Time and Temporality
in Live-Action Role-Playing

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Abstract: This article examines perceptions and systems of time and temporality in live-action role-playing (larp). Taking cues from the work of management game scholar Timo Lainema, the article presents examples of the effects of game duration, asynchronicity, and boredom, and then offers a new option for viewing time at, and in, larp play.

Keywords: Live-action role-playing; Magic circle; Temporality

1. Introduction

The magic circles of play are not only separated by their social contracts from mundane space, but also from mundane time, even as they are still affected by both. What matters is the *perception* of time, and how it affects what takes place inside the circle. Likewise, play is influenced by the *presentation* of time, whether by organisers, game mechanics, or players themselves in interaction. This short theory article examines the central questions of temporality in live-action role-playing (larp[1]). It seeks to answer the question: How does time function in live-action role-playing, and what are the implications of that function? The article relies on existing research, creating a combinatory argument based on fieldwork and documentation done by other researchers. This is a method known to bring forth new, emergent findings (Galliers, 1992). It also possibly gives rise to new theories and hypotheses, which can then be field tested by others.

As its guideline, the article follows Lainema's (2010) work on temporality in management simulations, and asks whether similar phenomena can be found in live-action role-playing. In simulation, differences can usually be made between continuous processing (roughly the same as "real-time", or "accelerating time", if learning processes are supported in the beginning by some time-lenience) and batch-processing, in which batches of orders are given and decisions made, and then the computer crunches the results, and a new round begins (ibid.). As this article shows, live-action role-playing has factors of both types (while in simulations only one of them usually appears), yet still the same kinds of questions may arise for both design and play itself.

After this introduction, the article discusses the ways in which magic circles are temporally set apart from mundane reality. Then, it introduces three types of time-related phenomena in live-action role-playing. Finally, the article concludes with some remarks on new ways for viewing game-time.

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[1] This article follows the Nordic-originating principle of treating larp as a noun and no longer an acronym ("LARP"), in a manner similar to words like "laser" or "radar" (see e.g. Harviainen et al., 2018).

2. Magic circles and time

The idea of some ritualistic activities being separated from mundane space and time is quite old, carrying from the likes of Gennep (1909) and Huizinga (1939) and through later theorists such as Turner (1969). This is exemplified in the contested concept of the *magic circle*, later adopted also to game studies, explaining how games take place in not quite the same reality as everyday life (e.g. Harviainen & Lieberoth, 2012; Klabbers, 2009; Salen & Zimmerman, 2004; Stenros, 2012a). Most studies have so far focused on issues of spatiality, rules and ethics in magic circles of play, but a handful have also forayed into issues of time. This article follows their lead.

Temporality is a complex issue. Factors of time to consider in a play process may include things such as the duration of activities, temporal locations, sequences, deadlines and other constraints, cycles of repetition, and rhythms of intensity (Lee, 1999). All of these can be found in larps, with the possible exception of repetition (and, as noted below, some larps have even that).

Larps have time during play and time is set apart for their preparations, briefings and debriefings (Harding, 2007). This is very much like Gennep's (1909) description of ritual time stages: separation, transition and (re-)incorporation (Harviainen & Lieberoth, 2012). Hansen (2016) bases in-game larp game time on the presence of narrative, between organised time (narrative) and unorganised time (experience). Players appear to appreciate both, if in good balance (Harviainen, 2006).

Time is also cultural. Bluedorn and Denhardt (1988), for example, describe some cultures as having a polychronic view of time (doing many things at once) while others are monochromic (focusing on one thing at a time). Lainema (2010) argues that this makes multiple-task-making either concurrent or sequential. For a larp, such differences would impact gameplay itself, due to the ways in which tasks are resolved and narratives are carried out in interaction.

One more central issue arises from differences between the purposes of magic circles. In a ritual, particularly a transformative one, the goal is to enter in one state (e.g. adolescent) and to exit in another (e.g. adult), or in the case of a more social ritual such as a church service, to reinforce

one's beliefs through repetition (Whitehouse, 1996). For an educational game, the goal is external to the magic circle (Klabbers, 2009). For recreational gaming, the activity itself is usually self-rewarding, so being in play-time is the central goal, as is finding that play-time interesting. There is a reason why some German and Russian language players speak of being in-time, instead of being in-game, after all.

Next, we turn to examining types of temporalities in play.

3. Fixed time frames

Like most forms of physical role-playing (excluding mostly just 24/7 sadomasochistic role-plays; Harviainen, 2011), live-action role-playing has a fixed time frame. Play begins and then eventually ends, and is expected to do so. Whether play takes place, in Lainema's (2010) terms, as *continuous processing* or as *batch processing* is another thing, and an influential design decision.

Many of the larp systems that are time-wise hybrids, are basically types of batch processing. In batch processing, play goes forward in continuous time until some game mechanics are needed. At that point, the "crunch" (between-batch) part of the game takes place, while other forms of playing are suspended. The same way as a computer might process numbers between turns, while events do not proceed, players may resolve things like combat through e.g. rock-paper-scissors, and then return to continuous time, where they act out the results. Larps such as *Minds-eye Theatre* and many types of fantasy play in the United Kingdom and the United States exemplify this kind of approach to time and mechanics (see e.g. Lancaster, 1996; Stark, 2012; Harviainen et al., 2018).

This is, however, not the only significant type of batch-time larp play. Another system of time, starting decades ago with larps like *Hamlet*, has used daily sequences of continuous time, interspersed with rule changes between periods (Koljonen, 2004). *Hamlet*'s rule changes exemplify this: arguments that must end on the first day as just verbal quarrels have to be lethal on the third, last day. Other Nordic larps have used the same system to present e.g. episodes of life on a spaceship (*The Monitor Celestra*) or different decades of a gay community (*Just a Little Loving*). From a design

perspective, this is batch-processed time at its most obvious – and at its most useful.

This approach sidesteps a classic problem of larp time, that of temporal inflation: When single-shot games near their end, some players are eager to spend their resources (or characters' lives) in an unrealistic fashion by throwing away in-game cash, making illogical purchases, or suicidally charging into an end-game mass battle (Faaborg, 2005). In episodic, escalating play such as *Hamlet*, this challenge is turned into an advantage. Then, inflation through game time too becomes a tool for storytelling.

It must, nevertheless, be noted that this is a technique that can also turn against itself. For example, if pauses during play are more focused on taking awesome character photographs than on creating further play and better narratives, it takes some (continuous) time for play to find its natural pacing again. It is therefore recommended that focus is maintained on play-time's existence also during any sequenced breaks.

4. Asynchronicity

As already mentioned, asynchronous time may arise from elements such as breaks for mechanics. It may also come from players' information gaps that need answers (Harviainen, 2006), from unintended off-game disturbances, and so forth. Whereas in a tabletop role-playing session the roll of dice is an acceptable break that everyone may observe, rock-paper-scissors in a hundred-player Vampire larp or a point-based melee in a fantasy game of thousands will cause time to twist itself. Players mostly accept this as they do in tabletop, however, since it is a set default of the system they are playing.

The larger the scale of a larp grows, the less control its organisers have over time, especially if the game has a lot of mechanics (Tychsen & Hitchens, 2009). This is a part of what Fatland (2005) calls the phenomenon of "Fog of Larp", in which information about events does not carry over to all parts of the play, and due to which multiple contesting "facts" may exist in a larp at the same time. Yet, there are more subtle temporal disturbances in larps as well.

One of those disturbances is the presence of metatechniques. If, for example, everyone else has to freeze during a character's inner monologue, in order to stay synchronised, everyone in the room will. This is not, however, necessarily true of people in the next room (some of whom will think the monologue is actual character speech), and most certainly not of those outside the building. The more complex metatechniques are used, the more time becomes asynchronous, because people vanish for long periods of real-time in black boxes, and so forth. Yet continuous time is not perfect for play, either, even when no game mechanics are needed. This is where we turn next.

5. Realism, boredom, and other disturbances

The key problem with continuous-time play is that it can be very boring for some players. Standing outside the room while the Primogen meet in a *Minds-Eye Theatre* Vampire game is a classic example of this. Likewise, playing everyday activities ("domestic realism"; Pegg, 2011) can be fun, if one enjoys e.g. historical re-enactment, but in an action-oriented larp it may be extremely boring if it means one is mostly left out of fruitful play. The fact of the players' physical presence at play (Harviainen, 2016) means that they are also present for the less interesting parts of continuous time.

Sometimes boredom also arises from more radical asynchronicity. An example of this is my own experience at the Swedish faerie larp *Moira* (2005), in which my character desperately needed to talk to certain contacts, and spent an hour looking for them – an hour during which *as a player* I could continuously see that their players were chatting in the off-game area outside the building. In order to handle asynchronicity and boredom, the organisers either need to fast-forward at times to more interesting content, as in the case of some games described above, or they need to come up with new ways to handle game-time.

This is, however, not the only intrusion of time-based challenges to continuous larp time. Whether by accident or by conscious intent, players' experiences of a larp are easily affected by their real-world existence (Harviainen, 2005). Elements such as hunger, cold and exhaustion

intrude on the play experience, making it difficult to focus on staying in character, or even to find the motivation to play out plots. The longer play lasts, particularly in continuous time between breaks, the more likely such incidents become. As a result, larps like the science fiction survival game *Lotka-Volterra* (2018) risk player attrition during play, simply because extended temporality combined with elements of physical discomfort becomes too much to bear.

As noted by Klabbers (2009), the real world always functions as a referent for games, no matter how abstract they are. Therefore, it is impossible for a larp, no matter how ingenious its time structure, to completely separate itself from real-world time. In that sense, the magic circle is less than perfectly magical. But exceptional designers can still utilise the differences, if they can control the environment. For example, *Mellan himmel och hav* (2003) used a theatre stage as its venue and thus had access to lighting systems with which the organisers reconstructed the length of days in the game, altering the internal clocks of players to some extent (Wieslander, 2004; Stenros, 2012b). Other examples can be found in larps that play with isolated spaces and e.g. dream-like content, in which things such as repetitive actions are used to make the players lose track of time.

This brings me to the final element related to realism: fantasy, fairytale and historical larps, as well as a handful of others, are some of the rare few situations in which people yield their chances of tracking time. In them, the now ubiquitous mobile phones are left outside of play, and no clocks tick on walls. While scheduled events may exist in play, they happen at the behest of the organisers (or key players) rather than according to a visible schedule – something that rarely takes place even in re-enactment events. To play fantasy is to yield to the temporal plans of others, while hoping that it will be a positive (or at least very interesting) experience and not something that just leads to exhaustion and hunger.

6. Discussion

In opposition to Lainema's (2010) observations on the superiority of continuous time flow in business simulations, live-action role-playing appears to benefit also from non-continuous time. It enables the

treatment of things such as longer time frames by way of episodic presentation, flashbacks, history creation and so forth. It also enables further drama by allowing for secret-sharing through e.g. inner monologues, and alleviates player boredom, at least to some extent. Its problems are more tied to spatial issues.

As noted by Hansen (2016), the Danish larp *Delirium*, with its idea of playing scenes in different order to emphasise mental illness, exemplifies design decisions on play-time. For example, the cleanup of a party was played well before the event itself. Yet, such decisions need not be so drastic. The ways in which games like *Just A Little Loving* play on the sense of time passing and friends lost may be just as powerful, as can a well-timed *Fateplay* (Fatland, 2005), in which events can be set using sequential time, in a pre-planned network, to create organised time out of seemingly unorganised time frames.

This brings us to a new concept noted by Lainema (2010), based on Clark (1985) and Lee and Liebenau (1999): *event time*. It flows unevenly and has discontinuations and many contingencies, and can be personal instead of being shared by all. In my view, this exemplifies the ways in which we should also view larp time. An event-based view enables us – and our players – to sidestep some of the problems of asynchronicity, and maybe even those of boredom. Event time, as default, enables players to reach more reliable mental models of storyworlds in their heads (Mochocki, 2017), taking into account space, narrative – and temporal dimensions. Let's not synchronise our watches, fellow larpers.

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Percepcja oraz systemy reprezentacji czasu i czasowości w larpach (live-action role-playing games)

Artykuł zajmuje się percepcją i systemami reprezentacji czasu i czasowości w larpach (live-action role-playing games). Na podstawie prac Timo Lainema, badacza gier menedżerskich, niniejszy artykuł przedstawia przykładowe efekty czasu trwania gry, asynchroniczności i nudy, a następnie proponuje nowe podejście do postrzegania czasu na - i w - larpach.

Słowa kluczowe: live-action role-playing games, magiczny krąg, tymczasowość

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