

Conflict and Change: Testing a Life-Cycle-Derived Model of Larp Group Dynamics

Popular abstract: This paper extends theoretical work on small group dynamics in live action role-play (larp; Leonard and Arango 2013), honing in on three challenges larps face that are anticipated by our unique integration of roleplay studies with small groups research. These challenges are: relative *group embeddedness*, which can cause splintering and unfavorable social comparison when a larp is situated in a dense network of other larp groups; *bleed* of relationship dynamics such that in-character conflicts can foster intragroup tension (Bowman 2013), especially under conditions of *zero-sum competition*; and *principled conflicts* in which players disagree on core values, ideas, and goals of the larp itself (Wheelan 1994). We analyzed 17,371 survey responses to explore the role of embeddedness, socially competitive play, and regional play-style “fit” in explaining larp satisfaction. We discuss implications of these hypothesis-driven analyses, both for their scholarly and practical value.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this research is to investigate the nature of small group dynamics in live action roleplay (larp) communities. We examine which features of larps and larpers intensify three challenges anticipated by past integration of roleplay studies with small groups research (Leonard and Arango 2013). These challenges are: intragroup tension due to *zero-sum competition* (Bowman 2013); relative *group embeddedness*, when a larp is situated in a dense network of other larp groups; and *principled conflicts* in which players disagree on core values, ideas, and goals of the larp itself (Wheelan 1994).

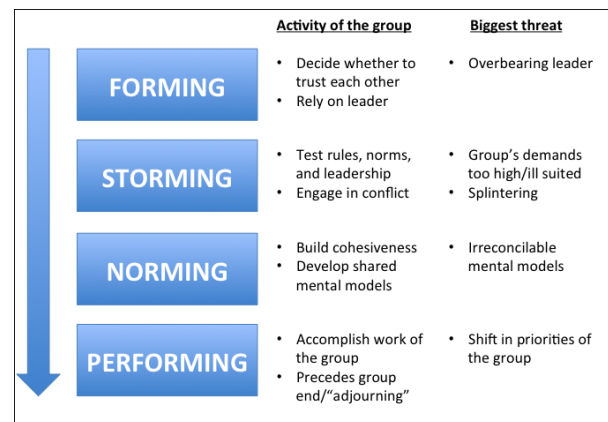
To explore these key challenges, we analyzed an anonymous survey of larpers (larp census.org). Our work is grounded in industrial/organizational and social psychology, and roleplaying studies. Beyond its scholarly contributions, we seek to offer advice for larpers and facilitators who seek to improve the health of their groups. Further, we hope to inspire a greater consideration of group dynamics in larp communities.

2. LARP GROUP DEVELOPMENT: A PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM MODEL

We argue that the focal challenges of competition, group embeddedness, and principled conflicts are inevitable “growing pains” experienced by larp groups at various stages of group life. According to organizational psychology research, groups mature over time and gradually progress through four stages: (1) forming, (2) storming, (3) norming,

(4) performing (Tuckman and Jensen 1977). As depicted in Figure 1A, groups are expected to transition linearly through stages in which the primary activities are (1) deciding whether or not to trust each other and the group leader; (2) testing rules, norms, and leadership; (3) building cohesiveness; and (4) accomplishing the work of the group.

Figure 1A: This model of group life has been validated in groups engaged in therapy and human resources training as well as task-oriented groups (i.e., software development teams).

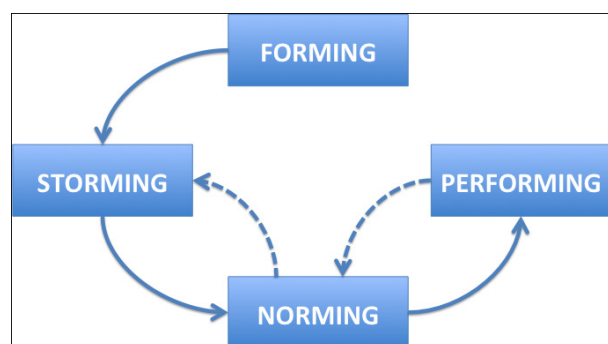


However, larp communities pose a unique challenge for classic models of group development for several reasons (Leonard and Arango 2013). First, larps often blend the characteristics and activities of groups that classic group theorists assume are distinct types (e.g., task, therapy, and recreation groups). Second, they operate on multiple layers of reality that include immersive roleplaying as well as out of character interaction (e.g., Fine 1983), such that group dynamics operate on several levels.

Finally, campaign larps are recursive in that players may retire characters and thus “reboot” their position in the social network, frequently reshuffling in- and out-of-game relationships. Thus, we view larps as more complex than the groups that have previously been studied by Tuckman (1965) and others, and their development is likely to be more complicated as a result.

Due to the multilayered and recursive social dynamics of larps, we argue that they likely experience punctuated equilibrium (Leonard and Arango 2013). This is an alternative trajectory of larp development described by Gersick (1988) in which the group cycles frequently between stages rather than experiencing uninterrupted flow towards group dissolution (e.g., Tuckman 1965; Tuckman and Jensen 1977; see Figure 1B for a depiction of this alternative model).

Figure 1B: Determining the correct life-cycle model that fits the complex dynamics of larp group is an important step toward pinpointing when and how social conflict and transitions are likely to occur in various larp communities.



3. CHALLENGES FOR LARP GROUPS PREDICTED FROM GROUP DYNAMICS THEORY

How can group dynamics predict challenges for larps? First, group life may become unstable when the members are embedded within a larger community or organizational structure. Effects of may include the forming of bonds—and, thus, subgroups—by individuals who have played together in other contexts; upward or downward comparison with other larp groups that exist at different stages of development; and even split loyalties and defection to other groups in the broader community. Per McGrew, Bilotta, and Deeney (1999), external influence can disrupt or reverse the course of group development. **Hypothesis 1.** *The number and diversity of larps a player is involved in will negatively predict overall satisfaction with larp groups.*

Second, competition may also negatively affect larp group health by attracting destructive players and/or fostering conflict in relationships. People who are interested in socially competitive play may be more inclined toward interpersonal conflict (Collier, Ryckman, Thornton and Gold 2010) and this could shape the tenor of a larp group. Also, in a phenomenon called bleed in which thoughts and feelings of the character and player crossover (Montola 2010), a spiteful in-character dynamic can generate hostile out of character interactions (Bowman 2013), which could be exacerbated by competitive play. **Hypothesis 2.** *Preference for a socially competitive play style will negatively predict overall satisfaction with larp groups.*

Finally, whether you enjoy conflict or not, you likely expect your groups to fulfill your needs. We propose that dissatisfaction will be higher when a player’s motivations to larp are not consistent with the style of play available to them. For example, Nordic larp is classified as emotional play with high investment, whereas larp in US/Canada is often viewed as featuring a rules-governed “play to win” style that undercuts roleplay value (Hellstrom 2012). We take these stereotypes at face value to test **Hypothesis 3.** *Larpers who prefer achievement-based play will be more satisfied if they reside in US/Canada, and those who prefer heavy roleplay will be more satisfied if they reside in other regions.*

4. METHOD

4.1 Data Source and Participants

In order to investigate these hypotheses, we obtained data from a large-scale anonymous survey collected by Aaron Vanek and Ryan Paddy.¹ The survey was created in consultation with international larp scholars, but was not sponsored by a particular research group (Vanek 2015). It was collected online from October 1, 2014 to January 10, 2015, and invited participants to confidentially answer questions primarily pertaining to their demographic information, experience with larp, and motivations for larping.

From the initial sample of 29,751, we retained only those participants who answered our key criterion variable (satisfaction with larps) and reported that they were over 18 years old. The remaining participants ($N=17,371$) averaged between 25 and

¹ Vanek recently served as Executive Director of Seekers Unlimited, a nonprofit company located in Los Angeles, CA, that used larp for education. Paddy is a founding member of the New Zealand LARP Society.

34 years old.² The sample was 61.4% male, 36% female (2.6% declined to respond). Participants were from countries around the world³ (see Table 1) also reported playing in a mix of single-event larps (52% had played) and long-term campaigns (76.5% had played) in the past year. Most participants (74.1%) had larped for five years or more.

Table 1
Number, percent, and cumulative percent of the top 15 countries sampled.

Country	<i>n</i>	Percent of sample	Cumulative Percent
1. United States	3911	22.5	90.8
2. Germany	2125	12.2	68.3
3. United Kingdom	2082	12	56.1
4. Russia	1769	10.2	44.1
5. France	919	5.3	33.9
6. Sweden	671	3.9	28.6
7. Denmark	670	3.9	24.7
8. Canada	662	3.8	20.8
9. Czech Republic	572	3.3	17
10. Italy	500	2.9	13.7
11. Belgium	456	2.6	10.8
12. Poland	430	2.5	8.2
13. Netherlands	426	2.5	5.7
14. Finland	337	1.9	3.2
15. Norway	233	1.3	1.3

Note: Remaining 32 countries represent 9.2% of sample.

4.2 Measures

The criterion variable for all of our hypotheses was a single-item measure of self-reported satisfaction. Participants responded to the question “how satisfied are you with the quality of the larps you have played in the last 12 months?” Responses ranged from dissatisfied to very satisfied. On average, participants were fairly satisfied with their larp groups ($M=3.328$, $SD=.676$; where 3=satisfied).

For our first hypothesis, we looked at the number of larp events participants reported engaging in during the last 12 months as an index of social embeddedness. The average participant reported playing in 8-9 larps over the past year ($M=8.877$, $SD=16.678$). However, this is a non-specific measure of social embeddedness, since all of the events a player engages in could be from a single larp. To further examine this construct,

² Age was measured with a series of four-year bins so the precise mean could not be determined. The 15-19 bin was dropped because it contained people under the age of consent by our ethical criterion.

³ Respondents from Russia comprise about 10% of the sample, followed by those from the Czech Republic and Poland (5.8%). Each classically non-Western country like Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa each individually account for less than .01% of the sample.

we assigned each participant two “diversity” scores based on the number of different themes⁴ and combat styles⁵ that they had experienced in the past year, respectively. The average participant had experienced about 2 different themes ($M=1.990$, $SD=1.121$) and slightly fewer combat styles ($M=1.395$, $SD=.725$).

For our second hypothesis, we indexed preference for socially competitive play via a single-item measure: “I enjoy larps that involve intrigue, scheming or political play.” Participants’ agreement with this statement ranged from 1-5, with the average player indicating agreement above the midpoint ($M=3.705$, $SD=1.102$).

For our final hypothesis, we looked for survey items that indexed preference for role-play and individual achievement. To obtain further clarity, we used a dimension reduction technique called a factor analysis on all items regarding participants’ reasons for larping (see Table 2). This approach parses a list of variables into a few conceptual dimensions based on shared patterns of responses (Thompson 2004).⁶

We identified a 7-item scale related to enjoyment of role-play features like high drama and powerful emotions, and prioritizing good story and scenes. A second dimension appeared to pertain to individual achievement via preference for being a leader, gaining attention and having influence. Reliability analyses indicated that these scales had very good internal consistency ($\alpha=.823$ and $\alpha=.722$, respectively) and that dropping any items would not improve their reliability. Overall, participants reported a slight fondness for both play styles (Role-play $M=3.739$, $SD=0.759$; Achievement $M=3.352$, $SD=0.839$; mid-point at 3). Interestingly, these scales were moderately correlated with one another, which indicates that, for these participants, enjoying heavy role-play goes hand-in-hand with preferring larps

⁴ The five themes could indicate they had experienced were as follows: fantasy/mythological; set in the future/science fiction; historical; horror/supernatural; and modern (“between the year 2000 and today”). Thus a participant was assigned a score of 0-5 for this variable.

⁵ The four combat styles participants could indicate they had experienced were as follows: live combat where participants hit each other with any kind of weapon; representational mechanics such as rock/paper/scissors, cards or comparing numbers; no mechanic or physical skill used; and combat was not an element. Thus a participant was assigned a score of 0-4 for this variable.

⁶ Two other factors emerged which seemed to be related to (1) practical skills (i.e., enjoying making your own costumes and using your real physical skills); (2) presence or absence of clear rules; and (3) mundane reality (i.e., wearing everyday clothing, transparent setting), respectively.

Table 2

Factor loadings for preference role-play and achievement scales.

Factor	ROLE- PLAY 1	ACHIEVE- MENT 2	SKILL USE 3	RULES CLARITY 4	REALITY 5
<i>Preference for role-play</i>					
I enjoy participating in dramatic moments in which characters are very emotional.	0.684	0.216	0.161	-0.068	-0.038
I enjoy making major changes to my acting performance for different characters.	0.666	0.252	0.123	0.057	-0.008
Creating a good story is an extremely important aspect of larp for me.	0.645	0.277	0.172	0.081	0.012
I enjoy larps that give me a new perspective on the real world.	0.629	0.071	0.108	-0.011	0.290
I enjoy larps that affect my real world emotions, even if the emotions I feel are negative.	0.617	0.064	0.136	-0.089	0.102
I prefer to play characters who behave very differently than I would.	0.612	0.152	0.047	0.082	0.072
I sometimes deliberately have my character fail because it creates a better scene.	0.606	0.119	0.039	-0.299	0.039
<i>Preference for achievement</i>					
I enjoy playing characters who are leaders.	0.150	0.795	0.166	0.042	0.115
I enjoy playing influential characters.	0.252	0.774	0.098	0.084	0.106
I enjoy having lots of people pay attention to my character during larps.	0.292	0.602	0.160	-0.108	-0.001

Note: The factor analysis was conducted using varimax rotation on all measures indexing preference for play style (25 items). Factors 1-5 accounted for 52.2% of the variance.

that allow for individual achievement (see Table 3).

Table 3
Bi-variate correlations among variables included in analyses.

Measure	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Satisfaction	0.048*	0.014	0.000	-0.015	0.084*	0.044*
2. Preference - socially competitive play	-	0.014	0.051*	0.049*	0.495*	0.446*
3. Number of larp events	-	-	0.110*	0.078*	0.026†	0.074*
4. Diversity - theme	-	-	-	0.498*	0.150*	0.087*
5. Diversity - combat-style	-	-	-	-	0.145*	0.08*
6. Preference - role-play	-	-	-	-	-	0.524*
7. Preference - individual achievement	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: Given the large sample size, conservative alphas are employed:
* $p < .001$; † $p < .01$; two-tailed.

5. RESULTS

Our first hypothesis was that social embeddedness would negatively predict overall satisfaction with larp groups. We used hierarchical linear regression to examine the extent to which a participant's satisfaction with the larps they play in is predicted by (1) the number of larps they have played in during the past year; and their diversity of play regarding (2) combat style and (3) theme (entered on Step 2), controlling for age and gender (entered on Step 1). Significant, negative coefficients across the board would show that (as expected) those who play in more larps and more diverse larps are less satisfied, possibly because of increased social embeddedness. Because of the large sample, we used a conservative cutoff for significance ($\alpha = .01$) for all linear analyses.

Overall, the results offer a mixed view of the effect of social embeddedness on larp satisfaction (see Table 4). The predictors and covariates (age and gender) together accounted for only 0.2% of the variance, suggesting that other factors are likely influential. As predicted, we observed a significant negative coefficient for combat diversity such that the more combat styles a participants had experienced in

Table 4
Regression coefficients predicting satisfaction from social embeddedness.

Parameter	Unstandardized Estimate	Standard Error	p-value	Standardized Estimate
Number of larp events	0.001	0.000	0.040	0.016
Diversity - theme	0.008	0.005	0.137	0.013
Diversity - combat-style	-0.025	0.008	0.003	-0.027
Step	Adjusted R Square	F Change	p-value	
1	0.001	7.683	<.001	
2	0.001	4.266	0.005	

Notes covariates entered at Step 1: age, gender.

their larping, the less satisfied they were with the larps they played in overall. In contrast, the coefficient for thematic diversity was non-significant; satisfaction did not depend on whether a player had engaged in larps with a range of themes. Finally, we observed a *positive* coefficient for number of larps such that the more larps players experienced during the past 12 months, the *more* satisfied they reported being with their larp groups. However, this effect was not significant at our conservative benchmark of $p < .01$.⁷

Our second hypothesis was that preference for socially competitive play style would negatively predict overall satisfaction with larp groups. We used hierarchical linear regression to examine the extent to which a participant's satisfaction with the larps they play in is predicted by level of preference for socially competitive play (entered on Step 2), controlling for age and gender (entered on Step 1). A significant, negative coefficient would show that (as expected) those who prefer "larps that involve intrigue, scheming or political play" are less satisfied overall in their groups.

Contrary to our predictions, we observed a *positive* coefficient such that the more a player reported preferring larps that involved intrigue, scheming, and political play the more satisfied they were (see Table 5). Although this effect was significant at our conservative benchmark, along with gender and age this variable accounted for only 0.3% of the variance suggesting that other factors are likely equally or more influential.

⁷ These effects remain consistent even when excluding participants with no combat experiences.

Table 5

Regression coefficient predicting satisfaction from preference for socially competitive play.

Parameter	Unstandardized Estimate	Standard Error	p-value	Standardized Estimate
Preference - socially competitive play	0.030	0.005	<.001	0.048
Step	Adjusted R Square	F Change	p-value	
1	0.001	8.306	<.001	
2	0.003	38.354	<.001	

Notes covariates entered at Step 1: age, gender.

Our third and final hypothesis was that satisfaction with larps would be greater when play style preference matched the kind of groups that are likely available in their region of the world. That is, we expected larpers who prefer achievement-based play would be more satisfied if they reside in US or Canada, whereas those who prefer heavy roleplay would be more satisfied elsewhere. To examine this hypothesis, we conducted a 2-way ANCOVA with satisfaction as the dependent variable. The independent variables were (1) preference for role-play style (high vs. low)⁸ and (2) preference for achievement (high vs. low)⁹ As in our previous analyses, the covariates were age and gender. This analysis included 4,346 US/Canadian residents and 12,159 players from other regions.

The overall statistics for the observed main effects and 2-way interactions are reported in Table 6. Achievement-oriented participants reported more satisfaction ($M=3.358$, $SE=.007$) than those low on this factor ($M=3.320$, $SE=.011$). As predicted, however, this effect was qualified by region. As shown in Table 7, participants from Canada/US were more satisfied if they had a high preference for achievement, compared to low.¹⁰

⁸ We used a median-split procedure to assign participants a value of 1 if they were above the observed median (3.857) and a value of 0 in this factor if they were below the median, thus splitting our participants as HIGH or LOW in preference for role-play.

⁹ As with preference for role-play, we dichotomized preference for achievement at the median observed for this variable (3.333333) such that participants above this score were assigned a value of 1 and participants below this score were assigned a value of 0.

¹⁰ This interaction also fully explains the main effect of region we observed, $F(1, 16495)=4.925$, $p=.026$ that reveals that larpers in US/Canada are more satisfied with their larps ($M=3.324$, $SE=.007$) than players from other regions ($M=3.354$, $SE=.012$).

Table 6

Main effects and interaction mean square, F-statistic, and p-values.

Parameter	Mean Square	F-Statistic	p-value
Preference - achievement	3.642	8.031	0.005
Preference - role-play	25.536	56.308	<.001
Region: North America versus other	2.233	4.925	0.026
Achievement by region interaction	1.916	4.224	0.040
Role-play by region interaction	0.294	0.649	0.420

Note: Achievement and role-play are dichotomized at their median. For each variable, $df = 1$ and $error = 16495$.

For participants with from other regions, however, preference for achievement did not impact satisfaction. Finally, when examining the effect of preference for roleplay, the predicted interaction was not significant. Regardless of region, roleplay-oriented participants were more satisfied ($M=3.390$, $SE=.011$) than those who had a low preference for roleplay ($M=3.288$, $SE=.008$).

6. DISCUSSION

Given that larp groups are extremely complex, we argue that larps likely follow a punctuated equilibrium model of group life (Leonard and Arango 2013). Using a large data set of anonymous survey responses, we explored three core hypotheses derived from this work. Specifically, we set out to investigate challenges that larps may face due to such unique group dynamics: social embeddedness, competition, and principled conflicts.

First, we expected that players involved in more diverse larp styles would be less satisfied with their groups because greater social embeddedness may give rise to problems (such as adverse social comparisons). Although we found support for the claim that diverse combat mechanics can reduce satisfaction, the results for diverse themes and numeracy did not match our predictions. Perhaps exposure to diverse mechanics is a more reliable signal of social embeddedness. Alternatively, the direction of causality could be

This is because this effect of region on satisfaction is only significant ($p<.001$) for participants who are high in preference for achievement.

Table 7

Decomposing interaction of preference for achievement by region: means, standard error, and pairwise comparisons.

	(a)US/Canada	(b) Other	p-value comparing a and b
(c) Low	<i>M</i> =3.321 <i>SE</i> =0.02	<i>M</i> =3.319 <i>SE</i> =0.011	0.921
(d) High	<i>M</i> =3.387 <i>SE</i> =0.012	<i>M</i> =3.329 <i>SE</i> =0.008	<.001
p-value comparing c and d	0.005	0.420	

Note: Based on estimated marginal means with covariates (age and gender).

reversed: dissatisfaction might cause exposure to more combat styles (e.g., I am not satisfied with my larps, which leads me to experiment with other styles). Similarly, this direction of causality explains the observed (weak) association between satisfaction and numeracy: the more satisfied you are with your larps, the more events you attend. Overall, while these results are mixed, our review of group dynamics still warns that social embeddedness (e.g., group overlap) can be a harbinger of worsening group health.

Next, we found that greater preference for scheming, political play, and intrigue predicted greater satisfaction with larps, not less. One explanation for this unexpected result is that we may not have indexed zero-sum competition effectively since the measure we selected from the pre-made survey did not ask participants to specify whether the play they enjoy results in other player characters losing resources or status.

Finally, we wanted to examine the effect of play style fit on satisfaction. We capitalized on a common assumption about US and Canadian larps: that they promote achievement at the expense of roleplay value (Hellström 2012). As predicted, players who preferred individual achievement were more satisfied if they resided in US/Canada. However, this effect did not emerge for preference for roleplay, which partially contradicts the perspective that roleplay and achievement are mutually exclusive. These data also support our view that dissatisfaction can arise when there is a mismatch between a player's motivations and the goals of their larp groups. Since group health is tethered to *principled conflicts* (Wheelan 1994) and an inherent mismatch may drive player dissatisfaction, game runners may want to continually assess

whether their community members feel their goals and mental models are shared by the group at large.

Overall, we found some evidence that social embeddedness and motivation-group mismatch may be detrimental to player satisfaction. However, since we were using previously collected data, internal validity of our study is uncertain. For example, we used many single-item measures because they were the best approximation of our variables of interests, but they may not adequately tap into the constructs we intended. Further, although the survey had a large international sample, its development and recruitment procedures (via social media, Vanek 2015) likely reveal a Western cultural bias. Finally, we are cautious about making causal claims from our non-experimental results. Despite these limitations, we hope this new quantitative analysis inspires further application of small groups research to the study and promotion of healthy group functioning in larp communities.

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BIO

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