
Trust and Intimate Interaction in Nordic Larp

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Abstract

Intimate play can be perceived as embarrassing or intrusive, it can violate personal boundaries, or make players feel unsafe. At the same time, intimate play can be fun, exhilarating, and trust-building. We look into

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intimate interactions in Nordic larp to get deeper insights into what triggers one reaction, or the other.

Author Keywords

trust; intimacy; embarrassment; play; live action role-play; Nordic larp

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Introduction

Do you play *Twister*, *SingStar*, *strip poker*, or *Spin the Bottle*? Which ones would you play with your colleagues? With your sister? Why?

There are numerous games that encourage intimacy and physical closeness [6][13]. Yet most people will set limits for how they wish to engage in games that require intimacy. Apart from being a source of embarrassment, intimate play can be perceived as intrusive, it can violate personal boundaries, or make players feel unsafe. At the same time, that mutual embarrassment and the trust it implies can be exhilarating. Trust is key here: do the players trust the game design, the event, and each other – and how can trust-building be facilitated.

In this text, we explore the relationship between intimate play and trust. Investigating the Nordic live action role-playing (larp) tradition [17], we explore if trust is necessary to develop intimate play, and to what extent intimate play builds trust.

Daring to Larp

Larps developed from tabletop role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) when players decided to abandon sitting around a table and started to enact the events bodily in space. In Nordic larp [17] the settings vary from the magical to the mundane, but the foundation, inhabiting a character in a fictional world co-created with other players, remains the same.

Larping is highly out-of-the-ordinary; pretending and acting as if you are someone you are not makes you a freak. So how can people even agree on larping in the first place? A commonly cited prerequisite for play is the feeling (and possibly illusion) of safety [1]. Social safety, the idea that one is not judged wrongly by larping, is an important building block. It relies on three reassurances that manage anxiety.

You are not judged based on your character. Role-players agree to separate the player and the character; this is called the *role-play agreement* [14]. Although the separation is analytic and indeed false in many ways, the idea is that the actions a player makes in a fictional setting should not be allowed to reflect on the player outside of the larp [14]. If players cannot trust that their actions are not interpreted this way, they become limited to the agentive procedures of her everyday persona.

You are not doing this alone. In a larp the participants also pretend that everyone else is someone else. You do not play just your own character, but everyone's, and within the context of the larp, that not playing along would be more deviant than playing along. In larp this has been called *inter-immersion* [12], and there are numerous formulations for engrossment in doing things together [16]

You are not doing it wrong. The key is not being a freak alone. One person pretending to be a lizard king is laughable, but if everyone present in the situation is playing along, a temporary new social reality is established. In order for the larp to be coherent and intelligible, players need to know how to communicate and interpret communication. This is facilitated by rules, a coherent background fiction, and pre-game workshops.

Overcoming the initial barrier to take part in pretend play as an adult is not enough, just as being able to play *chess* does not mean one is willing to participate in *Twister*. Some larps require the players to play at violence, power hierarchies, and intimate relationships. Fostering a situation where such potentially very embarrassing activities can take place requires firmly established trust.

Background: Trust and Intimacy

While trust is a multifaceted concept, Tanis & Postmes suggest looking at what people do: at a basic level a trusting behaviour involves *relinquishing power over outcomes valuable to the self* [18]. The social play in larp requires extensive relinquishing of power, in particular concerning social judgement as discussed above. Tanis and Postmes [18] further argue that trust

depends on the belief that the other will reciprocate. A player that relinquishes power to other players will expect them to fulfil their part. Communication is considered the foundation of trust [5] but trust also influences how people communicate [11]. Hence, the first step towards establishing trust is to make people talk to each other.

To some level, trust is quite easily established. Messick and Kramer [8] argue that humans have fine-tuned mechanisms for rapidly and shallowly evaluating trustworthiness and placing trust. We primarily place trust in individuals we believe we know or that we can somehow identify, but in absence of trusting individuals, membership of group is used to place trust [8]. In Nordic larp this is reflected in the concept of *ensemble play*, meaning that each participant is part of the group that is responsible for the outcome.

The relationship between trust and intimacy has mostly been researched in the context of intimate relationships (such as marriages). In this context, interpersonal intimacy is a complex relational concept where trust is a necessary component [19] but that also includes an element of self-disclosure. In work on inter-group dialogue, Biren [4] turns the relationship around and considers intimacy at the level of being friends to be a necessary prerequisite for self-disclosure.

There seems to be a potential for a ladder phenomenon where trust could be established early through fairly shallow means to support the basic role-play agreement (that the acts are not those of the players but of their characters), and creating a potential for deeper interpersonal intimacy.

The idea of creating a ladder of trust has been used outside of larp; it was taken to the extreme in 'Marathon' group therapy during the sixties [2]. It deliberately relied on group pressure to make patients move from 'impression-making and manipulative behavior' towards more honest and spontaneous interactions. Open only to people who declared themselves 'willing to change', participants would meet for two days straight: no interruptions, no subgrouping, and minimal breaks. Experiments with nude therapy sessions have been reported [3]. Today, we would most likely look upon such therapy techniques as unethical.

Pre-larp: Workshopping Intimacy

In Nordic larp, players typically sign up individually and do not necessarily know their co-players in advance. Yet all larps best simulate communities such as a village, a firm, an extended family, a gang, or the crew of a spaceship. Hence, players need to get to know each other before the larp also for practical reasons: they need to know enough of each others' roles to be able to play a tight-knit community. Still, many players may meet physically for the first time when attending the larp event. This requires that a basic level of trust, in particular trusting that other players will respect the player/character division, must be established within the group prior to the larp.

Many larp organizers organize workshops before the larp. General trust-building activities are sometimes used¹, but this is not the norm. It is common to start with an icebreaker exercise, but otherwise workshops tend to focus on exercises that are directly relevant for

¹ <http://www.wilderdom.com/games/TrustActivities.html>

the larp to be played. Focus is placed on communicating the artistic goals and fictional context of the larp, introducing techniques for meta-level communication, and letting players develop their characters and relationships. The activities serve a secondary purpose of creating a level of trust between players.

As the protective boundary of playing a character is not in place during workshops, workshops present their own problems related to intimacy and trust. It is not unusual that a certain level of forced intimacy will occur during workshops. Concerning physical intimacy, larps that use symbolic techniques for intimacy and sex typically let players practice them beforehand. Such exercises have been reported by players as more uncomfortable than actually playing with the techniques. In the larp, intimate play only happens if both players have agreed to it, while the workshop format leaves little room for negotiating the exercise in advance. Another example is when pre-larp workshops involve sharing personal stories related to the larp setting. Some players have reported problems with this coupling between the larp setting and characters - that is fictional - and their personal selves.

Playing on Intimacy

All social play requires collaboration. There needs to be an underlying trust in the collaboration, of playing together by shared rules. However, certain kinds of intense, close relationships that may require physical proximity require much more than just a collaborative basis. There are at least four kinds of intimate relationships, which sometimes merge and interact, that can create problems with trust.

Anchor relations

The most basic intimate relationship is that players need other players to be at the same time their friends, and form an in-game community. 'Anchor relations' and 'core groups' are designed to fulfill this purpose. These are characters which whom your character shares some level of mutual understanding; it can for example be a sibling, a close friend, an in-game spouse, or a family. Players will confide in their anchor relation or core group, share experiences, and gossip. The trust required to play this type of relation is typically established through quite shallow means: the fact that you are placed in the same group and is given some time to talk before the larp is often enough.

Romantic Relationships

It is not uncommon for role-players to engage in fictive romantic relationships. In the context of computer games, Waern [20] on romantic engagement in single-player games and Pace et al [10] discusses intimate relationships in online role-play. Waern [20] argues that one of the main drivers for romantic engagement in digital role-playing is the illusion of safety and fictionality; the romance is 'not for real'.

In comparison, larp could be considered both less safe and fictional than the romantic engagement in on-line multiplayer games, as live role-play is physically enacted and thus romance will require a certain level of physical intimacy. In larp, the role-play agreement functions to install an alternative alibi for romantic interactions. The alibi is strong enough to make romantic play fairly common in larp, facilitating what Poremba calls *brink play* [13]; one reason why people want to play romantic relationships in larps is that they do feel real, while everyone pretends they are not.

Indeed, the strategies that players develop for romantic play indicate that the player-character separation only presents an illusion of safety. Few players are prepared to play romantic story-arcs with just any other player, both for reasons of trust and attraction. Many players report on strategies to deal with lingering emotions post-game, as well as difficulties with negotiating the type of relationship the players would have after the larp. While the concept of bleed [9] covers several types of emotional interaction between the players' emotions and those expressed by the character, it is by far most common to talk about romantic bleed.

Sweet Nemesis

Relationships need not be of positive affect to be intimate. In larps, which draw from the more general dramatic traditions, the relationship between a hero and a villain, or of mischievous or bitter rivals can be quite intimate, sometimes as intoxicating as a romantic relationship. Playing such a relationship requires trust that the other participant respects one's boundaries – especially as such rivalries are usually carried out in public, whereas romantic entanglements are more prone to be conducted in the safety of relative privacy.

Antagonistic relationships are even heavier when there is a power imbalance in place. Playing a slave and a master, a prisoner and a jailor, a detainee and an interrogator, victim and rapist, requires relinquishing power in a very concrete way. Many players report difficulties in particular with playing the character with *more* power in such relations; and this has led to an increased use of metacommunication that both players are comfortable with the current play, such as the word 'green' that can be uttered as a question (are you OK with this scene)?

Physical intimacy

Playing on physical intimacy and sex is less common, both in the sense that fewer larps include any way to represent physical intimacy and that in most that do, players still tend not to play extensively on sex.

In recent online discussions, it has become blatantly clear that the trust required to separate the character's actions from those of the player is not always in place when it comes to intimate scenes. Many players – especially young women – have difficulties trusting that a scene is initiated to create play or drama; the distrust also lingers after the game. Interestingly enough it does not seem to be the most sexually explicit larps that have the largest problems, but rather casual larp.

The design of how intimate play is represented in larp seems to be an even more important factor than trust between players. Stenros [16] catalogues a range of approaches for representing sex in larp, ranging from verbal communication to various expressive and symbolic simulation methods. The chosen methods reflect the kind of play that is encouraged, ranging from seeing it as a plot-enabling device to encouraging deeper relationship play.

Conclusions

Larping, and especially larping intimacy, requires trust. The foundation of that trust rests on the flimsy basis of the role-play agreement. Trust needs to be built amongst the players before play commences, and is constructed from pre-game communication, workshop activities, and shared rules. The mutual doing-together of larp, the inter-immersion, ensures that it is more embarrassing to not play than to play while the larp is ongoing.

However, players do not always trust in this agreement. Furthermore, while the role-play agreement sometimes is sufficient in-game, trust issues may still emerge both before and after the actual play event. This is particularly obvious when the played relationships go beyond anchor relations. Romantic, sexual, and antagonistic relationships are intimate and possibly more embarrassing, and require a higher level of trust. While these kinds of relationships are habitually played in Nordic larp, there is no uniform pattern of negotiation or workshop tool box and players have their own informal methods of navigating for example potentially problematic players. As an art form, Nordic larp aspires to navigate a minefield but it does not manage to avoid all the mines.

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