The Hunter Will Take You

Seeking Spiritual Experiences within Live Action Role-Play

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> There are four seasons.
> Learn their rhythm, hear their story.
> The Hunter will take you.
> Fight him for every moment.
> Go to him full of joy.
> Show respect.
> For your prey, for those you feed, and for yourself.
> The strong survive, and the weak perish.
> The Pack is the strongest.
> *Tenets of the Hunter, Curious Pastimes LARP (n.d.: n.p.).*

> The greatest threat to the world is unchecked religious fundamentalism. The greatest threat to the world is unchecked scientific fundamentalism.
> *Christopher Potter, How to Make a Human Being (2015: 206).*

The sun has set and it is growing dark under the trees. In the ritual circle flanked by tall standing stones a small group is gathered. They have come to bid farewell to Oak, a well-loved priestly character. He has served the Goddess faithfully and now it is time for him to join her. Suddenly, the ritual circle erupts in coloured smoke and through it strides a barefoot woman in flowing robes – the Goddess has arrived. Recollecting his experience from the ritual, one of the participants reflects that it was "like a genuine… proxy for a real-life spiritual experience":

> And then at this ritual, someone playing the Goddess came out of the portal with loads of smoke, and it was just the most incredible… Completely unbeknownst to me that this was going to be happening, and I saw this person come out and I thought, "oh my God, it's the Goddess." And I had this sort of faux spiritual experience, where I started openly crying. (August Domecq, interview by author, online, May 28, 2021)

The scene is part of a Live Action Role-Playing game, where players embody characters who interact in a co-created fictional world. Unlike other types of Role-Playing Games (RPGs), where characters' actions may be represented on a computer screen or described verbally, in Live Action Role Play (LARP), players actually perform their characters' actions as the game unfolds in real time and space. LARP games are typically played in instalments of uninterrupted play, called events, which may range from several hours to several days in length. A series of events that takes place in the same fictional universe and comprises a continuous story belongs to one system. A system is, simultaneously, the fictional universe of a particular LARP game, the rules that govern that universe, and the logistical underpinnings that facilitate the game.

The system that the above ritual is taken from is *Curious Pastimes*, a UK-based fantasy LARP system that is the focus of this paper. Like many role-playing game settings, *Curious Pastimes* is a world full of magic and mystery, where gods are indisputably real. By that logic, the appearance of the Goddess in the ritual circle to accept her faithful follower is not remarkable in itself. What is, however, remarkable is that some participants recognised the event as approaching a real-life spiritual experience and felt emotions that transcended the boundary between their characters and themselves. This paper uses the players' response to this particular ritual as an example to comment more broadly on the role of spirituality and religion in LARP. It argues that the suspension of disbelief necessary in role-play primes players for spiritual experiences, and that a magical, religious outlook that can be achieved in the game offers a valuable way to reflect on our lived experience. While LARPers readily acknowledge the distinction between their primary reality and the fictional world of the game, there are moments during the game when the magic **feels real**, when it is easy to believe that the woman coming through the smoke is actually the Goddess. Once we get past the kneejerk reaction of 'oh dear, is this a cult? it looks like a cult,' the experience raises several interesting questions. How do fictional spiritualities operate in Live Action Role Play? How can LARP itself be compared to a religious movement? With players physically representing their characters, how is the boundary between 'reality' and 'fantasy' negotiated? And, crucially, why do players, who do not make religion a part of their daily lives, pursue spiritual experiences in LARP?

To discuss these questions the paper looks at the relationship between one of the fictional religions of *Curious Pastimes* and modern paganism. Fantasy media and modern earth-centric spiritualities have long been interpellated, with works of fantasy fiction influencing religious practices and vice versa.[1] But it is only recently that scholars noticed that the two fields appear to be converging, with increased likelihood that members of one community will also show interest in the other (Cowan 2019; Ramstedt 2007: 1–15). One of the reasons for this convergence, proposed by Stef Aupers and Julian Schaap, is

1 For instance, before publishing *Witchcraft Today* (1954), the cornerstone text of Wicca, Gerald Gardner explored many of the same ideas in his fiction novels *A Goddess Arrives* (1940) and *High Magic's Aid* (1949). In the preface to *The Moon of Gomrath* (1963) Alan Garner admits being inspired by the work of Margaret Murray, an anthropologist whose writing was long considered foundational for the pagan community. More nebulously, many modern pagans cite works of fantasy fiction, like Marion Zimmer Bradley's *Mists of Avalon* (1983), Susan Cooper's *The Dark is Rising* (1973) or the 1984 – 1986 HTV television series *Robin of Sherwood*, as catalysts of their spiritual journeys.

that "the activity of game play provides the opportunity for gamers to experience enchantment without 'converting' to a particular set of beliefs" (2015: 191). Exploring the use of pagan spirituality in the Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (MMORPG)[2] *World of Warcraft*, Aupers and Schaap note that many of the players they interviewed expressed a sense of purposelessness and disillusionment with social institutions. When it came to the question:

> Why do so many virtual worlds feature magic? […] The answers ranged from explanations that magic is a functional trope enhancing the boundaries between the real and the game world, […] to speculations about the intrinsic value of magic, myth and mystery, and its importance in the modern world, [to the viewpoints that] magic is […] a very compelling way to view the world and can provide more meaning and agency than a viewpoint that is strictly materialist. (Aupers/Schaap 2015: 196)

In other words, the supernatural elements of role-playing games 1) reinforce the distinction between real and game space, 2) possess intrinsic value and pleasure that players seek out, and 3) allow players to experience enchantment that is, somehow, absent from their daily lives. My interviews in *Curious Pastimes* certainly corroborate the last point, most evocatively in the words of a longstanding player:

> that's mostly why I role-play – to immerse myself and experience things I can't really experience in real life. So, for example, I am an atheist, but I really enjoy immersing myself in the idea of a faith. Because I don't really get access to it in my real life. But I used to… when I was a massive hippie when I was younger… (Bartos, interview by author, online, March 31, 2020)

Time and again, fictional religions inspired by modern paganism, which include ideas of magic and immanent divinity, are cited as providing RPG players with a sense of enchantment.

What is, then, this enchantment that is linked to spiritual experiences in LARP? The term arises out of Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno's claim that "Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge" (Horkheimer/Adorno 2002: 1). According to this view, we live in a profoundly unmagical world where rationality and materiality deconstruct the very wonder of life:

> The world that people had thought themselves living in – a world rich with colour and sound, redolent with fragrance, filled with gladness, love and beauty … – was crowded now into minute corners of the brains of scattered organic beings. The really important world outside was a world hard, cold, colourless, silent and dead; a world of quantity, a world of mathematically computable motions in mechanical regularity. (Burtt 1924: 238–39)

2 As the acronym suggests, the fictional universe of the game exists in cyberspace and allows a large number of players accessing it simultaneously.

As Aupers and Schaap have expressed, there is a need to rediscover the enchantment that has been lost. And role-playing games seem an especially powerful locus for doing that (Laycock 2015: 174; Cowan 2019: 56). However, the premise that an enchanted world ended with the Enlightenment, when science replaced religion as the dominant mode of interpreting the world in the West, establishes magical and rational thinking as an either/or dichotomy. This stance is criticised by Joshua Landy and Michael Saler, who argue that the creative arts can offer many benefits of enchantment previously offered by religion, without the need to subscribe to a specific creed (2009:1–2). Furthermore, *Curious Pastimes* players interviewed here, none of whom are religious in their everyday life, demonstrate that it is possible to subscribe to a dominant rational model of interpreting the world and still have evocative spiritual experiences under certain conditions. Religion, therefore, is not the only source of enchantment, but neither is it fully dismissible from the human experience with the advent of science. Rather than seeing rational and magical thinking in opposition, this paper explores them as complementary perspectives for interpreting our lived experience.

Nevertheless, in the case of *Curious Pastimes*, the rational outlook of the players and the magical thinking of the players/characters exist in different space. They are separated by the Magic Circle, a concept first proposed by game theorist Johan Huizinga to denote a boundary between the mundane world and the play space, but also between the profane and the sacred space of the ritual (Huizinga 2013 [1938]: 30). Within the Magic Circle, disbelief is temporarily suspended and players are able to immerse themselves in the game world. The overlap between play space and sacred space helps this paper examine how LARP is similar to religious movements. This is done by taking a broad view of similarities between faith and fantasy, proposed in Bainbridge and Stark's New Paradigm (Bainbridge 1997). The New Paradigm is a sociological approach for studying religion that uses cognitive science to argue that faith in the supernatural is an inextricable by-product of human cognition. Thus, spiritual experiences are, in some way, inevitable. Bainbridge further proposes a **curvilinear model of religion**, which holds that

> faith was fluid and inseparable from fantasy early in human history, and it will be the same late in human history, but near the middle of human history the social conditions associated with agricultural empires favoured the emergence of religious bureaucracies that demanded faith. (Bainbridge 2013: 4)

As in the case of both fantasy and religion being linked to enchantment by Landy and Saler, for Bainbridge, faith and fantasy exist in the same niche and fulfil similar functions. Thus, when discussing the similarities between religious movements and Live Action Role Play, this paper holds that the two are underpinned by the same cognitive process.

The primary remit of this paper is to examine how players engage with their spirituality in the LARP game space, and why LARP seems especially conducive for exploring one's spirituality and regaining enchantment. The ethnographic material used for the discussion is taken from semi-structured interviews with players of the *Curious Pastimes* LARP

system and draws on participant observation of the system's events by the researcher.[3] The paper is informed by in-depth interviews from a limited number of players, who have been identified, through the researcher's participant observation, as actively seeking a spiritual element of LARP, and directly engages with information provided by four interviewees who have been directly involved with the ritual invoking the Goddess summarised in the introduction. All four informants have, at various times, been both players and contributors to the world- and story-building of *Curious Pastimes*. Given the insular and introspective nature of Live Action Role-Playing games, which lack an audience, they are almost impossible to appreciate or critique without participant observation.[4] This informs the method of gathering data, alongside *The Handbook of Autoethnography* (2013) by Tony E. Adams, Stacy Holman Jones, and Carolyn Ellis, and the inclusion of a functional and a critical definition of Live Action Role Play in this paper.

The World of *Curious Pastimes*: A Functional Definition of LARP

As mentioned above, Live Action Role Play is a creative hobby where players represent characters who act in an imaginary world. These worlds, called systems, are defined by genre, duration, and the presence or absence of play combat. *Curious Pastimes* is a fantasy, fest, contact system – it is set in a faux-medieval world with magical elements, its events run over several days like a festival, and it includes play combat in the form of battles with specially designed foam weapons. A single event is likely to include active gameplay during the day from Friday to Sunday, interrupted by the gameplay stopping overnight on Friday and Saturday, although there are also events with uninterrupted 24-hour gameplay. LARP events can take place anywhere, but for larger systems like *Curious Pastimes* an outdoor setting is usually chosen. A common outdoor setting for LARP in the UK is a network of sites owned by the Scouts, a youth organisation focused on hands-on learning.[5] *Curious Pastimes* itself has four major events a year, with two Scout sites running two events each. These are complemented by smaller events where only a part of the player base is present. Overall, *Curious Pastimes* numbers around 800 players at the time of writing. These players are separated into factions: groups that are defined by their culture and religion in the game world. In the fictional universe, the player base constitutes the Warhost, an army of allied nations that travels the known world ridding it of evil, with each faction representing a specific fictional nation. This paper focuses on the religion of the Algaia faction, which is described later.

The running of the game is administered by the game team, a group of designated volunteers who oversee the logistics of set dressing the Scout camps (crew), create conflict storylines for players to engage with (plot-writers), and ensure that rules are being

3 To preserve their anonymity, interviewees are referred to by their character names.

4 Joseph Laycock holds this to be true for all types of RPGs, see Laycock 2015: ix.

5 The Scouts organisation manages a network of sites across the UK that are equipped with sanitary facilities, administrative buildings, and spaces of camping and bushcraft. LARP systems may make use of a whole or part of a Scout site to run their events.

observed (referees/refs). In addition to player characters, the fictional world is also populated by NPCs, non-player characters who facilitate the players' engagement with the world, and monsters[6], who provide an opposing force for players to fight.

Curious Pastimes events typically run between Friday evening and Sunday afternoon, with gameplay stopping between 2am and 10am. This amounts to approximately 28 hours of gameplay over the course of one event. A single player will not necessarily be actively playing for all of that time, taking time out to visit out-of-character areas or even sit quietly in the in-character space without getting involved.

In-character (IC) and out-of-character (OC/OOC) are terms used to distinguish areas where the fictional game world is assumed to be the dominant **modus operandi** from those taken up by logistical structures and camping fields for the participants. Thus, the faction camps and the battlefield are IC areas and everyone in those areas is assumed to be present in the fictional world of the game. Additionally, in-character and out-of-character designates the state of the players themselves. Regardless of their physical location, a player can be actively portraying their character or can break immersion to put that character aside. For example, players can exchange paper letters as their characters between events, and some of my interviewees have noted that they actively embody their characters in their own homes as they write the letters. Similarly, if something has happened during gameplay that requires out-of-character attention, such as a medical emergency, players can 'drop OOC' to resolve the situation. The transition from being in-character to being out-of-character is assumed to be an act of will on behalf of the players and a clearly delineated process. However, the reality of negotiating IC and OOC states is more complex.

While, despite their detractors, role-players do not actually confuse their everyday reality with the shared fantasy of the play world, it is necessary for that world to be sometimes accepted as 'real' for the game to go ahead. Gary Alan Fine writes that "the acceptance of the fantasy world as a (temporarily) real world gives meaning to the game, and the creation of a fantasy scenario and culture must take into account those things that players find engrossing" (Fine 1983: 4). By being in-character players suspend disbelief and accept the fictional world as real for the duration of the game; they immerse themselves in that world. And immersion can be achieved more easily if the fictional world engages with or comments on the players' out-of-game interests. An engrossing plot-line or setting will lead players to maintaining their immersion for longer. Conversely, while I corresponded with a fellow player between March and September of 2020, during the period of various restrictions in the UK connected to the Covid-19 pandemic, they told me that if a plot-line about a pandemic was introduced into the game in the near future, they would not get involved. Thus, a plot-line that they did not find engrossing would lead them to actively break character, going from IC to OOC. Engrossment is not the only way to conceptualise immersion. Mike Pohjola situates immersion within a participant's belief: pretending to believe their character constitutes their identity leads to them believing that their character constitutes their identity (Pohjola 2004: 84–85; cf. Hall 1996).

6 Despite the title, the monsters are not always monstrous and can range from an enemy army to a disgruntled bevy of supernatural creatures.

For Pohjola, immersion occurs on a character rather than an environment level. Engrossment follows immersion and is termed inter-immersion, "a state achieved when one or more immersed players interact with each other and their surroundings" (ibid: 89).

Not only is being in-character dependant on factors like physical location and the player's interest, it also varies in intensity. Immersion is achieved when the player is invested in their character's beliefs and actions in the game world. This often results in physical, emotional and cognitive overlap between the player and the character, known within the community as 'bleed'. Sarah Lynne Bowman defines bleed as a phenomenon where "role-players sometimes experience moments where their real-life feelings, thoughts, relationships, and physical states spill over into their characters' and vice versa" (2015: n.p.). The powerful emotional response of players to the Goddess appearing in the ritual circle can be seen as an instance of bleed. According to Bowman, the phenomenon is not inherently positive or negative, and is often an unconscious process; however, the term remains heavily contentious. Even in the nascent field of role-play studies, discussions of bleed have evolved significantly in a small number of years. One of the earliest discussions of bleed, undertaken by Fine in 1983, terms it 'overinvolvement' and suggests that it hampers effective role-play as the player is too focused on protecting their character to respond fully to in-game scenarios (222). In 2015, with the term 'bleed' firmly entrenched in the community, Bowman highlights that there can be positive outcomes of the phenomenon:

> At its most positive, bleed experiences can produce moments of catharsis: when the player and character emotions are synced in a powerful moment of emotional expression. Most often, these experiences manifest in great displays of joy, love, anger, or grief; in-game crying is often associated with bleed. (ibid: n.p.)

Unlike Fine, Bowman suggests that bleed can improve the LARPing experience, even though it remains a bit of a wild card that players cannot control fully. Control seems to be the lynchpin for defining bleed within the community as well, as is apparent from this interview:

> You have to experience those [your character's] emotions. You have to understand how to react to them properly. I think, and here's where I think the bleed is, I think bleed is about losing control of your emotions. So, you can feel your emotions… When I'm playing as Alejandro, for example, and someone says something bad about the Dauphin, Alejandro is angry, he is not happy… [I am] not angry, because it's made up, but I have to… I can only express that anger in a way I understand, so my brain has to go, "Here's what angry is like. Here's how you do your anger." So, you go and do your anger, but it's controlled. You're in control of that anger. Where the bleed comes in, is when that anger slips into real life. So, if someone says something bad about the Dauphin in the game and that makes [me] angry, rather than [me] understanding what anger is and expressing it. (Alejandro Sforza, interview by author, online, May 16, 2021)

The underlying leitmotif of the understanding of bleed is that it is inevitable and that the majority of LARPers experience it at some point. The question of control comes up again in Ane Marie Anderson and Karete Jacobsen Meland's article "Bleed as a Skill" (2020). In

it, the authors offer a toolkit for proactively responding to bleed, arguing that it can be a "controlled form of engagement with the game" (Anderson/Meland 2020: n.p.). Furthermore, the opening questions of the article – "Why would we want to reinforce bleed? Well, why do we larp [sic]? To explore things that we might not be able to explore in our everyday life, for liberation, playing around, for personal growth?" – imply that bleed is both a fundamental part of LARP and a desirable effect (ibid).

The idea of bleed as an extension of immersion, a player's emotional involvement with their character brought to boiling point, places the 'faux-religious experience' of encountering the Goddess into the wider context of player experiences, and it transports the ideas of IC and OOC from physical locations into the players' psyche. This is the stance taken by Pohjola in "Larpers Do It Ekstatikoi" (2001) and "Autonomous Identities" (2004), where he argues that gaming reality provides the player with a set of guidelines that the player then seeks to apply to other scenarios. For instance:

> Shamanistic ritual is LARP applied to religion. We have characters inside our heads. New ones join when we read a good character description and play the character for a while. They are not physical people, nor are they spirits. They are individuals inside our heads. (Pohjola 2001: n.p.)

Rather than representing discrete spaces, in-character and out-of-character denote a set of interpenetrating states which can apply to a physical place, a player or an aspect of that player's involvement in the game. These states are irreducible to a distinction between 'reality' and 'fantasy', but always contain both. To look closer at how this overlap functions in LARP, it is necessary to give a critical definition of what Live Action Role Play is.

Live Action Role Play as Ritual: A Critical Definition of LARP

When defining LARP, two approaches are usually taken: (1) it is positioned as a more involved version of tabletop role-playing games, such as *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gigax/Arneson 1974); or (2) it is compared to improvised theatre performance. These approaches are employed by both researchers and members of the community, as evidenced by this example from the *Empire* LARP official web page:

> **What is live roleplaying?**
> Roleplaying [sic] literally means assuming or acting out a particular role. In live roleplaying we take on a character for the enjoyment that can be had by acting out the role alongside other people. One way to understand live roleplaying is to look at the similarities and differences with related hobbies.
>
> **Roleplaying games**
> In online roleplaying games and tabletop roleplaying games players create a character who can explore a fantastic setting and talk with other characters in the world. The world is filled with challenges and dangers for the characters to overcome.
> Live roleplaying is similar but it is **all done for real**. You dress, speak and act as the character you have created once the game begins.

> Games like Empire have more in common with popular [Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games]. The foundation of the game lies in the activities and relationships between the characters rather than in a single overarching story spun by a game master.
>
> **Acting**
> In the theatre, actors embody the character that they're playing for the entertainment of an audience. When on stage, they stay in-character, following the script, but sometimes improvising their lines if needed.
>
> **When live roleplaying you are both actor and audience**, improvising lines for your own character and witnessing the improvised words and actions of the other players in the game. There's no script – rather there's a shared understanding of the kind of things that might happen in the game, and a detailed setting that provides framework and prompts to your characterisation. ("Live Roleplaying", Empire Wiki, n/d, emphases added)

While both comparisons are useful in explaining LARP to people outside the hobby, they also raise issues, highlighted by the emphases in the above quotation. Firstly, LARP is positioned as 'more real' than role-playing games in other media (Livingstone 1986: 254; Zagal/Deterding 2018: 21). By embodying their characters and by physically performing actions as those characters, LARPers are, indeed, more immediately present within the game space. However, the use of the term 'real' is problematised by the accusations levelled against early role players in the 1970s and 80s by moral entrepreneurs – namely, that players gradually become unable to distinguish between the game and their everyday, real, lives, leading to catastrophic outcomes. The cult panic surrounding early RPGs in the USA originated in the New Christian Right, and was governed by a sensationalised narrative that Dungeon Masters (storytellers in *Dungeons and Dragons* games) seduced impressionable teenagers to engage in anti-social behaviour and even take their own lives if their characters died in the game. Joseph Laycock, who explores the phenomenon in detail in his monograph *Dangerous Games* (2015), argues that "the panic over role-playing games was an extreme example of a larger pattern in which moral entrepreneurs ignore the frame of fiction and treat imaginary symbols and narratives as reality" (213). Laycock further asserts that, as with the vast majority of imaginative play starting in early childhood, RPG players themselves do not run the risk of confusing their game experience and their daily lives. What is it, then, that makes Live Action Role Play feel more 'real'?

In order for a role-playing game to be meaningful, the fantasy world must temporarily be accepted as real. And in order to suspend their disbelief, players need to be emotionally invested in the game and their characters. This, in turn, prompts an overlap between the players and the characters emotional and mental states, reinforced by the fact that the two share one physical body. Recent writing on Theory of Mind suggest that it is impossible for that overlap not to occur. It comes down to our ability to mind read, that is, to model thought processes of other beings based on what we know our own thought process to be like. This allows us to predict potential behaviours in others based on the smallest contextual clues (McCauley 2011: 13; Boyer 2001; Barret 2004). This adaptation

is believed to be so advantageous for human survival as to be hyperactive, leading us to extend our ability to model thought processes onto things and phenomena that are not independently conscious. As Lisa Zunshine writes in relation to the process of reading fiction, "on some level, our mind-reading adaptations do not distinguish between the mental states of real people and those of fictional characters" (Zunshine 2012: 24). In other words, it is not the aim of LARP or any other role-playing games to achieve realism, but the possibility of LARP itself relies on our ability to accept the fictional world and its characters as real. Immersion is then heightened by physical effects that players experience at LARP events, notably sleep deprivation, fatigue and intoxication, which leads to Live Action Role Play feeling **more** real than other RPGs.

Secondly, the comparison of Live Action Role Play with improvisation theatre establishes a dichotomy of actors and audience, where the first role implies activity and the second – passive reception. Even when there is no conventional audience, that dichotomy is not collapsed; instead, as is the case in the quotation from *Empire*, the players are made both actors and audience. The language of observation is insidious in academic literature as well, where players are said to "become simultaneously both the artists who create the story and the audience who watches the story unfold" (Zagal/Deterding 2018: 5). Comparing a LARP game to a stage play suggests the existence of a fixed 'story' that LARPers both create and consume. Like a play, even an improvised one, unfolds in accordance with a finite structure, so the 'story' of LARP needs to have a measurable beginning and end for the players to be able to watch it and reflect on it. Theatre is seen as involving passive consumers by the creators of *Chaos League*, an Italian LARP group, who write, "Larp [sic] is not cinema, neither is it theatre. It is not a show you can watch sitting comfortably on your chair. No one will entertain you, there's no passive audience, only co-authors" (Chaos League 2016: n.p.) and in *The Manifesto of the Turku School* (Pohjola 1999: n.p.). Thus, when equated to theatre, the experience of LARPing is somehow converted into a product that the audience consumes, instead of a shared fantasy that the players continuously co-create. This goes against the notion that LARP is a game without a measurable end goal, as suggested by Zagal and Deterding.

Rather than trying to distinguish between the player-as-actor and the player-as-observer, I argue that it is more advantageous to view LARP as an instance of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque, which erases the passive audience altogether. In describing the carnival, an early modern type of subversive folk festivity, Mikhail Bakhtin writes

> Carnival does not know foot-lights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators… Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (Bakhtin 1984: 7)

Carnival, the humorous subversion of the mystical and the profound, created a second world, a distorted mirror of the normative, which the Medieval and Renaissance populace could inhabit for an allotted time of the year. Through it, authority could be challenged and satirized (ibid: 6–7). Like in the carnival, there are no external observers in LARP, and, I argue, like the carnival, LARP is a radical pastime through which the normative order is scrutinized. As mentioned above, role-play narratives are a bricolage of

familiar elements, which help players be invested in the game, defamiliarized through play. In Laycock's words, "because fantasy worlds are ultimately derivative of the world of daily life, they are reflections *of* this world and enable a reflection *on* this world" (Laycock 2015: 186). Interpreted in this way, LARP is a non-teleological communal pastime that resists commodification.[7] The objective is not to 'win' the game, nor to have a specific type of experience; arguably, there is no objective at all, beyond having fun.

Curiously, when I explained my comparison between LARP and carnival as depending on complete immersion of participants in their environment, one of my interviewees compared the experience to being in a cult:

> I think the way you said it, about being totally immersed in something and you're a community that's totally immersed, it has quite cult-like connotations. […] I'd be interested to look at the similarities between cult indoctrination and LARP. And I think you do see those same structures. You do see cults of personality in LARP, you do have very structured things, like the factions themselves. They are… here is your belief set, here are the people who are in charge of looking after the belief set. The more you play to the belief set, the more your rewards in the game will be. It's very cult-like. (Alejandro Sforza, interview by author, online, May 16, 2021)

The comparison presents several challenges. Firstly, it harks back to the cult-panic surrounding role-playing games in the last decades of the 20th century and to role-play being seen as a tool for indoctrination. Secondly, the term 'cult' itself is not a stable definition, and it is unclear what definition of cult LARP is being compared to. But the statement also offers insight into the covalence of fantasy and faith, as posited by the New Paradigm.

Over the course of the last several decades the definition of 'cult' has migrated from sociological-technical to popular-negative. The popular definition of a cult, which one is most likely to encounter in media and conversation, holds:

> Certain manipulative and authoritarian groups which allegedly employ mind control and pose a threat to mental health are universally labelled cults. These groups are usually: 1) authoritarian in their leadership; 2) communal and totalistic in their organization; 3) aggressive in their proselytizing; 4) systematic in their programs of indoctrination; 5) relatively new and unfamiliar in [Western societies]; and 6) middle class in their clientele. (Robbins/Anthony, 1982: 283)

This definition has replaced, in popular imaginary, a more neutral one, proposed by James T. Richardson:

> A cult is usually defined as a small informal group lacking a definite authority structure, somewhat spontaneous in its development (although often possessing a some-

7 While the present author focuses on LARP's resistance against commodification, that resistance is not always successful. For-profit LARP systems, such as the Italian HUP, and theatre companies that offer a LARP-like experience to their audiences, such as Les Enfants Terribles, Shotgun Carousel, and Secret Cinema, blur the line between carnivalesque LARP and codified theatre.

> what charismatic leader or group of leaders), transitory, somewhat mystical and individualistically oriented, and deriving its inspiration and ideology from outside the predominant religious culture. (1993: 349)

Curious Pastimes, like many other UK-based LARP systems, does not align with the popular-negative definition of a cult. It lacks a clearly defined and enforced hierarchy, relying instead on a number of frequently changing charismatic local leaders. It promotes player choice and the individuation of characters through role play. It has no doctrine or creed that the players need to subscribe to in order to participate. It attracts participants from a range of social and economic backgrounds. The second, sociological-technical, definition fits better, in that *Curious Pastimes* has an element of spontaneity in its development, is individualistically oriented, and can be considered a counter-cultural movement. But even this definition is not a perfect match. What the interviewee's comparison makes plain is the similarity between LARP as a product of fantasy, and a cult, an organisation assumed to be a product of faith. The belief set the interviewee mentions is the fantasy setting that the players find compelling enough to suspend their disbelief while they inhabit it. And while the referees are 'in charge of looking after' the rules and the narrative of the game, the players have control over how they as individuals respond to the stories presented to them. Crucially, both Live Action Role Play, as a radical carnivalesque pastime, and a cult as defined by Richardson stand outside the predominant beliefs of society, whether those beliefs are religious or based in rationality and materialism. They allow people immersed in them to reflect on the dominant social models and envision new ones.

How is LARP Similar to Religion?

It is at this point that LARP can be most productively compared to religion. Joseph Laycock argues that role-playing games generally can be compared to religion:

> First, there are many elements of *D&D* that are substantively religious – that is, they concern morality, gods, rituals, and the supernatural. …
> Second, the most significant function that *D&D* shares with religion is the possibility of experiencing a more idealized time and place. …
> Finally, by inhabiting another world we are able to look back at our own from a new perspective. … Religion provides models of humanity's place in the cosmos and enables us to think in ways that were previously impossible. The imaginary worlds of fantasy role-playing games provide similar models and can, in some cases, provide a similar form of agency. (Laycock 2015: 52–53)

Laycock's stance corroborates the New Paradigm notion that faith and fantasy are, at their core, indivisible and serve the same function. While Laycock posits that function is modelling potential realities, Landy and Saler suggest they both provide people with mystery, wonder, order and purpose – qualities necessary for enchantment. A fifth quality that can be added to that list is comfort. The New Paradigm's key principle holds that

> the human mind evolved to solve practical problems following cognitive explanations, and when it proves impossible to achieve a strongly desired goal, people are open to religious explanations that promise to satisfy desires by some supernatural means. Religion thus serves as a socially supported compensator that compensates people psychologically for the lack of desired rewards. (Bainbridge 2013: 15)

The rational model of thought, overthrowing faith with knowledge, denies the comfort of this compensation. Positioning the world as knowable, it also implies it is controllable. Burtt's "world of mathematically computable motions" must obey its universal laws. And humanity, as the most sophisticated model of the Great Machine, must have mastery over these motions. However, the human lived experience, full of unpredictability and failure, is markedly different from this model. Our failure to live up to our projected role as rulers of the universe leads to feelings of inadequacy and disillusionment, perhaps the same that Aupers and Schaap cited when interviewing *World of Warcraft* gamers who showed interest in the game's religion. With no religion to compensate these feelings, new spaces emerge where we can temporarily abandon our rational outlook and reflect on our lived experience with a more compassionate eye.

When speaking about their engagement with religious themes at *Curious Pastimes*, my interviewees specifically highlighted the value of those engagements being temporary. One of the players, who embodied Alexander, a zealous priest of the Algaian religion, remarked that Alexander used the religion's tenets to justify any choices he made in the game as divinely sanctioned. It gave him a confidence that his in-game choices were correct. When asked whether he ever wanted to carry the same certainty into his daily life, the player noted:

> Yeah… yeah. I think I was quite that way when I was a bit younger, so I was. But, I'm more cautious of that sort of thinking now, because I'm more aware of things like privilege and pitfalls you can fall into. So, yes, I would love to just be certain and do stuff, but I think life is actually more complicated than that. […] So, like, I think definitive statements like that are always bad. It's often troublesome. And I think it's really challenging, actually. As I got older and more aware of things… I don't think you can do that. But would I like to, just to be certain you're doing the right thing every time? Yes, if you *were* always doing the right thing. But I think there's too much chance that you won't do the right thing. (Alexander, interview by author, online, May 11, 2020)

This player acknowledged the psychological comfort he experienced in the game-space from his character being certain that he was doing the right thing, but conceded that such a totalistic outlook would be out of place in his daily life.

As briefly mentioned before, the structure that allows players to both subscribe to a rational-materialist outlook in their daily lives and experience enchantment in the game-space is called the Magic Circle. The term, introduced by Johan Huizinga, draws upon the similarities of ritual and play space:

> The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis-court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e.

> […] All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. (Huizinga 2013 [1938]: 10)

The Magic Circle is a space that facilitates the experience of enchantment and provides a boundary between the temporary magical reality and the mundane rational world. Thus, within the Magic Circle of a LARP game, players are able to experience both the enchantment of fantasy and the enchantment of faith, that they feel restricted from in their daily lives. It would be misleading to say that the Magic Circle is populated by characters, while the players reside solely in the mundane world. The players do have access into the Magic Circle (by virtue of their mental states becoming indistinguishable from those of their characters as they suspend disbelief), but change the lens through which they see the world from rational to magical. This provides them both with the emotional benefits of enchantment and the ability to reflect on the mundane world from a profoundly altered position.

The Religion of the Algaians

Live Action Role Play designers can approach the topic of religion in two different ways: by making the game itself about religion, or by including religion into the fantasy world so that it impacts the characters' behaviour and outlooks. In both these cases, religion plays a diegetic role within the narrative – it is actively present in the fantasy world. Games about religion are likely to directly call into question the players' assumptions regarding the topic. For instance, Lizzie Stark and Nick Fortugno's system *This Miracle* invites two groups of players to each 'build a set of religious myths, ceremonies and artefacts', and then to interact with them, one group acting as 'pilgrims' and the other as keepers of the 'home temple' (Stark 2015: n.p.). In another example, the horror LARP game *Pan* combines aspects of esotericism and psychotherapy to explore themes of identity and nature. In both cases, religious elements are implicit in the game from the outset. Conversely, *Curious Pastimes* falls into the second category as a system where fictional religions are present, but do not form the thematic core of the game. This allows for these fictional religions to develop on the side-lines and come to influence the fantasy world in much the same way as real religions influence ours. In order to be involved with religious plotlines at *Curious Pastimes*, players need to make a conscious choice to do so. And this is the choice made by the participants of the Goddess ritual, one of whom admitted, that "we don't really think that we'd be able to play non-religious characters at LARP, because that's fundamentally what we're doing it for. I want to do LARP to get that false religious aspect" (August Domecq, interview by author, online, May 28, 2021). However, while not compulsory, religious aspects of *Curious Pastimes* are also not exclusive of any players.

The player base at *Curious Pastimes* represents a Warhost of allied factions. These factions are distinguished by their culture and religion. While all factions in *Curious Pastimes* have some form of religious structure, Algaia is the only faction whose identity is actively built around a religion. This attracts players who are interested in exploring themes of spirituality and faith, and informs the plotlines that are written for the faction as a whole. The official *Curious Pastimes* website describes Algaia as

> the Children of the Goddess: spiritual, respectful of the land and driven with a passion to rid the world of evils that plague the good people of the factions. Many among the Warhost are seen as zealots; filled with the strength of The Goddess they oppose the unnatural in whatever guise it takes, be it demon, undead or other manner of strange creature. Some take this to the extreme and dedicate every waking moment to the path of the Goddess. Known as her Swords, these powerful warrior-priests are beacons of light against the darkness who rally the faithful around them. Some are people of the forests or seas, scouts, sailors and rangers who venerate The Hunter, the noble protector that is son, father and husband to The Goddess. ('Factions', *Curious Pastimes*, n/d, n.p.)

In terms of metatextual inspiration, the Algaian religion is modelled on modern paganism, especially Wicca, with its worship of an Earth Goddess and a Hunter God. The name 'Algaia', derived from Gaia, the Ancient Greek personification of the Earth later used by Lovelock and Margulis as a concept of the animate planet, also attests to the religion's similarity with real world earth-centric spiritualities for a discussion of the Gaia hypothesis.

The Goddess and Hunter are largely absent from the fictional world, but communicate with characters through revelations (information covertly imparted by the referees). Their will is loosely codified in the religion's tenets, which are kept purposefully vague to encourage players to find their own meanings and ways of worshipping the divine. They are:

Tenets of the Goddess	Tenets of the Hunter
The goddess is within you; Do what you know to be right.	There are four seasons. Learn their rhythm, hear their story.
The goddess is the land; Protect her.	The Hunter will take you. Fight him for every moment.
The goddess is balance; Strive to keep her sacred cycles.	Go to him full of joy.
The goddess embraces freedom; All souls are free.	Show respect. For your prey, for those you feed, and for yourself.
The goddess is giving; Give freely all you can offer.	The strong survive, and the weak perish. The Pack is the strongest.

In addition to the tenets, the religion reifies the Cycle, the continuous emergence of death from life and life from death. Agriculture and hunting are seen as quasi-devotional activities and creatures that defy the Cycle (e.g. revenants, who do not die fully but exist in a half-life state) are persecuted. In addition to ordinary worshippers, there are also 'paths', specific modes of character progression associated with devotion. There are three

paths: the Swords of the Goddess, the Spears of the Hunter, and the Voices, who are able to interact with both. Characters who are on a path are zealots, seen by others as both exemplary and dangerous in their devotion.

The development of this fictional religion loosely follows the trends in the modern pagan community. Notably, the change from a chiefly Goddess-focused religion to the introduction of a balancing male aspect. In the 1990s, pagan authors such as Michael Howard and Alan Richardson lamented the excision of the male divine out of modern pagan movements:

> During the last thirty years the spiritual emphasis of the neo-pagan revival has been focused on the feminine principle or Goddess. This is an understandable reaction to the negative images of the male aspect of the Deity and male energy that have manifested in the patriarchal religions over the last 2000 years.
> Unfortunately, … [m]any pagans in rejecting patriarchal views and authority have also rejected the masculine principle in their spirituality and denigrated male energy as something which is intrinsically evil and tainted. (Howard in Jackson 1996: 5)

And

> In recent times, the inevitable backlash to thousands of years of repressive patriarchy and de-valuation of the feminine has led to the re-emergence of women's spirituality and a new respect for the ancient Goddess. Yet now the balance seeks equilibrium – not a denial of men and everything male, but a new equality between the sexes. (Richardson 1992: n.p.)

This signalled a change of attitudes within parts of the community, that started championing the Horned God and other male deities throughout the 90s and 00s.[8] Similarly, upon the foundation of *Curious Pastimes* in 1996, Algaia was monotheistic and only worshipped the Goddess. That changed around a decade later, with the introduction of the Hunter, a god representing the male aspect of nature, worshipped by a small group of players within the faction. Over the years, the players' interest in the Hunter grew and, though the original group that worshipped him is no longer extant, he is accepted as a part of the Algaian pantheon. However, his equality to the Goddess is still precarious, with some parts of the faction arguing that he is the Goddess' champion, but not a deity in his own right.

Modern pagan influences extend beyond Algaia and inform parts of the wider game world of *Curious Pastimes*. Most notably, the structure of in-game rituals is closely derived from Wiccan ritual practices. Most Live Action Role Play systems, *Curious Pastimes* included, contain two main types of magic: spellcasting and ritual. Spellcasting involves vocal commands with immediate effect, and is most often used in combat. For example, a player may say "By the spirits at my command I call forth power and strike thee with a mighty blow to thy spirit. Spirit bolt!" while indicating a target with 30 feet. The target

8 For examples, see above and also *Horns of Power: Manifestations of the Horned God*, ed. by Sorita d'Este, (London: BM Avalonia, 2008) and *Call of the God: an anthology exploring the divine masculine within modern paganism*, ed. by Frances Billinghurst (Salisbury Downs: TDM Publishing, 2015).

must then fall to the ground to indicate that they have been knocked off their feet by a bolt of energy. Rituals, on the other hand, are used to solicit favours from the supernatural forces of the fictional world. For instance, a ritual might be used to create a magically imbued weapon against a particularly powerful adversary. Rituals are often complex, dramatic affairs, performed by a group of players, called a ritual team. A designated referee observes the ritual and decides on its outcome (ranging from complete success to catastrophic failure) based on clarity, theme, performance, and the feasibility of what is being asked. Despite the *Curious Pastimes* rulebook not outlining a prescribed ritual structure, in-game rituals follow a structure that is widespread across multiple UK-based LARP systems, the oldest among which and the likely point of origin in *Lorien Trust*, founded in 1992. This structure closely resembles Wiccan ritual, with both Wicca and LARP rituals drawing on 'ceremonial' magic of the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century (Curious Pastimes 2016: 59).

A Wiccan ritual, as described by Janet and Stewart Farrar, takes place in a circle, marked out in chalk or string. It proceeds, with some variation, through the following steps: consecrate the space; draw the circle, marking magical space away from the mundane; call the entities that are being solicited for aid; perform the rite; offer recompense; dismiss the summoned entities and erase the circle (Farrar 1984: 16). Similarly, a *Curious Pastimes* ritual takes place in a ritual circle, a specially marked location in the game space. In the logic of the game, the circle is protected by wards, an impenetrable field that prevents rituals from being casually interrupted by other characters. In order to step into the circle, the ritual team must first lower the wards. Then, they proceed to cleanse the ritual space of any previous energies, raise the wards, and invoke the powers they intend to work with. Following that, they state their intent and offer recompense, usually in a form of a sacrifice. The Algaian ritual team specifically, with whom I have played during my participant observation, tends to act out a little scene to prove that they are worthy of the boon they are asking for or to demonstrate what effect is desired. After this has been done, the invoked entities are thanked and dismissed, the ritual space is cleansed and the wards are lowered. Within the ritual circle, members of the ritual team can take on the roles of the supernatural figures they invoke; in the case of Algaia, these are usually the Goddess and the Hunter. This, too, bears a close similarity with the modern pagan practice of adopting an aspect of a deity during a ritual.

In-Game Religion as a Way of Reflecting on the World

Considering the similarities discussed above: the ditheistic worship of a Goddess and God, the focus on nature, the gradual development to acknowledge both female and male divinity, and the ritual structure, it may be tempting to argue that the Algaian religion is Wicca. This argument may even be bolstered by the visible presence of practitioners of modern paganism among Live Action Role Players. However, in my research, I am yet to encounter a respondent who would conflate in-game ritual and devotional activity with out-of-character religious observances. When describing strong emotional, arguably transcendental, responses to encountering the divine in the game-space, players do not attempt to map that divinity onto a deity worshipped in the real world. Thus, one

of my respondents, whose character is a fervent adherent of the Hunter, and who is aware that the Hunter is inspired by the god Cernunnos, never refers to the Hunter **as** Cernunnos. The same player called his in-game spiritual experiences 'faux' and, when asked what makes them 'faux' for him, elaborated:

> ultimately, I know that it's make-believe. We are playing a game. That is where the falseness comes from for me. The knowledge that… My rational sense being able to go, 'you are having a really nice time, and I'm suspending disbelief, but ultimately we know that this is not real.' (August Domecq, interview by author, online, May 28, 2021)

However, he actively pursues and values the experiences without requiring them to be 'real.' In another instance, when asked whether an in-game ritual structured like a pagan rite is equivalent to a pagan rite, a player responded:

> So, they're not real… No, I guess is what you're asking is 'are they… are they the same as somebody doing a ritual with a religious purpose'? Well, I guess, again, if I were a person who did real-life rituals around Stonehenge, then I might make that connection and not really see any difference. […] I'd like to make a distinction… But, that wall gets very, very thin, the more you're immersed in it. And ultimately it would be grand if it could just collapse, but maybe that's why it's called role-play and not real-play. (Bartos, interview by author, online, March 31, 2020)

Both role-play and pagan practice are placed against the 'real', rational-materialist experience of the everyday world, but there still remains a wall (albeit a very thin one) between in-game ritual and ritual conducted for religious purposes. The mention of immersion in the last quotation supports Laycock's argument that "for a subset of 'magical gamers', role-playing games do play an important role in making magical ideas seem plausible", and that "realistic models of magic [within the game] make it possible to interpret events outside the game through a magical worldview" (Laycock 2015: 202–03). Not only does LARP itself help players reflect on and re-envision their lived experience, religious elements within LARP games aid magical thinking, a form of natural cognition described by Robert N. McCauley in *Why Religion is Natural and Science is Not* (2015), and a way of seeing the world that is radically alternative to the rational-materialist norm.

The use of real-world religious elements to increase immersion in the game is further championed by *Authentic Thaumaturgy* (1998), a book by a modern pagan practitioner and role-player Isaac Bonewits. The author's self-proclaimed purpose is

> to get people thinking about subtlety and creativity in game magic. By understanding the nature of psychic powers and magical techniques as they appear to operate in this universe … you will be ready to play any of the current popular fantasy games with far more realism than before. (ibid: 6)

Bonewits writes that an understanding of how magic and religion function in real life allows the players to create more consistent magic systems in their games, which makes them feel more real, that is, more engrossing. But magic in the everyday world and game magic are not conflated, as he reinforces by writing that the book "is *not* a full introduc-

tion to magic and readers should *not* attempt to do real world magic based only upon these pages and the rules of whatever game you regularly play" (ibid: 7). The goal here is not to reproduce a version of a real-world religion in the game space, but to tell a compelling narrative. Even though the Algaian religion is obviously based on Wicca, a significant portion of its devotional practices is derived from Catholicism. When asked about the reason for this syncretism, a former plot-writer explained that, in his eyes, Christian ritual would be more familiar to the players and would be received with more solemnity:

> I think it also adds a weight to it. Like, immediately it does something that you haven't got to explain. You haven't got to explain what a Christian ritual is, you know it's a religious ritual, you know it's a hugely important thing. So, you don't need to explain it in character, because there's already this out of character cultural knowledge. That symbology and all the pomp and ceremony translates over. And you can see it's massively important to these people and you understand how they feel about it because of your real-world knowledge. (Alejandro Sforza, interview by author, online, May 16, 2021)

While the suspension of disbelief in the game's Magic Circle helps players in accessing religious experiences, the use of religion in the game also aids the creation of an immersive, enchanted atmosphere for the game. The two work in tandem and reinforce each other.

Just as the fantasy world of the LARP system and its mundane counterpart are complexly interpellated states, so the religious experiences in LARP are not finite or self-contained. In addition to being pleasurable for the players going through them, they prompt reflection on the roles of faith, fantasy and various extant religious movements in the mundane world. Reflecting on his encounter with the Goddess, one of the interviewees commented:

> There was like a moment, this is just real, this isn't fake, I'm not at LARP currently, I'm just experiencing something. And sort of afterwards, you go, 'I can see why people during religious ceremonies are just convinced that their gods are with them.' Because if you believed in gods anyway, and then had an experience like that, it's just confirming your belief. Or, I felt like it would confirm your belief. (Alexander, interview by author, online, May 11, 2020)

In addition to a general understanding of other people's experience, exploring religion in LARP can aid in the understanding of real-world religious and political issues, as stated by a player whose character formerly followed the spiritual path of the Spears of the Hunter:

> I always have this image of what the Spears were, and it's basically [the Islamic State]. They were militants who were extremely violent and fundamentalist. I guess that was influenced by that going on in the world at the time. I do remember thinking a lot of the time, 'religion is so intoxicating. You can make people do whatever you want if they believe in this.' And that was a really powerful realisation for me. (August Domecq, interview by author, online, May 28, 2021)

Indisputably, quasi-religious experiences in Live Action Role Play prompt questions about the role of religion in our society. The enduring interest in spiritual exploration shows that the rational, materialistic interpretation of the world in unable to expunge a magical worldview. Following the New Paradigm, a religious outlook not only seems necessary as a psychological compensator, but also inevitable as a by-product of our ability to model conscious thought in other beings. Fantasy, while imbued with many of the same qualities of enchantment previously provided by religion, appears unable to fully fulfil religion's function. However, due to both fantasy and religion requiring a suspension of disbelief achieved within the Magic Circle, the two can share a space apart. An example of such a space in *Curious Pastimes* LARP system affords the players an opportunity to experience enchantment they feel restricted from in their daily lives, and to reflect upon issues of the mundane world by modelling them in the game-space. Enjoying the benefits of both a rational and a magical outlook, each given its proper space, the players are able to appreciate the value of both.

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