

Think Larp - Academic Writings from KP2011
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Editor-in-Chief

Thomas Duus Henriksen

Editors

Christian Bierlich
Kasper Friis Hansen
Valdemar Kølbe

Layout

Claus Raasted

Cover Art

Lars Munck

Proofreading

Claus Raasted
Jonas Trier-Knudsen
Nathan Hook
Nicolai Paulsen
Peter Michael Lintrup
Robert Harry Evans
Simon Rosell Holt
Tobias Demediuk Bindslet

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Attention! Please read!

There have been many developments in Japan since 2012, including the establishment of half a dozen larp circles (starting in Iruma, followed by one near Nagoya, in Chiba, Osaka, and on Shikoku), so that parts of this article are no longer reflecting the current state of affairs. For updates on “Larp in Japan,” please thus have a look at the following articles:

Kamm, B-O. 2019. ‘Adapting Live-Action Role-Play in Japan — How German “Roots” Do Not Destine Japanese “Routes”’. *Replaying Japan*, no. 1: 64–78. Available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10367/11682>

Kamm, B-O. 2015. ‘Die Kraft von nur 100 Yen – Larp in Japan’ [The Power of Just 100 Yen – Larp in Japan]. In *LARP: Zeug. Aufsatzsammlung Zum Mittelpunkt 2015*, edited by Rafael Bienia and Gerke Schlickmann, 17–36. Braunschweig: Zauberfeder.

THINK
LARP
Academic Writings from KP2011

Edited by

Thomas Duus Henriksen
Christian Bierlich
Kasper Friis Hansen
Valdemar Kølbe

Dedication

This book has been made as a part of Knudepunkt 2011 in Denmark.

Knudepunkt is an annual Nordic Larp conference organised by Bifrost, the Danish National Organisation that promotes roleplaying and other creative activities.

The conference, the book and all the other wonderful things happening in conjunction with the conference could not have been possible without the volunteers of the Knudepunkt 2011 team:

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Anders Berner
Marie Holm-Andersen
Nynne Søs Rasmussen
Carsten Prag
Claus Raasted

Social

Sofie Falk
Anna Emilie Groth
Marie Holm-Andersen
Jesper Kristiansen
Juliane Mikkelsen
Carsten Prag
Claus Raasted
Kristoffer Thurøe
Helene Willer

Program

Tobias Bindslet
Jakob Givskud
Marie Holm-Andersen
Bjarke Pedersen
Nynne Søs Rasmussen

Books

Lars Andresen
Christian Bierlich
Tobias Bindslet
Charles Bo Nielsen
Louisa Carbonelli
Thomas Duus Henriksen

Kasper Friis
Jesper Heebøll
Valdemar Kølbe
Marie Oscilowski
Claus Raasted

Fundraising

Troels Barkholt
Christian Bierlich
Jakob Givskud
Marie Holm-Andersen
Carsten Prag
Nynne Søs Rasmussen
Helene Willer

Logistics

Troels Barkholt
Kasper Sjøgren

Communication

Troels Barkholt
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Troels Barkholt
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Why Japan does not Larp

Björn-Ole Kamm

Keywords

Japan, Larp, Qualitative Research, Symbolic Interactionsim, Uses & Gratifications

Even though similar practices like cosplay (masquerading as media characters) exist in Japan, larp is quite unheard of. The aim of this study is to understand why Japanese roleplayers do not see larp as an activity they can easily adopt. Instead of following a common, Western research perspective on Japan that repeats notions of Japanese uniqueness, an interactionist approach is adopted. This is done by engaging in actual exchange with the researched subjects, and through the introduction of a theoretical model for the process of experience evaluation in order to understand how former experiences form expectations. It shows the importance of individual ascriptions of meaning and their connection to the historical, discursive, societal and personal contexts that frame these meanings. Fieldwork and qualitative interviews were conducted and analyzed in respect to larp in Japan. The interviews were later contrasted with the interviewees' experience of a mini-larp. Most players expressed a desire to learn about larps and try them but felt uneasy regarding the space and time restrictions they experienced in Japan. These restrictions have influenced roleplaying tremendously and have formed the expectations towards what roleplaying encompasses — and what people deem possible. Especially the perceived non-availability of knowledge about larp and of space is of importance.

Japan's popular culture has spread all over the globe. Console games, and later comics (*manga*) and animations (*anime*), have become part of everyday media in many countries. Where Japanese anime characters go, *cosplaying* — dressing-up as said characters — inevitably seems to follow. At first glance, *cosplay* appears to share similarities with larp (live action role-play). Additionally, local roleplaying (RPG) and larping groups in Europe and the Americas often share a population with *cosplaying* communities to a certain extent.

Those familiar with both practices express surprise when they learn that larp is almost unheard of in Japan. Where there are larps or similar activities in Japan, they are almost always initiated by non-Japanese¹. While conducting fieldwork and interviews in Japan for an ongoing Ph.D. research project on roleplaying in a global context, I increasingly wondered why the Japanese do not larp.

Questions regarding human behavior — especially in the context of different cultures — are easier asked than answered. Further, within the fields of social and cultural sciences, why-questions have often displayed the tendency to favor certain kinds of answers that ignore complexities and supply “others” with a uniform mentality, a shared purpose and genealogy (Becker, 1973, p. 9; Pickering, 2001, p. 150). This is especially the case for research on subcultures (Jenson, 2001) and on Japan (Clammer, 2001).

Bearing these pitfalls in mind, this article focuses on the active individual — on what people actually do and, even more so, how they make sense of it. This article's aim is to understand why roleplayers in Japan do not larp — or more precisely, why they have never interpreted larp as a possible activity. This differentiation is necessary because humans do not act towards things and other humans directly. Human action is based on the interpretations of these things and of the behavior of others (Blumer, 1969; Goffman, 1959). As I will show later, the ‘objective’ existence of space is irrelevant if not so interpreted, for example. For this article's purpose I introduce a framework to understand what people gain or expect to gain from roleplaying or larping based on their experiences and the evaluation of these experiences.

¹ See Castle Tintagel for an example: <http://www.castletintagel.com>. Reenactments exist, though: <http://portal.nifty.com/2009/04/14/a/>.

The outlined framework or model is a visual reference in order to picture this evaluation process. It offers a perspective that is not limited to the “game space” alone but includes the surrounding society as well as individual contexts. In this regard, it incorporates and goes beyond former frameworks like The Threefold Model (Kim, 2003), or GDS/GNS (Edwards, 2001) which classify player interests or desires as well as styles in three categories of game, drama/narration, and immersion/simulation.

The model at hand is integrative in regards to the historical, discursive, societal, personal and situational contexts that frame ascriptions and interpretations. It is based on an interactionist research perspective and a qualitative methodology of narrative interviews and fieldwork which are considerate towards individual ascriptions of meaning.

The interpretations of interest in this particular case are based on the roleplayers' experiences in Japan and thus, have to be situated within the historical development of (non-digital) roleplaying and the discourses on subcultures in Japan. The former builds the starting point of this article and is followed by an outline of the research perspective and process model. This section includes findings based on fieldwork and interviews conducted in Japan. These findings highlight the importance of “availability/accessibility”: You cannot do what you don't know. In more RPG-like terms: Experience counts.

1 Roleplaying or TRPGs in Japan

Roleplaying arrived in Japan in the late 1970s. Fans of war games encountered *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D, 1974) around this time, which was sold in a few toy or model shops. With the increasing popularity of computer RPGs, computer magazines introduced pen & paper RPGs as the predecessors of games like *Ultima* (1980). Within the industry and the public discourse, the term RPG was exclusively appropriated for computer games. This spawned several attempts to distinguish pen & paper games from their digital variant — *tēburu-tōku* RPG (table-talk RPG, TRPG) was the one that earned the most traction and is used until today.

1.1 Pocketbooks and the Rise of Replays (1989 until early 1990s)

The most popular and successful TRPG was *Sword World RPG* (1989) by Group SNE. Three years earlier, the game studio had released the D&D replay series *Record of Lodoss War* in the game magazine *Comptiq* (Yasuda & GroupSNE, 1986). A replay is a complete transcript of a game session aiming at introducing new players to TRPGs and teaching them how to play. This market is the most successful of Japan's TRPG industry today. Replays became quite popular with non-players as a unique genre of serialized novellas.

Record of Lodoss War as a media-mix franchise of replays, novels, *manga*, and *anime* was the starting point of *Sword World RPG*. The game heralded the success of *bunkobon* releases (paperbacks or pocketbooks). Instead of expansive hardcovers, the rulebooks (and replays) were published in a cheap paperback format. Additionally, the system used six-sided dices instead of the hard-to-find multifaceted ones. The cheap price and the ease of access to game materials are still believed to be a major factor for the game's success.

1.2 The Time of Winter and beyond (late 1990s until today)

TRPG player numbers are said to have decreased rapidly in the late 1990s, a period called *Time of Winter* (Baba, 1997). Many game designers tried to revive the market with new ideas that were tailored to the conditions TRPG players faced in Japan (Takahashi, 2006). Japanese houses usually do not favor a basement, nor are apartments very large, which limited play to public spaces like community centers and their respective open and closing hours. The game studio F.E.A.R. favored a quick and dramatist game play that took inspirations from *anime*.

The game designer Tokita Yūsuke likened the development of TRPGs in Japan to the one of animation (personal interview). While many admired Disney, full-animation was just not financially possible, so people made the best out of limited animation, created new forms of expression and told stories with the resources they had.

In a similar manner, games encompassing huge amounts of books and supplements like D&D were beyond the scope of Japanese game studios, which favored the switch to paperback books in the late 1980s.

F.E.A.R. now began to include quick and easy steps for game masters to follow in order to plan and hold 4-hour sessions that could be played even on weeknights or at conventions. Instead of randomized dice roles, some games like the cyberpunk *Tokyo Nova* (1993) use trump cards and a system that is less random but incorporates resource management. Players fail on purpose in the earlier “scenes” during a session to get better cards for the “climax” or showdown at the end. A focus on dramatic, “cool” or enjoyable scenes is inherent to most F.E.A.R. games, which often explicitly reward enjoyable roleplay with hero points that are to be used in a session's final.

Other companies tried to mix board game elements with RPGs. This resulted in dungeon-like city adventures. Similar to the US, game studios are increasingly reaching out to young players and players of digital RPGs. F.E.A.R. at times attempts to completely reconstruct the game play of console games. Group SNE, on the other hand, recently released *Endbreaker!* (2010), which can be played “offline” and in an online environment for PBW (play-by-web).

1.3 Larping and Cosplaying

Larp — as in *life action* role-play (see Morton, 2007, p. 245) — has not many adherers in Japan. So-called *raibu* RPGs (live RPGs) exist as treasure-hunt-like sessions at events like the Japan Game Convention (JGC). 40 or more players are divided into groups, each with their own game master. In 90-minute sessions the groups explore different parts of a huge dungeon in a “classical” pen & paper manner. After each session, intelligence is shared and found items exchanged. In the end, all groups come together to fight a dragon or similar powerful monster. Large outdoor fantasy larps or urban larps are unknown. Two smaller ones with a horror setting have been initiated in the Tokyo area by foreigners and members of a mixi.jp (facebook-like) community around 2005.

As part of my fieldwork, however, I was able to observe and participate in the preparations and execution of a mini-larp in October 2010 (see below). Mystery games or *dasshutsu gēmu* (breakout games) recently gained some popularity in Japan, especially in the Kyōto area through the *scrap magazine* (www.scrapmagazine.com). The players have to solve puzzles in order to retrieve a key and leave the space where the game is held.

Participants told me that most players have no connection to TRPGs and that everyone participates as themselves, not as a character. The organizers or staff might “dress up”, players usually do not. *Cosplaying*, which focuses on dressing-up as a character, contrarily involves no game elements or plots.

Cosplay comes from “costume” and “play” (Aida, 2004, p. 112). It refers to the masquerading as a character from popular media or as a member of a visual rock band. *Cosplay* is said to have its roots at the Japan Science Fiction Convention of the 1970s. Following similar practices of US American SF Cons, a Costume Show for the masquerading as characters from science fiction TV series was established (Takeda, 2002, p. 102). Since 1977/1978 people started to base their costumes on *anime* characters as well and the practice spread to comic market (Japan’s largest, bi-annual amateur *manga* and game convention).

During the 1990s an industry for cosplay costumes emerged and the practice was “exported” overseas on the heels of *manga* and *anime* (Galbraith, 2009, p. 52). Galbraith also notes, that amateur stage acts, so called cos-plays, have become quite popular outside Japan. Besides the annual World Cosplay Summit in Nagoya, however, most cosplay events within Japan do not feature these on-stage dramatizations. In Japan, *cosplay* is linked to comic market where people are photographed in poses typical for their character. Fukuzawa Maki, editor of the magazine *Cosubon Fantasy*, estimates that a large number of *cosplayers* (about 100.000) are so-called *taku-kosu* who only dress-up at home and share photos online (talk at “Prof. Cosplay from next door”, Summer Comic Market 2009). *Cosplayers* at Comic Market number between 13 and 16 thousand (Ichikawa, 2009).

Kan cosu (complete cosplay) is an example for participants who try to emulate the chosen character as best as possible (Galbraith, 2009, p. 114) — mostly visually, as immersion into a character’s personality does not seem to be an aim of the practice. Many *cosplayers* enjoy the communication about shared likes and dislikes, earning praise for a well-done costume, spending a good time together, and exchanging photographs (Aida, 2004, p. 114). The game designer Okada Atsuhiko, who has *cosplay* experience, sees the main difference between roleplay and *cosplay* in the approach to the characters “played” (personal interview): A roleplayer wants to *act* like another character or at least wants to play the character in a story or game. The *cosplayer* wants to *look* like a chosen, usually pre-existing character instead. The number of individuals engaging in both is extremely limited.

2 Larp-less Japan

Because my research is concerned with individual ascriptions of meaning, I try to leave my own preconception behind. So instead of a closed survey, I chose a methodology of participant observations and qualitative interviews which is more applicable in this regard (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). I participated in the activities of a roleplayer circle in the larger Tokyo area and conducted 25 qualitative interviews within and outside Tokyo.

Each interview lasted for 2-3 hours and focused on the interviewees’ experiences as roleplayers. Larping was touched as well as learning effects through roleplaying. Seven of my interview partners were female, the rest male, with the youngest player being 18 and the oldest 41.

They come from many different social backgrounds including university students, shop clerks, programmers, *manga*-artists and game designers. All the people I have talked to expressed a pronounced interest in larping and were delighted to receive information about larp in Europe but in general deemed larp to be impossible in Japan. Only one of my interviewees had participated in a larp before the interview. Some of the other interviewees, however, participated in the mini-larp *CSI: Akihabara* (2010).

I could ask them afterwards for re-evaluations of their former statements. When prompted, my interviewees gave several interpretations for the lack of larp in Japan. These interpretations are, of course, not representative. They are retellings of individual experiences which provide an insight into the contexts that frame these interpretations. The *Role-play Uses & Gratifications* (RUG) model is used as a framework to understand the processes behind meaning ascription (Figure 1). Even though models do not represent reality completely, they are useful tools for analyzing processes that we perceive in or as reality.

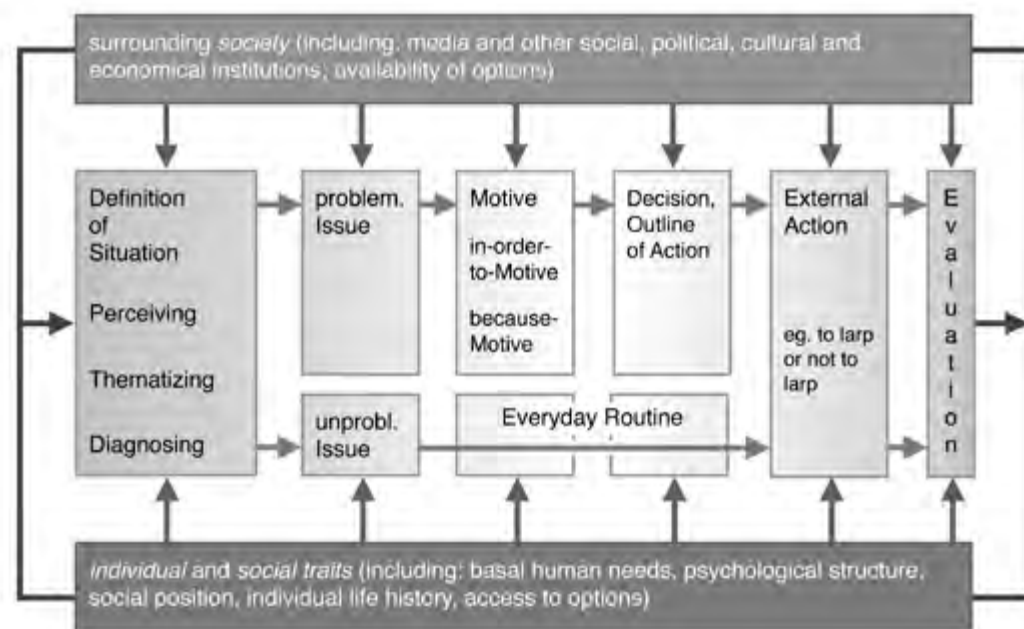


Figure 1: RUG Process Model (adopted from Renckstorf 1996:28)

2.1 A problematic issue: Larp knowledge

“We just do not know how to organize it, you know. It would be great to participate in a larp and, well, learn by doing. If someone would show us, how a larp can be done, we can learn and improve. The question is just where to start.” Kurokawa-san² is a 34 years old sales man with about 20 years of roleplaying experience. Like others, he has read about larps, “but reading is not the same as doing”. He and others are faced with a *problematic issue* when assessing the situation (see Figure 1).

Through experience we develop routines and habits, gain competence. The first basic concept of the RUG framework, *activity*, relates on one level to the selection process *before* we engage in an action. If we are faced with a situation that is new or unknown, this is a more or less conscious act. All decisions are based on former experiences: After several instances of repeated experiences a schema of expectations is formed resulting in habitual routines and a schema of what the action (roleplaying) consists of. This means, that a rational decision is no longer necessary (the “issue” becomes *unproblematic*).

This evaluation process, this *feedback* loop is at the heart of the RUG model and is the activity of main interest to the *uses and gratifications* perspective: the ascription of meaning during and after a given action. The uses and gratifications approach (Blumler & Katz, 1974), UGA for short, is a media use research tradition with roots in symbolic interactionism. A well-known example for an interactionist study is Fine’s research on fantasy roleplaying (1983). The premise of the interactionist perspective in general fits extremely well into conceptual ideas of roleplaying (Larsson, 2003; Lieberoth, 2006; and others).

Humans live in a symbolic world and thus, “... act towards things on the basis of the meanings they ascribe to those things” (Blumer, 1969, p. 2). The meaning of such things arises out of former experiences with those things and social interactions with others and oneself. The process of interpretation is ongoing and constantly modifies these attached meanings.

² All names have been changed for anonymity.

Habits, routines, and shared meanings occur and seem fixed, but are shifting, flexible and “always open to reappraisal and further adjustment” (Plummer, 2000, p. 194). Interactionists share a constructivist perspective with poststructuralism and its focus on language (cf. Regitzesdatter in this book).

The evaluations of experiences change with every new engagement. Expectations change as well. We might encounter things that we did not expect, but we still evaluate positively, what might lead to an increased desire to engage in that action. However, if expectations are increasingly and repeatedly not met, this may lead to a decrease of engagement or even abandonment of the given activity.

Such experiences and expectations as well as other personal traits like biography, social status (eg. wealth) and connections form one half of what frames this evaluation and engagement process. History and society (norms, rules, institutions) form the other half.

2.2 Roleplaying as a Dramatic Game

Even though they want to try larp, many of my interviewees evaluated the overcoming of their problematic issue as a difficult endeavor. They were dazzled after a showing of videos from *Drachenfest* (2010) and other larps. “What systems to use? Do you really hit each other?” What kinds of larp game systems are used, was a major concern for most who had doubts that “trust” in the other players might actually work. Former experiences at the game table form people’s image of what roleplaying pertains and what is possible.

“Most people I have played with do not distinguish between themselves and their characters. ‘I’ refers to the player in the same way as to the figure on the map”, says Okawara-san, 39 years old ex-editor of a game magazine. He did not use the term gamist when he talked about his experiences with other players.

However, a large number of his acquaintances seem to enjoy the process of character building, rolling dice, forging strategies and leveling up – and expect just that when thinking of roleplaying. These activities correlate with needs for esteem, cognition and safety. “Because there is not much time, I try to help create a good story everyone likes. So I do not think too much about my character but more about the scene at hand and how I could improve it.”

Kurokawa-san prefers storytelling-like or dramatic games, which often involve meta-gaming (eg. failing on purpose). However, Kurokawa-san is a good actor, using different intonations for his characters. When asked about that, he laughed and replied: “Yeah, but it’s for the story, not for narikiri.” He enjoys the communication with his friends and the cognitive challenge.

Narikiru, to identify completely with someone or something, is the Japanese term for immersion. Almost all my interview partners know someone who “acts in character”, but these are mostly GMs trying to distinguish between different non-player characters. Saika-san, a 33 year old translator, who participated in a stage play group in her youth, made a huge distinction between acting and roleplaying games. “Acting and stage play mean to recite text from memory. Roleplaying is more about decisions on the spot”, she said. She is the one with larp experience. “It was interesting, but most of us acted according to their role – police man, gallerist – but did not change much in the way of speaking or mannerisms. The focus was on the game’s goals.” A couple of players mentioned, that those who enjoy the acting become real actors, referring me to Sanō Shirō, a famous movie actor and roleplayer (Kobayashi, 2007).

2.3 The meaning of limited Space

Space and time constraints have been major factors in the development of Japanese TRPG practices. In the case of larp, the concept of *availability* and *accessibility* refers not only to space but additionally to how easy it is to gain information about larps, to retrieve the necessary “tools” of the trade, the number of events, the distance to events.

This is on a personal level as well as on a societal or regional level. Dozens of larps each month, which would mean a high degree of availability on a societal level, are still experienced as low accessibility if you cannot afford to go there, do not have the time or live too far away (personal or situational level). Availability, however, is not so much the “objective” or concrete availability. The concept focuses on the perceived availability.

Survival games, known as airsoft as well, are quite popular in Japan. These games need large areas for the battles and players can rent designated sites near or in forests. Furthermore, some roleplayers and war game enthusiasts do participate in historical reenactments staged during regional festivals. “Objectively” speaking, there is space for fantasy larps, while Tokyo and other large cities might be any cyberpunk fan’s dreamscape for an urban larp. From this “objective” perspective, space might be available.

During my interviews I mentioned these possible larp sites and explained some urban larps I played in Germany. “Oh, that would not be possible in Japan. The police would come and at least ask a lot of questions if not arrest you.” Yamaoka-san, a 35 year old mechanic, explicated referring to the public misgivings towards activities associated with *otaku*, Japanese “nerds”. In 1989, Miyazaki Tsutomu killed four elementary school girls and was labeled *otaku* after the police found thousands of horror movies and amateur *manga* in his apartment (Ōtsuka, 2004). This dangerous image of people who are labeled *otaku* because of their appearance or interests in *manga* or games is similar to how the early larp subculture was portrayed in European media, for example in Denmark (cf. Müller in this book).

While the *otaku image* has changed to the better in recent years, an unfavorable media coverage of “non-productive”, escapist hobbies remains, and practitioners still tend to keep their interests and activities private, remaining more or less a subculture. Regardless of an identification with what is called *otaku* culture, not one of my interviewees would talk about roleplaying with someone who he or she did not perceive as like-minded.

Another example of this awareness of the public eye are the rules of comic market which state that you are not allowed to come dressed-up to the convention site (Comic Market, 2010). *Cosplayers* are only permitted within a designated area. Concordantly, Yamaoka-san and others interpret larping with its dress-up elements as problematic.

2.4 Experience counts

The perceived non-availability of space and know-how as well as the experienced lack of acting by a large number of fellow players have led most of my interviewees and many professionals I talked with to the conclusion that larp is not possible in Japan. Many would like to larp, but express a profound uneasiness regarding their own and others’ competencies to actually do it. Most have come to associate roleplaying either with board game like strategy gaming or high-paced dramas, cut into scenes. Both styles of play were born out of space and time restrictions. Enjoying both or either one of these, people followed with their expectations. Those who like acting, on the other hand, have found other, more “accepted”, venues for such interests.

Many roleplayers in Japan have experienced a lack of private space. This influenced the mentioned styles of play, but relates to other contexts beyond the immediate game. Since similarly “nerdy” activities — *anime*, gaming in general or *cosplay* — have been targeted as escapist or deviant in unfavorable discourses, many are weary of the public reactions to larping. While it seems, that *cosplayers* have recently enjoyed more acceptance in the public eye – through marketing campaigns using cute, dressed-up girls – they are still pushed away from public spaces.

In accordance with the feedback loop of the RUG process model, former experiences with pen & paper RPGs as well as with the treatment of “escapist” activities are the basis for evaluations regarding larp. Additionally, a lack of available knowledge builds a wall that people in Japan experience as a hindrance to start larping. It is less the factual lack of space, for example, but more the evaluation of what this lack means that is important.

A crime scene investigation mini-larp held in October 2010 in Akihabara, Tokyo's major shopping area for electronic and pop-culture goods, gave me and my interviewees the chance to confront their former evaluations. The game had six organizers or non-player characters, including two Non-Japanese, me and the lead organizer, and twelve players of which more than half had been my interviewees or people I talked to about larp³. Within the five-hour game the players had to investigate several crime scenes in the area, report back, analyze clues and interrogate suspects. The game finished with a chase.

All players enjoyed the game, a handful immediately started to make plans for an own larp in the near future. Many were surprised at how complex the plot was and how easily everyone started to act in character. The physicality of a larp was interpreted as the main source for an increased level of acting. Additionally, the players did not experience any form of repercussions from non-participants. One player emphasized the fun of being part of something "secret" publicly. Another, however, offered a bit of critique regarding the system-less approach of the mini-larp. For some players this was a large step away from the very system-based meta-gaming play style of Japanese TRPGs, he remarked.

3 Summary

The aim of this article and the RUG model was to show how individual expectations towards roleplaying including larp are dependent on societal and historical contexts. These contexts frame in interdependence with personal experiences what people interpret as possible regarding roleplaying and larping. In the case of Japan, limited space and unfavorable public discourses have furthered a development of quick, dramatic games. Players engaging in these have come to expect this from a roleplaying game. Such interpretations, however, change over time. With a first larp experience the feedback loop regarding what pertains to roleplaying and larping started anew for the participants. What they evaluate as possible and expect from roleplaying changed and will change with each further experience.

³ Unlike the usual gender ratio of 0-3% women at TRPG conventions, one third of the mini-larp participants were female.

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