5 Live-Action Role-Playing Games

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5.1 Introduction

In this chapter we discuss the ways in which live action role-playing (larp) differs from other forms of role-playing. As noted in Chapter 2, larp is often understood as role-playing that takes what happens in a player's imagination and makes it "real" or embodied: instead of describing a character's actions, you perform them. Larps range from a handful (like tabletop) to thousands of players (like an MMORPG). For the larger larps, these numbers are even greater if we include non-player participants (referees, non-player characters, etc.).

Larps are physically performed forms of role-playing practiced in many places around the globe. As will be shown later, depending on whom one asks, they have several roots and origins including *Dungeons & Dragons*, historical re-enactment, 19th century educational innovations, and more. Thematically, they range from fantasy knights fighting orcs to introspective dramas based in the real-world. Larps vary from one place to the next, but have some traits they all share.

We first discuss the commonalities before examining some notable cultures of larps and larping.

Larp and Larping

Few formal definitions exist on what "larp" is, what the activity of "larping" consists of, or whether it may take place in also settings other than larps. Here, we use the words as shorthand for embodied role-based interactions and physically performed role-play.

Generally speaking, larps are more likely to be described than they are to be defined. Salen and Zimmerman (2004, 578), for example, say that they are descendants of tabletop role-playing that take place in real physical spaces, and in which players walk about and interact with each other, acting out their characters' actions. Stark (2012, x-xi), in turn, says that larps are like theatrical pieces, but without audiences and scripts, in other words, make-believe for adults. Montola (2008, 24) offers one of the few definitions, as an extension of his definition for role-playing, saying that larp is role-playing in which the game is "superimposed on physical world, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world". Fatland and Wingård (1999) use the simple but elegant definition of a *"meeting between people who, through their [characters] relate to each other in a fictional world"*[1].

Harviainen (2011, p. 176) defines the *activity* of larping, which according to him can also take place in non-larp contexts, with the following criteria:

- Role-playing in which a character, not just a social role, is played.

- The activity takes place in a fictional reality shared with others. Breaking that fictional reality is seen as a breach in the play itself.

- The physical presence of at least some of the players as their characters.

As noted, what differentiates larp and larping from other types of role-playing is the embodied presence of the players as characters. The play activities are framed by their fictionality, the same way as those in tabletop role-playing are, and everyone who participates is present in the same moment as both a character and as a player (Stenros, 2010), two personas the goals of which are rarely identical.

What does it look and feel like?

Imagine being inside a theatrical piece, in which you are physically there, have some inkling of the central characters of the play as well as its setting, but there is no fixed script. You can approach your role through various perspectives: as competition, as a tool for building the best story possible, or as trying to be your character as much as possible. The setting can be anything, from fantasy to science fiction to family drama, and so can the mechanics. Perhaps you solve

conflicts with Rock, Paper and Scissors, perhaps through fighting with foam

swords, or by consensually choosing a solution that seems to fit the situation

best. What matters is the sense of Being There – as a person, your character,

physically.

General principles

For play to be embodied, the player must perform the actions of the

character being played. When the player moves, so does the character. When the

player speaks, so does the character. While the player is playing a larp, it is

generally assumed that the actions of the player are the character's actions, unless

the player signals otherwise.

In-Character / Out of Character

Different larp communities have developed signals for communicating that a
player's actions are carried out by the player and not the character. Common
ones include: placing your fist on top of your head and holding both hands
together making a "T" shape ("time-out").

Even when playing versions of themselves, people keep the character

separate and fictional. Any action that is in-character is expected to be treated as

the character's action, not the player's, the same way many other forms of play

also function (Bateson, 1955). When for example a character breaks a law within

the game world, the player is not held responsible, but likely the character is.

When a character is rude to another character, the other player can have their

character be offended and act appropriately, but the player should not act as if they have been insulted. This in-character/out-of-character distinction is also often blurred (e.g., a character is insulted based on the physical traits of its player).

The principles of embodiment (players will embody their play, not merely describe their character's actions) and player/character separation (players will not mix character actions with out of character actions) are also complemented by the mores and laws of the surrounding society, the rules of the game, and community-specific practices that help larp players find or form a community that allows for the kind of play they are seeking.

Sample Community Specific Practices: Physical Contact

Different larp communities often distinguish themselves from each other by their standards and practices related to inter-personal touch. Some communities explicitly prohibit any form of physical contact, other might designate certain areas (e.g. hands and arms) as within limits, while others have sophisticated rules and protocols for players to negotiate among themselves what kinds of physical contact they are comfortable with.

Space and Time

In most larps, the corporeal presence of the players as their characters ties them to the locations where they currently are (Harviainen, 2012). As Stenros

(2010) notes, larps are temporary worlds superimposed on the everyday world where, as Relph describes (1976), the sense of place is created through a combination of activities, physical settings, and situated meanings. Larps use this mixture to make their fictional spaces seem real, even when the environment cannot be perfectly modelled. A game's narrative context, the actions each character performs within it, and the location everyone shares enable, in even cases like convention larps without any props, the basic social contract that is required for building the magic circle of larp play.

The embodied aspect of larps often means that they are constrained by the physical locations where they are played. For example, it is difficult to play a larp that takes place in a large space in a small hotel conference room. However, temporal shifts or changes are much easier to manage. Larps do not require in-game events to occur chronologically. Players can skip from one scene to another. Both experimental small-scale games like *jeepforms*, and high-profile, high fidelity games like *Hamlet* (see Koljonen, 2004) or the *Monitor Celestra* (see Fatland & Montola, 2015) may utilize scene-based approaches to narrative (and temporal) structure where, for example, different segments of a story can be played on different days. By framing content from one situation to the next, play can be moved from a point of time to another. For example, the rules of *Delirium* (by Høgdall et al., 2010; see Pedersen, 2010) required that scenes be played in the "wrong" (i.e. non-chronological) order in order to convey a sense insanity. For

example, the clean-up of a party might be played well before the party itself. Being able to take advantage of the possibilities afforded by larp players' presence in a certain moment of time, but without that time having to be fixed inside the fiction, provides opportunities for story and experience building (see e.g., Fatland, 2005; Semenov, 2015).

These issues of space and time in larps sometimes combine to create what Fatland (2005) calls the "fog of larp": Neither players nor their characters will be aware of things beyond their immediate surroundings, except through second-hand information sources. When an interpretation of a physical environment (e.g. the door in a room is imagined to be an iron gate that leads down to a dungeon) is not shared by all the players, what results is a set of multiple truths. For example, if the imagined iron gate is destroyed by a magical spell, players entering that location later on will not know that it no longer exists unless there is some way for that to be communicated explicitly. Although the fog of larp is often presented as a problem, it is sometimes used to great effect for creating authentic experiences (see e.g., Pettersson, 2014). For example, a crime larp can unfold in various locations at the same time, while preserving parts of the activity secret. Likewise, players' desire to keep playing often keeps the problems the fog causes to a minimum.

Immersion

Immersion, often described as the feeling of "being there", is an experience that is common in larps because of their embodied nature. This creates challenges and advantages for both the play experience and game design (Säilä, 2004). For instance, immersion and rules often run counter to each other because rules remind the player that what they are doing is not real (Caillois, 1961; Harviainen, 2012). However, rules are necessary for many larps to resolve the outcomes of actions players cannot perform due to personal comfort (e.g., play through a sex scene by actually having sex), safety (e.g., climb a high wall), or lack of ability (e.g. character casts magical spells).

Player immersion can also be at odds with narrative. For example, players who feel it would be logical for their characters to act in a certain manner may derail carefully designed plotlines for everyone in a larp meant to be very driven towards a pre-scripted central plotline.

Examples of Structural Larp Types

- Parlor or convention larps: larps made for small, random player groups at events, usually designed to run with next to no props and for a short fixed time.

- Campaign larps: games that have ongoing narratives and characters and extended character development. They are played over multiple events, e.g. once a month.

- Freeform: minimalist games that use no props and are often designed to facilitate optimized stories instead of e.g., interesting combat or deep character immersion.

- 360° one-shot: a non-campaign larp, often run several times, with a singular event and high production values.

These game types are not bound by nation or culture. Rather, they are templates upon which national play cultures give their own unique spin.

Finally, a player's state of immersion is not stable. Fluctuations in immersion can take place during the same larp at different stages of play (Harviainen, 2012) and can vary based on problems with fog of larp, concerns about rules, misinterpreted in-character actions, and more.

Bleed

Emotional transfer may take place between players and their characters during and after role-playing. People may for example feel empathy or attraction after a game towards a person with whom they played a romantic scene. This

phenomenon is called "bleed" (Montola, 2010; see also White, Harviainen & Boss, 2012). When bleed combines with immersive play, the in-game personality of a player can be considered to be in a highly undefinable, volatile state.

Understanding immersion, including research into players' mental states, primary frames of reference, and modes of relationship to their characters is quite challenging. Thus, it is currently sporadic and quite speculative.

Materiality and the 360 Illusion

Materiality is a third aspect that is both central to, and makes larps stand out. While tabletop games sometimes use props to enhance the experience, and many forms of digital role-playing use visual representations of items and environments, the presence of the body, bound in time and space, significantly enhances the influence of the physical. In the context of larp, it is believed by some that the more realistic things appear and feel in a game, the more enjoyable the play experience will be. In other words, a fantasy larp set in a forest will be more enjoyable when played in the woods than, all other things the same, played in a gymnasium. This is because the environment affects the play experience (Bienia, 2016) coupled with players' abilities in re-interpreting their play environments (see Loponen & Montola, 2004).

This notion has been articulated as an aesthetic goal called the "360 degree aesthetic". The idea is that in a 360° larp, everything in the game should look, sound, smell and feel as close as possible to the real thing. This goal is particularly popular in the Nordic tradition of larping and has led to high-level production values in larps where only abstract things like magic need to be imagined. These larps are an easy source of impressive photographs, which partially explains why they are popular as targets for extensive documentation, post-promotion, and press. Organizers, of course, agree that accomplishing a true 360° experience is impossible (Koljonen, 2007).

What cannot be modelled through physical representation (or sometimes written props) has to be telegraphed (signaled through a verbal message), in the form of discourse-constructed elements (e.g., extending an empty, open hand and saying "here, I give you this knife"). Edwards (2004) calls these things that are only real within the fiction "ephemera". They only make sense within the game and cannot exist outside it. The same is also true of any new affordances given to material objects during play and by the play (e.g., a rug is enchanted allowing characters to fly). Many smaller larps, particularly freeform and parlor games, rely strongly on telegraphing for their success. Likewise some play cultures (e.g., in the United Kingdom) use written descriptions to depict skills that a character has but the player cannot perform (e.g., magic, pickpocketing).

Successful representations also have their problems. For example, in-game elements that do not fit player expectations but would be logical inside the fictional reality can cause dissonance in some players. For example, a tall player playing a short character or obviously male players of female characters (see e.g., Habbe, 2012). Attempts to reduce this dissonance, for example by casting characters according to a player's characteristics, has led to criticism of the 360° aesthetic as potentially leading to larps being highly selective, ableist, and transphobic.

From basics to national variance

In the following sections, we examine the influences local play cultures have on these factors, and the implications of that variance for researching larps and their related phenomena. Each local larp culture is a microcosm of styles of its own, and often a reflection of cultural bias. They furthermore fragment into new patterns, as influences such as Nordic larp ideals reach other countries, inspiring some people while making others even more closely stick to their own tradition (e.g., Stark, 2012). One therefore has to be aware of the local styles, how they differ from each other and the styles of other countries, before generalizing any observations from that one larp culture.

Variations and culture

Systemic and stylistic variables first and foremost reflect the ways in which larps are manifestations of their surrounding cultures, and scions of the traditions from which they arose. Because of this, the individual "origin myths" of various countries' larps are so important.

No larp tradition can be separated from its historical roots, which are reflected in its practices and implicit assumptions. We therefore first look into the countries that gave larp its name and initial formulations, the United States, followed by the United Kingdom. Then, we take a leap into the much younger Nordic tradition of larping because of the influence it has had on larp in other countries since the turn of the millennium. Following that, we look into some local permutations of this handful of formulas or "basic templates" of larp types and larping styles, in order to demonstrate how cultures make the same role-playing elements their own.

Similarities and Divergences

The examples presented here show how larp cultures have grown to similar results from differing roots and how they may contain stylistic variations within themselves. Over the years this may change due to increased knowledge transfer between communities.

5.2 North American Traditions

The development of larp in the United States followed a trajectory common to larp across the world. The currently dominant forms of larp developed out of tabletop role playing, such as *Dungeons and Dragons.* However, its evolution intersects with other practices as well: theater, parlor games, simulations like the Model United Nations, and especially historical re-enactment. The Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA), a Medieval re-enactment organization started in 1966, was a significant influence, but US Civil War re-enactment was also important. It appears that the modern form of larp emerged in many places nearly simultaneously across the country.

Many US larp groups stay regional, knowing about others but interacting little with their surroundings. Many larpers play only locally, often solely within the same community in which they began larping. This locality has a key impact on the way U.S. games develop. However, there has been significant impact in connecting these isolated regions through the gradual rise of corporate, shared universe larps.

Many of the games and game unions are also defined by their complex mechanics. By having rules for as many things as possible, those games seek to enable participation by people who cannot do the same things in real life (e.g., pick pockets). In addition, complex rules ease the tracking of character progression and history. While particularly stereotypical of U.S. larps (Stark,

2012), such heavy mechanics are also common in countries like Germany and the United Kingdom.

Combat larps

Many of the rules and mechanics of larps arise from traditions of combat larps. Some of the first rules for live fantasy play can be traced back to 1973's *Rules for the Live Ring Game* (Hill, 1973), a rule set for a complex two team tag game which follows the general themes and plot of Tolkien's novel, *The Lord of the Rings* (CITE). These rules, in a modified form, are still actively used by at least one small community

In 1977, Brian Wiese founded the Dagorhir Outdoor Improvisational Games in the Washington, DC area. It is a full-contact battle larp, with rules that are similar to the simple mechanics used by the SCA. Dagorhir and the many games that evolved from it form a popular subset of larp often called Battle Gaming, and are considered by many to be more wargames than role playing games. The official guidelines of Dagorhir nevertheless require participants to stay in character while on the battlefield, again quite similar to the SCA's guidelines of maintaining persona.

Over time, some combat-oriented larps added elements from tabletop role playing, such as *Dungeons and Dragons*, while others focused on limiting the character largely to what the player can themselves do. These types of larps, as

well as combinations of court intrigue and combat gaming, remain highly popular in the United States (Stark, 2012). They are not, however, the only type of larp that people play.

Boffer Larps
Combat larps are sometimes also called boffer larps because they are played using foam weapons called "boffer weapons" or "boffers". Fighting with padded weapons precedes the existence of larps.

Mystery Dinners to Theater Style

An equally important trajectory involves larp focused on character interaction and relationships. The first popular verbal interactive events were a form of theater in which the audience played roles. Though there are many forms of experimental theater that bring the audience into the play, the step into larp began with the creation of events where the lines between audiences and participants collapse.

One very popular example of verbal larp is the mystery dinner, a role-played dinner party during which a mystery (typically a crime such as murder) is solved by the participants. As a form of theater, it is credited to Joy Swift in

England, who organized weekend long interactive mysteries beginning in 1981 (Swift & Livesey, 2007). These interactive mystery events quickly spread to the United States and combined with the growing, independent development of verbally interactive games. The first known published mystery dinner, Jury Box, was released in 1935. It was more simulation than role play, with the dinner guests presented a scenario and asked to be the jury determining guilt.

As the hobby evolved, it became less necessary to use actors or disguise aspects of truth from the players as these acquired more experience playing characters. Similarly, there was a move towards less heavy handed techniques to pace the game. There was also an interest in more complex plots and relationships leading to a transition from focusing on a single mystery to a layer of intertwined plots and relationships in which everyone else acted as the supporting cast of each others' dramas.

Even as they evolved, relationship-oriented larps still had players who wished to affect each other or the environment in ways that could not be done safely or physically. So, mechanics were developed to simulate them, e.g, stealth, picking locks and pockets, destruction of property, construction of devices, and - of course - combat. Many of these relationship-oriented larps borrowed from mystery dinner traditions, but also derived from tabletop role playing. Unlike in the development of battle larp, the reason to physically embody the character rather than simply narrate the character came from a desire to enhance the theatric

aspect of the game, not to simulate combat. For this reason, some have come to refer to these games as *theater-style larp*.

Interactive Literature and Company

The third root of modern larping arose somewhere between 1979 and 1983 when some tabletop role players stood up and embodied their characters in a style other than live fantasy combat. They created the first larp to be called a Live Action Role Play, later shortened to LARP (and then made into a noun, larp, in the Nordic Countries). The earliest group to form such a regional presence was the Society for Interactive Literature (SIL), an organization connected to Harvard University. Soon after, across town, the MIT Assassins Guild began to organize events. Meanwhile, in Delaware, a smaller group now called the Wilmark Dynasty began organizing events for their campaign. Games organized by members of these groups involved dozens of people and often lasted a weekend or longer. Each organization maintained a community of players, but it was convenient to create a central point where games could be run. This led to SILicon, the first larp convention for theater-style larp, followed by the formation of the Live Action Role Playing Association (LARPA) created to support a more regional convention. SILicon became Intercon and now draws participants from all of North America and England. Other parts of the United States have other large conventions that support larp including Gen Con in the Midwest (a general

role playing convention that outlawed larp in the 1980s), WyrdCon in west coat of the United States, and Living Games.

Broadly speaking, in the 1970s and 80's these kinds of larps, while inspired by TRPGs, were not supported by TRPG publishers. This began to change into the 1990s as publishers began to experiment with what they perceived was a growing and interested market. For example, Chaosium published "Nexus Live Action Roleplaying" (1994) by Rick Dutton and Walter Freitag (founders of SIL) and R Talsorian Games' *Castle Falkenstein* TRPG included rules for live action role play. By far the most significant, commercially and in terms of popularity, was the release of *Mind's Eye Theatre* by White Wolf in 1993.

Mind's Eye Theatre was a larp based on White Wolf's *Vampire: The Masquerade* TRPG sharing the same theme, setting, and to a certain extent, rules and mechanics. Early games were not interconnected except by common source material and rules, but in the early 1990s, two organizations formed that began to run interconnected games in a common world. The Camarilla (now Mind's Eye Society) and One World by Night spread nearly simultaneously across North America, with branches internationally.

The initial effect of these groups was substantial in changing the nature, and the demographics, of larps. For example, many more women were drawn to the Vampire tabletop games and larps than had been involved in combat larps (theatre-style larp generally maintained gender parity). Vampire larp rules favored

relationship play and no-touching interaction. While by no means the first such rule system, it was the first to be published so widely, taken up readily, and to maintain a loyal following. Other larp communities in the United States are now utilizing a similar formula of mixing social play, conflict and emphasis on genre and style to cater to varying target audiences, with significant success.

The next thing to really change these styles, however, was the influence of the Nordic larp scene on other countries, including the U.S.

5.4 UK Traditions

Larp in the UK has remained relatively consistent in form despite its growing popularity as a leisure activity and nearly forty years of development. Although similar to many other international traditions, UK larp has some notable differences in semantics, play-style and structure.

History and Development

The original UK larp was the *Treasure Trap* system in 1982, which gave rise to a gaming society of the same name in 1983. It had a traditional fantasy setting whereby players adopted the role of adventurers and explored a real world castle and surrounding environs. Weapons and equipment were supplied by the organizers, although players also made their own, usually crafting them from a combination of foam, plastic piping and gaffa (duct) tape to give them an authentic

"steely" appearance. The basic combat and magic system was based loosely on the rules of the tabletop roleplaying game *RuneQuest* (Perrin 1978).

Treasure Trap established some common phrases and acronyms that still have currency in many UK systems. "Refs" were the referees, or games masters who devised, wrote and acted as marshals at the event, and "monsters" were volunteers who opted to play NPCs (mostly monsters to be slain) throughout the event, and who typically do not have to pay to participate. Because monsters now adopt more diverse roles, such as becoming long term NPCs, taking up logistical roles, staffing Operations desks, and so forth, the term 'crew' is more common.

Opposing these monsters, "the party" was the name given to the player group, and since this name is common to tabletop roleplaying, it has largely remained constant for smaller games (in festival sized games, the players are usually defined by faction).

As players moved away and access to locations changed, *Treasure Trap* members spread across the UK, taking larp with them. New systems[2] such as *Labyrinthe* (1985), *Spirit of Adventure* (1985), *Fools & Heroes* (1985) and *The Gathering* (1991) formed. This also created an eventual market for larp gear manufacturing. From these roots, new groups formed and reformed, evolving into the complex family tree of UK larp today.

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[2] In the UK, "system" refers to a particular larp brand and its rules, whereas in most other countries the word denotes the practical mechanics of a game, not intellectual property.

In the UK, Live Action Role-play goes under two acronyms. During the 1980s and 1990s, the term "lrp" was commonly used with "live roleplay" as the descriptive term. In the 2000s, the term "larp" began to become more popular due to the influx of new players as well as international connections. The "rivalry" between lrp/larp is symptomatic of tensions relating to authenticity and belonging in the UK larp community. Considerable snobbery exists over these terms, with older players often rejecting "larp" as a term lacking authenticity, and using this as a way to identify themselves as more experienced players, even as 'Lrp' seems to have only gradually come into use in the 1990s.

[IMAGE TREASURE TRAP ADVERT]

(note to EMS – this is on page 6 of the White Dwarf pdf).

Types of System

Although there are no hard and fast determinants between types of events in the UK, they can roughly be categorized according to number of participants. Large 'Festival' type events such as The Lorien Trust's *The Gathering* and Profound Decisions' *Maelstrom* (2003-12), *Odyssey* (2012-2016), and *Empire* (2013 – present) attract between 500-1500 people. They are faction-based, run over a weekend, and usually culminate in large-scale battles between factions or NPCs. Each system has an overarching plot revealed slowly throughout events, usually via

a team of monsters, crew and NPCs. Plot is not directed at specific players or groups, but is available if players seek it out. Disseminating or sharing information is difficult, often deliberately so. The central focus of festival events tends to be politicking and trade within and between different groups, because targeting individual members can be seen as favoritism, and because logistically, it is impossible to maintain such internecine structures. Festival events in the UK whose settings are neither fantasy or historical fantasy are rare.

Intermediate sized games usually emulate festival systems, but may contain plot written for individual characters or groups and a closer relationship between characters and meta-plot. These events host between 50-100 people. Since the player base is relatively small, some events are organized such that players will 'play' for some of the game, and 'crew' for the rest.

Small-scale events are run over the duration of a weekend with a more personal level of plot and interaction and involve 15-20 players and a team of 5-10 crew. Players camp or stay in rented accommodation such as youth hostels, and are often given plot that relates directly to their characters or caters specifically to their skillsets. Rule systems may be more complex, with referees able to answer individual questions or oversee encounters between players and crew. The format is often quest orientated; with players carrying out a series of tasks or objectives. Some crossover exists between games of varying sizes.

One-night events, 'froths', and 'Nordic larps' are usually stand-alone events, or are held by a group or faction wishing to meet up and 'froth' (talk in enthusiastic detail) about a particular event or series. 'Nordic larps' may use rulesets or scenarios from Nordic games, but the term is largely used to describe games that are considered 'experimental' or atypical (see below).

Common Themes

Live roleplaying events in the UK have been predominantly fantasy themed, but have slowly developed to include other SF/F genres as well. In the 2000s, a new wave of players joined and larping greatly increased in popularity. Unlike earlier players, many of these people had very different frames of reference for play and rule creation; namely, the growth of MMORPGs. As a result they brought new variance to the hobby. Over the years, other media such as film and comics have defined the content and theme of many games – for example the TV series *Firefly* (Whedon 2002-3) has sparked several copycat games.

Rules systems have likewise become more hybridized, as games and continual gameworlds influence each other and take the concepts farther from their tabletop system roots. To sustain the games and in some cases to also keep them commercially viable, organizers quickly found themselves relying on the input of enthusiastic players to develop their games, which in turn forced the organizers to adapt to player requests and suggestions.

The UK larp scene has become more experimental as time progresses. Hybrid games have begun to emerge which combine elements of UK larps with more Nordic influences, however there is often considerable discussion about and resistance to these events on public fora.

Societal Setting

Larp in the UK does not usually take place on public land. The amount of public outdoor spaces are relatively limited and do not usually contain sufficient facilities for groups. There is also a high degree of stigma from the general public, which is supported by a feeling within the UK larp community that events should not take place in areas where they can be spectated. Laws prevent the carrying of offensive weapons, and replica weapons must be covered in public spaces, which can also prevent events from taking place. For these reasons, larp usually takes place on private land or facilities. As in some Nordic countries, this is assisted by ties to Scouting organizations, which in the UK own significant areas of land suitable and available for larp play.

A second type of site favors sites run for profit, usually maintained by larp enthusiasts. The Chislehurst caves in Kent have for example been rented by *Labyrinthe* since 1985, and comprise several miles of chalk caves and tunnels. They have been customized for roleplayers and the site can be partitioned to allow multiple events to run at the same time. Many groups use the same sites every year,

and have often customized these locations. Lastly, many events are held in smaller locations such as local halls, community centers or sometimes, large private rooms in pubs.

5.4 Nordic larp

If North American and United Kingdom larp set the initial baselines, Nordic larp was what brought the counterpoints. The Nordic countries have been quite visible in the debates about role-playing games, especially larps, in recent years. Nordic larp consists of national larp traditions that started interacting and intermingling, eventually forming a loose but influential community around their annual Knutepunkt conference. However, although this is the tradition best known internationally, it represents only a part of the numerous, rich Nordic role-play cultures.

Backdrop

Live action role-playing started in independently in numerous places around the Nordic countries in the 1980s.[3] The earliest sustained Nordic larp-like activities

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[3] This early history of Nordic role-play is largely anecdotal. No rigorous academic study exists on this history. This account is based on written accounts (Eriksson & Sahlin 1989; Gräslund 1998; Westerling & Sahlin 2001; Sander 2001; Pettersson 2005; Brodén 2008; Stenros & Montola 2010; Thomasen & Andresen 2011; Eidsem Hansen & Fatland 2011; Nielsen 2015b) and on informal personal and online discussions with practitioners.

that are somehow connected to larp took place in Sweden. The people who would later organize under the name *Gyllene Hjortet* (The Golden Deer) held their first events in 1983. In Denmark the first events can be traced back to the mid-1980s, and in Finland larp dates back to 1988. Norway was the last to join the party; in 1989 unbeknownst to each other, larping started both in Oslo and Trondheim.

There were no manuals for how to larp in the 1980s. Each group that decided to give larp a try put together their own interpretation. Common early influences were tabletop role-playing games, which had arrived to the Nordics earlier, first with exchange students that had travelled to the United States, then as imports, translations, and domestic publications. A number of groups also encountered articles about British larping (probably *Treasure Trap*) in foreign game or computer magazines. Some had even participated in larps in the UK, and later in other cities in the Nordics. The American television movie *Mazes and Monsters* (1982), which cashed in on the moral panic around *Dungeons & Dragons*, was also an important source of inspiration.

The earliest larpers came from tabletop, but also from Tolkien societies, historical re-enactment, science fiction fandom, scouting, assassination games, and community theatre. The early groups were largely unaware of each other and it took years for these traditions to find each other. Players would find each other through shared hobbies, shops that sold role-playing games, and through magazines within each country. There were soon attempts to bring larpers

together under national organizations, some of which prospered while others withered.

Most early larps had fantasy settings. A typical scenario was – and still is – some kind of a meeting between different factions. Fighting with boffer weapons was also important, but from fairly early on there was also the idea of simulating a whole village, town, or court. Fantasy larps were relatively easy to set up, since the Nordic countries (aside from Denmark) have a *freedom to roam*. Anyone can wander through, camp in, or pick berries and mushrooms, swim and hike in both privately and publicly owned forests even in privately owned forests, as long as they do not disturb anyone's homes.

Fantasy has remained popular throughout the years, although sources of inspiration have varied from Dungeons & Dragons to Nordic folklore, and from Vikings to Harry Potter. In the 1990s Vampire larps inspired by *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1993) became popular. Since the late 1990s, larp has been increasingly viewed as a form of expression, not tied to any particular genre. However, fantasy remains the most popular genre and in public perception of larp is still often connected to it. Larp has nevertheless gained a level of acceptance in the Nordic countries that it can be found reported in news media, larps may receive arts related grants, and the common vernacular may compare other forms of pretense to "larping" by default.

The Nordic Style

As there is such a wide range of Nordic traditions, teasing out common characteristics is hard. However, general tendencies can be identified.[4] Most larps organized in the Nordic countries tend to be *non-commercial*. The larps are designed, produced, and staged by the community for the community. Larping is not a service one purchases, but an experience one participates in creating. Players pay a participation fee, but this fee usually just covers the expenses – and usually not organizer labor. Although there is usually an official, bureaucratic structure (such as an association) staging the larp, typically none of the organizers are salaried.

This has numerous implications: First, the participant is rarely seen as a customer and the game organizers are not seen as a service provider. It is more common that the organizers are seen as having a vision they pitch to the potential players, and players who sign up are expected to put effort into co-creation as well. Second, larps are not a big business, but more like shared culture. As a result organizers can stage small, intimate, weird, alternative, and political larps without fear of alienating their customers. There is also an abundance of self-contained larps that are not part of any ongoing world. Building and guarding and

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[4] This sections largely based on Stenros & Montola (2010) and Stenros (2014).

intellectual property has not been a central consideration. There are people who earn a living by staging larps for larpers, but they are few.

Nordic larps tend to have *few game mechanics*, at least in comparison to many mainstream larps in countries like the U.S., Germany or the UK. The focus in playing is on conflicts and intrigues between players, not between players and game masters (Eidsem Hansen & Fatland 2011). Furthermore, in Nordic larps explicit fighting is rarely important.

Nordic larps do have mechanics, but these can usually be explained in a few pages. It is also quite common to hold pre-larp workshops where the mechanics are tried out and practiced. This ensures that everyone is one the same page and builds trust in the ensemble of players. Simulation rules are common, particularly for amorous and violent interactions, but the systems tend to be loose and honor based. It is also common to have rules to drive drama, such as 'conflicts escalate until someone dies' or 'all secrets must out'. This discourages gaming the system. Furthermore, "winning a larp" is considered almost as oxymoronic. An example of a loose rule is to 'play to lose': the idea is to let your character lose (e.g. spill secrets, fail, crack under pressure) in order to create a more interesting overall situation.

Nordic larp, as a pastime, requires quite a bit of *commitment*. The organizers are expected to provide a coherent vision, a compelling setting, and often even a fully realized environment. The players are expected to clothe and

equip their characters, often create character relations, and to stay in character for the duration of the whole larp – even if it lasts for days.

The aforementioned 360° illusion (Koljonen 2007; Waern, Montola & Stenros 2009) used to be a common ideal, but has been challenged. For example *black box larps* (Nielsen 2015a) have moved consciously away from realistic environments, but the environments are still highly controlled and designed. Indexical actions (player actions that look like the actions being simulated) are no longer as highly valued, and the concept of *steering* (players guiding their characters based on reasons that are not part of the game fiction) has challenged the notion that immersion is an ideal experiential state (Montola, Stenros & Saitta 2015). Likewise, small convention larps are often run without any props. Yet required commitment in general remains high.

Finally, in the Nordic countries larp is increasingly seen as a *worthy endeavor*, and as a valid cultural activity. Larp, although play and playful, is taken seriously. In some ways the Nordic countries are home to a geek pride movement; most larpers have rejected the shame with which adult play is usually burdened. After some early moral panics that were mostly imported from the U.S., larp has been successful framed as a cultural activity, worthy of artistic collaboration and public funding – even if receiving such funding is as difficult as for any other art project. At the same time serious analysis and later scholarly interest into larp and

larp design have grown. Larp is not something that needs to be hidden, but something one can be proud of and report on one's curriculum vitae.

The Knutepunkt Movement

At the heart of the Nordic larp traditions is a community of enthusiasts. The Swedish larp *Trenne byar*, (1994) brought together a thousand larpers from Sweden, Norway and Denmark. Following the mood it created, a landmark meeting for Nordic players and organizers was organized in Oslo in 1997. This event, Knutepunkt, became an annual convention that travels between the four countries, with English as its *lingua franca* and language of documentation and research. Since 2001, over 30 books on larp have been published by this community and the community has grown to include people from around the world.

Knutepunkt also arose from differences that first emerged in discussions and visits to each other's larps. They led to debates about the 'correct' and 'best' way to larp, often formulated as manifestos (Fatland & Wingård 1999; Pohjola 1999; Harviainen 2010). A written tradition started to emerge as people wanted to put together a sustained argument and not to repeat the same discussions at every Knutepunkt. At the same time, many of the 'classic larps' that form the foundation of the Nordic larp tradition and movement were played. After the formative years, many of the ideas expressed earlier were explored more

thoroughly and adopted into a widening toolkit. Examples of these included

theatrical techniques, pervasive play that blurred boundaries of game and

everyday life (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009), and the tearing down of barriers

between the player and the character in order to create *bleed*, strong emotions that

cross over (e.g., Montola, 2010; White, Harviainen & Boss, 2012).

As a result of active outreach, many of the ideas now associated with

Nordic larp originate from other countries. "Nordic larp" has become increasingly

ill-fitting as a title (Stenros 2014). A recent trend has been to recreate older larps

and to write down new ones as scores or "librettos", scrips that contain all the

information for re-staging a particular larp.

While effective, this removes some characteristics elements of Nordic

larps, such as the immersive 360° ideal environment, and diminishes co-creation.

Re-runnable Nordic *chamber larps* that are designed from the start to tackle this

were strongly influenced by the Danish-Swedish freeform role-playing games

(e.g. Thomasen & Andresen 2011; Wrigstad 2008). Chamber and black box larps

have become popular and there are numerous festivals devoted to them. They are

the Nordic larps most likely to be staged outside the Nordic countries, alongside

certain massive larps that are intentionally made for re-runs.

Other Nordic Traditions

Numerous Nordic larp and role-play traditions, although they cross-pollinate each other, have remained distinct. Groups for whom the authenticity of the setting, the props, and the culture is central have devoted decades to building a permanent village in a forest in Sweden. In Finland, others have kept honing a tradition of street larping, campaigns that are played around a city, on the streets and in bars and their backrooms (e.g., Niskanen & Järvelä, eds. 2015).

In Denmark children's larping is a very popular activity dating back to the nineties. The games are often led by paid adults and are action focused, featuring boffer fights between archetypal groups such as orcs, elves, cultists, and Vikings (Raasted 2010). Unlike with Nordic larp in general, most of their participants are male. Denmark, like Germany, also has a number of businesses that specialize in manufacturing or selling larp props.

The numerous Nordic role-play scenes, traditions and movements tend to organize themselves around slightly differing conventions, often based on their varying connections to tabletop role-playing (or lack thereof). Knutepunkt is the epicenter of the international scene and Fastaval is the capital of freeform, which mixes tabletop with larplike elements. Conventions also create the new legends of the scene, as central venues for promoting those larps the communities consider important and impressive.

5.5 Former USSR

Russian-speaking countries present an interesting counterpoint to the origin histories of larp in other countries. Evidence exists that many larp-like activities were held on the territory of Belarus over 100 years ago. The phenomenon we now call "larp" has been an object of attention for Russian scholars for quite some time, as the works of Kapterev, Krapivka and Karavaev in 19th century might suggest, but the first officially documented application of larp methodology in educational processes was dated 1916-18. That new wave was led by Inokentiy Nikolaevich Zhukov (1875 - 1948). While the fall of the Russian Empire and the formation of USSR were happening, Zhukov was the first to organize educational live-action role-play into a movement and to put larp methodology as a corner stone of new educational system. He was also responsible for the invention of the Pioneer movement.[5] In a way, here too we can thus see a Scouting connection to larp.

On role-playing games, Zhukov said: *"From the usual type of games, these games differ in that they are never accidental or short, but can be long-term or even permanent. In these games play got serious, merging with life itself. Two main types of these great educative games were used. The first type included games based on the imitation of contemporary adult citizens, such as School*

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[5] Kot, Yaraslau. Educational Larp: Topics for consideration. Wyrd Con Companion 2012 / ed. Sarah Lynne Bow-man (Ph. D.), Aaron Vanek – Mountain View, California, USA: Creative Commons, 2012. – (135 p.) pp. 116-125.

Republics and all kinds of Children's Clubs" (Zhukov. 1918).[6] In 1918 he

conducted the first of his "long-term larps", which included over 700 participants

aged 12-14 from schools, and was designed to last two and a half years. Such

innovations were strongly supported at first by the educational system at the dawn

of USSR, and with Zhukov's experience, the national youth organization was

created using the method of "permanent larp". However, the Communist party

decided to use this innovation as an ideological and political tool[7].

Larplike activities were briefly examined in the works of Lev Vygotskiy

(1896-1934) (e.g., 1929), but the most influential researcher of larp in the history

of the USSR by all accounts would be Daniil Elkonin (1904-1984). His works on

larps date as far back as 1930s and his books on the topic are still considered

unmatched by many (in particular 1957; 1978). Most of his over hundred

publications were about games, and the most prominent of those larp. Thus,

whereas larp in many other countries seems to have arisen predominantly from

Dungeons & Dragons and re-enactment, in the former USSR countries, it appears

to have its root in educational play.

As a subculture.

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[6] Zhukov, Inokentiy. Two directions of schools evolution. Chita. 1918. Print
[7] Kot Yaraslau. Long-term larp of Inokentiy Zhukov. Moskov. MSU. 201. print

Larp has existed in the Russian speaking countries as a subcultural phenomenon for some time as well. It was less of a movement and more of a children's leisure activity until the formation of the USSR when it was encouraged by ideological departments of the Ministry of Education. Later on these games became more centralized, and in time turned in to larp-like military games for children and teenagers.

In the 1980s larp suddenly had a surge of interest throughout the USSR. Thanks to the success of re-enactment turned into larp, and with the aid of educators and literature clubs, Centers of Role Modeling appeared all over the country. By 1982 each Soviet republic had at least one such Center. Some still remain and function, especially in the east and northeast parts of the Russian Federation.

With the fall of USSR, most clubs lost support of state institutions and were mostly disbanded. This same time was a turning point for a new generation. This new generation of players, influenced by previous pioneers ("boxed" educational larps, book-larps, literary creations, etc.) and a flow translated fantasy and science fiction literature from abroad, started playing out their own fantasies. Many larpers are now also historical reenactors, and larp is often a side hobby for them. Notable communities of play exist in many former Soviet states, and the communities in e.g., Russia, Belarus and the Baltic states are now also interacting with the Nordic tradition

Much of Russian larp design and research still falls outside the reach of Western scholars, due to language barriers, but contributions on the communities have made their way into e.g., the Knutepunkt books and some cross-cultural volumes.

5.6 Other Traditions

We now briefly examine two less well-known larp traditions, those of Australia and Germany. These traditions are of interest, both for their place in the historical development of larp and because they illuminate the way in larp traditions can have different roots yet lead to very similar results. They both show similar influences as the U.S. and the UK, but for very different reasons.

Australian Traditions

Australian larp began in Canberra in 1981 when a group of designers envisaged a freer game with far more players, instead of a typical tabletop game. The result was the birth of the Australian freeform a year later, which involved three game masters passing groups of people to each other – "a dynamic freeform form of game play" (Quinton, 2015). They followed up in 1983 with a larger event for over 150 players and 20 game masters, with interaction occurring mainly between players.

These games set much of the format for Australian freeforms, with some plot pre-defined but with development very much left to the players, a focus on player-player interaction, and a low player to GM ratio. The format solidified in the mid-80s, with designers also now providing characters to their players. Typical player numbers became 20-50, with games lasting 3-6 hours. These events varied significantly from early 80's larp forms in other countries, in emphasizing player-player interaction. While the earliest freeforms were SciFi-themed, they soon branched into other common RPG areas, such as fantasy and horror.

In the Australian context, the terms "freeform" and "larp" are often, but not rigorously, used to define different types of games. In a larp, players design their own character, in a freeform, the designer creates them. This particular Australian distinction descends from the origin of the freefrom in roleplaying conventions, and the limits forced by such a setting, especially in terms of time and necessary closure. Freeforms are generally short, often only a single play session, while larps are often longer, campaign-focused games.

Rulesets are highly defined in larps, and often derive from tabletop role-playing. Freeforms use much more minimal rulesets. Some larps involve acting out combat and physical activity, freeforms almost always use abstract resolution systems (which is also often true of larps based on tabletop).

Over time the emphases in freeform design have changed, with more focus on character background as opposed to raw statistics, experimentation with various play mechanics, and exploration of social, political and psychological themes. What has remained constant is an emphasis on player-player social interaction as opposed to mechanical or action-based resolution.

Fantasy larping arrived in Australia in 1986 and 1987. Larger combat-based larps first appeared in Australia in the early 1990's. The tradition of costumed fantasy larps is continued to the current day, mainly through clubs. Freeforms and larp campaigns based on published rulesets also appeared in the mid 1990s. Most were games set in White Wolf's World of Darkness (*Vampire:The Masquerade* and other related games), even before the official larp rules for that setting were available. These continue to the present day. These games typically have monthly or weekly sessions, and last from a few sessions to years of play.

These forms, particularly freeform and larps based on commercial tabletop systems have cross-fertilized each other, predominantly through roleplaying conventions. This influences the design of both, as players continue to participate across the spectrum of larp styles.

German Traditions

Despite similar historical precedents (Harviainen, 2012, pp. 18–22; Montola, 2012, pp. 109–110; Morton, 2007), larp was introduced to a wider public in Germany by a commercial imperative. The idea was to expand the business of the Drachenschmiede hobby shop in Cologne in the early 1990s, based upon British and U.S. larp models. Drachenschmiede distributed surveys among their customers to understand the specific needs of German role-players and evaluate a potential market (Schwohl, 2003). In 1992, the larp *Draccon1* was organized, which is considered the first officially announced German larp.

While the early years of larping in Germany showed a variety of do-it-yourself practices, players could already buy sophisticated and laborious game materials, such as metal armor. It is tempting to see commercial interests as the founding stone for larp in Germany, but other streams were as important, because they helped to spread the idea of larp independently. We stress two streams in particular, because they are typical for German larp. First, German history after the Second World War was characterized by the occupation of the Allied Forces and the division of Germany into East and West. During the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. and British soldiers brought tabletop role-playing games and larp to West Germany. Some of them were members of the SCA. In the East, Communism restricted certain leisure time activities, but allowed the reenactment of distant historical times, such as the Middle Ages. Similar developments of larp with a tradition of historical reenactment during communist times can be seen in Poland,

Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slowenia, and parts of Russia. The East German reenactment stream joined the West German reenactment and larp streams after the reunification in 1989.

Second, players thought independently about ways to translate the tabletop role-playing game into a live action format. One group translated the first German tabletop role-playing game *Midgard* (Franke, 1981), and decided to "play out" the adventures for real. According to one of the members, the idea originated in rumors about British larps after visiting Fantasy shops in the UK. Similar groups have developed in this fashion from the fast growing subculture of tabletop role-playing games. These groups are still active and exist separately from the visible larp culture.

As with the other traditions described earlier, to speak of one coherent larp culture in Germany is a simplification. Another common simplification is the distinction between commercial and non-commercial traditions. This simplification is artificial because the different traditions overlap and interact.

Today, the German larp market is shared by amateurs, semi-professionals, and professional game material manufacturers. General suppliers are complemented by special item shops for common game materials such as masks, tents that look appropriate for fantasy worlds, and raw materials. The commercial interest of larp shops is influential, but that position is challenged by a tradition of a do-it-yourself ideology that is also strong within several other national

communities, for example the Nordic tradition. The do-it-yourself ideal and the professional practices of larp shops supported the development of costumes regarding the quality and quantity until today (Bienia, 2016). For the German scene, more than almost any other, visual authenticity and tangibility seem to carry a significant impact on what is considered good play.

5.7 Summary

Larps, as forms of physical expression, exist on the borderline of several expressive forms, owing their existence not just to tabletop role-playing and re-enactment, but also children's pretend play, educational applications, and commercial interests. Even as the cultures of larp play increasingly converge, we can observe a widening variety of play. For any researcher tackling into the area, it is highly recommendable that they look into the local variables at hand. By doing so, researchers are able to calibrate their analytical expectations accordingly and appreciate the nuances and cultural connections of each game or campaign, or note that they would have more interest in another type of physical role-play, such as psychodrama, instead. The same is true for players looking for an optimal game as well.

By understanding the phenomenon better, more interesting play can be created. Escapism-style fantasy remains the most popular form, but dystopias,

Vampire, Witcher and various variations of Harry Potter have their enthusiasts as well. Likewise, applications within education, design and organizational development are also gaining more and more ground (see e.g., Daniau, 2016) so it is likely that the hobby will not remain just a hobby for long.

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