

Live Action Role-Playing: Transcending the Magic Circle through Play in *Dagorhir*

Abstract: Individuals interact with one another and develop themselves in accordance with these interactions. One group within this complex system is live action role-players (larpers). Larps are a variant of play that combine the “role-playing” of games, such as Dungeons & Dragons, with the “live action” aspects of sports. Using symbolic interactionism as its paradigmatic orientation, this study examines how the magic circle is reinforced and challenged through the development of in-game characters and their effect on the out-of-game self. The respondents of this ethnography participate in a larp called *Dagorhir* (1977-), which puts an emphasis on live action combat rather than role-play. Participants are part of the Las Vegas realm of *Dagorhir*, Barad’Dun. Players view *Dagorhir* as a full contact sport mixed with martial arts; role-playing and character development is encouraged, but not necessary. I observed, interviewed, and participated with this group over the period of six months. Even in a combat-oriented larp like *Dagorhir*, players get to choose names, weapons, clothing, fighting techniques, and other ways to develop their in-game characters; this ability establishes a connection between leisure larps and edu-larps.

The themes that emerged from coding show different aspects of self and social interactions that are affected through in-game character development: Larp Segregation, Reflection of Self, Critique of Self, and Evolution of Self. Players develop terms to label each other and other larpers, as well as create different social networks to further bonding within play. Many of the players recognized how they developed their in-game characters, but some failed to see how their characters facilitated personal change outside of the larp. Though some participants choose characters that reinforce who they are out-of-game, others choose characters to emulate attributes they believe they lack out-of-game. While participants often perceived their in-game characters and their out-of-game self as separate entities, this study was able to observe ways in which they are connected.

Abstract: Live action role-playing, larp, identity, boffer, combat, *Dagorhir*, social bonding, symbolic interactionism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Individuals interact with one another and develop themselves in accordance with these interactions and history (Mills 1956). One of the groups within this complex system is live action role-players (larpers), who create a basis for interaction within a new historical narrative. While some larps take place in realistic social settings, other larpers create fictional worlds that exist parallel to our own; they incorporate aspects of fiction and the arts into play. Fictionally-based games occur in a myriad of worlds where individuals can choose characters ranging from Orcs fighting in Middle Earth to struggling sub-species of humans surviving through the zombie apocalypse. The purpose of participation varies between forums and between individuals; this purpose extends to the forum of virtual reality and virtual gaming (Yee and Bailenson 2007). In sports larps, players can focus on role-playing (narrative aspects) or focus on live action combat (gaming aspects) (McDiarmid 2011; Bienia 2012; Kim 2012). Due to the wide variety of larps available, most participants are able to find one that suits their individual preferences and motivations. The purpose of this study is to explore how individuals develop in-game characters and how these characters connect with their out-of-game self.

The respondents of this ethnography participate in a larp called *Dagorhir* (1977-). Players view themselves as fighters and frame *Dagorhir* as a full contact sport mixed with martial arts; players fight for their realm and fight for their own advancement (Söderberg, Waern, Åkesson, Bjork, and Falk 2004). Players create intricate networks that are “realm” and “unit” based. On the macro level, players fight for the realm where they are geographically located in real life. On the micro level, players fight for units that they create through friendship and kinship networks. In the regard to social networks, *Dagorhir* is similar to Amtgard, in that they are structured around realms and individual play (Budai and Hammock 2014). But

unlike other larps like Amtgard, in-game character selection and development offer players no special abilities or items; with *Dagorhir*, you can choose to develop a character, but the emphasis is on combat.

Despite putting emphasis on combat, players are presented with decisions involving garment choice. Players regard clothing choices as regulatory—the rules state that players have to dress in accordance with the time period of *Dagorhir*—and do not correlate their decisions as part of character development. Ambivalent members who do not believe character development is necessary, argue that their characters were developed secondhand to their combat style. I claim that all of the choices a player makes are meaningful, having layers of context that can be subtle, rather than perfunctory. Whether or not players want to do so, they develop a character through the decisions they make. These decisions affect their game play as well as their trajectory out-of-game. Larps are observed as leisure activities, but have only recently been assessed for different educational properties (Bowman 2014). Past research has found that the arbitrary boundaries of larps are challenged by participants developing themselves while creating characters (Consalvo 2009; Montola 2009; Moore 2011; Waskul and Lust 2011; Stenros 2012). I propose that the conscious and subconscious development of an in-game character extends beyond the boundaries of *Dagorhir* and affects the player out-of-game.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The origins of larps vary between cultures, but are frequently traced back to *Dungeons & Dragons* and RAND corporation simulations (Fatland 2005; Hitchens and Drachen 2009). Contemporary role-playing games have existed for approximately 40 years now. Role-playing games can be played in a variety of ways, which is demonstrated by their multiple forms. Hitchens and Drachen (2009) discuss how role-playing games have evolved past board games and larps to include online and video games; though considered virtual reality, cyber gamers invoke some of the same processes to develop characters as individuals who larp and each format still has a central focus on the concept of “play.”

Huizinga (1949) discusses the importance of play. Play is biological; both humans and other animals do it. Play is also psychological; humans do it for the element of fun. He describes play as not being “real”; play is freedom from what is ordinary by creating what is fantastical. From play, we learn competition and understand other individuals’ roles in society. Huizinga continues by describing how play occurs in “the magic circle.” The magic circle is the boundary where play can occur and be appropriate; the circle establishes a new world that exists outside the time and space of ordinary life, but within a perimeter set by players (Salen and Zimmerman 2004). Caillois (1961) critically builds on Huizinga’s understanding of play and competition by describing play in four forms: 1) competition, 2) chance, 3) role-playing, and 4) altering perception. Sutton-Smith (1997) advances the work of Caillois and establishes rhetorics of play. Forms and rhetorics of play help to guide player’s in-game development and interactions within the context of the magic circle.

Contemporary forms of play expand larps beyond the physical boundaries of the magic circle (Raessens 2006; Malaby 2007). Copier (2005) examines larp through play and applies the concept of the magic circle. The inside of the circle represents the outside of normal life. From this process comes questions like: What does it mean to enter the game? How does play begin and end? The answers are determined by the individuals in the circle. The magic circle provides the boundaries of different larps, which operate in different periods in time and with different themes using multiple forms of play. Spatial expansion of gaming contributes to

temporal and social expansion, which argues for a more critical assessment of the magic circle (Montola 2005). The idea of the magic circle has been subsequently critiqued for its overly formalist approach. Consalvo (2009) asserts that the magic circle is challenged on the basis that it cannot be completely detached from the real world.

Rules from the real world still guide interactions within the magic circle. Researchers have concluded that the combinations of strong character development and technological advancements have collapsed the borders of the magic circle; the role-playing becomes intermeshed and the magic circle is broken (Moore 2011; Waskul and Lust 2011). The distinctions between player, person, and persona intertwine in the phenomenon of *bleed*, making aspects of larp life and day-to-day life difficult to compartmentalize (Bowman 2013). Challenges to the magic circle have pushed for more examination of the concept, expanding the scope of how play occurs. Stenros (2012) re-conceptualizes the magic circle as only one of three boundaries: 1) the psychological bubble, 2) the magic circle, and 3) the arena. This new format is able to introduce state of mind, action of play, and the special site when addressing criticisms of the magic circle. Research on play and gaming are increasingly necessary as larp expands and becomes more popular.

Individuals who participate in different role-playing games are frequently stereotyped. The basis for larp stereotyping originated from moral panics, stemming from the occult and diversity backlash (Stark 2012; Laycock 2015). Curran (2011) describes the contemporary stereotype for participants:

The image of role-playing gamers depicts them as anti-social male teenagers who are largely more interested in technology than their own personal appearance, believing that they are highly intelligent and imaginative, passionate about topics that are uninteresting to peers, and consequently persecuted by some of these peers. (Curran 2011)

Stereotypes contribute to ideas that individuals who participate in any role-playing deviate from the general population in accordance with Merton's Strain Theory (Curran 2011); individuals who feel social strain retreat into role-playing games to empower themselves. Players use role-playing as an escape; individuals detach themselves from the world around them and create new identities in order to establish a new form of social capital. Because they are pushed out by other social groups, these individuals are seen as more likely to "snap," but this is not the case (Curran 2011). Advancement from tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) to larps has assisted in the dissipation of old player stereotypes and has paved the way for larps like *Dagorhir*.

3. DAGORHIR'S SOCIO-HISTORIC CONTEXT

Bryan Weise, also known as Aratar Anfinhir the Stormbringer, founded *Dagorhir* in Maryland in 1977 (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013). Weise had never been involved in larping or any other forms of role-playing games prior, but was influenced by reading *The Lord of the Rings* series by J.R.R. Tolkien. Internal conflict between founding members over a legal contract caused a faction of *Dagorhir* members to diverge and create a new game called *Belegarth*. Weise created the "Counsel of Seven" to assist him in enforcing rules and regulations as the game grew in popularity, but an additional dispute led to the creation of a similar third game, *Amtgard*. A piece on *Dagorhir* aired internationally in 1981 and was seen by Beowulf the Dreamer, who

contacted the council to start his own group (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013). Soon, “tribes” were being created all over the nation. These “tribes” later became formal “realms” and would attend annual tournaments, such as Ragnarok. Ragnarok is held every year at a different location and had 1,627 participants attend in 2014 (Dagorhir Ragnarok 2017).

The emphasis that *Dagorhir* puts on live action combat has progressed elements of misogyny, which alienate women from participating. This becomes a similar issue with the representation of people of color within larping communities, where white men are largely represented (Holkar 2016). Martin, Vaccaro, Heckert, and Heasley (2015) examine *Dagorhir* and the prevalence of hyper-masculinity. The combat aspects appeal to the male demographic, but some women also participate; women participate in smaller numbers and tend to gravitate towards one another, making a group with a stronger bond. The aspect of *epic glory* that Martin et al. (2013) discuss describes how men in combat larps fight to win; this mentality tends to perpetuate gender inequality and causes women to participate to a lesser extent. While women lose power in these dynamics, men continue to enjoy the benefits of their status; they occupy positions of power within their realms that allow them to make decisions on behalf of the group. The problems associated with marginalized populations do not dissuade some individuals from participating in *Dagorhir*.

The history of *Dagorhir* is one of change and adaptation. Weise founded the game because he knew there were others like him who would appreciate the combination of fantasy and combat (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013). *Dagorhir* provided an outlet for individuals who wanted to act out events in Middle Earth, rather than just read about it. The branching of *Dagorhir* into different larps reinforced the public’s desire for activities such as this; over 100 realms exist across the nation and other realms exist in Canada, Britain, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Germany, Australia, and Japan (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013). Though *Dagorhir* focuses on combat, the fantasy element is still a central theme that pulls in new members.

4. PARADIGMATIC ORIENTATION

I utilize the symbolic interactionist thought in order to observe and document how players ascribe meaning to their in-game characters. This interpretive paradigm came out of The Chicago School with symbolic interactionism as its main theory (Rock 2001). George Herbert Mead developed symbolic interactionism in order to conduct a micro-analysis of groups within society and the individuals who create these groups. Symbolic interactionism argue the following: 1) Humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings these things have for them; 2) No thing is inherently meaningful, as humans learn meaning through interaction; 3) The meanings of things change through interactions with others and experiences with those things; and 4) the meaning of things depend on the context of their occurrences (Blumer 1969).

Herbert Blumer (1969) explains, “The symbolic interactionist approach rests upon the premise that human action takes place always in a situation that confronts the actor and that the actor acts on the basis of defining the situation that confronts him.” The ontology of the interpretive paradigm is that the social world is a meaningful one and utilizes pragmatism; it assesses the truth of meanings through practical applications (Rock 2001). Researchers, specifically ethnographers, utilize observation and group interaction, which allow them to derive meaning through application. Shalin (1991) discusses how objects and actions have different meanings to different people at different times. Though it is important to understand the immediate context of objects and actions, it is also necessary to examine the historical significance to see where meanings originate. Symbolic interactionism, though rooted in

sociology, can be applied to a psychological level when addressing elements of self.

I conducted this study to observe how basic levels of character development affect participants and the concept of the magic circle. Symbolic interactionism provides a foundational understanding of observation that facilitates a social and psychological understanding of the research group and how they develop senses of self through their characters. New elements and meaning are always being introduced because *Dagorhir*, like the social world, is constantly evolving and changing. I utilize the “logic-in-use” frame, which focuses on the process of inquiry (Rock 2001) to understand actors and guide the study in order to observe deeper meanings employed by *Dagorhir* participants. By using symbolic interactionism as a guide, I will be able to observe how players interact with one another, how in-game characters interact with one another, and how players interact with their own character.

5. METHOD

Much like society, *Dagorhir* is composed of many geographical realms located across the nation. The Las Vegas realm is called Barad’Dun. Barad’Dun meets twice a week; Wednesdays at 6:00PM and Saturdays at 12:00PM. I began recording observations when I was introduced to the group by my gatekeeper, Judge; before then, I had no contact with the group. I attended both meetings, which ranged from 2 to 5 hours each meeting. Along with attending meetings, I went to additional functions, such as weapon building sessions held at the homes of different players. The individuals of the realm were my informants and the unit of analysis for the observations and interviews that were collected over a span of six months; this time frame is appropriate for the amount of hours spent with participants at weekly events (Lutz 1981; Hammersley 2018). The group is so small that I was able to converse with everyone at least once (N=18); no identifying or demographic information was documented in order to protect participants. Interviews were conducted with members that attend the most practices and their names and pseudonyms were changed to protect their identities. I drew from interactions, but my focus was primarily on observations of the group that were supported by questions asked in interviews. This research was approved and supervised by the Institutional Review Board of UNLV.

The informal rules, formal rules, lore of *Dagorhir*, weapon regulation, and realms are all overseen by a non-profit organization. Realms come together for weekend tournaments; these tournaments are composed of competitions, crafting, combat, and leisure time. Players give meaning to different elements of themselves through evolution of their characters at practice and at tournaments. Though the game is combat-oriented, these individuals come up with elaborate background stories that intertwine with other individuals in their realm. The purpose of the current study is to examine the interactions between members involved in *Dagorhir* and observe the process by which they ascribe meaning to their in-game characters and interactions. I want to know how individuals develop their character and the effect that character development has on the individual outside of the magic circle.

5.1 Tools and Data

In order to observe how individuals develop their characters and themselves, I conducted observations, interviews, and regularly interacted with the members of Barad’Dun. Observations and participation are necessary to derive themes from the group and their interactions, as well as create lines of questioning for the interviews. I conducted semi-structured interviews

to obtain a deeper understanding of their idea of the larping world and their characters. Grubriun and Holstein (2002) explain that the life-cycle of in-depth interviews is dependent on receiving responses and observing actions that reinforce themes. Some questions are only appropriate at a given moment, so it is important to remain active within the group to take advantage of these instances. I relied mainly on informal conversations with the group and players in order to help guide the semi-structured interviews.

I entered my interviews with key, pre-selected questions in an attempt to make them structured interviews. Later, I adapted these into semi-structured interviews so that I could implement questions derived from observations and to keep the respondents active (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006). Framing questions in this manner made members of Barad'Dun more receptive to being interviewed. The dialogue was furthered by the sharing of experience and subtle joking. When one respondent talked about the murder of her friend, I believed that it would have been inappropriate to share one of my experiences because it might have undermined her own. The noting of subtle cues (i.e. her eye contact and change of tone) allowed for me to reach that line of questioning at an appropriate time.

I used thematic analysis to analyze my data as a method. Under thematic analysis, I record my observations and interviews to derive themes through coding (Guest, MacQueen, and Namey 1999). This process was repeated until themes were saturated and reinforced by data. For example at one point, a player named Burr discussed why he had created a monster character; some of the same reasons were discussed in Inferno's interview. Notes from observations and informal interviews were cross-examined with the semi-formal interviews. I looked for key words and terms to derive themes from the codes.

6. FINDINGS

The contents of the current study allow for an examination of group interactions in *Dagorhir* and the relationship between players and their characters. Barad'Dun's emphasis on combat develops a contentious atmosphere for those who focus their time on character development. Group attitudes against character development segregated members; this subsequently detached players from their characters. Seasoned players were able to recognize the importance of character development as it related to personal growth; character development changed players out-of game, challenging the boundaries of the magic circle (Consalvo 2009; Montola 2009; Moore 2011; Waskul and Lust 2011; Stenros 2012). Interviews and observations built upon the attitudes conveyed by players, establishing four themes: 1) larp segregation, 2) reflection of self, 3) critique of self, and 4) evolution of self.

6.1 Larp Segregation

An element of what I observed was how larpers interact with one another and individuals who participate in other larps. Even in this small sub-group, I was able to observe segregation. Depending on the larp players participate in, they are seen as either "stick jocks" or "flurbs"; this extends to other larps, such as Amtgard. One respondent stated:

Like I, I describe myself as a stick jock; it's just kind of a classification. There's another term "flurb" which can be kind of derogatory because, what it is, is someone who plays a game for the role-play aspect instead of for the fighting; people who prefer, like magic or just prefer not to fight as much.

Stick jocks are players who participate for the live action combat aspects of the larp, while flurbs participate for the role-play aspects; these terms are used by players to describe one another, but can be used as derogatory terms. The context of the terms changes depending on how players identify themselves. Because *Dagorhir* is combat-oriented, many of the members identify as stick jocks and joke about flurbs.

I witnessed players at several of the Barad'Dun practices preparing for larp events outside of *Dagorhir*; players would decorate elaborate costumes between sparing matches. In one instance, a member mocked other members for being flurbs because they were working on their costumes. This member's dedication to *Dagorhir* and identification as a stick jock changed the context of the term flurb. Though he is friends with the members and meant it as a joke, the term was used as an insult. Members who identified as flurbs would then respond by negatively referring to the instigating party as "just a dumb stick jock" who "did not understand the complexity of story lines."

Four other incidences occurred where members were discussing their characters in *Dagorhir* and other members would use the term flurb. Lex amended his character's story by marrying a fictional creature composed of tumbleweed; routinely, members would bring it up and call him a flurb. Though in each instance they were joking, they used the term flurb in a derogatory tense, relating back to the societal implication of any derogatory term. Derogatory terms can be used by members who identify with that group, but when used by a member outside of that group, the term is meant as an insult.

6.2 Reflection of Self

Ten respondents discussed how even small choices are reflections of the player. From garb to weapon, each choice tells you about the player. During a weapon building session, a member named Phantom stated, "The bigger the weapon, the better." His personal choice in weapons steers him towards two-handed red swords that have the ability to break shields. Other members commented that red weapons have advantages, but the way Phantom made his was incorrect. He would make them too large, making them harder to wield. Phantom did not care because his goal was to intimidate his opponent. Another member, Lich, uses a mace with which he swings and smacks the ground to disorient opponents. Lich and Phantom use two different weapons, but try to achieve the same intimidation.

Phantom's choice in weapon is a personal choice, much like how the characters developed by other players are personal choices. Burr stated, "I have been a very, very social person. I love talking to people, completely. I also love fighting. . . . I use to fight in my back yard with wooden sticks." His love for combat and outgoing nature has led him to develop his character as a "hat troll." Burr is known for going to tournaments and painting his whole body purple while adorning a large striped hat that hangs from the back of his head that flops past his shoulders. Four members commented about how individuals who developed monster characters, like Burr's character, were normally outgoing. This character choice also influences fighting style. One player stated in her interview, "People who play monsters tend to be lower to the ground and they will, I don't know, they just fight a little bit different."

Another member, Inferno, developed a werewolf character. Though he does not fight lower to the ground, he utilizes a werewolf's agility in combat. Inferno chose to be a werewolf because he believes it accurately reflects who he is. Off of the field Inferno is a nice guy, but on the field he becomes aggressive as the wolf part of him takes over. Inferno believes that people observe his good nature, but frequently overlook his aggressive and hostile tendencies. These

players have a strong sense of self and pick characters to reflect that strength; other players have an equally strong sense of self and transition through multiple characters to find an appropriate representation of self.

6.3 Critique of Self

Whereas a player's character choice says a lot about who they are, a player changing their character can sometimes say even more. Respondents reported how at tournaments, they are in character for the entire weekend. Though being in character is fun, it sometimes becomes overwhelming. Interacting with other characters becomes daunting when players are enacting a character with whom they no longer identify. Some players reported feeling uneasy at large events because of their character choice. Players from other realms would interact with them based off of perceptions of who their character was supposed to be, a character with whom the player did not fully associate. Interactions of this nature weighed on players of Barad'Dun and caused them to develop new characters that are more in sync with how they want to be perceived in-game.

A high ranking member of Barad'Dun, Omicron, discussed how originally his character was a jester. He thought it would be fun and enjoyed the wardrobe of the jester. After a few tournaments, however, he no longer enjoyed the character he had developed. Omicron stated, "He (the jester) did not fight that much and no one took him seriously." The problem with his jester character had stemmed from how other people interacted with his character; players assumed because he was a jester, he would be funny all the time. Omicron realized he was too serious for the character he chose, so he transitioned to a scarecrow. Through self-critique, he was able to change characters to one that was a better representation of who he was outside of the game. This made him more comfortable and relaxed in his interaction and fighting style.

Other players came to similar realizations as they transitioned through characters. Doom was originally an elf, but transitioned to a stone golem. His original character choice was influenced by his experience with a prior unit, The Kings Guard, which was composed of human and elf player characters. Once this unit was disbanded, he felt better able to explore his character options. Doom utilized an in-game process to develop a storyline where a witch was able to transform him into a golem. This adaptation of his character critiqued his previous affiliation, which allowed him to change into a more representative being. The elf was a character of utility and not an accurate portrayal of him. Doom said, "The golem was a stronger character and was more in line with my demeanor than the elf."

In both players, developing new characters led them to feel more fulfilled in their game play. Before, their characters trapped them into roles they could not occupy and shifted how they interacted with other players; they were trapped by their original character choices. The challenges of these roles led the players to critique and understand themselves to a greater extent, which was apparent to other members of the group. One participant remarked, "Yea, he [Omicron] was really unhappy as a jester. He got much better when he changed." Feeling comfortable not only affected the player, but also affected how they were perceived based on interactions their characters had within the game. Doom remarked, "The change made me happier and made me want to talk more with other people because I was excited about my character." Self-critiques allowed players to reconstruct their game play and evaluate what they wanted to achieve through their characters.

6.4 Evolution of Self

Dagorhir mandates that participants wear period garb when participating in tournaments, but developing a character is up to the player. A majority of the players who were interviewed reported that they were actually very shy and timid. These players used *Dagorhir* and their characters to step out of their comfort zone. Other players remarked that *Dagorhir* had no effect on them as people outside of the game; this mentality was indicative of players who identified as stick-jocks. Members who believed that they had not changed personally because of the game would still admit to becoming more outgoing and receiving valuable leadership experience. For example, Burr and Snazz both commented about how participation in *Dagorhir* increases leadership qualities by actively putting members in leadership roles; every player has the ability to assess situations in combat and direct other players accordingly. Players who recognize the potential to acquire leadership experience invest in opportunities, such as Burr and Snazz, while less aware members develop leadership skills secondhand.

An example of secondhand leadership is May, who was being pushed by his parents to be more active when he found *Dagorhir* at a local Renaissance festival. May stated, "I don't really have a character. I just do it for fun. I haven't really changed." He did not know that two other members had used him as an example for drastic change due to participation in *Dagorhir*. The members explained how when May joined, he was both timid and shy. Through months of attending practices, May became more vocal. Everything about him changed, from how he interacted with other members to how he positioned himself when fighting. May now regularly calls out flanking commands during fighting games. More than once, he called out orders to me and directed me to fall back. While May did not notice his own evolution, other players specifically created characters to develop traits that they wish they embodied out-of-game.

Another member of the group, Salem, commented how she was shy, which caused her to develop outgoing characters in the many larps in which she participates. She also believes that people take advantage of her nice nature, which has also pushed her to develop characters who identify as strong females. When asked about her character, she responded, "Yea, my in-game character is a bitch. I'm really nice in real life, like too nice, like people take advantage of me sometime[s]. But my character in the game is . . . not nice, like she's . . . got a customer service smile on, but it's all fake." She actively uses her characters to develop strength and aggressiveness that she believes she lacks outside of the game. Salem participates in flurb-based larps outside of *Dagorhir*, where her character made her realize how much she did not appreciate physical contact with strangers. In her interview, Salem stated, "And so I got a customer for the tattoo stuff and I actually felt really uncomfortable touching him because he was a complete stranger and I didn't know him. And that was kind of the first time I realized that I don't like physical contact with strangers." Salem's many characters bring forth different attributes and realizations, all which help her evolve herself as a person outside of the game.

7. CONCLUSION

A combination of observation and interview supported themes that influenced members of *Dagorhir*. Four different themes were developed through coding. Manifest content revealed the reoccurring use of terms used to segregate players, as well as how they engaged with creating their in-game characters. Some players chose characters that reinforced who they were, while

others were able to critique themselves through character development in order to restore aspects of self (Kohut 1977). Regardless of whether a player acknowledged their choices, in-game characters helped develop the player outside of the game. Interactions between players and their characters further their development beyond play and the magic circle.

Symbolic interactionist thought allows for a better understanding of the members of Barad'Dun. Players get to define their position within the realm, which becomes the basis for their interactions. Their understanding of meaning is heavily influenced by their attitudes towards character development. The choices with which they are presented vary between players and situations, increasing elements of subjectivity and agency. Where some members are rooted in a stick-jock mentality, others fully invest in flurb behavior by developing their in-game character. The different ways to engage in *Dagorhir* are indicative of the way the larp was originally framed (Dagorhir Battle Games Association 2013) and allow for player to develop meaning within the game in multiple ways. I observed that even individuals with undeveloped characters were influenced by the play in larping. All members agree that they receive leadership experience and confidence, even if they do not recognize it directly.

Larps that emphasize role-playing perceive character immersion as necessary because it advances elements of play. The prevalent attitudes observed in this study reflect *Dagorhir* participants who are combat-oriented; though *Dagorhir* focuses on live action, the minimal aspects of role-playing still influence players. *Dagorhir* and other larps allow players to define themselves within the magic circle. The self is subject to social and cognitive construction (Harter 1999). Participants in the current study expand aspects of self on a psychological level through character bonding and play (Lee and Robbins 1995). They can be anything, anywhere, at any time; there is a larp for almost every preference. Even in a combat-oriented larp like *Dagorhir*, players get to choose new names and new ways to recreate themselves. Though some choose characters that reinforce who they are outside of the game, everyone has the ability to grow and evolve themselves through participation. Some members of Barad'Dun put little effort in their characters, while other players are perceived as flurbs; findings indicate that character development occurs regardless of investment in role-play.

The themes that came from my coding show different aspects of self that are affected through larping. Though seen as different themes, they are all connected. The magic circle and play allow for these players to step outside of themselves. Play allows them to change within the circle; the change in the player transcends the magic circle (Consalvo 2009; Montola 2009; Moore 2011; Waskul and Lust 2011; Stenros 2012). Stick jocks, such as May, are more disconnected from this change, but individuals who identify as flurbs, such as Omicron and Salem, see how the player influences the character and vice versa. Players who develop characters as reflections, critiques, and evolutions of self are able to understand the complexity of the player/character relationship. Players and characters are perceived as separate entities, but they exist as one being. Different aspects of play bleed through the border of the magic circle as players learn from play and continue life outside of their larps. The findings of this study are specific to *Dagorhir*; future research on the topic of character development can expand on the findings of this study by exploring how character development occurs in other larps.

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— **Guy M. and Mark Jo LeClaire**
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