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larps and their cousins through the ages

Taking larp seriously requires that we think seriously about larp's relation to the rest of our culture. How does larp relate to other areas of business, art and recreation? What are larp's nearest cousins and neighbors? Likewise, if we wish to push larp to its limits or develop innovations of form, genre, or style, we must understand what its limits and neighbors are. The history of larp and its nearby cousins and neighbors is a rich field of ideas and object lessons. It is sometimes thought that the story of role-playing games begins with Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, who created the first modern tabletop role-playing game, *Dungeons and Dragons*, in the early 1970s. Indeed, that's basically what I thought too, a few months ago. I am no longer convinced that this is true, even for tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). But the story of live-action role-playing games (larps) and their close cousins is far older and richer. It involves Caesars and kings, Shakespeare and Goethe, Samuel Jackson and John Belushi. Many cultural forms, that we do not usually think of as larps, are either larps or very close. In this paper, my goal is to sketch the stories of a dozen or so styles of larp, or perhaps close relatives of larp, through the ages, with an eye to what issues the history of larp raises for larpers in the RPG tradition today.

What is a larp?

Defining live-action role-playing is not easy, and any definition is in danger of favoring some forms and styles of larp over others. Larps vary on exactly how "live" the "action" is: a genuine sword-fight is more "live" than a scripted one, which is still more "live" than a game of rock-paper-scissors or a roll of the dice. Larps vary on exactly how "roles" are "played." A water rescue training larp may involve players taking the roles of lifeguard and victim, without any real characterization, whereas a vampire larp may involve players immersing themselves into detailed characters, with little emphasis on the characters' roles in the game. By 1951, social psychologists were already distinguishing role-taking, taking-the-role-of-the-other, and role-playing, and distinguishing four levels of participation in role-playing exercises (Coutu, 1951: pp.180-187; Haas, 1949: p. 418). Indeed, a movie actor, a confidence trickster, a shaman playing the role of a spirit in a religious ritual, and even a person pretending to be unconscious in a CPR training exercise are all engaging in live-action role-playing, even though they are not playing a game. Nonetheless, the custom is to restrict the term "larp" to live-action role-playing activities that are either games or very game-like. It

is fair to wonder which of the styles, we are about to examine, genuinely count as larps and which are merely relatives of larps. This is a discussion we will mostly avoid, but I think the issues will not turn on the details of how we define “live-action,” or how we define “role-playing,” (see Mäkelä, Koistinen, Siukola & Turunen, 2005; Pohjola, 2003; Hakkarainen and Stenros, 2002; and Edwards, 2004 who defines “roles” but not “role-playing”), but on the details of how game-like larps are required to be, and exactly how we define a “game.” What is and is not a “game” is a thorny philosophical problem (Wittgenstein, 1953; Crawford, 2003), but games usually involve goals, rules, improvisation and play. Games often have other goals or functions besides just recreation: many games help develop practical skills or perform an educational or psychological role, for instance. But if an activity looks too unstructured, or too much like work, or like theatre, it might cease to be considered a game (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003; Crawford, 2003; Costikyan, 1994).

The earliest larps

The basic childhood game of “Let’s Pretend” is probably the oldest of all larps and was probably played in some form by pre-historic humans, or even pre-humans. There is still some controversy, but many experts believe that a wide variety of mammals engage in complex play behaviors, some of which have rigorous enough rules to constitute games (Mitchell, 1990, Rosenberg 1990, Allen & Bekoff, 1996). Play-hunting, play-fighting, and play-mating behaviors are all present and distinct for canines, as are other simple games or proto-games, like fetch, tug-of-war, and tag (“Play,” 2002). It would be surprising if juvenile early hominids did not engage in similar live-action roles of play-hunting, play-fighting, and play-mating. However, there is no evidence of this in the pre-historic world, and the earliest recorded histories do not focus much on the play behaviors of children.

Spectacle larps from ancient Rome to now

The first larps, we have records of, are the spectacle

larps of the Roman world where theatre was considered a form of game (*ludi*), and gladiatorial and naval combat involved various levels of role-playing. Role-playing was present to a small extent, even in normal gladiatorial matches. Gladiators were expected to feign killing fury and bravery, even if they did not feel it (Cicero, 45BCE, 4:48). Training and maintaining gladiators became expensive enough that killing became more rare, and dummy weapons were occasionally used to make the action seem more deadly than it was (Plass, 1995: p. 32). The costumes of many categories of gladiator were intended to represent the ethnic dress of various enemies of Rome. Gladiators were thought of as playing a role in the ritual re-enactment of the triumph of Rome over its enemies and (when animals were fought) over nature itself, and even re-enacting historical battles for spectacular entertainment was popular.

It is a hard line to walk to make a spectacle a larp, rather than mere theatre or mere sport. If the competition is too serious, then the incentive to play the role disappears, and the gladiator fights for his life, rather than pretending to be a Thracian soldier fighting for his life. Sumo wrestling, for example, is a sport spectacle that once focused on role-playing, but no longer does. Contrariwise, if the outcome is too scripted, the gladiator becomes an actor playing a role, but no longer a game player. Modern professional wrestling is (usually) a theatre spectacle, but not a larp. But balance these two, provide safety and incentive to play a role, and yet enough freedom to encourage improvisation, and you have the makings of a larp. There was a variety of sham-fight conducted by two teams of boys in ancient Rome called the “Troy Game” which may have been such a larp. Another ancient spectacle genre that is a good candidate for counting as a larp was the *naumachiae* or mock naval battle. Romans liked to give *naumachiae* a historical re-enactment theme and often fought many ships and thousands of men at once. Importantly, the outcome was intentionally left open, to heighten the excitement for the spectators.

When Emperor Titus staged “The Battle of Syracuse,” the Athenian side won, even though they had lost the original battle (Kohne & Ewigleben, 2000, p. 74). It is hard to imagine that the participants (thousands of condemned criminals) were not role-playing being sailors, or that it was not truly a game. The fantasy genre was also popular in the Colliseum: mythological spectacles or “fatal charades” complete with sets, props, monsters, gods, heroines to be rescued, etc. were performed (Ow, 1994).

Spectacle larps did not end with ancient Rome. Some modern recreations of medieval jousting in US “Renaissance Fairs” have the same basic structure: a competition put on for display before spectators in which the participants are playing a role, but also given just enough freedom from pre-scripting to be a genuine game. Another, far more popular modern example, is the Mexican wrestling style of “Lucha Libre” masked wrestling, which dates to 1930s Mexico. Here, as in Rome, masked combatants enter the ring to perform a partially staged combat (in wrestling slang a “worked” match), in which some degree of improvisation is allowed, and occasionally the outcome is not pre-determined (called “shoot” matches) (Levi, 1999). In Lucha Libre wrestling, the contestants wear masks and consciously adopt a character whom they are portraying. It is important to the style not to “break kayfabe,” that is, letting out the secrets of the show, such as by breaking the diegetic frame by letting on to the audience just how much of the action is pre-scripted or by confusing the stage-identities with the off-stage identities.

Spectacle larps suggest an opportunity for larp and give us a cautionary tale. Larps put on for non-participating audiences can work and even be popular while still being meaningful for the participants. The danger here is that the larp can turn slowly into a form or pure theatre, as American professional wrestling has, or into a sport in which role-playing becomes less and less emphasized, as in Sumo. Another trick worth noticing from spectacle style

larps is the Renaissance Faire style of having people at various level of the audience-participant spectrum. Some guests are pure audience, some play a little by dressing up or affecting an accent, some play more fully with full costume, persona, and kayfabe info, and some people are full participants. In professional wrestling there is a spectrum from pure audience “marks,” to “smarks” with some insider kayfabe information, to pure participant “workers.” Audience and participant need not be an on-off switch, but can come in a spectrum.

Theme party larps:

Caesars, kings, detectives, and knights

A second form of larp that goes back at least to Roman times is the theme party. While young, Octavian (who later became Caesar Augustus) hosted a “banquet of the 12 gods,” in which the diners dressed as and pretended to be the 12 Olympian gods, and where they even had a larpwright (called a “*choragus*”) helping to direct them in playing their roles (D’Arms, 1999). Themed banquets became popular among the upper class later in Roman history, with themes such as recreating historical or mythological events, and even parties where the guests take the role of departed shades. The medieval and early modern Europeans enjoyed theme parties as well. For example, King Charles VI of France was injured in 1393 when he was playing the role of a “woodwose” (a sort of French Sasquatch) for a “costume ball” (*morisco*), and his costume accidentally caught fire (Tuchman, 1978).

In modern times, theme party style larps have continued to be popular. The Society for Creative Anachronism, which was a huge influence on the growth of early combat-oriented larps in the US, was created in 1966 and began as a medieval theme party larp. A genre of larp called “Interactive Murder Mysteries” has grown up in the past few decades, apparently outside of the influence of RPGs, out of mystery fan conventions. In this genre, one participant in the party is a murderer or thief, and the other participants are playing out various other

roles typical of a mystery novel and attempting to determine “whodunit.” In some forms, there is even a mix of professional actor “ringers” salted in with the game players (Kim 1995).

Theme parties are certainly not all larps, even today. Often they lack the goal-directedness that games require on most definitions. But it is fairly easy to turn a theme party into a larp by adding some game elements, and this style has a lot of lessons to offer. Most importantly, theme party larps are very easy, which is probably why they have been perennially popular for millennia. They take little training in game mechanics, and it is not difficult for the audience to learn to appreciate what is going on. They are often quite approachable, even for people who have never larped before. The diegetic frame is everything that happens “in story” or “in the world” of the fictional action, and theme party larps tolerate breaking diegetic frames quite well. If some participants are talking about events in the real world or doing a poor job of staying in character, it need not be particularly distracting for the other participants. If a theme party is used as a frame for a larp, then you can make food, dancing, and perhaps some other light entertainments available along with some kind of game or plot. Those who find they enjoy the role-playing and plot or game elements can focus on those while others can focus on other aspects of the party. Because these events work well for a large spectrum of people, in the US they are sometimes used for family reunions or corporate events, situations where most kinds of larp would seem quite inappropriate. Interactive Murder Mysteries also provide a good illustration of how the notions of kayfabe and diegetic frame are distinct. Imagine that “Miss Delacroix” is an insider salted into a murder mystery, but that she accidentally betrays insider knowledge too early in the evening. It might well be that in the diegetic frame she has a good reason to know the information, which will eventually be revealed. If so, her slip is not breaking the continuity of the fictional setting, but it is still breaking the kayfabe frame, by tipping off that

she is a ringer, and partially spoiling the order and pacing of the revealing of information.

Festival larps: Saturnalia, Mardi Gras, and the Booger Dance

A third style of larp with ancient Roman credentials is the ritual larp. Religious rituals in many religions include elements of role-play: the Egyptian priest adopts the role of Anubis during the funeral ceremony, the shaman adopts the role of a storytelling spirit to retell the stories of the mythic days of old to the tribe, etc. But religious rituals often are too solemn to be playful enough to seem like games. On the other hand, festive rituals, on the boundaries between religion and party, are common in many cultures and are prime locations for religious role-playing to become game-like. In Europe, many of the traditions surrounding Christmas and Carnival go back in some form to Roman celebrations of Saturnalia. For example, in medieval Britain a celebrant was chosen by lot to be the “Lord of Misrule” and preside over the “Feast of Fools,” in which social roles are intentionally inverted in all sorts of amusing ways. Servants played the roles of masters and masters of servants. People cross-dressed. The Lord of the Misrule had the power to decree games and their rules and might appoint people to a variety of other mock offices. Role-playing is central to the fun, and the atmosphere is one of play. Further, because the Lord of Misrule has the power to set rules, goals, and even contests, the festivities include games on most definitions. In a sense, the “Feast of Fools” is a lower class medieval analog of the high-class theme parties, but with religious overtones.

Nor is European culture alone in having ritual celebrations which spill over into playful role-playing that are either larps or very close. In the Cherokee tradition, there was a dancing event called the “Booger” Dance, in which masked men (and occasionally women) take the roles of extremely crude, sexual beings called “boogers,” each of which has an obscene

personal name (Rothenberg, 1969). There is dancing, but it is interspersed with improvisational bits where the boogers attempt to shock, enrage, and entertain the audience, while drawing them into the diegetic frame. The spirit is playful, and there are rules. The booger must dance a solo in the most awkward and grotesque steps he/she can manage when someone sings a song starting with his/her booger-name. All participants must clap whenever a booger's booger-name is spoken aloud. Everyone must smoke between the 3rd and 4th act, etc.

Modern festivities like Halloween and Mardi Gras are likewise right on the edge of being larps. There is clearly a strong role-playing element (again note the repeated importance of masks), as well as playfulness; the issue is to what extent these are games rather than some other kind of play. So, what ideas can these cases give RPG-style larps? I have yet to see a RPG-style larp whose emotional tone was "festive" or one focused on intentionally crude sexual humor, a genre which has been explored by tabletop RPGs. Likewise, can larps be integrated further into other kinds of traditional festivities? Christmas larps and larps focused on local history have begun in Scandinavia, but I have not seen either in the US yet. Clark and Glazer (2004) argue that some larp forms are ideal for strengthening community bonds. Could we create parade larps? Larps as part of a wedding reception or bridal shower? Mardi Gras or Carnival larps? County fair larps? Can we integrate larp into existing social structures of festivity?

Training and educational larps: from war games to the classroom

A fourth style of larp already present in the ancient world is the training larp. Consider for a moment combat sparring: two warriors face off in a ring under the watch of a trainer, with fake weapons, and pretend to be enemies fighting each other. We have a clear game with rules, players, a game-master, and goals. Further, we have the rudiments of role-playing: the combatants are pretending to be enemies whether

they are or not, and the diegetic frame is enforced. Yet, role-playing and the diegetic frame, while present, are just not the focus or point of a sparring match. It is in fact a larp, but no one thinks of it as a larp because the role-playing is so secondary to the point and the experience.

But by the 18th and 19th centuries, the ideologies about how training exercises are supposed to work were changing. In military training, the Prussians were developing *kriegspiel* or war games. Some were sandbox exercises with models, which were forerunners of the TRPGs, and some were pure drill exercises, but some were field exercises emphasizing the diegetic frame of the fictitious war as much as possible in an attempt to make the exercise as much like real warfare possible. It is hard not to view this last kind of field exercise as a larp aimed at training military personnel.

Nor is military training alone in using larps. Doctors engage in mock diagnosis role-playing exercises, and legal training often involves mock trials (called moot courts in British dialects). By the 1940s, under the influence of thinkers like Dewey and Moreno, "reality-practice sessions" involving "role-playing" were being used to train everyone from elementary school kids to grad students in the US (Hendry, Lippitt, & Zander 1947; Haas 1949). By the 1960s, "Role playing cases," "models," "simulations," and "simulation games" were all related but distinct genres of education technique, used in many contexts and widely studied (Balinsky & Despenzieri, 1961 pp. 583-585; Kibbee, Craft & Nanus 1961; Chesler & Fox, 1966; Pancrazio & Cody, 1967 pp. 60-65; Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967; Boocock & Schild, 1968) and 70s (Bollens & Marshall, 1973; Nielsen, 1977). They were especially popular in social studies and business fields. We would have no trouble recognizing "role playing cases" as short larps designed for a classroom use, and we even have transcripts for some of them (Haas, 1949; Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967).

Many of the lessons of the training larp tradition are lessons that RPG-style larp has already learned. Yes, larps can be used to good effect for educational goals. If the rules are too complicated, it is often better to implement them in computer game format than in larp format (business games even went through a live-action plus programmable calculator phase in the late seventies). If the larp is very simple, it can help teach concepts one at a time, but if it is complex, the students will not be able to say exactly what they have learned, even if they have learned. Larps can be enjoyable, even when very short and using almost no props or setting elements, if you can create a situation with incentives both for conflict and cooperation. However, some of the techniques emphasized by educational larps are not now in common use. Several books emphasize replaying a basic scenario several times through in one setting, so that all can see the consequences of various choices. Likewise, a warm-up before the larp and a discussion of the results of the role-playing afterwards were thought to be key elements. Shaftel & Shaftel agree with Hendry et. al., 1947: that there are 9 “essential steps” to role-playing in an educational setting “1) ‘warming up’ the group (problem confrontation) 2) selecting the participants (role players) 3) preparing the audience to participate as observers 4) Setting the stage 5) role-playing (enactment) 6) discussing and evaluating 7) further enactments (replaying revised roles, playing suggested next steps, or exploring alternative possibilities) 8) further discussion 9) Sharing experiences and generalizing.” (p. 65-6)

Commedia dell’arte and Goethe’s friendly game

The renaissance also saw the development of a tradition called Commedia dell’arte, which flourished in 16th- 18th century Europe. Commedia dell’arte involved a troupe of actors engaging in improvised theatre for comic effect (Henke, 2002). They were not games at the time: they were professional comedy for the livelihood of the troupe. However, in the late 18th century, Goethe portrays a group of friends doing

Commedia dell’arte style improvisational comedy as a game for themselves (and one heavy on flirting) (Goethe, 1795 book 2, chapter 9). When a stranger encounters the group, he doesn’t find the activity odd and joins in, so using Commedia style as a live-action role-playing game must not have been too odd during the late 18th century. Indeed, the characters have a discussion on the role of improvisation in the arts, which is the earliest example of larp theory I have yet found. Commedia dell’arte has also been used as a larp in the 20th century and is an influence on improvisation in general. The heart of the style is to use stereotypical stock characters, stereotypical stock situations, and improvised dialogue salted with stock lines and jokes (*lazzi*). Commedia dell’arte was an important influence on writers like Shakespeare or Molière. One of the things that the Commedia tradition teaches us is that exploring minor variations on extremely stereotyped characters and situations can be enjoyable. Indeed, the stereotypicality of the characters and situations make portraying them easier, and makes it easier for the audience to understand what is going on. The Commedia tradition is also a great source to mine for characters and situations in modern larps.

Jacob Moreno: the first larp theorist?

By the early 20th century, artists around the world were beginning to passionately embrace the possibilities offered by improvisation. In music, improvisational elements in Jazz were coming to the fore; in dance Free Dance was gaining ground. Improvisational theatre seems to have arisen independently in several places at once. In Russia, it was pioneered by Stanislavsky and Meyerhold and eventually morphed into what we now call “method” acting and the New York style of improvisation. While this style allowed some improvisation of lines, this was strictly for the sake of interpreting the existing script, and was not at all game-like (Frost & Yarrow, 1989 pp. 15-20, pp. 40-54). In France, Jacques Copeau is imagining improvisation largely along the lines of a modern revival of Commedia dell’arte. By

1916, he argued that “games” of improvised acting needed to be part of curriculum of the theatre school he opened in 1921, writing, “Somewhere along the lines of improvised play, playful improvisation, improvised drama, real drama, new and fresh will appear before us (Frost & Yarrow, 1989, p. 24).” Improvised drama was also being performed in the gardens of Vienna by 1911, calling itself “art of the moment.” It was a spontaneity theater aimed at children (fairy tales were a major theme) and also had a child of 10 or 11, Elizabeth Bergner, as one of its stars. From 1922-25, it was recast as “*stegreiftheatre*”—theatre of spontaneity—and aimed at adults, largely by Jacob Moreno, although Peter Lorre was in the troupe too (Blatner, 2000 p. 17). In 1923, Moreno wrote the seminal *Theatre of Spontaneity* about this style, which is probably the first book of larp theory and is challenging, but still insightful today. But he is far more famous for developing the style in surprising directions away from pure art. He imagined impromptu theatre as a tool that could be useful in education of children and in psychotherapeutic treatment, as well as an amusing entertainment for audiences. A student of Karl Jung, he moved to the US in 1925 and worked on sociometry, psychodrama, and group therapy. He coined the term “group psychotherapy” in 1932 and “role playing” in 1934 (Biddle, 1979) and is now generally recognized as the father of psychodrama (Blatner, 2000, chap 2). For Moreno, psychodrama is one possible elaboration of a more primordial technique of spontaneous live-action play, exploring society and self (Moreno, 1947: p.31-36).

In psychodrama, participants act out their emotions and interpersonal interactions on stage. The primary goal is psychotherapeutic, and acting becomes a replacement for the psychiatrist’s couch. A given psychodrama session (typically 90 minutes to 2 hours) focuses principally on a single participant, known as the protagonist. Protagonists examine their relationships by interacting with the other actors and the leader, known as the director. This is done using

a number of specific techniques, including doubling, role reversals, mirrors, soliloquy, and sociometry. There are over 10,000 practitioners internationally, and it is a popular technique for group therapy. Psychodrama is not typically a game (although games might be used in related psychotherapeutic techniques like “play therapy” and play is an increasingly important part of psychodrama theory (Blatner, 2000, Chap 9)), but its resemblance to larp is striking, and it is an important origin of much of the 20th century’s interest in role-playing.

The psychodrama tradition excels at drawing out the intricacies of tangled characters (which is, of course, central to its psychotherapeutic goal). It does so by focusing on one character at a time and constructing other characters largely as foils of various kinds for the protagonist. It has well worked out doctrines on a variety of theory issues of interest to larpers: for example, psychodrama holds that there are four distinguishable levels of catharsis: abreactive, integrative, inclusive, and spiritual connectedness (Blatner, 2000, chap 11). The psychodrama tradition has long been interested in various ways of diagramming social relations and roles and uses techniques like sociometry, social network diagramming, action diagramming, and role diagramming; these are well-explored analogs of RPG techniques like relationship-mapping (Henry, 2003; Edwards, 2004).

Theatre Games and Improv

After WWII, a fourth major school of improvisational theatre began emerging: the Chicago style of “Theatre Games” created by Viola Spolin. Spolin had been taught by Neva Boyd, a sociologist, who emphasized “the use of games, storytelling, folk dance, and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self-discovery and personal experiencing”(Spolin, 1963 p. xi; Frost & Yarrow, 1989; p. 49), working at Northwestern University during the 20s and 30s. Spolin developed a series of “theatre games”: short live-acting exercises

intended as games, most of which involved role-playing. By 1955, her son Paul Sills, became one of the founders of the “Second City” comedy troupe in Chicago, which became a launching pad for Saturday Night Live comedians, such as John Belushi, and the Chicago improvisation style. Chicago style “improv” is a whole complex ideology (Seham, 2001; Spolin, 1963: p. 3-50; Libera, 2004). For decades, it was aimed at training actors and creating enjoyable experiences for mildly participating audiences, not at being fun in its own right. But, by the early 80s Chicago style “improv” was being repackaged as a game or sport, by companies such as ImprovOlympics and ComedySportz, as was a close relative, TheatreSports, created by Keith Johnstone in 1979. These forms are team games focusing on live-action role-playing for comedic effect. With the success of “Whose Line Is It Anyway?” a comedy show squarely in this tradition, in the late 90s and early 21st century, improv is continuing to gain ground. Improv is divided into “short-form”: in which a game may last only few minutes or less, and a string of many games will be played at one sitting, and “long-form” (often called “Harold”): in which a situation might be extended to roughly the length of a sit-com. Although Chicago-style improv involved “games” early on, it has drifted towards sports metaphors during its struggle to be taken “seriously” as a comedy art form distinct from stand-up. An important style element in most forms is to take suggestions from the audience or even use audience members in various ways, trying to break down actor/audience distinctions. In a sense, RPG-style larp and improv are two examples of a broader trend towards interactive theatre (Izzo, 1997). Part of the value of the improv tradition for larpers is as a source of situations and training exercises (Bernardi, 1992; Spolin, 1963, and 2001; Atkins, 1994), but it also provides models for much shorter larps than are typically played in RPG styles.

Games and Experimental Art

The experimental theatre of Moreno emphasized spontaneity and play, but not games as such. The

improvisation of Spolin or Copeau used games as a training technique or a way of generating material, but did not think of the games as art. Duchamp was fascinated by the project of combining games and art (Thomas, 1988) and did so in many ways, but neither he nor any other Dada artist seem to have tried anything quite like larp. By the 1960s, experimental art was exploring a variety of intermedia art forms, including happenings, events, Fluxus, and conceptual art. There are many lessons to be mined from this tradition, much theorizing, (Jenkins, 1993; Higgins, 1997; Friedman 1998) and many indirect influences on larps. The idea that an abstract metaphysical system, even a rules system, could itself be a work of art, probably could not have occurred to game designers without the influence of conceptual art in the 60s. The breaking down of the walls between audience and performer was flirted with by Moreno, but was pursued more vigorously by the 60s experimenters, such as Allen Kaprow (Goldberg, 1997: p. 83). The notion that art can be appropriate even when it is a form of goofing off is a fairly recent one that owes much to the aesthetics of jazz and of Fluxus-aestheticians such as Filliou or Flynt (Jenkins, 1993: p. 72).

I have not been able to find any piece from this extensive tradition that looks much like a larp. Often there are playful elements; often the artist collaborates with the audience to create the artwork. In Yoko Ono’s 1964 “Cut Piece,” for example, she sits motionless on stage wrapped in bandage-like clothes and invites the audience to come up on stage and cut away her clothing with a pair of scissors (Jenkins, 1993: p. 81). Most are shy and awkward, cutting a little. The responsibilities of choice, the air of sex and violence, and the passiveness of the victim are each present to all. Yoko and her audience are playing roles, complicit victim and hesitant voyeur, the action is live, and yet it is not at all a game. The actions and point of the art are tightly controlled by the author, who shares a little of the power as part of the point, but the action is not spontaneous. It

is important to the style of this tradition to work to efface the boundaries between life and art and to pack as much meaning into as tight a package as possible. But these very features efface the game vs. life distinction critical to the diegetic frame of most larps. Traditional performance art and its relatives are probably not larps, but they are just on the other side of larps. They are what happen when compact artistic meaningfulness overcomes the playful and game elements of a larp, just as sport is what happens when the competitive elements overcome the role-playing.

Larps and youth politics

Another larp tradition, which dates back to the early 20th century, is the political larp, such as Model United Nations and mock legislatures. In 1916, Taylor Statten, a Canadian “boy’s work” promoter with the YMCA, envisioned a national boys’ conference, modeled on various regional conferences promoting boys’ work. The idea began with the boys meeting to regulate their own organization, but soon developed into the concept of a boys’ parliament, where boys pretended to debate laws in the manner of a real parliament. He may well have been influenced by the “mock parliament” organized by Nellie McClung in 1914 to parody the refusal of the government of Manitoba to grant women the right to vote. By 1917, he had organized the first “Ontario TUXIS and Older Boy’s Parliament” (Edwards, 1960) (TUXIS was a Canadian youth organization like the Boy Scouts, except that it was explicitly Protestant in goals). Youth parliaments spread around Canada in the 1920s. Both New York City and Harvard appear to have begun “Model League of Nations” groups in the 1920s. Other early mock legislatures include the “Junior States of America” (founded by E. A. Rogers in 1934) and the YMCA “Youth in Government” (YIG) program in the US (founded by Clement Duran in 1936). Each of these aimed at simulating the activities of governments via role-playing. None of these American models acknowledge a debt to Statten, but it is hard to imagine that they are not imitating his work in Canada. By the 1960s, model

legislature has reached Australia, and the UN itself was promoting model UNs (UN & UNESCO, 1961). There are now about 400 Model UN Conferences in 35 countries with between 30 and 2000 participants per conference for about 200,000 participants a year (UN, 2006). US Supreme Court Justice Breyer, Samuel Jackson, and Chelsea Clinton are among the former larpers from this tradition (UN, 2006). Model governments usually have goals including education and real-world political goals, as well as entertainment goals. Some, like the Model UN’s, explicitly describe their activities as “role-playing,” (United Nations Association in Canada, 2004 p. 5) while others, such as the European Youth Parliament, aim at political expression “without reverting to role play” (“What is EYP”, 2006). Model governments have several noticeable style differences from other kinds of larp. First, they often get very impressive venues. Youth in Government often uses the real capitol building of a state while the politicians are on spring break, and I can attest that the authentic setting adds immensely to the quality of the larp. Second, model legislature larps often involve intense preparation on the part of the participants (Hazleton & Mahurin, 1986). Third, they often involve very large groups of people: 2000 participants is a big larp by any standard. In YIG, this is accomplished by having several largely distinct but partially overlapping larps take place together. The legislative branch does a mock legislature; the judicial branch runs mock trials nearby; the media creates mock newspapers; radio, and TV programs reporting on both; the lobbyists attempt to influence each of the processes; etc. But these, mostly distinct, games overlap in various ways modeling the actual process. Fourth, model governments by their very nature work hard to move their conflict resolution into the diegetic frame. If there is a rule dispute, it is taken to the parliamentarian, or even the Supreme Court, and dealt with in-frame, rather than being given to a referee, if at all possible.

Parlour games

The parlour game tradition goes back well into

Victorian times. It emphasized quick, easy games that could be played in a parlour with few props other than what would be readily at hand. Parlour games sometimes involved role-playing, (“Household Amusements,” c. 1880), but this was rarely much of an emphasis. By the late 1920s, the game of “Murder” was being played, a variation on the classic parlor game “wink murder,” with far more emphasis on live action role-playing, incorporating elements of the assassin game and of interactive murder mystery. We know the game was a favorite of the “Algonquin round table” of New York intellectuals, including critic Alexander Woolcott, writer Alice Duer Miller, and comedian Harpo Marx (Marx, 1961: p. 218-220). In 1935, the game *Jury Box*, by Ray Post, was published in the US, extending something like the parlour game tradition into the realm of a role-playing game. In *Jury Box*, the players take the role of jurors at a trial and try to piece together the evidence presented to render a judgment. The emphasis is still on puzzle solving rather than role-play, but the emphasis is now on the diegetic frame. Also, this is the first example I’ve been able to find of published props and structure for a larp. Another trope in the parlor game tradition that might be interesting for larps is a game where the rules are not known by the players, and much of the fun is trying to learn the rules by experimenting to see which things are allowed and disallowed, such as in the game “Elephant’s foot umbrella stand.” The far more recent parlour game known as Mafia, Werewolf or Village, invented by Dimma Davidoff in 1986, has a lot of potential as a larp frame too (the Graduate Mafia Brotherhood of Princeton University website lists over 80 variations).

Diplomacy and Slobbovia

The game Diplomacy was created in 1954 and released by 1959. Although it featured a board and pieces and stood clearly in the war game tradition, most of the action of Diplomacy takes place in the acted out negotiations of the players playing the roles of early 20th century diplomats. Diplomacy

is an important forerunner of tabletop role-playing games and was an innovator in Play-By-Mail gaming. It also features in the “Slobbovia” larp of Manitoba, which began in 1969. Slobbovia began as a live-action game with few rules, played by adolescent boys in the woods pretending to be high lords of Slobbovia, a fictional setting from Al Capp’s Li’l Abner comic strip. Upon learning Diplomacy, they created an alternate diplomacy board and switched their pretend wars to that venue. Eventually a regular journal of Slobbovia, the “slobinpolit zhurnal,” was created. A typical issue had 75 or 100 pages of “strakh,” stories written by the players about their characters, and 6 or so pages of “strumph,” actual moves in the diplomacy game. Players often borrowed each other’s characters but usually tried to coordinate stories when they did, so that characters didn’t end up in different places at the same time. It was an unwritten rule that no player could kill another’s character without his consent. Slobbovia came to resemble nothing so much as an ongoing cooperative novel (Costikyan, 1984). While it began as a live-action game, it morphed into a purely written format and eventually disbanded.

Assassination larps and Quest Games

In 1965, inspired by Robert Sheckley’s science fiction story “The Seventh Victim” and a 1965 film adaptation “Tenth Victim” by Carlo Ponti, college students began to play games of assassination (Johnson, 1980). The idea is that players are assigned some other player to attempt to assassinate while trying to prevent being assassinated themselves. The assassination game has a lot of names and variations, Paranoia, Killer, TAG, Killing As Organized Sport (KOAS), Circle of Death, etc. It spiked in popularity in 1980, Steve Jackson Games published a book on it in 1981, and several movies followed (Jackson, 1981, Tan, 2003 p. 25). In assassin games, one could be attacked suddenly at any time, perhaps with nerf weapons or ping-pong balls, one’s food could be “poisoned” with food coloring, one’s car “bombed” with an alarm clock, etc. The key element of this style is to allow play in a wide enough variety of contexts

that the player's normal lifestyle becomes invaded by the game. There may well be "safe zones" or some clear kind of way to step out of the game, but big chunks of one's normal life takes place within the game. Salen & Zimmerman have dubbed this a "lifestyle invasive" game.

Another game genre worth looking at is the quest game. Typically a team is given a clue which if deciphered leads to a destination where there is another clue and so on until the finale. The 1980 film "Midnight Madness" is a great modern example. This genre has roots in several earlier traditions including the Polish game of *podchody* and the Victorian tradition of "Letterboxing" (Clark & Glazer, 2004). Quest games often are not larps, but the structure adapts to larps well enough that they are now a standard technique of larp at MIT (Tan, 2003: p. 41). Both of these styles raise issues about how space is used. Larps are often very restricted in space or take place almost entirely within spaces that are deemed safe by the organizers. This can be a strength, but it can also be a limitation. The lifestyle invasive game makes us think about our use of space and time in daily lives. The quest game, in addition to being a great (and classic) frame for a larp, is a genre with great potential for exploring place and community. In a sense, a quest frame allows a larp to be "community invasive" rather than confined to a small area or to put the same point another way offers an excuse for building ties to the broader community.

Tabletop RPG influenced larps

By the 1970s, tabletop role-playing games had found their way into the science fiction convention culture and the gaming conventions, which already had well-developed costume ball traditions. Furthermore, role-playing was now clearly something that could be done as a game rather than as education or therapy. The SCA's combat and character systems, the rules systems and gaming emphasis of tabletop RPGs, and the convention traditions were all merging to create the American larp styles.

Much could be said about the development of different styles within the RPG traditions and the influence of other elements during this time, but it would take a whole separate paper to do it any justice. Niven and Barnes' novel *Dream Park* is an important influence, as is the questing game tradition, especially in Colorado where the use of real locations and heavy interaction with non-players was normal. On the other hand, at MIT players often holler out "NP halt" and play halts when a non-player happens onto a larping scene (Tan, 2004, p. 69). Some larps emphasized live-action combat, often from the SCA or assassin traditions. Others emphasized symbolic combat, using rock, paper, scissors, or card decks. Some larps were designed to last a few hours at a convention and some to last days at a college campus. Some involved organizer created characters, plots, and even goals; others allowed more player control over the nature of their character. Some used published game material; some were custom designed.

Altered Reality Games and Reality TV games

One new game style that has arisen since RPG larps is the Altered Reality Game (ARG). Altered Reality Games (ARGs) are a genre of cross media games that deliberately blurs the line between the real world and the in-game experience (McGonigal, 2003). A classic example is "the Beast," a game created to help promote the 2001 Steven Spielberg film A.I. Film trailers and posters included a credit for Jeanine Salla as a "Sentient Machine Therapist." Attempting to research Jeanine Salla on the web would lead to a host of interlocking web-pages allowing the player to attempt to decipher the riddle of the murder of Evan Chan. ARGs typically pretend not to be a game. They often involve heavy use of the Internet and electronic media and are often sponsored by corporations or are parts of "viral marketing" schemes. In a sense, they are live action, in that the players must engage in real world activities like calling phone numbers or using search engines to solve the clues. Some, like the "StreetWars" ("Streetwars Killer," 2006), even mix ARG-style clues with classic water-gun style assassin

larping. Because so many real life interactions now occur on-line and surrounded in the technological culture, ARGs become a kind of long-distance larp where the cooperating players are not playing “characters,” but are often acting “roles” via email, phone, and fax. ARGs have their roots in TRPGs, and Wizards of the Coast’s 1996 “Webrunner: The Hidden Agenda” may well be the first real ARG.

Another recent development in larps is the reality TV game show. Reality TV has been popular off and on since the Candid Camera shows of the 1940s, but none display role-playing and game playing until the 1997 Swedish show “Expedition Robinson,” which produced spin-offs called “Survivor” in several other countries including the US and has spawned a host of imitators. These shows combine the lifestyle-invasive TV genre forged by MTV’s “The Real World” with strategic game play similar to the Mafia parlor game. Like spectacle larps in general, these games have to walk a tightrope to remain larps. Too much scripting and they cease to be games, becoming pure theatre; not enough incentive to role-play, and they become pure sport. But somewhere in the middle, perhaps some of these shows should be considered larps. If so, they are among the most popular larps of modern times. Both ARGs and reality game shows are attempts to mix larp with electronic formats, and both are searches for alternative business models for larp funding. As larp continues to grow up, funding and electronic media will surely continue to be issues larp will have to engage with one way or another.

Conclusions

What topics does this history suggest that we think about more? We should think about masks, which have been perennially popular and unlike costumes can cut the player off from their normal identity as well as enhance the alternate identity. We should think about spectators and how to create a variety of levels of interaction between purely inactive spectators and purely participating actors. We should think about information flow: kayfabe

secrets, ringers, plants, codes, and a variety of techniques can affect the process of revealing information about the fictional situation. We should think about how to make larps easy and approachable for non-larpers. We should think about emotional tone and how to achieve emotional tones in larps that have not been explored much recently. We should think about how to integrate larps into existing structures of art and festivity. We should think about varying the length of larps: past styles have tried larps from a few minutes, to an hour, to an evening, to days, and even weeks. We should think about how larps use space: confined larps can tightly control their space, but expansive larps can adapt to existing places. We should think about politics. Larps can intentionally reinforce existing power structures, Imperial or democratic. They can covertly reinforce power through display of wealth or hierarchies of control over the game. They can critique society didactically or with satire, or undermine social pretensions subtly with comedy. We should think about money: larps are expensive in time and materials, but lots of strategies for supporting them have been tried. We should think about other media: writing, song, dance, TV, and computer media have all been integrated with larp at various times. In 1984, sociologist Gary Fine argued that role-playing games are tiny “idiocultures” where small groups of people create their own private culture and “use culture to imbue the events in their world with meaning and to create newly meaningful events” (Fine, 1984: p. 238). Role-playing games have built a meaningful and powerful culture, but it has remained largely isolated to our own little “idiocultures.” Our next task is to build bridges between our RPG cultures and the broader cultures we live in. Thinking about how RPG style larps relate to forms of live action role-playing outside of the RPG tradition and to culture as a whole is one instance of this broader project.

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