

# Live Action Role-playing –

## Teaching through gaming

*By Torstein Utne*

**Abstract:** This essay is a digest of an article on LARP and education submitted as a term paper in connection with gaming studies at the Department of Information Science, University of Bergen, in the autumn 2001. It discusses the use of games for educational purposes. A specific type of game, Live Action Role-playing (LARP), is discussed in light of educational purposes. The game concept is presented in a case study. Based on the game concept, a generic model for learning environments will be presented as well.

**Key words:** LARP, Interactive Learning Environment, History, Simulation, Education, Social systems, Actor, Rules, Resources, System Dynamics, Play, Hegelian dialectics.

### 1. Introduction

>From a cultural and educational perspective, history shapes the way individuals look upon and interact with society. In an educational situation, the classroom is made up of individuals, each with his or her own social history (Glassman, p. 13) History shapes our society, and social history provides us with shared historical artifacts. This gives us language, and also childhood symbols such as toys and games (Glassman, p. 12).

Vygotsky states that it is not the activity which gives meaning to historical artifacts, but historical artifacts that give meaning to the activity (Glassman, p. 7). In other words, it is the man-made artifacts that surround us which shape our understanding of activities conducted with these artifacts. Consider history a tool for understanding society; why society is the way it is. Thus, history as a tool shapes our perception of our society.

How does this relate to gaming and LARP? Consider Dewey's theory of educational gaming (Cited in Makedon, p. 49). Dewey included play in his curriculum, based on a belief that education should be based on the native needs and interests of the students. Dewey claims that play should be used as a means for the realization of educational goals.

Is it possible to design a game, which includes features for realization of these goals, that teaches history in a playful manner?

In this essay, I will show how Live Action Role-playing can be perceived as a game. Furthermore, I will present a conceptual model of LARP. I will show that LARP can be used in teaching by setting the

environment for the game in a certain epoch or place, and let the players re-live brief parts of history or social history. However, the discussion is only relevant to the Nordic LARP style; other styles of LARP are not subject for consideration.

## 2. Definitions

### 2.1 Frequently used words

- **Actor** – a participant in a game and a person who is given a specific role in a LARP
- **Environment** - The *setting* for the LARP and all reference material used to explain or support the players' cognitive thinking about the LARP, such as historical info, role descriptions et cetera. Furthermore, it includes the surrounding landscape that the LARP is set in, props and scenography, costumes and other things that gives the players a visual impression of the setting.
- **Setting** - The fictional time and place the LARP is set in.

### 2.2 What kind of game is Live Action Role-playing?

In a game, you have actors who utilize rules in order to gain resources. Consider the figure beneath (From Klabbers-a, p. 23):

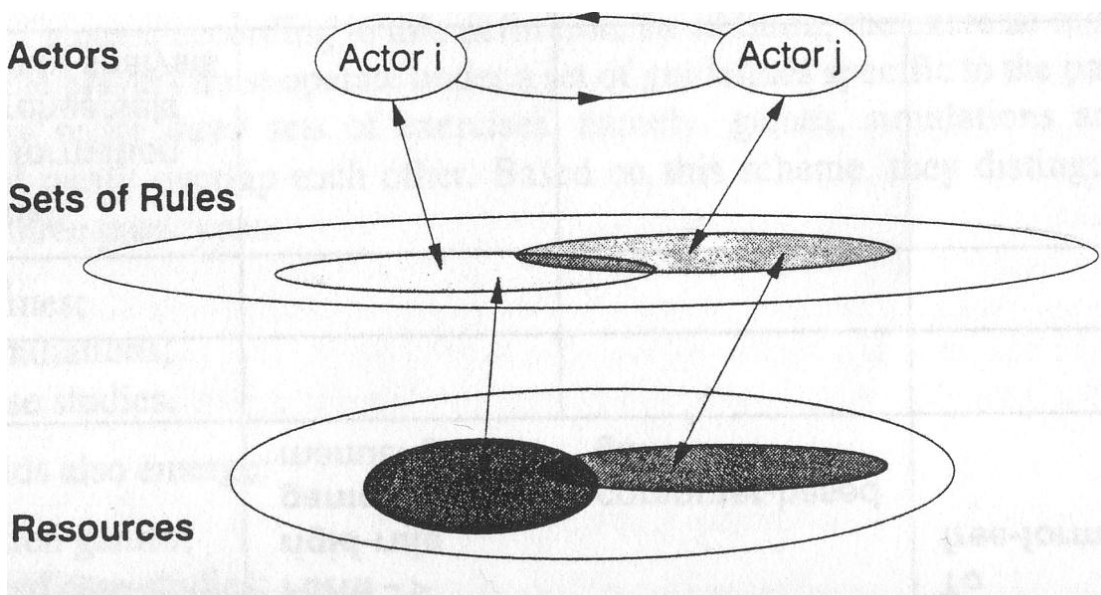


Figure 1

In a LARP, the actors or players utilize a given set of rules and conventions. Information is the main resource. With information, the actors/players can accomplish the given goals of their roles.

Caillos (cited in Klabbers-a, p. 20) presents a classification of games based on two dimensions. Four different categories (Agon, Alea, Mimicry and Ilinx) of games are placed upon a Paidia – Ludus scale (game rules vs free play) to measure the presence of rules and conventions. The category Agon is for athletic games such as wrestling, running and other sports. Alea is the category for games which is based on luck, charm, wits and chance, such as counting-out rhymes, roulette, and betting. Mimicry is concerned with theatre, roles, masks and disguise, while Ilinx is the category for dancing and ritualistic games. According to the classification, LARP is a game with a strong element of Mimicry.

But how strong is the presence of rules and conventions in LARP? It is possible to claim that LARP is almost free of rules and conventions. After all, it focuses mainly on the actor's free improvisation. There are even fewer rules than in theatrical plays, where the actors' scripts can be perceived as rules. Is there still a presence of rules and conventions in this game? Or can LARP be an event completely without a set of rules?

There is, but these are rules and conventions that consider the way the game is played, not rules and conventions that actually regard the gaming. These meta-rules regards matters such as the role-playing, not the game in which the role-playing is conducted. These can be social rules describing how players should behave during a LARP (e.g. – you do not play anything else than your role, etc.), or contextual rules, concerning the boundaries for the game (e. g. – a player can not stop role-playing and still be a part of the game, since the game is a role-playing game). Furthermore, the players can create and apply new rules to their game environment during the game.

But these rules are not in any way formal rules even though they concern the context of the game. In other words, LARP is a game with a high presence of freedom and free improvisation, and with few formal rules. According to the second dimension of Caillos' classification, LARP has a strong element of Paidia.

This classification of LARP as a game should however in no way be seen in context with the "Threefold Model" or the terms "Immersionism" and "Gamism". This classification can be regarded as one possible conceptualization of the phenomena LARP in itself, not a conceptualization of the different styles within the LARP scene.

### **3. The use of games for educational purposes**

In this section, I will discuss aspects of games that concern educational matters, and look at games as a mediator for knowledge transformation.

### **3.1 Why are games used for educational purposes?**

Games can be viewed as models of social systems. (Klabbers-a, p. 23) If we want to create models for training in various social systems, these models must in essence be games. Games better the understanding between content, process and context (Klabbers-a, p. 21) Games are suitable for the transfer of concepts. The learner is the one who constructs knowledge from the information presented. Games can be helpful tools for the learner to construct this knowledge to transfer the concepts of the human organization which the game models.

### **3.2 Which games can be useful for educational purposes?**

Basically, all games can be used for education. Children play games to develop skills. The need to play is in our biology. (Huizinga cited in Klabbers-a, p. 16) Sport activities can be games (e. g. Soccer). Such physical activities help children (and adults) to develop better psychomotoric skills. Strategy games, such as Chess, better people's mental skills. To play a game can also teach children better social skills. As mentioned, games are models of social systems. At the same time, games *are* social systems as well. (Klabbers-a, p. 23) There are literally thousands of games, and most of them can probably be used to teach children skills.

For educational purposes, there have been developed several games. These games all strive to add the element of play in controlled learning settings, such as a classroom. The problem with these kinds of games is that the nature of the school system may force or compel a student to participate in a game. The playfulness of the game is then reduced (Makedon, p. 52). Furthermore, educational games may become un-playful, because it has to be structured and ordered to reach certain pedagogical ends (Makedon, p. 52). The nature of the school system and the classroom teaching situation hampers the use of games in education because the games played are not playful enough. Makedon states (Makedon, p. 36) that games can be gamed un-playfully, but that this necessarily means that the participants have a dislike for the game. Spontaneous use of a game can never happen unless the game is playful (Makedon, p. 35). If a game were not playful, the participants or actors would simply not begin to play the game.

Furthermore, Dewey (Cited in Makedon, p. 50) states that free play or games that are very playful can be problem-oriented, democratic, and intelligent. These elements are all viewed as desirable in Dewey's theory of education.

In light of this, games that are used for educational purposes, especially in a school situation, must have a strong element of play in it, in order to realize the educational goals for such an activity.

## **4. Educational aspects of LARP**

LARP as a free-form game gives the students the opportunity to distance themselves from the rules, and produce new ones. Thus, a dynamic organization emerges. This characterization is based on the notion

that free-form games enable a self-organizing capacity. (Klabbers-b, p. 19) This capacity gives the students a chance to explore the subject own their own premises.

Actors form their own cognitive maps of the history presented and the game. Each actor will perceive the events of the game differently, and individually. In a LARP, there is no teacher or mentor telling them what to do, how to do it, and how to perceive and think about the concepts presented. There will only be facilitators, who can help and assist the players. This approach corresponds with Deweyan views, which holds that students' experiences should give momentum to new, secondary experiences. These experiences should follow the natural momentum. A prerequisite for this is that the teacher steps back and simply facilitates, rather than guiding or mentoring the children (Glassman, p. 9)

## **5. How can LARP be modelled conceptually?**

### **5.1 Game descriptions**

According to Peirce, games can be interpreted as semiotic systems (Cited in Klabbers-d, p. 13). This is one approach to describe a game. Games can be described at several levels.

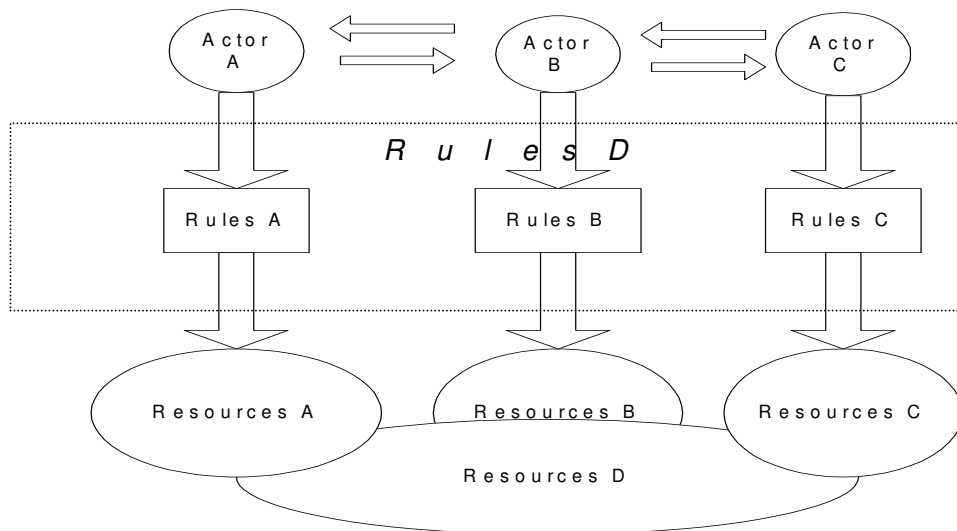
Klabbers, in his taxonomy on gaming (Klabbers-a, p. 23) states that games can be viewed in terms of actors, rules and resources. At a second level, they can be described by their syntax, semantics and pragmatics. At a third level, games can be viewed on the basis of group dynamics and organizational dynamics. And, at a fourth level, games can be described as narrative. Each player's own experience is a story that together with the experiences of the other players represents the story of the game session. These four levels all interconnect with each other. (Klabbers-d, p. 13). A LARP could therefore be conceptualized as the sum of the players, the rules, the information and environment, the organization, the meta-rules, the information flow, and of course, the actors' personal experience. But this, however, is a very un-useful definition, almost completely inapplicable for practical and academic purposes. We need to simplify this approach.

### **5.2 Perception as experience, experience as culture**

Each participant in a LARP perceives things differently and acts differently. They each construct different cognitive maps of the reality of the social system their role exists within. These cognitive maps represent the way a participant in a social system perceives the surrounding environment. Our culture/experience decides the way we think, how we perceive our surroundings, and what information these surroundings produce. Furthermore, the way we conceptualize and learn is decided by our biology, our culture, and our education. Experience in education is activity in which the link between action and consequence is interconnected with previous and future (related) activities (Dewey cited in Glassman, p. 8) In other words, what and how we learn is connected, and to a certain degree dependant on previous and expected experiences.

### 5.3 A model of a learning environment

It should therefore be possible to claim that these experiences function as rules which allow the actor to utilize the resources/information provided in ways that construct meaning for that actor. Then the cognitive map of each player in a LARP is made from the player's own culture, previous knowledge and education, combined with the information presented to the player in the LARP. These cognitive maps can be said to represent actors, rules and resources that the player uses to conceptualize the LARP. If so, it is possible to say that each participant in a LARP is a model of a social system, that he (or she) represents a game in himself. Each game is then a learning environment, conceptually an ILE DEFINISJON. A LARP can thus be represented as a series of models that all interconnect with each other. In other words, a LARP can be represented as a family of models. Each participant is represented as his or her own game with its own model, separate set of rules, and different resources. They all share one common resource, though, resource D; the information presented them in the LARP (See figure 2).



**Figure 2**

In this model, actor A has his own set of rules, rules A, based on how he or she perceives the surrounding elements, the cultural background of that actor, and the skills he or she masters. The actor also shares the common set of rules, rules D, with his or hers fellow actors.

An actor's resources are also individual. Each actor possesses different information and knowledge about different subjects. While learning, the actors can draw value from this information and knowledge. Actor A has his own resources, resources A. This previous knowledge and information combined with the new information presented, resources D, determine how a person conceptualizes and builds knowledge from the presented information. For each actor, this information may be perceived differently, but when it comes to figure 2, the information concerns the LARP as a whole, not the actors, and is thus represented as the total information available for the actors in the model.

This family of models describes LARP in terms of the fourth level of game description.

Each model of the participants' cognitive maps together create a family of models that represent the full story of the game session. Conflict between the models within this family of models drives the simulation of the history onwards.

## **6. Discussion/conclusion**

In this essay, I have shown how to construct a model of this game WHICH GAME, based on game theory. I have presented a model of the game, a model that in fact is a family of singular models which each represents a single actor. The model can be regarded as a representation of the learning environment in such free-form games.

Games such as LARP are useful for educational means, and could be used in education. It presents history in a different way than the ordinary class-room situation, and brings key elements of the history into play, though only on micro level.

The learning environment free-form games such as LARP represents, can be applied to a number of different learning situations. The model should be valid for wherever information is gained. People utilize information on the basis of their previous experiences. Each actor in a social system has personal resources that he or she utilizes, along with the information presented by a teacher, on the Internet, television or wherever else information is distributed.

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<http://www.studvest.uib.no/200022/kultur4.asp> (The text referring to the LARP in the article is added in the appendix)

**About the author:**

Torstein Utne is a 27 year old from Bergen, Norway. He has been gaming for 5 ½ years and organized 4 larps. His approach to making larps has always been to add a bit of humoristic incitements to the role. His latest involvement is a Woodhouse-larp. He has the rare fortune of having a degree in information science, which has landed him a job at the University of Bergen. This is his first article for a Knutebok, originally written as part of his master thesis. Torstein is a happy lad who prefers beer over wine.