On the Other Side: Analyzing Identity and Crisis Through Ludic Inquiry

Abstract: This study utilizes a form of scientific methodology, *ludic inquiry*, to analyze a role-playing case study. Ludic inquiry considers games as experiential artistic research questions, and player behavior as a form of research data responding to that question. Thus, it is an art-scientific methodological form, with a unique capacity to approach significant topics of meaning. Games feature interactive fictions, whose rules and procedures can rhetorically be analogized to research questions, where players' actions, thoughts and feelings within the fiction form a type of research answer of the experiencing and meaning-making they as individuals have within the gameplay. Live action role playing games in particular feature ambiguous moments where players infer boundaries and create their own norms and rules, demonstrating an even deeper insight into their reactions to the questions asked within the game. This methodology was applied in the creation and analysis of the artistic live action role playing game *On the Other Side: Who We Become After We Move Abroad*, which intentionally asks the question, "How does identity change as a result of experiencing a crisis?"

The game represents a double crisis, migration and fascism, and simulates how changes in the socio-material context affect personality traits. Our findings suggest that the characters' familial relationships were a response to crisis throughout the game, playing a strong role in significant events such as worker riots, choosing who to save from fascist violence, and the bending of the game's rules. The results also indicate that the experience of crisis depended on one's level of comfort—a crisis was only experienced when it entailed a sense of discomfort, whether it was social feedback, labor, migration, uncomfortable seating, or being asked to show political allegiance. This discomfort often became incorporated in how valuable the characters felt. This study indicates that ludic inquiry can be used to guide game design, analyze acts of play, and inspire real-world research perspectives. Future research could further develop ludic inquiry in other topics, players and contexts, genres, formats, and using other data collection methods, as well as focus on the role of family and discomfort within immigration experiences in the face of oppressive movements.

Keywords: ludic inquiry, art, larp, role-playing games, fascism

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the foundational questions for game studies as a field was whether and in what way games are a unique or novel artistic medium for expression (Gee 2006). There have been several overviews of how and which games are connected to art in a variety of ways. Mary Flanagan's 2009 book, *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*, provided an essential historical overview of different ways art is interconnected with toys, play, and

digital and non-digital games throughout history. There have also been several important works addressing non-digital live action role-playing as an artistic medium. There is a methodological question of how larp can be documented in a way to be consumed later in a traditional artistic form (Cox 2018; Stenros and Montola 2011). Other texts connect live action role-playing games with more generally accepted art forms by analyzing them through the lens of other media studies such as film (Mochoki 2018). Other texts have seen them through the lens of modern interactive art movements (Fedoseev 2014). *The Arts of LARP* by David Simkins (2014), explores a variety of traditional arts forms that he argues are connected, including theater, literature, and also games as a unique category. However, these texts essentially connect live action role playing games as an output, a completed artifact to be analyzed and appreciated in an artistic manner.

Indeed, the appreciation of something as art is one of the fundamental rhetorical means of art in general. *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* separates the philosophy of art into three general approaches:

> One focus involves a certain kind of practice or activity or object—the practice of art, or the activities of making and appreciating art, or those manifold objects that are works of art. A second focus involves a certain kind of property, feature, or aspect of things—namely, one that is aesthetic, such as beauty or grace or dynamism. And a third focus involves a certain kind of attitude, perception, or experience—one that, once again, could be labeled aesthetic. (Levinson 2003, 1)

In this way, the most common approach to connecting live action role-playing as a form of art is really in the aesthetic appreciation of role-playing and games.

This article offers an alternative approach to live action role-playing games as an embodiment of art: creating and applying larp as an *aestheticizing practice*. In this way, much like other art-scientific methodological forms, the paper will approach art-larp not as the completed object to be analyzed but rather as a method in approaching significant topics of meaning (Leavy 2020). We expand upon past scholars who have shown the value of applying games as an arts-research method (Cox 2016), especially for arts education (Cox 2014), by systematizing our approach in a uniquely replicable way. In this way, we utilize and present a form of scientific inquiry based upon the creation and enacted play of a live action role-playing game, namely *On the Other Side: Who We Become After We Move Abroad.* This game will be presented both as a case study of a larger form of inquiry we term *ludic inquiry* and also as an artistic-scientific contribution in and of itself.

This contribution is essential for the advancement of live action role-playing games as a form of art. As the *Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (2003) begins, "One conception of art sees it as specially concerned with perceptible *form*, with the exploration and contemplation of such form *for its own sake*" (Levinson 2003, 3, emphasis added). This text stands as a strong claim that live action role-playing games present a method by which individual players are confronted with, contemplate and explore a designed perceptible form known as the game. In analyzing the way players see, think, feel, and act in the course of the game-play we gain access to a unique and invaluable form of meaning-making based upon the mixture of the perceived forms within the game and the players' co-creative choices to reframe these perceived forms.

2. BACKGROUND

Games and art have a complicated and mostly disjointed history. Different groups and communities have gone about making games with artistic intents, often without being connected to each other. In general, there are two narratives of games + art that will be explored in this piece in order to contextualize our contribution to the field: firstly, established "game designers" exploring "art" and secondly, established "artists" exploring "games."

In the early 2000s there was a movement of traditional game designers deciding to step out of their expected game design practices in order to more intentionally make game artifacts they called artistic. Often described as the "artgames" movement, it was typified by designers such as Jason Rohrer, Rod Humble, Jonathan Blow and Brenda Romero (Sharp 2015). This is an important movement as they often gained credit from arts institutions' acknowledgement for video games. For example, Jason Rohrer's *Passage* is kept in the New York Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection of video games. While many of these works are digital, not all of them are. There are non-digital art game designs including works by Mary Flanagan and Blast Theory, and games such as *Sixteen Tons* by Eric Zimmerman and Nathalie Pozzi. Brenda Romero's *The Mechanic is the Message* collection of non-digital games was driven by a desire to create artistic critical experiences through game design (Brathwaite and Sharp 2010).

This movement is important as the principles of game design as an art form is highly influential for the current work. This text views itself as asking the question Brenda Romero wrote about her own works "Can mechanics truly capture and express a difficult emotion?" (Brathwaite and Sharp 2010, 216). Ludic inquiry begins with an intention of designing "games that do not take an overt position, but instead model aspects of the systems within the given phenomenon and allows players to explore a particular aspect" (Brathwaite and Sharp 2010, 329). Live action role-playing games have also had several past integrations between games and art contexts with relevant approaches. Live action games have had artistic intent, being designed to provoke difficult emotions and experiences in the players (Montola 2010). Especially in the Nordic Larp design context, designers sought to raise awareness and evoke difficult emotions on topics such as asylum (Bjørkelo and Jørgensen 2018) and military occupation (Pöllänen and Arjoranta 2021). They have been made to be played in traditional art contexts (Cox and Lewis 2023). Contemporary arts-research has applied non-digital games, such as work by, e.g., Jason Cox, who used games to study Poiesis, Praxis, and Aisthesis by players, which he described as

> Poiesis is the visceral and lived experience of "making," the transitory act that expires as it is created. Praxis represents the idea of "doing" a thing, often associated with will and thought, and generally represented as transformation. Aisthesis, which supplies "sensing," differs from aesthetics in that it does not refer to an intellectual evaluation of an encounter, but to sensations and perceptions that are felt when we encounter works of art. (Cox 2018, 82)

Based upon past scholars observing player behavior in games for artistic research, ludic inquiry equally views player actions, especially reframing or reinterpreting the boundaries of a presented game, as a key element of the artistic event to be analyzed. In addition, the inner experience of players during this is of equal importance. Taken together, we see the first pillar of ludic inquiry: Games are social, emotional, behavioral models allowing players to explore an experience. In this way, every game designed can be seen in the form of a research question—did this game inspire an emotionally authentic and relevant experience and which experience did it cause the players to explore?

Whereas past works in non-digital artistic games have generally focused on games as sites of change and education for players, ludic inquiry does not focus on this. Instead, the interest of the current work is on how games can be used as sites of generating data from player behavior and perceptions in response to games. In this way, we are not disagreeing with most of the previous work in this area, but rather taking a different methodological approach for how such projects can be valuable for research purposes.

In addition to game designers making intentionally artistic versions of games, there are also traditions of socially accepted artists making intentionally gameful/playful versions of art. Dada was an art movement between 1916 and 1925 that believed an absurdist and anti-rational worldview was the most necessary form of artistic expression for a period marked by the First World War's horror. In order to approach absurdism, they

created art pieces based on "great clownery that courts the absurd, and loves every kind of game, disguise, or deception" (Kristiansen 1968, 460). Indeed, it intentionally violated the premises of intent in art, often using "games" with automated rules that made it difficult or impossible to fully decide what your art meant. Indeed in the Dada manifesto one of their core principles was "DADA DOES NOT MEAN ANYTHING" (Tzara 1918, 1). This is embodied well with other surrealist games of anti-rationality. Possibly the most famous game developed by this era of artists was "cadavre exquis" or *exquisite corpse*, a set of parlor games for artists invented in 1925 (Kochhar-Lindgren et al. 2011) where different artists would contribute to art pieces without knowing what other artists were doing or why they were doing it, thus creating art pieces that literally could not have a single "intent" behind them. As an example, see the 1926 artwork *Nude* by Yves Tanguy, Joan Miró, Max Morise, and Man Ray, which was created as a game of cadavre exquis.

After the surrealist movements of the early 1900s, games were also a major tool of the Fluxus art movement of the 1960s and 70s, where they were used to create interactivity with participants in a playful event. Fluxus "happenings" were driven by a philosophy of inclusion and interactivity, where "scores" of highly open-ended behavioral descriptions were meant to be followed as the art piece. In many ways a rejection of elitism in art, it viewed the resulting behavior of participants as the primary artwork. *Solo for Violin* (1962) is a score for playing music which includes instructions such as "scrape strings with a nail, loosen strings and pluck ... hold bow to shoulders and bow with violin" and, finally, "bite violin" (Maciunas 1990, 39, excerpt from Bowen 2014, 2). The ambiguity is essential to the ideology of Fluxus, as "The incompleteness of the event score thus provides the opportunity for the interpreter to step into this site between the score and its interpretation" (Bowen 2014, 5). Taken together, these artistic forms greatly influence ludic inquiry.

Taken together, we have the context for the primary theoretical claim of ludic inquiry. Firstly, games are experiential artistic research questions; secondly, player behavior, especially behaviors that seek to interpret new boundaries for the game's rules, are the form of research data. What has been lacking from past approaches connecting artistic inquiry through games is a systemic process of research methodology for applying games as an aestheticizing practice.

3. METHODS

> Fiction as a research practice is well suited for portraying the complexity of lived experience because it allows for details, nuance, specificity, contexts, and texture; cultivating empathy and self-reflection through relatable characters; and disrupting dominant ideologies or stereotypes by showing and not telling (which can be used to build critical consciousness and raise awareness). (Leavy, 2020, p. 52)

This work will apply a novel, modified version of fictive narrative analysis to live action role playing game contexts, what will be called *ludic inquiry.* Narrative inquiry has a long standing role in a variety of social sciences (e.g., Sarbin 1986) with narrative techniques such as individual personal narratives, life stories, and memoirs being seen as valuable tools for accessing psychological and cultural information. Essential to these methodologies is a belief that the way individuals experience stories in their own lives affects them. Through accessing these stories a particular form of data is gathered.

These works propose a novel translation of fictional studies and narrative inquiry techniques into an interactive game space: ludic inquiry. Specifically, this text presents a form of research practice leveraging a fictional space, in this case a "game," in order to create an "engaging, evocative, and accessible" (Leavy 2020, 52) manner by which a broad audience may interact with a specific, emotionally complex topic. Through these lenses similar priorities of narrative inquiry as a way of gathering qualitative data will be applied instead to how individuals *interact* with this *fictional behavior space* presented by an interactive game.

The following four priorities of narrative inquiry, based on a summation by Leavy (2020) will be directly applied for the novel application of ludic inquiry:

(1) the relationship of the researched and researcher,
(2) the move from numbers to words as data,
(3) a shift from the general to the particular, and
(4) the emergence of new epistemologies.

Through the new lens of games as a form of interactive fictionality these four principles will be applied and modified.

3.1 The relationship of the researched and the researcher

In this article's context, researchers were gamerunners and non-player characters (NPCs) in a live action role playing game where the research participants were characters. Players are informed that they may try and change parts of the game at any time, but certain rules will be enforced. In this way, the game operated as a collaborative fictional frame. Researchers were co-players at times, and also rule-enforcers at times, and out of game safety officers at times. Players were invited to speak to gamerunners as any of these three roles during the course of the game, such as asking questions of non-player characters, asking out of game rule questions, or discussing non-play safety issues. As designers, our positionality and previous experience also frame our design intentions and could thus bleed-in (Toft and Harrer 2020) into the game. The initial frame we design is informed by our own values and perspectives on the themes being explored and thus designer reflexivity enables contextualizing for design choices. Players are thus in dialogue with an intentional value-based proposal and not acting in "neutral ground."

3.2 The move from numbers or words to actions as data

As compared to narrative inquiry, this text will use behavioral descriptions as the primary unit of data. This will still fundamentally be a form of qualitative data, where the researchers are describing a thickness of particulars as a form of data. The core theoretical framework is that the game presents a fictional narrative space defined with a procedural rhetoric (Bogost 2008) that invites players to playfully engage with that fiction. Procedural rhetoric here is used to emphasize mechanics as communication tools, though in this case being used to ask questions rather than communicate opinions of the designers. Through player interactions with the games fictional space, and furthermore supported by their discussions shared in the debrief, a form of data becomes clear. When these players are faced with these fictional narrative moments they *engage* in a specific way. By seeing how these players *engage* in these fictional frames, defined by the procedural rhetorical research question-asking of the game's design, the observer is learning about the way other players may engage with these fictional frames.

This design is in many ways similar to a psychology experiment, where a person's behavior is seen as a primary unit of analysis. With a critical epistemic, ethical and artistic difference: the participant is aware that this is a fiction that they are choosing to engage with. In this way, this form of fictional player behavior through the lens of a "character" is a distinct form. In addition, one form of behavior that is of special interest, is when a player engages with the game in an unexpected manner that challenges or reframes the rules of the game itself. Sometimes referred to as uncultivated emergence in games (Torner 2018), these moments go beyond the message-delivery model of expressionistic art games, where the game creates an experience for players. Rather these emergent moments where players create rules and frames of play demonstrate a narrative and act of sense-making they are enacting within the game. An important aspect of a game such as this one is the fact that players can bend the rules and push the boundaries set by the gamerunners. If players find rule-bending more engaging or advantageous even than established rules they may do it (Stenros 2019; Greve et al. 2019). Therefore, not every event in the game can even be planned for.

3.3 A shift from general to particular

As with most forms of rigorous methods, rather than focusing first on broad themes of behaviors, this text will first look at concrete specific behaviors, how they connect with other behaviors in order to construct interpretive themes. In this way, specific choices in specific moments by specific characters will allow a thickness (Ames et al. 2024) of particulars for readers to unpack contextualizing elements and reduce the risk of authors interpreting situations in a non-rigorous way.

3.4 The emergence of a new epistemology

In this way this text proposed a new epistemology of games as fictional behavior spaces, and player characters engaging with these spaces as a form of data. Of primary interest in this paradigm is intentional game-design choices, meant to invite players into a specific fictional context, whereby the player actions, and player attempts to reframe such contexts become specific, interesting, and topically relevant material. This is reasonably bolstered as a valid form of data gathering due to its structural similarity to psychological interactionism (Reynolds et al. 2010), where personality and environmental context have a history of being integrated to further understand human behavior.

While past works have used the term and certain components behind what we mean with ludic inquiry (e.g., Rapti and Gordon 2021), this is a unique systematization of how a play-based data method should work integrating 1. Game design as fictional frame for behavior as research question and 2. Player behavior and reframing of game rules as data. Taken together this presents a new epistemological theory for games as scientifically relevant, fictional interactive behavior spaces whereby player behaviors and rule-inferences can be seen as a form of qualitative answer to questions asked in the game's design (Figure 2).

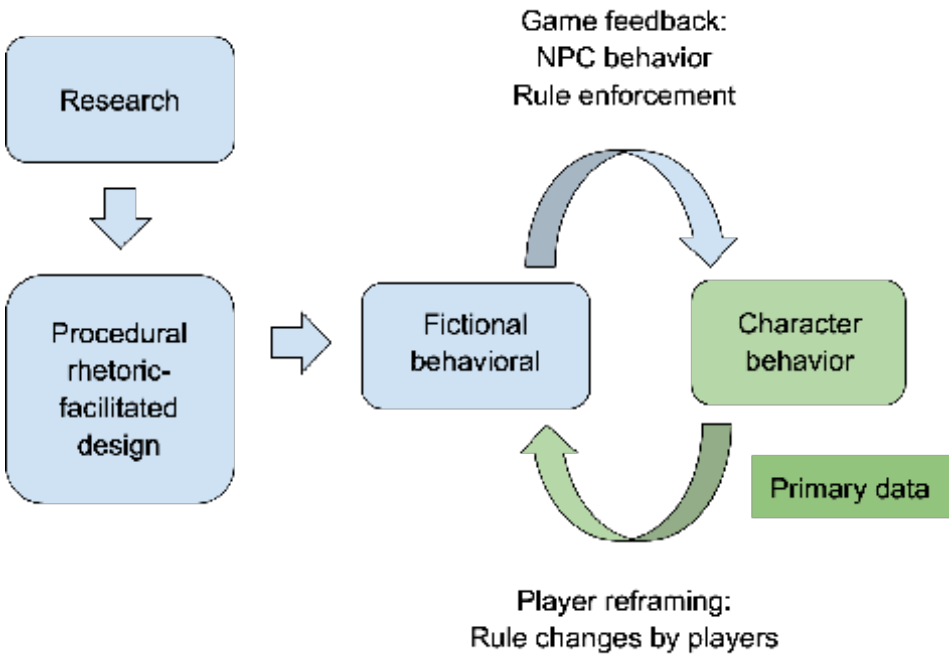

Figure 1. Ludic inquiry.

4. APPLYING LUDIC INQUIRY: A CASE STUDY ON IDENTITY AND CRISIS

The design team included five migrants in their 20s and 30s who had lived in Finland for one to six years. Additionally they identify as a US-born man, two Spanish men, a Peruvian of Italian and Palestinian descent who is gender nonconforming, and a Chilean man. Four of them are the authors of this article. They all share an interest in game design and research exploring serious topics, such as the interrelations of personal and cultural change. In this way, this game, though not necessarily all versions of Ludic Inquiry, was a form of community arts (Barndt 2008).

Echoing Toft and Harrer's (2018) insights on needs before roles, we did not assign specific roles during the design process, but created a space where we could discuss and articulate our own experiences as migrants and identify what we felt was meaningful as a group. This included discussing struggles, difficulties, and emotional moments that arose from our different cultural backgrounds. This led us to make intentional, collective, expressive design choices that reflected a values-based design process (Flanagan 2009). In contrast to some other values-based design projects, rather than having specific goals or messages we intended to communicate through the game as a fixed object, we sought players to respond playfully and appropriate those choices in the game-space. In this way, we also see players as fundamental contributors to a collective understanding: a dialectic expression of values between designer and player.

When conceptualizing our experiences as migrants and how it affected the way we understood our identities and subjectivity, we found inspiration in posthuman ideas of subjective experience as *becoming*, rather than fixed identities. Especially, understanding the subject as a fictional choreography composed of our relationships to others and the environment that configures a "socially operational" self (Braidotti 2014). In leaving home, we brought to the fore how aspects of ourselves that felt as part of "who we are," were contingent on the ways in which we fitted in and related to our social and material contexts. In having migrated, we were experiencing a keen awareness of how culture, environment, close relationships and more played roles in limiting and enabling who we are (and could be), rather than understanding our identity as an essential quality of ourselves. As Wilde (2023) states: "The different subjectivities that each one of us can embody at once also demonstrate how the idea of a unitary, stable sense of "self" is flawed – we are many things at once and, again, part of this is to do with who we are with, where we are in time or space, and how we intra-act with human and non-human others" (27).

This made us curious to explore how we intra-act (Barad 2007), or affect each other not as independent individuals, but as part of a larger interrelated system that includes a diverse set of people, but also environmental and material conditions. Thus, elements like living situations, material comfort, sense of security and relationship to nature also affected our subjective experience and ways of relating to the world. This all contributed to our desire of creating a ludic experience that explores how we are not ultimate sovereigns of our identities as individual rational subjects, but rather how they are configured in a field of complex affective inter-relations.

The choice of this topic was also driven in part by a thematic topic of the producing and hosting body *The Games As Art Center*. In February 2024 the institution was hosting talks and games about —identity and crisis. This integration was a natural fit as large context changes in life can be experienced as crises that affect our identity, from altered habit triggers (Wood et al. 2005) to sociocultural changes compelling us to adapt (Baumeister and Muraven 1996). We chose a double crisis, migration and fascism, as an international team of designers concerned with the global rise of reactionary politics. As for identity, the game simulates how such changes in the socio-material context affect personality traits. Some questions that this game asks are collected in Table 1. Most of these questions and the design approaches used to present in the game will be addressed in a later section.

5. GAME DESCRIPTION

On the Other Side is a Larp for 8 to 24 players about identity, social context, and the experience of moving abroad. Players embody characters that belong to one of two countries, Tai or Norr, and experience their daily routines before moving abroad and experiencing life in the other country, a new and different context. The game lasts an estimated 4-5 hours (including a workshop ~1 hour, gameplay ~2.5 hours, and debriefing ~45 minutes).

Table 1: The main research questions and the three categories of sub-questions.

Overarching research question
How does **identity change** as a result of experiencing a **crisis**?
1. Culture and the socio-material context
1.1. What is the role of new **social connections and feedback** in shaping identity?
1.2. How do people maintain a relationship to their **former socio-material context**?
1.3. How is identity changed after **returning** to a former social and/or material context?
1.4. How do different experiences of **labor and comfort** influence identity?
2. Identity and personal traits
2.1. How are **original identity traits** managed in a new context? (expressed, concealed...)
2.2. How do people integrate **new traits** within their preexisting identity?
2.3. How do players **perceive and reflect on their own selves** by the end of the process?
3. Crisis and fascism
3.1. How is the **rise of fascism** perceived depending on its **bluntness**?
3.2. What identity factors lead to **social support or abandonment** in a high-stakes situation?
3.3. How do players **navigate an authoritarian** crisis?

The game was run on two separate occasions. The first run was held in Tampere, Finland, in February 2024. The game was carried out at an independent art space. We had 11 participants for this run, 6 of which went to Tai, and 5 to Norr. The second run of the game was held in Visby, Sweden, in April 2024. We had nine participants, five of whom formed a large family in Tai. The remaining four formed two households in Norr—two sisters and a married couple.

These two countries are neighbors, but they have contrasting cultures, marked by a drastic difference in wealth. Norr is symbolic of post-industrial Western societies. Labor in Norr is marketing-related and consists of creative work done with others. Tai is a poorer industrial country, characterized by manual labor. Norr experiences cold weather and Tai is tropical. Tai is characterized by larger families living together, partly due to preference and economic limitation, whereas many people can afford (and prefer) to live alone or in a small group in Norr.

The game is played in a single room where furniture layout is used to create divisions between each country and between the different areas within each country (living space, workspace, and social/party space). When constructing the space, Norr is given more space, as well as more comfortable furniture. Five gamerun-

ners are present, 4 of which are NPCs during the game. Two of them play the work bosses in each country. The other two are flexible NPCs that take on various roles throughout the days of the game. The fifth gamerunner remains "out of play" to provide support for players when needed. Days are structured by songs that mark the passage from one section to the next and indicate to players what they are supposed to be doing. Whenever the "work" song starts, players know it is time to leave home and head towards the workplace. When that song is ending and the "party" song starts, that is a queue for players to finish the workday and move towards the social area.

The character creation process takes place during the workshop. First, players are divided into two groups which will determine their country. Within Norr, players form pairs, and in the case of odd players, the odd one out lives by themselves. In Tai, players form groups of 3-5 people. Each of these groups will represent a family, or people who share living arrangements. Once groups are formed, players receive three trait cards corresponding to their country. These are personality traits that will inform who their character is, and are generally aligned with the culture of the country they belong to, thus serving as an initial instance of tying identity to the context. Finally, players are given time to collaboratively create their characters with the other members of their group. They discuss what the relationship is to each other, how they are usually perceived and behave, what their name is, and any other relevant detail that occurs to them.

Play was structured through the repetition of daily schedules over 6 in-game days before the final phase of play. Each in-game day was divided into 4 moments: first, the early morning, where the players' characters would spend some "breakfast" time with the other characters in their home; second, the work day, where they went to their workplace; third, the socializing "party" time, where the characters could unwind and interact more freely with others; and finally, the end-of-day ritual called the "circle of feelings," where characters could express how they felt towards each other through pantomime and physical touch, if the players allowed it.
One aspect of the daily schedule that is worth examining more closely is the work that each character performed. In general terms, we wanted the labor to feel repetitive and ultimately not too useful. We did this in different ways in each country: since Norr was intended to resemble societies in the global North, their labor resembled intellectual work, with the characters taking turns around a set of presentation slides (which we partially procured from SlideLizard n.d.) and doing their best to make a coherent product pitch in corporate language, in the style of the improv game battledecks. Meanwhile, as Tai was intended to represent societies in the South, work was intended to resemble manual labor, which we achieved by handing pairs of players sheets of aluminum foil, which one player was tasked with folding so that another could unfold them.

During each one of these phases, players were encouraged to find ways to talk and interact with other players. Since our target audience didn't necessarily have prior experience with games like *On The Other Side*, we decided to also provide players with some narrative and ludic affordances to help them in this endeavor in the form of scheduled events. Every in-game morning, a gamerunner would approach each family group individually in each country as an NPC and provide them with a task or a problem to carry out throughout the day. In each country, whoever performed the best at the task among their peers got rewarded with an additional Trait card.

What the "best performance" meant for each task would vary depending on the nature of the task, and would produce moments of tension between the different drives for the characters: for example, one event has a social servant deliver a form to apply for government aid, but the form is overly convoluted and complex, and the funds are limited. What this means is that, by the end of the day, whoever in each country was the one that filled the form with the most signatures will be awarded the funds (and a new trait card). As a result, some characters may be driven to ignore other activities in favor of fulfilling this specific task.

The second kind of regular event were the migrations on the end of the second and fourth in-game days. In the first migration, half of the players of each country switch places with each other, and in the second migration, all players switch countries. After these migrations, players are assigned to new family groups for the next phases of play and encouraged to interact with them.

Finally, after the end of the sixth in-game day, the circle of feelings is interrupted to showcase how both nations have simultaneously been taken over by fascists, a development that was directly foreshadowed in the previous rounds, and that both countries need to strictly determine who belongs to which country. It is at this stage that all players are brought together into the "Theater of Fascism," in which every player takes the stage in front of everyone else to state their case on what country they want to continue living in, and why they should be considered for it. After one minute, the rest of the players may cast their Trait cards as votes of confidence, and if the player receives five cards of the same country, they will receive a passport for that country (e.g., five Norr cards award a Norr passport, but four Norr cards and one Tai card does not award a passport). The cards used up for a successful bid for a passport are expended.

After every player has had a chance to earn a passport, they are all brought to a final stage where, in an inversion of the circle of feelings, they have a chance to reflect in front of a mirror in an isolated space (such as a bathroom) for a few seconds about the result they have arrived at. After this, if they have a passport, they move to the issuing country, but if they don't, they move to the "Nowhere Place." The Nowhere Place is a final zone set apart from all the others that is meant to unambiguously signify death, either immediately as a result of the coup, shortly thereafter as a result of exile, or later as a result of further violence. After this stage is completed, the game is over, and the players are reunited for a round of debriefing, deroling, and conversation about the experience.

6. CONTEXTUALIZING THE GAME'S DESIGN

In this section, we detail how the mechanics used in the game address questions on culture, identity, and crisis. In each case, we provide an overview of literature bridging the relationship between the concepts and the mechanics.

6.1 Culture and the socio-material context

One cultural aspect explored in the game is how new **social connections and feedback** shape identity. Our personal identity includes all properties that make us "ourselves" (Olson 2023). Identity depends on variable and provisional factors, and even when factors remain constant, a person may give more or less importance to them in different moments, even to the point of experiencing an identity crisis when one feels like they lost fundamental characteristic aspects (Olson 2023). An important aspect that "makes us who we are" is personality, or the ways in which we tend to think, feel, and behave (Roberts and Yoon 2022). While personality tends to remain consistent throughout our lives, experiences in relationships, work, and health, including events such as traveling abroad, can change our personality traits, e.g., making us more extraverted or neurotic (Roberts and Yoon 2022). Players' construction of their own character's personality was guided by randomly given *traits*.

In addition to personal, one may have other forms of identity, including national, ethnic (Olson 2023), or cultural. These may be understood as forms of social identity, or "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership" (Tajfel 1974, 69). Social identities may be perceived in a positive or a negative light, and individuals may engage in different strategies to alter them, such as attempting forms of mobility or competition (Ellemers and Haslam 2012). Creating and maintaining a desired group identity is a core reason for engaging with others (Ellemers and Haslam 2012), and experienced acceptance or rejection by a social group can affect a person's self-esteem (Leary 2012). Identity-shaping forces include repeated contact with family and other close social groups (Putney and Bengtson 2002), from physical touch (Cekaite and Goodwin 2021) to verbal interaction in shared ritual moments such as meals. In the game, players could talk

to their new family during *breakfast*, and to the community during *work* and *party time*, whereas the *circle of feelings* mechanic allowed for non-verbal social feedback.

However, our own actions, such as competence at work and in other tasks (Christiansen 1999), are also important in identity formation. We introduced the *daily missions*, by which players could acquire new traits from the country they were in, as a way for them to demonstrate competence in ways appropriate to their national and social context. Neither does the other competence mechanic, *work*, exist outside of social and personal reality. We bring our nationality, gender, or religion to work (Berg 2002), and what we do there is relevant for identity formation (Gini 1998; Miscenko and Day 2015). In particular, different occupations and work types can lead to feelings such as pride and joy (Danielsson et al. 2019). Accordingly, we considered **labor** through distinct *metaphors for working life*, one being more manual and one being more intellectual. We also considered **comfort** through *differences in space* for sitting down and sleeping, as our sense of place is also relevant for our identity (Lengen and Kristemann 2012).

Another cultural aspect is the maintenance of a relationship to one's **former socio-material context**. In this game, all players were gathered in the same room, and the spaces were delimited by *porous barriers* (i.e., not even walls separated Norr from Tai). This means that the characters' physical home (the country, the household) need not coincide with their psychological home, which is connected with one's feeling of belonging to others surpassing the physical environment (Sigmon, Whitcomb, and Snyder 2002). As people visit, communicate, and share resources across countries (Adugna 2019; Soehl and Waldinger 2010), our players were also able to build a psychological home beyond the confines of their pretend physical space.

The game also questioned the effects of **returning** to a former social and/or material context on identity. In the game, some players had to *return* home, possibly with *new traits* acquired from completing missions abroad. One's experience as a migrant matters in relation to one's relationship to their culture and old country. A person's socio-cultural integration in a new country makes it less likely that they would like to go back to their country of origin (De Haas et al. 2014). Even after returning, transnational ties may be maintained (Vargas-Valle and Glick 2021) and a hybrid cultural identity formed (Sussman 2000). A forced return is often problematic due to a lack of possibility to prepare and set realistic expectations (Lietaert et al. 2013) and it can lead to experiences of discrimination and distance (Kunuroglu et al. 2015). These readaptation issues can impact one's sense of self and social identity.

6.2 Identity traits

On the Other Side also explored the characters' personality traits. They were given *initial traits* at the beginning and had to **manage them in a new context**, plus they were offered *additional traits* for completing missions to **integrate within their preexisting identity**. This all occurred as they received *feedback* from others who also had evolving traits. As said, our personality is defined by the ways in which we tend to think, feel, and behave (Roberts and Yoon 2022), and these may be altered as a result of new experiences (Roberts and Yoon 2022). Identity can be seen as adaptive, where both culture and choice and change are relevant factors (Baumeister and Muraven 1996), and developing in relation to goals and in negotiation with the context (Schachter 2005). Yet, at the social level, different people have different subjective beliefs that integration in different social groups is possible (Ellemers and Haslam 2012) and therefore this form of flexibility is conditioned by aspects of the self. Therefore, characters should have been able to manage and integrate their identity traits differently, but the form and extent of this integration should vary. It is also important to remember that in the game, others *migrated with the character*, so reinforcement of cultural identity could occur. Depending on the new social context, a change in geographic context can strengthen, e.g., an ethnic identity (Saylor and Aries 2010), but aversion by the environment can also reduce it (Ethier and Deaux 1994).

The final stage of the characters' identity came at the end of the game. How could they **perceive and reflect on themselves** after the crisis? For this, we provided *a mirror and a private space* for them to enact a circle of feelings of one for one minute. Mirrors have been found to support self-reflection and used as intentional tools for such purposes in exhibitions (Ridley 2015) and technology-enhanced interventions (Rajcic and McCormack 2020).

6.3 Crisis and fascism

We wanted to explore the participants' **perception of fascism** depending on how overtly its values and tactics were represented. In Norr, the escalation of fascism was *soft*, while in Tai the manners were always *aggressive*. The existence of a superficially soft form of fascism in Norr was not a fabulation—fascism is said to have adopted a "new face" (Traverso 2019). Groups on the radical right are often called "crypto-fascist" due to them not acknowledging the implications of their ideology and the policies they promote, and will often take offense to being compared with historical fascism (Copsey 2018). Both versions of fascism however were designed to mimic the factors of fascistic rise based on Paxton (2004):

> [Fascism is] a form of political behavior marked by obsessive preoccupation with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of unity, energy, and purity, in which a mass-based party of committed nationalist militants, working in uneasy but effective collaboration with traditional elites, abandons democratic liberties and pursues with redemptive violence and without ethical or legal restraints goals of internal cleansing and external expansion. (216)

In the game, this was an explicitly militant movement that, united with the elites (the bosses), sought to cleanse the "bad" members of society, and create a cult of unity.

The culmination of fascism in the game is the trial, in which the mechanic *one trait, one vote* and the exploitation of *built social relationships* become relevant. These explore the factors leading to **social support or abandonment** in a high-stakes situation. After all, according to social identity theory, social context is said to be "the key determinant of self-definition and behavior. People's responses are thus understood in terms of subjective beliefs about different groups and the relations between them, rather than material interdependencies and instrumental concerns, objective individual and group characteristics, or individual difference variables" (Ellemers and Haslam 2012, 379). In moments of external threat and common fate, people tend to care more about how a relevant collective views them, rather than how they see themselves or how society at large does, which has an impact on their behavior (Triandis 1989). Plus, people are generally biased in favor of members of their own group, from empathizing to sharing resources (Tajfel et al. 1971). In crisis situations such as severe disease, it is often the family who becomes the core support network (Snyder and Pearse 2010).

It is also important to remember that in the game, **navigating the authoritarian crisis** occurred in a context in which characters had the option of *compliance versus punishment* one of the defining features of fascistic authoritarian legal systems (Skinner 2015), with players for example being sent to jail in Tai. Historical examples include all sorts of individual and collective behaviors, from radicalization to partisanism, from collaborationism to quiet acceptance or resistance.

7. GAMEPLAY ANALYSIS

This section reports events as observed by the gamerunners during the game's two sessions. All statements were made in game and observed by gamerunners. Players in both runs were informed that the game was a

part of an ongoing research project with players agreeing to participate in this observation. No personal data was solicited or recorded for players. The findings are organized according to the three focal points of culture, identity, and crisis.

7.1 Culture and socio-material context

Some players approached new relationships confrontationally, strongly preferring their previous social bonds, while others were more adaptive. This led to a clear difference in wellbeing, as those who adapted reported experiencing a stronger sense of belonging in their new context, while those who did not reported a sense of rejection. The circle of feelings seemed particularly impactful in developing an understanding of how characters were perceived by their peers through emotionally charged gestures and physical contact (Cekaite and Goodwin 2021).

Even when forming connections to their new contexts, characters maintained a relationship with their former ones. Firstly, their previous experience influenced how they approached new environments, as we will see when discussing work. As mentioned earlier, countries had no physical boundaries, which also created a permeable space where characters were peripherally aware of what was happening in their previous context. This was reframed by some characters, who proposed using telephones to communicate with their relatives. Sometimes, this was accompanied by a refusal to develop further relationships in their new country, where lacking a sense of belonging led them to yearn to reconnect with family and vice-versa.

Upon returning to their original countries, characters expressed having gained perspective for self-understanding due to having experienced drastically different realities. This affected how they perceived their relationship to their original context as some discussed having a newfound appreciation for it, while others felt returning meant leaving a better life behind. For example, in run 1 characters returned to Norr from Tai describing it as chaotic. Most characters, regardless of country, preferred life in Norr, which led to some players in Tai grieving that they had to go back, and asking for Norr citizenship at the end of the game. This aligns with De Haas et al. (2014) as becoming well integrated in a new country made players prefer to stay instead of returning. To a lesser extent, a few Norr characters expressed feeling freer in Tai after returning home, and having discovered sides of themselves previously unexplored. In both cases, characters mentioned feeling unable to ignore their new relationships and experiences. This could be understood as approaching a hybrid identity (Sussman 2000) through their relationship to both cultures.

Characters were quick to interpret material comfort as wealth. Not only did the differences in space layout per country translated into their lived experience, but they also began ascribing their own meaning to game elements. Characters in run 1 seemed to decide that the household with the couch was the "wealthiest family," which in turn affected how they related to others in the game. Conversely, the use of cramped space and stools instead of chairs in Tai was immediately perceived as a contrasting lack of comfort which contributed to dissatisfaction with work life, which was observed through an eventual protest, where sitting arrangements for all factory workers was a primary demand. These interpretations worked to create a clear difference in the space identity for each country which "influence our way of thinking, our consciousness, the course our life takes, our social structures, our health and well-being" (Lengen and Kristemann 2012).

Labor experiences played a central role in configuring a sense of space for each country, in characters' self-understanding and identity, and the overall game narrative. As per Christiansen (1999), we saw that characters who were valued by their bosses and peers expressed feeling competent within their work life and feeling they belonged in that context, whereas those who did not fit in expressed dissonance with their context and a difficulty finding meaning in their own identity.

In this regard, we observed a tendency by some Tai characters to adopt a defeatist attitude towards their relationship to work. This was observed by Norr bosses in both runs of the game after the first migration.

Tai characters who already felt rejected by the harsh labor conditions in their country often assumed that they would not succeed in Norr, that it was not worth trying. Usually this came accompanied with comments suggesting that their ideas, creativity or unique perspective would not be valued, and that they would be unable to find a context where their goals or aspirations would make sense. Conversely, some people in Norr reported enjoying themselves doing work in Tai as a change of pace involving more physical labor. Not only does this speak to their already established sense of competency, which they were able to carry over, but also to the favoritism by the Tai boss, sometimes for explicitly racist reasons, who made a conscious decision as NPC to relate to them as inherently more capable and well prepared. In both cases, notions of one's national identity were brought to the workplace (Berg 2002) and informed how they perceived themselves.

One of the main forms of character reframing in the game were worker protests in Tai. What surprised us as gamerunners is how this emerged organically in both runs of the game, which could suggest that players have a strong reaction to notions of well-being in the workplace and chose to make worker movements a significant part of the narrative of the game. In both cases, the protests were prompted by bad work conditions, lack of safety and exploitation by bosses. In one case, the narrative developed through police detention and incarceration, which created fear in characters that being labeled a criminal would make them socially undesirable. Other characters whispered amongst themselves and to their bosses that their peer had been labeled a criminal and would not have good chances of staying a citizen. In the other, protesters were fired and the remaining workers were further exploited to cover for the missing personnel. Characters reframed this situation as escalating in a variety of ways, for example role-playing exhaustion and workplace injuries while their family took care of them before returning to work. These emergent proposals showed key ways in which players reframed the game space and narrative through their own meaning-making.

7.2. Identity traits

Some players immediately noticed that their traits clashed jarringly with their new context. For example, traits such as "I love peace and quiet" seemed to encourage some characters, when placed in a louder foreign country context, to retreat from social situations and become more isolated than they were in their previous context. On the other hand, in both runs, when visited by a charitable organization asking for donations, some players chose to give an identity card as a "valuable part of themselves." This could be interpreted as giving away part of your previous identity as you become part of a new context. Additionally, this also interfaced with the end of the game, as giving up trait cards meant having less votes on who to save from the threat of fascism.

When gaining new identity traits during the game, we observed that some characters did not put much effort into incorporating them into their identity, keeping them only as rewards for the end game. Characters adopted some traits from their new contexts, whether from trait cards or just from their experience. Migrants from Tai tended to become more orderly and structured, while Norr players developed more extraversion. What did have a more significant impact in players' self-understanding, and was the focus of many players during deroling, was the experience of character trauma by the end of the game, after surviving but having lost family members, which gave new meaning to their continued life.

The end of the game, after the theater of fascism, seemed to inspire a reflection on harsh realities about what had transpired in the game. It seemed to trigger feelings of abandonment, when characters had friends and family who did not use their votes to protect them. Others seemed to become estranged from relatives, from whom they would be separated or when one of their relatives would go to the Nowhere Place. Players sometimes seemed to experience something similar to survivor guilt when their loved ones did not get a passport but they did (Murray et al. 2021). Some players used the space and time for reflection to resist the outcome. Unexpectedly, several players tried to covertly give their passports to others, abandoning their safety so someone else could survive. The final minutes of the game were dominated by a solemn silence from characters, as they processed and reflected on the entire experience, and where they had ended up.

7.3 Crisis and fascism

During the game, organizer NPCs playing the fascist party members were given liberty to represent their characters in satirically creative ways. This gave rise to the "fash" party in run 1, and to the "fashionista party" in run 2, both in Norr. NPCs in run 2 also came up with their own armbands which satirically emphasized the role that social media plays in propagating fascist-sympathetic messages.

Despite this, most characters chose to vehemently oppose fascism during its foreshadowing and rise to power. In run 2 of the game, no character said they supported the fascist party when visited by party militants. During run 1, some characters did express support. During deroling, many expressed they did so out of fear. Some added that specifically due to their migrant status, they feared that openly opposing a rising party, or being seen to instigate political instability would affect their chances to legally remain in that country.

Moreover, it is important to remark that characters had been given no mechanical way to truly confront fascism or change the outcome without "breaking" the game. During the workshop it was explained as a fact that fascism would take over, and it was a key part of the game mechanics that they would then have to vote on each other for citizenship. This did not stop characters from attempting to find forms of resistance at the limits of this framework. Characters tried to disrupt the theater of fascism as a form of protest and were generally arrested, though they seemed content with resisting even when unsuccessful.

We observed characters become more worried about their past behavior during the game once the Theater of Fascism began. This manifested during group discussions, where characters made sure to bring up the ways in which they had helped others, as well as paint in a positive light those players that they wanted to encourage others to support. This aligns with Triandis' (1989) claim that during a crisis, perception by the collective becomes more relevant than one's own. Characters in particular seemed to strategize upon realizing that not everyone they wanted and cared for was sure to survive. We noted that despite having made new connections, during voting, characters defaulted to voting for their initial families, which resonates with Snyder and Pearse's (2010) findings on family as core support networks. It also relates to players' sense of psychological home (Sigmon, Whitcomb, and Snyder 2002) as characters chose to privilege remaining with family over obtaining citizenship in their preferred country. When making their case, many expressed a version of "wherever I go, please help me stay with my family." Two observations stemmed from this. The first is that in some cases, these bonds were so strong that characters whose family members went to the Nowhere Place chose to go with them instead of seeking citizenship. The second was that some characters worked hard to make sure that their family members received the support they needed, but when it was their turn to receive votes, they realized that most votes had been spent, and their family was unable to reciprocate in kind. In two of these cases, characters commented during deroling that they felt abandoned or forgotten by their family.

8. CONCLUSIONS

In this study, we have applied ludic inquiry to an original art-larp with the aim to answer the question, "How does identity change as a result of experiencing a crisis?" Our results suggest that the characters' familial relationships were a response to crisis throughout the game, playing a strong role in significant events such as the Tai worker riots, international phone calls, and saving others from fascism, including guilt over not being able to save family members.

Characters experienced the game's crises depending on their level of comfort—crisis was not an univocal external event but internally felt when discomfort existed. Social judgment led to negative feelings and introspection about one's behavior—a personal crisis. Seating scarcity in Tai led to a work crisis. Tai citizens who moved to Norr maintained a sense of discomfort even as the nature of labor changed, whereas Norr

citizens who migrated to Tai were well-treated and thus welcomed the manual labor and kept their feeling of comfort. For them, moving to Tai was not particularly a crisis. Thus, the crises presented by material and social environments resulted in a) discomfort, tension, and limitations to one's ability that then became incorporated in how valuable the characters felt, to the point that those who felt afraid were likely to express support for the fascist party, or b) a sense of comfort and adaptability when they sensed that they fit in an environment, to the point that some migrants preferred their new country to their previous one. In general, identity was relatively stable throughout, as some did not put effort to integrate new traits. Often, this personal identity seemed to determine how the game's rules and crises were experienced, as they reframed the game space and narrative through their own meaning-making.

This case study has both theoretical and practical implications for the use of ludic inquiry as a method. Players demonstrated behavioral responses, emotionally nuanced reactions and meaningful social relations within this unserious space that they described as authentic and were also in reaction to the topics we intended through our design choices. This seems to show that how players play and experience games can be seen as research data for games designed as research questions. Theoretically, ludic inquiry seemed suitable to answer the questions we proposed. While there are fundamental epistemic differences between reality and simulated situations in larps, we did find some alignment between our data and sociological literature. In practical terms, this method can be used to guide both game design and research—meaning that games can be designed with research questions in mind, and ludic inquiry can be used as an analytical lens.

Nonetheless, as limitations of this study we first put forward the importance of maintaining epistemological caution. In role-playing, players may feel, try to act accurately, and learn about themselves, but they are still playing a role in a fictional situation. Second, our data is based on observation and debrief, meaning that we could not ask every player about their perception of every event in the game individually. Third, because players were given a fictional role, we cannot know to what extent what people thought, felt and did in the game is related to their real identity and personality. This research methodology had no intent to necessarily change or educate its players as might be common in serious games or educational larp. While those are admirable goals, ludic inquiry is invested in a systemic method of observing player responses to a game as arts-research data, rather than as a site of intervention.

While this current application of the methodology was not built towards transforming players nor did we record any evidence of possible transformations, this does not mean players and/or designers do not change in the process of developing or playing intentional games. As designers, we bore the ethical responsibility of our design choices and how our own perspectives frame the ways players interact with and articulate their understanding of the themes of the game. In future works, it is important for designers to be aware of safety techniques, establish ongoing informed consent with players, and enable players to productively process any forms of reactions they may have in a game space. This project did utilize a number of techniques in regards to how players/designers may react to gameplay, including an out of play safety officer, an hour-long introduction describing several safety/consent techniques, a full explanation of every stage of the game to players, explicit discussion of how players could signal they were pausing their play of the game, players being asked "out of game" if they wanted to take a break when any game runner was concerned, and an hour-long debrief after the game for players to reflect on their experiences.

One of the limitations of the current work is directly addressing how believable the players found the game scenario. Players who take the game "seriously" (Jorgensen 2014) may have very different behaviors and emotions in the game. This is also connected to the larp concept of whether players saw their personal identity "bleed into" their character, or their character "bleed out" affecting them as people (Järvelä 2019). Future work on ludic inquiry should explicitly investigate bleed and serious perception. While this was not a question at the time of research, seriousness has interpretive value in our observation that players who took fascism in the game more seriously were more likely to not openly denounce it. Despite these limitations, we think

ludic inquiry as an explicit arts-research methodology for games has considerable value for future designers, researchers, or artists interested in applying games to answer research questions.

Future research could further develop ludic inquiry in other topics, players and contexts, genres, formats (e.g., duration, medium), and using other data collection methods, such as in-depth player interviews. Conversely, the findings of ludic inquiry can also encourage real-world research. While there is some scholarly interest in the family's role in resisting fascism and totalitarianism (Portelli 2017), this game directed our attention towards the prominence of familial ties in resisting direct violence and calls for further investigation on the role of family within immigration experiences in the face of oppressive movements.

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