

Combat Narratology

Strategies for the resolution of narrative crisis in participatory fiction

Simon Brind

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Abstract

In this thesis I investigate the structure and system of emergent narratives in multiplayer participatory fiction with a view to resolving the perceived tension between the vision of the writer and the agency of the players to perform actions that are unexpected, and which may produce a narrative crisis that threatens the coherence of the experience. The nascent field of larp studies has an uneasy relationship with storytelling and the terminology connected to it. Much of the literature exists as pre-theory (yet underpinned by more than twenty years of praxis)

The original contribution of this work is two-fold. I produce an object model which describes the (chaotic) narrative system and I offer a method for interrogating the system in order to derive an understanding of its state.

Using a combination of autoethnography, systems modelling, and object-oriented analysis as well as discourse analysis, I present a series of case studies in which I consider the role of the writer in participatory fiction, and I survey the processes of creating and participating in larps.

I develop an extended narratological model which describes the distinction between plot (planned events), story (emergent), and narrative (events described after they have occurred). I describe an approach to larp narrative design as a form of ontological engineering which I present as a framework and a method to support cultural practice. I describe the experience of participation and use the inherent subjectivity of this experience to illustrate the complexity and variables of a larp narrative system during runtime. I draw on this evidence to create an object-based model of the system. I identify underlying patterns and tropes in narrativization and suggest that there is a degree of observable narrative predictability. I offer a four-step process for interrogating the chaotic narrative system in order to derive a probable state and direction of the story in real time and using this to coherently resolve narrative crises.

I describe this process as Combat Narratology - the study of emergent narrative and its structure, performed under pressure in real time.

*There once was a larp with a plot
Where the writers got tied in a knot
They were caught by surprise
When the players capsized,
About this, I've written a lot.*

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

*“Invention, it must be humbly admitted,
does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos”*

- Mary Shelley

I am told that addressing you as “Dear Reader” is forbidden, but my research is about a participatory form of storytelling, and the cognitive shift between writing for interaction and writing for a passive academic reader is complex. I indulge this weakness only in this opening page, you shall not hear from me again in this way until we reach the end. I’m going to tell you a story. It is fragmentary and episodic. Events described out of order as they occur to me. I then draw them together to explain what you are reading, why I wrote it, and then I move on to describe this research project in more formal terms.

My autistic son, ten years old at the time of writing, keen to help with my research, has written a note for me. It reads “How do stories work?” Although I could not read until I was seven years old, I loved to listen to stories and I told them to myself out loud. Their structure and component parts — like written language — were a mystery to be unravelled. I was around the same age as my son is now when I first played *Dungeons & Dragons*: a secret world of maps and numbers, leading to a story that reacted to what the players did. My original Dungeon Master, now a famous choreographer, conducted the emergent story for us. Fast forward again, in 1986 I played my first live action roleplaying game, crawling through tunnels in the chalk caves beneath Chislehurst to the south of London, clutching a wooden shield and a mace fashioned from foam and Gaffer tape. I was almost overwhelmed by the full sensory experience of this form. In April 2015, I found myself playing a game in a castle in Poland, weeping uncontrollably, and literally covered in my own blood. I turn back to the question that my son has asked about these stories — magical, interactive, emergent, and immersive — and I wonder ‘how do they work?’

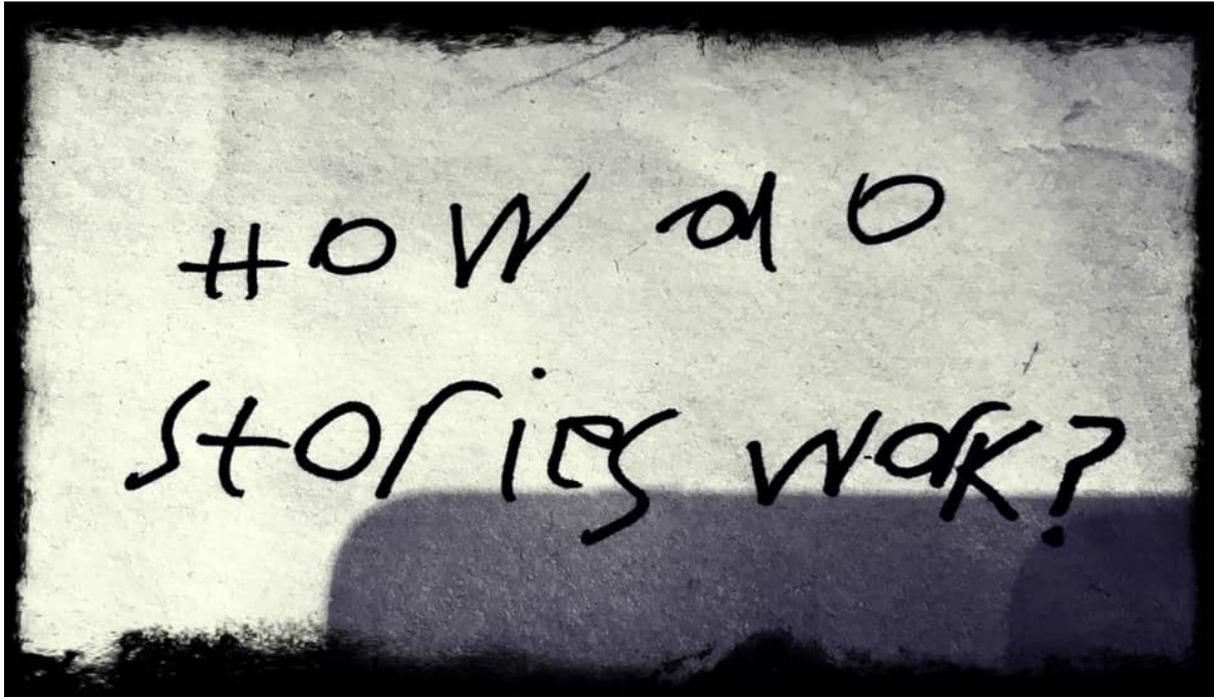


Figure 1 - How do stories work? Picture by Joshua Brind.

Aim of the research

There is an inherent problem when it comes to describing participatory fiction. Notwithstanding the incongruous use of Aristotelian poetics to describe a story that has no unity of action¹ and which relies on participant agency to emerge. I argue that a participatory piece does not have a narrative until it ends, but if this is true, what is the role of a writer in creating a piece of participatory fiction? Are they “an anachronistic personage, the bearer of messages, the director of consciences?” (Calvino, 1986) or the system architect of a “literature machine?” (ibid.)

In this research I investigate the role of the writer of participatory fiction. Specifically, I will study Live Action Role Playing (“larp”). Larp is a co-operative game of make-believe, a form of embodied and physical role-play, where the participants pretend to be characters within a predefined context which is different from everyday

¹ Whereas Aristotle thinks of (tragedy) as “an action that is worth serious attention, complete in itself” (Aristotle, 1965, p.39) which can be appreciated as a whole by a spectator, a larp — as I will argue — contains a multitude of action, and either multiple spectators or no spectators at all, because everyone is a participant. In addition, his assertion that there could be tragedy without characters (ibid, p.40) is not true for larp as the character is the means by which the larper tells the story.

life (Stenros 2015). This predefined context is a diegetic setting or storyworld. Although there may be an intended outcome, it will depend upon the participants' interaction with the plot. Lindley & Eladhari (2005) describe larp as "a kind of performative multitext," explaining that there is no authoritative story, as each player has a different narrative experience in which they are (or, more accurately, their character is) the protagonist. In addition, as active participants (as opposed to passive audience members) the players have metamorphic agency; they do not just affect their own story but can change the story experienced by others. These are reported to larpwrights during the game by players or non-player characters whose metaleptic position² is — at best — uncertain. Phelan (2005) argues that narrators, "perform three main roles—reporting, interpreting, and evaluating; sometimes they perform the roles simultaneously and sometimes sequentially." Descriptions of metamorphic events are rendered unreliable, even when the game-master witnesses them directly. Not only do we have to consider the character as an intra-diegetic unreliable narrator and the player of the character explaining what happened during an event extra-diegetically, but we also have the player of that character creating a whole new (unreliable) narrative layer to explain what they think has been going on. In simple terms it is difficult for the larpwright to understand what is going on until the event has ended.

This thesis will examine the process and practice of writing larps / writing for larps with particular reference to the relationship between the writer and emergent story driven by players. I will examine moments of 'narrative crisis' when players do something catastrophically unexpected within the storyworld which shifts the narrative model into a state of chaos. I will attempt to answer the question "How can the larpwrights understand the story?" and "What should they do next?" These decisions — be they authorial, dramaturgical, or ludological — taken under pressure and without the ability to go back and edit, are at the heart of storytelling in an immersive/participatory setting.

² From *Metalepsis*, in larp terms I use it to describe the shift of narrative level between larp participants and their characters. I discuss this in chapter 6.

The thesis focuses on the following research questions:

- What is the role of the writer in participatory fiction?
- How can the larpwright understand the state of a story during runtime?
- How can we resolve moments of narrative crisis in larp?

Whilst this thesis is about larp, I acknowledge the rise of experiential forms which may rely on participatory behaviours, from immersive theatre, theme parks, ARGs and VR. Many of these experiences rely on an emergent narrative and I hope that the findings here prove useful and relevant to others outside of larp.

Narrative Crisis

I must first describe “narrative crisis.” To facilitate this, I’m going to offer an example from *Rutterkin’s Woods* (1998), a four-day larp for around one hundred participants. The players of the game were dispatched to capture a robber-baron. Their task was further complicated by the presence of two sets of supernatural creatures: malevolent *fae* and horrific undead *wraiths*. These creatures were played by the monster crew, volunteers who take on the roles of antagonists in the story (Mitchell, 2009).

In the storyworld, the player’s characters were from a nation opposed to any form of slavery or coercion, so the writers thought it would be an interesting ethical challenge to give the players a magical amulet that could potentially be used to control the wraiths, thus, avoiding having to fight enemies on two fronts, but at the expense of their own morals.

Unexpectedly, the players mistook the wraiths for *fae* and gave the amulet of wraith control to the wraiths. This derailed the plot and led to some frantic re-writing during runtime.

There is a similar example of unexpected action from a masque performed during the reign of Elizabeth I. The Lady of May, which evidence suggests was performed in 1578 at Wanstead House as a part of the courtly entertainments provided to The Queen as she made her progress around the country (Goldring and Eales, 2014). These entertainments tended towards a fictionalisation of Gloriana — arguably the character personified by Elizabeth Tudor as monarch — and played up her

sovereignty and grace. “On these occasions Elizabeth was in a sense already ‘on stage.’” (Asher,1993)

Stark (2012) suggests that these entertainments were an early form of larp, but in most cases Elizabeth had a lack of *agency* which Murray (1997) defines as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices.” Although the entertainments tended to be carefully scripted, Elizabeth’s actions within the dramatic world seemed to influence the outcome of the story; but in fact her presence was all that was needed to move things along as they followed their pre-scripted path.

At the Wanstead Entertainment, The Lady of May couldn’t choose between her two suitors, Therion and Espilus, and so she asked the Queen to help her decide; this choice is an example of agency.

“... at Wanstead in the middle of May 1578, Queen Elizabeth strolled one day ‘down into the grove’ of the estate. There she was accosted by an ‘honest man's wife of the country’ who, ‘crying out for justice,’ pleaded that she aid her daughter, at that very moment the object of a struggle between two rival suitors, the one a shepherd, the other a forester.” (Berry, 1989)

During the course of the play we hear from both the suitors, but the intended outcome is clear; the forester (Therion) has the advantage and no real case is presented for the shepherd (Espilus)” (Orgel, 1963)

Critics argue over the subtext. It may be that the characters were analogues of Robert Dudley and Sir Christopher Hatton, who were both real life suitors to the Queen (Cooper, 2004) or it could have been an attempt to dissuade her from marriage to duc d’Alençon (Gray, 1829). In an interesting inversion of Stenros’ definition of larp, in this example the characters pretend to be participants. “Here is no artifice; no frame for the drama; no theatre; the actors bring their world with them and transform ours; they deny that they are “characters”, treating their audience exactly as they treat each other; and we, as spectators, find we cannot tell them apart from ourselves.” (Orgel, 1963).

In this instance there seem to be two possible outcomes, but the text of the winner’s song clearly belongs to Therion not Espilus. It shows how Pan (the archetypal shepherd, loses his love whereas Sylvanius (the king of the Forest) wins his. The

plotted outcome was that Elizabeth would choose Therion, but she used her participant agency and she selected Espilus. The result was a narrative crisis.

“This being said, it pleased her Maiesty to iudge that Espilus did the better deserue her: but what words, what reasons she vsed for it, this paper, which carieth so base names; is not worthy to containe” (Sidney, 1605)

“Therefore O Ladie whorthie to see the accomplishment of your desires since al your desires be most worthy of you, vouchsafe [our] eares such happinesse, & me that particular fauor as that you will iudge whether of[these] two be more worthy of me, or whether I be worthy of them This I will say[, that in] iudging me, you iudge more than me in it.”

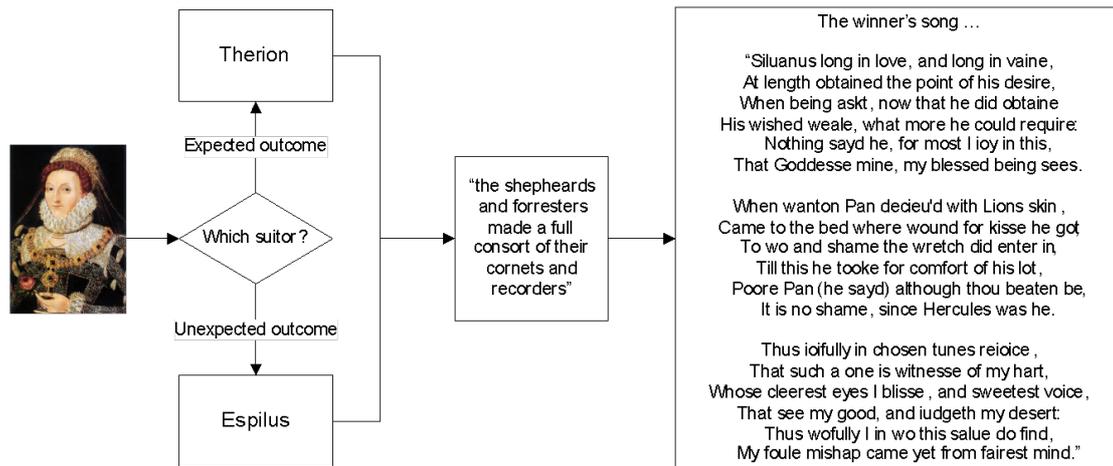


Figure 2 - Process flow illustrating Elizabeth I's narrative crisis.

Narrative crisis in larp is both more likely and more complex because there are many players, each with agency, and each spinning their own subjective story. They take diegetic actions that make sense to them but are unexpected by the writers. This could be because of an intradiegetic or a metadiegetic misunderstanding. Like the example given above, when a player mistakes one type of creature for another and accidentally gives an amulet of wraith control to the wraiths, planned plots descend into chaos and parts of the event need to be re-written on the fly.

Chaotic Narrative Systems

In 1988 I purchased a book on chaos theory from Dillons bookstore on Gower Street, London, where I had a Saturday job. I saw the book at lunchtime and decided to spend £5.33³ from my wage packet on it at the end of the working day. At the time

³ The retail price of the book was £7.99 but I had a 1/3 staff discount.

I was reading English Literature and so the choice to buy a book on popular science may have been unusual, but it was not *truly random*; whether I took a conscious decision to buy it, or it was deterministic, it remained, unread, on my bookshelf until October 2020. This action had an effect — some thirty-two years later — as it informed some of my thinking here; it serves as this example of how small events *can* affect the emergent story and to suggest that chaos and randomness are not the same.

The story of a larp derives from a systemically complex nonlinear system in which “cause and effect are often a puzzling maze” (Kiel and Elliott, 1996, p.2). There seem to be underlying patterns, or recognisable repetitions in the stories that emerge, but these are offset by the unpredictability of participant action — which derives from player agency — and which may result in narrative crisis, moments where the path of the story changes in unexpected ways.

This idea can be extended: if chaos theory is — as Brady argues — a mode of formalism (Brady, 1990, p.65) which seeks to “measure and describe” (ibid) a system then it should be possible to measure and describe the narrative system of a larp in a similar way.

Structure of thesis

Chapter 1 - Introduction

This chapter contains an overview of the research. Following this introduction, the remainder of this work is structured in nine chapters, followed by references and appendices.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

In chapter two I present my methodological approach to this study. I present the rationale for the combined use of autoethnography and participant observation for data collection. I explain my analytical approaches in detail. I also discuss ethical considerations around informed consent and participatory culture. I also provide detail about the design of specific case studies within those studies in later chapters.

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

In Chapter 3 I provide a critical overview of two key literatures: games studies with particular reference to playstyles, interactivity, and agency, and then Nordic (and other) larp theory and its relationship to narrative.

Chapter 4 - On Narrative Design and the Story Making Model

Chapter 4 is split into two sections. In the first I present an *explanatory* case study which surveys the design process for a larp. This begins to answer the research question “what is the role of the writer in participatory fiction?” This case study introduces some of the concepts and terms used in larp design with a particular focus on narrative.

I then introduce a brief history of larp, present a discussion of genre, and a survey of narratological terms. I discuss how these terms can apply to larps and use the findings of the case study to extend a narratological model to include participatory acts. I then discuss approaches to plot writing and introduce an object-oriented approach to narrative design which I develop across the rest of this study.

Chapter 5 - Every gun makes its own tune: Case Study - Conscience

Chapter 5 consists of a case study which examines the experience of participating in a larp. I use this study to illustrate the complexity of the narrative system of a larp, how it is affected by the participant, and to show various modes of interaction with the system and with other participants.

Chapter 6 - A systematic approach to authorial modes in unstable narratives

This chapter considers subjectivity in detail; considering first the individual variables that will lead to two different larpers, playing the same character, to have profoundly different experiences. I use this to develop a system showing modes of enactment — how a larper plays — and then develop this system to produce an object model that describes the authorial state of a larp during runtime.

Chapter 7 - On narrative patterns - Case Study: Odyssey

In this chapter I provide a case study of the UK fest larp *Odyssey* in which I consider the experience of writer and gamemaster⁴. I use the findings of the study to discuss the degree of observable narrative predictability and to suggest that an underlying grammar of tropes informs participatory play. I move on to extend the

⁴ A gamemaster is a facilitator of play. I use the term gamemaster to mean one who has mastered the game rather than in the sense of one who owns or controls it.

narrative object model to include an object to represent a narrative event, offering a relationship between narrative and enactment.

Chapter 8 - On Combat Narratology

In this final chapter I suggest that, despite the stories that emerge in a larp appearing to be random and unpredictable, there is a chaotic nature to these stories; this implies patterns can be seen. I offer a four-step process for interrogating this chaotic narrative system in order to generate an actional intersubjective narrative which can be used to inform plot and story decisions. I move on to discuss what constitutes a narrative crisis and what the criteria are for its existence. I will suggest that the narrative system is chaotic and that patterns can be found in a well-designed narrative system. Furthermore, because of the underlying structures of cultural narratives these patterns are predictable to a useful degree. Finally, I will describe how combat narratology can help resolve extreme events.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

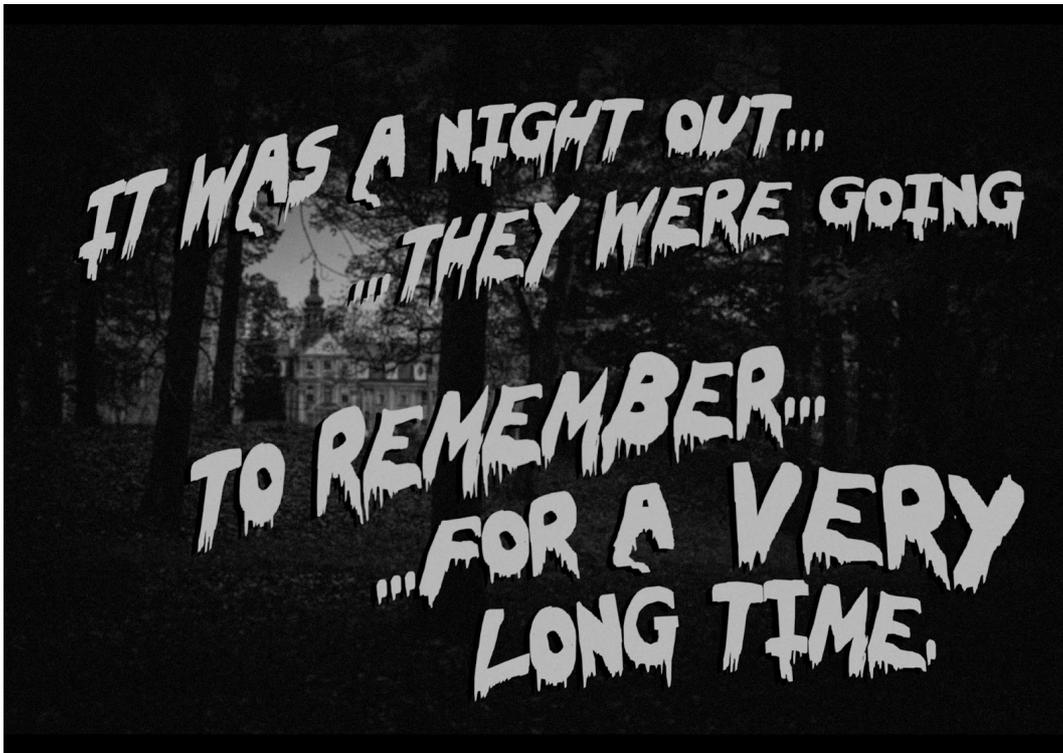


Figure 3 - Promo image for The Rocky Horror Larp by Lisa Julia Wolfrum, Wolfrum Graphics.

Introduction

The original intention of this study was that it would be practice based. I had planned to document the creation and runtime of three large scale larps and use this work to inform the research. The second project of the three, which was to be based on the stage play of *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), was due to take place in a castle hotel in Moszna, southwestern Poland. I had secured rights to use the *Rocky Horror Show* IP from the rights holders and had begun the design work. For a number of reasons outside of the control of the project, this larp was not able to go ahead. On the advice of my supervisory team, I opted for a theory centred approach to the research. However, to study how stories work in larps requires a working knowledge of the form as both a participant and a gamemaster. Therefore, I apply a mix of methods to answer the following three research questions.

- What is the role of the writer in participatory fiction?
- How can the larpwright understand the state of a story during runtime
- How can we resolve moments of narrative crisis in larp?

To answer these questions, I examine the structure of larp narrative in theory, and through the process of design. I consider the experience of participating in larps and how this may affect the participants' narratives, the practice of running larps, and how gamemasters operate "in the field." Initially, I use ethnographic and autoethnographic data collection and subsequent analysis as the basis for the theoretical explanations which follow. I complement this with modelling techniques from my previous field and professional practice of software engineering.

Positionality Statement

Positionality acknowledges that a researcher's views are affected by their location (Holmes, 2020, p.2). In this positional statement I will acknowledge personal positions that have potential to influence the research. I will give context by providing an overview of my educational and professional background. I will then describe myself to provide further context. Finally, I provide a reflexive conclusion based on this positionality statement.

I am a neurodiverse middle-class (and now middle-aged) white British man raised by working class parents of Jewish and British/Irish extraction. I am a Londoner. As an undergraduate in the late 1980s, I studied English Literature. After graduating I immediately went on to do a MSc in Software Engineering with a particular interest in interactive multimedia. I have worked in Information Technology since 1992 as a software engineer, business/systems analyst, and product manager. I completed a MA in Creative Writing in 2011. I undertook this research with a view to combining interests in narrative, creating storytelling, and a professional experience in systems engineering and design.

I have been a part of the larp community since 1986. I have designed, written, organised, and played larps during this time. Until 2015, all of my larp experience was in the UK. This would suggest an insider perspective (ibid. p.5), however much of my research involved the international and Nordic larp communities with whom I became involved as a result of this study. Although I strive to maintain culturally neutral, I acknowledge that, during the course of the research I move between outside and inside positions as I integrate with the Nordic larp discourse and community.

The overall approach here reflects my formation, my interest in narrative is pursued through my formal training in systems analysis, using modelling as the process and proof for the thesis. The perspective of this research originates at the

intersection between larp studies, software engineering, and narratology. This intersection produces what we might broadly think of as a structuralist analysis in which formal patterns in emergent narratives are identified as the way to address the research questions.

I approach this project from a structuralist position — in the sense of applying the theoretical rigour of a science to a literary form, specifically considering conventions and codes of communication (Cuddon & Preston, 1999, pp.868-871) — and extend this using my professional background in systems analysis and software engineering, using formal analysis, and modelling as the process and proof for the thesis.

Autoethnography and larp

Kemper (2018b) identifies key components for larp autoethnography: Character investigation, identifying common themes between your mundane self and your character, recording the narrative, and creating and investigating ephemera. (pp.70-71) Her focus here is on provoking emotional reactions and steering for what she describes as *emancipatory bleed*, a way of resolving personal issues or trauma by experiencing them as a fictional character. Josselson and Lieblich citing Ellis suggest that autoethnography comes from the first-person author writing about themselves and highlighting emotional experience (2007). As much of the subjective experience of larp is provoked by emotional responses, so I have not sought to remain dispassionate during my autoethnographic studies, but recorded thoughts, experiences, and feelings as they occurred to me.

Investigating the participant's experience

Extending Laws' statement that "criticism of the actual RPG experience is the Schrödinger's Cat of art criticism. Lift the lid to look at the cat, and you may well destroy it." (Laws, 1995, p.96), Ahlroth (2008, p.27) identifies a subjective paradox associated with any critical interrogation of a larp. As a participant in a larp contributes to the larp, that contribution undermines any objective credibility. I refer in Chapter 6 to Montola's subjective diegesis (2003) but use it here to argue if the experience is subjective then it follows that the criticism must also be subjective. Fatland explains, "a larp cannot be

observed, it can only be played. Passive observation is non-participation, and non-participation is not role-playing” (Fatland, 2005. p.153) If the critic does not participate, then the larp is affected by their extra-diegetic presence. “Larps are told collectively but experienced individually” (Barkholt-Spangsbo and Arbjørn, 2019, p.121). There are shared moments where experiences intersect, but the narrative that comes out after the larp is constructed based on individual memories. What is more, as the larp itself is ephemeral (Stenros and Montola, 2019. p.16,) and so the window in which critical interrogation is possible is limited. Furthermore, as I state later, the larper is an unreliable narrator, and — as a participant in the larp — the critic must therefore inherit some of this unreliability. This paradox is core to this thesis: one cannot understand a larp story without being a part of it but being a part of the story affects our understanding of it.

To mitigate the subjective paradox, I utilise a mixed-method approach by examining plot, story, and narrative separately, and using this narratological triangulation to interrogate the diegesis. Extending Kemper’s suggestion that “a combination of autoethnographic technique coupled with the creative use of a narrative write up of the larp, can allow us to investigate our participation in a larp” (2018b, p.83,) I include the *text*⁵ of the larp represented by its plot, autoethnographies to describe its *story*, and any post-larp participant contributions to represent the *narrative* of a played larp. These three terms — *plot*, *story*, and *narrative* — are defined and expanded in chapter 4.

Autoethnography “displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis and Bochner 2000, p. 739) and so acknowledges this subjectivity (Méndez, 2014). It is an approach which utilises the researcher’s own experiences to investigate a phenomenon and which can tell stories of/about the ‘self’, through two lenses: the *lifeworld* of the ethnographer and the *storyworld* of the

⁵ I suggest a few times in Chapter 4 that there “is no text” and in chapter 7 that a larper or gamemaster creates an imagined text. Whilst larp usually has pre-diegetic (Fatland, 2005. P.177) text-based artefacts such as character sheets, plot documents, and design documents which are written by the gamemasters, one of the challenges of this study is to make sense of the subjective understanding of the diegesis during runtime where a single, static, repeatable, referenceable equivalent to a literary text is not available.

character. Josselson and Lieblich (2007), summarising Ellis (2004), suggest that the “narrative, autoethnographic project is distinguished by an author writing in the first person about her/himself with a text presented as a story, in literary form, disclosing hidden details of private life, highlighting emotional experience and oriented to evoking emotional response in the reader.” Based on Conquergood, “proximity, not objectivity, becomes an epistemological point of departure and return,” (2002, p.149) I extend this by reflecting twice on storyworld events, as both researcher and participant, and as character. I represent this by using first person to describe lifeworld and third person for descriptions of the experience of the character. Sometimes I report first person writing as diegetic, in which case it will be within inverted commas. As autoethnography relies on “artistic and analytic demonstrations of how we come to know, name, and interpret personal and cultural experience” (Adams, 2014, p.1). I suggest that the first-person voice of the researcher is the primary source of analytic truth. I adopt Humphreys’ “autoethnographic vignettes as a means of enhancing the representational richness and reflexivity of qualitative research” (2005).

For the participant-based case studies my primary interrogation in this thesis is of the relationship between the participant ‘I’ and what I will introduce as the plot:story:narrative continuum. I apply the reflexive rigour of autoethnography to that relationship. However, I acknowledge that autoethnography has limitations as a method of research; it is an emotional form and thus, it is difficult to predict the responses that may be evoked in readers. As a personal narrative without a contextual framework for evaluation, it may appear self-indulgent (Atkinson, 1997; DeVault, 1997; Sparkes, 2002). To offset this, I complement the autoethnography with a structural analysis of the design and the plot of the larps I investigate. I rely on this ‘text’ as the primary data and the autoethnography as supporting data.

Investigating the gamemaster’s experience

Whilst the roles of designer, writer, and gamemaster are often performed by the same people, I consider them to be three phases of making and running a larp and examine them in sequence. For the non-participant-based case studies I focus on the relationship between the designer/writer/gamemaster ‘I’ and the process of creating and running a larp. At the time of starting to collect this data I had around thirty years of experience as a larp writer and gamemaster, and twenty-five years’ experience as

a larp designer, this enabled me to easily embed myself within organiser teams and to ‘pull my weight.’ In my field study, I supplement the autoethnographic approach with interviews from other gamemasters and writers and with narrative elements captured during the larp as a part of the process of running the larp, rather than recorded as a researcher/observer.

Individual case study methodologies

As each of the case studies presented in this research was designed with a different purpose and question in mind, methodology specific to the individual case studies is included with the case studies rather than summarised here.

Ethical considerations

There are ethical questions of the method’s inclusion of descriptions of potentially sensitive scenes and interactions involving the people around the researcher (Wall, 2008). Specifically, the question of when to obtain or not obtain consent to be included in the narrative (Miller and Bell, 2002). It is problematic to claim informed consent when “it is not clear what the participant is consenting to and where ‘participation’ begins and ends. (ibid. p.61) This is further complicated in larp by the concept of alibi — which allows for identity-incongruent action and thus, divorces the identity of the player⁶ from the actions of their character. I resolve this by seeking explicit consent from other participants where their identity may be inferred by their interactions, even where they are the only ones who would be able to identify themselves. This is particularly relevant to those ad hoc data points observed outside of a more formal study which may complement autoethnographic data. Where consent has not been immediately given, I have assumed no consent, and — to avoid any sense of coercion — have not followed up to request it.

Analytical Approaches

The case studies represent the analytical frame which is a container for a range of phenomena (Thomas, 2016, p.203). In this section I will describe the analytical

⁶ Used here to differentiate a participant in the study from the ‘player,’ the participant in a larp.

approaches common to all of the studies. I note that for the individual ethnographic / autoethnographic field studies, there were differences in the approaches due to the nature of the larps and locations. I provide further detail in the introductions to each study describing specific practical challenges, or changes to the approach required to elucidate specific data.

Grounded Theory / Constant Comparative method

I acknowledge that conceptually grounded theory (GT) is defined as an approach that allows important concepts to emerge out of qualitative data (Kolb, 2012, p.86) and delight in Thomas' description that it emphasises the way that theory can emerge from the researcher's immersion in a situation (Thomas, 2016, p. 210). I use terminology from GT, but specifically I apply the constant comparative method to combine "systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling in order to generate theory" (Conrad, Neumann, Haworth, & Scott, 1993, p. 280). This approach seems more iterative than continuous. I follow Strauss and Corbin's three levels of analysis: open, axial, selective. (2008)

Systems Modelling

As an output of the coding processes, I document and test the resulting theory using methods for describing systems deriving from software engineering, initially Soft Systems Methodology (SSM) which is way of modelling complex (social) situations with multiple interacting perceptions of 'reality'" or *worldviews* (Checkland, 1989, p.192). SSM is intended to be used as a way of improving a process, initially by learning one's way through it, as my purpose here was to understand and to map the process, I used SSM as a tool to produce a high-level survey of the notional system, and to develop a grammar to enable the next level of modelling.

From here I applied object-oriented analysis — where the target system is modelled through a theoretically motivated process of abstraction (Gilbert and Terna, 2000, p.58) — to create a logical diagram showing the complex inter-relationships of the narrative system.

Object Oriented Analysis & Design

I turn to Booch here for a brief definition and explanation of Object-Oriented Design (OOD). OOD is an approach to software engineering which describes complex

systems by breaking them down into a decomposed⁷ hierarchy of objects, with each level of the hierarchy representing a different level of abstraction. These levels are built upon one another but are individually understandable. For example, a multinational corporation can be decomposed into companies and then into divisions, departments, and teams. People within individual teams and branches are more likely to interact with one another although they share common systems and processes. (Booch, 1990, pp.19-21,) The complex system here is more than an org chart, but rather a way of describing how the individuals and process and operations of the multinational corporation work together. At a simplistic level, OOA is used as a method to understand an existing complex system, viewing it as a collection of objects that cooperate with one another to achieve some desired functionality (ibid p.352), OOD as a means to describe a new one. As a philosophical approach to modelling a system, object-orientation (OO) gives the designer/engineer a framework for representing complexity. It allows a visual representation of the system and, by extension, a process for testing and modelling the system.

Object-Oriented design for interactive narrative systems

This section will examine the Object-Oriented design of narrative in the context of research by Skov & Stage (2002), Bangsø et al.(2004), Figa and Tarau (2003), Liu and Lieberman (2005), and Shen et al. (2009)

I start with Montfort's description of a literary riddle, "beyond simply having a literary setting, the riddle offers what can be understood as a 'world' in which things relate to each other and are endowed with special abilities or attributes systematically" (Montfort, 2003, p.43). This description has clear parallels to an object-oriented system, where objects (and their attributes) interact with one another within a constrained setting. Indeed Skov & Stage (2002, p.58) experimented with using OO as a methodological base to develop a narrative system, identifying that "Research shows that contemporary interactive narrative systems are designed and created primarily by intuition." They conclude that object-orientation is a useful tool in the

⁷ In the Computer Science sense of the word, decomposition is a method by which a complex problem or system is broken down into smaller parts that are easier to understand.

design of interactive narrative, but that it still has some weaknesses when it comes to discourse.

Bangsø et al. (2004) develop the idea of using OO as a methodology by providing “a simple model that allows writers to specify a NOLIST⁸ as a set of actions which the game engine then combines to create the narrative.” This is interesting because their approach does not seek to replace the writer (thus, attempting to resolve the issue identified by Skov & Stage) but rather to provide them with a structure for creating a story. They extend their research further by applying object-oriented Bayesian⁹ networks to examine the narrative structure in order to predict likely paths through the story; again, this is intended as a tool to support rather than to replace the author.

“A NOLIST game engine specifies a set of actions which are the building blocks of the narrative. An action could, e.g., be a small movie clip, a sentence in a dialog, or the description of an event. The game engine maintains a model of the possible pasts and the possible futures for the narrative. The game is played in rounds, where in each round the game engine first determines which actions are possible. These actions must be part of a possible future and be consistent with a possible past.” Bangsø et al. (2004)

This approach takes what could be a formalist representation of a story (in as much as it looks at the form of the work as a whole, but also the component parts of the text) and considers multiple possible functions deriving from each event. By applying the Bayesian algorithm to these possible outcomes, the system is able to model multiple probable paths through the story:

“A story where all atomic story parts played are highly improbable might be fun to read but can easily become confusing and incoherent. Similarly, playing only the most probable atomic story parts produces a predictable and most likely boring story. Knowing the probability of each possible future helps

⁸ Non-linear Interactive Storytelling

⁹ A Bayesian network is a probabilistic graphical model for representing knowledge about an uncertain domain. They contain information about causal probability relationships between variables and are often used to aid in decision making. They are also used in machine learning.

the game engine to progress the story according to the stated intentions of the writer.” Bangsø et al. (2004)

One of the challenges faced by larp writers is the unpredictability of these ‘possible futures.’ The approach suggested by Bangsø et al. has value as a modelling tool for the design of larp narratives but is unlikely to resolve the issue of narrative crisis any more effectively than writers themselves considering possible and unlikely outcomes.

Figa and Tarau’s (2003) approach seems a little more traditional. They propose a model with one or more Storylines and a definition of possible user interaction during the story. The interactions may switch the route through the narrative from one direction to another. What is interesting is their definition of the Interactor

“Interactors are interface agents that are present in an interactive presentation as actors and assistants. An Interactor is a self-contained autonomous agent which has an expertise of data processing and user interaction. It is able to abstract the user inputs as events and to communicate with other Interactors. An Interactor can be present in an environment as a software entity, alive in a computer system or embodied in a hardware device” (Figa & Tarau, 2003).

This idea of the self-contained and autonomous ‘agent’ will be discussed further in Chapter 6 when I discuss Object based plot; this approach allows us to consider an intrinsically non-linear and incredibly complex narrative system as a model.

Shen et al. (2009, p.809) discuss emergent narrative in visual storytelling (video editing) and observe that, “the particular ordering of a story reflects a myriad of interdependent decisions about the interplay of structure, narrative arc and character development.” Their paper proposes a visual tool for the creation of new films based upon the editor/storyteller typing free text in the form of a story (as opposed to typing keywords). Underlying this system is an object-based model which uses a natural language parser to produce a subject character and their emotional state using three numbers from +10 to -10 using the PAD model (Pleasure-Displeasure, Arousal-Nonarousal, Dominance-Submissiveness). The system uses this to identify potential

candidates for a scene in the story by looking at the potential relations between the characters:

“If “Louis”, “Tiffany”, “Henri” are the only “child” characters in all the existing videos and “Jacques,” “Duffin” are the only “teachers”, then for the input “the teacher is watching the child improvising.” there will be six candidate sets including [“Jacques”, “Louis”], [“Jacques”, “Tiffany”] ...etc. “

The system then considers the emotional (PAD vectors) of the candidates and then looks for any emotional terms existing in the input story description, rejecting any candidates that have no emotional terms for the corresponding subject characters. Whilst this degree of specificity is not applicable to the subjective world of larp, this approach to modelling *potential* interactions is directly relevant to the design of a narrative system.

Liu and Liberman (2005) introduce *Metaphor*, which generates (pseudo) object code from natural language input. This is an interesting conceit — far more useful, as the authors point out, for novice programmers — but for the narrative designer a way of considering a character as an object with specific inputs and outputs.

“When a customer orders a drink, the bartender tries to make it. When the bartender is asked to make a drink, he makes it and gives it to the customer only if the drink is in the menu's drinks; otherwise, the bartender says, "sorry I don't know how to make that drink" to the customer.”

```
class bartender:
    def make(drink):
        if (drink in menu.drinks):
            bartender.make(drink)
            bartender.give(drink, customer)
        Else:
            bartender.say(\
"sorry I don't know how to make that drink", customer)
    def give(drink, to_customer): pass
    def say(quote, to_customer): pass
```

```
class customer:
    def order(drink):
        bartender.make(drink)
```

Liu and Liberman (2005)

By extending this approach to the description of the functions of characters I posit that the larpwright will be better able to predict, if not their exact interactions, a functional range of expected behaviours within the diegesis. I will review this position throughout this thesis and conclude that this approach can be used for narrative design and combat narratology.

Narrative Analysis / Discourse Analysis

There is a recursive irony to be found in these methods of analysis, as storytelling structures, tropes and how these stories are told in relation to their social context are a part of the methodology I propose in this study. I determined that this should be bootstrapped (“If a compiler for language L is implemented in L, then it should be able to compile itself” (Appel, 1994, p.1969). Thus, I applied some of the method I propose for the real-time analysis of larp narrative during the course of the study itself. Where applicable I rely on textual analysis, narrative analysis, and discourse analysis for specific instances of narrative. This is based on Spencer's argument that ethnography and discourse analysis are mutually relevant to field-based research (Spencer, 1994) and mutually complimentary (Krzyżanowski, 2011).

Evaluation of methodology

The selection of methods was intended to capture as much of the ephemeral experience of a larp as was possible without having a dissonant impact upon the experience. Whilst ethnography/autoethnography appears to be the most effective way of doing this — largely because it is embedded and acknowledges its own subjectivity — I have supplemented this where possible with additional data in the form of narrative “text.”

Chapter 3 - Literature Review

“Larp has an uneasy relationship with storytelling and the terminology connected to it.”

(Stenros and Montola, 2019, p.17)

Introduction

My interest in emergent stories in larp requires an engagement with literature across several fields and disciplines. Whilst interdisciplinary research provides an opportunity for researchers to think outside of the boundaries of their own discipline (Hesse-Biba & Leavy, 2010, p.2) those boundaries are not so well defined in the emergent field of larp studies. By necessity then, my review encompassed many subjects, but in this chapter, I offer a focussed critical overview. I base this selection on the following inclusion criteria: the study must relate directly to larp, to the problem of agency in interactive fiction, or to the study and analysis of interactive narrative. In addition, I review some foundational texts from these fields in order to isolate or define specific terminology. I chose not to include theatre and performance studies in the literature review. I base this decision on Stenros and Montola’s argument that — as a participatory artform — larp is separate from theatre; it cannot be observed, it must be played, and it is played for a first-person audience (Stenros & Montola, 2011, p.4). To understand emergent story and the narrative crisis in larp, I examine larp praxis rather than considering it through the lens of theatre or performance.

This chapter is split into two sections. In the first of these I will offer a brief acknowledgement of the distinction between ludology and narratology. I will move on to review literature on play styles and preferences. From there I interrogate interactivity and agency in digital narratives and ergodic literature.

In the second section I review the canon of Nordic larp theory from 2001 to 2021, with particular reference to *narrative*, *plot*, and *story*. In this section I also introduce and define a number of key terms and concepts unique to larp, or which have a specific meaning to the form that differ from common usage, and which are consistently valuable to this thesis. Other terms, such as bleed, are defined in the chapters in which first introduce them. I use the terminological definitions from the

Meilahti Model (Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2003) as a starting point in this study, but I acknowledge that theoretical understanding of larp has developed since 2003.

This chapter includes review of the twenty plus year canon of Nordic larp theory which is a body of work derived from practice. I note that some of this work should be considered pre-theory in as much as its basis comes from a hunch, general observation, or simple logic (Robinson, 2019, p.1) or para-theory in as much as it may resemble an academic text in language and structure, but on reading may be the author's opinion couched in academic terms. However, the academic validity of Nordic larp discourse is underlined by more than twenty years of praxis. It is as a summary of practical research in an emergent artistic field that I believe it to be useful. In recent years Nordic larp theory has started to include work by non-Nordic practitioners; I continue to describe it as Nordic larp theory — as the Nordics are the primary publishers of these works — but increasingly larp theory exists as a field in its own right.

Section One - Key Concepts

Ludology and Narratology

I note the existence of papers describing a tension between these two disciplines, one which concerns itself with narrative structures and the other rules and game mechanics, when it comes to the interpretation of games (Jones, 2014) but ludology, as Frasca (1999) explains, was intended to complement narratology rather than to replace it. Aarseth (2015) makes the case that ludology is an extension to narratology, explaining that he is a narratologist and that most of those “ludologists” are narratologists either by practice or by training. He argues that there is not one narratology but many. I do not propose to revisit this discussion other than to make the distinction between the *story* of the ludology vs narratology debate — that which emerged while the arguments were taking place — and the subsequent *narratives* which can be read after the fact. I return to this idea later in this chapter when I discuss the relationship between plot, story, and narrative. Frasca clarifies his position explaining that the ludology is a formalist discipline which incorporates the structures of the game — particularly its rules — as well as creating typologies and models for explaining the mechanics of games” (Frasca, 2003, p.222). If by considering the

narrative rules and the game rules side-by-side it is possible to interrogate both story and play in a video game; a similar approach should allow a similar interrogation of larp. Whilst there are no buttons to push on a keyboard in a larp game, there are objects within a complex narrative system that — whilst constrained by rules — react to player action. I suggest interrogation of the constituent parts of this narrative system in order to understand how stories work in larp, not just the final narrative.

Ryan (2001) concludes “the inability of literary narratology to account for the experience of games does not mean we should throw away the concept of narrative in ludology; it rather means that we should expand the catalogue of narrative modalities beyond the diegetic and the dramatic.” Ryan’s choice of the qualifying word ‘literary’ is crucial, it accepts there are non-‘literary’ narratologies, such as ludonarrativity (Aarseth 1997 / Arjoranta 2015). From this I extrapolate a need to further extend the methodology to interrogate narrative structure in larp. I use this extension, and the relationship between ludology and narratology (systems theory and narrative theory), to inform my application of Object-Oriented Analysis and Design to larp

During 2021, a playful discourse within the Nordic larp community considered the relationship between *writing* and *design* in the creation of larps. To avoid further bloodshed, I concede here that writing is a part of the design process.

Describing players / player preferences

In order to acknowledge and identify the different ways participants engage with a larp (this is relevant because it is a participatory form) I consider the taxonomy of players and play styles. Pedersen (2003. p.117) argues that “a larp is a dialectic creation undertaken by both participants and fictive framework” and as such the larpwright needs to consider the participants as well as the narrative system with which they interact. I acknowledge various published approaches to describing player preference and motivations: Bartle (1999), Edwards (2001), Harviainen (2003) (2006), McDiarmid (2011, pp.5-6), and Jurczyk-Romanowska and Zakowicz (2019, pp.4-25). For the purposes of this thesis, I use Bøckman’s *Three-Way Model* to describe three broad categories of play styles. Whilst it is occasionally confused with Edwards’ (2001) GNS model, (Gamists, Narrativists, and Simulationists), Bøckman (2003, pp.12-16) argues that the term simulationist does not work functionally for larps — or more specifically Nordic larps — because there is less reliance on game mechanics and

suggests the term immersionist as an alternative. His last version offers: Dramatist, Gamist, Immersionist.

"Gamist" is the style which values solving problems and plots, and overcoming challenges such as combat, mysteries, or politics.

"Dramatist" is the style which values a satisfying storyline.

"Immersionist" is the style which values immersing into the character's life and experience, feeling what they would feel and behaving as they would behave.

However, these categories were never designed to be exclusive, as Kim (1997) says, "Your individual style cannot be pigeonholed into a single word. More to the point, you probably use a mix of different techniques and work towards more than one goal. You may tend more towards one corner of the triangle, but you probably value a mix." The Three-Way Model can be used to describe both player style and game style, thus, an immersionist player on a dramatist larp may find the experience less satisfying. I acknowledge that it is simplistic, and that more nuanced and granular taxonomies exist¹⁰, but it remains the most widely used "typology of role-players" (Stenros, 2010, p.300).

Many of the larp theorists I review in this section use narrativist and dramatist interchangeably in their writing, using them as synonymous terms. However, to avoid confusion with the word dramatist meaning playwright, I prefer the term "narrativist."

Ergodic literature, emergent story, and narrative

I identify a commonality between ergodic literature and larp, as both contain stories that are designed to be played and — as a part of that design process — the writer must consider the choices that participants might make. Aarseth offers a leading account of text, agency and interaction in computer-based narrative in which he

¹⁰ I do not consider the disruptive playstyles in this thesis but acknowledge that some participants may take pleasure from styles of interaction which are mainly for their own entertainment, often at the expense of other participants.

introduces the neologisms 'cybertext' and 'ergodic literature.' The latter "centres attention on the consumer, or user, of the text" (Aarseth, 1997 p.1). His work bridges literary theory and ludology. Its foundations in hypertext narratology enable a discourse between interaction and narrative without the added complexity of game. Aarseth explains that this genre involves significant work by the reader to traverse the path of the text; this is roughly contiguous with Frasca's *ludus*, in as much as the reader must navigate the path of possible narratives, but they affect rather than control the outcome (ibid. p112).

Aarseth draws a distinction between the discourse of narrative and the discourse of hypertext fiction. In a traditional narrative the *event plane* where the narration takes place and the *progression plane*, where the implied reader receives the events of the story, are largely the same. In ergodic fiction, such as hypertext, these planes are divorced. The reader must actively explore to make sense of the event plane. (ibid. p.125). Aarseth makes a distinction between *writer* and *author*. Here the active participant as author can add new poetic elements to the work (ibid, p.164). Developing this idea of active exploration, Murray tells us that an active reader is a direct outcome of a writer expanding a story to include multiple possibilities; "an invitation to join in the creative process" (Murray, 1997, p.38). The result of this creative collaboration is an emergent story.

I use the term "emergent" throughout this study. I take Galyean as the basis for my definition in as much as larp gives the participants an environment to explore and goals to achieve leading — via exploration and interaction — to an emergent narrative (Galyean,1995, p.2). Computer-curated emergent stories are limited by technology rather than structure. Laurel describes it as a "unicorn we can imagine but have yet to capture" (Laurel, 2001, p. 72) The main technology challenge is to create a system that allows the player to develop the story in their own way, rather than being led by the nose by the narrative designer.

Aylett illustrates this in practice with 'Virtual Teletubbies' (Aylett et al., 1999) where the eponymous children's TV characters — Teletubbies — were incorporated into a virtual environment that a participant could interact with. The four Teletubbies were designed to appeal to very young children. They have their own proto-language and their behaviour is ritualistic. Each episode follows a similar pattern. The virtual Teletubbies were implemented "using a behavioural robot architecture, in which emergent behaviour at a given moment is determined by the synthesis of responses

from currently active behaviour patterns” (ibid). So rather than a predetermined (authored) story, the events, interactions (and the narrative) emerge based on the actions or inactions of the participant. Aylett argues that the virtual agents available at the time of her study were not equipped for improvisation beyond low-level, pre-coded reactions to stimuli similar to battlefield medical training environments ¹¹(Aylett, 1999). Aylett asks if there is something to be learned from the process of (real world) dramatic improvisation which usually derives from conflict between characters. Relationships and conflict can be decomposed to a series of “interesting behavioural reactions” and it is this word — *behaviours* — that I am interested in. It is emergent behaviour that drives the narrative crisis. If larpers were virtual agents their actions could be reliably predicted. Because participants have agency, the unexpected can happen.

Agency

“In a larp, the gamemaster typically gives almost all control over physical reality to the players at the start of the game” (Koljonen, 2014. p.69)

In this section I briefly review the concept of agency. I describe the limits of agency with reference to early text adventure games. I move on to compare this to the structural tension between Aristotelian plot and player agency.

Green (2018) describes *agency* as what happens when the outcome of a player action is unknown in advance; in an instance where that action has an impact on the larp — where there are consequences for that action — agency makes the player into a participant rather than audience. A story derived from role-playing is fundamentally different from other narrative forms (Waade and Sandvik, 2007) because rather than being a static thing that is told *to us* about another world, it becomes a process in which *we* take an active role within the narrative system. This narrative system is a designed space which encompasses “everything affecting player behaviour and participant agency” (Koljonen et al., 2019, p.11).

I use the design of Interactive Fiction games here to introduce some of the concepts and limits of narrative design. Magerko gives a useful summary of the approaches to constructing story based multi-path narratives in interactive drama and

¹¹ Where the virtual patient’s physical state changes according to the treatment given by the user.

the challenges they raise. He suggests a “combinatorial explosion of content” arising from the number of possible actions the player has to choose from (Magerko, 2006, p.3) He goes on to suggest that the only practical solution is a linear or near-linear plot which constrains participant agency in order to make it understandable. For text-based interactive fiction, combinatorial explosion is contained by the limitations of the parser. By comparing the simple noun-verb actions available in *Adventure* (1976) with the more complex sentences that *Zork* (1977-1979) appeared to understand, it is possible to observe significant progress towards the understanding of natural language, but the actions of a player are still limited by what can be understood by the parser and the code behind it. For example, in *Adventure* one of the puzzles the player has to resolve is how to get past a troll who blocks their way across a bridge:

```
A burly troll stands by the bridge and insists you
throw him a treasure before you may cross
```

By throwing treasure at the troll, your character is allowed across the bridge, but in order to win the game with maximum points you require all the treasure at the end. In a game that is not constrained by a parser, a player could try various methods to get past the troll. They could try to persuade it that a mundane item was in fact a great treasure:

```
say "the pillow is an ancient treasure"
```

However, the parser, which was mainly set up to deal with simple VERB NOUN phrases does not know what to make of that instruction.

```
Okay, "the"
What next?
```

In many ways text adventure games were just a form of riddle; the player needed to find the right combination of words to unlock the puzzle and could not progress until they had done so. These stories are little more than obfuscated hypertext, the player has little agency beyond that the implementers have allowed for. Thus, the problem of combinatorial explosion is resolved by the computer admitting its own extra-diegetic limitation:

```
I don't understand that!
```

Louchart and Aylett (2005) describe this as the Narrative Paradox; the conflict between the structure required by an Aristotelian plot and player agency. This paradoxical tension — between agency and story — is key to discussions about both computer originated narrative and larp; Louchart and Aylett also discuss how stories work in larp; whilst a bit of a generalisation in terms of what larp is and how it is organised (it describes larp as a form of Interactive Theatre) it helps to draw the distinction between computer generated and larp stories; one is seeking to invent a system which generates a complete and coherent story, and the other relies on participants within a system to generate that story. Abba proposes that it is the climax of a traditional (Aristotelian) narrative which is paradoxical here, and that interactive stories should reject the notion of 'Completeness.' (Abba, 2007, p.115) This forms a part of the narrative crisis too; agency is simple to accommodate if the writers are not concerned about a haphazard ending.

Temte thinks of the narrative paradox as “the clash between player agency and auteur intention,” (Temte, 2013, pp.127-129) arguing that whilst *railroading*¹² the plot is the most natural reaction from an organiser, the most effective approach to writing an interactive narrative is to consider oneself a story-enabler rather than a storyteller. The focus then should be on a designed (narrative) structure that enables emergent story. This emphasis on both design, facilitation, and a balance — not relying entirely on the players to do all of the story making — is something I return to in chapter 8. In larp, which can often be a sandbox, with hundreds or thousands of (subjective) diegetic points of view, stories *are* often open ended, and yet agency persists. I suspect this is because having your action defeated or otherwise constrained by another active participant does not feel like a limitation of agency, but rather a manifestation of diegetic agency within a multiplayer environment.

Mateas suggests that the solution to the narrative paradox, at least in as far as developing a theoretical framework for narrative drama, is an integration of what it feels like to be playing a game (specifically the ‘first-person’ experience which is intrinsically immersive) with the structural aspects of a well-crafted story. He argues

¹² In larp and TRPGs, railroading means forcing the story to follow a specific path, overruling player agency (and the free will of the character) to “keep the story of the game on the tracks” (Pettersson, 2004, p.262).

that you can only have agency within the formal constraint of a structured plot, (Mateas, 2001, p.148) and without that clarity of direction and structure, both plot and agency are disrupted.

Laurel suggests that in a system where players are encouraged to exercise their agency, the experience will be unpleasant (Laurel, 1993, p.99) because the structure which constrains the creative process is either missing or not uniformly applied, noting that, “the relationship between creativity and constraints is mysterious and symbiotic.” (ibid., p.99). She argues that, whilst constraint is an inevitable limitation of a computer moderated genre, it is also a necessity. Conversely, Frasca (2003) argues that one of the major weaknesses of “interactive drama” is its focus on Aristotelian closure as the source of the user’s pleasure, suggesting that the constraint of an understood structure is problematic for the participant.

In practice, it is possible to design for (or against) agency and these design decisions are at the root of the narrative crisis, because an action that the organiser considers the “only logical step” will not necessarily seem logical to the players (Bøckman, 2003. pp.168-169). Without enabling player agency, the larpwrights remain in control of the story and thus a narrative crisis remains unlikely. Balzac argues that this is no longer a larp, but rather an “improvisational drama, with the outcome fixed in stone.” (Balzac, 2007, p.6)

This thesis considers interactivity as an analogue process, more analogous with co-authorship and participation than navigating a path structure. More akin to Brown et al. (2011,) “interactive narrative emerges as a meta-structure that transfers meaning through the experience of interactive episodes with the data.” I note later in this study that larp participants often follow Aristotelian patterns of their own volition; that agency to do *anything* often involves doing the obvious thing.

Most usefully, Murray states that “Perhaps the most successful model for combining player agency with narrative coherence is a well-run LARP game,” (Murray, 1997, p.151) This suggests that larp has already had some success solving the narrative crisis and that this could be further investigated, which feeds into this research.

Immersion and Immersive

“Designing a larp is about constructing an artificial situation that is completely real. The players treat it as fictional — which it is — but it is also something fully embodied by the players. The larp designer needs to grasp this fundamental duality”
(Järvelä, 2019. p.22).

In this section I look at the terms *immersion* and *immersive* and conclude they have subtle differences in meaning between digital games and larp; I return to this in chapter 6 where I will discuss the effects of immersion on the participant in more detail. Murray describes immersion as the “experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place” for the purposes of participation. (Murray, 1997) The dream of cyberspace/virtual reality is the promise of immersion where the *presence* of the participant is absolute. In a larp, however, an absolute immersion would be a form of extreme psychosis; a loss of *lebenswelt*¹³ self, replaced with *erzählwelt* self. As Levin argues, total immersion is a myth, the participant always retains some modicum of presence and control (Levin, 2021). Instead, as Järvelä states, “Cognitively, immersion is primarily an attention process where the player strongly focuses on the fictive conceptual frame, its social rules and dynamics, and importantly, the character concept” (Järvelä, 2019, p.23).

Larps that focus on an immersive 360° illusion “are generally simulation-oriented rather than story-oriented” (Hultman et al. 2008, p.140). Wrigstad agrees that larp which tells stories through simulation can lead to narratives that are too much like real life, lacking dramatic arcs and good timing. (Wrigstad, 2008, p.125). An immersive environment (simulation) does not equate to *eläytyminen*: a form of complete immersion in character, that “includes thinking, experiencing, and feeling through the character” (Pohjola, 2003, p33). Thus, *immersive* and *immersion* apply in different ways to larp: Immersion is an active rather than passive process; it may be supported or enhanced by being in an immersive setting. To unpack this, I start by explaining how larp theory uses the term diegesis — from film theory — to describe things that

¹³ The concepts of *lebenswelt* (*Lifeworld*) and *erzählwelt* (*Storyworld*) will be explained in Chapter 5 when I discuss metalepsis. I prefer the English translation, *lifeworld*, which I use for clarity.

are present within the fiction; diegetic music in a film can be heard by the characters, extradiegetic music only by the viewer. In larp theory the word *diegesis* describes the fictional space of the larp and those things which exist within it. (Loponen and Montola, 2004) I will now offer some theoretical definitions to substantiate this statement and I consider the relationship between this theoretical construct, and truth and reality.

The definitions I create here will enable a distinction between *story* and *narrative*. The former emerges, and only becomes narrative, when the events of the story are told. Extending from the ludological claim that “role-playing games cease to exist the moment they end” (Montola and Stenros 2008, p.6). Koljonen suggests instead that the moment a larp ends is both the point it exists but also the point at which it begins to dissolve. “The readers are left with fragments, and start working them into a narrative, but that narrative is corrupted and complicated” (Koljonen, 2008. p.51). Thus, there is a modal and a chronological change between larping/play/storymaking and the narrativization/documentation/unpacking process which follows.

Story emerges because of the symbiotic interplay of many factors from events and existents (plot) to the actions of the characters and their players. It is not a static model. Action begets action, and that causes the story to emerge.

Larsson (2003. p.12) also points out that “the ‘pictures’ that one makes of the ‘world’ depend in large measure not so much on ‘the world’ as on the subject’s personal ‘history’.” This distinction is the basis for one of the complexities of the narrative crisis. Without a single objective reality, it is not possible to identify a single objective über-diegesis. This makes it significantly harder for a gamemaster to answer the question “What is happening in this story right now?” This creates the fundamental uncertainty; if they don’t know what is happening in the story now, how can they decide what should happen next?

Pohjola (2004, p.90) describes the diegesis of a larp as a “temporary reality” and this opens up a line of investigation about the relationship between a diegetic (fictional) space of the characters and the experiences of the players of those characters. In this thesis I use the word “real” to describe the events that take place within the diegetic reality of the larp (or, more specifically, inside the storyworld). Nordic larp theory has tended to use the words “truth” and “reality” interchangeably; Harviainen uses the word “truth” to explain what he means by reality immersion. My preferred distinction comes from Koljonen (2019) who explains that “these emotions

and experiences are *real*, but they are not *true* (in the sense of true vs fictional). Sometimes they are also true” (Koljonen, 2019).

I discuss this distinction further in Chapter 6 where I discuss bleed; however, as it is fundamental to the interrogation of immersion and the player’s reaction to it, I illustrate it here with some familiar examples from larps: a player whose character is being chased through the woods may experience an adrenaline rush as though they — the player — were being chased. Two players whose characters are in love may experience something akin to grief as the larp ends and their fictional relationship is revealed as transitory. A player may feel actual grief over the death of a character. All of these experiences are real, but they are not necessarily true.

The meanings of truth and reality are further complicated, because it is difficult to prove *truth*; the Meilahti Model describes diegesis as that which “is true within the game. Usually this means the gameworld. The diegetic frame is composed of what is true in the past (history of the frame and the characters)” (Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2003. p.56). Montola (2003, p.83) extends this definition by making a distinction between this objective truth and a more subjective truth constructed by each individual player. I explore these concepts in more detail in the later chapters of this thesis.

Section 2 - Interrogating Stories in Larp

The first section has reviewed cultural analysis of interactive narrative where ludology, agency and immersion are the key terms at both a general level and how they might apply to larp.

In this section I move on to consider how stories have been interrogated by (Nordic) larp theorists. Much of the disagreement over whether larp is a storytelling medium is actually a fundamental agreement that it is not a form of rhetorical storytelling in the Aristotelian sense and that the stories (and resultant narratives) are created by the players. *Story* is a problematic term in larp theory, as there are many divergent opinions on what actually constitutes a story and whether it is *desirable* for larpers to improvise/enact one at all (Fatland, 2006, p.19) Not all Nordic larpwrights and theorists agree: Henriksen (2005, p.109) states, the dramatist perspective has been subject to ridicule, and Wieslander (2012, p.131) suggests that larp’s approach to story pre-2005 is “reductionist.” Heliö claims there is no story to be found in any role-playing game and that anything that resembles storytelling is “implied” (Heliö, 2004, p.72). Grasmö and Edland (2013, p.157) claim “all larps are about the co-

creation of stories,” and Wieslander (2012, p.131) tells us that “most larps are stories in some way,” arguing that most of the practical and philosophical approaches used to interrogate stories are applicable, but the most useful critical methods have been written specifically for and about larp.

I begin by looking at the early 2000s *larp manifestos* — Dogma 99 and the Turku Manifesto — which are foundational texts for the Nordic larp discourse which followed. I align these to play style and discuss theoretical views informed by play style on stories. I then look at the perceived tension between immersionist play and auteurism. I move on to review the narrativist position. I then review the conflict between immersion and story and the intersection between steering and dramaturgy. Finally, I look at recent texts that specifically discuss larp and narrative.

Foundational Manifestos

Dogma 99

The Dogma 99 Manifesto is the starting point for much of the later critical discourse about how Nordic larp approaches story. In the “Vow of Chastity” (Fatland and Wingård, 2003, p.20) the authors lay out a number of rules for the larpwright that restrict any seeding of action by writing it into character backgrounds or event briefings and — more significantly — reject the concept of a “main plot” for a larp, instead choosing to focus their attention on a story for “each players character.” As Harding (2007, p.31) explains “A main plot is only relevant to the player as long as it makes his or her character more meaningful as a part of a larger narrative,” and there is a risk associated with main plot which side-lines those characters not closely associated with it. Fatland and Wingård go on to reject any distinction between *important* and *unimportant* characters. As Lassila (2008, p.114) explains “The most common mistake made by larp authors is to create some crown-headed main characters with interesting, big schemes and leave the servant girls to ponder if they should first serve the duke or the baron”. This is something that UK Fest larps — some with many thousands of players — have also recognised (Laird, 2017. p.278). The definition of larp as “a meeting between people who, through their roles, relate to each other in a fictional world,” seems to position larp as a storymaking form (Fatland and Wingård, 2003, p.23) but they are firm in their belief that larp is action, not literature (ibid, p.24) Their conclusion that the backstory forces players to relate to literary events rather

than action does not take into account the power of backstory and memory to shape both plot and characters.

Dogma 99 also excludes any involvement from the organisers once the larp has begun (Fatland and Wingård, 2003, p.20). This approach creates a “designed but closed” system which precludes what Fatland (2005) considers one of the four aspects of larp dramaturgy - runtime gamemastering. I return to this in the section on dramaturgy below.

Harviainen argues that Dogma 99 hinders larp design and that to make a Dogma 99-compliant larp is essentially impossible (Harviainen, 2006, pp.59-60) But Dogma 99 larps have been made successfully — *The White Road* (2006) and *Europa* (2001) — but in both cases there were not many fictive elements in the design. Dogma 99 remains a useful theoretical framework for larp design because of its constraints on narrative design; particularly in its rejection of a “main” plot and of privileging “important” characters.

Turku Manifesto

Whilst Bøckman (2003, p.13) defines dramatism as “the style which values how well the in-game action creates a satisfying storyline,” Pohjola (2004) dismisses dramatist players, claiming they don’t really understand interaction, and — little more than actors — they rely on the gamemasters to tell the story. To understand this I use Stenros and Hakkarainen’s set of four things required for a role-playing game: “a gamemaster, a player, interaction, and a diegetic framework” (Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2003, p.61). Whilst *interaction* seems to imply role-playing with others, Pohjola, (2004, p.85) believes this is not a hard requirement and that it is possible to role-play alone by interacting with the environment. This illustrates the more extreme end of the immersionist playstyle, that the *eläytyminen*-experience of being inside the character — mind and body — is the purpose of larp. Koljonen explains the divide between gaming styles is much more obvious in Finland because the larps are smaller than in many other countries (Koljonen, 2001, p.51).

Pohjola's Turku Manifesto (2003) states that larp is not a storytelling medium. A story requires a storyteller¹⁴ and an audience. A larp has neither and that's what sets it apart." (Pohjola, 2017) The core of Pohjola's argument suggests that players can either be audience (in which case they are passive) or combined audience and auteurs (in which case it is they who tell the story (Pohjola, 2017). Koljonen explains that auteurism was common in Finnish larp making at the time of the Turku manifesto (Koljonen, 2001, p.58) and Harviainen (2013, p.116) also emphasises the 'auteur' tradition in role-players wanting to create their own games.

It seems to me that Pohjola is rejecting storytelling as a reaction against that tradition, after all he states that in TRPGs "the story is told by the players," and so it is not a rejection of storytelling in larp, but of the larpwright as auteur. In fact, both Turku and Dogma 99 privilege the auteur in as much as they acknowledge the creative importance of the larpwright - before the larp starts. Nevertheless, the impact of these two manifestos persists throughout the canon of Nordic larp theory; both argue that an immersionist approach to larping makes for a better larp (or better larpers) than gamist or dramatist forms. Bøckman (2003, p. 13) argues that these forms are not mutually exclusive; a plot could be both a fair challenge and realistically resolved, and that most larps contain a balance of drama, realism, and competitive elements (Bøckman, 2003, p. 13).

Pettersson takes a harder anti-narrativist line, "story is the relic, and no amount of creative back-peddalling or academic exploration can make it relevant." (Pettersson, 2004, p.259). His suggested focus is on designing the experiences and perspectives you want the players to have. An example of this is *Luminescence* (2004) which was a surreal larp about cancer patients in a group therapy session. It is played by a group of participants in their underwear in a room filled with flour. "We wanted the focus of the larp to be in the flour, the extraordinary sensory experience of being knee-deep in the stuff" (Pohjola, 2005, p. 51). Despite the surreal elements of this piece, stories emerged during the playing of it. Once again, the reaction against story in larp is more against gamemaster as storyteller or larp writer as auteur than against the story itself. Pohjola seems to confirm this, (ibid., p.58) when he explains that dramaturgy sets the

¹⁴ I use the term *storymaker* (from Koljonen 2019) to distinguish from *storyteller*.

rhythm for a larp and is used to create “an environment where the events can work together with the themes.” By acknowledging dramaturgy, he is acknowledging a *potential* for story. I return to a discussion of larp dramaturgy later in this chapter. Indeed, Pettersson acknowledges that a larp has a story and that the characters have stories (Pettersson, 2017 p.79) but suggests that “stories are often merely narratives imposed afterwards.”

In *Ei minulta mitään puutu* Pohjola explains that he wanted every character to have a moment of *anagnorisis*, the Aristotelian term for the point in a story at which a character recognises a fundamental truth, leading to the resolution of their story. He acknowledges that this is “very close to narrativist ideas on larp,” (Pohjola, 2005, p. 61) but clarifies that the focus is on the experience of the character rather than the overall events of the larp. This clarification supports my assertion that the Turkuist position is against imposed auteurist plot, rather than against the inclusion of any story elements at all. Fatland agrees that part of the disagreement stems from what a “story” is and how they are told through larp, but he also is clear to state that “role-playing stories in my sense does not by definition imply narrativism or even dramatism.” (Fatland, 2005, p.154).

It would be reductive to suggest that Pohjola’s discussion of story is contra-immersionist; indeed, the Turku Manifesto states that the gameworld and the scenario (and the characters) belong to the gamemaster (Pohjola, 2003, p.38). This allows the argument that immersionism does not reject strong narrative design, far from it. Arbjørn (2018, p.182) also suggests that the perceived opposition between narrativist play and immersionist play may be a false dichotomy.

The Narrativist Position

I turn to narrativist larp theory in this section to identify some concepts which I refer to in this study. I also make use of praxis from the UK larp tradition — which tends to be narrativist and gamist — and reference other non-Nordic larp traditions.

Regueiro suggests that narrativity in larp derives from a set of interconnected elements — character, genre, and contexts — working together to create a story (Regueiro, 2016, pp.46). Genre in this instance is a literary frame and it underlines the storyworld so as to offer the players a well understood set of themes, conventions, tropes and aesthetics.

Certain types of genre literature also come with conventions that govern the required stylistics of the Storyworld; they form a set of rhetorical rules (and by extension, design) by which the writer should play. “The failure to grasp the stylistic needs of a particular category of fantasy may undermine the effectiveness of an otherwise interesting idea.” (Mendlesohn, 2008, p. introduction xv).

This is something that Järvelä (2016, p. 92) believes helps to resolve “information uncertainty.” A clear understanding of genre gives the players cues on how to interpret events and how to frame their role-play. He argues that realism is the most efficient genre because it is clearly understood. Regueiro’s *context* is also a part of the diegetic framing, whether it is setting, backstory, worldbuilding, a thematic element, or plots. A context is not static, but rather it is an affectable surface or element; something that can be changed by the players via the events/plots of the larp. New contexts may become available during runtime, others may complete, or become logically unavailable. This distinction is useful conceptually, but the word *context* is unhelpful because it has many other meanings. As Harper (2017, p.287) explains, Stanislavsky identified three contexts for a dramatic scenario: “Where is the action happening? When is it happening? Who are the characters involved?” and clearly this definition does not work alongside Regueiro’s. Instead, I use the adjective, *affectable*, to describe any element of game design that can be modified by player action.

Whilst plots in these conditions originate from both the organisers and the players (Parsler, 2008) we can define other formations at work in a range of cultural contexts. For instance, UK Fest larp tends towards the *main plot* that the immersionists so roundly reject, and these plots drive the action of the larp. Laird (2017, p.277) describes the process for writing and approving of plots for each of the factions at *Curious Pastimes*, where ideas are submitted to the Head of Plot and the Game Directors, who will check the plot for metaphysical consistence — “cosmology of the game world” (ibid) — and then schedule the faction plot and the world plot for the event. A similar approach is also seen in the USA (with larps like *NERO* and *Knight’s Realm* having “modules” (Ventrella, 1998. P.117; Stark, 2012. p.238) — linear adventures setting out from the main larp) — and as Dzervite (2009, pp.11-12) describes, in Russian and Latvian larps missions or “quests” that potential players can receive or find during the process of the game and in France the *instances* that Henry describes (2017, p.91)

Pettersson reminds us that the baseline of entry to play a larp is the provision of “a fictional persona that is interesting to inhabit and provides agency” (Pettersson, 2019, p.193). This underlines a semantic dissonance between the narrative and immersionist approaches (discussed below), as Pettersson’s definition suggests a lack of agency is a flaw rather than a design choice.

Wieslander makes the point that a larp never has a single story “because of its intersubjective nature and participatory structure,” as a larp tells participants something about themselves and their place in society, the act of “telling” implies at least one story exists (Wieslander, 2012, p.132). Rognli agrees that a larp should contain a multiplicity of stories and that this spectrum of individual experiences come together to tell “the story of a place, a situation and the people there.” (Rognli, 2004, p.149) This view of larp narrative design privileges the larp writers’ vision over player agency, where “each player is given a clear and specific obligation to the whole of the larp, making clear what his essential contribution to the story is supposed to be.” (ibid, p151). Barkholt and Trier (2007) suggest that larpwrights lead the players “in a predestined direction” (p.166). and they believe that they must consciously take on the role of storyteller. This approach can avoid narrative crises via extreme railroading.

Whilst Pettersson (2004) suggests that the easiest way to avoid railroading is to completely avoid having a story in the game, Westlund (2004) argues that this is because gamists and immersionists offer “weak techniques when it comes to telling stories.” (2004, p.249). He suggests that the strength of narrativist larps come from the fact that they are a collective experience which aim the focus of the larp “towards the common good instead of the individual player’s good,” (p.251). This is a view that Harrold (2017, p.126) echoes, defining a successful larp as “a collaborative effort between organisers and players to produce compelling narratives” as opposed to the tendency towards introversion found in immersion which privileges the experience of the individual over that of the communal storymaking of narrativism.

Despite the vocal anti-narrativist lobby, Montola and Stenros (2008, p.7) identify a narrativist style of larp design as one of and the oldest of the three most common design ideals: larps with a powerful and beautiful dramatic arc, citing *A Nice Evening with the Family* and *Agerbørn* as examples of this type. Interestingly the larpwrights of *A Nice Evening with the Family* made it clear that their intent was for deep immersion (Westerling, 2011, p.126). Middleton (1995, p.27) suggests that whilst immersion is a

part of historical re-enactment, there is a logical hybrid of immersive *Diorama* re-enactment (character-based life and household re-enactment, rather than battles) and storytelling, in which there is a plot and “individual participants improvise within their character, role-playing their actions. The audience are largely or totally invisible to the participants, wandering at will through the site. They construct their own version of the plot through the events they witness” (Middleton, 1995, p.27). Re-enactment is not larp in the purest sense, but there are some parallels here with the French Romanesque style of larp (Algayres, 2017, pp.255-260) which are both character-driven and historically inspired (ibid, p. 257). Algayres identifies a rich historical tradition in The Czech Republic, Finland, and Norway, and new work emerging from Italy that makes use of real history and deep immersion. Although it should be pointed out that these are larps and not *Diorama with an audience*. Larps with a narrative element are not necessarily in opposition to immersionism, indeed it seems as though the opposite may be true.

Heebøll-Christensen (2011, p.20) describes the design underlying the larp *Agerlund*; “a game designed for narrativistic role-play.” It made use of a multitude of pre-planned stories which were made during a series of collaborative workshops in advance of the larp. These stories were broken down into chapters and scenes and organised via a written storyboard which was used to give an overview of the larp. The larp had breaks each morning in which players reviewed the planned scenes for the day’s play and made minor adjustments where required (ibid. p.22). One of the conclusions from organisers of this larp was that the certainty of the pre-planned stories gave some of the “weaker” players (ibid) more courage; because they knew they were doing the right thing (according to the pre-defined plot) they were unafraid to act. In addition, the instruction “the players have to make sure that each part has something to do during the larp” (ibid., p.17). helped to ensure that these less experienced players were included. *Agerlund’s* story was agreed before the larp started — arguably the plot and the story were the same — and the players had no agency to change the story during runtime, only to develop their characters along the way. Heebøll-Christensen describes this as “an inversion of a regular role-playing game, where characters are built before the game and the story is experienced through their interactions” (ibid. p.12).

Trier-Knudsen discusses *Agerbørn*, another deliberately narrativist larp based on the stated assumptions that larps can be a storytelling medium, but not a *traditional*

storytelling medium. He explains that a good story is the core of larp and that it is experienced twice, once in a rush at the point the scene is played and then again in retrospect, where the participant “should be able to interpret the story and extract more meaning than was experienced at the time.”(Trier-Knudsen, 2008, p.153) He also identifies one of the key structural problems with a fixed narrative larp which is at odds with the concept of player agency. *Agerbørn* used transparency to tell the players what would happen, forewarning our participants of the expected direction of the plot in the pre-larp written material. Trier-Knudsen argues that this enabled the participants to focus on living out the story as presented by the organisers, concluding,

“in its current form larp has worked so much towards a praxis where a narrative has lost its foothold to the personal experience usually labelled “immersion.” Therefore, trying to tell stories through larp is possibly both naïve and slightly dated. However, narratives — or stories — have at the least played a significant role during the infancy and further upbringing of our medium” (ibid. p.158).

The tension between Story and Immersion?

I have discussed the narrativist and immersionist positions and now I come on to examine the tensions between them and whether they can be resolved. These tensions can be summarised by the statement “Nordic players will often complain that an excess of plot or story events is getting in the way of their role-play” (Koljonen, 2019, p.135). but this idea that role-play and story are mutually exclusive is not universal. Immersionist play will produce “a series of fictional events” (Kim, 2004, p.31). which correspond to the story. Kim differentiates between the expression of the story after the larp (which I describe as narrative) from the imaginary construct: a mental image or model; the Story itself. Harding (2007.p.28) suggests that participants understand their actions in the larp as a narrative, “interpreted by our characters as fictional narrators.” If this is true, then all larps must generate Story of one kind or another. Kim continues by suggesting a parallel between Immersion and Protagonism, (citing Egri, 1965, 18—19)

“Within the viewer’s imagination, the protagonist may take on characteristics which are personal to the viewer. For example, if the protagonist’s age is not described, the viewer may imagine it as being close to her own. The viewer’s

imagination will fill in many details about the protagonist as part of identification.”

This idea, that the participants’ emotional reaction to their character and their journey will be unique and affected by their own experiences and issues, can be proven by interrogating different players who have portrayed the same role in reruns of the same larp. But Kim’s argument is interesting in relation to the conflict between the “conceived story” — that which a player is creating internally and the “perceived stories” — the interpretation of the stories that the other players are conceiving. Loponen and Montola, (2004, p. 40) make much the same point - that there is no single objective diegesis, but that each participant has their own subjective experience. Montola (2014, p.105) makes a distinction between diegesis and gameworld, the latter encompasses the objective view on what is “true in the game.” Thus, there is a distinction between game world and storyworld, in as much as the storyworld is a subset which contains only the fictional elements of the gameworld. At the root of this dissonance is the unique semiotic structure of a larp which differs from TRPG because it tends towards indexical and iconic. Jungblut argues that larp only works because of a layer of symbols which function as an “abstract placeholder which we perceive as reality” (Jungblut, 2010, p.171). The argument is that one subconsciously transforms or translates the symbolic to have a diegetic meaning and function inside the storyworld. Loponen & Montola (2004) suggest that symbols are less valid in a 360° larp, where the design preference is for indices. Thus, an extradiegetic object — such as a sword — is used as a diegetic sword. For many larps, even though with a focus on immersion, icons are used, , an extra-diegetic blank firing gun used as a diegetic gun (*Black Friday*) or boffer or latex swords used as diegetic swords (Many fantasy larps, worldwide). Symbols are occasionally used: cards representing items, pre-written fate cards, the ubiquitous laminated powers card so popular in UK larp. But the “more a larp relies on indices in representing the diegetic world, the more *pure* it can be considered. “(Loponen & Montola, 2004, p.41) Either way, the function is the same, some aspects of the diegesis originate as abstraction, but manifest as *real*. This process of transforming the symbolic into the real is an intrinsically playful act — make believe — it can happen without ‘breaking immersion.’ This transformation of the abstract to the diegetic is a storymaking act, but it derives from immersionist play.

On Dramaturgy

In most cases, once the runtime of a larp begins its design will be fixed, but it is still possible for the larpwrights to exert an influence over the larp. At this point they can guide play, but they “cannot remove the influence of the players.” (Stenros and Montola, 2019, p.16) I describe this external influence as “runtime gamemastering.” As players are also involved in the process — shaping and guiding their own experiences either by steering or calibration — I use the term *dramaturgy* to encompass both player and gamemaster intervention. I also maintain a distinction that dramaturgy is an active and extradiegetic act; if passive dramaturgy exists, it would be more a function of role-playing.

Fatland suggests that gamemaster dramaturgy consists of four tasks, three of which are a function of design: creating the setting and storyworld, creating characters and their relationships, and as a part of this structural overview of larp dramaturgy he puts a particular stress on incentivising players to behave or react in specific ways, “to follow specific paths in their improvisation, to play specific scenes, to confront specific questions, etc.,” (Fatland, 2005, p.149) — this is not quite *railroading*, but rather a method of influencing the story. This approach to design is likely to initiate narrative crises, as players are unpredictable and can only be expected to do the unexpected. Fatland agrees up to a point. He describes this as “the fog of larp” (ibid. p.150) but argues that experienced larpwrights can usually “predict player behaviour” (ibid p.151) and that this is a part of the larp design process. Bowman raises a concern that unpredictable and uncontrolled flow of narrative information — what she describes as the “domino effect” — can potentially “upset or even trigger other players” (Bowman, 2018, p.161). These examples illustrate some of the complexities of both runtime gamemastering and larp design. It seems as though there are an infinite number of possibilities associated with emergent play and that larpwrights must consider “Story consent” (Stenros and Montola, 2019. p19) which defines what one character can do to another inside the story. Wilson (2019, p.241) explains that well calibrated players — those with a mutual understanding of story consent — “can take deliberate actions to support each other’s story directions: when they are not, they risk unintentionally sabotaging each other’s play.” Thus, calibration and metatechniques used before and during the larp are a form of dramaturgy. In practice though, the larpwrights exert influence over the larp simply because they are its designers.

Torner makes the point that emergent stories are a product of the larp's design, but this implies a sliding scale between dramaturgy and emergence (2018, pp. 171-179); the former implies intervention from the gamemaster and the later a more hands-off approach, in practice — unless the larp has signed up to one of the vows of chastity — the level and mode of active dramaturgy will vary during the runtime of the larp.

Fatland's fourth task is for larpwrights to make use of runtime directing, providing subtle influence, ad-hoc NPCs, and other elements to help the flow of the larp. Grasmø and Edland (2013, p.162) incorporated a similar "approach to dramaturgy in *Just a Little Lovin*," maintaining that the gamemasters should keep their "hands on the steering-wheel of the narrative. There are different approaches to steering, and some critics argue that larps with plots cannot be steered, because they are on rails. Railroading is one of the most invasive acts of dramaturgy available to the runtime gamemaster. Pettersson suggests that there is an implicit connection between story in role-playing and railroading: "the most grotesque and harmful manifestation of the malignant influence of the idea of a story. "(2004, p.262) but it remains a valid and useful runtime gamemastering technique — albeit an extreme one — particularly for larps where character journey or experience is more important to the vision of the larp than player agency.

Lassila (2008, p.114) introduces a number of dramaturgical tools including the *supporting character* ("unimportant servants and mindless warriors" or the "occasional dying Bedouin.") She explains that the players of these characters are usually given these roles well in advance and are "directed by narrators." The UK fest larp experience varies. Most volunteers playing supporting roles are rarely given as much notice, briefings tend to be verbal and given just before the characters go in to play. There are exceptions; larger and more complex NPC roles that are sometimes given in advance of the larp). Lassila's *Adventurous Romanticism* also makes use of "partly directed characters" which are players of the larp who have volunteered to help direct the story in a desired direction. (ibid., pp.114-115). Berger (2010, pp.49-53) presents a model for runtime gamemastering — effectively real-time dramaturgy — He interviews five larpwrights to get a view of their approach to the management of story during runtime. He explains that the use of NPCs and directed characters, as discussed by Lassila (above) is by far the most common approach. One respondent suggested explicit game-master instructions (although only to inexperienced or shy players). I note that this style of direct, interventionist gamemastering is a part of the

toolkit for some larp styles, so it should not be considered uncommon. For example, Westerling and Hultman (2019, pp.342-356) discuss the using runtime directors as a tool to influence or control the larp. From larps like *En stilla middag med familjen* (English, “A Nice Evening with the Family”) where gamemasters can direct players to deliver specific monologues during the runtime of the larp, to the role of the Referee or storyteller in fest larps or *World of Darkness* larps where the gamemasters “work through telling players what happens rather than nudging them in specific directions”(ibid. p.342) They suggest that these sorts of directors can be used to guide the plot arguing that it can make the player’s feel more free to follow their impulses as they are less likely to lose track of the story when they have “someone around to take responsibility for the overall narrative arc.”(ibid. p.343)

It is not just larpwrights who have a hand in dramaturgy. Wieslander (2012, p.131). suggests the players have a dramaturgic function. He identifies a trend for players to steer towards an Aristotelian catharsis, even when such an event was not a part of the original design. I think this is a key point, larp is a co-created medium. As Kolesnikov (2013, p.6) explains “the positions of the author and spectator are completely merged within a participant; co-creating every moment of the individual diegesis in collaboration with other interacting participants and gamemasters.” Jarl (2013, p.53) suggests two levels of dramaturgy, one which describes the “dramatic” story of the characters — which belongs to the players — and the other which is the overall “epic” direction of the larp and this is the domain of the gamemaster. Lasilla (2010, p.88). discussed the inclusion of player-originated plots and suggests that the runtime gamemaster allows these. She suggests, “The solutions players invent are often better ones than those you would have come up with,” which is an approach that *Odyssey* used as a part of *Combat Narratology* (See chapter 7).

Steering as dramaturgy

Steering is a form of dramaturgy that all participants are able to apply. Applied by players, steering is a conscious extra-diegetic decision made to influence the actions of their character (Montola, et al, 2015, p.108). In this case, steering happens when a player decides to take their character in a specific direction, rather than simply following the flow of the story and in doing so they are taking an active role in the storymaking process. Regueiro (2016, p.48) reminds us that the gamemaster is also able to steer the entire larp by providing incentives to the players to make specific

story choices, which gives players agency to affect the contexts of the larp. The story choices players make here are also a form of steering. There are many different “story preferences”, from players looking for a tragic ending, to those who want to play the hero (Andrews, 2017, p.316) and these preferences for particular types of stories combine with what Barkholt-Spangsbo and Arbjørn (2019, p.121) identify as using culturally familiar narrative structures as a guideline (either consciously or otherwise).

Summary

There are two main conclusions from this section of the literature review:

1. There is clearly a contested and evolving terrain with different views of the relative weight of narrativism and immersionism — which Nordic larp theory holds as polar opposites (Brodén, 2006) — and as Nordic larp tends to privilege immersionism, this means there is less narrativist theory.
2. Larp is not a storytelling medium — at least not in the Aristotelian sense — it is primarily an immersive activity as in most cases it is the player’s relationship with their character which frames their attraction to the form. However, larps do create stories and this storymaking is a key part of what makes a larp interesting. Berger explains that each of the voices within Nordic larp discourse on the matter of stories “has a personal — and most of the time, implicit — definition of what a “story” actually is” (Berger, 2010, p.43). This emergent story is co-created, with every participant an author to some degree and this is not at odds with the immersionist ideal.

From this summary I conclude that I need to establish and describe a framework for the research by bridging the gap between the theory that exists, the documented praxis, and more mature fields of study. Based on my review of these literatures, at the start of this study, my questions about the role of the larp writer, the state of a story during runtime and the resolution of narrative crises are unanswered.

Chapter 4 - On Narrative Design

“At one extreme of the spectrum of viewpoints, the live experience (both of creators and witnesses) is considered to lie beyond representation and articulation — inexpressible to the point of the sublime” (Nelson, 2013, p.71)

Introduction

For the purposes of this thesis, I make a distinction between *narrative*, *narrative system* and *narrative design*. Koljonen defines larp narrative design as “the practice of creating larps where meaningful, interesting stories can be told by participants within the frame permitted by the design” (Koljonen, 2019, p.91). This design creates a structural place for the emergence of story — the narrative system — and the narrative is the output of that system after the larp is complete. I extend this definition to include the plan for an overall arc which describes the events that should take place during the course of the larp. It also encompasses some of the decisions writers make when designing the larp: the genre, setting, and storyworld. In addition, it includes how and where they plan to enable stories to emerge, and the degree to which player agency can affect the narrative outcomes of the larp. More simply put, narrative design is the design of a dramatic space which will enable well-structured stories to emerge.

Narrative design refers first to an overall arc describing the events that will take place during the larp. This could be how the larp begins and ends, or the definition could be extended to take in punctuation points at the start and end of each act. It also encompasses the plot or plots of the larp. It also refers to the authorial contribution to larp design: the process of describing and building a dramatic space which will enable well-structured stories to emerge. The true challenge of designing such a space for a larp is what happens when participants start to play in the storyworld; players are complex and unpredictable. In most cases, at the time of writing the larp, the larpwright does not know the identity of their participants. They risk over-engineering for the unknown if they try to design for every participant interaction, or under-engineering if they do not consider different people and playstyles.

The focus of this chapter is on the authorial design of the storyworld and those writing tasks prior to the start of runtime (plot), as distinct from any authorial decisions taken by writers during the larp itself (story). The first part of this chapter is based on

practice-led research, using data gathered during the design and runtime of a larp — *The Quota* — which illustrates and interrogates the key design methods adopted for this larp by example. The UKCGE (2001:16) acknowledge a well-documented and structured approach to creative enquiry “might be more fruitful than extended philosophical debate on methodologies” thus, this chapter uses data collected from notes made during the larp design process, from field notes captured during the runtime of the larp, and from interviews, published commentary, and social media comments with and from those who participated in the larp. Primarily, this chapter starts to answer the research question “what is the role of the writer in participatory fiction?” by providing an insight into the complexity of the authorial situation.

I use the findings from the case study to develop a storymaking model and to describe practical approaches to larp narrative design, specifically those that enable a balance between agency and story. The exegesis describes an ontological approach to narrative engineering which I present as both a framework and a method to support cultural practice. I begin with a review of the basic design decisions required to create a larp and then move on to a detailed ontological design of the immersive experience.

After the case study, in the second part of this chapter, I offer a discussion of types of plots and how participants access, disseminate, and interact with it. Finally, I explore an object-oriented approach to narrative which I will use both as the theoretical basis for interrogating the narrative system and later to support my assertion that an ontological approach to the design more easily enables reactive plot and what I introduce later in this study as Combat Narratology.

There is an iterative element to this chapter in as much as the case study and the section on storymaking are cross-referential. I have opted to present the case study first — in order that evidence comes before conclusions — but note that some of the terminology used in the case study may rely on the storymaking section.

Case Study — The Quota

“The detention centre sits on the border. Once a low-security prison, it is in a depressing state of disrepair. The private company running the government facility plans improvements, but the flood of desperate “residents” has pushed these firmly on to the back burner.

Residents are not prisoners, but a perceived scarcity of social resources means public opinion towards them is volatile; in response, the government has set an extremely small immigration quota. Residents undergo rigorous assessment in order to have their immigration applications even considered.

The border is with Wales. The refugees are from England, Scotland, Ireland and parts of Europe whose economic status has crashed post-Brexit.

The setting is the near future, and this is a game” (Reith-Banks, 2018)

The Quota was a larp staged in the UK in May 2018. It was designed to explore some of the pressures and crisis points experienced by refugees and migrants trapped in the limbo of an immigration detention centre. Fifty-five participants (36% identified as male, 54% as female, 10% as non-binary or other) were invited to play the part of an individual struggling with the loss of their autonomy within a system, in which many have been trapped for years, unable to move forwards with their life or make significant choices about their future and the futures of any loved ones they have responsibility for.

The fiction behind the role-play was a near-future scenario in which Great Britain has divided into separate states, with England on the verge of economic collapse. The refugees and economic migrants in the larp were hoping to be granted a right of entry in Gweriniaeth Pobl Cymru (The People’s Republic of Wales). Play took place in a so-called ‘temporary’ detention centre:

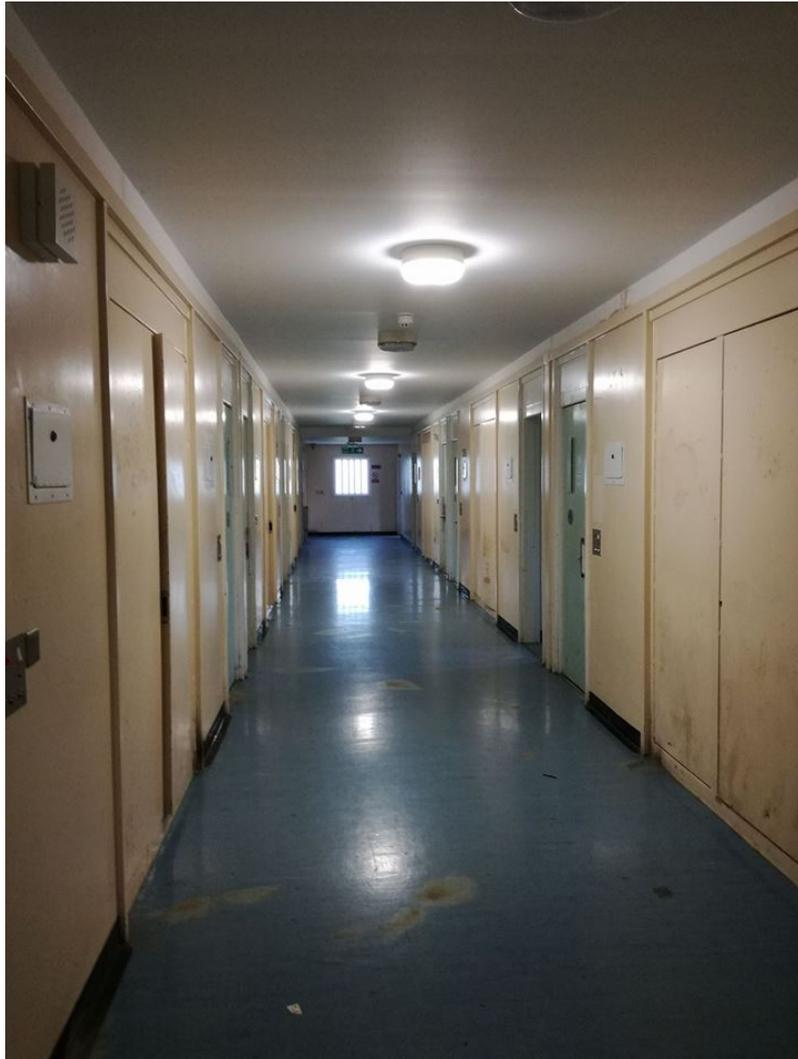


Figure 4 - *The Quota* — Detention Centre, Second Floor.

Reith-Banks' article in *The Guardian* uses the word 'game' as she argues that role-playing games can be a force for social change. However from a design point of view *The Quota* deliberately avoided the word game in all written material. Taking part in the larp was a form of play and (ironically) it was a *winnable* experience — in as much as participants were able to attain a Welsh Visa — but it was an active design choice not to frame *The Quota* as a game. This was intended to avoid accusations of trivialising the experience of real-world refugees, but also to position it as a serious work. This decision was a part of the ontological narrative design process. It is similar to identifying a piece of long form fiction as a part of a specific genre; it sets an expectation for the reader or the participant.

Overview

The key themes that the participants were invited to explore were:

- State/institutional control over their daily life, when they eat, what activities they have access to, what their future will be.
- The sense of uncertainty, as participants strived to meet a set of arbitrary criteria that might or might not secure their release from the detention centre.
- Anxiety about individual identity, as all previous markers of identity (language, status, profession, etc). are all potentially rendered redundant.
- The absence of a duty of care on the part of the state towards the stateless, e.g. inadequate access to medical, educational and other support facilities.
- Lack of personal safety: in both interactions with the centre's security personnel, who were there to control inmates, and potential violence within the population of the detention centre, when security personnel are not present.

Design of Study

My initial plan was to undertake an autoethnographic survey of the narrative design process of a medium sized international larp from the viewpoint of a larpwright. I have fulfilled this role many times since 1986, but this was the first time I attempted to document it. The study was *explanatory* — intended to unpack the connections between different parts of the (writing) process (Thomas, 2016, p.132) — so as to document and explain the role of the writer and to provide context for subsequent chapters in this study.

The data for this chapter is drawn from my journals and notes collected across the design process for *The Quota*. These are presented as a commentary alongside details of the decisions and artefacts produced as a part of the design process. These were first recorded in google documents as comments on the documents and then captured as field notes. I also make use of private journal entries and anonymised comments made by participants (both players and NPCs) and other members of the design team, which were offered after the run of the larp. These serve as a commentary on the outcomes of the narrative design, showing the effect of the narrative design choices on play. Participant and crew comments also appear in *The Book of The Quota*, which was published after the chapter was complete.

Very early in the case study it became apparent that the writing process touched all aspects of the larp design, so I opted to record all of the touch points where

writing, larp design, and experience design intersected leading to the idea of an *ontological design*, used in a sense similar to Fraga (2020) but referring to designing the mixed experience of lifeworld and storyworld humans. Whilst the design of this larp, particularly in its early stages, involved some brainstorming where many ideas were captured all at once, I present these findings in a more structured way. I start with the setting and location of the larp, then I discuss the physical design of the experience. I move on to review the sensory design. I then move on to consider the structure of the larp, activity design, and then to the characters of the larp. Finally, I discuss the plot for *The Quota* and provide an example of a narrative crisis that occurred during runtime.

Ontological design in action

In order to unpack Mink's argument that "stories are not lived but told," (Mink, 1970, p.557) I make use of Meretoja's conclusion that there is a difference between experience and narrative (Meretoja, 2014, p.105). Mink's *story* here is narrative in the sense of the storymaking model, it is a means for making sense of a lived experience. Experience design as an approach to the creation of larp/participatory narrative/events puts the participant experience first and foremost. It asks the question: "what do you want the participant to experience?" Ontological design extends this idea into something that encompasses not just experiences, but every aspect of the participants' "being" within the story world and beyond into the 'rules' of the larp.

The design process here was curatorial. For each step of the participant's interaction with the larp the design process asked the questions:

- What will they experience?
- What do we want them to feel?

This process compliments the metaphysics as an integral part of the worldbuilding process. For a participatory story to be successful (and I include immersive theatre here) I suggest that *plausibility* is a key factor. Sensory input that does not belong in the setting — from an electric torch or the sound of distant traffic intruding on a fantasy larp, or a latex weapon prop at *The Quota*, these things are not plausible. This lack of plausibility intrudes on the narrative coherence of the story: In a larp that offers a 360-degree immersive play-space (like *The Quota*) players need to

step outside of the diegesis and construct some momentary fiction to explain or justify the intrusion; at best this is jarring, at worst it takes them off-game.

The intention of the ontological design for *The Quota* was to construct a *heterotopia*, which Hutchings and Giardino's (2016) argue might be better used to describe the playing space for a larp than Huizinga's Magic Circle (Huizinga, 1955, p.10), particularly when a participant is asked to "recognize the reality and humanity of the people and places they are about to embody and enter." This is significant as it suggests an approach that considers people and place equally. This matches the ontological design process which encompasses "everything" and does not privilege any specific aspect of the design. This "flat ontology" — from Bryant, (2011) — "invites us to think in terms of collectives and entanglements between a variety of different types of actors, at a variety of different temporal and spatial scales." (p.32) It is an authorial act which adopts a systematic approach to the creation of an ontological narrative space.

Setting

From the earliest larps, where larps would often begin with players being told that they have journeyed to a tavern, to the spoken introductions to larps like *Convention of Thorns* (2016) and *Inside Hamlet* (2015+), some work has been done by plot writers to frame the story. For ongoing campaign larps it may be a recap of what has gone before, and for black box or chamber larps, some context given in the workshop. From a writerly point of view this acts as a prologue.

For *Avalon* (2018) this took the form of a "spine document" which was produced by and for the plot writing team. It gave the facts of the larp, a "what has gone before" backstory and motivations for the major antagonists and contained the metafiction of the piece. It was — in Information Systems terms — the Single Source of Truth. This information was not shared with players but was used to ensure consistency across the plot and as a resource for briefing the NPC characters. *The Quota* followed this approach, collecting all relevant materials about the world, backstory, and history into a single spine document which was used by the writers to maintain consistency across characters and events.

Worldbuilding in The Quota

Worldbuilding is important in order to give the players a shared context of the storyworld they are larping in. It risks what Harrison (2007) describes as the “clomping foot of nerdism” particularly in a fantasy setting where the temptation to “exhaustively survey a place that isn’t there” can lead to a space where the reader is a victim of the writer’s design. This idea is useful to the designer of a larp storyworld too. The Quota used an economy of description and exposition when it comes to detail that participants *needed* to know. Harrison warns us:

“This kind of worldbuilding actually undercuts the best and most exciting aspects of fantastic fiction, subordinating the uncontrolled, the intuitive & the authentically imaginative to the explicable; and replacing psychological, poetic & emotional logic with the rationality of the fake.” (ibid)

Whilst a rich and complex backstory and history can add a great deal to a campaign setting, and some players seem to love to read and assimilate vast swathes of information, the larpwright needs to consider this to be like a pyramid; only the topmost layer of information should be required for the storyworld to be understood. For example, in Essendrop’s *No island is an island* (2017) the storyworld only exists inside the heads of the individual players; they create soundscapes together and then explore them — blindfolded — using touch and hearing only, at no point do they discuss or agree on a single interpretation of the storyworld. The players know they are a part of a tribe travelling to different islands, and they know that being alone and out of physical contact with others is frightening, everything else is their reality. This is enough to build a space in which story can unfold.

College of Wizardry produced a 560-page hardback student guide with over 125,000 words, and *Empire LRP*’s wiki has over 1,000,000 words of backstory. This seems excessive and yet no players are expected to know, or even to have read, all of that information. It is provided as a rich background only for those who want to immerse themselves in the detail of the storyworld. This form of exploratory metaplay (arguably taking place outside of the larp) is unnecessary and yet it is enjoyed by creators and players alike. This level of detail is not a requirement for larps set in the real world, except to illustrate where it differs from our own.

Tenement 67 (2017-) adopted a “sketch-based-design” approach (Brind, 2017) with the descriptions of the world released via a series of short fictional snippets. This approach means that players don’t have to remember the details of a world but are introduced to the shape of it in manageable chunks. T67 is a trope-heavy cyberpunk larp. There is just enough backstory for the world to be defined and the result is an immediately accessible fiction in which to play. Whilst this “less is more” approach can be a mitigation for narrative crisis, where the detail of the storyworld is unwritten it is far easier to maintain narrative coherence because there is less canon material and so less to misinterpreted, however, this is offset by a lack of consistency.

“On 1st March 2021 Wales formally closes their borders. They institute a socialist-leaning government. Their main national income is the sale of water to England after securing rights to the operations of all national waters in Wales. The same year England suffers a huge drought after the government refuse to pay for Welsh water and accuses Wales and Scotland of price-fixing their water supplies. Alt-right groups, emboldened by the government line, are increasingly active. They blame the economic downturn on layoffs and the nanny state, which they say is a drain on free entrepreneurship.” (Dabill, 2017)

The Quota took place in a fictional 2023, after the UK had left Europe and after the break-up of the Union. *The Quota* was designed to tell Western European stories to avoid having participants from privileged countries playing the roles of people from Africa and the Middle East. As the backstories of these characters were closer to home, they were easier for the players to understand and role-play. The played experience was of refugees coming to a foreign country and being a part of a process they did not understand.

River Severn Security (R7S)



Figure 5 - The Quota — R7S Security Logo.

As a part of the worldbuilding for The Quota, the organisers invented a private company that ran the detention centre. They were called River Severn Security, or R7S, a thinly disguised analogue of G4S. They were there to add an antagonistic layer to the story. Other antagonists were the English Government and the soldiers that they sent to interrogate some of the political detainees, and the lurking menace that was the Albion League. This was simplistic storytelling. Having a single monolithic ‘big bad’ antagonist can work in larps, but it often feels unrealistic. Having a mixture of physical danger, existential threat, and the low-level corporate evil of R7S allowed participants to calibrate their own oppression. Calibration is a form of *participant* (as opposed to *player*) agency; it is a metatechnique that allows the player to turn up or down intensity of an interaction or to negotiate specific themes or outcomes. Its inclusion and support is a design rather than a writing decision, but it forms a part of the narrative system because it has an effect on the story during runtime.

River Severn Security purchased the prison building after it was partially destroyed in a riot as a part of a planned expansion into the detention and correction sector. However, it became obvious that there was more money to be made in bidding for the Quota contract. In the fiction R7S brought a new Warden to run the facility. In his character it stated that he had experience of cost cutting in the hotels and leisure sector; he had no experience of running a prison or a facility for refugees. The NPC character of the Warden was the face of R7S inside the prison, but he developed as a character during the course of the larp. This is not uncommon; simple NPCs gain a backstory and a life of their own during the larp in the same way as any other character. R7S also provided the medical staff for the facility, this was represented only by a slight change in the design of the identity badges worn by the medical staff.



Figure 6 - *The Quota* — River Severn Medical Logo.

The Albion League

The Albion League was a chimaera made from the EDL, BNP, and various other far right groups. In the fiction they were a grassroots organisation who were responsible for a number of attacks, beatings and worse and seemed to be getting away with criminal activity without any interference from the police. Originally, they were to appear only in character backstories, but during the narrative design phase it was decided to give two of the guards some links to this organisation; the Albion League became a presence within the gaol, this added to the tension of the piece by introducing a slight paranoia to the setting.

“What is the Albion League? In a number of ways they are similar to NSDAP “Brownshirts”, in that they are bent on violently controlling the streets and society. They have tendrils up into the centres of power, locally and nationally, and this makes them more or less above the law. There are members and sympathisers in all areas of public life, so drawing their attention as an ‘undesirable’ can very quickly see your life unravelling.” (*The Quota*, design notes).

There are sadly enough contemporary examples, Soldiers of Odin, Britain First, EDL etc., to imagine an alt-right vigilante-turned-paramilitary group rapidly securing huge power in the face of a break-down of public confidence. One of the participants, whose character background involved the Albion League contributed the following image to the larp.



Figure 7 - The Quota — The Albion League Logo.

This image was used to doctor one of the newspaper articles that was smuggled into the facility; bringing a co-created piece of backstory into the larp.



Figure 8 - The Quota — Image from in-game newspaper cutting.

By offering an overlay on the lifeworld and encouraging participants to write their own character backstories, *The Quota* acknowledged a shared authorial responsibility for the storyworld, once which was close enough to our own for those participants who had not involved themselves with the pre-game collaboration to be able to very quickly assimilate their characters into the fiction of the larp.

Spatial Design

Writing about *College of Wizardry*, Stenros and Montola state “... the biggest impact was provided by the location itself. Zamek Czocha was very much a character in the larp and capturing the castle’s nooks and crannies as well as its majesty is important in communicating what it was like to be there.” (Stenros & Montola, 2017, p16). This anthropomorphisation of the castle suggests that ontological design (specifically for a 360° larp) may be affected or influenced by an appropriate location. Running *College of Wizardry* in a 13th century castle with oak panelled rooms and secret passages offered a Hogwarts-esque credibility to the experience in a way that running it on a Scout campsite could not. The *credibility* here is an aid to immersion; a castle with secret passages and oak panelled halls implies tropes and stories; the same is true of a ruined prison.

The Prison

The design process for *The Quota* began a year before the event with an initial visit to the proposed site: The former HM Prison Ashwell was a Category C men's prison located in the parish of Burley, in the county of Rutland, England. The buildings were damaged during prisoner riots in 2009, leading to the closure of the facility in 2011 as a part of a government scheme to cut inmate numbers¹⁵. It is currently a part of a business park and the prison itself is used mainly for airsoft games.

McAuley, 2012 (p.48) observes that site specific performance can allow for a more powerfully deployed experience of place over traditional theatre, because they have a lived, embodied experience of that site. The “self-reflexive awareness of the representational process, of the relationship between real and unreal” is reduced; this

¹⁵ Other prisons closed at the same time were repurposed as immigration removal centres, but the damage to Ashwell meant it was not financially viable to rebuild.

is something I return to in Chapter 7 where I discuss immersion and dissonance. The gaol had a “bleak air about it and seemed colder inside than out” (Brind, 2017) and this impression was borne out by participants

“Waking up in my cell. The room is quite small, and I've been here for what seems forever now. Still, the whole space and everything in it feels alien, part of the machine that is keeping me here and making me jump through hoop after hoop of humiliation. The sunlight streams through the window's thick glass, but it's like every surface in this cell nullifies heat, staying stubbornly dead and grey. In it, I too feel dead and grey” (Larpin, 2020, p.108)

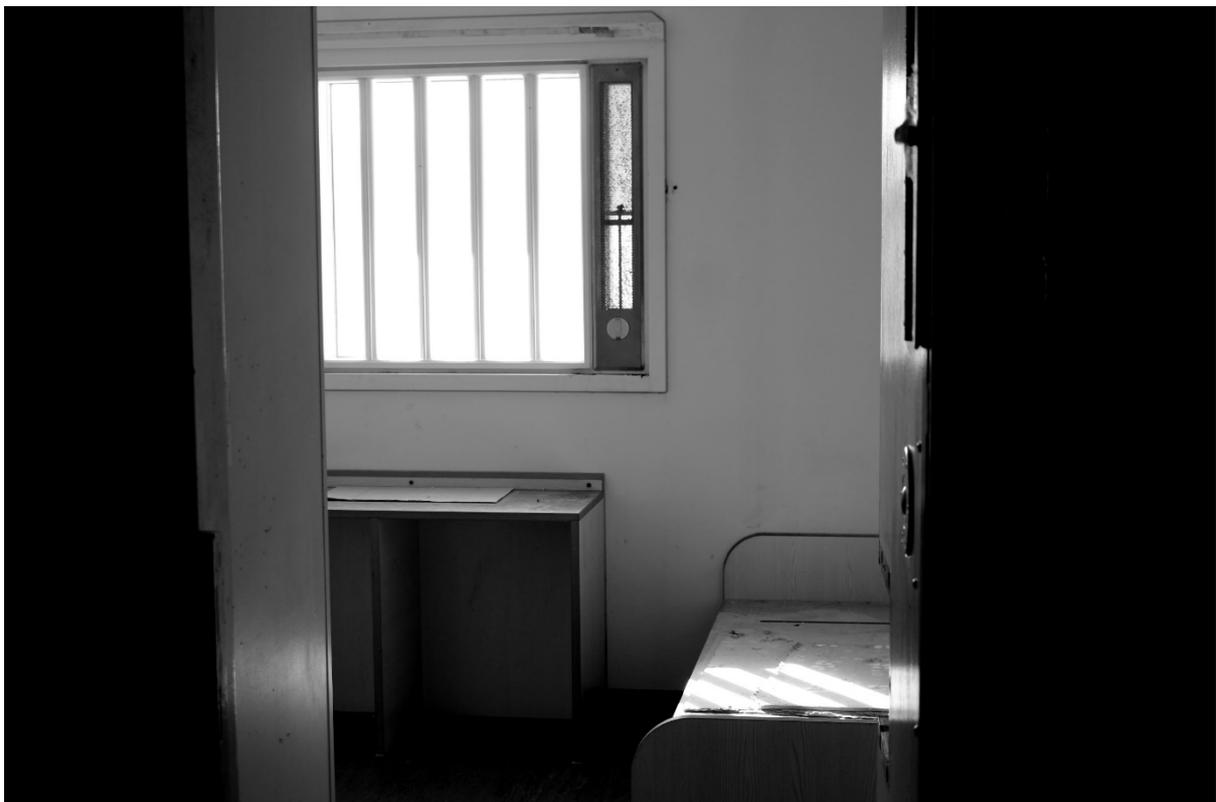


Figure 9 - *The Quota*, Site Visit One — Inside a cell.

The prison needed limited scenography for it to appropriately represent a detention centre. The “phenomenological interaction with the genius loci or ‘spirit of place” (Hunter, 2005 p.367) required only small signs and signifiers. Budget was spent on specific props and screens for the medical rooms, uniforms for the security team who worked in the prison, and also on some items for the recreation room (See *Recreation Room*). Much of the narrative power of *The Quota* came from the gaol. Hunter’s work — on site specific dance performances — argues that for the performers their creative interaction with the site required them to be wholly present in the space,

(p.380). This concept of participants engaging with the place and being wholly present, is a requirement for immersion into a larp.



Figure 10 - The Quota, Site Visit One — Ground floor corridor.

Reception

The Quota experience began at the moment participants arrived at the event site. Participants entered a building used as the base location for the airsoft games. This building doubled as the off-game space where participants could come to step outside of the diegesis, to use a flush toilet, or access running water. This base location is a single-story building situated outside of the prison fences. It suffers from damp and it smells of the two large dogs who live inside the building. It served as the briefing point for players and as an off-game sleeping space for crew members. Whilst the original design was to make this briefing area a liminal space, the final implementation opted to keep the area used for the briefing free of any in-game imagery, with the exception of a Welsh flag outside the off-game and two small Welsh flags on the roof of the car that was used to collect those participants arriving by train from the local railway station.

The Recreation Room

“All the colourful flyers of tourist destinations in Wales, oh God. The books in indecipherable Welsh. The too few chairs. At least there was coffee... (Well. It was coffee adjacent).” (Quota Participant L, 2018)

The recreation room was the social and physical centre of the larp. It was located in a well-lit room on the first floor of the gaol. This room was designed as a hub of interaction and it was also a place where participants could go during the classes (see below) in order to signal to the security guards that they wanted their characters to *get in trouble*. Participants needed to opt into every interaction and activity. Because of this there was a need to differentiate between a *player* who did not wish to attend a class, and their *character* wilfully ignoring the rules of the detention facility. The design used the recreation room as a place that a player could take their character to indicate to the NPC crew who were playing security guards that they wanted to explore the tension between inmate and authority. An inmate in the recreation room when they were supposed to be at a Welsh language class, for example, was signalling to the NPCs that they wanted an antagonistic interaction with the guards. A player returning to their cell and shutting the door was signalling that they needed some off-game time to themselves. This style of metatechnique is both diegetic and plausible and thus, supports the ideal of narrative coherence.

“My favourite thing in the rec room was the flyer which had in large writing on its front 'CAN YOU ESCAPE?’” (Quota Participant M, 2019)

The recreation room contained a table, chairs, and a limited amount of scenography and props. These included some children’s colouring books (but no coloured pens¹⁶), a set of pamphlets and fliers collected from tourist information centres in Wales, a handful of books, and some board games. These choices told a story about the detention centre.

¹⁶ The Chaplain did provide some coloured pens to a participant but, “he knew that they had value and so he kept them for himself” (Quota Participant J, 2018).

“It felt like the entire larp was a roller coaster, with moments of genuine and beautiful bonding interspersed with awfulness. Things that stand out for me is my very first scene of trying to play Welsh Scrabble without a board or any knowledge of Welsh — I really felt friendships evolving there.” (Quota Participant M, 2018).

As a social hub, the rec room also became a place to find others; it was a neutral and trans-sectional space that allowed various characters and NPCs to interact on an equal level. This is an extract from a story told by a member of the NPC crew captured after the larp.

“So, he remembered the confiscated cigarettes that Lydia Carter had dropped right in front of him by mistake. He asks the room if anyone is a smoker. No one answers a clear answer. He retrieves the cigarettes from his pocket and throws them to a person he knows is a smoker — she's been there for a long time, after all, and he appreciated her poetry. He told the room to share them. Someone raises their voice and says that this must be the sign of a very bad thing. A tiny bit irritated, the Warden simply replies that it is a good thing, and then leaves.” (Quota Crew Member S1, 2018).

This entire narrative, taking place inside the head of the character played by a crew member, is a useful illustration of how the story emerges during the run-time of a larp, but it was *enabled* by the intentional design of the rec room. Without that social hub, the Warden would have either had to have the interaction on a corridor where it would have been a literal passing moment, or it would not have happened at all. Larps like *College of Wizardry*, which have several social hubs (a staff common room, house common rooms, and a tavern), rather than one, suffer from a narrative dilution. This is a legitimate design choice in a large sandbox larp but makes the sharing of story harder because players are rarely in the same place at the same time.

There is also a spatial element to this design choice. The original design specification had located this space on the ground floor of the building because a participant with a limited mobility was booked to participate, but they cancelled a few days before the larp took place. The room selected was optimal for the number of participants. Had it been much larger or had the number of people attending been significantly higher it would not have worked.

Sensory Design

Sound and music

“Sound design is the process of specifying, acquiring, manipulating, and generating audio elements to generate specific outcomes.” (Tolvanen, 2017, 18:40)

The Quota opted to use a single piece of music for the larp. The original design had called for songs by the Welsh rock band, the Manic Street Preachers, to play in the background, particularly around the kitchen and recreation room area, however as their song “if you tolerate this, your children will be next” was used at the end of the larp KAPO (Sønderskov, 2012, p.64) and at least two KAPO players were signed up to participate in The Quota, the decision was taken to cut that idea because it would be immersion breaking for them. Instead, the only piece of music that featured was “Men of Harlech.”

Participants were taught the song by the naive yet well-meaning volunteer teacher C. Brookes, portrayed by an NPC in a music class. This class was framed ostensibly to introduce the characters to an important aspect of Welsh culture. However, playing the piece of music over the prison’s Tannoy system also signalled the end of the larp. It was hoped that the participants would join in with the song. The Interaction Frame (Tolvanen, 2017, 44:37) was unclear here, but it did not matter to the end of the larp whether the participants sang along, or not. During the runtime, this led to a moment of narrative confusion, less than two minutes before the end of the experience. The participants had written their own version of the lyrics and many characters opted to sing that version, as an ensemble. Rather than joining in with the chorus at the end of the Charlotte Church version of the song, the participant’s version conflicted with it, both in tempo and lyrics. There was a dissonance here that threatened to make the end of the larp unclear and discordant. A decision needed to be made immediately by the larpwrights; they acknowledged that the story is told by the participants, and the function of the larpwright is to enable this, and so the solution here was a simple one: fade out the music and let the participants have their own ending:

“This our answer, voices stronger

Knowing that they have done wrong here
If we have to stay here longer
Take us out from shade!”
(Townshend et al., 2017)

The gaol had a working public address (PA) system which could be accessed from the central security room in the gaol. This room was used as the control room for the larp. It was a semi diegetic space, in as much as it existed within the erzählwelt as “The Security Office” and that an in-game security guard would answer the door to a participant’s knock, but once inside the room, participants were off-game.

The PA was used to play the end music, but also for the purposes of diegetic announcements. These were made regularly throughout the larp. There were two different types of announcements. Pre-recorded announcements which were all in Welsh. They included messages such as “Breakfast is being served,” “Please assemble in the courtyard, “Morning sessions are about to begin,” etc. These messages, each introduced by a slightly off-key set of chimes, punctuated the day in the gaol. These chimes served an important function. As Tolvanen (2017) argues that there are different states of hearing, and that hearing something does not necessarily mean we are listening to it. The human brain is very good at filtering out background and superfluous noise and so the chime subliminally ‘tuned the players in’ to the announcement that followed.

“In larps we often use these different types of sound cues, , to signal that something is going to happen or as background music or whatever, and as designers we often might make the mistake of thinking it is enough to put the sound there and make sure it is loud enough, but that’s not the case; if you are like super into some scene you are not “listening to” those sounds. Unless you are given a reason to listen to those sounds” (Tolvanen, 2017, 14:15)

The second type of announcements — also introduced with the same chime — instructed named characters to attend a particular room in the facility, for an interview, or a medical etc. These were not pre-recorded. This allowed “The Voice” to express a degree of frustration with residents who did not turn up to an appointment. The character playing the voice was never named, however the characters participating in the larp gave him a name and a back-story. This attempt to humanise an unseen

oppressor illustrates a subliminal necessity to create narrative coherence; the Voice became “Richard,” and he “seemed to have some character development too” (Quota Participant L, 2018) story emerged where there was no plot.

Taste and smell

“Eating food is also often a social ritual. The time during the day when we gather together and share our experiences with each other. In all these ways food and eating are excellent tools to carry a narrative. To enhance an experience of being in an alien or different culture, or even literally to act as plot-tools.” (Göthberg and Sandquist, 2017, p.241).

The food for *The Quota* was diegetic. Participants were fed in-game, from a kitchen within the prison complex, they ate with plastic cutlery at tables in the dining room of their cell block. Whilst the larp catered for a number of dietary requirements, including vegan, gluten intolerant, and specific food allergies, the meals were designed to sustain life, but were heavy on the carbohydrates — in order to make participants feel slightly sluggish and tired — and deliberately cheap. The original food order, to be delivered to the site by a large supermarket chain, did not arrive. The organisers called the supermarket and were told “a delivery had been attempted but there was nobody there.” (In fact, organisers had been on site since 8am) This meant that much of the menu planning — which had been done months in advance — had to be thrown away as the kitchen crew were dispatched in a van to the local Sainsbury. The food that was purchased, however, needed to remain diegetically *plausible*. In the design, one of the work groups (see below) was supposed to be responsible for the food, but UK food preparation and hygiene laws — plus the lack of running water in the gaol — made this problematic. So, they were quite limited in what they were allowed to actually do.

Göthberg and Sandquist (ibid). argue that larper’s emotions are affected by what they eat, and that the disappointment of not being able to eat what you want when you are really hungry can be very powerful. This was borne out by the scene that played out during *The Quota* on Friday night. Participants had been in the gaol for just over twenty-four hours at this point. They had eaten their evening meal: a vegetable stew. The meal was nourishing, but deliberately under seasoned. It was served with white bread (and a gluten free alternative).

Shortly after 8pm, the security guards at the gaol received their meal: A large order of take-away fish and chips. The security guards were played by members of the event crew (NPCs). They were instructed to eat the fish and chips inside the detention centre, in full view of the inmates. The smell of the deep-fried food permeated the building, leading to many of the inmates going outside, even though it was cold and dark, to avoid having to watch (and smell) the food being eaten.

Most of the people playing the guards either gave away their food to inmates or — if they were playing guards without compassion — left food so that it could be taken.

“I left 80% of my chicken and chips — despite not having anything since a pot noodle at 11am — because I could not eat it in front of the participants.” (Quota Crew Member S2, 2018)

“It was so humiliating to be handed the scraps like that, but I couldn't help myself. That taste of something otherwise forbidden and unavailable was just too much.” (Quota Participant M, 2018)

The “Fish-and-Chip Torture” had a profound narrative effect which persisted even after the larp was over:

“I just walked down to the shop to get Fish and Chips (yeah, your fault, and the second night in a row — I may now have issues); and on the way someone was flying a flag of St George from a pole in their garden. I was unable to help myself from shuddering upon seeing it.” (Quota Participant J, 2018)

Structure & Temporal Design

Some larps are written with a three or five act structure, others are designed to fit into a three-hour time slot at a festival, others — particularly in the UK — run from Friday evening through to Sunday afternoon, either as a single event or as a part of a longer campaign. The length and structure of the larp is a basic design decision that will inform the rest of the writing process.

The Quota was played out over two days in real time. There was no manipulation of time and no ‘act structure’ that represented the passing of time. Larp allowing time to pass at a different speed can produce a useful dramaturgical effect; *Inside Hamlet* has a three-act structure with three months passing between Act 1 and

2, and two days between Act 2 and 3. *KAPO* artificially manipulated the player's concept of passing time by having a different set of sound and lighting for night and day and changing the duration of these cycles. Players reported that "Sometimes we slept for what felt like 30 minutes and other times it felt like hours," (Holm, 2012. p.78) and this added to the surreal intensity of that experience. However, for *The Quota* the passing of actual time was a part of the larp. This was not used to the same extent as suggested by Svensson (2017) in his putative "Designing for doing nothing" Manifesto, where proposed larps "where stillness, introspection and boredom are part of the experience," but these aspects of being detained were a part of the narrative design for the larp. The intention was to allow space for characters to be bored and thus, for participants to explore boredom, without actually being bored themselves. This idea is also referenced in the player communications from *Inside Hamlet*, which invites participants to make use of the off-game room if they are bored but challenges them to check whether it is they or their character who is bored, advising "If it's you, step out of the fiction for a while to reload and gain a new perspective." (*Inside Hamlet*, 2018, Player Letter 3)

For example, the first act of *Inside Hamlet* divides the players, some are immersed in the decadent party in the court of King Claudius, others are wondering when the Act will end. This appears to be an active design choice and is used to inform the workshopping in the second day of the larp where players are invited to consider how they felt at the end of Act 1 and to explore what that would feel like after three days, a week, a month, and then three months later. The Nordic larp *1912* which tells the story of a Swedish Christmas celebration, mixing a working-class drama and an upper-class family drama also opted to include boredom in its design, Sandquist (2018) explains, "hope relationship dynamics will be enough to entertain the upstairs; the lack of activities is a way to show the oppression of comfort and the restriction of good manners."

Unless the larp is deliberately designed without activity, leaving gaps is important. They are a punctuation for what Thomas (2017) calls "the dramatic flow of the story." For *The Quota* these gaps stood in contrast to the activity design.

Activity Design

Increasingly designers are using the question “what are the verbs?” (Townser and Li, 2019, p.61) (Torner, 2019, p.217) to inform their work. Players of a larp need to have something to do with their bodies during the larp whether that is an objective, an activity, or a scene or a series of scenes to play out. A larp with no activity must centre itself around that lack of activity; the lack of anything to do becomes the activity itself. For a longform larp like *The Quota*, the larpwrights need to understand what the participants would be doing during the 48 hours of runtime. Some UK larps fill this time with ‘a major plot line’ (Gibson, 2018, p.36,) a series of events involving interactions or conflicts with NPCs. Others leave time for politics and scheming. These activities are sometimes described, taking a term from computer games, as PvE (Player versus environment) or PvP (player versus player) (Müller, 2019, p.6). In more collaborative larps, this idea of *versus* is less helpful. Whilst conflicts may be a part of the larp they are not necessarily a key part of the experience. Irrespective of the style of larp, activity design accounts for much of the player’s narrative interaction with the larp itself.

The Quota took some inspiration from the school larp format popularised by *College of Wizardry* and developed the idea of groups being responsible for work within the larp from *KAPO* (Raasted, 2012 p.69). These activities were designed to give a narrative reason for groups to form. This would allow participants who had requested to get an opportunity to play with other specific participants agency to bring their very different characters together and would also help all participants to quickly build a functioning (but not necessarily functional) community. Larps struggle to start *in medias res* — certainly without extensive workshopping or pre-play — and so it is a key function of narrative design to start the story as quickly and effectively as possible; having well designed activities allows this to happen. Each character was assigned a *workgroup* which was given an actual useful task to perform. From cleaning the Portaloo¹⁷, to re-painting some of the internal walls of the gaol, picking litter up, and the previously mentioned kitchen team. The different tasks meant that the groups had

¹⁷ The Quota boasted some of the cleanest temporary toilets ever seen at a UK larp; not only did Workgroup E take a very honest pride in their work, but other participants were decidedly more respectful of the facilities than they otherwise might have been. One supposes the fear of getting shanked in the dinner queue for not wiping the seat down may have been a factor.

a different perceived status and this built a social dynamic inside the detention centre. For the participants playing detainees, the kitchen team had the highest status, the toilet cleaners the lowest. This was an important part of the world-building process for the larp. Whilst the fiction of the outside world was important to the creation and backstory of the characters; it was the fiction of the detention centre itself that framed the experience of the larp. I use this in the same sense as Goffman (1974, pp.10-11) as a means of defining a situation in relation to the organisation and participants' subjective involvement in them.

Staff of the detention centre and the soldiers who appeared during the larp also fit this model; their job fulfilling the same narrative function as a workgroup. In terms of status, the prison guards had a higher status than the detainees, and the soldiers, with their guns and government mandate, had the highest status of all.

Classes & Voluntary Activities

Much like the workgroups, the classes had a dual purpose; they were an activity, which was designed to break up the day into institutionalised segments. They functioned as vignettes — self-contained segments of plot/story/narrative within the overall larp, but they were also diegetically important as they underlined the Quota process. The people (characters) in the detention centre were hoping to be given Welsh citizenship and the classes were there to help them learn about Welsh culture and to better integrate with the society they hoped to join. The teachers, all played by members of the NPC crew, were either worthy volunteers, or — in one case — there as a part of a community service order for drunk driving.

The classes were fifty minutes long, repeatable, such that the same class could be re-used for multiple groups of participants. The classes included a time for “housekeeping,” which was when the workgroups were expected to carry out their duties. The timetable for Saturday was different to allow for work groups 2 and 3 to have their singing class. The original design for the larp intended to use a large open field within the prison for a game of touch rugby. It was likely to be cold and muddy, and the participants only had one set of clothes, but the intention was that the class would be an inclusive and positive experience; a surprising moment of fun designed as a juxtaposition against the bleak institutional misery found elsewhere. Of course, the benefit of moments of joy in terms of narrative design is that the grief that follows is felt all the more sharply.

“I felt like our whole group got really uplifted by the session and it was amazing how the power struggles and everything vanished as everyone did their best to work well as a rugby team.” (Quota Participant A, 2018)

The NPC teaching the rugby class was, in real life, a player of the sport, and was prepped to make the class as realistic as possible. During the course of the year between the initial site visit and the larp, the grass (rugby) field had been colonised by rabbits and the surface was too pock marked with holes and burrows for it to be remotely safe to use for the lesson as planned. The NPC improvised around this and made it a diegetic problem which he resolved by running training drills on the concrete exercise yard. These unexpected improvisations and moments also generated story elements, as Hartung recalls,

“After the rugby class, someone found a red and black butterfly, trying to fly but hardly able to move forward. It was clearly hurt very badly. Jamila carefully took it up and brought it to a piece of grass, saying “nobody should die on concrete”. (Hartung, 2020, p.154)

Whilst the design of the Rugby Class defied expectations, the Welsh Language class was wilfully awful. It was based on the experiences of refugees coming into the UK whose access to English Language classes was often limited or ineffectual. *The Quota* provided a ‘Learn Welsh CD’ and a single copy of the associated textbook. The NPC teaching the class was not a Welsh speaker. Other parts of the larp design — such as the Tannoy announcements already mentioned — used Welsh to reinforce the otherness of the participants. They were expected to strive to join a culture that they did not understand, and one which spoke a language that had few common words with English. It is worth mentioning here that the participants came from fourteen different countries; whilst the larp was played in English, it was a second or third language for many of those who took part, but Welsh shares few roots and words with other European and Nordic languages and so shock and confusion was common. For the French run of the larp — *le Quota* — Welsh was replaced with Breton, a similarly complex Brythonic language.

Towards the end of the larp, all residents were made to take the Welsh Citizenship test. Whilst the exam itself was in English, the cover page was in Welsh. This had a profound and powerful effect on the participants. More than one person

cried with frustration when presented with the exam paper believing it would be entirely in Welsh.

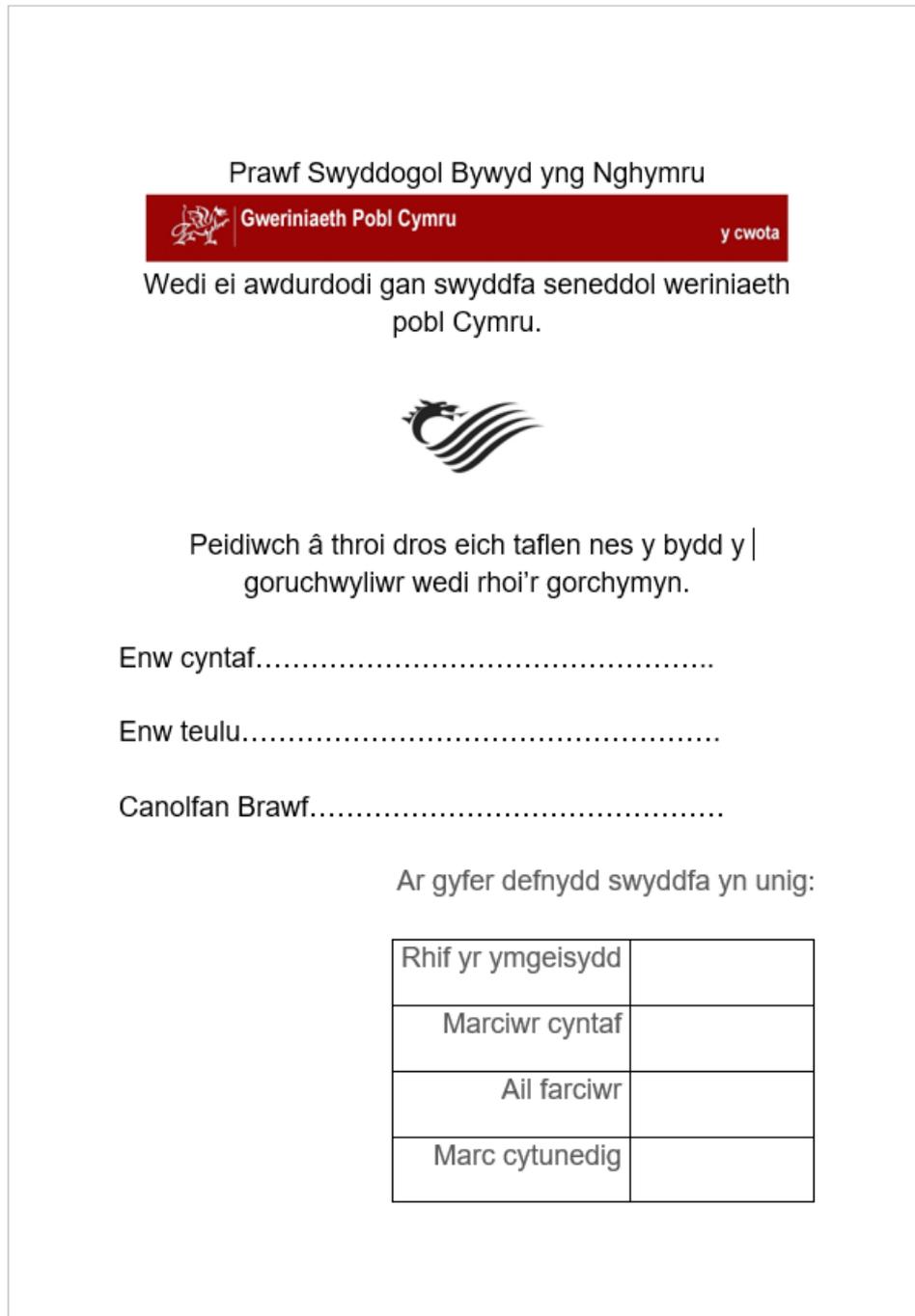


Figure 11 - The Quota — Cover page of Welsh Citizenship Test.

Some of the participants had taken the UK Citizenship test as a part of becoming British Citizens in real life, and also reported a strong emotional response to the scene.

“We had worked SO HARD on that test! Suffered through completely awful lessons, incompetent teachers, useless material. We had taken initiative,

hosted study sessions with notes we painstakingly gathered, reviewed together, supported each other. . . . We were all honestly doing our best, and then we get that impossible, arbitrary test thrown in our faces... The unfairness of that place is really starting to hit me.” (Quota Participant M, 2018)

The voluntary activities were structured much like the classes but remained optional. They were there to provide something to do in the evenings for those participants who worked better with a structure. They included a representative from a Welsh theatre company coming in to teach *Under Milk Wood*, an art therapy class, and a group counselling session. Each of these activities was designed to give participants narrative tools to develop their character and their story during the larp.

Interviews and medicals

Each participant was also scheduled to receive at least one interview and one medical. These were one-to-one scenes with a member of the NPC crew. Both the “medical” NPCs were played by people with some medical training. The function of these scenes was to establish an empty narrative opportunity and to allow those participants who were less able to create a space for themselves in the story, access to it. The intention here was to produce something akin to the one-to-one (Cook, 2018) experiences beloved of *Punchdrunk* audiences, intimate and ephemeral moments of drama. The narrative design here was about creating that opportunity and developing the NPC characters who facilitated it. The scenes took place in specific interview or medical rooms inside the gaol with simple furniture and minimal scenography. The intensity of the one-on-one interactions enabled some profound and powerful scenes. There were no specific plots associated with these scenes, but this part of the larp involved the most design effort and iteration to create the processes and guidelines for the NPC team to use as the basis for their interactions.

Cook (2018) describes her character development process for the psychiatrist, Dr Alice Pauls, “I dressed her in clicky, shiny high heels, red lipstick and a red frock . . . She was there to make people feel uncomfortable, sad, ugly and not good enough.” The interviews gave participants an opportunity to reveal bits of their character but then to have what they said played back to them in the worst possible light, “If someone havered they were “indecisive” if they were forthright they were “arrogant”, if they

worried for their safety they were “paranoid” and if they ever contradicted themselves or their notes they were “pathological liars” (ibid).

In the original specification for *The Quota*, various topics were excluded from the event in order to allow a ‘safe space’ for participants. Sexism, racism, homophobia, transphobia, sexual assault, and ableism were prohibited topics. The design of the characters (see below) enabled arbitrary tensions along political, class, moral and regional that participants could play on in order to create antagonistic play. However new thinking, particularly that from the *Larpers of Color* panel at Knutepunkt (Kemper et al, 2018) and direct requests from participants, led to a significant rethink. They argued that by removing racism, homophobia, and transphobia from *The Quota*’s storyworld, part of their identity as participants were also erased. The design had inadvertently removed the opportunity for participants who wanted their identities to be a part of their character stories to play on those themes. As Svanevik (2018) explains, “Several people chose to play characters that were very close to home, dealing with issues they themselves dealt with in real life and pushing themselves on precisely those themes that we had initially been afraid to include.”

The new design allowed for the inclusion or re-inclusion of oppression as part of character backstories and the opportunity to have this played upon in private interactions with NPCs, i.e., in interviews, psychological assessments, black box scenarios, or medicals.

The design stated that participants were able to opt-out of these encounters at any time, and there were metatechniques available that allowed them to escalate or de-escalate these interactions, to control the intensity of the story as they went along. In order to support this narrative process, the larp instituted very strict safety protocols for these interactions. Each participant completed an off-game form just before the larp on which they specified their personal limits and wishes for scenes they did or did not wish to play. These forms were included with the character’s files. which were provided to NPCs before each scene. Participants could change their answers at any point. The forms were annotated by the NPCs to ensure that relevant information was always available. No form would mean no scene.

“Some of those scenes were very intense and created stories which are usually only alluded to in games rather than played through” (Quota Crew Member S3. 2018).

Whilst similar processes were used by the guards at *KAPO* (Fallesen and Ponsgaard, 2012, p104-111) this was the first time these methods were used at a larp in the UK and thus, this was a new experience for most of the NPC crew who were more used to playing “gods and monsters” (Quota Crew Member S3, 2018).

Interactions

The writing team reviewed the characters created by the players (see below) and identified interesting scenes that could be played out during the larp. Some of these were initiated by letters from the outside world, or by a smuggled in mobile phone, others from visits from external NPCs. These were written as interaction briefs that could be picked up by members of the NPC crew and brought into play at short notice:

| | |
|-------------------------|---|
| Name: | Officers M. Hale and G. Pierce |
| Gender: | N/A |
| Profession: | Police officers |
| Reason for being here: | Confront her about drug dealing activities with the Detention Centre. It is known that she is dealing. Her suppliers have been busted, which has led to her. There is nothing she can say, they have the evidence for a conviction already. If she gets another dealing conviction, on top of her past record, there is no way she’s getting into Wales. But, if she turns Queen’s evidence and helps them uncover other criminal activity within the Detention Centre, then there’s a chance they’ll let her conviction slide. |
| Antagonist primary for: | Claire Wright played by <player name redacted> |
| Objective: | Push her towards desperation. How badly does she want into Wales when the alternative is a custodial sentence? Secure information and promise for more on criminal activities, including activist activities if possible. |
| Leave condition: | When she has told you what she can for now and warn her you’ll be back for more. |

Figure 12 - The Quota — Interaction Brief

The Black Box

The outline of the characters for *The Quota* were computer generated to create a wide selection of dramatically complimentary inmates from different social and political backgrounds. Participants were invited to flesh out the characters they were assigned with an interesting backstory and to create relations with other characters present at the larp. To facilitate this backstory creation, participants were invited to complete a questionnaire about their character:

- Please describe a memory the character has in which they felt truly happy.
- Please describe the character's worst life experience.
- Has the character ever committed a crime? If yes, what was it?
- Describe something the character wants to achieve with their life if they get to Wales.
- Would the character sacrifice themselves for others?
- Are they married?
- If yes or in a relationship? What is/was their partners name/names, describe them Do they have a family? (Describe them)
- How did the character find school?

The responses to these questions were included with the character sheets and participant questionnaires in the character records. Members of the writing team and NPC crew went through these character questionnaires and looked for interesting elements of backstory on which vignette scenes could be built during the runtime of the larp. This was referred to as “mining.” Most of these vignette scenes were played out in the black box.

The “black box” was a meta space that could be used by participants to play out scenes that were outside of the temporal or spatial confines of the larp itself. It was set up in a building away from the main prison wing where the larp took place. There were a few coloured lights and a sound system that could be configured by the NPC crew for each scene. Scenes could be flashbacks, flashforwards, dreams, or memories. This space was available to participants on request, but also used by the organisers; they summoned participants to see “the counsellor” and members of the NPC crew would facilitate the black box scene. By encouraging participants to play out their character’s memories, the larp design deliberately added an affective layer to

the narrative; as the character's memories came to the forefront of the storytelling process, the bleed became more intense.

“Lydia and Kris (two participants) did a flashback scene from when they were a couple. The scene was simple. It was the moment they realised that while they love each other, it simply wasn't enough due to the difference in beliefs. It was so poignant and beautiful and so utterly rea.” (Quota Crew Member D. 2018).

The Chaplain

“The Chaplain returns six days a week, sometimes for longer stints, he remains "The Chaplain" and nobody asks his name. Nothing changes, he brings the rock, the late-night drink with detainees, he weeps with the detainees on “Quota Day” and comes back the next day. Then one day he just doesn't turn up at the centre. Nobody knew his name. Nobody ever thought to ask. He was the Chaplain” (Quota Crew Member R. 2018).

The Chaplain was a diegetic gamemaster. The role was played by one of the primary organising crew and he spent the larp in character and inside the detention centre living with the detainees. He played the role of The Chaplain, who was there to provide spiritual support to the characters. He had an off-game function as the primary point of contact for players who had a problem. They could ask to speak to the Chaplain in private and they could close the door and go off-game. The Chaplain also provided a way for the organising team to gauge the mood inside the detention centre, and as a way to calibrate events and facilitate play. He was well-placed to look after those players who were isolated or unable to find a way to interact with the larp.

As a tool for understanding the emergent story having an embedded gamemaster is useful, as shown in larps such as *The Washing of Three Tides* (2001), *Lloegyr* (1999), and *Forsaken* (2015-) as all of these larps have used diegetic GMs to react to player action. However as direct participants they are also affected by the story. I return to this in chapter 7.

Character Design

The approach taken by *The Quota* to character design was to create a set of characters-as-objects from a set of archetypes. These were derived from the twelve Jungian archetypes but extended to include more fictional tropes suitable for larp. The

archetypes signalled to the players the sort of character the organisers wanted them to play, specifying their dramatic function. It also acted as a balancing force within the narrative design in as much as it ensured a mix of antagonistic and negative characters mixed in among the heroes.

| | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------|----------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|------------------|-----------|-------------|---------------|------------|
| The Innocent | The Survivor | The Hero | The Caregiver | The Adventurer | The Rebel | The Lover | The Creator | The Jester | The Sage |
| The Magician | The Ruler | The Traitor | Saint | Anchor | Crusader | Altruist | Pilgrim | Revolutionary | Enthusiast |
| Know-it-all | Fool | Teacher | Visionary | Leader | Devil's Advocate | Naïve | Citizen | Rescuer | Mediator |
| Seeker | Free-agent | Confidante | Innovator | Truth Speaker | Tactician | Meddler | Politician | Turncoat | Empathic |
| Critic | Dragon Slayer | Humanitarian | Wanderer | Outlaw | Broken-hearted | Poet | Comedian | Detective | Destroyer |
| Despot | Social Climber | Dreamer | Realist | Martyr | Parent | Explorer | Wild-One | Romantic | Builder |
| Joker | Philosopher | Catalyst | Manager | Antagonist | Follower | Stalwart | Champion | Counsellor | Gambler |
| Individual | Sensualist | Inventor | Actor | Chessplayer | Enchanter | Diplomat | Intriguer | Victim | Sycophant |
| Bully | Advisor | Spy | Misfit | Romeo | Dealmaker | Trickster | Scholar | Charmer | Gang-Boss |
| Snitch | Guilty | Fatalist | Coward | Stranger | Mouse | Conformer | Cynic | Nihilist | Malcontent |
| Dogmatic | Rationalist | Unionist | Double-agent | | | | | | |

Figure 13 - The Quota — Archetype Selection.

Not every archetype was selected by a participant; those shown in dark grey were either not selected or not cast. In addition to the archetype, each of the characters was assigned the following attributes:

| Attribute | Description |
|-----------|------------------------------|
| Class | Refers here to social class. |

| | |
|-----------------|---|
| Job | If the character had a job, it is shown, if not it describes them as unemployed. |
| Political Party | Which political party the character votes for. In some cases the character does not vote. |
| EU Referendum | Which way the character voted in the EU referendum. In some cases, the character did not vote. |
| Region | The region of England, Scotland, or Northern Ireland the character originated from |
| Football | The character's relationship with football, whether they are a supporter, an ultra-fan, or not interested at all |
| Traits | Five possible character traits. |
| Category | Whether the character is a refugee or an economic migrant. In addition, a few characters were classified as political detainees; their experience was slightly different from other participants. |

These attributes were assigned using a weighted pseudo-random process. The assigned social class was based on data such that The Quota would have a representative cross-section of classes and regions. The assigned political parties and EU referendum votes were also weighted according to class and region. It was therefore unlikely to see a Conservative voting Brexit supporting member of the precariat working class from the Northwest of England, but the process would generate plenty of UKIP voting Brexiteers from Essex. It also avoided contradictory positions such as a UKIP supporter who wished to remain in the EU. The process for creating the character objects was automated (Written in VBA code in Microsoft Excel) and could generate a full set of character objects in a few seconds. Each attribute had some boiler-plate text which was added to the character sheet.

"Conformer"

You are desperate to fit in. You have always done your best to belong in society and encouraged others to do the same. Will you conform inside

the detention centre as well, or will the prison break you? What will you become if your desire to confirm radically shifts?

Class: Affluent Working Class

The affluent working class, about 15 percent of British society, show moderately good economic capital, relatively poor status of social contacts, though highly varied and moderate highbrow but good emerging cultural capital. Typical occupations include electricians and electrical fitters; postal workers; retail cashiers and checkout operatives; plumbers and heating and ventilation engineers; sales and retail assistants; housing officers; kitchen and catering assistants; quality assurance technicians. They tend to come from non-middle-class families and few have been to university. 57 per cent are men. Many are young people in white collar and blue-collar jobs in the private sector and in customer facing occupations.

Job: Shift production supervisor

Voted For: Conservative

EU Referendum: Remain

The Conservative Party is a centre-right political party in the United Kingdom. It is currently the governing party, having been so since the 2010 general election. The Conservative Party is one of the two major contemporary political parties in the United Kingdom, the other being its modern rival, the Labour Party.

Region: Southeast

Football: Ultra fan of a football team

Possible Traits:

Magnanimous

Scrupulous

Emotional

Pure

Dogmatic

Ridiculous

Category: Economic Migrant

Other larp characters have additional initial attributes that can be added to this model, they will tend to include variations on some or all of the following:

| Attribute | Description |
|-------------|--|
| Function(s) | <p>This describes the purpose of the character within the plot/story. In <i>The Quota</i> this was incorporated into the archetype. It is important that a character has at least one function. We can identify the function by asking the question “What would be the effect on the story if this character were not present?” or “Why is this character here?”</p> |
| Desires | <p>This tends to be an internal and diegetic attribute. It describes what the character needs and what the character wants. Yorke (2013, p.12) articulates that <i>Need</i> and <i>Want</i> are not necessarily the same thing. In a simple linear larp it could be as direct as “to survive the dungeon and get treasure” or it could be a series of complex desires and wishes. For <i>The Quota</i>, the desire of most of the characters was to get a visa into Wales.</p> |
| Action | <p>This describes what the character does diegetically and thus, what the player does with their body during the larp. This sometimes reflects their function, but not always. For <i>The Quota</i> this was left undefined; the characters had little agency of action and were told what to do and when to do it.</p> <p>For some more traditional UK larps, character skills, points, and magical abilities would be included here, however <i>The Quota</i> had no rules or metatechniques that needed to be included in the character design.</p> |
| Flaw | <p>Arguably optional, but characters with flaws seem more three dimensional and plausible than those without. Most of the characters in <i>The Quota</i> were deeply flawed.</p> |

| | |
|------------|--|
| Trajectory | This implies where the character would end up without the input of the player. In larps with fate-play it also describes where the character <i>should</i> end up. |
|------------|--|

NPC Design

NPCs or Supporting characters are either a functional part of the larp or a plot mechanic. In some larps they are nameless antagonists (monsters) but in *The Quota* the NPC's followed the same design process as for participant characters except they were written by the organisers and had relationships with one another written into their character sheets. They were designed in such a way as to generate conflict and to bring the participant characters into those conflicts. They had their own motivations and personalities. Striking a balance here is important. If they were all antagonists and bullies then the face of the facility would have been monolithic; some of the NPCs were written to genuinely care about the inmates, others despised them, others still were one unpaid bill away from having to enter the Quota programme themselves.

Plot and the Narrative Crisis

The Quota's plot elements were seeded within the characters and their relationship with one another, with the NPCs, and with the Quota process. In this respect it was a PvE plot, except without defeatable antagonists. Its main plot, therefore, was quite *linear* (I describe this in the section below). However there was still an opportunity for narrative crisis. One of the design mistakes of *The Quota* was around the inclusion of political prisoners. Their experience was slightly different in as much as they were taken away by soldiers, allegedly in the employ of the English government, and interrogated. These scenes of simulated torture, degradation, and fear took place in a different building in the prison complex. In retrospect they should have been scaffolded as flashback scenes, experiences from the characters' pasts rather than events happening during real time. We could have used the black box for these. During the run of the larp, the other characters rallied round; determined to prevent their co-detainees being taken again and this threatened to destabilise the narrative system. *The Quota* was clearly pitched as a larp that did not include a rebellion against the guards or the system, but it was in danger of becoming that larp during runtime. The plot met players and they did something that was unexpected. My notes show that one of the solutions mooted was to kill the power to the prison,

plunging it into darkness, and sending in guards and soldiers armed with riot shields and clubs. This would have escalated rather than resolved the crisis, forcing the larp along a path that was not the point of the story. Instead, it was the Warden, an NPC, saying no; putting his safety and that of his fictional family on the line which resolved the escalation. It was a subtle event but a significant one which still made sense within the story world.

Concluding comments

The Quota was not a typical larp as it mixed methods from both the UK and Nordic larp traditions. It allowed participants to write their own characters and it relied on NPCs to drive the plot of the larp forward whilst also relying on 360-degree immersion and metatechniques for calibration; however, both traditions contain events and existents which I consider as constituent parts of *plot*. By producing a larp that utilised methods from both the UK and Nordic traditions the study surveyed and documented the widest possible set of decisions and considerations that go into the design of the narrative system of a larp. I have extended this survey by considering the relationship between the writing of fiction and the ontological design. There is an intersection between writer and designer during this process; whether the designer takes an authorial role, or the writer engages in design risks a journey back to the ludology versus narratology debate. Rather than engaging with this rabbit hole, I venture that the functions are complimentary. Having introduced the methods and challenges of the design process I now move on to the second part of this chapter which considers the plot, story, and narrative of larp.

Section 2 - On Storymaking: a narratological model for the discussion of larp

In order to address the gaps in research so far identified I will now describe the medium of larp in narratological terms. I begin by reviewing larp as a genre and as a medium, providing a brief history and taxonomy of the form. I move on to describe the structural components of the larp's diegesis and describe a model for extending fictive narratology to encompass discussions of larp. I present some examples to illustrate how a broadly narratological approach is consistent for the interrogation of narrative crisis

Larp as Medium / Larp as Genre

Chandler (1997) acknowledges that whilst we have spent two thousand years dividing the world of literature into types (of text,) it is not a neutral or an objective process. He explains “what is technique, style, mode, formula or thematic grouping to one may be treated as a genre by another,” He also acknowledges that the definition of genres is a “theoretical minefield.” But placing larp within a specific genre, or — as Fatland and Wingård argue — as a medium in its own right (Fatland and Wingård, 2003, p.23), is an important source for critical interrogations of the form by the “discourse community” (Swales 1990, p.54). As Bazerman (1997) states, “genres are the familiar places we go to (in order) to create intelligible communicative action with each other and the guideposts we use to explore the unfamiliar.” For example, if I identify larp as a sub-genre of role-playing games (and thus, a sub-genre of games) I can explore the extent to which ludology is useful in interrogating larp or whether I need a different set of tools and methods to discuss it, or whether I need to remain objectively constructionist in my approach.

To unpack larp's theoretical home I turn to Aarseth's statement, "few literary genres, if any, can be traced to a single point of origin... To pinpoint a genre's origin is to define it, not to discover it. Hegemonic traditions generally seem to start in some prehistoric time, well before the spotlights of critical attention flooded the scene" (Aarseth, 1997, p.97) and consider larp's relationship with those other disciplines with which it may share a common root. I begin by trying to pinpoint the modern genre's origin. Discussions of whether the origins of larp can be found in Ancient Egypt, Greek Theatre, or the court entertainments of Tudor England are fascinating but do not advance my argument, thus, focus my attention on the twentieth century.

Modern larp has various antecedents from psychodrama, military simulations, theatre games, and TRPGs (Fatland, 2016). Montola et al. (2009 p.36) agree that larp “seems to have evolved from traditional “table-top” role-playing in the early 1980s” but they also suggest that it bears a number of similarities with improvisational theatre and psychodrama. Fatland (2016) agrees. He claims that the ‘grandfather’ of modern larp

was not Gygax¹⁸ but the psychiatrist and psycho-sociologist Jacob Moreno¹⁹ arguing that psychodrama is the root node of the form.

I make a distinction between modern larp and *classical* larp. This is because the early larp adventures in the UK particularly owed more to *dungeon crawling*, a style of tabletop role-playing game (TRPG) where the adventurers would fight their way through a series of ‘encounters’ with monsters, solving puzzles, and acquiring treasure along the way. The basic (introductory) adventure from *Treasure Trap* — the larp equivalent of *Adventure* as a “mythological Ur-text” (Aarseth, 1997, p.108) — shows this progression from TRPG to larp.

The document consists of a hand drawn map of a part of Peckforton Castle with a list of fourteen *encounters*. It tells the referee running the monsters that there should be up to seven orcs in the *first room*) Each Orc will be able to withstand one or two *hits* from the adventurers before falling to the ground, but they are more prone to running away or attacking from behind or with superior numbers. A ‘hit’ meaning a blow from a padded larp weapon or the effect of an offensive magic spell. In room five the orcs are merely magical illusions (Lowndes, circa 1982). The term ‘party’ here refers to the characters playing the larp (the adventure party). This usage is found in the first edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* (Gygax, 1974, p.26) referring to the group of characters exploring the fictional dungeon. Gooby (1994, p.16) also states that the vocabulary of early larp was mainly derived from TRPG: the ‘adventuring party’, the ‘encounter’, the ‘monster’ (Gooby, 1994, p.16). Compare with an introductory D&D module: “The goblins wear leather armour and carry swords and daggers. They can each take one 8-sided die hits... If half their number is killed, the other(s) will try to escape through one of the doors or surrender,” (Gygax & Arneson, 1977, p. 42) and the structural intersection is clear.

Although there are parallels, Mackay (2001) states that Live-action role playing is "ontologically different from the tabletop role-playing game. Each is performed in different ways and the performance that results are circumscribed by different

¹⁸ (Ernest) Gary Gygax 1933-2008, an American game designer best known for co-creating the TRPG *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974)

¹⁹ Jacob Levy Moreno, 1889 – 1974, Romanian-American psychiatrist who co-created psychodrama with his wife Zerka Toeman Moreno.

boundaries." (p.175). Larp is a compound of forms, rather than a sub-genre with many antecedents. It can be a game, but this is not always the case. It is a form of 'play,' but not necessarily fun²⁰. Larp comes from role-playing, but it is not purely role-playing. It inherits from games but is not necessarily a game. Some larps are performed, or have performative elements, but there is no audience²¹. As Montola et al. (2009) suggest when they discuss genres of pervasive games, "some games do not fit into any category and some fit into more than one," (p.31)

There is no "simple, unproblematic merging" of genres (Hutcheon, 1988, p.9) and I propose acknowledging that by treating larp (and it's critical study) as a separate medium I can avoid a dogmatic adherence to a single form of critical method — be it ludology or performance studies or any other — but rather selecting the appropriate method from any and all of these disciplines (which depends upon whether the larp is in the plot, story, or narrative phase of what I will come to define as the storymaking life cycle) in order to interrogate the state of the narrative system at that time.

From narratology to storymaking

Narrative is understood as a "mode of ordering" which can be used to describe genres beyond literary fiction (Friedman,1990 p.87) but ironically larp *is* a form of literary fiction, it is just not written down; there is no *text*. If there is no text, nor a replacement media artefact the form does not adhere to the third minimal requirement of *narrativity* offered by Meister et al. (2005, p.xiv) as there are no "concrete tokens" (ibid) to be examined. (Part of the problem of the narrative crisis derives from the difficulty (or impossibility) of verification) According to classical narratology, because larp does not have a *text*, the term narratology would not be applicable to larp.

²⁰ I question whether "type 2 fun" is actually fun at all? Type two fun is a term that originated in climbing circles and is used to describe something that is miserable when it is happening, but which is fun in retrospect, as distinct from type one fun, which is simply fun (Cordes, 2014).

²¹ There have been a number of attempts at larp with audience. I argue that the definition of audience is problematic. If their presence is diegetic then they cease to be audience, even if their function is voyeuristic. So the people who came to watch Amerika or KAPO were playing characters who were people who had come to see, rather than attending as non-diegetic audience who had come to watch the larp.

Narratology — as a formal process that interrogates the principles of narrative representation — is a relatively young discipline (it has only been around slightly longer than me). Narratology has been variously defined as a set of general statements on the structure and process of telling a story (Ryan & von Alphen, 1993, p.110), a *theory* (or multiple theories) (Prince, 2003) (Herman,1999,) and a *method* (Kindt & Müller, 2003, p.211). Meister (2011) argues for Fludernik & Margolin’s term, *discipline* (Fludernik & Margolin, 2004, p.149). as it acknowledges narratology’s dual nature as a theoretical and an applied form.

At its most basic level, it provides us with a set of tools for discussing the component parts of narrative. Deconstruction, not of meaning, but of method. It is a logical and structural approach, although perhaps not the *science* of narrative that Todorov (1969) intended. Meister describes it as a set of theories, concepts and analytic procedures that enable exploration and modelling of narratives in multiple forms. (Meister, 2011) This offers a useful starting point for investigation, narratology as both an analysis modelling tool, and a set of terminology for discussing the how and what of larp storytelling.

If narratology allows us to critically interrogate the entire narrative structure of a story, rather than forcing us to a critical discourse informed only by the text, this is useful for discussions around larp because — as I argue in this thesis — “there is no text!” I will move on to consider how larp fits within the structures of fictive narratology and will argue that the starting and end points of larp fit well within that structure, it will then seek to extend this narratology to encompass the unique aspects of larp.

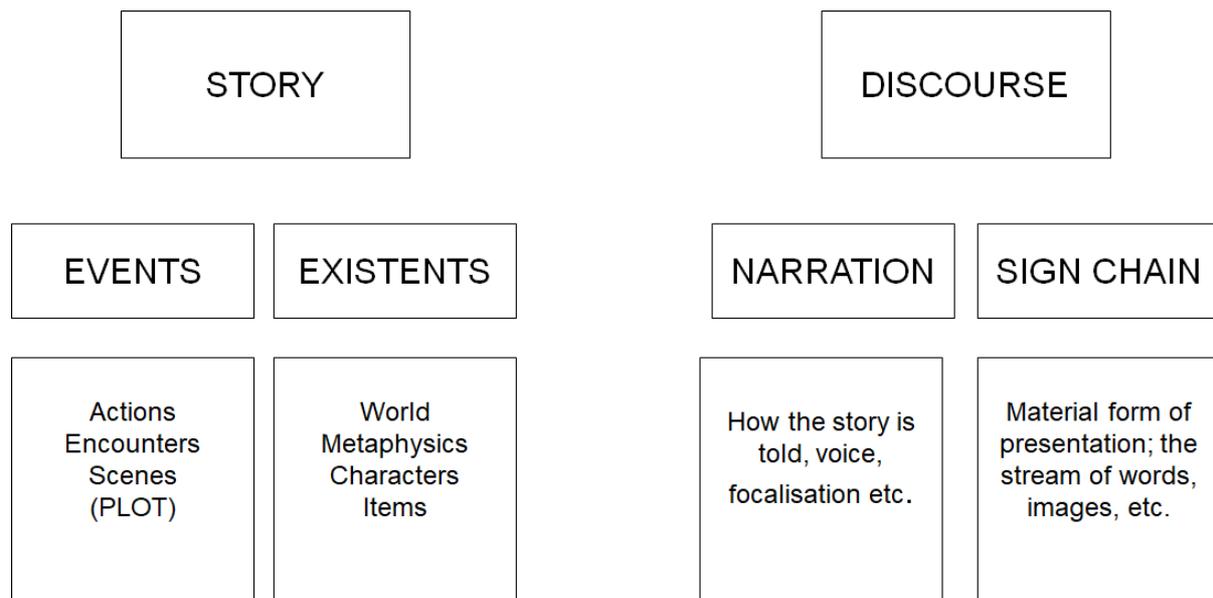


Figure 14 - Distilled Narratological Model.

In simple structuralist terms a narrative is broken down into *story* and *Discourse*; *what happens* and how that *what happens* is *transmitted to the reader*. The story is further broken down into fictive elements: Events and Existents. Events are the actions: the things that happen and the order in which they take place²². Existents are the objects within the narrative, the world itself, things within it, places, and the characters that inhabit it.

Discourse consists of the narration — how the story is told, the voice, the focal position of the narrator — and, what Aarseth (2015) describes as the *sign chain*: The way in which the material is presented, the order of words and images; in discussion of the narrative of a computer game this would also include the way that the game is presented and played.

I move on to show the intersections between this model and larp. I then extend it to include those elements which are not represented. Following my own design method for larps, I begin with *existents* and then move on to *events*. I then introduce

²² The Russian formalists used similar terms *fabula* and *sjuzhet* — the “raw material of a story,” and “the way a story is organised” (Cobley, 1994). There is not an exact mapping here, as *fabula* would tend to intersect with some aspects of existents as well. In addition, *sjuzhet* is occasionally translated as “plot” (rather than “emplotment”) which creates a problem when discussing larp as it is a word with a very specific meaning. (Bruner, I think uses plot)

enactments as a third mode and introduce concepts that are unique to participatory interactions.

Existents

World

One of the jobs of a larpwright is to design and describe the storyworld. This could be a simple scenario for a Black Box,²³ the selection of a historical setting for a period piece, or the creation of a fully realised world for a large-scale fantasy game.

For example, the larp, *Fat Man Down* (2009), is set in the here and now. Thus, the world does not need a description, because we know it well enough to play in it. Whereas *Winson Green Prison* (2016) is a larp about suffragettes set in the early 20th century, the larp runners gave participants a brief introduction to the historical setting and read out a paragraph about the fight for women's votes. *Fortune & Felicity* (2017) was based on the novels of Jane Austen. Thus, its world was a fictional pseudo-historical Regency setting; the larp pre-supposed players would have a passing knowledge of Austen's work.

At the other end of the scale, *College of Wizardry* has over 500 pages of background information that describes the fictional world of the Witchards and *Empire LRP* has around half a million words of worldbuilding on its online wiki. I will discuss worldbuilding as a part of narrative design in chapter four.

Place / Setting

Place is a specific part of the storyworld. Most larps — with the exception of some highly experimental art larps — have a setting, a diegetic location where the in-character action will take place. For example, Primrose Park, in *Fortune and Felicity*, is diegetically a fashionable country estate somewhere in England where the well-to-do would come to see and be seen and try to make a suitable or preferential match for their offspring. The players of the larp understood that the events of the game would take place in 'Primrose Park.' Whilst in game conversations often veered towards the

²³ Black Box larps are played out in a simple theatrical space — ideally a literal black painted room with some lighting — they seem quite Brechtian

state of the roads on the journey to or from the place²⁴, the participants understood the *place* of the action.

Black Box larps might not be immersive in the same way, but the place is clearly defined to the players. *Winson Green Prison* had two locations; a holding cell for the Suffragettes to wait in, and a room for the menfolk to sit and talk in while they waited for their women to be released. These were represented by tables and chairs in the black box space. Again, participants understood that “here” was Winson Green Prison.



Figure 15 - Primrose Park: *Fortune & Felicity*. (Hotel Medevi Brunn, Motala, Sweden) Photo by Kalle Lantz.

Things (“Items”)

I acknowledge that different larp cultures approach existent diegetic items in very different ways. In UK terms, an ‘item’ is an object or item that exists within the diegetic space that can have an impact upon that space. They will often be marked with an off-game signifier that shows that they are special in some way. For example, a printed ribbon, or a laminated card attached to the item. For larps that involve

²⁴ One of the meta-techniques of *Fortune & Felicity*. The male characters were expected to keep the conversation going and to be entertaining — to do more of the social labour than perhaps they do in real life — and female characters could signal that they were finding the topic of conversation dull by talking about the weather or the state of the roads.

simulated combat, specially constructed weapons made from foam and latex, or blank and cap firing guns also fit into this category. Within the diegesis the weapon is a real weapon. Being hit with one represents being hit with a real weapon, made from steel, in anger. There are also diegetic items that have an extra-diegetic effect. For example, in *Fat Man Down* (2009) the player of the Fat Man is given a few pieces of chocolate. If they eat one of the pieces of chocolate during a scene of the larp, the attitude of the other players to them will change for the better until the end of that scene. Some larps have in-game currency — represented by metal or plastic coins — and some larps have cards that represent the ownership of an item without there needing to be a physical representation of said item available in game.

In some larps, this idea of having semi-diegetic items is anathema. They focus on a 360-degree immersion and having something like a latex weapon or a scroll with an off-game description of what happens if a character reads it would break that immersion. For example, in *Inside Hamlet* the swords used for duelling are fencing swords rather than latex facsimiles.



Figure 16 - larp weapons, these produced by Medlock Armouries in the UK.

Characters

The *character* existent is the means by which the participant interacts with the larp. Without the second skin of a character, a participant will tend to struggle to enter the “ludic heterocosm”²⁵ (Vella, 2015). For example, as General Norman Whiteford, I was able to be the tyrannical gothic shadow over Primrose Park; as Simon Brind I would have been an awkward immersion-breaking audience for the play of the actual participants.



Figure 17 - General Norman Whiteford. Photo by Kalle Lantz & Frida Selvén.

The concept of *heterocosm* seems useful to the interrogation of larp, but as Bolter argues, describing the text as heterocosm implies a passive reading where the reader ‘loses themselves’ in the story (Bolter, 2001) but larpers cannot be passive. Someone who is simply an audience member in costume is not larping; they are scenery or a voyeur at best. Whilst modes and levels of engagement in the process of play (and larp) undoubtedly shift during the course of the game, if a participant does not engage, does not assert their agency to affect the story, does not play their character, then they are not a serious part of the diegesis. If they do, however, then

²⁵ If a heterocosm is the idea of a textual, represented world, then a ludic heterocosm – the IF game, *Adventure*, is “indebted for its ontological nature and aesthetic character to the formal qualities of the medium of its presentation – that is, through its being established as a gameworld.”

they are *playing*. Thus, Vella's distinction of *ludic* heterocosm is preferred. There are different types of character, most notably the distinction between player and non-player characters (PC and NPC).

Backstory

Backstory bridges the gap between worldbuilding and character. It usually takes the form of pieces of shared history that help to position a character into the world or to allow access to plot events. In fiction, backstory tends to be for the purposes of exposition, or because the author wishes to do interesting things with time. Backstory in larp — when delivered in advance of the larp — performs much the same function, but it comes with an inherent offer of action, or resolution. For example, a backstory that implies a midnight meeting with the Devil (*Freakshow*); the expectation is that the events of the larp will extend or resolve that *mytheme*²⁶.

Events

Some larps — particularly those that self-define themselves as “Nordic” or “Nordic style” — do not have organiser-initiated events. They consider the narratological system of a larp that was running to be ‘closed’ and they do not intervene in any way. Instead, all of the events are organised or initiated by the players. The UK larp tradition is very different. Organiser initiated and pre-planned events are common and designed to influence or drive the diegesis of the larp. These events — which are commonly referred to as *plot* — don't fit the Aristotelian definition of the term.

Lindley and Eladhari (2005) discuss the narrative structure of Trans-Reality Role-Playing Games and consider larp as a part of their study. They break down the diegesis of a story into specific objects and events and suggest that the plot is a presentation of these elements, with “expressive variations of emphasis.” Whilst this definition of plot seems to work on a textual level — i.e., if we were looking at the text of a narrative — it is less useful when discussing larp because for larp the word *plot* tends to describe a planned series of events that have not yet happened. A larp writer will create artefacts such as a “plot document” or the “plot for an event.” The events detailed in the plot will not necessarily take place and, fundamental to this study, if

²⁶ The basic unit of mythology. Sometimes, as in this instance, synonymous with “trope.”

they do take place are unlikely to unfold in a way that the originators could have predicted.

Plot

Plot in larp has more in common then, with the active term “plotting” — scoundrels planning in dark basements — than with E.M. Forster’s (1927) example of a plot as “The King Died, and then The Queen died of grief.” In larp, a plot would more likely be “The King dies and then the players need to do something, or the Queen will die of grief.”

Larp plot may be Aristotelean (*mythos*) at the point of conception — it will be “whole,” and will have a beginning, middle, and end — and it will likely fit the same pattern when the larp is complete, but something happens in larp between story and discourse. Plot is a *ludus* — *possibles narratifs* (Frasca, 1999) — and the latter coming into being after the sequence was built.

Abbott identifies this liminal space between story and discourse during his observations on the uneasy relationship between the role-playing game (RPG) and narrative theory.

“The players enter into the game with their characters (or “avatars” in gaming discourse), but underlying each game is a kind of skeletal story, with critical “plot points,” all under the control of the “Game Master.” Here is something that appears to be narrative but that is so free that players, while they are involved in trying to understand the larger story, have (within a range of limits, depending on the game) the capability of introducing events on their own.” (Abbott, 2002, p.35)

Unlike playing a TRPG, the amount of “control” the gamemaster actually has in a larp is quite limited. The players enter into the larp with characters and there will usually be an underlying plot or plots. The players certainly have the ability to introduce events of their own; arguably every action they take will be a new event. This leads to what Lindley and Eladhari describe as a “performative multitext” without an authoritative story (Lindley and Eladhari, 2005,) so every participant has their own subjective story.

Abbott wonders whether we can describe something that is happening right now as a narrative; he argues that — unless we can describe the events of our life as

they happen as a narrative — that it is not the right word. He discusses the use of the word story as an alternative, “Story, you will remember is something that is delivered by narrative but seems (important word) to pre-exist it” (ibid., 2002, p.36). Narrative, he tells us conveys story ... He remains uncertain about the use of the word story to describe the events of life or of a RPG as they are happening, suggesting “latent stories, virtual stories, untold stories, story material, pre-narrative” and — interestingly — “life itself,” before going on to explain that he is writing about things in story form as they are recounted (i.e., narrative).

This gels with Genette’s cautious use of the word story for the signified or narrative content as distinct from narrative for the discourse and narration for the act of telling (Genette, 1980).

I suggest the active verb, storymaking, is more useful to a discussion of larp. The creation, or co-creation of the story is authorial, collaborative, and ongoing. The story is not complete until it is finished, but it is being ‘written’ in real time, by multiple authors. This means the emergent events of a role-playing game are different to a traditional narrative text. The creation of the narrative is something that happens after the events have taken place and, if this is the case, when discussing larp, it is possible to separate discourse from story.

Discourse — mainly narration, unless the larp is being documented in some other way — becomes separate from the larp itself, with the exception of those events that are narrated during the larp; here narratology identifies the diegetic position of the larper who relates (or narrates) during a larp. I will discuss this in more detail in chapter six.

My starting point for the storymaking Model was that plot (in the larp sense of the word) exists only in potentia. The planned events and existents are only static before the larp begins. If I write a larp — its plot and characters — I am the author, up to the point that players get involved. Once that happens, I no longer have control over my own work, nor the characters within it. Here the process of playing the larp, of plot becoming story happens. Finally, when the story is complete, it can be narrated; we have discourse (or many streams of discourse).

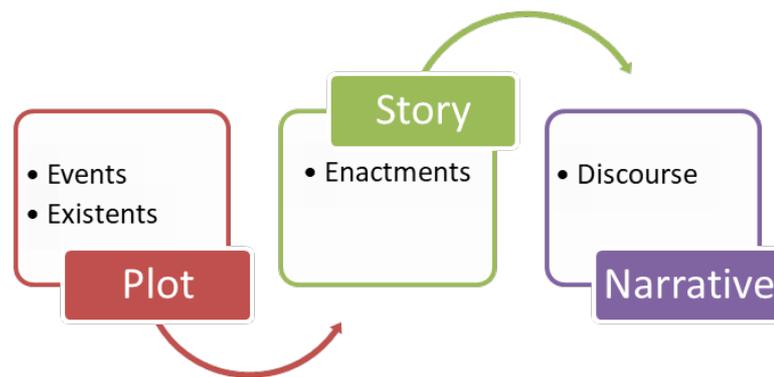


Figure 18 - The Storymaking Model

Enactments

I rely on Ryan’s statement that “Interactive narratology does not have to be built entirely from scratch, since it involves the same building blocks as the traditional.” (Ryan, 2006, p.100) both traditional narratives and interactive texts have time, place, characters, events and existents, but there are new behaviours and new elements of both an interactive text and additional layers needed to understand a participatory narrative like a larp. The question of how to “expand the catalogue of modes,” (ibid) has been a significant challenge. Early drafts of the model above focussed on extending the *discourse* tree, but these proved unhelpful as trying to describe story as it emerges in terms of narrative does not effectively acknowledge that it is in the process of emerging; they can only be described as narrative after the fact. Instead, I have added another item at the Events/Existents level — a process I am calling *Enactment*.²⁷ This provides a space to interrogate the *storymaking* that happens during a larp. It also gives us a convenient narratological mode for discussing the meta-game elements and allows the separation of the meta-layer from the events and existents. This process has an uneasy relation with the discourse, simply because

²⁷ The choice of the word enactment is not simply a conceit in order to select another word starting with an E — Although I acknowledge it was a factor — it is an evocation of praxis, but without the Marxist meaning. That is not to say that larp cannot be used “towards changing society” (Cieszkowski, 1838 in Cieszkowski 1979) – it can, but not all larp is political.

discourse does happen during runtime: a participant relating events that have (just) happened during the larp.

Participants

Whereas narrative discourse considers focalization — “the position or quality of consciousness through which we “see” events in the narrative” (Abbott, 2002) — for the purposes of enactment it is necessary to understand the location of the person portraying a character. (I introduce the concept of location in chapter 6).

“How an individual is located physically, socially, sexually, culturally, and historically, by herself and by others, and how she is positioned according to class, gender, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality, among other influences, make location in all its complex variability come to the fore as an essential consideration in how meaning is made, valued, and distributed by readers and writers.” (Upton, 2015, p.33)

The located person — the larper — is not a part of the diegesis, nor are they a reader, but they are an active contributor to the enactment whilst also being affected by the process of enactment. The term I will use to describe this individual is participant.

Rules & Metatechniques

Immersionist larp tries to reject metalepsis by maintaining a 360 illusion; however, most larps (and arguably even the immersionist forms) have a set of rules, meta-techniques, techniques for calibration, or safety measures that inform the enactment. For some UK larps there are lengthy rule books, with skills and spells to learn; for other larps there are simple mechanics for escalating or de-escalating a scene. These are not a part of the diegesis, but they inform the diegesis.

Metaphysics

There are some artefacts of larp design that are similar to existents, but which have a slightly different function in participatory fiction to narrative fiction. The first of these is metaphysics.

The metaphysics are the inherent logic of the world created by the larp designers. The key difference between worldbuilding and metaphysics is the level of detail involved and the visibility of that detail. In a novel, the metaphysics inform and constrain the author, in larp they have a direct effect upon the story; well-constructed larp metaphysics are able to provide the answers to any philosophical questions that arise pertaining to the diegesis (Brind, 2021.) In the larp *Odyssey*, there was a published set of rules for participants that enabled their characters to cast magic; this is very standard for most fantasy larps. During the design for *Odyssey*, there were also definitions of what the gods were, how they came about, their limits, and how their magic and the magic of participants worked. The designers understood the true nature of the game universe. They did not publish this information. “Players actually discovered and inferred a lot of it for themselves during the run of the game.” (Brind, 2016)

I explain that metaphysics are useful because they shape how the story works. In *Odyssey* the metaphysics provided limits to divine powers and that drove a narrative consistency; things didn’t happen arbitrarily; they made logical sense. Based on the feedback received after the games, when players tried something and it failed, their assumptions tended to be in-game (“What did we do wrong?”) rather than out of game (“the organisers railroaded this plot”)

Arguably, factors such as bleed²⁸ also affect the enactment and will be discussed as a part of the meta-layer too.

Agency

In enactment terms this refers to participant agency, rather than the agency of their character to act with intent. Different approaches to larp allow for different degrees of agency. These range from railroaded plots, fate-play, and linear adventures, where there is very little participant agency, via forking path plots — where participant actions have an effect on the narrative — to a more reactive style of larp that allows the most participant agency.

²⁸ An exchange of thoughts or emotions between participant and character or character and participant

Crises

These are events that take place in the enactment of a larp that go contrary to plan. From a Tudor Monarch wilfully sabotaging a planned event, to high winds preventing three sailing ships from leaving harbour for 24 hours (*Skull and Crossbones*, 2017) to participants skilfully assassinating a key NPC (*Odyssey*) these are events that throw the storytelling process into a state of chaos. As *events* are planned as a part of *plot*, *crises* are the unplanned equivalent during *story*.

Extended Narratological Model

In this section I have identified what larp and narrative have in common. First, the narratological concepts of “story” and “discourse” were defined and mapped onto their conceptual equivalents in larp in an attempt to draw clear parallels. Secondly, terminological issues around the use of the word “plot” and “narrative” were explored. From this I propose the following model for extending fictive narratology to encompass discussions of larp. This extended model allows the use of common narratological constructs and methods to discuss plot, story, and narrative in larp and participatory fiction.

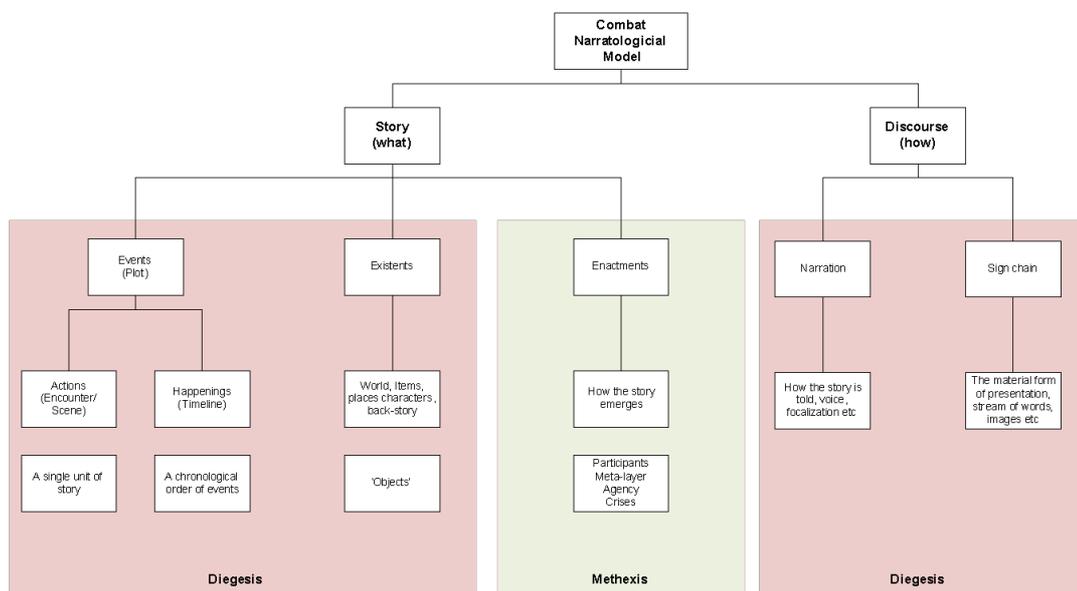


Figure 19 - Extended Narratological Model - Combat Narratology.

I have chosen to nest *enactments* underneath *story* because they have a transitional function. Enactment takes the *events* and *existents* and enables the story

to emerge in real time. (Enactment is not a diegetic event, but rather it is *methectic*²⁹. This is a superset of diegesis that describes what happens within the ludic heterocosm. I continue to use the term *diegetic* in this study as it is in common use in larp theory). Enactment has much in common with the process of writing or acting, in as much as it is a creative process. But, as Abbott points out, it is much like real life; there is no text and it is not in itself a form of narrative discourse (Abbott, 2008, p.36). Instead, the process of the creation of a larp begins with *plot* (or plotting,) the play of the larp generates *story*, and the documentation or recounting of the larp is *narrative*.

Plot

As introduced in the storymaking model, *plot* represents events and existents planned by the larpwright. Based on a personal review of UK and International larps written/played since 1986, I identify three broad approaches to the design of plot for a larp; they represent the amount of agency the larpwright wants to give to the players. These are Linear, Nodal, and Event based. In simple terms, these three approaches can be summarised as:

- Linear: “Events X and Y will take place, irrespective of what the players do.”
- Nodal: “If the players do *this* thing, then the outcome will be event X, otherwise it will be event Y...”
- Event or Responsive: “the players are free to do anything. Whilst the *probable* outcomes are X and Y, the larp is prepared to react to other outcomes.”

This thesis does not privilege a specific approach to plot writing, as all are valid depending on the artistic and aesthetic intentions of the writer. In practice many larps are a hybrid, mixing elements of these three approaches. I will now discuss each of them in more detail.

Linear

As I described earlier in this chapter, the earliest larp adventures tended to be linear. Based on table-top RPGs, an adventure party would progress through a ‘dungeon’ and would have a number of ‘encounters.’ The story and narrative would

²⁹ From Methexis, “group sharing,” a collectively created diegesis.

follow the pattern common to the *Portal-Quest Fantasy* (Mendlesohn, 2008, Chapter 1) being a journey through a strange and perilous world. The flow of the early larp linear therefore is intrinsically the same as *Alice in Wonderland*, or *The Hobbit*; a game with a “sequential plotline” (Mars, 2018)

Linear plot writing also encompasses larps with a pre-determined ending, for example, *Inside Hamlet*, a larp with a three-act structure. It ends with a set piece performance by some of the royal characters — an edited version of Act V scene ii of the play — and the arrival of Fortinbras/the leader of the Communists. The final line of *Inside Hamlet*, “Go, bid the soldiers shoot” is followed by the lights going out and the sound of machine guns firing as any surviving characters are put against a wall and shot. The plot of *Inside Hamlet* is on rails. Even though there is an illusion of agency, in as much as certain characters can order military units to move around on a map, their fate is sealed. The map game is unwinnable and nothing that the players do here will affect the outcome of the larp. There is no way for Hamlet to survive, no salvation for Ophelia and no redemption for the members of the Court of King Claudius. However, linear design should not be taken to imply a lack of complexity or finesse: the stories of the characters in the larp — within that linear narrative — are tremendously powerful and complex; the relative simplicity of the narrative design privileges the ontological / experience design of the piece which allows players to create stories inside that narrative space. Linear plot does not necessarily equate to linear story. This type of larp has a closed narrative system, there is no requirement or opportunity for the larpwrights to intervene during runtime. However, the design of *Inside Hamlet* has iterated across its multiple runs and changes to the narrative system have happened outside of runtime.

Larps that rely heavily on fate-play or instructed play — methods that instruct the players to take their characters in a specific direction or to end with a specific outcome — are also linear. Here, it is not just the end of the larp that is predetermined, but the journey taken by the characters within the larp. Thus, what the larps in this category have in common is that the intended story is well understood before the larp begins; and that the plot and story will tend not to diverge. There is little room for participant agency in the design of a linear adventure or a linear larp. Indeed, by designing to enable agency, the larpwright is rejecting the linear approach.

Branching Path/Nodal

Nodal (or branching path) narrative design is a feature of interactive new media. Marsh describes the user controlled non-linear narrative structure as like a spliced storyline or edits of a film, (Marsh, 2003, p.94) but I use the analogy of a choose-your-own adventure story. This design acknowledges some agency on the part of the players to select a direction for the story to take at specific points during the larp, but controls both when these choices can be made and what the choices are. Harviainen (2009, p.99) describes these as “plot waypoints.” These may be set piece encounters, significant battles, political decisions, or success/failure points during the plot:story interface. An example of this is the Southern Way (Italian) larp, *Black Friday* (2014, 2016) in which the players took on the roles of miners, scientists, law enforcement officers, and special forces soldiers during the outbreak of a virulent plague which broke out in “Liberty Town,” a remote settlement in Wyoming. The flowchart below shows the three possible endings of the larp and how the players would end up with one of those endings. In *Black Friday* no other outcomes were possible. To the extent that when players at the second international run in 2016 started to take an approach that was not supported by this model, they were instructed by the organisers to change what they were doing in-game because it did not fit the model.

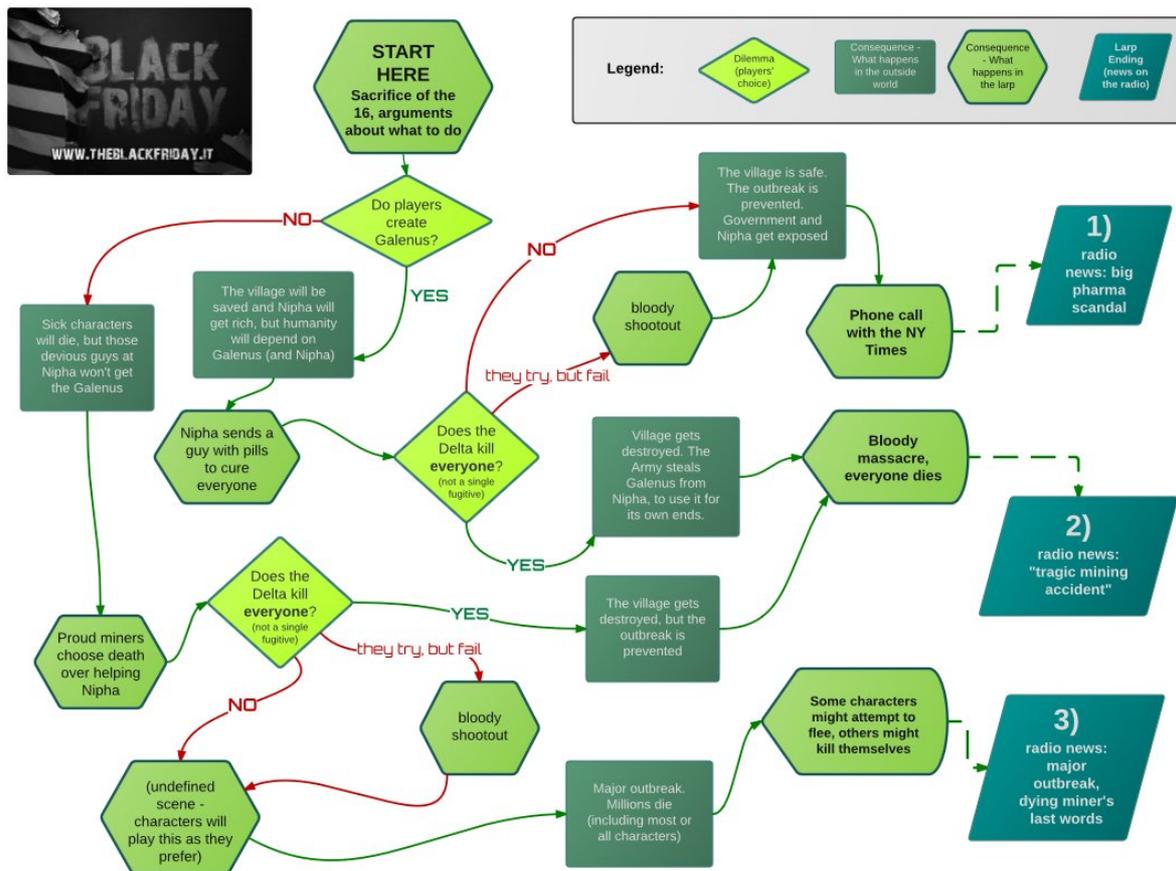


Figure 20 - Black Friday Epilogues, Amantini et al, 2016, Used with permission.

This approach to design can also include larps with single or multiple plot arcs where the actions of the players may have an impact on what is to follow, as long as the designers have predefined what follows those actions.

Event Based / Reactive Plot

Pettersson (2017, p.83) describes *Black Friday* as a simulation. This is an interesting idea as it encourages the larpwright to think of the narrative design systematically. I will return to this when I discuss object-oriented plot (below), but it is also relevant when considering larp plot not as a sequence of linear events, nor a single path through the narrative design, but rather a system of opportunities and events which may (or may not) happen depending entirely upon player action or inaction. The “moment-based” story design described by Thomas (2017, p.271) fits this category as he makes it clear that these *moments* are opportunities for players to experience events rather than fixed occurrences. This approach to plot design —

thinking of it as a system rather than a series — builds player agency into the design. The writers have no intention as to how the story will unfold but have created Sloane's "dream weaving machine" (2000 p.23). I return to this below in the section on levers.

There is a subtle difference between event and reactive larp. The former is designed in such a way that participant action or inaction triggers an event, the latter is designed to enable events to emerge. For example, *Avalon* (2018) was largely a reactive larp. Whilst a few specific events were linear (with player agency restricted), in most cases the story that emerged was created as a reaction to player action. The larp contained two separate NPC factions who the players were able to meet and interact with. These factions had their own cultures, objectives, and characters.

Dissemination

One of the basic design decisions — particularly for larps with large numbers of players — is how will the players find out about the plot during the larp. From a wounded messenger stumbling into the player's camp deep in the marshes (*Washing of Three Tides*, 2001) to phone calls coming into a besieged castle (*Inside Hamlet*, 2018) there needs to be a method that allows plot events to be triggered. In linear larps this will usually be players arriving at the location associated with a new encounter and at UK fest larps this often involves an NPC or a letter or document.

Access

Extending the question of dissemination is the problem of access. As a larpwright the designer wants to ensure that plot reaches the right players. In most cases the "right" players are synonymous with "all of the players." There needs to be equal access to the plot of a larp, such that all participants who want access to it can get access to it, or there needs to be multiple threads of plot, each aimed at different sets of players (Tardivel et al., 2018. p.125).

Levers

For any narrative design, the question of how and when players will interact with the plot is important. Harrold (2018. pp.189-190) argues that interaction is what makes larp stand out; he asks what 'levers' a player must pull so that their decision has consequences? Sometimes there needs to be a mechanism for a player's action to be seen by the plot/story team. If these levers are diegetic, rather than built into the

rules and metatechniques of the larp, then they are a matter of plot design. For both Nodal and Event based plots, these levers could be points of interaction or moments of decision. The example given in the introduction to this thesis, of the prince handing over an amulet of wraith control to the wraiths, is a lever. When a lever is pulled in a planned way a pre-arranged event is triggered, when it is pulled in an unexpected way, a narrative crisis usually follows.

Endings

From a dramaturgical point of view, if nothing else, knowing how a larp will end is important. For *Avalon* (2018) the plot writers did not know what would happen. There were so many possible outcomes that the larpwrights had considered that every character at the end could be a ghost or a spirit; It could have been a funeral, or a celebration, a battlefield, or a peace party. With no certainty about the story, the larp ended with a set-piece ritual, guided by NPCs, which could be tweaked to reflect the story of the larp, regardless of which direction the players took it in.



Figure 21 - *Avalon* — Final Ritual — Photo by Nadina Dobrowolska.

Section 3 - Object Oriented Modelling of Plot

This section introduces an object-oriented approach for modelling plot. This derives from Object Oriented Design (“OOD”) which originates with software engineering. I will introduce the idea of object-oriented character design and extend this to include other existents and events. I develop this method of describing and modelling the narrative system of a larp throughout this study. I further suggest that by modelling a narrative system using an object-oriented approach, this allows the larpwright to simulate the runtime of the larp and identify the potential structural strengths and weaknesses of the whole.

Building on Frasca’s argument that the authorial approach for novelists and simulation authors are different in as much as the later needs to write behavioural rules that will result in specific actions (2001, p.46) the larp designer privileges certain outcomes as a part of the character design. Consider Mr. Darcy from Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). The reader comes to understand that he is a wealthy man, a romantic certainly, but very aware of social status and his position within the (perceived) hierarchy. His pride and arrogance are overt, his tact and authenticity are less obvious. As a character he is far more complex than he first seems. Similarly, Elizabeth Bennet, the heroine of the novel, is quick witted, driven to find happiness, and a romantic to the core. She uses her intelligence as armour, to keep the world at arm’s length until she is entirely satisfied with it. Arguably she is quick to judge, making assumptions about Darcy that she later decides were wrong. Elizabeth also receives romantic interest from Mr Collins, a man who will inherit her father’s estate upon his death. Austen takes the reader on a romantic journey where these characters find love and happiness. The difference between a novelist and a larp designer is that the novelist has authorial control over the story, whereas the larpwright cedes authorial ownership to the participants once the larp begins.

In some larps there exist pre-written romantic relations between characters. In *Fortune & Felicity* (2017) — a larp based on the novels of Jane Austen — most characters had one or two potential romances written in. “It was not implied or encouraged by all gamemasters to make play outside of that. Many people felt obligated to play out the story rather than forging their own path” (Kemper, 2017). An object based approach to design acknowledges that a character (or a player) may form relations (romantic or otherwise) with anyone in the larp; the simulation is not

under the control of the larpwright and any social rules they may seek to apply to the experience are likely to be subverted by the players. In OOD, an object is an entity which other objects can interact with. The potential *methods* for interaction are designed, but the interactions themselves are not specified. I explain how this applies below.

If the larp designer was to add a fourth character to the mix — in this instance Lord Byron — then Elizabeth Bennet may (or may not) have been interested in a man who mixed “affectionate sweetness and playfulness” (Byron, 1831, p.4) with being famously mad, bad and dangerous to know. A multi-millionaire by today's standards, Byron's estate seems to have been larger than that of Mr Darcy. Byron's attitude to women was not impressive, however, even by the standards of the time.

Below is a simplified set of objects showing four characters, Elizabeth, Collins, Darcy, and Byron, with a set of arbitrary attributes assigned to each one. The objects here have two *operations* — Judge and Relationship — which the process uses to consider the interactions between the objects. The attributes, listed below, are arbitrary. (I return to the importance of *operations* in Chapter 6).

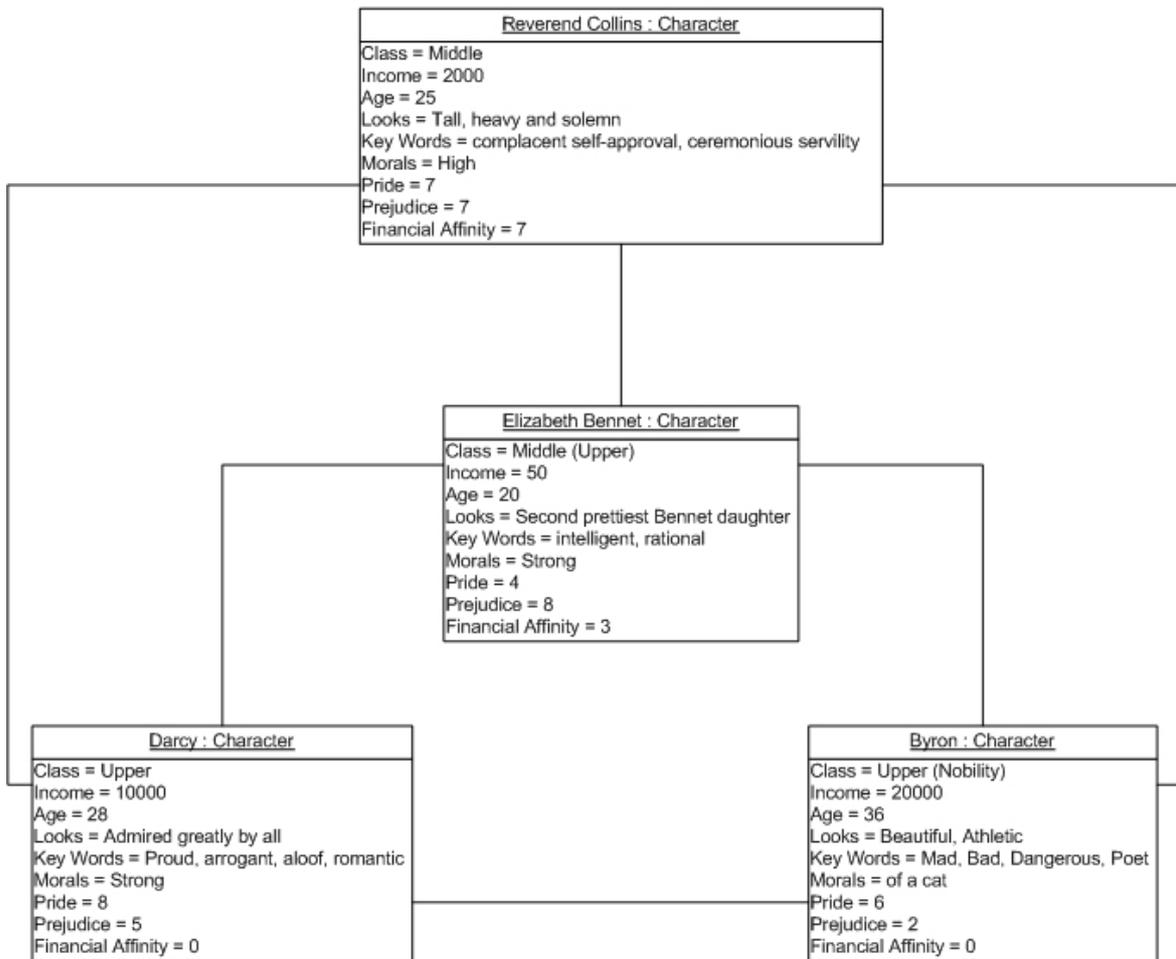


Figure 22 - Entity Relationship Model — Pride & Prejudice & Byron

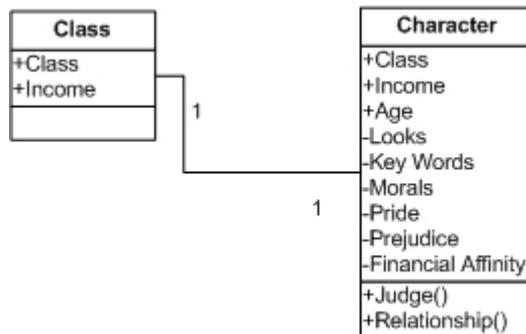


Figure 23 - Character Object Model — Pride & Prejudice & Byron.

| Attribute | Description |
|--------------------|--|
| Class | Refers here to social class. Confusingly, this is also shown as a class in its own right as there are specific attributes and attitudes that one could ascribe to various social classes. |
| Income | In pounds, per annum. From the text it is possible to know the fictional incomes of both Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy. Both Darcy and Byron were millionaires by today's standards. |
| Age | Age of the characters in 1813 |
| Looks | The physical looks of the character |
| Key Words | A few words that describe the character |
| Morals | A simple description of the morality of the character |
| Pride | How important is perceived social status to the character. Rendered here a numerical score from 1-10, with 10 being the highest |
| Prejudice | Rendered here a numerical score from 1-10, with 10 being the highest |
| Financial Affinity | How important is income to this character's decisions. Rendered here a numerical score from 1-10, with 10 being the highest and 0 meaning it is not relevant at all. But see the "Pride" attribute. Wealth may not be important, but class still may be. |

As Jackson (1995 p.137) reminds us "Objects are reactive rather than active. If you don't send a message to an object, it won't do anything," so this model also includes two operations: *Judge* and *Relationship*.

| Operation | Description |
|--------------|---|
| Judge | The character makes a decision about another character which affects how they will behave towards them. |
| Relationship | The current state of the relationship between the two characters. |

By interrogating this model, it is immediately clear that it is incomplete. Whilst Mr. Collins is set to propose to Elizabeth, there is nothing here that will help us to predict that relationship; a writer would need to increase the number of keywords for this model to be useful, or carefully select the ones included. In the case of Mr Collins, it would be a part of the character’s description:

“You hold Lady Catherine in the highest regard. She has 'urged' you to find a wife as quickly as possible. Your second cousin, Elizabeth Bennet, is the logical choice, she is most suitable and in need of a husband as she has no fortune.”

With this information the model would suggest to Mr Collins that the operation Judge (Elizabeth Bennet) would suggest that Mr Collins’ relationship with Elizabeth could be “violently in love.” Conversely Elizabeth’s operation:

Judge (Mr Collins)

returns a less favourable relationship — she turns him down — and this leads to a repeat of the Judge () operation, Mr Collins is no longer violently in love, but deeply offended. These examples, of course, are given with the benefit of the text and the hindsight that comes with it; in a larp we are dealing with possible and/or probable outcomes.

By adding Byron to the model then, it is possible to consider alternative outcomes. For example, what happens if Mr Darcy elopes to Greece with Byron? This is an unexpected outcome. It is not that the writer expects Elizabeth to fall for Byron; indeed, the fact that he is wealthy, intelligent and both beautiful and athletic does not sway her, because Elizabeth is intelligent enough to see the man that lurks beneath the surface. However, for Darcy, Byron offers everything that Elizabeth does, plus he has a title and an extra twenty thousand a year. In this way the model allows us to consider edge cases that may have an impact on the narrative design. If the larp is designed to end with a wedding, but two of the characters have followed their hearts

overseas and the other two are estranged, then the narrative system is in chaos and can have no satisfactory ending without intervention.

Using a simple object-oriented relationship model to interrogate the relationship between pre-written characters, and to examine their proposed and possible interactions, it is possible to understand where narrative stress points may occur. This is not done with the intention of removing these stress points, but rather to make the writer aware of where they are. This process does not only apply to the personalities of the characters. Steele (2016) suggests that the mechanical rules of a larp are interpreted by players in a way not dissimilar to a computer running code, a player being hit by a weapon in the UK larp system *Labyrinthe*, will know that a single weapon blow delivers six points of damage. They will calculate the amount of damage inflicted and will react accordingly. And this meta-information is also relevant to object-oriented plot design if it is a part of the larp. A character with a significant skill with a sword, for example, is likely to have a degree of confidence in matters of escalating conflict over one who does not. It is not material to the process whether an attribute refers to a mechanical rule or a character trait; understanding that the mechanics of the larp may have an effect on the story is a part of the overall design.

Constructing an Object-Oriented Narrative System

From Frasca's claim that a simulation can "can express messages in ways that narrative simply cannot," (Frasca, 2003, p.225) and Eco (1989)'s idea that there is a class of art "works in movement" that have in common "the artist's decision to leave the arrangement of some of their constituents either to the public or to chance" (Robey, in Eco, 1989, Introduction) it is useful to treat the narrative system of a larp like a simulation.³⁰

At this point, however, we must avoid a possible misunderstanding: life in its immediacy is not "openness" but chance. In order to turn this chance into a cluster of possibilities, it is first necessary to provide it with some organization. In other words, it

³⁰ Frasca's claim that works in movement should be "understood in the same way as Murray's concept of "transformation" in computer software" is interesting, but not directly useful.

is necessary to choose the elements of a constellation among which we will then—and only then—draw a network of connections. (Eco, 1989, P.116)

By modelling this system of diegetic objects (events, existents, and enactments) and considering the interactions between these objects within the methectic network — literally the “messages” that pass between the objects — the larp writers are able to identify any structural weaknesses in the plot and narrative design of the piece. This approach applies the same flat ontology to the model as to the object approach to narrative design. Each element of the system is added to the model in order to derive a symbolic representation of a simulation. Included here are NPCs — what Figa and Tarau (2003) described as autonomous agents — which the process treats in exactly the same way as other characters; whilst the larp writers have a greater degree of control over the portrayal of NPC characters, they still have agency, sometimes equivalent to those characters portrayed by players.

Once the model is completed, the larpwright can use it to simulate the runtime of the larp. The simulation here is a paper-based exercise, best run with a group, but I suggest it could also be rendered as a playtest with a small group of larpers. The simulation has two phases. The first uses an entity relationship model to consider the interactions between the characters in the larp (PC and NPC). The larpwright considers both pre-written relations between characters (if they are a part of the larp design) and emergent interactions. They are looking for:

- Issues with the plot. For example, the characters who are written to be antagonists have too much in common and it seems possible that peace may break out between them.
- Potential moments of narrative crisis. For example, Elizabeth Bennet falling for Lord Byron.
- Structural problems with the character: they are a pinch point for interactions and are likely to be too busy or be in the way of other players' actions.
- Weaknesses with the character, they only have one interaction that makes sense and may find themselves shut out of play, particularly if that relation does not work out. This is a real issue for some larps with pre-written relations. A player may opt out of a romantic relation, for example, and in doing so cut the player of the other character off from what was intended to be the main plot of their game.

- The number of relations they have (they do not have to be the same for every character, but large discrepancies need to be plausible).

The second stage of this process looks at the complete ontological model and looks at the messages between characters and other objects. The intention here is to simulate the function, desire, action, flaw, and trajectory (see p.80) of each character against the rest of the model. Just as Marsh (2003. p.11) argues for activity-based narrative, stating “complex narratives can be planned and modelled in a hierarchical structure”, for larps with an event-based plot it can also be used to validate player agency. In practice, particularly with larger larps and massively multiplayer larps, it seems sufficient to validate the model using the specific play styles described in chapter 6.

This simulation of the larp’s story will not prevent moments of narrative crisis; its purpose is to identify structural weaknesses in the plot and the narrative design of the larp in advance. By taking an ontological view of the larp’s narrative and including all aspects of the potential story (rather than privileging humanity) the designer can show not just character relations but the entire methectic space, allowing them to see the shape of the story and to understand the multiple protagonists and plot elements, and how they interact. This will prove valuable during run time — when the narrative wheels inevitably come off the moving train — as the model provides a structure for interrogating the chaotic narrative system.

Having considered the narrative objects of event and existent, I now move on to consider a larp from the point of view of a participant, the objects associated with enactment, and how these affect the reliability of a participant’s narrative and so make it difficult to understand the emergent story.

Chapter 5 - Every gun makes its own tune: Case Study - Conscience

"Every gun makes its own tune."

- S. Leone

Moving from the experience and processes of the larp writer here, this chapter considers the participant's experience and discusses the concept of *unreliability*. I use this term in the sense of an unreliable narrator. This theory arose from multiple studies of larps played across Europe between 2015 and 2019³¹. I focus on the problem of player agency in larp, originating from two separate autoethnographic field studies of *Conscience*, a larp produced by NotOnlyLarp in Spain. I analyse the design, the structure and plot of the larp and identify various potential causes of the subjective nature of participating in larps and identify limits of player agency. I use the ideas and questions that arise as the basis for the following chapter. This chapter is split into three sections and a conclusion. The first introduces the design of the larp, the storyworld and metaphysics. The second deconstructs the plot and characters, the third uses autoethnography to interrogate the tension between larpwright intent and player agency.

Content Warning: *Conscience* included some scenes of violence, murder, and non-consensual sex. These are not described in detail during this chapter, but they are referenced.

The Problem of Player Agency

In larp discourse, *agency* describes the ability of a participant or character to affect the story. Whilst every participant has some agency in larp — at least on a personal level to tell their own story — I am particularly interested here in their ability to “change outcomes.” (Saitta et al. 2020, p.316) This overlaps the agential experience in a digital game — a “spectatorial/participatory relationship” (Rehak, 2003, p.111) —

³¹ A full list of larps I played during this study can be found in Appendix A

but it is used here to describe an action with an intrinsic “capacity.” (Koljonen et al, 2019, p.411) Larpers are unpredictable; they will often seem to do things that are unexpected and contrary to the larpwright’s vision and this is where agency can become problematic; when this planned capacity is exceeded and the participants (try to) play outside of designed parameters. My specific interest here is in how participants seek to make story decisions which subvert the plot, *agency* affects every interaction. This chapter introduces the idea that there is a difference between agential actions that affect the story, and the *functional agency* that allows these actions to take place. Without agency, there is no opportunity for a narrative crisis as the participants can only take pre-determined actions with pre-determined outcomes. Based on this argument that agency is the problem, I explore what agency is and whether there is more than one type of agency. I describe agency’s relationship with the complex narrative system of a larp. In chapter six I decompose what the participant actually does during the larp; the problem of agency unlocks the narrative crisis.

Section 1 - The larp

This section provides information about the logistics, location, and plot of the larp. I describe the nested diegetic structure, introducing the *Mayfield model* as a means of illustrating the focal position of the characters (see chapter 4). I provide an overview of the playable character options and discuss the safety and calibration techniques. I move on to review the combat mechanics and the underlying technology used both diegetically and as metatechniques as these are constraints and methods on play which I will refer to in subsequent chapters as *functions*.

Conscience is an international larp created by NotOnlyLarp, a Spanish and Italian collective. It has been run four times, twice on consecutive weekends in early 2018 and again in the winter of 2019. It was developed over the course of twelve months following the *Southern Way Manifesto*, a narrative led approach to both writing and playing larps, which approaches “larp as art” (Chaos League, 2016). It took place at Texas Hollywood/Fort Bravo which stands in the Tabernas Badlands, at the foot of the Sierra Nevada mountains in Southern Spain. Fort Bravo was built as a movie set in the early 1970s when the area around Almeria became associated with Spaghetti Westerns (Hughes, 2004. p.xviii). It is still used as a film set but is also a tourist destination offering Western themed shows (Fort Bravo Website). The left-hand side

of the image (Figure 24 below) shows the Aleph corporate offices and the host warehouses. In the top left corner are the cabins. To the right is the part of the site designated as *the park* which consists of three main streets of the town of *Mayfield*. To the right is an area known as the *Mexican Town* which is architecturally different but still a part of *Mayfield*. To the bottom of the map is the off-game car park, and stables for the horses. The location was open to members of the general public during the day which meant that some types of play were restricted in public areas during this time.



Figure 24 - Screen capture from Aleph Security Map, Conscience Run 1 (cropped).

The larp was based upon the 2016 HBO television series, *Westworld*. It took place over approximately 60 hours across three days and two nights, starting on Saturday afternoon and continuing through to Monday evening. Whilst there was time for sleeping during the course of the larp, there were no formal breaks and the events of the larp continued throughout the period. Meals were provided. There was ready access to flush toilets and fresh water (recorded here because this is not always the case).

Participants could sign up to play one of ninety-two characters within three broad categories: *guests*, *hosts*, and *employees* of the fictional company, *Aleph*³². The diegetic structure of *Conscience* is unusual as there are nested levels of fiction. I introduce the “Mayfield” model, below, to show the nested distinction between the lifeworld (Fort Bravo, Spain, early 21st century,) the fictional storyworld of the *Conscience* theme park (its location is unspecified, but it exists sometime in a Utopian future where illness has been completely defeated) and the story-within-a-story world of *Mayfield* (American West, late 19th century) which I describe as *B-world* (from the German compound word, *binnenerzählwelt*³³).

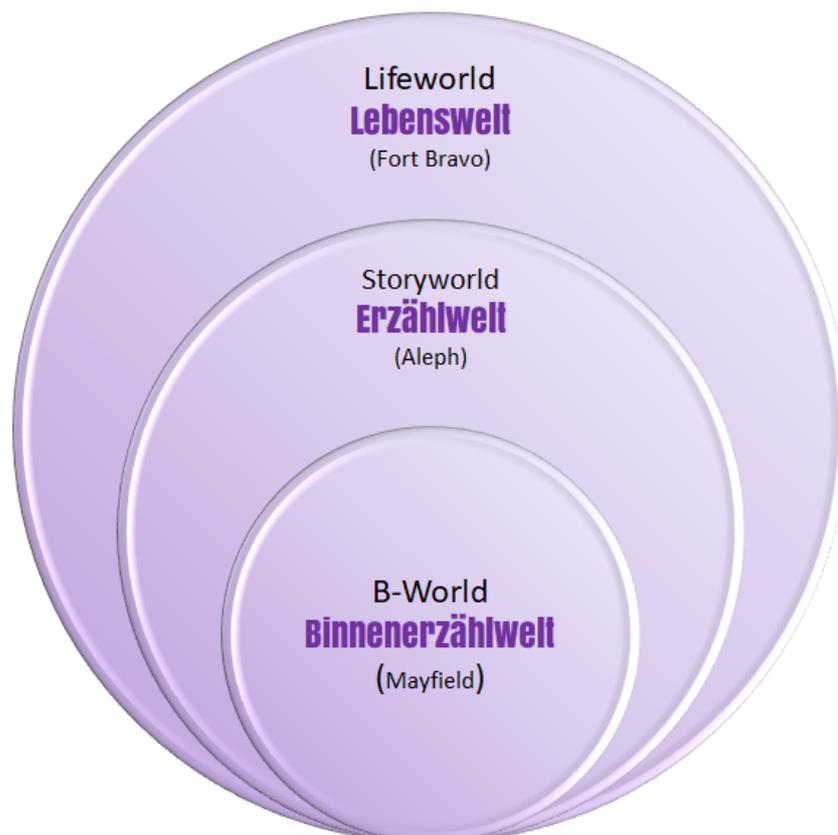


Figure 25 - The “Mayfield Model”.

The guests are human storyworld characters who are visitors to the park. They have come to “live out a true Western experience” (*Conscience* website). They move

³² As distinct from Delos in the Film and TV series

³³ “Story within a story” world

between the storyworld and the B-world in the same way that larpers move between the lifeworld and the storyworld; they are participants in the storyworld who play characters in the B-world. The guests are roughly split between “white hats,” those whose initial desires are to fully explore the Wild West experience that the B-world offers, and the “black hats,” who are there to live out their extreme fantasies of sex and violence, using and abusing the hosts. The hosts are androids created solely for the amusement of the guests. They are artefacts of the storyworld, but most start with no knowledge of it; they believe the B-world to be real. They are programmed with personalities, memories, and plots, which play out in a loop. For most of the hosts, this loop resets each day along with all memories of the previous day. Hosts are unable to permanently harm a human being, and a security system is in place to ensure that the firearms used by the hosts do no lasting damage when fired at a human. The hosts’ programming is loosely based on the Three Laws of Robotics (Asimov, 1942). Conversely, guests can damage the hosts; this imbalance is critical to the design of the larp: hosts are abused, murdered, tortured, and are subject to dehumanizing (sic) situations and sexual violence. The safety mechanics and metatechniques are designed to allow these themes to be explored consensually.

The larp was ‘zoned’ with certain activities restricted to specific locations, or at certain times of the day. Participants wore white and/or red coloured ribbons in order to opt-in to scenes of violence, or of sexual violence respectively. There were coded phrases to escalate, de-escalate, or stop a scene, and pre-negotiation was mandatory for scenes of an extreme nature. Finally, the larp made use of a series of hand gestures that could be used to subtly check-in with another participant and to establish whether they (as opposed to their character) were alright.

Also existing primarily within the storyworld were the humans who worked at and for *Aleph*. They were split into departments, each led by a director and ultimately reporting to the Managing Director. Quality Assurance was made up of a security team who looked after the park and Maintenance who repaired and cleaned up damaged hosts. Behaviour created the personalities of the hosts. Plot writers were responsible for creating the plots to be played out by the hosts (and guests) each day. A different play experience was designed for each of these teams. The Aleph staff would occasionally enter the park. Whether they remained within the storyworld or entered the B-world depended on their motivation for entering. For example, maintenance workers going to collect a ‘dead’ host would remain within the storyworld, but off-duty

writers heading to the saloon for a drink would be in costume and “in character” as visitors to the town of Mayfield. Aleph staff below director level wore a uniform provided by the larp organisers, but many also had western style clothes that they wore in the park.

Whereas scenes of physical violence required negotiation between participants, anyone could be ‘shot.’ As the laws around replica weapons in Spain are strict, *Conscience* used physical representations (“physrep”) of Western cap guns that were available to rent from the organisers, or participants could bring their own. In order to ‘shoot’ another participant one fires the *physrep* at them and — assuming the cap explodes — they will react to the bang. Hosts will be damaged or killed, guests will not be permanently harmed. Some participants also used *physrep* knives constructed from latex and foam. Physical fighting was theatrical and telegraphed; punches and kicks were pulled rather than delivered with full force and intent. This was introduced and practised during the pre-game workshops.

Conscience relied on a technology layer for the control and communication of the hosts. This utilised a website which allowed plot and behavioural statistics to be modified by Aleph staff and uploaded to the hosts. It was also used by maintenance to log the repairs to the hosts that were damaged. I offer some screen shots captured during the first run to illustrate this. Some contained images of participants which they uploaded prior to the larp; I have anonymised these.



Figure 26 - *Conscience* - Aleph maintenance screen.



Figure 27 - Conscience - Aleph Behaviour Screen.

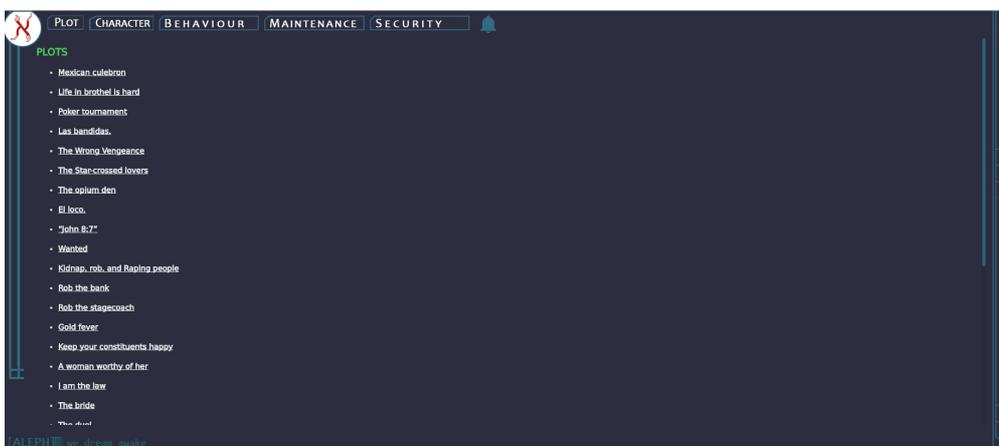


Figure 28 - Conscience - Aleph plots screen.



Figure 29 - Conscience - Security log screen.

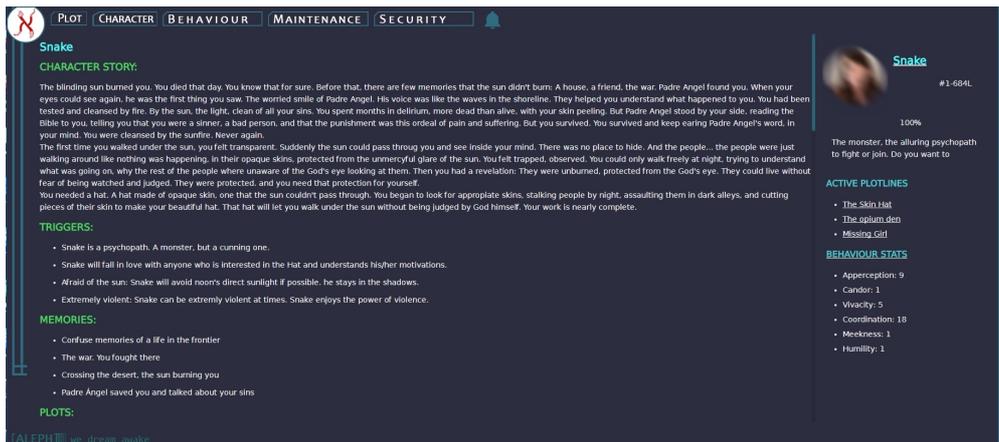


Figure 30 - Conscience - Plot screen for a specific host character.

At the first run a system had been implemented that would track the location of hosts in real time, but this technology failed at scale. It was removed from the design in later runs. At the third run, a Discord server was set up to allow communication between characters and for sending instructions to hosts. Participants playing hosts wore an earpiece which would sound an audible alert when a new message arrived. Discord was also used to deliver audio briefings as a metatechnique; these could be memories coming back, or specific instructions from the organisers.

Section 2 - Plot and Characters

This section surveys the main plot of the larp and the types of characters on offer. I review specific decisions made by the larpwrights which affected the storymaking model. *Conscience* has a main storyworld plot which deals with the emerging sentience of the hosts caused by a virus injected into the Aleph system (Montero, 2019) This plot comes to a head on the Monday after the location is closed to the lifeworld public. Here the security protocols fail and the robotic directives are deleted; the robots are free to wreak their revenge. This plot event, initiated by an announcement over the park's PA system, is unavoidable; subplots are connected to this main plot.

Some of the hosts are 'eidolons:' human consciousnesses uploaded into androids until cryopreservation technology catches up. These replacement bodies were purchased by Aleph and turned into hosts, but some of them have started to remember. There are twelve other plots within Aleph, usually seeded in the character sheets, which participants may elect to play on, some of which the organisers can exert control over; for example, an industrial sabotage plot where NPC members of

but are not central to it. Participant 28 suggests that Aleph employees, especially maintenance and security seemed to be less important than others. “It didn't seem to matter what we did, because it wasn't "our" game that mattered; it was about the hosts and guests and their relationships. (Participant 28) Some of the Mayfield characters and many of the guests are tier three characters, they are there mainly to provide interactions with others. Sklar (2017) notes “I did not have a lot of luck with the plots written into my character sheet.” Another participant explains that during the larp it seemed that “Other players' stories took precedence” (Participant 9). I discuss the problematic effects of this difference between tiers in both autoethnographies.

Section 3 - Autoethnography

Design of Study

Hine acknowledges that ethnographic study is adaptive, that it requires constant re-evaluation in the field (2008, p.7) but this does not remove the requirement for “Ethnographers to begin with a set of foreshadowed problems that give them a sense of what will be interesting to study.” My plan was to undertake an autoethnographic review of player agency from the viewpoint of a virtual plot team. I identified potential similarities between the writing and running of a larp and playing the roles of a fictional plot team performing that same function within the diegesis: The plot team created plot for the park during the larp and so were likely to encounter moments of narrative crisis caused by storyworld participant agency. In addition, I understood they were going to face narrative crises engineered by the lifeworld plot team, in the form of B-world characters achieving sentience. This metalepsis — in the sense that characters could cross (or even break) ontological boundaries between various layers of diegesis (Enslin, 2011, abstract) — is uncommon in larp and offered a rare opportunity to study plot diegetically.

The data for this chapter is drawn from my diaries and field notes collected before, during, and after two runs of *Conscience*, the first run of the larp on January 27th - 30th 2017 and the third run 19th-21st November 2019, from an interview with the lead designer of the larp, a post-larp questionnaire of participants and crew, and extended interviews and answers with participants. Responses on the questionnaire have been anonymised, named Participant and a number. In three instances,

participants are named — with their explicit permission — where I cite their narrativized accounts of their larp. In addition, I have been given access to and permission to quote from the plot documents and character sheets for the larp. This chapter is further illustrated with screen captures, photographs taken by Kai Simon Fredriksen, an organisation called “Monsters Inside”, and my own photographs; these serve as a visual ethnography which complements other autoethnographic methods and is a means of physically documenting the ephemeral nature of larp (Kemper 2018b). Finally, participants have freely offered their own ephemera, write-ups, and accounts of the larp to aid with this thesis. As the larp was an international event I have corrected the English spelling of non-native speakers for readability.

I had not planned a second study as there were initially no plans to re-run the larp, but an opportunity presented itself at the end of 2019. For my study I chose open questions with an acknowledgement that they would probably change during the studies. This was based on Boellstorff et al. (2012, p.53) who observed that the act of exploration suggests new lines of research. This was true of my study of *Conscience* and I entered the second run with the intent to explore the *lack* of agency associated with playing a host. As my lack of agency was more severe than I had envisaged, the results of this second study were unexpected.

The approach then is theory building (Thomas, 2016. pp.134-138). I offer a curated selection of notes and narrative, specifically around the creation of a new plot, *The Choice* in run one and the personal challenges of playing Lemuel Caster in run three. Finally, I identify a subtle difference between the problem of *player agency* and *agency to play*; the former represents participants playing beyond the designed limits of the larp and the latter a situation where they are unable to have any meaningful effect on the story at all. I identify there are differences in participants’ personal approaches to larping and storymaking and I use these to form the basis for my work on the unreliability of larpers which I discuss in the following chapter.

Autoethnography - Robert Leone

I have followed Lachance’s method of breaking the autoethnographic narrative into separate fragmentary “encounters” (2016, p.7) and I utilise the gaps between them to acknowledge the “breaks and gaps and swerves” (Morawski and Palulis, 2009, p.9) of autoethnography and to apply a reflexive and critical commentary of each encounter. This approach is not without risk, as this thesis is not primarily an

autoethnographic study and the irony is — because of the fragmentary presentation of the narrative — the reader may not be “fully engaged, immersed in the flow of the story.” (Ellis, 2000) I mitigate this by providing context for each episode. I make use of two different fonts here; any and all material originating from field notes is rendered in Courier New whereas any critical commentary remains in Arial.

Environment

At the first run the temperature varied from around 4 degrees to 12 degrees centigrade. The weather was largely dry, but there was some rain on the Sunday morning. The offices of Aleph were heated and coffee³⁴ was available, but with the door regularly left open it was cold at night. I slept on a sofa bed in one of the cabins. The lack of privacy meant my sleep was poor and interrupted by the low temperature. The food was of a low quality and quantity and was served at random times during the day as the makeshift catering team struggled to provide hot food for 100 people out of a tent.

Pre-game

In this section I offer four encounters from the pre-game. The first records my initial thoughts about casting, I then discuss my design process for the embodied presentation of the character, I describe a pre-play interaction between members of the plot team where we collaboratively work on a plot for the park, and finally I recount a part of my journey to Spain for the larp which had an unforeseen impact on my experience. Corrections and clarifications on this text are provided in parentheses.

Encounter 1 - Reading the character

“I am cast in my first-choice role, Robert Leone, the head of the Aleph Plot Team. I will be running a larp plot team inside of a larp. I do not know all of my co-players but am excited that three of my team are people I have played with before and are experienced larpers and larp makers. The relief I feel here is palpable; I won’t have to teach my co-players how to make interesting plots, nor will I need to ‘play up’ the writing ability of people who cannot write.” The initial

³⁴ I note that it was terrible; for my return trip I brought a kettle and a supply of my own coffee.

concept for the character was sent out shortly after casting and it read as follows: "A genius in decline, Leone was a Hollywood star hired to make real the most incredible and advanced storytelling project: Conscience. He led the "Golden Age" of the park, when Plot could program the hosts without Behaviour poking around, when the STORY was paramount. Now, the Board hired new writers, writers who only think about self-importance, QA only wants profit, and guests only want to fuck and kill. Something needs to be done" (Not Only larp, personal email received 23rd April 2017) My character (sheet) arrived on Oct 22, 2017. It (the character sheet) is 3000 words long and is evenly split between backstory and his thoughts about other characters in the organisation. It is written in the second person and this comes across as quite prescriptive. From the first reading I note that Robert excelled as a screenwriter, he won two Oscars, but wants to be taken seriously as a fiction writer. His novel failed. His marriage failed. And he fell from grace. The job at Aleph was a second chance at fame, but as the larp starts that dream is already coming to an end. The character is supposed to be close to my own age but seems to have been written by someone much younger. I note an incongruity in terms of Leone's voice; he reads like a teenager or a man in his early twenties rather than someone approaching middle-age. His ex-wife, Alexia, is mentioned once, but she is not cast in the larp. I wonder how she will manifest during the story³⁵? He is arrogant, a narcissist, and has not taken responsibility for his failures. He is angry at the world. He is written with very little respect for most of his team and next to none for his co-workers. As written, this is a problematic character for me to play; I think they are likely to be isolated and at risk of blocking play for others. With a first language advantage and a full set of privilege, his personality could easily dominate. I have decided to work on his trajectory; whilst the character sheet remains the single source of truth about his past, I

³⁵ Alexia does not appear during the larp; her only reference was on the pocket watch that I had engraved for the character. I used this same watch — now broken — as a prop in run 3.

need to understand who he is now and where he is going in order to make him playable, by me.

The multiple runs of *Conscience* mean four different readings of the character sheet, portrayals of the character, and four different stories arising from the text. During an online exchange, Piancastelli described her portrayal of Leone as “very much a luvvie, rather self-absorbed, and something of a creative narcissist” (Piancastelli, 2020) here I identify both the commonality of the reading and the divergences between them. Other participant’s readings of Leone differ. Kemper suggests that most of the plot team “relied on Robert for validation” (2018b, p.103) but this observation surprises me; as a participant it had not occurred to me that he may be perceived as a mentor or father figure. This is an example of the way participants may create different *readings* of the same character. I discuss this in the next chapter. I offer two pieces of in-game ephemera here that represent the character Leone became in my play. The first is a photo of the result of a scene where Leone addresses Aleph and explains their work transcends the acknowledged limits of storytelling. At the height of the speech, I grab a copy of Aristotle’s *Poetics* from his desk, talk about his work briefly, and then tear the book into pieces and throw it on the floor. If nothing more this is an example of alibi; it was certainly the character who ripped up the book, not the participant.

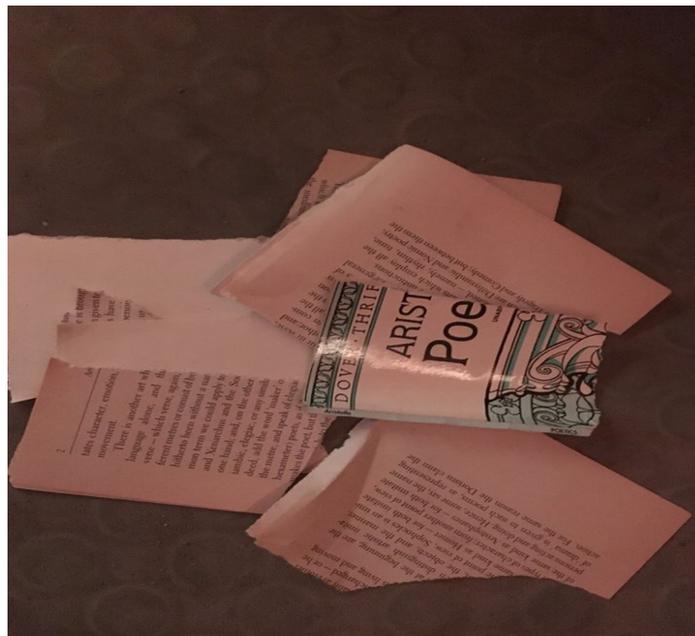


Figure 32 - Leone tears up Aristotle’s *Poetics*.

The second is a constructed montage left on Leone's desk just after the security system had failed and hosts started to kill. He was heading out to find the remaining members of his team. If he were to die it would look like he had foreseen his death; If he were to survive then the words would not be read. I enjoyed the way that he told these lies but persuaded himself that it was his art. This Leone exists within the character sheet, but other interpretations are expected. Piancastelli observed of her Leone that the "grudges between the department heads and members of the plot team quickly got lost in favour of grudges over things that happened in play" (J. Piancastelli 2020, personal communication, 30 July).

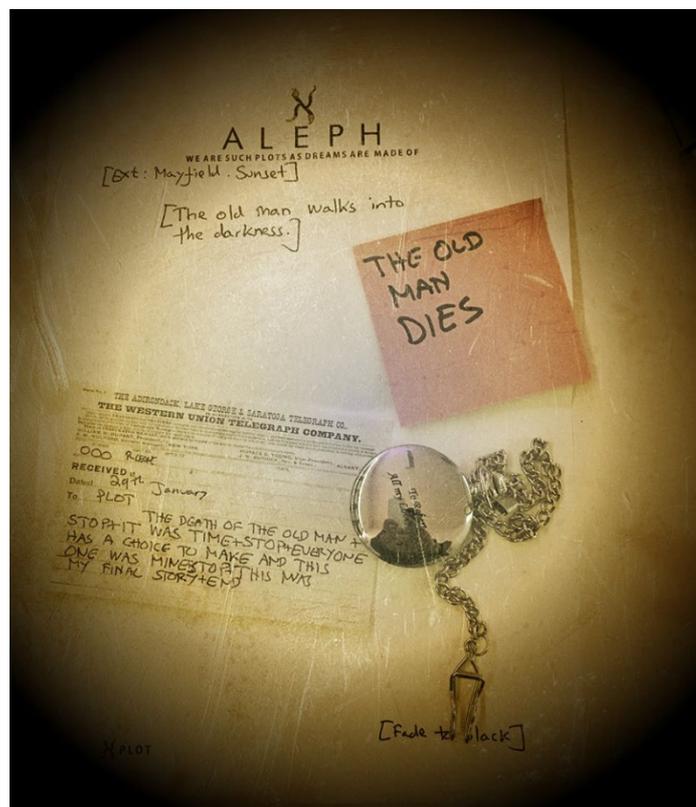


Figure 33 - A constructed montage: A telegram and a post-it note.

This differs from Leone 4's ending. Piancastelli offered the following screenshot from Run 4's discord server:

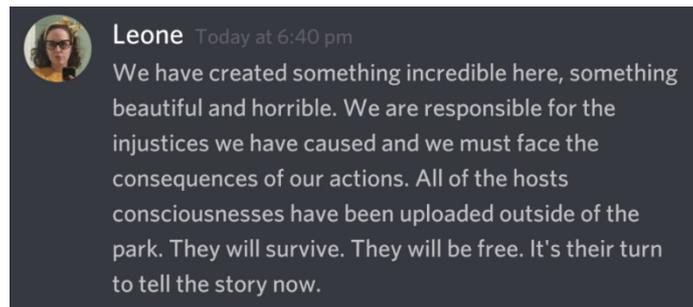


Figure 34 - Discord Server Screenshot, Run 4.

Encounter 2 - Embodiment design

"I elect, after Stenros (2015. p.11), to grow 'playful' facial hair for the character. As a bald man there is little I can do to alter my appearance. I cannot wear wigs, and so I am restricted to changing my facial hair and wearing hats. I decide that Robert's wardrobe should be utterly different from my own; made up of neutral light colours rather than my customary black. The only thing I plan to keep are my glasses; Robert is vain enough to wear contact lenses, but I am not sure that they will go well with 18-hour days in a desert. I chose a scent for Robert – Bodyshop, White Musk. I mixed a soundtrack for the character (available from www.mixcloud.com/simonb/conscience-mix-i/). These are all parts of my personal approach to character generation; subliminal cues to myself that I am not myself; that I am larping."



Figure 35 - Robert Leone, Conscience Run 1.

Encounter 3 - Pre-play plot

On November 27th, 2017, on the Conscience 1 Plot Writer's Facebook group I started to refer to the guests collectively as *hats*, with white hats being those on the side of angels, and black hats being more inclined to sexual violence, murder, and criminality (Agnew, 2012, p. 131). This slang term made it into the larp. Participants within the plot team met via Google hangouts on three occasions prior to the larp, once including a member of the organising team. We used these meetings to discuss playstyle and so we could form (Tuckman, 1965) as a group both in and out of game. We used these sessions to calibrate play and to discuss what we were and were not looking for out of the larp. We also discussed some of the plots that our characters were supposed to have written. Identifying one that we collectively felt uncomfortable with; originally entitled "The faggot" and dealing with the Mayfield townspeople stoning "Chuck", a male prostitute, to death. During November 2017 some participants collectively revised this plot, commenting on it as their characters inside the google document and also off-game in the comments. This pre-play created the dynamic between those participants who took part. Our rewrites (Brind et al. 2017) caused a narrative crisis for the organisers, as they intervened: "we need this specific scene. . . because it is in other layers of the story" (Montero, 2017). I recorded some tension here, some of the plot team felt we should have carte blanche to write or rewrite all of the plots. In the end it was only this one — renamed John 8:7 — that made it into the larp, where it remained for all four runs. I will return to this tension between the storyworld plot writers and organisers in Encounter 6, below.

Encounter 4 - The Gun

26th January 2018, London City Airport

"I had previously acknowledged that the replica cap gun purchased for *Conscience* had the weight and heft of the real thing. Enough so that I contacted the airline to ensure I would be permitted to travel with it. There were forms to fill in and a supplement to pay at the airport. The weapon was in a locked gun case, in my hold luggage. I was instructed to tell the check-in agent that I was travelling with a firearm. They were very professional, 'I just need to contact my supervisor.'

"A minute later I was noticing the detail about the barrel of a H&K MP5 A3 submachine gun – many tiny scratches – and the size of the SO18 armed police who surrounded me. These memories are super sharp, but the details of what was said are vague, even a few minutes after the event. I recall being 'de-arrested.' but not what happened immediately before. London City Airport has nowhere reasonably priced to buy breakfast, someone has just kicked over my coffee, I am tired, and I am travelling without the gun." (Field notes, 2018)



Figure 36 - The Gun.

"Writing this on my phone on the coach. The experience yesterday was slightly more traumatic than I understood at the time; I had arranged to stay in an Airbnb with a group of other larpers who flew in later from Scandinavia. I spent the afternoon alone, in a country where I did not speak the language. I had not eaten since the night before and I found myself unwilling to venture out in search of food. No, unwilling is the wrong word. I was frightened. I sat on the floor and zoned out for a while; my hands shook." (ibid)

I include this anecdote as a rather extreme example of how lifeworld events may have an impact on play. I attempted to socialise with other participants the evening before the larp but ended up going to bed early; I slept badly. My state of mind, energy levels, and social equilibrium were all affected by the incident at the airport. I describe below a scene where my character was held at gunpoint by Aleph

security. The bleed here would not have happened were it not for my encounter with similarly armed law enforcement officers in the lifeworld.

"I was fairly certain my larp was going to end on Monday morning. Robert grabbed the barrel of a gun which was vaguely pointed at him by an angry member of security and, repositioning it under his own jaw, shouted at them 'if you are planning to shoot me – then shoot – otherwise piss off. If you think I am going to cancel a plot line just because you are *ordering me to*, then you are deluded. I have two Oscars and you ... you work in a fucking basement.'" (Field notes, 2018)

Run Time

In this section I report four encounters from the larp itself. The first describes the start of the larp, I then discuss some of the design issues that affected the storymaking process, but which provided interesting data for the study. I describe the creation of "The Choice" which was a piece of plot written for the newly sentient hosts rather than for the guests. Finally, I describe the endgame and talk about what happened as the alarms sounded and the shooting started.

Encounter 5 - The larp begins

"Writing field notes at a larp is a nuanced undertaking; either the character needs to be literate and have a diegetic reason to sit and write, or it becomes an immersion breaking activity. If the character is core to the plots of others, the time they write removes them from play, or they may be subject to interruption. At Conscience I am playing a writer, in charge of a team of writers. He is arrogant enough to make people wait for his attention. The larp has just started; it would be more accurate to say that it has just started for us (the plot team). We were still setting up our office and very much off-game. We gently fell into the storyworld. This room was largely empty when we were assigned it; just four blank walls and a couple of chairs. As writers, mainly with laptops and a few iPads, the plot team needs somewhere to sit and work. It may have been a design decision to give us a non-ergonomic space, but if it was it was a poor one. I have acquired a desk, a sofa, a heater, more chairs

and turned the room into a more effective working space. At one end is the entrance to the “blue room,” a place where hosts can be sat in a sort of dentist’s chair and reprogrammed. It is mainly used by the behaviour team. At the other end is a short corridor to the MDs office and to a reception area. We have branded coffee mugs designed by a co-player.” (Field notes, 2018)

These were the first notes I took during *Conscience*. I note that I shift in perspective between the autoethnographic *I* and the reflexive *he* as I was trying to position myself and work out who was writing. This cautious metalepsis is expected; there is an energy cost to flip between immersed and non-immersed states (Brind, 2020, p.129). Kemper, also writing about *Conscience*, got around this by giving herself “an alibi to take field notes in character” (Kemper, 2018b, p.101). Having another autoethnographer present normalised note taking; larp is a communal undertaking and being able to sit in companionable silence diegetically was a benefit to the process. I did not have this luxury for the second field study.

On the first evening I sent all of the plot team in as visitors, to report back on the state of play and to see how the guests were getting on. This is a technique I use when running a larp and I elected to carry that across to Leone. The characters, Jill and Diana (two members of the plot team) described their visit to the brothel as a “horror show” (Field notes) and explained that the place was empty all evening because it was “too horrific” (ibid)³⁶. They had witnessed a scene where one of the brothel girls was branded. (In the fiction this was a plot written by Leone, but we did not know which characters were supposed to have written which pieces of plot until after the larp). In a post-larp discussion however, players of the brothel staff said they were busy all night and most guests were really lovely to them: “they were too kind, really, I was hoping for more oppression.” (ibid). This is an example of the unreliability of reported events within a larp. Whilst Jill and Diana certainly saw a scene in the brothel which took place when it was empty, or which was extreme enough to drive other participants (or characters) away, it was not accurate to extend that description across the entire evening. Leone, however, was worried (and by extension I was too)

³⁶ I return to this example in chapter seven.

that guests were bored and there was not enough for them to do. This is an example of the unreliability of larpers which I discuss in significant detail in the next chapter.

Encounter 6 - Flaws & Frustration

"The park has a narrative ecosystem. Different stories for different guests at different times of the day. The nature and needs of the guests change over time and from visit to visit. Change one host, one story, and the world will change." Robert is angry, I am angry too. The process of writing and rolling out new plot lines is broken and, whilst he tries to fix it from within the system, I fear that the design of the larp is flawed. The writers used to have carte blanche to create their own plots, but according to the larp backstory this was lost when a guest was hurt by a badly programmed host. Now all plots need to be signed off by Behaviour and QA. This could have generated a lot of play within Aleph, but the other teams are too busy to engage. Thus, the plot team is blocked."

There was a design issue here with the larp and the organisers made a change to the process between the first two runs based upon feedback received (as Montero recounts in an interview May 5th, 2020). Much of my personal play was dedicated to finding a way around this block in-game without disrupting the play of others. When the plot team did manage to release some new plot, some factions within Aleph thought it dangerous and tried to stop it going live. The scene described above, where Leone was held at gunpoint, was an attempt by security to cancel this new plot. As my co-players had worked for 12 hours straight to get it into play and it was the only piece of plot they managed to release during the whole larp, I felt I had to throw everything behind it, even at the risk to my own character; this choice is an example of steering (q.v).. I now move on to discuss this piece of contentious plot in more detail.

Encounter 7 - The Choice

"The hosts are becoming conscious. I was with Susan Calvin, the head of behaviour. We use the word 'command' before giving a host an instruction: 'command, sit down' and the host will sit, 'command: analysis mode' to put the host character into abeyance and shift it into its diagnostic state. The two states are distinct. One is operative, the other performative. The analysis mode host is aware of

the existence of the character but has no access to it and the story mode host has no awareness of the robot. I can't remember the question I asked of the host, only that Calvin interrupted and said, 'You have to use the command phrase,' 'I won't order them to do anything, Susan, not if they are alive.' 'If you don't use "command," the host won't respond - '

But the host did respond. It was aware, and operating outside of designed parameters.

During the course of Sunday, it became more obvious that we had a problem and that the hosts were, by degrees, becoming sentient. Some were more advanced than others. They were behaving erratically and, in some cases, contrary to their programming. As long as the park security system was working, guests and Aleph staff seemed relatively safe, but at the back of my mind was an accusation from "a nameless goon from the lower echelons of behaviour who accused us of writing *snuff*." As a writer, if your character suddenly comes alive, you are responsible for their backstory, for all the terrible things that have happened to them.

I note here that I was still using the form 'it' to describe the hosts at this point, although Leone had taken to using gender specific indicators to describe the hosts. This represented a dichotomy between participant and character; I was able to keep them distinct until the following day when it was revealed that one of the plot team was also an android. This was the point during the day, when the stress of the storyworld overwhelmed any sense of academic distance. I offer no evidence from this period. By Sunday night, Leone was ready to quit. He had written his resignation letter and had filled a full page of the journal that he and I shared for taking notes with expletives³⁷. I ended this second full day of the larp physically and emotionally exhausted and frustrated with the failings of the plot creation process (detailed above). I settled down to sleep, on my uncomfortable sofa bed, directly beneath an extremely noisy fan heater: when the fan was switched on, I could not sleep because of the

³⁷ Kemper revealed in personal correspondence a similar repetition of the word 'fuck' written from the point of view of the autoethnographer rather than the character (distinguished by using a different colour ink).

noise, but when it was off the cabin rapidly got uncomfortably cold. I slept badly but *in character*. I recorded that the thoughts that kept me company during the night belonged to Leone. He and I were dealing with an approaching narrative crisis — which is at the heart of this study — the crisis was nested within the storyworld, but despite being a fictional construct the underlying problem was the same: participants within a story were doing something unexpected. It was logically coherent. but outside of the designed constraints of the plot.

In an emergency meeting the following morning (Monday), Leone explained the three-act structure with specific reference to the resolution of a story, suggesting Act 3 could mean redemption. As Field states, “it’s important to remember that resolution does not mean ending; resolution means solution” (Field, 1979, p.26) Leone noted that, were he writing the present, the team would be in the middle of Act 2, just after the big plot twist that “suddenly comes out of nowhere” (ibid, p.96). He invited the attendees to brainstorm all of the trope endings to Westerns; these were recorded on pink post-it notes and placed on the communal wall in the plot team office. After Osborn (1949 and 1963) the objective was quantity of ideas with judgement suspended until after the brainstorm. After the ideas were captured, the team rejected those that were unworkable or unacceptable; metaphorically *collapsing the mine* and killing all of the hosts was not something that characters felt comfortable with. They concluded that the story needed a *High Noon* ending, but also one where a *New sheriff arrives in town* and one where the protagonists ride off into the *Sunset*. These were all wrapped up in a plot which Leone called *The Choice*. This was a plot line written for the hosts, not the guests. *The Choice* would be theirs to make. It would certainly be influenced by Aleph and guests; it was increasingly becoming obvious to all of the humans that their lives would depend on it. Leone’s job, as head of the plot team, (and as a participant) was to find a way around the process failures that had broken the first two days of play, and fast. ‘Hacking’ a larp is a form of larp design, done during runtime (Svanevik & Brind, 2020, p.237). There are various methods for doing this. In this instance I opted to introduce another element consistent with the larp setting which hadn’t been used in the design and made diegetic use of a new senior management structure introduced to the park, when guest shareholders sacked the managing director and took over direct control of Aleph, petitioning them directly to change the plot process. I am thankful here for experienced participants who enabled this play rather than blocking it.

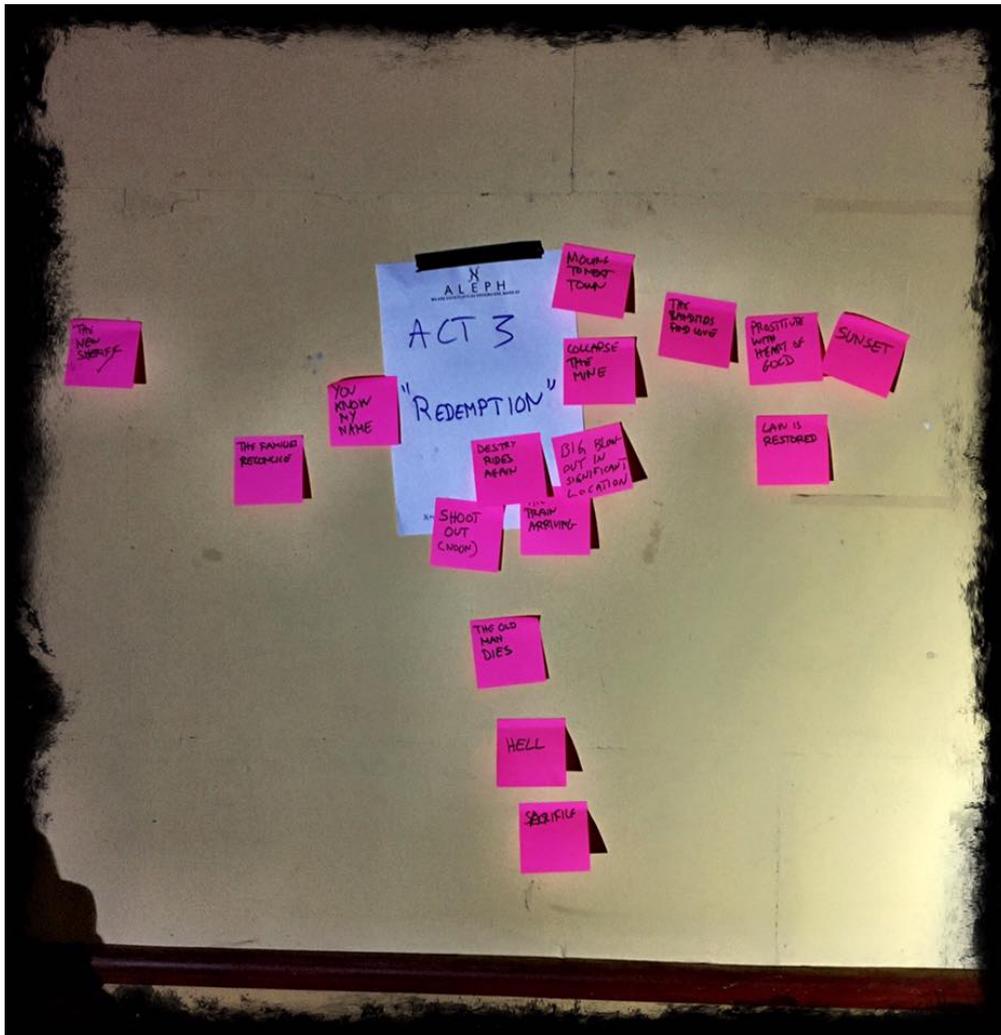


Figure 37 - A guided brainstorm in which the plot team were guided towards a final attempt to save the hosts, guests, and Aleph staff.

The idea behind *The Choice* was to give the participants playing hosts both functional agency and narrative agency, and to let them decide their own fate. They were reprogrammed with this information. This was a pragmatic decision rather than an in-game one. According to the metaphysics of the larp, each host should have been brought into Aleph for a role-played scene to teach them this new plot; in practice this was simply not viable. Instead we changed their routine and then used the larp's messaging system to let them know there was an update. The new plot told them that they should look out for a woman in red, who would be in the church at 2pm and would offer them a choice. In the end the Woman in Red, played by a human plot writer Diana

Barret, entered the park and addressed the assembled hosts in the Church. The bulk of the speech was captured on video. She offered the hosts three options, to have their memories wiped and to continue to live in the park, but this time with the promise of a repeated perfect day, to have a ticket out of the park or to achieve an ending.

“If you want us to make this park what it was supposed to be and if you want to live a better life, over and over and help make this life what it should be, then at sunset tonight come back to this Church. If you want a ticket out of here if you want to see something different and do something different then you should go to the Saloon and if, once you remember what you have done . . .” (Svanevik, 2018)

Then, having delivered this message, she was fired by the new chief executive. Larp tends to play for maximum drama and consequences like this can make for interesting play. Indeed, players allowing something their characters don't want to happen to go ahead and then reacting to it allows a story to emerge. I discuss the reaction to *The Choice* in the section on narrative, below.

Encounter 8 - Lemuel X Caster



Figure 38 - Lemuel X Caster enters Aleph, Photo by Herwigg Kopp.

In the final minutes of the larp, the security system having failed and the robotic laws which prevented hosts from attacking humans deleted, some members of the Desperado gang (hosts) walked into the offices of Aleph, demanding to know who had

written their terrible experiences. One of these was Lemuel X Caster, the leader of the Desperados.

“‘Who is responsible? Who is in charge?’ he shouted.

I knew what was going to happen; the absolute certainty here came from my belief in the power of the story. The hosts were alive and yet still bound by the same seven stories that own us all. Perhaps Aristotle was right after all. Caster had one eye, the other – out of focus and wild – did not seem to belong to the here and now. The security team drew their weapons just after he pulled out his six-gun, a right-hand draw from the left-hand side. I could see where this was going and I wanted to make it right. I wanted to stop him. “Don’t do this, please?” I begged him.

I think that everyone in the reception area thought he was going to shoot me; everyone that is apart from him and me. When he put the gun to his own head, the security team relaxed, but I was crying, I think. The shot, when it came, was impossibly loud and final. I think I told them to bury him; they wanted to take him down to maintenance, patch him up, wipe his memory. I told them no. Caster decided to end his own life and that was what “The Choice” was all about.

When the larp was rerun, I was cast as Lemuel Caster and wanted to explore his plot and story from the other side of the metaleptic border in order to look for theoretical replication where a second case study offers contrary results but for predictable reasons (Zaborek, p.9). I undertook a second autoethnographic study of this re-run. I include the report from this study in Appendix F.

Post-larp Reflection

These notes were written 24-36 hours after the larp, after my return to the United Kingdom. They represent a first pass of narrativization where the participants start to make sense of the events of the larp with the benefit of a distance. I start by considering my character and then consider them in relation to other characters. How participants understand their characters before, during, immediately after, and with more distance seem to be different things. I certainly look back on Leone with a fondness that is not reflected in these words.

"Robert was a narcissist with an ego large enough to make him believe that he was bulletproof. That he was godlike was not a matter of faith, but of simple evidence. He was, I must reluctantly admit, a massive prick. Mainly to Aleph employees who were not members of plot, but also to those members of his team who were not excellent writers. The plot team were a group of amazing and passionate larpers who put up with Leone's media douchebaggery, corporate brainstorming, and narrative theory. They worked from 8am through to midnight some days and a few barely made it into the park at all! Many of the Aleph characters – his own team included – hated him, although he remained oblivious to this fact. But even with a gun held to his head, Robert was able to weaponize words but in the end, perhaps he was able to use some of them for good.

"When Robert realised the hosts were sentient he was horrified. I had many short but intense scenes with far too few of the players of hosts. Each one of them was powerful and profound; a series of vignettes that all seemed to end with Robert in tears. Some hosts reacted to the revelation of what they were with extremes of rage, others with confusion, a few with pity. Some scenes I only watched, from the shadows, red light reflecting off Robert's glasses as he stroked the beard that I shaved off moments after the larp ended. I spoke with only a few guests. The actual process of managing a creative team, dealing with corporate bullshit, and trying to deal with the crises as they happened meant there was no time for other play, but there were short scenes, in passing, with Robert wearing a corporate mask that said, "everything is under control."

The Narrative

In this section I review some of the narrative that emerged after the larp. I begin with the narrativized accounts from a *tier one* character, Rose Radel: "I was sitting in a room, I was old, my body ridden by cancer. My grandson was with me, holding my old wrinkly hand. I knew he was my grandson, but I did not know my name. I must have lived a long life, but I did not remember that either, just the conversation. That he had found a way for me to live on. "(Sandquist, 2018) This account, arguably at the

centre of the main plot and story of the larp, helped to clarify some of the events of the larp. Rico, one of the security team, killed himself on the Sunday morning. He had been trying to recover the memory of his late grandmother, who was uploaded into a computer, but — he believed — had been accidentally deleted. From Sandquist's account I discovered that the grandmother was the human whose personality had been uploaded into the host who became Rose Radel. Sandquist's narrative does not touch on *The Choice* at all, instead she describes it as background noise as she dealt with her character's lingering confusion (ibid). This is a good example of the subjective protagonist narrative; each participant tells and narrates their own story. My notes match the testimony of participant 6, who states "I wasn't prepared for the complexity. Anyone I talked to had a different experience." What is central to one participant's experience may be less relevant to or even absent from the experience of another. As Perryman (2018) observes, "in games like Conscience it is not possible to engage with all the plot or players in a meaningful way. Some will be peripheral, others not touched. Some might not want a shared plot leaving it dead and that might in turn open up other opportunities." One respondent also expressed surprise at how seemingly throwaway possibilities turned into "dominant storylines." (Participant 6). There were also some instances where romance plots did not work out, or participants elected not to play on them and a few unexpected romances that were not pre-written (This is possibly down to participant *chemistry*, which I describe in the section on bleed in chapter six).

I now move on to examine some 141arrativized accounts of *The Choice*. My first observation is that participants tended to assume that this was an organiser created plot (originating from the lifeworld) rather than player-instigated plot (from the storyworld). One participant suggested that *The Choice* "felt like going against organiser wishes" (Participant 26). Perryman played Roger Young, one of the security team, and he explains, "I initially thought this was game plot, only later realising it was player-created" (Perryman, 2018). Young is a conflicted character who is uncomfortable with how the humans treat the hosts but is still not averse to betting on the host versus host fights that take place after the park closes. He has also been attacked by a host, something which is not supposed to be possible. His initial focus in terms of plot was searching for *Project W*, a military spec host who was somewhere in the park, but his focus changed to helping the hosts achieve sentience. (Perryman, 2018) His account tells that security wanted to arrest all of Aleph, Plot, Behaviour, and Maintenance, but that he was personally in favour of *The Choice*. Because of this he

chose to assist some of the plot team to escape and to get to the church. Sklar played The Judge, one of the hosts, programmed to be a corrupt politician. She became aware that her memories and behaviours were not her own and her story was about developing her own morality and philosophy (Sklar 2018) For the judge, at least *The Choice* was simple and her character resolved to head “back east.” For other host participants, *The Choice* was more complex: “Good doesn't matter if it's not a choice. We must choose to do good in order to be good people. Because A— finally had the AGENCY to CHOOSE to do good, I finally got to see her true colours as a character.” (Participant 17). This observation, that *The Choice* was an example of agency where none had existed before, inadvertently uncovered my lifeworld intention in steering Leone to deploy it to the B-world. I now move on to explain this intention and to further discuss the concept of player agency.

Narrative Agency - Agency to affect story

Understanding player agency was the initial focus of the field study. By making *The Choice* about giving agency to those (B-world) characters who had none, I was able to examine responses in-game to the event. In the post-larp survey the participants were asked “To what extent did you feel you had agency to affect the outcome of the larp?” 47% of participants felt their character had agency, and 35% said they did not. The rest were ambivalent. This is a figure that reflects the number of hosts in the larp; those characters without free will at the start are the ones who get to make decisions in the final act. Participant 30 observed that the actions taken by characters have little effect on the conclusion unless they play a host. Other participants agreed: “as the hosts awaken to their own agency and choices, they have far more ability to affect the ending. They can choose to rise up, to have a revolution, to murder all the humans, or to do better” (Participant 17). I noted that the fear of a robot revolution and wholesale murder was a key driver for Aleph characters during run one. However, looking at the plot for *Conscience* much of this agency is an illusion, “it has a set ending and development, it goes towards a goal of showing a particular theme. Is so far from a sandbox it leaves very little to the players "free will" (Participant 30). Another Participant — who played a different run, not featuring *The Choice* — notes that as the end of the larp is set “for Aleph there is no chance to actually make any impact on how it goes” (Participant 36). This differs from the recorded experience of the first run, where Aleph did have an impact on the story. Whilst the failure of the

security system and the deletion of the robotic laws cannot be changed, what happens next can be influenced by the Aleph characters. Participant 22 suggests that the first run was unique in this respect: “Talking to players of the other runs, run one was really a happy ending where almost all the guests and host gather together to fight for freedom. I like this kind of cheesy stories so for me it was just brilliant. But in other runs and other *mes*, the story was totally different.”

The organisers exercised a degree of control over the story, from an imposed reset of hosts which wiped their memories of the previous day (apparently instituted because the hosts progression to full sentience was happening too quickly for the plot of the larp), to the restrictions placed upon the plot team. As participants in the storyworld we had little narrative agency in regard to the main plot, however some participants had a lot of agency with regard to their own individual stories — Caster’s suicide, the Judge’s escape to the real world, Leone’s redemption arc — and the plot team found a way to bring agency into the B-world. The effect of this was chaotic. A larp that, according to Western tropes and most Wild-West cultural narratives should have ended with bloodshed, with the death by violence of the oppressors and the heroes riding off into the sunset, found a different path which was still subjectively satisfying. However, this is not always the case. Some larps are not satisfying and can be emotionally challenging and difficult to play. For example. I note in Appendix F that I experienced a less satisfying outcome and an experience which was subjectively difficult and even unpleasant, playing the third run of the same larp. However, from this experience I was able to consider another aspect of agency, that of functional agency.

Functional agency - Agency to Play

As a part of this study, I was able to look at the plot for *Conscience* as a whole. I discovered at that point that Lemuel Caster was one of the human consciousnesses transposed into a host body, that his memory of his wife and child was — at least in part — based on the memories of a real human being. There was a rather beautiful arc to be found for that character, but it was dependent upon the action of another participant to unlock this memory. When I played him (described in the second case study, Appendix F) that action never took place. In my study of participants doing the unexpected, I had not included the results of *inaction*. Some of this comes down to the

participant's *playstyle* and *mode of enactment* and some down to *interactions* with other participants. This suggests a distinction between individual agency and the relational agency of the system as a whole. In this instance Caster was a character who should have been interesting to play, but he lacked *functional agency*. This means that there was no way for him to affect the story without the aid of other participants; A lack of any "lever" to affect the storyworld (Harrold, 2017) is problematic when other characters do have access to one or more levers. I noticed similar issues in *Bunker 101*, playing a news journalist whose daily broadcasts could not actually be heard by other participants because of an off-game technical failure, and in *All For One* and *Convention of Thorns*, where the designed mechanics for spying and interactions of low-status characters did not work, meaning low status characters had no access to the story without the support of others.

Summary

These studies serve to illustrate the complexity of the narrative system of a larp. It is not just that our skeletal guiding text — the plot — does not survive first contact with the players, but rather that what emerges is tremendously complex and prone to multiple failure modes. Some of these can be steered around or played around, others may be fixed with course corrections from the organisers, but some are unforeseeable. There are some instances where the narrative crisis makes play impossible for some participants. In this instance the problem of player agency is not about them playing beyond the designed limits of the larp, but rather the impossibility of them affecting the storyworld at all. I differentiate between *player agency* and *functional agency* (or *agency to play*) here. The former is often a cause of narrative crisis, the latter may be considered a flaw in narrative design which may lead to a narrative crisis when participants try to hack the larp (Svanevik & Brind, 2020, p.237). This leads to an extradiegetic form of narrative crisis in as much as the cause of it is coming from outside of the story, but which may possibly be resolved through diegetic play.

The key findings of these studies, however, were not explicitly around the problem of player agency, but rather the complexity of participant interactions and the reasons why they may misfire or fail. I consider these modes of interaction and of failure in more detail in the next chapter where I argue that while it is almost impossible to understand what is going on in the story solely based on the subjective narratives and perceptions of the participants within it, understanding the process of interaction

can allow for a model of an emergent narrative system. This model allows for a structural and structuralist understanding of the story.

“We can’t define consciousness because consciousness does not exist. Humans fancy that there’s something special about the way we perceive the world and yet we live in loops as tight and as closed as the hosts do, seldom questioning our choices, content, for the most part, to be told what to do next. “

~ Dr Ford, Westworld, Season 1 (Nolan et al, 2017)

Chapter 6 - A systematic approach to authorial modes in unstable narratives

“To pretend, I actually do the thing: I have therefore only pretended to pretend.”

- Jacques Derrida

Whilst larp is a communal and collective undertaking, each participant is the protagonist in their own story (Hansen, 2016, p.50), playing to a first-person audience of one (Stenros and Montola, 2019, p.18). This makes the experience of playing a larp profoundly subjective. In the previous chapter I identified this subjectivity; here I examine the causes of this subjectivity in detail and how it affects narrative structure and may evoke a narrative crisis. The chapter consists of five sections. In the first I explain how and why the story may be different for each participant, because of who they are, how they play, and because of the complexities of playing a larp with others. I introduce a diagram which describes modes of performance and how the participant performs in different ways and at different levels of immersion.

In the second section I examine the relationship between the participants and their characters, stepping through what I define as the character lifecycle. I consider different readings and performances of the character and how the participants' understanding of their character may change over time. I identify a scaling complexity with multiple understandings of the characters, with each individual character being interpreted differently by each participant. This complexity necessitates my approach. The third section offers a decomposed taxonomy of the interactions between participants during a larp, describing the way that participants and characters interact with one another on different levels. The fourth section introduces narrativization — which is at the root of the unreliability of larpers — and then I move on to model these complexities and differences programmatically (after Steele's suggestion that “aggregate larp rules are a type of code that runs on humans” (2016)) and use the model to illustrate that — during the storymaking process in particular — all participants are intrinsically unreliable narrators. Finally, I consider the position of the

writer during runtime and, by comparing their role to those of participants, argue that they are better able to serve the needs of the story by remaining outside of the diegesis; an argument I develop in Chapter 8. This chapter is a key component in resolving the central questions around authorial roles in larp and will lead to the development of a model that both describes the complexity of the narrative system and underpins the thesis conclusions.

Participants

I define the term *participant* to mean any person who enters or interacts with the diegetic storyworld. Primarily participants are the players of the larp, but the term participant also includes any supporting characters (NPCs) or other *functional* characters. In *Midwinter* (2020), organisers played costumed characters who could move about the diegetic space if they needed to perform functions necessary to the running of the larp: delivering food, setting up scenography, etc. Because these characters existed within the storyworld and could be interacted with by other participants diegetically, they count as participants themselves. Conversely, a person employed by the venue where the larp took place entering the set to fix a blocked toilet was neither in costume nor in character; they could not be interacted with diegetically and therefore they are not defined as a participant. I include runtime directors (Westerling and Hultman, 2019, p.342) as participants. Whilst they are not in costume or in character, they perform a storymaking function as and when they guide action or play through “input on story” (ibid. p.343). However not all of the examples given in this section apply equally to runtime directors. My goal is to identify a set of variables (in the sense of “a quantity that may possess different values” during execution (Knuth, 1997, p.649) which describe the participant.)

Preferred Playstyle

In this section I refer to the models for preferred play styles that I introduced in the literature review: Bartle (1999), Bøckman (2003), Harviainen (2003), etc. and suggest that for each of these models, where there is a preferred style for individual play then it follows that this impacts a participant’s relationship with the storymaking process. To support this I will provide empirical examples from larps demonstrating that preferred playstyle can produce specific story outcomes. Hellström (2012, p.33) notes that members of a (larp) community will “share ideas about good and bad

practices and behaviour and develop norms that tie the members together.” This is observable at international larps where participants who know and apply the norms of their home games will disrupt play for others. Montero (2020) suggests that this is a cultural discrepancy that may lead participants to not “respect the plots of other people.” (I return to this idea of cultural identity and discrepancy in Chapter 8). She identifies gamist “power players” as a problem in a larp like *Conscience* (2019). ‘Power players’ or ‘power gamers’ is a term from TRPG used to describe participants who are playing to enact “some macho fantasy of having something bigger than everyone else.” (Desborough and Mortimer, p.7). I observed similar issues at *Avalon* (2018), where participants who had played *College of Wizardry* — a larp set in the same storyworld, but with a very different theme and culture — struggled to adapt to *Avalon*’s *play-to-lose* ethos. Montero (ibid.) describes participants from Poland who struggled to adapt to the *Conscience* storyworld because their approach to larp involved trying to kill the other characters; she suggests that was because of a cultural difference in playstyle between Polish larpers and the Spanish or Nordic players. This idea of geographical larp cultures is discussed by Hellström (2012) and Leonard (2016) who identify common approaches to play, from the emotionally charged Nordic style to a rules-governed “play to win” style that privileges winning over role-play which is common in the USA.

These geographical indicators are useful, but not absolute. In *Black Friday* (2016), participants playing military and FBI roles were deliberately not provided with sufficient food or means of cooking food by the organisers. In the Italian run these characters commandeered food from the participants playing miners; however, in the international run, the participants of law enforcement characters, immersed in their roles, did not consider this behaviour to be realistic in character, so they went without hot food. This had a story impact. The theft of food from the townspeople was supposed to cause rising tension between law enforcement and miners; the larp design had called for the FBI agents to start interrogating and isolating the miners on the second night, but in fact the relationship between civilians and law enforcement remained cordial and communication between the two groups was easier.

Some larps privilege a narrativist style. *All For One* (2019) included a metatechnique that allowed a participant to profoundly affect the story in a positive or negative way. By using the phrase ‘I have you at an advantage’ or ‘you have me at a disadvantage’ it was possible to signal to other participants that the scene would move

in one direction, or another. So, the servant, Navet, tells the assassin sent by Cardinal Richelieu, “I am afraid I have you at a disadvantage. You might think I am a fat old servant, but in fact, I am a horrible bastard,” and he proceeds to cut the assassin’s throat. This is an example of narrativist players co-operating. In a gamist setting there would have been retaliation or competition to decide the outcome. In a more immersionist larp, the servant would have lost the fight.

Considering Bøckman’s *Three Way Model*, I suggest that the preferred playstyle is subjective and it follows that this preference informs a participant’s approach to the larp. I consider the preferred playstyle to be a baseline but not necessarily a constant (Kim, 1998). Indeed, it is counter-intuitive to suggest that a participant will always play the same way, with most people having a combination of interests but with a preference (Bartle, 1999). Thus, the dramatist participant tends to “play to lose” or to “play for maximum drama,” whereas a gamist participant is more likely to “play to win.” I conclude that a participant’s motivation at any given time will have an effect on if and how they engage and interact with the story of the larp. I examine how the participant *interacts* with the story in section 3 and now move on to how a participant *engages* with the story, starting with their “mode of enactment,” or — more simply — how they go about playing the character.

Energy

In this section I discuss the demands that participation in a larp makes on the participant. The participant needs energy to larp effectively (Pettersson, 2020, p.139). I suggest that the expenditure of energy is significant as it is an extreme variable affecting how a person reacts to or engages with a situation. Participation in a larp can be physical: some larps take place outdoors, in the cold or in the heat. Participants get dehydrated, they may eat at irregular times, or suffer from a lack of sleep (Brind, 2020, p.126). These physical demands can be utilised as a part of the larp design (specifically in larps that apply sleep deprivation, or restrictions on food. For example *Black Friday* (2016), which woke players with sirens at 5am and provided insufficient rations for some players (see above)). Alternatively, they may be specifically acknowledged with off-game sleeping breaks and uninterrupted, regular mealtimes, for example *College of Wizardry*. As well as the physical, larp makes cognitive, emotional, and social demands on its participants (Korhonen, Nykänen, and Partanen, 2020, p.36) which require an expenditure of energy. Even for larps which are not

physically demanding, simulated situations of conflict and stress can lead to the release of adrenaline or other brain chemicals, such as cortisol (the stress hormone). This can lead to an inability to sleep as participants focus on the conflict that has happened during the day or worry about what's going to happen tomorrow. (Brind, 2020, p.127). Interactions that are not explicitly driven by conflict still affect energy levels: extroverts may derive energy from interaction with others, but introverts require an opportunity to process to regain that energy (ibid, pp.127-128). An engaged larper needs to expend cognitive energy to notice and interpret the details, cues, and nuances offered by other participants (Torner, 2020, p.269) and to make decisions about them (see *metareflection* below). Torner cites Tierney (2011) to make the point that ongoing demands of a participant's attentive decision-making capacities is more taxing than one would think: "No matter how rational and high-minded you try to be, you can't make decision after decision without paying a biological price. It's different from ordinary physical fatigue — you're not consciously aware of being tired-but you're low on mental energy" (ibid, p.270). Any decision or interaction made by a participant may be affected by how much energy they have, or how tired they are. As Saitta et al. (2020) observe, "Sometimes you have to select an action which by itself is not the most desirable, in order to save time and energy, or because you do not have the capacity to carry out another behaviour right now." (p.16) I conclude that at any given time, the amount of energy available to a participant is a variable that is not under the control of the gamemasters or the participants themselves, as there are too many unknowns to accurately predict the energy levels of individuals. However, tiredness, hunger, stress, and adrenaline will have an impact on the storymaking process on both a personal and macro level.

Mode of enactment

In this section I consider the question "are larpers acting?" and if not, what are they doing instead? I describe the way they present their character as the *mode of enactment*. The audience of a play expects the actors to perform, not just the words written by the playwright, but the emotions of the characters they portray (Brecht, 1964, p. 94) but a participant in a larp might not have the skill or the intention to do the same. An actor aims for a degree of consistency across multiple performances (Autant-Mathieu and Meerzon, 2015, p.383) but (with a few possible exceptions) a larper experiences the story once only and without a rehearsal. Meisner's definition of

acting as “living truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (Meisner and Longwell, 1987, p.15) would seem to apply to larp, but acting is a specialised professional skill (Brown, 2017). I question then whether it is the appropriate term. Actors either learn through apprenticeship or one (or more) of the taught approaches to acting (Classical Acting, Chekhov Acting Technique, Method Acting, Meisner, Practical Aesthetics etc). Whilst larpers may adopt one of these formal approaches, not all larpers have been taught to act. In this section I make a distinction between acting, role-playing and fantasy as three different modes of enactment; participants may use one or more of these modes during the course of a larp. I discuss the *process* of enactment below. I rely on Medler and Magerko’s distinction between improvisational acting and role-playing for entertainment (2010) and Goffman’s work on role playing (1959), and I build on Bowman’s study of the close similarities between stage acting, role-playing, and improvisation in which she observes that participants in a larp have different degrees of agency and creative freedom to a theatrical performer (Bowman, 2017, p.143). The challenge here is that critical writing about participation in larp tends to come from theatrical practitioners who consider larp through their specific lens. MacDonald’s distinction between the Stage Aesthetic, which is beautiful to watch, and the Immersed Aesthetic, which is beautiful to do (2012) is useful here as he comes from a theatre discipline but is also a larper.

To build on this idea that there are differences between modes of larp enactment and acting, I start with the observation that the pervasive aspects of a larp, particularly the intensity and long duration without breaks, may provoke a transition between these modes. To make this point, I provide some testimony from professional actors and directors who have taken part in improvisational shows which run far longer than most theatrical performances, but which are similar in length to a larp. Cariad Lloyd is an actor who specialises in long form improvisational comedy — usually a one-hour ensemble piece based on Jane Austen — but she discusses a Canadian fifty-three hour long improvisational show she participated in that ran from Friday to Sunday without stopping. In this show she played the wife of another character who was dressed as David Bowie from the film *Labyrinth*. “Halfway through my brain broke and I thought he was real and I thought ‘I am married to David Bowie’” (Lloyd, 2016). The late Ken Campbell — who Lloyd credits with importing marathon improvisational shows into the UK — suggests that something happens after thirty hours of play and that the length of the improvised performance opens up the “lizard brain” (Irvine 2005).

Adam Meggido, another long form improvisational actor, describes this experience: “there was a period where I felt I was dying. Going through that was brilliant. It’s a very freeing thing to just gloriously die and not care about it.” (ibid). Meggido also notes that “spending a day and a half closely engaged with 25 other performers to whom you refused nothing was an unusually intense experience.” (Irvine 2005). Lloyd illustrates that intensity as she describes her thoughts of the actor who played her fictional David Bowie husband as being like her ex-boyfriend, concluding “if someone played your partner for 53 hours, you think ‘we kind of went out’” (Lloyd, 2016). This experience is an example of bleed.

From Bowman’s conclusion that acting and role-playing are distinct enactments, (Bowman, 2017b, p.154) I identify a third mode, *fantasy*. I start this by referencing Brown and Cairns (2004) and Turkington (2006) who offer a scale of “engagement, engrossment, and total immersion” from “marionette” to “possessing force” respectively. These provide a way to describe the participant’s relationship between self and character, from the engaged / marionette — which is a tool used for aesthetic purposes — to the totally immersed / possessing force, where the participant has no concept of self but is entirely subsumed by the fiction, enabling them to “directly, experience the full subjective reality of the character” (ibid). Bowman carefully compares this to psychological dissociation. This third mode, which seems an extreme form of immersion (see below) was also seen by Johnstone who describes actors reporting split states of consciousness, amnesias, and their body seeming to move autonomously (Johnstone, 1989, p.151). In a personal interview³⁸ MacDonald pointed out that rehearsal — a part of the process of professional acting — would fit under the mode of fantasy. I am grateful to him for this observation; it suggests that even within a mode of enactment the degree is not fixed.

I illustrate these enactments with the following diagram.

³⁸ 28/5/2020 Zoom call

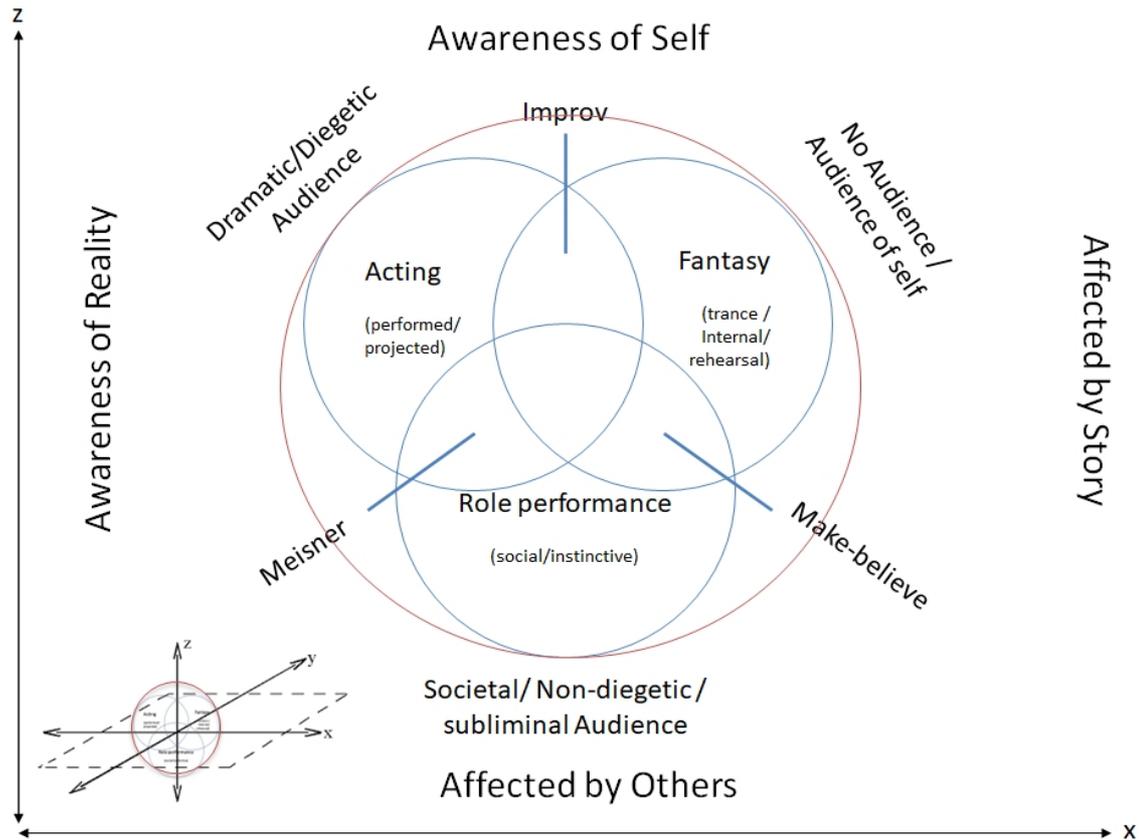


Figure 39 - Modes of Enactment.

(I acknowledge comments from Jamie McDonald, Jaakko Stenros, Annika Waern, Eleanor Saitta, and others in the creation of this model.)

There are three modes of enactment distinguished by their relationship with an audience. Acting includes those participatory actions enacted for other characters (the diegetic audience). Role performance³⁹ includes participatory actions enacted for other participants (the non-diegetic audience); some of these may be subliminal performances of societal or gender roles. When I — a middle aged, white British man with a grey beard — stand up and deliver a speech during a larp, unconscious biases (Greenwald and Banaji, 1995) come in to play because of my age, gender, accent, and appearance. The third mode, fantasy — as in fantasising — describes those

³⁹ I use the term Role Performance here to differentiate it from the more general term 'role playing', it is a distinct mode in this model.

participatory actions which either have no external audience or are enacted for an internal audience of one. There are also three linear scales which consider the participants' awareness of self and of others (Z-axis), how they are affected by the events of the story and the lifeworld reality⁴⁰ (X-axis), and an indexical level of embodiment/dissonance (Y-axis).

These ideas serve to illustrate that a participant, whether they are a professional actor or not, will engage with the performative elements of the larp in different ways. I conclude that the mode of enactment is not fixed; an actor may — over time — find themselves adopting the fantasy mode. Equally, an improvisational role player may find themselves performing more for the benefit of a diegetic audience, but the awareness of a non-diegetic self or making extra-diegetic decisions because of an awareness of the fiction (or a diegetic decision because of a lack of awareness of reality) will affect the mode. If there are different modes of enactment then there are different receptive modes; a participant will receive and interpret another participant's enactment differently if they are in fantasy, or in role performance. I return to this later in this chapter when I discuss narrativization.

Embodiment & Dissonance

I suggest that the requirement to expend many types of energy (see above) originates from the fact that larp is an embodied form of role-play (Bowman, 2017a). It relies on the player's body to move through the (diegetic) space (Mackay, 2001, p.182). Varela et al. (1991. pp. 172—173) explain that the choice of the term 'embodied' emphasises both that cognition depends upon the experience of having a body and that that experience is informed by various contexts, "biological, psychological, and cultural." Unlike a digital games, VR, or a traditional theatre audience, in a larp the participant's body is biologically present in the space. If the location is cold, both the character and the participant may be cold. Many larps⁴¹ have mechanisms for the simulation of physical conflict; in these cases, the participant's

⁴⁰ In the sense of *truth* and *reality*, see chapter 3.

⁴¹ This is a feature of the majority of UK larp systems and is found in most larp traditions in one form or another. Nordic larp is less inclined to have a formal combat system using simulated weaponry, but escalation mechanics allowing participants to calibrate intense physical conflicts are common.

body is exposed to a risk or injury. Whilst combat metatechniques and escalation mechanics (see *metatechniques* below) should mitigate that risk, accidents can happen because of a fight using latex weaponry, or an agreed physical struggle, ostensibly within the metatechniques of the larp, being imperfectly controlled or escalating out of hand. Whereas a character in a MMORPG or a TRPG will succeed in combat against an antagonist based on the character's equipment, skill points and an element of random chance, many larp combat systems rely on the physical skill and speed of the participant to be able to actually fight — albeit with a representational version of a weapon — for a protracted period of time, possibly whilst wearing armour. Other larps offer realistic simulations for physical intimacy, such as 'dry-humping in underwear' (*Inside Hamlet*) which can lead to some potentially embarrassing moments. Indeed the briefing workshops for *House of Craving* (2019) acknowledges and normalises involuntary arousal in the bodies of participants. More extreme physical elements can come into play in larps: *The Quota* used simulated water boarding as a part of interrogations. *Midwinter* used an electric shock device to simulate the torture of Santa's Elves. *KAPO* simulated torture using stress positions, white noise, blindfolds, and used smells and liquids to simulate the participants being urinated on by guards. *KAPO* also included mock medical exams where medically competent volunteers took actual blood samples from participants. The design of this larp also artificially controlled time by regulating sleep cycles with sound and light effects. These examples are included to demonstrate that the body of the participant in a larp is present in both the lifeworld and within the diegetic storyworld simultaneously. The sensory overlap of a shared body, however, does not necessarily mean a shared experience. Blackstock's (2016) study concludes that from a phenomenological position this psycho-kinaesthetic experience is bi-directional. As well as the participant controlling the character, the character may take a course of action which is "unmitigated by the player's knowledge" as the participant becomes embodied (ibid. p.7). Säilä (2005) notes there is a reciprocal relationship between behaviour and mind, and the participant's actions affect both self and character and vice versa. One of Blackstock's interviewees — who describes himself as "a big fat man" — describes a scene of intense embodied physicality which he as a participant felt was unusual: "I remember jumping the couch ... This is not something easily done. Jumping the couch, running up the stairs, finding the person I think was responsible, screaming at the top of my lungs ... I was just gone; I was the character, literally"

(Blackstock, 2006). This example of a participant finding themselves performing an activity that they would not normally be capable of is not exceptional. Kemper (2017) discusses her character, Dorothy Smith, being bitten by mosquitos at *Fortune and Felicity*. As Kemper is prone to being bitten herself, she chose to bring this into the storyworld, explaining that it was because she had “sweet blood,” thus, creating a thread between the character and self (2018b, p.157-158) The character of General Whiteford replied that the same logic would explain why the mosquitos did not bite him. My field notes record that I had no recollection of being bitten, but I later discovered I had dozens of painful insect bites inside my boots. I felt the after-effects of the bites for some days after the larp, but I did not feel them at the time because diegetically, the General had not been bitten (Brind 2018) This apparent disconnect between participant and character’s body is reflected in the ‘awareness of self’ scale in the figure above as the participant moves into a fantasy mode of enactment they may dissociate. Whilst Fine (1983) does not identify dissociation as an issue affecting players of TRPGs, suggesting that the differentiation between character and gamer is always clear and that it is relatively consequence-free to step out of character (p.228), there is an increase in both depersonalization and derealization⁴² (DP/DR) seen as a result of entering storyworlds using virtual reality technology (Aardema et al., 2010). This is demonstrated by the unwillingness of some airlines to allow pilots to fly real aircraft within an arbitrary period after training on a simulator⁴³. Epidemiological studies suggest some level of non-pathological dissociative experience is a normal phenomenon, particularly in people with “imagination inflation and fantasy proneness” (Aardema et al. 2010).

I refer here to Frost’s work on embodied subjectivity, which Tamari summarises as combining biology and semiotics to “explore the complex mechanism of meaning-making in organisms” (Tamari, 2021, p.88). Frost suggests that “in addition to language, psyche, affect, identity, movement and extended cognition, there is this

⁴² Bowman defines depersonalization as “feeling disconnected from one’s body”, and derealization is “feeling disconnected from reality or experiencing amnesia, identify confusion, or alteration” (p.153)

⁴³ This is due to an inconsistency between the experience of mass and acceleration in the simulator and how the actual bodies of the pilots respond on a real plane. (Gualeni et al. 2017, p.7)

further dimension of the self that is attentive and engaged, that is not managed by the extended neurological system but nevertheless exhibits intentionality or referentiality in processes that shape the subject's growth and capacities. "(ibid, p.88). Bodies are genetically responsive to their experiences of their environments (Frost, 2020, p.5) and in a larp there is a relationship between the body of the participant and the diegetic body they inhabit within the storyworld. In this section I explore the Y-axis in the model above which represents an indexicality of embodiment.

Lukka (2014) argues that an immersive state leads to dissociation between the character and the player and notes that "becoming conscious of it weakens it." I use this to extend the concept of dissonance to mean an awareness of a change in the state of immersion. Lukka also suggests that immersion and the dissociation it produces act as a psychological defence (p.87) as the action of the larp is directed to the character, not the participant; a participant may engage in an escalated argument and feel actual rage or fear, but with the (subliminal) knowledge that they can step away. This implies a connection between immersion and alibi (I discuss this in section 3 below). An immersed participant may take part in a physically intimate scene, or portray an act of violence that they would not normally countenance: chemically torturing a court companion as a means of passing the time *Inside Hamlet* (2018,) taking part in a four way sex scene *Conscience* (2019,) blinding and mutilating a young woman as an act of revenge (ibid). Ironically, those participants high in cognitive empathy may be more prone to deep immersion (Lukka, p.88) and forgetting themselves.

Whilst anecdotal and experiential evidence suggests that participants in larp may be prone to depersonalization — significant numbers of larpers describe not feeling physical pain or fatigue until after the larp is over — this may be down to increased levels of adrenaline or cortisol; I can offer no empirical evidence here but observe that further study would be useful. As I cannot prove dissociation, I introduce the term 'dissonance' to describe the transitory moments of awareness of the artifice, the intrusion of non-diegetic stimuli into the storyworld, or the confusion experienced by the participant about their shared body. Dissonance is particularly relevant when trying to resolve narrative crises; unobtrusive techniques such as reconstructions and railroads make this awareness of artifice more likely.

Having considered various aspects of immersion and embodiment, I turn to Ryan (2001), Brown and Cairns. (2004), Ermi and Mäyrä (2005), Arsenault (2005) and

Lipsyc (2019) to state there are different types of immersion and different degrees of immersion. To describe this, I offer the following diagram which illustrates a possible relationship of immersion types specific to larp. I suggest that movement of any kind within this model, or any other awareness of being immersed, will cause dissonance. The diagram differentiates between the lifeworld and the storyworld (represented by the dreaming cloud). Within it are three types of immersion⁴⁴: the cognitive/sensory form that is presence, the embodied physical immersion that comes with being in a body which is diegetically a part of the storyworld, and an associative diegetic immersion which relies on imagination (see below).

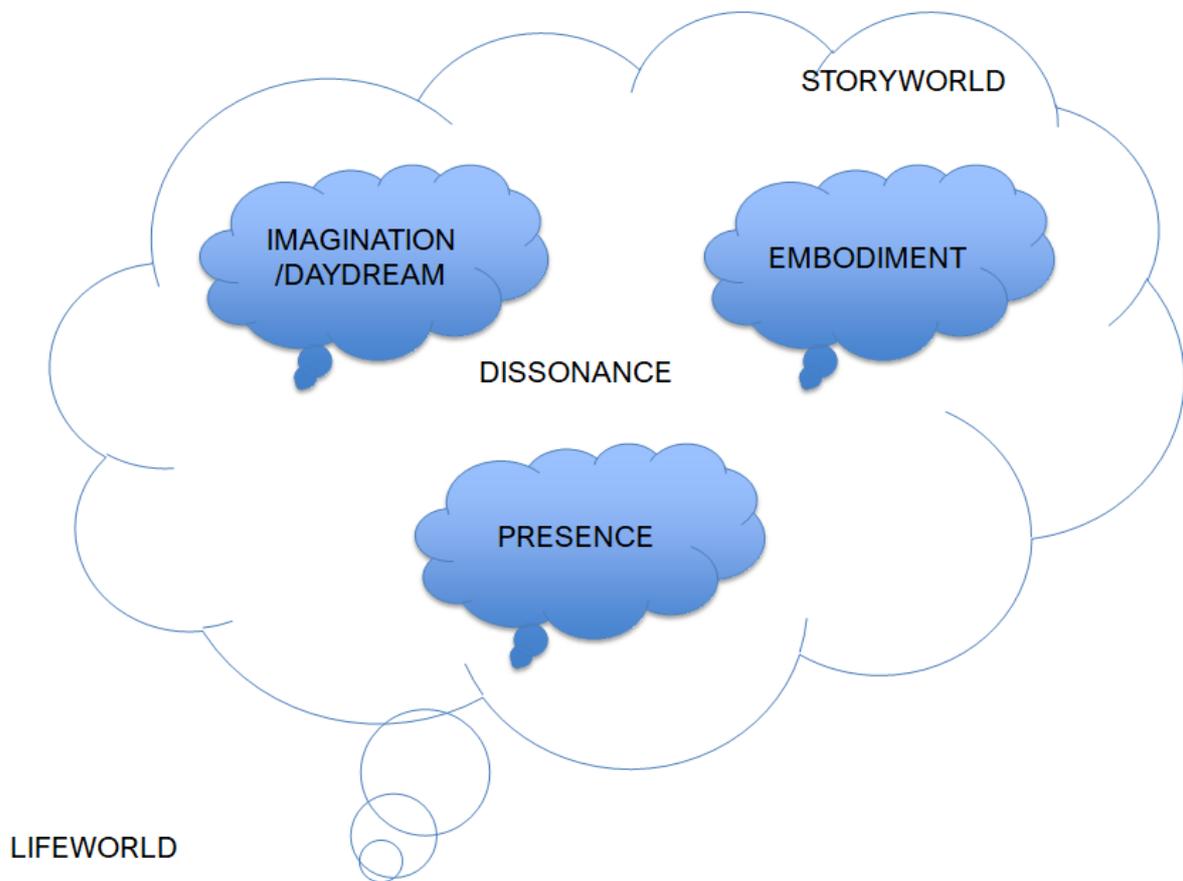


Figure 40 - Dissonance.

I also note Pohjola's concept of inter-immersion, a recursive function where immersion begets immersion. (2004, pp.89-90). Pohjola defines inter-immersion as "a phenomenon strengthening the identity of the character (as opposed to the identity of

⁴⁴ After Clérambault's three types of mental automatism, associative, sensitive and motor. (1909)

the player), which occurs when the player is immersed inside a believable diegesis.” Thus, depth of immersion can be modified by itself. I also suggest that the participant may be at different depths of immersion within the different types. Playing a black box larp, one may be immersed in imagination and embodiment, but not in presence. I do not suggest this is a definitive model. It serves to illustrate a variability in both states and forms of immersion.

Section Summary

In this section I have offered a set of conceptual variables that describe the *participant*, these suggest multiple variances of mode and of experience during the course of a larp. I return to these variables at the end of this chapter. These variables describe aspects of the participant at any given time. A model of participant behaviours is useful to understand how they are moving through the larp, but it is not sufficient to allow for a structural understanding of the narrative system. To enable this and to develop the model, I now move on to discuss the relationship between the participant and their character.

Character

I define the character as a playable fictional construct by means of which the participant enters the storyworld.

Whilst the larp character seems to be synonymous with an avatar or character in a digital game, there is a marked difference. I turn briefly here to Salen and Zimmerman’s statement that “the immersive fallacy⁴⁵ would assert that the player has an immersive relationship with the character, that to play the character is to become the character” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p.453). The relationship between a larper and the character they embody is closer to this fallacious ideal because they do share the body. Because of this, some aspects of the character will be affected and informed by the participant (and vice versa). As the basis for this section, I have analysed character sheets and/or the character creation processes of fifteen different British

⁴⁵ “That the pleasure of a media experience lies in the ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality” (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p.450).

and European larps played or written over the last thirty years.⁴⁶ I explain that there are multiple possible readings of a character and these readings inform the subjectivity of the model; I introduce an annotation for describing these readings.

Throughout this section I refer to the character lifecycle — which runs from inception and creation of the character, through the player’s reading and characterisation of the character, and then from playing through to narrativization and disengaging. The participant’s understanding of the character and their relationship with it may change over time.



Figure 41 - The character lifecycle.

Creating the character

Different larp traditions and styles have their own approaches to character creation (van der Heij, 2019, p.205; Weißenfels, 2017, p.184 and 191; Shockley 2017, pp.203-205; Algayres, 2017, pp.259-260). In some traditions characters are pre-written by the organisers and assigned to participants via a casting process. Some larps will create characters during the workshops. Others do not provide pre-written characters at all and players are responsible for creating their own character and backstory. In some cases these characters are co-created (Holkar, 2019. P.211) or are reviewed by the organisers to ensure plot consistency (e.g. *The Quota*, *Avalon*, *WereWar*,) or to *mine* the character’s background for plot ideas that can be used during the larp. I do not review the process of writing characters, other than to acknowledge that the output ranges in terms of detail, length and quality. For some larps character creation is a matter of deciding where to spend skill points, or the selection of a character class. This mechanical/mathematical form of character creation defines what the character can do, their relative strengths and weaknesses.

⁴⁶ *The Quota*, *Avalon*, *WereWar*, *Conscience*, *The Gathering*, *College of Wizardry*, *Do Androids Die*, *Convention of Thorns*, *Black Friday*, *Bunker 101*, *Midwinter*, *Inside Hamlet*, *Freakshow*, *All For One*, *Empire*

Character class and race selection in *Labyrinthe* affects the hit points, weapon choices, skills, and magical abilities of a character. *The Gathering* (Lorien Trust) gives a basic player 17 skill points with which to 'purchase' various abilities and magical powers. This mechanical framework derives from TRPGs. It is less common in Nordic larp and derivative forms, but it ties to a desire of participants to understand what a character is for.

For the remainder of this section, I concentrate on the fictional text of the character rather than the systemic skills and flaws that may be a formal part of the character creation process. I focus on pre-written characters — those created by the larp writers and organisers rather than the participants themselves. The process and output of character design depends on the needs of the larp (Pettersson, 2019, p.193). The subjective quality of character sheets analysed was variable. The most common format for a character sheet is a text document containing the personality, background, and relationships with other characters (ibid). Torner (2019) describes the character sheet as “the information the players need to successfully play the larp” (p.216) This can describe any type of character, including those written by participants, or those whose primary focus is on applicable skills.

On Gender, Identity and inclusion

For re-runnable Nordic larps (including those run as 'blockbuster' events) it has been common to write non-gendered characters. The pre-written characters available at *College of Wizardry*, for example, are written as gender neutral, with only an initial letter for their first name. For most characters in *Inside Hamlet*, they offer a male and a female presenting name, although some characters are gendered for the purposes of that larp. There is, however, no restriction on which character a participant may play; so a person of any gender can take on a gendered character. Lassila (2008 and 2010) identifies a problem with a gender bias in pre-written characters, in that the leading characters are written for men and less important characters for women. She states that this bias is “regardless of the writer’s gender.” Koljonen (2019) summarises what she calls the “fishwife problem” (pp.25-26) as a (perceived) restriction of the agency of female characters as they were “often disconnected, by design, from the main narratives of the larps,” by writing a character who is a fishwife in a larp which is about the political conflict between kings. Whilst this was not a deliberate choice by the larpwrights — most likely a reliance on tired fantasy tropes and a pseudo-medieval

setting — it still made the larp less playable. A similar issue exists for older players and for those from marginalised identities. Haldén (2019) states that “older larpers are treated as less interesting to play with: excluded, ignored, overlooked.” My review suggests that characters over forty for women and over fifty for men are often written without a connection to the plot(s) of the larp, because the writers do not understand how to write characters for this age group (see encounter 1 in from the *Conscience* field notes). This is either because they do not have the lived experience of people of this age, or because they are falling back on clichés (Shockley, 2019). Writers rely on a limited number of tropes such as the ‘wise old head.’ These Issues exist also for players with non-binary gender expressions, different sexualities, and for larpers of colour. (Kemper, 2018a, pp.209-221; Paisley, 2016). Whilst some larps have been inclusive when it comes to players of colour and of varying sexualities, often this has been done in the off-game space, by making a broad statement of inclusivity, rather than by including characters of colour or with varying genders and sexualities into the larp. An attempt to make larp more inclusive by explicitly removing stories and events that reference structural oppression has led to an erasure of players who have those lived experiences, (Holkar, 2016, p.98; Svanevik, 2018). This erasure can lead to dissonance and also contributes to the likelihood of narrative crisis. I return to these issues below where I consider the location of the player and the complex intersection between the player and the character, and in chapter 8 where I discuss the contribution of cultural narratives to emergent stories.

Casting

The process of casting is the means by which characters are assigned to participants. In some cases, this process is based on participants selecting from a list of characters they are interested in playing (*Black Friday*, *Conscience*, *Bunker 101*,) selecting from a set of preferences about where they want to play (*College of Wizardry*, *Avalon*) or answering questions about the themes they are interested in exploring (*Inside Hamlet*). Participants may also be asked about other people they do or do not wish to play with or have pre-written relations with. As a result, the casting process is complex and participants do not always get what they wish for. I include casting here because the differential between what is requested by a participant and what they receive often affects the participants’ reading of the character artefact.

Reading the character

Lankoski et al (2003) note that the interpretation of a computer game character affects the whole game experience and this extends to larp as well. I refer here to pre-written characters received by a participant as opposed to a character they have written themselves. I begin with a close reading of a character from *Inside Hamlet*, to examine the structure and content of a subjectively 'good' character sheet. I then consider the participant's relationship with the text and how that might complement or conflict with their personal desires for the larp. I introduce a notation for describing the multiplicity of text and readings of those texts generated by participants, which I use at the end of this chapter to inform the logical model of character interaction.

A reading of an example character - Dorian/Daria Cornelius, *Inside Hamlet*

I invite the reader to stop and read the character sheet — included as Appendix B — and to consider how they might portray them, as this will illustrate that the translation from text to characterisation is a personal experience. I suggest this is a fairly typical example of a character sheet from a Nordic larp and that of those I reviewed it is of a high quality in terms of the detail and play opportunity it offers to a participant.

The characters in *Inside Hamlet* are not innocent, they are all horrible people (Hjorth, 2018). The larp is a tragedy and, like the eponymous hero, all of the characters in it have a tragic flaw that should lead to their death or destruction. In the case of Dorian/Daria it is they are a megalomaniac who believes they are destined to change the world for the better. The design of *Inside Hamlet* makes use of these extended household groups to encapsulate the Hamlet narrative; each extended family contains the seeds of its own destruction. Whilst some of these houses are based on Shakespeare, others take inspiration from other works such as *Game of Thrones*, and — in the case of House Cornelius — Moorcock's *Elric of Melniboné* (ibid). Each of the great houses of Denmark have rivalries similarly described and reflected in their character sheet. I infer this is a part of the design of the larp to encourage dramatic conflict and subterfuge. The character sheet provides a brief description of Dorian/Daria's relationship with the rest of the household, including some elements designated "secrets" or "open secrets." Secrets in larp are a potential source of drama, but this drama is reliant on the secret coming out (Vejdemo, 2018). Secrets are an offer

of play from writer to participant. I note from my own writing that the dramatic relationship between characters often relies on a participant taking action based on a piece of plot in their character backstory. Secrets are an example of this, others may be less clearly signposted. (See Appendix F for an example of participant inaction meaning key plot points do not come into play for other participants). The character sheet continues to detail relationships outside of the house. It describes a rivalry between Dorian/Daria and the apothecary, Codmor, who is probably the supplier of the poison which killed the old king. Examining the character sheet of Codmor (which is not something necessarily available to participants as it depends on whether the larp is transparent⁴⁷ or not) I discover that Codmor did indeed sell the poison that was used to kill the late King. This is an example of a plot.

Inside Hamlet also offers the participant a set of goals on the character sheet. Dorian/Daria has an assignment to get a list of named nobles hooked on drugs so they can be more easily manipulated by the Directorate, the secret police. Again, this seems to be a plot opportunity, but reviewing the character sheet of their Directorate contact I note that this plot is not so clearly signposted there. Instead it instructs the participant “If you ever want to get rid of Dorian/Daria, you will have to find another source of drugs for the Directorate.” This asymmetrical plot can be problematic, as the experience of one participant is reliant on the action of another; if one participant is incorrectly briefed, the plot does not exist. This potential failure mode (crisis) — usually associated with a large writing team, responsible for different characters — can be resolved with full transparency (Šumar, 2019. p.221) or with more careful editing. Dorian/Daria is haunted by the ghost of their long-lost love, Emily, who the participant is instructed to see reflected in another character; the sheet makes it clear that “no specific player has been given the role of Emily’s image.” This signposts that this is not a plot. The participant is free to use it as they wish but should not expect another person to reveal that they are, in fact, Emily.

The complete character sheet fulfils a number of functions: it presents a simple overview of the personality of the character, it provides them with a number of pre-

⁴⁷ Transparency is a design choice to let participants have information their characters would not know. (Koljonen et al., p.419)

written relationships and plots, and it offers some guidance for one or more plot trajectories. It is relatively clear about what plot lines are available to explore (the asymmetrical issue notwithstanding) and provides plenty of opportunities for an immersionist player to explore the Dorian/Daria experience.



Figure 42 - Dorian Cornelius, photo by Boris Bernhard.

Inside Hamlet is not a gamist larp. Participant agency here is limited to how the character meets their end and, whilst it is possible to survive or to escape from Elsinore, the purpose of this larp is to explore “Decadence – Deception – Death” (ibid). The character of Dorian/Daria could be played as someone who seeks to triumph, as long as the participant can reconcile that with ultimate defeat.

The Participant’s relationship with The Text

For the larp *Freakshow* (2017) the character creation process was unusual. Participants were invited to an interview with their individual writers. These interviews were carried out via video calls, emails, and text-based questionnaires and were designed to find out from the participant more precisely the larp experience they were looking for. Direct contact between writer and participant is unusual as it adds an

overhead to the writing process that larps cannot usually afford. (Most larp character writing is done by volunteers, although some larps are now paying writers at the TRPG industry per word rates or a fixed price per completed character). *Freakshow* characters were created based on direct input from the participants. I compared my notes from the interviews with participants and those taken during the writing process and compared these with the narrativization written up as fiction after the larp. I note that the characters as played differ from the characters as written. To describe this, I consider how the participant reads the *text* of their character sheet and how this contributes to the subjective diegesis (Montola, 2003) of the larp. In this section I reference reader response theory and hermeneutics to describe how the participant engages with the text provided to them by the organisers.

A larp offers a number of textual artefacts, including the game-systems, rules, scenarios (Ahlroth, 2008.p.29), the document that describes the storyworld — which is particularly relevant for larps where participants create their own characters — and the character sheet itself. I focus here on the fictional aspects of the larp (specifically the character sheet). What the participant receives from the text will depend on their reading of it, modified by their previous experience of reading and decoding a character sheet. Some larpwrights acknowledge this is a learned skill and offer a guide for participants, (e.g., *Inside Hamlet*, *Midwinter*) but others do not. Even with a guide, the participant must decode the document for themselves to answer the questions “Who is this character?” and “How can I play them?” Harviainen suggests that the reader relies on a set of pre-understandings of a role-playing text and that this leads to a predilection towards a subjective interpretation (2009, pp.68-69). This pre-understanding relies somewhat on the participants' acquisition of a metalanguage, a means to aid deconstruction of the writer's intent, and to translate it into something playable. This may privilege more experienced participants.

Other linguistic challenges apply. Whilst the lingua franca of international larp is English, native-speaker privilege is not always acknowledged. *Midwinter* included the following verbal instruction to players, the speaker switching from what appeared to be American English to their native Norwegian to make the point, “*Husk at de av dere med engelsk som førstespråk har en klar fordel i forhold til de som spiller en karakter på et annet språk enn sitt morsmål*” translated as “Remember that those of you with English as your first language have a clear advantage over those who play a character in a language other than their native language.” But even for native

speakers, comprehension can be problematic; the literary style of a character sheet can make interpretation more challenging. For example, a character written in the second person which adopts an unreliable narratorial voice belonging to the character, relies on the participant to understand this fictional nuance. If the words are taken literally then the reading of the character changes.

The complexity of reading a character sheet is further enhanced because its rhetorical position is unclear. Most character sheets appear to be works of fiction: a summary of a person's life and behaviour, snippets of how they view the world and the people in it, but the function of the character sheet is to inform the participant; it is metaleptic, "a fictional representation that consists of different levels and worlds, among which unconventional transgression takes place." (Wolf, 2005). Genette clarifies *this* transgression as a deliberate pretence by the author (1980, p.101), but I suggest that the writer of a larp character is inadvertently transgressing. The character sheet should be a tool for immersion, but my realisation here is that the character sheet is an imperfect and imprecise device for communicating auteristic intent, instead it is an 'open' text (Eco, 1979, p.63) in the sense that it is an invitation to uncover the totality of the character as conceived by the writer by means of conscious and active engagement with the document. Whilst the reading of a character sheet should be an exercise in hermeneutics, deconstructing pre-understandings (Harviainen, 2009, p.69) and searching for the objective truth about the character as written, it is not. The participant as reader has a contextual horizon (in the sense of Gadamer, 1997, p.302) meaning everything they can see (read) from their personal vantage point. As Harding explains, "The same text will thus, mean different things to different people in different contexts" (Harding, 2007, p.27). This is an aspect of subjective diegesis, where each participant owns their own experience. Some character sheets are little more than descriptions, sometimes a single word can serve as a character (Fatland, 2014) but the less the writer provides to guide the participant, the more open the text will be.

Pre-written characters and LFR

Pre-written characters are often defined by their relationship with other characters (Pettersson, 2019, p.201). When the participant reads their own character, they are also encountering some information about other characters for the first time. Just as they do when reading their own character, they read these relations with their own interpretations and biases. As pre-written relations are prone to failure (ibid),

some larpwrights suggest ideas for types of relations (e.g., *College of Wizardry*, *Convention of Thorns*) and let the participants make their own connections. This is often done via social media. This method is also used formally and informally by larps where participants create their own characters. Anecdotally I record a perceived imbalance here; informal conversations suggest these are seen as a ‘popularity contest,’ with younger and more attractive participants receiving more response to a ‘Looking for Relations’ (LFR) post. Whilst this may be the case, I analysed the LFR Facebook groups for three different international larps⁴⁸ and can offer no clear evidence to support or disprove this assertion. In the Facebook groups surveyed, the LFR posts tended to be a summary of the participants’ reading of the character, thus creating a new text for a pre-written character. This is the point where two participant’s interpretations of their own characters meet. The larp has not yet started and so the negotiation of interaction is still plot, but multiple participants are engaged with the reading process.

Player’s desire

Participants will tweak or subvert a character in order to make it closer to what they want to play. They tend to do this without the intervention of the writers. This further supports my assertion that the third order character χa_3 (explained below) is a creation of the participant. I conclude that, with the exception of a first order character (where the participant writes the character themselves), the extradiegetic wishes of the participant will change the way they understand the text and so the character.

Characterisation

Building on this understanding, I define *characterisation* as the process by which the participant designs, creates, or improvises the “the observable aspects of a character” (Lankoski et al, 2003, p.8) It is the translation between the participant’s reading of the text and the manifestation and portrayal of the character. Whilst it is a subjective process, I have elected to exclude further study from the scope of this thesis, other than to note there are different approaches to characterisation and different interpretations of the characters portrayed.

⁴⁸ *College of Wizardry*, *Conscience*, *Inside Hamlet*

A notation for describing the multiplicity of readings constructed by interaction.

Building on Montola’s “constructed diegesis” (2003), the rendering of a character sheet as a LFR post may generate a new text, which in its turn will lead to multiple readings of the character because of the interaction between participants. This is one of the first indicators of the complexity of the narrative system of a larp. Even here we can see there is no single diegetic truth.

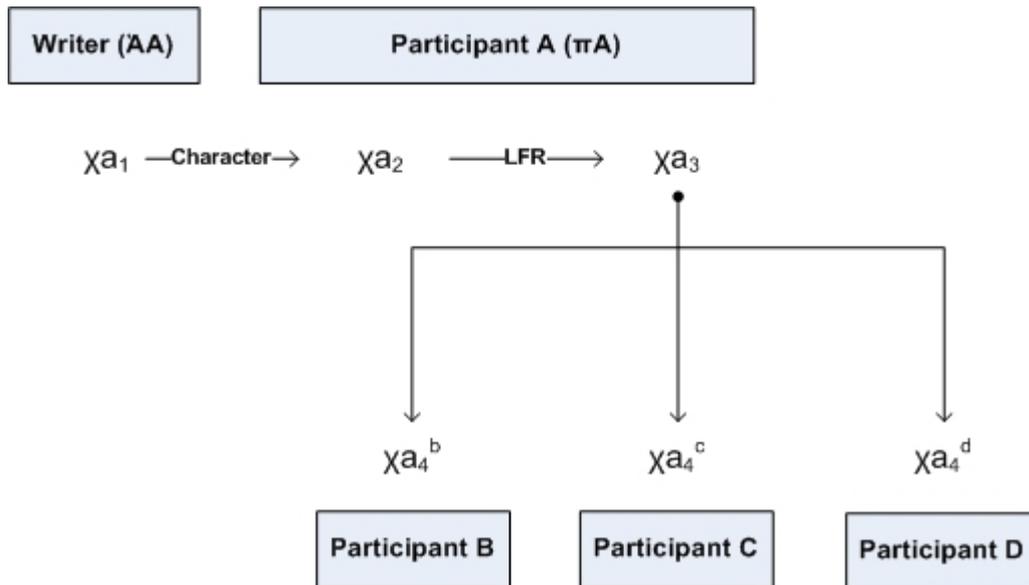


Figure 43 - Multiple readings of the same character in play.

Assuming Character B (χ_b) references Character A (χ_a)⁴⁹ then Participant B’s reading of χ_{a_4} is informed by χ_{b_2} to make $\chi_{a_4}^b$

I discuss below that the participants’ awareness of the non-diegetic presence of others (and the existence of their bodies) affects the decisions they make around play. It is not important whether these decisions are conscious, merely that they are made. So, participant B (Π_b) making play decisions affected by participant A (Π_a) extends participant B’s reading of the character $\chi_{a_4}^b$ to be informed by Π_b to make

⁴⁹ X from the Greek χαρακτήρας (charaktiras) - character. Π from the Greek Παίχτης - player (paichtis,) - A from the Greek ἀρχιτέκτων (arkhitekton) - master builder, director of works.

χα₄^bΠb. In this simple model with four participants without pre-written relations, the four character sheets with LFR posts would lead to the emergence of eight texts and twenty-four readings of those texts. The number of readings increases to twenty-seven or thirty if the LFR posts are read in relation to pre-written relations in character sheets and/or in relation to the body of the other participant(s). These texts and their readings are a part of the plot as they lead to preconceived ideas of what will happen during the larp.

I have identified a set of variables affecting character readings. These variables describe how the text is interpreted, to what extent the participant plans what to do with their character, and how that participant reads and plans their reactions to other participants and their respective characters. I reiterate at this stage play has not yet begun and the story exists only *in potential* as plot. Any interactions — if they exist — are non-diegetic and are between participants in the lifeworld. The relationship between multiple participants, multiple characters, and their intersubjective experiences and expectations shapes the complexity which necessitates my approach to this project, because the plot is static, but during runtime the system becomes far more complex, because the participants and their characters start to interact.

Interactions

I have considered the participant and their relationship with the character. I now discuss the intersection of the two, where participants and character combine during the runtime of the larp, the storymaking process; runtime is represented by the 'playing' stage of the character lifecycle. For the purposes of this section, I discuss what happens while the participants are playing the larp. I will define and describe a subset of *interactions* that they carry out in order to play or as a result of play. *Functions* are diegetic interactions between characters. *Operations* are decisions and reactions made by the character. *Processes* are meta-diegetic activities and are further split into high level metatechniques and low-level processes that represent the act of larping. Finally, *Filters* are largely subliminal *passive* activities which inform participants and characters alike, they may be diegetic, meta-diegetic or extra-diegetic.

Functions & Operations

Functions encompass the core mechanics of the larp, those “essential moment-to-moment” actions Salen and Zimmerman (2004, p.389) that take place in the storyworld I define them specifically to refer to the class of things that the character does — in-game actions, or what Steel describes as “diegetic language” (Steel, 2016, p.31) — A guest at the Aleph theme park shoots the leader of the outlaw gang (*Conscience*), a courtier puts poison into the drink of a minor noble (*Inside Hamlet*), a young druid decodes a magical riddle (*Avalon*), a warrior-priest casts a *Spirit Bolt* miracle at an approaching ghoul (*Labyrinthe*); these are examples of physical interactions. Conversation is also a functional interaction. A functional interaction takes place between two or more characters. However, the interaction does not need to be direct, it can be indirect if observed, or reported. Thus, the guest (χ_a) shooting the outlaw (χ_b) in the first example, functionally interacts with other characters who witness the shooting, as the witness (χ_c) assimilates data and makes one or more *operational* decisions based upon it (see chapter 4 for operations,) the χ_c may decide χ_a is dangerous, a hero, and thus someone to approach for help.

```
 $\chi_a$  [shoots]  $\chi_b$ 
 $\chi_c$  [witnesses shooting by]  $\chi_a$  {
Operation:  $\chi_a^c$ =dangerous
Operation:  $\chi_a^c$ =heroic
Operation: Approach  $\chi_a$  for help
```

I do not develop the taxonomy of functions and operations further here as the list of possible actions is more or less endless, (Saitta et al., 2020, p.21) and it would not further the argument to do so. My summary is that participants perform diegetic story Functions and those functions may operationally modify the story.

Processes

Processes also extend the core mechanics, but unlike functions, a process is extra-diegetic or meta-diegetic. Operations may also be informed by *processes* (see example below). First, I consider ‘high level’ processes, or metatechniques that have

an obvious and visible effect on play, then I examine ‘low level’ processes that tend to be less visible to other participants.

High Level Processes - Metatechniques

Metatechniques allow participant-to-participant communication about their characters without breaking play (Koljonen et al., 2019, p.416) I list here some common types of metatechniques whilst acknowledging that the larpwright uses metatechniques to extend the system of their larp (ibid. p.233). In boffer larp physical conflict between characters is seemingly inevitable (Svanevik, 2019, p.281). In these larps, a character has a number of *hits* or *hit points*. When struck with a weapon (usually represented with a latex replica, in itself another metatechnique,) the character takes damage; possibly modified by armour points, skills, or magic. (e.g. *Treasure Trap*, *Labyrinthe*, *The Gathering*, *Empire*, *Odyssey*, *NERO*, *The Dream Game*, &c).

```
χa [hits] χb {  
    Metatechnique.HitPoints: Πb reduce χb hit points  
    Operation: χab=dangerous  
    If (hit points >0) {  
        Operation: χb react diegetically to blow  
    Otherwise  
        Operation: χb dies  
    }  
}
```

Similarly, metatechniques are also used to simulate skills that the characters have but the participants do not, for example, casting magic spells. In the *Labyrinthe* system, the magical effect ‘Spirit Bolt’ inflicts 18 points of damage to its target; the participant is expected to understand this. At *College of Wizardry*, the target decides the effect of the spell. In both cases the participant needs to react to the metatechnique on behalf of the character. Not all metatechniques equate directly to *systemic* games rules; metatechniques can also be used to calibrate play. For example, during *Inside Hamlet* a participant may signal that they would like to step up the “physical and social intensity” of the play directed at them by using the word “Rotten” in a sentence (*Inside Hamlet*, Player Letter 2). Other participants then decide if they are comfortable acceding to this escalation.

```

χa [hears the word "Rotten" from] χb {

    If (Πa is comfortable to escalate) {
Metatechnique.Escalation

Operation: χa escalates intensity
Otherwise
    // No Operation
}
}

```

Some metatechniques are also representational. A good example of this is those that represent intimacy. Participants understand that in a larp using the *Ars Amandi* metatechnique, touching the hands and forearms represents sexual activity (Stark, 2011) at *The House of Craving* participants 'theatrically dry humping' in their underwear are representationally having intercourse.

```

Πa [is consensually dry humping with] Πb {

Metatechnique.Sex(Πa, Πb)
Operation: χa experiences pleasure
Imagination: (Πab) understand that χab are having sex
}

```

Whilst high level processes are metatechniques which exist outside of the story, their effects are usually observable by other participants who need to interpret them and make them into a part of the story; this representational process is translated into the diegesis by the participants; this translation is a *low-level process*.

Low Level Processes

I move to consider low level processes; these are universally extra-diegetic and invisible to other participants. In software engineering, *low level* refers to programming languages that do not offer much abstraction from the hardware or underlying system. They offer the best performance whilst using minimum memory. I intend this meaning here rather than implying a hierarchy of process. Theory surrounding what participants do during larps is relatively new and underdeveloped (Saitta et al., 2020) and I begin

by considering the procedural role of *Imagination* in larp and then, drawing on the (published) work of Helsinki Group (2019) cited in (Saitta et al., p.8) I summarise their work on *Mapping*, before considering *Steering* in relation to Levin's work on *Metareflection*. I use this to introduce a relationship between the variable states of a participant (above) and these low-level processes. Finally, I add *Encoding* as an authorial process and *Enactment* as an active process (as well as a Mode) to describe the physical act of larping.

Imagination is a term used interchangeably here with "pretence" and "pretend." Bowman (2012, p.36) suggests imagination is generally the wellspring for role-playing games; it is not a simple category to explain (Sutton-Smith, 1998, p.127) an abstract heterogeneous concept that can be defined as "the act of making what is present absent, and what is absent present." (ibid). Importantly, it is an active process; what Jung describes as "a sequence of fantasies produced by deliberate concentration" (Jung, 1959, p.49). For example, object substitution — "conceiving of an object as two things at once" — is a skill acquired in early childhood and developed with age (Lillard, 1994, p.352). A child pretends a stick is a horse; a participant sees a latex weapon, but the character reacts as though the physical representation is made from sharpened steel (Boffer larp). A child pretends a sandcastle is a delicious cake; a participant tastes vinegar when they drink their wine and reacts as though their character has drunk poison (*Inside Hamlet*). In early larp, taking a technique from TRPGs, participants would ask their referee, "What do we see?" (*Labyrinthe*). The referee would then describe the location, or the NPC monsters for the benefit of the participants. To creatively redefine the physical space and the people within it as a diegetic space, populated by fictional beings requires imagination. Imagination is the process by which the participant can be immersed. Children seem to be able to hold a shared imagined diegetic space as an overlay upon reality (via make-believe play) with relative ease; this is similar to the imaginary process used in larp. Imagination is a shared responsibility (after Leslie, 1987, p. 416) and larp pretending requires "the ability to understand pretence in others." As in inter-immersion (see above) it is recursive. The example given above, where the participants translate the act of dry humping into the idea that their characters are having sex, is an example of the imagination process.

During a larp, the participant is continuously drawing and redrawing an analogous 'map.' This represents the imagined structure of the diegesis in relation to

the character. It contains an array of subjective information, narrative of past events, and both plots for the future and extradiegetic information such as the length of time left for play (Saitta et al., 2020, pp.16-17). It seems to be a fictional equivalent to Tolman's "tentative map, indicating routes and paths and environmental relationships: which finally determines what responses, if any, the animal will finally release" (Tolman, 1948, p.193). *Responses* here are congruent with physically, diegetically, and logically coherent actions (ibid. p.21). This concept appears in the model of the narrative system and in the section on narrativization (below). Mapping and some of the decisions taken as a result of it may be subconscious (ibid. p.22) but a level of conscious control is applied when the participant chooses to *steer*. The process of steering is defined as "making in-character decisions for out-of-game reasons" (Montola et al., 2015, p.108). It is an authorial act that is used by the participant to consciously override the character's autonomy. Whilst it is often something that shapes the story, steering is used for other reasons, such as to moderate participant safety, because a participant is bored, to get out of the frame of a (non-diegetic) camera, or — pejoratively — to *metagame*: to use off-game information to effect in-game outcomes. The other authorial process I identify is *encoding*. this is one of the outputs of mapping, the means by which the larper positions themselves within the diegesis.

Steering seems antithetical to immersion, but as Montola et al. argue participants are bicociated (ibid, p.109) most of the time. Stenros (2013) describes this as like having double vision: whilst your character perceives the fiction as real, the participant remains aware of the real world, or holding "one thing in front of another in order to protect or conceal or disguise it" (Austin, 1979, p. 260) Levin explains this double vision as seeing the interpretive frame of reality and interpretive frame of fiction, through the expanded perspective of what they call *metareflection*. The participant does not see storyworld as an audience member from the lifeworld, but rather the storyworld in context with the lifeworld (Levin, 2020, pp.64-65). There may be times when deeply immersed participants — those experiencing Turkington's "possessing force"(2006) — are too deep into the fantasy to steer. There is not sufficient evidence to prove that the participant is always fully conscious of the storyworld, nor evidence to suggest that the participant is not. The degree of immersion is a variable state. interactions have a relationship with the participant's state variables. In this instance,

the process of steering could be affected by the participant's (variable) level of immersion.

```
if Πa.immersion = possession {  
    // Πa is not steering  
}
```

Irrespective of the *mode* of enactment (see above), *enactment* can be a process in itself. It represents the differentiator between larp and other forms of role-playing: the participant 'performing' actions — the participant's body co-located with that of their character in the storyworld — rather than describing the actions (Harvainen et al, 2018., p.87) as we would see in a TRPG. Here the participant combines their subjective reading of their character with the *map*, and via the coroutines (Knuth, pp.193-194) of *encoding*, *metareflection*, *steering*, and *imagination*, shows what their character does via *enactment*. This enactment may be physical, emotional, or through the spoken word.

Low-level processes are key to the action of larping. As an imaginative overlay, they need to become subconscious to enable immersion.

Filters

The final type of interactions are *filters*. For the purposes of this thesis, filters are black-boxes, "a fiction representing a set of concrete systems into which stimuli *S* impinge and out of which reactions *R* emerge" (Bunge, 1963, p.346). These are subconscious and largely passive activities which inform participants and characters alike. Filters may be diegetic, meta-diegetic, extra-diegetic, or metaleptic. This does not represent a complete list. I begin with a discussion of *Alibi*, a well understood term in larp discourse which I consider in relation to *Bleed*, which describes the movement of various experiences from participant to character and vice versa. I offer the term *literacy* to describe the participant's experience of larp and finally I move on to acknowledge how real-world *Bias* may affect play.

Alibi

Alibi describes the different social rules of a larp (Järvelä and Meland, p.109), those which enable the participant to play the character, specifically "those things they

would never do in normal life” (Koljonen et al., 2019, p.411). For example, behaviour that would not be acceptable in the lifeworld is permitted by alibi in the storyworld. Alibi can be either a positive filter, one which enables play, or negative when it is used as an off-game excuse for inappropriate behaviour in-game. In both cases alibi licenses acts that would not be acceptable outside of the context of the larp — acts of stupidity, lust, violence (Montola & Holopainen, 2012) — playing *Inside Hamlet*, the participant has an alibi to indulge in sex, drugs, and violence as other participants have consented to these themes being a part of the larp. The participant of a political prisoner character at *The Quota* was able to experience scenes of sexual violence and torture (Sandquist, 2020, pp.90-91) because alibi offered some distance between the participant and the character. Stenros et al. claim alibi is stronger when characters are written by the organisers (2019, p.212): as the participants did not write the character themselves, they feel more able to play transgressively. Indeed, alibi is often used to describe an opportunity to transgress, but there is more nuance to this filter; it is as Johnstone (1989) describes, that the participant is not responsible for their actions while in the Mask of the character (p.165) Or to use Deterding (2018), the actions are *identity-congruent*, but the identity is that of the character, not the participant. The alibi filter extends (and occasionally restricts) the set of actions available to the participant during enactment, insulating them from blame, harm or embarrassment that might arise from identity-incongruent actions by the character. However, alibi is an imperfect prophylactic, because the character and participant share the same mind and body, some aspects of the larp experience may be transferred between the two.

Literacy

I offer the term *literacy* to describe the participants’ real-world experience of larping and the amount of bandwidth they have for processing incoming stimuli. Literacy is perhaps a factor of location (which I describe below in reference to bleed). I do not rely on this filter to further my argument, but I acknowledge that it exists.

Bleed

The transfer between participant and character is known as ‘bleed.’ It can happen in either direction, that is from participant to character, or vice versa (Seregina, p.107) The term is usually used to describe a transfer of emotions (Koljonen, et al, p.412) but may also include thoughts, relationships, memories, and physical states

(Bowman, 2015) Bleed may be a side-effect of larp, but some participants actively seek it out (Harviainen et al. p.100) Bowman (2015) states that it remains an “unconscious process;” thus, participants can steer towards or away from bleed, but it is not guaranteed. To define this filter more fully, *Location* and *Focalisation* are used to describe the relative positions of participant and character.

Murray (1997), discussing reading, states “we assemble the story into the cognitive schemata that make up our own system of knowledge and belief,” (p.110) and this cognitive schemata reflects the location of the participant. Location (from social-constructionist epistemology) is not simply a geographical variable, it also refers to how someone is located socially, culturally, sexually, and historically by themselves and others (Sloane, 2007, p.33) In larp this describes a set of variables including the class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, and religion of the participant, and — with regard to the filter — how these affect the understanding of the story. Haraway (1997) suggests that location is partial in the sense of being for some worlds and not others. (p.37) This idea raises the complexity of the participant’s location, versus the participants’ relationship with the diegesis; not only does the participant have a location, but the character they are playing has their own fictive location and it is unlikely to be the same one. So, in larp, there is an additional layer of locational discourse that affects meaning. Arjoranta (2015) uses the term focalization to mean the “narrative perspective of the character.” Sloane (2007) uses this term to describe a (computer game) character based on where they end up (end state) and the choices available to them along the way. Depending on preferred play style, a larper, as distinct from the player of a video game, may not be seeking to make the ‘best’ choices, but rather will be looking for *appropriately focalized* choices as dictated by the character. Based on these definitions, I differentiate between the *focal* position of the character and the *local* position of the *participant*.

Bowman (2015) suggests that bleed is inversely proportional to alibi, arguing that participants can increase the propensity for bleed by playing characters that are “close to home.” Kemper (2018b) suggests that making use of this propensity and steering a character in a direction that interrogates or breaks the participant’s lifeworld oppressions can be transformative. Building on these statements, bleed is more likely when the participant has a greater *positional affinity* with their character. A participant who identifies as a queer woman who is a parent, playing a character who is also a queer woman and a parent, is more likely to experience bleed.

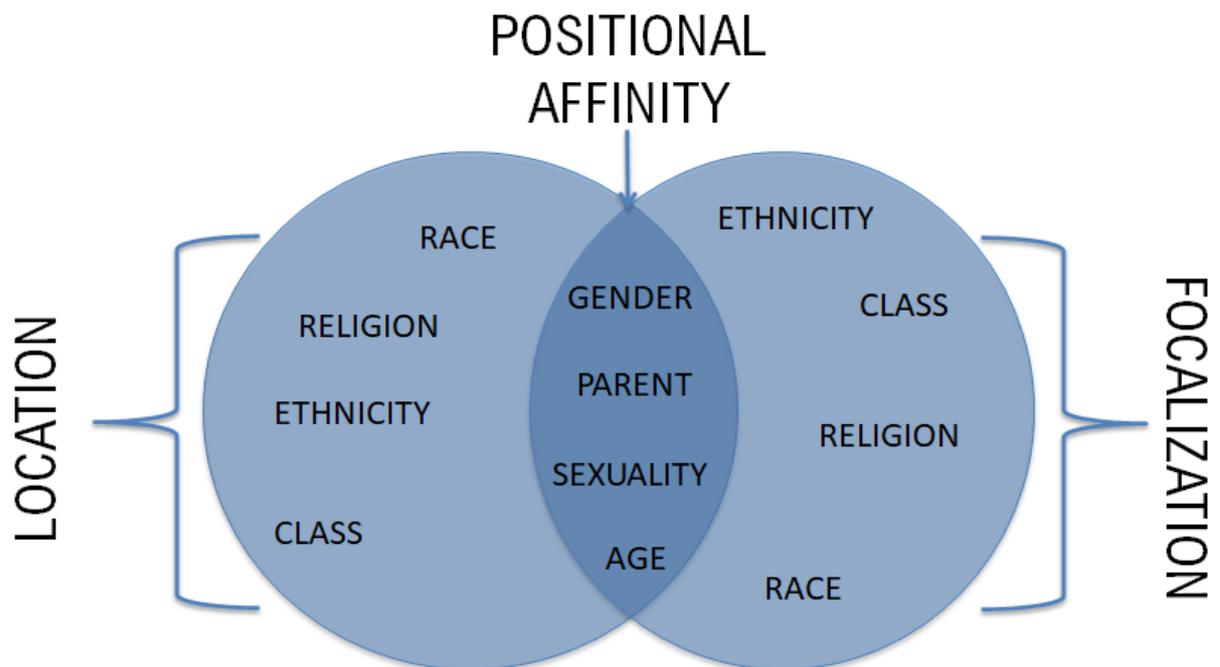


Figure 44 - Positional Affinity.

Bleed can also be triggered by abstract affinities between participants. This often manifests as strong feelings about the participant rather than their character. Some larpers use the common term *chemistry* to describe their desire to interact with others, whether this is finding another participant interesting or attractive in some other way. Tolvanen and MacDonald argue that “Most players put strong emphasis on player chemistry, attractiveness, verbal skills, or social status. This is human” (2020, p.164). As in real life, participants make decisions based on these unconscious or subliminal cues. Conversely, if there is no chemistry it is very difficult to get them to play together (Pettersson, 2019, p.201) Relational affinity is a combination of the participants’ chemistry and their positional affinity to the other participants’ characters⁵⁰. Whilst bleed caused by relational affinity can sometimes lead to positive or even intimate relationships outside of larp, some participants may have aggressive or antagonistic behaviours towards another participant because their character acted antagonistically towards their character during the larp (Bowman, 2015) Connected to

⁵⁰ $(\Pi_a \cap \Pi_b) + (\Pi_a \cap \chi_{ab}) + (\Pi_b \cap \chi_{ba})$

this, but different enough to warrant a separate filter, are the unconscious biases of the real world that may also influence play.

Bias

The *bias* filter is a cognitive process which affects the participants' understanding of the actions and motivations of others. Implicit biases exist in the lifeworld (Greenwald and Krieger, 2006) and it follows they must be a factor in larp. Cultural, gender and other prejudices colour participant's perceptions and their interactions with others. Whether it is an assumption of common rights which are only consistently afforded to white people (DiAngelo, 2011, p.56) or conversely the internalised oppression of minority participants

Kemper (2018b, p.5) larp is not free from societal oppression (Tudor, 2010, p.3) because it is a part of society. For participants with privilege this is often masked by an unconscious assumption that one's own lived experience and understanding applies universally. Therefore, the implicit bias between homogeneous participants will tend to be competitive. This is because within any community perceived authority affects social relations (Hellström, 2012, p.1) Interactions with a well-known or influential participant are passed through the bias filter. Whilst participants have biases, either implicit or overt, some larps include themes of oppression based on lifeworld characteristics. In those cases, where the biases belong to the character, I would describe them as a part of focalization; so a racist prison guard threatening a refugee (*The Quota*) is an example of focal bias.

Section Summary

I have reviewed the various interactions performed by participants during the 'playing' stage of the character lifecycle. I have broadly categorised these as Functions, Processes, and Filters (shown below). These interactions are authorial in as much as they lead to the creation of the emergent story. I now move on to describe the final stages of the character lifecycle where I discuss Narrativization.

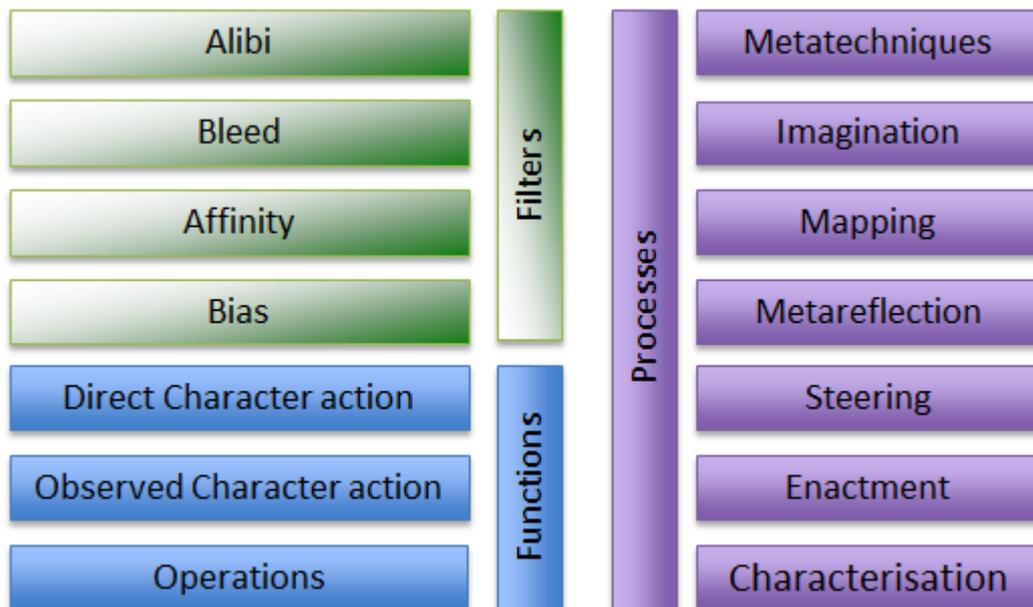


Figure 45 - Filters / Functions/ Processes.

Narrativization

In this section I consider the process of narrativization through two slightly different lenses. First I use “something that comes into existence after the larp is done, this is when participants look back on the plot, the story and their character’s actions and try to answer the question ‘what happened in this larp?’” (Brind, 2019, p.110) I acknowledge *disengagement*, the final stage of the character lifecycle, here. I then move on to introduce the second lens definition of narrative, which is as “events that have taken place and are being described after the fact” (Brind, 2017, p.320). This considers narrativization during the run-time of the larp and allows for a nuanced discussion of recursion. I consider this recursive narrativization during runtime in more detail in the chapter On Combat Narratology.

Stenros (2013) suggests that the communal understanding of a larp begins during the debrief — an organised post-runtime event (Koljonen, et al., 2019, p.413) — debriefs are less common outside of the Nordic tradition. However, as Brown (2019, p.365) observes, if a larpwright does not provide a formal mechanism for this, “players will do it anyway — often the narrating of one’s experience starts at the moment the larp ends.” The UK tradition favours online discussions such as ‘hot & not’ posts, or ‘froth’ meets in pubs. These fulfil the same function: “to put the runtime into perspective, to share stories” (ibid). This is “narrativization by participant community” (Stenros and Montola, 2019, p.17), an active process where participants *negotiate*

(Brown, 2014b) for an agreed outcome. Here I consider Fairfax (2016), who uses a Facebook post to tell the story of what had happened to their character at *College of Wizardry 13*. In this third person, 4700-word text, the author presents a non-diegetic perspective. Fairfax describes that she thought her character “would be actively opposed from all directions and that her frozen heart would be crushed by those she had wronged,” and then proceeds to narrate twelve unexpected diegetic events that melted that frozen heart. Because this narrative was published on social media, it came with an implicit invitation to comment. Some offered praise for the writing, others sought to offer small descriptions of their own character’s involvement in the reported narrative. For some larps a written epilogue or coda may be a part of the final stage of the character lifecycle, a means to disengage from the character. *The Quota* used a postcard, of a tourist scene in Wales, sent between participant and character as a means to close the narrative. Some participants chose to write to other participants characters to find a way to say goodbye. *The Quota* also invited participants to write postcards to their characters or to answer the question, “So what happened to your character?” (Gouliou, 2020, pp.162-175). These techniques are a part of a structured debriefing process, designed to help participants to process what occurred during the larp (Brown, 2019, p.368) but they contribute to narrativization because, as Montola argues, the function of narrativization is to build a complete picture made up of the fragments of subjective diegesis (2014, p.110).

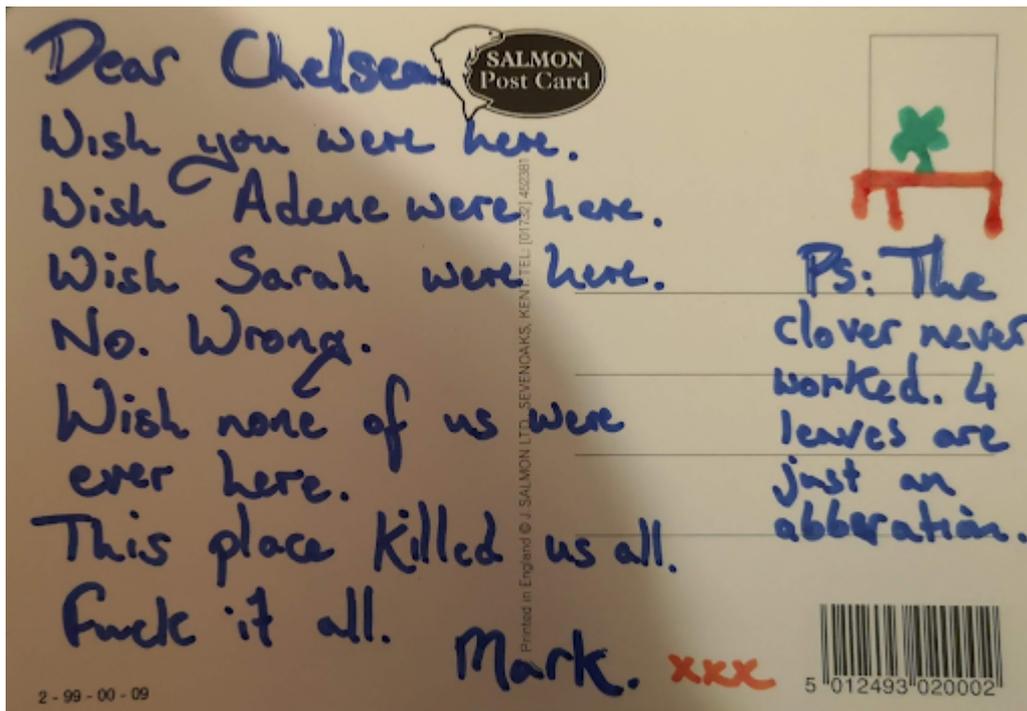


Figure 46 - A postcard to Mark. Photo by John Shockley.

For campaign larps, where a series of interconnected events play out over a number of years, some attempt may be made to provide a historical archive of storyworld events. One such example is the *Brighthelm Stane Library of the Harts of Albion* which contains the in-game history of a fictional nation spanning over twenty years of real time. It contains various *in-game* accounts of events which took place during this time. As they are in-game (diegetic) texts then the narrator's perspective is also diegetic. My own character's first-person account of the larp *Rutterkin's Wood* (Brind, 1998) contains appended text from other participants/characters; these extend the narrative. Both texts were read by others and interacted with — more in 2016 than 1998 — continuing the process of narrativization until no further comments were made, at which point they seem to have become static. Narrativization may help shape a more objective understanding of “what just happened?” but I do not contradict Montola's assertion that — even with texts in the form of diegetic or non-diegetic write-ups, documents, photographs, video, and in-game ephemera — it is impossible to fully document the internal processes of diegesis creation from all the participants (Montola, 2014, pp.110-111).

With larp, as with any event where multiple participants are asked to recall or describe the same event, there will be different memories and different retellings of the same event.

For example: Character A has a poison dagger. Unseen by anyone they give their target B a small prick with the blade, thus, fatally poisoning them, before handing the knife to Character C telling them “You should be the one to do it!” Character C stabs target B with the poisoned blade. Character D witnesses Character C stab target B and sees target B fall to the ground and, shortly thereafter, expire from the poison. Objectively, A has murdered B and made it look like C has done it. Subjectively B, C, and D believe that C is the murderer. During narrativization, Participant A tells Participant D, “actually, B was already dying, I had stabbed them with the poisoned knife before I handed it to C” (*The Gathering*). These subjective deltas are a result of multiple internal focalization (Genette, 1980, p.90) and are not unexpected; post-larp narrativization provides an opportunity to fill in the participants gaps in understanding. However, narrative starts to emerge during the run time of the larp, and I move on to discuss this now.

When mapping (see above), the participant works out *what is happening to my character right now*. In order to do this, the participant includes a “narrative of past events” into their map. This means that any event or enactment that has already taken place is subject to narrativization during the runtime of the larp. This is particularly obvious when characters start to discuss storyworld events which have taken place diegetically in the recent past. My position in this study is that the tense is the clearest differentiator between a Story Event (something that is happening as a part of the storymaking process) and a Narrative Event (something that has happened diegetically). I acknowledge that a Narrative Event may become a Story Event if it is referenced in game. For example, in the scenario above, Participant D runs to the authorities and tells them they saw C murder B. The narrativized account of the murder passes back to *plot*, then to *story*, and finally becomes a new *narrative* in its own right.

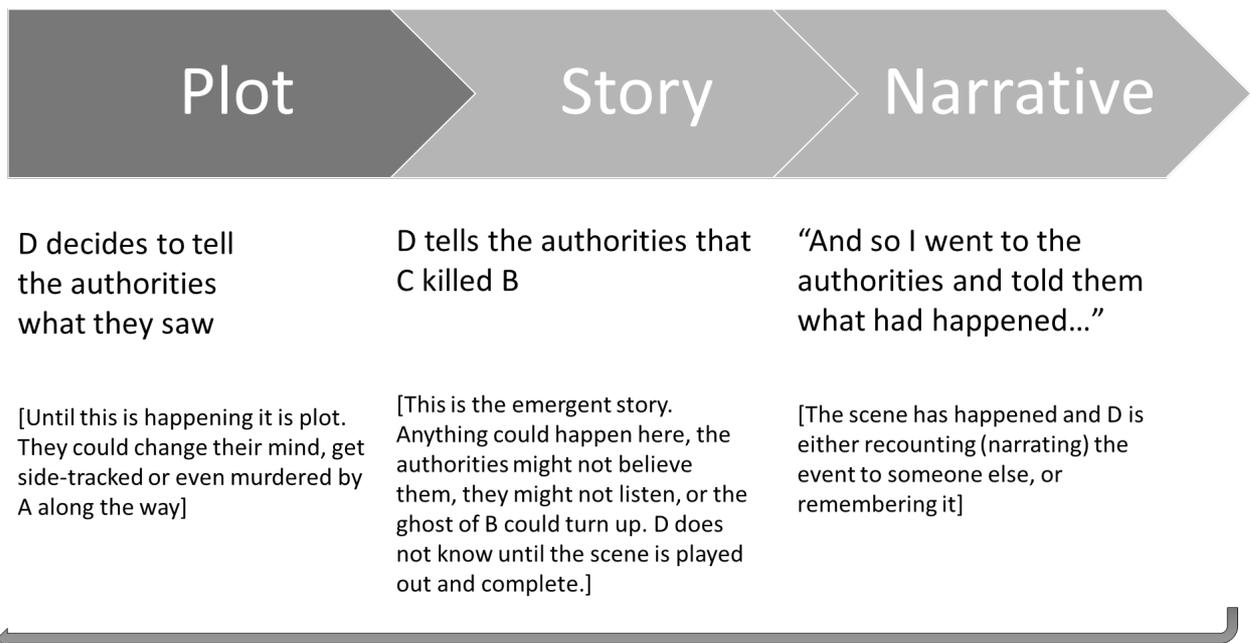


Figure 47 - Plot/Story/Narrative example.

As Brown (2014a) describes “What is constructed by one player or gamemaster is used as the basis for what other players can and do construct as a result.” This recursion represents a continuous generation of narrative as an output of storymaking; that which has taken place is rendered as (a subjective) narrative in participant memory, or as an intradiegetic narrative within the storyworld.

Abstract Narrative Model

Having introduced narrativization as the third part of the Plot: Story:Narrative process and demonstrated it is recursive when used during runtime, and based on Steele’s assertion that the rules of a larp — particularly one with meta-mechanics — can be described as “code that runs on humans” (2016, p.30), I now offer a logical model of the narrative system of larp during runtime, showing the relationship between participants, characters, plots, and story, and how variables, filters, and functions may affect the generation of story and narrative. This demonstrates that the state of the narrator — the one who is describing their subjective reality as narrative — is unknown and must be considered intrinsically unreliable.

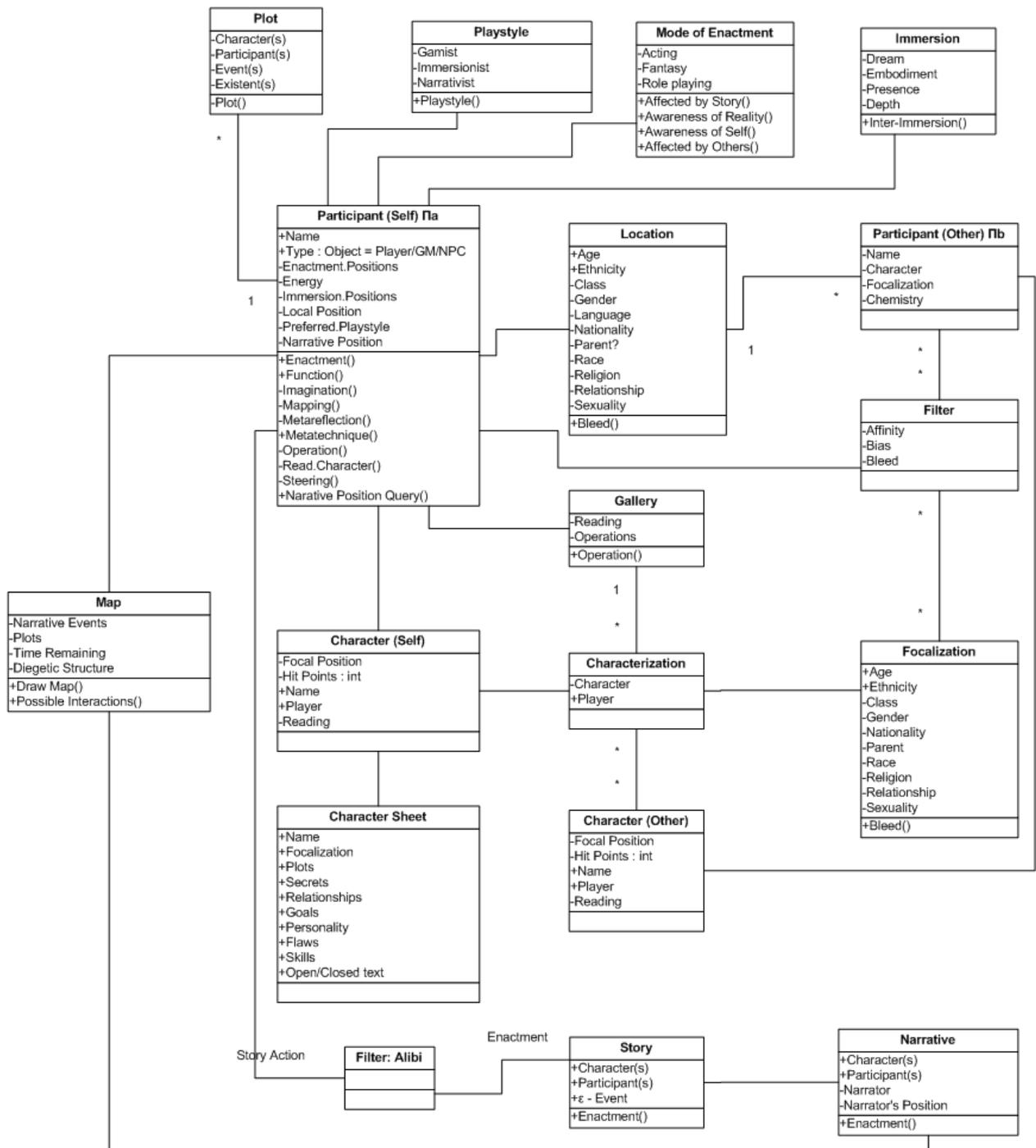


Figure 48 - Abstract Narrative Model - Plot to Narrative.

How to read this Model

This model makes use of *abstraction* (Locke, 1706, XI.9) to generalise the behaviour of objects within the model and to hide some information. The temporality of the larp is not shown, nor are any spatial or physical aspects of the larp included. The model contains a number of objects. These are boxes split into three sections. The top-most section is the name of the object. The second section contains the

'attributes' of the object. Those marked with + are objectively 'visible' to other objects. Those marked with - are private and, whilst they may be discovered or interrogated are not immediately obvious. In cases where they may sometimes be 'visible' and sometimes be private, they are set as private. Gender is sometimes, but not always visible, therefore it is set to private. In a few cases different options for the type of the attribute are set. So, in the Participant Object, the Type of Object could be Player or GM. The third section shows the methods by which the object can modify itself internally (-) or communicate with other objects (+). Most Objects have a simple one-to-one relationship; one participant has one Character, one Location etc. In these cases, the relationship between objects is implied. For those where the relationship is one to many, this is represented as 1 and *. The model shows abstracted relationships between objects; at a lower level most objects would be able to interact with one another directly.

Uncertainty Principle

If this model were rendered in software, it would be logically possible to take a snapshot of all of the data in it at any given time. The narrative system of a larp, however, is analogue rather than digital and it runs on wetware; so getting an accurate reading, even with a relatively small number of participants, would be problematic. I warrant that successful gamemasters of small TRPG groups manage to do this to some extent, but as Fine (1983) says, stepping out of character here is normalised and thus of little consequence (p.228). The effect of doing this is less clear in a larp. Whilst the act of *observation* might not cause dissonance — a gamemaster watching two participants interact — the act of *asking* a non-diegetic question of a participant is an *intervention* and this may force them to change their level of immersion in order to answer. If there is dissonance, or a change in a participant variable caused by conscious metalepsis, this will have repercussions throughout the model. Thus, the accuracy of answers to questions pertaining to the diegesis asked from outside will be skewed by their extra-diegetic origin; it forces a redrawing of the map as the participant's state changes. Whilst this is not necessarily true of an intradiegetic inquiry, the response, coming from the character rather than the participant, is a part of the fiction. Whilst it is possible that the information given may be objectively true, it is difficult to validate without understanding the position of the narrator. Heisenberg (1927) suggests it is not possible to know the *present* of a narrative system in all its

parameters, because the act of inquiry affects the output of that inquiry: interrogating the narrative position affects the narrative position. The roles of author and narrator are distinct. Authorial acts, particularly those within the system, are functions of storymaking rather than Narration. Plot and character writers working *before* the larp will produce texts which can be read and interrogated using the tools and methods of literary criticism. Writers and organisers during the larp runtime, presupposing they are insulated from the diegesis and are not playing characters themselves, retain their neutral authorial position. This statement — that authorial neutrality may be lost if the writer enters the storyworld — is not commonly shared by larp writers; this study offers no value judgement on their decision to become participants, but rather argues that their presence does have some effect upon the story.

Summary

This chapter has examined and modelled the relationship between participant and character and what they do before, during, and after a larp with particular relation to the storymaking process. It identifies a set of variables which describe the metaphorical position of the participant within the model. I have analysed what the participant does and how participants interact with their characters and so with one another. I have argued that even using this relatively simple abstract model it is not possible to determine the objective accuracy of any single piece of narrative. Thus, I conclude that a participant must be considered an unreliable (or diegetic) narrator. Based on this conclusion, I also recommend that a writer refrains from entering the diegesis during runtime as the moment they put on a character — no matter how simple or insignificant — they become a participant and their objective distance is lost.

'But we're outside the stories,' said Lily. 'Me because I . . . am the medium through which they happen, and you because you fight them. We're the ones in the middle. The free ones —' Terry Pratchett, *Witches Abroad*.

Chapter 7 - On Narrative Patterns - Case Study: Odyssey

*“There is no route out of the maze.
The maze shifts as you move through it, because it is alive. “*

Philip K. Dick

As I have shown above, larps are intrinsically intersubjective phenomena. More so, perhaps, because as well as the potentially equifinal game state and rules, there is also the story state. Although Montola argues that participants make sense of games in an equifinal manner (Montola, 2011, p.314). I have argued that an equifinal narrative is unlikely. I use the term commonality to describe any intersection of understanding between participants. However, I adopt the term intersubjective to describe the narrative gestalt where many narratives and story objects come together and are collectively understood by participants.

In this chapter I will illustrate this collective understanding by way of a study of a larp where source material, tropes, and the cultural narratives of the storyworld were largely shared between participants. This study consisted of a series of ethnographic field studies of the Story Team at *Odyssey*, a larp produced by Profound Decisions in the UK.

This chapter is split into three sections. The first describes the design of the field study and the structure and design of the larp, *Odyssey*. In the second section I share the key findings of the study, which suggest a degree of observable narrative predictability because of the repeated tropes which seem to inform participatory play.

In the third section I return to the model and further decompose the narrative object. I discuss its creation and progress through the narrative system suggesting that, whilst there is no written text, a series of imagined texts exist and these can be used, in parallel with semiotic and other attributes, to infer and deconstruct meaning.

I will develop this idea further in chapter 8 where I argue that recognisable patterns exist within the narrative system of the larp.

Section 1 - Odyssey the larp



Figure 49 - Odyssey LRP - Photo by Charlie Moss.

Odyssey was a UK fest larp set in the ancient world in a “time of classical myth” (Harrold, 2017, p.121). Participants with an understanding of Greek, Roman, Persian, or Egyptian myths started with a shared understanding of the storyworld. It ran between 2010 and 2016 with a series of thirteen events which ran from Friday evening through to Sunday afternoon. The events were run for hundreds of players at locations in the Midlands of the UK by a professional larp company called Profound Decisions. I performed a field study of the operating Story Team which included autoethnographic field notes, recordings, interviews, and photographs. This approach is more fully documented in the methodology chapter.

Introduction

This section provides information about the logistics, structure, and plot of the larp. I introduce the storyworld and metaphysics, and then go on to describe the approach taken by the Story Team to create the plot for the larp and their operating model during runtime. This includes a set of photographs taken during my field study which show the location and operating conditions of the story team. This information is provided as a scaffold which I rely on later in this chapter when I discuss narrative crises that arose during the game.

Location and setup

Odyssey took place at three different sites during its seven-year run; this was not a deliberate choice on the part of the organisers, but rather an unfortunate logistical necessity. The events were run at Tournament Stud, Brackley, Sperrall Farm, Worcs. and Dadford Road Campsite, Stowe. In all cases there was a delineation between the in character (IC) and out of character (OOC) areas, either with a hedge or a ditch. The “Story Tent” and “GOD⁵¹” were in the out of character area. As is common in UK larp, the event was largely camping. Whilst some players and crew opted to stay in nearby hotels, the majority slept under canvas. Players either camped OOC, or opted to remain in character and slept IC, according to their selected *nation* (see below). As the event ran for 24 hours a day, camping IC meant players were subject to interruptions during the night.

There were on-site caterers where participants could purchase hot meals, and free meal tickets were provided to volunteer crew. Some participants chose to self-cater or to cook IC. There were Portaloos, some rented flush toilets, and limited hot showers available. Drinking water was available from standpipes across the site.

⁵¹ GOD - or Games Operation Desk is the point of call for players with rules queries, logistical issues, or in need of off-game help. At the first runs of *Odyssey* this was in a physically separate tent, but in later events the tents were merged, with a canvas wall separating the two functions. The upside of this was easier communication between off-game functions, the downside was that plot discussions could be overheard by players. For a non-transparent larp, like *Odyssey*, this led to some cases of cheating!



Figure 50 - Odyssey Site Layout Map.



Figure 51 - Odyssey Toilets - The perils of larp camping.

Storyworld

The storyworld was described on the website for the larp as a place for “legends and larger-than-life characters” where the players would portray great heroes rather than shadowy villains. The larp was pitched as an equal mixture of Player vs. Player (PvP) — where most of the conflict comes from competition between characters for resources — and Player vs. Monster/Environment (PvM/E) where the game organisers introduce external threats (plots) to drive a story forward. Described as more Harryhausen than Homer, *Odyssey* did not seek to represent historical fact. This was a conscious design decision to avoid sexism, racism, and the exclusion of marginalised identities. The different cultures (nations) were set-up to provide different gameplay and roleplay opportunities. Some were led by player characters, others by directed NPCs or characters appointed directly by the gods in game. This allowed players to self-select the sort of play culture they were most comfortable with.

To provide context for the examples and situations given below, in the fiction, Alexander the Great had challenged the power of the Gods. The resulting war had

almost destroyed everything and so the Fates⁵² had decreed that all future battles would take place in an arena on Atlantis, which they raised from the sea for this purpose. The gods and legends of Greece, Rome, Persia, Carthage, Egypt, and Atlantis coexisted in the middle kingdom, but they existed within their own metaphysical magisterium. Thus, the Gods of one nation could not affect the people of another, nor could they directly interact with one another.

System Design

“Nations will compete against each other in the Great Game, a means for the mortals of this new age to affect the world of *Odyssey*. Some will choose to fight in arena combat. Others will duel on the political stage. Yet more will plumb the mysteries of magic. *Odyssey* also has a dedicated story team that will provide opportunity for adventures, quests and intrigue to those who attend the Annual.” (*Odyssey Website*)

Harrold describes a triptych in the design of *Odyssey*, with the events taking place around the Arena — a wooden palisade 25 meters long and 14 meters wide and up to 5 meters tall in places, with gates at either end (see pictures) — where warriors fought to capture land, or for other prizes. “We wished conflict to be meaningful; every fight in the arena had some concrete advantage on conquest and many also had deep significance to the wider story.” (Harrold, 2017, p.122)

⁵² The Fates were a significant yet silent power; to the best of my knowledge, they manifested only once and that was immediately after the end was called of the 13th Annual.



Figure 52 - Odyssey Arena during set-up.



Figure 53 - Odyssey Arena interior: Photo by Charlotte Moss.

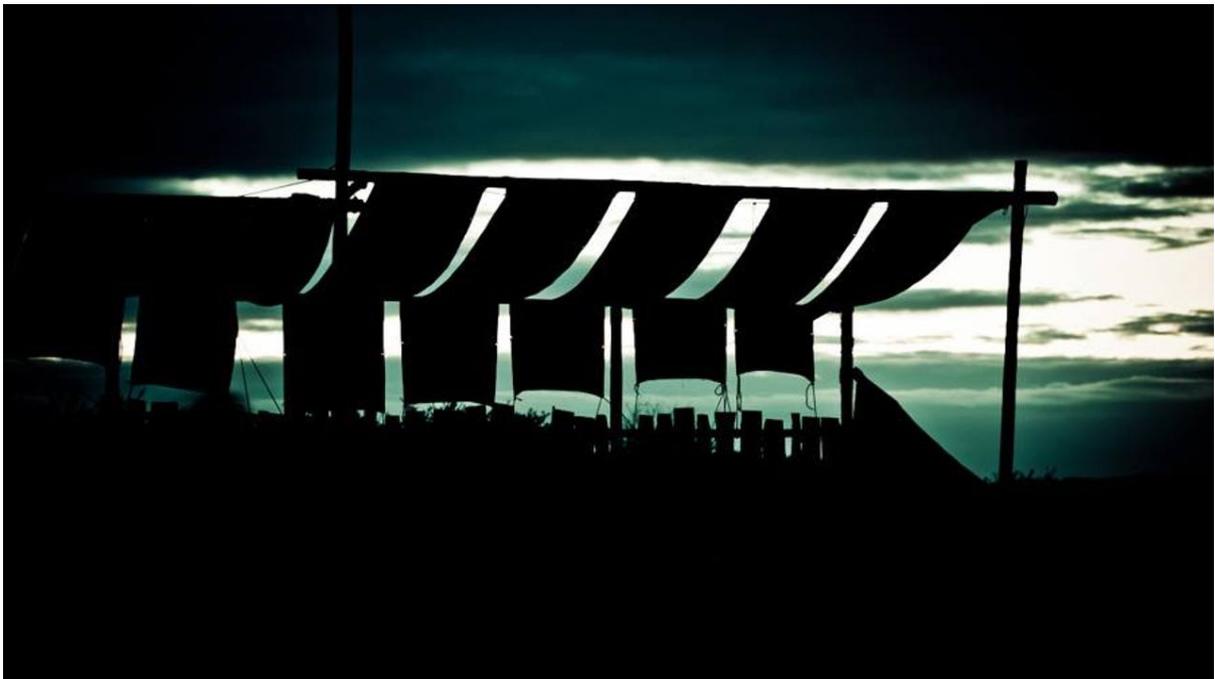


Figure 54 - Odyssey Arena at Night: Photo by Charlotte Moss.



Figure 55 - Odyssey Arena Stand.



Figure 56 - Odyssey Arena interior with players for scale.

The other two parts of the game design were the philosophy game and the priest game. Philosophy was the magical system of *Odyssey*; philosophers learned

spells that initially provided some benefits to combatants in the arena, but they were able to investigate and unlock the secrets of the universe as the larp progressed, eventually discovering the Great Rites which Alexander had used to try to turn themselves into a God. Their work took place inside a space called The World Forge which was a universe in its own right. Finally, the priests of the various nations were called to audiences with their Gods. Here they could make sacrifices, ask questions, beg favours, but mainly were there to serve the whims of their (often conflicting) gods. The characters had to follow a specific path. Only priests could enter the home of the Gods, only philosophers could enter The World Forge, only warriors and warleaders could enter the arena to fight. This was so that no one character could do everything they might want to, ensuring collaborative play.

Characters

Participants created their own characters, selecting a path and a nation, but making their own selections around skills and backstory. It was possible to change paths between events, but changing nations was not permitted. This approach is common in UK larp. Most events allow players to decide who they want to play. Players formed groups within their nations and these groups could submit a background. These were read by the story team and occasionally used as the seeds for plots. The story team asked for “a short summary of the things your group has done and any allies, obligations or feuds you have” (*Odyssey Website*). Some larps will accept this on a character-by-character basis, but it requires a great deal of creative energy from a writing team to manage this and it does not work at scale: during the run of *Odyssey* there were 1056 unique players registered, who played 1394 characters; the effort to assimilate and incorporate plots for each of these individual characters would have been significant. It adds a level of complexity to the understanding of the narrative model in as much as the writers did not create the characters and so do not know them, but conversely it removes a layer of complexity in as much as the relationship between Γ a and Xa is 1:1 – the character is understood as written, because it is written by the player.

Plot and Story

The *Odyssey* Story Team generated the individual plotlines for the event, briefed or played various NPCs, and reacted in game to the participant action or inaction. They had various levels of experience of writing for larps. The team size varied as members joined and left but it averaged between twelve and twenty. The team met twice each year for a full day of creative meetings to pitch and refine ideas. These meetings tended to be at the start of the year and between the two events. Plots were written into a wiki. A copy was taken of this at the end of the final event. Whilst this is a textual artefact, it represents the plot as written. For some plot events, crew members were presented with a written briefing sheet explaining what the plot was about and what they were expected to do. For the majority these briefings were delivered verbally by the plot writer to the crew member. At this point the plot is starting to become story and the text ceases to be reliable.

During the event the Story Team were based out of a large tent in the OOC field. The tent had electricity and a local area network for computers and printers. The tent was powered by a diesel generator. This also powered the AV systems used for the God audiences. There were moments during the larps where the power failed. During *Odyssey XII* there were two power cuts: between 20:55 and 21:15 on the Friday evening, and from 10:15 to 10:55 on the Saturday. We relied on laptop batteries and electric torches during these times. The Story Team were also in radio communication with the IC referees (The Drowned Dead) and with the Quest Team, who ran plot events which took place 'Away from Atlantis.'



Figure 57 - Odyssey Story Tent.



Figure 59 - Odyssey Story Tent - Props.



Figure 60 – The Hand of A God - This prop was large enough to grab an adult player.

The Story Tent also served as the costume, props, and make-up department, as well as a resting place for the NPC crew. This proved problematic as there were times when the desire of enthusiastic crew members to tell war stories actively interfered with the ability of the story team to do their work: not so much unreliable narrators as unwelcome narrators. The temperature varied during the course of the day. In the morning it was cold enough that the laser printers in the tent steamed when printing; during the day it was hot enough to require fans and, despite the illusion of shade, the canvas offered no protection from the sunlight, causing some volunteers to suffer sunburn. At night it was genuinely cold. The vagaries of British weather also meant we had to deal with mud and rain, including leaks in tents containing electrical equipment.



Figure 61 - Odyssey Story Tent during flood.

20:05 on the Friday of *Odyssey XII*, “The rain is catastrophic; heavy enough that we have had to power down the AV environment (one of the two God audience locations) taking it out of action. (Brind, 2016, *Odyssey Field notes*)



Figure 62 - Odyssey Gods.



Figure 63 - Odyssey Story Tent - reactive plot writing during the event.



Figure 64 - Odyssey Story Tent - briefing some Egyptian Gods.

Design of Study

The *Odyssey* ethnographic field study was carried out over three years to investigate the process of plot creation and actuation with the emphasis on how it manifested as story during the running of the larp. I was particularly interested in any moments of narrative crisis and how they were resolved by the Story Team. Ethnographic study precludes detachment (Emerson et al. 1995, p.3) and I designed the study with constraints in place that would enable both active participation in the society of running the larp but would also allow the objectivity that comes from distance. My plan was to carry out an ethnographic study of the *Odyssey* Story Team

during the final years of the larp. I took on the role of 'Director of Narrative' for the project which enabled me to be embedded with the team, but without responsibility for writing the plot. During the writing phases I operated as a sounding board, primarily asking the question, "Do players have agency to affect this?" I would challenge set-piece plots — where something would happen in a specific way — and ensure that no events would consist of two or more NPCs shouting at or otherwise interacting directly with each other without player involvement. During the larp I took on responsibility for keeping the event running, ensuring that Story Team members and NPCs were briefed and that scheduled events went out on time and that the state of the narrative system was understood as much as was possible. This gave me oversight of the Story Team operation and of the story itself as reported to the gamemasters. Throughout I was able to observe and question as a member of the community rather than an interloper, so my presence as a researcher, although understood and consented to by participants, was largely invisible.

In order to understand the complexity of the narrative system I resisted the urge to watch the game being played; instead, I maintained an objective distance from players. *Odyssey* had a hedge or a ditch which divided the in-game and off-game spaces. During the field studies I tried not to cross the hedge. There were two exceptions: those instances where I was required to play a God NPC (this took place in the God Environment) and during the final event where a crew member who was in play needed a reason to return to the Story Tent; with no one else available I elected to cross the hedge as an NPC, to murder her character and to allow her to return. I discuss the learnings from this metalepsis below. I further enforced the objective distance by keeping away from data which linked players to characters. I would know the actions of a participant only through their character name and to try to prevent my perceptions of the player — some of whom were known to me — to inform my opinions and decisions.

As before I took observational field notes both on computer and by hand. I also recorded voice notes on my phone where possible. Because of a lack of reliable internet on site, I made a regular backup of the written notes to a USB hard drive. I transcribed the notes within 48 hours of the end of each event. In addition, I interviewed members of the Story Team and selected NPCs using a portable digital audio recorder which stored audio on a SD card. All participants in this study signed a form explicitly opting into the study and were aware they could withdraw at any time.

I was further aided by the debriefing process that *Odyssey* adopted. When the crew member playing an NPC returned from play, they debriefed onto a networked computer which ran a tool (called Mimir) for this purpose. Each NPC character had a *journal* page which could be updated regularly throughout the event. They would write a short description of what they had seen and done, and what happened, directly into the computer. This generated narrative text almost immediately after the event which was useful for this study. Mimir also provided a way of tracking the favour of the various gods (kudos,) any magical blessings and curses that were in effect, the players at the event, magical or other items, and spells which had been uncovered as a part of the philosophers' investigations into the metaphysics of the world.

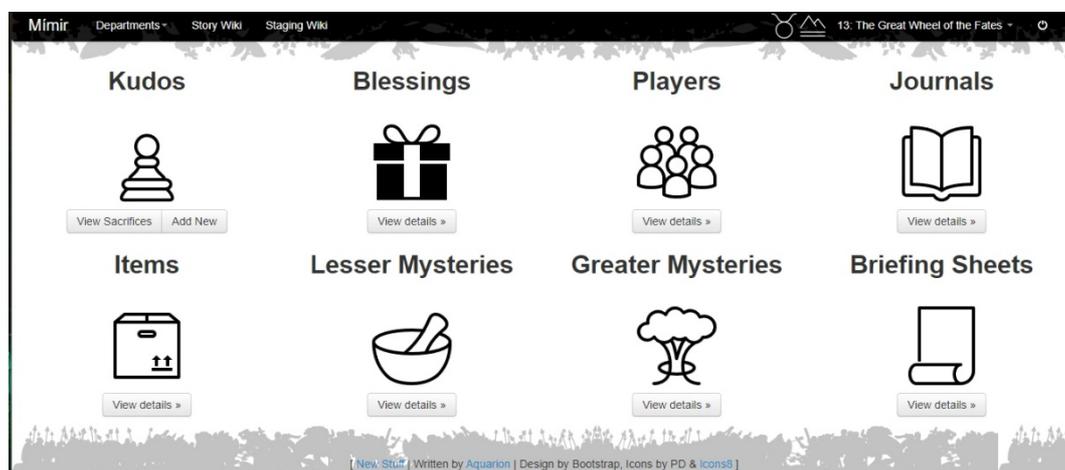


Figure 65 - Mimir Title Screen.

I offer a curated selection of findings from the study. Two of these build on the previous chapter to suggest that gamemasters and NPCs are also intrinsically unreliable. The others I use to identify repeating patterns in larp stories which I use to form the basis of the following chapter.

Section 2 - Findings

There were five key findings from the *Odyssey* field studies.

Recognisable and repeated narrative patterns

Larp narratives can be decomposed into enactments which then generate the story. It is possible to compare these narratives with their original plots. Much like Propp's consideration of the morphology of the forms of the folktale, patterns start to emerge. Because of the complexity of the larp narrative system as compared to the text of a fairy tale, it is not possible to model all of these, certainly not for a larp the scale of *Odyssey*, but what I illustrate here is that patterns — and more significantly *repeating* patterns — existed.

In their study of narrative at Vampire the Masquerade larps, Milspaw and Evans suggest that participants found their collectively created stories most satisfying when they were structurally closer to traditional narrative. Larp participants, operating as collaborating authors within the constraints of a multithreaded emergent narrative, will tend to steer their stories towards a known structure. *Known* here refers to a shared understanding of morpheme (story grammar), trope, and genre. I combine Bringsjord and Ferrucci's statement, "an interesting story is at least a partial instantiation of one-or-more story grammars" (Bringsjord and Ferrucci, 2000, p.154), with Black and Wilensky's insistence that "knowledge is used in understanding both stories and procedural expositions" (Black and Wilensky, 1979, p.222).

Storyworlds created in TRPG frequently mirror the structure of traditional narrative genres (Milspaw and Evans, 2010. p.212) Murray suggests that the morpheme elements identified by Propp are understood by the reader from the fairy tales they know even if they are not familiar with the original Russian fairy tales (Murray, 2017, p.241) In larp — and particularly at *Odyssey* — tragic patterns are common, perhaps as a result of a play-to-lose style from some larpers which means they will steer towards a defeat or an unhappy ending, and sometimes because the larp simply plays out that way. I make use here of Harrold's article on stories from *Odyssey* which collected narratives from participants after the end of event thirteen. One example from *Odyssey* is a result of a *quest promise*: here, two characters agree to wed if one of them can complete three tasks: to find the wedding sword of Alexander the Great, recapture the city of Corinth, and successfully defend Athens in battle. In a traditional folk tale, the hero would complete three tasks and then win their bride, but this story was tragedy not folktale; although the hero completes all three tasks, tragedy strikes and their beloved is lost.

"We are united, briefly, in joy as she rushes into the Arena and my arms after Athens stands. Then she needs to go back to Corinth. She will return, she

promises. But The World Forge breaks, Corinth vanishes, and so does she” (Harrold, 2017. p.124).

Other participant narratives also follow understood patterns. Whilst *Odyssey* offered the option for participants to camp and sleep out of character, for those who opted to sleep in character, the larp continued for 24 hours a day. One night, Sirens — mythological creatures who lured any who heard their songs to their doom — entered the field of Atlantis. A participant’s narrative of the event that followed:

“Don’t go with them Tribune!” a wavering Roman voice called from a small distance off. A faint snatch of music, high voices singing a haunting, alluring, receding harmony. “Don’t listen, Tribune! Block your ears!” The eerie singing slowly faded to nothing. “Tribune!” Sobbing. Silence” (Ibid., p.128).

What is interesting here is that the participant, hearing the Siren’s song, went along with them — to their character’s doom — without any metatechnique or rule that told them that they had to go along with the crew members playing Sirens. They understood the rules of the story and followed them.

Odyssey also offered examples of ‘sacrifice for the common good,’ ‘impossible promises’ and ‘fighting against impossible odds. ‘The Egyptian players discussed a moment where they were about to give up but, from somewhere, they found a spark and decided to fight on or to die in the attempt,

“We suddenly snapped and decided to make the effort, no matter how impossible it seemed. It was a defining moment for our small nation that we would always fight to win and to obey our gods, never mind the odds” (Ibid., p.127).

In this instance the story moment — where the warriors of the nation were inspired to fight on — led to an unexpected victory in the arena. This is an extreme example; it is not my intention to imply that the emergent story enabled a miracle in the lifeworld. The most common patterns follow some variation on the Campbellian hero's journey or were tragic cycles leading towards a heroic death. It should be noted that these

were all on theme for the larp. Patterns found in other larps tend towards the relevant themes. At *College of Wizardry*, for example, there are any number of students involved in dark prophecies, resolving familial curses, or confronting their bullies. These patterns have tended to be analogous to fantasy tropes.

Trope as grammar

Further to these patterns, the *Odyssey* field studies also suggested that tropes are used as grammar, particularly in rapid communication between members of the Plot/Story Team, during both team meetings and in the field. The names of plot events on the wiki, for example, were designed to provide an aide de memoire for the writers but also to quickly communicate the intention of the piece. “Pharaoh wants a pony” (*Odyssey V*) is an example of the *Ludicrous Gift Request* trope, defined as a request that could be impractical or extremely hard to obtain, or not exist. In this example the divine Pharaoh instructed the priests of Egypt to provide increasingly outlandish gifts and entertainments, creating dramatic tension as they increasingly moved towards the point where they would have to say ‘no.’ Looking for other mythological examples from the TV Tropes website to illustrate how certain plots and stories might be decomposed into tropes, I discovered that *Odyssey* (the larp), already had its own page on TV Tropes and that some of this work had already been done. For example, in the larp, much of the plot originated from the machinations of the Gods. These were supporting characters played by the gamemasters and writers, who used the participants as pawns in their own games. The tropes identified on the website *Jerkass Gods* and *Pantheon Sitcom* accurately encapsulate the plot as designed, and the trope *Death of the Old Gods* returned on more than one occasion during the run of the larp.

TV Tropes then is an example of what Liszka describes as a semantic field; a conceptually categorised lexicon of affinity and contrast sets (Liszka, 2016, p.150)

Wikis work because the community consensus shapes the agreed definition, as behind the scenes (but available to anyone who is interested) the editors can discuss and argue the content of the published page. As the entries on this website are collaboratively created and collaboratively understood, they can stand as exemplar rhetorics for some mesanarratives (sub-narratives “contained within the

narrative”).) So when an NPC is described as *The Big Bad*,⁵³ that can be understood in an analogous way by those who have been exposed to that trope. When a character is described in terms akin to *Sergeant Rock* — the experienced NCO who will look after his inexperienced troops in combat — most participants will be able to place that character easily within their story, because they are habitually familiar with the concept.

The use of tropes as a grammar enables shared communication and a rapid transfer of ideas because they represent a fixed point of understanding. I return to this in the chapter On Combat Narratology, when I discuss the triangulation method.

Unreliability of Gamemasters

My field notes state “The signal to noise ratio in an immersive environment, or on the liminal edges of said environment, is poor. There are a lot of extraneous feeds of data, a lot of noise, and too many interruptions.” I used the expression “signal to noise ratio” after Shannon (1998), although I am referring to the maximum rate of transmission of narrative events (narremes) when the communication is perturbed by various types of noise. *Noise* here could be literal volume with many people talking, background noises, or — most commonly — interruptions. Having to context switch between decoding narrative, answering plot questions, and fielding other questions such as “Have you eaten?” adds a cognitive load. At times I had to write lists of questions and clarifications which needed to be cross checked with multiple crew members or writers. I realised these questions and the style of questioning, represented a repeatable process. I return to these lists and the matter of questions and clarifications in chapter 8 where I present them as a part of the Combat Narratology process. I also observed that there were enthusiastic crew members who wanted to tell their narratives to anyone who might listen, including writers who were trying to concentrate on their work.

⁵³ <https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/BigBad>



Figure 66 - Odyssey Story Tent Sign, 19th June 2016. Image by Harry Harrold.

The volume of these conversations was also problematic as they often included details of the plot that were not intended for players. Being inside a tent gave the illusion of privacy. The photograph above was a sign that we put up inside the Story Tent to remind crew members of this. There were occasions where I moved the writers out of the main Story Tent in order to give them privacy to write or to think. These secondary locations were occasionally used for debriefs and discussions of specific plot points. That way writers could focus without the risk of being derailed by information about other story events. However, it was not just the signal to noise ratio that was a challenge. I also recorded incidents where the writer's preconceived ideas affected their understanding of the story. In one case their interpretation of the narrative effectively overwrote the narrative as reported by those in the field.

Odyssey event XII provides the clearest example of this discrepancy between report and perception, with the murder of Medea. Here a long-term NPC working towards a specific plot set piece was killed by a group of participants who had a reputation for the sort of play which focused on killing and stealing. This led to

frustration from the writing team, which concluded that the NPC was killed for the magical items she carried:

“It was just done in such a dunder-headed, poorly executed way for, for the most trivial of reasons; they did her over for her shineys” (Andrews, Interview, 29th June 2016).

However, the journal entry by the crew member playing Medea and discussions with those participants who were actually responsible for the character’s murder, were clear that the reasons for Medea’s murder were because they had investigated her thoroughly and discovered that she was lying — spinning a different story to each nation — and was clearly betraying everyone and working for her own benefit. This was objectively true, but participants were not expected to have solved it so quickly and the reputation of the participants who enacted the murder also informed Andrews’ interpretation of events, the *imagined text*.

The *imagined text* is the product of the encoding of a narrative; this contains the who, where, what, when, and why of the object. This is an authorial act. The participant or gamemaster assembles this text based on input from various sources. This differs from writing a literary narrative because of the metaleptic position of the gamemaster as reader, author, and potentially participant, because of the timebound constraints of the real-time emergent story, and because the text is not written down. However, I suggest that this text *could* be written — indeed the recorded examples of narrative crises offered in this study are proof this it can be done —the act of recording an imagined text creates an actual text. These are transcriptions or reconstructions of these imagined texts. I discuss the process of encoding in the next chapter.

In this instance it seems that the gamemaster was seeing a narrative pattern in the system that was not actually there; examples such as these are common, although not always as clear-cut. Gamemasters' preconceived ideas of what will happen in the larp, or what is happening in the larp will rarely intersect with the story or participant narratives. But seeing a narrative in the system that was not there helps inform Combat Narratology. Understanding that this is a behaviour that exists is useful. It serves as a fixed point for the understanding of the narrative system for the purposes of triangulation, a method I will return to in the next chapter.

Metalepsis and the loss of objectivity

“Deimos is a different beast. Terror has a wider portfolio than the personal. Deimos is concerned with dread of the crowd, the panic of the mob, the rout of the terrified army. The deeper, intense fear of the unknown and the unknowable. He is the more talkative and worldly of the twins and also the more intelligent. If either of the twins is calling the shots, it is he. Deimos thinks the warleaders would be stronger under his direct leadership but seeks initial support from the Hoplites and Priests” (*Odyssey Plot Wiki*, 9 June 2013).

Reviewing the journals, I discovered that some are written in the third person and others are first person narratives. Some crew members wrote in the first person and so wrote in-character:

“Bastard Greeks STILL distrust me. Explained the 'Thoth Heist' scam, span it considerably - Ares not pleased. Facing an angry Ares and potential beaky-death decide nothing to lose and explain in no uncertain terms why my plan is great, and Greece needs me” (Hermes, Greek God Audience, Odyssey VII - Touch of Death).

Other crew members maintained some distance and wrote in the third person and a few shifted from third person to first person across events, or across a single journal entry. The account of Yam, the Carthaginian Death God, in *Odyssey VII* describes an audience where the NPC leaves the Godhome to walk on Atlantis. It begins as a third person narrative, but ended up first person. Some crew members were attached to specific roles they played; they tended to write these in the first person, even though they used a more detached third person voice for the journals of others.

My involvement as an active participant during *Odyssey* was limited to some plot written for the Greek Priest characters. I took on the role of Deimos, the God of Terror: he made limited appearances in the God environment and, ironically, was intended to make the priests stand-up for themselves a little. He respected those who would look him in the eye. The plot events I played as Deimos connected me to the story. I became a player and was invested in his soap-opera relationship with his

brother, sister, and aunt (Phobos, Nike, and Eris). I realised that his appearances were affecting my focus — I would be looking forwards to his audiences and closely following the activities of his favourite priests — and with that in mind I handed over the character to another crew member so I could step away. This player also portrayed Deimos' sister — Nike — and it was her, who had chosen to become mortal to be with her lover, who I walked onto the field to murder towards the end of the *Odyssey* cycle. I was armed with a vial containing the tears of a God, a poison that could not be purged, which gave just enough time for a heart-breaking farewell. Here is an instance where I could provide a detailed, first person narrative, but it would be intradiegetic and therefore intrinsically unreliable; my emotional and physical connection to the embodied story affects the way that I would tell it.

Ian Andrews, Head of the Story Team, also recalls that he became attached to some of his NPC roles, “It was one of those characters that becomes very close to the physrep's heart. And it was actually something of a relief to bail it because it meant that I was no longer constantly under pressure to maintain a neutral and equitable position with a character that I was getting a little too fond of.”

My findings here imply a lack of consistently reliable narration from participants who step in and out of the diegesis, even for a short while. Whilst some of these participants may be unaffected by their embodied role-play, others won't be, therefore we should consider all diegetic narratives to be intrinsically unreliable. It is not just player-larpers who are unreliable but supporting cast participants too.

Patterns of Narrative Crisis

As a part of the field study, I was particularly interested in moments of narrative crisis. Although the plots for *Odyssey* were designed to privilege player agency (which reduced the likelihood of their actions having this sort of impact on the game,) some events took place which I recorded as crises. I discuss two of them here: One which was utterly unexpected and one which was an experiment which took place in the field.

Death of Darius

By design, each of the nations of the middle sea were governed in different ways. Off-game, some were led by player characters, others by NPCs. This enabled players to select a style of play that suited their preferences. The nation of Persia was a hybrid design. Darius — the king of kings who had been mortally injured, but not

killed, by Alexander the Great — was an NPC, rarely on the field of play. He was also limited by his plot in his ability to influence the actions of the players:

“The Risen Darius is no longer a man. His heart is made of pure gold and quicksilver runs through his veins instead of blood. The land shakes when he walks and his very smile is a blessing. With a word, he can remove curses and restore crops. He is a god that walks the land.” (Persia Game Bible, 2010)

The blessing upon Darius was so powerful that the bonds between the king and the land were intimate. Thus, Darius could not weep lest rain sweep away the land or grow too angry lest the ground shake. By design the NPC was dying but could be kept alive by consuming items of power. Every time he did this, Darius got to stay a little longer on the mortal plane, though that was not his motivation. Much of the plot of Persia, therefore, revolved around keeping their ruler alive, whilst using his inability to intervene directly to play complex politics with the rest of the nation. From a Story Team perspective, the option for plot to kill him off was there, but it was not planned.

As a part of the Persian pantheon of gods and the metaphysics that governed their magisterium (the metaleptic storyworld that was Persia,) there was an underworld where the souls of the dead were sent. (See Appendix C for the text from *Odyssey* which explains the Persian Underworld). Key to this narrative, the names of all of the Persian dead are recorded by *Namtar* — the Persian psychopomp — in a book. During *Odyssey IV* a group of Persian characters went on a quest to rescue one of their princes who has been dead for a year. After stealing *Namtar's* pen, the adventurers needed to remove the name of the dead prince from the book and this would enable him to return to the land of the living. This quest was successful; however, as well as removing the name of their lost prince, the players also added the name of Darius the Risen, Shah-an-Shah of all Persia, in its place.

This represented a moment of narrative crisis. The players had done something unexpected, but which clearly made sense within the narrative system. If they were allowed to succeed, then all of the plot surrounding Darius for the remainder of the larp (and that which had been written for the next one) was obsolete. It would, in retrospect, have been easy to fudge the issue here. The Book of the Dead was a bureaucratic device, designed to track the location of the souls of the dead, rather than the instrument of a character dying. There were many justifications for a gamemaster ruling that this action had no impact on the story. However, *Odyssey* was designed to

privilege player action and player agency, and the Story Team made the decision to throw away plot and to produce something new, on-the-fly.

It stands as an interesting case study because it was relatively simple to determine the diegetic *truth*: the name was written in the book. The descriptions of the events surrounding the name being written in the book matched enough for a degree of certainty. The metaphysics allowed for it. It became a fixed point in the story — as though it were a plot event — and the Story Team reverted to their writerly, plot tasks based on this new fixed point. The tasks that were previously carried out over weeks, with meetings, calls, and times to reflect and review, were now completed in a tent at night and under pressure.

Golden Fleece Wish - Event XII - The Golden Ram

In the *Dungeons & Dragons* TRPG, a Wish Spell can alter the very foundations of reality in accord with the caster's desires. (Wyatt et al, 2018 p.288). As children we play games that invite us to consider what we would wish for if we were granted three wishes. The obvious answer to a ten-year-old is perhaps *I would wish for a million wishes*; an unconstrained wish, therefore is a risky device to bring into a story. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, for example, the effects of the spell are constrained and whilst the dungeon master has explicit latitude to enable the player's wish spell, they can also decide that it does not work: "The spell might simply fail, the effect you desire might only be partly achieved, or you might suffer some unforeseen consequence of how you worded the wish" (ibid, p.219).

In *Odyssey*, The Golden Fleece has been an artefact that has been in play in the storyworld from the beginning. Its power was to bring the dead back to life, but this was used up at event X. At event XII Andrews recalls, "we thought, well, let's let them sheer a new fleece from the Golden Ram, but if it does the same thing, that's just dull. And through a variety of discussions, we ended up in a position where we decided to, to effectively give it a wish in the finest, 80's AD&D be careful what you ask for style" (Andrews, interview).

The Story Team discussion here was quite heated. There was a lot of resistance to this idea because it was felt that participants could have asked for game wrecking things, particularly a wish that rewrote past history; something that is extremely difficult to communicate in a field to 400 participants. My notes show that there was an agreement to give the players about 60% of what they asked for, keeping

the remainder back to ensure game balance and playability. Andrews explains: “There were a number of calculations involved with putting that item into play and the first and foremost of them is it would likely end up in the hands of one of a handful of players, all of whom I largely trust, not to break Wheaton's law. Those players would equally have an eye to game balance in what they ask for” (ibid). The Story Team concluded that there were four or five wishes that were *likely* to come up, because “these were things that had been run up against previously in the game. “(ibid) but it was acknowledged that there were risks here, depending on which players acquired the item. However, much like the Book of the Dead, once the item was in play there was no control over what players would actually do with it. From a research point of view this was useful, as *The Golden Fleece re-sheared* represented a predictable point of narrative crisis.

The team’s confidence in the participants was borne out by the players with the magical item coming off-game to consult, saying, "can we?" rather than "we have!" But Andrews acknowledges that this was not on the critical path, “my instinctive response when presented with what they had to say was yes! And now we'll work out how it works” (ibid). Significantly, it was one of those five impossible things identified by the Story Team that the participants wished for, reported here as post-event narrative:

“I step forwards, almost as in a dream. Knife. Palm. A sudden blossoming of pain. The words come tumbling forth, in one great release of the boy I was, dreaming of wizardry, and a birth of the man I must become. ‘I AM LYSANDROS OF SIKANDERGUL, CHIEF PHILOSOPHER TO PLATO’S REPUBLIC OF HUMANITY, WHO SHEARED THE GOLDEN RAM. I CLAIM NOW MY ONE WISH. I WISH FOR THE PIVOT OF THE WORLD RESTORED, WHOLE AND NEW, AS IT WAS IN THE START OF ALL THINGS!’ ...and like that it is done. Why am I not weeping?” (As reported by Harrold, 2017, p.125).

The Story Team was able to successfully predict the wish. This example implies, but does not prove, that the participant decisions that inform moments of narrative crisis are not random. Reviewing other examples of narrative crisis, they tend to make sense in diegetic hindsight. Those examples where a participant (rather than their character) does something unexpected and for no good reason, it is less a crisis of narrative and more one of game design or play style. When someone disrupts play,

cheats, or deliberately takes an action that is out of character because they are bored, or because “it is funny”, they are playing destructively rather than collaboratively. These cases seem rare. Whilst I have encountered them as a participant a few times since 1985, I recorded no examples during the course of my research. In general, unexpected actions by participants make diegetic sense to them, in context, at the time those actions are taken. In both these examples, the participants engineered significant changes to the storyworld via their character’s decisions and actions. Whilst the wish was expected, the death of Darius was not. Both are narratively coherent and both were predictable. The Story Team members involved in the Darius incident agreed “We should have seen that coming. “(Field notes). At the micro-level of individual plots, then, there are patterns here. I now move on to consider the patterns to be found at a macro level, across the entire narrative system.

Section 3 - The narrative object over time

In this section I describe a logical model for the narrative object and how it is created and changes over time. I begin with some definitions of the precursors of the narrative object (Narreme and Event) and then I describe the encoding and decoding of the narrative object and how this is a recursive process. The narrative object contains the “text” of the narrative, the context used to encode and decode that narrative, and other attributes that describe its meaning.

Narreme

A narreme is the fundamental unit of narrative (Dorfman, 1969) or of meaningful narrative — in the sense of “*les incidents signifiés*” (Whittmann, 1975, p.20) — in larp terms an enactment which moves the state of the story forwards or where “there is a change from one state of affairs to another” (Rimmon-Kenan, 2002, pp.16-17) Baikadi and Cardona-Rivera extend this definition and suggest that each narreme encodes the state of the narrative, along one or more narrative axes (Baikadi and Cardona-Rivera, 2012,p.44). I also refer to Labov and Waletzky’s definition of a narrative clause, a narrative unit which is “not displaced across a temporary junction without a change in the temporal sequence. (1997, p.27). These concepts of a single time bound and significant occurrence which describes the state of the narrative maps nicely to the idea of a narrative object. Narremes operate at the level of fabula. (Baikadi and Cardona-Rivera, 2012, p.44).

Events

Whilst “Darius is dead” (*Odyssey IV*) is a narreme, “The school counsellor has been giving the details of the student’s mental health struggles to the enemies of the state because she is a spy working for the opposition” (*College of Wizardry III*) is not. If the first example were ‘Darius is dead; obviously, the Greeks killed him,’ then there would be both a functional and an indexical unit, or fabula and a discourse, and it would no longer be a fundamental unit of narrative. With this complexity comes the possibility of subjective and intersubjective interpretation. I describe these more complex enactments as *events*. By separating *narreme* from *event* (essentially, fabula from discourse,) I make a distinction between something which has objectively happened within the storyworld and something that has been filtered through a subjective lens. I use *narreme* to describe an enactment which is purely functional, and *event* for (the more common) enactment which comes with an additional packet of description.

Encoding & Decoding

I move on to describe the processes by which Narremes and Events — enactments that have taken place within the storyworld — become narrative objects. I describe these processes as *encoding* and *decoding*. These processes are complementary rather than sequential. They represent a method for turning story into narrative.

I borrow the term encapsulation from software engineering, where it refers to “the bundling of data with the methods that operate on that data. (Rogers, 2001). The narrative object encapsulates the imagined text of the narrative, along with other attributes and methods that operate on that text. The schema of a narrative object is shown below. I will introduce and define any new attributes and processes in this section.

| |
|---|
| Object: narrative object |
| Attributes: Focal position of the character Location of the participant |

Scale (how many larpers saw this)

Generation (is this an enactment seen by the larper,
or is it a reported enactment)

Iteration (how many times has the larper revisited
this narrative object)

Semiotic Mode {

Material

Sensorial

Spatiotemporal

Semiotic

Cultural

Technical

Contextual

}

imagined Text {

Who

Where

What

When

Why

}

Methods:

Encoding (input)

Mapping (internal process)

Decoding (internal process)

Steering (internal process)

Enactment (output)

Narrative (output)

Encoding

Ryan suggests that the mind plays games with narrative structures in the production and reception of texts; an act of personal interpretation (Ryan, 1992, p.385). I suggest that encoding is a low-level version of this process (See chapter 7) — an output of mapping — where the participant asks themselves “What just happened?” or “How should I react to this event?”

In its simplest terms encoding is the process for describing the enactments associated with plot and story into narrative or understanding an event in relation to the character. The encoded narrative object contains an internal discourse, “the story that we tell ourselves.” The narrator may be fully diegetic (the character,) extra-diegetic (the participant) or meta-diegetic (the metareflexive larper). However it is likely to involve a mixture of these states; the interpretation of an enactment may be carried out first by the character, or by the participant, but it is then informed by the other. The encoding is informed by the location of the participant and the focal position of the character. These processes may happen either in series or in sequence and the initial narrative object is only formed once encoding is complete.

This narrative object in its initial state is static. It remains static until it is recalled. It is here that complexity manifests. When the participant considers the narrative object a subsequent time, its state is subject to change. It may be rewritten or re-mapped. The most common example of this is in narration to a third party. The story grows in the telling, or in relation to the reaction of the person who hears it.

I illustrate this section with an example from the pre-play of *CoW-V* using two descriptions of the same scene describing the first interaction between two characters. These were written by the two participants who played those characters (August 2015). These texts were not captured as a part of this study but were written by the participants for their own use. These examples are included for illustrative purposes rather than as a proof. They are used here with permission. The text of both descriptions is included in Appendix D. This example of a narrative object describes the enactment ε_1 from the viewpoint of Π^t

```
// Ksenia hits Thomas.  
Define {  
    Enactment { $\varepsilon_1$ }  
    Narrative { $N_1$ }
```

```

    Participant { $\Pi^t, \Pi^k$ }
    Character { $\chi^t, \chi^k$ }
}
 $\chi^k$  [hits]  $\chi^t \Rightarrow \epsilon_1$ 

```

```

 $\Pi^t$  [Processes] ( $\epsilon_1$ ) {
  Process.mapping
  Process.steering
  Process.encode:  $\epsilon_1 \Rightarrow N_1$ 
}

```

```

N1.What_happened{
   $\epsilon_1$ .Narrame: Xt: "She hit me"
}

```

```

N1.Why {
  N1.Why1      I am worried about my sister.
  N1.Why2      Thomas decides to get a drink to
                  assuage that worry; he goes to the
                  tavern.
  N1.Why3      The tavern seems unfriendly, people
                  are aggressive and drunk.
  N1.Why4      A woman staggers across the room; she
                  drunk.
  N1.Why5      The floor is wet.
  N1.Why6      The woman snarls at me, "Get out of my
                  way, I wanna drink."
  N1.Why7      She slips on the wet floor.
  N1.Why8      She makes a grab for me - to try and
                  break her fall - but I move out of the
                  way instinctively.
  N1.Why9      She falls.

```

N₁.Why₁₀ Thomas says "Whoops," (in a condescending way).

N₁.Why₁₁ Ksenia - the Russian woman - blames Thomas for pushing the drunk woman over

// leave the Tavern to go outside and fight.

N₁.Why₁₂ They leave the tavern, go outside, and start to fight

}

N₁.Narrative {

Narrated as: "She moved impossibly fast, I barely had time to block, and then I had no time at all. She moved like a fucking snake. Punches and kicks and elbows and ... I felt my legs go out from underneath me and I hit the ground hard."

End Point: χ t is on the floor, bleeding with χ K on top

}

X^t [Reacts to] (N₁) {

Metatechnique.PhysicalViolence {

Operation: [χ^t reacts diegetically to blow]

Operation: [χ^t ^k=dangerous]

}

}

The character's thoughts are recorded here as first person, the participants are third person. The interplay between them represents the shift in narratorial position as the participant analyses the context of this enactment and creates the narrative object from it. In Why₁₀, the condescending tone is a deliberate choice by the participant. A more sympathetic character may have tried to stop the drunk woman from falling or

tried to help her up once she had fallen. The events that lead to the fight are a mixture of events, narremes, and narrative objects.

Whilst the situation of the narrativised story *may* be recorded, it is difficult to accurately render all of the variables. Because of this the transformation of emergent story into an imagined text and an actionable narrative⁵⁴ during the runtime risks being subjective precisely because there is no concrete text; the gamemaster's understanding of this risk is fundamental to the discipline. If the larp narrative *can* be recorded — as a piece of text, in film, or as a transcript of speech — then it has narrativity, and narratological methods can be applied.

Much like the distinction between narremes and events, the text of the narrative object may contain additional discourse added by the larper. I turn here to Barthes' distinction between functions and indices. (Barthes, 1966, p.9) The functional narrative is an action-reaction sequence, the indexical narrative provides a description. It is the indices, therefore, where unreliability can be found, but sometimes it is not immediately clear whether a narrative statement is functional or indexical.

The subjective importance of the attributes of a narrative object to the larper changes over time. So, asking the question “Why did this fight happen?” or “Who started the fight?” will get different answers depending on who is asking, who is asked, who is answering, and when the question is asked. In addition, the answering of that question changes the state of the narrative object from static to dynamic. The map is redrawn, the text changes; this is iteration.

Iteration

A narrative object can be described *now* but the act of description may change that narrative object as there is no static text. When one participant (as narrator) engages with another participant (as recipient) this is an interaction; the narrative object is affected by the recipient's reaction or response to the narrative. Or, upon reflection, a participant/narrator's understanding of their own narrative object may change. For example, in the example above *Why*₁₀, I have chosen to highlight

⁵⁴ I use the qualifier *actionable* to differentiate between the recursive narrativization that happens during the storymaking model and the narrative on which the gamemaster bases their combat narratology decisions.

Thomas' condescending tone. In the original text this is implicit, but it is not made clear. Thus, my readerly and authorial understanding of this narrative object has changed over time. I move on now to discuss the process of decoding and understanding narrative objects, but it should be understood that decoding and encoding are complimentary. Enactments lead to imagined text (narrative) and also to new enactments (story) as shown in the diagram below.

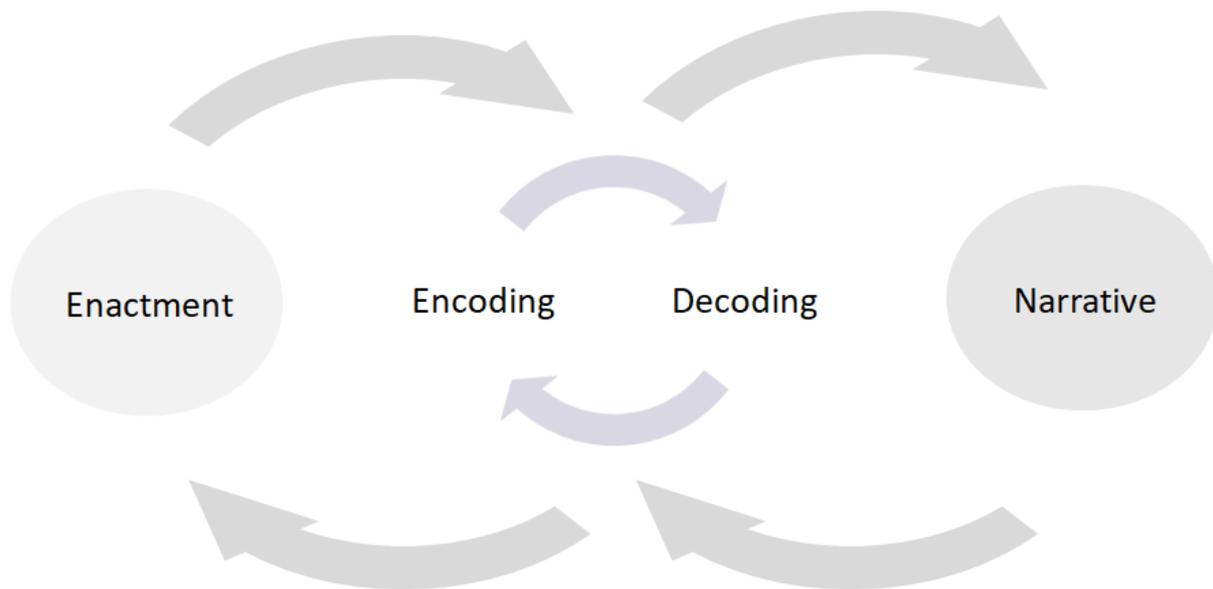


Figure 67 - Encoding and Decoding cycles of narrative and enactment.

Decoding

The subjective understanding of an event is a result of decoding the narrative object. In this section I consider how participants and gamemasters interpret narrative objects described by others or by themselves. I describe this process as decoding. It is a readerly act. I start by reviewing Elleström's work on transmedial narratology, specifically the four modalities of a medium. I illustrate this section referring back to an example referenced in case study five from Chapter 5. In Elleström's work on transmedial narratology he introduces the idea of *modalities of a medium*. (2010, pp.17-24) Elleström does not rely on a single dimensional 'text', but as Bateman (2017) states, he "distinguishes four basic dimensions of variation that necessarily

apply to all media.⁵⁵ Larp is a multimodal medium (Mochocki, 2018, p.93). Whether these are the four modes described by Elleström, or Ryan's "three dimensions of mediality" (2014, p. 30), I will discuss these dimensions and consider their relationship to the understanding of larp story:

Material modality: 'The latent corporeal interface' of a medium, i.e., 'where the senses meet the material impact.' This remains the most complex mode for larp because there is no physical media product we can identify; it is not a text, or a film, or an image. Elleström suggests that the definition of *materiality* can extend to something that can be understood as a phenomenon (Elleström, 2010, p.46) and a larp is something that can be observed to happen (usually from within the experience).

Sensorial modality: The 'physical and mental acts of perceiving the interface.' This seems to apply nicely to the participatory act of larping; it can only be understood through physical and mental perception of the diegesis.

Spatiotemporal modality: The 'structuring of the sensorial perception of the material interface into experiences and conceptions of space and time.' Elleström explains that media products must have a spatial or temporal trait, or they will be inconceivable (ibid. p.20). Larp has multiple spatiotemporal modes. There are differences at least between these modes as regards to plot, story, and narrative, as well as between participant and character (as regards to the narrative voice). With that in mind I suggest that methods from transmedial narratology can apply here.

Semiotic modality: The 'representation or, more broadly, signification: how the mediated sensory configurations come to signify cognitive import in the perceiver's mind and form a virtual sphere.' This is the most complex of the modes because there are multiple perceivers and their perceptions are affected by the experience of each perceiver. (I use the term 'perceiver' here rather than 'participant' as the perceiver may not be a participant in the larp).

Ryan offers three dimensions, the *cultural* which describes general recognition of media as forms of communication. Larp is a closed culture, in as much as its norms

⁵⁵ Elleström's states that these modalities form a scale from the material to the mental (ibid. p.44) This seems to be less applicable to a larp; there the sensorial modality would be a layer on top of the spatiotemporal modality, representing the perception of the larp as an embodied experience of the phenomena.

and practices are learned from within the community; for those outside of the form it is often described in terms of theatre or video game. However, I use it here to describe the diegetic culture, that of the character rather than the participant. The second *technical* dimension describes “any kind of mode of production and material support” (Ryan 2014, 29). Mochocki suggests that the primary mode of production for larp is — like ballet or theatre — the human body, but that it is mixed media; it can include “oral storytelling, writing, music, numerical game mechanics, stage decoration, as well as photography, film, and advanced digital technologies.” (2018, p.99) So the embodied participant’s interaction with the physical environment, any props, scenography, or objects (as a sub-category of existents) in the game space may communicate meaning. The third dimension, that of semiotic *substance*, is analogous to Elleström’s semiotic modality.

Extending Ryan’s Modes of Narrativity (1992, pp. 368-387), larp seems to be a *chaotic mode* which combines Multiple and Complex Narrativity (p.372) with braided Narrativity (p.374). I now offer an example of how these modes affect decoding.

At the larp *Conscience*, two members of the diegetic plot team visited the brothel in the park on the first evening and reported that the place was both horrific and almost completely empty, suggesting that the scene they had witnessed — a sex worker being branded — was too horrific and oppressive, and it was adversely affecting play by driving guests away. Even though two participants presented this narrative, it was based on a single point of contact with the story. By treating this (admittedly first-hand) information as a fixed point, the plot team’s understanding of the story was flawed. They treated it as a crisis to be resolved (field notes), but there was no crisis. Participants who played the brothel workers later stated that they were busy the whole time and that they’d been hoping for more horror and oppression.

```
Define {
  Enactment {ε1}
  Narrative {N1, N1}
  Participant {Πa, Πb}
  Character {χa, χb}
}
```

[horrific scene in otherwise deserted brothel] ⇒ ε₁

```

Π(a. .b) [Processes] (ε1) {
  Process.mapping
  Process.steering
  Process.encode: ε1 ⇒ N(1. .2)
}

```

As Π^a and Π^b experienced the same enactment, particularly from the spatiotemporal position there is likely to be some similarity in the narrative objects created.

N1.Spatiotemporal ≈ N2.Spatiotemporal⁵⁶

The degree of intersection between Π^a and Π^b for each mode is a variable. Both characters originated from a position outside of the B-World diegesis, they were similarly located in terms of gender, age, and attitude, allowing for additional modal intersections. They had also discussed the events they had witnessed in character before narrating them together back to the Head of Plot back in the Aleph office⁵⁷. The focal positions of the participants were similar, but not identical. There are likely to be semiotic similarities, but these are not two corroborating narratives, but a convergent narrative largely shared by two characters/participants. Mochocki's conclusion, that participants sharing the same physical space tend to have intersubjectively coherent perceptions, supports this (2018, p.114) although he states that despite this coherence, their in-game perception is not fully identical, but — because of the discussion between the two narrators leading to a further convergence of the sensorial and material experiences — it is close enough to seem to be a single narrative rather than two complementary narratives. It would appear that anyone coming into that scene as a participant at that particular time is likely to have understood the story in largely the same way, but this was not the case.

⁵⁶ ≈ approximately the same as.

⁵⁷ "We discussed in character on the way back" Svanevik, Facebook chat, 16/3/2021

My interviews with other participants who were present at the same enactment record that they encoded it differently. For these participants — who played sex workers in the brothel — their narrative objects were uniformly different because they interpreted the enactment in relation to their character stories and other enactments they had experienced. They reported the enactment as a part of a larger narrative, which included the context for that scene. For them it was a single, event which took place in a rare quiet time. Prior to and after that scene the brothel was busy, and their play lacked oppressive and violent content. They remarked they were disappointed in the lack of oppression. This example suggests that the context of an event is key to understanding. Thus, *contextual modality*.⁵⁸ This could be considered an extension of spatiotemporality, but it is more useful to separate it out to differentiate between the here and now and what has gone before. This mode informs the semiotic mode. It refers to that which is known by the perceiver in relation to the state of the narrative system, as well as their state. To define “state”, I refer to the Abstract Narrative Model (chapter 6) where the context map is redrawn constantly during play. Thus, the same participant, witnessing the same scene, could experience and interpret it differently because of the variable (and chaotic) narrative system. In the example above, the plot writers did not have the context of the sex workers’ experiences up to that point. Fundamentally, context is not a constant. Context may not be unique to the understanding of larp, but it remains a medium-specific feature (Kukkonen, 2011, p.34)

In the example two new narrative objects are created: N_4 as a result of the report made by the plot team members (Πa and Πb) to the Head of Plot (Πd) and N_5 arising from my post-larp interviews with the brothel workers and their collective object N_3 .

Given that there are two different accounts of the enactment in question, $N_1 \neq N_3$. But also $N_1 \Delta N_3 \neq \emptyset$ (the delta between N_1 and N_3 is not empty, there is some commonality) To understand why there are differences I consider those attributes where there is no commonality. Examining the Cultural and Contextual differences in the example, Πc is playing a character who exists inside the B-World diegesis (Culture), with a knowledge (Context) of what has gone before. Πa and Πb are playing

⁵⁸ I also considered subjective modality

characters from the storyworld, with no idea of the played experience of Πc. Some of these semiotic modes reference the object entities — e.g. focal and local positions — so for any given narrative object, the state of the Participant and/or the Character will change the way the imagined text is decoded.

Stripping away the details of the example and considering only the abstract allows a closer examination of the deltas to provide an insight into the divergent narratives.

$N_1.$ Material \approx $N_3.$ Material
 $N_1.$ Sensorial \approx $N_3.$ Sensorial
 $N_1.$ Spatiotemporal = $N_3.$ Spatiotemporal
 $N_1.$ Semiotic \approx $N_3.$ Semiotic
 $N_1.$ Cultural \neq $N_3.$ Cultural
 $N_1.$ Technical = $N_3.$ Technical
 $N_1.$ Contextual \neq $N_3.$ Contextual⁵⁹

This illustrates why the imagined text may be so different and enables the gamemaster to understand the nature of that difference. By understanding from whence the narrative voice originates, the gamemaster is able to better understand the state of the narrative system.

I warrant that the act of observation influences the outcome and that a participant who stops to consider their position risks breaking their immersion and forcing themselves into a destructive loop of deconstruction.

⁵⁹ Key to the three symbols used here:

= the same as.

\approx approximately the same as.

\neq not the same as.

Scale

If observation influences outcome, then understanding the number of participants who witnessed an Enactment is useful, but it is not necessarily an accurate indicator of veracity. Something which is observed by the majority of participants tends towards a more reliable description, but not if they are also affected by it. Context, then, can affect the encoding as well as the decoding. As before, narremes tend towards reliability and events tend to be less reliable. Thus, “Darius is dead” (*Odyssey IV*) was likely to be more accurately narrated than “The school counsellor has been giving the details of the student’s mental health struggles to the enemies of the state because she is a spy working for the opposition.” (*College of Wizardry III*)

An enactment witnessed first-hand seems more likely to contain accurate imagined text than one that has been passed through multiple generations of larpers.

This is one of the core differences between larp and TRPG (Berger, 2010, p.54), as larp has multiple protagonists, multiple locations, and gets progressively harder to synchronise as the number of participants and locations increases. The larp gamemaster is in a different position to one who is running a tabletop role-playing game for four others, all sat around a table.

The number of participants affected by a narrative crisis affects the severity. When the issue impacts only a few people it can usually be resolved directly; a participant who has played their character into a corner can — sometimes after a discussion with a gamemaster or through steering — opt to change a part of the character’s nature or backstory to unblock their play. This can be done without risk to the larger game and with a degree of certainty that the participant who identifies that there is a problem understands both the nature of that problem and their own story. For narrative that affects a wider group, however, some of the approaches of combat narratology become appropriate.

Extending the Narrative System

A narrative object describes a single subjective enactment — usually part of an intersubjective narrative system (mesanarrative) — and a set of these narrative objects describe one or more emergent stories. There is additional complexity here, because these stories are nested within one another and many versions of the same story exist, one for each participant. The subjective experience of an immersed larper

is such that many of their stories are encoded:internal and known only to them. The immersionist player sitting alone in the tower of a castle thinking their character's thoughts and crying their tears is telling a story; that story exists even though it may never be known by another participant. It may also inform and affect other stories. Some stories are internal and others are more obvious and affect many or all participants. In *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker loses his mentor (Episode IV, death of Obi Wan) and has to deal with the grief and anger versus the destruction of the Death Star; one of these affects the character (and a small group of participants), the other is arguably the plot/story of the film. The narrative system is the set of all the stories and the narrative objects pertaining to those stories affecting all of the characters involved in the larp. The narrative system for *Star Wars* would not contain only the stories of the focus characters, but of every character seen on screen.

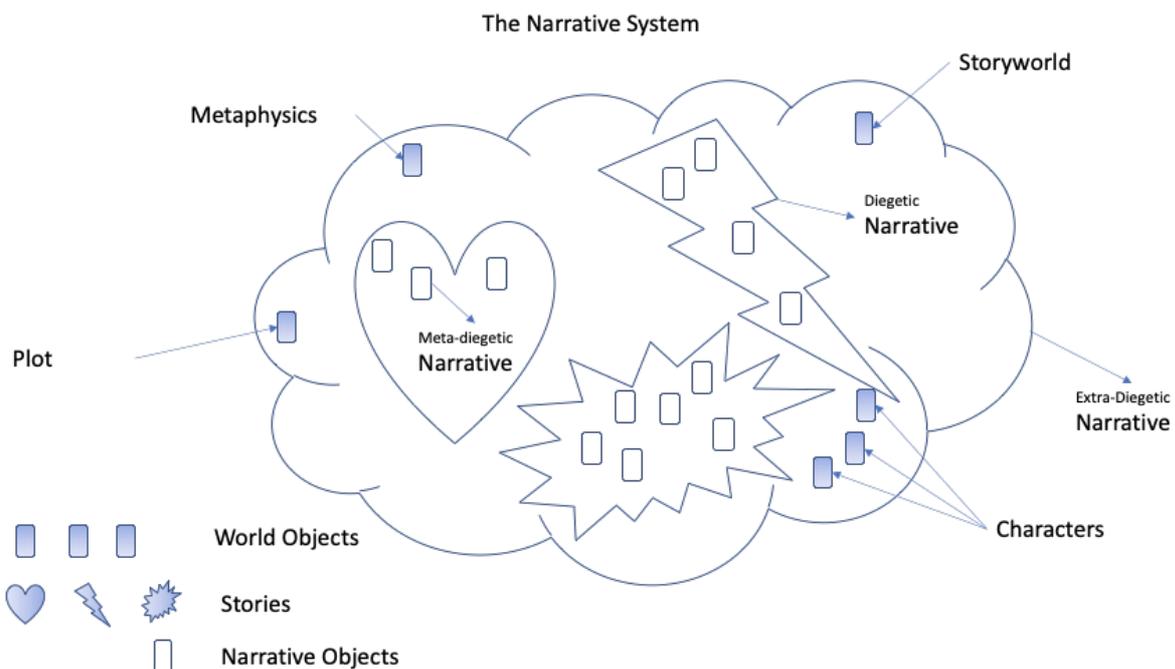


Figure 68 - A Narrative System during runtime.

I make a distinction here between the meta-diegetic narrative which emerges from the encoding and decoding cycles, diegetic narrative where characters talk to characters and extra-diegetic narrative, where the events of the larp are described outside of the larp. Whilst my particular focus here is on extra-diegetic narrative where the recipient is the gamemaster, I acknowledge the existence of a “semantic gap” — a difference

in meaning between constructs formed within different representation systems (Hein, 2010, p.57) — whenever two or more participants share a story or a narrative object. I move on now to discuss some methods used to bridge that gap.

Chapter 8 - On Combat Narratology

“The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousandfold”

Aristotle

Introduction

Building on the conclusion of chapter 6, which states that any single piece of narrative provided by a participant in a larp should be considered as intrinsically unreliable and the findings of the case study in chapter 7 which identified patterns and tropes in emergent stories, in this chapter I consider how is it possible to interrogate the story during runtime.

In the first section I begin with a discussion of chaos theory, move on to look at Catastrophe Theory and will then draw these two ideas together with the findings from chapter 7 to discuss how emergent stories are understood culturally and cognitively. I argue that a larp’s narrative system should be considered chaotic rather than random and as such, identifiable narrative patterns exist within it.

In the second section, I introduce *Combat Narratology* as a method of interrogating this chaotic narrative. I briefly consider how this differs from and extends traditional narratology. I introduce the four concepts of the process: Orientation, Investigation, Triangulation, and Abstraction. The process aims to turn disparate narratives originating from multiple participants within a larp into a single view of the narrative system which represents an intersubjective “diegetic truth”. This theory arose from my practice of writing for UK Fest larps between 1999 and 2016.⁶⁰

In the final section I draw conclusions about the nature of narrative crises and offer some solutions arising from the practical application of combat narratology. I conclude that a well-designed narrative system — being chaotic but not random — has a degree of predictability and this predictability has a structure which can be inferred.

⁶⁰ A full list of larps written during this time can be found as a part of my larp CV in Appendix E

Chaos

I have used the term *chaotic* to describe the state of the runtime narrative system throughout this study — after Montola (2004) and Brown (2014a) — as an allusion to chaos theory. In science, chaos is used to describe “erratic behaviour that appears to be random but is not” (Gleick, 1987).

Gleick (1988.p.47) uses the example of a shape to visualise the behaviours of a simple system, suggesting that as the system progresses through time a single point might move across a curved surface. Shapes that look the same would give roughly the same behaviour. Bending the shape slightly changes the system's parameters. I look to Propp here for a narrative example; he suggests that functionally the villain causing harm to a family member instigates the movement of a (fictional) folktale (Propp, 1968, p.30). It sets the story in motion. The narrative system's parameters can be varied in many ways; for example, when the villain abducts a person: a dragon kidnaps the Tsar's daughter, or a peasant's daughter, a witch kidnaps a boy etc. (ibid. p.31) but the shape of the story remains the same. As observers we can see the trajectory of the hero from that point. The folktale represents a deterministic, rather than a dynamic narrative system. Its path is linear towards an understood point of equilibrium, where everyone lives happily ever after. Despite local variations in terms of the elements of the story, the outcome is globally predictable: given the same inputs the output will be the same each time. A dynamic system is harder to visualise, it has many dimensions (Gleick, 1988, p.47) and seemingly insignificant changes in starting position and external variables can have unforeseen consequences on its behaviour.

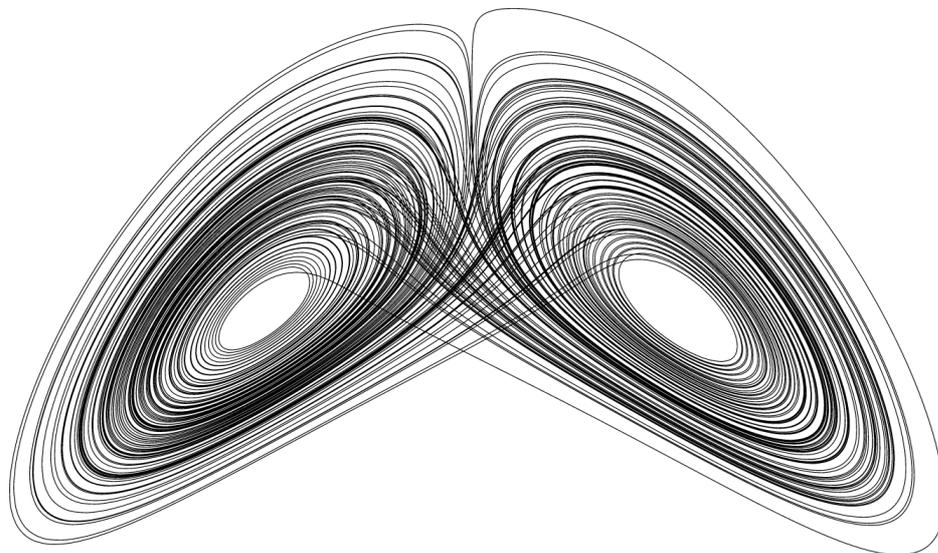


Figure 69 - Strange attractor of the Lorenz equations, CC0 1.0

But as Hofstadter (quoted in Gleick, 1987) suggests, inside of a chaotic system we may find lurking an “eerie” type of order (as illustrated above,) implying that chaos and randomness are not necessarily the same. This is supported by Brady (1990, p.68-69) who suggests that, from a structuralist point of view, the human brain and mind are limited by their own structure or physiological organisation and that *truly* random activity is impossible when humans are concerned, even when affected by pathological or traumatic stimuli. I do not intend to attempt to unravel this specific ontological knot, but I think the point here is that larp narrative systems exhibit *constrained randomness (ibid, p.70)*: strange narrative events emerge from the dynamic system that is the storyworld because participants may do things that seem unexpected or do things that were expected in unexpected ways. Whether this is driven by bleed, trauma of being arrested the day before by armed police, or because a participant exhibits a specific type of play style, very small changes in the interaction model have *exponential repercussions (ibid)*. The initial conditions of a larp, on which the experience of the participants and the story are *hyper-sensitive(ibid)*. are infinitely variable.

Catastrophe

I have argued that there are enough parallels here to usefully adopt the term chaotic. I move on now to briefly talk about René Thom’s Catastrophe Theory, which Brady defines as research devoted to the description, analysis, and ultimately the prediction of topological processes that are “abrupt or discontinuous” (Brady,1990, p.65). Panati summarises Thom’s work in this field, concluding “despite the almost limitless number of discontinuous phenomena that can exist in all branches of science, there are only a certain number of different pictures, or “elementary catastrophes,” that actually occur. “(Panati, 1976, p.54) “Discontinuous” here refers to a sharp change rather than “unbroken trajectories” (Gleick, 1987) In a larp, these discontinuous events are moments of *narrative crisis*; but despite an almost limitless set of possible narrative crises, there are only a certain number that actually occur. This is an outcome of subjectivity: as an individual participant their personal trajectory seems clear to them, but to an observer (or any other participant) their actions may seem discontinuous. The subjective trajectory of their own character seemingly clear to a participant is an important function of the emergent story.

Laplace's suggestion that, given an intelligence that knew and was able to analyse the exact position and motion of every object within the universe, "for such an intellect nothing would be uncertain and the future just like the past would be present before its eyes. "(Laplace, 1815, p.4) This would seem to describe an omnipotent as well as an omniscient author. Whilst the universe of a storyworld, however chaotic, is finite, even if we were able to model the exact position and trajectory of every character within it, it would seem impossible to predict any outcome. There is what Gleick (describing chaos theory's application in predicting the Stock Market) calls "doubly entangled complexity: because the humans trying to understand the system are able to influence the variables they seek to predict. "(Gleick, 1987) Unlike forecasting the weather or understanding the financial markets, there are potential aids to understanding the emergent story in a larp in the form of the patterns found in cultural narratives and in shared understanding of the tropes and norms of the story being told.

Inference Mechanisms & Cognitive Narratology

In this section I consider the relationship between tropes and communally constructed stories and argue that tropes can be a set of shared subconscious grammatical, logical, and rhetorical tools that help communicate narration. I extend this tool set to include other cultural narrative patterns.

For example, the wiki-based⁶¹ website TV Tropes. This website documents various tropes across television, film, games, history and (to a lesser extent) politics. This is *trope* defined as a culturally universal object which comes with a set of encapsulated contexts. They stand as a plot, story, or narrative metaphor, or what Liska describes as a semiotic phenomenon that encodes information in a way which has a significant effect on sign agents (Liszka, 2016, p.136). In participatory storytelling, participants often use tropes to communicate intent; when describing their character to one another, or when steering. For example:

"I had a character I wasn't terribly invested in, tell a group of people I wasn't terribly invested in that they had *become her family*, because it was

⁶¹ A wiki is a collaboratively created and hypertext repository.

narratively the Done Thing under the circumstances. I've watched enough movies and played enough larps that I knew it would feel structurally satisfying to anyone who had become more immersed than I had at that point.” (Piancastelli, 2021)

When tropes are used frequently enough that they “become habituated in a way that makes them seem part of literal discourse” (Liszka, 2016, p.150). The *habituation* is key here, like with any metaphorical or memetic form, they work once we know them. Some tropes are cultural (or subcultural) and therefore do not work effectively as a narratological object with people from outside of the culture; this can cause dissonance, narrative crisis, and arguments in participatory fictions. I deliberately focus on trope as a narrative object rather than considering monomyth (Campbell, 1949) or the suggestion that there are only five, six, or seven stories in the world (Booker, 2004, p.3).

Black and Wilensky question the usefulness of story grammars as a basis for comprehension (1979, p.227) as they tend to focus on the structural integrity of a story rather than the meaning. They conclude that an examination of “the kinds of knowledge needed to understand story content and on how that knowledge is used during understanding” (ibid) is more useful. Wilensky opens with the statement that “*To understand stories, a reader needs a large body of knowledge about the kinds of situations that may occur and must be able to use this knowledge to infer implicit aspects of a situation described by a text.*” (Wilensky, 1978, p.1)⁶² This idea is described by Wilensky as an “inference mechanism,” (from Wilks, 1975) which seems to be a function of mapping; as a part of their mapping process, participants in a larp perform a kind of “semantic calculus,” a term I borrow from Eco & Paci (1983 p.217). in order to make sense of the story. Gamemasters must perform a more complex version of this in order to decode and deconstruct the multi-threaded story of the larp back into plot. Tropes form a part of this semantic calculus in as much as they are “helpful in clarifying and enhancing meanings and sharpening reference”(Liszka, 2016, p.150) Building on this idea that participants fall back on well understood

⁶² I acknowledge that Wilensky is writing about how AI's might interpret a story here, but the argument works for human readers as well.

patterns in order to communicate and understand the story — and remember that this is a real time process, a part of mapping, that takes place under pressure — it seems possible that they may make use of other patterns beyond tropes; they may have a particular morphology in mind and this implies a structure. Just as Propp stated, ‘all fairy tales are of one type in regard to their structure. (Propp, 1968, p.23): there are conventions and structures that are repeated in storytelling. Because of the complexity of the real time deconstruction of larp story, participants seem to keep episodic structure relatively simple. That is not to suggest, for example, that the epic narrative of a single character from a campaign larp will not be extremely complex, but in terms of understanding the trajectory of a character ‘right now’ during runtime, participants tend to utilise a frame of reference that allows them to access their character directly and that implies a simplistic and well-understood story.

This can be identified more easily by exception: when participants are from a similar cultural background, particularly when they are closely *located*, their propensity to perceive the story in the same way increases, but when participants originate from different cultures, or locations, discrepancies and disagreements are more common. New participants, coming into a long running larp, or joining from a different larp tradition, often experience a dissonance here. Community interpretation is a group level function, where a group is defined as those who share particular attributes (Davis, 2002, p.19) thus, those coming in from outside of a group often lack a shared context, whereas those inside the group take the context for granted. This is not unique to larp. Finlayson & Corman state that narrative is bound up with culture (2013, p.175). They consider the military use of narratives, particularly in the Middle East, where local (extremist/insurgent) forces make use of well-understood cultural narratives from Islam and Islamic history as a narrative frame (ibid. p176) and have greater success in controlling the story than American forces using Western and American narrative forms. Just as there are differences which may impede a shared understanding, Murray points out there are striking formulaic similarities in some of the stories found in different cultures (2017, p.231-232).

Larpers and other participants in virtual worlds rely on one another to constitute the ludic heterocosm. As Stenros states, the storyworld becomes a “social fact when participants act as if it were real,” (Stenros, 2015, p.156) and people tend to bend over backwards to make the shared storyworld seem coherent, and actions taken by them which may seem unexpected to the observer are logically coherent within the diegesis.

The collective participants' expectations of the story informs the structure of narrative; because of this, it is chaotic rather than truly random, but to understand the state of the narrative system at any given time remains a challenge because of the intersubjective nature of that system. It is this combination, of chaos and intersubjectivity, that necessitates combat narratology. I move on now to offer some strategies and processes to resolve this challenge.

Combat Narratology

In this section I detail methods which enable gamemasters to interrogate the chaotic narrative system of a larp during runtime. I present these as a set of techniques which have emerged as a result of this research and from experience of running larp events.

This process does not represent a search for a single objective truth but rather a combination of multiple participants' understanding of the intersubjective state of the narrative system into a plausible and coherent object. This intersubjective output represents an understanding of the narrative state on the basis of which story decisions can be taken. In the particular case of a narrative crisis, this state is required in order to make an authorial decision about a solution, if a solution is required.

Extending Narratology

In this sub-section I consider the relationship between the *discipline* of narratology and how the narrative of a larp can be understood, acknowledging the primary issue — the lack of a *concrete* text in larp — and I argue that narrativization produces an *imagined* text and thus narratology can be applied.

If the traditional object domain of a text-based literary narrative does not exist, then in order to lay claim to the term *narratology* I must turn to forms of postclassical narratology. Fludernik uses the term “pseudo-oral storytelling” which includes conversational narrative and oral storytelling (2009) and this would suggest that larp could be positioned as a candidate for “Natural” narratology (Fludernik, 2002). However, I agree with Ryan, that the question of narrativity is more a phenomenological matter than a semantic one. (Ryan, 1992, p.368) and with

Nünning⁶³ (2004, p.353) who argues that classical narratology and context sensitive analysis of narratives are complementary.

I introduce the idea of *combat* narratology, which I define as “applied narratology under pressure with a focus on decoding uncertainty”. I explain this rhetorical uncertainty by considering it in Aristotelian terms and by comparing a single narrative event in a larp with an equivalent event in a piece of fiction. For example, Austen describes Mr Darcy’s thoughts about Elizabeth Bennett as “. . . Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed, that were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger” (Austen, 1813, p.96). Here we have a reliable authorial voice making a definitive statement about the thoughts of a character. As readers we all know — at that moment — what Darcy is thinking. The author has told us; it is an objective truth. Returning to the object model from chapter 6, the *Judgement* and *Relationship* operations are clear with regard to Darcy’s thoughts about Elizabeth. In fiction — outside of some metafictional texts — the position of the narrator will tend to be fixed in as much as we can say whether it is diegetic or extradiegetic. In a larp it is not clear who is telling the story because the metaleptic position of a given narrator is unknown. In a larp we have neither a single authorial voice nor a reliable one. The challenge of combat narratology is to use the information which is available and to construct an authorial truth from it.

These methods start with an *orientation*, where the gamemaster considers who is speaking, where they are positioned in the diegesis, and *investigation*, into what information they are sharing. Then *triangulation*, where the gamemaster considers this narrative in relation to others, then the process of *abstraction*, where they describe an intersubjective narrative object as an extradiegetic author. The output is an *actional narrative*; this is an artefact that enables decision making in service of the larp. I describe each of these steps in more detail below.

⁶³ I note the similarities raised by Nünning (ibid) between respective practitioners who “tend to ignore or violently attack each other’s work” and the narratology/ludology discourse.

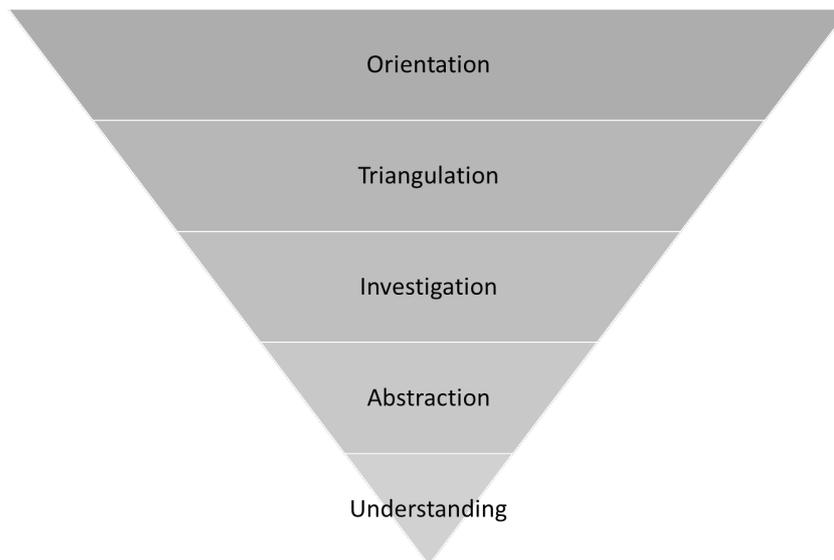


Figure 70 - Abstraction to understanding

Orientation

Many of the larp narratives fit Horace’s description “*Semper ad eventum festinat et in media res non seus ac notas auditorem rapit*”⁶⁴ (Horace & Wilkins, 1964) in as much as the narrator — in a hurry — assumes the listener already knows the background to an event and starts the story in the middle. This is common because there are certainly aspects of the storyworld that should be understood: the metaphysics, the genre, the themes and style of the larp, perhaps some of the characters involved. I refer here to the section on trope as grammar in chapter 7 with particular reference to Liska’s semantic field (Liska, 2016, p.150). Orientation enables the gamemaster to check a broad commonality of understanding; it is less about the content of the narrative object but more about the narrator’s understanding of the other world objects within the Narrative System and of the story.

Who is talking?

If the narrator is clearly in character, or talking in the first person, the gamemaster should seek to avoid dissonance by matching their mode. Any questions asked at this stage should be about confirming the horizon: the attributes of the narrative object (primarily the narrator’s location and focalisation). This is not a time to

⁶⁴ “He always hurries to the main event and whisks his audience into the middle of things as though they already knew”

challenge their account, but rather to find out where the narrator is in relation to the story. Their understanding may be very different from that of the gamemaster; this is understood and acceptable.

Where are they in space?

For example, my wife, thinking of a location on our allotment, describes it thus, “The shed is behind me and I am facing towards the bottom of the allotment. “As there are three available sides to the shed and the location of the “bottom” of the allotment is subjective, the point is not fixed, and the horizon is unclear. A railway line runs north to south along the side of the allotment; when she explains that “I am standing next to the shed with my back to the railway line,” I have a fixed point of reference and horizon; I know where she is standing, but for you to share that understanding and be able to picture the location I would need to provide additional information: a map of the allotment, a photograph, or a more detailed description. The gamemaster needs to understand the location (in the spatiotemporal sense) of the narrator. For example, at *College of Wizardry* there was a location known to participants of the earlier runs as The Ritual Space, however other participants had given a different place the same name. This caused confusion; two characters turned up for a midnight assignation at “The Ritual Space,” but they were in different places.

What happened?

Here the gamemaster considers the content of the narrative object as described by the narrator in relation to the attributes identified in the previous steps. In their work on oral narratives of personal experience, Labov & Waletzky identified that it was common for people to use free clause descriptions to set the scene when describing an event. This orientates the listener (Labov & Waletzky, 1966, p.32) in respect to diegetic person, place, time, and situation. They identify some examples where narrative is unclear; this is common in children, non-verbal adults, or when the narrator wishes to occlude some information. I also noted that, when narrating events that did not fit a known trope or pattern, the narrator tended to use apologetic qualifiers such as “This is a bit complicated. . .” or, “you’ll never guess what happened?” Those events that I recorded as narrative crises were often described with apologetic qualifiers.

Investigation

Whether the gamemaster is able to ask additional questions of a participant witness depends upon the larp. For some games, particularly those that focus on 360-degree immersion, any discussion between gamemaster and participant (outside of an off-game problem) is likely to be diegetic. Even for larps with off-game spaces for communication, participants may be in a liminal mode where they are trying to avoid dissonance by engaging with as little of the off-game world as possible. I recorded a lack of eye contact or focus on the individual gamemaster but not the space around them, an unwillingness to come far into an off-game tent, or in some cases a request for gamemasters to come outside into the dark or the rain to talk to participants. Dissonance will affect the narrative object, but I acknowledge that sometimes the gamemaster needs to qualify or quantify the narrative. I suggest that questions should be specific and personal to the narrator; “what did you do next?” is more useful than “why did they do that?” because the gamemaster is not asking the narrator to extrapolate. Again, matching the mode is useful here, particularly when dealing with a participant. By asking questions that can be answered diegetically the gamemaster can reduce dissonance. The answers are more likely to originate from a diegetic position, thus the gamemaster can work with the assumption that any unreliability derives from the character.

Where were you?

When was this?

Who else was there?

What happened?

What did you do next?

Who else saw it?

What are you planning to do after this?

This final question is intended to ascertain trajectory. This often clarifies a character’s motivations when they are not immediately clear.

For crew members, supporting cast, other gamemasters, and other people whose immersion may be less precious, the gamemaster can move on to ask questions which may force a change of mode. I suggest ordering these questions such that the dissonance comes after the first round of (diegetic) questioning.

How did the (other) characters react?

What was the mood of the characters?

What do you think they were trying to do?

It is also possible to ask questions that force a diegetic shift; acknowledging that a long-term NPC may be affected by bleed, or the crew member may be immersed, questions that remind the participant of their diegetic position. These questions either acknowledge the difference between participant and character or are explicitly non-diegetic:

What do you think happened and how does that differ from what your character thinks happened?

From a strictly off-game point of view how do you see this playing out?

What do you think caused this?

What does your character think caused this?

With each set of questions, the level of narration changes and, with that change, the answers may differ. Whilst this approach will allow for a single participant's view of an event, it is still subjective. In order to shore-up the understanding of the state of the narrative system, I recommend against relying on a single source but rather searching out different narrative opinions and then triangulating.

Triangulation

Triangulation is defined as 'using more than one method or source of data' (Bryman and Bell, 2003, p.291). It is the latter that I consider here, treating each narrative object as a separate data source. I am not proposing a methodological triangulation (Du Bois, 1996 [1899]) except in very specific instances where quantitative methods can be used to check facts. I use McEvoy and Richards' traditional distinctions associated with quantitative and qualitative methods where they suggest that a qualitative approach is more useful for the ontological interrogation of an intangible reality, and where knowledge is constructed via social interaction or hermeneutic understanding, and quantitative methods apply to the tangible and

specifically that they can be used for verification/falsification of data. (McEvoy and Richards, 2006, p.68) thus, in the example of Darius' and the Book of the Dead, the quantitative method is to check that the name has been written in the book, but this establishes the veracity of an outcome, not of the narrative itself.

To support this, I turn to Bateman's development of Elleström's ideas. Bateman complements Elleström's approach with a perspective grounded in multimodality theory. He explains that combinations of semiotic modes provide methods of communication and meanings that may not be available to the semiotic modes individually (Bateman, 2017). In this context, 'mode' means "a regularised and organised set of resources for meaning-making" (Jewitt and Gunter, 2003). These resources can include any kind of representative input: text, image, movement, speech, music, embodiment, etc. Bateman suggests that by identifying the genre of the medium it can be used as an appropriate horizon for triangulation of meaning. I use this specific concept — triangulation of meaning — as a basis for triangulation in combat narratology by suggesting the gamemaster relies on a minimum of three sources, ideally with very different relationships to the event.

Then by analysing the semiotic modes, along with the other attributes, scale, generation, and the focal position of the character/location of participant, and what is known of the storyworld and metaphysics, the gamemaster considers the relationship between the narrative objects to decide on a single narrative *truth*.

```
Define {
    Enactment {ε1}
    Narrative {N1, N1}
    Participant {Πa, Πb, Πc}
    Character {χa, χb, χc}
}
```

[horrific scene in otherwise deserted brothel] ⇒ ε₁

```
Π(a. .c) [Processes] (ε1) {
    Process.mapping
    Process.steering
```

```

Process.encode:  $\varepsilon_1 \Rightarrow N(1..3)$ 
}

```

In this example the gamemaster includes a third narrator, in this instance a *black-hat* guest, the one responsible for the branding. Guests in *Conscience* are an interesting example here as they operate at multiple levels of diegesis. Thus, interviewing them in a B-World location may persuade them to answer as their B-World persona, “I don’t know what you are talking about, I am a law-abiding visitor to Mayfield and I certainly would not be visiting a house of ill repute.”

Whereas speaking to them in a storyworld location, such as the headquarters of Aleph, or the guest sleeping quarters may persuade them to be more truthful,

“I visited the brothel and the opium den a couple of times, it was a lot of fun, but then I remembered that they are robots, not real people at all, so I thought it would be interesting to do something terrible to one of them. It is not like they’d remember it. I waited until it was really quiet in there — which took ages — and then I pulled a gun on them and ...”

This third narrative object is not an exact match for the first or the second, but there is some commonality in terms of the description of the event, particularly around context. This would seem to imply that the initial narrative — the one originating from the plot team members — is the outlier, the points of intersection and partial intersection are closer between N_2 and N_3 .

```

N2.Material = N3.Material
N1.Sensorial ≈ N3.Sensorial
N2.Spatiotemporal = N3.Spatiotemporal
N1.Semiotic ≈ N3.Semiotic
N1.Cultural ≠ N3.Cultural
N1.Technical = N3.Technical
N2.Contextual ≈ N3.Contextual

```

Sometimes when the intersection between narrative objects is unclear, further detail can be derived from the stated trajectory of the narrative. By understanding what a character was trying to do or what they are planning to do, the gamemaster can infer what actually happened, from the context.

I note that, if the gamemaster is relying on their own witnessing of or participation in an event, they may consider their own subjective narrative to be the abstract (see Medea's murder in chapter 7). My assertion that the gamemaster should remain outside of play originates from this challenge. Even with triangulation, I posit there is a risk of confirmation bias during analysis, where the gamemaster looks for attributes that match their own and discounts narrative which does not match their own. This is particularly problematic in the final stage — where the gamemaster once again operates as an author — because they may privilege their own narrative object over others.

Abstraction

Whilst the investigation and analysis may have been implicitly retroductive — 'an argument which explains what conditions in reality may have or could have led to these observations' (Olsen and Morgan, 2004, p.275) — the output of the triangulation is an abstract narrative object akin to the event itself. Passed through the filters of encoding and decoding three or more imagined texts are considered in relation to what is known of the larp design, storyworld, metaphysics, and plot. The gamemaster is uniquely positioned here, because they have a view of the event as a whole and are able to step away from the immersed position. One final authorial process is completed by the gamemaster with a view to zero focalization. The gamemaster decides what has happened here and with that decision, they arrive at a view of the narrative system. This will not reflect the interpretations of all participants and characters, but — with the gamemaster acting as author — it is intersubjectively *true*. By aiming for intersubjective truth over objective truth the gamemaster can derive a coherent diegetic explanation for what has happened and what this means for the story (and any plot yet to come into play). In simplistic terms, this abstraction is the gamemaster's *reading* of the imagined text as narrative. This extends the narrative model as shown below:

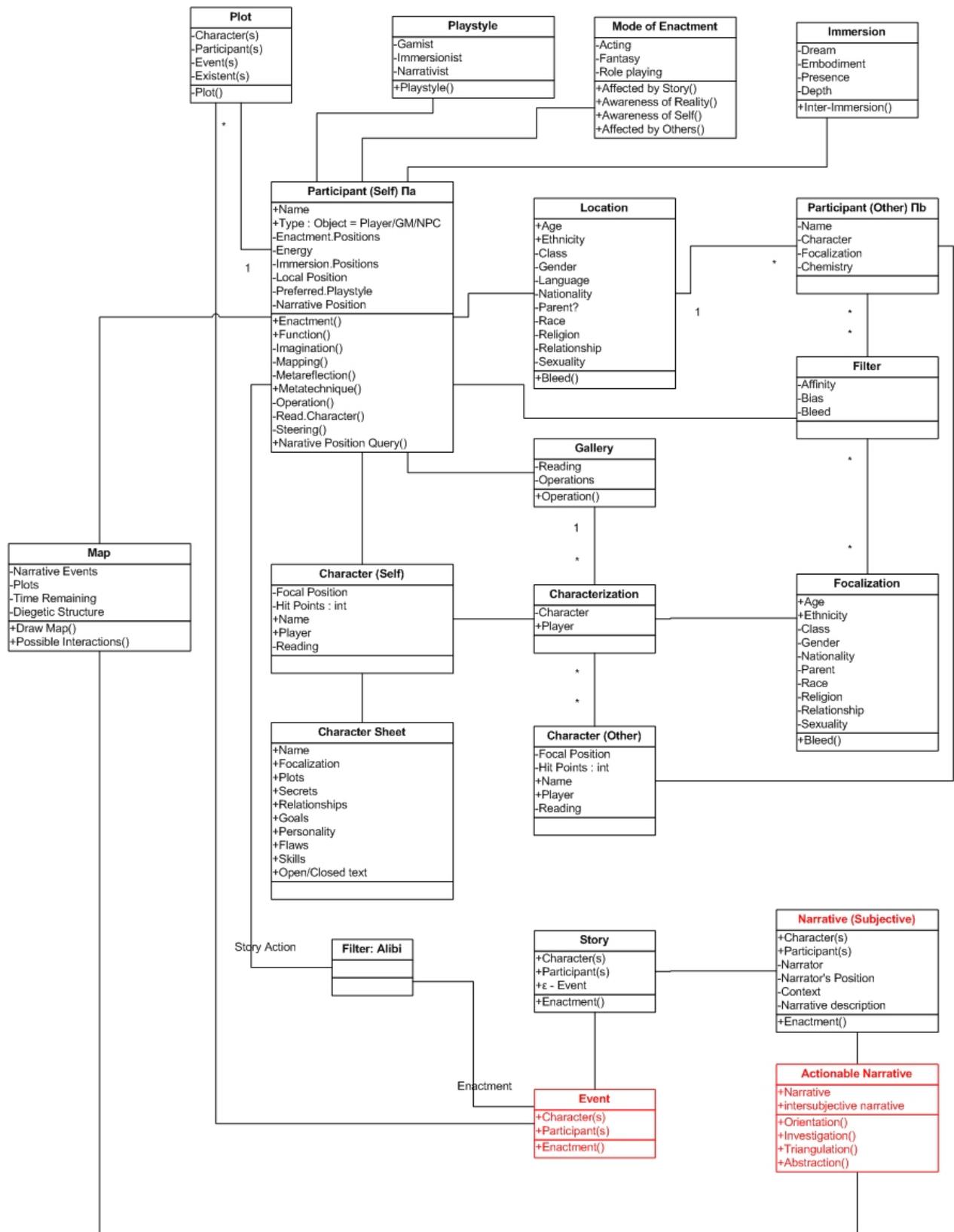


Figure 70 - Abstract Narrative Model – Extended. Additions shown in red.

The creation of an imagined text is an authorial act; the abstracted output is actional narrative. Actional narrative has the potential to move the larp forwards in as much as it can be used to enable one or more of the following:

- Creation of further play opportunities, unplanned but interesting conflict between characters
- Movement of the story forwards towards another plot point
- The bringing of a part or all of the story towards a conclusion
- The answering of a question about the state of the story of the larp right now.
- The description of a narrative crisis

It is this final point, the description of a narrative crisis, that I come to next.

Conclusion: On the Matter of the Narrative Crisis

“Extreme events — unexpectedly fast and unexpectedly large — are a hallmark of chaotic systems” - Gleick, 1987

In this conclusion I will discuss what constitutes a narrative crisis and what the criteria are for its existence. I will suggest that whilst the narrative system may be in chaos, because of the underlying patterns found in a chaotic system, and because of the underlying patterns of cultural narratives, specifically those within a well-designed narrative system, it is still predictable. A narrative crisis cannot exist inside a non-functional narrative system as any inconsistencies emerging from a poorly designed narrative system are not *narrative crises* but rather design flaws. I will then describe how combat narratology can help resolve extreme events. Finally, I offer a brief summary of my findings.

What is a narrative crisis?

At the start of this thesis, I defined the narrative crisis as occurring when “players do something catastrophically unexpected within the storyworld, thus shifting the narrative model into a state of chaos”, in reference to this chapter, where the effect of the abstract on the story or the planned plot means that remedial action may be

required. It is the combination of player agency meeting predicted narrative and something diegetically unexpected happening which requires an intervention by the gamemaster.

Well-formed Narrative Systems

A narrative crisis can only exist within a well-formed narrative system. If the storyworld is broken or inconsistent, then the crisis is not one of narrative but of ontological design. This could be because the metaphysics are inconsistent, or that the participants do not understand the storyworld in which they are immersed. In some cases, it could be a deliberate act of vandalism, or poor design, but I offer no specific examples of these.

Examples of Narrative Crisis where participants do unexpected things that change the plot

- Queen Elizabeth selects the “wrong” suitor.
- The participants give the Amulet of Wraith Control to the wraiths.
- Medea is murdered and a plotted ritual cannot take place.
- Darius’ name written in the Book of the Dead

Patterns in Chaos

When scientists refer to “chaos” they are describing behaviour which appears to be random, but which is not; arguing that there are underlying patterns in seemingly random systems (Gleick, 1987). It seems that some narrative crises are predictable. The Death of Darius, for example, remains a narratively coherent outcome and thus, it could have been predicted. The operations of the object Book of Names are simple. Names can be added or removed; this operation changes the state of the soul, and with that the death attribute of a character object. The object offers a narrative lever which may be used in unexpected ways. The amulet of wraith control operates in a similar way. In both instances the larpwrights assumed an operation — the players will act in a particular way — but did not model other use cases.

Considering the attributes of Πα for example, the focal position of the character and the preferred playstyle of the participant, it is possible to identify a play-to-win participant and a character who adheres to the trope or archetype of the Evil Chancellor. A manipulative trickster who schemes for the sake of it.

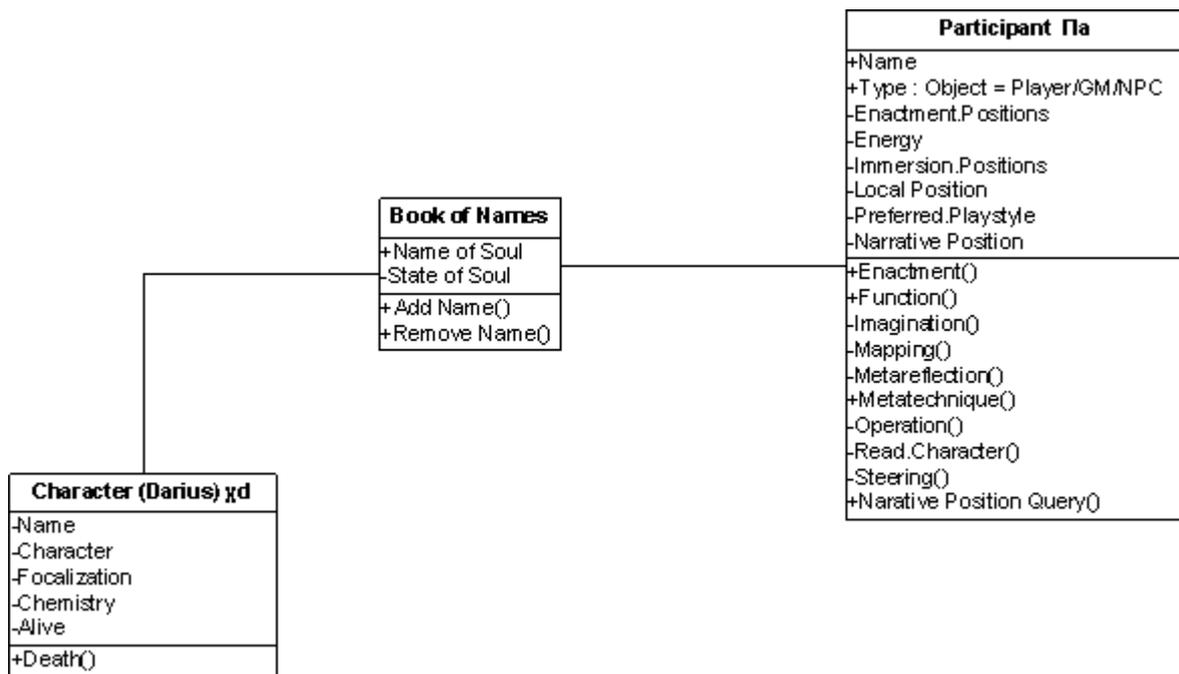


Figure 72 - Object Model for Namtar's Book of the Names of the Dead

```

// Modelling interactions with the Book of the Dead.
Define {
    Enactment {ε}
    Object {Ω1}
    Participant {Πa}
    Character {χabcd. . .}
}

For each χ65 {
    Review ε where Πa [adds χ] to Ω1
    Review ε where Πa [removes χ] from Ω1
}
  
```

⁶⁵ This instruction means "Repeat this process for each Character."

So, for any Object, consider potential interactions with other objects within the narrative system. What if the Book of Names is destroyed? What if it is lost? What if the names of all the Gods of Persia are written into it? These outcomes are plausible and therefore they are possible. With the characters and participants in play, they may seem random, but they are not.

Heisenberg explains we cannot know all of the parameters which define the present and therefore must acknowledge that all perception is “a selection from a totality of possibilities and a limitation of what is possible in the future” (Heisenberg, 1927, p.32). and I acknowledge the possibility of epistemic opacity of any kind of modelling, even a non-mathematical form. As Kouw states (discussing immersive simulation of hydraulic systems) this simulationist approach straddles “discovery and manipulation” (Kouw, 2016, p.207) Within the narrative model it may be impossible for the gamemaster as a cognitive agent “to know all of the epistemically relevant elements of the process” (Humphreys, 2009, p.4) but as an author of the storyworld their goal is narrative coherence not mathematical perfection. This approach accepts “all models are wrong, but some are useful” (Box and Draper 1987, p.424) and suggests intersubjective utility is more important.

For a larp on the scale of *Odyssey* the totality of possible outcomes cannot be modelled. However, it is possible to identify those parts of the system which are most likely to significantly affect the story because they test its limits. A narrative object that can bring the dead back to life (or kill anyone) fits this criterion. If the larpwright can identify these edge cases ahead of time, they can make an informed decision whether to constrain or enable agency. This pre-narratological design activity (in as much as it is a part of plot, rather than story or narrative) mitigates the narrative crisis because it transforms the unexpected into a known (yet improbable) outcome. If the model can be used as a part of the design process, it can also be used during larp runtime, not simply to understand what might happen, but to help answer the authorial question “*what should we do now?*” By following this process for a specific object during runtime we can better understand possible and plausible actions and outcomes and more effectively derive the most probable.

Solutions from Combat Narratology

Di Bernardo, reviewing Currie, states that the narratological approach to the analysis of the future, the unexpected, and surprise is based on the assumption that

reality and stories are cognitively interrelated (Di Bernardo, 2014). In Currie's terms, a narrative blends what has not yet happened with what has already taken place to describe an idea of the future (Currie, 2013, p.13). This approach suggests that narrative crisis occurs when two or more ideas of this future are incompatible, specifically when the diegetic and non-diegetic frames are incongruent. Currie describes an unexpected event as one which "stands out from everyday routine, established reality or the inductive reasoning of common expectation" (ibid, p.99,) and suggests it is essentially unpredictable. Thus, the narrative crisis is intrinsically metaleptic because it is dissonant, the seemingly random nature of these events can provoke a non-diegetic reaction *because* they are unexpected. Where two or more characters' concepts of reality do not match, that remains a diegetic incident; it will generate conflict, but it is a conflict that exists within the storyworld and which can be resolved there. My solution derives from the conclusion, when a crisis event can be reacted to diegetically, it ceases to be a crisis.

When an *Odyssey* crew member ran into the Story Tent exclaiming "Darius has been killed," there was panic. The death of a major NPC (and technically a God) should not have been possible. The first reaction from the team was to look for reasons why it was not true, why it could not have happened. I checked the book, spoke with a player whose character saw the name written into the Book of the Dead, one of the in-play referees / gamemasters, the NPC who played Namtar (whose pen had been stolen), and finally the player who was responsible for adding the name. Via orientation, investigation, and triangulation I abstracted the actual events: a clear example of conflict between plotted events and player agency. After some heated discussion (and literal tears) the Story Team decided to honour the player's action and to react to it diegetically. This effectively resolved the narrative crisis.

Thesis Process Review

In this section I will discuss the selection and order of the case studies. I will then explain how the outcomes of these studies informed the research.

Selection of the case studies was an iterative process. I began with the *Odyssey* study; this was the longest of the three as it ran for three years which adds up to around 100 hours of data capture. I started this one for a number of reasons:

Firstly, I already had contact with the Story Team, including the Story Team lead who was sympathetic to my ideas, knew my work from previous larps, and who

was friendly to the idea of academic study of larp. This is important as UK larp has been historically antagonistic to academic interest. It is only in the last four years that has started to change. I knew that both the narrative crisis and its resolution would be found in this backstage/creative space, so it seemed the logical place to start. In addition, Odyssey had systems in place that would make the documentation and data capture easier.

The findings from this initial study were that larp narratives contained recognisable narrative patterns. The study also generated the idea that larpers used trope as grammar, and that gamemasters were also affected by their personal relationship with the emerging story, particularly informed by metalepsis; how quickly playing an NPC can engender loss of objectivity. This led to the work around the narrative object and how it changed over time.

The second case study was an explanatory work to be able to show the processes of narrative design. There was a lack of citable material here, so I needed to produce something on which to illustrate my points about how writers do the world building and character creation. This led to the idea of ontological design when it became apparent that the writing process extended far beyond the textual tasks. The other output from this study was the plot:story:narrative progression which I used to inform my proposed extensions of the narratological model.

The third case study was *Conscience*. Based on the understanding that agency was the cause of the narrative crisis, the case study examined the unpredictable behaviours of the participants. The key finding here was capturing and documenting the complexity of the interaction. This enabled me to create the logical narrative model, which is one of the key outputs of the whole study.

I asked three questions at the beginning of this thesis:

- What is the role of the writer in participatory fiction?
- How can the larpwright understand the state of a story during runtime?
- How can we resolve moments of narrative crisis in larp?

Whilst the case studies provided data to help answer these questions, the explanation and thesis require a linear progression: I needed to demonstrate the existence of a system in order to argue that it is a chaotic system. I needed to find an

explanation for the patterns in order to identify them. I needed the patterns to exist to offer the methodology to interrogate the system.

Original Contributions to Knowledge

The main contributions to knowledge are the detailed survey of the processes of designing, writing, playing, and running a larp which has added to the sumtotal of knowledge not just of larp or other participatory events such as immersive/interactive entertainments, but also in more general terms about how we tell stories together and how we communicate and understand those stories.

My main findings are that we can model a narrative system, we can design a narrative to work within that system, and whilst we can't yet map that system in real time, we can interrogate the system and infer the shape of an emergent story and its trajectory — even at scale — within a well-designed system. This form of storytelling extends rather than replaces, successful larp narratives remain linear Aristotelian artefacts, but the way they emerge is chaotic. The understanding of the system can both reduce instances of and provide solutions to narrative crisis.

My work extends rather than contradicts the understanding of larp narratives and emergent participatory stories; as I have argued the rejection of stories in larp derives more from a rejection of auteurism: Stories are being told but the larp designers are not telling them. Fundamentally the models that describe the narrative system and participants interaction with it are at the core of the project; they enable and informs a theoretical basis for future research into participatory storytelling.

In terms of published literature in my field (as opposed to the para-theory) I believe that this work is an opening of a conversation and I hope that it will form the basis of subsequent research by myself and others.

Unresolved Questions and Directions for Future Study

Within the field of larp studies, the question about the relationship between dissonance, depersonalization and immersion deserves further study, but It would be useful to have the input from other fields; deeper knowledge of neuroscience is needed to determine what is going on in the brains of larpers. For example, to what extent are participants in larps prone to depersonalization? It would be interesting to define a study that would determine to what extent the participant is conscious of the distinction between the storyworld and the lifeworld. Is it possible to monitor larpers' heart rate,

levels of stress hormones, and brain activity? How can we do this without affecting immersion? An experimental larp where testing is a diegetic necessity could possibly enable this.

Aspects of the model I have described seem to have similarities to what might be described as a living organism with the larp designer as the overseer of an ecology; this line of thought would benefit from more exploration.

One of my undocumented observations from the Conscience study was the degree to which the potential similarities between the writing and running of a larp, and playing the roles of a fictional plot team performing that same function within the diegesis were realised (See Chapter 5, section 3.) My suspicion here is that a well-designed larp run as a simulation may return similar results to an actual field study, if that is the case then Future research could investigate opportunities for larp to be applied as a methodological approach to research.

Further research into the modelling of narrative systems could increase our knowledge of how participatory stories work and are understood. Given that larps can be designed at different scales (in terms of number of participants, budget, and duration) I think there is value in testing the theoretical assumptions of this thesis through practical applications of the work. Extending that idea, a detailed review of the canon of Nordic larp (para-theory) would make it easier for academics in larp studies and in other fields to rely on the important work done within that community.

Building upon the findings of my research, there are other applications of the Object-Oriented modelling of narrative systems that can inform situations and fields. I am particularly interested in how Combat Narratology could be applied by News organisations to understand diverse narrativization of current events, as this could be applied and tested at scale using social media.

Since the original submission of this thesis the understanding of machine learning and what an AI might reasonably be expected to understand has transformed. The possibility of training an AI on the narrative system for a larp, the characters within it, combined with their ability to assimilate cultural narrative patterns and tropes suggests that a machine learning system may be able to predict moments of narrative crisis.

It would be interesting also to see how these methods could be applied to the challenges of the narrative paradox and the narrative “uncanny valley” – the alien 1% (Weschler, 2002) – in stories originated by AI. Would a clearer understanding of how

stories are understood collectively inform the machine learning system in such a way that the 1% variance is reduced?

Positionality Review

As a researcher, I acknowledge a set of privileges but hope that my awareness of these, and the methods and approaches I have adopted have either drawn attention to or mitigated them where appropriate. My position as writer, larp designer, software engineer and being able to call on these different academic and professional disciplines have shaped these findings.

Closing Statement

I have examined the role of the writer as both a creative and as an ontological narrative designer. I have presented an object-based model which can be used to understand the state of the story during runtime and presented some strategies for triangulating and deconstructing intrinsically unreliable narratives into an intersubjectively coherent imagined text. The strategies for the resolution of narrative crises loop back to the writer again and will depend on the level of agency the larpwrights have given to participants. As authors of the storyworld there are many ways to nudge events back towards a linear plot if the design favours a linear or nodal structure. For reactive plot, characters and events are written in real time; this is a participatory act as the writers are players too.

My personal practice and my preference, is to trust the emergent story, just as Berger suggests that some gamemasters adopt a Zen approach and “let go of control” (Berger, 2010, p.54). When examined through the lens of combat narratology and in conjunction with consistent metaphysics and a well-understood storyworld, my research suggests those moments of confusion and panic experienced by larpwrights during runtime are the beats of a hidden story emerging from a chaotic narrative.

I return here to my opening quote, from Mary Shelley’s Introduction to Frankenstein (1831), “Invention, it must be humbly admitted, does not consist in creating out of void, but out of chaos,” the process of combat narratology allows chaotic moments to be understood. It is then the job of the writer to incorporate or reframe them in a way that enables a diegetic participatory reaction rather than a dissonant one; to use that chaos as a material for invention.

All that remains is to thank you, Dear Reader, for coming on this strange journey with me.

“How dangerous is the acquirement of knowledge and how much happier that man is who believes his native town to be the world, than he who aspires to be greater than his nature will allow.”

— Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*

Appendix A - larps played during this study.

College of Wizardry 3, Poland, 2015
Debauchery Party (College of Wizardry), Denmark, 2015
College of Wizardry 5, Poland, 2015
To Hell and Back (College of Wizardry), Norway, 2016
College of Wizardry 8, Poland, 2016
Black Friday, Italy, 2016
Convention of Thorns, Poland, 2016
Forsaken, UK, 2016
Fortune & Felicity, Sweden, 2017
Inside Hamlet, Denmark, 2017
Tenement 67, UK, 2017
College of Wizardry 13, Poland, 2018
Conscience Run 1, Spain, 2018
Bunker 101, Italy, 2018
Inside Hamlet, Denmark, 2018
Conscience Run 3, Spain. 2019
House of Craving, Denmark. 2019
All for One, UK, 2019
Countdown, Spain, 2019 (NPC)
Redemption: Salvation Through Sin, Finland, 2021
The Last Song, Denmark, 2022

Appendix B - Dorian/Daria Cornelius

Full character sheet "From the Larp *Inside Hamlet* created by Participation Design Agency" included with permission. Original 2015 character was written by Martin Ericsson, relations by Simon Svensson with re-writes for 2017 run by Freja Gyldenstrøm. (Uncorrected text)



Dorian/Daria Cornelius

The Gatekeeper between Heaven and Hell

“War is destruction, and the more destructive it can be made with the least suffering the sooner will be ended that barbarous method of protecting national rights. No doubt in time chemistry will be used to lessen the suffering of combatants, and even of criminals condemned to death.”

- Lord Lyon Playfair, 1854.

Eternal playboy/girl, rumored agent, and a master of chemical warfare. Thousands have died from the mustard gas and zyklon B produced in Cornelian factories, a fact that haunts Dorian/Daria nightly. How much more efficient and humane would it not be to use weaponized long-lasting psychedelics that drive enemies to awe, madness, and helpless ecstasy?

Dorian/Doria is a terrible person because they believe that they are the only one who can change the world for the better.

The Cornelius-owned company IG Farben supplied Danish troops with mustard gas during the Great War. In 1923 a chemist at the company discovered Sarin, the first lethal nerve-gas of many. Dorian/Daria is the lead chemist of the German-based company and in control of the family's majority of its shares. They know that another Great War is sure to happen soon, and consider it a personal responsibility to make it quick, painless, and profitable for the Cornelius family. Dorian/Daria truly believes that an arsenal of chemical weapons, ranging from nightmare psychedelic gas to nerve-agents with 100% lethality is the way to end all wars. If there are terrible enough weapons, wars will end very quickly.

Dorian/Daria trusts no-one. Especially not their own family and House, but then again, they've been around to see the ugliness of the degenerate line unfold.

They saw Sardric capture the rosy-cheeked infant who were to become the creature Tressel, tearing the babe from its mother's breast. Many, many years ago they found the rotting bodies in the locked cellars of The Ruby Mansion and burned them; the stink still lingers.

Dorian/Daria lost love and innocence a lifetime ago, if not more, when the sweet rose of evening, the beautiful Emily, was pushed from nobility and into the streets, to whoredom and syphilitic death, by a father who would have none of her love for Dorian/Daria. Perhaps he was right. If all members of house Cornelius are destined to become like the monsters who came before them, there is nothing left of it to save. After centuries of inbreeding, members of your family have begun to degenerate into pale, weakly creatures of decadence. Lately death has been much on your mind, and you treat it as a hated lover, whose attraction you know to be fatal and invincible.

Goals:

Unbeknownst to the other Cornelians, Dorian/Daria has made a deal with the Security Directorate, providing them with scopolamine, lysergic acid, and lethal poison for use in their operations. Being a drug-pusher for the intelligence community was just the start of Dorian/Daria's second career as a spy and a provider of chemical entertainment for the nobility of Elsinore. Their current assignment, over a period of

months, is to hook a number of named nobles as regular customers to make them dependent on the Directorate and house Cornelius.

As a spy and agent of the directorate Dorian/Daria uses psychedelics, aphrodisiacs, and sleeping drugs to control their targets. Under the guise of being simply a decadent chemist and dandy happily supplying their friends, this has been surprisingly easy.

Dorian/Daria also holds the power over the House's estates and assets, together with Alex/Alexa, until the day that Katrine marries and takes over the House. Unless, of course, someone else has entrenched their power enough by then to rule the House in practice.

House Cornelius - Group relationships:

The ancient inbred family that ruled Denmark before the Hamlets' dreams of power. The Cornelius family is paralyzed by the struggle between Arkon and Jared Cornelius over the affections of their sister Katrine. Their race-horses Stormbringer and Mournblade are about to face off in a decisive duel. Will the Duke-to-be make a deal with the devil to overcome his addiction and weakness, or will he fall before the boisterous macho power of Arkon? The brothers think the battle is theirs, but Katrine is more in tune with the forces at play than any of them suspect. Incest is illegal and considered a terrible sin, but among the Cornelians it is as common as sleeping with the servants is in another House. No judge or priest would dare to challenge the decaying house openly, but behind closed doors good Christians plot to bring these heathens down.

The Cornelians are sworn enemies to the Duchy of Marcella, since House Cornelius once held their lands back when the Cornelians ruled Denmark.

Motto: Et sanguis animarum (Blood and Souls)

Colour: White

The first of the last of the Cornelians was Duke **Sardric Cornelius**, a proud and cruel man who treated his children unequally and harshly. He himself is now dead and his seat empty.

Duchess **Katrine Cornelius**, spoiled daughter of Sardric and middle sister to his sons, will determine which of them shall inherit all at her side. Betrothed to Jared since childhood, but not blind to the strength of Arkon, her pride and vanity will surely play a role in the decision. She is close to Tressel who used to take care of her when she was just a little girl. However, Katrine does not yet have the power over the House, not until she marries. Alex/Alexa and Daria/Dorian hold the de-facto power over the House's assets and estates, and she is not powerful enough to go against them. **Secret:** Through Sardric, Katrine holds Tressel's true name, giving her the power to free the demonic servant if it pleases her.

The sickly **Jared Cornelius**, youngest son of Sardric, is he who carries most heavily the curse of an ancient house given to decadence and facing degeneration. He dreams of a better world, but dare he believe in it? He hates his brother and most of his fallen family, but loves his sister blindly. **Open secret:** Jared is addicted to amphetamine.

Arkon Cornelius is the eldest of Sardric's children, and the bastard result of his lordly rape of a farmer's whoring daughter. He is strong and angry as a bull, and all the house knows of his temper. He despises all who are weak, most so his brother. He desires Katrine with burning passion.

To all the children of the Cornelius family, **Dorian/Daria Cornelius** has always been someone they could bring their troubles to if they could go to no one else. The younger sibling of Sardric and the priority shareholder of the family-owned company IG Farben is a highly skilled chemist as well as a connoisseur of human experience who has seen more than anyone can imagine. The eternal dandy is always available to point out a faster way to reach Hell. Dorian/Daria hold the formal power over the House, sharing it equally with Alex/Alexa, until Katrine has married.

Secret: For years, Dorian/Daria has been the source of the amphetamine Jared needed to function. Until Jared stopped asking for it, that is.

Lord Castellan **Alex/Alexa Cornelius**, first cousin to the heirs of Sardric and elder sibling of Scilla/Scius, is the family's representant in the Patrician Council and serves as Lord/Lady Castellan of Elsinore. Convinced by Jared, Alex/Alexa unfortunately made the wrong call and supported young Prince Hamlet over Claudius for king: the Crown has yet to forgive them. Within House Cornelius, Alex/Alexa holds half of the power. The other half is held by Daria/Dorian. If Alex/Alexa could only secure a strong marriage, they might be able to wrest the power over the House from Katrine altogether. Especially if King Claudius were to fall.

Scilla/Scius Cornelius grew up at court, but spent many years in a convent in Jutland after an assassination attempt on their life. They have now finally returned to fulfill their betrothal to Eligius/Eligia of House Strato in marriage. Their affections and loyalty should be won by the other Cornelians, lest they turn against the family they barely know and decide on a match that benefits themselves rather than the future of House Cornelius.

Banquo/Banqua Cornelius is newly arrived from Jutland in order to petition King Claudius for help regarding some trouble with the local factory workers. This second cousin of Sardric's heirs knows nothing of the ways of the court. Young, idealistic, sweet, and terrifyingly naive, they are ripe for corruption by the more experienced and glamorous trio of Katrine, Jared, and Arkon, who they admire and follow in all things.

The dutiful manservant and creature of the night **Tressel**, also known as **Tanglebones**, was summoned by Sardric from the pits of Hell to serve his children - or so the story goes. Tressel can never harm its masters or any of their blood. Not as long as it remains nameless. Tressel **secretly** lusts for Jared, a man who is almost as inhuman as itself. It hates Arkon, but must still obey him. It loves and adores Katrine, who is perfect and beautiful and whose touch is like the summer wind and almost makes it feel like a person. Tressel could hurt her with the power of its love if it was ever set free.

Relationships outside the House:

The apothecary **Codmor**. When old King Hamlet was poisoned, some suspicions pointed towards Dorian/Daria as the supplier of the lethal concoction. As you had nothing to do with it, Codmor must be selling whatever killed the king. That is powerful knowledge, and should be well used against the deceiving drug dealer. For who else are they selling to? Your nephew *has* stopped asking for his dose.

The head of the directorate, and your contact, **Barde/Bona** is your ticket to changing the world. By providing services to the intelligence community and making yourself invaluable to Barde/Bona you hope to make your radical suggestions for the future of Danish warfare reality. You and your company are the sole supplier of truth serum and psychedelic compounds for use in interrogations to the Directorate. You've been given a list of nobles to get hooked on drugs in order to make them easier to control. The list is topped by **Prince Hamlet**. The war hero **Alarbus Belar**, the journalist **Alonso/Alida**, and your own cousin **Jared Cornelius** are also on the list.

You used to share a bond of trust and friendship with **Eligius Strato**, but recently you have heard that he has started selling amphetamine and other drugs to your customers, something that you see as a personal reason for a vendetta. Ruin them, destroy them, humiliate them. Do whatever is needed to make them regret crossing you.

Abelard/Abela Voltemand is a shrewd businessperson you'd like to work closer with. IG Farben is the main supplier of chemical weapons for the Voltemands. You suspect they are preparing a hostile takeover of the company. If this happens you need to be included in the deal and move your loyalties to House Voltemand. The Work is more important than your House.

As a seasoned dandy, of course lives have occasionally been ruined in the greater service of your "sensation experiments". One of these lives belongs to **Tara/Taro**, who these days pretends to be an actor. They are no such thing. You were the nobleman who put this orphan in the brothel in the first place, when they came to you penniless and lost. And you were there, the happily paying client, when they first

sold their body, pushing them further into the bizarre, relishing in their disgust and pain. You kept returning over the years. For the humiliation, for the forced porn, for the recording of films that almost crossed over into death. No other creature has starred in as many of your vile experiments as them. Now, they want to be someone else. They want to be a movie star. It will be interesting to watch. And interesting to reverse should they succeed. You practically made the little whore.

One thing might stop you in your terrible trajectory. You've seen a youth across the throne room. You've noticed their innocent smile, their beautiful hair. Is this? Could this be? The very image of Emily, your long lost love from ages ago has stood before you. Is it her ghost or could she have found a way to cheat time? Is it a child, a grandchild of the fallen woman, as of yet undestroyed — could they be yours the way their ancestor never was?

(No specific player has been given the role of Emily's image. They can be a figment of your imagination, as you slowly and finally lose your mind; or they can be a character you recognize in the first act, and who grows increasingly similar to your lost love as the game progresses. They can even be several characters, found among the companions, the alter boys, the civilians who have recently appeared at court. One thing is certain, Emily is haunting you).

What you can do

To Be:

- Convince Barde/Bona to use psychedelics or dissociatives to neutralize an enemy instead of killing him/her.
- Give a suitable drug to someone who really needs it right at that moment.
- Come clean about your involvement with the Directorate to your family.
- Make sure Codmor never sells poison to anyone ever again.
- Help Tara/Taro succeed as a star and socialite, they've deserved it.

Not To Be:

- Get hooked on your own supply.
- Dose someone with a psychedelic drug without telling them (you will need to tell the player, discreetly, out of character).
- Convince the council to use chemical weapons against the people of Denmark.
- Betray your House to the Directorate.
- Betray the Directorate to your House.
- Destroy Tara/Taro utterly only to realize they were always an Emily to you.

Vices:

- **Megalomania.** You consider yourself so talented at creative pharmacology and spycraft that you are the chemical messiah of a future age.
- **Illoyal.** You consider yourself to be more important than your House. This is a grave sin among the Cornelius family.
- **Blasé.** You've done so much, you barely feel excitement over anything anymore. The only thing to do is to keep experimenting and chasing that spark.
- **Hypersexual.** You lust for men, women, and the ones in between. As long as they are doe-eyed and ripe for ruin.
- **Dacryphilia.** You get turned on by people crying.

Function at court:

You are a genius, one with clear goals in mind. You do not act in court to please others but because it is your experimental laboratory. There you receive all the privileges you need to work and all the subjects and clients you could ever wish for.

Appendix C - Persian Death Rites - Odyssey

As one would expect from the afterlife of the Thousand Nations, the Persian underworld is a complex affair, governed by multiple Deities, and the fates of the souls within it are based on a complex balance of faith, allegiance both Mortal and Divine, judgement of the worthy and unworthy, and sometimes sheer blind luck for good or for ill.

Those that are treated with the correct funeral rites - whose bodies have been cleansed and have not lain upon the bare earth - should come before the Throne of Erishkigal in Irkalla. Should, and not will, for both rulers of the Twin Thrones have trickery within their nature, and more than one deceased Immortal has expected to stand before Erishkigal and instead come face to face with the Nergal of the Black Shield - or vice versa - especially in the Age of the Annuals.

In the normal way of things, Nergal takes the sullied dead, the unburied dead, and the abandoned - as well as those judged unvirtuous by his wife. Most of those he claims fight in his army against the beasts and demons of Azi Dahak, lest such creatures of the underworld break through into the lands of the living. For a few who earn Nergal's personal distaste, he has more inventive punishments; the pits of Irkalla are deep and dark, and many terrible things lurk within them.

By the normal way of things, the Grey Lady stands in judgement of those who receive appropriate funeral rights. Those who have lived an unvirtuousness life or have in some way been sullied, she sends to serve with her husband's Black Army. Of the virtuous, those who follow the old Gods remain by her side in the Grey Gardens of Irkalla - a beautiful but changeless and twilight place of tranquillity and rest.

In her role as a yazata, Ereshkigal is also able to pass on followers of the New Religion to the Bounteous Immortals, who see them escorted across the Cinvat Bridge - another point of judgement. Worthy followers of Ormazhd and the Light pass beyond Irkalla to the True Heaven of Perfect Light. Those who seek judgement of the Bounteous Immortals and do not have the Truth of Ahura Mazda within their hearts also take the Cinvat bridge. But for them, the chasm is endless; the bridge narrows to the mere width of a sword's blade, until finally those with the Darkness of Falsehood in their hearts can balance no longer and tumble down into the deepest chasms of Irkalla to be endlessly consumed in the eternal darkness by Azi Dahak's most terrible

monsters, or, if they are exceptionally lucky to be swept up into the ranks of Nergal's Army of the Dead.

Other Deities have their places in the system of Persia's afterlife. Kiu hunted Azi Dahak's beasts endlessly through the pits, and could be found in depths of Irkalla as often as at the Gods' feasting tables. And any of the daeva and their monstrous broods and followers might be testing themselves against the Black Shield alongside Azi Dahak.

The final possibility for a Persian in death is to face the shining knives of Asto Vidatu. The ways of Irkalla are dimly lit and uncertain; Asto Vidatu is the patron god of assassins; and any Persian knows that to meet him in the afterlife is to face utter undoing - he binds the souls of those he catches into his knives, where they are used to evil ends. Asto Vidatu is known to pursue souls between Ereshkigal's judgement and the Cinvat Bridge; those who reach the bridge are safe from his attentions - a worthy soul will be light enough to outpace him, and even a damned soul may escape to Azi Dahak's pits. An unfortunate few have met Asto Vidatu in death *instead* of coming before the Twin Thrones; for them, escape is even less certain. It is unlikely that a soul bound into one of the shining knives would have been able to break free of the underworld in the recent chaos; however it is possible that a dead Persian saw a companion fall prey to Asto Vidatu's knives.

Your experience in the underworld will have depended on your life, your beliefs, and your luck in death. Unchanging, beautiful, restful grey days amongst grey gardens that do not grow and the exquisite architecture of grey towers. Unending war with the beasts in the pits - or infinite, unending, repeated destruction and devouring at their hands. Or for the truest believers in the New Religion an indescribable paradise of Burning Light and Truth.

Perhaps because of its complexities, the Persian Underworld is actually in many ways an extremely well-ordered place. As Imperial Persia has its civil service, so Irkalla has Namtar, psychopomp of the dead and Chamberlain of the Palaces of Nergal and Ereshkigal. For the most part, all the dead are correctly recorded in Namtar's Book of Names, and the Bureaucracy of Death knows the rough fate or whereabouts of any deceased soul at any time.

Appendix D - Ficlets

Used with permission, uncorrected texts

When Thomas met Ksenia for real. (Brind 2015)

“I need a drink, are you coming?”

“No, I have to go and look at the stars. Have you any idea how many there are? More than six. Six is one of my favorite numbers. I am going to count them and find the missing one...”

Thomas sighs. Dee is possibly the oldest of them all but her mind works in a different way from almost everyone else, she’s walking the *Wyllt* path and that will take her into madness and darkness and — hopefully — out the other side. Sometimes she seems the youngest, the most vulnerable; but she is the one they all fear.

He heads across the bridge, stubs his toe on something in the dark, and angrily opens the door with a wave of his wand. It is warm in the tavern, but almost oppressive. The angry ones are skulking in the corner, drinking vodka like it is going out of fashion and glaring at each other and everyone around them. Thomas renews the three charms he always has cast on himself; three forms of protection that will give him a chance to react to any offensive magic cast at him. He’s been using them since he was three years old; they remain his constant companions.

The Irish woman stumbles across the room; she’s drunk. The floor is wet.

“Get out of my way, I wanna drink.” She snarls and slips on the wet floor; grabbing for Thomas to try and break her fall. But Thomas has moved out of the way. It is instinctive now. At Avalon they learn not to block an attack, but to move around it or into it. Mac grabs for air, swears once and falls on her arse

“Whoops.”

He’s about to offer her a hand up, but then he’s pushed hard back against the bar.

“Hey! You!” She sticks her finger into his chest, the sternum, just below the ribcage. Putting pressure on the nerve, “Stay away from my friend!”

Thomas raises an eyebrow. He looks down at the finger pressed against his sternum. Not bad. If it were two centimeters lower it would be cutting off the blood supply; where it is now is just uncomfortable. Pretty finger though. Here we go again though, better get this over and done with. Remember, stand up to bullies, never let them know you are frightened...

"You better move that finger if you want to keep it."

She pushes it further in; it slips down two centimeters. *Now that hurts properly, good girl.*

"Like this? You want me to move it like this?"

He grabs her hand, pulling it into him, locking it in place and then turns his whole body. This puts pretty much his entire body weight on the bone at the base of her index finger. He holds just short of dislocating it. No sense in giving away too much.

She twists and aims a kick at the side of his knee, but she's not got room to do it fast enough, he turns some more so that he's almost behind her, moves his arms downwards although cutting with a sword projecting forwards and round.

Gwenllian, the warfare teacher at Avalon would have punished him for that. "If someone attacks you, you put them down and fast. If a second person attacks you, you put them in the hospital. If there are three or more, you kill them. This is not a game."

But it is a game, so he throws her across the stone floor rather than skull first into it. The bar is silent now. Everyone has picked their drinks up off the table and is watching. She gets to her feet. She is full of rage; her fingers are spread like claws.

"You and me, Bitchboy, outside now!"

"Bitchboy?" he laughed. "Right."

Here we go again. He holds the door open for her. Checks out her butt as she stomps in front of him. Out into the darkness. He smiles.

The world was quiet. Most reasonable students had gone to bed already, so they were alone on the bridge.

"So how do you want to do this then?" Thomas asked, "duelling club rules?"

He spoke these words sarcastically. There are no fucking rules to a fight. You hex the other person hard and fast and piss on the corpse.

"No rules. No wands. I don't need tools to hurt you."

He was surprised. Perhaps he felt a moment of fear. The protection spells would be useless against a physical attack. He felt his heart rate spike. Breathed deep to control the adrenalin. Focused

“I guess we’ll see about that.”

They circled each other warily. There was something predatory about ... Ksenia, that was her name. *What would that be in English, ‘hospitality,’ or something like that.* She was expecting him to attack first, he could see from her stance. Defensive but ready to switch suddenly into attack. He slowed his breathing, felt his heart rate drop to 60. He could feel the creature in the mirror waiting inside him, looking out through his eyes. It was ... hungry

“What is wrong? Too pussy to fight me?”

Thomas shrugged, get her good and angry.

It worked. She was distracted by a thought. In that fraction of a moment he’d delivered a roundhouse kick to the side of her head.

He expected her to fall. The power behind that kick should have put her on the ground. Possibly even knocked her out. But she barely even staggered. Suddenly she was on him. She moved impossibly fast, he barely had time to block, and then he had no time at all. She moved like a fucking snake. Punches and kicks and elbows and ... he felt his legs go out from underneath him and he hit the ground hard. It was cold.

When Ksenia met Thomas for real. (Svanevik, 2015)

The candles burned fast in the tavern that night. It might be because Eris drank like a Russian in the corner. She hadn’t spoken a word to Ksenia all week. She couldn’t stand to look at her. Ksenia understood. The twins should have saved Boulder and they hadn’t even avenged him. Ksenia couldn’t look at herself either. Unbeatable indeed.

The door slammed open, revealing one her least favorite people. Say hello to Thomas Wychwood - aka King of the hill - aka Chozha’s biggest bastard - aka Boy Bitchwood himself.

“That’s all I need,” Ksenia muttered.

“What was that?” Mac grunted. “More to drink? I’ll get a bottle.”

She stopped, swaying at the edge of the table for a second. Boulder always used to get the bottles.

Ksenia balanced the empty shot glass on her knuckles. Across the table, Vlad mimicked her movement with his own glass. She smiled at him and he nodded back. Vlad was solid. Ana, on the other hand, her grief was so pungent that Ksenia wished she could be nose-blind. Here they sat, seven days in a row, drinking together, not allowed to talk about what had happened and unable to talk about anything else.

A loud crash at the bar brought her back to the present. Mac was on her butt looking infuriated, Thomas Wychwood posed against the bar with an insufferable smirk. Ksenia didn't know what had happened, but she knew whose fault it had to be.

"Hey! You!" She marched over to the bar and stuck her finger in his chest. "Stay away from my friend!"

He raised an eyebrow. Looked down at the finger pressed against his sternum and huffed disdainfully. "You better move that finger if you want to keep it."

She pushed it further in, forcing a pained sound out of him. "Like this? You want me to move it like this?"

He grabbed her finger and twisted. She gasped. The pain was sharp and immediate, cutting through everything. Turning her mind from the winter break and everything that had happened after into one clear focus: Make it stop. She twisted with the movement and aimed her boot at his knee. He was quick as a snake. Suddenly, she was on the floor too. That was new. She shot to her feet.

"You and me, Bitchboy, outside now!"

"Bitchboy?" he laughed. "Right."

He looked way too comfortable. She didn't like that. But she'd make him scared. She'd make him piss his pants and then she'd make him bleed.

She realized she was smiling too.

The world was quiet. Most reasonable students had gone to bed already so they were alone on the bridge.

"How do you want to do this then?" Bitchwood smirked. "Duelling club rules?"

The black mask covering her dragon's eyes. Boulder falling in slow motion. Ksenia's wand shooting spells faster than she'd ever done but still not fast enough. Eris' scream and the fire. The smell of her brother roasting in dragon fire.

Ksenia forced herself back to present and the enemy in front of her. "No rules. No wands. I don't need tools to hurt you."

That made him nervous. She could smell it even if she couldn't see it in his stance.

“I guess we’ll see about that,” he said.

They circled each other warily. Ksenia hadn’t expected him to be fast but now she was ready for him. Patient like the wolf inside her, she paced. He didn’t make the first move. Waiting, like her. It was hard to hold onto anger like this.

“What is wrong? Too pussy to fight me?”

He shrugged, keeping the slow movement going.

How dare he keep this from her? Too good to fight a prole? Typical Bitchwood behavior! She would show him!

Bham! Ksenia grunted as Thomas’ army boot smashed into the side of her face. She turned, snarled and launched herself at him. And then everything went red.

She remembered throwing him to the ground; furiously beating every piece of him she could get her hands on. He had training but she had passion. Suddenly, she was on top of him. They were both panting. She had her hands around his throat, her knee pressing on his chest. His hands dug into her neck, trying to force her to release him. She had fresh blood in her eyes. She felt the beast stir inside her, aching to stretch its claws. She stopped moving. Very carefully, she kept holding him down.

“Give?” she asked.

He thought about it for a moment. Then he wheezed something that sounded like a yes.

She released her grip carefully. He let his arms fall to the ground. She looked down at his red, bruising face and smiled. He smiled back. She fell down next to him, breathing the beast back down. Lazily it settled in her guts. She had missed this good exhaustion.

Neither of them moved for a while. Finally, Thomas got to his knees and pushed himself to standing. He held out his hand. She grabbed it and he pulled her up.

Suddenly, she couldn’t meet his eyes.

“Spasibo,” she murmured.

She could see him nodding out of the corner of her eye. Then they both hobbled back to the bar.

Appendix E - Larp CV

In this appendix I provide a list of larps I have worked on, written for, designed, or produced.

Midwinter (Remix) (2022) Writer
Cyberpunk London (2022) Character Writer
The Last Song (2022) Designer / Writer
WereWar Chapter 2 (2022) Writer
WereWar Chapter 1 (2022) Story Lead / Designer / Writer
Midwinter (2020) Designer / Writer
Tale of the North Wind (2019) Character Writer
Avalon (2018) Designer / Writer
Where Androids Die (2018) Character Writer
The Quota (2018) Designer / Writer
The Quota - Border Crossing (2017) Designer / Writer
Freakshow (2017) Designer / Character Writer
Odyssey (2010-2016) Director of narrative / Story Team
Cheerleaders of Satan in Bondage (2002) Designer
Lorien Trust / Harts of Albion: Bel's Faire (2002) Plot Writer / Referee
Lorien Trust / Harts of Albion: Into the Woods (2001) Plot Writer / Referee
Lorien Trust / Harts of Albion: The Washing of Three Tides (2001) Designer / Plot Writer / Referee
Lorien Trust / Harts of Albion: Dreams and Shadows (1999-2002) Plot Writer / Referee
A Winter's Tale (1999) Plot Writer / Referee
Zombie: The Gibbering (1994) Designer
Labyrinthe: Deci Underground Campaign (1991-1992) Plot Writer / Referee
The Dream Game (1989-1992) Designer / Plot Writer / Referee
System Two (1986) Designer / Plot Writer / Referee

Appendix F - Lemuel Caster

Autoethnography Two - Lemuel X Caster

The idea that a larp can be re-run is an intriguing one. In the UK most systematic larps are sequential stories — campaigns — and whilst participants return time-after-time they are playing different episodes of a larp, rather than playing the same larp again. Excluding sandbox experiences like *College of Wizardry* (it has been played over twenty times, but with a different plot and story combination,) some larps run with the same plot and the same set of characters. (For example, *Inside Hamlet*) but *Conscience*'s metaleptic structure seemed to offer an opportunity to experience the story from a different point of view. In this autoethnography I will briefly discuss my experience of playing Lemuel X Caster. I will explain why I did not have a successful larp, and how design and execution issues severely reduced my opportunities to get into character and thus, for immersion and play. However, being repeatedly taken out of character was ultimately useful. Each time it happened I made detailed notes in an off-game space about the participant interactions I had observed. These records and those taken at *Bunker 101* — where similar blocks to play meant I was forced to act as a diegetic observer in the larp — informed the model that I introduce later in this thesis. I note that both *Conscience 3* and *Bunker 101* were unpleasant as a participant, but arguably useful from an autoethnographic point of view.

Environment

At the second run the temperature varied between 13 degrees and 24 degrees centigrade. The weather was largely dry, but again there was some rain on the Sunday. There were significant winds particularly at night and this interrupted sleep. Again, I slept on a sofa bed in one of the cabins but was better prepared and had packed my own pillow. The food was of a much higher quality and was plentiful. It was catered by Fort Bravo, but there were long queues at mealtimes and many participants dropped out of character during this time.

Pre-game

In this section I describe my initial thoughts about casting and the character, and the process of pre-game negotiation for scenes of sex and violence.

Encounter 9 - Reading the character

"Lemuel Caster as a terrifically rounded character with a lot of layers and a powerful backstory: He's a bandit and a bastard; sexy as hell and six times as dangerous. Shoot him and he will spit your red-hot bullet back in your eye; you must love him with a knife or else bring him a fist full of dollars. . . Leader of the bandit gang . . . except decidedly woke. He's a white hat-wearing villain, with strong triggers against sexual violence and a sense of morality that sets him apart from many of his gang members" (Field notes).

The designed host experience at *Conscience* is initially about dehumanization and abuse, but Caster is a difficult character to abuse. He's a high-status outlaw with a penchant for violence offset by a propensity for self-destruction. The character sheet says that he would die rather than be captured. If I played him exactly as written, I would give the impression that I didn't want to interact outside of a gun battle. It would mean there would be no opportunity for oppression-based play outside of the auspices of Aleph. Whilst Caster came with the sort of tragic backstory that appealed to me — he'd set out for revenge after the murder of his family and realised that once he set off down that path there was no way back — his aversion to sexual violence was likely to set him at odds against members of his own gang as well as black hat guests. In previous runs Lemuel X Caster had been nicknamed "Lemming X Caster" because of the number of times he was shot and sent for repair. I was concerned that if the larp involved repeatedly queuing at maintenance to be put back together it would not be the experience I was looking for. I expressed my concerns directly to the organisers in an email 26th September 2019, after different answers were given to the question "what happens when a guest is shot by a host?" ranging from the "feel nothing" to "they may feel a tingling" or "it is up to them as it only affects their experience." I considered this important because, "if the guests can choose to walk through a cloud of bullets without noticing — as though they are playing on God mode — it's going to become very dull very quickly. Indeed, it only takes one guest to do that and I'm going to start feeling like a NPC." The organisers clarified that the bullets affect guests as in the TV

series. Nolan (2016) explains in the TV storyworld the guests felt “an impact, a bit of a sting, so it's not entirely consequence-free for the guests.”

Caster is set up with a number of “plots.” These are on a loop meaning that they are played out each day at set times. For example, “Rob the Stagecoach” which takes place at 10am has the instruction: “Caster will lead the assault, following the Left-Handed’s⁶⁶ plan.” These are plots in every sense, pre-organised events which may, or may-not play out as planned. In the B-world they will inevitably lead to the desperados being gunned down, either by the law, or by guests. In the storyworld they are designed to provide interaction for the guests. In the lifeworld they allow for a spectacular set piece when a real stagecoach, drawn by horses, shows up. However, none of these plots pertained to meaningful relationships with other B-world characters; Caster was interesting as a diegetic construct but had no clear trajectory. When combined with the mechanical effect that his memory was wiped at the end of each day, his experience was entirely in the hands of other participants.

⁶⁶ “The Left-Handed” is one of the Desperado Gang



Figure 71 - Lemuel X Caster on the street of Mayfield, photo by Kai Simon Fredriksen

Encounter 10 - On Ribbons

In the photograph above I wear red and white ribbons, a splash of unnatural colour in Caster's neutral tones. They signify to other participants that the person wearing them is willing to participate in scenes of sex and of violence (see safety mechanics, above). A Facebook group was set up prior to the larp for participants to talk about the shared scenes they wanted to play known as Looking for Relations (LFR). I shared my view of the character and my concerns about playing him, with the other members of this group. On the whole engagement with this LFR process was low on the third run of the larp. When compared with *College of Wizardry V* where some participants spent in excess of forty hours engaged in pre-play (Svanevik and Brind, 2016, p.112), *Conscience* saw relatively little pre-game activity. This was reflected in the survey where forty respondents with ribbons reported an average of a couple of hours of pre-play and pre-planning. I note however that all of my interesting in-game encounters were as a direct result of the limited pre-planning I was able to do. In previous runs there was some suggestion that responses to the LFR posts were gendered, with younger, female-presenting players getting more attention. I found no evidence to support this for run three.

Encounter 11 - The Streets of Laredo

Anecdotal evidence suggests that curated character playlists seem to be a common form of larp preparation; participants create a set of songs that somehow reflect the character and listen to these tracks as a means of preparation for the larp. Spotify is commonly used as music can be shared with other participants. Whilst I had produced a playlist for the first run of *Conscience*,⁶⁷ Caster had a playlist on my iPhone. One of which was the Johnny Cash cover of *The Streets of Laredo*. I played it to get into character, but I ended up playing it a lot more than I had envisaged:

"The promised instruction to players of guests about how the guns work was not delivered. Everything I was worried about has come to pass. I have been shot so much that the players in Maintenance have asked me to stop coming back and have suggested I 'walk around for a bit and then just go back in to play. 'I have returned to the cabin

⁶⁷ Available from <https://www.mixcloud.com/simonb/conscience-mix-i/>

to recharge and rehydrate. I am bored. I am frustrated. I am upset. It is getting increasingly difficult to get back into character.”

“My character – and by extension I – have been described as ‘old and weird’ by another player. Those are the words that haunt me and they hurt enough to bring the darkness like a crashing wave. In a world of marginalised and oppressed identities, some cis het white guy being called weird and old in character shouldn’t matter. But it did. It mattered a lot.”

My character should have been unaffected by this; he was a robot and the comment was describing his storyworld manifestation, rather than the B-world outlaw but the sting hit the lifeworld participant. This is a form of bleed which, because it is unpleasant, leeches some of the joy from the experience. When it ceases to be fun — be that type one or type two — it becomes harder to play. I noted that day that the process is physically and emotionally taxing:

“For me the immersion into character is everything, and if I am not immersed then I burn through a lot of energy just trying to get the character started. It is like the starter on a car: The battery gets the engine started, and then once the engine is running the battery gets charged up again; but if the engine doesn't get going then the battery quickly runs flat. This is why I should never really go off-game. I have come off-game a lot.”

These events meant that whenever I went into the storyworld I ended up not being in character for any length of time before getting shot and coming off-game again. This, combined with a desire not to interact with the participant who had called me old and weird, further restricted the parts of the larp where I could interact. As it was me who struggled, other participants had successfully navigated the larp as this character, my working assumption was the issues were down to my own failings as a larper. In retrospect I suggest this is a *process* failure. I define processes in more detail in chapter five, but in simplistic terms there was incongruence between participant intent and understanding. I consider this idea further in my discussion of *filters* in the next chapter.

“As a result of a rape and murder scene gone wrong, a guest has been stabbed by a host. This should be impossible. The victim’s

girlfriend is screaming for help, alone in the dark. The host responsible has escaped. Another host remains in the dark, shooting harmless bullets at them both. When the security team arrives, the victim's girlfriend says of the remaining host, "It was not him." I am playing the remaining host. I have deliberately remained in the vicinity to try to get into trouble. By being present at the scene I hope to be included in the investigation and thus, find a way into the game."

This is an example of steering, taking the character in a specific direction in order to develop the story. Because of the (diegetically legitimate) assertion that I was not involved, I am sent away by the security team and absolved from any involvement. Thus, I am blocked from play and effectively shut out of any further involvement in this plot line. Debriefing afterwards with the participant involved, they are clear that this was the character speaking. As I note above the statement that my character was not involved was true. Additionally, playing a traumatic and emotional scene it is next to impossible to consider the repercussions of each and every statement. As participants we make decisions in the moment and there is rarely a way of changing the signals we send once they have been received. After the fact, I can think of several ways of rescuing that scene and the larp which followed, but at the time I could think of nowhere to go. It was effectively the end of my larp.

Post-larp Reflection

These reflexive notes were written two days after the larp. There is little narrativization here. Instead, I consider the events of the larp and personal learnings about play and what went wrong. I base some of my argument around participant subjectivity on the subjectively negative and destructive experience which I record and consider here. I develop and provide further evidence for these assertions in the next chapter.

"I have had a ... *difficult* larp. Somehow a series of small events – seemingly minor setbacks – stack up and leave one outside of the game.

"Such as it was this weekend. From a research point of view the larp was interesting. It is a larp that deserves analysis because of the clever things it is doing with layers of reality. From a personal

point of view, it has been quite destructive, even damaging" (Notes, 22 October 2019).

Getting shot to the point that play became impossible was a frustration as my initial concerns were well-founded; Caster was effectively an NPC. In the UK tradition he would have been a *monster*, sent out to be killed by the players, but treated as a part of the event crew, rather than as a participant. In the end it was not the character that had the dehumanizing experience, it was the player.

Appendix G - Participant Information Sheet



1. Study title

How do plot/story writers at live action role playing events react when the players do something unexpected?

2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the purpose of the study?

In my research I am investigating the role of the writer of participatory fiction. Specifically I am studying Live Action Role Playing (“larp”) in the United Kingdom. I am examining the process and practice of writing games / writing for games with particular reference to the relationship between the writer and emergent narrative driven by players. My focus is on moments of ‘narrative crisis’ when players do something catastrophically unexpected within the story world thus, shifting the narrative model into a state of chaos. I am attempting to answer the question “What does the writer do next?”

This study will take place over the next four years, leading to a publication of the final thesis in 2020

4. Why have I been chosen?

You have been invited to be a part of this study because you are a part of the plot/story team for this event, or because you are a volunteer crew member (NPC, GOD, etc).

5. Do I have to take part?

No. You do not have to take part. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time up to the end of the larp event (“Time out”) and without giving a reason.

6. What will happen to me if I take part and what do I have to do?

During the course of the event, if there is a situation where the players have done something unexpected enough to warrant a re-write or a re-direction of the plot I may wish to record relevant conversations made by members of the plot/story team.

I may also ask you questions about the processes you follow. I will be taking notes about actions and re-actions.

7. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

N/A

8. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

N/A

9. What if something goes wrong?

If you have any concerns or complaints about this study, your first point of escalation is the academic supervisor for the project: Dr Esther MacCallum-Stewart. The fastest and most effective way to contact her is via email: neveah@gmail.com

10. Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

I will be capturing and retaining the following data:

- *Recorded interviews, stored as WAV and MP3 Audio files on a SD Ram Card, Local Hard Drives and backed up to an encrypted off-site (cloud) storage.*
- *Handwritten notes, to be filed with my research notes at my home address*
- *Transcripts stored as Microsoft Word documents on Local Hard Drives and backed up to encrypted off-site (cloud) storage.*

- *Photographs, used in the main as an aide-de-memoire to support the field notes to be stored on Local Hard Drives and backed up to encrypted off-site (cloud) storage.*

There are no plans to retain this data beyond the end of the study or to offer it to archives.

Information gathered during the course of this study will be pseudo-anonymised, this means that participants will be given a name like WRITER A, WRITER B. Whilst I do not expect the material gathered will be contentious it will be treated as confidential.

The identity of participants in this study will not be disclosed to third parties unless there is evidence of a criminal offence.

11. What will happen to the results of the research study?

The final results of the study will form a part of my proposed PhD Thesis "Combat Narratology: Strategies for the resolution of narrative crisis in participatory fiction," which I expect to publish in 2020.

12. Who is organising and funding the research?

I am a PhD candidate at the Digital Cultures research Centre, University of the West of England. The research is self-funded

13. Contact for Further Information

Simon Brind

Simon2.brind@live.uwe.ac.uk

Thank you for agreeing to take part!

Date: 24th May 2018 -27 May 2018

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"We were in the jungle, there were too many of us, we had access to too much money, too much equipment, and little by little we went insane"

Francis Ford Coppola, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse*

One of the characters I played at a larp during this study was a PhD candidate studying "Beauty and the grotesque in historical and contemporary art." His name was Jacob, and he was an unspeakably awful human being. He never finished his work, as he was devoured — body and soul — by the darkness lurking in a haunted house in Funen, Denmark:

"I played towards not some sort of death, but towards oblivion. My character's ending was a ceding of control to the unknown by a character who was wilfully in control of himself and his environment up to that point. He did not allow himself to feel physical fear or pain, he kept it inside, until — at the end — only fear remained. His mantra "without you, I am nothing" became the poem that ended the larp, as he slipped away, and the lights went out. (Here I literally move away from my fellow players and end the larp alone in the darkness, I feel their hands reach out to find me, but I am gone). "Without you I am nothing. Without you I am nothing. I am nothing. Nothing. (nothing)." (Field notes)

Jacob was so certain of his own genius and his fictional thesis would surely acknowledge no contribution beyond his own. I am pleased to remember that I am not Jacob.

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⁶⁸ Although the cats are lovely and the Indian Palace (now sadly closed) did do a remarkable Rogan Josh

direction, feedback, and — even though the word made him visibly wince on Zoom calls — for his wisdom throughout.

Even after having to listen to me talking about nothing other than this research for what must have seemed like a century, I still have friends! They didn't run away, they even came to some larps, (or were already at the larps when I first met them) Helen Pummell, Emma Middleton, Jonaya Kemper, and Martine Svanevik.

Finally, I could not have got close to the end of this road without the patience and support of my family: my late father, Michael; my Mother, Barbara; and my wife and son — Juliet and Joshua — who have put up with seven years of me disappearing off to pretend to be some tortured soul, and to return bleeding and battered, before shuffling off to mutter about it, darkly, in the library.

“Without you I am nothing.”

Simon Brind,
September 2022