2014

Technological Mediations in Collective Fantasy: Exploring Gameplay, Initiation and Technology in LARP

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In live action role-play or larp, imaginary worlds are co-created through the persistent organizational actions – both online and ‘in real life’ (IRL) – of gamers as they embody carefully constructed game personas. This project poses the question: how are newcomers initiated into live action role-playing, and how are these processes aided through online actions and social media? I argue that larpers collectively fabricate a universe from existing and user generated texts through the merging of creative production and narrative consumption, integrating newcomers into these creative processes at the organizational, interpersonal, and diegetic, or imaginary, levels. In larp, these processes are technologically mediated. Social media and virtual worlds provide meditative and contemplative spaces for gamers to reflect on their in-game lives in ways that facilitate meaning, identity, and community for a tight-knit collective of larpers in New York City. This ethnography is grounded in my experiences as a larper, and my integration into the fictive world of *Vampire: the Masquerade*. 
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My thesis advisor, Dr. Katherine Chen’s has challenged and inspired me through this project, I am grateful for her guidance. Dr. Jack Thomas has been an ally and a confidant at City College from the beginning, I am thankful for his service here as a second reader.

My deepest thanks to the larpers who embraced me, trained me, and let me play, if ever so briefly, in their world. Thanks and love to my family, my friends, the faculty at City College, and the cohort who stood with me through this program.
INTRODUCTION

[21:15, February 8 2014] Spirits apparently find me irresistible. I’m reminded of this when a storyteller or ST, one of the young men facilitating tonight’s game, whispers it in my ear mid-scene. He’s reminding me that I have the unique ability to attract supernatural attention – usually in the form of a gigantic blue wraith. At the moment, I’m in a stilted but friendly conversation with an envoy to the prince. The envoy is a heavyset man in glasses – he has a store-bought foxtail affixed to his jeans. We are both aware of my low status within the realm, and I defer appropriately; there’s no shame in being meek, I’ve learned. It appears that this ability to entice a variety of phantoms and apparitions is in demand. I’m being drafted into a covert operation for the good of the domain, and the envoy’s attempting to whisk me away, to throw me off guard and make to sure I don’t ask any untoward questions or speak out against the prerogatives of the prince. He tells me I’m to be used as bait while the other, burlier members of the Camarilla engage the phantom in combat.

I realize I have leverage – that I could provide for me and mine with little risk and clear significant rewards for my troubles. My allegiances are scattered after all, and I borrow time – only a few minutes – to speak to my clan, members of the Ventrue, who have been with me since my arrival in New Rochelle, New York. To protect our machinations from the prying eyes and ears of competing players, we assemble outside the youth theatre in lower Manhattan. All are still in character while smoking tobacco and clove cigarettes. I’m simply cold. They are
coaching me, teasing out and refining my ability to negotiate under pressure – it reads like an impromptu improvisation class. We agree on what to ask of the prince, the clan has needs, scores to settle, and matters of class and etiquette to reinforce before I meet with his excellence. My words are affected; my gestures slightly more extreme, it’s challenging to do this for five hours straight; trying to merge how I want this scene go while staying in character. My character Braxton Montomery needs to be sassy and self-assured during negotiations, maintain a positive clan presence and remain a fun player – I’m just hoping I’ll be able to take notes as a researcher without breaking the scene and ruining my debut into the main storyline.

***

As a Vampire: the Masquerade (V:tM) live action role-player, or larper, I met with other adults in a rented children’s theatre where we took on meticulously crafted vampiric personas; answering to new names and living out dark fantasies of our own design in an imaginary world. Together we did battle, formed political and personal alliances, participated in complex social hierarchies, politicked, and built families. Each one of us advanced personal and group agendas that succeeded or failed, and in time, each one of the personas that we had created and embodied would die and be mourned. Loosely defined, live action role-play in Vampire is a form of heavily rule-structured improvisational theatre. Players moved and spoke through characters that conformed to the cosmological strictures of a collectively defined game world – an imaginary universe.
This paper builds on my experiences as a larper, and presents an understanding of how imaginary worlds are co-created through the purposeful organizational actions – both online and ‘in real life’ (IRL) – of live action role players. I argue that larpers collectively fabricate a universe from existing and user generated texts through the merging of creative production and narrative consumption; participants integrate newcomers into these creative processes at the organizational, interpersonal, and diegetic, or imaginary, levels. In larp, these processes are technologically mediated. Social media and virtual worlds provide meditative and contemplative spaces for gamers to reflect on their in-game lives in ways that facilitate meaning, identity, and community for a tight-knit collective of larpers who meet in New York City.

The two chronicles I gamed with, which I call [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter], used two popular and readily available texts, *Mind’s Eye Theatre: Dark Epics* (2001) and *Laws of the Night: Revised Rules for Playing Vampires* (1999), to frame their imaginary worlds. Tabletop and live action role-play are traditionally grounded in rulebooks, with Dungeons & Dragons as the classic example. These texts, along with an expansive media world of video games, novels, fan sites, and chronicles’ own lived histories, stand as touchstones for a thriving and global community of gamers. *Vampire: the Masquerade* was originally published and distributed by White Wolf Publishing in 1991. White Wolf is a for-profit organization specializing in digital and print publishing, tabletop and live action role-playing games, and collectible card games. *Vampire*
stands alongside the other intellectual properties within White Wolf’s *World of Darkness* universe; a landscape of games focusing on supernatural creatures: vampires, werewolves, faeries, and wizards.

In this paper, I will review the sociological literature of organizations, artistic prosumption, play, and imagination. I also highlight scholarly treatments of live action role-play as an academic subfield; providing a conceptual vocabulary for, and definition of larp; drawing attention to a vibrant and emergent field of inquiry exploring the ways in which gamers re-mix identity and reality in imaginary game worlds. Next, I detail the methodological decisions and challenges that materialized as I entered the field as a participant-observer; I describe how I came to larp as a research topic, the multi-sited nature of my fieldwork, the dangers and risks of character creation and *bleed* (Bowman 2013), and the my own positionality as a researcher-player in larp.

In my findings, I aim to grapple with the puzzles and unaddressed questions that manifested during my fieldwork. How do larpers transmit community values and norms through social actions that occur both in-game, and in the mundane group life of the collective? How is the creative work that animates larp, and builds the world of *Vampire* nurtured through collective practices, organizational prerogatives, and rites of initiation that place both online and IRL? And how can I make sense of the digital spaces that are so vital to integration into this community? What is it about the pervasive nature of these larps, their expansion into virtual worlds and social media that brought me closer to my characters, my community, and my own identities as a gamer?
In the first chapter, I will describe my chronicles: the community, fellow players, game staff and confidants that I observed – group life. I am interested in not only in the demographics, and group practices of these larpers, but also in the ways that they shape a collective identity through their actions. I explore how gamers deploy storytelling as a tool, to not only solidify and transmit institutional characteristics, but also as a means of setting normative boundaries and staving off the negative emotional effects of *Vampire* role-play. Visual presentations of self are also examined, and the ways that costume, performance, and interaction are folded into the subjective interpretations of imaginary worlds that shape meaning in live action play.

Second, I look at character creation, and the ‘first night’ rituals that present new players with *organizational logics*, the concrete social relations between individuals that make meaning and symbolically define reality within a collective through rules, beliefs, and values (Thornton and Ocasio 1999). These logics set standards for creative competence that direct the co-creative energies of group members. In this section, I examine my own ‘first night’ experiences and elaborate on the processes that larpers employ to socialize new members, key them into the processes of narrative consumption and production that form the stories that animate action and sociality within *Vampire*.

Finally, I tackle the technologically mediated nature of contemporary larp, and the role that virtual worlds and social media play in how gamers make decisions, interact with other group members, and mitigate the effects of their own performative shortcomings. I argue that the online spaces facilitate a deep,
contemplative and reflective engagement with game content that is difficult to engage in during embodied larp; that through engagements with social media interfaces like [LARPhub.com], stronger relationships can be formed between community members within chronicles, between larpers and their character in-game personas, and between players and the dramaturgical and psychic demands posed by *Vampire: the Masquerade*.

I am inspired by Gary Alan Fine’s (2003) notion of a “peopled ethnography,” a richly descriptive, multi-sited, theoretical, and extensive qualitative style, that is grounded in the observation of small groups with a focus not on individuals, but on the action and talk that animates collective life (54-55). Fine (2003) argues for an ethnography that draws theoretical implications from field notes, detailed vignettes, and interview excerpts (41). I will focus my observations on the sites where structure, interaction, and culture converge within group life, and attempt to make clear what is routine and what is rare; making apparent and making sense of the “hidden webs of power in a world-system” that is fundamentally social and deeply creative (Fine 2003).

Fine’s (1983) *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* was seminal in my research, in particular the methodological appendix at the end of the book. It was a guide of sorts as I also approached a qualitative examination of role-play from the perspective of total participation, with a keen attention to my own reflexive reactions throughout my time in-game. This project updates Fine’s (1983) thorough analysis by focusing on a contemporary game style (live action role-play) and its incorporation of technology into an immersive experience
grounded in embodied role-play and the adoption of complex anthropomorphic game personas. The project acts as a springboard for deeper research into the intersections of technology, organizational perspectives, and live action role-play and linking sociological takes on organizations and interaction with larp theory.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly attention to gaming and play has focused on discussions of imagination and constructed universes, identifying the definitional and normative power of rules, and the boundaries and characteristics of imaginary worlds. I will draw on research from sociology, anthropology, and larp scholarship to gain a grounding of what happens when we submerge ourselves into a parallel universe, expanding and developing our identities in the pursuit of joy, fulfillment, creativity and fun. This interdisciplinary pursuit provides a conceptual vocabulary sufficient to analyze these imagined realities, but also presents the tools necessary to explore these games as co-creative communities.

ORGANIZING IMAGINATION

Through imagination, we can conceive of wild, fantastical and tragic universes, completely new or revolutionary objects, systems, and lives far removed from the limitations and conventions of the brute reality (Searle 1997). How then is imagination harnessed to build the vast and fictive worlds of larps like Vampire: the Masquerade? Prior studies have examined how sociological imaginations fuse biography, history and sociality together, moving the analytical gaze beyond the strictures of common sense (Mills 1959), while other scholars have asserted that an “idealizing imagination” can envision potential futures and parallel worlds beyond our material reality (Dewey 1934: 48, 72). Imagination is linked to processes of meaning making (Alexander 2004) and the coupling of
action to symbols and signs (Geertz 1973: 13); a malleable, generative force that can overthrow the “canonical order” through the construction of utopian or apocalyptic worlds (Amsterdam and Bruner 2000: 236).

Researchers have grounded these ethereal notions of imagination by framing them within social action and material relationships. Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis examines the possible, infinite, and imaginative worlds of social interaction as structures that can be reduced and simplified, broken down into networks of interconnected rules and practices (5). For Goffman (1974), social realities are given context and meaning through frames, or “schemata[s] of interpretation;” systematic regimes that work to gird our behaviors and social interactions (21). Natural frameworks codify events that are interpreted as occurring beyond the reach of willful agency and causal intentionality; social frameworks contribute meaning to events shaped by live human agency (Goffman, 1974: 22). How are the requirements of these shifting frames of reality codified within larping collectives with their own interests, needs and values?

Organizational sociology provides a lens through which Vampire: the Masquerade chronicles can be viewed as collective entities reproducing systems of symbolic meaning, and facilitating adaptive change through observable institutional logics (Friedland and Alford 1991), while utilizing storytelling as a tool to make meaning and establish normative values (Chen 2012). Chen’s (2012) organizational ethnography of the annual Burning Man festival exhibits how institutional logics can work through organizations dedicated to artistic, creative,
and ludic activities such as larp. Broadly speaking, *institutional logics* are as defined by Thornton and Ocasio (1999) as

“The socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality” (804)

Organizational frameworks help make apparent the institutional logics (Friedland and Alford 1991) at work within lar ping collectives as they drive both players and storytellers to strive for efficiency, accountability, legitimacy, and conformity through their in-game performances and creative efforts (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Meyer and Rowan 1977; Weber 1946). Imaginative co-creation in live action role-play occurs at the individual and group levels as players develop alternate personas and envision new worlds collaborative through communication and interaction. Larp, however, is still a game, a hobby approached ideally in the pursuit of fun and camaraderie. Why do games matter? What role do they play in social life, and further, what can we glean from larp theory to help us make sense of these immersive and complex game worlds?

**ROLES, PLAY, AND LARP**

“Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing” (Huizinga 1980:1).

Live action role-play is a game, a form of heavily structured improvisational theatre performed within an imaginary world. The literature surrounding imagination, culture, and organizations can help frame my
observations, but what theories and analyses investigate larp as social phenomena? Can larp be broken down into its composite parts?

Scholars have argued that there is a primordial quality to play, that it exists as a *significant form*; a set of actions converting concepts and mythologies into alternate worlds bound to a specific time and place – a *magic circle* (Huizinga 1980: 10; Salen and Zimmerman 2004). For Goffman, ([1961] 1997) this magic circle is a “membrane” (132), a barrier within which an individual can become engrossed conjointly with others in euphoric “gaming encounters” (132). Other research asserts that game worlds can be mapped and examined spatially through the deployment of “ludic architectures,” envisioning the magic circle as a contested and interpretive “playce” (Walz 2010: 42). Markus Montola (2005) suggests the magic circle can be scattered by technology, that games can be made *pervasive* by communications devices and online interfaces capable of weaving imaginative gameplay into the mundane reality at the social, spatial, and temporal levels (Montola 2005:3). *Magic circles* either physical or digital clear spaces where the structures and strictures of the mundane reality cede to the imaginary laws and cosmologies of gameplay, but what are the conditional laws that guide larp?

Research has examined the social systems that take root within magic circles, teasing out the characteristic elements of live action play. Gary Alan Fine’s seminal *Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds* (1983) envisions role-play as an interaction between players, game masters, and rule systems resulting in the creation of transportable *idiocultures* embedded within
collaboratively created game worlds – realms constrained only by the social expectations and imaginations of the players and the game (2-3) and shaped through human action and chance (Klabbers 2006: x, xvii).

Building on Fine (1983), Montola’s (2009) “invisible rules of role-play” classifies live action gaming as an “interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world” (23) taking place within recognized hierarchies of definitional power. Harviaenen (2009) sees power in larp enacted in a “ritualistic liminal state” as players manipulate layers of solidly real, and imaginary objects and persons while in gamespaces (76). Larps have also been considered immersive. Player motivations and emotional states are often drawn from a deep identification with their constructed personas (Kim 2004: 37), where “often the role of the player is not immediately lost, but diminishes and eventually disappears as immersion deepens” (Pohjola 2004: 85). Llieva’s (2013) interprets larp as bricolage (35), an ad hoc assemblage of “cultural languages” (26), images, themes, and narratives already working their way through our cultures, psyches and dreams. How do larpers create the personas used in role-play?

Montola (2009) stipulates that larp can only exist when players embody anthropomorphic character constructs and insert them into an imaginary world. Scholars have investigated how roles are established and created from within and beyond the magic circle. Goffman’s (1959) foundational The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life conceptualizes identity as a constant and collaborative performance; through our interactions with others, we internalize the routines,
scripts, and symbolic values of various performative gestures and engage in “impression management” as we move through frontstage and backstage environments; our gestures, voices, movements, styles of dress and conversational topics – “fronts” – construct meaning and allow us a sense of self built piece by piece through the interpretive reactions of other humans. Larp provides the opportunity to experiment with and embody various complementary, oppositional or contradictory selves and allow individuals to play with new modes of self-expression and “experience a sense of ego permeability while still maintaining their primary identity in the ‘real world’” (Bowman 2010: 127). Bowman (2010) argues that role-play allows individuals to practice new or suppressed roles in a low-consequence environment; larpers practice role discovery (134) as they engage in identity-play that allows them to construct and act out hoped for or possible selves and potentially transcending current and lived socioeconomic or historical confines. How then can we analyze the interactions between the constructed roles of character constructs as significant elements of an imaginary world?

Larp scholars have forwarded theories of subjective diegesis (Montola 2003); the individual interpretations of an imaginary world communicated between players within a larp to generate the scenes and events made meaningful by their performers.

A diegesis includes everything we know about the world, it’s the sum of the background information, the laws of the fictional reality (guided by natural sciences, rules and genre- and style definitions), the explicit symbolic feedback from other participants (both players and gamemasters), and one’s original
creation (thoughts, emotions, actions). In addition to facts about the diegetic material reality, it includes the perceived history, the expectations of future, hidden knowledge, and secret feelings (Montola 2003: 83).

Conversely, Hakkarainen and Stenros (2003) view the diegetic frame as objective realities “everything that is true within the game world,” and the tenets of the imaginary world are imposed solely through the actions of game masters (56). Semiotic approaches to diegesis construction focus on the interpretation of “iconic,” “indexical,” and “symbolic” signs that link objects in the unimagined world to ones within the larp, either through complementary “equifinal” understandings, or through “arbitration” – where signifiers are interpreted, declared, and made final through the actions of a game master or storyteller (Loponen and Montola 2004). Communications in larp can also breed conflict as differing creative agendas and the frictions between players and game masters “bleed out” into out of game life (Bowman 2013).

Diegetic, organizational, and cultural communications are not limited to conversations taking place in real life (IRL). Larp is a co-constructed creative endeavor. Within larp, the actions that generate story and give meaning to group life also occur online through messages, social media and user interfaces. These interfaces allow players to prosumne content that is both digital and embodied. How do technological presentations of self and the simultaneous production and consumption of creative content in larp operate within the imaginary worlds of larp?
PROSUMPTION AND CO-CREATION

In larp, creative game-content is prosumed (Toffler 1980) – situated in shifting modes of production and consumption – at the ludic level during gameplay, and online. Scholars of prosumption note that the ubiquity of Internet technology normalizes the production of immaterial goods (Chia 2012), simultaneously increasing the potential for alienation and exploitation (Rey 2012) and “fusing the power and creative control of production with the joy and novelty of consumption” (Ritzer, Dean, and Jurgenson 2012: 387). Of particular relevance to larp, other studies have examined the “inclusive community logics” (Chen 2012) that disseminate the sometimes-unfamiliar tasks of prosumption throughout organizations to benefit the collective; social media’s ability to streamline subcultural identities through the projection of aesthetic content and the notion of prosumed daydreams (Woermann 2012), and the prosumption of identity mediated through online and IRL social interactions (Davis 2012).

BRINGING IT TOGETHER

In larp, raw imagination, the fodder of make believe and play, is structured through systems of rules and definitional powers, shaping diegetic worlds and giving meaning to larpers’ precious game personas. Live action play demands space, both conceptual and physical, to facilitate the creation of magic circles wherein gamers can experiment with identity, and enact scenarios that are challenging, thought provoking, and fun. Prior research on these topics have illuminated my observations and provided me
with the conceptual vocabularies necessary to make sense of my observations within larp.

These bodies of research are, however, incomplete and do not address the ways in which online interfaces provide larpers the contemplative space to reflect, communicate, experiment and collectively make in-game decisions that are then reflected back through embodied play in prosumptive loops that inform organizational life on both the social and diegetic levels. The literature as it stands does not adequately address the complexity of technology as a mediating factor in live action role-play, nor has it provided a reflexive and ethnological look into contemporary larps occurring both online and IRL.

My contribution to this vast and fascinating body of research is an ethnographic exploration of how technological mediations enable players to overcome their own personal shortcomings and more fully engage their character constructions, learn from more experienced gamers, and explore their diegetic motivations and goals in a (potentially) low-risk online environments. This research focuses on how larpers fold the distance and freedom of online interactions into an imaginary realm, and how they mitigate the risks and do so in a way that generate role-play, creates narrative, and provide for the consumptive needs of live action play.
As larps grow more sophisticated and the collective goals of gaming collectives grow more complex, my project examines the role that online spaces play as a medium through which creative is made richer through the considerations gained through online socializations. This work also illuminates the organizational structures at work within live action collectives and the techniques used to socialize and train new larps to become better gamers, more productive community members and skilled prosumers capable of generating compelling plots and novel ideas for group consumption within these magic circles.
METHODS

The qualitative data collection and analysis for this project were grounded in my participant-observations and reflexive experiences as a *Vampire: The Masquerade* larper. Live action gaming sessions took place on the second and fourth Saturdays of every month, from November 2013 to April 2014. Game sessions ran from 19:00 to 12:00, and post-game socializing, or “afters,” would last until roughly 3:00. I participated in two distinct *chronicles*, [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter]. Each chronicle generated and maintained an immersive narrative arc, each was comprised of unique and unrelated storylines, characters. Each chronicle also had a distinct organizational identity. In an email exchange, a storyteller for [Blood Reign] clarified the issue for me, explaining “there is no direct link between our two games other than [in-game] territory lines and shared universal histry [sic].”

The chronicles were, however, linked at the macro organizational level. The two chronicles [Fell Winter] and [Blood Reign] are recognized by, and adhere to the bylaws of One World by Night (OWbN), “a collaborative World of Darkness live-action role-playing game community.” After a chronicle has applied to OWbN, it enters a three-month “probationary check” phase where members adapt to organizational protocols and begin interacting with other chronicles in the “org” – after a probationary check, the chronicle is subjected to a “full admissions vote” after which it is either accepted outright, or its members are given six more months of probationary status, wherein they can make the suggested changes and are then once again voted on by the full OWbN council.
(One World by Night, “Admissions Process” n.d.). Both chronicles [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] are full members of OWbN. The preamble of the OWbN charter briefly defines the terms of sovereignty and autonomy for local chronicles within the organization, and highlights group values such as respect and a commitment to “cooperative Storytelling.”

One World by Night (OWbN) is a network of international Live Action Role Play (LARP) chronicles, brought together for the purpose of enjoying a shared in-game universe. Participants believe in the sovereignty of each Chronicle, so far as it does not impugn upon the cohesiveness of the organization as a whole, and further agree that treating each Chronicle—and by extension each Player—with respect is the bedrock upon which sound, cooperative Storytelling takes place (One World by Night, n.d.).

OWbN membership is contingent upon the proven adoption of organizational bylaws that standardize and network this international community of larpers. This standardization allows for an administrative uniformity across regionally disparate and culturally diverse larping collectives. It pertains to the formation of “house rules” and the use of genre-specific publications and novels, conflict resolution techniques, financial management regimes and account requirements, the collection of dues, website maintenance, archival standards, internet presence, and participation within democratic OWbN council deliberations (One World by Night “Administrative Bylaws,” 2013).

Despite their organizational distinctions, both of the chronicles exist within the same imaginary universe; they inhabit a shared world with known and negotiated political and cultural structures. Within chronicles, characters and players are held to agreed upon standards of behavior and conduct, and each
chronicle must independently subject itself to application and review by OWbN before it can be admitted into the larger community. Player overlap is common, and the gamers I played with in one chronicle would often create new characters to introduce into the other – although for the most part, the time required to maintain two characters was too extensive for many players.

Methodologically, these institutional characteristics are significant; they contextualize my position as a researcher moving through an expansive organizational ecosystem. My observations were not of singular, discrete larps arranged by isolated collectives of life minded gamers. These smaller larps and their players comprised an important part of the larger gaming community, but they will not be considered in this project. Rather, my experiences were instances occurring within a persisting chronology. They were specific moments occurring within durable, and co-created narratives that interconnect an international community of gamers. The “house rules” and guidelines I adhered to during play were unique to these chronicles. The structures that girded group life were informed by organizational precedent; they were evidence of a deliberative and democratic history of decisions that pre-date my involvement in the organization and will endure long after I have departed.

SITE SELECTION

The decision to join and participate in a Vampire: The Masquerade larp evolved from a series of conversations in which I asked a group of ‘geekier’ friends – young men roughly 18-35 years of age with advanced interests in
comic books, science-fiction, horror and fantasy literature – about their gaming habits. The group had been tabletop role-playing *Vampire* for months, arranging small and informal games of five to eight players in their Queens apartments. Tabletop role-playing is similar to larp in that it revolves around the creation of personified character constructs and the maintenance of, and interaction with, an imaginary, *diegetic* game-world – but played using only pens, paper, and rule books. Tabletop role-playing it is not ‘acted out’ or embodied, tabletop gaming relies on symbolic representations of objects, and is grounded in speech communication and text (Montola 2004).

While the definitional boundaries between live action and tabletop play can be fluid, in these initial conversations, these men expressed a clear and marked difference between tabletop and live action play.

Despite not being larpers themselves, and having no interest in live action role-play, these men were familiar with the New York City larping scene and knew that a number of groups were running *Vampire* games in the city. Differing levels of organizational complexity, and varying player populations, they described, would characterize each gaming group. They would potentially use different rulebooks to construct their imaginary worlds, and abide by unique and group specific house rules – or organizationally specific tweaks to game mechanics. Internet searches for *Vampire: The Masquerade* larps at a location within a one-hour subway trip of my home led me to the [JoinHere.com] profile page for the [Blood Reign] *Vampire: The Masquerade* larp. I ultimately chose [Blood Reign] due to its
high level of organizational maturity, its large number of players, and what I perceived to be a highly professionalized game staff.

[Blood Reign’s] ‘about us’ section on [JoinMe.com] stated that the group had existed “for over ten years,” as of March 2014. The group’s [JoinMe.com] page listed 106 members, or “Cainites,” as they are referred to on the site. Additionally, both the formatting of the group’s [JoinMe.com] profile page, and the layout of their organizational website exhibited signs of technological sophistication – the sites were attractive, regularly maintained, and contained no errors or dead links – group announcements were regularly made and discussion threads were common with many engaged participants – the game, and its staff seemed to have achieved a certain level of professionalization.

Game frequency was also an important factor in my selection process. [Blood Reign] larps occurred on the fourth Saturday of each month, and they lasted roughly five hours each. As a potential research site, [Blood Reign] would provide a large group of mature and experienced larper who, due to their openness regarding questions and the willingness with which they courted new players, would be used to individuals new to larp – and potentially would be comfortable with a researcher participating in their games. I was searching for a consistent and well-maintained game whose players would meet frequently, have existing and long lasting player relationships with a strong organizational structure that could accommodate my lack of knowledge and experience as a live action role-player and also provide me with the skills necessary to integrate into
the community and excel within these games. [Blood Reign] met all of these criteria.

**Gaining Entry**

The [Blood Reign] [JoinMe.com] event page served as my entry point into the group. [JoinMe.com] is an online space that facilitates in-person group activities through a well moderated and public online user interface. Prior to joining the group’s individual page, and in accordance with the terms and conditions of [JoinMe.com], I created a general profile by providing my name, age, gender, email address, and location.

Next, I created an event-specific profile for the [Blood Reign] group page. Within this digital space, I was able to browse the profiles of current group members view their photos, observe when they joined the group, send them private messages, start discussion threads, and observe the last time they were active on the group’s page. Each individual member profile on [JoinMe.com] provides space for the inclusion of personal information. Member profiles for [Blood Reign] consisted of: an introduction, a short biography, and one’s answer to the question, “what type of story are you interested in experiencing?”

Creating a profile visible to members of the group before meeting them in person allowed me a unique entry point into the organization. The ‘about us’ section of the event page provided me with the specifics of what type of *Vampire* larp they would be running. [Blood Reign] would be a “Sabbat” game, which would require the adoption of some, and avoidance of other, game rules and player character restrictions. Along with links to their home sites and house rules,
I constructed a targeted profile reflecting the interests, hobbies, and biographical information I wanted to put forward.

Before meeting anyone in the group, I was able to establish a presentation of self that conveyed a solidarity and attunement to group expectations and ideologies while preserving my position as a student, social scientist, geek, and enthusiastic first-time live action role-player.Aligning with Zhao (2008), I suggest that online presentations of self and currently ubiquitous exercises in digital profile creation allowed me to exhibit publicly the self I wanted others to see by highlighting emergent or hoped for characteristics, and futures. These presentations online enabled me to share aspects of these possible and desired selves with other while offline and in the field (Zhao et. al. 2008:1820). Below is the content of my personal profile and the photo I chose to act as my avatar:

**Introduction**

Greetings, I'm a Sociology graduate student interested in role playing games and geek culture. I've been a console and MMO role player and I want to jump into table top and live action games. NYC has a really rich community and I want to be a part.

**What type of story are you interested in experiencing?**

I've been doing Vampire lore research lately and I'd be interested in story lines that deal with inter-clan conflict and provide spaces for magic and combat. This would be my first time in an organized group so I'd be interested to see how a variety of story lines are played out and what each one has to offer.
While gaining access to [Blood Reign] demanded an initial movement through technological social fields, entry into [Fell Winter] was established through more organic means. Both chronicles, [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter], take place at the same venue and share some staff members and players. During my first larp with [Blood Reign], players and staff informed me that each participant must create and maintain a separate character in each chronicle if they are to play both. Since both games exist within the same imaginary universe, but are organizationally distinct and do not overlap— it would be logistically inconsistent for players to embody a single player character and play in both game-worlds.

Through conversations and questions asked of both storytellers and other larpers, I learned more about [Fell Winter] and realized I could join and participate in both groups; doubling my time in the field, and further integrating
myself into the community. [Fell Winter] is a Camarilla game, and as such is less focused on combat and more concerned with the intricacies of the Vampire social hierarchy, issues of status, prestige, etiquette – and betrayal. [Carter], a larper who is active in both chronicles put it this way:

“Seasons of Strange is all about the velvet knife – palace intrigue and matters of court. You are playing a member of the Vampire upper class, so you have to be more delicate, more careful, more deliberate. You can’t just run around killing monsters, it wouldn’t make sense – it’s just not how the game works.”

Each chronicle demanded a unique skill set from its players, and my participation in [Fell Winter] would expose me to yet another facet of gameplay in Vampire. The character-centric play style of [Fell Winter] set a higher standard for dramatic performances than [Blood Reign], a game grounded in combat mechanics quantitative game rules. [Fell Winter]’s focus on gossip, scheming, and social alliances offered more chances to learn, experiment, and grow accustomed to live action play, and how to thrive in an imaginary world.

**EXITING THE FIELD | LEAVING LARP**

The multi-tiered nature of live action play, the way larps required action at the organizational, interpersonal, and diegetic, or imaginary levels, complicated my exit from the field; an exit heavily impacted by thesis deadlines and an impending geographic move out of the area. For me, leaving larp involved three discrete departures, and the respectful acknowledgement of three distinct relational positions within the group. Leaving larp forced me confront, as a sociologist and player-researcher, how exit ought to be handled, but I had also
lived through two vampire player characters, and profoundly effected the socio-
narrative ecosystem of an imaginary world. I had integrated two entities into the
larger narrative universes of [Fell Winter] and [Blood Reign]. Of course, the
option existed to simply alert one’s informants, collect any last scraps of relevant
data, and fade from group life. I was however torn, and asked [Anders], a
storyteller in [Blood Reign] and player character in [Fell Winter], how exits from
the chronicle were handled, and how others had handled their exits in the past.
[Anders] advice is uniquely suited to gameplay in Vampire, but his suggestions
were useful, and could provide guidance for other researchers approaching
participant observation in larp.

“What you should be doing all month is setting up all of the
terrible shit you'll be doing to people. And then trust me, when
you show up, the people you were scheming with for the last 3
weeks will have an emergency, their kid will get sick, their car
will break down and then you’ll just have to leave quietly. It’s
not narratively satisfying – you’ll just bounce.”

He goes on and says, “Look, if you really want to go out in a
blaze of glory you can – it's just not something that's good for
game stability. If you want to kill someone, let it generate role-
play, not end role-play.”

I ultimately chose to leave the field in a way that would generate role-play,
and continue the narratively generative work that had marked my participation in
both chronicles. Like all of the past creative efforts I had offered up to the group,
these were also technologically mediated. In the downtime before my final larp, I
wrote in-character emails to my staff, and direct messages to other players on
[LARPhub.com]. I composed an end of game journal entry that explain my
departures – a sort of digital will, an online act of final disclosure from the perspective of my characters.

The technologically pervasive aspects of larp allowed me creative agency, and the ability to approach my departure from the field collectively with my fellow player characters. In these chronicles, before an exit was made ‘real’ and enacted in game, it is first arranged, and processed through technological meditations. Protecting my informants and their in-game personas necessitated a delicate exit that held sacred the imaginary relationships that were the foundation for group life, and worked to maintain the fictive universe that ultimately bound my chronicles together.

THE SITE

The [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] larps are both held at the same location, the [Telford Porter Youth Theatre] in New York City. During normal operating hours, the space is a children’s theatre school and day camp. After hours, the organization rents its black box studios and rehearsal rooms to any group capable of mustering the funds. I observed other groups rehearsing throughout the building, however interactions between the larpers and these other groups were sparse. Both of the larps I participated in use the third floor of the theatre for live action play, it was not shared, and the larpers had access to the entire area.
DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

I recorded field notes *in situ* using a smart phone; snippets of conversation, interactions, scenes, and environmental details were documented while in-game and expanded upon after each session. The use of mobile phones among players during larps was nearly constant. The game demands that players be constantly aware of the character data stored on their character sheets: their available disciplines or magical powers, the abilities their characters possess, and the amount of social, mental, or physical traits that they had amassed to this point – traits and disciplines rationalize in-character actions, setting limits on what is possible and creating power hierarchies with more experienced players on top. As players progress and their character sheets become endlessly more complicated, they will oftentimes store a PDF version of the sheet, or a ‘cheat sheet,’ laden with lore or ability descriptions will be stored on a mobile phone or tablet. Additionally, in or out of character texting and emails were a normal part of in-game life. Given these practices, my note taking did not violate any normative restrictions concerning the use of technology. Mobile communications technologies – specifically smart phones and tablets – were fully integrated into the mechanics of live action play.

Digital versions of official, and chronicle approved *Vampire: The Masquerade* rule books, novels, and related texts were accessed during larp to reaffirm rules, challenge actions, and provide new players with the game’s lore, cosmology, and discipline builds during character creation. Communication
technologies were a ubiquitous and unremarkable aspect of every game; this
technological openness allowed me to actively record field jottings while in-
character without interrupting gameplay. Additionally, SMS or text messaging
was a regularly utilized strategic component within the larp; players would share
information via text message during the game allowing for instantaneous,
discreet, and invisible interactions. *Vampire* lore also makes room for technology;
during game my characters were often instructed to ‘call’ other players, usually
using my hand in place of my actual phone. Additionally, during character
creation and through the life of a character construct, XP can be invested into
technological skills such as the “computer” ability, or a focus on “academics”
wherein a character could choose to have a computer science degree or specialize
in hacking or weapons technologies.

I participated in recreational and strategic meetings with other players
outside of the venue. Post-game, I engaged in online fieldwork. I regularly
contacted larp staff, storytellers, and other player characters on [LARPhub.com]
via other digital interfaces: emails, and SMS messages. Talks with informants
both online and IRL occurred both in and out of character, these shifts were
depending on context and the topic of discussion. Additionally, I conducted one
in-depth interview with [Anders], a player character in [Fell Winter] and
storyteller in [Blood Reign].

I made requests both in person and via [LARPhub.com] to arrange in-
person, email, telephone, or Skype interviews with 9 other gamers and storyteller
staff members. Each prospective interviewee was sent two requests via
[LARPhub.com] and I requested their participation in person when applicable. These requests proved unsuccessful. Participants often cited time constraints as the primary reason they could not be interviewed. Many larpers traveled long distances to attend games, often driving in from Connecticut or New Jersey, and many found the prospect of an in-person interview too time intensive. Carpooling compounded the issue with many gamers being tethered to the perogatives of a single driver. Other gamers simply did not respond to interview requests.

The low response rate could also be attributed to the simple fact that engagements tangentially related to the imaginary world of Vampire, but those that did not in some way benefit their characters or advance their in-game lives, but consumed scarce time and energy resources all the same. While my research many have benefitted from the added perspectives of these players, my in-person participant observations and off-line interactions provided sufficient data to address the research questions I have posed in this paper.

Creating Characters

I created, developed, and maintained two characters for these larps – one in each chronicle. My characters – Braxton Montgomery in [Fell Winter], and Mosser Brughes in [Blood Reign] – were integrated into each chronicle’s immersive, multi-character narratives. Each persona existed as a vampire living in fictive versions of New York City ([Blood Reign]) and New Rochelle, NY ([Fell Winter]). The characters were free to establish goals, build relationships, and do whatever I felt expressed their unique identities to their fullest within the game.
They could be killed like any other character. In the event I died or was killed – “GNC’ed,” a larp slang term for “generate new character” – my player character or PC would no longer exist within the chronicle. I would be free however to remain a part of the organization, and encouraged to create another character to be debuted in the following month’s larp. In-character actions were not limited to the physical spaces in which larps are enacted; digital spaces allowed gameplay to continue in the weeks between official meetings. Public threads on [LARPhub.com], private messages, and online “downtime” scenes between player characters and overseen by storytellers extended sessions, and the results of these online actions were represented and re-created at the next game IRL.

While my online interactions were primarily out of character (OOC), oftentimes storytellers would make in-character (IC) announcements on public threads concerning events taking place within the bounds of the game. Game facilitators would often embody non-player characters (NPCs) online, posting messages in their voice as a way to keep the fantasy intact in between physical sessions. [LARPhub.com] was also where character maintenance and development took place; I completed journal entries written in-character after every larp. These journal entries would be written in first-person and detail my perceptions of the previous game, my short term and long term goals within the chronicle and more generally give the game staff an opportunity to interact with my character and tend to any concerns I may have as a player and organizational participant. Storytellers would allocate experience points (XP) to my characters
and approve, amend, or deny my XP purchases for abilities and powers through the journal interface on [LARPhub.com].

Character progression was thus tied to online actions and decisions occurring in “downtime” as well as IRL. Digital user interfaces served as a methodological tool through which I could introduce myself to characters I didn’t engage during role-play, and begin dialogues that could further unpack fleeting in-character interactions. [LARPhub.com] acted as an archival data source. Through the study of past announcements and discussion threads, I was able to view and analyze moments of tension, conflict, and change within the group as they played out through posts and messages. Additionally, the advice provided by other players on these forums was invaluable as I created my own Vampire personas.

The creation of a character entails its own specific sorts of labor and personal considerations. To craft these diegetic alter egos, I consulted the extensive literature covering the fictive universe of *Vampire: The Masquerade*; rule books specifically written with larp play – as opposed to tabletop play – in mind. These publications helped acclimate me, not only to the imaginary universe, but also into the mechanics, rules, and expectations of live action play. I researched the ways in which various clans intersect and collide within the game’s complex social hierarchy. I pondered the abilities and magical powers or *disciplines* that would decide what actions I could perform while in-game.

Character creation was an exercise in strategic imagination; I painstakingly devised archetypically novel approaches to the standard genre
representations often deployed within science fiction, horror, fantasy, and video games, but did so in ways that expressed some aspect of my personality or biography that warranted exposure in what storytellers would jokingly refer to as “our pretend vampire game.” Characters and their accumulated abilities and affiliations, referred to as “builds,” are tactical choices that can drastically alter a player’s successes or failures within Vampire. In-character expressions of self were not limited to character sheets and online journal entries, they were also enacted physically and sartorially.

My relationship with costume and self-presentation in larp evolved as I spent more time in-game and formed stronger bonds with other player characters. My choices changed gradually, and eventually dressing ‘to fit the character’ became a natural extension of who I was playing at the time – it made sense. Not only is costuming incentivized through XP allotment, it added another layer of interaction between the player and the game, providing fodder for our imaginations and infusing the game with realism.

For my Gangrel character Mosser Brughes, a “vampire hippie”, environmental activist and freegan, I paired tie-dyed t-shirts with baggy pants, hiking boots and crystal necklaces. Conversely, Braxton Montgomery a blue-blooded member of clan Ventrue was more formally dressed in lavender button down shirts, slacks, and freshly shined black dress shoes accented with silver chains and my best watch. Embracing costume was also a rewarding methodological decision; I found more informants willing to discuss their plots and motivations with me in character while costumed, and it was a symbolic
gesture on my part to further signify my desire to become an insider within the community, to experience the activity to its fullest and truly integrate myself into the narratives and into the social collectivity.

**LIMITATIONS AND RISKS**

This integration however is not without its costs and potential risks to the researcher-player. My social immersion into this collective fantasy required considerable expenditures of care, attention, passion, and emotional energy. In moving beyond mere observation and entering into these fictive universes of dense relationships and high stakes, I realized that there was an affective element of this research, and to this methodological approach, that cannot be ignored. I was surprised at the emotional attachments that I felt towards the characters I had created; these fictive constructs were at once reflections of myself, and also evidence of my creative and performative achievements in the game.

In-character betrayal and murder was a fundamental game mechanic in *Vampire*, a mechanic with the potential to invoke feelings of apprehension, suspicion, and anxiety towards other players. Reflecting on my own field experiences, I can assert that the full range of negative emotions can be elicited from imaginary in-game actions. The reflexive acknowledgement and examination of my emotional responses to larp are methodologically and sociologically significant; larp is grounded in human interactions within imaginary collective fantasies. To deny these emotional elements in my analysis would only serve to distance me from the community I was a part of, and obscure
my position within the group. Sarah Lynne Bowman’s (2013) concept of “bleed” is significant when considering the methodological complexities of larp. Out of game relationships, emotional states and dispositions “bleed-in” (17) to inform in-character actions, and conversely, intense in-character moments “bleed-out;” negatively (or positively) entangling themselves within participant’s out of character lives (Bowman, 2013: 18).

The data gathered from in-character interactions was limited by the prejudices, politics, and pre-existing relationships that had informed gameplay up to the point of my integration into the chronicle. In both sabbat ([Blood Reign]) and camarilla ([Fell Winter]), seemingly impenetrable systems of status and power delineated the nature and depth of in-character relations. The oppositional factions and social hierarchies written into Vampire lore and reinforced through gameplay worked to separate me from other players; excluding me from certain scenes and events, and limiting the scope of my in-character perspectives. These barriers existed in both chronicles.

The storyteller/player dichotomy, and my position within this organizational division of labor highlight the narrow scope of my investigation. There was so much to observe, that what I did see, hear, and participate in can only be considered from my immediate in-character and out of character vantage points. Although I received permission from storytellers to sit in and take notes during their pre-game meetings, there were situational and practical elements of their experiences that I did not witness. Comparative work exploring the these
two interdependent positions and the individuals who hold dual positions within one or multiple larps would be fertile ground for future scholarly research.

It is also necessary to note that my actions in larp, even the ones confined within the boundaries of a negotiated and evolving imaginary world, did not take place within a sociohistorical vacuum. I am a male-bodied person who appears white and actively benefits from that privilege, I am college-educated, able-bodied, and within me are innumerable characteristics that have informed, altered, affected and tampered with the objective standing of this ethnographic project. I am also a researcher entering into what many still consider to be a stigmatized subculture, one that I was not raised in; one I approach with respect and diligence – but ultimately one that I approach solely out of sociological inquiry. Any stigma attached to me through my time in live action role-play was temporary, and so I approached these gamers with a normative privilege as well.

Further, the decisions I made when constructing a character – personality characteristics, clan designations, discipline builds, and social allegiances – coalesced over time into an in-character positionality; a fictional yet coherent sociopolitical identity with the potential to alienate or attract, succumb to, or manipulate, other players within the chronicle. Methodological and ethical considerations of identity must be considered with the researcher’s in-character and out of character personas in mind. While I do not believe that this work suffers from such problematic dynamics, potential for this research to take advantage of, or reproduce systems of power and inequity that must be
acknowledged before any meaningful analysis of this community and these phenomena can take place.
FINDINGS

To enter a chronicle is to be inducted into a community, an organization, and a complex and multi-layered imaginary world. The contours of this imaginary world are collectively decided through the content generated by every member of the group. Newcomer initiation in larp eases fledgling larper into these processes of co-creation. As they develop in-game personas and traverse the narratives of the game, newcomers participate in recurring loops of narrative production and consumption that generate role-play and make larp meaningful. Initiation takes place IRL through embodied larp and online, as gamers enter into contemplative virtual worlds wherein they refine their in-game identities and play styles with the help of the other group members. My findings are based in my experiences maneuvering through these initiation rites, and display how identity is created and maintained in live action role-play at the group level, at the diegetic level and through technological mediations.

PART I: SETTING THE SCENE
DEMOGRAPHICS, STORYTELLING, AND BLEED

How do larper prepare for the immersive experiences of live action role-play? How do they unwind, debrief, and protect themselves from the traumas of larp in ways that create community while acclimating newcomers and integrating them with longtimers?
1.1 MAKING IT HAPPEN

“You didn’t know [Blood Reign] was this fancy?” I’m helping [Anders] hang ‘blood’ splattered sheets along the mirrors that line the back wall of the dance studio where the bulk of our role-playing takes place. I’m completely amazed. The level of detail going into preparing the space is beyond my expectations. “You can use your card here too” [Anders] mentions and points to an Ipad with a credit card reader attachment for paying dues. It’s around 19:25, and other gamers are showing up early and removing props from a large black Tupperware container brought in from a car parked outside. Some are arranging silver plastic candelabras, 6 to be exact, around the dance studio; draping a tattered cloth over the plastic foldout table in the room, and carefully positioning the black plastic that fill the space into small, cozy circles. The plastic torches are lit with orange bulbs and tiny fans animate small ribbons, giving the illusion of guttering flames. Little black plastic skulls with red glittering eyes are placed on the rarely used baby grand piano, and [Anders] and I are placing color-change LED lights in the corners of the room. Together, we are hanging a huge homemade banner painted with the symbols of Sabbat in the center of the game space. In [Fell Winter], we rely solely on imagination, and this same dance studio is left bare and unembellished. Each chronicle devotes time and resources in ways that reflect their priorities, goals, and desires.
Entering into a larp is a physical shift, and moments like these highlight the ways in which [Blood Reign] larpers prepare material spaces for the imaginative and spontaneous performances of live action play. By prepping, or costuming seemingly incongruous spaces such as a children’s theatre in the brutal
and gothic style of *Vampire*, gamers set the stage for the night’s game and the inevitable acts of diegetic co-creation that will take place though text, action, and speech (Chen 2012; Davis 2012; Montola 2003; Woermann 2012). Cooperative efforts to visually customize spaces for larp can also be seen as *institutionalizing* activities that imbue organizational spaces with distinct characteristics and values beyond their rational goals and functions – what I would consider to be the deployment symbolic power and the generation of a palpable and shared organizational culture within the group (Scott and Davis 2007). Philip Selznick’s work on institutionalization in particular argues that the individuals populating organizations matter, that their characteristics, desires, skills and potentially irrational motivations shape group life, and that the resulting informal social structures can re-direct and shift organizational priorities and goals (Scott and Davis 2007: 63, 74).

I argue that in larp, imaginative co-creation occurs between player characters and storytellers both in-game through embodied action, and online through game-specific social media; that these activities exist as loops of artistic prosumption that gird the processes of group life and new player initiation in larp. Individuals larpers matter – and their presentations of self in addition to their communicated and constructed identities serve as the basis of role-play, and thus an attention to these individuals as players and as people is necessary. The ways that larpers create identity within the bounds of this community can only be established after setting the scene and detailing the characteristics of group life within these chronicles as I have experienced them.
During every larp, I recorded the number and demographic traits of every player in the chronicle. Monthly game sessions usually took place with roughly 15 to 30 other players. Larps were facilitated by 3 to 5 storytellers who were in charge of running the games and handling any administrative duties that would arise throughout the evening: consulting with new players, manning the check-in desk, collecting dues, and making sure that the venue was reserved and unlocked by 19:00. Many of the gamers commuted into the game’s Manhattan location from Connecticut or New Jersey, and thus inclement weather, traffic, and car troubles were often cited as explanations for low or sporadic attendance.

[Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] larpers were primarily white males between 25 and 60 years of age, with a clear majority within the 25-35 ranges; older larpers (50+) were a significant minority in both chronicles. [Samuel] was Latino in appearance, and [Marques] was African-American; both were consistently present at game, but remained the only people of color to enter either chronicle during my participation. A smaller, yet active cohort of female larpers were present at every session; their attendance fluctuated throughout my time in the group, and the number of women present did not exceed 5 individuals on any given night. The storytellers in each chronicle were all white males, with no exceptions.

My earliest observations of the group noted the role that food played before, during, and after games. Sessions began at 19:00, and oftentimes larpers would eat dinner “at site” due to long travel times or work schedules. Fast food, burritos, snack chips and candy were mainstays, and were regularly consumed
while in-character and during the nightly post-game meetings or “afters.” “Afters” were held at a 24-hour bodega close to the site and usually lasted until 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. Caffeinated energy drinks – Red Bull and Monster in particular – flowed freely. I found myself bringing coffee to games blend in, stay awake, and match the hyper-caffeinated energy of the other players. Cigarette smoking was also common, and due to restrictions on indoor smoking, gameplay often drifted outdoors. Cigarette smoking, and the resulting demand for outside space worked to expand the playable boundaries of the venue, incorporating the sidewalk in front of the rehearsal space, the stairwells, lobby, and elevators of the building into spaces for larp.

1.2 “AFTERS” AND LEARNING THE ROPES

The larps were sober. No alcohol was permitted at the site, and any overt signs of drunkenness or chemical impairment were grounds for dismissal from the night’s game. [Leif], a player character in [Fell Winter] explained how:

“All Vampire larps are sober. Let’s say you came to game drunk. . .you’re impaired. . .you might make a decision you would regret or completely ruin the game for another character. You could get physical, angry or violent, sexually aggressive, or simply inappropriate. Third of all, something happening in-character has the potential to be more emotionally detrimental if one is intoxicated. I’ve been in games where people got wasted and really wreaked havoc. It’s hard because we’re adults and we’re doing this for fun . . . but I’ve seen it go south really fast, so it’s for the best”²

On the subject of marijuana use during game, [Leif] pointed out that, “larpers are so quiet as it is, imagine if they were stoned,” implying that the drug didn’t have

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² Field notes. February 8, 2014
an obvious place in the group was generally prohibited. The dangers of intoxication as [Leif] describes them were not only to the individual, but also to other players, their characters, and the integrity and quality of the imaginary world and the narratives that weave throughout it. However, nowhere in the official rules or literature for either chronicle was sobriety explicitly mandated, nor were the potential punishments explained; the prohibition was communicated to me through an anecdotal narrative – a story. Storytelling in this instance acted as a form of soft power (Chen 2012), a method through which the normative expectations of the organization could be transmitted in a way that was contextually appropriate and meaningful.

Chen (2012) asserts that the bureaucratization of organizations – the implementation of rules, hierarchy, and regimes of accountability – can disenchant and alienate members, excising the “meaning and magic” from group life (312). That alienation, Chen (2012) argues, can be remedied through storytelling as a means of “charismatizing the routine” (313). According to Chen (2012), storytelling facilitates the transfusion of agency as participants use narrative to embed organizational principles into real world scenarios, expresses the potential for alternative or emergent organizational forms or practices, enhance feelings of commitment to the cause, and crafts a cultural ecosystem that encourages storytelling as a meaning-making tool for participants throughout the organization. In [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter], storytelling occurs backstage; after games and outside of the formal bounds of live action play during “afters.”
“Afters” were a post-game social ritual that took place at a nearby 24-hour bodega. Larpers drank beer and queued up in long lines for cheeseburgers and deli sandwiches – they also told stories. Storytelling during “afters” was crucial to my early socialization in the group, and my development as a player. Through these jargon-laden narratives, I learned about long lost moments of glory, epic in-game betrayals, how larpers defined successful games, and what factors could make a game miserable and toxic.

Storytelling was a vehicle for complaints about organizational shortcomings; in particular, a past storyline involving a mental asylum populated by storybook characters that it turns out ‘was all just a dream’ was recounted frequently and with derision. The story served to help players justify what they felt was wasted time and also serve as a warning to newcomers; a way of presenting the ideas that fail, and the responses those failed narratives could engender. [Leif] would often complain about how “boring” these games were compared to larps in western Europe or Scandinavia, and regale us with stories of larps held in rented castles with sumptuous costumes and atmospherics – through storytelling about other games, she laid out an alternative path for the group, a possible world forged from her own experiences.

During “afters,” more experienced larpers would provide me with guidelines for appropriate and inappropriate behaviors based on their own past experiences by explaining parts of the game and game rules that I found confusing or didn’t know about. Stories acculturate and orient group members, contextualizing and rationalizing prohibitions and rules like those regarding
sobriety, but also introduce newcomers to cultural schemas; facilitating introspection, creativity and the development of a group identity through discourse and education (Chen 2012: 317).

Storytelling during “afters” also served as an informal mechanism through which players could collectively and informally combat negative bleed; the “bleeding-in” of out-of-character dramas or conflicts into in-character relationships, or the “bleeding out” of diegetic discords or betrayals into out-of-game interactions (Bowman 2013: 17). Bowman’s (2013) own qualitative work on Vampire: The Masquerade larpers argues that the long-term nature of “campaign-style” play, like the kind I engaged in with [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] “creates a desire to protect [one’s] character as an entity” and as a result of that attachment, “campaign-style play increases the chances of players reacting negatively to threats toward their character’s existence or emotions” (18). These concerns regarding bleed in Vampire were echoed in an email correspondence with larp journalist and author [Jordana] I participated in before entering the field:

Conventional wisdom says that vampire is basically an experience that lays bare social sadism, creates immense bleed, and doesn't really deal with that. Vampire is generally regarded as a place where completely dysfunctional social relationships form over time. The game is essentially supports play whereby you dick over your friends after plotting for, in some cases, years. Even though it's "a game" that is bound to have an effect on people. A prototypical story is of the powerful dude who mind controls the new lady larper's character to be in love with him, for example."

3 Personal communication December 23, 2013
Within [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter], participants had also had negative bleed experiences. In an interview with [Anders], a longtime storyteller in [Blood Reign], player character in [Fell Winter], and clan coordinator in One World by Night, he described how in-game disappointments can foster abusive or negative behaviors that bleed into organizational life; disrupting the group’s ability to function administratively. Negative bleed, as [Anders] depicts it has consequences beyond the interpersonal, and the mitigation of these bleed moments is integral to the continued viability of a larping collective.

People invest a lot into Vampire - maybe too much, probably too much. People can be very shitty to us [storytellers] sometimes. You’d be surprised at how awful people can be when calls don’t go there way, or you say that they can’t have something. . .[coordinators] have gotten death threats. A [coordinator] quit last year. . .People were annoyed at the way an event didn’t work out – And people got so mad, and they blamed the marketing coordinator for reasons I’m still not clear on, and they blamed her. People gave her death threats.  

Stories like these, and other tales of bad conduct and negative bleed permeate “afters.” Like Chen (2012), who found that organizational storytelling can align newcomers and longtimers within ongoing organizational tensions and community issues, I discovered that for [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] larpers, storytelling functioned to inform new players of the potential perils and emotional traumas embedded in the rules of Vampire. By linking new players to problematic ‘horror stories,’ and larger issues pertinent to the Vampire larp community, like [Leif]’s discussion of “drunk-larping,” participants demonstrate agency as they define their place in the collective, and project idealized notions of how the

4 Interview March 25, 2014
organization ought to be. Larpers use storytelling as a warning to newcomers, as a tool to socialize ‘newbs’ and forge a collective identity within the group, and as a way to indirectly envision possible organizational futures (Chen 2012: 322) where bleed is mitigated through communication and post-game debrief.

Debrief according to Bowman (2013) consists of non-game interactions that build community, de-stress players and resolve potentially toxic plot-points. Debrief as a social mechanism serves to “cool out the mark” (Goffman 1952); soothing the feelings of loss and injury experienced by players “whose expectations and self-conceptions have been built up an then shattered” (Goffman 1952) through in-game betrayal, the loss of status, or even character death. According to Goffman (1952), these practices protect antagonists from the feelings of guilt that can spring from intense and unresolved in-game actions, and simultaneously allow the aggrieved to “vent out” their frustrations and save face when their vampiric personas have been disrespected, harmed, or alienated within the larp. “Cooling out” via debrief was evident in [Ander]’s thoughts on character death. He explained that “Yes, I’ve arranged character death, and [the reaction] depends on the person. Some players take it really well and it’s just like “cool, you owe me a drink for killing my character. . .we’re going to hang out its fun, this is part of the game.”” For [Anders], “afters” diffuse or “cool out” potentially catastrophic in-game losses and safeguard out of character relationships from negative bleed (Bowman 2013) while maintaining the high stakes cutthroat styles of gameplay indicative of Vampire.
My observations suggest that debrief in [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] is accomplished through informal storytelling during “afters,” narrative sharing and emotional ameliorations that not only attempts to relieve potential bleed moments but also, as Chen (2012) points out, acts to disseminate organizational values and rules, instill newcomers with practical group knowledge, and provide the agency necessary for larpers to envision and enact possible futures that use informal storytelling as a mode of debrief.

1.3 Costumes and “Fronting”

As larpers adopted new in-game personas, and embodied them during gameplay, they reflected these constructed identities visually through costume and modifications to movement and speech. The donning of “expressive equipment” conveyed significant meaning about a player’s character, and comprised in part, the in-character fronts that drive live action play (Goffman 1956:13). Goffman (1956) asserts that fronts are the behaviors; the presentations of self that “define the situation for those who observe the performance;” in larp, fronting is significant both in and out of character. Character constructs, or diegetic fronts, provided depth to in-character representations, they also signaled the commitment and skill of the gamer behind the persona (Goffman 1956:13). Sartorial expressions of identity within the community were diverse and varied, and although costuming was an optional, it was an encouraged method of self-expression in both [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter]. Arriving costumed, or
“dressed,” was incentivized through the experience point (XP) system used by the chronicles and formalized in the *Vampire* rulebook. Costuming netted a player 2XP that could be spent later on more powerful abilities or traits.

How costumes were integrated into character personas differed as well, and for many players, a character construct was tethered to a specific item of clothing or accessory that was put on before gaming began and removed afterwards. For players who were shifting back and forth between two characters during a game, these “props” (Goffman 1956:143); physical items lending symbolic weight and narrative clarity to words and actions, served to alert other players to the transition from one persona to the next. Affected modes of speech and action complemented the physical transitions from character to character, and players were often evaluated on their ability to successfully integrate both props and performances into a fully realized character construct.

Trench coats and black leather jackets, canes and costume jewelry, ‘steampunk’ goggles, and chain mail; a fox tail attached to the belt loop of a male larper’s jeans, and the small plastic skull affixed to the walking stick of a player in mismatched red and white gloves; a leather top hat encircled by crocodile teeth, lab coats and doctor’s bags were evidence of the diverse ways in which larpers

5 XP is an experiential currency used to ‘purchase’ more powerful abilities and disciplines in *V:tM*. Attendance at game garners 6XP, helping to set-up and break down the space is 2XP, arrival in costume earns 2XP, and the completion of an end of game (EOG) journal entry on [LARPhub.com] provides 2XP to each player. Linking XP to end of game journal entries rewards larpers for creative production between live action sessions. XP cannot be sold or traded. Unreported XP spends and lying about XP allotments are serious breaches of *Vampire* rules and can result in harsh penalties or a GNC or ‘generate new character’ – the removal of a character from the chronicle.
envisioned their in-character personas and expressed them visually. Context and lore also played a part in shaping sartorial expressions in game, and the more aristocratic characters in [Fell Winter] would often costume in less imaginative but more classically formal attire: suit jackets, ties, sweater vests, and slacks.

[Eva] is wearing an elaborate goth-inspired costume; a black latex corset, stiletto patent leather boots, a white and teal wig, and makeup that pales her skin complemented by heavy black eye make-up. [Marques] has chosen a Rastafarian reminiscent head-wrap to which he has attached artificial dreadlocks, a two-fingered golden snake ring, along with gold bangles and a skull-adorned hairpin. I spend much of the night with [Marques] and after the gaming has commenced, I watch him carefully place his costume in a plastic grocery bag for the subway ride home. [Grover] is wearing a gray suit and a bowler hat that was transported to the game in a garment bag, and some are wearing the clothes they worked in that day.6

Observing the demographic trends, foodways, storytelling traditions, and modes of in-character self-presentation began the task of establishing how identity was created and enacted within the chronicles. Live action play in [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] required a prosumption of identity (Davis 2012), a blurring and shifting of the processes of consumption and production through which larpers fashion their in-game selves and present those selves to other players to be consumed through the normal processes of live action game-play. The presumptive co-creation of identity in larp was accomplished through the ongoing and overlapping interactions between game lore and rules, storyteller constructed narratives, and player creativity. These interactions took place during ‘real life’ game sessions and online.

6 Field notes, November 24 2013
In line with Davis’ (2012), the self-created or assembled costume items used by larpers worked to definitively link players to their character constructs and incorporated these items and constructed selves into meaningful interactions as their performances are consumed by other players within the game’s narrative (598). The embodied and visualized in-character identities of larpers, and the costumes and touchstone items they produce and use during role-play are actively consumed by other players and storytellers throughout the larp as they are used as the fodder for in-game scenes and further narrative arcs. End of game or EOG online journaling systems transform lived moments into searchable, permanent and recorded files that can be retrieved by storytellers or players, and used to build plots or stories months after they initially took place.

1.4 ROLE-PLAY AS INTERACTION | DEFINITIONAL POWER IN LARP

Drawing on Davis’ (2102) attention to interaction as a precursor for a prosumptive identity, it is also necessary to examine the ways in which larp was also a performative and dramaturgical engagement between players in an imaginary world. For Goffman (1959), our identities as persons are cleaved in two. We are both performers, the generators of impressions and participants in the drama of interaction as well as characters; abstract assemblages of dispositions, emotions, and aspirations all housed within one discrete physical form (Goffman 1959). Goffman (1959) asserts that the self is a “dramatic effect,” and the body nothing more than the dress form onto which we pin our complex and collaboratively constructed roles – we are the performative self-productions;
continuously re-worked, re-imagined, and re-deployed in our attempts to manipulate and manage our impressions in the eyes of others, and shift through the various roles and social frames (Goffman 1974) that comprise our lived experiences. The self, as Goffman ([1961] 1997) describes it, is a “ceremonial thing,” a “sacred object” taking part in rituals of appropriate demeanor and expectations of deference; the self in this view is conditional and dependent on the items and actions that are perpetually forming and performing it (29-31).

Conceptions of a dramaturgical and ritualized self are complicated in larp through the creation of a subjective diegesis (Montola 2003, 2009). Diegesis, a literary term is defined by Genette and Lewin (1983), as the “spatiotemporal universe” (Brunia 2011) housed within a narrative and conveyed through storytelling. The events taking place within a narrative universe are considered by Genette and Lewin (1983) to be occurring at the diegetic level. In live action role-play, a subjective diegesis (Montola 2003, 2009) refers to each player’s unique in-character interpretation of the imaginary game world – their internal narrative universe as they understand it – the monologues, subnarratives, hidden motivations, goals, and fictive histories that animate a character construct as it moves through a larp. Each player’s subjective diegetic understanding of the game is subsequently informed and constrained by game rules, the reactions of other players, and the definitional power hierarchies that structure the fictive universe of larp.

While still aligning with Goffman (1959) in his view of the self as a collection of performances, interactions, and impressions; in role-play, the self of
symbolic interactionism exists on multiple levels simultaneously, adhering to differing sets of interactional expectations and notions of appropriate action reinforced by exogenous, endogamous, and diegetic frames of power (Montola 2009). Montola (2009) aligns himself with Hakkarainen and Stenros’ (2003) definition of role-play as communicative, something that “is created in the interaction between players or between player(s) and game master(s) within a specified diegetic framework” – in identifying the “invisible rules” of role-play, Montola (2009) frames diegetic actions within the agreed upon power hierarchies that direct play in larp, and specifically, my experiences and observations playing *Vampire*.

Exogenous power delineates a player’s ability to influence gameplay from outside of the game – it is defined through frames of authority not addressed or defined by the game system (Montola 2009: 29). Exogenous systems of power in [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] govern the more mundane aspects of organizational life and are wielded by storytellers and volunteers: securing the venue, setting the start and end times for games, the collection of each player’s $7.00 per game dues and the more general house rules that outline expectations for mutual respect between players. Players wield exogenous power when they participate in organizational votes, make suggestions, the group, and adhere to, or rebel against, organizational policies and prohibitions.

Endogamous power dictates player actions in accordance to a game’s written rules, the laws that govern the cosmological boundaries of the imaginary world. Rule systems limit character actions within the game world, and actively
inform an organization’s interpretation of the game itself, and the possible actions that can occur within the diegesis (Montola 2009: 29). I adhered to the rules of *Vampire: The Masquerade* as filtered through the texts of *Laws of the Night: Revised Rules for Playing Vampires* (1999), the genre-applicable house rules of each chronicle, the conventions of the Sabbat or Camarilla’s subgenres, and the regulations and conditions agreed upon by the members of each chronicle and as stipulated by One World by Night, the international organization of *Vampire* chronicles of which are groups are members. Endogamous power is also expressed through game mechanics such as “throwing a chop” – playing rock-paper-scissors with another character or storyteller – to determine the success or failure of an action, XP expenditures, the effects of magical abilities, combat actions, or enacted understandings like the knowledge that by crossing one’s arms flat against one’s chest, a player has accessed their powers of vampiric invisibility.

Endogamous and exogamous frames of authority are not mutually exclusive. In [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter], these forces worked conjointly when storytellers and One World by Night staff members altered or amended

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7 The Sabbat and Camarilla are oppositional factions within the *V:tM* universe. Each are characterized by specific histories and social mores that dictate the style of play indicative of a given chronicle. Sabbat larps are traditionally more combat oriented while Camarilla role-play is more concerned with matter of court and vampire etiquette, social climbing and clandestine schemes.

8 Chops are traditionally thrown using rock-paper-scissors hand symbols. Some players carry a deck of playing cards with the words “rock” “paper” and “scissor” written on each card in black marker; a card would be drawn and the result of the chop determined by the draw. I also observed players using smartphone apps that randomly generate a rock, paper, or scissor symbol at random – these more unorthodox methods for throwing chops were deemed acceptable and unremarkable by the members of the chronicle.
game rules or styles of play they felt did not serve interests of the organization or the genre. In an interview, [Anders] described his role as a clan coordinator in One World by Night, and how that position framed his actions within [Blood Reign], the “local chronicle” where he is on the ST staff.

I control number of important Lasombra\(^9\) NPCs . . . I approve rare and unusual things related to clan Lasombra. If people want to learn Obtenebration\(^10\), I have to sign off on it, or they can't learn it . . . I can propose changes to the bylaws that structure the org in a way that benefits, what we call genre . . . Basically I'm supposed to keep [players] from doing anything too stupid and wacky with the Lasombra.

Endogamous authority is flexible, and ultimately dependent on the motivations and goals of the storytellers. STs construct and implement the grand narratives of larp while simultaneously acting in ways that benefit the organization, and their own positions within it. Exogenous and endogamous frames of power are constrained by the bureaucratic sensibilities of OWbN, and by the willingness of rank and file members to either reject or adhere to the changes to game rules or genre alterations that have the potential to limit or threaten their in-character opportunities. [Anders]' assertion that part of his role as ST is to keep players from making “stupid or wacky” decisions points to the professionalization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) of storytelling and OWbN coordinator functions within the chronicles.

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9 A clan in *Vampire: the Masquerade*

10 A discipline within the game that allows a player to manipulate shadows, it is a powerful ability and thus it is within the storyteller or clan coordinator's purview to limit the number of players who have this power in order to maintain a balance within the game world
As organizations compete for resources or strive for legitimacy, they can homogenize, becoming similar to other collectives within their organizational environment through pressure from authoritative bodies, by mimicking the operating regimes of well known or successful organizations, or by harnessing the prestige and status that can be derived from professionalization (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Within [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter], the coercive processes imposed by One World by Night: mandatory adherence to bylaws, the required development of accountable digital files, and organization-wide creative constraints coalesce into rituals of conformity that bring together a global community of larp, but also sacrifice collective idiosyncrasies in exchange for collective legitimacy.

As storytellers and coordinators professionalize; clearly defining the conditions of their work and establishing legitimacy through the adoption of standardized ways of operating, the logics of other systems – and implicit references to notions of ‘customer service’ – emerge in organizational discourses (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). These professionalized discourses can be seen in [Anders]’ approach to emails he receives from the chronicle.

It all probably takes about twelve to fifteen hours a week, about 50 or 60 emails a day. I don’t have to respond to all of them depending on the week...And we’re pretty good at keeping our response times low. Like I actually think [Blood Reign] has a six-hour turn around max. We’re very fast responding to stuff. I’ll do it from my phone.
Pressures from outside and within the organization contort official actions and expectations. These pressures work to characterize the frames of power operating within the games, as the interactions between gamers and staff are measured by efficiency, speed, and other professionalized discourses.

The third level of power through which the co-creative processes of identity formation and self-presentation in larp are framed is through diegetic authority – the power of a character to interact with and through the immediate and historical contexts of an imaginary world (Montola 2009: 29). According to Montola (2009), diegetic power situates the actions of characters within the social systems, histories, precedents, and conventions that have developed within an imaginary universe over time. While my in-character identity and actions within the larp are given meaning through diegetic power, they are ultimately informed by my subjective understanding of the imaginary world. This understanding is reached collectively through embodied engagements in live action play, and also through the discussions and reflections produced and recorded online through emails, text messages and the [LARPhub.com] user interfaces.

1.5 SUBJECTIVE DIEGESIS

According to Montola (2003), larp itself is the communication of these subjective understandings performed through speech and action. I argue that this definition can be expanded to include online actions within a digitally expanded and pervasive (Montola 2007) magic circle, and the visual and textual actions of larpers as they presume the content that is re-worked and re-fashioned into the
narratives that drive live action role-play. For Montola (2003), no one player can interpret an imaginary world in quite the same way, and further, that the specific viewpoints of a character construct, and the non-diegetic biographical prerogatives of a player work collaboratively to create an interpretation of reality that is significant, yet is so nuanced and multilayered that it cannot be fully conveyed.

These subjective interactions are constrained both by storytellers, and the game’s rules and established lore, each exerting definitional power onto the larper. Within these hierarchical frames of definitional power, storyteller actions comprise arbitrated communications (Laponen and Montola 2004). STs deploy definitional power to standardize the sometimes contradictory or nonstandard diegetic interpretations that can arise from the individual subjectivities of a player character (Loponen and Montola 2004). The arbitrated nature of meaning-making and subjective communication in larp also applies to the objects, items and costumes that give texture to the diegetic game world, “in larp every object in the physical space and every act performed is a sign” (Loponen and Montola 2004: 42). It is through the production, consumption, arbitration, and interpretation of these signs that identity within larp is produced, and made significant; folded into the collaborative and co-created world of live action role-play.

Expressions of identity, be they sartorial, narrative, performative, or digital, make public the less evident aspects of a player’s subjective diegetic interpretation. These expressions allow players to signify rarely seen elements of their fictive personas and engage in creatively fulfilling processes that are
necessary and generative. Presentation of self in *Vampire* is arbitrated and mediated by a hierarchy of definitional power that, through written rules and storyteller actions, collaboratively refine player-generated signs and symbols into diegetic matter suitable for consumption and re-purposing in subsequent narratives.

The creative efforts of the player are collaboratively molded online in the downtime before these ideas and concepts can be experimentally debuted in game. As larpers create characters and adorn themselves in preparation for play, they are eking out space in hierarchy of definitional power. Through co-creation, larpers become prosumers, crafting diegetic expressions of their subjective imaginary interpretations that are moderated and refined through interactions with storytellers and fellow larpers. Role-players form diegetic identities that are unique, representative but also useful and consumable – reflections of community standards reproduced through the logics and behaviors of the organization. Through storytelling, larpers prosume functional narratives that define their identities as accomplished players, socializing newcomers and reifying organizational rules and values. How are characters that comprise these multiple identities created? Further, how do downtime interactions taking place online help new members to create alternate selves that are rewarding, fulfilling and ultimately useful for the ongoing narratives that sustain group play?
PART II: CO-CREATING CHARACTERS AND THE RITUALS OF INITIATION

How do new larpers construct their in-game personas in *Vampire*? How are these new, imaginary personas inducted into an imaginary world, and the mundane organizational sphere of the chronicle? And further, how do burgeoning role-players learn to hone their creative energies in ways that generate role-play and adhere to community standards?

2.1 WHO DO I WANT TO BE?

The [JoinMe.com] instructions tell me to be at the site by 19:00 for [Blood Reign]. I arrive late, around 19:45. Two men in trench coats are smoking a cigarette outside under the multi-colored banner of the [Telford Porter] youth theatre. I see the trench coats and assume I’ve reached my destination – they explain that they are also here for [Blood Reign] and buzz me in. The game is on the third floor.

I’m greeted by [Sid] who is crouched on the banister. Sinewy and lean, [Sid] is in his mid-twenties and appears white. His red hair is shaved on the sides; the center portion is longer and slicked back – pompadour meets mohawk. He smells strongly of cigarette smoke and he’s wearing a worn-in white t-shirt with a hole near the collar and baggy brown camouflage pants and black Doc Martins. [Sid] peppers our introductory conversations with generous use of the word “fuck”; he is friendly, engaging, and gives off a hyper-active punk rock energy. I tell him I'm here for the game, and that I’ve never played before. [Sid] begins by
giving me a really basic breakdown of the lore structuring the *Vampire: the Masquerade* universe. I’m familiar enough with the universe, to relay that I’m not a complete novice – I downloaded PDF versions of multiple rule books prior to tonight’s game and spent enough time on *V:tM* fan sites to cobble together a reasonably thorough understanding of the different vampire clans, their respective powers, and how they all work together in the universe.

[Sid] is a storyteller or ST. He, along with a team of other STs shape the narratives that we’ll be playing in. He’s “on staff,” and it’s understood that if I have any questions, he’ll be equipped to answer them. [Sid] is also in charge of helping me create my character. All around us are reminders that we’re gaming at a children’s theatre; paper mache animal masks (no touching), inspirational posters, and photos from past performances are hung on the walls. There is a working gumball machine down the hall near the vending machines and water fountain. It’s a colorful happy place, a place made for children. It’s an odd and incongruous setting for blood soaked and gritty urban landscape of *Vampire*.

[Sid] sits me down at the office desk and retrieves a well-worn copy of *Laws of the Night: Revised Rules for Playing Vampires* (1999); on the pages I can see black and white photos of *Vampire* players in full costume snarling or preening in their photos – “this is specifically for live action play, the rules are different when you’re not playing tabletop” [Sid] explains. The first choice is clan; various vampire clans inhabit the game world, each with a distinct culture, and access to a specific set of physical or magical skills. [Sid] describes some of the clans I can choose from and what this choice means for my character; *Brujah*
“big motherfuckers... anarchists, punks” that are “good for combat; Ventrue are “old world aristocrats – blue bloods and businessmen;” the Ravnos are “vampire gypsies;” clan Gangrel are “hillbillies and hippies – but if you play them right you can morph into animals, like a wolf – or a fly!” while Malkavians are “out of their minds – literally insane” and the Nosferatu are “monsters, old school vampires with hideous deformities.”

Figure 1.3 Gangrel Description, Laws of the Night: Revised Rules for Playing Vampires (1999)
I choose a “country” Gangrel and name him Mosser Brughes. The qualifiers for this clan, “country” or “city,” provide me with more guided choices for my character build and allow me to further customize the actions I can perform. [Sid] tells me “country” Gangrel are solitary, that they usually live in wooded areas and can shape-shift as they grow more powerful – I’m sold. I’m drawn to the idea of a Grateful Dead following, crystal healing, incense burning, countercultural vampire; a hippie survivalist that runs with crust punks and talks to animals – I feel engaged by the amount of creative license built into the game. The ability to challenge familiar archetypes and subvert tired fantasy tropes is exciting. [Sid] explains that the character we’re making tonight will be “bare bones” and that over time, and with more experience “you’ll get more powerful and have more awesome magic vampire powers.”

“Now we’re going to make a character sheet.” By ‘character sheet’ he means a nearly indecipherable handwritten document that can remind me, and inform the other storytellers of what actions I can perform in-game, and how strong I am should I find myself in complex social or combat scenarios. [Sid] is adamant: “you carry your character sheet with you all the time, put it in your pocket – but don’t show it to anyone other than an ST.” This culture of secrecy is serious and is woven throughout many in-game interactions. Character sheet etiquette is brought up again when I’m chastised later that night by [Marques], another player character, for “waiving around my character sheet” during a scene; he tells me “if someone knows your abilities and weaknesses, its easier for them to betray and kill you.”
[Sid] describes how the sheet is set up as I pour over the rulebook to find definitions and concepts. “Abilities” [Sid] describes “determine what you character can do and what you know.” Everything from handgun expertise to academic knowledge, leadership skills, and etiquette, driving ability, familiarity with the occult and fighting style are covered under “abilities.” I tell [Sid] “I want to be scrappy and tough” so he helps me maneuver through the rulebook and we figure out an ability set that works. Next, we choose our “disciplines” or as [Sid] reminds me with a smile, “your magical vampire powers.” Gangrels have access to three “disciplines” and the number of points I invest determines their strength. [Sid] tells me that I have four “dots” – or points – to invest. With [Sid] standing over me at the desk, I get to work; researching disciplines and ability types and doing the simple math necessary to flesh out my brand new persona.

After a few minutes of this, [Sid] “need[s] go fuck off” and leaves me to build my character. Before he goes, [Sid] reminds me “that the point of the game is for everyone to have fun” and that “if you need anything or have questions, just come find me.” I ask him what people usually do when the game starts – I’m not really thrilled to be completely on my own; he tells me to “finish your character and start talking to people – get to know people and see what happens – ask questions, make friends.” [Sid] is tying a purple tie-dyed bandana around his neck ‘outlaw style,’ and I realize this is because he is a storyteller tonight – all of the other STs are also donning similar bandanas in equally idiosyncratic styles to signify their out-of-character or OOC position during tonight’s game. After our introduction and foray into character creation, I have no further interactions with
[Sid] during the game. [Sid] has scenes to run and goals to accomplish tonight, and – and now so do I.

My first night at [Fell Winter] is two weeks after my larp with [Blood Reign]. This time, it’s [Graham] that I meet of the stairs. [Graham] is white, is in his early to mid thirties with long black hair down past his shoulder blades and a black beard. [Graham] is a self-professed “mechanics guy;” extremely well versed in the numerical rules and statistical point systems that map out the deeper elements of character creation. He explains that “if you submit [the sheet] to us beforehand, we can review it with you, work out any kinks, answer any questions and then work you into the plot for tonight – you can hit the ground running and start with a real finished character.” He spends time explaining the complex system of attributing flaws and derangements that go into a character construct; a balancing act where detrimental traits allow me the flexibility to choose powerful or useful abilities. Character creation with [Graham] at [Fell Winter] is a detailed and thorough endeavor.

We create the character, Braxton Montgomery. A member of clan Ventrue and thus characterized by a thirst for capitalist accumulation, an adherence to tradition, and rigid conceptions of honor. Braxton is a queer art gallery owner and visual arts professor at the University of New Rochelle. I like the idea of a crafty, manipulative, and decidedly flamboyant art dealer and academic; [Graham] encourages the concept and helps me develop the idea and suggests characters that I should interact with. I jot the words “deadly dandy” onto the top of my character sheet – a performative touchstone for the persona I’ll be adopting
tonight. This is my second time larping and after experiencing [Blood Reign] two weeks prior, the character feels more nuanced and better conceived. I feel more confident and grounded as I begin to devise goals and backstory, history and purpose for this new character.

2.2 ‘First Nights’ and Community Standards for Creativity

For new players, character creation was an opportunity to sit one-on-one with a storyteller, a time where they could vet ideas, express longstanding or emerging in-game aspirations, and ask questions in a low-stakes collaborative environment before being thrown head first into live action play. Larp can be hectic and while storytellers can, and often do, pause role-play to field a question or explain a game mechanic, these pauses could be disruptive for other characters in a scene or embarrassing for someone new to larp. Through a ritualized first night, the basics of play were put forth in a constructive way that helped me establish an in-game persona while also introducing my out of character self to the rest of the group. I focus on these initial, ‘first night’ character creation sessions because they are markedly intimate, instructive, and exhibit the ways in which new players are introduced into a chronicle both as character and as organizational participants and fellow hobbyists.

Character creation was personal; a rite of passage; a showing of solidarity and commitment to the game and to the organizational values of the group. The practice publicly identified new and fledgling members, and also gave established larpers time to decide how, and if, to include a new member’s player character
into their diegetic lives. My ‘first night,’ and the ‘first nights’ of other players provided us access to a knowledgeable and professionalized storytelling staff. In [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter], storyteller guidance directed a player’s creative intentions; nurturing them in ways that adhered to the group’s standards for appropriate and inappropriate creative production. After my ‘first night’ this guidance continued online through communications with ST staff members in between games.

Collaboratively building a persona with a storyteller was a public and visible act of imaginative co-creation. Storytellers and new players sit, talk, and build character constructs alongside current members and other STs as they get ready for the night’s larp. During these rituals of initiation, storytellers and more experienced group members present and visibly reproduce the terms of an “inclusive community logic” (Chen 2012); sets of beliefs and practices that seek to establish who can create imaginative content in larp – storytellers alongside player characters – in ways that reset conceptions of production and consumption, re-casting larp participants as prosumers (572). Prosumers in larp are encouraged to both create and consume narrative content. The improvisational performances and visual representations produced during larp are consumed as storytellers and other player characters take-on, interpret, and integrate these imaginative actions into their own subjective diegeses (Montola 2003) – absorbing them into the larger, ongoing narratives of the game, and generating role-play.

According to Chen (2012), “inclusive community logics” also help guide what is produced and how it is consumed while simultaneously providing
frameworks for how new members can adopt and master unfamiliar prosumptive practices considered commonplace and taken for granted within the group. In game spaces, these logics direct the organizational energies of participants, concretize collective identities and roles, highlight systems of status and power, establish an organizational status quo, and couple rules and values to specific group and individual activities (Chen 2012: 573). Through exposure to inclusive community logics, new members can adopt the unfamiliar activities and prosumptive choices involved in character creation, character sheet construction, and diegetic self-presentation.

In larp, standards for appropriate action during games, and the adherence to rules and organizational policies are buttressed by shared values concerning creative competence. These standards are collectively imposed as larpers submit scenes and character ideas to storytellers for approval (or denial) either online or in person. These standards are seen as vital to the health of role-play as they help create worlds that are engaging, fun, and meaningful to members.

Once identified, and introduced to group play on their ‘first night,’ new players experience a handicap; an initial pampering during the first few sessions wherein potentially lethal gaffes are overlooked, and breaches of *Vampire* etiquette are handled constructively rather than punitively. I sat in on a storyteller meeting one evening prior to a game. I transcribed pieces of a conversation exhibiting the stresses experienced by STs as they familiarize new larpers into the mechanics and creative expectations of game play. “I’m not spoon feeding him plot” the storyteller said, “he’s just a little cuokoo, and not everyone can make the
transition to a larp setting. My job is not to coddle. A period of time I’ll give for coddling, a learning curve, but making a character is work – and you have to do the work.”

Sometimes, the ‘work’ of larp isn’t fun. Moments of boredom plagued my game sessions. When creative momentum slowed down, when we just ran out of things to say, other characters and I would stare blankly at each other for minutes at a time. Listless boredom was socially awkward and shattered the immersiveness of the game. Larp in [Fell Winter] and [Blood Reign] required structured plots to progress, and when storytellers initiated an event or scene, players would flourish and snap into character, creating memorable moments and driving the game forward. Moments of boredom brought to light our deficits as actors, and highlighted our inability to be constantly creating content unprompted – we were, after all, amateurs.

To address creative deficits, larpers would ask for “stuff” – activities, plots, any opportunity to ground their performances. “Stuff” would be desperately requested by players telling each other, or STs that, “I just want some stuff to do.” On some occasions, it was obvious that the hunger for content and plot was more than the storytellers or the players could provide, and these discrepancies weakened the game world; often leaving us disappointed after our five-hour commitment had ended. General boredom and a lack of things to do while in-character comprised the bulk of complaints voiced by larpers, either during games or in “afters.” However, these moments also provided breaks between scenes, and required members to collaboratively remobilize and reconsider existing frames or
alternatively, suffer from the realization that backstage work, and the now public failure to produce engaging game content was not made visible frontstage.

I argue that the creative “work” of character construction, as it is performed in [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] act as “presentation rituals;” performances that evoke, togetherness, intimacy, and comfort between members while symbolizing the informal and decentralized structures of authority that bind the collective, and the creative standards of imaginative production at work in the group (Kunda, 1992: 92). As new members shift from discussions revolving around creative choices to more casual, interpersonal topics, they swing from ritual frames to routine frames and back again in ‘initiation’ scenarios that dramatize the group’s creative ideologies and forge the interpersonal bonds that will ideally be reflected back during game play (Kunda 1992).

These rituals were part of my ‘first night,’ and I also sat with storytellers as new players built characters and asked questions throughout my fieldwork; witnessing the ‘first nights’ of others and their gradual inclusion into the chronicle. The public nature of character creation prompts new and specific behaviors set aside specifically for ‘newbs.’ The use of tattered paperback rule books as opposed to the more commonly seen e-books, ‘homemade’ character sheets written on printer paper rather than the printed ones handed out to established larper, and the welcoming of new players during general announcements cement ‘first nights’ as something special; an experientially rich event that signifies inclusion into the group, and a temporary novice status. These traditions also expose new larper to individuals at different levels of the group
and introduce organizational messages and modes of presentation, speech, and creative production that subtly exert symbolic power to “create a complex web of normative pressures” (Kunda, 1992: 159). Normative expectations begin on a player’s first night, but extend into embodied play and in-character online communications.

Larpers know what stories they want to experience. My informants in [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter] were experienced gamers; sophisticated players who could differentiate between chronicles that could provide compelling and long lasting campaign games, and those that couldn’t. They were vocal and open about the potential for larps – as organizational and ludic entities – to devolve into boring, listless, or drama-ridden collectives where the quality of creative content and the social pleasures group life were low. There are stakes involved in imaginary co-creation. ‘First nights’ are opportunities for new players to wade through delicately conveyed community logics transmitted through instructive and nurturing ritual frames. These interactions are guided by the expertise of storytellers and the friendly camaraderie of other larpers.

The result of these practices is the inculcation of a creative morality; sets of values that benefit group members at both the diegetic and organizational levels. Rituals of visible co-creation, and the presumptive training achieved through the deployment of “inclusive community logics” (Chen 2012) groom larpers for the unpredictable and perilous challenges of role-play. The decisions gamers make while embodying their characters during larp can thus be positioned within Anteby’s (2013) conception of vocal silence; the promotion of
organizational morals through dynamic routines that require significant decision-making efforts from participants with little direct guidance from their superiors. Once inside the magic circle, new larper must independently make choices that reflect their subjective interpretation of the imaginary world; creating roleplay and generating prosumptive content (Montola 2003). These choices are however informed by the normative currents and moral prerogatives that weave their way through group life.

For Anteby (2013), these decision-making processes occur within organizational environments rich with indirect signs; inducing perceptions of self-determination for participants while “allow[ing] for the repeated, seemingly private reenactment of morals in apparent voids” (Anteby, 2013:8-9). As new larper are let loose into an imaginary world, their actions are their own – but their decisions are embedded within subtle moral systems that couple normative expectations with the promise of creative freedom. This coupling aims to stimulate the generative abilities of vocal silence (2013), harnessing creativity in ways that reflect organizational imperatives while still working to assure the production of diegetic relationships and in-game moments that make gameplay rewarding, and ensure the continued existence of the chronicle.

After characters are created, they ‘live’ online. Making a character ‘official’ online through [LARPhub.com] standardizes and streamlines in-game action and the evolution of player characters over time. Embedding my character into [LARPhub.com] cements his membership into the chronicle. A
[LARPhub.com] user profile signals my out of character inclusion into the organization and allows me to view general announcements and discussion threads; enables me to accrue and spend experience points – subject to ST approval – and provides other players and STs an avenue for in-character and out of character communications. Below is a screen capture of Braxton Montgomery’s character sheet as seen online.

![Braxton Montgomery Character Sheet](image)

Figure 1.4 Braxton Montgomery Character Sheet
PART III: TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATIONS

How do virtual worlds serve as backstage spaces for larpers? When larpers collectively prosume online, how are their reflections and in-character ruminations technologically mediated? What processes are in play that allow these online actions to become realized and lived out through embodied larp IRL?

3.1 FINDING YOUR VOICE BACKSTAGE

Socialization in larp is technologically mediated. The introduction of new players, bureaucratic machinations, and the labor of character creation are not exclusively performed in person and face-to-face. As games progress, online interactions with storytellers and other players become integral aspects of engaging with the imaginary world of *Vampire*. Play is no longer limited to a children’s dance studio – it becomes folded into life, as diegetic thoughts and in-character perspectives bleed into player’s texts, emails, and direct messages. Virtual spaces create a contemplative arena where diegetic actions and motivations can be refined, discussed, or vetoed in the weeks between meetings IRL. The ability to message, ‘follow,’ or block other players works twofold: to broaden the scope of who can be involved in imaginative prosumption within the group, and increase opportunities for storytellers and One World by Night functionaries to impose influence creative production within the chronicle.

At midnight, storytellers “call game” and end the session. They remind us to log into [LARPhub.com] “as soon as possible” and compose our end of game journals, register any new characters, spend XP, and make ‘official’ everything
we accomplished in the game. Out of character announcements like these are framed through bureaucratic discourses. They remind participants of the larger organizational frames that the game moves through, and of player’s responsibilities not only as larpers shared fantasy, but as group members; individuals whose behaviors and values are important to the continued survival of the collective. During one of these announcements, Head Storyteller (HST) [George] conveyed how important online record keeping is to the organization and discussed the potential threats that lax enforcement could pose to individual players, their characters, and by extension the imaginary world and the collective that nurtures it:

> You need a history. We’re trying to cover your ass. If anyone from the org. says ‘we need XP histories or we’re auditing your chronicle,’ we have 24 hours to hand them over or they go over us with a fine-tooth comb. If they don’t get what they want they will GNC your character. We need emails for all XP approvals so it can be paper trailed. As long as there is an approval they’re fine. Every time you do an expenditure and no one knows, we don’t have a proper paper trail. I have to keep what we do in line with the paper trail in case we have to show it to the bureaucracy . . . People’s characters can be shelved indefinitely . . . We’re there for you. It’s our job to liaise between OWbN and you. So keep a copy of approved emails. They are your bread and butter . . . they’ll save your life. I’ve lost whole characters due to trusting an ST to do the right thing. Until you get email approval it didn’t happen.

Again, we see storytelling acting as an organizational tool to diagnose problems within the group (Chen 2012) – larpers are not being careful enough when recording their XP expenditures online and are apparently engaging in inconsistent game-related communications. [George]’s story also makes explicit the power relationship between local chronicles like [Blood Reign] or [Fell
Winter] and One World by Night. His narrative serves to detail the kinds of agency and action needed to combat the problematic situations that could lead to tedious and invasive audits, which are detrimental at the organizational level, and the loss of player characters which would be a personal blow to participants, and detrimental to the narrative health of the imaginary world.

[George]’s story highlights how the injection of personal anecdotes, flush with community specific languages, can “charismatize” (Chen 2012) potentially alienating bureaucratic narratives, and bring a community closer through the promotion of agency and action against potential complications or threats. Technological mediations can close the distances between agents within an organizational environment, and reinforce bureaucratic focuses on accountability and record keeping. Technology in larp also works to scatter the magic circle and extend gameplay and co-creative prosumption into contemplative and communicative virtual worlds.

When character concepts are ‘made official’ through the interfaces of [LARPhub.com], the technologically pervasive (Montola 2005) elements of larp are triggered, as gameplay is extended into a virtual world (Boelsdorff et al. 2012) housed within online social media. Boelsdorff et al. (2012) define virtual worlds as multi-user social environments; places imbued with a sense of worldness that can be traversed and explored, object rich environments that are persistent and exist after their participants have logged off, and realms of embodiment where users can interact and communicate through graphical or textual avatars (7). Within the bounds of a virtual worlds, larpers construct a contemplative space
where they can communicate with storytellers, build coalitions, and prosume content that is recorded and stored in permanent digital files.

Online, frontstage and backstage efforts merge, and social media aids in the generative practices of prosumption as they are enacted in a virtual world. Embodied frontstage performances in larp erase the elaborate and time-consuming backstage efforts of storytellers and players. The backstage efforts of *Vampire* larpers craft the personas and the events that populate the meaningful moments, and engaging scenarios of every larp. While engaged in live action play, these scenes and in-character interactions appear organic, effortless, and inspired – the fruit of raw creative potential. As Goffman (1956) notes, players can transform any region into a backstage; what he defines as the space where performances are painstakingly fabricated, and the illusions of impression and interaction are openly constructed (69). [Fell Winter] and [Blood Reign] larpers commune in a backstage eked out in a virtual world. They infuse it with a symbolic intimacy that breeds familiarity; erasing any gaps between players and storytellers and erecting a “work control” (Goffman 1956: 79-80) barrier between their creative impulses and the demands of live action play. Backstage and online, the roles of storyteller and player are blurred. STs assist players in crafting the narratives and plots that will nourish each participant’s role-play in the upcoming game.

Within the virtual world of [LARPhub.com], player initiative and storyteller labor work conjointly. Time, effort, and creativity are unbound by the temporal restrictions and spatial necessities that guide role-play IRL. According
to Woermann (2012), social media practices are *scopic systems*, “reflexive mechanisms of projection that aggregate, contextualize, and augment” (Knorr and Grimpe 2008: 164) creative or aesthetic content; they enhance subcultural daydreams and provide a global showcase for creative productions. End of game journaling exists as that reflexive mechanism in [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter].

EOG journals allow larpers to delve into their in-game personas and re-tell the events of a larp from their own diegetic perspectives; sharing a personal and nuanced take on in-game events that may not be evident during play. In turn, storytellers comment on, and in my experiences, praise players for their contributions, and fold the data embedded within these journals into future narratives that ideally reflect the player’s wishes and hopes – merging production and consumption online. EOG journals utilize the anonymity of Internet communications to provide a space where organizational critiques or complaints can be made. They give players license to reflect on diegetic goals or motivations; honing their in-game personas in an arena far removed from the performative stresses and ‘stage frights’ that can be present during live action play.

EOG journaling are written from both an in-character and out of character perspective and can be accessed through a player’s [LARPhub.com] profile under the ‘characters’ menu. The interface is split along those lines. The “Event” subheading asks out of character such as: “What was the most enjoyable part of the event?” “What could staff have done better during the event, and how?” “Was there too much or too little to do at any point?” or “Were there any questions about game rules? Any rules changes you would like?” These questions are
opportunities to express contentment, frustration, confusion, or simply a way to give feedback to the game staff. The “Downtime” section of the EOG interface allows for in-character journaling. Larp is also a subcultural hobby, and in my out of character life, there weren’t people around that I could discuss these instances with, no chance for debrief. Below is the text from my February 2014 EOG journal written while playing Braxton Montgomery. I had just experienced some rather intense events within the game, and EOG journaling allowed me to express what happened from my in-character point of new.

**Downtime**

- What is your character doing between events?

I found the events of the last month to be ... intense. Dealing with the prince can be draining, and I can only do so much groveling in an evening. I'll be preparing my space for the arrival of Mr. Oz's art and taking time to explore the fact that I'm apparently irresistible of the misplaced spirits of the damned. I am thankful for this affliction, it has garnered me attention; attention which can be valuable or fatal. However, I feel as if I have acted admirably for the sake of my clan and reaped gains far greater than what I risked. I may not be able to provide the raw economic benefits of some but it appears I have other, more ethereal gifts to offer.

- Do you have any long term goals? What have you done towards them?

Legitimacy. I still long to have my compatriots see me as worthy; worthy of the noble ruthlessness that defines our ilk, a person of stature, a being of power. I have made no made enemies yet in New Rochelle (that I know of) but adversaries are common, and I need to be prepared. I am grateful to be acknowledged by his grace, but the whims of the mighty are fickle. All I can do is attempt to gird myself in the case of a storm and persist as I have.

- Do you have any short term goals?
I would like to see what lies beneath the timid facades of my fellow Ventrue neophytes. They had the opportunity to seize great power in our last meeting but chose, as I did, to leave such suspicious gifts lie. I am curious regarding the allegiances they are undoubtiedly forming and if they are of use to me. I have boys to collect and - train. As my activities grow more sophisticated in New Rochelle I will need attendants, and these will do nicely. If Oz bears me spoiled fruit or tries to deceive me, it will be within my power to control these pawns and bend them to my will. In the short term I plan on surviving and acting as I'm needed. I will adjust to my...more public position within the domain and reap the blood and treasure that I am owed and deserved with a smile on my face and a skip in my step.

Always and forever,
Braxton Montgomery

EOG journaling gives larpers time. Woermann (2012) asserts that social media have the capacity “elongate ephemeral events” (628), extending short-lived moments and opening them up for consideration and contemplation. In the downtime, decisions concerning a character’s trajectory, their use of XP, or the plots they are involved in can (ideally) become collaborative, well-researched, diegetic events incubated online and fostered through storyteller contributions.

The technologies that saturated these Vampire larpss have allowed me and other player characters to mitigate our own performative short comings – the rifts between our own abilities as role-players, the stresses of certain often necessary in-game events, and the psychic and dramaturgical demands of role-play. It was the time I spent online in the downtime detailing my goals and my motivations, asking questions on [LARPhub.com], and experimenting in the weeks between live action sessions that I learned how my character sounded, how he spoke, where his allegiances truly lay, and that it turns out he signs his letters “always
and forever Braxton Montgomery.” By utilizing the communicative of [Blood Reign]’s and [Fell Winter]’s online interfaces through [LARPhub], I and other players can move towards more idealized modes of play – ways of interacting with the game and other players that are deeper, more social, and less dependent on raw skill and experience.

The perceived anonymity and freedom of social media provide avenues for the presentation of hoped-for possible selves; “cognitive bridges between the present and the future, specifying how individuals may change from how they are now to what they will become” (Markus and Nurius 1986: 961; Yurchisin, Watchravesringkan, and Brown 2005). In larp, players devise hoped-for selves for our diegetic personas and re-create these identities over and over again as they enter new chronicles, or generate new characters after ‘death’ or punitive archiving. These processes are not isolated from one another, they work in concert. Whether it be through the advice offered over beers during “afters,” or horror stories shared by STs or other players, the processes through which diegetic and organizational identities are shaped in larp are uniquely social and decidedly digital. Larp is an act of prosumptive co-creation expanded by technology and grounded in community standards that direct imaginative content, both online and off, in ways that generate role-play and engage an organization as they build lives, create selves, and play within an imaginary world.
CONCLUSION

Through my observations and in my analysis, I have put forth the thesis that prosumptive co-creation in larp is social; it occurs at the organizational level as members organize, initiate newcomers, and craft community standards for creative content – it is technologically mediated through online spaces that facilitate communication and reflection. This paper contributes to the study of larp by offering a sociological examination of larping collectives as organizations, and framing creativity in larp through theories of prosumption. My contribution is also ethnographic, providing an analysis of how new larpers are initiated and acculturated into larping collectives through my own experiences and actions, both embodied and online.

I wanted to see how someone who had never stepped into live action role-play would be acculturated and integrated into a chronicle, and what these processes felt like – how I could see and interpret these experiences as a researcher while retaining the enchantment of play. My role in the generative processes that formed a universe of vampires was that of player, and that of a participant in a voluntary association, a hobby group. Both roles were learned, and it was through online and IRL communications with storytellers, other players and larp scholars that I was given the tools to flourish.

As I integrated myself farther and farther into the diegetic, interpersonal, and organizational frames of [Blood Reign] and [Fell Winter], I realized that I was exerting agency and power through choices at multiple levels within the
experience. Through online journaling, I reflected on both imaginary and ‘real’ decisions in a safe and low-risk virtual space. In an online virtual world I found myself building stories through comments and direct messages with other players. I costumed myself; affecting my appearance and my mannerisms to gel with my character constructs.

As I performed and interacted, weaving myself and my ideas into the historical precedents of these diegetic worlds; making my mark on an fictive, magical versions of Manhattan and New Rochelle – other gamers were inserting moments with me and my characters into their own performances and interpretations of the game world. We were building a universe through loops of prosumption – and the loops were guided by organizational values and institutional policies that worked out the mundane details of group life that weren’t evidence when we were throwing chops or enacting the grand dramas of our diegetic existences.

From the unpaid labor of storyteller staff and the One World by Night coordinators – I learned that prosuming is work. It is the creative and organizational labor that bound everything together within these collectives, and served as the basis for our social and diegetic lives. The quality of this labor was set at the organizational and individual level; larper worked together with storyteller staff members to refine and hone the types of stories and narratives that they found more desirable – by setting the terms of production, they could control what they consumed, and thus the contours of the game world would be established collectively. Through gaming, I learned how to create what the group
needed to consume – we all did as we were offered approval or denial in online discourses with storytellers and each other. In order for our imaginary world to stay healthy, engaging, and fun, we had to meet the standards implicitly set by the organization, and our own desires.

I found a community that was open and willing to teach me those standards and explain the arcane rules that dictated action in *Vampire*. The community was frank regarding the kinds of stories that worked and which ones didn’t; always recounting and reminding each other about the failed narratives that bored us and stunted our ability to make meaning and build worlds. I was taught about the dangers of *Vampire*, and the risks involved with immersing yourself too deeply, and growing too attached to a fictive personas. These gamers showed me how to mitigate these dangers directly in our hours of conversation, and indirectly through the stories, rumors, and anecdotes that were peppered throughout our out of character relationships.

The performances that larpers blithely considered to be normal parts of gameplay weren’t native to me – they were learned and instilled in me during the instructive ritualized initiation rites like ‘first nights’ where I learned how to express my diegetic identity through numbers and statistics. This education continued after hours; at the 24-hour bodegas during “afters” – where official group dogmas faded away and we let down our hair to trade battle stories that not only made me a better player but brought me closer to insider status, a laper capable of gossip – someone who over time grew to answer questions for new larpers.
Ultimately, I realized that the work I performed through embodied larp was only part of the equation. Online spaces and game-specific social media in particular were vital to the multi-layered creative efforts of gamers and staff. Online, I had the freedom to ask questions, experiment, and try on different modes of presenting my characters, thinking like them and writing like them; learning to be like them before debuting a persona IRL during gameplay. Technological mediations allow games to extend beyond embodied, face-to-face interactions and into contemplative virtual worlds where creativity is communal and liberated from the stresses of gameplay. Despite this freedom, complete immersion was still illusive. When scenes broke down and left us standing in silence, or whenever I crossed my fingers to signify that I had an out of character question, the vulnerabilities of the imaginary world were laid bare, and the magic circle exposed as something fragile and vulnerable.

My work signals the need for further sociological treatments of live action role-play, both at the interactional and organizational levels. There is tremendous potential for continued, and more thorough explorations of the global, tightly knit, and powerful, bureaucratic forms that permeate the co-creative role-play of local Vampire chapters by way of One World by Night. How conflict, creative freedom, and power are handled from within OWbN, and the chronicles it manages, are of extreme interest to me moving forward. As I have argued here, the organizational demands of OWbN on local chronicles force them to bureaucratize, pushing them to engage in technological regimes of accountability and standardization. Continuing work in V:tM larping communities has the
potential to illuminate how these demands are structured within OWbN, and how these precedents that have led the “org” wielding such complete creative control over the local chronicles who apply to operate under its purview?

As Montola (2003, 2009) has discussed at length, power in larp is trifurcated at the exogamous, endogamous and diegetic levels. Definitional power, the ability to define the contours and cosmological frameworks of an imaginary world, is granted to players through their embodied character constructs, storytellers through their power to arbitrate discordant subjective interpretations of diegetic content, and games through their quantitative rule sets and lore narratives. The lingering puzzle for me is how does organizational or bureaucratic power, exerted through umbrella groups such as One World by Night and expressed through the logics and institutional behaviors of local chronicles, either interfere or augment the collective co-creation of game content as to possibly disrupt the power hierarchies that, by Montola’s definition, must exist for larp to take place?

What is uncertain still, as I conclude this project, is to what extent are the behaviors I participated in; how much of the group life, organizational culture, and socialization was arbitrated by the requirements and standards of One World by Night, and the goals its sets for chronicles who want to join its ranks? These questions are vital as social scientists look to augment the theoretical contributions being offered by larp scholars as they tease out how meaning and sociality are constructed within imaginary worlds.
Larp as a social phenomenon is the product of collaborative co-creation on the part of participants and facilitators. This qualitative project took place within the imaginary world of *Vampire: the Masquerade* and looked at issues of creation, bureaucracy, identity, and storytelling. Conceptually, imaginary worlds permeate all levels of social and organizational life. In larp, these worlds are made explicit, and the gamers who traverse these narrative and ludic realms shoulder the burden of creating and maintaining these fictive spaces. Technological mediations make larp more human, more dangerous, and labor intensive; yet, ultimately they clear the way for a more satisfying, emotional, and deep experience for participants who don co-created identities and play a pretend vampire game.
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