

Playing in the Fields of Desire: Hegemonic Masculinity in Live Combat LARPS

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Abstract

Gender based research on Role Playing Games (RPG's) has long claimed that many males are attracted to RPG's due to the possibility of creating and performing hegemonic identities in-game. This paper presents a research study of males participating in Live-Action Role Play (LARPS), where we seek to better understand the institutional and social limits on identity generation in RPGs, the extent to which pre-existing masculine hierarchies follow gamers into the game context, and the meanings players make of their experiences in game.

Author Keywords

LARPS; masculinities; gender; hegemony; identity generation

Masculine Identities in LARPS and other RPGs

Social contexts are the stages upon which individual and collective identities are performed. Nephew (2006) observes that “role playing worlds make sense because of their resemblance to the real world, yet the RPG scenario also places the players in positions of power that may differ radically from the reality of their everyday life” (p. 125). One oft-noted difference between many RPGs and everyday life is the emphasis on physical combat, which in RPGs occur to such an extent that “rules for combat are viewed as a category separate from all other rules, because combat is the primary rules-mediated means of interaction between players” (Tychsen, Hitchens, Brolund & Kavakli, 2006, p. 260). Additionally, Schut (2006) notes the emphasis on power relations, violence, physical bodies and sexual conquest that permeate most RPGs (including Live Action RolePlay Scenarios, or LARPS) identifies this activity as primarily constructed for and appealing to men.¹ This claim supported by Yee (2006), whose demographic research on combat-based RPGs has shown that 88% of players are male. In short, as the primary components of western hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987), physical, sexual and economic power is the current upon which many RPGs thrive. LARPS differ from electronic formats such as MMORGs in important ways because of their incorporation of physical bodies into game play. The verisimilitude of the LARPing experience is especially powerful. As noted by Costikyan (1998), LARP play is the closest thing available to actual immersion in an interactive story. At the same time, the presence of characters’ bodies link game play more strongly to the cultures and identities that exist outside. LARPS, then, offer a unique lens through which the interaction of player identity, gender construction and performance, and game play can be observed.

Understanding LARPS in the context of this study

A live-action role-playing (LARP) game is different from a more traditional RPG in that the participants physically act out their roles in a safe environment. This type of role-playing is very similar to improvisational theatre in that all of the participants are physically representing the actions of their personas in an agreed upon setting without any sort of script. Most LARPs are similar to RPG environments in that they use a set of guiding rules intended primarily to adjudicate actions that the participants cannot perform or that cannot represent safely.² A live-combat LARP is a more specific form of game in which the participants resolve physical confrontation using padded weapon representations. This has led to the nickname ‘Boffer LARP’, due to the sound that a fake foam weapon makes when it impacts something. Role-playing and LARPing can be performed in a myriad of ways in a wide range of genres, but the embodied nature of LARPing and the physical activity inherent to live-combat games make live-combat LARPs a very interesting social environment for the study of masculine identity.

Hegemony and masculine desire as components of LARPS and other RPGs

In many RPGs the emphasis on physical power and violence parallels Connell’s theories of hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell (2000; 1995; 1987), hegemonic masculinity is the idealized form of masculinity within a culture and the form against which other masculinities are valued. Connell (1987) identifies hegemonic masculinity as relating both to and against femininity and other subordinated forms of masculinity, noting several identifiable traits that are characteristic of the construction of hegemonic masculinity in the contemporary United States and Canada. These traits include: physical strength and bravado; suppression of certain feminized feelings such as remorse, empathy, and uncertainty; strict heterosexuality and a corresponding obsession with heterosexual “conquests”; economic power; authority over women and other men; and capacity for violence and aggression (Connell, 1995). Males who approach these ideals are often privileged within institutional and societal frameworks while males who are perceived as lacking them are subordinated. Connell (1987) has identified hegemonic masculinity as “not necessarily what powerful men are, but what sustains their power and what large numbers of men are motivated to support” (p. 183). Simply put, hegemonic masculinity is useful for men as a resource to consolidate power. For individual males, power emerges from their ability to publicly perform hegemonic identity traits within a social context that understands certain practices as more or less hegemonic. Based on their actions, then, individuals are empowered or marginalized relative to hegemonic standards. At the center of this process are issues of power, as males simultaneously seek to align themselves with hegemonic ideals and practices in order to access social power, which, in turn, increases personal power and positions them as more hegemonic.

Schut’s (2006) observation that RPGs are deeply concerned with physical power in the form of “blowing things up and killing enemies” (p. 107) is accurate in a great number of computer-based, tabletop or LARP scenarios. Schut also offers a widely repeated observation regarding the gendered presentation of bodies and the exaltation of heterosexual masculine power in many RPGs, noting:

“Men appear as powerfully built warriors, trim and agile thieves, or respectable and wise-looking wizards. Women, on the other hand, are almost always, regardless of their character-role, beautiful and voluptuous, with tight-fitting, revealing clothing. In other words, men are powerful and women are eye-candy.”

(Schut, 2006, p. 109)

Economic power, another aspect of hegemonic masculinity, is also a central theme in many RPGs. Economic capital takes two primary forms, the first being money that can be used to purchase equipment to increase a character’s power, and the second being experience points (XP) that in level-based games increase the power and skills of a character. In addition to refined skills and better equipment, in many RPGs, advanced characters with high levels of Gold and Experience can own land and slaves, build empires, hire armies, and participate in the larger political aspects of a campaign. Most game encounters offer the possibility for characters to gain wealth and/or experience. This can be achieved in several ways, but by far the most common form is through physically defeating an opponent.

Research Questions

The centrality of hegemonic masculine identity performances in many RPGs and the corresponding hypersexualization of female characters leads Nephew (2006) to place RPG environments in the context of Freudian day-dreaming spaces where masculine desire for power and sexual gratification can be fulfilled. Nephew’s observation that RPGs allow “the player’s unconscious desires to become manifest in the role taken, since the persona of a character allows the player a disguise behind which to hide” (p.122), indicates an availability of hegemonic power within the context of the game.

LARPS, then, provide a context structured around the qualities of hegemonic masculinity where males create and perform identities in a fantastic yet embodied environment. As such, LARPS offer intriguing research possibilities for those seeking to better understand the relationship between virtual and real identities and the production and maintenance of masculinities.

This paper sets out to better understand possible answers to the questions, “What masculine hierarchies might be present within the LARP arena?” and “To what extent do LARPS function as spaces where masculine desires for hegemony can be fulfilled, and how do players’ every day masculine identities inform their character performances in the liminal spaces provided by the LARP environment”?

Participants and Methods

In this study we interviewed participants of an American live-combat LARP called New England Role-playing Organization (NERO) International in order to understand how the male players construct their identities within this expanding social arena, and to investigate if and how

hegemonic masculinity is reproduced by the actions of these players within the context of game play. NERO was chosen because of its large size (more than fifty chapters in Canada and the United States), its commercial character, and its long history. In short, it is emblematic of live-combat LARPing in North America.

The subjects in this study were recruited through gatekeepers who are administrators in the organization. Because we desired players with a deep knowledge of game play and culture in order to conduct research on masculinities, we sought male players with lengthy memberships in their NERO chapters who initially self-described as deeply immersed in LARP culture. Recruiting veteran players also allowed us to minimize the bias that exists towards new players. As is the case in many RPGs, newbies in NERO are often marginalized within the game environment due to their lack of playing skills and peer support. Thus, we selected participants with a minimum of four years experience with LARP game play and with deep social networks within the game environment. Research participants were individually interviewed in sessions that ranged from forty-five to ninety minutes. The interview questions focused on their experiences in LARPs, their perception of their own LARP identities, their identities in their everyday lives, LARP identities adopted by others, and their opinions about the meaning of live role-play in players' lives. The interviews were digitally recorded, and later transcribed by a member of the research team. Pseudonyms were used and at the end of the project the tapes were destroyed.

Results – Game Identities

One way participants identified game player characters was within a binary of hegemonic / subordinated masculinity (Connell, 1987). Named “power-gamers” by several study participants and adopted by the research team as an identifier for this group, the membership in the hegemonic identity group was linked to multiple qualities of hegemonic masculinity, some specific to and some broader than game contexts. The term role-player was used by most participants (and was adopted as a term used by the research team) to describe subordinated identity roles similarly characterized in ways both specific to game play and in terms of broader masculine behavior.³

The Power-gamer Identity: a Hegemonic Model

The Power-gamer identity was described by participants as adept at in-game combat. Several traits were noted as typical of Power-gamers, including strong personal character, independence, and aggression and athleticism. Interestingly, our respondents compared Power-gamer aggression to behavior which occurs in organized sports such as high school football. According to the participants, Power-gamers achieved significant success in the game (both in terms of ‘winning’ and in terms of storyline attention), and were identified as successful outside the context of the game, which also alludes to the link between masculine aggressive behavior and hegemonic status (Malaby 2007).

Michael and Trent described themselves as Power-gamers in the LARP context. Michael, a 27-year-old married college student, regularly chooses combat-oriented characters. When asked why he preferred these types of roles, Michael responded:

“The warrior role...is definitely a role that is more centered in the game than other roles. For me definitely it fits my personality a lot more because I am much more in the thick of action than a normal support character, but I would say, more than anything its because I get to fight stuff, and fighting...in respects to a sport, is pretty darn fun.”

Michael perceives the combative aspects of his gaming style as reflective of his personality, and he underscores the privileged position of combat-oriented characters by associating the combative aspects of the LARP with sports, a broadly acknowledged social stage (Connell 2000, Author, 2007) for hegemonic masculine displays. In noting the connection to sports and physical activity Michael works against stereotypical notions of RPGers as apathetic, unattractive and unathletic.

Similar to Michael, Trent stated that combative roles “fit his personality” and identifies his physical strength and agility as one of the reasons that he assumes a combative role in the game.

“I’d have to say that a lot of my personality comes out...I tend to be an alpha male, a lot more of my...I guess, drives that I have, are subconscious, and comes out in, like, live-action role-playing ‘cause then I might be more assertive than I normally would be, not that I’m not, but most of my characters I’d say are super assertive guys that when they put down how its gonna be, that’s how they do it.”

Trent and Michael identify with the element of aggression integral to the power-gamer identity, and recognized that this association with violence and dominance worked to their benefit in the context of the game as well as in their lives outside it.

Power-gamers as viewed by other game participants

Participants who do not tend to choose combat-oriented roles still associated power-gamers with positive markers such as the ability to ‘win’ in a game and the ability to secure more attention. In our discussions they also noted that power-gamers are physically skilled and possess dominant personalities. Jonathan, a 26-year-old who works as a short order cook, described power-gamers as “adept”, and able to accrue more wealth (and therefore more power) in the context of the game than the more support-oriented role-players like himself. “The power-gamer is usually associated with [good play] because the proactive group usually has more items than the reactive or passive group. That is just the way the game works.” According to Jonathan and several other participants in this study, qualities of hegemonic masculinity are noticed and rewarded in the game context, which indicates a structural bias in favor of players’ hegemonic performances. As a group participants noted that scenarios are often structured in ways that require physical confrontation for both initiation and resolution. This centering of the warrior is one example of the many ways in which hegemonic masculine values are institutionalized in game play.

James, a 27-year-old online retail employee, identified combative players as skilled at game play and also as being successful outside of the context of the game than players who choose more passive roles.

“Players who are more combat-oriented usually tend to be...good at it. It’s not just their skills they’ve bought through the game, it’s their...natural ability and they tend to gravitate towards that. It’s about physically what they can do...winning. Those kinds of people tend to be...people you wouldn’t know to see them on a daily basis that they LARP...you wouldn’t really think about it because they, you know...they...have jobs, and families and lives. People who role-play more tend to be more involved in the genre, so even if you see them, you may notice the way they dress, and how they stand out...not in a good way.”

James emphasizes the physical stature of combat-oriented players and goes on to identify them as people who are able to hold down jobs and, according to broadly held social norms, live a more empowered life outside of the game than players who adopt more role-play intensive identities in-game. This type of broad comparative valuing and devaluing was common in descriptions of players. Desirable traits in everyday society were associated with power-gamers, whereas undesirable traits were associated with role-players. This type of association contributes to the power of the masculine hierarchies that exist within the game.

Privileging the Warrior

During his interview, Jonathan recounted several stories of Power-players subordinating Role-players within the game context even when the structure of the game did not logically validate these acts.

“I was at a recent LARP traveling with a group of friends that...kept a very dark and mysterious attitude both in and out of the game, and they were also very straightforward. When their characters were insulted by another character, they were straightforward and demanded the apology or gave them two results: that they would either be cleaning a mess up from their character’s blood on the ground, or be on their knees apologizing. And because of this attitude and stuff, people feared this group of characters even though they only had third of the in game capabilities of most of the other players.”

When asked to explain this in more detail, Jonathan started out by emphasizing the group’s role-play ability, and quickly added that they were, “all extremely good players.” Jonathan then followed up with his definition of a good player:

“A good player is someone who is not just good at role-play, but also at the mechanics of the game as they can do the physical attributes...what it takes to play the game well. That either they’re good at the boffer combat or the throwing of bean bag packets. They’re skilled enough in those areas that people don’t really want to challenge them ‘cause they know that they’re gonna have to play two times harder to beat them even though like I said before they may be a third of the capabilities that they have.”

In this statement Jonathan conflated athletic skill with a dominant attitude in the game. He associated both qualities with an ability to compensate for weaker game statistics in a way that allowed Power-gamers to draw upon their athleticism and aggressive personalities to maintain hegemony. This is possible in part due to the construction of the game itself, where, as noted by Tychsen et al (2006), player to player interaction often occurs without the presence of a referee. In this way, the possibility for fulfillment of hegemonic desire is conscribed by external factors outside of game mechanics and in some ways beyond the scope of the game. These limitations work to maintain existing masculine hierarchies (Malaby, 2007).

The Role-player Identity: a subordinate model

The role-player identity is defined as subordinate to power gamers and characterized among participants by a lack of physical power and grace, poor game play, a weak personality, and awkward social skills. Being physically limited is seen as a primary reason role-players select less combative roles. According to participants, these roles offers weaker players the chance to feel needed, but also maintains their subordination and the entrenchment of existing masculine hierarchies (Connell 1987, 2000).

Timothy, a 28 year old artist who works at a bank, described some characteristics associated with his role-player identity. Timothy expressed a preference for more supportive roles, described his preferred game activities as being role-play centered, and positioned his game characters as “near the bottom” of the social hierarchy even though he has lengthy experience as a gamer and a member of his LARP chapter. Timothy explained that his preferred role in the game was that of a healer, a type of character that rarely engages in direct combat and occupies a supportive position relative to combat-oriented roles. Timothy went on to explain that his interest in these more supportive roles is reflective of his personality and his desires outside of the context of the game where he sees himself as a “great friend” a “creator”, and a “helper”. Much the same way that the power-gamers aligned their in- game and outside identities relative to hegemonic masculinities, Timothy chose less hegemonic characters in-game and spoke at length about his love for non-hegemonic activities such as cooking and knitting.

“I typically am a healer because they are always useful. [A healer] facilitates combat in the sense that it extends the length a combat can take and the amount of combat that can happen, but in and of itself it’s not combat-oriented...I really like portraying characters that have a lot of sort of trade skills, so they can produce things in game, although that’s frequently not very practical. I think that the trade skills...In real life I am a ceramicist; I make pots. I very much enjoy in life making things, cooking things, knitting things, so I think that’s obviously where that comes from.”

Timothy’s self-described aptitude in currently feminized skills, his social emotionality and empathy and his application of those aspects of his identity in the context of the game helps to explain the feminized way in many role-players are portrayed. In the context of larger masculine hierarchies, it also explains the rationale for its active subordination. As mentioned by Connell

(1987), masculine groupings are not static and must be maintained in the locales where they are presented.

Subordinating the Healer

Trent's opinions about why role-players adopt supportive roles in the game are characteristic of most of the responses we encountered, in that he closely associates players who adopt supportive roles with a desire for emotional support and need for affirmation.

“Just...like an emotional need or an emotional attachment. I mean, most people that I've seen play a healer class does...or at least if it is their first character, or their primary character, probably the largest thing would be they need some kind of commitment or need somebody or emotional support or what have you. That would be my opinion for why they might do it.”

This feminized characterization of the role-player was widespread among participants and contributed to the general subordination of those who chose the role-player identity in-game. Trent's comments underscore an oft-overlooked component of the structural maintenance of masculine hierarchies: the tendency of marginalized/subordinated males to join privileged males in validating the system that oppresses them (Connell 1987). As affirmed by all participants, this tendency can be observed in the similar framing of role-player characteristics around the belief that role-players are essentially less proficient at meeting the demands of the game. James' comments about the marginalization of role players due to their lesser skill were typical, as were his comments regarding the desire of marginalized players to gain hegemonic positions during game play:

“For instance, if the storyline is by some chance hooked (introduced) to a group that is more the mentally oriented people, a lot of times there's going to be combat involved in the resolution and they have the choice to bring people who are the best at that...the physically-oriented people, especially if they want success...But a lot of times they become uncomfortable and I think they even become a little jealous...This is kind of their opportunity to do their own thing without involving people who, I think to them, probably have had the upper hand kinda for a lot of their lives. But it doesn't usually work out for them.”

As James noted, the game structure is such that aggressive, combat-oriented players are given more attention and tend to advance more quickly than role players. When (as usually happens) storylines start with power-gamers, they are liable to exclude role-players from the action on the principle that they are not as useful in combat and may even be a detriment to the success of their group. In some cases, a power-gamer will require skills associated with role-players, but in these cases, according to the power-gamers we interviewed, the role-player is brought along to fulfill his specific task and is otherwise often considered dead weight. Role-players are often situated in game play as supporting actors to the power-gamer stars. This structure has a sorting effect to the extent that a line of awkward tension exists between the two groups that was identified by all participants. Several went on to say that role-players and power-gamers often avoid each other during an event. Michael described the situation in this way:

“It’s definitely a matter of the non-combative character or non-combative player...typically if they are avoiding the combative player or vice versa, its because maybe the combative player is a good athlete and the non-combative player is not a good athlete and would not be very good at combat, so maybe they are kind of avoiding that reality since they are playing the LARP to avoid reality.”

Timothy showed considerable frustration with his subordinated position in the game, especially when compared to what he perceived as the high degree of success typical of power-gamers. In an act of reflective agency (Author, 2009), he initially associated his frustration with a thoughtful unwillingness to force his way into the center of attention like power-gamers often do. When asked if he ever was the center of attention in a LARP game, Timothy responded:

“Yes, but it doesn’t happen very often because...I just don’t care a whole lot and I’m usually unwilling to bull my way to the forefront as you have to do because everyone wants to be the center of attention, and I always figure...I don’t care so much so I go ahead and let them do it and I am content with my supporting role.”

Later in our discussion Timothy admitted he had become increasingly frustrated by his subordinated position in the game to such an extent that he was considering abandoning LARPing.

“It just doesn’t hold a lot of pleasure for me anymore. I find it frustrating, I find it boring. I...don’t seem to manage to ever get anything that’s very interesting to happen, and whether that’s because I’m a curmudgeon or because I don’t have the right friends, or...I’m not sure why, but I don’t enjoy it anymore. I find it very boring and very expensive.”

Conclusions

To an extent unmatched in most RPG games, players in LARPS are expected to embody their avatar. This means that they are not only responsible for the creation of the game character but for that character’s presentation of consistent, believable actions and interactions over the course of the game, much of which is extemporaneous and can last up to a week. Thus, playing a character successfully requires considerable mental investment, as the participant has to develop a lifetime of history for the character in order to create, as Wallis (1994) describes, “a library of experiences and references which define their [character’s] past and present. (p. 86). The verisimilitude of developed characters is part of what makes the game so pleasurable for the players. The sheer scope of this requirement makes it understandable that the players often draw upon their own identities and life experiences in the creation and performance of their characters. It is due to this creation and performance of characters by individual players that Fine (1983) argues that the local culture of each game does not exist in the abstract. Instead, it is determined anew in the interactions among players and is grounded in their own non-LARPING lives. To some extent, the physical embodiment of characters and direct, non-representational interactions creates a unique environment among role-playing games. In the realm of LARPING, primary

masculine hegemonic qualities such as physical size, power, and capacity for violence directly affect game play. Taylor (2009) notes that MMOG's allow players opportunities to construct characters that do not reflect their off-screen personas. This freedom of identity seems less available to the male LARPer we interviewed, however.

The LARPer who participated in this study play within a social structure where physicality, assertiveness and independence were lauded and traits such as an orientation towards teamwork, support and empathy were marginalized. This leads to the construction of a masculine hierarchy not far different from traditional arenas of masculine identity performance such as the playing field and job site.

Hegemonic masculinity constructed as the antithesis of the feminine draws upon a variety of resources to maintain its power. Connell (1987) notes that while physical force can support the ascendancy of hegemonic maleness, mutual agreement and acclaim for hegemonic forms keep them in power. In other words, because the values of hegemonic masculinity are embedded in multiple cultural forms, marginalized and subordinated groups recognize and then validate hegemonic forms of masculinity along with the privileged, dominant groups. In the LARP setting, this occurs in a variety of ways, the most powerful being the structuring of the game scenarios to center hegemonic masculinity. This includes promoting actual physical violence as a means of resolving conflict. This structure works to maintain existing hegemonic hierarchies within the game, creating an environment that does not, in fact, serve as a field of desire where hegemony can be easily performed by otherwise non-hegemonic individuals.

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¹ While this study focuses on male perceptions of LARPing and the power relations within, it is important to keep in mind Taylor's (2009) reminder that females can and do find success and pleasure in this environment as well.

² More detailed rules and information regarding NERO, the organization we studied, can be found at <http://www.nerolarp.com>

³ These categories are not to be confused with Taylor's (2009) similar categories, power and casual gamers, which focuses more on the level of investment in game play and less on the power relations between them. The fact that our participants identified LARPer who dominate in-game as also more successful and engaged in the word beyond indicate another difference between LARPer and other RPG settings that seems worthy of additional study.