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## **11 Performance Studies and Role-Playing Games**

*Sarah Hoover; David Simkins; Sebastian Deterding; David Meldman; Amanda Brown*

Role play is a form of performance. We take on roles, speak and use body language to represent our character – our own or through an avatar. We engage in verbal storytelling and we take actions in the character’s world. This chapter explores the relationship between role play and performance by drawing connections with theories and practices of social science and the performing arts fields.

Role play and performance can be viewed through the lenses of ritual and play. We commonly think of ritual as connected only to the religious, but in the social science sense, we see all cultural ceremonies as combining ritual and play.

Sporting events, office meetings, court rooms, and the way friends greet each other on the street all engage in ritual. Any activity in which rules surround action is ritual; any activity in which there is room for experimentation is play.

The connections between ritual, performance, theater and role play are not recent realizations. Though modern role-playing games (RPGs) sprouted more from military wargaming than from theater, from the beginning, RPGs were seen as an interesting way of telling stories, playing characters, exploring themes, and recasting traditional performance rituals in a new and personal light. Early in the development of RPGs, M.A.R. Barker's Thursday night group was using it for collaborative storytelling (Fine 2002, 144). Greg Stafford was exploring ritual and myth (2012). Bruce Young's interactive theater show, "Dungeon Master LIVE!" (1983), brought fantasy RPGs to the stage in what was already a combination of game and theater event. Whether looking to the groundwork for the field of RPG studies or seeking ways of enhancing role play experience, we are wise to look to our cousins in theater and performance studies.

This chapter begins with the basis of role play as ritual performance, moves to an exploration of how we understand the rules of performative play and then finishes with a contextualization of theater and role play theory and practice. Throughout

we will discuss some concepts and techniques from performance that can enhance our understanding of role play.

## **Performance and Ritual**

Many scholars in anthropology, philosophy, and theater have noted deep similarities among a cluster of universal human practices commonly called *performance* or *ritual*: play, ritual, shamanism, magic, theater, sports, dance, music, art-making, story-telling, celebrations and many others (Schechner 2002, 11). Some argue that these similarities stem from a shared historical origin: at the beginning of human culture, play and ritual formed one intertwined *sacer ludus*, holy game, and from it, drama and the other performance genres sprang (Schechner 2003, 1–6; Huizinga 1949). Others explain story-telling and art-making evolutionarily as cognitive play with form that is adaptive because it facilitates cultural innovation and trains pattern recognition, causal reasoning, and inferring the internal states of others (Boyd 2009; Dutton 2009). Yet others hold that such origin stories will always remain speculative and thus of little use (Schechner 2003, 7).

***Ritual: A type or style of action where behaviors are stylized such that they lose immediate practical function and gain experiential and meaning-making functions. For instance, the ritual of drinking wine during Christian Eucharist***

*does not serve to quench thirst, but to remind Christians of Christ's sacrifice and union with them.*

Call-out 11.1: Ritual

However one may explain the formal similarities of performances, contemporary RPGs unquestionably share many of them. Indeed, RPGs have often been likened to performance genres like pretense play and ritual (Harviainen and Lieberoth 2012), theater (Simkins 2015), or narrative (Mackay 2001), and several scholars have explicitly engaged in comparing RPGs with or framing them as theater, ritual, or performance more generally (Bergström 2012; Bowman 2015b; Bowman 2015c; Bowman 2010; Harviainen and Lieberoth 2012; Stenros 2013; Montola and Stenros 2010).

Many designers and players have intentionally incorporated aspects of other performance genres into their RPGs. Finally, when designers create RPGs or players encounter them, they do so already informed by their cultural knowledge of the other performance genres. Hence, regardless of whether theater or narrative or others 'directly influenced' the first RPGs (and how could they not have, given their cultural ubiquity?), viewing RPGs through the lens of performance can enrich our understanding of them. To this end, the present section articulates and relates central features, types, and functions of performance to RPGs.

## **Characteristics**

So to begin: What prototypical features are found across different kinds of performance? First, performances are “restored” or “twice-behaved” behaviors: they are something people repeat, practice, prepare for, rehearse – and/or the transformed repetition of some *other* behavior (Schechner 2002, 22). In theater, both are the case: actors rehearse a script, and the script is the representation of other, fictional behaviors.

***Performance: Restored behavior, that is, behavior that is repeated, practiced, prepared for, rehearsed, or representing some other behavior. Apart from being (1) restored behaviors, performances are usually (2) enacted with an audience in mind, (3) ritualized, (4) producing new meanings, and (5) made-special, designed to stand out of the ‘everyday’.***

Call-out 11.2: Performance

Second, performances are often intended to affect observing participants (2002, 23). They frequently entail the situational roles of actor and spectator, although the two roles can coincide in the same persons. Even solitary religious rituals are usually directed at an audience – albeit a supernatural one.

Third, performances are “ritualized” (Stephenson 2015, 8–20): they involve behaviors and objects that are exaggerated, emphasized, formalized, patterned according to a socially shared knowledge of forms, in short made more readily recognizable to increase their communicative function, sometimes to the point where behavior loses any practical effect and becomes purely symbolic. Alland (1977) coined the useful term “transformation-representation” to describe this process for art-making: materials, events and actions are modulated such that they gain a new socially legitimate representational function. As a result, performances are usually “non-productive” in terms of immediate bodily survival or economic gain (Schechner 2003, 11–12). This does not mean that performances can’t have any practical social effects (instantiating a new king) or even bodily ones: in the course of a Christian sacrament, people do eat bread and drink wine. It just means that symbolic meanings and connected experiences are the legitimate main purpose of a performance.

As a result – fourth –, the actions and props of performances instantiate a shared frame of meanings (**see chapter 12**): these may be primary social meanings like “married” in the case of a wedding ritual, or secondary fictional meanings like ‘cops and robbers chasing each other’ in the case of play. A frequent experiential quality of performances is the iridescent simultaneity of meanings that Droogers

(Droogers 1996, 53) called “the *ludic*”: “the capacity to deal simultaneously and subjunctively with two or more ways of classifying reality.”

Fifth and finally, performances are “made special” (Dissanayake 1999), designed to stand out from the stream of everyday life. They organize space, time, and action (Schechner 2003, 8–10, 12–15) to temporarily excite and bind heightened levels of joint arousal, affect, and attention. This typically involves *compressing* behaviors and events into one tightly interwoven spatial and temporal knot, and *bracketing* them from everyday life through spatial, temporal, and communicative bounds (see **chapter 12**). Also, this means that performances are enacted and attended to with special care – or at least *expected* to be. Effort and skill is put into the design of behavioral and material forms, and there is usually at least some appreciation and enjoyment of such artistic craftsmanship.

### **Functions of Performance**

Given these characteristics, the question arises: *why* do performances entail them? For what function or effect? Anthropologists have long argued that rituals serve to reproduce the social order, ties, and power structures of a group (Stephenson 2015). By stoking intense experiences of *shared* emotion, attention, understanding, and action, they create *communitas* (Turner 1982) or “effervescence” (Durkheim 1964; Collins 2004): a ‘we’-feeling of group

belonging, unity, solidarity. In addition, performances like rites, theater plays, or sagas often depict (and thus, teach and reinforce) the group's myths – perceived self-evident stories that integrate personal experience with basic assumptions how the world and group does and should operate (E. A. Schultz and Lavenda 2005, 195). Through 'making special', performances focus attention, stoke emotion and thus, facilitate memorization of what is important to a culture (Dissanayake 1999).

**[Box 11.1 here]**

Ritual theorist Victor Turner (1982) offered another useful functional-historical distinction between *liminal* and *liminoid* performances. Roughly speaking, Turner held that in pre-modern societies, ritual and other performances are fully integrated in the social order. All of life is one cosmic ritual "work of the Gods": religious service, social order, and private life fall into one. In theory, performances like rites of passage or carnival could perturb this unity as they often entail a socially risky "threshold" (lat. *limen*) phase of disorder, chaos, playful inversion and recombination of "proper" forms of conduct. Yet this temporary state of *liminality* is safely couched and functionalized: it serves to discharge energies of dissent and dissatisfaction and to show the horror of being thrown into the chaos outside the group. In contrast, in modern, secularized,

individualist cultures, performances retain many of their formal features, yet they become dislodged from their religious and social embedding and function. In Turner's word, they become *liminoid*, not liminal: Modern art, theater, literature is set free to critique society or be enjoyed for its own sake; parties, games, movies, sports and other events are still "made special" in that they are designed to excite and bind attention, arousal, and affect, but chiefly as private options not public (let alone religious) obligations, and for no higher purpose than personal leisure, entertainment, and socializing.

### **RPGs as Performance**

Restored, audience-involving, ritualized, meaning-making, made-special behaviors; *communitas*; events that model, present, and re-present social life and myths; the liminal and the liminoid – these are just brief excerpts from the lively fields of *performance studies* (Schechner 2002) and *ritual studies* (Stephenson 2015). Even so, viewing RPGs in the context of their performance precursors and parallels readily generates some valuable observations.

First, comparing RPGs to the characteristics of performance quickly deflates the exceptionalism of early game scholarship which portrayed games as set apart from other human practices by formal features commonly subsumed under the label "magic circle" (Stenros 2014). For as Huizinga (1949) himself already

noted, these features *unite* RPGs (and games more generally) with performance practices. For instance, viewing both RPGs and art-making as performance puts the question “can RPGs be art?” on a very different footing (see e.g. Stenros 2010, 305–6). Like other performances, RPGs involve *restored, transformed-represented behaviors*, though interestingly with the generative openness of pretense play or sports. Actions in RPGs are always *communicative*, ranging from the fully symbolic (pixels and sounds in computer RPGs, verbal descriptions in tabletop RPGs) to the iconic in live-action role-play (larp). The shared creation of a *frame of meanings* is recognized as a core characteristic of RPGs (**see chapter 12**). What Dissanayake describes as *making special*, game scholars know well as the avowed main goal of playing RPGs – ‘fun’, ‘immersion’ or ‘engagement’ – and the so-called magic circle (**see chapter 22**). And RPGs are noted to evoke feelings of *communitas* and form and be carried by strong communities of play around them (e.g. Pearce and Boellstorff 2009) (**see chapter 21**).

Beyond deflating the exceptionalism of RPGs, a comparison with common formal features of performances also foregrounds interesting specifics of RPGs that are only beginning to receive research attention: For instance, as in e.g. pretense play, rituals or happenings, RPG participants are both *actors and spectators* (of their and the other players’ characters’ actions) at the same time (Stenros 2013). Larp scholars Like Stenros (2010, 2013) or MacDonald (2014) have traced the

difference between the “beautiful to watch” stage aesthetic of traditional theater, where the audience is in a pure spectator role, and the “beautiful to do” immersed aesthetic of larp or Happenings (Kaprow 1959), characterized by a so-called first person audience: to access the (embodied, co-creative, emergent) intended aesthetic experience of the piece, one has to perform, become an actor. In a certain sense, many RPGs restore the iridescent simultaneity of experiential stances characteristic for early childhood pretense play, where children fluidly switch between enacting, narrating, observing, directing, etc. (Boyd 2009, 177). Additionally, they often have secondary, ‘delayed’ audiences in that players commonly re-tell the events of a gaming session as a story, supported by e.g. photography (in larp) or in-game video in multiplayer online RPGs (MORPGs).

Second, the manifold *ritualizations* around RPGs is a noteworthy phenomenon: Tabletop RPG (TRPG) groups for instance tend to fall into a script of typical talking, playing, and eating times during gaming sessions. MORPG players often go through celebratory rituals after a successful shared raids. Workshopping or debriefing are similar ritualized pre- and post-game bracketing activities in larps (Bowman 2014). RPGs often contain the re-enactment of rituals or performances within their own performance (Bowman 2015a). And RPGs in general heavily feed off of genre fiction rich in tropes that provide easily recognizable forms for composing characters, actions, and scenes.

A performance view furthermore provides conceptual tools for understanding the social function and role of RPGs more broadly: while cast predominantly as modernist liminoid entertainment, RPGs like other performance genres still always exist in a dialectic of efficacy and entertainment (Schechner 2003, 129–152). Intentionally or not, they are always potentially events that present basic stories and assumptions about the world and society, as e.g. the discourse around gender stereotypes in RPGs readily shows (**see chapter 26**). As communal events and events in which players interact with social groups (real or virtual), they necessarily reinforce groups and with them, group-internal power structures and in-group/out-group distinctions. Beyond that, indie TRPGs and larps have begun experimenting with using RPGs as events that re-present – reflect and critique society – and even events that model – through stoking morally transformative experiences, but also directly, e.g. by raising moral questions for players, as in the TRPG *Dogs in the Vineyard* (Baker 2004) or LARP collection *#Feminism Nano-Games* (Bushyager, Stark, and Westerling 2016), or by situating larps in public space as a form of protest, such as *Amerika*, a Weltschmerz Network larp (2000).

Seeing these continuities opens RPG design and research up to the stores of practical and theoretical knowledge in performance studies how these kinds of events work, how to design them, and opens important areas of criticism. And as

noted, the forms and functions of performance are but a fraction of these stores: liveness, embodiment, the relation between script and performance, the processes, practices, and phenomenologies of performing and many other strands of research await the interested RPG scholar.

## **Theater Histories**

Role play and RPGs show close formal ties to and influences from the many practices of theater and performance. Formalized performance dates to prehistory, but three important historical eras impact RPG and their design most strongly: Ancient Greek theater with its categorization of narrative structures and ideals of dramatic presentation; Realism's valorization of mimesis, audience / performance separation, and psychophysical acting techniques; and the current postdramatic era, still being developed, in which multiple texts and many viewpoints are interpreted by many collaborators and contributors. This section surveys structures, intentions and interactions in these historical theatrical forms to suggest parallels to and concepts for RPG design, critique and analysis.

### **Ancient Greek Theater**

Theater emerged as a dialogic medium of group performance during the fifth century BCE. Though remaining records are sparse, we have some works of playwrights such as Aeschylus (525-456 BCE), Sophocles (d. 406 BCE), and

Euripides (480-406 BCE); some material evidence remains of spaces, costumes, and traditions ( Green 1996; Ashby 1999). Long tragedies and short Satyr plays (ribald comedies) were performed alongside rituals and games at festivals. These brought attention to important historical and civic issues, “involving the audience symbolically, architecturally and in the conduct of the performance” (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998, 50). Masked actors represented heroes, witnesses and judges while choruses, speaking and moving in unison, narrated action and reacted to events on stage, establishing an affective link between audience and performance. Performances stimulated pity and awe, ‘purging’ the audience of these emotions in a process called *catharsis* (Walcot 1976, 4–5; Sata 2008, 464). Pohjola proposes that for chorus members in these early Greek performances the experience was “that of a participatory ritual”, similar to the embodied ritual of many larps. By Aeschylus’ plays (c. 525-456 BCE), however, the role of the chorus had declined significantly and actors performed a greater number of individual characters.

In 335 BCE, Aristotle (384-322 BCE) wrote his *Poetics* to advocate for a formalist narrative structure and analysis. According to Aristotle, the best tragedies contain six dramatic elements: plot, character, thought, diction, song and spectacle, of which the most important are plot and character. Aristotle claimed that the best plots involve a three-part narrative. First, *peripetia* or reversal of

fortune caused by a serious mistake (*hamartia*) and not by evil, next *anagnorsis* or moment of insight, then *catastrophe* or downturn of the protagonist's status that develops into *pathos*, a destructive or painful action (Nellhaus 2016, 63–64).

Neo-classical theater theorists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century used Aristotle's writing to enforce three unities of action, time and place (Howarth, Clarke, and Wickham 2008). The unities required a play to have one action and minimal subplots, to occur over no more than one day, and to exist in a single physical space. These concepts have found their way into contemporary RPG scholarship. RPG narratologist Mackay argues that dramatic elements, three-part narrative and the unities all enhance the "continuous flow from author through narrator and narratee to the reader" (Mackay 2001, 132) in theatre as well as in RPGs. While such narrative flow may break in RPGs through load times or side conversations, players repair the experience "into an aesthetic object encased within an Aristotelian narrative" (2001, 133) when re-telling in-game events. Similarly, interactive drama and narrative in and beyond CRPG has seen a number of Neo-Aristotelian scholars expanding Aristotle with considerations around aesthetic categorization (Murray 1998) or the design of player agency through affordances and restraints (Laurel 1991; Mateas 2004).

## **Realism**

Realism emerged in the 1880s at the same time as psychology. Both used the physical and biological sciences to “explore questions about human nature” (D. Schultz and Schultz 2008, 4). Three-walled box stage sets, influenced by the new technologies of photography and gas or electric lighting, introduced accuracy in intimate detail and the *fourth wall*, a concept that placed a passive audience (for the first time sitting in the dark) behind an invisible barrier watching characters presumably unconscious of their presence. Combined with the unified vision of a director (also a new development), Realism placed the events of characters’ internal and external lives under a microscope.

*The Fourth Wall: The convention that stage performers focus attention and interaction solely on the fictional world on stage, ignoring the audience as if an invisible wall separated the two. In so-called “box set” stage designs popularized in 19th century Realist theater, the stage is framed by three occluding walls to the back, open to the audience only in the front through the Proscenium arch. As performers ignore the audience, they act as if there were an additional imaginary “fourth wall” going through the Proscenium arch separating stage and audience. “Breaking the fourth wall” refers to instances where this convention is violated, for instance by performers directly addressing the audience.*

Call-out 11.3: The Fourth Wall

The Realist stage with its interest in photo-accuracy reproducing a ‘real’ landscape directly links to RPG work interested in “360 degree immersion” (see **chapter 22**). Likewise, Realist actors and followers of Stanislavsky’s (2013) system and its adaptation, “The Method”, seek to produce a psychological space in which the character completely inhabits the body of the actor. This is comparable to the motivations of immersionist LARPer as described by Pohjola (2004) and Bøckman (2003). Bowman (2016) compares these to the intention of method actors to live “truthfully under imaginary circumstances” (Meisner and Longwell 1987).

### **Postdramatic Theater**

Similarly, RPG designers may find connection to and inspiration in postdramatic theatre, as it incorporates participation, a variety of performance activities, and multiple narratives (or none). Postdramatic theater has its roots in the individualism, public spectacles and skepticism of established social and political institutions, technological advances and cultural exchange characteristic of the West since 1960. This section will touch on three main characteristics of the form: rejection of literary text as the primary mode; the breaking of boundaries between audience and performer; and methods of making which focus on collaborative exploration ‘from the ground up’.

Karen Jürs-Munby, in her introduction to Lehmann's seminal *Postdramatic Theater*, discusses "a renewed attention to the materiality of performance in theater and in renewed challenges to the dominance of the text" (2006, 6) in the 1960s demonstrated in Happenings (Kaprow 1959), Fluxus events (see Ruhé 1998), and forms like Environmental Art, Performance Art, Devised Theater, etc. This focus on the *materiality* of performance results in "a simultaneous and multi-perspectival form of perceiving" (Lehmann 2006, 16), an example of which is Robert Wilson's *Einstein on the Beach* (1976, with restagings through 2017). The opera/play is structured as a sequence of three different kinds of space. Within these, repetitions of tone, words, and actions (pressing keys, raising a telescope) suggest the bones of a narrative that audiences develop imaginatively and individually. Postdramatic performances (even virtual performances like *Telematic Dreaming* (1994) which highlight the absence of the body) use the materiality of the human body in space as a medium. This echoes abstract larps such as *Luminescence* with its sensory stimulations of sight (harsh neon green lighting and simple white clothing), sound (abstract soundtracks and obscure voiceovers), and touch (800 kg of white flour on the floor) (Pohjola and Pettersson 2004).

Postdramatic theater is also characterized by boundary-breaking. Improvisation breaks boundaries of authorship as well as psychological and phenomenological boundaries. For example, Johnstone's Impro techniques (1987; Bowman 2015b) invite a reflexive dual consciousness within the same body. Theaters escape from theatrical spaces in attempts to disrupt and "make strange" (Shklovsky 1917) daily life. One example are pervasive theater games such as Blast Theory's *Uncle Roy All Around You* (Flintham et al. 2003) or *Abstract Tours* (Ruggeri 2001). Another is theater in the public space such as Augusto Boal's *Invisible Theater* (1993), which stage performances designed to raise political questions for bystanders. These techniques have been borrowed by larps such as Belarbi's *Foreningen Visionara Vetenskapsmans Arliga Kongress* (1996). Site-specific theater, another contemporary form, breaks temporal boundaries by incorporating the history of a location and "haunting" the performance with actual events (Carlson 2003; Kaye 2004).

Many postdramatic theaters break boundaries between the roles of spectator and audience. Boal's Forum Theater (1993) stages situations of oppression drawn from the community, then asks audience members to suggest (and eventually embody) actions the protagonist can take to resist or escape. Addressing MORPGs such as *The Sims* (Wright 2000), game designer Gonzalo Frasca (2004)

early on suggested that RPGs could be used to break boundaries in similar ways, practicing or enacting resistance.

*Immersive Theater: A contemporary theatric form that surrounds audiences with the aesthetic and fictional space of the performance, often allowing audience members to move through or interact with it. Productions of the British company Punchdrunk like Sleep No More (2003) are popular examples. Immersive theater pieces are often theme park-like, site-specific immersive installations as much as performances in them. In contrast to larp, audience members tend not to become 'full' performers co-creating the flow of events with the actors.*

Call-out 11.4: Immersive Theater

Contemporary immersive theaters such as Punchdrunk or ANU meticulously stage an environment in which audience members might bodily follow actors through their scenes, explore the set for character and plot revelations, and interact with varying degrees of agency. In some cases, lack of agency is designed to evoke an affective link to characters' experiences. In ANU's *Laundry* (Lowe 2011), participants encounter characters incarcerated in the Magdalene laundries, industrial prisons for women whose families and communities identified them as

having illicit sexual desires or experiences, thus emphasizing the women's and participants' lack of agency.

During the 1950s and 1960s, a concern with the creative process itself as opposed to the product of the performance led many theater companies to experiment with collaborative means of production. Challenging “the cult of the artist” (Stenros 2010, 304), they democratized the devising, rehearsal, and economic processes of theater by removing distinctions between creators, directors, performers and audiences. RPG designers must face similar questions as did these theater-makers, asking who the ‘we’ is in a collaboration, who benefits from it, and how structures of collaboration function toward specific ends (Flanagan 2009).

### **[Box 11.2]**

#### **Phenomena**

A useful way of understanding role-play and performance is examining their particular experiential qualities. We here will focus on four particular ones: liveness, presence, the aesthetics of action, and the phenomenology of playing a role.

#### **Liveness and Presence**

Two key terms in which scholars have tried to capture the experiential and aesthetic specifics of theatre are *liveness* and *presence*. Theatre unfolds ‘live’: an unrepeatable stretch of events and experiences here and now, at a particular juncture of time, space, and people, with some opening to the unexpected and spontaneous. However many recordings might be taken of the event, some essential quality of experience will be lost in them, only remaining in the shared memory of those that were present (Reason 2004). This theatre shares with RPG play. No matter how many times a piece or game is played, it will never be the same because players never interact exactly the same way.

But what is the specific, non-recordable quality of experience of being present at a ‘live’ event? Gumbrecht and others have called it *presence*: the immediate embodied, sensual and material experience of things and people, the emotional charging of interacting in bodily co-presence with others is something that media and analysis focused on representation and meaning cannot capture (Gumbrecht 2004, Power 2008). Current immersive and interactive theater forms like many larps try to maximize such presence by making the spectator a bodily participant within the performance, not separated by architecture or a fourth wall. The underlying assumption is that this deep emotional embodied experience is more likely to affect or even alter participants (Giannachi and Kaye 2011).

## **Aesthetics of Action**

Coming from RPGs not theater, Stenros and MacDonald (2013) have tried to articulate the unique aesthetics or “beauty” of larp as a co-creative game/performance. First, the meaning and experience of larps occur embodied in the player: “They are *beautiful to do*, but not necessarily interesting to watch”. Second, they are rule-bound. The experience of traditional film and theater is also enabled by shared (social) rules, but they are usually implicit, taken for granted, and not subject to change or explicit upfront negotiation. What such explicit rules negotiation and agreement allows is a space for new kinds of bodily shared interaction, such as role-playing intimate encounters. Third, larps are co-creative, requiring essential input from all participants and therefore not determined by any one participant or author. Hence, fourth, they are *emergent*, meaning that the resultant experiences cannot be predicted, but can (and have to be) afforded by careful preparation to create the right conditions (in materials, expectations, people’s moods, etc.) for desired experiences to come about. Fifth, they are *reflexive*: players experience both fictive and real worlds in a dialogic relationship. Finally, pretending together or *inter-immersion* is a key requirement and source of engagement. Some contemporary theater, such as Coney’s *A Small Town Anywhere* (Stevens 2009), may fit the requirements for LARP under these aesthetics. Coney frames the event as theater, but we may still evaluate it through

the lens of Aesthetics of Action. Similarly, designers of other forms of RPG may find inspiration and guidance in Stenros' and MacDonald's theory.

### **Phenomenology of Performance**

As Stenros and Macdonald capture in the term “reflexive”, the process of performance involves some consciousness *that* we perform and some ‘quotation’ of our selves (States 1983) within the performance. Some may see this a distraction and therefore seek to minimize it to increase mimetic virtuosity, a sense of realism, or immersion (**see chapter 22**). But it is likewise a possible strategy “to pursue the thing as it is given to consciousness in direct experience” (Garner 1994, 1), to explore the experiences and meaning-making that arise when we both explore the performance bodily and retain reflexive consciousness of our performance and the meanings that arise from its intersection with the many other ‘texts’ present.

Many postdramatic theater forms seek to make familiar objects and actions strange in this way in order to imbue them with new meaning created in the dramatic process, deconstructing them, drawing out certain characteristics, or placing them in different contexts. For instance, so-called devised theatre (Oddey 1994), where the performers collaboratively develop the script to be performed, includes methods that allow to understand objects or actions in multiple modes at

once. One technique is to allow layers of time to be present at once, for instance by making a character's past choices visible as objects or people. The usually implicit process by which humans 'quote' their histories becomes a tool of dramatic character exploration, exposition, or relationship building between characters. Some experimental forms of larp explicitly seek to express and work with similar phenomenological processes. Jeepform, black box, and arthouse larp often use these techniques on the surface (**see chapter 5**), but many other forms, digital and analog, can benefit from pushing beyond a rudimentary understanding of realism into a more robust understanding of experience and meaning making through role-play.

## **Summary**

Role play is both part of everyday experience since the origins of humankind, readily visible in children's pretense play, and part of formalized genres of human action, including theater and RPGs. This chapter invited to read both through the lens of performance studies. Seen this way, theater and RPGs share roots and formal characteristics as forms of performance – behavior that is restored, stylized, made special, often audience-facing, and forfeiting a primarily practical function to stoke experience and meaning-making. Performances can reproduce, critique, or transform individuals and the societies in which they live, and we found theatric and RPG examples for each. A historical survey of Aristotelian,

Realist, and Postdramatic theater found parallels, connections, influences and inspirations aplenty. Contemporary postdramatic theater genres like immersive theater in particular share many aesthetic goals, forms, and techniques with contemporary larp, from high production value, 360 degree staged immersive environments to collaborative story creation and the desire to afford lasting emotional experiences by pushing formal and social boundaries. Both are united experientially in affording liveness, presence, and an “aesthetic of action,” a split consciousness between ‘being in character’ and being aware of performing. Across concepts, histories, and experiences, performance studies and RPGs have much to offer to each other. By applying and comparing the familiar to the unfamiliar, we can bring new life and interest to both.

### **Box 11.1: Three Functional Forms of Performance**

Anthropologist Don Handelman (1998) has developed a useful typology of three functional forms of performances (which he calls “public events”). First are *events that model* social reality. These structure action to achieve a certain change of affairs. Common examples are rites of passage, weddings, drug trips, or evangelical services: they all exist to transform the social status of participants through witnessed acts and/or the participants’ beliefs and values through a literally transformative experience. Then there are *events that present*: military parades, religious processions, political rallies, in short, events that present the

normative ideal of conduct and order in that group. Third are *events that re-present*, that compare and contrast social reality – be it that they decry a fall from grace, critique the group’s order and myths themselves, or present visions of alternative orders, myths, realities. Medieval carnival, Brechtian theater, or public protests are ready examples.

### **Box 11.2: Critiques of Immersive Performance**

One might assume that performance studies wholeheartedly embrace immersive, interactive, collaborative, boundary-breaking performances that seek to transform their audiences and surrounding societies, such as they can be found in contemporary postdramatic and ‘immersive’ theater or larps. Yet there are also criticisms. Take German playwright and director Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), whose Critical Realism sought to shift the passive consumer of Realist theater into an “active producer of meaning” who would recognize that oppressive behaviors and structures found in the world and re-performed on stage are just as contingent as a theatric performance, and therefore change them – a rhetoric very much in line with contemporary activist larps (Belsey 2003, 126, 175–79). Critics, however, respond that this logic absolves procedural authors (White 2013) for the oppressions that are almost inevitably re-performed within the creation and performance of these events. When you bully someone on stage to rally against bullying, you still bully that person on stage. This becomes all the more

problematic as postdramatic theatre and larp move toward embodied participation. While the intense affect of embodied experience can be a potent tool of social critique, it can also create traumatic experiences and remove objectivity (Haughton 2014). Performance can slip into voyeurism (Maples 2016). Larp theorists often examine such issues under the label “bleed,” capturing how the thoughts and feelings of a player are influenced by her character and vice versa (Gerge and Widing 2006) (**see chapter 23**). Finally, high-profile immersive theatrical events have also been criticized as money-making “experience machines” where the critical objectivity of an audience’s experiential separation from the performance is traded for a hedonist pursuit of desirable affective experience (Nozick 1974, 42–45; Alston 2016).

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## **Key Terms**

Ritual

Performance

Fourth Wall

Immersive Theater