

Bridging Historical and Present-Day Queer Community Through Embodied Role-playing

Abstract: *Just a Little Lovin' (JaLL)*, a live action role-playing (larp) portraying queer lives in the face of the HIV/AIDS crisis, provides an example of how a larp might connect participants to historical communities (Baird 2023). This connection may serve as a catalyst for an ongoing bond that might foster personal growth as well as present-day community building. There are many reports on the impact that the larp has had on the participants on a personal level (Baird 2021; Bowman 2015; Friedner 2022; Gronemann ed. 2013; Groth et al. 2021; Levin 2019, Stenros 2021; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). Through the lens of emerging theories on transformational role-playing, new perspectives arise that enlighten these experiences further.

Taking into consideration metareflection (Levin 2020), transformational containers (Baird 2021; Bowman and Hugaas 2021), and different types of bleed (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Kemper 2020), this article discusses what we might learn from role-playing queer history. I argue that in the affirmative space of the larp, playing queer personality traits that might have been suppressed has offered personal growth through emotional (Bowman and Hugaas 2021), emancipatory (Kemper 2020), and ego bleed (Beltrán 2012). However, continued development of marginalized personality traits might require extended integration work, for which post larp practices are just emerging. Through the feeling of belonging to historical queer movements that *JaLL* offers, participants have been spurred to reach out to queer communities of the present-day, and have also built their own queer communities, both of which may support prolonged integration and development processes. These perspectives might aid in a continued development on post-larp integration practices and community building, as well as open up the possibility for other marginalized groups and historical movements to consider how they might benefit from their own bespoke larps.

Keywords: community building, LGBTQIA+, queerness, larp, role-playing games, metareflection, bleed, integration

Hilda Levin

thehilda@gmail.com

1. *JUST A LITTLE LOVIN'*: A LARP KNOWN FOR ITS IMPACT

Just a Little Lovin' (JaLL), a larp (live action role-playing) portraying queer lives in the face of the HIV/AIDS crisis, provides an example of how a larp might connect participants to historical communities (Baird 2023). This connection may serve as a catalyst for an ongoing bond that might foster personal growth as well as present-day community building. There are many reports on the impact that the larp has had on the participants on a personal level (Baird 2021; Bowman 2015; Friedner 2022; Gronemann, ed. 2013; Groth et al. 2021; Levin 2019; Stenros 2021; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). Through the lens of emerging theories on transformational role-playing (Baird 2021; Beltrán 2012; Bowman and Hugaas 2019; Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Hugaas 2019; Kemper 2017; Kemper 2020), and by looking at the impact on a community level, new perspectives arise. These might aid in a continued development on post larp integration practices as well as open up the possibility for other marginalized groups and historical movements to consider how they might benefit from their own bespoke larps.

JaLL is a larp for about 60 participants, created in the Nordic larp tradition by Tor Kjetil Edland and Hanne Grasmø. It was played for the first time in Norway in 2011, and has since been organized in Sweden, Denmark, USA, Finland, UK and France. Within the Nordic larp community, it is considered to be one of the most impactful larps to play, with its strong themes on desire, fear of death, and friendship; bespoke design choices in act structures; workshops; and metatechniques; as well as a complex range of characters and social connections (Bowman 2015; Groth et al. 2021; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019; Waern 2012). I played the larp myself in 2016, and returned to organize it in 2022.

The larp is structured over three nights of celebrations, where people from the queer, alternative, and spiritual communities of New York are invited to celebrate the 4th of July together in 1982, 1983 and 1984. The HIV/AIDS virus is spreading throughout the queer community, leaving a huge impact on the characters and their festive gatherings. The day between each evening of in-game celebration is used for off-game contextualization and calibration, where the participants collaboratively consider what will happen in the following year (Groth, Grasmø, and Edland eds. 2021).

2. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ROLE-PLAYING HISTORY?

When we are role-playing, we interpret our bodies and surroundings through a layer of fiction. Through focusing on our interpretation, we may immerse into the fiction (Järvelä 2019; Levin 2020; McConachie 2013). And by zooming out, we may see both fiction and reality in relation to each other, and metareflect (Levin 2020), which might allow for a constructive relationship between our lives and the role-play. While we may also reflect on the experience after a larp, metareflections are an important aspect of the contextualization and personal correlations we might find while the larp is ongoing. At *JaLL*, the long breaks for calibration between each act allows for a shared metareflexive space that informs the larp, while still allowing for deeper immersion during play.

Participants use what they know and can imagine to inform the fiction they create. It is therefore relevant to ask: What can we learn from imagining history, or playing being gay, or playing being sick? What we might learn about real life in any larp relies on what is brought into play through the experiences, thoughts, and ideas of participants and organizers, meeting in a design informed by the experiences and knowledge of the larp designers. *JaLL* has a very good starting point, as the designers have extensive knowledge on queer lives, non-normative sexuality, and HIV/AIDS. Even though the larp is open for anyone, the larp's strong themes have always attracted a large amount of queer participants (but as their queerness is not necessarily visible, this is not always evident to outsiders or even other participants) that also bring their experience into the imagined universe (Stenros 2021). With all these contributions combined, there seems to be enough shared experience to create a fiction that is complex, nuanced, and that rings true, as has been affirmed by participants well rooted in the queer community at the 2022 run, as well as in earlier accounts (Torner 2018).

Infused by these combined efforts, “performances may energize people to make hundreds, even thousands of [interpretive] blends and meanings” (McConachie 2013, 73), which might lead to new insights. Through the shared fiction, participants that are not queer might also gain new knowledge through *memetic bleed* (Hugaas 2019; Bowman and Hugaas 2021) where values and ideas of other social groups might be more understood.

To allow participants to get the information they need to be able to improvise this history, there is recommended reading and watching sent out before the larp, and over a day of workshops before the larp starts. During the larp, short historical updates are given during each act break, before the participants develop how the story unfolds next. Some runs of the larp have also been followed by lectures on the history of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the present-day situation (*JaLL* 2022; Waern 2012).

Performance researcher Rebecca Schneider (2011) suggests that historical reenactments may be seen as a form of performative documentation. As other types of media, our own bodies may carry information from one time to another by recreating historical issues. While we also need stories where queer lives do not end in tragedy, insisting on the retelling and remembering of past struggles can also be seen as a form of resistance for marginalized groups (Malburne-Wade 2013; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). While the deadly sickness is a prominent theme, it is the queer lives that we embody, fall in love with, and remember (Bowman 2015; Friedner 2022; Paisley 2016). In addition, the participants carry

with them the present-day knowledge that this crisis could have had a very different outcome, which adds a metareflective hindsight that challenges any deterministic narratives. What becomes visible is not a tragedy, but a crisis hitting characters that could have been us, that could have become our elders had they lived today, and how society failed them.

JaLL does not strive to be a historically correct document. The information sent out before the larp is very condensed, and to a large extent optional, and the aesthetics of the larp is more of an '80s dream than strictly realistic. With a focus on human relations, the participants are free to create stories meaningful to them within the themes presented. It might be contradictory to still call it a performative documentation, but rather than having the participants confuse the larp for historical accuracy, this approach insists on an open dialogue between our shared imaginative experience and historical facts, where the two might inform one another. This encourages participants to continue this dialogue, engaging in other historical documents and stories long after the larp has ended. Well aware that "when we blend concepts to create possible worlds, the end result is still hypothetical" (McConachie 2013, 27), it is after the larp that most of the factual learning happens.

Still, even though we know that our character fates are not facts, we carry with us over 60 different imagined human fates of *what it could have been like*. While resisting any conclusion on *knowing*, the larp gives a spectrum of experiences that people like us might have had: "Speaking to ancestors, body-to-body, we might not see eye-to-eye, *but we might*" (Schneider 2011, 137). While attending my second run of *JaLL* as an organizer, in the last act taking place in 1984, some characters had started a bright confetti-driven HIV/AIDS activist group called The Radical Fairies, inspired by a group that did exist at the time. I watched them perform in 2022, infused with memories from my earlier 1984 that took place in 2016. The props that one of the participants brought turn out to be actual props that they used in a similar activist group in the 2000s. In a beautiful moment of metareflection, "the 'liveness' of the event was itself syncopated with other times. The time, then, was not (only) now. It was (multiple) past and present, present and deferred into the future" (Schneider 2011, 183). I watched reality and fiction intersect, as queer histories intermingle in an intricate dance with the layers of time.

3. WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM QUEER ROLE-PLAYING?

While the role-playing is fiction, it provides an alibi that allows us to try out who we could have been, which might be followed by discoveries of our own of what we are, what we are not, and what we could be today. Returning to the larp in 2022 as an organizer, I saw a new group of participants dive into the *JaLL* universe. Extravagant '80s outfits, genderbending participants, drag queens, fairies and butches, leather and disco. The first evening, there was an atmosphere of being a bit out of one's comfort zone. *Is the outfit and the makeup too much, or not enough? Is this too weird, or could my character have worn it?* Throughout the larp, as if it were it a crash course in queer pride and ownership, I recognized players move like I once did, from braving awkwardness into carrying themselves with pride and ease in a variety of outfits, romancing, dances, or stage performances.

Many people entering queer communities for the first time have probably questioned if they are too queer or not queer enough to fit in. In the redeeming light of there being no such thing as "too much" in the '80s, the participants can try out almost any style and get away with it. With the alibi of character and fictional universe, there might be awkwardness, but there is no feeling of judgment or shame that might threaten trying things out in real life. Within the frame of the larp, extravagance and camp is unanimously celebrated both in- and out-of-game, as a gift to the queer party and to the shared effort of aestheticizing the larp. As such, the larp creates a transformational container (Baird 2021; Bowman and Hugaas 2021) for developing queer ownership of one's body and space.

Through this safer training ground, participants may try out being more explicitly queer than they would in their everyday life, and with the collective support around them, become more at ease with showing who they are. This might especially be of use for queer participants without an established network, who might then enter real life queer arenas with greater confidence.

At *JaLL* 2022, I learned through off-game conversations that a significant amount of participants try out things they have never done before, from wearing leather to same sex flirting or even having their first drag show. The alibi of playing a character who masters something, might actually heighten the participant's ability, which can be especially noted when seeing players with little previous stage experience excel in the larp's performances. Through *procedural bleed* (Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Hugaas 2019), these abilities, traits, and skills may be transferred from character to participant after having managed them in the larp. In this way, the larp offers an opportunity to learn skills in all things queer, from flirting to visibility, advocacy, and artistry.

For all participants, the larp may allow for *emotional bleed* (Bowman and Hugaas 2021) or *emancipatory bleed* (Kemper 2017; Kemper 2020) through inhabiting queer experiences that have been dormant, suppressed, or lacking opportunity in their lived lives. In addition, *JaLL* builds a supportive community where being queer is the norm and even celebrated, both in and out of game (Paisley 2016; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019). For queer participants who have lived lives with a lack of visibility, community, or dealing with shame, this process offers an opportunity for emancipatory bleed of belonging, affirmation, and appreciation. Exhibiting queer behavior in a supportive community is an important aspect of this impact of the larp, and many participants report that they continue exploring their gender identities and sexual orientation after the experience (Stenros 2021; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019).

4. INTEGRATING WHAT YOU FIND

In light of the emerging work on transformative larps (Baird 2021; Bowman and Hugaas 2019; Bowman and Hugaas 2021; Kemper 2020), I would like to look back on my own journey since *JaLL* 2016. The larp moved me like no other (see also Levin 2019). But at the time, my default tools to handle character and bleed were blunt and inefficient for an experience of this caliber.

I had been nervous to embody my assertive lesbian character, but while playing, she found a confidence in me that I didn't know I had. When she died in the second act, I was devastated. My grief when I could not spend more time with her didn't quite make sense to me intellectually, since the difference as a player was only half a day before all of us would have to leave the fiction anyways. In hindsight, I realize that I had lost an unexpectedly freeing alibi to keep exploring being a fearless lesbian in a tightly knit queer community. And with an ignorance spurred by an internalized idea that the "right thing to do" was to leave characters behind, I didn't go into the third act to keep exploring something similar. I set out to play something different and, unfortunately, more close to home, and reentered the larp as a bi newcomer in an overeager attempt to integrate my present self directly into the larp. But in an environment that had just allowed the queer sides of me to be so much more, playing closer to home was to put these sides of me back in their usual constraints. Instead of finding a shortcut to integrating my queer self, I ended up despising my new character for everything she (I) wasn't (yet).

Bowman and Hugaas (2021) explain that this habit of letting the character go is an important part of the larp alibi. Alibi lets us try out new behavior through the suspension of normalcy, which is then expected to be restored as we leave the fiction. Alibi might allow us to find new sides of ourselves, but can at the same time turn into a gatekeeper that hinder us from continued exploration (see also Baird 2021; Stenros and Sihvonen 2019).

When *JaLL* 2016 ended, the de-roling continued through distancing techniques. I left a piece of my main character's clothing behind: her rose clip. As I wrote her a letter, I came to realize that I couldn't let her go. My character was both fictional and dead, but I still could feel her strength in my body, to the point where I had a recurring sensation of her rose petals already tattooed on my skin. Despite what I thought was the "proper" way to leave a larp, I went back to pick up her rose and wore it for the rest of the summer.

I can now see that I experienced what Bowman and Hugaas (2021), Kemper (2017, 2020) and Beltrán (2012) and/or *ego bleed*, where the character allowed me to inhabit suppressed emotions and suppressed aspects of my identity. As a bi person struggling with visibility in a heteronormative society, playing an unapologetic lesbian had given a marginalized part of my identity an opportunity to reclaim its space. As Kemper (2020) suggests, larps may allow us to "explore the selves we could never be, or that we might have been. . . and it is within this space we might find some of the characteristics we have always wanted to exhibit, but we have been closed off or discouraged from being." She proposes that this aspect of larp is especially useful to people who live with a fractured identity due to marginalization (Kemper 2020; see also Baird 2021), and such experiences might help us to consider how to better affirm this part of us in our everyday life.

But even though I decided not to leave her behind, I had no idea of how to integrate a character that was very different from me into my own personality. Could I keep the aspects of her that I had cherished in my everyday life? Without the alibi and the support of my co-players? How could I integrate these traits with my current self, that had been assisting in keeping them dormant?

As a larp, *JaLL* excels in being a transformational container, with community building and calibration allowing for trust to explore marginalized sides of your queer self. When it was made, educational and transformational larps had just started to emerge. How one might work to integrate experiences, rather than reflecting on and overcoming them, is just developing. Theorists such as Baird (2021), Bowman and Hugaas (2019; 2021), and Kemper (2020) have started to map out how this process might be facilitated through actions such as "creative expression, intellectual analysis, emotional processing, community support structures, and taking action on goals" (Bowman and Hugaas 2021). Even with this advice, it can be genuinely hard to carry change out of the larp, as we usually have reasons to marginalize parts of ourselves. It may be as a response to a hostile society, and it might be that we have set up boundaries to protect ourselves that it takes a long time to tear down. We might have been able to find these aspects in a transformational container that made them more easily available, in a way that our real life has a limited capacity to enable. To know how to "*distill* the essence of the experience and *infuse* our lives with the meanings we uncovered" (Bowman and Hugaas 2021) can be quite daunting. In my experience, to really integrate marginalized parts of your identity may take years, and is a more complex and slow process than we usually admit. It might be a lot to ask of designers to structure this integration work for us (as proposed by Bowman and Hugaas 2019), given how different the personal finds and needed processes might be.

My change was slow, and even though I engaged in some of the individual processing activities suggested, what really allowed the marginalized sides of me to grow, was something much more close to what the larp had given me: Finding more communities where they could be affirmed and developed over time.

5. BUILDING TRANSFORMATIONAL COMMUNITIES

The participants from *JaLL* often form their own little queer community, transcending identity and orientation. Following the 2022 run, a participant invited the entire player group to keep meeting up

regularly, as they found that this kind of queer community was missing in their life. Baird (2021), Bowman (2015), and Gerge (2004) point out that it might not only be the queer fiction itself that helps create this connection, but also the recurring shifts between players and characters that build both in- and off-game relations. In Gerge's (2004) example, the larp *Mellan himmel och hav* was spanned by months of regular meetings before and after the larp, allowing for impressions and relationships to develop over time. This seems like a really interesting approach to allow participants from marginalized groups to build lasting connections.

The participants from each run often keep in touch in Facebook groups, where they share memories from the larp, facts, news, stories and events that concern queer lives and the HIV/AIDS virus, historically and today. The learning impact from *JaLL* then spans over several years after the larp, as the participants keep sharing new topics of interest with each other. Many also let their engagement grow into political activism. For example, at the unsanctioned solidarity marking after the shooting at Oslo Pride 2022, I met many of the Norwegian larpers, both queer and allies.

Schneider (2011) suggests that reperformances of historical events are aimed as much forward as backwards in time. When bringing history to life, information is transferred to today so that it may be remembered tomorrow. Experiences such as *JaLL* affect the participants' understanding of queer history, as well as how they relate to queer future. "Laboring at the pass between pasts and presents we might recognize our labor as collective" (Schneider 2011, 137). The larp's content connects the participants to a historical movement that is still active today. We do not enter actual history through role-playing, but we may enter the historical movement (Friedner 2022).

With an increased sense of belonging, many participants set out to find other queer communities after the larp. After the Danish run, both queer participants and allies joined the local Pride parade, many for the first time (Gronemann 2013). I had never been to Pride myself before *JaLL*, but I have since co-organized the Oslo Pride two times. Through finding queer communities to engage with in my everyday life, the parts of me that were marginalized have been able to develop. Being back at *JaLL* six years later, my old character had turned into a seed that had grown into an integral part of my identity, and I hope the new participants will go on similar journeys.

Since the first *JaLL* in 2011, a significant queer community building has happened within the larp community in addition to the player group of each larp. There is an international Facebook group that gathers *JaLL* participants from all runs, continuing the dialogue between the larp and real life, with new infusions of participants and discussions for every new run. After the Swedish run, a Facebook group called *Regnbågslajvare* (Rainbow larpers) was founded (Gronemann 2013), gathering queer larpers not only from the larp, but from all of Sweden. The annual conference *Knutpunkt* started having *JaLL* room parties, which has progressed to also having room parties for different queer subgroups and printing queer pins so that we might find each other (and see how many we are!); there's now an annual drag and variety show, as well as a large international Facebook group for all queer larpers. *JaLL* has made queer larpers more visible and more connected, which has made the hobby more inclusive, fun, and safe for a previously overlooked minority. More queer characters and larps have also followed in its footsteps (Stenros and Sihvonen 2019).

Following Baird (2021), Bowman and Hugaas (2021) and Stenros and Sihvonen (2019), the larp subculture itself may also be seen as a kind of transformational container, where many participants have been able to continue exploring queer aspects of themselves outside of the larp, as their network kept supporting them. Looking at the community development after *JaLL*, it is inspiring to see that marginalized groups might gather and build their own communities together, which might then begin to function as transformational containers, spurring further growth and affirmation. Could other bespoke larps connect other marginalized groups to each other and their historical movements? It seems a practice worth exploring.

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Hilda Levin (b. 1987) is a Swedish larper living in Norway. She has a Master's in Dramaturgy and wrote her thesis on metareflection in embodied role-playing. She works with theatre productions and emerging playwrights, and has taken part in organizing the Oslo Pride cultural program in 2018, 2019, and 2023.