



ISSN: 2230-9926

Available online at <http://www.journalijdr.com>

IJDR

International Journal of Development Research

Vol. 12, Issue, 07, pp. 57613-57616, July, 2022

<https://doi.org/10.37118/ijdr.24616.07.2022>



RESEARCH ARTICLE

OPEN ACCESS

THE USE OF LARP AS ACTOR/PERFORMER'S WORKING TOOL

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 20th April, 2022

Received in revised form

18th May, 2022

Accepted 21st June, 2022

Published online 28th July, 2022

Key Words:

Larp, Performativity, Acting.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the current article is to investigate larp (acronym for Live Action Role Playing Game)- a contemporary artistic form of expression that has strong presence in Scandinavian countries and was brought to Brazil in recent years- and its relation to the performativity of artists from other scenic fields, with emphasis on theater. Based on the concept of performativity, we address the relation between larp and theater/performance, besides analyzing how some concepts by Russian director Constantin Stanislavski may be related to larp. Finally, we investigate how the practice of different games - larp art products- can help actors/performers to do their work.

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Citation: Ariane Guerra Barros and Thiago Vieira Borges da Rosa, 2022. "The use of larp as actor/performer's working tool", *International Journal of Development Research*, 12, (07), 57613-57616.

INTRODUCTION

The larp (Live Action Role Playing) game is used in the current study to draw a parallel between its use and theater/performance, mainly based on the concept of performativity. We herein investigate the role played by larp in the artistic field based on its history, since its unpretentious birth in friends' reunions to the present days, when it is practiced by actors, performers and larpers from several regions worldwide, mainly from Nordic countries. We point out its evolution in forms and applications, the functions of individuals playing the game, how rules and languages were transformed into the current format, and how larp can relate to theater/performance. The common points between larp and other scenic arts are remarkable; thus, products developed based on this language increasingly attain a poetic potential that closely resembles theatrical spectacles or performances. Players themselves, who are the artistic unit in the larp game (just as actors are the artistic unit in theatrical spectacles or dancers in dance pieces), can be understood as performers, since they act consciously and make rational choices in order to perform their actions, whenever they play. This very essence makes us believe that larp, besides being a legitimate and autonomous artistic language, works as creative tool to help other professionals in the scene to explore new potentialities. The concept of performativity approached by theater scholars such as Marvin Carlson, Josette Féral, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Richard Schechner places it as a competence in both larp and theater/performance games, in which action is the main feature associated with the desire of players/actors/performers.

People repeat actions as a habit on a daily basis without thinking too much about them; however, on stage, these actions acquire a performative status because, besides being aware of them, actors have previously thought about them and rehearsed them for the scene - which happens in both theater/performance and larp. Therefore, larp application to theater/performance can be a useful tool to help improving the creative potential of actors/performers, since this potential emerges through improvisational performance; the current study gives examples of larp games capable of sharpening the senses of artists in certain processes. The strength of larp-based creation lies on the autonomy of actors/performers to build a rational and affective universe without external interference. They do it based only on the game process and on its rules, which are the guidelines conducting them to their own poeiticity within a process that is very close to a collective/collaborative theater/performance creation.

ABOUT LARP

LARP (or larp) - acronym for Live Action Role Playing Game - is a game in which players assume themselves as characters in a plot defined by a set of rules that were previously established by a facilitator. The most accepted origin of larp comes from the adaptation of another game - the RPG - whose enthusiasts decided to try out scenarios, costumes and corporeity in the actions of their characters. The acronym RPG stands for Role Playing Game. RPG players fill in sheets and use other devices such as dices and coins (as in a board game) to attribute physical, psychological, technical, as

well as supernatural features to their characters within a given game system. It is worth emphasizing that RPG is seen as a "tabletop game" because its characteristics are very close to those of a board game, since most players remain seated around the Master. For example, in the RPG called *Vampire: The Mask*, individuals play undead characters of nocturnal habits, who struggle not to be discovered - and therefore, destroyed - in a similar, although parallel, universe to ours; a dystopian and gloomy world where supernatural creatures exist. The appeal for this narrative awakens the interest of players, who can choose between different clans, such as vampire races, whose members can have their own personality and powers. However, despite all the character details, players stand in a place, around a table, or even in a circle in order to play. Players fill in a sheet to describe individual character traits; they tag specific attributes that describe their character and their ability to perform different tasks, such as physical, social, or mental exercises. Players have one turn to describe their "action", which is described in the rules of the game as any action that takes place between 3 and 10 seconds; this action can be approved based on the score attributed to a specific feature after the dices were rolled and itenables, or not, the character's intention success. The Master - an extremely important central figure in tabletop RPG - is the player assigned to create and narrate the story, besides describing the action of "non-playable" characters that other players relate to in the course of the plot. Based on a poetic license, the Master in the tabletop RPG would be the equivalent of the playwright, since he/she creates the plots and defines the difficulty of a given task, the obstacles faced by the characters and even the success, or defeat, of other players in their goals.

RPG turned into an increasingly varying genre over time due to its multi-faceted language. Some systems began to deeply explore the narrative capacity of players by limiting both choices and rules in order to facilitate story flow. Other systems focused on complex mathematical mechanics to give players the sense of evolutionary construction of the character in a quantitative way. It is worth highlighting that RPG games were produced in an amateurish, almost intuitive, way, as well as that the scientific reasoning about its processes only emerged in recent times. One among all the ways of playing catches our attention in the topic, namely: players started organizing the actions in shifts, which made the narrative slow due to pauses and tests, and they also began to interpret their stories off the table by impersonating their characters through costumes and free interpretations in scenarios that were previously agreed with the game master. This new style was called LARP - Live Action Role Playing. Top tabletop RPG comprises action shifts that must be respected so all players can participate in an equal way, whereas actions in LARP take place in real time, according to players' interpretation, although some rules are kept for scene control purposes: in that first moment, the narrative remains under the responsibility of the Master, who decides the moves that cannot be interpreted or who leads the story, whenever necessary.

Thus, the Master appears as another central character, or as a metaphysical narrator, within the context of the scene. The practice of Live Action games has spread all over the world and several games have been developed in a spontaneous way based on old systems. Sheets, rather than being often consulted, worked only as reference to create characters by defining their personality traits, lists of personal items, as well as their own life story, desires and goals, rather than physical attributes or specific abilities. Gradually, the Master, who used to conduct the story, began to be absorbed in the scenario, lost the metaphysical figure status and no longer controlled the narrative. In other words, the Master was emptied until he/she became just another contributor to the scene. The fantastic situations experienced by the characters, which stimulated participants' imagination, as well as the dice throwing based on the attributes written on the sheets, began to disappear for the sake of the narrative. Characters' actions became increasingly mundane and meaningful, whereas the least rigid systems were replaced by guidelines to allow the story to remain fluid. Rules began to take the form of scripts, and to work as guiding principles for characters in the scene, rather than limiting actions. Stories about vampires, spells and heroic powers have also given way

to situations closer to players' everyday life. The flirtation between Live Action Role Playing and poetry, aesthetics and drama, as well as the different ways of playing it, turned the substantive acronym LARP into the lowercase-spelling word: larp.

The game and the word itself changed their original meaning when they stopped being no more than an acronym in order to become a practice and to, consequently, de-stigmatize the concept. According to Lizzie Stark, in her book entitled "Leaving Mundaneia":

In the United States, larp is often written LARP, since it is an acronym denoting live action role-playing. The word is adaptable - one can larp, play in a larp, go larping, be a larper. Like the acronym scuba, laser and radar before it, many think it's time for larp to lose the caps and enter language as regular, lowercase word, a move that I hope will be destigmatize the hobby, making it seem like unrelatable jargon. The Nordic countries, which have a long-established discourse on larp aesthetics, have already de-capitalized it. (2012, p. 15)

Individuals who practice the larp game are often called "larpers". We made the option to use the term larp (in lowercase letters) in the current study, since our focus lies on the action, on the verb itself, rather than on the noun, fact that makes it easier to relate larp to performance. It is worth emphasizing that this interpretation (the lowercase larp) is not yet unanimous. The community of players in Brazil, and worldwide, did not yet reach consensus about the permanent transformation of the term, since it is a relatively-new plural language that can be interpreted in several ways. Some larp (or LARP) players in Brazil prefer to call it Live action, thus being nicknamed as "laive", based on the Portuguese pronunciation of "live". Some people do not reckon this approach and the artistic potential of its language. Although it has long been discussed in different communities of players, we here defend this point of view and address the common points between larp and theater/performance. This section addressed how larp was born - an artistic language that no longer mirrors its origin in RPG, and that has an identity apart from other scenic arts, as detailed below.

LARP AND THEATER/PERFORMANCE

Spontaneous, collaborative, rule-driven gameplay is what differentiates larp from other game types, i.e., there is no "victory" or "defeat" to enable building the narrative through the improvisation by players, and there is a conductor, either a participant character or an abstract entity, to enable unity in the game. Larp players play roles such as the ones played in theater; they give body, ideas or concepts to the characters without putting their identity aside as performers would do a scene. However, unlike classical theater or performance, larp has no audience watching what is going on in the scene. Instead, the experience itself is the final result of the work. Larp is the participatory art of the "now", it has horizontal fruition because it turns the artist and the public into the same person, and it is ephemeral because it only exists within its own temporal unit. Space is set by the pre-established rules of each game - what one would call scenic space based on the perspective of a theatrical artist - and it delimits the physical space where the action takes place. Such space can vary from a small table in the center of an apartment room - as in the poetic game by Luiz Prado called *Café Amargo*¹ (Bitter Coffee), where two acquaintances must say goodbye to each other while they taste an extremely bitter coffee, and the speech rules are dictated by the rhythm in which they sip their coffee - to an entire city, as in Jamie McDonald's *Big Fat Mass Wedding*, where players impersonating their characters took public transport vehicles to go from many different places in Helsinki to a pre-established church where everyone would be collectively married. The game called *Noite Escura da Alma*² (Dark Night of the Soul) is another interesting

¹The full game can be accessed at: <<https://luizprado.wordpress.com/2013/12/04/caf%C3%A9-amargo/>>.

²The full game can be accessed at: <<https://luizprado.files.wordpress.com/2018/07/noite-escura-da-alma.pdf>>

example, where players are guided by simple rules in a step-by-step process in which they play a terminally-ill famous writer for an entire day by following rules written on a paper, without interacting with other players; thus, the main character remains isolated in his/her own execution and fruition. Rules have a key function in every larp game, since they set the performance, and the guidelines to the narrative, of each player and character. If one takes into consideration this specific aspect, it is possible saying that rules have the same function as dramaturgy or script in theater: they delimit universes and suggest the ways players can (or cannot) act while playing. Thus, they result in a unique creation each time a certain game is played, since each player brings personal and subjective matters to the scene. Larp games rarely have protagonist characters. Each character is based on the perspective of its player, whose autonomy, choices and interference in the narrativity of the game are important to assure its success. Therefore, there is no audience, or passive spectators, in larp games, only players, who can be freely compared to the actors/performers in the scene. Every player is relevant in larp, even if they do not do anything during the game; hence the strong link between larp and performativity. Performativity is linked to performative in the simplest meaning of the word. The actor on stage performs in the sense that he/she consciously, fully and effectively performs actions. The word *performer* in English suggests *acting*, so much that actors are called *performers*. Actor in the sense of acting, doer, someone who performs something. Someone who acts and consciously performs an action. Unlike when people (sometimes automatically) perform the same action in their daily lives, this action is performed on stage. According to the American theater scholar Marvin Carlson,

The difference between doing and performing, according to this way of thinking, would seem to lie not in the frame of theater versus real life but in an attitude – we may do actions unthinkingly, but when we think about them, this introduces a consciousness that gives them the quality of performance (CARLSON, 2009, p. 15).

Therefore, performative “quality” is different from real life due to players’ awareness about the action. People repeat actions as a habit on a daily basis without thinking too much about them; however, on stage, these actions acquire a performative status because, besides being aware of them, actors have previously thought about them and rehearsed them for the scene. It happens in both theater/performance and larp. Let us use the Dark Night of Soul game as an example. Every action taken by the character in his/her universe is performative, because it was conceived in a cohesive thought based on rules. Throughout the game, the player needs to remain aware of his/her status as a famous writer who visits an unknown city alone while he/she has to deal with a terminal illness; all his/her actions are driven by this guideline, thus resulting in a real-time, improvised, performative action. According to the German theater scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, performative is “a tension-binding element that destabilizes dichotomies such as subject and object, signifier and meaning, besides being characterized by apparently paradoxical potentialities” (Apud BONFITTO, 2013, p.182). Performative is simultaneously self-referential and creates a new reality in something we are already familiar with. The awareness of the act itself at the time it is performed enables the direct contact between performers and spectators, a connection that has physical and perceptible implications, that sometimes turns spectators into actors and other times turns them into accomplices of the actor/performer. The identification between spectators and actors/performers can also generate the sense of belonging, the sense of community “[...] sometimes explored through physical contact; through the emphasis given to the present continuous; through the transformation of spatialities, sonorities and temporalities; through the importance given to materiality as self-referentiality” (BONFITTO, 2013, p. 182). If one takes the external audience out of this equation - for larp has no spectators, but players – it is possible understanding larpers as the binding element of all these tensions. Larp players carry within themselves the potential to “transform spatialities, sonorities and temporalities” in the game.

According to Austin, “performative refers to cases in which the uttering of the sentence is the doing of an action”³. Therefore, there is the relation between performer and audience, as well as an act, a doing, an action. This action can be easily compared to the action taken by an actor/player in the larp game: this actor/player utters a sentence that is also the doing of an action, which is necessary and fundamental for the game to take place. However, the word action can have different meanings between theater and performance; in theater, action is linked to the character, whereas in performance, it is directly linked to doing:

Performative actions are not forms of mimetic action linked to a fictional cosmos and referenced in a dramaturgical text or in some other type of narrative matrix that represents life. It almost always aims to articulate itself as a communication and direct interference device in reality, as an event that emerges from the programmed transgression of aesthetic and social conventions, based on the transformative (political, aesthetic, existential, among others) effectiveness of its strategies (QUILICI, 2015, p. 107).

Thus, action in the larp game is closer to performative action, since it directly affects the reality of the universe depicted in the game. This universe mirrors our own universe and references such transgressions in an almost direct manner. Richard Schechner corroborates the assumption that performativity is linked to action, since he defines performance and performativity through action(s) such as being, behaving, doing, and showing the doing. Based on these actions, it is possible to encompass not only artistic performances in the performance modality, but also daily aspects and fragments of life, since all people act, are, do, behave and show what they do as part of life.

The use of larp as facilitator for artists- An experience: If one takes into consideration all the aforementioned potentialities in the field of doing, larp can be a great facilitator for actors/performers, both in creating scenes and in understanding the universe depicted by a given work. Although larp is a specific language with a specific final product, its theater-performance intersectional fields enable making different readings of what is proposed on scene.

According to Russian director Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938):

[...] All of our acts, even the simplest, which are so familiar to us in everyday life, become strained when we appear behind the footlights before a public of a thousand people. This is why it is necessary to correct ourselves and learn again how to walk, move about, sit or lie down. It is essential to re-educate ourselves to look and see, on the stage, to listen and to hear (2005, p. 112).

What we herein propose is to use larp as a re-education method. According to the so-called “Stanislavski method”, actors remain in their roles, even outside the scene, in order to create a repertoire of emotional actions to be naturally accessed during the execution of the final work. This methodology adopted by Stanislavski approaches the emotional memory (also known as memory of emotions) and consists in bringing a personal memory to the character to help building him/her and his/her role. This memory works as background for the actor to simultaneously create actions for the character and to be guided by the emotion brought to the surface by such memory (STANISLAVSKI, 2004 and 2005). Another technique used by the Russian director consisted in the faith and the feeling of truth showed through actions, which, in their turn, were supported by some goal of the character and linked to the supergoal of the scenic work - also

³Quote from the website “What are Performance Studies?” Available at: <http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/wips/o-que-estudos-da-performance>. Accessed in Nov./2017.

called “supreme goal that encompasses everything” (2004a, p. 102). The psychology of the character and his/her role should be fully formed and acknowledged by the actor. According to Stanislavski, “the actor must learn to compose a score of life-filled physical and psychological goals. [...] the supergoal (desire), through action (effort) and attainment (action), results in the creative process of living the emotional role” (2004a, p. 102). This emotional role, according to Stanislavski, can only be reached through the unconscious of the actor. This unconscious “realm”, which encompasses intuition, can be accessed through the nature of the actor. Nature is the keyword:

The subtler the feeling, the more the superconscious, the closer to nature, and the further from consciousness. The superconscious begins where the real, or more properly speaking, the ultra-real ends, where nature becomes exempt from the tutelage of the mind, exempt from conventions, prejudices, force. Thus, the natural approach to the unconscious is through the conscious. The only approach to the superconscious, to the unreal, is through the real, the ultranatural, that is to say through nature and its normal, unforced, creative life (STANISLAVSKI, 2004a, p. 104).

Therefore, actors must let reality, or rather, the ultra-naturality act, and consciously access this “magnified reality” in order to reach the superconscious. Based on their very nature as human beings, they can give “life” to the role played by them. Larp transforms the unreal into ultra-natural by using rules to clean the environment from all individual and personal interferences during the execution of the game, as well as by giving to the world the status of scenario where players/performers act. There is no escape, and even though the character has personal material, the transcoded universe makes all actions natural and feeds the subconscious of actors/performers to enriches their repertoire of emotional actions. Therefore, it is necessary playing the game by following all rules, because trying to apply the work in an adapted way, under the control of a director, with excessive pauses or with the presence of a passive audience can diminish the immersion of players in the universe depicted in the game. Consequently, they may not reach the potential to create the natural emotional repertoires (suggested by larp) to be brought on scene at the end of the process. We performed an experiment based on the application of a larp specifically developed for the spectacle entitled *Meu Mano Humano* (My Human Brother) performed by Cia. Última Hora, under the direction of Marcos Chaves. The play told the story of a domestic cat, who was terrified with the arrival of the newborn son of his owners in the apartment where he lived. According to the dramaturgy of the play, Palomito (the cat) was very fearful and often had nightmares. Due to his anguished and lonely nature, he counted on his imaginary friends (other animals) to help him overcome his fears and afflictions. The following game was suggested to be applied to this universe: Palomito and his friends should visit the veterinarian, because the region where he lived in was experiencing the outbreak of an extremely contagious disease, whose main symptom varied from time to time. Each actor was given a sheet, similar to that of tabletop RPGs, where they should write their names, species, sex, whether they were adopted animals or not, their main “symptoms”, and the date these symptoms emerged. The difference between this sheet and the ones used to describe characters in the classic tabletop game was that it did not describe physical and emotional features, or skills, in a quantitative way. As there was no interest in rolling dices and in performing tests, and as all actions would be solved through actors’ performance, this set of information had dramaturgical importance: first, it gave support to the individual who would play the veterinarian and conduct the larp game; second, it provided a primitive emotional background to the other individuals who would play the characters in the piece and in the larp game.

A house was prepared to host them, and they should act according to their characters. They handled the sheets filled with their information to the veterinarian who was already waiting for them in the main room. An alarm placed in the waiting room informed the veterinarian that the symptom had changed, and the doctor should indicate the new symptom on the board in order to give rhythm to the game and to help the interpretation of the characters. Symptoms could comprise, for example: propensity to tell lies, excessive euphoria, or even the urge to speak in a compulsive way. The rules were simple: the characters could not leave the pre-established place to avoid contamination and they had to respect the veterinarian’s authority. Characters were anesthetized, removed from the main room, and placed in a quarantine room, whenever they showed signs of contamination. Thus, each character was gradually removed from the room, but only after they had interacted with the other actors/players and with the player-conductor.

Consequently, only Palomito (the main character) and the veterinarian remained in the main room in the final minutes of the game. Then, the doctor informed Palomito that the main symptom of the disease was actually loneliness, that he was the only sick patient in the room; before the end of the game, the cat realized that he was just having another nightmare. According to participants’ reports, this narrative gave emotional depth to their characters, even if it was never referenced on scene. It helped the actors/players pursuit emotional actions, and a more solid performance, without mischaracterizing the previous experience. Actions, gestures, and even features not yet perceived by the actors/players started emerging during the larp game and, subsequently, they were used on scene. The construction of characters, which was concurrently happening during rehearsals, was deepened; a new perspective was felt and experienced by the actors/players, who were able to accurately and safely play their roles. The larp game was applied in its entirety by respecting its individuality as language; however, it had positive impact on actors’ performance because, as suggested by Stanislavski, it created an emotional memory by accessing the unconscious of artists through nature itself. Thus, based on the herein reported experience, we believe that larp can be a useful tool for actors and performers, since it can help them building characters, and even scenes, in an amusing and interesting way - a new way of preparing for acting.

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