

Materiality, magic and belief: Framing the countryside in fantastical live-action roleplay games

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Abstract

This account of a UK live-action roleplay (LARP) event highlights complex shifts between different interpretive frames, foregrounding the role of the physical setting as well as of non-players and locals in providing symbolic resources that inhibit or support breaking frames. The conception of framing used here draws upon and extends Goffman's definition of a frame as part of the organization of activity that specifies meaning and expectations of involvement. In looking at the setting of such framing processes ethnographically, this article presents UK LARP as a distinctive engagement with rural materiality and a creative alternative to traditional country pursuits. From the point of view of a game organizer, the paper identifies the creation of specific contextual frames by the visiting hobbyists associated with three interpretations: 1) a narrative conception of the space as a backdrop for fantastical events, 2) a ludic conception of the space as an area of game-playing, 3) an event conception of the space and its inhabitants as something to be managed. Three examples of disruptions to the work employed to maintain these frames demonstrate the fragility of the magic involved in this fantastical hobby.

Keywords

context, frame analysis, framing, Goffman, LARP, roleplay, rural, setting, place

Introduction

The countryside has for some time been the subject of many different interpretations and visions from diverse social and economic perspectives (Glyptis, 1991; Harrison, 1991; Halfacree, 1993; Mingay, 1989). This paper acknowledges that a fantastical or 'Arcadian' vision of the countryside held by romanticists is commonly problematized by local communities and developers in the quest for value

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(see Marsden, 1993), and explores the situation of visiting hobbyists undertaking the leisure pursuit of live action roleplay (LARP) applying their own unique fantasy to the rural landscape. It might be expected that such constructions provoke conflict with local interpretations of the land and its use, and it is worth exploring such conflicts as they have wider resonance than the fantastical exploits of a niche group.

Fine (1983) describes the leisure activity of roleplay gaming as 'finely woven webs of magic and belief ... which if not physically real, are real to those who participate in them' (p. 123). Yet the live physical reality of this pursuit occurs frequently in remote areas of the UK countryside setting, and is a practice that is vastly under-researched. Drawing on narrative fantasy inspirations, such as JRR Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, that present the countryside as a setting for events of a grand and heroic nature, groups of individuals throughout the country engage in these theatrically inspired games. This interaction is, however, guided by a fantastical genre that is often faced with the tangible matter of the rural space and its human and animal inhabitants in unexpected and contrary ways; conflicts which are managed and handled by game participants and organizers. This process of interacting with the material and the symbolic is an integral part of the construction of this shared fantasy, distinguishing a unique countryside place for participants.

The empirical work on which this paper has been based is an ethnographic study of a single weekend LARP event in 2010 as a participant observer. This event will be referred to as 'Darkdune' and was held at a remote location in Wales, with the majority of participants travelling around 80–200 miles to attend. The author maintains an ongoing engagement with the community organizers and this event was not the first time participating with the organizing team, although this was the first time the author of this paper also had part authorship of the event and associated inclusion in the preparatory activities. Neyland (2008) has highlighted that one of the main impediments to any ethnography of organizations can come from the requirement of ethnographic time, with lengthy engagement often problematic in the contemporary academic environment. As an event-based organization this case represents a coming together and breaking apart of organization in a particular rural space which is ideally suited to event-based observation. As a member of the organizing team, developing a certain distance from the activity has only come with time and reflection on the observations through a different lens which holds little interest for the organization itself, in this case, the positioning of the rural sites as locations for fantasy.

The foundation of LARP activity, as Fine (1983) describes in his study of the related activity of pen-and-paper roleplay gaming, lies in the constitution of a fantasy world:

Members recognise that they share experiences and that these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members, and can be employed to construct a shared universe. (1983: 136)

The transformation of everyday and mundane interactions into a fantasy world through acted games enjoyed by many in the USA has recently been outlined in popular non-fiction by Stark (2012), foregrounding the role of members in the co-constitution of meaning systems around such activities. This account along with a broad practitioner literature emphasizes the role of settings to sustain immersion in these meaning systems. Yet the varying importance of localities and their features in facilitating or disrupting this activity are not discussed beyond the significance of site ownership or set building as an important aspect of game planning (Stark, 2012) and quality. In the process of organizing and running *Darkdune*, the players and organizers of the game encountered a series of difficulties posed by the pitch-blackness of the night sky, the remoteness of the location and the informally administered parking charges of local landowners. Yet the landscape also facilitated an ideal backdrop for ruinous halls, dangerous forests and evil hideouts along with concealed facilities necessary to the modern lifestyle: electricity, kitchens and showers.

This account of a UK LARP event highlights complex shifts between different interpretive frames, foregrounding the role of the setting as well as of non-players and locals in providing symbolic resources that inhibit or support breaking frames. Although frame analysis is applied in existing research to the study of different communities, workplaces and social movements (Miceli, 2005; Agne, 2007; Prego-Vasquez, 2007; Kaplan, 2008), the role of the setting in the practices of participants has not been explored. In looking at the setting, this paper presents LARP as an engagement with rural materiality. From the point of view of a game organizer, the paper identifies the creation of specific contextual frames by the visiting hobbyists associated with three interpretations: 1) a narrative conception of the space as a backdrop for fantastical events, 2) a ludic conception of the space as an area of game-playing, 3) an event conception of the space and its inhabitants as something to be managed. Three examples of disruptions to the work employed to maintain these frames demonstrate their fragile nature. The conception of framing used here draws upon Goffman's (1974) definition of a frame as part of the organization of activity that specifies meaning and expectations of involvement.

In the first part of this paper, I will explain and define LARP and explore some of the literature on this leisure pursuit as an engagement with shared meaningful frames. In the second part I will explain the methods used to collect data about one particular event, entitled '*Darkdune*', through participation in the community of organizers and player-volunteers and records kept in a research diary, emails and game documents. In this section some initial suggestions are made as to how the landscape is interpreted and used by this community as a material resource, or setting, for establishing 'natural' or low-key alternative and fantastical frames of meaning. In the third part I present narratives from field notes and my research diary that highlight incidents involving the interaction between heterogeneous actors and how these contributed to or disrupted the production of the shared fantastical world and leisure occupation. The final part of the paper sets out the discussion in more detail and reflects

upon the relationship between setting and frame, which signifies the importance of the rural space and considers the extent to which this is of broader interest to studies of the countryside.

LARP: Engrossment in multiple shared frames of meaning

Live-action roleplay (LARP) is a leisure pursuit based upon the acting out of an improvised narrative, in the context of a particular setting or genre. It has a varied history, developing from a variety of related activities including scenario-based boardgames, model wargaming, boardgame and computer game 'roleplay games', historical re-enactment, tactical outdoor battle games and theatrical pursuits (see Stark, 2012). In the UK, LARP may be defined as a niche leisure occupation where participants come together in a particular location for a limited time to act out an improvised costumed drama, often in a carefully designed scenario and setting, with minimum direct guidance. This differs in some features from the way such activities take place in other national contexts or in training or psychological settings. LARP as leisure has much in common with the activities of re-enactment societies, yet differs in that it bears little resemblance to history and is instead loosely coupled to genres of narrative fiction. Importantly, diverging from re-enactment and other theatrical formats, the activity is designed for no audience, the game and narrative being purely for participants' entertainment. Such dramatics are co-ordinated by a group of organizers and often facilitated by volunteers.

The activity of LARP in this paper is discussed in a leisure context as a hobby or game, though other forms and related activities are known to the literature. Academic interest in acted-out forms of roleplaying generally has been limited, and such interest as there has been comes from diverse backgrounds. Dramaturgical perspectives associated with the work of Erving Goffman have long highlighted the significance of role-taking (1959, 1961, 1967) and the application of narrative or contextual frames (Goffman, 1974; see Scheff, 2005) in everyday social interaction to the dynamics of identity and meaning, but the animation of temporary roles as a technique has also been studied more pragmatically as a means of teaching and training (e.g. Donahue and Parsons, 1982). The association with identity research has also informed studies of virtual roleplay in the form of online identities and roles performed in virtual spaces (Bardzell and Odom, 2008; Dibbel, 1994; Isabella, 2007; Taylor, 2006). There is in addition a developed practitioner literature located primarily among participants of the Knutpunkt conference (see <http://nordiclarp.org>), who outline a particularly distinct type of gameplay and a leisure culture more closely related to the arts (see Cantwell, 2009). This literature extensively debates principles of game design and also reflects upon the consequences and potential of LARP for social and self-improvement goals (e.g. Bowman, 2007; Kjølørød, 2013; Larsson, 2003; Montola, 2010). Evident throughout these writings is a distinction between a focus on roleplay as a technique, and LARP as a leisure activity and community subculture. The least

developed area of research lies in the subculture of LARP in general, and in its practice in the UK specifically.

Live-action roleplaying in the UK represents a relatively small and tight-knit community of players and organizers participating in different games, often meeting through regular societies or clubs. Though many of these are non-profit, some organizations operate 'festival'-scale LARP events on a for-profit basis, supported by a large cohort of unpaid volunteers from the community. Players sign up to a particular 'event' and pay a participation fee to the organizers. They then assemble details of their character and role, including props and costume appropriate to the setting. Instead of engrossment through the viewing of a narrative, LARP instead offers various attractions through participating in narrative challenges and competitive crises. These may be emergent from player interaction or, more commonly, orchestrated by the organizing team and achieved through the work of volunteer crew or 'monsters'.

Cultural studies of related activities are to be found in studies of re-enactment groups (Crang, 2000; Hunt, 2004), and the practice of roleplay boardgaming (Bowman, 2010; Fine, 1983). These studies of closely connected hobbies have focussed heavily on the role of community and the development of particular customs and knowledge through the pursuit. Although the motivations of participants in these leisure activities may be variable, each of these studies emphasizes the pursuit or development of meaning as a central element of the activity. Hunt (2004) emphasizes the centrality of constructing 'alternative identities' while Crang (2000) argues that a psychological focus on escapism by academic interpreters prejudicially overlooks the scholarship of a knowledgeable yet unorthodox community. Fine (1983) has argued that players of storytelling fantasy games self-consciously develop their own subculture in relationship to their broader cultural systems. Fine's (1983) work, as well as that of Kociatkiewicz (2000), explores how these games offer players significant engrossment in stable co-created fantasy 'worlds' despite the clash of fantastical and everyday meaning systems.

Goffman's (1974) frame analysis is an analytical tool already applied to the interpretation of roleplaying games and simulations in a virtual or narrative setting (Fine, 1983; Schick, 2008) as well as in theoretical work on roleplaying undertaken by Montola (2008) and in one ethnographic study of Nordic LARP (Brenne, 2005). The strength of this approach lies in the ability to incorporate a wide scope of social activity around the game activity. It is therefore particularly appropriate for comparable application to UK LARP, particularly considering the physical and embodied element of LARP games as compared with other types of play. While ludic studies of virtual games often draw on the concept of a porous boundary between the 'real' and 'game' world (from Huizinga's, 1949 [1938], definition of the 'magic circle'), Goffman's (1974) approach to social interaction in terms of framing allows for a broader range of potential definitions of place and meaning inside or outside of these ludic boundaries. These existing studies clearly distinguish between a 'representation' frame that denotes the not-reality of the game or simulation, and an immediate social frame which remains ever-present, with transitions between the two

being frequent. Such transitions demonstrate evidence of broader social norms and conventions within and outside the group of 'players' being reasserted within the representation or simulation space. By exploring these dynamics in greater depth, applying Goffman's (1974) conceptual approach to the subculture of UK LARP promises to offer new insight into the wider world of these leisure participants.

According to Scheff (2005), Goffman (1974) defines frames as a basic building block in explaining the constitution of mutually understood 'definition of a situation' or context. Goffman (1974: 25) describes frames more simply as the consensual answer to the question 'what is it that's going on here?' Scheff (2005) further distinguishes explicitly between subjective and intersubjective (or mutual) frames of meaning. In effect, Scheff (2005) argues that through the processes of interaction, individuals develop understanding about the general interpretation of events through engagement in layers upon layers of frames, which are at each stage recursively inferred in the perceptions of others. These interpretations may not be identical at each stage, but as a consequence of recursive awareness they establish the solidity of mutually understood 'social facts'. Though this is a complex concept outlined by Scheff using Baptista's (2003) mathematical notation, he also summarizes this more simply as resembling the song lyrics 'I know, that you know, that I know, that you know ... etc., that we're in love, (Scheff, 2005:3 76). In this instance, as the author of this paper I might as well be singing that 'you know, that I know, that you know, that I know, that you know, that I'm writing about the experience of organizing and playing games like Darkdune'.

Goffman (1974) outlines several important concepts in the mechanics of frame activity, including bracketing and keying. Framing involves identifying salient experience and symbols within the interaction; subsequently bracketing is the set of conventions that mark the episodic nature of that interaction and its interpretation. These conventions then entail setting aside other interpretations and symbols around the activity in order to maintain engrossment in the interaction. Examples such as games of chess emphasize how temporary behaviours relating to the rules of turn-taking and success in the contest, as well as when to interact with the chess pieces, may involve active efforts to ignore other activities in the same room or usual social conventions around movement and conversation. Keying, then, involves a transforming signal for a shift in frame, often remaining much the same as everyday interpretations of interactions but with notable modifications. Goffman describes such transformations that are modelled on but do not replicate another frame to be 'up-keying', or adding further frame laminations to the interaction. Down-keying, by contrast, represents a shift from a more layered interaction to a less complex one. Although a problematic concept, this hierarchy of up-keyed frames representing remodelled lower frames implies a baseline 'primary framework' made up of interpretive approaches to natural and social phenomena (Goffman, 1974: 21–39). The question of unitary primary frameworks, and especially the role of the natural experiential world within which all frames are 'anchored' (Goffman, 1974), will be of significant interest within the context of the empirical studies later in the paper.

Fine (1983) describes narrative fantasy games as consisting of three frame layers: the social frame of natural interaction between participants as members of a community, the game frame as players of varying status or as game masters, and the diegetic (or narrative) frame as characters. Movement between these mutually constituted frames involves an up-keying process to transform participants into narrative characters. Montola (2008) combines Fine's work with that of other practitioners to make an argument that this model can be broadly applied to live-action and virtual forms of roleplay as well as to solely narrative games, with some differentiating characteristics. Montola argues that in LARP, 'the game is superimposed on a physical world, which is used as a foundation in defining the game world' (2008: 24). In contrast to virtual or storytelling forms of game, then, where the representations are more likely to be shaped by technical capacities for world modelling, narrative convention and imagination, representations in LARP rely partly upon physical properties (Brenne, 2005: 73–79). Yet this is not to suggest that such limitations do not also appear within the game frame and diegetic frame of virtual online games or narrative storytelling. As Fine states, 'By playing fantasy games, participants implicitly agree to bracket the world outside the game. Yet ultimately all events are grounded in the physical world' (1983: 183).

Compared with other games studied, LARP engages significantly with the physical world as a symbolic resource for multiple frames. LARP, understood as a leisure activity whereby engrossment in the activity is a shared interaction, involves not one but multiple mutual frames. As a part of the activity participants may shift between engrossment in the social interactions with fellow participants, engrossment in the game activity or engrossment in the diegetic narrative. Although the role of the physical surroundings has been identified and explored tentatively in the literature, this remains underdeveloped. The rural environment that provides the ideal context for a fantasy setting, as discussed in this paper, presents difficulties and opportunities for the participants and the game organizers in their attempts to stabilize and maintain these frames.

Methodology

The data for this paper are drawn from diaries and field notes collected as part of a larger project looking at the interactive dimension of meaning and worth in organizations, and the focus on this leisure group in particular offered an opportunity to explore how such meanings were built from group interaction and participation, and how incidents of conflict are resolved. Although the data were collected with ethnography in mind, a full ethnographic account was not produced for that project, in the sense that the ethnographic data were written down, but a full ethnography of this organization was not written up (see Humphreys and Watson, 2009), as the project compared the researcher's experience of different levels of membership (Munro, 1996) in several different organizations across different industries. This larger project, focussing particularly on theoretical development took inspiration from ethnographic writers such as Coffey (1999) and Marcus

(1995) as well as organizational theorists such as Czarniawska (2008). However, the project of looking specifically at the data from the LARP subculture on their own terms takes closer instruction from Fine's (2003) distinction between personal and peopled ethnography to outline the features of this subculture on its own terms. This paper thus represents part of the process of writing a comprehensive ethnography of the subculture and its values so that this may be represented in full.

The notes on LARP initially focussed on understanding the activity as a leisure pursuit and organization studied from a first person perspective. There are several national organizations that operate to provide large- (festival-)scale and small-scale LARP 'events' who rely heavily upon an extensive community of volunteer groups to undertake a variety of organizing roles. For two years, notes from participant observation as a volunteer organizer and as a participant within one group were collated with material documents from annual meetings between volunteers, tales of good and bad practices, as well as additional notes made through reflection on various key objects and artefacts of the hobby; notably particular elements of costume and props. Starting from a position of familiarity, various writing techniques were used to allow some analytical distance or 'strangeness' to analysis. Sometimes these were included with voluntary tasks undertaken for the group, such as writing guides for new participants and advertising leaflets for other groups. Themes were identified in the data around notions of good gameplay and extensive consideration of the maintenance of spatial and interactional boundaries around the game and the game's fantasy narrative. This data cast light on the embodied, situated and subcultural nature of LARP activity.

Neyland (2008) has argued that the necessity of ethnographic time is increasingly problematic in contemporary organizational research, as it comes into conflict with 'organizational time' and the short-term demands and interests of the (business) of the organization. Yet the problems of long-term study of LARP community and organization lie in the fact that such organization is fluid and voluntary, with transient sites and varying levels of interactivity among members. As a leisure activity, LARP engages with a variety of rural sites yet does so on a transient basis, providing games which ordinarily last only two to four days. Though the longer games involve significant and lengthy processes of set-up and removal, ranging from two weeks to a month, the shorter games may rely on as little as a few hours on-site preparation, though this may draw on more extensive pre-game planning undertaken over several months and distributed among a variety of dispersed community members. These individuals may be involved in only one, or several games, for more than one organization in any given time period. Such fluid boundaries present some difficulties for the researcher, yet Neyland (2008) advocates the potential for in-depth ethnography focusing upon key organizational 'events'. For LARP, the focal event of any aspect of the organization is the game event.

At the time of collecting this data I had around seven years of experience as a LARP participant and casual volunteer in the community at specific game 'events', and eight months experience as an assistant game organizer with one particular

group, assisting with logistical and creative planning and administrative tasks with access to a catalogue of group documents on the narrative of the game. The game event described in this data represents the first incidence of my involvement as a primary planner and organizer within the core group. The novelty of adopting this role highlighted a number of activities as particularly significant to the organizing of the game, and served to demonstrate the interaction between the fantasy game 'reality' and the local landscape.

Since collecting this data I have had a further three years' experience as a game organizer and have had wider participatory experience of several different UK LARP organizations. In the course of these further experiences, including comments from research participants and the wider community, I have returned to the original data and expanded on the incidents where actions appear to be persistent and to occur in other LARP organizations. Preliminary writings outlining these themes have been shared with the UK LARP community through a publicly available online weblog. Generalizations made in this paper about common activities and practices at LARP games describe the activities within the organization studied, but also draw on these broader experiences to anonymize the participants and organization of the original project.

There are several limitations that reasonably apply to this case, not least that the activity is not representative of frequently and widely practiced leisure activities in rural settings. Additionally, the event-based form of ethnography involved here follows the participants in the game and subculture, rather than local inhabitants, though the interactions between the participants and locals are of key significance in this analysis. Alternative conceptual frameworks might also offer significant opportunities to explore the role of non-human agents in the experience of the rural environment, or the experience of the fictitious narrative world created through LARP. A closer look specifically at this particular element would likely benefit from a broader focus on a diverse group of activities, or focus on a study of multiple LARP activities among different practitioner groups using the same site. These limitations are acknowledged as significant to the engagement with the game and space, and clearly offer the potential for further work beyond the scope of this paper. I can only add that the features of the physical environment are an element of extensive discussion, and are agreed to be of significant importance to members of the UK LARP community.

'Darkdune': Framing a game event set in a narrative fantasy world

Planning and set-up of the game

Prior to the game, a geographical site for the game had to be identified, booked and paid for by Charlotte. There are a number of suitable locations for hire throughout the UK, from scout camps and outdoor hobby centres to National Trust properties. Although some of these sites are close to urban centres, many are rural and

often some distance from major transport links. The site for this game event is very remote and can only be reached by car. Charlotte negotiates a price with the owner and confirms the booking by phone. Few structures supplied with electrical power or lighting are present at the site, so a large vehicle has to be hired to transport community equipment such as fuel and a power generator as well as large marquees to provide additional weather shelters and theatrical props to support the game. We agree by email that I will hire the van, as the storage area to collect the equipment is on my route to site. Public liability insurance documents are copied and checked by Dave. Volunteers are recruited using a community online forum to help with the set-up of this equipment immediately prior to the game, and a catering company run by a frequent player is booked to provide food and drink for the weekend using the kitchen facilities available at the site. A plausible narrative describing the fantasy setting and the constraints of the game is developed by John (with some involvement from me) and written up in secret detail, specifying the many dangers the players of the game may encounter. This is then shared by email among the small group of organizers and checked to ensure its compliance with agreed game rules and the known narrative elements of the fantasy world 'Darkdune'. 'Darkdune' is a part of a broader fantasy game world, and is known for its dangerous inhabitants of beasts, fairies and monsters. In recent game events, player characters (PCs) have been evicted from this land by the wrath of their deity in the form of earthquakes, magical beasts and plagues of madness. Players have been told previously that their known enemies may be trying to take advantage of this to invade their land, and so they have decided to try to journey through this hostile place and claim back their territory. For this particular game, players will have to traverse dark tunnels, track through dangerous magical forests and defeat their enemies in tests of wit and combat. A short narrative from the exiled leader of 'Darkdune' is written on a game advert, along with pictures of a forest in flames and details of how to sign up to participate in the game event as a paying player of the game, or as a volunteer crewmember or 'monster'. This information, including the date and time that the game will begin, is circulated among the community of players using email, virtual community bulletin boards and other online social media.

This pre-game activity among the organizing team sets out a particular range of tools and techniques to be used in the transformation of the rural site environment. With little interaction between this group and the rural area, the hire of the space is seen as the purchase of an opportunity to visit and use the space but also to transform its significance and meaning. This activity goes to the heart of the distinction made by human geographers between space and place (Tuan, 1977). This distinction significantly compares physical location against human interaction and subjective individual and collective experience. In the case of Darkdune, the construction of a very particular place is the goal of both organizers and players.

The interactions between game organizers and local owners, with each other, and with the distributed community of LARP participants, begin to key into a particular frame. This identifies organizers as gatekeepers of the game experience

and as responsible hire customers of rural site owners. Documents such as the game advert establish relationships of paying customer and freely participating volunteers, resembling a ticketed festival experience and distinguishing between the roles of those producing and consuming Darkdune as a game experience. The preparatory activities outlined here demonstrate the work of constructing a doorway into the fantasy world of Darkdune, establishing the rural game place, the site, as a setting for the game and as a space over which the organizers have control. For simplicity, throughout the remainder of the paper this framing will be referred to as Frame 3: place-as-event. As will become evident, this frame is closely related to ordinary social interactions but is not without its challenges. Organizers of LARP events have a vested interest in the production and consumption of a specific interpretation of the space, yet they remain amateur managers of the rural environment.

Siting the setting

This travel to site feels like a race against time; loading the van, co-ordinating a convoy of helpers, racing down motorways followed by unknown country lanes, to arrive before the players hoping our directions are correct and that we won't have to reverse to allow a family of locals (or farm machinery) to pass our blind and unwieldy, unfamiliar vehicle. Parking the van allows for a long-awaited stretch of tired legs. But then it's off running down the dirt tracks to check the kitchen and bathroom facilities are unlocked and switched on as promised, to unload the van and start the power generator for the kitchen. Without a minute to spare, spaces are verbally identified and labelled among the organizers as 'sign in area', 'prop storage', and 'monster room', comprising our base of operations.

Then it's a case of getting everyone on the organizing team together to do a site walk, identifying risks and key areas for particular effects or specific dramatic events. Since no one stays still for long and the paths twist and turn around hillocks and dips which confuse the eye and deceive the foot, finding each other is a difficult task. The light is becoming golden with the onset of dusk and the need for frantic activity and swift absorption of the layout of the site raises the feeling of frantic anticipation. One of the things we have not prepared or agreed is a list of priorities, and every member of the team is attempting to focus on unpacking and establishing a different essential space or task. The kitchen has not been unlocked. I encounter other volunteer crew and ask them if they have seen Dave or anyone else from the team, 'I think they've gone to the car park where there is 'phone signal to contact the site warden' I am told, and immediately turn about and crash off through the undergrowth in the direction I think leads to the car park. After adjusting my direction slightly to my right as a path comes into view. I meet one organizer who tells me our third team member has driven off to acquire fuel for the generator, and that players might begin to arrive within the next half-hour. 'Where will we set up the camping area?' I wonder aloud, and Rob suggests the long straight 'path' at the rear of the site, as it is on the edge of the site, open and flat.

We need to leave someone near the gate to direct the traffic of arriving players to the sign in area and camp (in order to keep them away from the monster room), so I walk back to the central building and send down a volunteer in a high-visibility jacket who is not part of the organizing team. The remainder of the crew are already erecting a marquee to house the monster room, where the costume and makeup supplies are stored. All the 'enemy' roles will be briefed, costumed and made-up here. About half an hour later, three out of four of us have finally managed to be in one place and set off to agree where the adventurer's route will start in the landscape. Early arriving players are checked off as players or crew against the booking list and once payments for players and catering are collected players are told to meet near the main building (and crew by the monster room) once they have set up their tents, changed into costume and are ready to begin the game.

The activity in the rural location described above demonstrates further attempts to frame the rural space as a game place under the control and direction of organizers. From my perspective, compared with the previous experiences of the other game organizers, the unknown location of the site and the path layout presents an additional challenge to be overcome in establishing my organizer credentials. Nonetheless, in focussing my activities on managing player's arrival and camping space I throw myself immediately into engrossment in this frame.

Designating entry points to camping space and outlining game spaces as distinct from narrative spaces is a clear part of Frame 3: place-as-event. Yet this additionally engages with behavioural norms and symbolic boundaries well-known among the community of participants from previous event experiences. A volunteer standing in a high-visibility jacket by the entryway directing traffic is one of the first symbolic up-keyings for those arriving that they are entering a managed event place, as is the checking-in process, payment and setting up a camp. As they are directed to specific spaces, participants communicate and construct a different understanding of place and behaviour which reflects a distinction between 'producing' roles (crew) and 'consuming' roles (players). The 'monster room' and 'prop storage' areas are crew-only areas, and although players may well stray into these spaces, the distinction being drawn between the differing roles will result in divergent experiences of the site.

The activity of costuming has not been expressed in detail in the above account, but this practice keys the boundaries of both Frame 2: the ludic experience, and Frame 1: the narrative. Costume presents a symbolic resource in LARP activity as dress and uniforms do in everyday life (see for example Goulding and Saren, 2009; Pratt and Rafaei, 1997; Roach-Higgins and Eicher, 1992). Conventions in UK LARP require that players make or purchase their own costumes, while crew undertaking 'monster' roles are only expected to wear basic and practical clothing that is suitable for the genre. Organizers, referees or other crew roles are usually marked out in an agreed way using high visibility jackets, specific coloured markers or armbands. In the initial flurry of activity as game participants arrive, the costuming distinctions between players and crew learned from previous event

experiences act as passports to different game areas and as keyings to behaviours appropriate to their different ludic functions. Engrossment in this frame is highlighted in subsequent excerpts but, as will be evident, once the game is underway it is often difficult to distinguish between ludic and narrative frames, as shifting between frames can be swift and dynamic.

Framing the ground

As time moves on and the daylight begins to wane, I become increasingly anxious about my lack of knowledge of the site. The narrative of Darkdune requires that the characters travel through tunnels and caves to surprise their enemy, but where can we locate such imaginary tunnels and caves? We intend the players to hunt down one such enemy concealed in a hidden cave, but a volunteer performing the enemy role waiting there may have to wait for several hours to be found. The space cannot be left empty as otherwise it may be discovered and considered uninhabited. And if the volunteer is waiting long we must attempt to ensure their comfort from the elements. A wooden building stands among the trees, but it is obviously a building and not a cave. Tomorrow, the characters of Darkdune will establish a small encampment a full day's march from the cave, but we have only one building in this world to use, and though I do not know its location I doubt it will be so considerate as to move overnight.

At last, I manage to meet up with some of the other organizers. Several of the long-serving members of the organizing team (including Charlotte and Dave) used to know this site really well and I hope they know how best to use the layout. They suggest we take a look at some scrubland as a good place to start the game, but to their surprise, areas that had been clearings now appear as overgrown copses of young trees surrounded by effervescent explosions of saplings, bramble and fern. Old paths are now constricted by offensively fruiting and thorned gorse and although I suggest we could cut them back given time, these now have to be considered unusable as throughways or settings for mock combat. Other paths have disappeared entirely. We agree that by draping the outside of the wooden building in cloth, it will look more like a cave in the dark, and if we put some lighting around it this might encourage players to investigate. As the sun begins to set on our appraising walk of the site, we also note the enclosing gloom beneath the trees. We realise that the flora of the site has considerably matured, and our usable space for gameplay has consequently decreased.

Decisions have to be made quickly, and our plans for the locations of key narrative scenes amended. I occasionally join the game, or we send in a volunteer, in the role of a Darkdune 'scout' to walk the players in circles and create the illusion of progress in an infinite world.

The manipulation of the materiality of the setting to frame a meaningful experience of the rural space as game and narrative place is a significant part of the event organizers' activity. What is evident here, however, is the struggle to reconcile the demands of the setting and multiple planned frame 'laminations'. Along with

the other organizers here, I am working to try to match up the characteristics of the rural space with that of the fictional narrative within the constraints of gameplay. This rural space presents several challenges to the organizers' attempts to key a ludic frame. The type of game planned for this event involves frequent combat. For reasons of safety and compliance with our public liability insurance, as well as protecting participants' well-being and game equipment, combat is staged around 'safe' areas of terrain such as broad pathways, clearings or open woodland. Evident here is the organizers' discovery that these areas have changed over time, or that their perception of them has been altered such that despite the narrative efficacy of our 'heroes' hacking through undergrowth, the likelihood of first aid incidents and other problems (such as the limited success in attacking gorse with a foam sword) would definitely challenge participants' engrossment in the game.

As the area is identified as out of bounds for gameplay, fewer varieties of playing space are available and the organizers' concern in establishing symbolic resources for engrossment in the narrative frame is evident. This highlights contradictions between the keying practices and symbols appropriate to these two frames. As the narrative is part of a fantastical genre, the interpretation of the experience in terms similar to fantastical tales of epic journeys and heroic deeds calls for a variety of scenes and encounters indicating progress across an landscape and through a (preferably well-paced) storyline. Such narratives allow for claustrophobic or open spaces, surprise attacks by different enemies and a wide variety of natural features. Leading a group of around 40 urban-dwelling individuals in fancy dress through the woods with some eagerness to engage in mock battles, on the other hand, requires that thought be given to safety, the concealment of enemy monsters and the need to prepare set-dressing and to brief referees on special effects.

The game crew attempt to exert control over how the rural space will be experienced by negotiating the site's hazards, modifying the appearance of buildings and improvising narrative roles performed by crew to direct the interventions and interpretations of the landscape in the framing of the game and narrative. Later, as I take on the role of the scout, I engage explicitly in directing players' attention away from the accidental repetition of a route: 'although this tree looks just like the one we just passed, that's the danger of this forest! You see, it tricks ya! Good thing you've got an experienced scout like me ta show ye the way!' Nonetheless, despite efforts to exert such control over the interpretation of the rural space, several disruptions to the anchoring of these activities intercede.

Disruption one

After a short pre-game briefing on safety to all participants, excitable fully costumed and made-up players are taken to the starting area. Enemy 'monsters' who have been costumed and briefed on their character motivation and activity by the team in the 'monster room' are taken by a different route to be placed ahead of the players by a game referee in a safety appropriate high-visibility jacket. After Charlotte explains to the players that their characters have been travelling through

tunnels for about a day and are nearing the exit, she shouts ‘time in’ and Sophie, the player of the Warleader character in charge of the group, starts to improvise about information received from ‘earlier scouts’, barking ‘we should be looking out here, the levels of the tunnels nearest the surface always hold dangers! Once we get outside let’s start looking for our scout . . . we need to find a defensible position!’ The sandy route ahead is initially easy to spot in the remains of the twilight, but as the game progresses and players move beneath the trees, the last hints of light are extinguished. A series of combative encounters representing beasts and horrors continue to attack the characters and once slain are returned as fresh enemies to beset them in waves. I am called out by radio to support this combat and quickly grab my jacket. I take a torch with me, but the light is disorientating as I stumble across the deceptive terrain. I turn in response to hearing shouted voices and discover myself immediately in the players’ path. Scrambling aside, I hear someone swear and curse as their limited night vision was ruined by my torch. I quickly point it at the floor and fumble to find the switch, eventually turning it off to see only a few tiny chemical glow lights distinguishing blindness from blackness. There is neither moon overhead, nor starlight, and even after allowing my eyes time to adjust there is little I can see. On the final day of the event, after the game is complete, Steve as representative from the organizing body chastises the team over safety and for neglecting to plan for the near-total darkness of the site.

Once the game has begun, the explicit use of cues by participants to up-key and down-key between the game frame and the frame of the Darkdune narrative world can be seen more clearly. The detailed costuming and makeup applied by both participating players and enemy ‘monsters’ provide significant and transportable resources to create a portable setting within the woodland, encouraging interaction in Frame 1: the narrative. Charlotte’s explanation of the experiences of the characters in Darkdune immediately before the start of the game encourages participants to bracket everyday interpretations and even those of Frame 3: place-as-event. Her shout of ‘time in’, a specified game term, marks the start of gameplay and ‘up-keys’ the game Frame 2, yet the narrative element of the introduction also offers the opportunity to participants to up-key further to the narrative Frame 1. Given the choice between interpreting interaction within the game frame and that of the Darkdune narrative, ‘Warleader’s’ immediate comments and tone subsequently position interaction clearly in the narrative world. At this point, participants are thoroughly engrossed in the narrative frame of interaction, though organizers such as Charlotte, by their lack of participation in the interactive narrative and uniform of modern high-visibility jackets remain within the game frame.

The sheer darkness of the site at this juncture is a double-edged factor in the interaction of participants. Shrouding the players’ perception of their surroundings encourages engrossment in the narrative frame; the belief that despite the woodland setting, the characters of Darkdune are really traversing a dangerous subterranean underworld. However, the very same low lighting conditions of the site, far from urban light pollution and oppressed by mature woodland, simultaneously

facilitates and disrupts framing activity. High-visibility clothing is used to distinguish referees as 'invisible' to the narrative as part of the game, enabling players to react to this symbolic cue as an invitation to bracket their actions. High-visibility is therefore something of a misnomer, and in these dark conditions all referees are carrying some form of light to be identifiable to players and crew. The player characters disattend these lights and carry few of their own, relying upon their position as heroes of the narrative world to overcome obstacles. My stray torch interferes with this enactment, destroying the limited night vision of the players and down-keying the interaction to one temporarily outside of either the narrative or game frame, as participants return to their primary interpretations. For a moment, this crowd is a blundering mass of blinded individuals in a foreign and potentially hazardous rural environment. This not only disrupts the fragile narrative and ludic frames (Frames 1 and 2), but also momentarily challenges the definition of the situation as (Frame 3) a controlled and managed event.

Disruption two

The first day had passed with only minor organizational difficulties for running the game, including one vehicle breaking down in the player area shortly before the game began. Luckily the owner had managed to 'limp' his car back to the car park just outside the site entrance, which served as access to the dunes and a nearby historical monument. We had just finished breakfast and participants had begun to return to their tents to put on their costumes for the start of the game when Charlotte received a complaint relayed from the site groundskeeper. The owners of the car park had no agreement with the event site and had sent a representative to collect payment for the additional cars parked there. No one knew how much this was. I was sent with cash to pay for the van while players were given the uncomfortable news that they would have to delay their game and pay for the privilege of the use of this private land in addition to their game fee. Most were less than impressed. When I arrived at the gate to the site, a small number of people had arrived before me and were waiting next to a small and unfamiliar rust-rimmed white car parked across the exit road, where a glum looking man in his early twenties sat in the passenger seat. He was taking parking fees from equally gloomy-looking costumed players and scribbling out what looked like hastily printed tickets. One player asked if the price was for the whole weekend and the man stared at him, before stating that he would have to buy two tickets. After paying for the van, we then co-ordinated player vehicles being moved into the grounds of the site for those who did not wish to, or were unable to, pay the fee. This incident represents an overt conflict of interpretation between the visiting hobbyists and the local landowners, and again demonstrates a challenge to the framing of the activity as a legitimate and managed leisure event set within the countryside.

As part of the event framing, game organizers work to exclude material cues from the setting, such as a broken-down car, which might encourage down-keying

to the primary framework; an interpretation of the interaction as reality, not game or fantasy. Yet the economic relations of the local landowners present an unarguable interpretation of land use as part of a practice of rent charges, and this is not considered in conjunction with the benefits gained by the property next door. The negotiation with owners necessary to facilitate bracketing that established 'primary framework' of the everyday understandings common to social interactions around access to and use of premises was presumed by participants as part of the preliminary work undertaken by the organizers. The need to return to that primary framework, consequently returning to the world that participants had worked hard to bracket out of their interpretations, resulted in disruption for all concerned. Significantly, as an activity as frequently associated with urban as with rural space, this disruption strongly affects the experience of the rural environment as just another paid-for service or attraction, imposed by the local owners on the possibility of alternative interpretations of the rural environment as a fun or fantastical place. The transaction disrupts the carefully established distinctions between participants and organizers, players and crew, and consequently challenges organizers' roles as mediators of the setting and its meaning for the participants. This has the consequential effect of destabilizing the game and narrative frames.

Disruption three

After the darkness of the first encounter we agree to position some lighting at the other end of the site, diffused using fabric to prevent unsafe glare. The game is in full swing on the other side of the site, but we should be able to carry the generator along the narrow pathway that circles down the rear side. Four of us are struggling through the woods against the undergrowth carrying the heavy generator when there is a radio call from Steve – a distraught player has approached him having been disoriented by the dark woodland and has driven their vehicle off the road when leaving the site. Dave swears under his breath and rushes off to deal with the emergency. There is some confusion at the time, as no players are known to have left site. It later becomes clear that the person in distress is not a player at the event, but had visited friends on site earlier that day, though this is not clear to Steve. Steve directs the not-quite-player away from the gameplay area to the warmer and well-lit kitchen while Dave covertly enquires among the players until he finds someone with a large vehicle and towrope. They then all set off on a journey of a mile or so to find the car. Several hours later, Dave and Rob return to site in poor spirits having excavated the abandoned vehicle using shovels and with help from the player with the towrope. In their absence, we have set up the lighted area and the game has continued more or less as planned, though once again Steve is disappointed in our planning.

This final disruption demonstrates that challenges to the framing of the activity as event, as game and as narrative come not only from native countryside dwellers or unexpected features of the rural space. Here, an individual with connections

within the player community disrupts the framing activity (for the organizers and some players) partly as a consequence of their 'bridging status'. Steve's radio call demonstrates an interpretation of what is going on as part of the event frame (Frame 3), an interpretation facilitated by the identification of his position as an authoritative one. To maintain that frame and avoid disruption to player engrossment in further up-keyed frames he contacts Dave by radio and directs the distraught driver away from player space, to an area that is both 'backstage' and full of the comforts associated with normative primary interaction frameworks. Dave and Rob's subsequent recruitment of help and resources to go off-site and help the driver uses ludic conventions and behaviours accorded to referees that allow some participants' behaviour to be disattended without breaking frame, yet their own experience is one of frame collapse. As a consequence of the ambiguity between the event framework (Frame 3) and primary frameworks, they have been compelled to perform actions beyond those they understand as event organizing. As they see it, the terrain and people beyond the site are outside of their control or responsibility. Nonetheless, their capabilities to maintain frame (Frame 3) are questioned by Steve over this ambiguous issue.

These disruptions, as they have been seen and recounted from the perspective of an organizer, may overemphasize boundaries between frames and the role organizers or the countryside setting play in their maintenance. Importantly, local businesses, crew and players engage significantly in keying practices to manage smooth transitions between the different frames, as discussed below.

Engagements

Despite the main concentration of our efforts focusing on the backstage areas on-site, fuel for the generator had to be acquired from a local business reached by car. Dave returned with the fuel looking somewhat bemused and told us of his surprise on learning that the staff at the tool hire store were all well-informed about the hobby and had asked detailed questions about this weekend's storyline. We agreed that the business must have regular LARP visitors, as the nearest place to buy fuel for the site.

The monster room was becoming chaotic as groups returned and were sent out again, but there was often time to spare when moving into position or lying in wait for players. Moving a group of monsters into position they discussed with the referee why the 'bad guys' would choose a particular copse of trees or how best to use the ground to tactical advantage, looking for a closer link to the story. They also did other things to adapt their environment in line with the demands of the dramatic narrative even where it caused discomfort or damage to their equipment. Some monsters modified their basic costume with loose woodland grasses and twigs. One role a monster played involved resembling someone who had been 'surviving' in the wilderness for a few days, so they spent time smearing mud and grass on parts of their face as well as their costume. Some 'scouts' spent time attempting to emulate the calls of local birds to communicate their position.

Notably, one group constructed sand, leaf and charcoal ‘remains’ to be left behind when the players inevitably defeated and ‘killed’ the enemy earth, air and fire creatures they were representing.

As the players moved forward to face a group of dangerous trickster magical creatures, two referees hidden in the undergrowth set off green smoke bombs, which quickly filled the area. The referees then moved among the players, informing them quietly that the smoke caused a game effect, paralysing the characters. Meanwhile, the enemy monsters advanced through the smoke, ready to take advantage of the players and their characters’ foolhardy behaviour. Later, we set off white smoke canisters in a narrow valley, and the light breeze caused it to drift slowly uphill towards the player group. The group swiftly began to retreat as Warleader screamed for them to stay out of the mist.

In the final battle, which took place outside of the site in a public area, enemies poured out of three hillside locations towards players defending a central area. As these monsters were despatched, the volunteer monsters raised their arms to mark them as deceased and trudged back up the hill to re-enter the fray anew. Three characters died by self-adjudication of the game rules. The referees were at the heart of the skirmish monitoring safety, while many of the volunteers (including players who had withdrawn from the game earlier due to injuries requiring first aid) were engaged in patrolling the boundaries of the skirmish and preventing interruption by members of the public walking their dogs. Most of the dog-walkers and other tourists waited awhile to view the battle, seemingly reluctant to pass by the space or otherwise disrupt the ‘show’.

Discussion: Framing and setting – countryside as a resource for context

Studies of rural tourism have challenged rural leisure as experiences of place whereby visitors might participate in a ‘natural’ and unmediated experience of ‘the countryside’, identifying the contested and political nature of such debates (see Ateljevic, 2010; Darby, 2000). Such framings of rural experience key certain features as symbolic and bracket others to be disattended just as Darkdune does. This does not, however, discount the significance of rural materiality and a plurality of active framings built upon it by both local and visiting persons. The accounts of Darkdune highlight the collective work implied in establishing normative understandings of three frames and, in particular, the impact of a variety of physical elements and material symbolic resources.

As the experience of organizing this event confirms, LARP as a leisure activity relies upon the creation of an event experience, and is reliant on the production and maintenance of frames such as ‘place-as-event’ in co-operation with the environment. This involves a level of control over the physical and social setting. Goffman refers little to setting in *Frame Analysis* (1974), the term being used vaguely in line with the dramaturgical metaphor of his earlier work *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). Broadly, however, setting refers to either the physical or

social surroundings within which the interaction takes place. In *The Presentation of Self*, Goffman draws attention to the significance of settings in maintaining a personal identity 'front', and identifies how the static nature of settings and control over them could present significant problems to the maintenance of a clear identity in different settings. In *Frame Analysis*, Goffman also explores the relationship between transformative frames and the 'unstaged world' with the following metaphor: 'a cup can be filled from any realm, but the handle belongs to the realm that qualifies as reality' (Goffman, 1974: 249).

In the depths of Wales, the symbolic interpretation of fallen leaves or burned charcoal as natural woodland litter, as a resource for set-dressing, as a symbol of game success or a resource for improvising narrative is all a consequence of different keying practices indicating the relevant interpretive approach. Importantly, however, the same leaves or charcoal are present in all of these transformations. Social setting is a little more complicated to distinguish from frames, yet in the comparison between the car park attendant and the employees at the tool hire shop it is possible to identify similar local workers specific to the setting. Their approach to and engagement with the framing activities of the LARP organizers, however, could not be more different.

That the appropriate symbols need to be in place to support keying of frames is clearly evident in Goffman's work. It is significant in this setting that these symbols have to be managed to support multiple frame laminations. In the disruptions examined here, unexpected intrusions or the failure to successfully manage or bracket these events result in disruptions to the experience of place-as-event, as game and as narrative. Tangible intrusions such as the overgrowth of the undergrowth and the darkness demonstrate how each frame transformation relies upon the stable achievement of the success of the previous frame attempt, with the whole reliant upon a compatible base of participants' primary frameworks and the setting.

Specific to the leisure activity of LARP described here is the emphasis on mutual, or intersubjective, framing. This supports Scheff's (2005) claim that use of frame analysis can provide a detailed analytical understanding of the construction of context. Context can thus be defined here as the sustained endeavour of multiple actors (including elements of the setting in this definition of 'actor') to maintain (three) intersubjective frames through complex keying practices. Examples such as the keying activities of Charlotte and Sophie ('Warleader') highlight how individuals pick up and respond to each other's keying practices, extending them in order to promote interpretations which they infer will be the same as those of the people around them. This level of collective engrossment in the laminated frames in this setting can be understood as the co-created Darkdune context.

The nature of LARP as a leisure activity aims to promote significant and sustained engrossment, as is common in other leisure activities (see Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Goffman, 1961). In pursuit of this engrossment, the work of maintaining and keying frames is undertaken using the resources of the physical setting available and in reference to the broader shared history and normative practices of the player community. Conventions around costume, in-jokes and references to shared

cultural tropes all play a part in the specific social setting that permeates framing activities. It is this shared social setting which supports the confusion underlying disruption three, and which is expected to be absent from the interactions with the tool hire staff. Considering this lack of a shared social setting, the persistent location of these events in rural spaces seems inadvisable. Yet their remoteness, presenting many difficulties for logistical organization, also decreases the likelihood of conflict with different contexts. In addition, the practices engaged in by the participants in order to bracket interactions with those outside of the event are often respected by members of the public, such as the dog-walkers unwilling to disturb the fantastical 'battle'. This may be founded on a broader cultural acceptance in the UK of the countryside as a place for self-expression and exploration by visitors (see Darby, 2000).

The symbolic flexibility of the physical setting also seems to play a significant role in the maintenance of the Darkdune context. Despite its disruptive capacities, the material setting is subject to fewer perceived transformations than the LARPer's more extensively manipulated urban or semi-urban home environments. The Welsh woodland can more readily be interpreted as a place for events of magic and mystery than a local park with clearly marked cycleways, electric lighting and restrictive bylaws. Yet it remains a setting that is an object of control for participants, which in turn presents situations of conflict and disruption for all concerned. Nonetheless, the role of the physical setting in the case of Darkdune highlights the potential for a plurality of contexts finding ways to inhabit the same space, provided some leeway is accorded to different framing practices.

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