can be diegetic (such as dark room, interrogation room, ritual space) or non-diegetic (black box, “kink zone”). Sometimes these spaces stack fiction upon fiction and expect characters to play a specific functional erotic role (e.g., interrogator, sex worker, cruiser). Using *narrative design* to strengthen alibi was also very common in the dataset. A significant number of larps with erotic content are played out in the frame of horror, domination, religion, or with the power of gods or demons. Being possessed or dominated by “unnatural forces” provides a special strong alibi for the players. Game mechanics can also be used in a compelling way. Domination especially is a common tool. In *Vedergällingen* it was directly written into the character relationships, whereas in *Pan* and *Baphomet* whoever wears “the necklace of Pan” must be obeyed. This third group we have discussed as compelling mechanics: pushing, strongly encouraging, or forcing characters to engage in erotic and sexual acts.

Since none of these moves fully solve the tension between distance from character and the arousal of the player, erotic larp design seems to use several layers of alibi to enable engaging in erotic scenes. Some alibi-strengthening structures work through *increasing agency* (f.i. calibrating mechanics), by enabling and empowering the player to participate; negotiate and calibrate play; use sexual mechanics; choose a role; enter a specific space; etc. Other alibi-strengthening structures work through *limiting agency*, compelling a player/character to act in a certain way because of the mechanics. This is where oppressive themes and power structures come in: Playing on being oppressed gives a stronger alibi for playing on sexual themes.¹⁸ We call this stacking of enabling transgressive play while restricting player action *double alibi*. It can be compared to *consensual non-consent*, a concept that is found in BDSM subcultures (Ley 2020), because the players agree to bracket their agency. The only way to escape play activity is to quit playing. The function of this double alibi is to uphold the division between the player and the character, to hide the real-life desires by being playfully forced from outside.

A useful way of understanding erotic larp is as what Cindy Poremba (2007) calls *brink play*. In brink play, framing an activity as play is used as an alibi to be able to do things that would otherwise violate social norms. In brink play, norms are bent and played with, but not broken. Erotic larp is playful, but it is meant to feel real: It is located on the brink. However,

¹⁸ It is interesting to juxtapose this with sex therapist Jack Morin’s (1996) work. According to him, the four cornerstones of eroticism are: longing and anticipation, breaking taboos, searching for power, and overcoming ambivalence. Interestingly, all four straddle the line between attraction and obstacles, as do larps (and games as well). Basically, we want something, but if for some reason it’s not easily had, we find ourselves wanting it more.

remaining on that brink, developing a whole tradition of works there, requires ongoing work to uphold alibi.

8.2 LIMITS OF INCLUSION

During the past decade Nordic erotic larps have proliferated, and non-normative amorous play has become a common part of the design of larps. According to design abstracts, Nordic erotic larps have been quite inclusive of players with marginalized genders and sexualities. This is a recent development; for example, queer or gay themes were extremely rare before *Just a Little Lovin'* that premiered in 2011 (Stenros 2021).¹⁹ The sexual play available in Nordic erotic larps is plural; heteronormativity is rejected.

That said, anthropologist Margot Weiss' (2011) work on the rise and popularity of pansexual BDSM-communities in the San Francisco as a result of neo-liberal consumer-culture resonates with Nordic erotic larp. Weiss discusses how "just play" and liberating role-play may be excuses for upholding inequality, and questions the eroticizing of suppression and torture. Furthermore, there are significant similarities between the communities she studies and how larps frame liberal inclusion of every identity, signalling being totally safe, while simultaneously playing with inequality, the individualisation of norms, and the making of the self (Foucault in Weiss 2011). To participate in a larp, a potential participant needs to learn the skills to participate, but even more importantly, they need money. Many of the Nordic larps that feature erotic design (like *Inside Hamlet*, *Pan*, *Just a Little Lovin'*, *The Forbidden History*, *Libertines*, *A Nice Evening with the Family*) are clearly priced for a select, privileged group of people: professional, liberal, middle-class, with enough money and ability to join.²⁰ This is a similar demographic to the one Weiss studied in San Francisco. While subsidized tickets to erotic larps exist, and do help economic accessibility, participating is still costly.

Stories of marginalised people can be played out to foster empathy and understanding (Smith 2017), but also as identity tourism (Nakamura 1995). Furthermore, it is possible to do so in an erotic way. While the player base in Nordic countries is diverse in many ways, it is predominately white, meaning that addressing experiences of racialized people carries a particular risk of trivialization or "toxic embodiment" as Nakamura (2020) names the 21st century game-industry reframing of VR as virtuous and providing "racial empathy." Even if the design abstracts clearly signal inclusiveness of "all bodies," most larps in our data make no mention of ethnicity at all, effectively discriminating through absence (Trammell 2018). As Aaron Trammell (2020) reminds us, play is not just about pleasure, but also about pain and evoking and remembering painful emotions. Racism continues to be a part of the fabric of our societies, and we need to discuss how it also exists in erotic larp and how it differs from erotic role-play within BDSM cultures (cf. Cruz 2016). Thus while Nordic erotic larps have become much more inclusive during the past decade, there are still limits to be removed in the future.

Finally, it should be noted that the very subject matter of some of these larps, eroticism

¹⁹ The obvious trailblazer was *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003), where all characters were one of three new genders, the normative relationship structure contained four people, and all characters were, from the point of view of our world, queer (see Stenros 2010b). However, in its time *Mellan himmel och hav* was an anomaly.

²⁰ Note that there are also shorter larps playable in a few hours, in which one can participate at festivals, or even stage by oneself. The larps selected for the dataset in this article are all at least four hours long. Thus the situation is not quite as bad as this data corpus would suggest. Still, participation in a larp reviewed here requires paying the participation fee (100–500 Euros for a weekend) and travel, time away from work, and producing a costume and possible props.

in connection to oppression particularly, can render them inaccessible to some players. For example, people who face oppression regularly as members of a marginalized groups, people who have ancestral roots in enslavement, or people who have experiences of abuse or sexual violence may very well conclude that these kinds of larp are not for them and never will be. Indeed, the design abstracts are built to enable players to make informed decisions if a larp is for them – which clearly means that these larps are not for everyone. This underlines the importance of transparency in communicating the themes and other ingredients of a larp.

9. CONCLUSIONS

A clear tradition of Nordic erotic larps is emerging; significantly more larps in the international, contemporary scene deal with sexual themes and erotic content than just 6–7 years ago. The design of these larps cater for erotic and sexual play-styles, in addition to immersive play. Sexual arousal is no longer taboo, even if it is strongly bracketed and seldom proceeds to orgasmic experiences or real lovemaking. Larps with erotic design provide numerous layers of alibi to allow for participation, even as the character-player division, which has historically served as the foundation of the alibi, has been questioned. Design abstracts of larps communicate clearly and transparently the erotic content of the kind of play the larp aims for, with ingredient lists and content warnings, as well as prose vignettes, thematic illustrations, and character descriptions.

Erotic larps are inclusive of people of and themes relating to marginalised genders and sexualities. This has been a remarkable shift during the past decade. Erotic larps also contain a multitude of kinks woven into and played out in the fiction. Representations of non-monogamy are common. However, the cost of participation is quite high, meaning that economic accessibility remains an issue. Furthermore, while Nordic erotic larps are inclusive of different genders and sexualities, in the future more work is needed to improve inclusivity: Whose stories and fantasies are being explored in erotic larps? Who is able to participate in these larps?

Larps with erotic content typically send simultaneously two different messages: The larp is going to be adult, emotionally heavy, possibly shocking, and will include transgressive play. Concurrently, the larp designers assure the players that the larp is safe to play, there are rules, safety teams, pre-play negotiations, and always the possible to cut a scene or leave play. Numerous mechanics are available to play erotic larps; in this article they are divided to methods for abstracting erotic play, adjusting the level of sexual intensity, calibrating the player-to-player dynamic, and compelling erotic engagement.

The design abstracts of larps surveyed in this article promise that structured erotic role-playing games in fictional worlds are safe and exciting, and provide the players possibilities for exploring sexual identities and emotions. The next step in understanding embodied erotic role-play is to move from the design abstracts to the embodied practice. What do players do, what emotions and experiences are created? How do erotic larps relate to BDSM practice? What happens in and between the bodies of the players and characters – and what does it all mean to them? How can recreational erotic larping be leveraged for sexual well-being and transformative personal or educational change?

10. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Sharang Biswas and Katherine Castiello Jones, as well as the editors of *IJRP*, Sarah Lynne Bowman, Evan Torner, and William White, for their invaluable feedback. Special thanks also to J. Tuomas Harviainen, Mo Holkar, Annika Waern, and our colleagues at Game Research Lab. The making of this article has been supported by the Academy of Finland funded Center of Excellence in Game Culture Studies (CoE-GameCult, 312395) and University of Agder writing retreat at Metochi Study Center, Lesvos.

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APPENDIX A

Table 1: Overview of Nordic Erotic Larps 2011–2021

Larps with erotic or sexual content themes, with mechanics for playing such scenes out, designed to be played for more than four hours, and playable for 10 participants or more. Some of these larps are re-runned, and the webpages become updated and revised.

FI = Finland,
 SW = Sweden,
 DK = Denmark,
 NO = Norway,
 AU=Austria,
 FR= France,
 GE = Germany,
 PL = Poland,
 US = United States,
 UK = United Kingdom,
 UKR= Ukraine.

Larp runs are marked as sold out if thus indicated on the website.

Title	Premiere/ Published	Web site, accessed	Short description	Sexual play mechanics	Ticket cost, length	Runs	Designers	Other notes
<i>3 AM Forever</i>	2020 (FI), postponed to 2022	https://www.wildh untlarp.com/3-am- forever 14.7.22	Contemporary party with magical faeries who take the power from the humans to make them dance forever.	Theatre style: Possession.	€59–99, 5 hours	(FI) 2020 (postponed), (NO) 2021 (postponed) (sold out) (DKx2) 2022	Bjarke Pedersen and Juhana Pettersson (Participation Design Agency)	At the time of writing <i>3 AM Forever</i> has been postponed three times due to the pandemic, but two runs were finally played August 2022.
<i>A Nice Evening with the Family</i>	2018 (SW)	https://aniceeven g.se/ 4.3.2020	Bourgeois family drama, built around Winterberg's film <i>Festen</i> and several Nordic theatre plays.	Shag mechanic (top sit on the bottom). Black box. Off-game negotiations.	€290, 3 nights	(SWx2) 2018, (SWx2) 2019 (sold out)	Anna Westerling and Anders Hultman	The larp was originally staged four times in 2007; the 2018 version was significantly redesigned.
<i>Asylen (Eng. Asylum)</i>	2019 (SW)	http://www.lajvet.s e/asylen/ 15.8.2021	Near-future dystopian asylum for those who are queer (who are regarded as mentally ill).	Character's limits in questionnaire. BDSM/sex action simulation. General rules: variant of <i>Ars Amandi</i> .	€130, 2 nights	(SW) 2019	Caroline Sjöwall	
<i>Baphomet</i>	2015 (DK)	https://www.pantil ogy.com/baphomet 25.2.2020	"Vintage" suicide cult with possession and erotic decadence.	Theatre style: Possession. Rituals: Escalating/de- escalating: scratching/tap- out. BDSM simulation (and eventually real).	€140 (2015), €295–485 (2020), 3 nights	(DKx2) 2015 (DKx2) 2019, (DKx2) 2020 (sold out)	Linda Uldby and Bjarke Pedersen with Johanna Koljonen	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp. Sign-up as couples.
<i>Disgraceful Proposals</i>	2020 (FI))	https://disgracefulp roposals.wordpress .com/ 28.2.2020	Punk rococo, queer historically-inspired hedonism.	Sex performed with objects, not each other. Physical play with no genitals (Finnish earlier runs: "Sea Shell" built on Phallus method.)	€69–110, 1 night	(FI) 2020 (postponed) (FI) 2022	Tonja Goldblatt, Vili von Nissinen, Kirsi Oesch, and Nina Teerlahi (Kimera Artist Collective)	Erotic themes are central to the design in this larp. International and redesigned version of the larp <i>Säädyttömyä aikeita</i> , (FI) 2017, (FI) 2018. Postponed due to pandemic, scheduled to be played in 2022.
<i>End of the Line</i>	2016 (FI)	http://solmukohita. org/uploads/AW/F/	Contemporary vampires, in White Wolf's World of Darkness.	Fade to black: Variants of different abstracting methods.	€25, 7 hours	(FI) 2016, (GEx2) 2017, (US) 2017	Bjarke Pedersen, Juhana Pettersson, and Martin Ericsson for White Wolf	

		EndOfTheLine-intro.pdf 1.3.2020						
<i>Finding Tom / Tomia etsimässä</i>	2020 (FI)	https://findingtom.wordpress.com/ 10.8.2021	Art larp about Tom of Finland, and the history of gay men in Finland.	Simulated by variants of theatre sex, touching hands or balloons.	€15, 5 hours	(FIx5) 2020, (SW) 2021, (NO) 2021	Nina Mutik and Vili von Nissinen	Larp premiered as part of Tom of Finland jubileum. Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
<i>Follow My Lead</i>	2019 (US)	Published in 2020 in <i>Honey & Hot Wax</i> collection.	Non-verbal, about consent, BDSM and fetish, at a kink club.	Blindfolds. BDSM negotiations. Characters have representational kinks.	Free - 10 4 hours (2020)	(US) test runs, 2019, published 2020, (NO) 2020, (FI) 2022	Susanne	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
<i>Garden (Eng. The Farm)</i>	2017 (SW)	http://www.lajvets.e/garden/ 5.3.2020	Near-future treatment and torture to become a better human. Satire of two-gendered society.	<i>Trummaromet</i> (like a black box). Diegetic rulebook. Sex and BDSM real and simulated.	Free - €100 1 night	(SW) 2017	Caroline Sjöwall and Karl Alfredsson	
<i>House of Crawing</i>	2019 (DK)	https://www.houseofcrawing.com/ 28.2.2020.	Erotic (teenage) horror larp: The house ghosts will steer your taboo actions. First you play the family, then you play the same ghosts in the next run.	Theatre style. Ghost dominance/possession. (BDSM real and simulated) Pre-scripted erotic scenes.	€495 2 nights	(DKx6) 2019 (Sold out), (DKx6) 2022	Tor Kjetil Edland, Danny Wilson, and Bjarke Pedersen	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp. Adaptation of a freetform role-play with the same name.
<i>Inside Hamlet</i>	2015 (DK)	https://www.insidehamlet.com/ 28.2.2020.	Shakespeare's play adapted for 100 larpers in Elsinore castle, vintage decadence and descent into madness.	Theatre style. Escalating/de-escalating. Diegetic code words for invitation/tapping out – calibrating in-game	€400 (2018 version) 2 nights	(DK) 2015, 2017, 2018 (sold out)	Bjarke Pedersen, Martin Ericsson, Johanna Koljonen, and Simon Svensson. (Participation Design Agency)	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
<i>Just a Little Lovin'</i>	2011 (NO)	http://just-a-little-lovin.blogspot.com/ 25.2.2020.	Gay larp about desire, friendship, and fear of death, on three consecutive 4th of July celebrations. Explores the HIV/AIDS epidemic and surviving cancer.	Phallus method, including Feather and Inner monologue. Theatre style. BDSM simulated. Black box. Off-game negotiations.	€275 (2019), 5 nights	(NO) 2011, (SW) 2012, (DK) 2013, 2015, short version 2020 (FR) 2016, 2021 (US) 2017, (FI), 2018, (UK) 2019, (FR) 2022	Tor Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grasmo	Larp script published as a book in 2021. Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
<i>Kapo</i>	2011 (DK)	https://kapolarp.dk/ 4.3.2020	Near-future prison camp, where the prisoners rule themselves. Extreme play, sound/light disturbance, interrogations.	<i>Ars Amandi</i> . Theatre-style rape and domination/submission. Black box.	€35 for a 24 hour ticket (could play for 12, 24 or 48 hours)	(DK) 2011	Anders Berner, Jakob Hedegaard, Kim Holm, Juliana Mikkelsen, Peter Munthe-Kaas, Frederik Nylev, and Rasmus Petersen	

<i>Kink & Coffee</i>	2012 (NO)	Published 2014 in <i>Larps from the Factory</i> .	Introduction night at a BDSM club, where a religious polygamous family shows up.	Freeze and show fantasy (Kink zone), BDSM adjustment: SiM-levels. Diegetic poster with rules. Action cards for play.	€0–10, 5 hours	(NO) 2012, Published 2013, (SW) 2014, (AU) 2014, (UKRx3) 2018	Hanne Grasmø	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
<i>Koikoi</i>	2014 (NO)	http://koikoilaiv.org/ 5.3.2020	Hunter-gatherer larp with three genders, lots of rituals, also for sex.	Love-making ritual with eye-gazing, sound-(dis)harmony and rhythm-making. Rituals.	€65–90, 3 nights	(NO) 2014	Eirik Fatland, Margrete Raaum, Trine Lise Lindahl, and Tor Kjetil Edland	
<i>Libertines</i>	2018 (PL)	http://libertines.atropos.se/ 1.3.2020	In 1795, libertines gathered for a secret party, where a lot is at stake. They have norms outside society.	Theatre style. Behind closed doors.	€300–500, 3 nights	(PL) 2019, 2020	Simon Svensson and Julia Greip (Atropos)	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
<i>Nocturne</i>	2019 (NO)	https://struensee.wiki/site.com/nocturne 2.3.2020	Brothel in US Civil War, soldiers and sex workers trapped in same place.	Representation technique for sexual action, no dry humping. Off-game negotiations.	€140, 2 nights	(NO) 2019	Adrian Angelico and Anne Marie Stamnestrø	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
<i>Pan</i>	2013 (DK)	https://www.pantilogy.com/pan 28.2.2020.	Contemporary couples-therapy weekend, where Pan possesses people. Horror (and desires) from within.	Theatre style. Possession by object, every/body must follow orders from the possessed one.	€445 (2020), 3 nights	(DK) 2013, (NO) 2014, (FI) 2015, (DKx2) 2020	Linda Udby and Bjarke Pedersen	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
<i>Pleasuring Women</i>	2021 (SW)	http://pleasuringwomen.atropos.se/ 25.8.2021	British upper-class finishing school for young women in 1910. A story about young women discovering friendship, love, intimacy, and desire, in a reserved society.	Theatre style, cuddling.	€250–370, 3 nights	(SWx2) 2021, postponed to (SWx2) 2022	Julia Greip and Siri Sandquist, with Atropos	Postponed to 2022 Not included in analysis, published too late. One mixed run (all play women), one female player run.
<i>Redemption: Salvation Through Sin</i>	2021 (FI)	http://nordicrpg.fi/redemption/ 24.11.21	Historically-inspired cult of sinners set in Russia 1913.	Dry humping/theatre style. “The Hand” (between you and the body). Slow escalation with saying what you will do.	€350, 3 nights	(FIx2) 2021 (sold out)	Maria Pettersson and Juhana Pettersson	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp. Not included in analysis, published too late.
<i>Reborn</i>	2018 (SW)	https://reborn.atropos.se/ 1.9.2021 and Society document - google doc 15.9.21	Near-future reinventing of gender and relationships, dissolution of the body and the ego. A kind of spiritual closed society.	<i>Ats Amandi</i> as “soul sex.” How your body looks does not matter – it is the spirits who are having sex. Versus taboo “body sex.”	€100, 2 nights	(SW) 2018	Atropos team, inspired by Kajsa Seinegård.	Remake of <i>Livingdöd</i> (2014).
<i>Roxanne</i>	2015 (DK)	https://the-smoke.org/programme-placcholder/roxanne/ 28.2.2020	Sad love stories between sex workers and their customers. Emotions danced out between acts.	Dancing/miming emotions. Theatre style. Spotlight for wanting sexual action.	Included in conference fee, 4 hours	(DK) 2015, 2016 (NO) 2018, (UK) 2020	Nicolai Strøm Steffensen and Rasmus Teilmann	Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.

		(working)					
Screwing the Crew (NO)	2010	Published in 2014 in <i>Larps from the Factory</i> .	Contemporary circle of friends where all are more or less polyamorous.	<i>Ars Amandi</i> . Inner monologue, not just for sex.	Free, 4–6 hours	(NO) 2010, (SW) 2011, Published 2013 (NO) 2016, 2018, 2019	Elin Nilsen and Trine Lise Lindahl
Screwing the Crew, queer edition	2017 (NO)	Sign up form 5.8.2021	All-female and all-male runs of the larp with a circle of friends where all are more or less polyamorous.	<i>Ars Amandi</i> , inner monologue, not just for sex.	€10, 4–5 hours	(NOx2) 2017	Elin Nilsen, Trine Lise Lindahl, and Tor Kjetil Edland
Spellbound / Bjergtøget	2015 (DK),	spellbound-scenariotext.pdf 2.3.2020	Underworlders bind humans from the village, non-verbal and with masks.	Dance as communication and erotic encounter. Bonding (dominance).	Included in conference fee, 4–5 hours	(DK) 2015, (NO) 2017, (NO/SW) 2018, (DK) 2019	Maria and Jeppe Bergman Hamming
St. Croix	2015 (NO)	https://svengeunionen.wixsite.com/saunkt-croix 28.2.2020	Danish–Norwegian slave-colony in the Caribbean; about building a community while oppressed. Included abuse of slaves and subordinates.	Off-game negotiation mandatory for sex and/or violence. Abuse and dominance sex abstracted with neck grip and counting.	€165–200	(NO) 2015, (NO) 2018	Anne Marie Stammevre and Adrian Voje
The Future Is Straight	2021 (DK)	https://straightfuturelarp.com/ 18.8.21	Gay convention therapy camp in a sex-positive but heteronormative and binary alternative society. Satirical.	Different sex technique for queer and straight intimacy. Involved looking down, turning back to each other, holding hands. Masturbation technique: rubbing your own hands.	€250–330 4 nights	(DKx2) 2021 (sold out)	Karete Jacobsen Meland, Tor Kjetil Edland, and Anna Emilie Groth, based on an idea by Cleo Kai Hatting
The Forbidden History	2018 (PL)	https://theforbiddenhistory.info/ 4.3.2020	1980s private college with secret societies, who engage in sexual, ritual, and BDSM acts.	Theatre style. Rituals. Players asked in sign up if wanting play on sex, romance, BDSM.	€370–700 4 nights.	(PL) 2018, (sold out), (PL) 2021 (sold out), upcoming (PL) 2023 (waiting list)	Simon Svensson, Julia Greip, Jonaya Kemper, Agata Swistak, Linnéa Fredin, Kjetil Hedgard Hugaas, and Freja Gyldestenstrøm (Atropos)
Vedergällningen – Viking horror larp	2019 (SW)	https://vedergallningen.wordpress.com/ 29.2.2020.	Viking horror larp centred around women (Völvas) and nonbinary people, where stranded Vikings land. Thrills that are owned, sexual rituals, all Völvas have their kink.	Slag mechanic (top sit on top of bottom). Rituals. Fetish and Dominance/submission, BDSM simulated: Theatre style, pre-planned scenes, escalations.	€100 3 nights	(SW) 2019, (SW) 2020 (postponed twice) (SW) 2022	Karin Edman and team
							Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.
							Erotic or sexual themes are central to the design in this larp.

APPENDIX B

Promotional images for Nordic erotic larps.

Figure 1: Mood-setting image for *Finding Tom* by Nina Mutik. The picture evokes the style of the artist Tom of Finland, but in a gender-inclusive way.



Figure 2: An illustration accompanying the playstyle for *Gården*. Photograph by Karl Alfredsson.



Figure 3: Documentary photograph from the UK run of *Just a Little Lovin'* by Oliver Facey. The picture shows the physical playstyle and queer characters of the larp.



Hanne Grasmø is a Norwegian sociologist, larp designer, educator, and writer. She authored the first book about Nordic larp in 1998, *Laiv – Levende rollespill*, co-founded the *Knutepunkt* larp conference, and co-designed the world-touring larp *Just a Little Lovin`*; the larp script book was published in 2021. Grasmø was Head of National LGBT Knowledge Centre, and now serves as the Head of Pedagogical Sexology committee of the Norwegian Sexology association (NFKS). She is currently employed as Doctoral Researcher at Tampere University, Centre of Excellency in Game Culture Studies, doing her PhD on role-play and sexual arousal.

Jaakko Stenros (PhD) is a University Lecturer in Game Studies working at the Centre of Excellence in Game Culture Studies at Tampere University. He has published ten books and over 90 articles and reports, and has taught game studies for well over a decade. Stenros studies play and games, his research interests include norm-defying play, role-playing, queer play, game rules, and playfulness. University of Turku has awarded Stenros the Title of Docent in 2019 in Game and Play Studies.

Recomposing Lovecraft: Genre Emulation as Autopoiesis in the First Edition of *Call of Cthulhu*

Abstract: The article examines how genre is emulated in the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu* (1981), analyzing the game's potential to answer social needs during the Reagan era. Genre is understood in the response aesthetic sense, as collections of traits sedimented from authors' and designers' attempts to meet their audiences. Similar to how software can be engineered to replace older hardware, *Call of Cthulhu* replaces the genre functions underpinning Lovecraftian stories. Previous research discusses *Call of Cthulhu* as a horror RPG, mostly referencing later editions. This article's analysis, based on systems theory, deals with the first edition and a more complex genre composition. Emulation is described as autopoiesis—a generative mechanism of simultaneous autonomy and dependency vis-a-vis an environment. The role-playing system selects genre elements through structural couplings to its surroundings, and then recombines them in a new way, giving them new affordances.

The result shows the ways in which the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu* fuses elements from the fantasy role-playing genre with elements from literary horror, detective story, pulp fiction and colonial mystery. The three most prominent characteristics of the game—the characters' mental health, the manner in which they confront Mythos representatives, and their expeditions to remote locations—are solutions to genre tensions, rather than properties of horror. Following the sociohistorical framing of the elements involved, the composite emulation allowed for the processing of perceived threats to the American way of life during the early Reagan Era. The game offered a colonial fantasy, where real but more diffuse menaces, such as the nuclear arms race of the Cold War or the Iranian Revolution and ensuing energy crisis, could be fictionalized and reconsidered from the perspective of a predominantly white Christian struggle against evil in a 1920s world.

Keywords: cybernetics, genre, Lovecraft, Reagan Era, tabletop role-playing

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1. INTRODUCTION

Call of Cthulhu is a frequently mentioned work in role-playing game research. Whether referenced in passing or in depth, it is given labels such as “successful,” “highly influential,” “classic,” or “pioneering,” and is generally considered to be a landmark in the field (Hite 2007; Rouse III 2009; Weise 2009). The game is known for conservative development and backward compatibility over its seven editions. Most research articles are version agnostic in the sense that they focus on aspects of the game found in all editions. And as the action takes place in the world of H. P. Lovecraft, the reasonable approach to *Call of Cthulhu* seems to be as a pure horror game (see, for example, Burnette 2015; Schrier, Torner and Hammer 2018).

However, the original subtitle was “Fantasy Role-Playing in the Worlds of H. P. Lovecraft” (Petersen et al. 1981). At first glance, this might appear to simply be a marketing trick, or a wide definition of fantasy. David Jara and Evan Torner (2018, 273) remark that the mentioning of Lovecraft's name in *Call of Cthulhu*'s subtitle, as well as the haunted house cover art, signal a horror game. The change of the word “fantasy” for “horror” in later editions (starting with the fourth—see Hite 2007, 4) would also point in the pure horror direction. But main author Sandy Petersen's *Different Worlds* article about the design process for the first edition tells a different story:

All the foregoing difficulties were actually minor compared to the one paramount design problem which I faced: “How can I make the mood of a fantasy role-playing game match the mood of a modern horror story?” (Petersen and Willis 1982, 9)

The quote clearly does not include horror in the definition of fantasy, or treat the latter as mere marketing. Instead, it singles out different genre moods as “the one paramount design problem.” The use of the word “match” in the quote is multifaceted. There is an element of adaptation, where the moods need to be fitted together, as well as one of remediation, where modern horror stories are to be told in the game medium. But following Clara Fernandez-Vara’s distinction between adaptation and transmedia storytelling (2015, 80), this is not a remediated adaptation in the sense of a movie tie-in or a game version of a well-known story. Such adaptations were made later (most famously *Beyond the Mountains of Madness*, 1999). It has more in common with Matthew Weise’s “procedural adaptation” (2009, 238–239) and Ian Bogost’s “procedural translation” (2007), which refer to how literary traits are moved into digital games. The stories here are yet to be told, in the form of written and played adventures. Emphasizing that the tabletop role-playing game is designed to “run” an indefinite amount of such adventures, an apposite description of *Call of Cthulhu* would be as a case of *genre emulation*, that is the attempt to re-design a fantasy game engine so that it can replace the genre functions underpinning Lovecraftian horror, making it possible to tell those new stories in the RPG medium.

The focus on “mood” indicates that genre cannot be used in the more common classificatory sense—however useful and necessary that may be in an investigation of a broad field of games (see for example Cover 2010; MacKay 2001). Mood, as used in the quote,¹ involves player and reader response—how fiction in a certain genre *feels*. And in the response aesthetic sense, genres are not classificatory categories holding individual games or literary works. They are collections of traits, which can be combined in the individual work and be interacted with in a certain way in a certain historical context (Jara 2018, 24; cf. Stenros 2004, 168). This includes both the more direct, conscious and choice oriented ergodic interaction, coined by Espen Aarseth (1997) and further developed by Marie-Laure Ryan in her studies of interactivity and narrativity (Ryan 2006, 107–122), but also the more elusive “deep attention” associated with less ergodic media and used by Astrid Ensslin in her discussion of literariness and ludicity (Ensslin 2014, 38–39). Aarseth, Ryan and Ensslin all connect to reader response in literary studies, where the human mind “working” with fiction is a reciprocal and potentially transformative process, tied to social needs (Iser 1978, x, 98). Rather than being designed tools for describing categories of fiction, genres are organic products of work–audience eco-systems, sedimented from many author and designer attempts to meet such needs (Bawarshi 2001; Miller 1984; 2015).

While it does not deal directly with actual flesh-and-blood readers and players, genre in the response aesthetic cannot be considered separately, without sociohistorical context. Genre is very much involved in the responses a work invites, and thus says something about an *implied* audience (Iser 1978; cf. Aarseth 1997 110–113; Israelson 2017, 64–68). In the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu*, genre is composite. In addition to the fantasy game genre and modern horror fiction evidenced by the cover and the author’s own design notes, there are, as we shall see, distinct elements from the colonial mystery, detective story, and pulp action genres.² A study of composite genre emulation must thus show what genres do for the implied players and how they do it, but also account for the dependency, selection and recombination of genre elements into something new, with new affordances.

In the following, I will map this structure and show how the three most prominent characteristics of *Call of Cthulhu*—the characters’ mental health, the manner in which they confront Mythos representatives, and their expeditions to remote locations—are the products of composite genre

1 Note that mood also has a precise, narratological meaning. See Marku Eskelinen’s (2012, 165–179) discussion of Genette’s term.

2 Lovecraft’s fiction is also associated with several horror sub-genres, as well as with science fiction and weird fiction. See Smith 2011, 830.

emulation rather than properties of horror in the game medium. In turn, this allows for a reinterpretation of the game as an example of colonial escapism, answering common needs and concerns during the early Reagan era.

2. EMULATION AS AUTOPOIESIS

There is a lot of overlap between study of interactivity in games and post-classical narratology. A functional apparatus could be fashioned in many different ways from the combination of the already cited authors—in particular from a multidisciplinary, “messy” perspective, where theoretical conflicts are regarded as beneficial (as the object of study is complex and unordered, cf. Law 2004). For example, David Jara discusses genre, theme and mood relative to the concept of framing (2018, 120–122; cf. Fine 1983; Goffman 1961). He could be complemented with Alastair Fowler’s extensive treatment of genre in a similar vein (2002). But the concepts of dependency, autonomy, selection, (re-)combination and sedimentation, which seem inevitable in a discussion of composite genre emulation, have their original habitat in cybernetics. The process of *autopoiesis*, roughly “self-generation,” contains these parts and can capture the notion of emulation. It has been used previously in the study of the fantastic (Israelson 2017) and is arguably a tighter theoretical fit for the investigation.

Autopoiesis is the generative process whereby a system distinguishes itself from an environment. First introduced in the context of biology (Maturana and Varela 1980), it is a cornerstone in social cybernetics and the main idea in Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory (1995). In the case of a mainstream role-playing game, the separation of what happens and what does not happen (in the game fiction) is repeated over and over again, such as when the game master or referee makes a judgment call, when a player talks in character, or when dice are used to settle whether a gunshot is a hit or miss. Cybernetically, happens/happens not is a binary *code*, and iterating it establishes the game as a system occupied with such distinctions. Simultaneously, the surroundings are established as occupied with other things. This basic perspective originally comes from George Spence-Brown’s formal logic (1994), and can be described very simply as a circle drawn in a plane. The circle creates an inside, a border, and an outside, and no matter how you do it, the size and character of the border will give outside and inside their respective identities, *and* describe a relation between them.

This is the logic behind the autopoietic combination of cognitive dependency and operative autonomy. While a system autonomously selects what is part and not part of its domain through the manner in which it “runs” the internal code, this also makes it dependent on a structurally coupled environment, which can irritate it to take action. In Per Israelson’s study of the participatory aesthetics of the fantastic, the term *sympoiesis* is used instead of autopoiesis to highlight the simultaneity of autonomy, dependency and co-creation (2017, 41), but this concept is already there in autopoiesis, and actually predates it through the roots in Spencer Brown’s logic. A system which serves as the whole outside for another system is *penetrated*, and if this condition is reciprocal, there is *interpenetration* (Luhmann 1995, 213–214). These are useful complementary terms when describing relations between subsystems, such as a narrative system being penetrated by a game mechanical subsystem.

Sedimentation in cybernetics is usually called *condensation*, and refers to stable structures and residue generated over time by one or many systems (Spencer-Brown 1994, 10; cf. Luhmann 2000, 207). An example of internal structure would be the division between game master and player found in many mainstream role-playing games. These roles are condensed through the alternate attribution of system internal communications. An example of residue would be a set of verbally agreed upon house rules, or a published ruleset. Both are condensations existing on the outside of the individual game system, which autonomously chooses what in those rules to use and disregard.

Genres, in the response aesthetic sense already described, are condensations—here from game systems and from literary systems. They can manifest themselves concretely, as an explicit section about a genre in a publication or paratext, but also in a less obvious manner as non-written megatexts affecting the expectations of the audience. The traits of a genre are components available for selection and re-combination in the individual system, where they contribute both to the internal condensation of a participant interface (like in the case of the game master and player roles), *and* to the genres they were selected from (cf. Israelson 2017, 70–71). This is how genres evolve, usually very slowly, and also how they are tied to historic contexts with specific social needs.

Against this background, composite genre emulation can be given a cybernetic working definition as the autopoietic selection and re-combination of genre elements, via the structural couplings between a role-playing social system and its surroundings. The re-combination generates a participant interface and enables the telling of new (game) stories, inviting response and meeting the demands of an implied, contemporary audience.

3. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND MATERIAL

The historical context surrounding the first edition of the *Call of Cthulhu* role-playing game were troubled times, at least in the United States. The Cold War, the energy crisis, and the Iranian Revolution were perceived as threats to the nation, to the American way of life, and ultimately to Christian faith. The nation dealt with the fresh trauma of a lost war in Vietnam, with recessions from 1979–1982 (triggered by the energy crisis), and also with continued racial tensions that had grown throughout the 1970s and resulted in major riots every year from 1977 to 1980 (Hayward 2001). Anti-nuclear protests reached an all-time high (Cortright 2008), while military expenditure saw an almost 40% increase from 1978 to 1982.³

On the technical side, punched card computers had been replaced by workstations, and video games entered first the arcades and shopping malls, then American homes. In 1981, the home computer revolution had still not reached its peak, but Apple, Commodore and Atari hardware, and early role-playing computer games such as *Beneath Apple Manor*, reached millions of middle class homes (Kocurek 2015). The gaps between generations and classes in regard to digital media were huge (Schulte 2008). In 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected as a voice for conservative values, presented as “common sense.” In popular culture studies, the following years are known for “Reaganite entertainment,” with *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981)—an explicit influence on *Call of Cthulhu*—being a prominent example. The term refers to a plot that appeases the audience by trivializing dangers, meeting their expectations, and restoring order, thereby returning things to status quo (Britton 2009; Needham 2016).

Lovecraft was a well-known author in popular culture and had been for the better part of the century. In 1980, S. T. Joshi published a major collection, *H.P. Lovecraft: Four Decades of Criticism*, defining the field of Lovecraft studies. Following Tzvetan Todorov’s seminal paper from 1970, “Introduction à la littérature fantastique” (2013), academic interest in several popular genres was on the rise. In 1981, Rosemary Jackson discussed horror as a sub-genre of “the fantastic,” and, borrowing terminology from linguistics, suggested fantasy as the *langue* from which different *paroles* emerged—including the works of Kafka, Maupassant and Lovecraft (4). She distinguished this meaning from the “popular sense,” which denoted works by for example Tolkien and Le Guin (5). The academic umbrella term of the fantastic does not seem to have had much impact on gaming publications. The only major game to use Todorov’s label was *Metamorphosis Alpha* (Ward 1976), which had the subtitle “Fantastic

³ From 4.9% of GDP in 1978 to 6.8% in 1982. See World Bank Data: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=US>

Role-Playing Game of Science-Fiction Adventures.” Looking at other major games during the era, *Traveller* (Miller 1977) had “science fiction” on the box, whereas *Gamma World* (Ward and Jaquet 1978) was marked “science fantasy.” The games that referred to “fantasy” on the cover all used fantasy in Jackson’s popular sense: *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (Moldvay 1981) as well as *Runequest* (Perrin et al. 1978, Bronze-Age fantasy) and *Stormbringer* (Andre and Perrin 1981, sword & sorcery).

Throughout the seventies, fear of religious cults and of brain-washing rouse in the United States, as described by Joseph P. Laycock (2015, 76–100). The disappearance and later suicide of Dallas Egbert was linked in the press to role-playing, manifolded the sales-figures of the newly released Holmes version of the *Dungeons & Dragons Basic Set* (Holmes 1978; Peterson 2021). While the ensuing moral panic dubbed “Satanic Panic” was focused on *Dungeons & Dragons*, cults, delusions, and deteriorating mental health would be heavily thematized in *Call of Cthulhu*, which also put a much greater emphasis on ritualism than *Dungeons & Dragons* ever did. The attention to historical detail, the prominence of mental health issues, and the action taking place in a fictionalized version of the real world, gave *Call of Cthulhu* a more serious and thought-provoking air than the contemporary mainstream games. In a 1982 editorial for the Chaosium Game Catalog (also appearing in *Different Worlds*), Tadashi Ehara voiced a countercultural perspective: “Role-playing demands our participation to provide us with visions of breaking through social conventions, to challenge our contemporaries, and to surround ourselves with quality” (2).

First edition *Call of Cthulhu* was released in December 1981, after a development period of some two years. It followed a line of products based on Chaosium’s *Basic Role-Playing* rules (stand-alone booklet by Stafford and Willis 1981), originally developed in 1979 for *Runequest* and also included in first edition *Stormbringer*. Shortly after the *Call of Cthulhu* release, the BRP booklet would also be in *Worlds of Wonder* (Perrin et al. 1982) and *Elfquest* (Perrin, Petersen and Chodak 1984). The idea was that BRP provided basic rules mechanisms, which the individual game then modified and built on in order to suit its setting. In the cases of *Call of Cthulhu* and *Worlds of Wonder*, this also applied to genre. While “Fantasy role-play” was initially defined in BRP in a very general manner, all the examples, equipment, monsters, rules in the booklet unanimously pointed to a medieval/Renaissance fantasy world. The rules that *Call of Cthulhu* are known for—such as the sanity mechanism or the monster specific rules (both described later in the article)—were all in their own, thicker booklet. The same went for *Worlds of Wonder*, which had separate booklets for the superhero genre, the science fiction genre, and for extension of magic to the BRP fantasy rules. While horror components, character sanity, and Lovecraft’s mythos are represented in a few earlier publications, perhaps most notably in the later omitted sections on Lovecraft and Moorcock mythoses in the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* supplement *Deities & Demigods* (Ward and Kuntz 1980), the contents of the specific Cthulhu booklet in *Call of Cthulhu* were largely unique on the market.

First edition *Call of Cthulhu* came in a box set, rich with content both for its time and by modern standards. The box contained three stapled books, dice, a crayon (to fill in dice numbers), character forms, a world map, character silhouettes, an introductory letter describing the hobby, a product catalog from Chaosium, and a customer response card. In the deluxe edition, equipped with a deeper box, the *Shadows of Yog Sothoth* campaign was also included. In the two years following the release, this campaign was released separately (Carnahan et al. 1982), as was three additional products: *The Cthulhu Companion* (Chodak et al. 1983), *The Asylum & Other Tales* (McCall et al. 1983), and the aforementioned *Different Worlds* special issue about the design of the game. This concludes the first edition publications. The second edition of the game was published in 1983.

4. EMULATING SANITY

Humankind's encounter with cosmic evil, and the ensuing madness, are prominent features of Lovecraft's horror fiction (Smith 2011, 835–836), mainly dealt with in *Call of Cthulhu* through the sanity mechanism. The rules for sanity are iconic for the game, but also emanate from a problem in genre emulation.

The rules dictate that when a character encounters something horrid, a certain amount of sanity points must be removed from their sanity value, also known as SAN (Petersen 1981, 23). If too much sanity is lost, the character goes insane, and if the value reaches zero, this state becomes permanent. Sanity can be increased if the character is victorious in the fight against creatures from the Cthulhu mythos, or if the character receives treatment, such as therapy in a mental institution (27). However, the sanity value is also tied to the character's knowledge of the Cthulhu mythos. Each skill point in the latter reduces the maximum possible sanity the character can achieve. If a character's Cthulhu Mythos skill has value 16, their sanity can never exceed 83 ($99 - 16 = 83$). In this way, knowledge and sanity are balanced; note, however, that sanity can decrease without a corresponding increase in Mythos skill. (23–28).

The sanity mechanism is mentioned in just about every article discussing the game (see, for example, Burnette 2015; Herber 2007, 4; Leavenworth 2007, 1). Jon Peterson points out that it was developed from similar mechanisms in other games, and mentions a Lovecraftian version of *Tunnels & Trolls*, published in 1980 (Rahman and Rahman 1980; cf. Peterson 2020, Epilogue; also acknowledged in Petersen & Willis 1982). Tyler Burnette (2015, 47) connects the mechanism to genre and shows how it tracks the mental development of the characters in a way that is typical of Lovecraftian horror: the heroes in Lovecraft's stories usually go mad when they see their insignificance compared to the size, age, and utter evil of the universe and the unearthly creatures that surround them.

While very reasonable in themselves, these perspectives do not discuss the particular combination of game and literature that was present in the design process and explicitly discussed in *Different Worlds*, where Sandy Petersen noted the effects of an early SAN version without a recovery mechanism:

This made for a very fatalistic or depressing game, as the players watched for their precious Sanity go down, and down, and down . . . In many ways this matched the stories' mood perfectly, but it often made for a feeling of hopelessness in a game. . . The current sanity rules are quite good, I feel, and still give a feeling of hopelessness to the players at times, though in actual play it is usually possible to overcome the handicaps of having a poor Sanity. The whole concept of Sanity permeates the game and makes it what it is. (Petersen and Willis 1982, 11)

As the quote makes clear, genre emulation gets into trouble when it results in a game that is true to the Lovecraft stories but is not fun or rewarding to play. The quote also stands out in relation to Laycock's research (2015, 76–81). As the connection between sanity and the fear of cults was firmly established in the historical context years before the Satanic panic and connection to role-playing games, Petersen's problem bleeds into the real world. A “very fatalistic or depressing game” means more than people not wanting to play it. The conundrum, including the social dimensions, could be described as a kind of collision or tension between genres, as player expectations are not only Lovecraftian, but also based on the “fantasy role-playing” game genre.

In 1981, the most common case would be expectations originating in previous *Dungeons & Dragons* experiences, based on the dungeon crawling game genre (cf. Gygas and Arneson 1974; Holmes 1978; Moldvay 1980). This genre was condensed from other sources than *D&D* as well.

Sword & sorcery fiction (such as by Robert E. Howard or Fritz Leiber) and roguelikes had strong elements of dungeon crawling, not to mention the prominence of this feature in ancient myth.⁴ Dungeon crawling means going on adventure into some kind of underworld, hopefully emerging richer or wiser than before. This characterization has been developed by many game studies scholars (see for example Barton 2008; Peterson 2012, 81–108, 605–632; Craddock 2015), but it should be pointed out how the game genre is both catabatic and colonial. In the former case, it lets the players identify with a character who explores the underworld in order to grow in knowledge, wealth and power (Fletcher 2019, 44–47). In the latter case it lets the player relive the status of white supremacy from the colonial age: the characters travel to distant and exotic lands, kill representatives of cultures they do not understand, and return to “civilization” with their riches—all in the conviction that they are themselves good while others are evil.

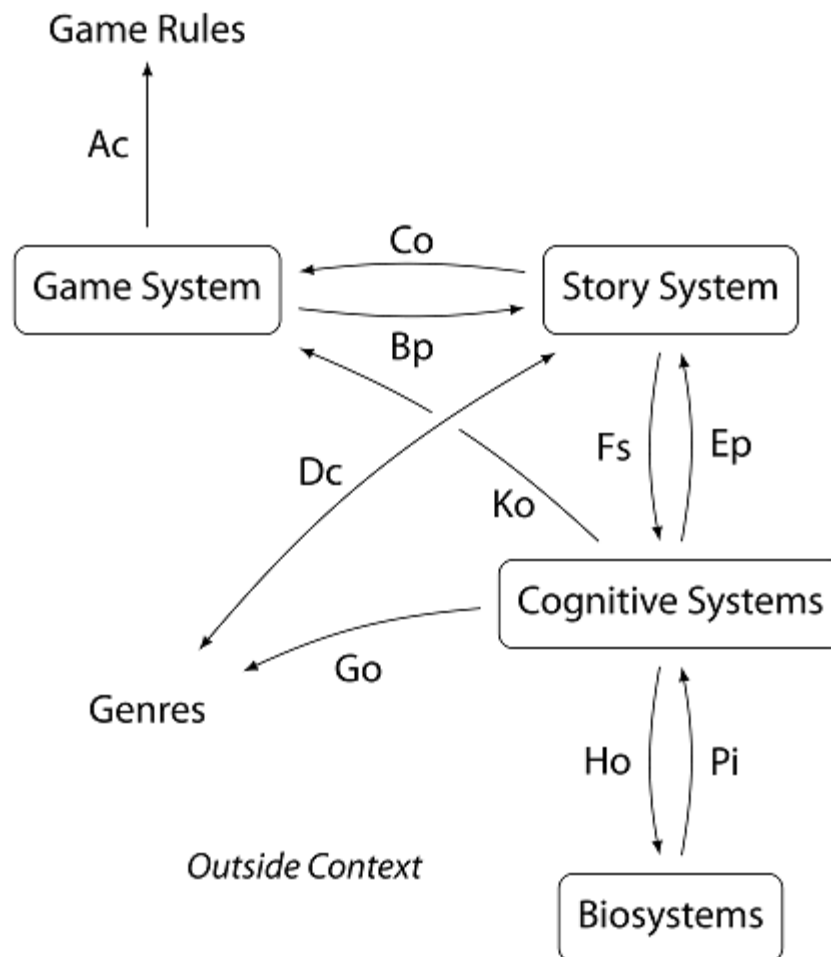
Emulation of this genre element is shown in Figure 1. The structural couplings are given an uppercase identifier, as well as a lowercase annotation designating the type of coupling; all couplings also involve observation, however. The types are listed in the legend. Looking at the coupling (Ac), the identifier *A* has a *c* annotation, meaning that the game system condensates its own rules. Looking at the coupling (Bp), the identifier *B* has a *p* annotation, meaning that the game system penetrates the story system. In this manner, the figure is a map of the emulation *Call of Cthulhu*, showing the entities and their relations and kinds in systems theoretical terms. Figure 1 will be developed in two additional steps, the final map—a part of the article’s result—being Figure 3.

- **The Game System:** This system deals with rolling dice, keeping track of stats, etc. Through the (Bp) penetration coupling, it observes the Story system for utterances that irritate it and that it may act upon. For example, “Jonna Doherty attacks with her shotgun” or “My character reads the Necronomicon” are interesting, but “Can I have the last slice of pizza?” is not. The system also condensates (Ac) its own rules, but may refer to the rulebook as a previous condensation.⁵
- **The Narrative System:** This is a social system that narrates the game story. It selects (Fs) the verbalized thoughts from the Cognitive System (relayed as sound through a biosystem),⁶ turning them into narrative communications. It also observes the Game System through (Co), and genres through (Dc), in order to know what it is allowed to select. Out of place expressions or events are not selected, but filtered out from the narrative.

4 Arguably, the genre also appears in modern fiction. In *Ready Player One* (Cline 2011) is not only an explicit part of episodes where the protagonist plays some game (for example chapters 8 and 23), but an organizing principle for the whole novel. The plot structure in *Ready Player One* as a whole is that Wade, the protagonist, goes into a fantasy realm (e.g. virtual reality) and explores layer after layer of mystery until confronting a final boss and getting a reward.

5 Much like late Wittgenstein sees rules as secondary language game abstractions which do not govern the games but may be used for guidance, so are *programs*—the way a system’s code is run—condensated from the evolving system. Thus they only govern the system, which is operatively autonomous, to the extent that its structural couplings allow it. This is easily seen in a role-playing game, where a gaming group might decide to consult a rule in one case, but disregard it in another.

6 To be exact, the cognitive system irritates the biosystem to produce sound, which the narrative system selects. It is feasible that the thoughts of the cognitive system are very different from what is produced as a communication in the narrative system.

Figure 1: Structurally Coupled Systems and Genres in a *Call of Cthulhu* Game (Version 1)

- o → Observation. The system sees the outside, waiting to be irritated
- c → Condensation. The system repeats similar activities, and more stable elements result from repetition.
- p → Penetration. A system serves as outside for another system.
- i → Interpenetration. Two systems serve as each other's outsides.

- **The Cognitive Systems:** These systems are the minds of the participants, i.e. what they are thinking. The cognitive systems observe *all* the other systems and have thoughts about it. They also observe genres, and interpret what goes on in the other systems in genre terms. A failed sanity roll when confronted with dread Cthulhu is expected to be imagined by the player in horror terms. But that is not the only possible way. The player's cognitive system could *also* think about what the encounter *would* have been like if the character was a *Dungeons & Dragons* hero, or if the roll been a success instead. In this way, any sentiment of disappointment over a hero's Lovecraftian development (as related by Petersen in the above quote) also comes about through genre, when the horror and *Dungeons & Dragons* genres collide.

- **The Biosystems:** These systems observe the cognitive systems only, responding through increased heart rate, sleepiness, etc. Naturally, both the Game System and Story System depend upon the biosystems for sounds, thrown dice, etc. This is not shown in Figures 1–3.

These systems are also related to the context in which the game takes place. These contexts may include other minor social systems (such as a gaming café), and will inevitably include major systems such as the religious, mass media, scientific, and political systems, which are all but omnipresent. Each such system also remembers its own evolution, for example the ideas and circumstances of the 1920s or the reports of cults and brain-washing. This means that communications originating in some other system may be selected through their affinity with late-colonial history or news reports about Dallas Egbert. Conversely, actions and sounds that are not selected as communications in *Call of Cthulhu* may well be selected by another system (like in the above pizza example).⁷

The figure shows in detail how the sanity mechanism is activated by the game system due to an irritation from the story system. The story system observes the sanity results from the game system in order to be able to communicate in accordance with the genre. This in turn is observed by the cognitive systems, who respond based on genre expectations. If the narrative style is genre-compliant with Lovecraftian horror only, the cognitive systems are likely to be dissatisfied, as they also have expectations based on previous experiences with the dungeon crawling game genre. Only by recombining elements both from Lovecraftian literary horror and from fantasy dungeon crawl, can the story system irritate the cognitive systems into feeling satisfied with the character development and, consequently, also with the game.

Two things are particularly notable here. One is how the subsystems differ in their genre couplings: the cognitive systems simply take more genres into account—any that a participant thinks of—even if these thoughts are not verbalized and selected by the story system. The other is how the sanity mechanism's selected and recombined genre elements were originally meant to meet very different needs. The loss of sanity in Lovecraftian literary horror invites the reader to process fears and questions about humankind's insignificance in the face of the vastness of space and time, while the recovery of sanity is part of the dungeon crawling genre's triumph, with both catabatic (increased knowledge) and colonial (increased richness and power compared to others). Both these affordances can meet contemporary needs to process the contemporary moral panic about faith and mental health.

5. SHOTGUNS & PULP

The rules for character Sanity are not the only examples of where the *Call of Cthulhu* RPG needs to recombine elements from Lovecraftian horror into something new with different affordances. Another example can be found in how the rulebooks and the 1920s sourcebook deal extensively with different weaponry, weapon skills, and damage; in *Different Worlds* #19, these parts of the game design process are highlighted as particularly important and hard to get right (Peterson and Willis 1982, 11). Meanwhile, in the collected works of Lovecraft, pistols, shotguns, revolvers, and rifles are mentioned very briefly and only a handful of times.⁸ The attention to detail in this area originates from somewhere else.

⁷ It also means that the same sounds uttered during a game may be picked up and turned into communications in another system. For example, if a player has her character make a prayer and this results in an argument about beliefs in the 1920s, the discussion may have the meaning of a disturbance in the game system but the meaning of an important and interesting discussion in the religious and science systems.

⁸ A single *grep* search (*grep* is a small c-program preinstalled on all Unix-like operative systems) can quickly find out the prevalence of weapons in Lovecraft's collected works. For example, the simple search "`grep -Ec 'pistol | shotgun | revolver | rifle ' complete-lovecraft.txt`" reveals that the listed firearm words were used a total of 18 times, 8 if you only count the stories listed as important in the beginning of the rulebook (Petersen 1981, 5).

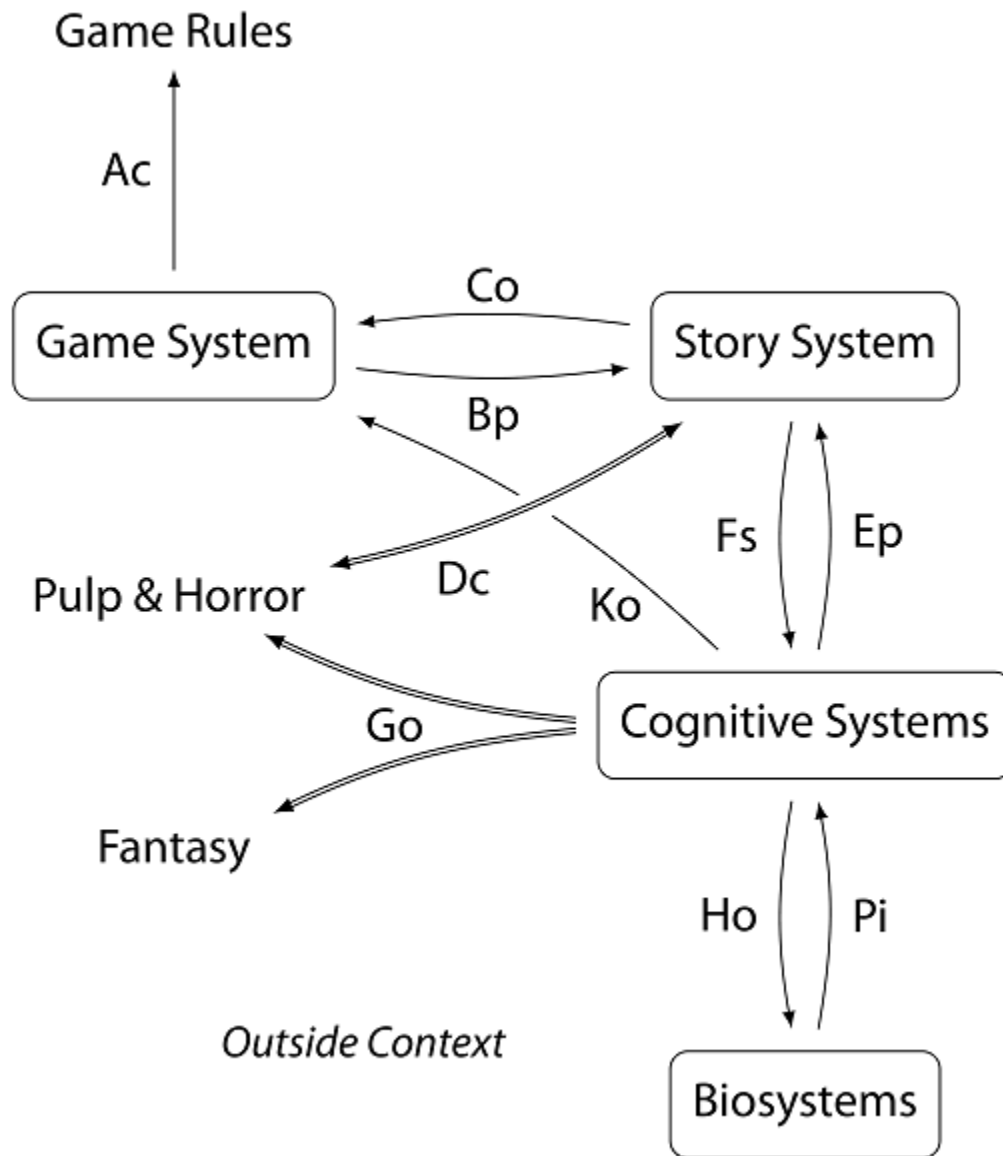
The pulp genre, which is generally much more action-oriented than Lovecraft's fiction, is an obvious source, especially since Lovecraft's work was almost entirely published in pulp magazines. An additional source would be other role-playing games, in which horror traits—such as monster hunting, violent encounters with unknown creatures, and thwarting the evil intrigues of cults—were core to several games before 1981. The first ever RPG adventure was written for *Dungeons & Dragons* and published in the *Blackmoor* supplement (Arneson 1975). It was titled “The Temple of the Frog” and had the characters fight an evil cult of amphibians. In *Villains & Vigilantes* (Dee & Herman 1979, a superhero game) and *Gamma World*, battles against unknown creatures constitute significant parts of the action. In addition to these influences on the contemporary audience's expectations, at least two violent and relevant films were produced in 1980 and released in 1981 before *Call of Cthulhu*: Stephen Spielberg's pulp action blockbuster *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and the zombie movie *The Evil Dead* (Raimi 1981).

Given the above, it can be assumed that the target audience of the role-playing game *Call of Cthulhu* expected their characters to defend themselves against threats to a much greater extent than that possible in Lovecraft's fiction. Sarah Lynne Bowman remarks that “players often recreate heroic quests” and “perform heroic deeds” even in horror role-playing games (Bowman 2010, 146). On the other hand, there is also the possibility of *playing to lose*, as discussed by David Jara (2018, 266). Jara's description gives this play style a cathartic quality, where the misfortunes of a character can be recognized but also safely followed from a narrative distance. This is arguably a possibility in *Call of Cthulhu*, despite the game predating the trend by more than 20 years. But it is also somewhat counteracted by the catabatic and colonial aspects of the dungeon crawl genre: the idea is that the hero shall survive, reemerge, and at least in some way be better off than before.

In the historical context, the nuclear threat and the lost war in Vietnam can be emphasized here. The urge to fight back and have at least some kind of victory, as well as the need to process an all-encompassing but looming threat, are prominent features in the early Reagan era. The ending of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* restores order and gives the audience comfort and reassurance: the Nazis have been beaten; the ark has acknowledged the righteous and wise character of the hero; and the US army have “safely” re-buried the weapon of doom in a secret state storage. The needs reflected in the movie's success, which are inescapably also tied to genre, posed a potential dilemma for the game's design, similar to that of *Sanity*. In Lovecraft's short stories, the protagonists are often helpless in the face of the Old Ones and their minions, which in turn lays a good part of the reason for the horror and dread incited in the readers. How do you include the ability to fight back without destroying a core element of cosmic horror?

Figure 2 features a slightly updated version of the graph from the previous section, taking pulp action into account. Here, the story system is coupled (Dc) with the pulp and horror genres (contributing to some tiny degree to their condensation), as are the cognitive systems (without condensation), but the latter are also coupled with the fantasy role-playing game genre (Go). These connections are marked with double lines in the graph, meaning that the story system does not have a direct coupling with the fantasy genre; it only works through the cognitive systems, who can think about the *Call of Cthulhu* story while at the same time comparing it to a fantasy role-playing game.

The core mechanism for calibrating combat in the tradition of basic role-playing is the use of hit points, a mechanism borrowed from *Dungeons & Dragons* (which borrowed it from *Chainmail*, cf. Peterson 2012, 320–341). In *Dungeons & Dragons*, this resource is mostly derived from a character's level and class, while in *Call of Cthulhu*, it is derived from a character's constitution and size. When a character is hit by an attack, the weapon's damage is randomized and then subtracted from the target's hit points, after considering protection such as armor or cover. As soon as the hit points reach zero, the target is out, in most cases dead (Stafford and Willis 1981, 10).

Figure 2: Structurally Coupled Systems and Genres in a *Call of Cthulhu* Game (Version 2).

Such genre comparisons may not be explicitly verbalized, but they still generate communications in the story system, e.g., “I want to fire my shotgun and kill Great Cthulhu” (because in a pulp story or a fantasy role-playing game, you frequently attack huge monsters) and, subsequently, “This game is impossible! I died again!” (because in a pulp story or mainstream fantasy game, you do not die as easily once you have passed a certain level). Through (Bp), exclamations such as these trigger the game system to take action: it is also coupled with the rulebook (Ac), which has attack rules as well as advice on how a Keeper¹ should handle enemy strength (Petersen 1981, 70–72). However, there is no guarantee that the rules will be followed. A Keeper’s course of action could be to say, “Look here, it says in the book that Cthulhu’s stats are . . .,” but it could just as well be to fudge a roll or create a house rule on the spot. In any case, the game system will have some sort of reaction, and the game clearly benefits from being aware of genre collisions.

¹ The Keeper in *Call of Cthulhu* is a “keeper of secrets”—what other games would call a Referee, Game Master, or Dungeon Master.

In *Call of Cthulhu*, hit points vary greatly between the many types of creatures, and this allows the characters—who are more often the academic type than the action-oriented type—to fight back. You can defend yourself against other humans, animals, and smaller mythical creatures, as they only have a few hit points. The larger Cthuloid creatures, on the other hand, have far too many hit points for this to be feasible, especially since they may also have regenerative abilities, armor, immunities, etc. For example, a player character has 11 hit points on average, while Great Cthulhu has over 150 hit points (Petersen 1981, 10, 37).

Because of the variations in hit points, encounters with the truly unknown are much more Cthuluesque than more mundane encounters, in the sense that the rational strategy is to let the character run from the horror, not to fight it. Frequently in the adventure texts—like in *Shadows of Yog Sothoth* (Carnahan et al. 1982, 2)—it is also mentioned that player-characters who fight against Cthulhu are very likely to die. The need for such remarks substantiates that in the early 1980s, it was quite common for players to choose fight instead of flight, even when their characters were pitted against larger opponents, and to sometimes be annoyed with the almost inevitable result.

In the section titled “Fantasy Worlds and the World of Daily Lives,” Laycock draws on research on religion and social systems to show a duality in role-playing games, where they are reflections both of and on reality (2015, 186). On the one hand, they are products of their historical contexts, but on the other hand, they also allow for the participants to see the world in new light (186). The structural couplings between the cognitive system and the narrative system are interesting in this regard: what can the mythic creatures represent, consciously or subconsciously, for a participant? The features of the monsters, as they are represented in the narrative system, which is in turn penetrated and supported by the game mechanical system, form the contours of a space, to be filled in by a player’s fears and needs. The unknown abilities of the monster, its overwhelming size, its life-changing effect on the protagonist, civilization at stake—when put together, these things have the potential of metaphorically representing perceived threats in the historical situation. For example, Great Cthulhu as presented in the *Shadows of Yog Sothoth* campaign is not only a representation of Lovecraft’s monster. To a player infused by popular culture, he also has many of the qualities found in the distinctly nuclear-related Godzilla. But just like a direct fight against the looming Cold War missile arsenals or energy crisis recession is impossible or futile, so is the direct confrontation with the Great Old Ones. Their plans need to be thwarted, and the fight be brought to one against their lesser minions. This is how emulation in *Call of Cthulhu* and its re-combination of genre elements allows for the processing of the contemporary historic situation.

Call of Cthulhu quickly got the reputation as a “deadly” game, a notion which likely served just as much as promotion as a warning. Some players identify strongly with their characters and experience the game story through this focus. If the characters often die, such a player’s experience of the game may be unsatisfactory. *Call of Cthulhu* solves this problem by making character generation quick and easy, and by pointing out that the game stories of the published material can be experienced through multiple characters and viewpoints. In addition to its affinity with the play to lose style, it is reminiscent of the Forge concepts of author vs. character stance that would emerge 20 years later

(Edwards 2001). You can see this starting with *Shadows of Yog Sothoth*, but it carries over into all the major *Call of Cthulhu* campaigns (see for example *Masks of Nyarlathotep*, Ditillio and Willis 1984, 5, 12).

6. THE HORROR! THE HORROR!

An additional and related problem follows from the collision between fantasy and horror and the influences from the pulp genre: in literary Lovecraftian horror, there are not that many different opponents

that the protagonists encounter and fight. Consequently, it is difficult to meet the players' expectations in this regard, when those are both influenced by games and media with a more diverse monster fauna, and may have a deeper need to fight back successfully, at some level. Again, this is explicitly mentioned in *Different Worlds* #19:

I pored through the all the stories written by Lovecraft and a great number written by his imitators and picked out all the hideous abnormalities that seemed to be at all consistent from story to story. The total was surprisingly low, and I had to dredge up monsters from quite obscure stories and collaborations in order to have a respectable number of creatures to smite the players. (Petersen and Willis 1982, 9)

In trying to make the game itself have the feel of a horror story, I first set up the monsters such that almost any single monster was more than a match for a single character, and some monsters were even beyond the capabilities of even a well-organized party. (Petersen and Willis 1982, 11)

As the quotes show, creatures had to be scavenged from a larger body of text than the stories that had been identified as being core to the game. But, in particular, it became clear that most combatants would actually have to be humans. In systems theoretical terms, the story system is cognitively dependent on its surroundings, and needs to establish a structural coupling to a genre where people can consistently serve as monsters in the game. In *Call of Cthulhu*, the choice falls upon colonial mystery.

This genre is very much present in Lovecraft's work, but in the game, the colonial aspects are enhanced and put in the foreground. Together with the pulp attitude towards fighting, this creates a different kind of horror than was likely intended. The expression "colonial horrors" usually refers to the *deeds* of the colonizers, not to their experiences or to the colonized. The most iconic example is Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), in which the ivory trader Kurtz gradually turns from a naïve idealist into the epitome of a cruel and corrupt colonialist, ruthlessly using and abusing the African natives. As he dies on a steamer down the Congo, his famous last words are, "The horror! The horror!" (Conrad 1899, 86). Marlow, the story's narrator, interprets the utterance as referring to Kurtz's own crimes.

The average opponent in *Call of Cthulhu* is not a monster, but a cultist. And it is not just someone in a sect, but frequently a cult member of color, in a remote part of the world (from an American point of view). The racist and colonial aspects of Lovecraft's work are well known (see for example Kneale 2006), easy to see in the short story that gave the game *Call of Cthulhu* its name. In the short story, the culprit causing the death of the narrator's relative—thus initiating the story—is a "nautical-looking negro" (Lovecraft 2008, 202). The first Cthulhu statuette is found in the "dark cult" in the "blackest of the African voodoo circles" (208). The second trace mentioned in the narrative comes from "degenerate Esquimaux" (210) until, finally, the trend reaches a crescendo in the following quote:

Examined at headquarters after a trip of intense strain and weariness, the prisoners all proved to be men of a very low, mixed-blooded, and mentally aberrant type. Most were seamen, and a sprinkling of negroes and mulattoes, largely West Indians or Brava Portuguese from the Cape Verde Islands, gave a colouring of voodooism to the heterogeneous cult. But before many questions were asked, it became manifest that something far deeper and older than negro fetishism was involved. Degraded and ignorant as they were, the creatures held with surprising consistency to the central idea of their loathsome faith. (Lovecraft 2008, 213)

In the above, the word “creatures” is combined with “loathsome”—a common combination in Lovecraft’s fiction, also found just before the finale of the short story, where Cthulhu and his “hordes” sleep in R’lyeh, a city built by “loathsome shapes” (Lovecraft 2008, 222). This establishes a strong connection between the non-human Cthuloid monsters and people who are not white Christians.

Such blatant racism was never in the game *Call of Cthulhu*, but there are still places where colonial perspectives and othering are evident in the 1981 first edition:

Example: Professor Anderson sees a swarthy man swagger down the street and into a bar. Anderson has an Anthropology skill of 75%, and succeeds on his skill roll, so he can tell that the character was a Dravidian Indian by ethnicity and probably a Hindu by religion. The professor then attempts his Anthropology roll a second time to make a prediction or deduction about that individual (Professor Anderson is allowed to do so because he once spent a semester in India observing the natives), and he can tell that the character observed is probably devout because of various caste marks, and that such an individual should not be going into a bar, as members of his sect are teetotalers. He can also tell that the scarf around the man’s neck is a sign of the secret sect of Thuggee, a band of assassins. (Petersen 1981, 17)

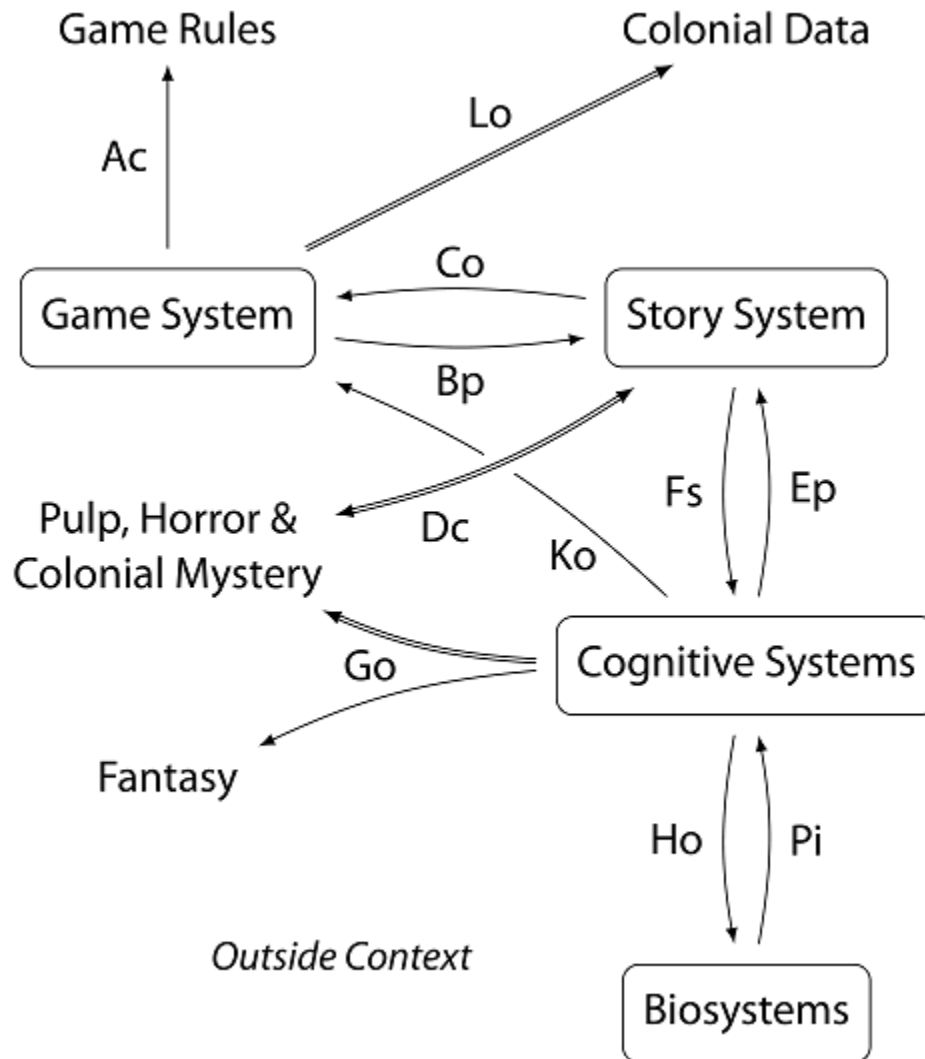
This quote is completely structured around a white, colonial gaze—or, in cybernetic terms—produces the object of observation in a narrative system governed by a colonial way of running the happens/happens not code. There is a professor bearing a Scandinavian name, who “spent a semester in India observing the natives.” He is now watching a “swarthy” man who “swaggers” into a bar. Through his superior education, the professor can confirm the suspicions aroused by the combination of swaggering, the character’s complexion, and the bar: it is a cult assassin up to no good.

The final version of our structural coupling graph can now be produced, as shown in Figure 3. It should again be noted that while the game and story systems are in a state of penetration (i.e. the story system is the game system’s outside, as in (Bp)), the story system is structurally coupled to the cognitive systems (Fs), which in turn cannot escape their surroundings when making selections for their thoughts. The historical context in which a game takes place is ever present in this way, and can irritate the narrative system to produce a story with a strong colonial flavor—not just in its environments and presence of historical characters and events, but also in its perspectives. The racial tensions of the period leading up to the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu* need to be factored into the response aesthetic perspective on the game text. Regardless of authorial intent, it emerges as a non-innocent response-inviting structure in its historical context.

The above quoted paragraph stayed in the game in the second and third editions, but disappeared with the fourth in 1989 (Petersen et al. 1983; Petersen 1986; Petersen 1989). However, this does not mean that the colonial aspects of *Call of Cthulhu* can be dismissed as artifacts of a bygone era. The quote is a symptom of the game’s inherent perspective, which is motivated not only by the imitation of Lovecraft’s fiction, but also by ludic concerns. The story and game systems rely on player character agency and common adversaries, which are both qualities provided by the game’s colonial setting. By enhancing the colonial aspects of Lovecraft’s fiction and putting them in the foreground, *Call of Cthulhu* gains a number of ludic advantages, generated diegetically through the setting:

- The player-characters can have a lot of funds for hiring help and getting equipment in remote parts of the world.
- The player-characters can travel anywhere.
- The player-characters can be given access to most middle- and upper-class institutions.
- The player-characters speak English in the British Empire/Commonwealth era.
- Their skin color, social class, and (usually) Christian faith make them the norm;
- ... and, consequently, others become *others*, beneath them in social hierarchy—observable, peculiar, and ultimately kill-able.

Figure 3: Structurally Coupled Systems and Genres in a *Call of Cthulhu* Game.



In the first edition material, these aspects are easiest to see in *Shadow of Yog Sothoth* and in the 1920s source booklet. The campaign follows the premise of the short story “Call of Cthulhu” very loosely and takes the player-characters to different American locations, but also to Scotland and to Easter Island (see the chapter introductions in Carnhan et al. 1982). All great *Call of Cthulhu* campaigns would later come to imitate and enhance the pattern of remote expeditions, and the above privileges are what makes this both diegetically and ludically possible. The source booklet’s whole *raison d’être* is to facilitate this kind of play. It is structurally coupled to the game system (Lo) and contains things like

references to famous (mostly upper class) 1920s contemporaries, timetables for middle- and upper-class global travelling, and remote locations—culturally othered—that the characters can explore (Chodak et al. 1981, 18, 19). While an exceptional publication (in a role-playing game context) in its great attention to detail and historical accuracy, it is also a cornerstone in a colonial style of play.

Going back to the initial comparison between a colonial and a mythic perspective on the game stories produced by *Call of Cthulhu*, the “descent” into the unknown regions in the 1920s constitutes a mythical catabasis, in the sense that the characters gradually learn more about the Cthulhu Mythos and the reality of humanity’s precarious situation and utter insignificance in the cosmos. But the colonial reading is just as important for the game, given the agency it gives the player-characters. It is also very much a design *choice*—part of the answer to Petersen’s question about how to combine fantasy *Dungeons & Dragons* framework with literary horror. The difference between the two perspectives does not have to be that great, either. In *Heart of Darkness*, the colonial and the catabatic are united in Marlow’s reflection on Kurtz’s last word, and the two are also explicitly fused in the beginning of the novel:

The best way I can explain it to you is by saying that, for a second or two, I felt as though, instead of going to the center of a continent, I were about to set off for the center of the earth. (Conrad 1899, 27).

Establishing a structural coupling (Dc) to the colonial mystery genre as per the above is both desirable and easy for the game and story systems, because they are connected to the cognitive systems of the participants. As remarked by Petersen (Petersen and Willis 1982, 12), the colonial era was not such a distant time for players in 1981. A participant in his mid-twenties (a highly likely case for this game), would have met, talked to, and, in many cases, grown up with people born around the turn of the century, who remembered the Roaring ‘20s first hand. Similarly, many of the technological concepts that are quaint or distant today—such as wired phones, transistor radios, mechanical typewriters, and completely analogue communications—were everyday occurrences only starting to disappear with the home computer revolution. For the implied participant, the colonial era had a nostalgic potential. It offered an escape from the rapid technological changes and general fascination with electronic devices, cheap plastic and digital displays in the early 1980s. It also offered an escape from racial tension—albeit to a point in history where white rulership was undisputed.

7. CONCLUSION

The structural part of the analysis result can be seen in Figure 3. The division into subsystems and the different kinds of structural couplings between them, to the surrounding environment and to genres, provide a detailed map of the composite genre emulation in the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu*. As is the core idea in response aesthetics, this structure also invites response, and it implies a group of players in the historical context of the game. The direct interface for participation is to be found in the (condensated) Keeper and player roles of the narrative system, but the cognitive systems using it are also dependent on things outside the game—such as the political, economic, and religions systems; their backgrounds and ethnicity; their social situations, etc. Any actual response to the response inviting mechanisms and structures, will entail selections from these surroundings. In other words, the analysis of a space is inevitably also a description of potential, an indication of things that might fit in it.

Laycock’s duality, where a game both reflects and sheds new light on reality, depends upon this

quality. The composite genre emulation in *Call of Cthulhu* allowed the players to process the changes and dangers of the early 1980s. The investigator facing the incomprehensible age, vastness, and evil of the Cthulhu mythos is analogous to the player facing the risk of nuclear war, also unfathomable in its consequences. But instead of succumbing to depression in the real world, the player could watch his investigator go mad (and recover). Instead of getting lost looking for a way to fight the more diffuse threats in the real world, such as perceived challenges to the American way of life, the player could identify with an investigator who fires away at distinct and very tangible enemies. Instead of dealing with the technological revolution, economic recession and social and ethnic divides in the 1980s, the player could dream away to the enormous privileges of being a white ruler of the world in the colonial era.

Core to Reaganite entertainment, the successful campaign where the characters thwart the Elder Gods is a restoration of order and, ultimately, the maintenance of status quo. However, this interpretation of *Call of Cthulhu* as a work inviting a conservative response can be moderated to some degree. The game's more serious air makes it appear less Reaganite than *The Adventures of Indiana Jones Role-Playing Game*, released just a few years later (Cook 1984). The publication context described in the background also affords a countercultural aspect, where the characters' dealings with religious cults highlight the cult-like nature of a predominantly Christian culture starting to target role-players. Similarly, while the racial injustices of the game world are exploited ludically, the accentuation of white privilege also has the potential to bring this topic to the foreground of the players' critical attention, if it was not there before.

In this double-edged understanding of escapism, the first edition of *Call of Cthulhu* can be seen as a colonial fantasy answering a mix of player needs. This is possible mainly due to the three most prominent features of the game—sanity, alien encounters, and remote expeditions—all produced through genre tensions rather than a singular horror focus. By selecting genre elements from fantasy role-playing Lovecraftian horror, pulp fiction, detective stories and colonial mystery, and then recombining these elements so that they end up working differently and together, emulation not only replicates a lot of the functions these genres fill, but also gives them new affordances. The subtitle “Fantasy Role-playing in the Worlds of H.P. Lovecraft” means that the fantasy game genre can be used for modern horror, but also that the cosmic horror genre gets a cure for madness and the possibility of a few happy endings. The supportive genres also appear changed in the emulated genre composition. The detective story becomes distinctly catabatic. While pulp remains largely the same, there is an accentuated use of therapeutic violence, arguably giving it greater depth. The colonial mystery genre is represented in the game medium, where it yields very tangible ludic advantages—while also staying deeply problematic.

In present day editions of *Call of Cthulhu*, the inequalities of the 1920s era have been toned down, and the most blatant examples of the colonial gaze have been removed. But the colonial era remains the game's default, and the iconic campaigns remain popular: you still fight cultists of color from remote parts of the world. The moderated sanity mechanism and the exaggerated weapon focus (relative to Lovecraft) also remain. Perhaps the more interesting question is not how *Call of Cthulhu* has been adapted to our time, but how our time relates to the early 1980s.

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