

Queer Resistance Through Sexual Role-play. Arousal and Community

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INTRODUCTION

Distribution of care and pleasure is one way critical, queer, and feminist thinkers evaluate democratic life, while game scholars have described play as sites of resistance and political activism (Flanagan 2009, Harper 2022, Hutchings 2016). This paper examines a BDSM role-play event (larp) within a long-standing leather dyke+ community as a site of shared pleasure, communal care, and queer resistance.

BDSM larps combine structured mechanics, collaborative fiction, and embodied performance (Sihvonen, Harviainen 2020, Harviainen 2011). Situated within queer game studies (Sihvonen and Stenros 2018), erotic larp scholarship (Grasmø, Stenros 2022, Waldron, Trammell 2018, Jones 2014), and ethics of care (Tronto 1993, Hemmings 2012, Pettersen 2021), this study explores how erotic play cultures produce political and affective forms of belonging.

The leather dyke+ community (Moon 2023) of queer females, trans and nonbinary folks has been active across the Nordics and Europe for over twenty years. Consent and sexual agency are central to community practice (Bauer 2014, Simula 2015). Within this network, erotic role-play games have developed into a distinctive play tradition blending kink practices with deliberate larp design techniques such as workshops, calibration tools, and fictional narratives. These events create carefully designed ludic spaces where participants inhabit fictional characters while engaging in sexual interaction.

Drawing on scene-focused small-group interviews (n = 7), participatory observation, and analysis of design documents, this paper examines one event in depth as a heterotopic “common world” (Arendt 1958) in which queer desires can be explored collectively. Pleasure emerges through collaborative worldbuilding, consensual power exchange, sensory intensification, and character immersion, as well as the play space itself; a queer cultural center in a former church.

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Using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun, Clarke 2022) from an insider perspective (Hansal, Gundersson 2020), we analyze the event as both ludic counter-public (Fraser 1990, Grasmø 2026) and a site of radical intimacy (Rosa 2023).

CONSTRUCTING AROUSAL, PLAYFULLY

Erotic larp relies on worldbuilding grounded in physical co-presence, “larp worldbuilding is embedded in both physical space and shared sensory acts such as touching, tasting, listening, and smelling” (Grasmø, Sihvonen, Stenros 2026). In BDSM larp, these sensory registers become part of the game system itself, shaping not only individual arousal but communal erotic atmosphere. Pleasure is encoded into the spatial, aesthetic, and bodily design of play.

Participants distinguished between everyday selves and fictional characters while describing arousal as emerging through the interaction of fiction, bodily sensation, and communal culture. This understanding of arousal moves between self and character rather than belonging to a fixed identity. The event thereby functions as a queer heterotopia (Foucault 1986, Jones 2009); not utopian escape but “somewhere else” where desires and identities can be explored differently.

INTIMACIES OF LUDIC COUNTER-PUBLICS

Queer worldmaking has long emphasized how embodied interaction can produce alternative social realities (Muñoz 1999). Radical intimacy (Rosa 2023) similarly reframes democratic space as constituted through embodied relations, where care, intimacy – also towards strangers - and emotional connection become political resources. Queer kinship outside heteronormative family structures thus becomes forms of resistance.

The BDSM larp in our study creates a temporary world structured through queer desires and experimental subjectivities. Unlike many role-playing games, where queering often depends on player intervention (Maletka, 2024), erotic larp embeds queerness into its foundational design, since identities are treated as fluid and relational, co-produced through performative interaction. BDSM larps function as socio-cultural technologies, enabling participants to explore identities and relational dynamics that may be unavailable or unsafe in everyday life.

These play spaces produce pleasures that challenge normative understandings of gender, sexuality, and intimacy. Such pleasures are not merely erotic but political and transformative. Feminist and queer scholars have long described counter-publics as spaces where (marginalized) people gather outside formal institutional channels to contest hegemonic norms and imagine other worlds (Fraser 1990). BDSM larp may be a ludic counterpublic (Shepard 2006); a playful and affective space for collective queer worldmaking.

QUEER SEX-LIFE AND QUEER RESISTANCE

Our four themes constructed through reflexive thematic analysis are: 1. **Ridicule of patriarchal and heteronormative clichés:** Community knowledge manifested through humor directed at oppressive structures, particularly patriarchy and religion. 2. **Balancing role-play and eroticism:** Participants navigated the tension between performative role-play and erotic arousal, producing complex relationships between

fiction and desire. 3. **Un-shaming queer erotic action:** The play environment validated queer eroticism and enabled exploration of non-normative desires. 4. **Un-gendering and redefining arousal:** Participants expanded understandings of sexual arousal beyond normative gendered frameworks, particularly through transmasculine erotic traditions.

Because desire is enacted through both fiction and bodily practice, BDSM larp becomes a potent site for queer resistance. Shared exploration of kink, dominance, submission, and transgressive sexuality produces counter-narratives to normative regulation of queer bodies.

These practices also perform repair work (Trammel 2023, Kemper 2017); nurturing queer ways of being eroded by heteronormative cultures. Through shared erotic worldbuilding and embodied co-presence, participants create livability strategies (Butler 2004): crafting viable and pleasurable queer lives despite cultural suppression. Pleasure here is not escapist, but survival-oriented and deeply connected to communal care.

By understanding queer BDSM larp as ludic and caring counter-publics, we show affective play practices as political resistance. Simultaneously, semi-public sexual play is a part of living pleasurable lives, in the margins.

CONTRIBUTION TO GAME STUDIES

This paper contributes to game studies by examining an analogue play practice where queer embodiment, sexuality, and community-building intersect. It expands scholarship on erotic larp by demonstrating how pleasure is structurally embedded within game design rather than added onto it. The study further argues that the transformative potential of intimate play cultures lies merely in individual identity exploration, but in how resistance becomes integral to the ludic experience through queer community and shared sexual pleasure

Our study invites the DIGRA community to consider how analogue erotic play challenges conventional boundaries of game research. By centering leather dykes, this work foregrounds forms of pleasure that are radical, interdependent, and deeply situated.

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