Larping (Live Action Role Playing) as an Embodied Design Research Method

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Abstract
Embodied design methods are gaining popularity among design researchers. They leverage the physical and situated experience of designers to access and better understand present and future situations, humans, and design opportunities. Here, we propose a workshop to learn about, engage with, and discuss larping (live action role playing) as an embodied design research method, in particular as: i) a sensitizing activity prior to design; and ii) a test-bed to investigate and further iterate design concepts and prototypes. The workshop is organized by design research experts in embodied design methods and larps, and it is aimed at those interested in embodied design methods, with or without experience with larps. Insights from the workshop will be captured in a joint article extending current embodied design methods.

Author Keywords
Design Research; Embodied Design Method; Role-Playing; LARP; Empathy; Games and Play.

CSS Concepts
• Human-centered computing~HCI design and evaluation methods • Human-centered computing~Interaction design process and methods

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Larps in HCI and IxD

In HCI and IxD, larps have mainly been used to inspire technology design. In [12], the appropriation and usage of technology by larpers was studied; in [5,11], larps were used as a target design space, producing research insights that could inspire technology design for co-located social experiences.

Safety and Check-in

Larps are immersive experiences and players can feel very connected to their and others' characters and the situation at hand. Hence, while larping, safety and check-in mechanics support players being in control of, and enjoying their experience. In our workshop, we will practice and use these techniques. E.g. a fist on top of one's head will signal a break to talk outside the context of the larp world. This is used to discuss needs of the players as well as possible narrative turns proposals that will impact the larp situation once the "break" is over.

Introduction

Embodied design (ED) methods are becoming popular in Interaction Design (IxD) and Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) (e.g. [1,3,9,13,14,16,21]). Through hands on, physical engagement of designers (and other stakeholders), ED methods facilitate accessing and understanding present and future situations, contexts of use, target users, technology, and design opportunities [9,13,21]. Many of these methods involve designers role-playing as users or other relevant people in the context being designed for, as well as enacting contextual elements in the imagined context of use. For example, enacting the role of non-interactive objects and envisioned technology [13,14].

However useful for designers, methods for using role-playing in HCI and IxD have been created in ad-hoc and intuitive ways. The term 'role-play' is often used interchangeably with other embodied design methods, such as bodystorming (e.g. [3,13,16]). At the same time, theories and design methods for designing through role-playing have developed in rich and nuanced ways, deserving additional attention in design research.

In this one-day workshop we will focus on, experience, and discuss larping (live action role playing) as a particularly useful way to approach role-playing as an embodied design method. In particular, we will focus on the potential of larps as tools to assist in the design process, in particular: i) to sensitize designers to perspectives and situations far from their own; and ii) to test design prototypes that would be deployed in those situations. The organizers, who collectively gather expertise in embodied design methods, larping, and larp design, will present participants, and facilitate

engagement, with several micro-larps. The intended audience of this workshop includes designers, researchers, and practitioners interested in embodied design methods, with or without experience with those methods and with larps.

Background and Motivation

Role-playing in the design process

Role-playing and play have long been used to help people inhabit new perspectives, establish social bonds and trust, and support mental and emotional well-being. The work of Boyd and Spolin laid the foundation of much early work on play, role-taking, and empathy [8], and informs much contemporary research into play and identity, including the immensely influential work of DeKoven [7]. Role-playing experiences can produce moments of temporary identity transformation by placing a player into the role of a character in a story [20] by using design strategies similar to those used when training actors to experience character transformations [6,10]. This allows players to both take on a new perspective and perform a new identity. Exploring these alternate worlds allows for engaging with empathy[1] for lived experiences from others' points of views and within different contexts. Consequently, role-playing can be used to learn about and empathize with marginalized points of view; particularly in contexts of significant power differences (e.g., in medicine, doctors-in-training role-play situations from

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[1] We make a distinction between empathy (feeling as another person), and sympathy (feeling for another person) [18]. Both kinds of experiences have value to designers and players seeking to better understand another's perspective, but while sympathy can occur through viewing a character within a narrative, empathy demands a more intimate, first-person, experience of a character's perspective.

Word of Caution

Throughout the workshop, we will actively acknowledge and reflect on the limitations of larp as a way to 'walk in the shoes of others.' Role-playing an experience is significantly different from living it. E.g. people with visual impairments have developed functional strategies to act in their everyday life; yet, people who suddenly experience a loss of vision (intended like when blindfolded or not) do not have access to these strategies. Blindness is hence experienced very differently in these situations. While larping constitutes one of the stronger tools available for gaining insights into unfamiliar experiences and marginalized perspectives, those insights should not be confused with the first-hand experience of users and should not overshadow the need to include the voice of these users in the design process [19].

the perspective of patients [15]). The empathetic potential of role-playing has been used as a sensitizing tool for designers [16], to step into the user's shoes [2] and "enact experiential awareness" prior to design [16]. We argue that larps can go a step beyond by focusing on taking on something else than a role: a character with emotions, feelings, and agency.

Larps
Recreational larping has developed into a nuanced form of artistic and performative expression that lies at the intersection of physical games and participatory theatre. Although there are many larp styles and genres, a commonly shared characteristic of larps is that they allow participants to physically enact fictional characters in fictional worlds [17].

Compared to other forms of role-playing used in HCI and IxD, larps have the potential to foster a deeper emotional connection to, and understanding of one's and others' characters, as well as a wide range of fictional situations and settings. In large part, this is due to how the larp experience is supported by a well-crafted combination of simulation, narration, character descriptions, and representational strategies that have been developed in larp design. This can present important advantages in a design process, yet it also brings methodological challenges including the logistics of the larp experience, and facilitating the designers' engagement with the larp experience. To circumvent this issue, in the workshop, we will use micro- or nano-larps like those within the larp anthology of #Feminism [4]. These are scenarios that can be played by small groups of players (e.g. two), during a short period of time (10 minutes to 4hours), requiring minimal logistics

(only basic props or none at all), which is a suitable format for a DIS workshop.

Workshop Goals and Outcomes

First, our participants will learn more about, and experience larping. They will also be able to "take home" the micro-larp scenarios experienced in the workshop, which might help them advance their design research projects. Second, this workshop will allow the organizers to test a series of micro-larp scenarios techniques selected and iterated to sensitize designers to unfamiliar situations and users' perspectives, and to test design concepts. Last, this workshop will result in a better understanding of both organizers and participants of the potential usefulness of larping as an embodied design method to better understand a design space and users, and to develop and test technology designs. This will materialize in a joint article extending current embodied design methods.

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