LARP Mechanics as Social Skills Training

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Abstract

This project examines the way that the rules governing Live Action Roleplaying Games (LARP) can be constructed to help players learn social skills and examine their own identities.

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There is a lot of discussion in social justice and education circles about the need to teach people skills like empathy and cooperation and to encourage them to understand people’s varying life experiences. The response to this is often to earnestly explain these concepts to people who have not encountered them before. While this has resulted in a greater understanding of these ideas, there has also been a significant backlash against requests to take these concepts into account by people who feel threatened or attacked when they are asked to look at their own experiences and those of others through this lens. So how do we get people to engage with these ideas in a way that feels unthreatening, and to take the lessons they learn and apply them to the wider world? One answer is through games. Games in which players create a character and take on the characteristics and personality of that character are particularly useful in this type of learning. There has been a fair amount of work around this issue done by scholars studying multiplayer online games, but it is also highly relevant to other types of games, including Live Action Roleplaying, or LARPing (Bowman, 2010; Consalvo, 2017; Ensslin & Muse, 2011). This project focuses on one specific LARP game called Dystopia rising.

LARPs are games in which players are given a world and a few specific criteria about what type of people exist in that world. They then create a character and dress and act as that character for the duration of the game, which can last anywhere from a few hours to a week. Many games also happen serially, so the players play the same character in the same world in monthly or weekly events that may happen over the course of many years. These games are highly immersive; players are generally encouraged to remain “in-game” for the duration. LARPs usually take place in fantasy worlds that are
LARP mechanics as social skills training

Unlike our own, but require characters to interact and even build a society together. LARPs that happen serially require characters to build relationships over time as they interact with the same characters over months or years.

The idea that players and their characters are not the same is an important part of LARP for two reasons. First, the same person may play multiple characters, each of whom has unique relationships and characteristics; differentiating between each of the characters is important. Second, characters sometimes act in cruel or immoral ways based on their personality, circumstances in the game, or even the different legal and moral codes that exist in the game world. Most LARP rulebooks include a section on ways to avoid “bleed” between the character’s feelings and the player’s feelings - referring to how to avoid taking frustration about things that happened to your character or anger your character feels towards another character out on that player outside of the game. To the same end the rulebooks include sections on how to check in with players before, during, and after the game, especially if your character might have hurt theirs. All of these things are ways to differentiate between the player and the character so that players feel able to allow their characters to explore difficult content and make hard decisions with limited real world consequences. This structure is meant to allow players to explore difficult questions in a safe way because it is not their world nor are they their characters.

The idea that LARPs can teach these skills as well as other types of content isn’t new; there is a high school in Denmark devoted entirely to teaching through LARP that has been operating since 2006 (Gjedde, 2014). The school is designed to help integrate special needs students with those in a general education program. Each week students do one LARP that is designed to teach a specific piece of the curriculum, and because they play different characters each week, students get to try different ways of interacting and participating. However, most of the current scholarship on LARP and education focuses on the way that the act of roleplaying helps players learn skills like empathy (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 2002). The ways that the rules and game structure can encourage players to think about issues of identity and difference beyond what may happen naturally through the act of roleplay are rarely considered.

The particular LARP I’m writing about, Dystopia Rising, is written specifically to incorporate rules and design elements that encourage players to think about the relationships their characters have in game and to extend that into the way they think about the real world. The creator of Dystopia Rising has said that he wanted to create an “innate distrust because of the idea of other” and then make people question the idea that those people are the enemy (Dystopia Rising, n.d.). I chose to focus on this game because I wanted to look at the exact ways game rules and mechanics could be used to make players think about issues of identity and difference, and I thought that would be most apparent in a game that was written with these ideas in mind. I also had a small amount of experience with this game before I started this project, which gave me a better understanding of the rules than I would have had otherwise.

I am employing two methodologies to understand how the game rules work. The first is a close reading of the rule book in which I am examining the ways the game’s structure and rules create innate
groupings of characters and encourage players to think about ideas of identity and difference. However, this method has the potential to miss some of the ways that the rules are reinforced during the events to further encourage players to think about these issues. In order to better understand how rules are implemented during the game, I am employing a second methodology called auto-ethnography which is used fairly frequently in game studies (McArthur, Peyton, Jenson, Taylor, & Castell, 2012). This is an adaptation of ethnography, except instead of trying to understand the experiences of everyone involved, I am only using my own experience playing this game as a way to better understand the ways the various rules interact and are implemented in the game, and not as an example of the gameplay experience.

Dystopia Rising, or DR, is a monthly serial LARP with sixteen chapters throughout the US and one former chapter in Canada. Each chapter has a game every month, with some players traveling from game to game and playing more often. DR is set in a post-apocalyptic world where there are no humans. Instead, there are strains of humanity that evolved after the apocalypse. Each strain, having evolved a different way of surviving on the now radioactive earth, will look different and have a few specific characteristics. For example, natural ones have developed the ability to commune with nature but have also developed an innate fear of technology. They tend to wear furs, and they shy away from the strains most likely to be using the things they fear. Characters can learn certain skills based on their strain and another set of skills based on a profession they choose, but it is nearly impossible to create an entirely self-sustaining character, so it is necessary for characters to work together to survive. This setup makes it easier for the game makers to get players to create identities to differentiate between their own identity and that of their character because strains are quite obviously not related to players’ real appearance or identity, which makes critiquing a character’s biases easier (Pucci, 2016).

One of the best examples of the ways rules are designed to teach players to think about ideas of identity and difference in-game and then help them transfer those ideas to the real world is the use of strains. A character’s strain determines some aspects of how they look as well as certain skills they will be able to learn easily. For example, one strain, Yorkers, tend to be loud and in your face. They often wear sports jerseys, and are naturally inclined towards fighting, particularly with their fists. Another strain, Baywalkers, tend to be much quieter and more reserved. They usually carry a lot of things on them in their many pockets and they are more inclined toward books and research. Baywalkers and Yorkers hate each other, but the game is designed so that they have to interact and are likely to need each other’s skills (Pucci, 2016). This means that players are forced to roleplay unfounded biases. The player often will not have any negative feelings towards the other character and may even be friends with the other player. Thus, this bias feels constructed in a way that its real world counterparts might not. Players learn about the way this type of innate bias can affect interactions through this experience. Of course, equally important to understanding this concept in the abstract is understanding how it relates to the real world. There are no explicitly stated parallels between game rules and things that exist in the real world in the rule book, but this is where the auto-ethnography piece of the study comes
in. To help players do this, the people running the game make this parallel explicit at the transition between real world and game world. When they make announcements at the beginning of game they include one that generally goes, “please don’t use derogatory terms that reflect a person’s real life race, gender identity, sexuality, etc. Instead use the strainist terms listed in the rulebook”. This way of stating the rule makes the parallel obvious. As you can see in this example, the game structure creates a reason for players to reflect on bias and the idea of other in the game itself. Then that rule is presented in a way that helps players move their thinking from the game world to the real world. The game rules help players learn skills beyond what they might learn naturally simply from roleplaying a character. Looking at games in this way has implications towards understanding how player interaction can be shaped in games through game design and game rules. It also has implications for the way games and game like activities can be used to teach these skills in other settings.

References


