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## **LIVE-ACTION ROLE-PLAYING THE COALESCENCE OF FANTASY AND REALITY**

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CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY: SUSTAINABLE CITIZENSHIP

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ROCK FORMATION BY NEIL SIMONE

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# **LIVE-ACTION ROLE-PLAYING**

## **THE COALESCENCE OF FANTASY AND REALITY**

**Master Thesis Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship**

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Submission Date: 15th of August 2017



**Utrecht University**

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## Introduction

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It was at the end of 2016 when I stumbled upon a *YouTube* video called ‘lightning bolt’. From the moment it was uploaded in 2005, this video has been viewed over five million times on *YouTube* alone. The clip shows a live-action role-playing (LARP) battle. Most of the players in this clip, who all wear costumes, are armed with a melee weapon made from foam. They fight two rather simple looking monsters – played by other players - in close combat. A stocky man of approximately thirty-five years old, who is dressed in clothes that can best be described as a traditional Scottish costume, holds some distance. While following the movements of the monster, he throws small objects towards it. As the objects leave his hand he empowers them with a high-tone rhythmic call of “*lightning bolt... lightning bolt*”. Soon the first monster falls to the ground and it does not take long before the other one collapses as well. With the defeat of the monsters the throwing of small objects stops. People who stand out of sight of the camera start to cheer and with this loud applause the clip ends.

Being curious I scrolled down to read viewer’s comments. They clearly showed the rough side of their character. A person named Fitzcannon, for example, sarcastically commented, “*I’m sure those guys got a ton of pussy afterwards*” and also Soleyiu S questioned the sex appeal of these men dressed in costumes by writing, “*Their virginity. You will have to duel them for it.*” Corvus Clamor kept a much more subtle – though no less painfully – tone by mentioning, “*I feel embarrassed just by watching them.*” These are only a few of the numerous devastating comments below this video. Yet, my attention moved from these opinions back to the play I had watched in the video. What was this kind of play where people dressed up and conduct in what looked like a form of theatre? More importantly, why were these people playing this game in the first place? Clearly, as the comments indicated, most of the individuals who saw this clip were discouraged by its appearance. These astonishments became the start of my three months of fieldwork in The Netherlands investigating the world of LARP. I entered this journey with one question: “*What do players in The Netherlands gain from engaging in live-action role-playing?*” This simple question came to amaze me with insights far beyond the realm of LARP itself, as it illuminated answers, thoughts and perspectives of not only this particular world, but also the contemporary times we live in.



Since my exposure to anthropology I have been increasingly interested in places that stretch beyond our ordinary world; places that touch upon a so called “otherworldliness” (Mackay 2001). Whether it is festivals, religion, narcotics or rituals that transfer people into liminal phases, the ability of these

phenomena to “*carry us beyond ‘ordinary life’ into a world where something other than daylight reigns*” (Huizinga 1938, 26) never stopped to amaze me. There seems to be an element in the human being that longs for the opportunity to wander, for a brief moment, into a world that lies beyond ours.

Popular entertainments, such as films, comics and videogames, but also circus and carnival, can also be addressed as a way to transcend to alternative worlds. Circus and carnival might be one of the oldest forms of popular entertainments that presented alternative, fantasy-like environments. However, their popularity have fallen victim to the rise of advanced technologies like radio, television, the movies, and the internet (Mackay 2001, xiii). Gaming is another form that helped replaced the classical popular entertainments (2001, xiv). I consider LARP to be a product of this mixture between gaming and popular entertainment. What all these aforementioned forms of popular entertainment have in common is that they are not taken very seriously by many people (2001, xiii). Often they are deemed as irrelevant and pointless (Huizinga 1938, Fine 1980, Laycock 2015) and LARP is no exception to the rule. Yet, despite this hegemonic image, I will demonstrate that any form of popular entertainments is of utter significance, as it beholds the power to provide meaning in the lives of their participants. Considering this ability, its unfamiliarity, and being a fascinating product of our time, a profound research on LARP becomes relevant, because, to put it in Fine’s words, “*It is worth knowing about*” (1980, 2).

I consider LARP to hold a unique position among all popular entertainment phenomena. Within LARP, players are not only carried beyond ordinary life, but they deliberately constitute a new imaginary world, with the ultimate goal of perceiving it temporarily as real. Another distinct feature about LARP is that the imaginary universe is not only established in the minds of the players, but actually played out in the physical world. Like a theatre play - a comparison I will refer to more in-depth in chapter two - players physically and verbally perform the actions of their characters. The guy in the lightning bolt video does not only imagine his character throwing lightning bolts; he actually performs this action through bodily gesture and tongue. Thus, players within LARP are not solely engaged in transcending to an alternative world, but also try actively to let it mix with the physical world through performance. In this process an intriguing coalescence between fantasy (i.e. the imaginary) and reality occurs, which forms the central focus of this text.

Forms of popular entertainment, such as LARP, have known an increase in popularity in the last couple of decades (Bennett and Woodward 2012, Kirby 2013, Laycock 2015). The ruins created by capitalism (Tsing 2015) and the devastating consequences of modernity (Bauman 2011) have often been used as causes why people would turn to places that allow them to escape the mundane world (Fine 1980, Mackay 2001, Bennett 2012, Roeland 2012, Kirby 2013, Laycock 2015). I do not denounce that we live in turbulent times in which processes such as capitalism and modernity, but also

globalization, climate change, and migration, impact our lives in all sorts of ways. However, seeing these features as powerful undercurrents pulling mankind underwater is in my eyes too simplistic. This pessimistic angle namely stimulates the idea that the growing popularity of escaping to the realms of the mundane is an action of the suffocating human struggling for air (Fine 1980, Mackay 2001). Consequently, escapism becomes a passive *escape* of the modern man enable to bare the burdens of modern times. This thesis beholds a different approach.

In her book *“The Mushroom at the End of the World (2015)”* Anna Tsing offers a profound insight about the global state which is harassed by alienation of men and nature caused by capitalism and modernization. Instead of follow other analysts that have dissected the dreams of modernization and capitalism, Tsing argues for a different, more optimistic angle. In her eyes, *“We do not have choices other than looking for life in this ruin”* (2015, 6). Through the lens of the matsutake mushroom Tsing shows how even in these dreadful times, people, animals, and plants find manners to adapt and subsequently empower themselves in alternative ways. In similar lines I want to approach LARP in this thesis; not as a passive escape to an imaginative realm, but as a method through which humans deal with their strange new lives. When we approach LARP in this perspective its meaning illuminates and subsequently its supposed irrelevance evaporates. It is then, that a picture of the suffocating human struggling for air, can be changed into a much more powerful image of men finding new resources to fight the ruins of modern times.

Where Tsing focusses on capitalism and modernization as the ruins out of which new life emerges, I will address the hegemonic understanding of reality in the West as the ash from which LARP could flourish. In line with Laycock (2015), I believe that a reality is formed by a socially constructed framework which alters chaotic elements in an imagined new order. This framework is a lens through which a society agrees to understand their world; to understand their reality. The intriguing part of the way of understanding reality in contemporary times in the West is that it incorporates an inner value between what is true and what is false; what is real and what is imaginative (Ingold 2011, 111). What we empirically detect is what we deem as real, and what we imagine falls easily in the realm of make-belief (Fine 1980). This understanding produces order in the lives of many, but can also be oppressive as we will see when we start to focus on the players in LARP.

In order to comprehend the connection between the hegemonic way of understanding reality in the West and the growth in popularity of LARP, I first need to make myself clear about how I will address this “reality”. I built my understanding of this phenomenon on the British anthropologist Tim Ingold. Ingold (2011, 111) shows that in contemporary times the understanding of the world is derived from Kantian cosmology, an essential element in the Western intellectual tradition. According to Kant, *“The extent of the surface is finite and potentially calculable. [Therefore, man] can estimate not only the limits of his present knowledge but also the limits of the entire, potentially knowable world”* (Kant

in Ingold 2011, 110). In this understanding of the world, everything that is calculable and knowable, that is the surface of things, is part of reality. Therefore, when we talk about reality we refer to an absolute, complete, and comprehensive entity of the world that is playing out right before our eyes. And so, in the hegemonic socially constructed framework of our time we see – or are taught to see – only the surface of things, as relevant. Imagination and fantasy are sentenced to the graveyard of superstition, irrelevancy or pointlessness, and are, above all, merely make-belief (Huizinga 1938, Fine 1950, Laycock 2015).

In the light of how reality is understood, the man in the lightning bolt video must have lost track of reality along the way. Whatever he is imagining, he is no wizard. Whatever he is throwing, these are no lightning bolts. This is something we clearly observe with our eyes and so we perceive this as real. However, during my fieldwork I have come to understand that a whole world of new experiences hides behind what we can see; a world that stays obscured from the lenses of cameras and the eyes of the observers. In the contrary to the ordinary world, in LARP a framework is constituted in which the imagination and fantasy of players become prior to what one detects. I believe this contradiction between both worlds beholds the answer of the popularity and attraction LARP has on its players. In this light, the understanding of reality has become the pave from where I will explore the rising popularity and significance of LARP.



I imagine my three months of field study at the beginning of 2017 can best be explained as a journey in which I have come to learn about new, previously unknown landscapes. Throughout this journey I have played at six different LARP events, held thirteen in-depth interviews, had informal talks with dozens of players at these events, took part at a workshop about role-playing and another about costume making, made my own costume together with a professional costume designer, read numerous of LARP related blogs on the internet, watch a similar amount of related online videos, and joined two of my participants on one of their table-top role-playing evenings.

In this journey I have not only gained an understanding about who players are, as will be elaborated on in chapter one, but also gained insights about the mechanisms at work within the game itself, which I will explain in chapter two. Both chapters are designed to make you accustomed and familiar with the world of LARP. Without these descriptive chapters the rest of my chapters would be hollow and likely to end in vain. As my journey continued I came to understand that the full experience of LARP stays obscured when one only observes its physical outcome, which is the performance of players. Most of the play happens inside the minds of these players as they add a layer of fantasy over what they see. In chapter three I will explore this coalescence of reality and fantasy more profoundly. In chapter four I will turn to two narratives through which I will clarify how the



hegemonic understanding of reality in the West has left us fixated on the outer appearances of things, while in LARP it is exactly the internal that matters. It is through the understanding of how reality is comprehend in the west, and by relating it to the importance of fantasy and imagination in LARP, that a door is opened to understand what players actually gain from engrossing in a play. This is what I will explore in chapter five and what will ultimately lead to my argument: LARP is not only a one way passage for players to escape the burdens of our times, but it also actively empowers their ordinary lives by allowing players to explore the powers of their imagination.



Most of the prominent scholars on role-playing, such as Alan Fine (1980), Daniel Mackay (2001), and Joseph Laycock (2015) have generated this research topic from a deep affinity with role-playing. If one would place them on the ‘insiders’ side of the spectrum, I would situate myself on the other, ‘outsiders’ side. My experience with role-playing, before entering the field, extended as far as two awkward drama classes at high-school. Moreover, my affinity with fantasy and science-fiction went as far as that I have viewed the popular movies and series of *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Hobbit*, and *Lord of the Rings*. Throughout my research I have cherished my unique perspective of being in unfamiliar territory in terms of my experience with LARP. It gave me the advantage of exploring the landscape with new eyes and perceiving things accustomed eyes would more easily miss. But it also brought a certain disadvantage as my technical knowledge about LARP extents only as far as I could absorb in three months. I hope my text is read and valued in consideration of this.

An interesting friction occurred during this research considering my role as an ethnographer in LARP events. In order to fully grasp the experience of the players during these events I had to actively participate, meaning that I had to fully engross into a fictive character and play the game myself. In this process, my role as ethnographer and the role of my fictive character came in opposition as being one of them would result into the exclusion of the other. Yet, only through active participating it felt as if I, to put in O’reilly’s (2012, 3) words, “*Could fully encounter, respect, record, and represent the irreducibility of human experience.*” Therefore, I decided to “*go native*” (Jorgensen in DeWalt en DeWalt 2011, 22) for the duration of the event. It was only after the events or during downtime that I quickly turned to my notebook to write down my experiences and observations. This temporarily state of “*going native*” not only provided the opportunity to experience myself what players experience during LARP events, but also gave me credits with other players as they appreciated my level of devotion. During most events it only took a couple of hours before I was treated as an insider (i.e. a co-player and not a researcher). This gave me the benefit of opening up new levels of understanding that might have stayed obscured for researchers who solely observe.

Throughout this thesis I will tell brief stories of my experiences with players and LARP itself. In line with Kirsten Ghodsee (2011, xiii), I cherish narratives from their visualizing capacity of letting you experience fieldwork from the first row. I have chosen to implement descriptive details within these narratives that may seem irrelevant on first sight. However, I deem these small details essential to shape the context through which I have extracted my data. When recapturing them during my writings, they have brought me back to the field. I hope that they, in similar lines, function as a portal for you as a reader through which you can envision my field more vividly.

All stories are drafted directly from my field notes and my memories of conversations or episodes that I have encountered during my fieldwork. Despite the origins in real events, it is important to state that these stories are filtered through my own recollections of how things happened. Moreover, as some notes were written down a few hours after the moment, they may be not as *fresh* as some might long for. But my will to understand, translate and expound the experience of players during a play outranked this inconvenience. To use Malinowski's (in O'reilly 2012, 17) words, "[...] it is good for the ethnographer sometimes to put aside his camera, note book and pencil, and join in himself in what is going on... ."

I owe enormous debts to the people who agreed to talk and work with me in and outside the events I participated in. Players interrupted their play during events to talk to me and participants devoted their spare time to answer my sometimes rather clumsy questions patiently. I am grateful that they opened doors for me that otherwise would stay close for inquirers. In consultation with my participants, I will name their real names throughout this piece. I see this as an ode of appreciation and respect for the immense knowledge and thoughtful insights they were willing to share with me.



In the comments on the 'lightning bolt' video Corvus Clamer mentioned, "*I feel embarrassed just by watching them.*" This statement may not be much different from how many of us would react when watching this video or any LARP event. Its appearance can be bizarre, its play may be mystifying, and for most of us the game is hard to relate to anything familiar. What we see, therefore, might often be bewildering. But, as I will argue, the reality of LARP is not formed by watching with one's eyes, but experienced with one's imagination. We should not take the outer appearance of the game for granted, but delve ourselves in its inner appearance. This given is brilliantly portrayed in the painting of Neil Simone, called 'Rock Formation' standing on this thesis' cover. When we look with Simone's eyes, we see that the rock beholds a world that extends beyond its outer surface. When we follow the windings of the trail, we are not rejected by the outer surface of the rock, nor do we end up in a space of nothingness inside the rock. Rather, we become engrossed in a world in which the leafless trees are rooted in fields of grass; grass that is just as vividly as the grass on which the outside of the

rock is nested. In this painting a coalescence of fantasy and reality occurs. It is with similar eyes we need to approach LARP in order to capture an all-encompassing understanding of the play. Let this image be a mental guide as we take the first steps into the world of LARP...

## Chapter 1: Mapping the Community

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*“If you see the kind of people who attend LARP events... we all come from different layers in society, enjoy different educations, some have kids and some are kids themselves. There is no common denominator except that we share a hobby and, maybe, that we enjoy making an appeal to our imagination in order to generate a new world.”* Marieke, a twenty-two year old nurse who has been playing LARP for over four years, made this comment in the first interview I had with her. This interview was conducted in the first week of my fieldwork and my knowledge and understanding by that time was still minimal. However, as it grew, and my times spend with players and playing LARP on events increased, I came to understand that the diversity between players is much more prominent than their similarities – just as Marieke mentioned. As such, during my three months of fieldwork I have played with players from the age of five to those who were close to their sixties. I heard a story of an individual of the royal Dutch family who engages in LARPs, and I played with computer engineers, physics professors, actors, politicians, nurses, and students. I have encountered eccentric figures with an obsession for everything out of the ordinary like leather crafting and folk dancing, as well as unobtrusive wallflowers, and everything in-between. I have played with people from The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, France, United States and Brazil; males and females, of all races and sizes. So how would one describe the live-action role-player? To quote Alan Fine (1980, 47), *“Describing the ‘typical’ gamer by a single example is impossible, probably more misleading than instructive.”*

However, among all the diversity of players, I did observe certain overlapping characteristics which can form an image, though simplified, of players which helps you to understand this - for most of us - mystifying world. My aim for this chapter is to generate an image of a player without impairing the diversity among them. I will turn to a story about one of the nights on which I was playing ‘Rogue Trader’ (i.e. a table-top role-playing game) with one of my key informants Sander, a robust thirty-five year old computer engineer who has been playing LARP for over fifteen years, and his friends. All the people in the room that night were active live-action role-players. However, the informal gathering resulted in an outstanding opportunity to learn more about who these people are outside the LARP events.

### **The stories that stories tell**

It was the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March 2017. The previous week Sander had invited me to come over to his house to play ‘Rogue Trader’ with his friends. I eagerly accepted with the knowledge that the players who were joining that evening were also highly involved in LARP. This is no coincidence, many of the

players that I spoke to engage in role-playing on many mediums such as table-top and online.

The weather in the Netherlands can still be unpleasantly cold at the beginning of March, and so I was glad that Sander's house was located near the bus station at which I had arrived. As soon as I rang the doorbell of an old terraced house, Sander opened the door. As always I got welcomed with a big hug. The 'hug' is the common handshake among players in the Netherlands. The hug is such a prominent feature in the interaction between players that some participants speak of a "*hug-mentality*."<sup>1</sup> This mentality characterizes the warmth within the community. Most players are extremely attentive and concerned about making outsiders feel at home. Marieke had mentioned that, "*Many players have known a tough time through some periods in their lives in which they felt as if they were outlaws.*"<sup>2</sup> Having experienced what it is being excluded from a certain group, this might explain why players are so sensitive to make others, and especially newcomers like myself, feel at home. Just as they have found a warm nest among live-action role-players, so they want others to experience the same. Likewise, this night I came to experience that everyone was highly concerned about my well-being. This warmth is something that never ceased to move me.

As I leave my jacket and scarf in the tiny hallway I make my way into the living room. On my right a well-worn, what once was black, leather couch stands in front of an enormous ultra-modern flat screen television. Multiple controllers lay on the floor in front of it hinting on an active use. I turn to my left. The entire length of the room on my left is covered by an immense bookcase. The left side of the case is filled with books about table-top role-playing. 'Rogue Trader', 'Dungeons & Dragons', and 'World of Darkness' are but a few book series that fill up this immense collection. The other side of the case is filled with DVDs of the fantasy and science-fiction genre, most of their titles unfamiliar to me. In front of these books and DVDs numerous beautifully crafted miniatures of fantasy and science-fiction creatures are displayed.

I feel the eyes of the persons at the other side of the room staring at me, interested in the newcomer. Before I introduce myself, my thoughts, for a slight moment, stick with the items displayed in these brownish oak bookcases. Their clear presences obviously hint to the residence's preference of elements of popular culture, particularly fantasy and science-fiction. Considering these items, the game controllers, and the table-top game I am about to play, the inhabitants most have a far-reaching interest in fantasy worlds; worlds that stretch beyond the ordinary world. This interest has partly shaped the way society thinks of players as Mick, a twenty year old mechanical engineering student, states, "*Society, in the most simple way, sees us as persons who no longer see the difference between what is part of the real, and what is part of the fantasy world.*"<sup>3</sup> Although

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<sup>1</sup> Interview – 07/03/2017.

<sup>2</sup> Interview – 10/01/2017.

<sup>3</sup> Interview – 11/01/2017.

most players have a large affinity with fantasy and science-fiction, and thus with the fundamentally concern of an extension of secondary worlds (Kirby 2013, 29), I have never met players who could not separate their ordinary world from the fantasy one. Players like to cross the boundary between what we refer to as *real* and *imaginative*, but they are as equal aware of its demarcation as any of us.

From across the room ten eyes are still staring at me. Five men are sitting at an old dark oak table which is covered with snacks and soda and more fantasy miniatures. From the amounts of unhealthy food and drinks I assume that the growing popularity of healthy organic food in contemporary times has not yet landed here.

I approach them and together with the usual hug I introduce myself. Looking at their faces some of them must be early in their twenties, while the oldest must be in his mid-forties. As I come to know later, the profession of these individuals is as diverse as their age: two of them work with computers; one is a high-school teacher; one works in the medical industry; and the last works in government classified job. I take the last empty seat between the bookcase and the table and look at my companions of tonight. Although these people have regular jobs, they cannot be described as your usual car salesman. From the styling of their hair I assume that most of them have not paid interest to it from the moment they got out of bed. This carelessness is also reflected in the clothes they wear. The oversized hoodies with logos of famous science-fiction movies, the wide pants and hiking boots seemed to be picked for comfort rather than for style.

To break the ice, and overcome the awkward first few moments that is inescapable in a new group formation, I start to tell something about myself. After a brief monolog I turn to the others to ask about their hobbies and interests. In the conversation that follows I hear hobbies like archery, folk dance, leather crafting, making costumes, alternative music preferences (e.g. Heavy Metal and Folk music), and - of course - table-top role-playing. All of them are examples of hobbies that are not considered ordinary in contemporary society but are very common amongst players. Just as their choice of clothes suggests the disinterest of the latest fashion, their interests and choices in hobbies do not correlate with the mainstream. Fine (1980, 45-46) uses the term 'social nonconformism' to describe "*the offbeat interests of gamers,*" and observing the persons across the table, and hearing their preferences, this term seems to be quite adequate.

As our conversation changes to a mellow note, one of the players, who is in his late twenties and clearly the most outspoken of the whole group, points at the two men on my left who are the quietest of the group and jokingly states: "*Do not worry about those two. This is master-autist number one and this is master-autist number two.*" They all laugh and so do I. However, there is a serious underlying tone in his statement. During my fieldwork I have sensed the overall idea in society that players are socially less capable; indeed to a point that they have been stigmatized with autistic elements.

In one of my interviews with Marieke, she made an interesting statement about this. *“Surely, there are people who are socially less capable and when you put the focus on it, it will generate a strange image. However, there is so much more behind it. The only problem is that those people deviate from the norms of society. Society has unwritten normative rules about what is seen as acceptable behavior. In The Netherlands we follow the assumption ‘act normal, then you’re already crazy enough’. So if you deviate in your belief, sexual preference, hobby, [and behavior] than we are inclined to label someone as ‘strange’.”*<sup>4</sup> Marieke refers to the notion that culture is the mutual agreement between individuals of a group concerning what behavior is acceptable, which is the norm, and what is not (Eriksen 2010, 30). The two individuals here, who were pointed at in the joke, might indeed be perceived as socially less capable, yet only to the our cultural norms. As we began playing it soon became clear to me that this time I was the one falling outside the norms.

As the game starts I soon experience that the complexity of the game is beyond what I had expected. Not only is the gameplay itself miles away from anything I have played so far, but also the unfamiliar terms and the diversity of elements in this game is something I have utmost difficulty to understand. Consequently, the progress of the game that night is slow, as I continuously need to ask what is going on. Luckily, a great deal of the time during a play is spent not on actual game time, but by evaluating the way the game evolves and mocking on actions of other players. Another favorite subject during these ‘down-time moments’ is telling each other ‘war stories’, which are stories about memorable in-game experiences in the past. This may include stories about hilarious movements, engaging scenes and awesome battles. However, outside the context of the game, not many other topics are brought into the conversation and this observation returned when I attended later LARP events.

When players come together before a LARP event, they almost exclusively talk about LARP related topics. This includes the way their character has evolved during the last sessions, or the awesome moments they have experienced in the previous plays. Also, after the event players often seek each other’s company to evaluate the proceedings of the last event. Rarely do players talk about mass entertainment such as sports and television shows, with the clear exception of Netflix and videogames, nor do they discuss their personal lives in-depth. LARP functions as their main vehicle for social interaction. The game generates a story in which each player engages and thus all the players are engrossed in the same happenings and experiences. These shared happenings and experiences brings them together around practices of meaning, a thing Arali and Pedla (2010, 188) refer to as ‘focal practices’. Focal practices bring an engagement of mind and body, so that among a group of individuals *“there is an immediate and centering power of the focal thing they are devoted to”* (Borgmann in Arali and Pedla 2010, 188). The two persons on my left may be quiet before the

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<sup>4</sup> Interview – 10/01/2017.

game started, but during the game and as the topic of the conversation turned to a game related one, they actively involved themselves in the conversation. As all players in the room are devoted to a shared interest, namely table-top role-playing, they no longer feel a certain disconnection with other individuals. In this matter, the role-playing game provides them with a vehicle through which they can interact and built social relationships with others – the same goes for LARP.

The game proceeds and every time I think I get the hang of it a new element is introduced which, again, brings back my state of confusion. Because of all the intricacy I am losing my focus on the game. Instead, I start to pay attention to something that I already noticed at the beginning of this evening. My co-players continuously refer to famous quotes from fantasy and science-fiction movies, series, books and games. For example, as our gameplay brings us to a moment in which we travel through space, one of the players quotes to me, *“Traveling through hyperspace ain’t like dusting crops, farm boy.”* As all the players understand the context of which the quote is extracted – Han Solo mentioned it in the Star Wars movie ‘A New Hope’ - they burst into laughter. However, the context of this quote is completely lost to me and so I politely generate a little smile not aware of what the joke is actually about. Quotes are an important part of the humor for most players who engage in live-action role-playing. More than just humor, I have observed that quotes are a way of testing other players’ knowledge about fantasy and science fiction culture. In this way, a distinction can be made between those who share the same interest and those who do not. Thomas Eriksen (2010, 31) argues that this form of communication, *“helps to define one’s own group in relation to others by providing a tidy ‘map’ of the social world.”* It helps determining who is X and who is Y (2010, 31). In contrast to their immense knowledge about fantasy and science-fiction, my knowledge is non-existent and quotations clearly illuminate our differences this evening.

The game is now almost three hours old and the hands on the simple clock on the wall show 10:30pm. My mind is exhausted after being engrossed into an imaginary character in a fictive world for three hours. However, the minds of the players across the table still seem to be in perfect shape. As much as some like to exercise their bodies to become in perfect shape, it seems like these persons enjoy exercising their minds with fantasy mind games. The players notice my tiredness and as the storyline of the game is drawn to a transition, we mutually agree to stop the fictive narrative for now and continue another time. My co-players use the opportunity presented by the game coming to a temporarily end to ask about my experiences of this night - again, their high compassion with newcomers is illuminated. I answer that I enjoyed playing with them and liked the freedom and the endless possibilities of controlling the progress of the fictive narrative. They appear to be satisfied by this answer. After having provided them with my humble opinion, my eyes made their last walk around the living room to leave no detail out of my observations, before I grab my jacket and scarf that I left in the hallway. Standing in this small corridor, I think about the different people I played



with tonight. Although they share certain interests such as their affinity with popular culture and alternative hobbies, and use shared characteristic elements of behavior like quotation, there is no way I would be able to merge all of these parts in one clear-cut profile without ruining the diversity among them. It is with this thought, and providing my co-players with one last hug I disappear into the cold winter night to catch my bus home...

## Chapter 2: An Understanding of Live-action Role-playing

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Let us now turn to LARP itself. What exactly is LARP and how is the game played? Mick, a twenty year old mechanical engineering student who has been playing LARP for around eight years, has given a clear statement about the hegemonic way societies sees LARP, "*In society the idea prevails that LARP is dressing up in lame costumes and beating others with foam weapons.*"<sup>5</sup> In my first encounter with LARP, by watching the 'lightning bolt' video clip, I too held a similar simplistic image of LARP. However, I came to understand that this idea is highly short-sighted and patronizing, and does not correlate with the actual complexity and sophistication of the play. It is the objective of this chapter to give an understandable and rightful description about what LARP I is.

This task turned out to be more difficult than I firstly thought. LARP is a phenomenon that does not let itself easily be defined. Within LARP the experience of players and their imagination and fantasies is of utter importance, but this is extremely hard to capture within definitions. Therefore, I follow Mackay's argument (2001, 89) that role-playing in general, and LARP in particular, cannot be fully comprehended through observation and reading alone. As he states, "*The role-playing performance (...) exteriorizes a fantasy that originates within each individual role-player's imagination. Such a performance, therefore, requires the active engagement of the critic to experience the efficacy and appeal of the role-playing game*" (2001, 89). This understanding, that the full efficacy and appeal of the game can only be understood by active participation, gave me the insight in how to clarify LARP in this chapter. I have come to a strategy through which I let you participate and experience your own LARP in an exercise that works fully by using your own imagination. For this strategy I will use the power of worlds to evoke images in the mind of the reader, something that Ingold (2011, 200) calls *ekphrasis*. The first part of this chapter will then be an exercise in which words will let you imagine and participate in your own LARP event.

The second part of this chapter focusses on a vital observation that all the mechanisms active in LARP, from the setting, rules, and to its goal, are designed to generate an experience that is as *real* as possible. To understand LARP is to comprehend that these mechanisms behold the ability to translate an imaginary world that exist within the minds of its players, into the physical world. This process, in which a coalescence of fantasy and reality occurs, forms the base for the upcoming chapters, but for now it is essential to make this process comprehensible.

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<sup>5</sup> Interview – 11/01/2017.

## **An exercise of the imagination**

Tuomas J. Harviainen (2010, 131) states that a comprehensive way to clarify LARP is to compare it to theatre, as both contain physical role performances. I suggest adding the word 'improvisation' to theatre provides a comparison that is more precise. Not only do players engage in physical role performances, like actors, but they also improvise their actions, rather than acting out a pre-scripted play. LARP can therefore best be compared to improvisational theatre. But even then, the abstractness of this term still tells little about LARP. We must turn to a strategy in which you can imagine yourself participating in an actual play.

Imagine yourself standing on a theatre stage. Spotlights are lighting up your face while you look at all the seats in the hall. You are an actor. You are about to perform, but there is no script. Through improvisation you and your co-players create the storyline. When the play starts, everything you do, every choice you make, and everything you say will contribute to and direct the story. By interacting with your co-players you thus create happening upon happening, ultimately creating a line of events: the story of the play.

Similar to other actors you need to play an imaginative character. This character can be anyone and anything as long as it exists within the context of this fictive world. From the moment the play starts, every decision you make will be no longer yours but your character's. Whether you will interact with other players, go on a quest, fight, or do something else, the actions are executed in the frame of your character.

At this point, you possibly still imagine yourself on a stage. Within LARP it is highly unlikely that the stage on which the play unfolds is in an actual theatre. In LARP the stage is mostly a location in the real world, such as a vacant building, a basement, or an open space in the forest such as seen in the 'lightning bolt' video.

Important to mention is that there is a big difference between LARP and theatre in terms of the audience. For the play you are about to engage (i.e. LARP) there are no spectators. You and your co-players are your own audience. The performance during this play is directed towards the players themselves. Therefore, unlike a regular theatre play, where spectators enjoy a dramatic experience brought by the actors on stage, in LARP you create a play for yourself.

Just as I felt insecure the first time I became engrossed into a LARP, you also must be confused as you question what to do when the play starts. Because you can be whoever you want to be and do whatever you want to do, the options are limitless, which can cause stress. But do not worry; multiple times I have been told that everyone feels this anxiety for the first time. All I can tell is that you will enter a fictive world; a world of possibilities. Similar to the choices in your ordinary life and

where to focus your attention – which spectacles to witness and which to pass up – you now make comparable decisions about what to do, what to say, and how to behave. You can try to get to know the other characters, you can explore more of this fictive world, you can choose to go on quests, make friends or you may even want to kill. Apart from some agreed upon rules, there are no restrictions. Not for you, nor others.

## **RULES**

The rules of LARP have two parts. The first part is about game rules that are part of the inner game experience. E.g. when a player gives a “*double hit*” call, his assault will produce double damage to the player who receives the blow, or when a player shouts, “*Lightning bolt!*” other players are supposed to imagine his character casting bolts of lightning.

The second part consists out of outer game behavior rules, e.g.: no touching without permission, shields are not allowed to be used as a weapon and the use of a safety word that immediately pauses the entire game.

All rules combined act as tools that guard the safety of the players when engrossed in play. It is this mutual agreement upon specific rules that makes actions and events, which occur within the field of play, not bleed to the ordinary world.

Up till now, nothing is said about the context of the fictive world you were about to engage in. The options for you to choose a certain imaginative setting and character are therefore endless. Now, let me enhance your imagination by providing a clear framework that sketches a particular imaginative context for you to engage in.

I want you to create a fictive character, within the world of Oròm, who lives in a village called Khobar in the land of Jara. Oròm is a high-fantasy world, similar to that of J.R.R. Tolkien’s ‘Middle Earth’ (known of the trilogies of ‘The Lord and the Rings’ and ‘The Hobbit’). In the lands of Oròm, elves and human reign, but orcs also wander around in this world. Whether you want to be a majestic elfish lord, an ordinary human blacksmith, or a mercurial lonesome orc; everything within these three races is possible.

Now think of certain characteristics of your character. Presumably, these characteristics are formed through its lifespan, so a bibliography needs to be created that indicates how history has formed your character. Besides characteristics, also think about certain striking behavior, language, and special abilities, all elements that are needed to establish a vivid character: the more a player *knows* about his created character, the easier one can engross. Dedicated players often chose to write entire bibliographies with detailed narratives about their characters in order to *get to know them*. So if you choose to be a mercurial lonesome orc, think of the paths he has wandered and the things he

has encountered that made him mercurial and lonesome.

Once you are satisfied with the *being* of your character, the outer identity needs to be established. Costumes play an important role in this part. Just as in the ordinary world, clothes and faces become the outer layers of a character's identity. Most players are highly creative with their costumes and often spend weeks on sewing and wandering through thrift shops and jumble sales to putting together a custom made costume that fits their character's identity. Players often are perfectionists, almost vain about the looks of their characters and in this sense LARP is also an exhibition of the most exotic costumes.

I want you to imagine a costume that fits your character's identity as well as the universe he lives in. If your imaginative character is a blacksmith elf, the identity of your costume preferably indicates your race and profession. Do not stop by only imagining clothes. All the outward appearances must be thought through. Haircuts, facial decorations, footwear, and jewelry are other examples that can contribute to a vivid outer image of your character.

At this point you will have an image of the identity and the looks of your imaginative character. Again, think of yourself standing on a stage. But as the play starts that stage is no longer what it physically represents. Imagine that the stage is now the village of Khobar in the land of Jara. Your fictive character stands in the center of the village next to a water well. As you look around your co-players characters will be engrossed in all kinds of village activities. Merchants sit behind their stall, a blacksmith is forging steel on his anvil, and newcomers like yourself are trying to acquire a bed for the night. Although you know something about this universe, your understanding about this village and the people who live here is minimal. Just as in ordinary life you need to interact with other fictive characters (i.e. other players) to learn about this place's social norms, hierarchies and customs. You are a stranger in these lands and only by generating play with other characters you will gain knowledge about this new world.

In short, the creation of a new role in a fictive setting is what we refer to as *role-playing*. As each ordinary actor, you will embody your character with your *mind* and *body*. You will not play this game on a game board, but in a physical atmosphere, in this case a stage. You will perform the actions of your character *live*. This is why it is called *live-action*. The adjustment of a new imaginative role in a fictive setting, combined with a physical performance of your characters' action is what eventually completes the amalgamation: *live-action role-playing*.

### **The mechanisms active in LARP**

Although the aforementioned part has established a basic understanding of LARP, still some confusion may exist about the actual goal of the game. LARP distances itself from ordinary games in that the ultimate reward of the play is not gained through triumph. As Mick mentioned, "*Playing to*

*win, or to gain power and points within the game, is the most toxic mentality you can have. These are people who want to be the invincible wizard and hereby ruin the fun for others.*"<sup>6</sup> The reward must be gained through another spectrum than winning.

Most of the time during the play, players are highly aware that they are merely playing. In similar lines, the audience of a theatre play is most of the time highly aware that the actors are merely performing. However, there are some scarce moments when players get so caught up by the fictive narrative that for a short period in time they are no longer consciously aware that they are playing. In these moments players experience a flow, or high, which is characterized by "*the merging of action and awareness*" (Csikzentmihalyi in Mackay 2001, 85). Within LARP spheres this is called 'immersion'.

My first experience of immersion happened on a vampire LARP which was located in a conference room of a timeworn castle. Walking into this building one could taste the history that it was breathing. The walls of the conference room were covered with dark oak bookcases full of encyclopedias. Above these cases the paintings of influential persons watched over the room like owls over the forest floor. Together with five vampires I was sitting on authentic leather chairs at a massive brown oaken table which occupied the entire length of the hall. Across the room five other vampires were situated on a similar imposing table. One of the chairs was empty, as its owner had just made her way to the middle of the room. Above her head a massive chandelier floated. Its candles provided the room with just enough light to see the contours on her face. As the woman spoke she made the entire room witness her lips cast her thoughtfully chosen words spread into the deepest spheres of our consciousness.

For a moment the awareness of my presence in that room turned to oblivion in light of her performance. No longer was I more than my being in the here and now. In the enchanting spell of her words I became unaware of being engrossed in a fictive narrative. For a short while I was no longer conscious about the fictiveness of this reality. I was immersed into a world of fantasy... until my awareness broke the magnificent of her spell.

Fine (1980, 53) depicts that the possibility of immersion produces the fun in role-playing and Mackay (2001, 84) states that, "*Such moments are the supreme reward for role-playing.*" Jan Maarten, as many other players including myself, underlines these statements. "*When a game becomes enthralling, when it becomes so convincing that it generates real emotions, this is the goal I try to achieve in LARP.*"<sup>7</sup> But what mechanisms are active that help the players to achieve this goal? For this answer we must rewind the gears of time and start at the origin of LARP.

By tracing the forerunners of LARP we end up in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1811, the first war game,

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<sup>6</sup> Interview – 11/02/2017.

<sup>7</sup> Interview – 19/02/2017.

*Kriegspiel*, based on *War Chess*, was created by Herr von Reiszitz and his son, a Prussian artillery officer, which simulated a miniature battle terrain. In this game, opposing players strategically arranged encounters, while random dice rolls simulated the chance factor associated with battlefield encounters. Although the game was originally adopted by the Prussian military for the use in the training of young officers, the game became widely popular as a leisure activity for the late-Victorian and early-modern bourgeoisie (Mackay 2001, 13).

Approximately a century and a half later, around the 1960s, war gaming (e.g. *Kriegspiel*) gradually grew in popularity and became an established hobby (2001, 14). At the end of this decade the fundamentals of war games suddenly changed.

In 1968, Dave Arneson began to experiment with war games in which players controlled individual characters rather than entire armies (2001, 14). Because players were now able to create individual characters or personae, they could develop a much stronger identification with these game figures (Fine 1980, 10). Different from its earlier war game relative, that incorporated a historical and thus static simulation; table-top role-playing became a more flexible game (Fine 1980, 10). With regular games the dice is superior to the movement of the players. In contrast, in table-top role-playing the movement of the character gets communicated by the player through the performance of language; players tell each other what their character's action will be. It is this element of performance that became a defining mechanism in LARP too. Therefore, rather than being bounded to a single scenario, which requires the same structural constraints each time it is played, this form of role-playing allowed its players to do whatever they wish within the confines of their character (Mackay 2001, 14).

Although it is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when the live-action variant came into being, my talks with players indicate that LARP set first foot in the Netherlands around the late 80s, early 90s. LARP is to an extent quite similar to its table-top relative. Both games are situated in an imaginary game world where personified imaginary characters generate the storyline of the game. Just as in table-top role-playing, most imaginary worlds and fictive characters in LARP are created from elements of popular culture, such as science-fiction and fantasy.

However, the vital difference between them is that within LARP the play unfolds itself upon the physical world rather than in the imaginary realm of the players. When Sander and I were on our way to a LARP event, a player who joined us on our trip clarified this distinction as follows, "*Where you role a dice with FRP to see if your character succeeds to dodge a bullet, you actually perform these actions by yourself with LARP.*"<sup>8</sup> The player's ability to dodge, rather than the outcome of the dice roll which, is grounded in luck, decides the outcome of the action in LARP. This element makes players argue

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<sup>8</sup> Fieldnote – 24/03/2017.

that the gameplay feels more realistic as they themselves physically embody the actions and feelings of their characters. With this physical role performance a whole new experience comes into play as this mechanism allow the player's imagination, something that we see as *imaginary*, to be conducted into the physical world, that is *reality*.

But with this unique physical performance feature, a vital limitation of the player's fantasy occurs: the restriction in performance generated by the physical world. Elaborating on the limitation of the player's fantasy by physicality Sander mentioned, *"You can play vampire, but it is impossible to fly, with a waving cape, from rooftop to rooftop. The aspect of flying needs to be incorporated by imagination. A lot of things can be simulated. There is a Star Wars-LARP in Japan, in which a person plays a Jedi and other players play its powers. This is a beautiful creative solution. But especially fantastic elements are hard to simulate within a LARP. Eventually you are limited by the laws of physics. Your fantasy is situated upon the real world and this latter generates its limitation."*<sup>9</sup>

What this comment shows is that there is a continuous friction between the player's fantasy and the way it can be performed within the physical world. As Mackay (2001, 56) states, *"The role-playing game performance may potentially be a dreamfield of unlimited possibilities, but the game mechanics and conventions of the drama sphere limit the limitless possibilities of fantasy."* If this friction between the drama sphere (i.e. the physical world) and the player's fantasy leads to a stalemate, the imagination of other players is addressed to make up for these limitations. At such, even though a player cannot fly from rooftop to rooftop, in the imagination of other players it is possible to for him to hover. Here the importance of the imagination comes into play.

Underneath all the mechanisms that are active in LARP, such as the establishment of an imaginary world, the creation of an imaginary character and costumes, and the use of physical performances lies the inner motivation to shape an imaginative world that becomes real in the minds of the players. From the start of the *Kriegspiel* role-playing has developed itself through stages. Each of these stages has tried to generate an experience more *real* than the one before. Ultimately, with the development of LARP, players can now translate their imagination into the physical world so that they can temporarily experience what happens when their imagination intertwines with the physical realm. What does it feel like being a *real* vampire? What happens when one becomes part of a *real* spaceship's crew? What does someone feel when he or she throws an *actual* lightning bolts killing a *real* monster? LARP is experiencing what it is like to live in another reality, feeling to be a different self, and being immersed into a fictive narrative other than the narrative of our own lives.

But this is not reality. This is play. *"For the duration of the event, LARP allows you to realize a romantic version of reality, but how perfectly executed it may be, eventually you are consciously*

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<sup>9</sup> Interview – 30/01/2017.



*pretending. You are fooling your own rational by saying that Elves, Dwarfs and Orcs exists in your generated reality.*"<sup>10</sup> Players are impeccably aware of the difference between the reality we refer to and the reality they are engaged in. This is beyond a doubt. However, when the utmost goal of the game is reached in the act of immersion, the clear demarcation between play and real, between fantasy and reality, dissolves. For the duration of this moment, how briefly it may be, an intriguing phenomenon occurs where play and real, fantasy and reality, and the imaginative and the true, all align. This may lead to confusion, but the muddle occurs neither in LARP itself, nor in the minds of the players. The confusion occurs due to the hegemonic way of understanding reality in the West indicating that there reigns a clear separation between reality and imagination. LARP illuminates that this simplistic distinction, at times, does not hold up. In the act of immersion the boundary between them gets penetrated; its chasm crossed. Chapter four will explore more profoundly how the hegemonic thought in the Western world has come to understand reality and fantasy as two separated entities, but before we can turn to this; we first need to understand the exact process of how a *new* reality gets constructed in the minds of the players during LARP. This is what the next chapter is devoted to.

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<sup>10</sup> Interview – 19/02/2017.

## Chapter 3: Mental Images and Dissolving the Demarcation between Reality and Fantasy

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My first experience as a LARP player was in an event called '7Realms'. This event was held in the basement of a tall building on the campus of the University of Enschede. The fictive narrative of this day evolved around the celebration of the birthday of a prominent character called 'Malladin'. The basement of the building, our main stage, represented a tavern. One of the basement doors led the players outside to a parking lot which, at the time of the play, represented the forest in which the tavern was located.

*"Let's go outside to find some leather hides for those new shoes you want."* One of the players had noticed my discomfort during the play and tried to help me engross in the play. In our conversation, which was held while we were in our character, my imagination had brought me to a point in which it would make sense to suggest that my character needed new shoes. As my co-player's character immediately saw some opportunities he encouraged us to go outside to look for hides out of which we could craft shoes. And so, there we were; on a concrete paved parking lot. It must have been fascinating to see two grown-up men wandering around in amusing costumes searching for imaginative non-existent game.

In the frame of the player, indeed, we were wandering around on this concrete plateau. However, in the mind of our characters we were making our way deeper into the forest searching for hides. As I became caught up by the narrative, images in my mind envisioned me being in a forest although I was clearly able to see that I was walking on a parking lot. As we wandered around in circles I imagined us walking around on impassable forests paths. Bushes were trying to regain their territory that was taken by the openness of the trail, and fallen trees formed barriers in front of our feet. As these images occurred vividly in my mind, I was still wandering around on the smooth surface of the parking lot.

An intriguing friction occurred between what I was empirically detecting and what my imagination was envisioning. In this chapter I will examine how it could be that I was walking on a concrete paved parking lot between concrete buildings while simultaneously imagining myself being in the woods. Furthermore, I will try to answer the question: *"How could it be that my reality was no longer determined by what my eyes saw, but was formed by the mental images generated in my mind?"*

### Virtuality

Lancaster identifies the process of perceiving the physical world, the material interface, as if it were an imaginary realm as 'virtuality' (in Mackay 2001, 78). In the process of virtuality, conjoins of images

from the past become a new material interface to an immaterial idea that exists wholly within the imagination (2001, 78). Virtuality - which is crucial in LARP - is essentially the addressing of a social framework in which players no longer perceive reality from the material interface of the world, but from within the realms of their imagination. In terms, the experience of my *being* at the parking lot was no longer derived from the material interface of this parking lot, but from a forest generated from conjoins of images of different forests that I had seen throughout my lifetime.

Within LARP players continuously need to alter the image of the physical world to make it correlate with their fictive narrative. The parking lot was by no means part of the fictive narrative and we had to alternate it with imaginative images in our minds. Yet, not only has the environment to be alternated. In addition every element that is incorporated within the play, to more or lesser extent, needs to be modified with a layer of imagination so the physical world becomes synced with the story of the play. Yes, parking lots can be turned into forests, but also dull fights can be alternated to majestic battles, and small objects can change into fearsome lightning bolts. To put it in other words, players continuously project a layer of fantasy on the physical world, so what they see correlates with what they imagine and *vice versa*.

Virtuality is forcing oneself to believe the images that occur in one's imagination to indicate the reality, instead of only trusting what is displayed in front of one's eyes. Even though I was fully aware that I was not walking in the forest, I deliberately forced my mind to think I was; and so I was. This process of deliberately fooling one's own mind is called 'suspension of disbelief' in LARP spheres. In one of my many private conversations via social-media, Jan-Maarten clarified suspension of disbelief as, "*The urge to believe that everything around you is real, and so you force your rational to ignore imperfections.*"<sup>11</sup> When a player, in rare moments, is no longer aware of his suspension of disbelief and temporarily accepts the play as real, a moment of immersion occurs. During my fieldwork I came to understand that suspension of disbelief is more than ignoring certain imperfect images of the physical world that do not correlate with the fictive story. With the suspension of disbelief, these imperfect images are simultaneously replaced with new images from one's own imagination. In this way, my imagination allowed me to see a narrow forest path, covered in forest life, while empirically there was nothing more to see than the sterile smooth surface of the parking lot.

"*Here! I think I found something,*" my co-player was pointing at a manhole cover at the outer edge of the parking lot. "*We should be able to use the hide of that dead animal.*" Although clearly conscious about the squared cast iron look of the cover, I imagined myself seeing a dead animal. "*Yes, that would do it,*" I answered. With some discomfort we performed carrying a dead animal inside the tavern - the basement of an adjacent building.

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<sup>11</sup> Interview - 17/02/2017.

That afternoon I could not help myself thinking how my co-player imagined the forest in his imagination. How different or similar was it from mine? And were we even carrying the same sort of animal? From this reasoning a more abstract question blossomed: “*What determines the mental images that we see in our imagination?*”

### **Mental Images in our Mind**

Through *ekphrasis* a certain mental image must have formed in your imagination when I asked you to envision a fictive character in chapter two. Arguably, this mental picture would be different from person to person even though reading the same instructions. Even when persons are caught up in the same fictive narrative, such as I was with my co-player when we looked for hides our image of the imaginative forest, the mental images that we formed inside our minds would probably be dissimilar. This assumption is underlined by Sean Hendricks (2006, 43) who argues that, “*Each individual has a different mental picture of the fantasy world.*” The question arises that if we perceive the fictive world in our imagination through mental images, what determines the outcome of these images?

Throughout our lives we are exposed to myriad ideas, attitudes, phrases and images which we store as memories. As Mackay (2001, 77) recalls, “*These memories were once embodied in real, non-diegetic environment of the player – everything from day-to-day interaction with others who leave impressions on the player to memorable images culled from the players experience with art.*” Embodied in the real world, tropes are stored in the players’ memory. These self-contained, decontextualized images are what Mackay calls ‘fictive blocks’ (2001, 77). Altogether, these fictive blocks form a *musée imaginaire* (Harvey 1991, 87) in our minds: a museum of experiences and knowledge.

In the act of forming mental images, fictive blocks form an unlimited source of inspiration. In the exercise of the imagination I have asked you to imagine an imaginary character while providing you with certain *leads* such as particular species. In between these leads tremendous gaps were left open in which your imagination had complete freedom to determine the characteristics and looks of your character. The way you have envisioned your character is the outcome of the assembling of multiple fictive blocks encountered at different times and places during your lifespan.

Mackay (2001, 79) argues that the players’ exposures to popular culture is an integral part of their fictive blocks. For example, the world of Oròm, which I described in the same exercise, shares a lot of similarities with J.R.R. Tolkien’s ‘Middle Earth’. Oròm is the world in which the narrative of the LARP of ‘The Balance’ takes place. In my attendance at this LARP I have observed that the costumes of many players are to a large extent based on the costumes that are displayed in the ‘The Lord of the Rings’ and ‘The Hobbit’. Moreover, the Elves, Humans, and Orcs which are the most common

creatures on Oròm, are also present in 'Middle Earth'. The encounter with this fantasy universe, created by Tolkien, has thus formed fictive blocks in the minds of those who have created and play at Oròm.

In terms, popular culture is in Mackay's eyes an inexhaustible source of inspiration for players. Additionally, my experiences suggest that not only popular culture, but all ideas, attitudes, phrases and images that players encounter in their lives are possible sources for imagination.

In one of our interviews, Marieke described one of her characters; a wicked witch who pretends to be a five year old girl. She played this character on '7Realms' and was also present at the birthday of Malladin. In order to generate a realistic image of the madness of her character, she explained that she used a squirrel doll which she called 'Annie' with whom she holds extensive conversations during the game. In our interview I asked her how she got to the idea of using this squirrel. She replied, "*My grandma's name was Annie. We had an intimate bond. She used to stop the bike when she spotted a squirrel. I always enjoyed these moments when I was little.*"<sup>12</sup> That her character carried a squirrel doll called Annie was therefore no coincidence. Her past memories functioned as building blocks for her imaginative character.

Another example occurred when I asked Jan-Maarten how much his character's identity refers to his own self. After a moment of silence he answered, "*I never thought about it, but I am a person who likes to be of use to others, but not always knows how. My character, too, wanted to be of use in his tribe, but was unable and therefore decided to leave. Now I think about it I recognize myself in this behavior. I am helpful person, but if I no longer know how I push myself to the background and prefer to disappear. So, some of my character's characteristics reflect my own.*"<sup>13</sup>

These examples show that mental images in our imagination do not occur *ex nihilo*, but are assembled out of myriad of ideas, attitudes, phrases and images that we have encountered throughout our lives and are stored as fictive blocks in our minds. Popular culture is an essential, but by no means is it the only source of inspiration for players. Everything players encounter throughout their lives can function as possible sources for mental images. Let us return to the concrete paved parking lot...

Walking on a concrete plateau and observing the painted white lines which indicated where cars must park, my *musée imaginaire* hinted that this plateau was a parking lot. Arguably, someone who never saw cars and parking lots in his live before would perceive this concrete plateau as something entirely different. Although empirically there would be no distinction between what our eyes captured, our understanding of this place could be worlds apart. Understanding, in this sense, is not

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<sup>12</sup> Interview – 02/02/2017.

<sup>13</sup> Interview – 08/02/2017.

so much how we *see* our surroundings, but how we *experience* it. In line of this, Laycock (2015) argues that the order of reality is not a characteristic of this world, but an order that we imagine. How we imagine it is determined throughout all ideas, attitudes, phrases and images that we have encountered throughout our lives. This makes him conclude that, "*There is no Archimedean point from which we may perceive the world without recourse to our culturally inherited biases*" (2015, xiii). Our cultural backgrounds may have a far greater influence on how our reality is formed than what we would originally think.

In the hegemonic way of thinking in the West about reality, we come to understand that what we empirically can depict is *real* and what we imagine is *imaginative* (Laycock 2015, xiii). It is hard to think otherwise, because this way of understanding the world is playing by its own rules. Understanding the world differently is often denounced as make-believe, fantasy, imagination and above all insane, because we can empirically proof that what is at the surface of things is real. I will explore this hegemonic perspective on reality more profoundly in the next chapter. For now it is essential for my argument to comprehend that the imagination plays an essential role in perceiving an alternative reality LARP. I have tried to illuminate this process by turning to the example of the concrete paved parking lot when the mental images I imagined, and not what I saw, determined for a moment my reality. In all its innocence, and for some absurdity, LARP teaches us that the hegemonic thought of understanding reality in the West is not all-encompassing. Instead of excluding imagination from reality, LARP forces us to open our eyes for its role in generating our reality. By playing LARP it has opened mine, and I have tried to translate my experiences to open yours. Let us, with these eyes, explore the missing link in this story: what exactly is the hegemonic understanding of reality in the West?

## Chapter 4: The Hegemonic Way we Imagine Reality in the Modern West

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It must have been around 10AM when I sat outside enjoying my cup of coffee. The warmth of the sun was slowly making its way through the foliage of the trees. I was at the LARP called 'The Frontier', which is a science-fiction LARP held at an enormous log cabin in a remote location in Belgium just across the Dutch border. The log cabin is surrounded by a vast coniferous forest, which are characterized by open spaces. Twelve players gathered at one of these open space in front of where I sat. The players all wore identical black SWAT costumes and replica weapons, which gave them an impressive look. In contrast, their performance lacked conviction. In spite of their desperate attempts to form a neatly organized battalion, what I observed were eight men and four women walking aimlessly back and forth. Moreover, continuously players bumped into one another as they were struggling to keep a steady pace. The instructions of the captains were only fuel to more chaos. As their instructions were inconsistent, confusion reigned among the other players. In short, what I observed was a group of players that were unable by their motor skills or due to lack of practice – probably both - to convince the audience of being well-trained troops. Instead, they generated an unintended parody of marching soldiers. Convinced that they too must have felt that their performance was missing the mark, I asked one player who was part of this march about his experience of that morning. To my surprise, he stated that the morning march was *"awesome, because it contributed to the high spirit in the team."*<sup>14</sup> This was not the answer I was expecting. In the conversation that followed I came to understand that my observation of the scene was miles away from what he had experienced. In my observation I was completely focused on the surface and appearance of the display. I focused on the players' skills, their facial expressions, their costumes, and the way they moved through their surroundings. The combination of this formed the image I had about the event and in my ignorance I was convinced that this was reality. However, this reality, by far, was not correlating with the experience of this player.

The dissimilarity between my observation and the player's experience of the same scene kept me busy all day. At moments I started to doubt the truthfulness of the player's comment. Possibly, he was just afraid, or too proud, to honestly reflect on his own performance. But more often I was searching the flaws with my own competence as an ethnographer. Maybe I failed to properly interpret what I observed.

These conflicting thoughts were still in my mind when the night fell. In an attempt to get an answer I

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<sup>14</sup> Fieldnote – 24/03/2017.

chose to share them with Elmar, a player I met the night before. On that evening I already figured he had a brilliant mind and with his experience of more than sixteen years of LARP I thought he could be the right person to help me understand this problem. Without letting me down, he explained that what outsiders see when observing LARP is the outcome of fantasy in the physical world; something that is not representative for a conceptual ordering of experience. He elaborated by referring to the example of an artist. Like an artist who is depending on his locomotive skills to materialize his imagination, a player is relying on his locomotive skills to alter his imagination in the act of performance. When these skills are not adequate – such as with the march – parts of the imagination get erased in the act of the performance. What outsiders perceive is merely a representation of the player's imagination. The result is that what an outsider observes hardly ever correlates to the experience of the player(s)<sup>15</sup>.

With this clear explanation, Elmar shows that the problem of that morning was not due to the untruthfulness of the player, nor that my observations were wrongly interpreted, but that my observations were simply not all encompassing. When I sat there observing twelve players performing a march, I took the outward appearance of the scene for reality. Yet, there was hidden a world of the players' experience out of sight. My way of understanding the scene that morning exposes the hegemonic way of how we have come to understand reality in modern times; namely, as a phenomenon displayed on the surface of things (Mackay 2001, 136). Let us examine this hegemonic thought more profoundly.

Ingold (2011, 110) argues that the fixation on surfaces in the modern thought deprives from Kantian cosmology. According to Kant, "*The extent of the surface is finite and potentially calculable. [Therefore, man] can estimate not only the limits of his present knowledge but also the limits of the entire, potentially knowable world*" (Kant in Ingold 2011, 110). Objects of knowledge, the things we perceive, are in Kant's assumption arrayed upon the surface of the earth. The surface is finite and therefore potentially calculable and knowable. But not only objects, also life, and thus people, find themselves on the outside of a material world-sphere (2011, 110). Reality is then the end-product of the knowledge deprived from the surface of this earth. Consequently, we talk about costumes, performances, buildings, laptops, trees, animals, oceans, and the sky, like everything else, as boundaries; their surfaces incorporate everything there is to know. In similar terms, I was convinced that there was nothing beyond the clumsy marches, the confused faces, the imposing costumes, and the inconsistent instructions. In that moment I surely became a lively example of Ingold's assumption that Kantian cosmology has become the leading influence in the modern way of understanding reality; a reality that is based on outward appearances of things (2011, 110).

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<sup>15</sup> Fieldnote – 24/03/2017.



However, just as Elmar explained, there is a world of experiences that stretches beyond what we can detect. Kandinsky (in Ingold 2011, 206) counters the Kantian view on reality by addressing that there is more than just outward appearances. In terms, he stresses the distinction “*between the inside and the outside, between the internal and external aspects of things*” (2011, 206). In his eyes, the world can be understood through a pane, like in Kantian cosmology, and can be seen from the external aspects of things, or one can plunge into it, become an active part of it, and experience its pulsation with all our senses (2011, 206). Perceiving the world in Kantian tradition obscures a realm of experience; a realm that, in Kandinsky’s eyes, beholds new kinds of truths that, “*Directly touches the soul and sets it in motion*” (Ingold 2011, 206). It is therefore necessary, in his eyes, to grasp the internal aspects of things to generate a full mental experience of space. To the extent that I represented Kantian way of understanding reality, so the player signified a Kandinsky perspective, resulting that we both experienced and understood the same event entirely different.

Let me now relate an experience from the LARP event ‘Vampire: The Masquarade’, which was held in the Dutch city of Rotterdam. Unlike the previous story, this one will not be told from the observer’s perspective, but from my perspective as a player. Therefore, our focus shifts from the outer appearances of the performance, to the inner experience of the play itself. Let us see – or rather experience – what happens when we plunge into the play and experience its pulsation with all our senses.

At this LARP, I was playing a character called ‘Mick’ who was a cunning, posh businessman. Although he was human, Mick was working for a powerful vampire and over time he slowly had made his way into the realm of vampires. He was sent by his boss to Rotterdam that night to retrieve some sensitive information from one of the attending vampires. And so I, or rather Mick, became involved in a political joust with monsters that were strong enough to turn him into ashes with a flick of their fingers.

The play was approximately an hour old when one of the characters received an in-game call with a tip that their enemy was spotted in a hotel room at the other side of the city. After a quick consultation the leading vampires of that night decided that they wanted to take the risk of being ambushed and make a quick visit to the hotel. To my surprise, Mick, together with five other vampires, became appointed to infiltrate the room and exterminate the enemy. With the cover of the darkness that the evening provided, we drove in a van to the hotel. Luckily, Mick’s costume was a fashionable suite so I felt rather comfortable being out in the *real world*, but all the other players were wearing dark eyeliners added with large leather jackets, tight black scarred jeans, and punky hairstyles. Their remarkable looks surely made them feel uncomfortable; now our play moved itself into the real world, as one player recalled.

Arriving on location we parked the van around the corner in an adjacent alley. Out of sight from any

random passerby's we forged a plan of attack. Together with the secrecy of the mission, this thought was slowly increasing the level of adrenaline rushing through my veins. As we walked out of the cover of the darkness and the lights of the lobby exposed our presence, my mouth ran dry and my hands turned clammy. It felt as if I was part of a thrilling Hollywood movie scene.

As we made our entry into the hotel, a large lobby full of people separated us like a wall from the nearest elevator. Trying not to attract too much attention, we crossed the hall as fast as we could. My heart was pounding an addictive cocktail of excitement and fear to the outer corners of my body. As I almost reached the elevator my eyes crossed with the receptionist behind the desk. I could just see the bewilderment in her eyes, as she observed this group of macabre creatures surrounding a man in a suit, before the closing elevator door cut off our eye contact. With shaking hands I pressed the button with the number six on it and soon the elevator went up. We braced ourselves, not knowing what waited for us at the other side of the door once we arrived at the 6<sup>th</sup> floor.

As we were moving our way up, I looked at the appearances of my co-players while I thought back about the bewildered expression in the eyes of the receptionist. From her outsiders perspective it must have been absurd to see five grown-ups dressed in absurd costumes, accompanied by one man in a suit entering the lobby nervously. If I were her I would have had similar confusing, scornful thoughts. However, I was engrossed into a fictive narrative in which these macabre creatures were real vampires and this was no ordinary lobby but a possible vampire battleground. When I crossed the lobby I was not busy thinking about the way we looked, rather I became completely caught up in the excitement of the play. My pounding heartbeat, sweaty hands, and dry mouth were indicators of how real the play was to me. Although we were in the same lobby, what she *saw* and what I *experienced* were worlds apart.

My point by telling this story is not to argue that her perspective was less real than mine, or *vice versa*. I tell this story because it makes us question if reality, that we have come to understand in a Kantian way, is really as all-encompassing as we might believe. Not only this story, but LARP in general shows us that there is more to understand than just the outward surface of things. It shows us that when we plunge ourselves into the LARP world we force ourselves to experience the internal aspects of things. We become engrossed in a world that does not necessarily correlate with its outer appearances. I totally misjudged the experience of the player who was engrossed in the march as I blindly assumed that my observation was representative of his experience. Moreover, when I switched perspectives in the story that followed, my experience did not correlate with what an outsider would observe.

My encounter with Elmar made all puzzle pieces fall into place. Not only did his comment make me realize that I had experienced a profound example of the hegemonic understanding of reality in the West with myself in a leading role, but he also made me comprehend that LARP is more than just a

performance played out in front of our eyes. If we want to grasp what players experience during a play we must plunge into their world and actively participate to experience it ourselves. But there is something else hidden in this notion. In chapter three I have argued that one's imagination is a vital tool in generating a new reality in LARP. In this matter, I showed how in the act of play a concrete paved parking lot could be turned into a forest by using my imagination. In this chapter I illustrated how LARP allows a player to temporarily understand his world from the realm of experience, rather than from what he or she empirically detects. If we melt these two findings together, we come to the understanding that the answer from which I started this journey, "*What do players gain from engaging in live-action role-playing?*", may lay in the ability of LARP to allow its players to understand and see reality from a new perspective; a perspective that focusses on the realm of the imagination. I devote my last chapter to elaborate on this thought.

## Chapter 5: The Way Live-action Role-playing Empowers Players

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April the 8<sup>th</sup> 2017, my fieldwork is approximately two and a half months old. At the moment I am attending a LARP event called 'The Balance' in the outer corners of the Dutch Southwest province Zeeland. The terrain on which this event is held is extraordinary. Five small wooden cabins and one larger hut are situated around an open field which forms the base of our camp. The small footpath behind the hut takes one to a beautiful river meandering through the landscape on its way to the North Sea. Following the river to the right, one arrives in an open field where cattle are grazing. Behind the field is a forest that follows the contours of the river as far as the eye can see. All this terrain is part of this event's stage. The camp represents the village in which all the main activities are held. In here, merchants try to sell their goods, travelers who just arrived in the camp bargain with the innkeeper about the cost of a room for the night, and village guards stroll around with their intimidating armor and weapons. The space outside this camp, the field with cattle and the forest, represents a dangerous and unknown outside world where bandits roam around and mystical creatures can be spotted. This all together forms the terrain of 'The Balance' and right now I stand in the middle of the camp, next to a bonfire while staring at people at the other side of the camp.

It is late afternoon and players who played the village guards have made themselves comfortable on one of the benches between the hut and the cabins. Exhausted from running around in armor while chasing bandits of the land, simultaneously trying to avoid disturbing the cattle, they seemed to be tired of performing. As I approach them I come to understand they are no longer engrossed in the fictive narrative - something that is called 'dipping' in LARP spheres. Rather, they are telling each other war stories about marvelous experiences at previousLARPs. When I am close enough I politely ask if I can join them. A short, stocky man wearing a full length coat of chain mail, nods and greets me with a smile while he wipes away the sweat that is rolling from his forehead. I sit down at a clear spot at the end of the bench, feeling that all eyes are now on me.

I make a brief determination of whether I should introduce my character or myself. Considering that they are dipping I choose the latter option. *"Thanks for allowing me to sit here and excuse me for interrupting your conversation."* I continue by briefly telling them who I am and carefully add, *"I am doing a research on LARP, so I am quite interested in about your experiences."* Being transparent in my role as a researcher always generates a certain reaction among players that raises their alertness. Jan Maarten has clarified this by mentioning, *"We do not appreciate inquirers slumming from a distance. We all try to generate a safe environment for opening your heart. When the whole town is*

*watching us this is complicated.*<sup>16</sup> Although these persons are dipping, I observe in their gestures and facial expression that they, indeed, feel as if the whole town is watching after they came to know who they invited at their table.

During my fieldwork I have become experienced with taking down the wall of skepticism that reigns around my role so I start to tell one of my war stories as an indication of my experience in LARP. *“One of the most epic moments since I play LARP was at the event of ‘The Frontier’. On a particular moment I had to play the role of an elite sniper who was part of a legion of hostile aliens. My mission was to assassinate as many players as possible without being noticed. (Exaggerating) I have lain hidden under a pile of leaves for over one hour before they spotted me and killed me close combat.”* A large bald man who is in his forties, and has a goatee, gestures that he want to reply on my story. He is sitting next to the one who had politely nodded and it seems as he recognized parts of my fictive story. *“I have also played on Frontier,”* he states affirmingly. Without providing me with the opportunity to reply, he continues to tell a story of something he experienced that weekend while continuously searching for recognition from my side. My tactic has payed off. The state of alertness has ebbed and everyone at the table is again starting to concentrate on telling war stories. My presence functions no longer as a suppression factor to speak openly.

As the talk continues, I come to know that both the short and the bald man are friends in their ordinary lives and have played LARP for over fifteen years. One of their most impactful experiences in LARP happened when both of them got captured and sentenced to death after having committed a murder. The entire village was summoned to the main square and watched their execution. Commenting on their experience the short one speaks, *“It was a marvelous and engaging experience. I had to watch my friend die, with the knowledge that I would die soon after. Emotions of anger, impotency, sadness and grief were rushing through my veins. I will hardly ever experience these emotions in such an extent separately in my ordinary life, let alone all together.”*

Clearly being moved by the recapturing of his own memory I asked him if this rush of emotions made him feel alive. By the puzzling expression on his face I noticed he was not fully grasping my question so I elaborated, *“It sounds like LARP enables you to feel deep, almost primal emotions, which can make you feel that you are alive.”* Two dark blue eyes stared at me like I just spoke Elvish. The bald man noticed the incomprehension of his friend and answered for him, *“That is hard to tell. It is not at that exact moment that you consciously feel to be alive. At that time you are only focused on the acting part. It is after the play when you consciously can think back about the marvelous scene you have established which each and every one. The energy you get from that, this is what makes you feel alive.”*

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<sup>16</sup> Interview – 19/03/2017.

The guy sitting next to me is wearing an impressive majestic full coat of armor that almost looked surreal compared to the modest costumes of the previous two. Up to now he seemed to be into a trance-like state as he carefully observed the wavy vapor patterns arising from his hot coffee. However, the subject twist awakes him and suddenly he starts to join in the conversation, *“For me, LARP allows me to explore and develop parts of myself. Can I be a bad guy? Can I be a good guy? Can I be harsh? Can I be a soldier? Can I be a businessman? LARP allows me to experience glimpses of what it is like to be somebody else. It allows me to walk, for a while, in somebody else’s shoes.”* The short guy once again nods approvingly.

The other three men at the table, all wearing the same bluish armor with golden details which makes them look more like elite guards of a powerful king than guards of an ordinary village, now also start to join in the conversation. One of them, who has his long brown hair in a tight ponytail, states, *“More than experiencing to be another person LARP, for me, is a way of letting go of myself...”* the bald one interrupts him, *“LARP is a holiday, in which you no longer need to think about all the oppressing things in life.”* The short one, who is apparently recovered from the confusion of my question, adds, *“For some, LARP provides a safe environment in which players can try things they would never do in their ordinary lives, because there are no consequences and it feels liberating to try them out.”* With this comment a whirlwind of sounds spread across the table as all try to gain each other’s attention to tell another war story about the weirdest thing they tried in LARP. I hear stories about torture, nasty betrayal, lion courage, humiliation, awkwardness and random ceremonies. But seeing through all these war stories, told by men eager to overrule each other, one can detect the forming of friendships. A story that is told is a search for communality. When this is replied with a new story the search is answered. LARP generates space to establish social bonds that can turn into friendships and even relationships. With this thought in mind I thank the village guards for their time and transform myself back into the fictive story. After all, the play does not stop for anybody and my imaginary character has still a lot of unfinished business to do...



In this conversation I had with the village guards all the different answers I have heard through my fieldwork to the question what players gain from LARP get reinforced. Although this list may not be all-encompassing, it certainly gives a clear indication what players gain from LARP. There should be noted that the answers do not exclude one another, as players often address a combination of these reasons to the question why they play.

First, some players play to encounter moments and experience emotions that are rare in ordinary life. One player commented on this, *“At one moment I played a leading figure on an event. When you stand there and twenty men are shouting your name, this feels marvelous. When you hear later from*

*players that they loved the scene, this gives you even more thrills. But it does not have to be grandiose. Also intimate scenes, like when my leg needed to be amputated when I was attacked by zombies, can be awesome and give you an adrenaline rush. These moments make me feel like I am alive.*<sup>17</sup>

Second, some play to gain knowledge about themselves by exploring how it feels to play a different role, and others play a new role to experience what it feels like to be someone else. Marieke made a profound comment on this in one of our interviews, *“When you have difficulties with approaching someone in real life, then you can create a character that is very social. In this way you force yourself to approach people, but then in a safe environment of LARP. The worst thing that can happen is that your character dies, but then, you know... you just create a new one.”*<sup>18</sup> In another interview she commented on my observation that I believed LARP made her land on her feet: *“Yes, it has made me stronger. I know who I am, I know my boundaries, and I am willing to be myself. This idea is comforting.”*<sup>19</sup>

Third, some players play to escape the grind of ordinary life and let go of burdens and oppressive thoughts. One player told me during an event that she was suffering from depression. For her LARP was a method to shift her depressive thoughts and to focus on a world which allowed her to be the person she wanted to be. In her ordinary life, she knew exactly which path she needed to take to fit in with others, to become accepted, but this was not her path. LARP allowed her to meet with like-minded people, to live in a world which she felt like she belonged. For her LARP is a way to give meaning to her life, or to put it in her own words, *“LARP is an enhancement of my life.”*<sup>20</sup>

Fourth, some play because they see LARP as a safe environment for social experiments, so they become more skilled in handling difficult situations and interactions in their ordinary lives. One player I spoke to during an event described this in a brilliant metaphor. *“LARP is a safe environment, a carton box which can safely be put away after the play is over. Social experimenting in the real world is like throwing a rock in a lake: its effects stay visible like wrinkling waves over the smooth surface of the water. Social experimenting in LARP is more like throwing a rock on a beach: no wrinkling waves are generated. LARP is experimenting without consequences. In this matter, I am much more confident now to have conversations with strangers, something I would eagerly try to avoid before I engaged in LARP.”*<sup>21</sup>

Fifth, some play because it allows them to get into contact with like-minded people and to search for new friendships. This is what happened with Sander and his friends who I mentioned in chapter one.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview – 07/03/2017.

<sup>18</sup> Interview – 02/02/2017.

<sup>19</sup> Interview – 10/02/2017.

<sup>20</sup> Fieldnote – 25/03/2017.

<sup>21</sup> Fieldnotes – 18/02/2017.

They are certainly not an exception to the rule. Many of the befriended players I played with mentioned that they have met each other at LARP events.

Lastly, some play simply for the fun, , as one player mentioned, *“Eventually, play is about generating joy within each and every one,”*<sup>22</sup> or to put it in Goffman’s words, *“Games can be fun to play, and fun alone is the approved reason for playing them”* (in Fine 1980, 53). Whether it is a simple enrichment or an impactful enforcing in their ordinary lives, all of these aforementioned reasons to engage in LARP behold the capacity to empower the lives of players. Yet, they do not fully answer my question what players gain from LARP.

During my fieldwork these reasons always felt shallow. It seemed that there was something more significant beyond their surface. Players can address different roles when joining a theatre club, and they can immerse into imaginary world through books, movies, series, and videogames. In other words, these empowerments can also be found elsewhere. What makes LARP unique in the eyes of its players?

There is a reason why I have spent the previous chapters examining the interplay and interaction of fantasy and reality in LARP. What makes LARP unique among other ways through which people can extract themselves from their ordinary lives, is that in LARP players not only generate an imaginary world, but that their goal is to accept this world for a moment in time as their reality. This reality is not based on a Kantian cosmologic understanding, but generated through imagination. In here a peculiar phenomenon occurs in which their fantasy becomes a new reality. For a moment players can physically walk in the shoes of fantasy creatures and roam around in fantasy world, while perceiving this as reality. Through this process they find ways of empowerment and consequently meaning in their lives. Transcending into an imaginative world, then, is not merely a passive escape out of their ordinary lives, but simultaneously an active enrichment of it. This is what makes LARP unique and utterly valuable to its players.

Tsing (2015) shows that even in the ruins of capitalism new forms of life, in which humans, plants, animals and nature collaborate, flourish that can spark hope. In a world in which the powerful currents of modernization, globalization, capitalism, science, and others, are constantly shaping and reshaping the landscape, people can often become estranged from their experience of life (2015, 6). I have followed the same path that Tsing has outlined and addressed the flourishing of LARP as a mushroom sprouting from the ruins of a narrowed vision on reality. The world from a Kantian cosmology perspective is one in which we can believe in the realness of the surfaces of the cars we drive, the iPhones we use, the skyscrapers we built, the laptops on which we watch Netflix, the sky that roams above our heads, and the ground on which we walk. On the contrary, fantasy is not

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<sup>22</sup> Fieldnote – 25/03/2017.



permissible to *believe* in and is often deemed as superstition, irrelevant, and pointless (Huizinga 1938, Fine 1980, Laycock 2015). In this world, our world, there is little use for the imaginative faculty because what is created here is deemed not *real*; it is only *imaginary*. Is it possible that an intellectual tradition, which makes us perceive reality as the calculable and knowable surface of this earth, can be suffocating for certain individuals and consequently function as a new *ruin*?

Mackay (2001, 147) answers this question for us by stating: “*People need to exercise their mind’s eye to scan horizons invisible to the naked eye and unavailable for the foot to tread. [The] popularity of fantasy grows when the experience of people in their daily lives are increasingly narrowed and limited, reduced to the surface only*” (2001, 147). Indeed, I have emphasized the hegemonic way of understanding reality as a factor that narrows and limits the experience of players in their ordinary lives. It is in LARP that players find a place outside the mundane world that allows them to break free from these chains. In here are allowed to make long walks in their imagination, with the ultimate bonus that their fantasies can be alternated to a new reality. It is in this marvelous place that players find empowerments for their regular life. If we look at these empowerments, will it still be possible to address LARP, and fantasy and imagination alike, as something irrelevant if its effect, the social and cultural significance it has on its participants, is so mammoth? I believe we cannot – not anymore.

## Conclusion

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Let us return to the story that I told in chapter one about the play of the RPG game 'Rogue Trader' at Sander's home with his friends. I will continue from the moment where I stopped. I am making my way back to nearest bus stop after having said goodbye to Sander and his friends. The cold winter night is embracing my body in utter chillness and I walk in a firm pace to keep my body warm. The temperature must have fallen below freezing by now. Arriving at the bus stop I already see the headlights of my bus approaching in the distance. After a couple of seconds waiting I enter the bus and plunge down in nearest empty seat.

The bus takes off. Completely exhausted by the continuous stimulation of my imagination during the game, the rhythmic passing of streetlights steers me in a trance-like state. I start to focus on the openness and straightness of the streets and sidewalks along which the bus is traveling. The scene reminds me of the geographer Miles Ogborn. In his study of the paving of the streets of Westminster in the City of London, Ogborn shows that the construction of sidewalks offer the modern pedestrians a street surface that is smooth and uniform, regularly cleaned, free from clutter and properly lit (in Ingold 2011, 42). The sidewalk that runs parallel to the track of the bus, lighted up by the passing streetlights, establishes, just as the road, order of movement. The bus follows the road as the pedestrian follows the sidewalk.

To a certain extent a similar process through which societies generate a social constructed framework from which they perceive a correlated reality occurs. Throughout its life each individual in a society is exposed to ideas, attitudes, phrases and images, all slightly different from the next person. To generate order out of this chaos of myriad perspectives, society needs to engage into world-building projects – creating imaginative roads that direct how reality should be perceived. In line with Laycock (2015) I perceive these roads as culture. Just as the physical roads steer the movement of the bus, so does culture steer how individuals should understand their world.

The imaginative roads of our time move us to understand reality, as shown in chapter four, in a Kantian Cosmological way of thinking. Like the tires of our busses and the shoes we walk in are fixated upon the surface of the roads, so are our eyes fixated upon the outer surface of what we see, as it is at this level that reality is incorporated. The intriguing part about this way of thinking is that it depicts everything that can be empirically detected as *real* and everything that falls out of this categorization as *imaginative* (Laycock 2015). In this perspective reality is displayed in front of our eyes. This seems as obvious as walking on sidewalks, instead of the middle of the road.

In chapter three, however, it is demonstrated that the surface of concrete constructs like roads, sidewalks, and parking lots, but also that of laptops, trees, animals, oceans, and the sky, as anything

else, may not be as static and objective as we think. It is through LARP that individuals are allowed to perceive reality not from its outer appearance, but from the inner experience constituted through their imagination. Engrossed in the fictive narrative of the play, players are enabled to alternate what they see by replacing these images with mental images in their imagination. As such, concrete paved parking lots can morph into an imaginative forest; a forest that can be, for the player who is engrossed in the game, just as real as the parking lot itself.

In chapter one and chapter two I have used *ekphrasis*, the power of words to evoke images, to let you imagine who these players are and how LARP works. Although these chapters are valuable for their documentary data, they also have been designed to illuminate the process through which imagination helps us to understand certain phenomena. In the process of reading you have constantly filled in the gaps of incomprehension, consciously or unconsciously, with mental images that made it understandable. You may be familiar with LARP or never heard of it before reading this text. But every idea, attitude, phrase and image you have encountered in your life, being related or not related to LARP, is a possible source to help you understand this text. A similar process occurs in LARP, in which all the chaos of the imaginative world is rendered understandable through the imagination - sometimes successfully and sometimes utterly failing. But it is exactly the reaffirmation that our imagination can be (or is) a valuable human ability in understanding, and thus experiencing the world, that is essential to why LARP is meaningful to its players.

The bus halts at a remote bus stop to let one of the other passengers out. The girl, who must be around her twenties, politely greets the bus driver before gracefully hopping off the bus with her white sneakers onto the concrete sidewalk. I observe that she neatly stays on the track the sidewalk provides her, making no attempt to wander off. If the girl embodies how reality should be perceived by the social framework of our times, then players embody individuals who feel the deep urge to go off-track and walk on the green spaces. Not that players denounce regular routes that roads and sidewalk provide them to go from A to B. Instead, they want to explore alternative paths; paths that allow them to use their imagination. LARP provides them with such a path and the result is marvelous.

Through LARP players empower their ordinary lives in myriad ways, as shown in chapter five. By engaging in this play, players may gain wonderful and unique experiences, do things they thought they were never capable of, learn things about themselves and others, be overcome by emotions that are both affecting as relieving, forget for a moment the person their social surrounding depicts them to be, and make friends along the way. It may be one of these, all of them, or something entirely different. Yet, eventually, players return empowered and enriched to the ordinary world. This is the answer to the question from which I have started my fieldwork, "*What do players in The Netherlands gain from engaging in live-action role-playing?*" LARP beholds the power to carry players

to a world that lies beyond ours; a world in which the coalescence of fantasy and reality occurs; a world in which they can explore the powers of their imagination; a world from which they do not return empty handed.

The bus arrives at Utrecht Central Station, my final destination. After a night of being engrossed into an imaginary world I remind myself that I am not the kind of person who longs to take an alternative route. As I hop off I immediately start to enjoy the clarity the roads, sidewalks, and signs provide. They are here to provide structure to the movement of people that would otherwise fall into chaos. Culture, in similar lines, structures the chaos of the social world. It answers, for example, how to perceive reality. But what if this way of understanding feels unsatisfying? I believe LARP provides an answer to this question for its players. It allows them to engross in a place in which they can use their imagination to generate a new reality – the coalescence of fantasy and reality. This journey on the interplay between reality and fantasy in the Western world, through the lens of LARP, has changed my perspective on how to understand our world. It provided me with an understanding of how culture determines our reality, and how groups may alter this understanding by engrossing in projects of “otherworldliness”, such as LARP. My view has changed - I hoped yours has too.



Let me briefly reflect on my role as an ethnographer in the field and the role this work might have for future research. With the exception of observations during workshops and interviews, I chose to actively participate. This meant that I functioned as an active player during events. Consequently, my role as a researcher during play became secondary. Note-taking, for example, would only intervene the flow of play and constrain the quality of my experience. By using the method of experiencing directly (*verstehen*) I have tried, to put it in Fine’s words, “[To] gain a more intensely personal understanding of the behavioral dynamic of this social world, and, permit the reader a similar experience” (1980, 249). This form of participant observation has been criticized in terms that one’s presence inevitably alters behavior (Fine 1980, DeWalt & DeWalt 2011, O’Reilly 2012). Yet, it felt desirable for my research to learn the ropes by being an active player, as much of the happenings during PLAY – as argued – stay obscured for the observer. During play I have not experienced signals that I was influencing others by my presence as an ethnographer. At times my involvement during play turned to a level in which I no longer was aware of my role as a researcher and fully immersed in gameplay. Even this has been useful to experience and translate the form of utmost pleasure players witness in LARP, which is immersion. Although I am aware of the criticism in relation to active participating, I am confident this method has only contributed positively to the quality of my fieldwork and extracted data.

The outcome of this three month of fieldwork which is translated into this work, may serve as a

paradigm for critical scholarship on a form of popular entertainment that is in its earliest stage of development; LARP. Yet, I believe that my conclusions can be applied beyond the subject of my work. My work illuminates that LARP empowers its participants in myriad ways and I am confident similar results can be found for other forms of popular entertainment. It is hereby that I feel required to state that the time has come that (more) forms of popular entertainment step out of the shadow of irrelevance, in academic terms but also in popular thought. Their influence on the lives of some are simply too large to longer be ignored.

Furthermore, LARP is a unique product of the contemporary (Western) world, which makes it an interesting object for social research. Its existence indicates a coming together of unique processes of our time. Throughout this work I have focused on how the Western world has come to understand reality and attempts to see LARP as a product through which people ought to search for understandings beyond. Yet, this might be only the tip of the iceberg. Capitalism, modernization, rationalization and globalization are only but a few angles that seem legit through which the existence and popularization of LARP, and other new forms of popular entertainment, can be explored. In lines with Tsing (2015) I therefore encourage others to search for astounding places of possibilities, adaptations, empowerments, and hope that blossoms in the cracks generated by major processes signifying our contemporary world. It is in these cracks, or what Tsing (2005) calls *friction*, that I believe a better understanding of the complexity of our contemporarily world can be found. Tsing (2015) has used the matsutake mushroom as a pave to explore the processes of our time and the way persons (and nature) deal with it. In this work I have replaced the matsutake for LARP. I encourage others to search for new lenses through which new adaptations and empowerments of people and groups can become illuminated. Let my work be a start in triggering your own fantasy and imagination.

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