Costume Agency in German Larp

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ABSTRACT

Costume Agency in German Larp has two aims. First, it contributes to the understanding of costumes as collaborators in a larp network. Second, it shows that the change towards a network perspective expands the understanding of games as relational processes.

An actor-network analysis of the costume builds on first-hand data from three larps. Data analysis required a set of qualitative methods based upon participatory observation and qualitative interviews.

The results of the analysis are: 1. Larp works, because the costume contributes to role playing. 2. The costume contributes when it changes its arrangement of material actors to fulfill the demands of the network. 3. Costume contribution demands changes from narrative and ludic actors as well and the result of these negotiations is a development of the network. 4. The development of the three observed larp networks resulted in costumes that work towards the 360° illusion ideal, change game rules, and raise the popularity of one favored narrative genre: Fantasy.

Following the costume and tracing its work, reveals how larp as a network of heterogeneous actors structures itself. These processes become visible with an actor-network perspective that reaches beyond the division of agency as being driven by human or material actors.

Keywords

Role-playing game, larp, materials, actor-network theory, Germany

INTRODUCTION

Currently, materials become more apparent as a topic of research in game studies. One study was concerned with personal and collective values of material manifestations in digital games, such as nostalgia about card boxes in which games are sold (Toivonen and Sotamaa 2011). Players who gather game related objects, gain subcultural capital that is relevant to digital games as well as to non-digital games, as larp. On the basis of similar single studies, some authors recognize in the growing interest for hardware, body of the player, and the playing situation, a material turn in game studies (Apperley and Jayemane 2012). While revealing an elaborated material culture within the game communities raises

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questions about identity construction, social belonging towards a community, and personal meaning, these questions root in an understanding of games from a human-centered perspective. This study moves from an anthropocentric perspective on games and moves from similar material studies of video games, for example Bogost's work with object-oriented philosophy (Bogost 2012), to an actor-network study of materials in live action role play. Thus, the paper contributes to the growing interest in material studies and combines it with the rising field of role-playing game studies.

Live action role play (larp) is a type of role-playing games that is based on the "based on the physical form of the simulation" (Montola 2012, 11). In larp, players and the environment turn into a physical representation of the chosen story world. Players enact individual fictional characters in a series of events that is staged by a team of commonly five organizers.

While game materials were used in previous studies to indicate card boxes, dice, character sheets, game materials in the understanding of this study expands the definition of materials to any physical component that becomes a collaborator of a larp network: costume, location, rain, dirt, and so forth.

Observing players and game materials in play situations raises questions, such as: how do physical game materials relate to the non-physical story world in a larp? What is the role of game materials in role playing? How are different people with different approaches towards larp and the masses of materials kept in line so that everyone and everything follows the purpose of role playing? To focus this study, I follow one example for a material actor, the costume. The main function of a costume is to represent the personal belongings of a fictional character during a larp.

Thus, the question for this study is:

> ***How do costumes as material actors collaborate in an actor-network of German larp?***

To answer the question, I follow five steps.

First, I introduce actor-network theory by explaining key concepts and providing a short example. With this example I illustrate the theoretical framework of the question which bridges actor-network theory with role-playing game studies.

Second, I discuss data selection and analysis. Actor-network theory provides an ethnographic repertoire to observe, record, and report action, but also to analyze epistemological and ontological dimensions of collective action (Callon 1986; Latour 2005; Law 1999). The major corpus of data roots in my participation in three larps at the location Utopion in Bexbach, Germany: *Alcyon 15* (2011), *Alcyon 16* (2012), and *Epic Empires 2012* (2012). I employed two methods for the selection of data: participatory observation and semi-structured interviews.

Third, I report the main results of how costumes collaborate with a larp network and how costumes change in this process their actions and the actions of the network. The section begins with one history of German larp which provides the wider context for the study results. The main part of the section presents the results in complementary sections.

Forth, I raise further questions about the mass production of game materials that are relevant to the field of game studies in general.

Fifth, I summarize the study and draw conclusions from an actor-network analysis of costume agency in German larp.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this section, I introduce key concepts of actor-network theory and create a bridge to concepts from role-playing game studies.

Introducing actor-network theory

Actor-network theory (ANT) roots in the work of Callon (1986), Latour (1987; 2005), and Law (1987) from the field of Science, technology and society studies. It is in the tradition of social constructivist studies that "do not primarily answer the question 'what *is* technology?'; they trace the process 'how to *make* technology'" (Bijker 2010, 63). Following these roots, this study does not aim to answer what larp is in general or what German larp is in particular, but aims to answer the general question how to make larp.

Actor-network theory adds to social constructivism the understanding that any actor can make larp, including human and non-human actors. The inclusion of non-human actors, such as costumes, and the focus on processes connects actor-network theory to "posthumanism" (Schatzki, 2005, p. 20) or "new materialism" (Sayes 2014, 134). This expansion views reality in symmetric relations and positions actor-network theory towards relativism in regard to ontology, and towards relative subjectivism in regard to epistemology.

The following example illustrates the three concepts actor, network, and agency:

Safety belts have been built into cars to increase security. But the safety belt did not automatically increase security; it did not collaborate just because the belt was in a car. To make cars safer, the belt demanded a change in drivers. Drivers had to be trained to use the safety belt. To ensure that drivers behave, a law was formulated and enforced by fines, police, and the training required for a driver's license. As this did not always sufficed, Latour tells, engineers developed alarm systems in cars to give a sound when the belt is not fastened (Latour 1992).

In this example, I identify actor, network, and agency as follows: the belt is an actor. It acts, because we can observe that it demands from drivers to change their behavior. The common goal of a belt and a driver – a human actor – is to ensure an increase of security. Security is the agency that serves as the goal or inertia of the collaborative net-working. Examining how actors collaborate, helps to understand how the car as a network incorporates security as agency. It tells why it is not sufficient to see security as the result of drivers' agency alone, because people do not automatically behave. Instead of looking who *has* agency, looking at agency as a relational process that emerges as the result between different actors explains how in the end, despite the misbehavior of drivers (and belts), the car network is stable enough to incorporate an increased security.

Now, I transfer the example to this study of costumes. The costume is the actor in focus of this study. The costume acts, when I can trace how it collaborates to ensure the common goal role playing. The primary task is to find out what the costume changes. As the costume is itself a network of material actors, I have to follow the development of its

materiality, which should result in similar observations in the example of the belt, when the belt developed to a network of belt and alarm system. Following the costume changes, I can ask with actor-network theory, what changes the costumes demands for its collaboration, because actor-network theory looks at interrelations (Law 1987). The observations help to answer the question about costume agency as the costume's ability to make a difference. In the safety belt example, the equivalent to belt agency revealed itself in the changes of behavior. Drivers were made to learn and to use the new technology safety belt, not because the belt demanded it directly, but because the collaboration only worked when belt, driver, and other actors behaved according to the agency of safety. Instead of drivers and belts, this study on costumes looks at material, narrative, and ludic actors.

So far this section has introduced the theoretical framework of actor-network theory. The following section will bridge the theoretical framework with role-playing game studies.

Bridging actor-network theory and role-playing game studies

In larp, role playing turns players and the environment into a material representation of the chosen story world according to a common set of rules. This definition of larp resonates the introductory definition of larp as it is based on the works of (Montola 2012; J. T. Harviainen 2012; Heliö 2004). From this definition, I identify three shorter actor-networks that contribute to the whole larp network: material (physical representation), narrative (story world), and ludic (rules).

I introduce the word dimension in order to distinguish between the overall larp network and the shorter actor-networks. This allows discussing relations between different network levels without using terms such as subnetwork, which suggest a hierarchy that is against the idea of a flat ontology in actor-network theory.[1]

The material dimension consists of all observable material actors connected to the activity. The material dimension includes material actors from game materials – costume, location, props, et cetera – to raw materials –latex, foam, leather, metal, and so on. The reason why I chose "material" and not the more common term "game equipment", is that material as a word includes equipment, but also the raw materials. One contribution of this study is the view that costumes themselves are made of single parts. Such a view on details allows studying how costumes develop in the relations of materials that make them. As the common practice among larpers is to build their larp equipment to some extent, speaking of game equipment would imply that costumes are ready-made objects and would ignore the demands on raw materials.

The narrative dimension involves actors responsible for the side of role playing that has been studied before as the diegetic (Loponen and Montola 2004), the shared fantasy (Fine 1983), tether fantasy (Goetz 2012), narrative experience (Heliö 2004), possible world (Ryan 1991), and the story world (Cover 2010). The dimension consists of narratives actors that can be traced when studying human participants, because they are phenomena of imagination. Nevertheless, the relation between narrative and material actors reveals traces of narrative agency, as narratives or narrative experiences that form memories are mediated, for example, in literary texts, diaries, and verbal accounts of past larps, but also discussions, both offline and online. Studying the costume in relation to narrative actors, builds on previous studies and works with previous results on an empirical level.

The ludic dimension consists of visible and invisible rules. Rules are responsible for what is commonly understood in game studies as agency (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009). Agency as the power of the player emerges from the interaction with a game that is perceived as a system, usually in focus of ludology studies of games. The ludic dimension includes actors that have been considered as what makes a role-playing game a game, such as the six elements of role-playing games (Hitchens and Drachen 2009). Ludic actors become visible in relation to material actors as printed rule books, or the invitation letter from larp organizers, where the player is told what setting, genre, and rule system is in use. Moreover, role playing involves further rules, and Montola makes aware of invisible rules. Invisible rules include power rules which are negotiated among participants (Montola, 2009). Social power is carried out based on hierarchies that follow according to the traditions of a larp community, where it is seemingly "natural" to know about how to role-play. For example, self-made objects are "better" than off-the-shelf articles. Moreover, social rules include what is accepted by general cultural norms. For this reason I introduce the historical context of larp in Germany. The actions of ludic actors can be traced as decisions made for or against an action by any actor, decisions that follow a set of rules.

By following the costume, this study examines how a network makes heterogeneous dimensions of larp collaborate. These dimensions follow their own agencies, but in order to become part of a larp, certain actors of the three dimensions change their behavior. Then, these agencies tune in according to the general agency of role playing and this process keeps all actors connected as one stable actor-network of larp.

As each dimension is a single coherent reality of its own, it is possible to study each independently. Previous research focused on human-centered questions that approached phenomena that are rooted in actors either from the narrative or the ludic dimension. The advantage of an actor-network study is an account that builds on previous studies by putting in relation the material, the narrative, and the ludic dimensions. Thus, this paper contributes to previous studies and reveals interrelations.

This work begins by tracing how the costume changes its own behavior. The next task is to gather data about when costume collaborations become visible.

Methodological implications from actor-network theory

So far, I have introduced and linked actor-network theory to texts on role-playing game studies that contributed to this study. The first task was to explain the network perspective that views how costumes collaborate. The second task is to gather data which requires that I explain the chosen methods in more detail. The strength (and requirement) of actor-network theory lies in an empirical study of a network. In order to gather data, the basic methodological task is to "follow the actor" and trace the relations the actor makes with other actors (Latour 1987). "Following the actor" roots in ethnography and it results in a report about the process of net-working.

What can be observed that counts as data about when a costume acts? In the example of the safety belt, the belt acts, because it can be observed that it makes drivers to use the belt. One might ask: but is it not the engineers who demand a change of behavior from drivers? Or the law? Or the police men? That is the point when one moves the researcher's perspective from a centered view on one element as the cause of an action to a network perspective where action emerges in relations. A network perspective recognizes the belt, engineers, police men, and the law as cooperatively responsible in the

demanding work on drivers to put on the belt. If the researcher decides to follow a belt as the actor, it is one of many possibilities to study a network, a decision that Barad names "agential cut" (Barad 2003). The researcher decides where to cut the chain of action. This makes sense in light of the ontological position of actor-network theory, because the question is not who or what acts, but how a network is made.

Actor-network theory is a bottom-up approach that requires ethnographic methods, because they help observing processes in their habitat of a dynamic environment.

METHODS

The set of methods include participatory observation and semi-structured interviews. The

Participatory Observation

Participant or "participatory observation" is a method to learn the explicit and tacit aspects of a living culture (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002). Active participation is necessary as larps are not played with a non-participating audience. The challenge for the researcher is to avoid disturbance, as this breaks the illusion of being in a fictional world. Players are sensitive to elements that do not belong to the diegesis of the game world which requires the researcher to take the role (or the appearance) of the "complete participant". According to Gold's typology of participant observer roles, a complete participant takes the insider role and is a full functioning part of the environment which is often observed covertly (1958). Moreover, being a full participant permits to observe processes that are embed in context. Thus, long term participation is recommended to gain a profound understanding for a nuanced and accurate description.

The three chosen larps, *Alcyon 15* and *16* as well as *Epic Empires*, were set in a Fantasy storyworld, created by the Fantasiewelten e.V., a group of larp organizers that have run annual game sessions for more than seventeen years in this setting. The larps offer their users opportunities to change the campaign, experience adventures, battle supernatural enemies, and negotiate with different factions about the future of Luxburg, the fictitious homeland of the campaign. A large portion of these organizers form the body of the Epic Empires Event UG that runs the *Epic Empires* events since 2009.

Observation of the larps described above was compared with observations during participation in approximately forty more cases, as since 2006, I participated in several larps in the roles of player character, non-player character, and organizer. This long participation in the German larp culture had at least one benefit and one downside. Although it is discussed whether the necessary "rapport" between the researcher and the observed group depends on time, there are examples for fieldwork that depend on a considerably long participation (DeWalt and DeWalt 2002, 269). On the one hand, having established rapport before actual fieldwork, in my case 2011-2013, reduces the effort to gain necessary information. On the other hand, participatory role play requires the balancing of three roles: oneself, the character that is played, and the researcher. If I choose to participate in playing, switching between the three roles is difficult. If I choose to observe as a researcher, distancing me from my observations is necessary. One way to solve this problem is to compare my results with insights from other participants and earlier participations.

Semi-structured Interviews

As this article is part of a wider dissertation chapter, the observation data is complemented with data from twenty interviews between 2011 and 2012. Each of the

interviews took sixty minutes via online voice communication. I conducted the interviews in the form of semi-structured interviews. This type of qualitative interviews connects a list of open questions that were prepared before the interview with the opportunity to explore certain themes that emerge during the interview further (Kruse 2011; Kvale and Brinkmann 2009; Silverman 1985). The interviews were translated by me from German into English.

The study follows our university's "Code of Conduct Scientific Research" (2012). The participants of the interviews were informed about my intentions to summarize the results and make them visible within an academic study. Participants provided consent in advance. Some interviewees chose clear names (i.e. Walter) while others chose nick names (i.e., Habakuk). Also, online discussions were treated anonymously and merged into the observations (i.e., SVA, E-Mail).

Reflecting the researcher's decisions

Reflecting the methods from an actor-network point of view frames the researcher as an actor in a network and allows questioning the participant's role as a mediator or intermediary. Subjectivity during field work is one obstacle which I share with other researchers on games employing participatory observation (Pearce and Artemesia 2009; Taylor 2006, 153). Objectivity was maintained in two ways. First, field notes and observations were revised with new data from interviews after each of the larps. The researcher reflected his role of the larp network by mirroring his understanding with insights gained from "qualitative in-depth interviews" with players and producers (Silverman 1985). Second, framing the role of the author as an actor within the network, helped to define the position and reflect the influence of a researcher on a community (Copier 2007). The oscillating role of being player and researcher can be compared to Latour's metaphor of Janus in ANT having "two faces: one that knows, the other that does not know yet" (1987, 7). The Janus metaphor raises awareness of the process between two states instead of focusing on what is known or is aimed to be known. Understanding the embedded researcher as an actor within the network raises the necessary awareness to question the point of view on a phenomenon. Additionally, Barad's concept of agential cut supports the reflection by making aware that any attempt to transform subjectivity to objectivity is a decision (see footnote 1 for details about this study's decisions).

COSTUME AGENCY IN GERMAN LARP

A History of German Larp

Despite its historical precedents (J. T. Harviainen 2012, 18–22; Montola 2012, 109–110; Morton 2007), larp was introduced to a wider public in Germany by a commercial imperative to expand the business of the Drachenschmiede hobby shop in Cologne in the early 1990s. Schwohl, one of its owners, reflects in his entry in the German LARPWiki that the idea to make a larp was based upon British and U.S. larp models. Drachenschmiede developed surveys among customers of their shop in Cologne to systematically test the new type of role-playing games in Germany (Schwohl 2003). In August 1992, the larp event *Draccon1* was organized, which is considered the first commercial German larp that promoted the hobby significantly.[2] While the early years of larping in Germany showed a variety of do-it-yourself practices, players could already buy sophisticated and laborious game materials, such as metal armor. In the early 1990s

hobby shops as Drachenschmiede, and Czech armor smiths at medieval fairs supplied both larp and historical reenactment. In mid 1990s, the brand "Leonardo Carbone" ran an online shop (Walter, interview, 2012).

It is tempting to see commercial interests as the founding stone for larp in Germany, but independent streams helped to spread the idea of larp. I want to stress two trajectories as they open connections to Anglo-American larp traditions. First, allied soldiers imported different types of role-playing games to Germany. German history after the Second World War was characterized by the occupation of the Allied Forces and the division of Germany into East and West. In the West, during the 1980s and 1990s U.S. and British soldiers brought tabletop role-playing games and larp with them, some of them members in the *Society for Creative Anachronism* (Habakuk, E-Mail, 6 March 2013). In the East, Communism restricted certain leisure time activities, but allowed the reenactment of distant historical times, e.g. the Middle Ages. This tradition joined with West German players after the reunification in 1989[3] as could be seen in the spread of medieval markets and East German Medieval Rock bands (i.e. *Corvus Corax*).

Second, player groups thought about ways to translate the tabletop role-playing game into a live action format. One of the members of such a group, Patrick Walter, explained that his *Midgard* group annually organizes two larps since 1991 (Walter, Interview, 13 October 2012). Originating with a group of tabletop role-players they "translated" the tabletop role-playing game *Midgard* (Franke, 1981), and decided to "play out" the adventures of their tabletop characters for real. According to Walter the idea originated from rumors about British larps after some group members went to the UK to visit shops.[4] Similar groups have developed in this fashion from the fast growing subculture of tabletop role-playing games, and are still active separately from the visible larp culture (Walter, Interview, 13 October 2012; Habakuk, E-Mail, 6 March 2013).[5]

Thus, to speak of one coherent larp subculture in Germany is a simplification. However, a distinction between commercial and non-commercial traditions is artificial because the different traditions did overlap and interact. Nonetheless, the notion of a coherent larp subculture serves an analytical purpose because it allows scholars to draw attention to the range of negotiations between the different influences.

Since the late 1990s, more and more commercial shops have tried to tap into the market of Fantasy larp in Germany. Today, the German market is shared by semi-professionals and professional game material manufacturers. For example, the Drachenschmiede shop became Hammerkunst at the end of the 1990s and is now part of Mytholon. These general suppliers are complemented by special item shops for common game materials such as masks (e.g. Ungebil.de, Maskworld.de), "Fantasy neutral" tents (e.g. Sahara), and raw materials (e.g. Latex). The commercial interest of larp shops is influential, but that position is challenged by a tradition of a do-it-yourself ideology that is also strong within several national communities, for example the Nordic larp tradition (Jaakko Stenros 2013). The do-it-yourself tradition of fans and the professional practices of larp shops supported the development of costumes regarding the quality and quantity until today. While it is difficult to estimate the size of the German larp culture, the umbrella larp association D.L.R.V. estimated between 30,000 and 40,000 active larpers in Germany in 2010 (Deutscher Liverollenspiel Verband e.V. 2010). According to the website "LARP Kalender", between 660 and 780 larps were officially announced in Germany every year between 2006 and 2011 (Wagner 2011).[6]

This brief history of German larp will help contextualize the following recent research results on larp and put them into relation to this study.

Costumes Collaborate with Rules

During play, costumes become a node of the three dimensions. The material and the ludic translate costumes into game tokens.[7] Costumes represent the character's appearance. Furthermore, costumes have a ludic function in the game world. Different types of costumes are divided into categories of armor points by game rules. This rule can be traced to the prototype version of the first larp game rulebook in Germany: *DragonSys* (Weis and Putzo 1991). It was distributed among participants during *Draccon 1* in 1992, the first commercially produced larp in Germany (Meister Habakuk, E-Mail, 6 March 2013).[8] Weapon or magic damage is quantified into a point system and the costume corresponds with armor points. One point allows ignoring one hit by a weapon or spell. Clothing has zero points, chainmail two, and so forth.

DragonSys became the most influential rulebook in Germany, as armor points are still in use. Even the less rule-bound games use armor points, as metal armor is treated as more protective against a sword hit than a tunic. However, according to Bolle who did a quantitative study on larp in Germany, the alternative rule system *DKWDDK* is almost equally used among German larpers as later editions of *DragonSys* (Bolle 2009; Bolle 2008; Bolle 2013). *DKWDDK* can be translated as "your character is able to do what you are able to portray" (German: "Du kannst was du darstellen kannst"). It is the equivalent of WYSIWYG ("What you see is what you get") in other larp traditions.

The causality of armor and a point table shows the relationship between ludic actors, such as the rule book and game masters in their function as referees; the material dimension, such as costumes, weapons, spells; and a commercial model of larp shops. The first *DragonSys* led to a decisive change in the history of costuming practices in German larp by demanding that armor replica get acknowledged by game play. Real metal is required as a raw material for the representation of a metal armor in the narrative. A character's metal armor should not be made of aluminum or plastic, as was common previously. One function of using real armor instead of low quality replications made of duct tape or other artificial and cheap raw materials is that this practice distinguishes present German larps from their own past costuming practices. Thus, the 360° illusion ideal is inscribed in the representation of the character's costume.

Demanding real armor in *DragonSys*, Drachenschmiede has successfully inscribed a commercial model for larp shops, as Fred Schwohl later recounts (2003). This model was widely accepted by players as it resulted in equipment that improved the 360° illusion. However, the effort to participate in larp increased for those who played certain characters that were dependent on armor, such as warriors, mercenaries, and other fighting classes. Nevertheless, the success of the battle simulations, for example in the common adventure and popular fest format (*Drachenfest* since 2001, *Conquest of Mythodea* since 2005, and *Epic Empires* since 2009), shows the extent of this practice. Moreover, since then, the fest larp type has served as a way to promote battles and therefore the sale of armor. It is no surprise that *Conquest of Mythodea* is organized by *Forgotten-Dreams-Studio* that owns *DeinLarpShop*, one of the successful larp shops in Germany. Armor and weapon prices fell[9] due to the fostered demand and inundated larp with identical costumes.

When material actors are replaced to inscribe the rule of "real armor counts as armor points", costumes and game rules collaborate. Moreover, when rules are made matter, they change how a costume looks like and the narrative dimension of a character is invited to make stronger ties with the costume.

"Individual Costumes are the Alpha and Omega"

If players follow the alliance between rules and armor bought at shops, the costume has to fulfill the demands of the narrative dimension that aims to represent an individual character with the physical representation during a larp.

Larpers, as seen on online sites as larper.ning.com, cherish self-made costumes. One reason is that when players rely too much on the same elements from a shop, the costume itself loses the ability to represent individual fictional characters. Two veteran players emphasized this point in an e-mail: "In our opinion, individual costumes are the alpha and omega of good role playing." (SVA, E-Mail, 14 June 2011). Thus, the individual quality of costumes is the most important thing compared to mass produced costumes: it is the alpha and omega.[10] If larpers value individual costumes as important, it explains the discourse between purists who scorn "mass ware" and those who buy armor because of its affordable price. A compromise can be seen in "making-of" photo series' on social networking sites for larpers on Larper.ning.com, where people show the steps for how they have modified a piece. This practice of modification and sharing tutorials led to an improvement of costumes together with the development of "mass ware". Costumes in German larp improved throughout the years, because they have combined the development in mass production with do-it-yourself techniques. These techniques are important beside an apparent ideology.

Identical costumes provided by one supplier contradict the idea of the representation of a story world, because when all costumes look the same, the players do not succeed in representing individual characters as inhabitants of a living world. The aim to be as close as possible to the imagined story world is expressed in the idea of "Ambiente" (German for "ambience"). Players who aim at "Ambiente-Spiel" or ambience play are interested in the details of the material dimension and its relations to narrative and ludic actors. The costume, as one example among accommodations, food, and other parts of a character's daily life, has to look as if it was a part of the chosen Fantasy world. This is the material-narrative relation. Moreover, it has to allow interaction, it has to function as what it appears to be. A dummy works less in this regard. In the Nordic larp community, this idea has been conceptualized as the 360° illusion design ideal (Waern, Montola, and Stenros 2009; Koljonen 2007). Thus, 360° illusion supports role playing that aims at a network of material, narrative, and ludic actors. More important for players, costumes that fulfill the 360° illusion are individual, because they require further work.

During the Role-Play Convention 2012 in Cologne, I met Frances, who I knew as a non-player (NPC) from *Alcyon* and *Epic Empires* larps in 2011. Excitedly, Frances showed me a metal helmet that she has bought cheaply from one of the larp shops at this trade fair. Frances was less excited about the affordable price than about her ideas to modify the helmet in order to fit her character. Three months later, I played at her side during *Epic Empires* 2012. She wore her helmet that had been painted green. She had also stamped her leather quiver with a green comet, a symbol of the invaders from the stars. Modification is a creative, do-it-yourself practice, also known in other game cultures (Sotamaa 2003; Sihvonen 2011).

Modification is interesting for several reasons. First, mass produced materials are not considered conducive to "good role play" by some larpers. They do not represent everyone's individual imagination of how a certain material should look, because mass ware is standardized in order to sell high numbers of the item. The costume as the "alpha and omega of role play" loses its indexicality when all players look the same. Second, Frances translated her creativity into the new helmet by modifying it according to the campaign given standards. These standards are prescribed by the background narrative as developed by Fantasiewelten e.V. Modification allows to individualize items that resemble the character better, with less effort than making a costume that requires metal work. For example knitting chainmail is comparably easier to do[11] than forging a hauberk. Third, because of the modification, the item is bound to a specific character. In our example, the item is bound to a specific narrative. It is exceptional to create game materials for a non-player character of one specific campaign only, as larps are usually played annually and the actual playtime is relatively small for such an effort.[12]

Costumes Collaborate with Dirty Actors

When a player buys a new tunic at a larp shop and adds it to the costume, there is the problem that the tunic will probably not fit. The reason is the relation between the material and narrative dimension. In a conversation during *Alcyon XIII* (Utopion, 2010), Lars, a fellow player, made me aware of a practice to change new costume parts. "The clothes of a character, who is travelling for weeks, do not look like they are new. So I make them used, tear some parts apart, and apply Larp Dreck" (Lars, 19.4.2010). 'Larp Dreck' (German for larp dirt) is a term that describes a practice of making new game materials look used. This is achieved in different ways, depending on the effect and the raw material. Before going to a larp, a player can distress leather part by using sandpaper and emerizing parts of the costume that stick out, such as the elbows, knees, or edges of cloaks. At the location, the player can take some earth and smear it on shoes, trousers, and cloak. After a larp, the player can decide not to clean and polish metal armor. Soon a light rust film covers the metal. The LARPWiki entry on Larp Dreck suggests several techniques to achieve this goal (http://www.larpwiki.de/LarpDreck). Larpers share further do-it-yourself tutorials that explain how to achieve a used look without ruining the impression by overdoing Larp Dreck or applying it on wrong parts of the costume. Larp Dreck inscribes the time to a costume that passes between larp events in the story world. As Lars said, a character travels in the story world for weeks before it reaches the fictional place that a larp location represents.

Larp Dreck serves the 360° illusion ideal, because the costume appears more realistic in regard of showing a character's life span. Visible traces of use fit the narrative background of a battle-worn character. Not everyone uses this technique, as the costume gets used with play time anyway. Fights leave scratches on armor, chainmail rings are torn away, and equipment breaks. Both changes in the material-material relations of a costume – signs of use from play and artificial amplifiers like Larp Dreck – let the material actors collaborate with the narrative experience of playing a character. More important, these traces are visible to player and other participants, and they add to the 360° illusion of being in a living world where time shows traces – sometimes with help of Larp Dreck.

"Clothes have nothing to do with role playing"

"Clothes have nothing to do with role playing. Clothes are about money, the personal standard, and skills. This has nothing to do with role playing." (Tobi, Interview, 30 August 2012). He explains that good clothes have to do with money spent on clothes, a

player's standard towards the quality of clothes, and the skill to make, modify, or arrange different clothes to make one individual costume. However, Tobi adds: "We try to find a combination. We have always tried to find good role-player whom we can give good clothes." (ibid.) He and his team of organizers look for a combination of good costumes and good role-players.

Both statements seem paradoxical, but only if one looks at clothes the center of role playing. Then clothes can be at one side of an extreme in relation to role playing: either as the actor that is the alpha and omega of role playing or as the actor that has nothing to do with role playing. The point is, as Tobi elaborates, that clothes are not responsible for role playing, because it is the "combination" between costumes and players that makes role playing.

The combination or collaboration demands a good costume and a good role-player. In order to be good role-player, the player needs training, similar as the car driver learning how to use a safety belt. As larp is not the topic of standardized trainings, players learn through experience. Good role playing, however, is subjective to each player. Organizers, too, have an own understanding: "According to my understanding, we try to play a role in larp, as the name already says. But we also try to create a fantasy or a second reality during playtime. There are different approaches to achieve this." (ibid). The network perspective provides an alternative understanding. A "good" costume works when it collaborates with narrative, ludic, and other material actors.

The actors costume and player change in this relation to become "good". The costume develops with the growing standard of the larp community on costumes, as the previous sections have shown with the development of costume production, mass production, and modification.[13] The costume demands for its collaboration that players improve role playing as a skill, similar to the drivers learning how to use safety belts. To understand how role playing spreads as an agency, and how the "different approaches" become part of a larp, it is important to keep in mind a multi-centered network perspective that sees larp as a collaborative work process between actors with different approaches, standards, or agencies. Larp does not work because of one actor and one approach or agency. This network perspective gives credit to what Tobi means with "different approaches to achieve" good role playing. Tobi says that it is a combination. By uncovering agency, it is possible to examine the relations that combine a costume and a player. And while most players learn through experience, costume agency explains how part of the experimental and individual training is streamlined by "good" costumes, costumes that demand certain changes in how a larp works.

The players play their roles or characters, the organizers create a second reality, and the costumes collaborate when they develop and the network develops with them. Thus, decentralizing the role of costumes for role playing is in line with both player statements that emphasize a combination of costumes and role-players and with the network perspective. Costumes have nothing to do with role playing – alone.

Costumes Collaborate with Narrative Actors

Patrick made me aware of how the materiality affects the scope of possible narratives and bends game rules (Walter, Interview, 13 October 2012). The reason why characters do not usually die in the common and frequent battles is that players invest much effort to make a character costume. In the battle-intense fest larp *Epic Empires*, killed characters are magically transported to a safe place where they are healed and game masters in most

kinds of fantasy larp do not wipe out characters. Costume effort also explains the shift of control from game masters to players, coined as "Opferregel" (translated here as "rule of the victim"). The "rule of the victim" is a commonly accepted game rule and philosophy in which the player decides upon the character's "perma-death" (Drachenroester 2012). Perma-death is understood as the permanent death of a character within a game and is particularly important to the design of computer games, as it differentiates the levels of time penalty (Yee 2010, 4). In larp, the decision regarding perma-death marks a shift of ludic control towards the player and away from other participants, such as non-players, other players, and above all the game master, who serves partly in the function of the referee. This aligns with the fact that characters are usually regarded as property. For example, common larp jargon uses "my character" instead of "the character." The investment in elaborate costumes, which became more and more demanding over time, thus prevents the involuntary death of player characters. Preventing player characters to die, limits agency in larp game design (Wardrip-Fruin et al. 2009).

Moreover, this development limits narrative possibilities as well. Fantasy as the genre of choice becomes an obligatory passage point for future creations of larp actor-networks in Germany. An obligatory passage point prewrites the negotiation between actors, as it requires to be incorporated in the beginning. Twenty years of practice and the history of larp shops provide a wide range of sophisticated game materials, modified rules, a network of Fantasy fans that have been changed to cater to the specific requirements of the Fantasy genre. Thus, Fantasy larp requires less effort in time and money for new and old players alike to participate and establish a 360° illusion of a Fantasy world, as costumes can be bought cheaply, made easily due to a culture of do-it-yourself manuals, and often can be burrowed from fellow players. This may be surprising as the *Vampire larp* tradition (Rein-Hagen et al. 1992) that is set in an alternative present day setting requires modern clothes which lessens the effort of acquiring a costume. Nonetheless, *Vampire larp* is less common in Germany. Most officially announced larps follow today the Fantasy genre, as it can be seen in the disproportion of about eighty percent Fantasy larps (Wagner 2011).

The example of costuming has shown that the representation of the narrative in the material is bound to "360° illusion" as the network's agency. First, it naturally opens the discussion to non-human actors. Second, the analysis of the costume shown that the better the game materials become, the more they limits the narratives. Frances will use her quiver only in campaigns that are related to the narrative of the *Alcyon* campaign, adding up to nine days of play in one year. Moreover, the material dimension of game materials is contested by economic reasons and the practice of distinguishing individual characters with individual costuming that requires custom-made pieces or modification of the original material. The economic development had a homogenizing effect on German larp culture in the past decades, while the do-it-yourself attitude challenged and pushed this development further. The more people invest in larp materials, the less they are willing to lose their character, to which a certain individualized costume is bound,. This investment limits what is possible to experience, e.g., perma-death.

An Actor-Network of German Larp in the 2010s

The task of the previous sections was to examine how costumes act. Costumes collaborate when they fulfill the demands of players, stories, and rules. Costumes, however, collaborate when the other actors fulfill their demands. The common goal, to make a larp happen, can be understood as a net-working process of heterogeneous actors that keep role playing running as the common inertia.

Role playing itself is something that different players, organizers and researchers define differently. Tobi mentioned different approaches and named the creation of a second reality which has been analyzed in role-playing game studies with concepts, such as immersion (Balzer 2011; Harviainen 2003; Hopeametsä 2008), information system (J. Tuomas Harviainen 2012), or frame analysis (Stenros, Waern, and Montola 2011). While recent studies focus on player experiences or a human perspective on role playing, this paper aims to contribute to explain the role of costumes.

The results of an actor-network study are difficult to generalize, because such a study draws from an empirical case. Studying three larps allows a general perspective of some results, but it has to be kept in mind, that the results tell about three German larps at the location Utopion in Bexbach from 2010 until 2012. Nevertheless, the previous sections resonate a tendency that connects the results.

The results of this study indicate a shift of agency from human to non-human actors. Human actors include players, organizers, and producers of game materials as larp shops. Non-human actors, such as game materials collaborate via a process of negotiations that led to the shift in agency. The major consequence of the shift is the strengthening of any larp network that uses the Fantasy genre, turning it to an obligatory passage point of larp in Germany. Materials are neither static objects nor do they possess a power of their own. These results encourage the study of material actors in analogue and digital games and play, as the relations between the dimensions can explain socio-technological dynamics in game and play cultures.

ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF GAME MATERIAL MASS PRODUCTION

Following the actor beyond game play opens further questions that is one way to broaden the field of game studies, as it can lead to questions regarding ethics (Dodig-Crnkovic and Larsson 2005) beyond the question of violent video games (Ferguson et al. 2008; Bartholow, Sestir, and Davis 2005; Elson, Breuer, and Quandt 2010; Sherry 2001). Let us return to the fact that the variety and quality of buyable larp materials rose over the years while the prices fell. A few of the larpers who I interviewed during my fieldwork between 2011 and 2013 talked about this economic miracle. One larper asked me how it was possible that a product got better and cheaper at the same time. He gave the answer himself; game materials improved in quality through the development of the product lines, the symbiosis with the reenactment market, and time spent in design. In order to sell better game materials for a similar price, costs had to be reduced.

One solution that works is to reduce the price on the side of production, which, however, also raises ethical issues. In the last years, Pakistan and India have replaced the Czech Republic as countries of production for larp materials. The countries offer cheap a workforce on the assembly line, and are also sources for metal. In the case of chainmail, one possible place to get cheap metal is Gadani Beach, Pakistan. Gadani Beach is known for “ship-breaking” and is located near the Hub River and Cape Monze in Gadani, Lasbela District, Balochistan. A similar place is the shipbreaking yard in Alang, India. Ship-breaking implies that shipwrecks stranded on the beach are climbed by workers and deconstructed under hazardous conditions. Following the actor game materials beyond actual game play opens room for ethical reflections about the production of game materials for the games we study. They open questions about the working conditions in the production countries and ecological questions that are specific to metal recycling places like Gadani Beach (Chaudry, Memon, and Danish 2002). Recent newspaper reports about working conditions at the assembly lines of the *Playstation 4* add to this

topic (Bland, Mishkin, and Mishkin 2013) as well as studies on gold-farming and outsourcing of MMORPG labor to China (Xu and Wünderlich 2009; Nardi and Kow 2010; Debeauvais et al. 2012). Taken together, the discussion of ethical and economic goals is supported by empirical evidence as seen in game materials. Further actor-network analysis can provide further insights about the production of consumer entertainment products and discuss the role of materials in (digital) games.

CONCLUSION

This actor-network study examined the agency responsible for a stable larp network as explored through participant-observation in the larps: *Alcyon 15* and *16* (Fantasiewelten e.V., Utopion, 2011 and 2012) and *Epic Empires* (EPIC EMPIRES Event UG, Utopion, 2012). The study followed the material actor costume. The costume acts in collaboration to a network of neighboring actors. This understanding follows actor-network theory by recognizing the game materials costume as a single element (actors) within the entirety (network) of a larp. As the analysis focusses on relational processes, agency emerges when actors form relations with other actors to stabilize the network. A larp network is stabilized when it transports role playing. To achieve this, all actors have to follow role playing as agency and change their behavior. Because of the network perspective, these changes are relational, too. As role-playing game studies have provided studies on narrative and ludic actors, but little on material actors, such as costumes, this study traced the costume as a material actor.

The first aim of this study was to examine how costumes as material actors collaborate in a larp network, and what costumes demand for their collaboration. The study provides the following results:

1. Larp works, because the costume contributes to role playing. Role playing as agency is the inertia of a network. Role playing turns all actors during a larp into allies that collaborate in what is usually interpreted as a narrative experience by players, or a working larp system by organizers, or in this study as a stable network of material, narrative, and ludic actors.

2. The costume contributes when it changes the relational work of material actors that net-work the material dimension as part of the overall larp network. To fulfill the demands of the network, the making of costumes develops. Material agency reveals itself in the different ways how the materials make other actors do things, as was traced in the examples of mass production, modification, do-it-yourself practices.

3. Costume contribution demands changes from narrative and ludic actors as well and the result of these negotiations is a development of the network. The costume changes the larp network. The network of narrative and ludic actors appears as if the larp is moulding themselves around the costume demands rather than demanding, for example, that players follow a rule book to the exact formulation of armor points. Another example was the stabilization of the costume-genre relation that lead to Fantasy as an obligatory passage point in German larp.

4. The observations of the three larp networks resulted in this study that reports how the development of German larp is interrelated with costume agency, as seen in its relations: material-material relations that aim towards the 360° illusion ideal through modifications, material-ludic relations that aim away from a point based systems, and material-narrative relations that raise the popularity of one favored narrative genre: Fantasy.

The second aim was to contribute to the understanding of costumes as collaborators in a larp network. The results of this study indicate that game materials are moving and acting according to the relations they make with other actors. These relations work beyond preconceptualized dichotomies of human/non-human or material/non-material. Following the costume as one possible actor and analyzing qualitative data, it is possible to show how costumes collaborate in relations beyond such dichotomies. Looking at costumes beyond preconceptualizations that consider non-human actors as passive, neutral, or irrelevant, this paper aims to expand the understanding of game materials. A network perspective expands the understanding, because it looks at games as relational processes and invites local examinations. A network perspective provides an alternative approach to the currently perceived material turn in game studies (Apperley and Jayemane 2012), because instead of replacing previously studied actors with material actors, and keeping a single centered perspective on games that the name "material turn" proclaims, an actor-network study offers a multi-centered perspective. This study was one example, how future researchers can work with actor-network theory on the basis of previous research, because the network perspective on larp collaborates with previous results on narrative and ludic actors in role playing and works them into a net with new insights about the often hidden, overlooked, or invisible but lively actors: the collaborating and demanding costumes in live action role play.

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ENDNOTES

[1] A distinction of actors in advance does not help the researcher as an analytical category, because actor-network theory suggests avoiding categories and starting with a study of an actor's work in relation. The distinction between micro and macro-levels distracts from certain phenomena that indicate invisible net-work process – in the beginning of an actor-network study. The dimensions, however, are one result of my actor-network study. The decision to introduce the three dimensions serves the aim of this article to bridge actor-network theory to readers that are not familiar with it, but expect some explanation in advance. Those familiar with actor-

network theory can skip the theoretical part and move to the methods or directly to the result section.

[2] The organizers took further steps to promote the hobby, for example a film was made about the event. The website of the film making crew Midnight Entertainment, responsible for the first full length larp documentary in Germany, provides further images and information: around 180 people participated in *Draccon1*, that took place in 7.-12.08.1992 at Castle Starkenburg, in Heppenheim an der Bergstraße. The fee was 245,- Deutsche Mark, which is about 125,- € (2011).

[3] The development of a rich culture of historical reenactment and the spread of medieval fairs in Germany after the reunification in 1990 were possible, because the communist government allowed these activities during its existence as a satellite state of the Soviet Union. Similar developments of larp with a tradition of historical reenactment during communist times can be seen in Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slowenia, and parts of Russia.

[4] Three possible sources for the rumors are for example: 1, popular larp events. *Treasure Trap* was a live action role-playing game at Peckforton Castle in Cheshire, running from April 1982, and covered by the BBC show *Blue Peter* in 1982. 2, magazines, as *GamesMaster*, published on early larps in the UK. See issue September 1988. 3, people moving to Germany. Habakuk writes in an e-mail about early *Dungeons & Dragons* tabletop groups in Zürich, Switzerland: "I was allowed to join a huge AD&D group in Zürich from spring 1986 on: the initiator and engine: Ari (raised in California, USA) had all core books and miniatures from the US and was in contact with the larpers in Boulder, Colorado (there are still strictly structured four to six hours quest and a funny rule book, according to the game master accompanies the heroes in a black suit and a note book..)" (Habakuk, E-Mail, 6 March 2013).

[5] One marker for different traditions is the different terminology. Patrick calls the activity simply 'live' and told me in a conversation that he cannot get used to the word 'larp'.

[6] The number of officially announced larps in Germany has been according to the LARP Kalender: in the year 2006: 663 larps, 2007: 722, 2008: 731, 2009: 784, 2010: 754, 2011: 706.

[7] Game token in the sense of a 'game piece' that has a ludic property within the game. For example, a larp sword is a representation of an object in the storyworld and is a rule based game token that can be used to do symbolic damage. A player is not damaged by the padded sword, but has to count down his amount of life points.

[8] "I send you scans of a first version of the DragonSys that I received during Draccon1" (Habakuk, E-Mail, 6 March 2013).

[9] A chainmail cost about 100,- € in 2006. Five years later, chainmail was available for 50,- € at Mytholon. Not all players were satisfied with the flood of qualitatively poor mass ware and showed this by coining the pejorative neologism "Müllthолon", a compound of the German word 'Müll' for "trash" and "Mytholon". The shops have reacted to criticism from the players' side, and the quality improved while the price remained low.

[10] The idiom "alpha and omega" roots in the biblical quotation Revelation (22:13) and is attributed to Christ being the first and the last letter in the Greek alphabet (alpha, omega), thus being the beginning and the end. In Germany, above other countries, the idiom is used in everyday speech to state the most important thing, attribute, or quality.

[11] Many larpers have knitted chainmail in the first ten years of larp in Germany.

[12] The example of Frances indicates that larpers are fans. Rather fans of objects (i.e., design labels), people (i.e., stars), or media content (i.e., literature, movies, games), larpers can be defined as fans of an activity that is the focus of their passionate attention.

[13] In the context of decentralizing costumes as actors in larp, there is a comparison to be made with a larp tradition that seems to abolish costumes. The so-called freeform and certain Nordic larps avoid the effort of costuming (J. Stenros and Montola 2010; "The Games of Vi Åker Jeep / We Go by Jeep" 2012). Or they reduce the effort to a minimum following the Dogma99 manifesto (Fatland and Wingård 2003).