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impact of relationships on games

It is a given that when we produce Live Action Roleplaying events, we try to do everything possible to make sure the game goes well, and take control of every detail. But in the midst of most games sits a proverbial 1600-pound gorilla, a force more powerful than almost anything else in our game. And for the most part we shrug and ignore it. We seldom talk about it except in passing, and we tend to pooh-pooh it as a major factor in our productions. In truth it controls the participation of many of our players, and even the way in which our plots will run.

I'm talking about personal relationships in-game, specifically those that have a romantic or sexual element to them. These relationships, both in and out of game, are the one element that writers and producers often have little real control over that affects the game profoundly.

Relationship problems have caused games to fail, destroyed GM groups and frequently caused players to drop games. While it's unusual for us to know a player who got so upset over special effects, or even food service or the game site, that they quit without warning and without giving the game a second chance, most of us know someone who has left a

specific game – or even left larp overall – because of a relationship.

In looking at how relationships affect larp. First we'll look at why relationships (meaning in this sense romantic or quasi sexual relationships) are a unique feature of larp not shared by most other hobbies or arts. We'll also look at the various types of relationships that exist in larp – those that are engineered and those that arise spontaneously, and the different consequences in different lengths of larp. Finally we'll look at what authors and producers can do to help control the impact of relationships and harness them as a positive force in their games.

Throughout, we'll be sharing quotes from a November 2006 survey of 54 larpers, publicized to support the composition of this article. The survey was publicized through lists for four diverse campaigns, and through the general announcement forum for LARPA, the *Live Action Roleplayers Association*. Because the survey was not random – those who answered it are probably those most interested in relationships in larp, it is not statistically valid as a measure of frequency, but it is a fair tool for giving a rough idea of how relatively common certain situations are to

those who tend to become involved in relationships through larp. The majority of respondents can be presumed to be from the Eastern United States, however some were from Europe or the U. S. West. Italicized quoted material, is from this survey unless otherwise indicated. Where respondents are not identified they chose to remain anonymous and are quoted by permission.

THE UNIQUE NATURE OF LARP

Every human group has its romances. Even the office may have water cooler seductions. We are used to dismissing romance as incidental to our arts and hobbies. But in larp relationships are integral. We build drama on human intimacy and interaction.

The principal antecedent of larp is certainly drama, and drama shares some of the characteristics of larp. Since the days of Restoration Drama, when females first strode the boards as professionals, actors and actresses have had a reputation for flamboyant sex lives. *I believe that it is difficult to separate in-game relationships from real relationships even though we know better. I believe this is why Hollywood actors and actresses have intense relationships with people they have played romance with in film and theatre.*

It has been posited that larp is essentially interactive theatre – a form of drama where there is no distinction between presenter and audience. This may be the case. However, it means that the passions which are reserved for screen stars in film involve every participant. As audience in theatre or cinema we are in no position to become involved with the leading lady. But in larp we may become her male lead, or foil. We do not just watch, we are drawn into the drama in a very literal sense. So while relationships are incidental to the local sports league, they are *integral* to larp.

Let's think about this seriously. We take a group of people who in most cases have no formal training as actors, and have no special social training, and

we throw them into situations where they play at being emotionally involved with each other, and act out dramatic interpersonal situations. It would be surprising if they did *not* form intimate relationships. The problem is that in many cases they are unprepared for this, seem caught by surprise when it happens, and have little idea what to do about it. Often they walk away scared or muddled, and are lost to the community, sometimes blaming larp for ruining a relationship that existed outside the game. *There are a lot of people who think that they are mature enough to deal with this type of situation, but just like someone who thinks it's ok to "swing" before they've ever experienced it before, they sometimes find out that it's too intense of a situation for their long term relationship to handle or survive.*

Long time larpers do not seem so easily burned by these things. This is probably because they have "gotten the hang" of interpersonal interactions within the community. The problem is that this is a difficult level to achieve. In the early days of larp most producers believed in the "school of hard knocks." Players learned the hard way how to handle larping, or dropped out when little help was given. But a more modern approach suggests that we can predispose players to success by providing them with guidance and information. The problem is that this is explosively difficult with relationships. Yet relationships are one of the most common factors that may cause a player to leave our game.

It is difficult to be straightforward about advertising the reality of relationships in larp. How does one say "welcome: you are joining a community unlike most others, where relationships are driven not by casually getting to know your fellows, but by heavy emotional involvement mandated by the event, making your life as volatile as that of any Hollywood actor or actress."

The difficulty is that many people do not overtly come to larp for emotional or relationship involvement. Most people do not think of larp as a singles bar, and

if they are interested in “meeting people” many think of it in a very passive way as if they were becoming involved in any other low key activity. If anyone pointed out the really heavy emotional investiture involved in larp they would probably see it as “too much drama” and look elsewhere, even if actual participation showed that it was not a major problem for them. As we’ll see later, of the many who are drawn to larp for these reasons, fewer still can easily admit it.

Relationships in larp should not be seen as “a problem” anymore than any other emotional or adrenal experience is “a problem.” In fact, it has become my belief that a desire for intimate relationships on many levels is the primary driving force behind most players participation in larp – secondary only to adrenal reactions in Live Combat games.

My thesis is that larp essentially rides on the back of a need for human contact and intimacy. All of the elements that can be found in larp which go outside of that – except for adrenaline in Live Combat – can be found better and more completely in other types of gaming. There are better puzzles to be solved online, better mysteries to be read.

The traditional model for larp suggests that it flourishes through the desire we have for fantasy and to experience being someone else – that it is essentially escapist. After twenty years involved in larp I feel that this is not the case, or is at best putting the cart before the horse. While I certainly acknowledge that escapism is an element of larp, I feel that the principal underlying element is social – we play to come into contact with other human beings. larp circumvents many of the artificial rules of society on how we can interact intimately with others. While that represents a sort of escape, the primary instinct is social not escapist. As Dr. Keith Harris said, “ Humans are social creatures through and through. As undergraduate psychology majors universally learn, at its core, all psychology is social

psychology” (Harris, 2003). larp meets our social needs.

Self Deception and Honesty

Unfortunately human beings are not inherently socially honest creatures. Dr. Eric Berne, in developing his influential social theory of transactional analysis classified most of our social interactions into a set of gamelike patterns (Berne,1964). These games are inherently somewhat dishonest. Whether or not one accepts Berne’s theories, almost all psychology suggests that people are seldom entirely candid or frank about their motives and goals in social interactions. Since the turn of the century we have understood that individuals may often not understand their own psychological motives and goals. Most forms of analysis from Freud to the present day suggest that some effort is required to get humans to recognize their own subconscious motivations. We know that this becomes more true in cases that involve relationships that fall into the sphere of sexual contact; human courtship and mating behavior. In practice we can be quite deceptive about these matters, to ourselves and others.

Most people are raised in a society that teaches certain “goods,” and “norms.” In the most traditional of societies this may include marriage, eternal fidelity to one partner, and so forth. larpers, at least in North America and Europe, are drawn primarily from the educated middle and upper-middle classes, especially those with a college education, since at least in the U.S. that is often where players first become involved in larp. Predictably this means that larp has a higher proportion of individuals who already are disposed towards a more liberal outlook on social interactions, including a higher acceptance of alternative sexuality and alternative relationship styles than most other communities. However even participants who are not strictly monogamous – whether they actively consider themselves polyamorous or simply are “single and dating” – often have cultural expectations of fidelity and devotion.

The problem is that many of our core instincts work against the “rules” of whatever society we are involved in. Research in the early nineties even indicated that biology can have great impact on human sexual conduct and behavior in real social settings (Barker, Bellis, 1993). On an admittedly more day to day level, social norms typically tell us to be loyal to our current partner, but biology and psychology may be driving us to seek a better partner, even if we do not realize it. Conversely a person who professes to be accepting of their partner having other relationships may claim that such behavior is acceptable, while giving strong social signals that it is not.

The Threat

In previous centuries society often condemned “dance” as an evil. As late as the 1950s, some conservatives railed against the “wild music” of sock-hops at the high school gymnasium. These moderators of society were not mindless – they knew what they were about and they had a good point. Dance creates a social environment in which there is implicit permission to touch, and be intimate with, others who are not our chosen partners. In a small society, beset with challenges, chaos seemed to invite death and irregularity in the social order was seen as a grave threat to survival. A sword at the throat. To indulge a custom which might tend to destabilize the social structure by promoting the formation of what 18th century French writer Choderlos de Laclos termed “dangerous liaisons” seemed threatening indeed.

Realistically if dance is a sword at the throat, then larp is an atom bomb. Dance allows for a few whispered words, a passionate glance, a touch.

They [relationships] are, like any other aspect of larp, perfectly safe and healthy as long as clarity is maintained... It's much harder with emotionally-loaded material like this, [Live Roleplay] of course.

Let's consider for a moment. In most social situations how would we react to someone proposing “how

about for the next four hours your boyfriend will pretend to be my boyfriend. We won't be very physical, but we will have deep and intimate personal conversations, which you of course will be excluded from, and your boyfriend will behave as if he belongs to me.”

Larp as a social threat is very real. In many ways it is playing with fire.

While not all the questions presented here have occurred directly to me, I have observed the full breadth and depth of them in action - real-world marriages ended because players were swept away by their in-game romance, real-world S/Os [Significant Others] demanding “in character” relationships end because they are severely uncomfortable with the amount of real-world time the “in character” love-interest is demanding, “in character” relationships where the participants said they would never fall for the player in the real world ending up dating them for years.

The Promise

Now that we've looked at why larp may seem socially threatening, it's time to look at the very positive things it can accomplish.

Larp is a fictional landscape in which we can “practice” actions and emotions that have much more serious consequences in the real-world. There are many things to experience – moral dilemmas, suspense, frustration, and how we respond to them tells us something about our own personality but interpersonal relationships are certainly the core of larp. larp is inherently social – it isn't primarily about solving puzzles. Occasionally we'll see a player who steadfastly refuses to acknowledge any segment of the game that does not involve mechanics or puzzles. Often this is a player with problems making social contact trying to reach out, and over time they come “out of their shell.” However the player who consistently refuses all but the most superficial social

interaction may do poorly in a larp where there is much depth of play, branded a “geek” even in a world where “geek culture” is common and accepted.

Most players come to have some level of real emotional exchange with other players and in many cases that deepens into relationships. In some cases they learn differently: *It turned out that we were [attracted] but we had no plans to do anything about it since, at that later time, we were each looking for different kinds of people for serious play and/or partnering. (In fact, larping with zir convinced me that we would probably not be compatible in the short or long run.)*

But the keyword is “experimentation.” Our example above would be difficult in real life. However there is no singles scene where you would find someone make a suggestion along such lines. “Let’s be in a very passionate committed relationship. But just for the next four hours. Then we’ll pretend it didn’t mean anything and didn’t happen, and feel no major social awkwardness about that, because it will be perfectly normal.”

Larp allows us to experiment with feelings: *I think that in-game relationships can be a good way to explore your feelings for another person if an out-of-character relationship is not possible for whatever reason... just as it is possible to experiment with different sexual modes in a “safe” way – akin to performing “thought experiments” about subjects, or fantasizing without actually performing the acts in question.*

DIFFERENT TYPES OF GAMES

Different larps have different characteristics in regards to relationships. Most players who are involved in larp play games which are episodic, often called “campaigns” after terminology borrowed from wargaming through tabletop RPG. Most Live-Combat games are “campaign” format, as are most games based in the various Vampire milieux. While the

practice is not invariable these games tend to call on players to develop much or all of their own character concepts.

For obvious reasons, campaign-length larp is where we see relationships have the most impact. First, there is more time for the arc of a relationship to appear, rise, and potentially cause trouble. Additionally players are often encouraged to build their own characters, leaving them free of GM-created encumbrances. In some cases groups of players may come in with pre-existing relationships already defined, which can cause its share of issues.

Live Combat – the Adrenaline Factor

Live combat carries its own odd distinction. While relationship interest may be a “stealth” interest in all other larp, we can clearly see that interpersonal interaction of some type dominates play. But Live Combat has another big lure. Adrenaline. So it is perfectly normal to find players, both men and women, who are lured by the fighting element, and are getting the same athletic charge out of larp that they would out of paintball or soccer.

In twenty years of larp I have often seen accusations go back and forth about roleplaying at combat games being superficial. I think in many cases the relationship gorilla is the determining factor. In some groups where larp is more like a sport, the same rules prevail that would prevail in most other social settings. “Don’t get too close to my boyfriend... don’t act too flirtatious.” When players break those rules in the name of roleplaying they might be successful, drawing the group more into the realm of roleplaying. But if a group’s first few relationships are negative – spurring messy breakups or resentments – a chilling factor can prevail, where the group paradigm suggests that “we are not about that.” In other larp groups this might lead to the collapse of the group, but in combat larps there is another very primary and emotional element bonding players to the game – the combat element itself.

Obviously many combat groups fluctuate on what behavior is tolerated, and some have even broken into sub-groups where some factions or cliques are emotionally interactive and relationship elements are strong, and others are much more distant and focused on the athletic and adrenal element of the game.

The argument about roleplaying in combat-oriented larp is often a cover for a core debate about the nature of the game. If it is essentially a sport – in which case relationships should be curtailed and behavior subordinated to the athletic and team ethic. If it is primarily a roleplay event, then the full gamut of relationships should be allowed and encouraged – even if that means making some members who are intolerant of risk or acting out along those lines withdraw from the activity. Unfortunately the debate is seldom framed so clearly, and often progresses by action and crisis as relationship activity is put forward or slapped down. Often it progresses by luck. A successful in-game romance can make emotional roleplay “more acceptable,” while an infidelity or ugly scene can promote a “crack down” in which the group’s social leaders evince intolerance for emotional roleplay.

One model I have strongly observed in more conservative communities is a larger larp where relational and emotional elements are kept at arms length with a core of “good roleplayers” who are strongly emotive. When one comes into close proximity with them, one finds that they tend to have a more colorful and flamboyant set of interpersonal relationships – the sort that one would tend to associate with “actors and actresses,” often including polyamory, triads, sexual experimentation with kink, or outright affairs. However they may also be secretive, and a “code of silence” may prevail leading to the appearance of a double standard, or severe misunderstandings about the nature of relationships within the group or the larp overall. This situation may be adaptive, but it is far from ideal.

HOW SHOULD IT BE?

– IS INVOLVEMENT RIGHT OR NOT

In those games where it is taken for granted that in character relationships will exist and will be explored in some depth, there are several schools of thought regarding to what extent such relationships should go and how they should be allowed to proceed.

For many players, especially those identifying as being in long term relationships, expressing a separation of in-game and out-of-game is important.

Different people have different levels of “inner separation”. I consider mine fairly high, in that in-game is strictly in-game, and that’s that. I admit I really do have to at least be on friendly terms and feel comfortable with a person though in order to have a fun in-game relationship/romance.

Some make a conscious decision to control their emotional investiture: *I tend to have emotional relationships that don’t include close physical contact. It keeps the emotions at arm’s length, too, but the drama of too much emotional involvement is just not worth it to me.*

However most acknowledge the reality of relationships overlapping into real life.

I think in-game relationships are VERY tricky to keep in-game and I think it takes more than a fair bit of maturity to keep them in-game, especially if you’re in a committed relationship with someone else.

Many see the progress as healthy, and see little reason to disguise the fact. A male respondent said: *I’d be lying if I didn’t say that hooking up at a larp event isn’t at least 50% - 75% of my reason for being there. You’re playing a role, you meet members of the opposite sex, and you get to be somebody else for a few hours. Of course you’d think about throwing a little romantic action into your gaming.*

Women could be equally forthcoming: *On several occasions, I've been more apt to attend a game because a good-looking, interesting-seeming guy whom I've just met has either encouraged me to play or flirted with me in past game sessions.*

Another respondent put it simply: *Everyone I've had a relationship with, I've met in a game.*

Some players acknowledge the move toward real relationships as normal, and positive. *And it's HARD for regular human beings to turn that off at "Game Over", shake hands, and go their separate ways for 6-8 weeks. Borders on dysfunctional, in my opinion. So, I think that in-game relationships that are healthy, would (barring other OOG [Out of Game – ed] relationships) naturally progress to OOG and either succeed or fail. As to the effect that might have on the in-game relationship ... I think that would depend upon the parties maturity and professionalism.*

Another said: *One of those in-game relationships continued for many years, and very slowly and naturally developed into a friendship and then relationship with the other player. I will note that this other player and myself didn't begin dating until after that in-game relationship ended and I started playing a new character.*

The situation is muddied by subversion and mixed-signals. Many of those who are seeking relationships and intimacy say they are not. In some cases, they may be subversively seeking intimacy that does not exist in their out-of-game relationship, but may become frightened when it happens, causing them to suddenly move away from the relationship.

Sally was an attractive girl in her second year of college. At an event outside her normal circle of acquaintances she met several male larpers, was flirtatious with them and even engaged in off-camera sexual relations with one of the players

which she wrote about to that player and a GM. Before the next game, she broke off contact, citing some of the content of the game unrelated to her relationships as making her "uncomfortable" and refused to return.

Sometimes we don't know the basis for a breakup, but it is not uncommon to see a situation where a player makes a false move and the other moves away.

My last in-game relationship ended when the other player took inappropriate action toward me during a scene, and I asked the player to leave me alone in-game and out-of-game because of this.

ENGINEERING RELATIONSHIPS

So far, we've dealt primarily with those relationships players choose for themselves spontaneously during runtime. There are two other areas to look at – relationships that are pre-planned by players and those which are infused into the game by the writers.

Planned Relationships

In some cases players plan in advance to have their characters in a relationship. This can be very simple, or quite elaborate.

In a campaign I once played the abused daughter of another [male] player - with an incestual element. The details of the relationship weren't known to the other players at first - it was something we wanted to become more apparent as time went on.

I've had relationships with female friends in larp's, that we set up ahead of time with lots of road blocks, even though neither of us are bisexual out of character. Generally, when we do that, we decide we were a couple in back story and could be again.

As a GM in a game with a lot of in-game relationships, I found that when the players negotiated the in-game structure in a time and space outside of game, and far out of character, they tended to get

along better, both in-game and out. It reinforced the fictional aspect of the relationship - it's a story we're telling together, rather than a relationship we're muddling through.

My favorite experience playing in a relationship was being part of an in-game triad in... a Vampire MET game. The triad was comprised of my boy-friend and our best [male] friend. It gave us an immediate "group" to play in-game full of strangers, and allowed us to create three symbiotic characters. We negotiated the character generation process but let the rest of it develop on the game floor. We had a great time confusing people, while still being a politically strong unit and a force to be reckoned with. We never really had any OOG issues about our relationships in-game, but that's because we were very close friends and had known each other for years beforehand.

Most players agree that planned relationships go smoother. But that is often because they are more conservative to begin with, more "acting" and less romantic interest, as well as potentially more openness about expectations. To many players, particularly those with long term relationships outside the game they feel "safer." At the very least they represent pursuit and experimentation with someone who already has a certain level of interest and trust.

Stereotypically, women more than men seem to do more organizing of the pre-planned relationships, manage the holding of the gate keys of what is and isn't permitted, and are more likely to give "I was just swept away and couldn't help myself" as justification.

To players seeking new in-game relationships and attending at least somewhat based on that, existing pre-planned relationships may seem pernicious, creating an artificial barrier. And they can go awry if players don't maintain them, or find another interest.

Doug, Katie, and Walt were friends who entered the game planning to play together as a team. Walt was playing Katie's current romantic interest, a fiance, and they talked loosely of marrying in-game. Doug was an old flame. Katie was dating someone who did not play but broke up with them shortly after game start. Within a few of the game's monthly sessions, she'd started dating another player. Doug and Walt were both shy and had counted on Katie for a great deal of their character's social context. They found themselves floundering as she "ignored them" in favor of her new found interest.

Writer Infused Relationships

How much say writers have in setting up character backstory varies from game to game. In some games, particularly short games, writers provide "character sheets" detailing the character's entire life. In others the game producers are merely referees and have no control over the players past or present. Many games fall somewhere between these extremes.

The principal danger in writer-created relationships is of them being ignored, or the player being unhappy about them.

In a game nearly fifteen years ago, I was cast in a romance plot opposite someone unsuitable. I did not particularly like the person, found them unattractive and unpleasant, and was on very bad terms with their S/O. I did have some respect for them as a roleplayer, and I think we were both painfully conscious of carrying the burden of not screwing over each other's game or the plot by failing to play, in the coldest most formal possible manner, our "romance." It wasn't fun.

At the time, the tradition was to write sheets well ahead of time, and it was considered almost an evil to take personal chemistry into account when casting. Obviously there is some benefit to this. Some people might never be cast in romantic roles if it were left to the prejudices of a GM. On the other hand, a lack of

chemistry may doom a romance plot, and if any other plot point hinges on it, that may fall to the wayside.

Some GMs like to play matchmaker. One female GM was insistent on her ability to play “Yenta” to her players, even though her matches were often visibly painful. A GM who invests too much time in “setting up” romantic relationships may be acting out their own power fantasy, controlling others by arranging their sexual relations.

One suggestion is to set up brief pre-game scenes in order to investigate chemistry and allow some selection by players. In any case, it is impossible to know how well a relationship will work until the players interact, and failures are probably as likely as the occasional stunning success.

THE COMPLEXITIES AND MOTIVATIONS

It’s wrong to call all complications from relationships “problems” because that suggests that, among other things, the larp is more important than the interpersonal happiness of the people involved in it. And one person’s “problem” is another person’s “love story.”

Fantasy

One element that justifies the view of “larp as escape” is the frequent use of in-game relationships as an “escape mechanism” from an unhappy out of game relationship.

I was in a very long relationship that was not in a good place when I was in an in-game relationship with someone else. I found that I had more fun with the in-game relationship, and almost used as an escape from the rocky relationship I was in. The in-game relationship never turned serious out of game.

Fantasy matters to the game producer because it is important to understand that an interpersonal fantasy of this sort may be more powerful to the player than some other character element, and they

may respond badly to the perception of the game producer “interfering” in it. The player may respond with something very like the immortal words of Mick Jagger “Hey you, get off of my cloud.”

It can be fun, and intense, to have an in-game relationship; after all, it’s like acting out a fantasy in many ways. The problems arise when the fantasy doesn’t meet the players’ visions... and of course, each player has his or her own vision of that fantasy

Breakups

Of the two biggest negatives to in-game relationships, it almost goes without saying that breakups are the first. There are two basic patterns of breakup. In the first, the in-game relationship goes sour. In the second it is going too well, and an out-of-game long term partner exerts pressure to end it.

One respondent said: *One example, the woman got kind of “freaked out” by the in-game relationship and broke it off as it was just too freaky for her.*

Another said: *I’ve seen my share of OOG break ups cause folks to not return to games. While sad, I think that is a fact of larping, especially when one of the partners was lead to the larp thru that previous SO.*

Often it is a long term partner who becomes jealous. One respondent said: *My only problem with the area has been the occasional jealousy on the part of an out-of-character partner of my in-game partner-in at least one case, this has caused the in-game relationship to break up, even though in that case there was nothing save friendship between me and my in-game partner out-of-character.*

A respondent felt that: *To be fair, some men also get swept up in the in-character relationships and end OOG relationships as a consequence.*

Even the choice to play separately may unduly affect a player:

My girlfriend always wanted our characters to be partnered. Not only did this mean that I couldn't flirt with anyone else, but it meant that I couldn't follow serious plots, go off and fight, or be involved in diplomacy because I had to be having romance with her. When I was cast in a game as a leader who was an older man with no romance in his plotline at all, she made a really unlikely pass at me, playing a character I wouldn't even know or have anything in common with, and was offended when I tried to brush her off. I don't know how much of this was really wanting romance, and how much was wanting to keep other girls away from me.

Breakups become big problems for game planners when they happen just before game, or derail a long term plot. In one game, planners set up two players in a known relationship to play long lost partners – only to have them break up a short time before the game.

Producers and writers must keep a weather eye on relationships in their game. It is fine to hang a plot on two characters love affair, but if they are known to be mercurial and prone to sudden reversals or breakups, care must be taken to ensure that the fun of others is not derailed. Sometimes players may be good sports and continue to play at least a semblance of the plot if it affects others, but it is not uncommon for one or both to leave the game entirely, resulting in a rapid and painful end for any plot based on their relationship.

Worse the breakup of two characters who served as the core of a “group” can split the group dynamic. Breakups among polyamorous partners may tend to be slightly less violent, however this is not always the case and in some cases a “domino effect” may take several players out of the game, or split multiple game segments or groups.

Players in-games are no more averse to making others “choose sides” in breakups than they are in real life, and close friends may feel they have little

choice, withdrawing from contact, and breaking game alliances on which plots depend.

“Bleed through”

In addition to the potential for an OOG partner to force an in-game breakup, there is the potential for OOG relationships to affect play in other ways. This goes back to the initial element we mentioned in the introduction, the proverbial invisible gorilla. Currents outside the game may profoundly affect how players behave towards each other.

From what I've seen, OOG relationships are more likely to affect a larp than in-game relationships are to bleed into outside life (though I do know of one situation where an in-game relationship did lead to some nasty OOG complications). I go to larps to have fun, and knowing that I'll be around someone I'm currently having difficulties with certainly doesn't up my incentive to go. On the other hand, I haven't avoided games or events because an ex was there. Maybe it's because I tend to end things on good terms with my exes, or perhaps it's just because I'm in so many relatively small communities that trying to avoid exes is simply pointless.

Some players make an effort to compartmentalize the effects of “bleed through” by choosing roles in which their real life relationships won't unduly color in-character behavior.

Generally, my SO and I don't play as a couple in larps. We ally our characters in ways where we would never betray each other, playing siblings, allies, pack mates, best-friends.

Rivalry

Rivalry is another bugbear of in-game relationships, and it can take many forms. Often the most traditional is the least damaging.

There are two larps that I really enjoyed, but was forced to drop solely for romantic/personal

issues. *The first was a vampire larp that I invited a girlfriend to attend... . Sadly, we broke up very shortly afterward for reasons completely unrelated to the larp. I decided to keep attending the larp, and made a promise to myself to treat her character as civilly as if nothing had happened between us. But she seemed like she used that opportunity specifically to torment any character that I played. After a few games, I realized that any new character I created would have to plan advance contingencies for: “What to do when my ex-girlfriend tries to ruin the game for me”, so I stopped coming to games.*

A noted facet of in-game relationships is a tendency toward heterosexual players, particularly females, anecdotally and in survey expressing enjoyment of situations in which they were part of a triad, and the other two members were of the opposite sex. Socially most people like the idea of having many partners and of being the center of attention, so it should not surprise us that individuals who have been in a situation where they had the attention of two admirers enjoyed the situation. The tendency of members of either gender to want to attract a “harem” may lead to conflict:

Robert was a career man....had never ventured into interpersonal relationships in larp, but now he became involved in a “triangle” with a female player about his age who was coming out of a divorce. Robert was not free to carry the relationship into “out of character” interaction, and his rival, a single programmer and longtime fixture in the local game, was....when the object of his affections chose his rival, very obviously because they had begun dating outside the game, Robert felt bitter, and within a few months left the game.

Sometimes the rival is a former partner:

I...was forced to drop solely for romantic/personal issues....Sadly, we broke up very shortly afterward for reasons completely unrelated to the larp. I

decided to keep attending the larp, and made a promise to myself to treat her character as civilly as if nothing had happened between us. But she seemed like she used that opportunity specifically to torment any character that I played. After a few games, I realized that any new character I created would have to plan advance contingencies for: “What to do when my ex-girlfriend tries to ruin the game for me”, so I stopped coming to games.

Stalkers

The word “Stalker” gets thrown around with alarming frequency in our society. Anyone who reads Victorian literature would quickly conclude that the sort of pursuit that was considered normal, or even idealized in a previous era might be categorized as “stalker-like” now. To make matters worse, the sort of impassioned desire for intimacy and intrusion into personal life that characterize stalking may be welcome from a partner that is desirable and only become “stalker-like” when they are carried out by one who is undesirable or inconvenient.

Typically women are more likely to complain about stalking behavior than men, but members of both genders talk about being “stalked” at least in the social sense.

I was involved in an in-game relationship with a girl at a game I was driving to attend in another state. We flirted online but always in character, and our relationship got very complicated. It was never physical, we never even kissed. But she began to get very obsessive about it in chat rooms between games. I eventually broke it off and stop going to the game, but she wouldn’t stop contacting me or bothering my friends....I wasn’t sure she really understood the difference between the real world and the game.

I have found that some larpers (Theatre Style) don’t know how to handle an in-character relationship. Some can’t deal because they are emotionally

immature. Others refuse to separate reality from larp. Whatever the case may be, some become stalkers and others become sexually 'free'.

Some players in long term relationships preferred to form in-character relationships only with others in similar relationships: *Committed friends know the difference between in-game and out of game, whereas single male friends invest in the ic relationship and often step over the line, thinking we're such a match that they start pursuing my out of character, which is uncomfortable.*

GENDER DIFFERENCES

It is difficult to make many meaningful extrapolations about gender differences in larp, though there are a few exceptions.

First, it is clear that women are presented with the opportunity for relationships more than men, though it is unclear whether because in general men tend to play the role of pursuer or because women are more scarce in larp.

I get "asked out" rather frequently, mostly because I think that serious female gamers who have a clear understanding of the rules are rare creatures.

Resultantly concerns about relationships being taken seriously out-of-character when they were not intended that way is a high concern for female larpers.

One woman commented: *before the next game session, a mutual friend told me that he was extremely interested in me out-of-game, so I decided that the out-of-game attraction would make an in-game relationship a poor idea.*

Another said: *a person may pursue you for an in-character relationship that you don't necessarily want and end up hurting them both in-character and out-of-character, or perhaps they're completely*

relentless, or sometimes the other person wants to turn it into an out-of-character relationship etc.

Another respondent sheds some further light on this.

The second game involved a girl who was one of those "just a friend" people that I was none the less very attracted to. There was a lot of chemistry between us, but I was engaged, and she claimed to be not attracted to me. I invited her to a outdoor boffer larp. When we got to the game, she clung to my side most of the time, and didn't really let me interact with the other players....Out of game, she remained very clingy and passive-aggressive, almost as if she thought of me as a kind of surrogate boyfriend. I later found out that she left my wedding reception in tears. After that, I felt very uncomfortable going back out to the game with her.

The suggestion may be that women are as likely to be attracted to men as vice-versa, but may be less likely to act out, potentially because of pre-existing societal conventions.

One other notable gender difference is "playing house." Young girls have a strong preference for playing house (Cramer, P., & Hogan, K. A., 1975: 145-154). Sociological theory suggests women carry this preference into later life "Women enjoy talking about buying homes" (Relationships/How Women Select Men, 2006).

In-game women may move rapidly to press for an in-game wedding. You have barely gotten to the point of kissing and women want you to get married in-game. That's the first thing that they want to do. And you can just see the guy wilting.

Typically we see women as the ones who, at the early stage of the relationship, are likely to cut it short, head it off, or curtail it for fear of getting "too serious." But once committed we see men as the ones more likely to shy away from "commitment" at a later

stage and move on. Said one respondent: *Some men have proven more inclined to enjoy the benefits of blurring the lines between in-character and out-of-character relationships (making out, sexual benefits) and then re-establishing those boundaries when they decide they are ready to move on to someone else.*

In-game weddings can themselves be a mixed bag. Like real weddings, if properly run and well directed they can be a benefit to the game environment. But also like real weddings, they are for the audience not for the bride and groom who could elope if they wanted an intimate personal encounter. If the players understand that, and can be ecumenical in planning, handing out roles, an in-game wedding can be a successful event.

In real life, weddings tend to trump all other social events. Even those who are constant complainers or detractors feel some obligation to behave with dignity at a wedding. This balances to some extent a tendency of brides or grooms to behave badly or selfishly. They may get talked about but not disrupted. In-games, while a wedding carries more *gravitas* than most game events, the immunity of real life weddings does not exist. Players who are jealous of either member of the couple – or who are just jealous that someone else is having an in-game romance while they are not, may feel much more free to vent their emotions on the event.

Organizers also run the risk of seeming to play favorites. If one high profile couple that is relatively well liked marries in-game with time and or resources set aside for the service, other players may want “equal time” even if they are not as popular. Such demands can be very taxing on producer time and resources.

POLYAMORY AND ALTERNATIVE LIFESTYLES

A final element to consider is the complexity brought by non-traditional relationships. Above we briefly discussed polyamory, and the fact that such relation-

ships may make for a “domino effect” taking down several plots or game elements if they collapse.

Polyamorous relationships seem to be statistically less likely to disintegrate spectacularly. The degree to which the relationship is “open” may be seen as a predictor of this. A polyfidelitous triad (a group in which all of the members are faithful to each other) may explode as painfully as a fifteen year marriage, but three individuals all of whom are dating other partners are less likely to come to a truly explosive end.

There is actually a real dynamic here. Proportionately they have less invested in the relationship and because of other interlinked relationships may have much more to lose socially by “turning it ugly.” There is no rule, but a predisposition. Breakups in dating couples tend to have less long term impact than divorces among married couples and the same is true of those who have multiple partners. The availability of other options tends to soften the blow and to some extent the perception of “need” to fight over the relationship that is failing. The more loose the bonding, the less explosive its disintegration.

Alternative sexuality and lifestyles don’t seem to have a profound impact on larp, however there can be issues. In the demographic among which larp is popular, homosexuality is effectively accepted and normal, at least in the Eastern United States. Individuals may have issues, however as a group, larpers are unlikely to feel negatively about gay players.

There are subsidiary issues however. Some players who identify as gay may be perfectly happy to play a heterosexual relationship in-game. Others may be actively offended, or made uncomfortable by the idea. The issue can become more unclear if a player “comes out” during the course of a campaign, something not at all uncommon in campaigns with a college demographic, where individuals may be confronting their sexuality for the first time.

One woman said: *I've also been in a relationship with a PC who was straight, even though the player was 100% gay and in a committed relationship.*

Transgender players can create additional complexities. An attractive outgoing transgender player might be a tremendous asset to organizers, being willing to play both male and female roles and having a winning personality that tends to put both genders at ease. On the other hand a transgender player who is sensitive about a complex gender identification can constitute a substantial challenge.

Again this can be complicated among younger players when an individual is first “coming out” with a new gender identity. Confusion, especially if it results in a set of changes that involve “acting out” can make other players uncomfortable, and if it involves taking offense at perceived slights can arouse resentment and hostility.

We had a problem player in our game who said sie was agender, or had no gender. Sie seemed obsessed with things that pertained to gender, with what people called hir, and we got tired of it. Sie never seemed happy and everything having to do with gender was a big issue. Most of us felt like sie was using the game as a therapy group.

Transgender sexual identities are not necessarily as widely accepted as Gay and Lesbian identities, possibly because they are more ambiguous and perceived as more of a threat by those who are not comfortable with alternative sexuality to begin with. One player confided that they “could not deal” with a Transgender player and stated: *I try to ignore that they exist.*

Despite a few negatives however, most players seem very accepting of difference, likely because larpers tend to be educated, and educated people tend to be more tolerant. The fantasy world of the game helps render sexual distinctions less significant, and soften

the impact of differences, just as the filter of “the game” softens “in-game” relationships to muted mirrors of those that dominate life “out-of-game.”

CONCLUSIONS

Relationships in-games are very much the same thing for producers of larp as weather in an outdoor game. We can do very little to head it off. But we can predict it and see it coming, and take appropriate action to lessen the damage, or take advantage of good weather.

Relationships are clearly a driving force behind participation in larp overall, and underscore the larp as primarily a vehicle for social interaction. To ignore them as a driving force of our games would be as unrealistic – and self defeating – as boffer organizers failing to plan for excitement and competitive spirit.

larp producers tend to be heavy on control and sometimes weak on reaction. Relationships are a matter for reaction – we can seldom control them, but we can do things to make sure they don't damage the game for others, and to take advantage of the energy they create to drive our game along.

Some respondents suggest going further however. *I think as a storyteller that the best way to hook players in-game is to offer a relationship to them with an NPC, or to encourage ic relationships and then but tension on them - one is kidnapped, etc. People really respond to relationships and it seems to be the easiest way to add tension to the game without providing live or die situations, which have to be spaced out to keep up tension.*

By understanding and studying the relationship gorilla, we can at least keep it from doing as much damage, and at best learn to harness its power for good.

Often it is relationship energy that is driving large segments of our game. At least one respondent out

and out admitted that it was more than half the reason they attended at all, and others hint that it is not an insignificant factor. That much energy is a tremendous portion of our player interest.

First we need to look at the Gorilla. Then we need to understand it, and not just by taking what players say at face value, but by looking at the hidden social exchanges in every human interaction, from Berne's games to the deceptions inherent in our biology. Then we need to look at how it positively influences our games, and how we can draw more energy from it, without placing too much reliance on a thing which is still... at heart... a very wild beast.

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