Symposium

An examination of living through enjoyment: Live-action role-play

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[0.1]   *Abstract*—Many in the gaming community argue that video gaming has enhanced the RPG experience, allowing for increasingly immersive experiences for players. The live-action aspects of LARPing anticipated the movement toward virtual play that video games have worked to create.

[1]   The woods are warm tonight in Mississippi, and I have bite marks on top of bite marks from the mosquitoes. My group has assembled for the final hours of a 3-day campaign in "Call of Cthulhu," a nihilistic horror game set in the 1920s and steeped in the arcane. We look scruffy, in T-shirts and wifebeaters, wearing sandals or barefoot. The landscape is scattered with lawn chairs and discarded Coke cans.

[2]   For our characters, things are rather different. A chilling wind cuts across us as we stand at the top of a bluff overlooking a small town just a few miles outside the luxurious winter retreat where select faculty and graduate students of Miskatonic University have assembled for a holiday. Wool and fur and leather do little to warm us; we've been out here too long and the fact that nothing stirs at the bottom of the hill, nothing wanders in the town in the standard way, is enough to freeze the blood in our veins. In just 3 days, the quaint little place has become a ghost town—worse, actually, because we have seen the frostbitten come to our door, black and cold and unaware of their condition, too far gone to save. Something has happened here.

[3]   As a player, I know what has happened. Well, not exactly. I don't know which great elder god has been unleashed to destroy our party. I do know that I'm playing Call of Cthulhu, and quite often campaigns end badly; characters die, towns are destroyed, evil is unleashed…that sort of thing.

[4] My character, Edmund, knows nothing about it. It's his lodge the characters are at, and if he is unhappy to be tramping about in the snow, it has more to do with the warm brandy and cozy armchairs back home than with fear of the dark unknown. He is here because he has to be. It's his home, these are his guests, and the people down there have been attached to his family, in the form of retainers and otherwise, for some time.

[5] I know what is down there. The townspeople have become monstrous. People running naked in the snow, forfeiting skin and muscle and tendon in their frantic whim, still moving on bone, stilts that keep them inexplicably upright, their bodies somehow alive in a terrible ecstasy that propels them through the snow in search of…well, that part I don't know yet. I do know that when my group goes into this area of the game, we will set off the final events of the campaign. I also know that my character will probably die. He's an idiot, a skeptic, and a dilettante. Practically speaking, this means he doesn't know what is going on, and he won't believe it when he does see it. His skill with a hunting rifle is more perfunctory than not. But as a player, I have to let my character do what he is going to do. After all, that's part of the fun.

[6] So Edmund does the worst possible thing. He musters up his voice and he calls down, "Hello?" This triggers several events. The packhorse startles forward just a foot. The guide, who had so carefully explained to us the importance of watching where you step in the snow, moves forward to take the reins. A look of alarm and then, swiftly, resignation comes over him as the snowbank shifts and breaks and takes him down to the bottom, a broken doll. Down in the village, something moves.

[7] In game play, we pantomime. I say, "Hello." The game leader explains that when the player to my right stepped forward, he shifted the snow, so the player hurls himself forward a few feet and crumples, and someone throws a rock into the woods to make noise so we can say "Look over there" with a reason. Someone asks how many supplies our characters lost with the guide. We start figuring out who among our group has characters that can shoot guns with any accuracy.

[8] In a role-playing game (RPG), characters assume fictional personas and enact previously determined behaviors. The more common forms of role-play include sexual play, interactive gaming, and computer and video game system gaming. For each, there are specific and distinctive aspects that uniquely identify them as separate, though all fall under a general umbrella of gaming in character (IC). That is, players create or utilize previously rendered personas in play.

[9]   Live-action role-play (LARP) is a particular type of interactive role-playing in which players perform the actions of their characters in a physical setting, physically interacting with the other players to a greater or lesser degree, rather than interacting through mere verbal discourse or electronic interface. Falk and Davenport (2004:127) argue that "These post-desktop games inhabit our physical surrounding and objects within it, employing human senses" and that they "take on ubiquitous and tangible forms—properties that contribute to the blurring of the lines between player and game character, game world and real world." Thus, LARPs offer more immersive experiences for the players than standard RPGs because LARPing communities enable realistic interactive socialization.

[10]   In everyday society, people must act based on the explicit and implied manifold nuances of the layperson and the skilled worker, the parent and child, the citizen or soldier, and so on. We are taught that action in society is best enacted by feigning the appropriate knowledge, attitudes, and roles. The general notion is that via practice, people will eventually produce the actual. Just as people attempt random simulations of inferior quality while learning to play an instrument, so too will they playact until they learn to *be.*

[11]   In life, socializing practices are learned by cues, many visual, situational, and theoretical. The practical application of socializing is engaged, however, not by memorizing rules or by attempting to reiterate the rhetoric attached to them—rhetoric steeped in the rich cultural traditions of religion and culture—but by acting. The term *acting* brings to mind a twofold usage—that is, to act as a state of doing something and to act as a state of feigning some other thing. In "The Impact of Relationships on Games," Gordon Olmstead Dean (2007:195) acknowledges, "The principal antecedent of larp is certainly drama." He adds, "It has been posited that larp is essentially interactive theatre—a form of drama where there is no distinction between presenter and audience." However, he very firmly advocates that the players "do not just watch, we are drawn into the drama in a very literal sense."

[12]   This is because, as shown in the example of a gaming night, the players interact with each other in a very real sense. Both standard RPG and LARP stories branch out on the basis of decisions made not in all times and places by the individuals but by the myriad players working on their own agendas, some forming groups and alliances, some conspiring under cloak and with dagger, others unknowing puppets of the game master's (GM) vision. Seasoned players are able to understand the rules and conform to the restrictions of the world in which the game occurs, of the game, of the group, and of their own roles in each. The players are not the characters; they are actors fulfilling their roles. Thus, the needs of the players may be in conflict with the needs of the characters, but the needs of either are secondary to the needs of the game.

Players play for various reasons. In the games, characters must have reasons for acting. The reasons for the player playing and the character acting are not the same. For example, a Civil War reenactor, or someone playing an alternate history version of the Civil War, may play with full knowledge that a character is going to fail in his or her mission. The player understands this, but the character would not. The player must then play IC to the hilt, pursuing the unattainable goal with a will, in spite of his or her knowledge out of character (OOC).

[13]   In such games, players choose characters on the basis of types (and types may be based on species, race, gender, class, tribe, or similarly pertinent signifiers). Just so, the world-building devices are based on generic concepts (whether the world is based in fantasy or horror, whether the setting is the present day or the Dark Ages, the 1920s or the far-flung future). In addition, players select a variety of general attributes to define their characters, including, but not limited to, height, weight, sexuality, education, speed, stamina, and charisma. They also specifically select defining criteria compatible with backstories preset or created by players. These feature strengths and weaknesses related to who their characters are. For example, a barbarian swordsman (like those traditionally found in the game *Dungeons & Dragons*) tends to focus on physical, martial exercises. Extensive academic education is not a probable character attribute for such an entity. Additionally, a character accustomed to utilizing brute strength as a problem-solving tactic may be brash or bullying. On the other hand, a hideously deformed and physically limited character (like the Nosferatu in the *World of Darkness* games) relies on stealth, manipulation, and strategic mental maneuvering to achieve his or her goals. Diplomacy would be a virtue in such a case, but such a character would rarely be a prominent social figure.

[14]   For LARPs, these ideas hold true as they hold true in RPGs. In addition, though, there are sensory layers available within the game mechanics in LARPs that are not available in video games, across tabletops, or on the written page. For example, touch is often a component to a greater or lesser degree. In some instances, players may act out their characters' impulses by indicating physical affection, wrath, or other feelings through symbolic or actual touch. That is, characters may actually touch in a realistic manner, hugging each other, striking each other (lightly), or pushing and pulling at each other. The player's level of comfort may impact the game play here. For example, when I am playing *Vampire* with strangers, players may demonstrate physical connectedness by simply holding someone's hand or standing close. Physical proximity will serve to indicate physical relationships. With long-term gaming groups, however, players may feel able to act more literally. For example, people may hang on each other. The dynamics are rather simple. Game intentions are discussed OOC, generally at the beginning of games, before they are acted out IC. The games tend to be more fun in these instances because players feel more comfortable, which allows

them to get into their character. In some games, battles may be staged and peace-bonded weapons (created or altered to prevent any real harm) may be utilized. In other instances, symbols are used to indicate touch. For example, small beanbags may be thrown in a player's general direction to indicate the damaging assault of magic, bullets, or arrows. In other cases, damage may be indicated through strips of paper lost as one is injured in the course of a game. Certain games utilize "rock, paper, scissors" or similar methods to determine the effect of attack, defense, and similar actions.

[15]   In a standard RPG, the details of the settings are explained verbally or they are sketched in a blueprint form (the classic graph paper dungeon comes to mind). The most basic LARP offers a more tactile, 3-D experience, and more advanced setups go even further. In a real setting, players may experience visual stimulation. Some LARPers carefully design massive and detailed play areas. They may build wooden or cardboard structures to represent the game world. Some draw chalk outlines and boundaries to roughly detail the landscape. Others may use very little in the way of stages, costumes, and related materials. Some play in the public sphere, which can lead to a variety of interesting consequences. For example, in the *World of Darkness* games, vampires live in secret among humans. Some LARPers will play in public and will be penalized for attracting the humans to the game. In this scenario, all and sundry become nonplayer characters.

[16]   In every instance, the narrative is just as relevant as it is in the standard RPG. However, facial expressions, tones, and cues aid in the overall effect to a larger degree in a LARP. IC, everything a player says, does, or depicts is attributed to the character being played. Therefore, subtle changes in voice or posture offer cues that the other players are expected to analyze and act upon. It is vital that players announce intentions to go OOC. In one game, a player may decide that her character has a nervous tic that becomes evident when it loses composure. In another, a character may have a habit at leering at women in a sinister and inappropriate manner. How the players react should reflect how their characters would react. Certainly the players should not be offended by what the characters do or say, and the characters should only react in ways befitting their characters. On the basis of the latter scenario, if a female character is naive, she may miss obvious insinuations. If she is lascivious, she may embrace them. If she is aware of them but unappreciative, she may respond accordingly. Similarly, the smallest of physical actions may have larger consequences. Kicking an idle stone in real time could create an avalanche in game time. Stepping on the smallest twig may attract undesired attention. Coughing at the inappropriate moment may condemn a character to a harsh fate. In standard RPGs, the actions of the characters are painted with broader strokes. In LARPs, a player's activities become

the character's movements. The game takes on a sharper focus and is infinitely more realistic.

[17]   In fact, interactive game play simulates life—not the everyday, probable world, but the archetypical one. Common gaming genres include military strategy or historical reenactment (such as the Colonial Living History Alliance), fantasy and science fiction (such as live-action *Dungeons & Dragons* or *Star Wars*), and gothic and horror (such as *World of Darkness* and *Call of Cthulhu*). Within each, one is expected to play roles, to conform to fixed rules (made by the GM, by the rule book, by the conventions of the players, and by the players' development of their characters) that define landscapes as surely as gravity, to adapt to a story as it unfolds and to change the story to alter or even redefine entirely the fate or the individual characters, the group, or the world (if one is clever enough) and to conform to the rigid certainties and absolutes of the plot devices.

[18]   It has been argued by many in the gaming community that video gaming has enhanced the RPG experience. Certainly, with each successive generation and video game system, the technology has allowed for an ever more immersive experience. From movies like *Tron, Lawnmower Man,* and *War Games* to cyberpunk games like *Chill,* players have imagined the future of gaming to be one of sensory appeal. The classic image of this is a person wearing a full body suit complete with a visor that allows total fixation on simulated reality. It is true that video games have come a long way; I felt validated when, the first time I picked up my Wii remote to play *Metroid,* I took the controller in hand, thrust it forward, and turned it sharply to open a door in the game. The only thing closer to opening a door…would be opening a door. That, in fact, is the point of LARPing. The live-action aspect of a LARP allows players to open and close such doors in real life through a virtual, socially interactive game played in real time in a physical setting. Thus, LARPing anticipated the movement toward virtual play that video games have worked to create. At this point, the LARP surpasses video games by offering a more realistic, alternative form of role-play.

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