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Analog Game Studies

Title

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<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/56b2x591>

Journal

Analog Game Studies, 9(2)

Author

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Publication Date

2022-05-23

DOI

10.5070/V7.22IX02

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IMMERSION AS A METHOD AND A MINDSET

Axiel Cazeneuve

Abstract

This essay engages and seeks to articulate voluntary and emergent forms of immersion as a continuum in live-action role-playing games. A player can shift from one to the other, back-and-forth and always in hybridized ways, throughout the same instance of an immersive experience. The essay argues that even strong immersion does not involve losing contact with the reality outside the object of immersion and some amount of consent from the person experiencing immersion is always necessary. Moreover, the essay compares two seemingly distinct postures—the larper and the anthropologist—to argue that they frequently share a common interest in understanding diverse human experiences by resorting to immersion to achieve that goal, giving way to understanding immersion as a method.

Keywords

LARP, live-action role-playing, immersion, players, anthropology, ethnography, methodology

"Who today can claim to be the initiated masters of the threshold realm, priestesses of the cunicular realms of phantasmagoria and poets of heart-to-heart? Who today can compare to the thousands of fanatical role-players as they wield the first art of man in ways never before dreamed of?" —Martin Ericsson¹

Immersion is the holy grail of live-action role-playing games: ever-pursued, yet arguably unattainable. Indeed, even though larp theorists and aficionados were not slow in calling out immersion as a vague and ultimately self-referential concept,² its attraction has remained active—and immersion might not have spoken its final word.

¹ Martin Ericsson, "Play to Love," in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Ropecon ry, 2004), 25.

² As early as 2007, Matthijs Holter's eloquently titled chapter "Stop Saying 'Immersion'!" in the Knudepunkt conference book speaks of how the mainstream use of the word in reference to larps was already a topic of exasperation. Matthijs Holter, "Stop Saying 'Immersion'!", in *Lifelike*, edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade & Line Thorup (Projektgruppen KP07, Landsforeningen, 2007), 19-24.



Figure 1: Image from promotional materials for the 2018 larp *Fight Like A Girl*. Photo by Jan-Åke Fonnaland. Used with permission.

A live-action role-playing game, or larp, is an activity that is, in its modern form, usually considered to have emerged from table-top role-playing games, even though many events of ritual or social play throughout history could be considered early forms of larping.³ In short, larp is about taking the fiction into the physical world, acting it out and using (pre-existing or especially made) material elements as foundations and props to enact a collaborative and mostly improvised story or scenes. In larps, players embody their characters in full: in the Nordic larp tradition, in particular, players not only share their voice and body with their characters but are expected to remain “in-character” while interacting with other players-as-characters, to express their emotions, to perform or simulate most of their actions. “Nordic” larp is a tradition that emerged from the annual Knutepunkt conference and generally places a greater emphasis on social and political discourse as well as player experience, often carrying around a toolbox containing now largely widespread elements such as pre-larp workshops,⁴ safewords and/or “safe zones.”⁵ It has influenced larping in Europe and all over the world, in particular art or “experimental” forms, for over two decades and has been widely studied, even though its definition is largely self-referential.⁶ Participants in Nordic larp typically strive to

³ Ericsson, “Play to Love,” 15-27.

⁴ Martin Nielsen, “Culture Calibration in Pre-larp Workshops,” Nordiclarp.org, April 23, 2014, <https://www.nordiclarp.org/2014/04/23/culture-calibration-in-pre-larp-workshops/>.

⁵ I argued elsewhere that the term “safe” is actually misleading, as no space can be “safe” (let alone people) and it instead functions as an ideological subtext which effects might directly contradict the intentions. See Axiel Cazeneuve, “The Paradox of Inclusivity,” in *What Do We Do When We Larp*, edited by Eleanor Saitta, Johanna Koljonen, Jukka Särkijärvi, Anne Serup Grove, Pauliina Männistö, & Mia Makkonen (Solmukohta, 2020), 244-253.

⁶ Jaakko Stenros, “Keynote Script: What Does Nordic Larp Mean?,” *Jaakko Stenros*, April 18, 2023, <https://jaakkostenros.wordpress.com/2013/04/18/keynote-script-what-does-nordic-larp-mean/>

reduce the distance between them and the character, reaching to an asymptotic state of immersion in which player and character would truly become one. The (at best momentary) superimposition of the character's and the player's feelings is often sought out and considered to be key to a "successful" larping experience, representative of effective character immersion (in Finnish *eläytyminen*, an endeavor defined in *The Turku Manifesto*, an early attempt at fixing a goal and shape to a certain larp tradition, as "the goal to becoming the characters, to experiencing everything through the character").⁷ This ideal also applies to the game environment: the less has to be simulated, the more is "actually there," the better.



Figure 2: Larp participant in OldTown Festival, Kluczewo. Photo by Marcin Bielecki. Used with permission.

The holistic ideal of immersion, in which the player would forget herself entirely, has been disproved by Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman through what they call "the immersive fallacy"⁸—the idea that game designers should always strive to create games such as the player would experience the game as if it was reality and forget she's even playing. This conception of immersion is unrealistic, as it can arguably never be reached. It is also simplistic: players don't play to forget they're playing—the game must always be perceived as an *alternative* reality/setting, in relation with and by opposition to their ordinary reality. A player needs to know she's playing to benefit from the experience. Only then can strong emotions be experienced safely.

If such deep immersion might be achieved in sparks—intense moments closer to Csikszentmihalyi's concept of *flow* (a state of deep involvement in an activity)⁹—the player could still, at all times, assert that she's playing. Yet, the term keeps being engaged with, and a great many designers still work towards immersion.

Moreover, what is meant by that on a design perspective remains rather elusive: a larp with a near-360-degree aesthetic—where everything that is experienced is diegetic¹⁰—can be called immersive just as well as a minimalist blackbox experience— in which a near-empty, stage-like room is used to represent any environment—while we could wonder whether the same quality of immersion applies to games with a strong fantasy setting as opposed to a contemporary one. Indeed, immersion requires an object in which to immerse: Bowman and Standiford propose that in larps, the *object*

⁷ Mike Pohjola, "The Manifesto of the Turku School, 3rd Edition," *The Turku School of Roleplaying*, 2003, <https://mikepohjola.fi/turku/manifesto.html>.

⁸ Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman, *Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals* (MIT Press, 2003).

⁹ Mihály Csikszentmihályi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (Harper Perennial, 1996). Braxton Soderman recently published a rebuttal against the very concept of "flow," which has questionable ideological underpinnings; see Braxton Soderman, *Against Flow: Video Games and the Flowing Subject* (MIT Press, 2021).

¹⁰ Rule 8 of the famous Dogma 99 manifesto reads: "No object shall be used to represent another object. (all things shall be what they appear to be)." See "the Dogma 99 manifesto, *Dogma 99*, 1999, <http://fate.laiv.org/dogme99/>, archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20010419022813/http://fate.laiv.org/dogme99/en/index.htm>. For example, the Belgian larp series CLΩNES, which strives towards immersion and attempts to reduce simulation and representation to the minimal, has a "what you see is what you get" policy supported by the universe: for instance, there exists no genital sex in this universe (as the characters are genderless and sexless clones), and the hand-touching that is sometimes use as a simulation technique in larps (Ars Amandi, first developed by Eliot Wieslander) is actually what sex among clones look like.

can be the activity itself, the game (problem-solving or “winning,” for instance), the environment, the narrative, the character, or the community.¹¹ As we seek to understand how the person—larger or anthropologist—relates to or seeks to experience a different perspective as one’s own, the object of immersion in larp considered here is primarily the *character*, both itself and as part of a narrative constructed with others.

On the other hand, the asymptotic ideal of the reduction of distance between the self and the object into which it is willing to immerse itself is no stranger to a different species of immersion hunters: anthropologists. Sociocultural anthropology is a field of research in humanities that seeks to understand structures of human societies through the study of particular groups, often comprised of a relatively small number of individuals (a scale such that all members of the group may or do interact). Fieldwork, that consists in living (with or by) and interacting on a daily basis with members of the groups, sharing their activities and burdens and creating sometimes tightly-knit bonds with them, is a key part of anthropology. This type of gathering of knowledge by accurately documenting day-to-day experience is called ethnography. Ethnography, as we’ll explain later, relies strongly on “immersion.”

Looking beyond its object, immersion seems to oscillate between two very different dynamics that are contained in ordinary uses of the word. In everyday language, immersion is used figuratively to describe one of two things: (1) the capture of the individual within a given situation,¹² or (2) the voluntary exposure to a new environment to gain a particular knowledge or insight.¹³ According to game designers and theorists White, Harviainen, and Boss, immersion understood in relation to play echoes its nature, creating a “magic circle”—a term famously coined by early game scholar Johan Huizinga—of its own.¹⁴ If play is both entered willingly *and* strongly engrossing, capturing the voluntary subject within its own separate realm, so is immersion.

In both aspects, immersion is (a) temporary, (b) presupposes an initial distance between the immersed individual and the object in which she is being immersed.¹⁵ In one case, however, immersion is a voluntary action, whereas in the other, it is the capture of an individual within fiction, akin to the “engrossment” cultural sociologist Gary Alan Fine observes among table-top role-players.¹⁶ In other words: one is a method, the other is a mindset.

In this essay, we will place these two aspects, *voluntary* and *emergent* forms of immersion, on a continuum. A person can shift from one to the other, back-and-forth and always in hybridized ways, throughout the same instance of an immersive experience. We will argue that even strong immersion does not involve losing contact with the reality outside the object of immersion, and that some amount of consent from the person experiencing immersion is always necessary.¹⁷ At the same time, we will compare two seemingly distinct postures: that of the larper, and that of the anthropologist. Indeed, we will argue they frequently share a common interest in understanding diverse human experiences to form a more acute conception of different social realities and

¹¹ Sarah Lynne Bowman and Anne Standiford, “Enhancing Healthcare Simulations and Beyond: Immersion Theory and Practice,” *International Journal of Role-Playing*, no. 6 (2016): 12-19.

¹² Often a fictional situation, e.g. a compelling book.

¹³ E.g., linguistic immersion, or ethnography.

¹⁴ William J. White, J. Tuomas Harviainen, and Emily Care Boss, “Role-Playing Communities, Cultures of Play and the Discourse of Immersion,” in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (McFarland & Company, Inc., 2012).

¹⁵ This is just as the magic circle of play implies the existence of the “ordinary,” paramount reality which the player steps away from and to which one returns. See Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Anchor, 1967).

¹⁶ Gary Alan Fine, *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (University of Chicago Press, 1983).

¹⁷ It is not “immersion” if a person is being manipulated or lied to.

behaviors. They both resort to immersion to achieve that goal, giving way to understanding immersion as a method.

As such, larp and anthropology can both constitute ways to come in contact with, or get to know, figures of otherness. As such, they have the potential to fulfill the same political function of making different realities accessible and visible. Their approaches, however, are different—one is ludic (larp), the other, scientific (anthropology). We will try to draw bridges between the two and show how they can be mutually supportive in forming a wider, more comprehensive relationship to difference and otherness.

Larp, Immersion, and Anthropology

First, we need to understand how immersion works: to *feel* immersed, a person has to *get* immersed. The most famous formulation of that fact was coined by poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817: he describes the attitude of the reader, necessary to give full substance to the work of the writer, as “willful suspension of disbelief.”¹⁸ Without the reader’s compliance, or even complicity, an artist’s work has very little chance to convey anything. In other words: the person engaging with the medium (reader, player, spectator, etc.) is only captured if she wants to. Historian Michael Saler brings the notion further by rephrasing it insisting on the reader’s (or player’s, etc.) agency: according to him, this phenomenon could be better called “willful activation of pretense.”¹⁹

By adopting this attitude, the person *actively* consents to the fiction she is entering, in order to take part in it, to be moved by it. Immersion is never a result of the environment, although environment can contribute to it: instead, an *immersing* attitude is key to an immersive experience. Tobias Harding, who places emphasis on character immersion in larp, states that “larp can [...] be understood as a change in how the player interprets the world,”²⁰ insisting that this change in interpretation relies on the player’s will to do so. I have since made a similar argument, in a slightly different perspective, in a paper about larp as a magical practice.²¹

The immersive attitude—which we are not yet calling a “method”—aims at reducing the distance between oneself and the object of immersion, while still being aware of the persistence of the distance. It mirrors Diderot’s portrayal of the “hot” actor, who strives towards authenticity by trying to feel the way his character does, by contrast with the “cold” actor, who aims at giving the *impression* of authenticity while refraining from empathizing with his character.²² At the opposite of Diderot’s model, which placed the “cold-blooded actor” as superior, anthropology experienced a shift that roughly resembles “cold” to “hot” when evolving from a tradition of “armchair anthropologists,”

¹⁸ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, “The Project Gutenberg eBook of *Biographia Literaria*,” *Project Gutenberg*, 2004, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/6081/6081-h/6081-h.htm>, 151.

¹⁹ Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality* (Oxford University Press, 2012). Cited in Karen Schrier, Evan Torner, and Jessica Hammer, “Worldbuilding in Role-Playing Games,” in *Role-Playing Game Studies: A Transmedia Approach*, edited by José P. Zagal, and Sebastian Deterding (Routledge, 2018), 349–363.

²⁰ Tobias Harding, “Immersion Revisited: Role-Playing as Interpretation and Narrative,” in *Lifelike*, edited by Jesper Donnis, Morten Gade, and Line Thorup (Projektgruppen KP07, Landsforeningen, 2007), 25–33, 25.

²¹ This 2021 paper was actually written about a year after the present paper. See Axiel Cazeneuve. “Larp as Magical Practice: Finding the Power-From-Within,” on *Book of Magic*, edited by Kari Kvittingen Djukastein, Marcus Irgens, Nadja Lipsyc, and Lars Kristian Løveng Sunde (Knutepunkt, 2021).

²² Denis Diderot, “Paradoxe sur le comédien,” 1777.

who studied based on existing documents such as reports by explorers and missionaries, to modern ethnology in which fieldwork is essential and participant observation widely used. Bronislaw Malinowski, a Polish anthropologist who moved and studied in the Trobriand Island (New Guinea) throughout the early and mid-twentieth century, is given credit for installing fieldwork and participant observation (which has, since then, known several redefinitions and generally become more and more participant) as a key element to the anthropological method.²³

Participant observation requires immersion, throughout several months or years, among the social or cultural group the researcher wishes to study. It involves participating in everyday life and work tasks, learning the language, etc. For example, an anthropologist studying larp has to take part in larps, be it as a player, non-player character, helper, or other volunteer (e.g. photographer). The goal of participant observation is to gain a deeper understanding, an insider point of view—in the words of sociologist Loïc Wacquant, to “go native.”²⁴ However, Wacquant warns:

[...] “*go native armed*,” that is, equipped with your theoretical and methodological tools, with the full store of problematics inherited from your discipline, with your capacity for reflexivity and analysis, and guided by a constant effort, once you have passed the ordeal of initiation, to *objectivize this experience and construct the object* [...]”²⁵

Indeed, if genuinely becoming a member of the studied group can be very useful to the fieldwork researcher, remaining such, someone who belongs and “is” just like any other member, would impede the opportunity for science. The anthropologist needs to be wary of assimilation, to not get so absorbed in the field that she forgets she’s at work: and this is also true of people who were insiders to start with. A strong method and theoretical background are necessary to produce the kind of knowledge that meets the requirements of scientific rigor. Larp researcher and sociologist Katherine Castiello Jones describes this insider/outsider tension as applied to role-playing game studies, in which the vast majority of researchers and theoretical-content creators are themselves role-players: reflexivity, a process in which the researcher tries to describe her own posture, biases



Figure 3: Portrait of Denis Diderot by Louis-Michel van Loo, 1767. Wikipedia. Public domain.

²³ Bronislaw Malinowski, “Introduction. The Subject, Method and Scope of this Inquiry,” *The Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-20.

²⁴ The author and editors are aware such wording is now outdated, as it since has been pointed out it contributed to the erasure of Native American experience. It is not possible to edit out these words from Wacquant’s work. However, we hope to convey the method beyond the outdated vocabulary he used. For context, Loïc Wacquant is a bourgeois French sociologist who studied Black ghettos in the USA in the late 1980s-early 1990s. In particular, he conducted a thorough ethnography of a boxing gym for three years and became so caught up in boxing itself Pierre Bourdieu himself consistently warned him against getting too involved to study. See Loïc Wacquant, *Corps et âme: Carnet ethnographique d’un apprenti boxeur* (Agone, 2002).

²⁵ Loïc Wacquant, “The Body, the Ghetto and the Penal State,” *Qual Socio*, no. 32 (2009): 119.

and position within the studied object in order to identify—as much as possible—how her observations shape, and are shaped by, where she stands in relation to the object, is indispensable:

All researchers have biases that they bring to their research. Being an “outsider” does not guarantee objectivity. However, being an “insider” does give researchers particular experiences that they draw from when making claims or demonstrating their findings. “Insider” researchers may be less aware of how these experiences shape their research or they may be unaware of the particularities of their local gaming culture. Self-reflexivity has been used by anthropologists and feminist researchers to deal with the problem of bias in research. Since true objectivity cannot be obtained, researchers rather focus on describing their own positionality and how it may impact their findings and experiences.²⁶

The task is a difficult one for sure: the difference between immersion as an attitude/method and as a mindset is of degree, not of quality. The immersed mindset goes hand in hand with a suppression (or drastic reduction) of the critical distance, so that the subject experiences a temporary assimilation inside the object of immersion. This object can be fictional, as when the larper feels a rush of panic as her character’s cover is about to be blown, or non-fictional, as when the anthropologist genuinely shares the indignation of the group she studies while walking among them in a protest.

A strong, often emotional reaction to something that has no actual power to harm us doesn’t generally indicate delusion or failure to assert reality. It happens both in larps and fieldwork. The threat might be “more real” for an anthropologist, taking part in the ordinary world where it is not so easy to opt out. But she generally has many a lever to get herself out of trouble, contrarily to the people who truly inhabit the studied environment. In both contexts, we might get carried away from our ordinary reality, while still being able to tell—provided we’re asked—that we are not truly the character we’re playing. No anthropologist would tell a journalist she belongs in the group she’s studying, unless external context forced her. Similarly, few players would venture to claim a character’s identity outside of larp except as a joke or retelling of game events.

In short, immersion cannot be thought of as a binary on/off switch, but instead as a spectrum ranging from the intention to immerse, a consent given to the environment/object of immersion, to a state of mind in which we are barely—but still—aware of the distance between us and the object of immersion. Both the larper and the anthropologist move along this spectrum as they go. According to game designer Mike Pohjola, immersion is the process through which a player pretends to be someone else. This process gets easier as she goes on, although extrinsic or intrinsic events might disrupt immersion and cause distance to build up again:



Figure 4: Aftermath of Danish blackbox larp *White Death* by Nina Rune Essendrop and Simon Steen Hansen, as documented at the 2016 Living Games Conference. Photo by Evan Torner. Used with permission.

²⁶ Katherine Castiello Jones, “Gary Alan Fine Revisited: RPG Research in the 21st Century,” in *Immersive Gameplay: Essays on Participatory Media and Role-Playing*, edited by Evan Torner and William J. White (McFarland, 2014), 87-107.

Immersion is often defined as being in character or becoming the character. This is a very simplistic way of putting it. By immersion into the reality of another person, the player willingly changes her own reality. The player pretends to be someone else.

But more than *pretending to be* the character, the player *pretends to believe she is* the character. It is this self-induced state which makes it all so cool.

The longer the player pretends to believe, the more she starts to believe. [...] And she pretends to forget she's just pretending.²⁷

Indeed, the larper doesn't just want to act as her character: she's not performing for an audience, she doesn't just want other people to believe—in the same willful way—that she is her character. Instead, she wants *herself* to believe it, or to believe that she's believing it. She is both the author trying to set up a convincing story and the reader willing to immerse in it, and this ambivalence is key to the whole experience and how she wants others to witness it too. Same is true for the anthropologist: not only does she want to "blend in," to not stand out as an outsider, but she wants to connect with the experience of otherness she's somehow working to achieve. Both the larper and the anthropologist remain aware of the ever-so-tenuous distance. Yet, they both have moments when they almost, *almost* fool themselves, almost get entirely caught up in the role they're playing, almost feel "as" and not just "as if." They know the immersion "switch" is on, as they have pushed it themselves and can still see it from the corner of their eyes, but they do their best not to turn in its direction, ignoring its presence. It is the furthest end of an admittedly asymptotic spectrum: even then, however, immersion is not *assimilation*.

Realer Realities and Confirmation Bias

The purpose of immersion for the anthropologist is pretty clear: to document social groups and ultimately get to know more about human behaviors. When I started studying larp, I was surprised to learn that this motive was actually shared by many larpers, notably French "Nordic" larpers²⁸ and (later in my research) Finnish larpers and international larpers in the Nordic scene.²⁹ From an anthropologist's point of view, it was indeed quite curious to hear larpers describe the motivations to engage in play in terms of an effort to understand others, or even the human nature.

It was all the more striking, from a larper's point of view, to read a text such as Belgian anthropologist David Berliner's "Le désir de participation,"³⁰ which describes the attitude and mindset of the fieldwork researcher in terms that could very well apply to larp:

In this essay, I will emphasize the participatory dimension of anthropology and show how the latter constitutes an existential and intellectual adventure that requires complex human skills, such as empathy, imitation, and playing to be another.³¹

²⁷ Mike Pohjola, "Autonomous Identities. Immersion as a Tool for Exploring, Empowering, Emancipating Identities," in *Beyond Role and Play: Tools, Toys, and Theory for Harnessing the Imagination*, edited by Markus Montola and Jaakko Stenros (Ropecon ry, Solmukohta, 2004), 81-96, here, 84

²⁸ Axiel Cazeneuve, *Identité alternée, réalité partagée. Construction du cadre d'interactions et élaboration des conditions de l'expérience subjective dans le jeu de rôle grandeur nature* (MA thesis, University of Toulouse, 2016).

²⁹ Axiel Cazeneuve, *Éthique et politique du jeu. Jeu de rôle grandeur nature et engagement politique en Finlande* (MA thesis, University of Toulouse, 2016).

³⁰ Translation: The desire of participation.

³¹ David Berliner, "Le désir de participation ou Comment jouer à être un autre. [The Desire of Participation or How to Play to Be Another]," *L'Homme*, no. 206 (2013), <https://journals.openedition.org/lhomme/24520>, my translation.

But if the immersive attitude of the larper and the anthropologist are similar, can we say the same of the knowledge produced? Indeed, while anthropologists meet with actual people, in places situated within the ordinary world, larpers only *embody* people, meet with characters existing similarly, and in spaces that are either simulated or re-interpreted according to a distinct diegesis. The fiction exists as an additional layer to ordinary reality, while anthropology engages with the ordinary reality of the people who inhabit its field of study. At least, it tries to: indeed, the exoticization of otherness and lack of specific cultural literacy lay many a trap in which the starry-eyed anthropologist is prone to fall, if not careful enough.³²

As the whole larp diegesis emerges from the participants' preconceptions, a common pitfall would be to treat in-game experience as comparable to the off-game experience which served as inspiration. The risk of confirmation bias, *i.e.*, to interpret the game as proving our preconceptions, is high. Game designer Eirik Fatland warned about "the rhetorics of simulation," arguing immersion in an environment that seeks to replicate a reality cannot be a source of knowledge about this reality. To support this argument, he took the example of *Unge på Flugt* (Young People on the Run), a live-action experience organized by the Danish Red Cross since 1995. In *Unge på Flugt*, teenagers embody young people forced to leave their country at war. Pre- and post-game surveys aimed at documenting the impact of the game on the participants show that not only did the experience cause a very small number of people to change opinions, but negative prejudices were reinforced!³³ In addition, psychologists Diana J. Leonard, Jovo Janjetovic and Maximilian Usman explain that while "larping the experience of an individual can have a benevolent effect on intergroup [*toward groups the individual is not a part of, note from author*] perceptions and evaluations [...] this process does not necessarily make judgments of other groups and their members more accurate, and can even result in less accuracy due to assumed similarity to the self";³⁴ having experienced something embodying someone else, the person may wrongly assume that what they felt is similar to what people experiencing a similar situation "in real life" feels.

It is indeed naïve to think immersion would automatically change one's perceptions. However, that immersion happens within a fiction is not at the core of the risk of a confirmation bias. Indeed, people traveling abroad may feel their prejudices are confirmed by the "reality" they witness just as surely as if they'd seen a movie or role-played in a similar setting; some more-or-less well-meaning associations and companies, aware of the attractiveness of "otherness" and the romantic pull of "misery," have even made a business of it.³⁵

³² Anthropologist Margaret Mead, famous for her work *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) in which she described the more liberal treatment of (notably) female sexuality during adolescence, was later criticized for the allegedly ideological inclination of her work that would have led her to ignore some aspects of the Samoan society in favor of others, more supportive of her claims. Even though her work was critiqued, Derek Freeman (in *Margaret Mead and Samoa: The Making and Unmaking of an Anthropological Myth*, 1983), was criticized in turn for a systematic misrepresentation of Mead's work and poorly supported argument, at least one of Mead's informant admitted toying with her about her and her friends' sexuality. Whether that was enough to fool Mead has then been argued against by Martin Orans (in *Not Even Wrong: Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman, and the Samoans*, 1996). Nearly a century later, the scope and nature of Mead's potential misleading remains undecided, though many argue that in spite of her explicit purpose to provide an alternative model to that of the US's "adolescence", "she was a serious ethnographer" (Richard Feinberg, "Margaret Mead and Samoa: Coming of Age in Fact and Fiction," *American Anthropologist*, New Series 90, no. 3 (1988): 660). The shape and existence of the controversy itself is a testimony of the rough waters anthropologists must sail: as Richard Feinberg puts it, "At least Mead was open about her political agenda" (Feinberg, 661).

³³ Eirik Fatland, "Larp for Manipulation of Liberation" (keynote speech, Oslo: State of the Larp, 2018).

³⁴ Diana J. Leonard, Jovo Janjetovic, and Maximilian Usman, "Playing to Experience Marginalization: Benefits and Drawbacks of 'Dark Tourism' in Larp," *International Journal of Role-Playing*, no. 11 (2020), 25-47, 30.

³⁵ E.g., Mary Mostafanezhad, "Volunteer Tourism and the Popular Humanitarian Gaze," *Geoforum*, no. 54 (2014): 111-118.

Dismissing larp on the grounds that it is “not for real” would fail to address the root of the issue: our relation to reality is constantly mediated. Our empirical experience of the world is at best “realer” than fiction but cannot be “actually real.”

In fact, Nordic larpers in particular have borrowed or invented many ways to move past the confirmation bias in order to take knowledge out of larp. First, there are the larps themselves, which designers frequently build on existing present or historical situations, often well-documented and that leave players with actual pieces of context or awareness of a political situation (e.g.: *Kobani*,³⁶ 1942³⁷). In other cases, designers make informed cultural choices in order to provide the players with an analogy, thus avoiding potentially harmful behaviors and enabling participants to play (*Halat Hisar*).³⁸ Contextualization speakers, i.e. people whose real life experiences are portrayed ingame, not only reinsert chunks of reality within the larp context, but make sure the players act in a serious and respectful manner, more prone to openness and understanding than a single playful mindset (*Just A Little Lovin'*).³⁹ Via the workshops, larps also encourage reflexivity, making people aware of the way they move, speak, appear, etc. (*Mad About the Boy*,⁴⁰ *Suffragette!*⁴¹). These reflexive practices hold the same purpose as the scientific effort to situate the researcher in relation to her object: identifying and understanding biases to try to limit and anticipate them.

The key element might be to address larp not as comparable to reality, but as *analogous*, arguing that although it is never possible to reproduce, to simulate, a given reality, it is possible to build games that use analogy to generate experiences and emotions useful to form an understanding of other realities. Analogy is akin to how a person who experiences an oppression may empathize with someone who suffers from another kind of oppression.⁴² The downside of analogy, compared to simulation, is that it can be more difficult to get the point across—the players are expected to make the connection between the content of the larp and real-life experiences of i.e., marginalized people themselves, the argument is not “ready-made”—however, it avoids common pitfalls of “dark tourism” or “identity tourism” and relieves some of the pressure applied on larpers whose experiences are (indirectly) being portrayed.⁴³

Encouraging reflexivity allows players to “check their privileges,” to use a popular social justice saying: to take into account one’s position in the global society, how the various elements of her

³⁶ Kobani is a Fastaval scenario by Danish designer Signe Herkel, picturing the lives of four women in Northern Syria who join the Kurdish militia to defend their hometown against Daesh. See <https://scenariofestival.se/archive/scenarios-2018/kobani/>.

³⁷ 1942 – Noen å stole på is a Norwegian larp about the German occupation in 1942. Some of the content and backstories were based on actual experiences of Norwegian people who had experienced the occupation. See https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/1942_-_Noen_%C3%A5_stole_p%C3%A5.

³⁸ *Halat Hisar* is a Palestinian-Finnish larp about the Israeli occupation of Palestine, transposed in a Finnish setting (with reversed North/South relationships and power structures). It was organized by a Palestinian-Finnish team after an original concept by Kaisa Kangas, Fatima AbdulKarim, and Maria Pettersson. See <http://www.nordicrpg.fi/halathisar/>.

³⁹ *Just a Little Lovin'* is a Norwegian larp by Hanne Grasmø and Tor Kjetil Edland about the AIDS epidemic in 1982-84 USA. First produced in 2011, it was organized many times in different countries. Organizers often included contextualization speakers. See <http://justalittlelovin.com/>.

⁴⁰ *Mad About the Boy* is a Norwegian larp by Tor Kjetil Edland, Margrete Raaum, and Trine Lise Lindahl, first organized in 2010. In this larp, all characters but one are female: to allow non-female players to take part, workshops were run to address gendered way of interacting. See https://nordiclarp.org/wiki/Mad_About_the_Boy.

⁴¹ *Suffragette!* is a Swedish larp organized in 2018 by Susanne Vejdemo, Siri Sandquist, Rosaling Göthberg, and Christina Bodling, involving people speaking Swedish, Finnish, Norwegian, English and French. A pre-larp workshop was run to teach players how to walk like 1912 women, constrained by long, straight skirts and modesty. See <https://suffragettelarp.wordpress.com/>.

⁴² E.g., someone who experiences racial oppression could in theory empathize with someone experiencing gendered oppression.

⁴³ Leonard, Janjetovic, and Usman point out a kind of “ambassador fatigue,” a burnout-like exhaustion marginalized people within a community may experience “after repeatedly being called upon to explain or perform their culture for their White peers” (29).

"identity" articulate in terms of power relations and how they translate into her own experience of reality. The fieldwork researcher must also account for her posture and its effects on data collection. A reflexive analysis is instrumental in making her work and methodology clearer for her readers.

Fictiveness aside, the primary difference between larp and anthropology lies in the approach—the *ludic* versus the *scientific*. The fieldwork researcher does role-play; but for science. The role-player does research; but for play. In this conception, larp and anthropology can be mutually supportive, sharing methods for grounded knowledge and sensitive ways to become someone else.

Acknowledging Distance and Recognizing Otherness

Let us return to that necessary preamble to immersion: distance. Immersion requires the possibility, at least in mind, to go back to that distant state, to withdraw from the object of immersion. Immersion is not assimilation. The distance can be physical, as when a larper leaves the game location or an anthropologist flies home, but it is also mental.

The return to the self is a compulsory aspect of both larp and anthropology. Being immersed is a temporary state. A larper who remains entangled within the game diegesis may require the help of a trained psychologist; an anthropologist who loses her ability to rebuild methodical distance with her object can no longer produce adequate science. Even when she is studying a group close to herself, the quality of her works depends on her capacity to take a step back. As a contributor to both anthropology and larp, I'm putting myself on the line here: whether or not one successfully manages to juggle between the two realities might ultimately be undecidable, rendering a detailed reflexive account all the more necessary.

Save for that irreducible distance between oneself and the other, performed or encountered, a reflexive attitude would be impossible. One cannot go back to one's self if she wasn't allowed to leave it in the first place—or if she wasn't aware she was being carried away. Without distance, it is not possible to form a mediated understanding of the experience. As dramatist Richard Schechner says of Brechtian theater, "The distance between the character and the performer allows a commentary to be inserted."⁴⁴ Immersion understood as the abolition of distance is not desirable, because only within the tension between reality and fiction can we find space for different understanding to emerge. Dramaturgist and larper Hilda Levin developed the concept of "metareflection" to describe how we navigate this—both irreducible and fruitful—tension. She writes: "We may focus in on—immerse into—the experience of fiction while role-playing, but we may also choose to zoom out and observe both reality and fiction at the same time."⁴⁵

But neither the anthropologist nor the larper goes home unscathed. She cannot remain, nor can she ever truly leave—go back to the self she was before. For Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas, this impossibility is at the core of all genuine relationship to the (capital O) Other. Deported during World War II, he conceives of that relationship as a tragedy in which the Other constantly impedes the closure of the self and keeps the moral subject from reaching a stable (and comfortable) identity through appropriating the world and her perception. Because of the Other, one's sense of identity is always at risk of being disturbed, challenged, denied. There is, however, one condition for that tragedy to occur: the ethical relationship, *i.e.* the perception of other people *as people*, in their

⁴⁴ Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 9.

⁴⁵ Hilda Levin, "Metareflection," in *What Do We Do When We Play?*, edited by Eleanor Saitta, Johanna Koljonen, Jukka Särkijärvi, Anne Serup Grove, Pauliina Männistö, and Mia Makkonen (Solmukohta, 2020), 62–74.

humanity.⁴⁶ There is nothing obvious, or easy, about the recognition of the Other as such⁴⁷—nor can we ever be sure it's reciprocal.

Anthropology is a powerful force in recognizing the humanity of others. It works against globalization and standardization of human existence by helping make diverse experiences and social models visible. Born of European imperialism, and though it has benefited from it, it has worked against the simplification of power relations between "the civilized" and "the primitive." It still struggles against the commodification of otherness through tourism and mass coverage and posits the humanity of oppressed and precarious people as inherent, irreducible, and of paramount importance. In short, it enacts the Levinasian ethical relationship, searching to induce the shock of the recognition of humanity in the Other, refusing its appropriation by the abstract Self of the Western ideal of civilization.

To David Graeber, anthropology is most powerful in showing the existence of alternatives, not inventing them but merely documenting them and—provided anthropologists take hold of that mission—giving them away to those who have an interest in shaking the existing power structure. "Counterpower is first and foremost rooted in the imagination," writes the self-identified anarchist anthropologist,⁴⁸ urging his peers to make use of their science to that end.

Incidentally, larp seems to be a perfect media to support an increase in imagination. The ludic—*larp*—and the *scientific*—anthropology—collide in an effort to deepen the understanding of the diversity of human experiences.

Both use immersion to reach that end, carefully framing it by fostering reflexivity and acknowledging the irreducible distance between the self and the object of immersion. In that regard, the effort to take part in a real or imagined social group and culture is not simply an attitude but has been actively turned into a method. However, the drive toward otherness is by no means one of knowledge alone—and in that respect, larp and the ludic approach can be far less naïve than anthropology.

Softening Science: What Anthropology Can Learn from Larp

For a long time, anthropology complied with the reductive conception of sciences as "hard," based on mathematical ideals of accuracy and objectivity. Anthropologist Victor Turner, who was strongly interested in theater and live performances, remarks how inaccurate this conception is when it comes to social sciences:

in social life cognitive, affective, and volitional elements are bound up with one another and are alike primary, seldom found in their pure form, often hybridized, and only comprehensible by the investigator as lived experience, *his/hers* as well as, and in relation to, *theirs*.⁴⁹

The study of human lives is intrinsically relational and subjective and cannot be modeled on natural sciences without losing substance. As for anthropology, he adds:

⁴⁶ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: Essai sur l'extériorité* (Le Livre de Poche, Librairie Générale Française, 1990).

⁴⁷ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004).

⁴⁸ David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Victor Turner, "Dramatic Ritual/Ritual Drama: Performative and Reflexive Anthropology," *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (PAJ Publications, 1982), 89-101, 89.

Perhaps we should not merely read and comment on ethnographies [anthropological accounts tied to a specific fieldwork], but actually perform them.⁵⁰

Surely, that's one thing larpers could teach anthropologists: how to bring back to life the richness of others's realities, instead of studying them as cold as stone.

Furthermore, ethical neutrality, which recommends a value-free approach in social sciences, could easily be brandished to dismiss the works of researchers committed to "ideology," not taking into account that the ideal of objectivity is, itself, ideological. If social scientists must refrain from judgment in order to gain an appropriate understanding of their object of study, "neutrality" has material and even epistemological implications.

Anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes calls herself out on her reluctance to take part, "born of my natural anthropological inclination to want—as Adlai Stevenson once put it—just to sit back in the shade with a glass of wine in my hand and watch the dancers." In many cases, it is simply impossible—especially when, as for Scheper-Hughes, fieldwork is done in a politically sensitive context. "The times and anthropology had changed," she writes. "It now seemed that there was little virtue to false neutrality in the face of the broad political and moral dramas of life and death, good and evil, that were being played out in the everyday lives of the people."⁵¹ Instead of neutrality, Scheper-Hughes advocates for responsibility. As Graeber later did in the work previously cited, she wonders whether anthropology is of any use, and decides its power resides in making different realities visible. Larp, we've seen, can also fulfill that goal for those who take part.

The question remains of *whose realities* should be made visible. Anthropology has a fondness for the oppressed and the erased, though it sometimes attempts to document the hegemonic and the secretive. Both are, intrinsically, a political action, therefore the anthropologist's own values and motives must be acknowledged. There is little neutrality to hold onto when it comes to investigating human existence: our compulsion to do so arises from envy, outrage, compassion, desire, imagination. The anthropologist's motive to pursue knowledge is emotional. Anthropologist Don Kulick, playfully applying psychoanalytic terminology to analyze "the libidinal structure of anthropology," goes as far as to posit that the attraction for the oppressed stems from a desire of substitution that arises from guilt—a masochistic desire to be punished from one's privileges.⁵² A parallel can be drawn with larp, especially as it appears to have a similar social composition as anthropology.⁵³

On that matter however, the larper is wiser than the anthropologist: she knows what she's going for is the thrill, the dive, the intoxicating pleasure of becoming someone else. What can the anthropologist do, who keeps pretending she's pursuing knowledge when what she's truly after is *ilinx*,⁵⁴ the vertigo, to "soak in their drama, touch their ways of being, bathe in living flesh?"⁵⁵ Acknowledge the drive, for a start: recognize that if she uses immersion as a method, her true enjoyment lies in the mindset.

⁵⁰ Turner, 89.

⁵¹ Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "The Primacy of the Ethical. Propositions for a Militant Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 36, no. 3 (1995): 409-440, 411.

⁵² Don Kulic, "Theory in Furs: Masochist Anthropology," *Current Anthropology* 47, no. 6 (2006): 933-952.

⁵³ I attempted to do so in a paper published in French on my blog in 2017, titled "Masochisme anthropo-GNiste: des enjeux de la substitution" (Anthropologist-larper's Masochism: Matters of Substitution), <http://larpinprogress.com/fr/articles/masochisme.html>.

⁵⁴ As described in Roger Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes: Le masque et le vertige* (Folio, 1957).

⁵⁵ Michel Leiris, *L'Afrique fantôme* (Gallimard, 2011). Cited in Berliner, 154. My translation.



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