

Essay on the Strategies of Dramatization in a Live-Action Role-Playing Game as an Interactive Work

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Is anything more immersive than reality? The interactivity between entities in a context defined by a set of rules can be schematized as a network of dynamic processes, regardless of the nature of these entities, be they physical machines, conceptual constructs, or living beings. Role-playing games constitute a body of particular interactive works that have been integrated into various mediums, from written works to 3D simulations on computers. In all cases, the structure of the role-playing game is based on a set of rules that allows for the simulation of a parallel reality. The fictional aspect can vary in intensity, ranging from historical reenactment to science fiction, but the most common type to date is based on the fantastic universe of J.R.R. Tolkien, linguist and writer creator of the "Middle Earth" universe, including the famous trilogy "Le Seigneur des Anneaux." His work was the source of a myriad of medieval-fantasy universes that fueled role-playing games from Dungeons & Dragons to live-action role-playing games (LARPs).

In this analysis, we will focus on the LARPs (Grandeur Nature in French, abbreviated as L.A.R.P..) produced by the group Dernière Alliance (D.A.). Operating in the Quebec region since 2000, this organization presents a world modeled on campaigns, with each campaign having its own universe and its ontology. Since 2001, D.A. has designed two main campaigns operating under an evolving rules

system. In our case, we will specifically look at D.A.'s most recent campaign, the Azura campaign. This campaign spans a series of 8 LARPs over 6 years, with an average of 2 or 3 events per year, mainly from spring to autumn. However, it seems more appropriate to analyze the campaign as a whole since the Azura universe is active year-round, both in the imagination of the participants and on in-game discussion forums where players can continue to interact with their characters textually, following rules that avoid ontological issues due to the technological restrictions of a discussion forum. Therefore, the periods between the events can be considered as playtime in a massively multiplayer online game.

In our view, LARPs can be seen as interactive fictions that do not necessarily require the presence of a computer program but instead involve improvised theatrical simulation within a specific regulatory and ontological framework. In this sense, the L.A.R.P. as an interactive work employs certain dramatization strategies that we will attempt to identify. First of all, the notion of physical immersion emanates from this type of work, in that the players are directly present at the scene of the plot, contributing to its advancement and influence through their actions. Moreover, as in tabletop role-playing games, the players' imagination is paramount and allows the player to embody a fictional character. To do this, the player must accept the ontology of the proposed imaginary world and integrate it into their behavioral structures. To facilitate this integration, various means may be employed by the organizers, who are the "authoritarian" authors (as opposed to the "contributory" authors who are the players) of this interactive work. Classical scenographic techniques from theater, such as costumes, props, and scenery, add to the world's plausibility. The role-playing of player characters and non-player characters is also one of the dramatic processes inherited from the theatrical field. Through the analysis of the various aspects of the work, stimulating the players' imagination will remain the key dramatization strategy.

The Story of a World

In the proposed universe, the story is continuous and global. It encompasses the narratives of all characters and is situated in a fictive external space-time conveyed to the characters by various means such as background information, role-playing, and texts available in-game. The few-acre terrain where the events take place is located in a wooded area, which the scenario places between two major competing powers. It's a small road colony under the dominion of the main religion, a monotheistic faith closely akin to medieval Christianity but with some distinctions. The metaphysical universe of the Azura campaign is based on Judeo-Christian biblical narratives and the Bhagavad-Gita, one of the main sacred texts of India. This subtlety gains relevance in the fictional world where the players evolve, as it implies the concept of reincarnation. Characters on the field have the possibility to die. However, it would be uninteresting to die permanently at the beginning of an activity lasting an entire weekend. Therefore, a vital energy system governs character death until they have reached a maximum number of deaths. The rules stipulate that if a character's physical body dies, it will become an "invisible" soul that will appear before the guardian of the dead, where they will lose varying amounts of vital energy depending on how they died; if they do not waste their life recklessly, they will lose fewer points. Players can engage in the economic, political, and spiritual aspects or simply play an uninterested character and less actively enjoy the spectacle offered by other players. Combat is also governed by strict rules that ensure safety and allow for some fairness among players. These rules and open narrative structures, as we will see, all contribute to the game's dramatization effect.

Historical Context:

The game unfolds at a specific moment in a fictional world that may have a history extending back to its genesis. Past events form the logical explanations for the current situation in the imaginary universe and sometimes provide plot threads that can be resolved during play. Information about the world's history is

available to players in the form of historical summaries of past "Grandeurs Nature," situational settings at the beginning of the activity (usually followed by an in-game introduction aimed at immersing players in the described context). Historical information can also be discovered in-game through reading written works or interacting with player characters and non-player characters knowledgeable about narrative facts, or sometimes by entirely inventing fragments of stories to enrich the imaginary universe.

Concept of Interactive Modal Object:

To facilitate our analysis, we will use the concept of a modal object here. A modal object may consist of a place, accessory, character, or a narrative element with its unique interaction modalities. Modal objects can be analyzed following classical Aristotelian modal logic, including alethic modalities (necessary, impossible, possible, contingent), which can be compared to deontic modalities (obligation, prohibition, permission, facultative character) that characterize the more legislative aspect. Since a set of rules determines an object's interaction modalities, it is indeed appropriate to call them modal objects. The world in which the players evolve is itself subject to deontic modalities: events, the extent of possibilities and therefore what is allowed or contingent according to ontology, what these rules necessarily imply and must be accepted as true, and finally what they exclude from possibilities and thus prohibit.

The Plot

The plot evolves year-round based on characters' interactions with other actors (player characters, non-player characters, modal objects). It is the imaginary story that the player constructs and is nourished partly by the scenario elements planned by the organizers and partly by the imaginary universe of other players, which they share by interacting with others (including NPCs). The plot will evolve somewhat

through online interactions on role-playing forums but mainly during LARP (Live Action Role Play, or "GN" in French) events, which are fundamental to the existence of the imaginary universe.

Preparatory Synopsis:

The event scenario consists of broad lines (main quests) that intertwine. Triggering elements and possibilities for quest development are established based on the ontology of the fictional universe. The quests will be conveyed by non-player characters and by out-of-game organizers orchestrating key events. Thus, the completion of quests may follow a sometimes predetermined order and sometimes present a range of open possibilities. A certain number of probable possibilities are considered and constitute the nodal points of the scenario's algorithm. This algorithm is sometimes topographical (when an object or character must be found), sometimes linear (when predefined theatrical setups are orchestrated), and most often autogenerative, particularly towards the end of the event when the unpredictability factor is at its highest and the possibilities for resolution are improvised by the organizers for the greatest narrative coherence. To this end, a variety of equipment and events are prepared and can be adapted to the situation. The end of the event will then sometimes take an unexpected, sometimes predictable turn, but it will always be consequential to players' interactions with the narrative modal objects.

Auto Generative Narrative Structure and Branching Quests:

Some interaction modalities with objects and characters are planned and have a predefined effect on the scenario. The more intuitive these modalities are, the more players will feel control and a sense of competence during the interaction. By interacting in certain ways with these narrative modal objects, characters can influence the story and turn a situation to their advantage. Some modal objects are usable only once, while others have multiple uses. For example, an important character with a decisive role in a

quest who appears only once on the field can be killed or ignored, making the completion of that quest impossible. In another case, a key object granting access to a place or event can be reused to access that place or provoke that event again, although it will never unfold in exactly the same way.

Control

Role-playing involves shared control between the organizers as authoritative authors and the players as contributing authors. The self-generated narrative by players during the event depends on the actions they will take in creating their own part of the narrative and their interactions with modal objects. The player has direct control over his physical gestures and can use imaginary "skills" from the regulatory structure. This level of control is related to augmented reality and makes it possible to act in a specific way on elements having predefined imaginary modalities which are updated by each of the characters in their acceptance of the ontology of these fictitious elements.

Character classes and skills:

In D.A., the building structure of a character is inspired by D&D games. that is to say that the character has a class, a race, and sometimes even a people, which determines the skills to which he will have access during his progression. D.A. rules state that a character gains one level per event. The limit of evolution of the characters being level 9 and the average number of L.A.R.P.. of 2 or 3 per year, a character can peak in 3 or 4 years. The classes usually serve as a behavioral framework for the player, but the latter retains a certain independence vis-à-vis this framework according to the skills he chooses and which will determine the interactions of the character in the imaginary universe juxtaposed with the physical world. .

Interaction between players:

Players can interact with each other in several ways. The modalities provided by the ontology of the D.A. world allows players to communicate by embodying a character with their own culture. The discussions with particular accents and the writing in specific languages make it possible to give a cultural coloring to the character. Players can also affect each other with class-specific skills. For example, a "thief" with the "pickpocket" skill can try to steal another player's purse by placing his hand on it for 5 seconds without being seen. Magic can also be used according to precise rules. The player using a spell will have to cast it loud and clear so that everyone knows it is a spell, then he will have to indicate the target, the effect, etc. Targeted players hearing a spell will have to bow to the effects if they are unshielded. Combat is also allowed with weapons specially designed not to be dangerous. Again, the rules system will allow a player to imagine themselves wielding an actual sword through the damage they can inflict with a well-played blow (by simulating the weight of the weapon) and the player hit will greatly add to the dramatic effect of fictional combat by feigning pain and injury as well as the psychological affects of aggression.

Retroactive objects:

In the game there is a panoply of objects with specific characteristics with their own methods of use. These objects can be completely autonomous and serve as triggers. In this case, the object will be provided with a descriptive sheet on which there is a narration of the interaction and the rules specific to the use of the object. For example, an "event sheet" found on the ground indicates to the player picking it up that he has noticed suspicious tracks leading into the forest. He will have to simulate a search in the woods for 5 minutes and will then find a purse with 20 gold coins. The player will have to give this paper to a specific organizer after completing the excavation and he will receive his 20 gold coins. In other cases, the object may require the intervention of a non-player character who will manage the events that

the object triggers in order to increase the reactivity of this one and to increase the dramatic effect by establishing the feeling of suspense. Of course, in the best of all worlds, the player characters should not change their behavior because of the presence of the non-player character who is considered "absent" from the imaginary world, but since the characters are embodied in players and those These cannot completely ignore it, as good players as they are, the presence of the NPC will add to the dramatic impact of the effects of the object by adding suspense.

Temporality

The game unfolds in real-time but can sometimes be interrupted by types of narrative ellipses. Specifically, this occurs when using powers whose effects must be defined. In such situations, the players involved are considered "in suspension" until the effect is understood and applied if applicable. In cases of special events involving imaginary journeys over long distances and broader narrative framing, players might perform ellipses that transition from the in-game terrain to a unique location, such as an indoor or outdoor dungeon. In an indoor dungeon, the imaginary context is "augmented" through the narration of the dungeon master, who acts as both narrator and referee, sometimes as an in-game character and sometimes as an omnipotent being.

Spatial Arrangement

Anchoring Objects and Presence Effect:

The game takes place on a typically forested terrain predefined. Online documentation, out-of-game information provided before and during the event, and in-game information help visualize the space's imaginary geopolitical situation. The playing field then becomes the stage for an interactive story, allowing the player's complete immersion in an imaginary universe overlaid onto physical reality. Characters, objects, and places are the merging elements between the real and imaginary universes. The authenticity of the props significantly enhances the feeling of being immersed in a parallel universe, and interacting with them helps the player better situate themselves within the believable parallel universe they explore and enrich.

Place Modalities:

Among modal objects, specific locations with distinct rules can be found on the terrain. Buildings may have interaction modalities, as well as other places, with usage rules. These rules are wholly integrated into the imaginary universe and belong to the interaction domain. For example, a tower with a door that can be broken down – the rules dictate the number of hits with a battering ram needed to break the door. Players can exploit this and must consider these facts as true even if, in reality, lifting the latch would suffice...

Locations of the Azura Campaign:

Tavern

Quality: Warm, secure.

Purpose: Socialize, meet, gather information, find something to do, rest, warm up, take refuge, etc.

Location: It's situated in a wooden fort with tables, a counter serving wine and beer (juices) and coffee.

There's a stone fireplace, tables with coverings to stay dry in the rain, and it's located at the entrance of the field, serving as a public square often hosting theatrical performances.

Cemetery

Quality: Dark, cold, gloomy.

Purpose: The "souls" of dead characters appear before the keeper of the dead, who keeps a record of deaths and tallies life energy points. The death character is grim but open to spiritual discussions about the universe.

Location: Located atop a small hill, filled with graves, bones, spider webs, and the sanctuary of the death keeper.

Chapel

Quality: Calm, safe, sacred.

Purpose: Players may seek counsel from the priest, consult extensive writings on the universe, or partake in private confessions.

Location: Near the clearing, with paths leading to the cemetery or tavern. Decorated with religious symbols, and calm and silence prevail.

Tower

Quality: Imposing, easily defensible.

Purpose: Home to a powerful mage, offering information on unnatural things, potions, and magical objects.

Location: Three stories tall, located at the other end of the field, accessed through a door that can be broken down.

Little Town

Quality: Warm, entertaining, sometimes dangerous.

Purpose: Socialize, meet, gather information, rest, warm up, etc.

Location: A player community with its own tavern, doctor, shows, and spectacles, developed without organizers' initiative.

Paths, Forest, and Camps

Quality: Dangerous, intriguing, mysterious.

Purpose: Find adventure, make friends or enemies, or perhaps take refuge.

Location: Adventurous spaces, dimly lit, filled with danger, secrets, treasures, and hidden threats.

Dungeons

Quality: Dangerous, intriguing, mysterious.

Purpose: Find adventure, explore, discover riches and secrets.

Location: Zones outside the playable area, accessed through quests, specific modal objects like keys, magical portals, or non-player characters, following different regulations within a strong narrative frame, set in the forest or within wall structures.

Focalization

Focalization is mainly internal, meaning in the first person, but it can sometimes become external during descriptive or elliptical narration. The player can discover the physical and imaginary universe either by themselves or through the stories of other players. It's within the interaction of the role-playing game that focalization becomes most immersive. The acceptance of the ontology of the imaginary world and its sharing by a multitude of people reinforces the sense of credibility that emerges from it. Through these shared stories, characters stimulate the imagination of other characters, both players and non-players.

Avatar, Character Incarnation:

The player is first and foremost a person living in the 21st century. It is therefore challenging to hide the socio-cultural conditioning that serves as the foundation for the player's personality, knowledge, and beliefs. The choice of a character that will serve as the player's avatar in the game's imaginary universe is thus imbued with the player's personality. The player's acting talent will depend on their ability to embody a character with a history, skills, and distinct behavioral traits. It is understood that it is utopian to think that one can entirely abstract oneself from what one is, even with the greatest talent, considering that one is in large part the result of one's context. The player will therefore have to project into a character who does not know the same things as them, but the player THEMSELF has knowledge that the character is not supposed to know. Since the character is embodied by the player, the latter will have to act according to the idea they have of their avatar and what it knows and would do under certain circumstances. This is where the player's honesty comes into play. The entire game is based on the honesty of the players and their acceptance, understanding, and application of the game's rules.

The player thus embodies a character they have created and transforms it according to their player's desires while trying to respect the ontology of the character, serving as their interface in the imaginary world. If the character is inconsistent, it will lose credibility, and other players' immersion will be diminished when interacting with it. The character will allow the player to perform a range of actions they may not necessarily dare to do, and by projecting themselves into the character, the player can overcome some of their fears and invest themselves with traits that are not their own. Since the character has its existence in the shared imagination of the players, the player may identify with the character as a spectator identifies with the hero of any narrative work. This is catharsis. Through a *mise en abîme*, the player becomes the physical interface of the character, and the character becomes the imaginary interface of the player.

On the other hand, the player does perform the actions of their character, and this facade offers the possibility of vicarious learning. That is, the player can integrate the experiences of their character and assimilate them as their own, depending on their personal growth needs and compatibility with the character. They thus incorporate the physical information and behavior of their character, even outside of events. During periods when the player is not embodying their character, they may continue to identify with it in various ways. The character will thus evolve according to the catharsis between the player and the character following the emerging needs of the player, and the player will individually evolve based on the vicarious learning they gain from their gaming experience.

Conclusion

In the light of this analysis, we saw the different aspects of life-size as an interactive work and we

explored the strategies of dramatization that make the L.A.R.P., an extremely immersive and implicative work. The regulatory and ontological frameworks offered to the players and their involvement in the creation of the imaginary world in which they evolve are all elements favoring the dramatic effect of the work on the experience of the interactor. The history of the world offered by the organizers and enriched by the players is continuous and global thanks to the involvement of the players in this universe and the integration they make of it into their imagination. The plot is self-generating and the interactor can follow and influence it with extreme freedom. The control of “authoritarian” and “contributing” authors complement each other, the one providing a framework and reinforcing the plausibility of the world and the other enriching and supporting this world by integrating it and evolving in it. The game takes place according to a so-called “real time” temporality with a few processes borrowed from cinema such as narrative ellipses that help maintain the dramatic tension for the interactor and thus avoid stalls due to excessively long delays. All of this takes place in a probable physical space augmented by the imagination of the players and organizers. The effect of presence attributed to the scenographic elements precisely allows the interactors to also be convinced spectators. And finally, the essence of LARP, what differentiates it from other types of role-playing games and gives it its immersive nature, is the incarnation of the character in the player. It's this mind game that breaks all the limits that a traditional game interface can have. This relationship between the interactor and his character and the role of physical and imaginary interface that they share allows a deep integration of the imaginary universe. This integration can reach such a point that the processes of identification allow a vicarious experience beyond the catharsis attributed to spectacular works.

LEXICON :

- Psychological affect- Effect influencing the emotional and affective state.

- Algorithm - Formula describing a sequence of operations to solve a problem, procedures following a set of rules.
- Vicarious Learning - Integration of foreign behaviors into one's own behavioral structures, relates to learning by mimicry.
- Catharsis - Purgation of passions and desires through identification with a character or his actions.
- D.A. - Last Alliance. A Live Action Role-Playing. organization
- Ellipse - Scenario process which consists in leaping in time to the spectator, allowing to avoid the lengths or the uninteresting elements.
- Life energy -Corresponds to a certain number of total points that a character has, these will decrease according to the way the character dies until reaching the zero point, in which case the character is definitively dead.
- Stakes -Belonging to the imaginary universe.
- L.A.R.P.. - Live Action Role Playing
- Off-side- Not belonging to the imaginary universe.
- Alethic Modalities -Refers to the so-called classical or Aristotelian modal logic (due to Aristotle) and includes the modalities(necessary, impossible, possible, contingent).
- Deontic modalities -Refers to modal logic against the moral realm (obligation, prohibition, permission, optionality).
- Modal Object - Objects with predefined interaction modalities.
- Ontology - The term is used here as a reference to all the general properties that characterize a conceptual construct treated as an existing object (including the fictitious world) and the relationships that it maintains with the other elements.
- N.P.C. - Non-player character.
- Augmented reality - Here we mean a process for superimposing an imaginary reality on a physical reality.
- Self-generating narrative - Narrative generated by the experience of the real-time interactor.

- Topographical narrative - Story based on exploring a space and activating key objects.

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