

"Reality" and Ridiculousness

The Live Action Roleplayer Experience at St. Olaf College

Jake Koch

Abstract

Live Action Roleplaying (LARP) at St. Olaf College is a marginalized and distinct group. This paper examines the origins of the LARP game at St. Olaf and how the game itself is played. In addition, the paper moves toward considering the structure of the LARP group and the ways individuals can be successful at LARPing. Throughout, the paper contextualizes LARP gameplay within the larger social space of St. Olaf College.

Major Points

- St. Olaf students are both weirded out and fascinated by LARP
- LARPer's create versions of themselves in characters
- LARPer's must internalize themselves to the in-game and out-game rules and regulations of the LARP game
- Honesty and honor in LARP gameplay is threatened by social relationships between LARPer's at St. Olaf
- Relationships between PCs and NPCs are characterized by power their actions have over the other group
- Individual success is dependent on personal enthrallment and willingness to be ridiculous
- LARP gameplay is characterized by contradictions between stated goals and observed behavior

"Reality" and Ridiculousness

Live Action Roleplaying Experience at St. Olaf

St. Olaf Social Space and LARP

Of the variety of students and activities on the St. Olaf college campus, few draw as much attention as Live Action Role Play (LARP). Live Action Role Players (LARPer's) dress in full costume, paint their faces, and fight one another with foam weapons. LARP becomes something of a spectacle for other students; the behavior and dress are so far beyond St. Olaf norms, they "weird out" and "freak out" other students.

The LARP "spectacle" occupies a contradictory place in St. Olaf's social landscape. LARP is a marginalized group on the campus; they are weird and strange, and their behavior does not conform to the general student population. At the same time that students marginalize and exclude

LARP, they also manifest an almost obsessive fascination. Nearly every student knows, and more often claims to know, *something* about LARP. No one attends LARP events or socializes with LARPer, yet students know about and interested in LARP.

LARP's position as both socially unappealing and alluring is best understood with an example. On a Wednesday night in the spring semester of 2008, non-LARPer students created a "drunk LARP" event. The organization of such an event explicitly shows there is a wide awareness of LARP amongst non-LARPer at St. Olaf. More importantly, the event shows that LARP is something to be made fun of and lampooned. The event is not to play the game; rather, students will engage in a collective joke at the absurdity of LARPing. Being drunk simply assures and legitimizes absurd behavior. Of course, being inebriated also legitimizes the students to act on their fascination with the "weird" LARPer. The game is both a farce of LARP and a way to play LARP without the stigma. Drunken LARP proves that the LARP is a socially significant group, both amongst its members and amongst the greater St. Olaf population.

The research is collected within the context of the St. Olaf College campus. Project research techniques included interviews and unobtrusive and participatory observation. Project research was collected at St. Olaf College. St. Olaf College is a private, liberal arts college affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). St. Olaf College is located in Northfield, Minnesota, a small town of 18,256. Ninety-six percent of the 3,040 students enrolled live on campus. St. Olaf prides itself on a rigorous academic atmosphere and students are encouraged to develop themselves in mind, body, and spirit.

St. Olaf is also characterized by a culture of success. St. Olaf students routinely add concentrations and double and triple major. In addition, in the past academic year two Olaf students were named Rhodes scholars. St. Olaf is not unique in that its students receive awards and scholarships. However, at St. Olaf, there is a strong tendency to view this level of success as natural and normal for St. Olaf students as a population, rather than the unique accomplishments of exceptional students.

St. Olaf also has a pervasive culture of service. Most students are heavily involved in volunteering and service projects. The campus theme for the academic year is "being a global citizen", a theme which is featured in classes and talks around campus. Not everyone is service oriented and people rarely frame their daily experiences in terms of global citizenship; however, these values provide a baseline direction for student academics and activities. A general, but fair description of St. Olaf would detail the small size of the community and the cultural pressures to orient oneself toward achievement and service.

Origin of LARP at St. Olaf

LARP (Live Action Role-Playing) at St. Olaf was started in the fall of 2007. Rather than beginning by LARPing, the founder (and current game master) organized Saturday events that focused on the fighting aspect of gameplay and ignored role-playing and story. Beginning in interim 2008, the founder organized and held the first LARP events with three other people. Through second semester, as events were held on a more regular basis, four to five more members joined. Beginning in the fall semester 2007 LARP events were held Tuesdays and Saturdays. About five freshmen joined to play regularly, bringing the group total near fifteen. LARP members expect about five more freshman regulars to join next year and two incoming freshman already guaranteed their attendance at Accepted Senior Day.

The LARP Game

Games are recreational activities “characterized by: (1) organized play, (2) competition, (3) two or more sides, (4) criteria for determining the winner, and (5) agreed-upon rules” (Roberts, Arth, Bush 1959: 597). By this definition, LARP meets every requirement for being considered a game except number four. Do to the ongoing nature of the story and plot in LARP, games do not occur in finite time and winners cannot be rigidly defined. However, because a player can “lose” if their character dies, it seems reasonable that players whose characters continue to achieve higher levels of skill and ability are “winning.”

Games can also be classified into three general types: games of physical skill, of strategy, and of chance (Roberts, Arth, Bush 1959: 597). LARP incorporates all three types: first, it demands players be physically skilled and capable of fighting and running; second, it forces players to interact and cooperate strategically to complete group and personal missions and goals; and third, due to the unpredictability of interactions between characters and the loose plot structure, LARP is often shaped by chance.

Live Action Roleplaying is a game, albeit a complex one, that participants play. This point is obvious, yet integral to analyzing LARP. The importance of viewing LARP as a game can best be explained by utilizing a comparison between dreams and games by Christopher Cherry.

“Compare the following pair:

- It happened in a dream.
- It happened in a game.

(1) implies that whatever it was did not *really* happen, did not happen in actual fact: it was merely dreamed. The contrast between ‘in reality’ and ‘in a dream’ is immediate and clear. With (2), there is no such contrast for there is no such implication. ‘It happened in a game’ does not imply ‘It did not really happen’, or ‘It did not happen in actual fact’.” (Cherry 1976: 58)

Using Cherry’s account illuminates two key points about LARP as a game. One, events that happen(ed) in the LARP game have a real quality; the players who play regard LARP events as real and significant. Two, though the LARP world is considered fantasy, it exists. Games happen in actual fact. Thus, these two points insist that the characters and social world of LARP be considered relevant because they happen.

“Doing” LARP: Creating Characters

The LARP game played at St. Olaf is modeled from the New England Roleplaying Organization (NERO) game, started in 1989. The official NERO rulebook, which several LARPer own, serves as benchmark for the St. Olaf game. St. Olaf LARP utilizes the NERO game system as its framework, with several modifications that limit and enhance some skills and abilities. The rulebook makes the importance of role-play and character involvement explicit from the beginning: “the purpose of NERO is to tell a story. You are a character in that story and the more real you make that character, the better the story will be” (Ventrella 2005: 8). Thus the rulebook itself is overt in emphasizing character and plot over fighting and battles. The book encourages players to spend time on their costumes, and emphasizes the importance of honesty, fair play, and safety.

Of equal importance is a detailed reference for uses and values of items and magic. The handbook serves as a starting point for the creation of characters. To create a character, a player can choose from one of twelve races and six classes. Charts are provided which detail the skill advantages and disadvantages of race and class as well as different skills and weapons available to each. Choosing race, class, skills, and weapons is the bare minimum. NERO encourages characters to develop character histories that will make the characters more real and rounded.

In addition, developing a character requires the player to develop a personality for that character. St. Olaf LARPer consistently created personalities in one of three ways. The first way is to create a character whose personality is the opposite from one's own personality. This method is challenging and frustrating; one player remarked "it is extremely difficult to be a loud, talkative character if you aren't that way out of game. Even though it's fake, it's hard to fake it."

The second method is to create a character whose personality exaggerates one portion of one's own personality. This method is considered easiest, because it makes the length of the bridge between oneself and the character shorter. One player described the personality of their character as their own personality, but more "naïve and innocent." Another player stated "every character I play is a part of me." Indeed, most players said their characters were in some way modeled after themselves.

The final strategy involves creating a character with personality traits one may desire, but does not have. One player mentioned that their character was an opportunity to be "more carefree and naïve," an alternative to the regular stress and pressure of being a student at St. Olaf. As characters develop over time, their personalities tend toward this third mix of personal and chosen personality traits.

It is interesting to note that in addition to characters exhibiting personality traits of their players, one can also approach the relationship between player and character as players exhibiting personality traits of characters. One player explicitly stated that they came to conclusions about another player's out of game personality based on in-game experience. Many players often described other LARPer in terms of their character. For example, one player described a fellow PC as "hilarious out of game too." Admittedly, these descriptions were utilized at times because the researcher only knew LARPer with respect to characters. However, describing a player in terms of their character opens up the possibility of defining players in terms of their characters. However, it would be a false conclusion to assume LARPer are constantly identity-confused or that they are more their character than themselves. Rather, players are both themselves and their characters, and these identities influence and inform one another.

"Doing" LARP: Entering the Social World of LARP

After choosing a character and a skill set, one begins game play. The most difficult part is accessing the in-game society and world in place. The amount of information one must know to "live" in the LARP world is overwhelming. For example, within the context of just a battle, a player must know what damage they hit for with one hand, two hands, from the front, back, and behind, how much armor and what type of armor they are wearing, and finally, how many life points they have. The complexity and amount of knowledge needed to play increases considerably as magic and other different aspects of the world become involved. First year LARPer affirmed the difficulty of assimilating into the LARP world; players remarked they were not comfortable in-game until their third or fourth event.

The first step in integrating into the social world of LARP requires players to re-characterize St. Olaf space into LARP space. The student lounge in the Hilleboe-Kittelsby is re-imagined as the town

tavern, "The Stoned Elf", and the surrounding lawn and dorm space is considered the town, "Guntersville". Beyond the dorm and lawn space is the forest, which is usually a source of monsters and invaders, and the walking paths, which are roads to other towns and villages. In every case, spaces with St. Olaf meanings must be given new, in-game meanings.

The second step of integration, and perhaps the hardest, is integration into the ongoing story in place. The general overarching plot concerns the reappearance of previously extinct monsters in the north as well as attacks from evil Invaders whose origin is unknown. Within this world, players have created characters with life histories. An example of a life history would be a vengeful elf seeking his brother's killer against the wishes of his father, the king, who has sent out scouts to find him and bring him back to the kingdom. Thus, players as characters must negotiate both their own selfish, individual goals, the selfish, individual goals of others, and the appearance of monsters and invaders.

In addition to the story, players must also adhere to the laws and rules in place in the in-game society. The official law in place is described by one player as "a loose law system, with a lot of corruption and occasionally torture." The application of official law is often "racist and discriminatory." Players must adapt to a law system that allows the possibility of bribery and murder.

At the same time, players must understand the informal laws that govern the game. Although one may be able to legitimately kill another character, players constantly echo the idea that "there are consequences for every action." The informal law system is "karma-like": a "what goes around comes around" system. Where official game law is applied by the necessary authority in-game, the game master applies karma-law. Karma-law is somewhere in the space between in-game and out-game experience. It is an in-game judgment applied by an outside observer. Karma-law is generally invoked in situations where fairness cannot be maintained in-game. One player advised that one should never refuse to heal another character or steal loot from enemies they didn't kill. To sum up how players must understand the law system, one needs to "avoid stepping on toes."

The third step toward integrating into the world of LARP is understanding and choosing your social space in-game. Bourdieu's work on social space is particularly useful in understanding how LARPer's inhabit in-game social space. According to Bourdieu, "agents classify themselves, expose themselves to classification, by choosing, in conformity with their taste, different attributes (clothes, types of food, drinks, sports, friends) that go well together and that go well with them or, more exactly, suit their position" (Bourdieu 1989: 19). Thus, for LARP, players' choices locate them in social space.

It is tempting to look at the number of races and classes and assume that LARPer's have a higher degree of agency in creating themselves (as a character) than one would have in "real life." After all, they can completely create the conditions of class, race, even gender that constrain their choices and options in real life. However, possibly as a result of the degree of control players have over their material conditions, character choice is extremely regimented. The LARP social world still "presents itself as a highly structured reality" (Bourdieu 1989: 19). Choosing fighting over magic is a sacrifice in future abilities. In addition, the character must now behave and choose future skills that "suit their position." Several players have indirectly hinted at the strong constraints on their characters. One player remarked that having his character killed "didn't bother me that much because I was bored with him and didn't really like the direction he was going." Although choosing characters and skills and abilities is important, integration into the social world of LARP is centrally focused on understanding and adopting the limits, rules, and constraints the LARP world imposes on one's behavior.

"Doing" LARP: How to Play

After a player is integrated into the social world as a character, most of the action and plot they experience is free flowing and improvised. The missions, or adventures, players play during the course of gameplay are termed modules, often shortened to mod. Mods nearly always afford playing characters (PCs) the opportunity to fight or use magic. On a normal afternoon, players can expect to participate in five to six mods. In addition, players engage in at least an hour and a half of interaction and conversation with familiar and new non-playing characters (NPCs) in the tavern. Mods allow characters to fight and find weapons and money while tavern interactions allow characters to get information about the plot, buy items from merchants, and teach and learn skills to and from one another.

Fighting or spellcasting is complex and must be learned through experience. To "hit" another player, a player must call the amount of damage, the type of damage, and make contact with the enemy (hits to the head or groin are considered illegal and do not count). For example, the call "Seven, Normal" means the striking player has done seven points of damage to the struck player. The struck player receives the hit, exclaiming "taken" or "ouch." The fighting becomes complex because it occurs in real-time; players do not take turns attacking and defending, but actively strike and dodge at once. Fighting well involves skill with the weapon being used, as well as knowing the damage one has taken and the damage opponents and enemies have taken.

Spellcasting is exactly the same except players call out the damage and then must throw a spell packet (birdseed in a piece of cloth tied with a rubber band) at the target. Spells are only effective if the packet strikes the player.

In addition to fighting, players have to heal wounded comrades. If a player has 10 life points and is hit by two seven-point damages, they collapse and begin bleeding to death. Other players have sixty seconds to save the player before they bleed to death. After sixty seconds, the wounds become so serious that the player can only be healed by life spells. If five minutes pass, the character is permanently dead. Players who fight well must also be able to heal others well.

Roughly eighty percent of all mods involve the whole group of PCs. In order to complete group mods, players must be able to coordinate and cooperate with one another. Fighters are most skilled at giving and receiving damage while rogues are more skilled at attacking from the sides and back. Other characters are more effective healers and spellcasters who must be protected from direct attacks. In order to be an effective team member, a player must know their own strengths and weaknesses and have a rough idea of the strengths and weaknesses of every other group member, especially as the group encounters enemies that have higher life points, hit for more damage, and attack in larger volumes.

"Doing" LARP: Honor

The ultimate governing principle for participation in LARP is the code of honor. The code of honor is in place to protect the integrity of the way the game is played. The code of honor is applicable to players only, not the characters they play in-game. If one is an assassin or spy in-game, it would be inappropriate not to behave dishonorably and dishonestly. The player abides by the code of honor by being dishonorable within the game, not in the act of playing the game.

In order for LARP to function, all players have to agree to collectively believe the fantasy is real. Within the fantasy, when player one hits player two with a sword, they both have agreed that that action will harm player two. If player two refuses to acknowledge the shared meaning of the sword

blow, not only have they broken the code of honor, but the world of the LARP game fails. Thus, the code of honor binds all players to play the game in good faith within the game's context.

Players can also break the code of honor by meta-gaming, LARP's "unforgivable sin." Meta-gaming occurs when a player, as the character, acts with knowledge the character cannot have. As a mild example, a LARPer greeted an NPC by name although the character they played had never met the NPC. While this mistake is forgivable, meta-gaming players operate outside of the agreed upon social world of LARP, destroying the game.

Meta-gaming also occurs when one imports feelings about other players into the LARP game. A St. Olaf LARPer described an extreme occurrence of this type of meta-gaming that occurred at a non-Olaf event. Two dating LARPer played characters that dated in-game. One player decided to end the relationship and stop LARPing. This led to the players often breaking character to argue and shout at one another. In addition, it was rumored the leaving player planned to try to sabotage the other character's player. The problem of meta-gaming is readily apparent: characters were fighting in-game who had no reason to fight. In addition, feelings and emotions from outside the context of the game were affecting the behavior of player's characters. Meta-gaming compromises the reality of the fantasy in LARP.

More so than larger LARP games, where players are relatively anonymous out of game, St. Olaf LARP is acutely susceptible to meta-gaming. The size of the campus makes it impossible to stay anonymous out-of-game. In addition, it is easy for LARPer to spend time out-of-game. Large LARPs meet less frequently and more remotely, which inhibits players from developing strong out of game relationships. St. Olaf LARPer, by comparison, live in an intimate space and have more time to spend with the other players.

In sum, to "do" LARP, a player must be able to internalize the rules and constraints of their improvised and created character behaviors.

How LARP functions as a Group

LARP does little to recruit new members. Several players set up an informational table for new students to ask questions during Week 1 Orientation. In addition, LARPer maintain a group page on the social networking site, Facebook, which contains information about the game, event times, contact info, and pictures and videos from past games. Ultimately, while LARPer are quick to talk about the game, like publicity, and welcome new recruits, they do not actively pursue players.

Despite the lack of active recruitment, one player stated that LARP has more members and more consistent attendance than any other student group they had been a part of on the St. Olaf campus. LARP has between ten and twelve regulars at each event. Fellow players do not coerce one another into coming and rarely is non-attendance questioned; yet players consistently and deliberately organize their schedule so that they can attend as many games as possible. One player stated, "I never miss events. If I have homework, I always make sure that I have it done." In addition, another player cited LARP as their only "major social event" and declared they would never schedule something so they would have to miss a LARP event.

How does St. Olaf LARP maintain high attendance and membership? LARP maintains itself as a group by controlling success. Although each player measures success differently, nearly all players cited the importance of being a "better" character in order to make events more fun. Thus, characters that are more capable fighters, spell casters, craftsmen, etc., are more fun to play as in-game. In order for a PC player's character to become more skilled, they must attend as many events as possible. Each event is worth experience points that allow the character to level up and

gain access to abilities and weapons. Because success is intimately linked to game play, other LARPer do not generally coerce others into playing. Of those players interviewed, only one player described feeling "convinced" to play.

In addition to the control of success, LARP also controls time. In order to achieve success and unlock new abilities and items, players must level up. As one increases in skill, it takes progressively longer and longer to level up. The longer one plays and the more time one invests in a character, the longer it takes to see the results of one's labor. When one is invested in a character, it becomes more and more costly not to play because of the loss of increasing important experience points. In addition, most LARP events run from noon to six p.m. every Saturday, with an hour of logistics beforehand. Thus, to attend the required number of events to gain new abilities and skills requires one to not schedule any number of other events for the weekend. Thus, success in LARP requires one to relinquish at least a moderate amount of other opportunities.

Structure and Power in LARP

Another facet of LARP's success as a group is its structure. The game master develops the overarching plot and the weekly plot for every event and has the most game play experience of any group member. While the game master is open to all suggestions and ideas, game master decisions are final. In addition, there is a loosely designated second-in-command, who assumes the responsibilities of the game master when the game master is not present. All other players fall into two groups: playing characters (PCs) and non-playing characters (NPCs). PCs gain experience, make decisions in the game, and can change and grow. NPCs provide every other character: monsters, enemies, villagers, friends, merchants, and in one case, a wife. In general, NPCs work with the game master, also an NPC, to develop the plot and create missions for the PCs, while PCs work together amongst themselves to uncover the plot and reach their goals.

Power is best understood in terms of its effects on PCs and NPCs alike. One way to analyze power's effects is with the theory that "some people have more control over and determination of the nature of social realities that get constituted through face-to-face interaction than others do, primarily by virtue of being able to exert control over the production of discourse" (Phillips 2000: 194). Application of such a theory is fairly straightforward; the game master holds power in LARP because they control the social world of LARP to the largest extent. However, this theory fails because it focuses analysis on which actors hold the most power. A more relevant analysis focuses on power as a relationship.

Foucault defines power as designating "relationships between partners" (Foucault, 1982: 786). Foucault elaborates on this point further, and describes power as being "exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free" (Foucault 1982: 790). Power "is nevertheless always a way of acting upon a subject or acting subjects by virtue of their acting or being capable of action. A set of actions upon other actions" (Foucault 1982: 789). Thus, power designates the relationship between PCs and NPCs. In addition, members of each group are subject to power when others act upon their actions.

It is easiest to see the effects of power on PCs. Players stress that PC actions are limitless. Obviously, there are forbidden actions as a result of the game having some rule structure but hypothetically, if a PC can think an action, they can do it. However, PC actions are never free actions; instead, PCs are always restrained by NPCs and NPC control of the plot. PCs are dependent on NPCs to provide the action of the game. Without NPCs, PCs cannot act at all. Furthermore, the actions available to PCs in any situation are mediated and controlled by the actions of NPCs. When NPCs demonstrate skills and abilities, they force PCs to use certain responding actions. PCs cannot choose to use their strengths on NPC monsters; rather, PCs have to use the chosen weaknesses of

the NPC characters. More than anything, PCs spend their time reacting to the action of NPC characters.

NPC actions also are constrained and influenced by power. Regardless of their perceived control of the direction of the story and manipulation of the social world, they are subject to the institution of LARP itself. The majority of the group is PCs and the game caters to the development of their characters. No matter how much control NPCs try to exert over the direction of the story and choices the PCs make, NPCs always have to subordinate their desires to those of the PCs. Not only can NPCs never “win”, they must always lose to PCs. Thus NPC actions are constrained and acted upon by the LARP game itself.

While LARP has structural divisions, players also describe it as “a close-knit family.” Many players mentioned having closeness to and “a high comfort level with fellow LARPer” and many conversations revolve around past games. Several players said that they “always happen to show up at dinner together” and run into each other in Fireside (an on-campus lounge) often. While the players emphasized the serendipity of such encounters, it is the researcher’s opinion that such behavior has some degree of forethought and fits patterns exhibited by most friendship groups. Occasionally, when eating together, LARPer choose not to eat in the large cafeteria but eat in more private areas, further establishing the closeness of the group.

While the PC/NPC dynamic and the experience of power effects are common to most LARP games, the closeness of St. Olaf LARPer is relatively unique. As discussed above in relation to meta-gaming, the size of the St. Olaf campus makes it easier for players to connect and spend time together outside of the game.

While the size of the Olaf campus encourages and makes it easy for players to branch out within the LARP group, it inhibits players’ abilities to network outside the group. In addition, LARP on the St. Olaf campus is associated with the stigmas of being weird, nerdy, and strange. Reactions range from indifference to amused interest. On several occasions, LARP has been introduced in a classroom setting accompanied by laughter from students. While many students profess a “different strokes for different folks” perspective, LARPing is not considered as worthy a use of non-academic time as choir or athletics. Thus, as a group, LARPer are marginalized and stigmatized.

One result of this marginalization may be a move within LARP toward solidarity and close friendship because these opportunities have been narrowed or closed in other social areas. This is not to suggest that LARPer do not have and maintain close friendships outside of LARP; however, these relationships can be harder to create and maintain with the LARPing stigma.

Finally, LARPing is very public. Dungeons and Dragons campaigns are far more private and allow the players a degree of anonymity they do not have when fighting with swords in full costume. Due to the public nature of LARP, players are well aware of the stigmas associated with their behavior. LARPer may use close-knit friendships to overcome and avoid any awkwardness, embarrassment, and at worst, humiliation.

Individuals in LARP

As previously discussed, in order for an individual to be successful in LARP they must attend as many events as possible. In addition, the NERO reference book offers a variety of “How to” guides related to playing. There are two main themes: first, commit to role-playing and the character you are to become. Second, individuals will have more fun when they seek out opportunities to add to the realism and role-playing experience.

St. Olaf LARPer offered similar advice. A player remarked that the most essential quality an individual could have was a willingness to "be ridiculous." Players willing to be ridiculous are more carefree and imaginative and more willing to immerse themselves in role-playing and ignore any stigmas or embarrassment their real world selves may feel.

Beyond a willingness to be ridiculous, players must diligently practice to improve their acting and improvisation abilities. Although talent and personality can aid a player's improvisation, a more experienced player pointed to experience and practice as the most influential causes for their improvisation ability.

To encourage ridiculousness, LARPer stress the importance of costuming. Functionally, costumes are essential because costuming allows players to identify one another easily. Knowing goblins have green faces, dwarves have beards, and biata have feathery eyebrows makes it easier for players to react appropriately and maintain the shared fantasy.

Furthermore, the more intricate and reflective a character's costume is, the easier it is to become the character and role-play successfully. Putting on a costume during the logistics period attunes PCs to the personality and mindset of their character. For NPCs who play a variety of characters, good costuming enables them to more easily move from character to character.

Returning to the themes of success, the importance of making characters and the game real is repeatedly emphasized. Out-of-game, creating character histories and background makes the character more real to the player. In-game, LARPer repeatedly invoke the importance of *being* the character. To LARP, the individual commits to becoming a character, a commitment that changes their personality, abilities, skills, and knowledge. This commitment to the world of the game may be best understood as playing in a state of enthrallment. In a state of enthrallment, one engages "in a fantasy known to be false but felt to be true" (Stromberg 2000: 494). Enthrallment occurs when one uses the pronoun "I" in their speech in reference to a character that is not oneself.

Stromberg observes that fantasy role-playing gamers "consistently use first-person pronouns in reference to the characters they play in the game" (Stromberg 2000: 496). For example, a person may say, "I am going to hit him" with the pronoun "I" referring to the character in the game, not the player themselves. Stromberg uses this data to argue "the intensity-and hence enjoyment-of emotions generated in fantasy is dependent upon convincing oneself on some level the fantasy is real" (Stromberg 2000: 500). Not only does enthrallment enhance enjoyment in LARP, it is a compulsory prerequisite of LARP. One cannot LARP unless one uses the first person "I" to speak as the character.

In LARP, when one assumes a character, one is required to use the pronoun "I" to describe the character. Ideally, the LARPer becomes so immersed in the character that their use of the pronoun "I" will represent themselves as the character. Indeed, most LARPer said the most fun and entertainment is achieved when one "loses" oneself in character. One player related an experience in which he was involved in a night battle: "I had a great time because I didn't have to think about being myself. During the battle, I became my character, and I got so scared because of the monsters I ran away and hid behind a tree."

The player's account illuminates the importance of enthrallment in producing entertainment. One can imagine that being chased by monsters through dark woods would be a horrifying experience. However, because the event is not "real," pleasure is derived from being enthralled with the fantasy, with being convinced of its reality and acting accordingly.

LARPer regularly discuss characters, events, and plot points outside of scheduled gameplay. During this time, enthrallment becomes moves from an "I" to a "We". LARPer discuss characters as if they are independent individuals who belong to the group. A character is seldom spoken of in reference

to the actual individual who plays or created them. Instead, character's actions are discussed as though LARPer had seen or read about their actions and feelings, despite the fact they have acted or felt as the character. By discussing characters in such a way, LARPer are enthralled as a group. They collectively affirm the existence of the characters by discussing their "real" actions in the same way they talk about themselves. The LARPer can say, "We know these people" and collectively convince themselves the fantasy is real. In order for an individual to achieve personal success and enjoyment, they must become enthralled with the LARP and treat its events as consequential and real.

LARP Gameplay and Contradictions

As a rule, LARPer are quick and eager to discuss LARP. Players never fail to emphasize the fun and excitement of LARP and their enthusiasm is easily communicated. Players are also able to go into great detail about great moments, both individual and collective. Gameplay is described as constantly challenging and exhilarating.

These descriptions and enthusiasm for gameplay are intriguing because the majority of the game consists of sitting in the tavern waiting for the next mod. In order for the game master and NPCs to prepare the next mod they must change costumes, understand what characters they need to represent, and physically change locations, all of which takes anywhere from fifteen to forty minutes. Thus, during the course of a six-hour game, almost two thirds of the time is "downtime" or "nothingtime" for PCs. For NPCs, they spend the majority of their time preparing for short spurts of game. NPCs do portray merchants and other familiar characters for PCs to interact with to punctuate the time between mods, but LARP can be described as portions of action followed by "nothingtime."

Nothingtime appears to present an interesting contradiction: why is LARP engaging, fun, and exciting if most of one's time is spent doing nothing? However, this analysis presupposes that nothingtime is only the result of a deficiency in the game, a lack of space, ideas, or NPCs for the game to further itself. Rather, upon observation, nothingtime reveals itself as an essential part of the LARP game.

Nothingtime allows players an opportunity to break character and step back from the required state of enthrallment. Within normal gameplay, breaking character is inappropriate and transgressive. Breaking character deconstructs the LARP world and players who break character during mods or while interacting with NPCs are frowned upon, with repeated incidents leading to the possibility of reprimand. Nothingtime gives players an outlet to freely transgress this rule, without causing damage to the quality of the game.

Both PCs and NPCs acknowledge that players regularly break character and that breaking character should always be avoided. However, due to the effort required to maintain the fantasy for hours at a time, players seem to need breaks from being in character. In addition to breaking clean from character and discussing other social or academic concerns, players import non-LARP games and activities into LARP. Players play "Draguno" (the card game UNO) or "Familiarmon" (the card game Pokemon). Renaming the games legitimizes them as of the LARP world and allows players to feel as though they have not truly broken character. Of course, the games are still transgressions; players do not have to be in character to play and the rules they play by are a shared text outside the game. However, Draguno, Familiarmon, and simply breaking character to talk about school are important breaks in upholding the fantasy of the LARP world. In fact, one might consider players' unscheduled Saturday afternoons as a sort of nothingtime as well, with LARP providing a break from maintaining a "real life."

Another contradiction in LARP occurs in the relationship between group cooperation and individual goal attainment. PC characters emphasize that while the game is played in groups, the experience is "self-interested." Many players said they wanted to keep some portion of their motivations and character history secret from other players. Several PCs also mentioned that the goals of their characters always trumped the goals of the group. However, in observation, players generally sought to cooperate.

It should be noted that limitations in the duration of research mean that observing overtly selfish behavior by a character was extremely difficult. And certainly instances did exist when players avoided a battle or declined to share loot they collected from defeated enemies. However, players more frequently sought the help of one another.

Seeking help occurs for two reasons. Logistically, the game does not work if players do not participate. There would be no point to holding events if each player wandered around on their own. Secondly, the game can only exist as a part of a cooperative effort.

Expanding on the second point, the NPC perspective of LARP is a valuable tool for understanding cooperation as essential. NPCs provide a host of characters, among them the monsters and enemies the players must face. When playing these characters, an NPC mentioned that monsters are often tailored to make the fight challenging without being impossible. If PCs are too strong, NPCs can adjust the life points or armor of the monster to make the game interesting. PCs of course expect that while battles may be difficult or require a creative solution, they will not be impossible. Thus NPCs cooperate with the PCs to make the game better.

Even among PCs, character motivations aside, players seem to want to cooperate and get along with other characters. Deaths are rare in LARP; nearly all of the dead characters can be attributed to one player. Thus, any individual, selfish play seems to be overrun by a concern that all players remain alive. It is apparent that cooperation is the norm; deviations away from cooperating to make the game work are generally punished by karma-law. As a result, PCs seek to work with others, act generously, and treat others fairly.

Conclusions

If any general theme can be abstracted from the St. Olaf LARP experience, it would be that social life is contradictory. LARP social life is riddled with contradictions: LARP promises players can create characters who can behave in any way they want, yet character choice and personality are highly regimented and controlled. The institution of LARP and the LARPer themselves adamantly stress the importance of playing in character, yet this imperative is often infringed. What happens in-game is supposed to stay in game, but the code of honor and karma-law require players to constantly reflexively judge their out-of-character selves.

Despite contradictions in LARP gameplay, it would be inappropriate to conclude that LARP is flawed or instable in some way. Rather, these contradictions are naturally a part of the LARP social world. Returning to an analysis of games, Cherry asserts "that it is because we *play* games that they cannot directly affect the world" (Cherry, year: 61). Thus, were we to assume LARP was not a game, we could assume it would have a direct and real affect on social life. Therefore, it stands to reason that contradictions in LARP social life reflect that fact that "real" social life is contradictory as well. One might argue the tension in globalization between the local and the global is evidence of the contradictory nature of real social life.

Finally, it is valuable to examine the crucial ingredient of LARP success, ridiculousness, and the position LARP occupies in St. Olaf social space. LARP is located on the fringe and the center of St.

Olaf space at the same time. This location is due in large part to the ridiculousness of its players. Students confronted by LARPer's seem to have two reactions: they work hard to distance themselves from LARP yet also watch LARP from afar. It seems strong to suggest that students are innately fearful and innately envious of the LARPer's exhibition of "deviant" behavior, however, it is clear that there is some sense in which students feel both aversion and curiosity. LARPer ridiculousness is certainly responsible for the contradictory position LARP occupies on the St. Olaf. Furthermore, it is possible that LARP ridiculousness portrays social behaviors that are paradoxically condemned and envied by dominant St. Olaf culture

Accepted Senior day is an opportunity for accepted students to look at the St. Olaf campus one more time as well as familiarize themselves with clubs, programs, and other opportunities on campus. LARP had an information table at this event.

