

# Ecological Approach to the Performance of Larping

**Popular abstract:** This paper introduces an ecological approach to the performance of live action role-playing, commonly referred to as larping. Ecology and ecological, in this context, are not used to explain our relation to nature and its protection, but rather our relationship to our surrounding environment and other subjects dwelling in it. The approach was chosen because it provides the study with a comprehensive and an inclusive way of looking at performances.

Larps can be seen as performances from many points of view: it can mean displaying one's skills in role-playing or in improvising; it can mean patterning one's behavior to signify that of a fictional character; or it can mean keeping up a vision or expectations of a fictional character. In addition – and what is especially the focus of this paper – the performance of larping can be understood as completing or carrying out actions that constitute the activity called larping.

To explain the ecological approach, this paper will first provide the reader with an overview of larps as ecologies, and then dissect the performance of larping into four steps that are essentially connected to each other in the ecology: information pickup, extraction of possibilities, choice-making and embodiment. To summarize, a larp ecology is a comprehensive interdependent systems where all the players and other organic and non-organic components of the game support each other. In this ecology, the players pick up information, extract possibilities for actions from that information, make choices on which possibilities to carry out and embody those choices by applying their bodily repertoire to the performance.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces an ecological approach to the performance of larping. It is inspired by James J. Gibson's (1986) *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*, in which he defined perception as an ecological, reciprocal relationship between us and the environment. Respectively, larping can be seen as an ecological, reciprocal relationship between the participants and the environment of the event, i.e. the players and the game. According to Gibson (*ibid.*, p.7), environment means "the surroundings of those organisms that perceive and behave." Because the behavioral capacity of such organisms, i.e. humans and animals, is a crucial point to Gibson's approach, it is only natural to draw connections from his work to *performance*.

In this paper, the word *performance* is understood to have many meanings. Victor Turner (1982, p.13), for instance, explains that its etymology derives from Old French *parfournir* which means "to complete" or "to carry out thoroughly." In this sense, larps as performances could be described as events that the players complete or carry out thoroughly. Marvin Carlson (2004), on the other hand, divides the meaning of performance into three separate aspects: the display of skills; patterned behavior; and keeping up the standard. All of these aspects of performing can be found in larping: it can mean, for example, displaying one's skills in role-playing or in improvising; it can mean patterning one's behavior to signify that of a fictional character; or it can mean

keeping up a vision or expectations of a fictional character. In this paper, *the performance of larping* is understood especially through Turner's definition: as completing or carrying out actions that constitute the activity called larping.

Although some studies on role-playing games and performance have been conducted before, most of the theories applied in this paper stem from other fields of study and their relevance to larping is based on my own analysis and interpretation of the phenomena. To briefly summarize a few of the previous studies on role-playing and performance, Daniel Mackay (2001, p.53), for instance, has defined the performance of role-playing games as "the set of events available to the players themselves and the gamemaster, which includes all of the characters' interactions . . . in addition to out-of-character remarks and events." J. Tuomas Harviainen (2008) has approached role-playing as performance art by comparing larps with Situations and Happenings. For Harviainen, larps are the evident "heir" and "fulfillment" of the performance artist Allan Kaprow's ideals because they realize certain demands of performance art such as blurring the line between art and life, breaking the limitations of time and space, and eliminating the audience from the performance. Jaakko Stenros (2010, p.313) has suggested that larps are "like improvisational theatre without an audience that is (not) performed for its own sake, rather than performed for an audience." Eleni Timplalexi (2011), on the other hand, has explained that larping is a process in which the players mediate imagined,

iconic fiction through the performative.<sup>1</sup>

I have previously discussed that, especially in the context of *Nordic Larp Tradition* (see Stenros and Montola, 2010), larping could be seen as *transportative performative behavior*, in which the players pattern their behavior to signify that of their characters for the duration of the game (Lampo, 2011). To build on this notion, this paper will take a closer look at what it is that players do in the performance of larping and suggest an ecological approach by dissecting aspects of the performance into four interconnected steps: information pickup, extraction of possibilities, choice-making and embodiment.

## 2. LARP ECOLOGIES

Larps can be seen as *ecologies* and the performance of larping as *cultural improvisation*, the dramaturgical nature of which could be regarded as a *texture* that can be examined in the form of *scenarios*.

The conception of larps as ecologies is based on interdependence: we are connected to our environment and vice versa. Gibson (1986, p.8) explains that no animal or human could exist without an environment and an environment implies an animal or a human to be surrounded. It is a reciprocal relationship that binds our perception not only to the domain of the mind but also to the body. Unlike the Cartesian mind/body split, that has been the dominant assumption of Western science and humanities for centuries, the ecological approach suggests that we are complex living organisms with a body that is constantly interactive with our physical and social environment (Gibson, 1986; Damasio, 2006; McConachie and Hart, 2006; see also Lieberoth, 2007; Lankoski and Järvelä, 2012).

Exploring larping through an ecological approach entails the whole ecology of the performance. In his *Theatre Ecology*, Baz Kershaw (2007, pp.15-16) applies the concept of ecology to theatre and performance by suggesting that:

‘Theatre ecology’ (or ‘performance ecology’) refers to the interrelationships of all the factors of particular theatrical (or performance) systems, including their organic and non-organic components and ranging from the smallest and/or simplest to the greatest or/and most complex.

He also specifies that everything in this ecology is interdependent – clear distinctions between organisms and environments are not always easily

<sup>1</sup> See also e.g. Snow, 1993; Choy, 2004; Fatland, 2005; 2006; Phillips, 2006; Flood, 2006; Morton, 2007; Harviainen, 2010; MacDonald, 2010; Zimna, 2010; Montola, 2012; Stenros, 2013.

made. Adapting Kershaw’s take on theatre ecologies, a *larp ecology* would then mean a comprehensive interdependent system where all the players and other organic and non-organic components of the game support each other. Because of this interdependency, the actions of one player are dependent on the actions of other players (Hansen, 2003; Montola, 2004) – even to the end where a decision not to act, or to act in isolation from the others, automatically affects everyone else and everything else.

### 2.1 Cultural Improvisation and the Formation of Textures

Larp ecologies are based on improvisation. The players do not have predetermined scripts that tell them what to say or do during a game. It might be tempting to understand such behavior as theatrical improvisation. The connections between larping and theatre have been widely theorized (e.g. Choy, 2004; Flood, 2006; Phillips, 2006; Morton, 2007; Stenros, 2010; Timplallexi, 2011), but as the inherent perceptual, architectural and dramaturgical differences between the two are so prominent, it might be reasonable to steer the discussion on larping away from theatre rather than towards it (Lampo, 2011). Therefore, in this paper I work with the notion that larping is a form of *cultural improvisation* (Ingold and Hallam, 2007) that operates through its own cultural logic and guidelines.<sup>1</sup> I am applying this concept for the performance of larping because it helps in depicting certain features of the activity that are essential for understanding it as an ecology.

First of all, in cultural improvisation like larping the individual performances – the “carrying outs” – of each participant *weave* together the whole of the ecology. Applying Tim Ingold’s concepts of *weaving* and *texture*, Teemu Paavolainen (2012, p.36, italics in original) has suggested that “emergent or generative” dramaturgies have “more to do with *texture* than with precomposed *structure*, with *weaving* rather than *making*”. Since the dramaturgy of larping could be regarded as emergent and generative, texture and weaving have much to do with larp ecologies as well. In a way, larping is like weaving and the events that emerge from that weaving are like a texture of a sort.

Understanding cultural improvisation as weaving is based on Ingold’s (2007) notion that living one’s life can be regarded as a line. According to him, we live lives “along paths, not just in places, and paths are lines of a sort” (ibid., p.2). As these “lifelines” meet

<sup>1</sup> Theatrical improvisation can also be regarded as a form of cultural improvisation that is characterized by its own logic and guidelines. However, as the focus of this article is solely on larping, I have chosen to steer the discussion away from theatre.

and get entangled with each other, a texture, “a meshwork of entangled lines”, emerges (ibid., pp.80-82). Thus, as the players of a larp could be considered to “live the lives” of their characters for the duration of the game, the performances of the players could be considered to weave together their individual paths and form a specific kind of texture that embodies all the events, feelings and experiences of that specific larp ecology.

Secondly, the formation of the texture in cultural improvisation like larping is both emergent and generative. Emergence, for Paavolainen, relates to Chris Salter’s (2010 cited in Paavolainen, 2012, p. 32) notion of how “the world emerges over time, continually transformed through our history of interactions with it”. In larps, the actions players perform emerge in the moment as results of the players’ interactions with the environment of the game (see also Montola, 2012, pp. 75-77). I would add that emergence, in this sense, is relational, which, to Ingold and Hallam (2007), is a key element of cultural improvisation. “Improvisation is relational,” they explain, “because it goes on along ‘ways of life’ that are as entangled and mutually responsive as are the paths of pedestrians on the street” (ibid., p.7).

Thus, the performances the players carry out in larp ecologies are continually influenced by other players and the environment of the game, and simultaneously these surroundings are transformed by the players’ interaction with them. For example, if a group of orcs begins a fight with a group of elves in a Tolkienesque fantasy larp, the actions the players improvise emerge as responses to what sort of actions the other players perform. A strike of an elf warrior’s foam sword might get blocked by an orcish boffer shield but at the same time the orc carrying that shield might get stabbed in the back with a foam dagger by another elf. While concentrating on this hit, the back-stabbing elf might have missed a raging orc rushing towards him and right when he stabs the shield-carrying orc, the other orc hits the elf with a massive boffer hammer.

Just as the interweaving of textures in larp ecologies is emergent, it is also generative. To paraphrase Ingold and Hallam (2007, p.1), improvisation is generative because it gives rise to forms of culture as we experience them. Although such performance theorists, as Richard Schechner and Diana Taylor, have argued that performance is “never for the first time” (Taylor, 2003, p.28) and that it is “restored” or “twice-behaved” (Schechner, 2006, p.28), Ingold and Hallam (2007, p.6) point out that such “meme-juggling” is not what cultural improvisation is essentially about. “To recover this generative dynamic,”

Ingold (2011, p.7) has explained in a later work, “creativity must be read ‘forwards’, in the movements that give rise to things, rather than backwards from their outcomes”. Hence, the player performance in a larp ecology is – reading backwards – like restored behavior that reveals our cultural traditions, and at the same time – reading forwards – always for the first time. For example, in a larp with a medieval theme, if a player of a servant greets the player of a king by bowing in front of him, the player performs a culturally traditional act that show respect for a high authority and that has been performed repeatedly in the history of mankind. At the same time, however, the player performs an act that no-one has performed in that specific place, in that specific moment, in that specific situation before.

In a sense, larping seems to operate through a desire to simulate life.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, examining the performance of larping as a cultural improvisation in the above manner might raise a question: how does this approach differ from everyday life? The answer is: in a sense, it barely does. If larping simulates life, we need a way to understand the performance of larping *as if* it was life. The difference between larping and everyday living (working, studying, cooking, cleaning, etc.), however, is that during a larp the players are portraying specific (fictional) characters instead of their everyday social roles (see Lukka, 2011), the games are framed in a specific manner (Bateson, 1973; Goffman, 1974), and the events that emerge during larps tend to follow sets of guidelines and objectives that the players have agreed to respect for the duration of the game (Costikyan, 2002; Montola, 2009).

## 2.2 The Texture of Larp Ecologies as Scenarios

Since larping is a live cultural improvisation, the texture of its ecology is not predetermined, nor does it sustain. As soon as the game is over, it disappears. Attempts to record, document, and describe the performance inevitably alter the event itself (Phelan, 1993). Even if some kind of descriptions or narratives were created of the experiences, as the players often do (Heliö, 2004; Harviainen, 2012, pp.46-49), it is not the same as the live performance itself. The relics of the “backwards” can never restore the novelty of the “forwards.” In addition to their ephemeral nature, according to Jaakko Stenros and Markus Montola (2011, p.4), documenting larps is challenging because they are also subjective, co-creative and aimed at a first person audience.

<sup>1</sup> Jane McGonigal (2003) has suggested that games may have an unfulfilled desire to be transformed into real life. She calls this the “Pinocchio Effect.”



What then can be done to grasp even just a hint of this meshwork of entangled performances that larping is? Diana Taylor (2003) proposes *scenarios* as the meaning-making paradigm for performances instead of the traditional corner stones of Western epistemology, i.e. text and narratives. She explains that a scenario means “a sketch or outline of the plot of a play, giving particulars of the scenes, situations etc.” (ibid., p.28). In addition to plots and narratives, a scenario reveals such features of performance that are not reducible to language, for example milieu and corporeal behaviour like gestures, tones and attitudes. In larps, a scenario can be a small instance of player interaction, such as a simple gesture and its response from a co-player, but it can also be a larger instance, such as a discussion between some characters at a specific moment in the game, or a certain relationship between two or more characters that gets manifested throughout the event.

An example of a small scenario would be two characters greeting each other. What do they say? Do they shake hands, bow, curtsy or perhaps nod? How do they position their bodies towards each other? Do they show specific facial expressions? Do they use a specific tone of voice when speaking? All of these details are part of the scenario. In a larger scenario, where, for example, three characters are mixed up in a difficult love triangle and spend the whole game solving the mess, detailing gets more complicated and challenging. How did the characters end up in such a situation? What did the players do in order to hide or reveal it? What did they do when the situation was uncovered? What sort of gestures, postures and tones of voices were used when dealing with it? Were, for example, certain gestures repeatedly used in the scenario?

A scenario is simultaneously its setup and actions. The former lays out all the possibilities of the scenario and the latter embodies the traditions, values, goals, power relations and other features emerging from the setup (ibid. pp.28-29). Although there can be multiple reasons for why certain actions emerge from certain setups, larps as a form of cultural improvisation could be seen to have a few features that guide the player behavior to a certain kind of performance. Larps, like other role-playing games, can have some implicitly emerging goals (Costikyan, 2002) and some “invisible” rules (Montola, 2009). The players could, for instance, try to improve their characters’ social status and knowledge during the game, and usually the players are required to follow and respect the framework of the

fiction<sup>2</sup> (see also Stenros, 2010). In this sense, to larp is not the same as to live ones everyday life: larping is framed and structured in a specific manner by its rules and goals.

Because the texture of larp ecologies could be understood as interconnected scenarios that reveal the player performances in a specific way, it is important to point out that, if the player performances are understood as lines, then scenarios must be understood as knots formed by these lines. Ingold (2007, p.100, italics in original) explains the concept of knots by comparing them to his concept of hubs:

[H]ub, as a container for life, is clearly distinguished from the individuals it contains – each represented by a mobile dot – as well as from the lines connecting it to other hubs in the network. The knot, by contrast, does not contain life, but is rather formed of the very lines along which life is lived. These lines are bound together *in* the knot, but they are not bound *by* it. To the contrary they trail beyond it, only to become caught up with other lines in other knots.

To examine a scenario in a larp ecology, is to examine as much of the interwoven knots of player performances as possible (or necessary). It may not be easy to understand why certain events emerge from certain game setups because the trails of those events may lead all the way to the very beginning of the game – and even beyond, to the players’ private lives outside the game (see e.g., Bowman, 2013). Thus, although scenarios might reveal us something about the repertoire of embodied human tradition that is inherently lost in the archival knowledge (Taylor, 2003), I would still argue that the scenario is always “unhappy.” It can never fully unfold everything what has been tied together in a live performance.

### 3. THE STEPS OF THE PERFORMANCE OF LARPING

To comprehend my ecological approach to the performance of larping, the aspects of this performance could be dissected into four steps: picking up information from the larp environment; extracting possibilities from that information; choosing which possibilities to carry out; and embodying them into actions. Making such a cut helps in grasping the idea of the approach. However,

<sup>2</sup>In game studies *fiction*, *fictional* and *fictive* have been commonly referred to as *diegesis* and *diegetic*. This approach is, nevertheless, problematic, especially in relation to role-playing games, because it connects games to narratology, which, as a basis for terminology, can be rather constrictive (Frasca, 1999; Timplallexi, 2011).

dissected in real-life human behavior. The transition from one to another may not occur chronologically and the steps might even overlap. The players may not be aware of such processes – and they do not even have to. Nevertheless, in this paper they will be discussed in the order suggested above to keep the phases of the process comprehensible.

### 3.1 Information Pickup

An essential part of the player performance in larps is picking up information from the larp ecology. According to Gibson, his concept of information pickup differs radically from the traditional theories of perception because he neglects the conception of information as “knowledge communicated to a receiver”. He explains that gestures, words, pictures and writings communicate information but the information in “the sea of energy around each of us” does not. Information is not something that needs to be communicated – it is simply there to be picked up. (1986, p.242)

During a larp, the players pick up information in order to find out what to do or where to go. Harviainen (2012b, p.91) suggests that the players usually resort to a technique called *berrypicking*, meaning that they pick up “bits and pieces of conveniently available information from various sources.” *Berrypicking* is similar to *cherrypicking*, in which the players pick up only the best parts of the available information. The former, however, is apparently a preferred practice, as it does not disturb “the illusory reality” or “the magic circle” the game (Harviainen, 2012a; 2012b).

In larp ecologies, there are multiple kinds of information to be picked up: “diegetic,” “extradiegetic,” and/or “pre-game information” (Harviainen, 2007). Diegetic (or fictional) information is everything that is available for the characters in the “gaming world frame” (Fine, 1983), and extradiegetic (or extrafictional) information is what exists outside that frame. Pre-game information, on the other hand, is everything that the players have been provided with before the game, e.g. setting material, character material, genre information and game mechanics (Harviainen, 2007). The players tend to have different practices in how to treat the information they pick up, for example whether to use “extradiegetic” information during the game or to try to ignore it (Harviainen, 2006). Whatever the preferred practice, one thing is common to all players: none of them know what will happen next and what sort of information they will be able to pick up in the course of the game.

The players do not have prewritten scripts or maps to help them navigate through the game. Although they might be able to anticipate some events to take place based on, for example, the incentives placed in the pre-game information material (Fatland, 2005), or such *fabula*<sup>3</sup> that emerge during the event (Harviainen, 2007), the final texture of the game is usually unknown even for the game’s organizer, i.e. the gamemasters. Therefore, the way the players pick up information and interweave the texture of the larp ecology, is comparable to what Tim Ingold (2000) calls *dwelling*.

*Dwelling*, as a concept, derives from Martin Heidegger’s essay *Building Dwelling Thinking* (1971) in which he explores the meaning of dwelling in relation to building. Heidegger suggests that “we do not dwell because we have built, but we build and have built because we dwell, that is, because we are dwellers” (1971, cited in Ingold, 2000, p.186). Ingold (ibid.) explains that people do not build houses (or other constructions) based on innate or pre-existing ideas but as a result of “the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings.” In larping, this would mean that players do not perform their characters (solely) based on pre-given information but rather their performances, the textures of the larp ecology, emerge as they dwell in the larp environment picking up “the berries of information” and weaving their characters’ lifelines together in relation to that information.

### 3.2 Extraction of Possibilities

As the players dwell in the larp environment picking up information, they distinguish or *differentiate* (Gibson and Pick, 2000) between different substances in their surroundings and extract possibilities for action, or, in other words, *affordances*. *Affordance* is a term created by Gibson (1986, p.127) to depict what the environment offers or provides us. We perceive different affordances in the environment depending on our posture and behavior. A small hole in the ground, for example, might afford shelter for a badger, but not for a human.

Although, for Gibson, affordances are more a physical feature, for performances like larps, affordances can also be social and cultural. Therefore, certain kinds of larp scenarios may afford certain kinds of actions for the players. For example, a scenario, where two players are performing a fight between their

<sup>3</sup> Eirik Fatland (2005) has offered the term *fabula* to depict the intentional possibilities for the underlying stories in larps created by the game master(s). J. Tuomas Harviainen (2007) describes them as the “seeds for potential narratives.”

characters, may afford that the players insult each other's characters, glare each other intensively, or even make peace. A scenario where two characters are in love, on the other hand, may afford that the players flirt with each other's characters, hold hands, or even hug or kiss. The affordances are almost unlimited (Montola, 2012) and, therefore, it is up to the players to distinguish between the ones that are "appropriate" or "valid" and those that are not.

In their ecological approach to computer games, Jonas Linderöth and Ulrika Bennerstedt (2007, p.608) propose that, through the process of perceptual learning, players become more and more "attentive to the differences in the perceptual field which shows . . . the game specific affordances in the situation at hand". Hence, the players learn to differentiate between such affordances that exist in the game and those that don't but would exist in "real" life. A similar learning process could be found in larps: in the course of the game the players become more attentive to those affordances that relate to the game's fictional world and learn to ignore those that do not.

The affordances of a larp ecology can be understood in multiple levels. In addition to examining their relation to the game's fictional world, I suggest, that they can also be understood through their functionality in the larp ecology as well as their relation to the traditions and expectations surrounding the ecology. Based on these notions, I claim that at least six different levels of affordances could be distinguished in larp ecologies:

1. *In-game affordances* provide actions for the gaming-world frame;
2. *Off-game affordances* provide actions for the non-gaming-world frames;
3. *Conventional affordances* are usually performed by the players;
4. *Unconventional affordances* are not usually performed by the players;
5. *Dynamic affordances* have strong influence on the course of the game;
6. *Static affordances* have minor influence on the course of the game.

As Gary Allan Fine (1983; see also Mackay, 2001) has classically analyzed, role-playing games operate in three different frames of interaction: the primary social frame inhabited by the people; the game frame inhabited by the players; and the gaming-world frame inhabited by the characters. In terms of what larp ecologies afford to its dwellers, the first two

frames would provide *off-game affordances* that may or may not be game-related, but are, nevertheless, unreachable to the characters in the fiction of the gaming-world frame. *In-game affordances*, on the other hand, provide actions that belong to the gaming-world frame, i.e. the world of the fictional characters. An example of a simple in-game affordance would be to address one's co-players by their characters' names, whereas an off-game affordance would be to address them by their own names.

In addition to affordances being in-game and off-game, they can also be conventional and unconventional. Jane McGonigal (2006, p.242) calls these the "primary" and the "secondary" affordances to describe such properties of everyday objects that are usually applied on them and those that are usually not. A primary affordance of a box would be to open it, and a secondary affordance would be to kick it. In a larp scenario where, for example, a character admires or adores another character, the player could give compliments to that character, seek his or her attention and agree with everything that the character says or does. These would be among the *conventional affordances* of such a scenario. The player could also, however, disagree with that character, ignore everything that the character does, and even ridicule him or her in front of the others. These would be more or less among the *unconventional affordances* of such a scenario, but nevertheless possible courses of action.

The conventionality of affordances in larp ecologies is often culturally bound. Don Norman (2004) suggests that affordances don't only have physical constraints but also cultural ones. He explains that cultural constraints "are learned conventions that are shared by a cultural group" (ibid.). Therefore, it is possible that in some (larp) cultures certain kind of affordances might be performed more likely than others, and in a different (larp) culture a different set of affordances applies. This is a big part of what makes certain affordances conventional and others unconventional. An example of differences in larp cultures could be found between different larp genres. For instance, in a historically accurate medieval larp it would be rather unconventional for a female character, say, a maiden, to grab a sword and attack a king's guard, whereas in a futuristic science fiction larp a female character could very well be a pilot who fights the enemy force in her military spacecraft.

The affordances that certain larp scenarios provide may also be dynamic or static. Dan Pincheck (2009), analyzing specifically computer games, suggests that affordances can be divided into two categories:



those related to gameplay and those related to the game's fictional world. The former have the "capacity to affect other objects" and the latter "do not, but may still exert influence upon the player's experience" (ibid.). In the context of larping, I would call these *dynamic affordances* and *static affordances*. Dynamic affordances in larps are those that, for example, could take the player towards a specific goal or strongly influence the performance of his or her co-players. Static affordances, on the other hand, wouldn't have as much influence on the events of the game but would rather be phatic and meant to simply sustain the fiction of the gaming-world frame. Such static affordances could be for example discussing about the weather, walking around the venue, and eating lunch in the game. It should be noted, however, that clear divisions between dynamic and static affordances are difficult to make: something that might seem like an insignificant action for one player might be very meaningful for another player, and vice versa.

It should also be noted that analyzing the affordances of a certain larp scenario does not mean separating individual affordances into these six categories. Rather, these levels are something that might mix and overlap. Certain affordance in a larp scenario might be at the same time, say, a "conventional dynamic in-game" affordance or an "unconventional static off-game" affordance. For example, in a scenario where a group of local peasant characters are enjoying drinks in a tavern larp, one conventional dynamic in-game affordance for these players could be to behave as if the characters got really drunk and started a bar fight. An unconventional static off-game affordance, on the other hand, could be that one of the players drops out of his or her character and starts to talk about Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy – or something else rather unusual for the situation.

Through the process of differentiating affordances, the players perceive possibilities for actions in the larp ecology. This means that the players perceive what sort of actions their characters could carry out in certain scenarios. The different levels of affordances introduced above may be difficult to realize in improvised scenarios, and the idea of such a list is not to provide us with strict categories in the first place. Rather it offers analytical tools that can help us in understanding the texture of larp ecologies and reveal their diversity and multifacetedness.

### 3.3 Choosing Between Possibilities

In addition to perceiving possibilities for actions, the player performance in larp ecologies also includes a choice-making process: the players make choices

on which possibilities to carry out. This choice-making is influenced by the players' immediate perception of the scenario and by their past experience on related issues. Antonio Damasio (2006, p.96) suggests that "the factual knowledge required for reasoning and decision making comes to the mind in the form of images." These images constitute our thoughts and they guide our behavior as we move about in the environment. There are two kinds of images: *perceptual* and *recalled*. The former are formed in the moment of perception and the latter in the conjuring up of "a remembrance of things" (ibid). Images can consist of landscapes, music, surfaces, shapes, colours, movements, and tones – anything perceivable or recallable for the observer. Recalled and perceptual images occur side by side in our mind and, as Shannon Rose Riley (2004, p.454) puts it, affect our thinking in an "intentional process of layering" these images.

Mark Fleishman (2009) has come to apply Damasio's images and Riley's notion about their intentional layering to improvisation. He proposes that improvisation "involves a play or dialogue between certain core elements of the existing tradition and the spontaneity of the moment" (ibid., p.132). The tradition includes not only the social conventions and customs of one's culture but also the repertoire of embodied memory manifested in such ephemeral knowledge as performance, gestures, orality and movement (Taylor, 2003). Similarly, the players of larp engage in a dialogue between the immediate impulses of the present, and their past experiences, cultural conventions and bodily repertoire (see also Fatland, 2006). J. Tuomas Harviainen and Andreas Lieberoth (2012) have noted that the players are able to suspend some of these factors in their information behavior – or performance in this case – but, as Diana Taylor postulates, some of the assumptions, values, relations and other parts of our traditions and habitus can remain so remarkably durable and coherent that they inevitably affect our performance.

In addition to these cultural factors, the players' choice-making can also be affected by rational thinking. This rational thinking is often guided by the rules and goals that form the larp ecology. As mentioned earlier, the players usually agree to follow certain set of rules, for example respecting the framework of the fiction, and they might have implicitly emerging goals, for example improving their character's social status during the game. These features emerge in our perception in the process of conjuring up *conceptual categories*.

According to Eleanor J. Gibson and Anne Pick (2000), we use conceptual categories to give meaning

to objects and events. "Developing a concept," for them, "begins with experiencing a number of encounters involving the same affordance; whatever is invariant in these encounters . . . is abstracted by the system" (ibid., p.187). Such abstract concepts include the number and the animacy of substances as well as the sense of agency and causality of events. The latter means understanding that one has control over things and that one's actions can have certain causal effects on those things. As the players extract possibilities for actions from the larp ecology, they perceive what sort of casual effects their actions might have to the ecology and what is their relation to the rules they have agreed to follow and the goals they have decided to achieve.

Nevertheless, sensing the causality of events doesn't mean that the players are always able to – or even willing to – apply rational thinking to their choice-making. Antonio Damasio (2006) suggests that our reasoning and decision-making is fundamentally affected by our emotions and feelings. He argues that pure rational thinking would slow down our decision-making or even prevent it completely because calculating all the possible consequences of our choices and holding their losses and gains in our memory is not always easy (see also Montola, 2012). Therefore, we need emotions and feelings to guide our reasoning.

Emotions are bodily sensations that regulate the circumstances we create for ourselves (Damasio, 2000). In other words, their role is to assist us in maintaining life. This is why considering an option with a bad outcome might give us "an unpleasant gut feeling," or a *somatic marker*,<sup>4</sup> as Damasio calls it (2006., p.173; see also Lieberoth, 2007). Damasio (2000, p.54) explains that evolution has assembled matching emotions for different stimuli and that is why, "in spite of the infinite variations to be found across cultures, among individuals, and over the course of a life span," we can anticipate certain stimuli to produce certain emotions. Hence, in addition to the cultural factors and the rational thinking that is usually based on the rules and goals of the game, the choice-making process of the players in a larp ecology is affected by the emotions and feelings of the players as well as the somatic responses they experience in relation to the larp scenarios.

It should also be noted that the choice-making process of the players operates in multiple levels. Because the larp ecology includes all the frames of interaction

<sup>4</sup> Damasio calls the phenomenon a somatic marker because the feeling is about the body. "Somatic" comes from the Greek word for body, soma, and "marker" comes from the idea that "it marks' an image" (ibid.)

introduced by Fine (1983), it is natural that the players interact in all of these levels during the game. The choice-making process includes, at the same time, the viewpoints of the character, the player and the person. All of these affect the choice-making and all of these influence one another. Nevertheless, although the choice-making process operates simultaneously on multiple levels, the players can - and are usually expected to - choose which frame they situate or "key" their performances into (Bateson, 1973; Goffman, 1974). This is an essential part of the "boundary control" (Harviainen, 2012a) that the players practice in order to sustain the fictional gaming-world frame.

### 3.4 The Embodiment of Possibilities

The choice-making process in larp ecologies culminates in the embodiment of the possibilities that the players have decided to perform. This is the phase in which the players carry out the transportative performatic actions that represent their choices. They perform these actions by applying their bodily repertoire, such as gestures, postures, facial expressions, speech, and tone of voice, to the performance. The way they arrange these bodily repertoires compiles the behavior of the characters and weaves together the texture of the ecology. To borrow an analogy from Richard Schechner (2006, p.34), it is as if a film director organizes strips of film to compile the final work.

The way the players arrange the performance of their bodily repertoire may have considerable influence on the actions of other players. As discussed earlier, the actions of players are essentially dependent on the actions of other players. Even the tiniest gesture or tone of voice might affect what sort of information the other players pick up and how they extract possibilities from it. And, as also noted earlier, even the choice not to act or to act in isolation from the other players affects the performance. This is due to the hypothetical possibility that what could have been performed or what could have been perceived might have had a different influence on the performance of other players. Thus, whatever the players choose to do during the game, eventually, has an impact on the larp ecology.

The arrangement of the bodily repertoire may be intentionally planned and carefully executed but it can also be spontaneous and less systematic. Larping and other role-playing games have considered to have different methods of performing, such as the vastly analyzed immersionist playing in which the players throw themselves into the flow of the game and forget the surrounding world (e.g., Pohjola, 2004; Ermi and Mäyrä, 2005; Holter, 2007;



Hopeametsä, 2008). The players might prefer using certain methods game after game but it might also be that such “playing styles” vary, get mixed and overlapped between and during games (Kim, 1998; Bøckman, 2003; Harviainen, 2006).

The way the players embody possibilities is inherently defined by their bodies. According to Mark Johnson (2008, pp.165-166), we experience our bodies at least in five interwoven dimensions: *the biological organism* that perceives, moves, responds and transforms; *the ecological body* that cannot exist independent of its environment; *the phenomenological body* that is how we live, feel and experience what we are; *the social body* that develops in a dialogical relations with our social others; and *the cultural body* that constitutes of gender, race, class, aesthetic values, and so on. Johnson (ibid., p.167) explains that “our embodiment shapes both what and how we experience, think, feel, value, and act,” and that “it shapes who we are in such a way that it is implicated in all of our possible self-descriptions.” Because of this, I would argue, also larp characters as sort of “self-descriptions” implicate the experiences, conceptions and restrictions the players have in their bodies. This is also why such phenomenon as bleed <sup>5</sup> can occur in the player performance (see also Montola, 2010; Lankoski and Järvelä, 2012; Bowman, 2013).

Whether it be, say, an intentionally arranged set of gestures and facial expressions, or an unintentional consequence of a bleed effect from a player’s personal life to the game, everything, that gets embodied during a larp, is essentially part of its texture. Thus, all the actions the players carry out shape the larp ecology. These actions manifest the results of the individual player experiences, and they can become the object of a performance analysis on the event.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article, I have outlined an ecological approach to the performance of larping. It was chosen because of its comprehensiveness: an ecological approach intertwines and interconnects everything in the system and leaves nothing out. It is, by nature, an inclusive way of looking at performance. A larp ecology could be described as a comprehensive interdependent system where all the players and other organic and non-organic components of the game support each other. The performances of the individual players can be regarded as cultural improvisation formed as lines that the players

weave together and the interweaving of the player performances composes the texture of the larp ecology.

The performance of larping consists of four steps: information pickup, extraction of possibilities, choice-making and embodiment. During the event, the players pick up information from the larp environment and extract possibilities for actions from that information. The players are continually making choices on which possibilities to carry out, and they embody those possibilities by applying their bodily repertoire to the performance. These steps are not to be seen as a chronological or an intentional process, but rather as an overlapping and interconnected one. The players may not be aware of such aspects constituting their performance – and they do not even have to.

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<sup>5</sup>Bleed is concept that is used in role-playing to depict a situation where a player’s everyday social self influences the game, or vice versa (Montola, 2010).

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