

Lifestyle in Siberia and the Russian North

Edited by
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Cover image: Ulan-Ude, 2009. Participants of a brass band open-air festival are returning to their hostel from the main square where they've just performed. Photo: Luděk Brož, CC-BY.

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10. A Taste for Play

Lifestyle and Live-Action Role-Playing in Siberia and the Russian Far East

Tatiana Barchunova and Joachim Otto Habeck

The goal of this chapter is to understand how participation in Live-Action Role-Playing (LARP) influences the lives and self-perceptions of those Siberians who are involved in this scene, and how the boundary between play and “real life” is being continually constructed and yet often disregarded at the same time. We start with a short overview of the present-day Siberian LARP scene; then we discuss taste, play, and game in relation to the concept of lifestyle; further, we examine the construction and transcendence of the borders that delineate “play” and “reality” as different modes of existence. Finally, we discuss the varying degrees of involvement that different players have in the game — from casual players to those for whom LARP is all-encompassing — which, in our opinion, is the key factor when it comes to understanding LARP as a distinct lifestyle.

Theoretically, we proceed from four ideas: first, the connection between *taste and lifestyle*, established by Pierre Bourdieu, and second, David Chaney’s notions of *lifestyle and play* (both these ideas will be exposed in detail in the second section). Third, we draw on Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of *chronotope* to describe the designation of a certain space as a playground with its own rules and temporal setting. Fourth, we discuss Johan Huizinga’s ideas on the *separation of play and real life*.

In conclusion, we will argue that role players transcend this boundary frequently, and for the most devoted role players, the differentiation between game and life is not applicable.

Empirically, we draw on interviews conducted in the framework of the CLLP project (presented in the Appendix) with a dozen interviewees in Novosibirsk (carried out by Tatiana Barchunova, henceforward abbreviated as TB) and six interviewees in Vladivostok (carried out by Natal'ia Beletskaia, and analysed for this chapter by Joachim Otto Habeck). The authors also make use of interviews and participant observation in other LARP settings.

Live-action role-playing (LARP) in Siberia today

The Siberian LARP scene emerged in the early 1990s and then grew rapidly, with a diversification into different genres. It covers the so-called historical re-enactment games, based on various periods of world history (including the reconstruction of global historical events or of certain periods in the history of indigenous peoples); fantasy games, based on books or film plots; freely invented scenarios, written by LARP leaders; strike-ball games, etc. The participants of these various playing activities often describe themselves as members of the “movement of role-playing games” (*dvizhenie rolevykh igr*). However, recently, the term “role-playing games” has come to be used to designate computer games too. In order to differentiate between computer and live-action games, the acronym LARP is now colloquially used for the latter. It refers to a variety of games beginning from large-scale field games with hundreds of participants and ending with pavilion games with only two or three people involved. LARP games are thus part of a wider ludic¹ scene which also includes computer games, “classic” table games, gambling, quiz sessions and other contests, geo-caching, urban games at night time, car-based quests, cosplay, and many more.

The first role-playing game in Russia was held in Krasnoiarsk in 1990. It was arranged along the lines of J. R. R. Tolkien's writings and was called *Hobbit games* (*Khobbitskie igrishcha*).² Since then, the movement has

1 The term “ludic” is used here as a shorthand for “related to play”.

2 <http://vk.com/club19866195> — “Letopis' Pervykh KhI [Khobbitskikh Igrishch] [Chronicle of the First Hobbit Games] (1990)” on the social networking site VKontakte.

spread over the whole country and diversified significantly (Barchunova & Beletskaja 2004). It is hard to tell how many people were involved in the original movement or any of its later diversified fractions. In the beginning, the LARP movement was publicly almost invisible; it was either ignored or maligned as some sort of deviance. Some priests of the Orthodox Church discussed “*tolkienism*” as a dangerous occult movement (Steniaev 1999) and mainstream journalists often categorised it as a “*subculture*” with all the pejorative connotations of the word, including the idea of diversion from and degradation of “*proper*” culture. However, since approximately the mid-2000s, a small number of publications have analysed various aspects of the LARP scene in Russia (for an overview, see Pisarevskaia 2011: 24–31; see also Kopytin 2016; Vorobyeva 2015).

Nowadays, every big city or town in the Russian Federation seems to have its own LARP club(s), informal association(s) of players, and/or regular LARP events. Besides spontaneous and well-planned annual games of all sorts, there exist various regular and irregular conventions and festivals of role players being held in Bratsk, Cheliabinsk, Ekaterinburg, Kazan’, Magnitogorsk, Moscow, Novgorod, Novosibirsk, St Petersburg, Samara, Tomsk, and other places. These are gatherings of different scale with tens or hundreds of participants from Russia and neighbouring countries. In this chapter, we will refer to the participants as “*larpers*” (as the English equivalent of the emic term *roleviki*, literally “*role persons*”). Our usage of *larpers* includes participants of both fantasy role-playing games and historical re-enactment games. The reason for this indiscriminate usage is that the most prominent event of the ludic scene in Novosibirsk (and arguably, Siberia in general) is the so-called “*military-historical role-playing game ‘Makarena’*” (*Voенно-istoricheskaja rolevaia igra “Makarena”*), which is a mixed form of role-playing and historical re-enactment, as illustrated in subsequent sections.

At the first stage of the LARP movement, the so-called “*curtain larpers*” (*zanovesochniki*) had to use any pieces of leather, metal, lace, fabric (including used curtains) at hand under the conditions of the shortage of consumer goods in the 1990s. As of now, some participants produce rather sophisticated costumes and equipment for the games, they buy expensive natural materials (leather, linen, lace, beads) in

special shops and on the internet. The logistics of the games have also become more complex. Some larpers use their own cars to travel to the game sites, sometimes they rent buses and cars for the equipment. The organisation of LARP conventions and festivals is also more elaborate now. The accommodation standards and demands tend to be higher.

The concept of lifestyle and its relevance to taste, play, and game

Taste is one of the key elements in the acquisition and expression of specific lifestyles. In his book *Distinction*, Bourdieu argued:

Taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) a given class of classified, classifying objects or practices, is the generative formula of life-style, a unitary set of distinctive preferences which express the same expressive intention in the specific logic of each of the symbolic sub-spaces, furniture, clothing, language or body hexis (1984: 173).

In other words, personal predilections that shape the ambience of one's home or determine the choice of apparel should be understood as part of the "same expressive intention", and such expressive intention also comes to the fore in the domain of play and other leisure activities. Individuals have a propensity to cluster around shared expressive intentions: it is through such communities of taste that lifestyles become manifest as inter-personal, i.e. social phenomena. We will show in this chapter that this statement is valid for those members of the LARP community who pursue role-playing with a certain frequency and intensity.

According to Chaney, lifestyle "is a style, a manner, a way of using certain goods, places and times that is characteristic of a group but is not the totality of their social experience" (1996: 5). This interpretation is relevant to the subject of our research for several reasons. First of all, it addresses the appropriation of space and time and the usage of goods available. LARP in all its different forms, especially in the version of historical re-enactment or modelling of the future, deals with a special form of appropriation of time and space (more about that below), and it always entails the construction and application of paraphernalia (game

accessories, or to use the emic term — *anturazh*, from the French word *entourage*).

Let us begin with the latter aspect, i.e. the material side of the games. The concept of lifestyle in Chaney's interpretation underlines the importance of patterns of consumption as reflexive projects (1996: 14–24, 112–13). The acquisition or do-it-yourself production of material objects are to be understood as meaningful acts, and it is in this way that consumption also entails production of meanings as well as it presupposes a certain attitude to the value of production in general. Within LARP this dialectic of consumption and production also takes place. There are common trends in mass consumption of goods among both mainstream³ and marginal groups, including participants of ludic practices: for example, since the early 2000s, both mainstream and larpers' patterns of consumption decreasingly feature self-made things. Consumption is getting increasingly commercialised, differentiated, and sophisticated. This tendency is a subject of a public discussion in which individuals express their views on consumption and position themselves ethically around this issue. The value of what is self-made (or home-grown) as opposed to what is ready-made is a frequent theme of discussion and self-stylisation, and in the LARP scene this issue has gained particular topicality, as shall become clear further below.

Discussing the problem of identity (self) and consumption, Chaney draws on game as a metaphor and connects it with the idea of unpredictability:

[...] if the meanings of things we are using or employing are unpredictable, then at least part of what they, the objects, will be taken to mean is dependent upon who is using them and how they are being used. And in the same way who we are — as active players in the *games* of consumption — is constructed and displayed through how we employ the resources of the *game* (1996: 113, emphasis added).

Contrary to the common sense understanding of consumption as a routine practice of consuming pre-established and pre-given items, Chaney thus stresses its creative aspects: it is both consumption and cultural production. In his chapter on lifestyle sites and strategies, he

3 The term “mainstream” is used here for tastes and preferences widely accepted as normal, not necessarily in need of explanation, and in this sense not necessarily reflexive.

portrays lifestyles as creative projects, as “forms of *enactment* in which actors make judgements in delineating an environment” (Chaney 1996: 92, emphasis added).

Second, in his analysis of the lifestyle concept Chaney stresses some other aspects of this notion which are related to games and playing. These are: “theatrical sociality”, “dramaturgy of modern life”, “playful forms” of civilised conduct, and modern life as a spectacle. A special section of Chaney’s book on lifestyles deals with various concepts of lifestyle as symbolic exchange. One of the forms of symbolic exchange which is an important constituent of lifestyle is fashion. Here he refers to the account by Jean Baudrillard, who discusses fashion as “theatrical sociality” (Baudrillard 1993: 94, quoted by Chaney 1996: 54). The term is meant to express the idea that the display of fashion and other elements of outer appearance follows its own logic and purpose: display has the goal to attract the attention of others, and it is in this sense that sociability attains “theatrical” character. Though role-playing does not presuppose an audience (spectators) as such, it obviously belongs to a theatrical form of sociality, as we will argue in the conclusion.

Furthermore, in discussing the research of the origins of “civilized behavior” by Norbert Elias (1978: 79), Chaney mentions the importance of “playful forms” of human conduct (1996: 115). For Chaney, one of the essential elements of lifestyle is displaying difference, which he categorises through the concept of surfaces: “The *play* of surfaces creates distinctions that are matters of framing rather than qualitative difference. In the *dramaturgy* of appearance all actions are forms of performance” (1996: 123, emphasis added). The significance of surfaces, in its turn, is associated with the general trait of the unstable, fluid reality of modern “societies of spectacle” (ibid: 93). Not only here, but also in several other contexts does Chaney apply notions of game, play, and spectacle to his analysis of lifestyle and mass culture. For instance, when he analyses the approach to social practices by Michel de Certeau, he mentions that de Certeau suggests three types of practices through which “actors in everyday life manipulate established forms of knowledge and discourse in order to appropriate the ‘stuff’ of mass society for idiosyncratic perspectives” (Chaney 1996: 74). Those are “games, accounts, and tales and legends” (ibid.).

The above conceptualisations of lifestyle in terms of ludic elements — dramaturgy, spectacle, enactment, and game — seem to be following the trend of approaching social reality in terms of performance and enactment, which can clearly be seen in recent social theory, empirical research, and all sorts of playful simulations used in psychotherapy, business, and teaching.

The universal application of ludic metaphors to the analysis of social reality makes the analysis of games and playing *per se* a special challenge, as can be seen already in Huizinga's influential book *Homo Ludens* (1949), in which he exposes the history of culture as the history of playing. For Huizinga, human civilisation is rooted in playing: every sphere of life is imbued with ludic elements. However — and this deserves special attention — he argues that game and play are separated from “real life” in space and time (Huizinga 1949: Chapter 1). This act of universalising of the ludic element, on the one hand, and the act of separating it from the “real life” experience, on the other, seems to be a contradiction that calls for closer examination (Getsy 2011: xii; Hankiss 2001: 222; Norbeck 1974: 2), to be achieved through research of particular forms of games and play. To formulate this game/life paradox in other words: if playing is indeed separated from the “real world”, then how can one argue that every sphere of life is imbued with ludic elements? In this paper we are going to address this paradox empirically through the analysis of LARP activities and participants' degrees of involvement.

LARP as practice: separation and mixture of game and reality

LARP is a practice that has several key variables: the intensity and duration of preliminary organisation of the game, the space appropriated, duration of the game (or enactment as such), the number of participants, the quantity and quality of financial and other resources involved, intensity, and means of communication before, during, and after the game. Additionally, games differ considerably in their aesthetic design, the level of ludic conventions and symbolism, institutional support, and organisation.

The paradigm case of LARP is a big field game which can be characterised through its core and periphery. The core of the game is the

enactment of the game scenario by the majority of participants, which happens at a certain location over a certain period of time, usually a long weekend but occasionally up to more than one week. The conventional term for this site is the Russian word *poligon* (the same as *polygon* in English), and used by the military to refer to shooting ranges. Many (though by far not all) LARP sites are in fact located on territories of abandoned army grounds.

The space of the *poligon* is symbolically appropriated through the ascription of ludic temporality. In other words, by delineating the space and relocating it in time, the place is taken out of the surrounding reality and undergoes historical stylisation. Thus, time and place in this case are merged together and constitute a time-place conglomerate which can be referred to by Bakhtin's term *chronotope*.⁴

The delineation of the site, the declaration of a particular chronotope, is an obvious act of separating the game from the "real world" in Huizinga's sense. Moreover, there are certain stages, some of them carefully ritualised, that mark the passage from the real world into the chronotope of the game (cf. Pisarevskaia 2011: 148–51; Copier 2005: 9). The journey to the *poligon*, the change of dress, and the opening parade are the most important of these, as will be discussed below. Similarly, several events mark the passage from the game back into the real world. The organisers have to arrange and maintain these "gates" and they do so very consciously. The participants are usually fully aware of such passages and experience them with heightened attention. For novices in particular, the experience of entering the field is a very emotional one. This passage definitely has strong resemblance with what has been described as the transformative potential of rituals (Turner 1969; see also Carlson 2004: 16–17). In some of the opening rituals, organisers purposefully push novices into a state of *communitas*, disconnecting them from the outer world and integrating them mentally into the chronotope.

Having said that, there are many aspects in the preparation of the game, the discussion after the game, and also critical moments that may occur during the game which deny the idea of a strict separation. This

4 Bakhtin applies this concept to interpret various forms of interpretation of connection between time and space in different narratives (Bakhtin 1981; for a recent exegesis see Bemong & Borghart 2010). A similar concept of time-space is used by John Urry (2007: 15, 29, 118–24).

is not only a problem of border maintenance or a question of where to draw the line between the core of the chronotope and the periphery, but it is more generally about the unintended or intentional intermingling of game and “real life”, about the transposition of objects, language, and ethical judgements from one world into another (cf. Tychsen et al. 2006: 268). The analysis below is centred on a big field game, “Makarena”, and exemplifies this subversion of the classical distinction between game and actual life as separate modes of existence.



Fig. 10.1. A scene from the live-action role play “Black Prince” (*Chërnyi Prints*) in 2018 as part of the annual “Makarena” events. Source: https://vk.com/club27365038?z=album-27365038_253779390

Organisers and participants

A field game is a creative project; it constitutes a mode of cultural production. The project is usually organised by a group of masters headed by a leader, or “main master” (*glavnyi master*). The game masters select a game site, write the game scenario, and thereby establish the ludic reality which is called “the world” (*mir*). The scenario may be either completely invented or based on a historical event, an episode borrowed from a fictional book, or a plot of a movie. The scenario should draw on commonly shared cultural resources (for instance, deal with famous historical figures like Joan of Arc, Julius Caesar, King

Arthur, important historical events, or familiar fictional characters) and still be original enough to attract potential players. However, even if the scenario is based on historical facts or a fictional story, it is not designed to follow all details or historical data. The outcome of the game is open: there can be anachronisms or historically unconfirmed participants or events. In the case of the historical re-enactment scene of Novosibirsk, it is never strictly adherent to history. As Andrei Mel'nikov, one of the most prominent leaders of the Novosibirsk role-playing movement, says: "Well, in general, history is one thing and a game is something totally different. Here, everything can be, sort of, turned in a completely different way. Most important here is not to go beyond the frame of historical events".

The ludic world is constituted by roles, rules, and a plot. The plot determines some principal tasks to be fulfilled by people in different roles. Roles can be distributed by masters and/or the leader. But there can be individual participants who decide about their roles themselves. On a par with individual participants there are teams which have their own leaders. Inclusion of individuals — and even more so, whole teams — is usually subject to negotiation. For example, the online site (group) of Makarena 2013, the world of which is England in the early eleventh century, contained an announcement: "Applications from small teams of Scottish mercenaries will be considered separately".⁵ The site also has links to documents that lay out the historical context and the protagonists, the "rules of fighting, rules of fortification, siege, of healers and methods of healing, economy and capture, and also the land of the dead".⁶

The Makarena forum currently counts more than 3,000 subscribers and the announcement of the 2018 game attracted approximately 3,500 clicks, though by far not all of the visitors of the online site actively participate in the games or online discussions. The actual number of participants in a game can vary from several tens to several hundred. The age of participants grows with the age of the movement itself — there are more elderly participants now than ten years ago, and it is no longer unusual to see people in their late thirties and forties.

5 <http://vk.com/wall-27365038?own=1> — message posted to the group *Voennistoricheskaiia rolevaia igra "Makarena"* on 24 May 2012 on VKontakte.

6 *Ibid.*, message posted on 3 November 2012.

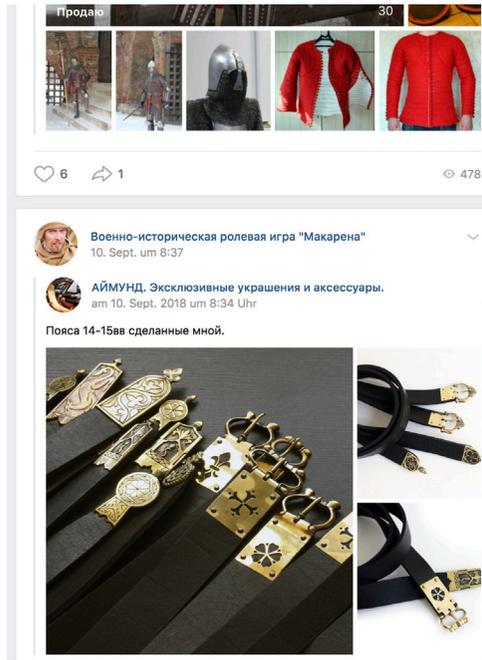


Fig. 10.2. Online forum for the “Makarena” on VKontakte. Screenshot as of 10 September 2018. The forum contains many posts about clothes, gear, weapons, etc. offered for exchange, purchase, or free of charge. Source: <https://vk.com/club27365038>

The majority of games are based on all kinds of *militarian*⁷ actions against a symbolic enemy. However, there are moments of negotiations between alien parties, and periods of armistice. The civil life with its everyday economy is indispensable in the game, though up to now it has been secondary. Women can participate in the *militarian* activities through cross-dressing, but more often they are engaged in religious activities, medical care, and management of the ludic household. Game leaders tended to think that such ancillary roles are most suitable for women. Some of them came to acknowledge the need for paying more attention to the non-*militarian* aspects of the ludic world. The ludic life of women has become more diverse since the introduction of historical dances from about 2007. One of the first games when they were introduced was

7 The concept “*militarian*” was introduced by Tatiana Barchunova to designate various forms of symbolic representation of martial element in everyday life (Barchunova & Beletskaja 2009–2010).

Burgundian Wars (the Makarena event organised in 2007). Debates about ludic roles of women happen not only in Novosibirsk, but also, as Ina Schröder points out in Chapter 9 of this volume, in other regions and role-play settings.

While the masters and leaders set the rules of the game, they also participate and perform in it. Vadim Zevlever (nickname: Makar), the major master and name patron of the Makarena games, comments on this: "I also want to play. Why should I sit all dressed in camouflage on a chaise-longue drinking Cognac? That's not my business. Unlike football, a role-playing game allows the trainer also to play, at least a little bit." Sometimes, however, a master may decide to let the chronotope crack on purpose for a moment. Later we will return to the question of "being within" the chronotope and simultaneously "being beyond it".

Preparation of the game

The preparation of a big field game can take several months. The preparation covers advertisement of the project (as exemplified above), registration of participants, physical training of the teams, exercises in dancing, fencing, and other skills, sewing costumes, making armaments, providing artefacts for construction or reconstruction of everyday economy, and assembling other items of equipment. According to one of the game leaders, the best exercises to teach the skills of role-playing are verbal games: "Imagine that you are X, doing Y in situation Z". These exercises have some similarity with exercises in professional drama schools. They mark the initial stage of the participants immersing into the ludic world and identifying with their roles. The *anturazh* (additional equipment, accessories) is sometimes highly sophisticated and much time is invested in its creation. For instance, for the big field game *War of the Roses* (Makarena 2006) the girls who played students at a mediaeval university had designed a library collection. They printed out mediaeval philosophical treatises using Gothic fonts. The covers were decorated by strasses. The paper they used was tinted by tea so that the books would look authentically aged.

The final stage of preparation involves engineering and construction work at the game site itself. Field games are normally being held outside the urban space, in a forest or on abandoned military terrains.

Wood is available on the spot, but all the other building material needs to be transported to the game site, which usually requires cars or vans. Volunteers build symbolic civilian and militarian constructions which are used during the game. For example, for the same game a model of a temple was constructed, with vitrines made of transparent plastic films.

The format of the advertisement and organisation of games has substantially changed with widespread access to the internet since the 2000s. Initially, games were advertised at LARP conventions, through booklets printed by LARP community members, public bulletin boards (for instance, there was such a board at Novosibirsk State University), and informally, through mouth-to-mouth communication. Currently, LARP conventions are also used to present new projects and upcoming events. Small booklets are still printed and distributed but the printout has shrunk to several tens. The major means of sharing information is the internet. In the late 1990s there appeared the website rpg.nsk.ru for advertising games, assembling the LARP archive, and maintaining communication. Over the last years advertisements and communication are mostly facilitated through social networks such as VKontakte (vk.com). Every big game has its own group or site on the internet.

The process of preparation undermines the strict division between game and “real life” to a great extent. In the intervals between big field games their participants meet for training sessions; they arrange tournaments, festivals, and conventions in preparation of future games. In the framework of these interim sessions the game project participants wear ludic costumes, call each other by their ludic names, and learn about the rules and traditions of the ludic world. Therefore, according to Mel’nikov, the entry into the game actually begins at the stage of its preparation when participants learn to deal with each other as ludic characters.

Game entry

How does the transfer to the virtual world take place? How is the ludic identity acquired? Part of it, as we have seen, is already built up in the preparatory stage, but the journey from one’s home or workplace to the game site is usually perceived as the moment when one “leaves behind” one’s everyday life and gets mentally attuned to the ludic world.

Especially when team members travel together, they are in high spirits, jointly looking forward to the things to come, enjoying the tension of the unpredictable, exchanging stories (*baiki*) of earlier events, making final stitches on their garments, etc., as is revealed by the interviews with Vladivostok larpers. Denis B. (Lans), one of the most prominent larpers of Vladivostok (interviewed by Beletskaiia), stated that “A journey with the club to some place is of course very useful for the club because it unites the team [...] The further you travel, the stronger will be the test [of integration], accordingly”. A similar characterisation of the journey as a rite of passage is presented by Dina Pisarevskaiia in her study on larpers in the European part of Russia: “the behavioural reactions of the neophytes are memorised, which later can have an influence on their reputation in the community” (2011: 150).

Travel to the game site may take several hours or even days. According to one of our interviewees, Aleksandra Anikina, packing and moving to the site is not very different from hiking and tourist camping. The most striking difference from tourism is that rank-and-file participants should bring their own accessories and ludic costumes with them, put them on upon arrival, and settle down at the camp. The act of changing dress is, for many people, the most decisive point in the passage from one reality to the other, and hence it is also an emotionally intensive moment. The organisers have also to deliver various ludic equipment (flags, bells, carriages, etc.) for modelling the life in the fictional world. Some participants begin to immerse into the fictional atmosphere before the game, at the stage of traveling to *poligon*, or even earlier, at the stage of reading the relevant materials long before the game. There are emic terms for the process of identification with the fictional character, all of which entail some literal meaning of “loading” (*zagruz*, *vgruz*, *pogruzhenie*). It is used to designate both the instructions of the game master and the self-identification with the fictional character.

Even though the start of the game is more or less fixed, not all participants enter the game at the same time. Therefore, while some of them are already *in* the game, the others are still preparing or tuning themselves to the action in what can be called the sub-ludic space (see below). In order to summon all the participants and to introduce them to each other, the game begins with a parade. At the parade, the teams and individual participants are already dressed up in the costumes of

the ludic world, and this is the moment when they stop using their non-ludic names. The parade usually includes a presentation by the major leader, short presentations by the teams, and the official opening speech act. This is the moment when the delineation of the chronotope (the ludic world against “real life”) is maintained at its strongest, and by many also experienced at its strongest. However, even here there is a link between the real and the ludic world, as participants take pictures of groups and individuals before the parade and sometimes after it. After the parade everybody briefly returns to his or her camp, and after this return the game events *per se* begin. If somebody appears in non-ludic clothes after the parade, the participants may joke: “Look, there is a naked chap over there!”

Chronotopic core: the feel of reality in the ludic world

The concept of the ludic chronotope helps us to describe how the borders between game and “real life” are constructed and maintained, but it has already become clear that this strict separation gets blurred in multiple ways. This brings up the question of game reality, of how this mode of existence is experienced. One of the Novosibirsk interviewees, Aleksandra Anikina, makes a strong statement on the ontological status of the ludic world: “A game is a reality of the notions of the participants about what is going on. Therefore, when loads of people in a particular location think that they are on the territory of Ancient Gaul [laughs], this is becoming real to a certain extent”. The success of the game, according to her, depends on the intensity of emotional and imaginative reality construction. If the level of this intensity is high enough, if the ludic reality becomes “dense”, if the ludic interaction is vivid, then everyone is happy with the game.

For many participants, the virtual world of the game reinforces their perception of reality in a mystical way. Anikina related a story that happened during one of the Makarena games and that in her narrative sounded like a miracle. In a game about Gallic wars she was playing a role of a Helvetian priestess. She recounted that all the Helvetians were destroyed and then said: “But on top of all of us being destroyed, it began to rain. I thought: ‘It’s started to rain — that’s all we need!’” In order to make the rain stop she went to the shrine and performed a series

of rituals. And then she observed that the sky began to clear exactly over the Helvetians' settlement. She was amazed to see how sharp the border between the blue sky and the thick clouds was, and to see that then finally all the clouds disappeared. It is obvious that she did not perceive the disappearance of the clouds and her magic as a mere coincidence; in her interpretation it sounded as ironic faith. For her, the virtual, the ludic, and the magic had the force to impact the natural events in the "real world". This is a particularly telling case of the contamination of the virtual with the real which we have encountered frequently.

Denis B. (Lans), the Vladivostok larper whom we introduced in the previous subsection, gave another impressive example of his emotional experience in which game and reality became blurred:

On the issue of immersion in the image, in the role: at this game something happened to me which has never happened to me again. At a certain point, the game has become — well, not as if reality [...] but the emotions which I began to feel through the game became real. [...] Once there was a situation when [...] I went to the far edge of the *poligon* and then returned. While I was away our camp was attacked. And all people of our tribe [...] were either killed or taken as prisoners. I was the only survivor [...] and our enemies noticed me and also injured me. And I am lying near their wall quietly and I am dying under a warm sun (*pomiraiu na solmyshke*). And there arises, from inside, somewhere, the anguish, which is so real that you can reach it with your hands and touch. I [then] was saved by a girl I had no idea who she is. I was hosted by a different tribe, by a different team. I was dressed and fed. And this feeling that you are the only survivor, and the feeling of the presence of people who saved you, helped you, that there is someone to lean on, it was so real.

This episode illustrates that Lans — although being himself one of the organisers of the game, responsible for controlling the chronotopic entry and exit gates — is "lost" in the reality of the game. Similarly, Anikina's experience is an indication of how the game affects the outer sphere and makes the "real world" part of the ludic world. It is exactly this density of the mixture of the ludic and the real that is cherished by the larpers. To sum up this subsection, these two examples illustrate *one* of the different ways in which the ludic and the real get blurred. In the next subsection we will present the reverse case: the density of the mixture can be so overwhelming that the chronotope must be temporarily annihilated — though not necessarily completely.

Sub-ludic space and temporal discarding of the chronotope

Even though the chronotopic core of the game fits the classical definition of a game by Huizinga — it is set apart from “real life” in space and time — there are some typical situations during the game when the border between the ludic and the real must be transcended for practical reasons, in order to keep the game going.⁸ Andrei Mel’nikov has called this the *sub-ludic space* (*podygrovoe prostranstvo*). This may be a tent or a room that is reserved for consultations of team leaders. One of the sub-ludic spaces is the campfire where the food is cooked and where team members come together during the evening or night. During these evenings it is not necessary for larpers to keep playing; they can interact as “real” persons. Mel’nikov perceives this sub-ludic space as the space for game management by the team leaders who have to control the sustenance of their camp life and the emotional state of their team members.

Also, there may be some emergency situations when players quit the game world and deal with each other in “reality”. This happens, for instance, when a ludic conflict turns into a situation of real aggression. In this case, according to Vadim Zevlever, the master has to break into the conflict by means of irony or comedy:

It happens that suddenly [...] as it is called, the boys went berserk (*perekrylo parnei*). With swords in their hands, just about to threaten each other’s life. [In that case] one has to joke, you know, on a distracting topic, one has to say “Suddenly in the dragon’s pocket a mobile phone is ringing”. Everybody [in amazement]: “What mobile phone?” — “Nokia. A red one”. The dragon says: “Hold on! Hello? I can’t talk right now, I am in a fight” [...] “What do you mean: which fight?” “With the crusaders [of course], what a question! As soon as I am done, I will phone you back”. And everybody sits [and thinks] “wow” and I say: “All right, smoking break! Everybody go for a smoke”.

Game exit

While the opening parade is a “compulsory” ritual, the closing parade is usually an optional procedure. Thus, the end of the game

8 Schröder states in Chapter 9 of this volume that “in the role-playing game actors are constantly moving between the subjunctive and indicative frames”. We interpret “subjunctive” as equivalent of the ludic mode and indicative for that what needs to be denoted as off-play (the “sub-ludic space”).

is less ritualised and less sharp a moment in time. At the end of the game while some people already quit the game, the others still identify with their roles, wear their ludic outfit, and keep playing. The disassembling of the buildings and the clearing of the site may take several hours or even days; it is carried out by a smaller group of people who do not have to rush back to the city. People travel home in smaller groups or even individually; they are usually much more tired and less talkative than they were when travelling to the game site. Participants experience the departure from the ludic world very differentially and often individually rather than collectively. Group photos, hugs, and handshakes at a bus stop or railway station mark one of the latest stages of passage back into everyday life. Such photos often show groups of mixed clothing, with some people still wearing ludic attire and others dressed in their “civil” clothes.

As an ultimate stage of releasing oneself from the ludic identity, upon arrival at home, participants clean their clothes and boots and store them away (though not everything, and not everybody does; see below). What follows is a period of relaxation: people take a bath, quietly reflect on what has happened, meet their loved ones and give first reports, and generally try to get back into “real life”. For some of our interviewees, this can happen within hours. For others, the emotional ludic status can last much longer, especially when the role of the player was ambiguous or problematic. Then, the help of the master may be needed. One of the game leaders we interviewed mentioned a girl who had a dramatic role and he kept communicating with her through email long after the game.

Usually a couple of days after the end of the game, the online forum gets increasingly frequented again. This is the time when photographs and personal assessments are exchanged. It comes with what some may see as a significant liminal rite: the game analysis (*razbor poletov*, literally the “assessment of the flights”). The commitment that individual forum members spend on these discussions is indicative of their general identification with the scene; in other words, participants take their ludic reality more or less serious throughout their “real life”. All these phenomena support the idea that the border between the ludic and the real is not fixed. However, we also know of larpers that *never* stop being involved in play, and of those who incorporate their ludic personage into their “civil” identity.

The issue of participants versus spectators

According to our interviewees and other sources, LARP events generally do not presuppose any spectators to be present during the event. However, there is an essential element of LARP games which implies the existence of an audience, and therefore transforms LARP events into performances: the visual documentation by means of photo and video representations of every game. The visual materials created at all stages of any game and especially during the game event are diverse and abundant. At the very beginning of the role-playing movement, the first visual documents were black-and-white photographs which were kept in albums of almost every role player. Then, video materials were added to the personal archives. And now, with the access to digital cameras, every game is documented by hundreds of digitised pictures and video clips.

These various visual forms are multifunctional. First, they are representations of games which serve both to record past events and advertise upcoming events of the same type. Second, they are the form of a collective memory which facilitates the formation of collective identity (Chaney 1996: 31). And finally, visuality constitutes the performative element of LARP. The game becomes a spectacle for the viewers, many of whom participated in the same game. Visual documentation thus facilitates the mental return into the chronotope and reflects what happened collectively.

Since most of the visual materials circulate online, the permanent access of the visual materials to the spectators also undermines the spatial and temporal borders between the game and the real world. The spectators comment on the visual materials online and thus provide feedback for the performers. The difference between this feedback and theatrical feedback is that in the case of LARP it is a delayed and continued communication. The vast spectrum of visual representations of games allows us to consider LARP a theatrical form of sociality — one in which the actors are among their own spectators and critics.

All the experiences which undermine the border between the game and the real world produce the feeling that the game never ends. Says the leader of Makarena: “I hate the final parade. In 1996 at the very first Makarena, when half of the game had passed, a girl came up to me and

asked: 'Tell me, Makar, when does the game come to the end?' And I responded: 'it never does'".

LARP and lifestyle: casual, regular, and total larpers

As we have seen above, a game as a practice covers preparation for the game, entry into the game (which involves travelling to the game site), non-ludic events at the site, the chronotopic core of the game (the enactment part or the game *per se*), exit from the game, game analysis shortly after the game, and communication of visual materials. We would like to identify three groups of larpers, based on the level of participation at these stages of the game: casual larpers, regular larpers, and total larpers.

Casual larpers are not involved in the organisation of the game, their appearance in the role play is usually restricted to basic functional roles — for example, that of an adept, a recruit, etc. — and the experience of the game usually does not exert a sustained influence on the way they see themselves and want to be seen by others.⁹ We may thus assume that casual participation in LARP does reflect certain predilections and sensibilities, but it does not exert a significant impact on the lifestyle of a person in the sense of shaping that person's habits or their outer appearance. Casual larpers perceive games as single experiments that may be continued but also stopped.

According to Vadim Zevlever, the majority of participants are not capable of feeling their role, they just try to do what is prescribed by the game scenario. By implying that certain people simply have no talent for identification with the role, Zevlever ignores the very likely possibility that some participants do not find satisfaction in the game and therefore quit the scene after a short time. They may turn to other role-playing games or other types of play or sport. The interviews also show that the change of professional status, the beginning or end of university studies, and similar biographical turning points may force a role player to stop participating, which also explains the volatility of membership in many clubs.

9 As one of TB's informants, a student from Krasnoiarsk, described her experience playing an elf in a fantasy game: "You get some ears stitched on and receive a spear, and off you go" (*Ushi prishili, kop'ë dali i idi*). By that, she meant that she was a casual player, not having made any preparations before the game.

Regular larpers participate in field games and other LARP events. A regular larper can become a member of the master group and be involved in the organisation of a game. However, his or her LARP participation does not develop into a life-long project. Regular larpers communicate with each other outside the game chronotope, and in this communication they can use idiomatic expressions originating in various games. In their everyday life they may wear certain clothes or accessories which display their LARP experience as signs of shared experience to anyone who recognises them. But most aspects and activities of their life are not affected by the impact of their LARP experience, or to return to Chaney's definition of lifestyle mentioned above, their LARP experience "is not the totality of their social experience" (1996: 5). Moreover, the person does not see the LARP engagement as something that deserves or requires to be publicised, to be shared with people outside the LARP community. Several of our interviewees said they did not tell their relatives or colleagues at work that they were participating in role-playing games for many years. Nonetheless, the person's participation in the LARP community has such a degree of importance that a significant part of leisure time is spent with other larpers, even outside the context of the actual games.

An interesting example of this was related by Natasha Permiakova. As a role player she identifies herself with the ludic Celtic clan *Kallanmor*, founded on the occasion of the 1998 Makarena, though currently she does not play because she has a small child:

In the same year [1999] in our company Kallanmor there happened the first wedding. And I went to participate in this wedding and we all came together in Omsk. And it was quite a performance. They got married at the Central Marriage Registration Office of Omsk. They had their Celtic costumes on, made of tartan, according to the traditional authentic Scotch wedding design. [...] This wedding was, of course, very heartfelt, because it was the first one. And also because we all came together with a very special cordial feeling.

This story of two larpers who decided to celebrate their marriage within the ludic community and mark their belonging to the ludic community by appropriate ritual clothes illustrates how ludic identities attain relevance in "real life", yet without fully occupying it. It is yet another example of how larpers wilfully transcend the boundary between the game and "reality".



Fig. 10.3. Natasha Permiakova during a LARP event near St Petersburg, August 2001. Photo: Tatiana Barchunova's interviewee (with permission), CC-BY-ND.

The ludic/real border is especially ambiguous in the case of the so-called clan games (*klanovushki*). These games, according to Mel'nikov, are non-stop. People stay involved in the game even when they are at work: "When someone goes to work or to school, his foes may, in game mode, kill him or carry out any other game-related action on him. They are not inhibited by any objection, 'I am at work', or 'I am busy'. Once you have decided to take part, you must take part".

Aleksandra Anikina during a certain period of her life was teaching at a school. At one of the games she played a similar role: she acted as a bachelor responsible for the enrolment of students to her university. By coincidence, one of her real students came to the field game and had to deal with her as a teacher. He was not well prepared for the camping aspect of the game and had not brought a tent or a sleeping bag. She took patronage of him both as a real and as a virtual teacher: "Well. I gave him my mat and my sleeping bag [...] That's it. Because I began to feel responsibility right away [laughs]. The situation was... how to say that? [...] identical, homologous to the situation in life in that I was teaching and he was my student [...] That's it."

What is remarkable about the second group of larpers is their high mobility, which is both geographical and virtual, i.e. imagined



Fig. 10.4. Aleksandra Anikina hitch-hiking from the outskirts of Novosibirsk towards Tomsk, summer 2007. Photo: Tatiana Barchunova's interviewee (with permission), CC-BY-ND.

(cf. Urry 2007: 9). In addition to travelling to LARP events in regions distant from home, they show a general propensity to travel. Two young women among TB's interviewees should be mentioned in this case. Anikina travelled through Russia, Europe, and the Asian part of Russia by many possible means: on foot, hitch-hiking, by bicycle, by train, by bus, by aeroplane. She made one trip to Europe together with the above-mentioned student of hers. Permiakova travelled to many cities and towns of the Russian Federation, to most former Soviet Union countries, to Europe, Japan, and Thailand. Their geographical mobility was facilitated by their personal inventiveness and creativity in terms of logistics (Zuev 2008). They used all possible organisational venues for travel and accommodation: standard tourist services, informal services, couch-surfing networks, and networks of friends and other role players. The prearranged accommodation and travel did not always work out: both women had moments when they were completely broke and miserable.

The virtual mobility of regular larpers can be called *chronotopic* mobility. By this we mean the ability and desire to move back and forth between different worlds, which may exist as “mere” fiction or as an imaginary connected to a certain “real” place, such as a historical site.

In other words, the “spatial imaginary” (cf. Chapter 5 in this volume) of regular larpers and their travel biographies come to include sites of importance experienced or narrated in the ludic world. Chronotopically mobile people are sensitive to stories and cosmologies of the past, and their geographical travels are often imbued with history. Thus, Anikina travelled to the Altai Mountains to see the Ukok plateau, which has become widely known for a major archaeological discovery (Broz 2009; Halemba 2008). She is also interested to see places related to Celtic history. Chronotopic mobility also includes the ability to get immersed in ludic reconstruction of the past, and participate in futurological games. An interesting case of chronotopic mobility was related by Natal’ia Vinichenko: she participated in a game where she had to live under extreme “prehistoric” conditions in order to test her survival abilities.

Chronotopic mobility does not necessarily imply intensive geographical mobility. Chronotopically mobile people might not have enough economical and network resources for long-distance travels in physical space. The major instrument of chronotopic mobility in this case is the power of imagination reinforced by ludic communication. A low degree of physical mobility and a lack of material resources do not necessarily reduce the intensiveness of play, and are often compensated for through the ingenious application of those resources which are at hand. We believe that chronotopical mobility — the ability and desire to travel between different worlds — is a highly important ingredient of the life experience of regular larpers, and connected with it is the readiness to transpose different elements — objects, words and concepts, moral values — from one reality to another (as is exemplified by the Celtic wedding in Omsk described above).

This readiness is even more true for the third category, the *total larpers*. Most of them are the leaders and organisers of games. They oftentimes “structure their whole life” (to use the words of one of TB’s interviewees, Andrei Mel’nikov) so as to participate in LARP. They are involved in all stages of LARP events. They are attached to a particular style of clothes, so that their ludic attire is never really stored away in the wardrobe or chest. In addition, some of them tend to use terms or even a specific linguistic style that derive from their interest in historical re-enactment.

Among TB’s interviewees, almost all the total larpers are in some way professional historians in their “real life”. For them, the modelling of historical events through playing is a cognitive resource. The acquisition

of military technologies of the past through their reconstruction and practicing, according to Vadim Zevlever, is a sensory experience essential for any historian:

A true historian is willing not only to read but also to touch and feel [...] A person who sits in a study and describes the deeds of the detachment of parachute troops and who has never bailed out himself, is ridiculous [...] Thus, now, thanks to my own experience I know what the gallop attack of bayonets is. I see it quite differently. Before I practiced it myself, I have not known, for instance, how a horse would move... How it moves, how it behaves when the cannons thunder around. One should sit on it and feel it.

Total larpers tend to have jobs that enable them to invest significant time into the organisation of games and participation in other LARP events. They are either freelancers, or they find jobs that allow them to accommodate their LARP experience with paid employment. The organisation of a big field game with several hundred participants takes, according to Zevlever, several months. Even the organisation of a small-scale game of one or two days demands more than a month. Three Novosibirsk interviewees who belong to the category of total larpers are professional pedagogues who have positions of extra-curriculum teachers at special clubs for children of a particular city district. Their lifestyle is definitely constituted by LARP and can be characterised as historical romanticism, often with a particular stress on military history. The majority of games they arrange or participate in are about historical reconstruction of different historical events. Lans, the leading figure of the Vladivostok role-playing movement, works as a system administrator. He says: "My work satisfies me in terms of self-realisation. [...] I can keep the balance that I have been always looking for: between the spare time [...] and salary". This interviewee also has a deep interest in history, but more in the ethical than martial aspects of it, and he recounts how the excessive focus on fights and weapons in earlier role-playing games in Vladivostok gradually led to an impasse that could only be overcome by redesigning the games in a more encompassing way.¹⁰

10 Above we have mentioned that some game leaders now increasingly think beyond militaristic action and try to integrate other aspects more strongly into the game scenarios.

What is characteristic for Lans and other total larpers is their intention and capacity not only to travel between different worlds, but to make these worlds accessible to other people. In other words, they do not just live in a “dream world” — they rather provide the basis for other people’s dreams to come true. Transposition of symbols, narratives, and normative orders is for them more than just a periodical or regular experience; rather, it is a mechanism whereby to communicate systematically their worldview to others. Often this goes hand in hand with the desire to make the “real world” a better place. Simultaneously, a new reality is constructed — one that follows and emulates certain models and conventions and yet exists in its own right.¹¹ We identify these larpers as “total larpers” because the value that they attribute to the chronotopical existence is so strong that this form of existence itself turns into a sensibility — into a moral purpose, to be shared with others.

The nexus of chronotopical mobility, romanticism, inventiveness, and a certain educatory mission comes to the fore in many leaders’ self-descriptions, and we introduce two of them in more detail here. Both are from Novosibirsk. Andrei Mel’nikov, a pedagogue in an extra-curricular school, is very explicit in expressing his style of travelling, which for him is primarily associated with hiking and overcoming hardship. He perceives hiking as a chronotopic experience since traveling makes him closer to his ancestors who had to overcome difficulties that modern people do not face. They had to light fire, they did not have warm running water. He and his associates make most of their ludic clothes themselves. In opposition to the general tendency from self-made to purchased accessories mentioned earlier, they perceive the production of clothes as a vital and authentic activity since its final product is not a “decorative”, disposable ludic costume but a functional outfit that has to protect the body from natural and human vicissitudes.

When Mel’nikov was asked by TB if he could describe his lifestyle he said that he would liken himself to early Mediaeval man (*chelovek*) and his values, especially his respect for nature. Mel’nikov sees his

11 From this point of view their experience is close to the experience of Indianists, described and interpreted by Petra Tjitske Kalshoven who in her turn refers to Michael Taussig’s ideas. She argues that “by embodying an imagined model steeped in mimetic capital” one can go “beyond representation” and produce something being “its own thing, where something new is at stake” (Kalshoven 2012: 225).

role model as a Viking, though not literally transferred to modern life. He is a partisan of a healthy way of life, without smoking or extensive alcohol drinking. He wants to create an environment based on rules and respect for freedom of others. The major problem he faces in arranging games is other participants' laziness and the lack of responsibility. He argues that the sense of responsibility in young men and women is undermined by playing computer games. The victories in computer games produce feelings of pseudo-achievements which, in his words, are pure phantoms. He stresses the importance of manual skills and physical fitness for personal development.¹²

Another total larper among TB's interviewees is Vadim Zevlever (nicknamed Makar). His notion of high cognitive value of embodiment of historical experience is similar to that of Mel'nikov. But unlike Mel'nikov he presents himself as a cosmopolitan, a citizen of Planet Earth, who has basic knowledge of several European languages and identifies himself as a descendant of Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, German, Polish, Belarusian, Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish ancestors.

Like Mel'nikov, Zevlever is interested in material culture and skills, and he too is a partisan of physical exercises. He sewed his ludic costumes himself. In his interview he mentioned that his apartment looks like a workshop filled with raw materials, game accessories, and toy soldiers. He is the head of the Napoleonica club in Novosibirsk. Like Mel'nikov, he teaches in the system of extra-curricular education. One of his courses is historical fencing. Zevlever graduated from the department of history of the Pedagogical University in Novosibirsk. He writes about the Napoleonic Wars and for him historical reconstruction in games is a field of experimental history. The "Makarena" games we have been discussing above were named in honour of Zevlever's nickname, Makar. However, the Makarena games are not only about the Napoleonic Wars, they also employ other historical motifs: Zevlever and his associates have already arranged 24 games about different periods of European and early Russian history. For example, *The Black Prince (Chërnyi Prints)*, took place near Novosibirsk in May 2018.¹³

12 Compare the note about "healthy way of life" (*zdorovyi obraz zhizni*) in Chapter 11.

13 <http://vk.com/club27365038> — the Makarena group on VKontakte.



Fig. 10.5. Vadim Zevlever (Makar). Cropped version of a photo published on 20 July 2019 in the forum for the “Makarena” on VKontakte on the occasion of the forum having reached 3,000 members. Source: <https://vk.com/club27365038>.

According to Zevlever, the annual Makarena is an important event in terms of LARP fashion in the region: “It looks as if, in general, I set the fashion. For after the Makarena all summer the folks participate in other games in the costumes they have made for my game”. Role models for him are soldiers of the past. A true soldier according to him has to perceive death as something which is inevitable and which one has to face with pride and dignity:

If a woman from Sparta lost her husband in a battle, she got happy, it was her day of celebration, since he met his death face-to-face. That’s it. And we know lots of similar cases in the history of the human society. For instance, with Scandinavians who lived to die beautifully. As a matter of fact, if the hour of your death has come, die beautifully!¹⁴

And he seems to be serious about it, both in terms of ludic and real death. Of all examples of moral judgements and stylisation among larpers,

14 The notion of death in role-playing games would deserve a detailed account on its own. Though the death of the personage in a LARP game is a virtual event, we have often heard in the interviews that it is emotionally uprooting and demands special psychological support. In fact, the game world has an institution which is responsible for the psychological rehabilitation — the so-called “place of the dead” (*mertviatnik*).

this is probably the most expressive statement. With this example of an ultimately deadly ethical and aesthetic personal project, we turn to our conclusion.

Conclusion

Writing about playing is a challenge. Besides different games as an organised form of playing, we are involved in numerous ostentatiously performative activities. We cheat, fantasise, play tricks on our neighbours, come up with surprises, blackmail, risk unusual social roles and outfit. All of us have a taste for play, as has been mentioned by such writers as Baudrillard, de Certeau, Chaney, and Elias. However universal the act of playing is for human beings, some players invest special effort into games and receive especially deep satisfaction from it. Total larpers exemplify this special commitment. For total larpers, the taste for play is the generative principle of their lifestyle.¹⁵ They invest lots of imagination, time, and resources into arranging various games and participating in them. Inasmuch as they are willing to share this passion with others, they come to be the protagonists not only of a particular game, but also of a community of taste and a distinct lifestyle with the “same expressive intention” (Bourdieu 1984: 173) in their ludic-and-real existence. Their experience allows us not only to understand how specific forms of leisure and consumption have developed, but also to grasp the nature of play and its relation to the real.

Returning to the concept of theatrical sociality, which we have borrowed from the writings of Chaney and Baudrillard: at the core of this term is the idea that the display of clothes and other elements of outer appearance has some self-referential aspect: it is a purpose unto itself. Nonetheless, such display may bear a subversive element (Chaney 1996: 54, with reference to Baudrillard 1993: 94), and has the potential to create irony. The larpers that we interviewed use clothes and other accessories with clear reference to some historical or fictional setting;

15 It is clear that for total larpers the game is (to use the words of Bakhtin about carnival) “life itself”, but “exposed in a special ludic way” (*ofornlenniaia osobym igrovym obrazom*) (Bakhtin 1986: 297). However, for total larpers games and real life are not two separate worlds as they were in the mediaeval carnival culture. Rather, games and real life constitute one single world, one single lifestyle.

in that sense the notion of self-referentiality may seem not applicable for role plays. However, what is strongly manifest is the notion of performance and theatrical forms of communication: participants take on certain roles that are to be enacted over several hours or days, and they immerse themselves in a play that reflects both the sensibilities of an earlier period or a fictional world *and* their own sensibilities around morality and emotional experience, transposed from the context of real life into the role play. Participants in role-playing games make use of the opportunity to try out themselves in a theatrical setting — a play in which actors and spectators are identical.

Common sense suggests that games are different from the real world. The rules and conventions of a game are different from those norms that regulate our operations in the real world. It is limited in space and time. We know when the game begins and when it ends. Game accessories are kept in special containers, to be taken out, worn, and displayed on certain leisure-related occasions only. This common sense is perfectly consistent with the conventional approach to games based on Huizinga's *Homo Ludens*. However, the empirical research of LARP events seems to undermine this approach.

Let's imagine the chronotopic core of the game when several hundred young men and women come together in a spring forest. It is early May, relatively warm during the day, freezing at night. They are all wearing special clothes, styled according to the historical period they enact. They feel themselves English aristocrats involved in dynastic wars, or Romans fighting against barbaric tribes. They are being aroused by the spring winds, sunsets and sunrises, contingencies of battles, intrigues of the courts, the romance of music near the fireplace, and the heroic deeds they have to accomplish. It is the ludic world, separated from the real one, the latter consisting of urban routines full of traffic jams, daily chores, service centres, IT departments, school, and college rooms with their artificial light and sober interior.

However, if we look at the game as a practice, the boundary between the real and the ludic is undermined in multiple forms. In this chapter, we have discussed four main ways in which the border is put into question. First, the border is not a fixed moment in time, because people prepare more or less intensively, arrive and depart at different times, etc. The five-day game core event is preceded by a long

period of preparation and training and followed by an extended time of evaluation and reflection by both participants and non-participants of the games. Second, the border disappears as the reality of the ludic world merges with that of the other world. As we have seen, the virtual magic of the game comes to be perceived as a “real” means to influence the forces of nature. Emotions, though emergent from within the ludic context, can grow as strong as to be taken for “real” experience. Third, participants temporarily leave the ludic space and enter the sub-ludic one. The management of logistics by game masters and the tackling of emergency situations such as real aggression or sickness, require an intermediate zone which has been succinctly called the sub-ludic space by one of our interviewees. This sub-ludic space as well as the “land of the dead” where dead characters have to stay before re-entering the game as different personalities, does not subvert the ludic conventions; rather, it makes them work. Finally, there are individuals whose ludic identity gradually merges with their “civil” identity (through transposition of items, language, and moral and aesthetic judgements).

The notion of game as a practice unfolding through several stages is also heuristic in answering the general question of this chapter: what is the impact of participation in games on a person’s lifestyle? We have identified three categories of participants: casual larpers, regular larpers, and total larpers. Casual larpers have a taste for play, but are not involved in its preparation. Regular larpers’ taste for play is revealed in the repertoires of roles they play, commitment to serial games and teams, and their involvement in the preparation of the games. They are familiar with all game sites and belong to the relevant social networks. Total larpers are not only leaders and organisers of the games at all stages, but they come to connect their activities with moral principles that apply to life in general, regardless of conventional differentiations between the ludic and the real. They are pedagogues in the most general sense of the word. From this point of view, they are similar to the leaders of the ethnic identity games described in Chapter 9. They have teaching expertise, they are supposed to be role-models for their students and proponents of a healthy and decent lifestyle. They are convinced that participation in role-playing games offers important moral lessons for life and provides for creative ways of consumption and self-experience. Their taste for play is their passion, and they want to share this passion with others.

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