

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RACE  
IN THE GAMESPACE OF LIVE  
ACTION ROLE PLAY

by

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A THESIS

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores identity, gender, sexuality, and race within live action role play, a game format designed in an impromptu theatre style. My goal was to assess the ways in which sexism, racism, and hypersexuality pervade contemporary forms of entertainment, and to imagine ways in which gamespaces can be re-imagined to be more inclusive. Using participant observation, I investigated the experience of live action role play and documented my findings in field notes. I discussed my observations in relation to experts on the subjects of identity, play, gamer theory, feminist theory, and critical race theory. I contend in this thesis that games, including live action role play games, are not free from societal oppression, but that interactive games such as live action role play can offer creative ways in which to negotiate and navigate social oppression.

## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis, and all the hard work that went into it, to my family, especially to my grandparents, Lawrence Tudor, Sr., and Edna Tudor. It is due to their guidance, faith, and love that I have continued to strive even when I did not think that I could.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION, HISTORY, AND A LIVE ACTION ROLE PLAY PRIMER

#### *Introduction*

This thesis examines gender, sexuality, and race, as well as identity negotiation, in live action role playing groups (“LARP”). More specifically, this thesis will explore the gendered, sexualized, racialized body as it seeks pleasure and entertainment within LARP games. Live action role play is a form of entertainment which uses a standard set of rules regarding character creation and character actions, as well as extemporaneous dialogue, in order to facilitate an impromptu theatre-style form of interactive entertainment. The particular gaming system I chose to investigate is White Wolf Publications’ *Vampire: [sic] the Requiem*. In this game, players take on the role of a vampire character they have created using *Vampire: the Requiem*’s character creation format, and they, as their character, interact with other characters in order to further a communal plotline. Often the physical environment is harnessed or modified to serve as a backdrop to the action. Indeed, according to Hitchens and Drachen, “[t]he embodied nature of play, together with the emphasis on props and costume, allows players to have their characters interact with the game world in extremely varied and detailed ways. While the use of real world settings may appear to limit the areas of the imaginary game world [...], the game masters are free to extend the scope of play as they see fit” (Hitchens and Drachen 11). In other words, creativity serves to mentally modify the environment in the absence of a venue which suits the in-game setting. The person takes on the role of her character and her actions become her character’s actions. Her words, likewise, become dialogue as she interacts with other such



characters. Fine contends that gamers “create cultural systems as their avocation—worlds of imagination formed by the participants, given the constraints of their own knowledge and the structure provided by the rules. [...] These ‘experiences’ can then be meaningfully referred to by members of the group” (Fine 2).

*Vampire: the Requiem* provides entry into an examination of popular culture: specifically, our relationship to pop culture as both consumers and producers. LARP in general also shares strong ties with video games, which are the most successful form of technological entertainment. According to Edward Castronova, “The global market for video and computer game hardware and software today stands at about ten billion dollars annually and has risen continuously for the past several years” (Castronova, Exodus 21). In fact, most LARPer are also invested in video game culture, and these forms of entertainment share both a cultural and a chronological relationship. Live action role playing is a pastime which, despite its growing popularity in the United States, and its already established international popularity, is still relegated mostly to the periphery in the United States. Many role players view what they do as a unique sort of “therapy,” an escape from real world constraints (either corporeal, social or, well, mortal) (Morton 259).

However, this does not exempt LARP from the overall patterns of society, and LARP gaming sessions do not take place in a cultural vacuum wherein all real-world constraints and socialization techniques are temporarily forgotten. I contend that LARPing has gendered, sexualized, and racialized systems of conduct just as the “real world” does. Furthermore, it is arguable that LARP can be analyzed by Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective (1959), wherein the navigation and maintenance of one’s identity is key to successful social interaction. LARP is emblematic of a growing body of popular entertainment which seeks the player’s full

immersion—that is, allowing the game to dominate the player’s thoughts to the exclusion of real world concerns. This, of course, is predicated on the notion that games are not “just” entertainment, but also constitute valuable sites of identity formation and negotiation (Castronova 2005, Fine 1983, Taylor 2006). The current gaming market—which mostly comprises video and digital games, but which also includes LARP—mandates the need for games to be more immersive, more real than real, more representative of life than lived experience. For video and digital games, this may include better and more realistic graphics as well as a storyline capable of pulling a player into the fictional world the game presents. For LARP, this includes new ways to quantify real life experiences so that the game can better model and reflect human actions and interests. For example, on a player’s character sheet, one quantifies the physical strength of one’s character, on a scale from one to five; character sheets also aid in quantifying physical attractiveness, mental composure, and intelligence, among others. I explore this move toward immersive forms of entertainment as embodied by live action role play, first seeking to understand the ways in which live action role play and real life inform each other, and second seeking to explore the answers live action role play can provide for real life concerns.

Much of the academic literature on gaming calls into question the distinction between gamespace (the world of the game itself) and the real world. T.L. Taylor writes, “It is, of course, much simpler when we bound off both spaces and try and come up with tidy categories for each, but what I find in my work (and see in many others’) is that people live much more in the gaps between the two and negotiate that experience in fascinating ways” (Taylor 19). Indeed, she says that “[i]n many ways a game/not-game dichotomy does not hold” (Taylor 19). In other words, we could ask whether art imitates life, or life imitates art, but regardless of the answer,

there is a compelling relationship between the two. As gaming technologies have become more innovative, so too have they become more immersive. This is not to say that the distinction between the “real world” and “gamespace” has become completely invalid; instead, it is to say that the places where these two spheres of significance meet can be instructive when examining the ways that play and identity negotiation influence each other. The spaces I find most fruitful for examination are: first, the gendered, hypersexed, and racialized body which goes to LARP sessions, controls the embodied presentation of her character, and controls herself as the player, second, the character as she interacts with other such constructed characters, and third, the player as she interacts with other players.

I chose to undertake this project for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to investigate a type of gaming that the academy has only recently begun to explore, in a way that has not been done before. Most academic gamer theory has been written with table top role playing games (such as *Dungeons & Dragons*) and console or digital games (*Grand Theft Auto* or *World of Warcraft*) in mind. I believe that LARP complicates the current trends of discussion about gaming in a useful way. This is a type of gaming which does not utilize a console, such as a Nintendo or PlayStation or personal computer, to play the game, but instead utilizes the minds and bodies of its players. Moreover, the *Vampire: the Requiem* game does not come with a pre-packaged plot, as would a console game, or a formal set of rules, as would a board game. The authors of the *Vampire: the Requiem* rule book instead created templates from which players can build characters, using a system of numerical values to determine qualitative information such as intelligence, strength, speed, and supernatural abilities. The plot is left to the participants: the game masters and the players themselves. How long has it been since people have created their

own forms of entertainment, rather than simply going to a local video game vendor, film rental location, or bookstore, thereby allowing others to create entertainment for them?

Another reason I chose to do this project is that I am interested in role playing games of all genres. I have played video games for as long as I can remember, ranging from games with simple plot lines (Nintendo's *Mario* franchise) to games with complicated plots and role playing elements (the *Final Fantasy* franchise). Also, while in high school, I became a member of an online community of role players who enacted characters in fantastical worlds and plotlines through text in chat rooms—much like a LARPer enacts her character through physical action and dialogue. Even despite the popularity of video games and the grudging acceptance of other forms of related entertainment, such as LARP, stereotypes about gamers are still prolific. From personal experience, I can recite these stereotypes: gaming is escapist and inherently antisocial; pretending to be something you are not for extended periods of time, and especially in a formal setting, is not normal; these games are neither socially productive nor personally productive. However, some of the most fascinating literature I have read on the subject has been literature which has debunked these myths in intriguing ways. For example, Castronova states:

For each happy, fulfilled person, how many are there who are bored, frustrated, unappreciated, defeated, unhappy? There's quite a lot of self-medication going on. Whatever people learn in school, it doesn't seem to be leading to stable homes, happy childhoods, and emotionally grounded adult lives. In some cases, sure. But in my view, there are quite a lot of people who crave change, and virtual reality [as well as gaming in general, for our purposes] can make their lives different: more exciting, more rewarding, more heroic, more meaningful. And those people, quite rationally, will spend much of their time in the virtual worlds now exploding onto the scene (Exodus xvi).

Indeed, much of the vitriol directed toward those who spend intensive amounts of time gaming is due to the meaning imparted to their activity. Why spend so much time, for example, pretending to be a vampire when one must inevitably succumb to humanity? Why spend so much time accomplishing fictive goals which will not enrich your "real" self? The distaste clearly stems

from the notion that, to truly enjoy something, one must maintain a distance from it. Being “swept away” by a fictional world, or into a fictional character, makes a jump from casual, “normal” enjoyment and into something else entirely. In Textual Poachers (1992), Henry Jenkins argues that this is a product of a classist ideology, in which “the stereotypical conception of the fan [...] amounts to a projection of anxieties about the violation of dominant cultural hierarchies. The fans’ transgression of bourgeois taste”—a taste which distances itself from the object upon which it is fixed—“[...] insures that their preferences are seen as abnormal and threatening” (Jenkins 17). Where fans go wrong in bourgeois notions of taste is when they “blur the boundaries between fact and fiction” and speak of characters “as if they had an existence apart from their textual manifestations” (Jenkins 18), and no doubt one can see the distaste projected onto LARP in these very statements.

Gordon Olmstead-Dean, a contributor to the Lifelike anthology on live action role play, states, “The traditional model for larp suggests that it flourishes through the desire we have for fantasy and to experience being someone else—that it is essentially escapist” (Olmstead-Dean 197), and many players I have spoken to would not deny this. In fact, as a person who has engaged in a handful of live action role play sessions, I can say that participating in the game provided a bit of relief from just “being myself.” I could behave in ways that I typically did not behave, and I could say things that I typically did not say. But Olmstead-Dean makes an important distinction: “After twenty years involved in [sic] larp I feel that this is not the case, or is at best putting the cart before the horse. While I certainly acknowledge that escapism is an element of larp, I feel that the principal underlying element is social—we play to come into contact with other human beings” (Olmstead-Dean 197). This is an important distinction to make because of the stereotypes about gamers. LARP provides something for them which they

are not getting elsewhere, and it is one of the tasks of my project to find out what that “something” is.

Another reason I have committed myself to this project is that I am not only a gamer, but a feminist gamer. So much work has been done on the negative portrayals of women in video games; much of the conclusions drawn in this work seems self-evident when one so much as watches a commercial for a video game on television. Women are portrayed in stereotypical roles, often presenting harmful stereotypes about women. In fact, video games capitalize on harmful stereotypes: many of the covers for video games themselves depict scantily-clad women in positions of subservience. Sexuality is emphasized: often the male leads will have sexual intercourse with, or a relationship with, a minor female character, if only to titillate the audience and sell more games. Much has been written on the harmful stereotypes regarding people of color in games as well. People of color are rarely featured as main characters, and are often portrayed as villains or street thugs. When they are given more screen time, and not portrayed as villains, they are often considered exotic or the bearers of some esoteric power or knowledge, incomprehensible but useful to the (white) protagonists. The racial implications are clear.

One element of LARP that fascinated me, as a woman, was that I could play a role playing game like *Vampire: the Requiem* and speak back to the stereotypes of women in games, and watch other women navigate the stereotypes and negative portrayals. T.L. Taylor makes an important point about women’s participation in virtual games which can also be applied to live action role playing games. She writes, “Unlike the offline world in which gender often plays a significant role in not only the perception of safety but its actuality, in EQ [*EverQuest*] women may travel knowing they are no more threatened [...] than their male counterparts are” (98). She cautions us to take this seriously, as it has real world implications for women: “While this may

seem an odd reassurance, it is far from minor. [...] Because of this gender-neutral approach to threat and safety, there is a kind of freedom of movement that women often do not experience otherwise” (98). In other words, when I am playing my vampire character, she can walk down a dark alley in the worst neighborhoods of Birmingham, Alabama, in a way that I, as a woman, would probably not be able to do. (Granted, I was not *physically* traversing these alleys; I was among friends, in either a gaming establishment or in the upstairs parlor of a New Age shop. Most action takes place in the collective imagination of the LARP group. However, this did not take away from the freedom I felt while playing a strong character.) In fact, given the supernatural nature of the character and the mechanics of the game, my character would clearly be able to defend herself more handily than I would be able to defend myself. Women can explore this supernatural world and even help their fellow supernatural citizens to defend it; as a woman, given the constraints on women’s positionality in the United States military, I would not be able to defend my nation in the same way. My ability to defend my nation is seen as sub-par to men’s. In *Vampire: the Requiem*, it is not so. This is important, not just for women LARPer, but for women in general. In some ways, the game’s supernatural mechanics serve as an equalizer: as a female, I am able to contribute just as much as a male. This is not to say that the game does not have problematic issues when it comes to treatment of men and women, but it does imply that there is something to be learned from live action role play and the ways in which women can consciously negotiate and rescript their femininity. For feminists and critical race theorists, too, this is important, as gaming is an explosively popular form of entertainment and feminist and critical race scholarship would benefit from a deeper examination of gendered and raced portrayals in LARP as well as other forms of gaming entertainment.

### *A Brief History of Live Action Role Play*

Some of the earliest role playing groups engaged in historical recreation (war reenactment, balls, Renaissance fairs) as an extension of a passion for the certain period in history they were reenacting. Miniature war gaming hit the peak of its popularity in the 1970s, and served as the model on which the highly innovative *Dungeons & Dragons* table top role playing game was created (Fine 8-9). Miniature war-gaming is a game wherein “historical or hypothetical battles [are] waged using tokens or miniature figures to represent armies” (Williams, Hendricks, Winkler 3). Indeed, Hitchens and Drachen assert that “[r]ole-playing games, in their modern form, are generally held to have originated with *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1970s” (3). *Dungeons & Dragons*, in turn, influenced the creation of LARP, which took the game off the table top and onto the “stage,” as it were. Of course, role playing is not only limited to the fantastical settings of *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Vampire: the Requiem*. “Role-playing has been researched as a useful pedagogical tool since the 1970s. Various handbooks have been produced for elementary to high school teachers with justifications for using games, simulations, and role-playing in the classroom, as well as providing examples for use in practice” (Williams, Hendricks, Winkler 10). From these same communities, virtual games were born, emerging first as text-based chat rooms in the earliest days of the Internet, and then growing with technology to become massive multiplayer role playing worlds, such as *World of Warcraft* and *EverQuest*.

### *A Live Action Role Play Primer*

*World of Darkness* is a style of role playing which focuses heavily on a supernatural world which secretly resides alongside human society. In this world of darkness, creatures such as vampires, werewolves, mages, and others live by a contract called “the Masquerade” which



states that all supernaturals must endeavor to keep their natures secret from human society.

*Vampire: the Requiem* is a rule book which details how to create a vampiric character within the world of darkness. Players are given a character sheet, which is more or less a bubble sheet with dots marking the different levels, which they must keep on their person while playing the game. The character sheet has sections for attributes, such as intelligence, strength, presence (physical presentation or attractiveness), wits, and composure. Players are allowed up to five “dots” in each category, and are given a set limit of dots that they can use to build their character. Also on the character sheet are sections for merits, such as resources (how wealthy one’s character is) and vampiric traits, as well as skills, such as in computers, automobile driving, weapons, persuasion, and others. Again, for merits and skills, players are given a set limit of dots to allot to each. Further dots, and thus higher skill levels, are gained by earning experience points. In the games in which I have played, players can earn either 5 or 7 experience points per game, and the character sheet has an attached form that players can use to keep track of how many points they have earned as well as how they have allotted those points on the character sheet. Dice rolls are used to determine the success or failure of each action. For example, in order for a vampire to sense that a covert attack is being directed at her character, a player would utilize her character’s wits score and her composure score. Say that the wits score is 3 and the composure score is 4: the player then rolls a many-sided die as a moderator to the combined score of 7. If the sum of the wits, composure, and moderator scores exceeds 10, then the character can successfully determine that an attack has been directed toward her, and she can take measures to avert that attack or to defend against it. If the combined score is below 10, then the vampire will have to endure the attack.

Vampires are given the opportunity to decide a clan and covenant identity. A vampire clan can loosely be described as a “family”—you belong to the clan of the one who bit you and made you a vampire. Each clan has its own distinct personality, and vampires typically belong to the clan which best meets their personal vision. Each clan comes with a specific kind of power. For example, Clan Ventrue is comprised of individuals with a personal sense of dignity and a desire for power and prestige. These vampires have the Dominate power, which does precisely as it says: provided that the vampire rolls a successful combination score above 10, she can use Dominate to make another person do her will. Clan Daeva is comprised of sensitive, artsy individuals who are strong in both sexual appetite as well as physical prowess. These vampires have the power of Majesty, which allows them to win people over or to seduce people through force of personality, even if other people wanted to kill them or work against them only moments before. All the vampire would have to do is get a successful roll of the die. There are other clans, such as the Nosferatu, who are secretive and most likely deformed in some way, the Mekhet, who are intelligent and make excellent spies, and the Gangrel, who are known for animalistic personalities. Vampires also belong to covenants, which are closely related to political and social affiliation. For example, the Invictus clan is known for seeking power at all costs, for promoting the dignity and influence of their members, and for having a membership which consists of powerful politicians, old money families, and businesspeople. They are often at odds with the Carthian Movement, a covenant which desires social transformation and the rejection of old, established ways of thinking. There are other covenants as well: the Ordo Dracul, who seek to overcome and transform vampiric nature; the Lancea Sanctum, who view themselves as demons whom God has put on Earth to teach mortals morality; the Circle of the Crone, who worship a mother goddess; and the unaligned, who hold no covenant affiliation.

Often, new players will choose to be unaligned, so as to gain more experience before joining covenants which are rife with opportunities for characters to come into conflict and die. However, this leaves them without the protection offered by covenant loyalties, or “safety in numbers.” At times, unaligned characters form bonds which are not unlike those seen within covenants. Cities in which *Vampire* games are run often organize their power structures through either clan or covenant membership. The choice between the two is a local decision and varies from game to game, and a blanket statement cannot be made on the popularity of one over the other.

Hitchens and Drachen assert that LARP “typically involves larger numbers of participants, ranging from the dozens up to hundreds or even thousands,” and emphasizes “player enactment of the character’s actions”:

[P]articipants are normally either players or game masters, with the players enacting a single character and the game masters, of whom there must be a considerable number due to the number of players, [controlling] those parts of the game world beyond the players’ characters. There may also be players who are assisting the game masters by carrying out pre-planned actions, and so are not entirely acting at their own discretion. (10-11).

Role players gather in a location, or venue, and use the physical world as a setting for role playing. In one of the games in which I played, we used a comic shop as the venue. A certain bench was reimagined as a meeting place for vampires; another bench was reimagined as an office building downtown. If you were in the general vicinity of the bench which had been designated as the office building, then you did not talk to the people at the bench which doubled as the meeting place for vampires; it would have made no sense to do so, given that they were

two separate “locations.” If our characters were sitting, then we sat; however, for trickier situations, such as driving a car, we used our collective imagination. In the other game, we used the sitting room of a local New Age shop as our venue. When a change of location was necessary, the storyteller simply narrated the place in which we were “going,” and, while we, the role players, remained seated in the sitting room of the shop, we narrated our characters’ actions: if my character, say, were to enter an abandoned house in search of a vampire who had disobeyed the rule of supernatural anonymity, I would simply say, “She eases quietly onto the front porch and tries the door. If it is unlocked, she will go inside, keeping one hand on her sword.” Therefore, when navigating parts of the city, we did not actually *go* there physically; but in game, our characters were there, and manipulated actions and events in our narration.

Hitchens and Drachen also elaborate on how the rule systems interact with the actual physical environment in which the game takes place:

Formal rule systems are commonly used for determination of the outcome of many character actions [...]. The embodied nature of play, together with the emphasis on props and costume, allows players to have their characters interact with the game world in extremely varied and detailed ways. While the use of real world settings may appear to limit the areas of the imaginary game world which characters can inhabit, the game masters are free to extend the scope of play as they see fit. (10-11).

In other words, LARP “venues,” or settings for play, act as a background for impromptu theatre occasions wherein the players embody characters with detailed histories and specific abilities, limited either by game masters, who are in charge of the plot and the game world, or intricate systems of rules, or both. “Characters are the primary (in most cases the sole) means by which

the players can interact with the game world,” assert Hitchens and Drachen (12). The frame of reference provided by the rule book, game masters, and environment is the foundation on which players engage their characters with other players, coming together to accomplish shared goals, character growth, plot fulfillment, and victory over enemies, who may be characters played by other people or characters under the control of game masters. Otherwise known as non-player characters, the latter types of characters are typically there to fulfill plot requirements or to make up for a lack of participants and add realism and flavor to the story. In the local game in which I participate, two game masters share at least ten characters in a group whose membership on a given weekend can reach as high as 30 people. The game masters meet, on their own time, to discuss potential problems with which to present characters, and they may use NPCs in order to fulfill this. For example, an NPC played by one game master is a leader of the clan Invictus, to which my character belongs. This character is not actively played within the larger group. Instead, the game master utilizes this character to control the machinations of the Invictus clan, and only members of his clan have any real interaction with him. He is one instrument through which the two game masters can create intrigue and instigate dangerous situations for Invictus clan members, and is played by only one of the game masters.

Below is a brief description of subsequent chapters:

Chapter 2: This chapter discusses current literature on play theory, impression management, role playing games, identity negotiation, and gaming culture, as well as the methodology I used for my participant observation.

Chapter 3: This chapter discusses the findings from my participant observation and discusses the gendered, sexualized, and racialized dynamics of *Vampire: the Requiem* live action role play.

Chapter 4: This chapter discusses the implications of my participant observation research, and concludes with the possibility of creating a space in LARP, and gaming in general, that advocates feminist, race conscious, and sexual justice ideals.

## CHAPTER 2

### THEORIES AND METHODOLOGY

The first part of this chapter discusses identity formation and regulation within live action role playing (LARP) games, using various theories and perspectives. The second part concerns itself with the methodology of this thesis, and ends by posing the research questions around which the rest of this thesis will center.

Central questions addressed in the first part of this chapter are: What is play theory, and how can we use it to understand LARP? What is dramaturgy, and how can it explain the semi-staged interaction style of LARP and its connection to “real life” interaction? How do theorists in various fields explain the significance of LARP as a social phenomenon?

#### *Huizinga and Play Theory*

It is imperative to ask how seriously we can take a group of adults who regularly pretend to be vampires. Johan Huizinga’s play theory can be of assistance with this question. Huizinga’s goal in the development of play theory is not “to define the place of play among all the other manifestations of culture, but rather to ascertain how far culture itself bears the character of play” (Huizinga ix). He views play as a primary human function that is older than culture and not limited to humans. In essence, he asks us to attempt to understand the ways that play has synthesized with all facets of culture. Huizinga asserts that “play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon,” and that it is a “*significant* function—that is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ which transcends the immediate needs of life and imparts meaning to the action. All play means something” (Huizinga 1, italics in original).

Indeed, play, he believes, is an object unto itself—it gives itself meaning, and things which are not typically understood to be play cannot comprehend this meaning. In other words, play, to the casual observer, may not make sense in paradigms constrained by rationality and organization. However, as discussed below, play has its own rules which are compatible with rationality and organization.

Huizinga, a Dutch historian, was a cultural historian who wrote about both American and Dutch history as well as comparative linguistics. His book, *Homo Ludens*, considered a foundational work in play theory, takes its view of play from a “magic circle” perspective: that is, play can be said to be distinct from what is otherwise considered real life (Huizinga 10). He names several other characteristics of play. For my project, the most important of these rules are that play:

- is a voluntary activity
- is performed in free time, is emblematic of freedom, and can be said to *be* freedom
- is a temporary activity which remains disaffected by “wants and appetites” (Huizinga 9)
- both creates order and *is* order, in that “the least deviation from it ‘spoils the game,’ robs it of its character and makes it worthless” (Huizinga 10)

Play, he says, is distinct from the serious, but that distinction is contingent upon its own fluidity: there is a fine line between play and seriousness, and something that is play can be serious just as serious things can share quintessentially playful qualities. Huizinga remarks that “[t]he inferiority of play is continually being offset by the corresponding superiority of its seriousness” (Huizinga 8). Indeed, he states that play is “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary life’ [...], but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (Huizinga



13). Hence our ability to immerse ourselves fully within a game: we can take play so seriously that, for a while, it becomes our world.

Likewise, the idea of play's limitedness, of the finite nature of its magic circle, should be understood as a partial characteristic. Huizinga makes this evident in his discussion of play-communities. Sharing a play activity can be good for group solidarity, and indeed it can help to establish a sense of belonging or permanent membership within a community. Huizinga calls this "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation, of sharing something important, of mutually withdrawing from the rest of the world" (Huizinga 12).

Huizinga also names two aspects of play. It can be either a contest *for* something or a representation *of* something. In other words, playing a game can represent a contest but with no tangible measure of success, or it can be a contest for representing something, for displaying something, wherein the one deserving of success is the one with the best representation or display. When play represents a contest, success is primarily measured intangibly. That is, the player has won the game, and this means that he has equally won esteem or honor which in turn may "accrue to the benefit of the group to which the victor belongs" (Huizinga 50). It is only incidental that there may be some material prize to enjoy as well, as the primary objective of play is to experience the intangible prizes. Indeed, according to Huizinga, the quintessentially pure concept of play is spoiled when the emphasis is to win a tangible prize.

LARP venues are perfect embodiments of Huizinga's characteristic of play even as they complicate these characteristics. Certainly the type of LARP at question in this thesis—the *Vampire: [sic] the Requiem* system—has its limitations in terms of temporality and spatiality. One might question the social appropriateness of playing *Vampire: the Requiem*, say, on a crowded city bus or at a shopping mall. (As an aside, it must be noted that, even though this

particular type of LARP is not under investigation in this thesis, certain types of live action role playing games *do* extract themselves from the magical circle, pervading real-life settings and engaging unwitting bystanders, thus raising the stakes for LARP's resemblance to impromptu theatre) [see Montola 2007]. However, the unique characteristic of LARP perfectly embodies the spirit Huizinga discusses which is at work in creating communities and networks from part-time gamers. LARP, as it is not particularly well-known in the United States, especially embodies the "apart together" feeling which, according to Huizinga, can act as a social glue in creating lifelong networks from gaming compatriots. Given the tight-knit subculture of gamers, the proportionally small population of LARPer within it, and that LARP is relatively unknown within the United States anyway, it is not far-fetched to imagine that LARP gamers view their fellow gamers as a primary social network.

LARP also embodies many of the other contradictory characteristics of play: while, at the end of the day, it is "just a game," at the same time, hundreds of people spend thousands of dollars to travel across the country and, indeed, the globe, to role play at the *Vampire: the Requiem* venue at the International Camarilla Conclave, an official fan club for *Vampire* and other games published by White Wolf Publishing. When Huizinga says that any game can run away with its players, he can most certainly speak to LARPer. Though this topic will be expanded in the conclusion, I feel it is pertinent to add here that the commercialization of even this small subculture—where membership to a relatively exclusive club and access to buyable materials related to the game—points to intriguing issues Huizinga raises when he says that play is freedom. This surely encompasses freedom from commercialization, as Huizinga states that when play is corrupted by money, then it ceases to be play. However, at the same time, one must also have the freedom to engage in hours of entertainment on a monthly if not weekly basis

without a loss to income, and to spend money on a membership and exclusive products and rights associated with that membership. In contemporary culture, play is not necessarily free: we must pay money for digital game subscriptions, board games, and even memberships to sports clubs.

LARP, especially *Vampire: the Requiem*, not only asks that players transcend their immediate needs, it demands it. When one plays with dolls, for example, it is easy enough to separate the doll from the appendage—the hand—which holds and directs it. In that classic sense of play, there is a distinguishable borderline between the player and the object or medium of play. In LARP, one's playable medium is one's *body*, and the most fascinating thing about this type of play is that it demands bodily engagement of a higher and more complex nature than many other types of play. One can set that doll down at any time and pause the game to attend to bodily needs and appetites, but when's one bodily appetites interfere with one's medium of play—namely, one's body—then one must carefully navigate the nature of LARP in ways not considered by theories on more conventional play styles.

In the meantime, the line between the player and the game, between Huizinga's binary of "ordinary" life and playground, becomes distorted. LARP utilizes the body, indeed the concept of an embodied identity, as the subject of play, not the direct object. This complicates Huizinga's play theory in fascinating ways. To reiterate, Huizinga believes that play is disinterested in the satisfaction of wants and appetites, and that it exists in a microcosm outside the space of "real world" or bodily desires, such as money, food, or sex. Indeed, he believes that profit spoils the fundamentally free nature of play. This leads him to problematize professional sports, as they traffic in advertising agreements with corporations, public consumption of merchandise related to the game, and the celebrity status of famous athletes. However, role

players of *Vampire: the Requiem* are driven by the fulfillment of desires. Predictably, some desires of the player, namely biological, may need to be subsumed in order to maintain the flow of the game. But some “real world” desires, such as money, food, and sex, may fit perfectly well within the flow of a game which concerns itself with acting out lived situations in a way that playing with dolls or playing a board game cannot understand.

LARP complicates play theory in interesting ways, just as it complicates our ideas of identity in interesting ways as well. From here, we can explore Goffman’s dramaturgical and impression management concepts in order to further the conversation about connections between LARP and “real life.”

#### *Dramaturgical Perspective and Vampiric Identity*

Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical perspective concerns itself with the ways in which we can come to know people, and the ways in which they can come to know us in social settings. It also concerns itself with the important ways these social interactions resemble theatrical productions, complete with a stage and audience as well as a back stage where one can manage one’s activities and prepare for the various productions in which one will engage. That is, Goffman views face-to-face interaction as the outcome of a series of social manipulations, in which social actors attempt to “acquire information about [each other] or to bring into play information about [each other] already possessed,” in order to understand the others’ social expectations as well as to “know how best to act in order to call forth a desired response” (Goffman 1). Goffman emphasizes that this series of social manipulations and negotiations often entails a shared understanding of what is going on within that particular social context, and that the impressions one attempts to make successfully are contingent upon the social contexts and the identities and goals of the other social actors involved. Of particular interest to Goffman, as

well as to this thesis, is the distinction between verbal assertions, which Goffman believes to be mostly under the control of the actor and therefore the easiest for her to manipulate, and expressions, which Goffman sees as more “ungovernable” and thus usable as “a check upon the validity of what is conveyed by the governable [verbal] aspects” (Goffman 7). As *Vampire: the Requiem* is primarily a game of social manipulation, it emphasizes the importance of the tension between what the actor wishes to convey and what the actor actually conveys. This tension can sometimes end with consequences which are lethal to a role player’s character. Indeed, Goffman explains the communication process thusly: “a potentially infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery” (Goffman 8), which perfectly illustrates the social machinations to which I have been witness—and in which I have played my part—during my participation in *Vampire* sessions.

Goffman calls this cycle impression management, and it encompasses successful social interaction and the acquisition of favorable responses. “When an individual plays its part,” he writes, “[s]he implicitly requests [her] observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them” (Goffman 17):

They are asked to believe that the character they see actually possesses the attributes he appears to possess, that the task he performs will have the consequences that are implicitly claimed for it, and that, in general, matters are what they appear to be. In line with this, there is the popular view that the individual offers his performances and puts on his show “for the benefit of other people.” (Goffman 17)

Impression management is successful when the observers take the actor seriously. Impression management, though, is tricky business when considered in the context of LARP, as the social actor has multiple, sometimes conflicting goals. To be seen as a threatening character in the gamespace, so that others would not want to attack that character, is at odds with wanting to be seen as an amiable participant with whom other players would want to establish a friendship—or

even with whom other players would want to share in-game secrets in out-of-game contexts. The social actor is acting out a role she has created even as she acts out the role she was born into: her self. At the same time, it is interesting to note that she is not just a social actor: she is also an audience to other social actors' performances of their roles. While it must be said that most LARPers (of *Vampire*-style role play, at least) have not had formal training in acting, and may not even have an interest in acting outside of live action role play, Goffman notes that “[s]cripts even in the hands of unpracticed players can come to life because life itself is a dramatically enacted thing. All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn't are not easy to specify” (72). It is this last point which is important to this thesis, and the “crucial ways” which are under investigation here: namely, the ambiguous ways in which social performance and lived experiences overlap, intertwine, and coalesce, and the ways in which LARP can help us to explain and explore this fascinating ambiguity.

### *Other Perspectives*

In more recent years, writers from fields as divergent as economics and law to culture and media studies have taken up gaming in general as an important site of identity and subjectivity negotiation. LARP can certainly be included in this discussion, although it has been relatively marginalized up until recently in scholarly circles when compared with digital games. Many of these writers warn us that gaming will become an increasingly important part of our everyday lives, if current trends in gaming merchandise sales are to be trusted. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that we pay attention to the changes society could face as it becomes populated by more and more gamers. Castronova is an economist who has written extensively on the subject of economics, digital games, and the way these increasingly innovative games blur the line between virtual reality and “reality.” He makes an excellent point which can easily be applied to

LARPing and its own unique innovations: “the action occurs in a place that is not quite the stage, but not quite the seats either. And once the audience becomes the players, of course, the play is no longer a play; it’s ordinary life, even though it happens on a stage” (Synthetic 10). He establishes the importance of this for the everyday citizen-subject: “[t]here is much more than gaming going on there: conflict, governance, trade, love. The number of people who could be said to ‘live’ out there in [the gamespace] is already numbering in the millions; it is growing, and we are already beginning to see subtle and not-so-subtle effects of this behavior at the societal level in real Earth countries. Even if you haven’t paid much attention to [these worlds] up to now, soon enough, I think, you will” (Castronova, Synthetic 2). The number of people who “live” out there is estimated by Castronova to be somewhere around 10 million people, and he believes that number is on the rise.

He continues:

As soon as it [is created] and begins to receive visitors, a synthetic world [which he defines as a virtual reality world in which large numbers of people interact] begins to host ordinary human affairs. [...] How fantastical the place may be— [...] it still and always is playing host to ordinary human beings, with their ordinary ways of interacting with one another. The physical environment is entirely crafted and can be anything we want it to be, but the human social environment that emerges within that physical environment is no different from any other human social environment. And because no one can permanently separate events in one sphere of their life from all the other spheres, that part of human life taking place in synthetic worlds will have effects everywhere. (Castronova, Synthetic 7)

Already we can see a compelling cleavage in both Huizinga’s and Goffman’s theories of play and dramaturgy. The sometimes-strict separation between play and “ordinary” life, and the stricter binary between the stage and the back stage of impression management, cannot hold when one considers the impossibility of keeping one’s life so firmly segregated. Though the site of interaction within *Vampire* and other types of LARP games may differ to varying degrees, this

does not change the basic rubric of interaction itself. This raises interesting questions about the types of characters people choose to play within LARPs, when they voluntarily take on a subjectivity with the potential to be every bit as different from the self they play in the real world as the real world is different from the LARP venue. This is an issue I will continue to address throughout this thesis.

T.L. Taylor, a sociologist whose work extensively engages digital games, identity, and embodiment, writes that “how people make sense of and experience who they are [in the gamespace] is not inherently separate from who they are and what they do [outside of the gamespace]. What seems more to be the case is that people have a much messier relationship with [each of these] personas and social contexts” (Taylor 18). What follows from this is an attempt to understand the larger framework in these terms: if our identities can become entangled with the identities we embody in a LARP game, then can we understand the relationship between gamespace and the “real world” as being “messy” in a similar sense?

McKenzie Wark’s unequivocal answer is *yes*. Wark, a media scholar and critical theorist, contends in his book Gamer Theory that, while work “is a rat race,” politics “is a horse race,” and the economy “is a casino” (Wark 4-5), games themselves increasingly become utopian versions of the imperfect game of real life. Games actually reward skill and merit, which Wark contends has become a foreclosed promise in the real world. Extending the metaphor, he writes:

Sure, reality TV doesn’t look like reality, but then neither does reality. Both look like games. Both become a seamless space in which gamers test their abilities within contrived scenarios. The situations may be artificial, the dialogue less than spontaneous, and the gamers may merely be doing what the producers tell them. All this is perfectly of a piece with a reality, which is itself an artificial arena, where everyone is born a gamer, waiting for their turn. (Wark 5)

Julian Dibbell, whose work My Tiny Life: Crime and Passion in a Virtual World describes his self-propelled research foray into another online, though text-based, role playing



community, says: “[I felt] a kind of closeness to these masks [his role play characters], [and sensed] deeply embedded aspects of myself carved into the surfaces of some of them” (Dibbell 127). Tellingly, he repeats throughout the text that he did not think he could become so consumed with his game identities. Eventually, Dibbell gave up online role playing because the ways in which it was beginning to coalesce with his offline life were becoming increasingly uncomfortable.

David Buckingham disagrees with the assertion that identification at such an intimate level can take place. Although players can become emotionally attached to characters and situations, they inevitably prize “real life” over what is, after all, just a game. “Ultimately,” he writes, “it is the rules that apply within the magic circle that define what things mean—and, in many cases, there are significant differences between” meanings within games and meanings within real life; and this applies “[even in games] that make strong claims to resemble real life” (Buckingham 7). While Buckingham makes the important point that significant differences between meanings in the gamespace and meanings outside the gamespace still hold under critical scrutiny, here we must hearken back to Goffman, who, to reiterate, asserts that though the world is not a stage and, similarly, gamespace is not real life, the ways in which these things are not their binary opposites is ambiguous. Interestingly, Wark asserts that “[g]ames are no longer a pastime, outside or alongside of life. They are now the very form of life, and death, and time itself. These games are no joke. When the screen flashes the legend *Game over*, you are either dead, or defeated, or at best out of quarters” (Wark 5). Castronova, too, echoes this sentiment: “the outcome of a society looks exact like the outcome of an open-ended multiplayer game,” which is precisely what LARP games are as well (Castronova, Exodus 76). Of course, it must be stated that Castronova’s books are the most enthusiastic within gamer theory to support the idea

that the binary between gamespace and reality is neither productive nor accurate. Other authors take a more nuanced approach to navigating this binary.

The significance of gaming, and of LARP specifically, is evident in the works of Castronova (2005 and 2007), Taylor (2006), Wark (2007), Fine (1983), and others. They all assert, in their own terms, the ways they envision gaming will shape and, indeed, revolutionize, the future of entertainment as well as society. Castronova points to the ways in which gaming has already revolutionized, and will continue to revolutionize, the way we think about political entities, terrorism, the economy and the marketplace, and criminal justice. He points to instances in which “police have made arrests[,] courts have heard cases[,] and plaintiffs have won” (Castronova, Synthetic 2) in legal situations involving online role playing games. He asserts that goods from online role playing games sell in online trading forums, such as eBay, and that “the globalmarket for video and computer game hardware and software today stands at about ten billion dollars annually and has risen continuously for the past several years” (Castronova, Exodus 24). Castronova cites Julian Dibbell’s experiment to see whether he could quit his day job and turn to trading virtual role playing game loot and still make a livable wage—the conclusion of Dibbell’s experiment was that, yes, he could (Castronova, Exodus 14).

Gaming as Culture: Essays on Reality, Identity and Experience in Fantasy Games is a collection of important essays by many current thinkers on fantasy and role playing games. Themes discussed in the book that are of significance to this thesis are gaming culture, social life, and the idea that gaming can tell us something about the ways we experience reality. For example, in his essay “The Role-Playing Game and the Game of Role-Playing: The Ludic Self and Everyday Life,” Dennis Waskul writes: “While role-playing games may be seen as unique social activities, at another level both role-playing and games are anything but distinct. All

people play and play with roles [...]. People play roles and roles play a significant part in defining self..." (Waskul 33). Similarly, Lifelike is a collection of essays on live action role play, gaming culture, social life, and the ways gaming can tell us about the human experience of reality. It was a writing project which came out of the Knudepunkt conference in 2007, a conference in which LARPerS discussed the social phenomena and the gaming mechanics behind their pastime. One of the most fascinating articles is "Impact of Relationships on Games," which discusses the complications of "real life" relationships on gaming. Olmstead-Dean writes, "I believe that it is difficult to separate in-game relationships from real relationships even though we know better. I believe this is why Hollywood actors and actresses have intense relationships with people they have played romance with in film and theatre" (Olmstead-Dean196).

From here, we will turn to the ways in which I organized my research questions and engaged in participant-observation.

### *Methodology*

Participant observation, refined by anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (Buch and Staller 189), is the method I chose to utilize for my research on live action role play. In describing her study of the online role playing game *EverQuest* by Sony Online Entertainment, titled Play Between Worlds: Exploring Online Game Culture, T.L. Taylor writes that it is a "qualitative approach in which the researcher immerses herself in a culture and lives, talks, and works with and among the community members for a stretch of time" (Taylor 17). While it was not my goal to attempt total immersion—i.e. living and working with LARPerS—I nevertheless committed myself to the utmost form of immersion I could manage during the five or so hours of LARP I attended at each venue. I socialized with the members, both in-character and out-of-character, and managed to make friends in part due to the fact that I was friends with members of

their community. There is a lot of time to socialize, given that two game masters had to split their attention between several scenes occurring simultaneously. It was during this time that I both studied the behavior of characters (those who were in-scene at a given moment) as well as their players (those who may have been waiting for the arrival of a game master). It was important to me to learn the game jargon and the informal rules which governed the game, and this was also a good time to clarify points on which I was unclear.

It was important to my research needs to pay particular attention to the relationships that players had to the game. In other words, I made it a primary point to observe the ways in which players negotiated the game's restrictions to suit their characters' needs and their needs as players: for example, if a character had a covert goal to accomplish, what tools, resources, and social networks did they bring to bear upon the situation? Did players attempt to find in-game information while out of game? (This is a strategy particularly reviled in role playing communities and is known as meta-gaming.) Interestingly, as my affinity for the game grew, I found myself actively attempting to learn these in-game survival strategies as well. T.L. Taylor writes: "Much as when I research the game itself, I find myself playing too, which brings with it affectivity and unguardedness. This method of participation puts the researcher in the interesting methodological position of being, both in practice and emotionally, deeply embedded in their world of study" (Taylor 6). But this is a methodology for which Taylor feels strongly and positively, as she believes it "foster[s] [a] kind of layered understanding" which fits perfectly with the layered identities one brings into the gamespace (Taylor 17). One of this thesis's primary goals is to understand the relationship between the player and the game, and the issues this relationship brings to our understanding of identity.

Gary Alan Fine's classic example of participant observation in *Dungeons & Dragons*, Shared Fantasy: Role-Playing Games as Social Worlds, offers many useful examples of cautionary behavior for the would-be participant-observer. He set important ground rules for himself while he engaged in ethnographic study, including that he "avoided becoming a dominant member of the group, the only leader in a party, or involved in lengthy arguments" (Fine 251). "Generally," he says, "I was not concerned about my impact, and recognized that I was influencing the games, but was influencing them as a fellow player" rather than a researcher (251). In the end, Fine found it difficult to keep from becoming a dominant member of the group, and this was one of the occurrences which influenced his decision to bring the study to a close. While it was not always profitable for me, as a researcher, or safe for my character, to remain neutral in some altercations, I did my best to allow my character to influence only indirectly. That is, I gave assistance to anyone to whom my character owed an affiliation, for to refrain from doing so may have meant in-character death as well as out-of-character resentment, but otherwise I attempted to maintain only a backseat role. When my character instigated a particular situation, I did not have my character's ambition in mind; instead, I acted in a support capacity as much as possible. Like Fine, I believe that any attempt at objectivity on my part may have been compromised if my character had experienced, say, a meteoric rise to fame. (Besides, it would not have been possible for me to take a spotlight role for another reason—namely, that I was new to the game, and did not have the required knowledge to lead.)

Prior to the study, I had some interest in role playing games which were not of the live action variety. I actively engaged in online, text-based role play, and I also played video games with role playing aspects while in high school. Online, text-based role play works in much the same way as LARP, except that the medium one uses to convey characters to other participants

is text narrative on a computer screen. Text-based role play is an activity wherein participants come together in a chat room and write a narrative together, each from the perspective of their own character. I first learned of live action role play and *Vampire: the Requiem* from people within my immediate social network who were also invested in text-based role play as well as video game role play. Had I not been a member of digital role play groups, I doubt I would have become aware of LARP; it seems that the way most people find LARP is knowing others who LARP. Some of my friends engaged in *Vampire* LARP every other weekend at a local comic and game shop in Cahaba Heights, a neighborhood of Birmingham, Alabama. It was through them that my interest in *Vampire: the Requiem* grew, and it was because of my gaming conversations with them that I first began to think of LARP as a viable subject of study. Participant observation allowed me to familiarize myself with the most intimate aspects of *Vampire* role play. Through my previous interest in online role play, I was already familiar with the idea of role playing as entertainment in general. I knew that one had to imagine a character and then act as that character. I would not have known the slang as well as certain hand gestures or other body language (how to convey that your character is invisible, and thus should not be approached, for example) particular to LARP. Using the slang and the body language, understanding under which contexts they were acceptable, and opening myself up to the experience gave me insight that I believe I would not have had if I had simply learned these things from sitting on the sidelines.

I was able to join two separate *Vampire: the Requiem* LARP venues, both located in Birmingham, Alabama. The first of these groups is the “troupe game.” What this terminology means is that *this* particular venue is a stand-alone; that is, it is not affiliated with the international, official White Wolf Publications fan club, The Camarilla. “Troupe” game is a way

to reference a local White Wolf game which is not affiliated with the Camarilla. I was able to attend three games at this venue, and I was also able to make more lasting connections with other players. The troupe game was the aforementioned game a number of my friends already played in.

The second group I joined, known colloquially as the “Cam game,” is affiliated with the official White Wolf fan club, The Camarilla. One can use “Cam game” to distinguish it as a game whose participants are officially registered with The Camarilla. What this means is that the character I play at the Birmingham, Alabama, Cam game venue is also playable at any other Cam game in any other location in the world, and she is also playable at large fan conventions. My character is also part of an international network of other *Vampire* characters, who have helped to mold the fantasy world of *Vampire: the Requiem*. As the troupe game is locally based, it has no involvement with the Cam game. Though individuals do migrate between these two venues according to their current tastes, and may even play in both games at the same time (as I did), I found a lot of enmity between those of each group who would not consider playing at the other venue. The Cam game was considered elitist, snobby, and limiting because of their involvement with a larger organization, whereas the troupe game was considered, dull, unintelligent, and full of people who did not know how to role play according to Cam game standards. The friends I had who engaged in LARP at the troupe game decided that we should join The Camarilla as well, and so we were equally well-known (or not well-known, as the case was) in that instance. I was able to make connections with other LARPerS at the Cam game, and I found that it was a common practice among Camarilla players to travel long distance in order to play with their friends who lived out-of-state.

Upon joining The Camarilla, I attended the International Camarilla Conclave 2009 in Atlanta, Georgia, one of the aforementioned fan conventions where members of The Camarilla gathered and role played for the weekend. In all, I attended the convention as well as three troupe games and two Cam games. In all of the games, I played the same character with generally the same levels of intelligence and physical strength, making only minor changes to my in-game persona which I thought would better integrate me into the context of each game. I was readily accepted into the fold.

However, as a new player, I did not have a high player status or a high character status. To achieve high status, I had to put in considerable “face” time at the LARP venues as well as informal gatherings, otherwise unrelated to gaming, between the gamers. In other words, I had to show up and give the impression that I was committed to joining these LARP communities. Otherwise, there were certain skills I had to master, such as being able to calculate complex skill levels off the top of my head as well as be familiar with powers specific to my character’s clan and covenant. However, I did not have to memorize *everything* related to these two skills, as even the most seasoned players had to refer to the rule books or to a cheat sheet at one time or another.

I recorded my experiential evidence through field notes. Once I gained enough rapport to reveal myself as a participant-observer, I spoke with fellow role players on what they thought about LARP, “real life,” and the ways in which they complicated each other. I spoke with James, a 30 year old white, heterosexual male and a former game master for the troupe game. I also spoke with Aaron, a 30 year old Iranian, heterosexual male and a participant in the troupe game. The members of my all-female group were Catherine, a 24 year old Iranian lesbian, and Justine, a 24 year old white heterosexual, and both of them participated in the troupe game and



the Cam game with me. (Note that all of the names of people I spoke to have been changed.) Topics of conversation included personal relationships to the game, how a good player negotiated the demands of embodying a LARP character, how LARP relates to other types of gaming, and how the dynamics of LARP are influenced by the cultural constraints and scripts surrounding gender, race, and sexuality. It was not my aim to study the players themselves, but rather *experiences* within playing, and I held conversations with players to gather information so that I could frame my research questions in the most efficient way. Also, I wanted to allow those with whom I was gaming to have some input on how my questions were framed. After all, “Intersubjective knowledge is knowledge co-created by the researcher and those she researches. These forms of knowledge were thought to be more consistent with feminist critiques of expert knowledge, which were seen as reflecting and reinforcing the power of academic elites over those they study” (Buch and Staller 190). Buch and Staller also write that “choices about how to balance participation versus observation are likely to be based partly on your research questions, partly on your theoretical position, and partly on what is possible in the field” (202). Given that one of my most important goals was to test the validity of the claim that “real life” and “gamespace” are self-contained, I made the decision to use my own experience as a gauge. Also, as playing provided one with such a “world” full of rich experiences, I felt that I would be missing out on an integral part of LARP experience if I chose only to observe and not to participate.

As a disclaimer, I will say that this study is not meant to be a comprehensive examination of the LARP experience. Local dynamics of *Vampire: the Requiem*, and the versatility of the game itself, mean that the experiences will differ from locale to locale. There are other types of LARP outside of *World of Darkness* and its *Vampire: the Requiem* title. For example, one of the

texts I utilize is *Lifelike*, a compilation of writings by Scandinavian LARPer whose style of play is completely different than the system used in *Vampire*. However, that text does examine such topics as character, immersion, role-playing and real life, and others which are pertinent to this project. This thesis is meant to add to the growing literature on modern forms of gaming, and yet it cannot take a stance on the entirety of gaming. While this thesis will discuss gay identities in the context of sexuality, it does not devote a significant amount of time to sexual orientation in the same way that it focuses on gender and race. I have also made the conscious decision to exclude a class analysis from my research. Most role players seem to come from either a working- or middle-class background, and most of the characters they play are privy to some kind of affluence. Most role players in both games are either in their early twenties to early forties, and most are either employed or are students. Also, in order to join The Camarilla a player must be willing to pay a small membership fee, and in order to participate in conventions such as the International Camarilla Conclave one must have the money for travel and registration, but this can be ameliorated by playing in a local troupe game, which does not require a player to pay fees. I chose to exclude a significant class analysis of my experience because, for the purposes of my investigation, I found gender, race, and sexuality to be more fruitful.

This thesis could also be significantly expanded to include other types of LARP which do not use such a strict structural system to determine character creation and action outcome. Also as the *World of Darkness* franchise includes other supernatural creatures such as werewolves and mages (human users of magic) which can coexist with vampires of the *Vampire: the Requiem*, I could have chosen to investigate the dynamics of playing one of these creatures. The experience of vampires within *World of Darkness* are unique to that “species.”

## *Research Questions*

I structured my research questions around the axes of identity, gender, race, and sexuality. These questions guided my personal inquiry as well as my conversations with fellow LARPer. They are as follows:

### Questions of Identity:

- When we interact in a LARP setting by taking on a fictional role, when we are free to act and behave in ways different than we otherwise would, what preconceived notions of inequality do we take with us?
- How do LARP players negotiate the demands of their own subjectivity versus the demands the game makes upon their subjectivity?
- If a character dies, does a part of the player die (emotionally, mentally)?
- Is it valid to say that there is a strong barrier between our experiences in the “real” world and experiences within the gamespace? Do games like LARP complicate our distinctions between the two?
- If play can be considered an important psychological and social mechanism through which we come to understand ourselves, what unique opportunities does LARP bring?
- With access to so many layers of identity, how do LARPer think of a concept such as “self”? Is it similar to an actor’s experience, wherein she may play dozens of roles in various films or stage productions?
- In what ways is the “real” world a gamespace of its own, and what useful answers can LARP give to “real” world questions?

### Questions of Gender and Sexuality:

- How does a game like *Vampire: the Requiem* function in a sexist, homophobic, and hypersexual culture?
- How are misogyny and homophobia treated? How do female players negotiate sexist behavior?
- Do we bring preconceived notions of gender and sexuality into the gamespace? What about these preconceived notions add to or take away from the dynamic of the game, especially given vampires' ties to sexuality and carnal behavior in the cultural imagination?
- In a society which places emphasis on gendered power structures and hypersexualizes the female body, what does it mean to inhabit a female body while playing an already exoticized and eroticized supernatural creature such as the vampire?

#### Questions of Race:

- In the context of the gamespace, is it viable to use “species” as a marker for race, given that people of color are devalued as bestial, animalistic, and inhuman—all qualities which mark a vampire in *Vampire: the Requiem*?
- In a game where everyone is “racialized” as “vampire” (read: savage predator) or “human” (read: food), what does it mean to inhabit a body racialized outside the gamespace while role playing a character which is “racialized” as savage and inhuman?
- What place does racism have within the structure of *Vampire: the Requiem*?

## CHAPTER 3

### OBSERVATIONS

Role-playing games can be described, explained, and understood as activities that exist in the unique interstices between persona, player, and person. How do participants in fantasy role-playing games negotiate these liminal symbolic boundaries? To what extent do these kinds of decidedly playful negotiations illuminate the ways we all actively fashion the precarious distinctions between person and public persona? Since we all necessarily juggle a multiplicity of roles—sometimes shifting from one to the next with remarkable fluidity—might we all be players of fantasy role-playing games? (Waskul 22)

#### *Demographics*

In the *Vampire* games in which I was a participant observer, it is difficult to get a true sense of the population because LARP games are voluntary and there is no method of tracking attendance or participation. However, in every game I observed, men significantly outnumbered women, at the very least by a ratio of 2 to 1. At the International Camarilla Conclave, I estimated that there were approximately 800 participants; men still outnumbered women, but the ratio of men to women was slanted more toward women. In the local Cam game, there are typically around 10-12 players in attendance, including me and my two female compatriots. In the troupe game, there are around 15-20 players in attendance, including me and my two compatriots. In the two local games, there are no people of color who play. At the International Camarilla Conclave, people of color were present, but their numbers were even smaller than the comparative number of females. Most of the players either at the local games or at the conclave had no visible physical disabilities, though I can think of at least one player who plays a blind vampire, and there is a vampire clan which is known for physical, mental, and social disabilities.

The overwhelming majority of men is consistent with Cox's sample of video game characters: she found that 75.4% of characters in her video game sample were men, and that females comprised 21.3% of characters; 3.4 percent of the characters were labeled "unidentifiable" (Cox 44).

Men also outnumbered women in positions of power. In the troupe game, there are six senators (one for each covenant), a chancellor, and a police force known as the Hounds. Of these, only two senators are female and one Hound is female. In the Cam game, three females hold a position of power, and the rest are men. As there were no people of color participating in either the Cam game or the troupe game, people of color had no representation in the game's government structure. Representation of one's character's issues is not guaranteed in either game, as senators pursue their own goals without consultation of their constituents. In other words, a character's concerns—about feeding grounds, guidance for new vampires by older, experienced vampires, or a character's political or social concerns—may not be represented by that character's senator. In the Cam game, two men—brothers—hold the highest positions on the city's supernatural "council," and they seem to rule the city without limit. Most cities have a "prince," who acts as an executive officer and is often the sole power wielder in the city. The title of "prince" is used even when a female occupies the position. A female holds the position of "prince of the city," though hers is a position of power in name only. The brothers on the council can overrule her decisions at any time. Her lack of true power is not something that is widely known by other Cam players in Birmingham.

There are no openly gay characters in either local game, or if they are, they do not make themselves known in typical ways. Perhaps it is because in general most characters do not engage in romantic entanglements, for a number of reasons: someone may use a character's love

interest against them, the love interest may not be completely trustworthy (everyone is a suspect in this game), or people simply have more fun killing other people than romancing them. Most players do not play a gay or lesbian characters as the social stigma may be attached to them personally.

### *Identity*

You wonder, should I increase my strength, or my intelligence, or what? Ah. Just a moment. Something important just happened. You said my strength, not its strength. Well, actually, you didn't say it, I wrote it. But you didn't stumble over that, did you? It seemed natural enough. You were thinking of this digital body as you, not a representation of you. Interesting. Media researchers have argued that their studies show how quickly and easily people can 'become' objects they manipulate. (Castronova, Synthetic 32)

What I experienced and observed in LARP, as well as what I was told in conversations that I had with other participants, was that the line between character and player was indeed a very fine line. According to Aaron,

“Even though players take on the persona of someone (oftentimes different) from themselves, they still have the same mindset. In other words, we may change our outward personalities, but our inward personalities are still the same. There are “in groups” and “out groups” at gaming events: popular people, beautiful people, rich people, poor people, etc. Even though these traits may have no relevance to character interaction, they still shape the way people are treated. Many times if Sally dislikes Bob in real life, she will be loath to work or associate with Bob's character Bill in game.”

It is interesting to note that in most of the out-of-character conversations I have had, with few exceptions, no one distinguishes between “myself—my real self” and “my character.” “My character” is simply subsumed under “I.” In speaking of acquiring special powers through training, for instance, one member of my group remarked to the other, “Justine [the player's name], you should go see the majordomo for training.” While this might seem as though it occurs because it is just simpler for the flow of conversation, I have found myself slipping into the “I” when talking about my plans for my character. For instance, I was expressing frustration

with my group mates after a particularly harrowing session: “I was thinking of getting Celerity level 1 [Celerity is the vampiric power of supernatural speed] once I have the experience points to get it, because when we attacked the senator I could have easily caught up with her and killed her. I think, in part, it was my fault that we lost because I could’ve kept up with her once she ran.” My character bears no immediate resemblance to myself: she is eternally 16, I am 24—she is petite and redheaded, and I am neither of those things—she is a vampire, I am not—she is coy and physically strong and rash whereas I tend to be scholarly and thoughtful and, well, not coy. It does not necessarily make sense that I should relate so intimately to her. But I do. When I am doing things my character would never dream of doing—writing a thesis, for example, or reading an academic text—I still find myself thinking of her problems, even when I am outside of gamespace. For example, I want to get enough experience points to buy Celerity level 1 for her, but this turns into “I want Celerity level 1 so I can run fast and kill enemies more efficiently.” I get into the game, because I want to win (I want her to win?), or I “get into” the game because I don’t have to drink blood or avoid sunlight to stay alive. I: scholarly, thoughtful, vacillate between decisions, uncomfortable with being coy, a little nervous or self-conscious in social situations; she/my character/(me?): rash, physically capable, immature, provocative and not shy. How do I “become”/become her so well? Why do I have so much fun playing her? Is she a “me” that was never realized? Aaron confirmed this in one of our conversations: “Many people will use their character as an outward extension of the person they would like to be. This character is what the player strives to be. Therefore, when that character dies, the player feels a sense of loss as their persona can no longer be portrayed outwardly.”

An excerpt from my field notes reads:

I keep coming back to the “I” issue: speaking of myself as if I were my character. (But am I not?) Even actors, when being interviewed about the characters they’ve



played in films, slip into the “I.” No shock there. Many actors fall in love with their on-screen romances, and several Hollywood marriages have been made in this way.

Indeed, other LARPer use this comparison. Julian Dibbell ruminates on the characteristics he shared with his characters in an online, text-based role play game:

Not that I didn't feel a kind of closeness in those masks, or sense certain deeply embedded aspects of myself carved into the surfaces of some of them. My attachment to the dolphin Faaa, for instance, was surely not without some lurking totemic significance. And as for Dr. Bombay, my core persona, I had no doubt that the wavering ambiguity I'd written into his description—its uneasy suspension between intellectualized ridiculousness and hardened competence—encoded all sorts of conflicting and barely examined truths about my self-image, both in VR and out of it. (Dibbell 127)

Justine notes that LARPer can become deeply invested in the characters they create. “In the world of LARP,” she says, “it's possible to carefully and painstakingly cultivate a character for years. Such characters often have physical connections to friends, allies, and enemies as well as vast intellectual investments in causes, intrigues, and governments. The death of such a character has the potential to be devastating to a player.” James agrees, insofar as he believes that a character is akin to an extremely personal creation on the part of the player—for example, a character can be likened to a painting, a musical work, or a novel, and the player is an artist, musician, or writer. However, he also told me that there were many reasons a player would not want to play a character anymore, and thus would look forward to the death of a character: if the character's personality was no longer appealing to the player, if the character's circumstances had gone so far beyond the control of the player that the experience was no longer entertaining, or if an idea for a better character had come along.

But role playing a character is not limited only to the experience of directly identifying with that character's personality or motives. Olmstead-Dean writes that LARP can also be “a fictional landscape in which we can ‘practice’ actions and emotions that have much more serious

consequences in the real-world. There are many things to experience—moral dilemmas, suspense, frustration, and how we respond to them tells us something about our own personality” (198). Indeed, this sort of thinking is reminiscent of the benefits LARP offers as a therapeutical device. By having this safe environment in which to explore their feelings, a person who elects to undergo role playing as therapy can experiment with different modes of thinking which may improve their circumstances. They can also deal with the guilt, or even the secret pleasure, that comes with choosing behaviors which are not socially sanctioned. Justine concurs:

“Through a character, a player may lie, cheat, steal, kill, love, lose, conspire, and backstab while suffering no consequences as an individual. The character must still navigate the consequences in game space, but this allows the player to act as a voyeur to her own behavior. She has the power to test drive potentially deviant or reprehensible actions and carry them to their conclusions. In this way, a LARP player has the unique ability to ‘do over,’ as the consequences of her actions remain in game space but the lessons learned there are free to be applied to her own out of game life.”

Though, of course, here we might reference T.L. Taylor, who states that “it is not, for example, that [gamespaces] are spaces in which we simply work out [“real life”] issues and once sorted, happily leave. That story over-privileges [“real life”] in ways that are not particularly useful” (19).

### *Gender and Sexuality*

Most of the men exhibit expressly patriarchal attitudes in-game. My character’s covenant senator in the troupe game, one of two females in this position, has no power over her own but is instead the pawn of Mr. Williams, the covenant leader. Interestingly this character seems to have been designed as an archetype for white male privilege. In private meetings with my group mates, Mr. Williams has expressed a desire to keep the senator in power only because she is so easily controlled. While her inefficiency and powerless status holds back our covenant as a whole, he will not give her more power than he has and he does not want her to become more

powerful than he is. The covenant's status and influence, as well as the positions of all the other covenant members, must suffer as a result of his personal avarice. Interestingly enough, he, the covenant leader, is the only male in the covenant. My two female associates and I, as well as the ineffective senator, make up the rest of the Invictus covenant. Ashley Cox writes that studies on video games and gender portrayals find that "the consistent portrayal of women in stereotypical roles may perpetuate traditional and possibly harmful ideals about women," and that they affect both men and women's ideas about women (9). The female senator is certainly in a stereotypical, subordinate role: she is given direction by Mr. Williams, and works to bring his beliefs to reality. Mr. Williams' plan to use the female senator as both a scapegoat and a tool makes sense only in a society where harm to women's image is only "collateral damage," of a piece with a society in which women are the objects, not the subjects. "[Games] may cultivate among gamers very limited conceptions of [sic] male's and female's capabilities in relation to work, relationships, etc.," writes Cox (29). Cox also establishes that "most females appear in supporting roles" and that "females are shown in background roles at *more than twice* the rate of males" (Cox 45, italics in original). If one were to take gender cues from watching the interactions between the female senator and Mr. Williams, one would have an extremely limited idea about a woman's capability to lead, and indeed a woman's idea to even understand or pinpoint the injustice being done to her.

Cox notes that "games often have sexually charged elements intertwined with violence against women" (32). Within the gamespace of LARP, I have observed both eroticization of the supposed superiority of men to women, and eroticization of the violence that can occur between men and women. Rape in LARP does happen. Sex has an interesting position in the game: to a vampire in *Vampire: the Requiem*, sex is equivalent to and no different from any other

pleasurable sensation, such as catching the scent of a lovely perfume or experiencing tactile pleasure when coming into contact with an expensive, well-made fabric. Also, vampires and other supernatural creatures consider themselves to be above human law. Crimes against a character are typically met with violence, rather than the pursuit of justice. In the world of *Vampire: the Requiem*, supernatural law enforcement exists only to protect the secrecy of the supernatural society; beyond that, one must look out for oneself. A past character of Catherine's was raped. Within the context of the game, the character's male boss used a mind-control power called Dominate on her, and ordered her to have sex with him—against her character's will, but because of the mechanics of the game and the Dominate power, Catherine's character could not say no. No matter how Catherine may have wanted to manipulate the game in order to prevent the rape of her character, she was not permitted to do so. Afterward, once the Dominate power's influence wore off, she [the character] sodomized her rapist in revenge.

Another anecdote of Catherine's further illustrates the ways in which "real life" and "gamespace" meet to create conflict which exceeds the boundaries between them. While waiting for the game to begin, a male role player made sexual advances Catherine's character, asking her, "Do you like [performing fellatio]?" Catherine rejected his advances. When the game began, the man's character [a half vampire who was immune to sunlight] followed Catherine's character to her daytime resting place and staked her [the vampire]. Neither the male role player nor his role play character stated the reason for this drastic action. However, the game master later told Catherine that he was sorry this happened as he was aware of the male role player's intent; the game master gave her a generous number of experience points to create a new character.

This is the way in which most instances of misogyny are handled: no official statements on anti-misogynistic behavior are made, and game masters make “off-the-table” deals with victims in order to placate them. Perhaps the most alarming inference one can make about violence in the game in general is that it is functional—that is, in Cox’s words, it “is the tool that characters are generally expected to utilize in order to advance through the narrative, and is enacted and received by all types of characters in multiple forms” (57). Naturally, one can conclude that the types of violence that men can use against women are sexual in nature. James, a former game master at the troupe game, told me that misogyny was accepted if it was part of a character’s identity, if it was in that character’s nature to be sexist, but as soon as it was determined that it crossed the line and made another player upset or uncomfortable, it should be brought to the game masters’ attention. In that situation, the question I would ask is this: why should it be acceptable for sexism to be a part of anyone’s psyche, be they “fictional” or “real”? How does one make the distinction between acceptable and unacceptable sexism? Justine remarks that “a LARP character is often a sort of brackish water mixture of the player and the concept for the character. Many preconceived notions manifest themselves through the character, ideas that often lack purpose in the character but come from the player's ideals.” From this, she understands the so-called acceptability of having a character who is sexist, racist, or both. It is okay for a character to be sexist because the player really does not disagree with those ideals, even if the label of male chauvinist is not a label with which the player would automatically identify.

The game master knew that a female role player’s refusal to perform a sex act with a male player brought about the death of the female player’s character. However, punishing or speaking out against the inherent misogyny of this was bypassed in favor of an indirect,

temporary solution. This certainly mirrors real life. Aaron gives this example: if a sexist game master will not budge on an issue, a female player can flirt with his character and that may help her chances. However, if the woman is not attractive in real life, this tactic more than likely will not work.

In one incident at the Cam game, characters were talking about prostitution in a very stereotypical and demeaning way. The conversation went something like this:

Vampire #1: “The prostitutes drive a van with an interior decorator’s logo painted on the side, and come to customers’ houses pretending to be interior decorators.”

Vampire #2: “What an amazing idea. It should cut down on vice squad arrests.”

Vampire #1: “Absolutely. Can you imagine their advertising slogans? ‘I’ll decorate your interior.’”

At this point, however, there were three feminists in the crowd, and the ensuing argument—which drifted from in-character to out-of-character, lasted for a heated fifteen minutes, wherein the game master finally stepped in and said it was time to call it a night. No commentary was made on the sexist nature of the argument—instead, to preserve group cohesion, the conversation was ended by a person who held out-of-character power in the gamespace. Another incident, which happened to Justine, is particularly instrumental in describing the sexism which is an intrinsic part of the fabric of gameplay. It is customary for a player, when approaching another player in-character, to describe the general appearance of the character: gender, stature, approximate age, clothing, and so on, and to wait for the other player to do so before commencing with in-character banter and action. However, when she was approached by a male player of approximately the same age, that is, mid-twenties, his first remark to her was that his character would not be swayed by feminine wiles, as he was not interested in matters of a

sexual nature. As Justine reported it, “This occurred before the player knew if his character was speaking to a male or female, adult or child, or any information regarding the nature of the character in question. He simply observed that the player was female and made the remark.”

One of the most emotionally engaging incidents happened when Catherine, Justine, and I visited a Camarilla venue in Opelika, Alabama. Catherine’s character is an extremely hot-headed feminist (coincidentally, of clan Ventrue and covenant Carthian). After espousing viewpoints in favor of feminism, she was heckled in-character for about twenty minutes by the mostly male contingent. One particularly stark example came when someone mentioned the word rape: Catherine’s expression grew angry, and the men proceeded to say such things as, “Come on, it’s just rape!” and “You’re going to get her started again if you’re not careful!” Both Justine and I were extremely uncomfortable, but given that we were guests of a mostly male group whom we did not know, we did not feel that it would have been prudent for us to speak up. The topic of conversation was eventually changed, yet without any resolution to the tension caused by my and my companions’ disagreement with the prevailing sentiments.

Gendered dynamics and stereotypes both add to and take away from the game at the same time in that the male vampire archetype is a sexy, aloof, often caustic and brooding figure, whereas the female vampire archetype is a succubus figure, alluring and dangerous, a perfect femme fatale. Interestingly, two of the most popular clans [“races”] of vampire are extremely gender-coded. The Ventrue clan are the moguls, patriarchs, and business scions of the gamespace—they are presented as being of old-fashioned beliefs, extremely patriarchal and hierarchical, and coldly rational. They are in most, if not all, of the positions of power, as they are compulsively driven to gain power just as they are to drink blood. Ventrue “[share] a ruthless will to power and the power to enforce its will,” according to the official *Vampire: the*

*Requiem* rule book (Marmell, Shomshak, and Suleiman 112). The Daeva clan members are the sensual artists, prostitutes, courtesans, entertainers, and socialites of the gamespace. They are presented as being hot-headed, hot-blooded, and extremely sexual, yet due to their vampiric nature they are emotionally hollow, lose interest fast, are emotionally damaged, and their only genuine desire is to drink blood. “Most Succubi are overtly sensual beings, drawn by beauty and blood in equal measure, but it’s an artificial passion” (Marmell, Shomshak, and Suleiman 104). In many conversations where I have juxtaposed the Ventrue and Daeva clans as male and female in nature, the topic of conversation has come up that the Daeva clearly represents an unhealthy or damaged sexuality—the sexuality of a heartbroken, betrayed, lonely, and/or single woman. These are women who must acquire sexual experience like trophies or collectibles, not out of any deep-seated desire to make an erotic connection. The sexuality of the Daeva clan is more *Sex in the City* than anything. It is also fascinating to note that the nickname often given to Daeva vampires is “Succubus,” and the plural form is “Succubi,” even when there are males present. As Aaron points out, the vampiric thirst for blood can easily be confused or conflated with sexual longing, as vampires are viewed as inherently seductive and tempting creatures. Sexism is rampant, given such cues as the head of a city being called a Prince, no matter the gender of the title-holder. Furthermore, since vampires are hundreds of years old or older, it allows for sexism to run rampant as the characters are, in the words of Aaron, “just playing the mindset of someone older than feminism.”

As James has mentioned to me, females are rarer than males in the game, so this can be “for the benefit” of female gamers who may want to “use their sexual wiles” to gain their own ends. However, this does not give women any real and lasting social power. It is a cheap currency for women, which does not serve to bring them good returns in the long run. But the



game provides ample opportunity for that the conflation of sexuality and power. James told me that “vampires are exotic. There is an element of sex to them and some players explore and embrace it.” Vampires hold a special significance in society’s collective psyche: they have a treacherously seductive and mysterious quality to them, which is present within the gamespace.

Fascinatingly, authors such as John Allen Stevenson, Shannon Winnubst, and Judith Johnson are theorizing the ways in which gender and race anxieties are conveyed through the literary figure of the vampire. “[I]n what way are vampires another ‘race’?” Stevenson asks (140). “An idea like race helps us grapple with human otherness—the fact that we do not all look alike or believe alike or act alike” (Stevenson 140). Stevenson discusses the ways in which Dracula’s sexuality, within Bram Stoker’s foundational vampire text Dracula, is used to deal with miscegenation, xenophobia, the Freudian model of incest, and exogamy. Judith Johnson continues this trajectory of thought: “Becoming a vampire is a result of the exchange of polluted blood or bloodlines. In this metaphoric construct, dying of a vampire bite becomes the equivalent of being the product of interracial marriage; that is, having a drop of non-Caucasian blood, immediately transforms ordinary humans into members of an alien and only semi-human race” (“Women” 76). Winnubst confirms the fact that vampires are often the textual bodies upon which our anxieties about difference are written: “As many studies have shown, the linking of racism, sexism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism is often unmistakable in the majority of [vampire stories in the late eighteenth century]. Jews, like whores and blacks and queers, are vampiric—in the fantasy life of Western European and North American psyches” (7). Indeed, the vampire for Winnubst is a figure of general anxiety as well. “The vampire is a bloodsucker. He sucks blood, transferring an illegitimate and disavowed substance, transforming his ‘victims’

from the living to the undead, giving birth without sex, trafficking in the strange and unruly logics of fluids, mixing and spilling and infecting blood” (Winnubst 7-8).

### *Race*

Vampires, as a “species” in the game world, are distinct from the humans upon which they prey and among which they live. It is an imperative in *Vampire: the Requiem* that each character must uphold “the Masquerade”—the secrecy to which all vampires are sworn, that they will never allow a human to know that vampires exist upon threat of death. Thus, there is a heavy emphasis on dichotomization between the species of vampire and human. I believe that it is a valid statement to say that vampires among other supernatural creatures, as well as the different “clans” of vampires, can be used as markers for race, and that behavior between vampires and other supernaturals, as well as behavior between vampire clans, takes cues from a racist ideology. People of color are devalued as bestial, animalistic, and inhuman—and these are all qualities which mark a vampire in *Vampire: the Requiem*. In a world where everyone is “racialized” as a vampire or a type of vampire (in other words, a predator), or “human” (in other words, food), what does it mean to racialize character types? This question is especially important when one considers that the majority of *Vampire: the Requiem* players are white, and, reading the stratification of difference involved in the personalities of each clan, they may become cultural tourists through the experience of playing a “racially different” vampire. However, this is not to say that cultural tourism within the act of playing a game is a relatively harmless thing. Merely representing racialized beliefs, as *Vampire* does, without questioning them, is enough to do harm. Cultural tourism is not benign.

In fact, Aaron believes that it is one of the driving forces behind the games. He told me, “Racism is very important for the dynamics of *Vampire* to work. Vampires work against

humans, and vampire clans work against other clans. These defining lines create the characters' existences and therefore, game dynamics themselves." Vampires are viewed as a general or default type of character, as it is the most popular species to play in both the Cam game and the troupe game; this is the same viewpoint taken in feminist theory, that men are the default gender, and any deviation is Other. Mages are seen as untrustworthy and greedy—I've heard it said that they are a bit "Jewish," clearly harkening back to damaging stereotypes about Jewish people created and perpetuated in the Dark Ages. Werewolves are literally considered slaves by the more powerful vampires. They are condescended to and treated as if they have no intelligence.

I can recall one instance in which it had been expressly stated that a character was of a race other than white. The incident occurred in the troupe game, and the character was a non-player character, a background character controlled by the game masters. He was described as a "large, muscular Black man who wore sunglasses even while indoors." Briefly, he served as a villain, and then was not heard from since.

Certain types of vampires are distinguished from others based upon rescripting old ideals: Ventrue embody the white male patriarchy, Daeva embody the complicit female population, Mekhet are intelligent and mysterious in the same way that Asians are portrayed in popular culture, Nosferatu deal with social, physical, or mental disabilities which make them "unfit" to entertain socially, and Gangrel embody the worst stereotypes of hypersexualized people of color. These differences are expressed and understood through appearance, behavior, choice of friends, attitudes held about other vampire clans, and game mechanics—which, for example, allow Daeva to be prettier and more social than Nosferatu, and allow for everyone to be more intelligent than Gangrel. And all of these creatures both fear and believe themselves superior to humans, who are their prey as well as their potential killers. Justine states, "Within the context

of *Vampire: the Requiem*, each vampire clan seems to embody a piece of hegemonic fear regarding racial ‘others.’ Some clans are wild, out of control, savage and brutal. Some are scheming, hoping to overthrow the status quo and seize power for themselves. Some are so fearsome to behold that they should never be viewed, but left to slink by unacknowledged.”

Here we can examine one of the many “species” or clans of vampire, the Gangrel clan. In the official *Vampire: the Requiem* rule book, it is written that the Gangrel are “predators among the predators, the most savage of beasts” (Marmell, Shomshak, and Suleiman 106). These vampires are noted for their animalistic behavior, which is even more extreme than other vampire clans. In fact, these vampires always run the risk of becoming so animalistic that they cannot interact in society, vampire or human. Gangrel “prefer the counsel of animals and other beasts, and some eschew contact with the mortal world entirely” (Marmell, Shomshak, and Suleiman 106). They are viewed by the other clans as being particularly dim-witted, emotionally-driven, and dangerous, though mindless, predators: useful to have in a conflict, but not fit for society. Some of their powers are Animalism—they hold a close connection with animals and can manipulate animals into doing their bidding—as well as Resilience—a supernatural sort of physical strength—and shape shifting into other animals. Catherine notes that Gangrel bear the brunt of physical activity, often taking direction from those in power and serving in a physical capacity. One of the general game mechanics is that, if you roll a 10, you are allowed a subsequent extra roll—this is a side rule which can be quite beneficial and even save a character’s life. However, if one is playing a Gangrel, and a 10 is rolled on a mental skill or challenge, the Gangrel is not permitted the “10 again” roll. Catherine says that it is common for a Ventrue to take a Gangrel as a lover, given that the Gangrel clan can be portrayed as sexual

because they are so physical, so mindless, and so driven by their physical appetites and that, in her words, this provides a “thrill” for the typically staid Ventrue partner.

Patricia Hill Collins speaks to the ways in which the Gangrel paradigm of vampire nature comes uncomfortably close to racist ways of thinking. “For both women and men,” Collins writes, “Western social thought associates Blackness with an imagined uncivilized, wild sexuality and uses this association as one lynchpin of racial difference. Whether depicted as ‘freaks’ of nature or as being the essence of nature itself, savage, untamed sexuality characterizes Western representations of women and men of African descent” (27). Indeed, this typifies the Gangrel clan’s difference from others. In the *Vampire: the Requiem* rule book, the Ventrue clan, patriarchal scions of white privilege, believe that Gangrel are “[s]tray dogs with sharp teeth” and that Ventrue should “[t]rain them when [they] can” (Marmell, Shomshak, and Suleiman 112). Their clan nickname is, in fact, “Savages.” I have heard a member of clan Mekhet say that he did not accept Gangrels as guests within his home, joking that he “didn’t want any dogs on the furniture.” Furthermore, Collins states that “men of African descent were also perceived to have excess sexual appetite, yet with a disturbing additional feature, a predilection for violence” (32). If the Daeva are white females complicit with the patriarchal power of the Ventrue, then Gangrels, both women and men, are certainly emblematic of the worst stereotypes about racial difference.

### *Conclusion*

What does this mean for racial representations in *Vampire: the Requiem*? Cox writes, “Minorities’ overwhelming absence from gaming literature and the constituent stratification or ‘ghettoization’ of them into stereotypical roles speaks volumes about their perceived behavioral tendencies, status, and niche in society” (70). Within the gamespace, larger societal beliefs

clearly shape the beliefs of the players. Using the racialized beliefs of the larger society, players can understand and enact differences within vampire clans; in other words, because players understand racism that is at work elsewhere, they can also understand the kind of thinking which would lead to racialized differences between vampire clans. And, as Cox points out, this issue is not simply made less relevant when we consider the low population of racial and ethnic minorities who participate in *Vampire* games. “Such depictions may influence minority gamers to limit their aspirations to such depicted roles. They could also cultivate a sense of inferiority to whites or stereotypes about other minority groups, further dividing these underprivileged groups” (Cox 70).

Why would people of color want to play a game that is so racialized? For that matter, why would women want to play a game which is fraught with sexist cues? People of color and women do not stop interacting in society even though society has racist, sexist institutions. Instead, they choose to reclaim the territory that was stolen from them. A prime example of this occurred in one of the gaming sessions in which I and my female compatriots participated. As they knew my subject of investigation, my friends and I began a conversation, while in character, with the other players in regard to sexism and racism. Our characters posed questions to the other characters in regard to their beliefs on sexism and racism: do these oppressions end after death? How do vampires negotiate the social baggage they have brought with them, from their former lives as humans? What social oppressions particular to supernatural creatures, if any, coincide with racism and sexism? From this conversation, our characters are putting together a paper which discusses such issues as sexism, racism, “clanism” and “covenantism” (distrust and hatred of those with other affiliations), and other issues at the 2010 International Camarilla Conclave, which will be held in New Orleans, Louisiana, in September.

Besides, while the game does provide opportunities to negotiate oppressive behavior, it is also fun in other ways. LARP challenges its players to think outside the box and to expand the meaning of playing a game. When we play games, we anticipate that everything we need will come prepackaged in a box, with instructions, various physical components of the game (including a board, representative pieces with which to move around the board, and so forth), and a definite way to distinguish winners from losers. With live action role play, it is not so. Even the instructions and rules in the *Vampire: the Requiem* game are only guidelines, and not formal rules with which players must agree or choose to quit playing the game. LARP allows for subjective measures of success. The board on which *Vampire* is played is a world which looks and works startlingly like the one in which players spend most of their time, and the players themselves are their own representative pieces. One never loses or wins in LARP, at least not in a final or ultimate way; the game is in constant flux, and one can experience a win or a loss several times in one gaming session.

Also, as I have mentioned before, LARP provides a forum in which to speak back to oppressive ideas, including sexist and racist ideas, which racist or sexist video games do not. Generally speaking, when given the opportunity, a female player can contribute to the game dynamic just as much as a male player, a Black player or Asian player can contribute just as much as a white player, and so on. As the game is interactive and social in nature, players can negotiate the inclusivity of the gamespace among themselves, in order to form a more egalitarian space for all players. As a modern form of entertainment, it is unique in that it allows players to create their own kind of fun. One does not have to select a character from a pre-populated list, as in a video game, but one can author one's own character, from her appearance to her behavior to how she will effectively deal with the burden and the tricky moral issues involved with being a

vampire. One is not simply a captive audience to a book plot or a video game plot, but instead is part of a collective which will create a communal plot. Indeed, according to Huizinga play is “a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary life’ [...], but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly” (Huizinga 13). In LARP, one can take the play so seriously that, for a while, it becomes a world unto itself. Perhaps more importantly, live action role play can help us to understand the world in which we live the rest of the time.



## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

#### *Discussion*

Sure, reality TV doesn't look like reality, but then neither does reality. Both look like games. Both become a seamless space in which gamers test their abilities with contrived scenarios. The situations may be artificial, the dialogue less than spontaneous, and the gamers may merely be doing what the producers tell them. All this is perfectly of a piece with a reality, which is itself an artificial arena, where everyone is born a gamer, waiting for their turn. (Wark 007)

This participant observation study indicates a number of fascinating points about the nature of play, and specifically gaming culture and live action role play games. The first is that, despite the flaws which go hand-in-hand with any product of a hetero-patriarchal, racist society, gaming in general and live action role play in particular hold promise for envisioning a society concerned with the participation and enjoyment of all its members. It seems useful here to reiterate my question from the first chapter: How long has it been since people have created their own forms of entertainment, rather than simply going to a local video game vendor, film rental location, or bookstore, thereby allowing others to create entertainment for them? According to Steven Johnson, gaming holds more potential than most other forms of entertainment. Johnson speaks to this particular thought when he extols the virtues of gaming over other forms of entertainment: "It's not what you're thinking about when you're playing a game, it's the way you're thinking that matters" (Everything 40). There is something about live action role play that is lacking even in video games, a cultural cousin. And that something is this: "Start with the basics: far more than books or movies or music, games force you to make decisions" (Everything

41). Johnson's work speaks to the decisions that LARPing forces you to make: you must engage thoughtfully with problems; you must prioritize your actions; you must create short-term and long-term goals, and plan the ways that you are going to achieve those goals. Neither video games, nor films, nor books allow one to participate in the creation of fun; the plot is already present, and the participant is a voyeur, participating by proxy. When the genre becomes fantasy, such as *Vampire: the Requiem* and other types of live action role play rooted in a supernatural or otherworldly setting, then that only allows for the decisions to be that much more unique, that much more different, that much more refreshing.

However, the idea that fantasy is a creative free-for-all is not feasible, says Fine. "Since fantasy is the free play of a creative imagination, the limits of fantasy should be as broad as the limits of one's mind. This is not the case, as each fantasy world is a fairly tight transformation by the players of their mundane, shared realities" (Fine 3). He reminds us that fantasy as a genre is not created within a cultural or temporal vacuum. "Fantasy is constrained by the social expectations of players and of their world. The game fantasy, then, is an integration of twentieth-century American reality and the players' understandings of the medieval or futuristic [or supernatural] setting in which their characters are placed" (Fine 3). Therefore, any ideas outside the norm which one wanted to make a part of the fantasy world would thus be filtered through one's preconceived notions.

Castronova writes:

[S]ynthetic worlds may allow us to experience human social life in an environment in which many characteristics of the body are no longer fixed endowments, but have become chosen attributes. People entering a synthetic world can have, in principle, any kind of body they desire. At a stroke, this feature of synthetic worlds removes from the social calculus all the unfortunate effects that derive from the body. Imagine a world in which all aspects of our physical appearance were under our control, so that all variations in thin, heavy,

tall, small, dark, and light were all voluntary. We are poorer for being still unable to experience such a world. (25-26)

In thinking through the problematic nature of Castronova's statement, my mind supplied the following questions: if the rules of the *Vampire* game do not distinguish between male and female, then why do players? Why is sexist behavior still so apparent, both within gamespace and outside it? If people can be anything they want to be, and experiment with identities, gain race consciousness through the paradigms and stereotypes presented in *Vampire*, and come to see beyond them in order to form in-game coalitions (which might then inspire coalitions between races outside gamespace, and go a long way toward acknowledging and eradicating white privilege), then why are most characters privileged white people? Why are most players white—and is there something about this game which speaks to whiteness, and to no one else? If the *Vampire* rule book states that sex does not hold such a prominent position in the lives of vampires, unlike the titillating position that sex holds for the rest of us, then why do females feel pressured to enact a particular kind of sexuality in order to advance their characters' goals? It is clear that we cannot re-envision gamespace into the kind of idealized space for which Castronova longs; fantasy is not a free-for-all, and the specters of Castronova's "unfortunate bodily effects" will follow us into the gamespace. Indeed, as T.L. Taylor reminds us, "As with ["real"] life, [in gamespace] bodies come to serve as mediation points between the individual and the world (both social and material). What they are and, more important, what social meanings they are given matters" (110).

Ashley Cox's sample of video games for sexist, racist, and homophobic cues illuminates the breadth and depth of the problem, which can also be useful in understanding gaming's cooperation with the racist, patriarchal system from which it was created. She writes: "[V]ideo games are very much still a male-oriented realm, particularly a hetero-male-orientated realm"

(Cox 57). “Women are more often portrayed as unimportant or not-as-important characters in comparison to men” (58). In fact, “women sometimes seem to have a very thinly-veiled dual purpose in video games that men never do, which is to be both a functional video game character as well as a sexual entertainer meant to titillate the targeted gaming audience,” which is, not surprisingly, the population of heterosexual men (Cox 58). She also finds that many of the games “center around white characters. They also occupy a wide range of roles in the narratives in relation to character likeability (i.e. ‘good guy’ or ‘bad guy,’ the actual tasks they perform, the contexts in which they do them). Non-white characters, however, are often shown in a very limited range of roles [...]” (Cox 61).

Within live action role play games, we can find something which utilizes and makes demands of the imagination in a way that few other forms of entertainment can match. The inevitable question must be asked: how do we re-imagine games, especially live action role playing games, so that they utilize the full capacity of imagination without compromising the feminist, anti-racist, sexually just ideals of a radically emancipated society? It is my belief that the question will carry us farther than any one particular answer in finding a solution. It is the same question which feminists not concerned with violations of social justice in games are asking about the larger society, and a sizeable body of literature is concerned with opposing viewpoints in the attempt to answer that question for patriarchal and racist society as a whole.

Torill Mortensen, who studies player experience in multi-player games, writes about a role player whose take on the game was particularly fascinating to her: “Playing was close to a spiritual experience for him, a philosophy, a way to understand life and a tool to explain the mechanisms of society to others. His intensity and deep commitment to the games he played and created was based on a fascination with the contrast between order and chaos inherent in human

nature” (Mortensen 7). It is this viewpoint that might point us in the right direction. First, it must be understood that games are not simply games, and that play is not simply play: there is something about each that goes beyond the frivolous connotation that we have given to each of these words. In Mortensen’s description of her study, role playing games can be utilized to understand mechanisms of society. She examines these games both as subjects of study in an academic setting, and also points to the ways in which everyday people who use multi-player games to study society, effectively participating in an “experiment” of their own making. To reiterate Goffman, “All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify” (72). And just as these ways are not easy to specify, they are also every bit as important to social scientists (or should be) who try to understand the complex relationship between society, entertainment, and the collective fantasies that are played out within mass entertainment.

### *Conclusion*

This participant observation study attempts to provide a number of findings. One is that play and games are not simply meaningless, whimsical pastimes, but instead can be used to understand society’s attitudes and as well as the ways in which these attitudes operate. A society will manifest its anxieties, particularly those anxieties that concern gender, race, sexuality, and other factors of social identification, in its forms of entertainment just as in its institutions. In the case of live action role play, not only are most of the gamers white, male, and heterosexual, but many times they also evince the beliefs that go hand-in-hand with the privileges attributed to each of those identity categories. In fact, these beliefs are so much a part of the fabric of *Vampire: the Requiem* LARP that participation by women and racial and ethnic minorities may be negatively affected. In many instances, sexist and racist ideas are coded into the structure of

the game and make up much of the social conflict within the game, given the natures of the bestial, animalistic Gangrel clan, the sexually depraved and emotionally hollow Daeva, and the scions of white male privilege, the Ventrue clan. The fact that these sexist and racist codes are so transparent makes it evident that games are not “just” games; for to be “just” a game implies that a game would not only be an abstract aesthetic space cut off from social reality, as Huizinga’s concept of the magic circle implies, but would also not reflect such “unattractive” social realities as sexism and racism.

Second, this study indicates that many LARPerS believe that the activity in which they participate is conducive to personal growth. Most of the LARPerS I spoke to said something to the effect that live action role play is a space in which participants can experiment with personalities and modes of communication which they do not normally adopt, and that this can also be a vehicle for positive personal change. LARP is an inherently social, rather than an inherently anti-social, activity. This means that it automatically has something important to do with the ways that we interact with people face to face, especially when one considers Goffman’s assertion that “life itself is a dramatically enacted thing,” as people seek to manage the impressions that they give off even as they juggle roles for various social contexts (72).

Third, it is obvious that LARP, as it stands, both participates in and reflects current and past social norms on women, people of color, and sexual behavior. In each *Vampire: the Requiem* game in which I participated, white men outnumbered women and people of color by a wide margin, both in a general way and in positions of power. That white male vampires take up the majority of cushy government jobs reflects the gendered and racialized make-up of human governments at every level is not a surprise. Role playing games exist in a society wherein real men and women, and real Black and Asian and Middle Eastern people, and other people of color,

are given very strict roles to play as well. A lot of social science literature exists on the punishments meted out to women and people of color when they deviate from their prescribed positions. While it is certain that the problems of a racist, sexist, and hypersexualized society neither begin nor end with live action role play or *Vampire: the Requiem*, the possibility of—and the need for—finding better questions or more feasible solutions within the gamespace is ripe for exploration.

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