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Actors without an Audience? Performance Analysis of the "Borderlands" Live Action Role Playing Epic

Shelley Wind Hooper

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**ACTORS WITHOUT AN AUDIENCE? PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS
OF THE “BORDERLANDS” LIVE ACTION ROLE PLAYING EPIC**

By

Shelley Wind Hooper

B.A. Theater/Arts, University of Maine at Farmington, 2001

A THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

(in Theater)

The Graduate School

The University of Maine

May, 2003

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Tom Mikotowicz

An Abstract of the Thesis Presented
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This case study details the preparations and performances that occurred for the Live Action Role-Playing (also known as LARP) events hosted by the Maine Adventure Society, Inc. (or MASI) in the summer of 2002. Explaining the MASI organizational structure and documenting these events substantiates current scholarly publications pertaining to LARP practices and performance studies. The “Borderlands” events are examined as a performance art form.

This work is organized into six chapters with a list of works cited, a list of figures and a list of tables. Chapter 1 is an introduction to the study of LARP. In Chapter 2, the history and organizational structure of MASI is described. Site preparations, staffing, and descriptions of typical activities explain the methodology of the “Borderlands” performances in Chapter 3. A narrative describing the plot and character development of two representative participants during each of the four episodes is presented in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 presents an analysis of these episodes as examples of performance utilizing Schechner’s definitions of drama, script, theater, and performance. Chapter 6 concludes

with a discussion of the cathartic nature of the “Borderlands” events. The application of Daniel Mackay’s structural approach facilitates this discussion through its description of the interactive aesthetic.

The progression from literary inspiration to role-playing games to LARP, as found in the “Borderlands” sequence, is consistent with the progression of other LARP organizations in the United States. MASI is one example of eleven LARP groups to be found in Maine, and the number of participants continues to grow. Instead of performing upon a stage or going to a theatrical performance, they opt for woods and fields, swords and shields. In a world that has become impersonal, lacking in spirituality, and devoid of heroic deeds, the LARP performers create an interactive aesthetic structure. They are at once actor and audience, simultaneously performing and achieving catharsis as they manifest their myths, fantasies, moralities, ethics, and dreams.

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Without the guidance and efforts of scholars before (and now beside) me, this project would not have been possible. Dr. Tom Mikotowicz, Kurt Lancaster, and Daniel Mackay provide insight and inspiration that sets an admirable standard for academic inquiry. Their personal attention and feedback, replete with candor and humor, has been an inspiration and a pleasure.

I cannot express fully in words the gratitude and amazement I have for Truax and Beth McFarland, who have literally dedicated their lives to LARP and the MASI organization. Independent scholars, gifted artists, tireless warrior-poets, savvy meta-organizers and dynamic collaborators, you are not just heroes in-game. You are, now and always, my heroes and dear friends.

I never take a step forward without thinking of my family, whose love and support have made possible my continuing existence and achievements past, present and future. My mother has taught me how to be a woman first, a survivor second, and an intellectual third. Thank you for helping me keep my priorities straight! The rest of my family, watching me fumble through life with good-natured bemusement, has offered me unconditional and unflagging support. You inspire me more than you will ever know.

Dr. Andrea Southard, my second mom, my mentor, and my inspiration, thank you for giving me the tools I need to succeed in this and my future academic endeavors. You have added your voice to those who have dared me to dream. Your patience and sheer force of will goaded me from sanguine disillusioned artist to avid scholar and writer, and my gratitude is immeasurable.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

From Book to Table to...Staging Without a Stage? The Study of LARP

Why does Rick McCoy, a systems analyst in southern California, want to travel all the way to rural Jefferson, Maine to dress up like a medieval warrior for two days? “I may not be an actor, but I love to perform.” He is not alone. Hundreds of people from across the country come to Maine to immerse themselves in another reality for a few days. According to LARPA, the Live Action Role-Playing Association, there is a consistent increase in the number of white-collar professionals who commit considerable time, money, and energy to participate in live action role playing events.

Completely removed from their often repetitive and monotonous professional lives, they create characters that embody figures usually found only in books and movies. While interacting with others who are also ‘in character’ they are as far removed from their daily reality as possible. With inspiration such as Tolkien’s fantasy literature, they are responding to both mythology and popular culture. They extend such fictional worlds beyond table games such as “Dungeons and Dragons” or interactive computer simulations such as “Myst” or “Riven.” By venturing beyond the confines of home or office, they are “able to actually experience instead of supposing or pretending.”¹

Live Action Role-Playing, commonly referred to as LARP, is “a dynamic art in which multiple participants interact at the same time, to create a story.”² A LARP

¹ Melissa Caruso, “Women in Live Action Role Playing” (Providence: Brown University, 1991) 3.

² Shade’s LARP List. <<http://www.larplist.com/mainelist.php?op=activelist>> October 2002.

organization's staff, sometimes referred to as non-playing characters (NPC's) works together to create a setting, storyline, and a series of characters. Players, or PC's, arrive at the prepared site and pay an entry fee to the hosting organization to offset the cost of the event. They each create a character, costumes, and properties within the parameters specified in the organization's rulebook. Usually this has been done well in advance of the events themselves. The character the PC creates will be utilized throughout each episode of each epic, until that player decides to create a different character to play or until the character is 'killed off' according to the rules of the game.

After the beginning of each event is announced, both NPC's and PC's are in character, day and night, in all the designated gaming areas (i.e. most of the site) until the event ends. Adventures, planned interactions, and improvisations ensue which include problem-solving, battle with padded weapons, shooting foam arrows, and hurling 'spells' of a tablespoon of birdseed tied up into a bundle of cloth. Battle formations, caste systems, and elaborate costume and makeup are essential components of these high-energy adventure scenarios.

There are four genres for LARP groups: fantasy, science fiction, gothic, and historical. MASI is an example of fantasy LARP, as it incorporates characters and creatures introduced by fantasy literature. "Borderlands" has a setting that roughly corresponds to medieval Europe, but does not attempt to mimic actual historical events. The setting is an isolated portion of a much greater fictional world, one that is decidedly not Earth. An overall quest or goal is presented to the PC group, to be accomplished by interacting and/or battling with the NPC characters as the storyline (a basic outline of setting and given circumstances) unfolds. The NPC staff has a general idea of the plot

elements to add to their basic character description and encounter timing schedule, and the PC characters have even less prior information.

This generalized structuring results in events filled with improvisational role-playing. Players do battle with the foam weapons and seed packets within the parameters of an intricately defined staged combat system. Each LARP develops its own system of ‘hits’, finite quantities of ‘defenses’, and ‘healing’ role-play with cloth bandages. After the events, there is often an “out-of-game” social outing before everyone leaves to return to their everyday lives to facilitate the adjustment to reality.

What is the casual observer to make of this extreme behavior? Is this recreation? Such activity goes far beyond the scope of a typical camping trip. Is this theater? There are some elements of LARP that are familiar to the theater practitioner, but the context is certainly different than that of a production on a proscenium stage.

Examination of MASI’s “Borderlands” event sequence is a continuation of academic research on live action role playing in New England. Kurt Lancaster’s research in 1991 focused on LARP performance in Massachusetts.³ He noted anthropological motivations for performance based on historical reenactment. Scripting, character development, voice and movement training, cast and crew formation, designated performance spaces, properties, costuming, makeup, mask construction, and production scheduling are documented. Lancaster’s subsequent publications continue to explore LARP utilizing metaphors of performance.⁴

³ Kurt Lancaster, Ariane’s Terror: A Performance Analysis of a Live-Action, Outdoor, Role-Playing Adventure (Orono, ME: University of Maine, 1991) 3.

⁴ Henry Jenkins, Forward, Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe by Kurt Lancaster (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2001) xviii.

Daniel Mackay, a performance studies specialist and graduate teaching fellow at the University of Oregon, has recently detailed his Schechner-inspired model of performance analysis as applied to the fantasy LARP genre. He focuses on performance aesthetics of role playing games and extends this focus to LARP performances. He delineates a four part structural examination of LARP performance: cultural *structure*, the extent to which the game relates to outside cultural elements; *formal structure*, the rules of the game; *social structure*, encompassing the degree and quality of social interaction among players; and *aesthetic structure*, concerned with the emergence of role playing as an art form.⁵

LARP has developed as a result of a progression found in recreational games. LARP performances began as an attempt to dramatize role-playing games, which are inspired by war games. A Prussian soldier and his father Herr Von Reiswitz created the earliest of the modern war games in 1811. This new game, called Kriegspiel, was used to train Prussian officers and proved so successful that the English soon developed their own version of the game. Opponents moved markers, symbolic of different groups and types of soldiers, about a representational battlefield, rolled dice and looked to a referee to decide the victor of any given battle (the referee decided this through a complex set of guidelines). For a little more than a hundred years the war game remained a tool for the military alone.⁶

By the turn of the century, the war game had started to make its way into the

⁵ Daniel Mackay, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) 3.

⁶ Daniel Mackay, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) 13-16.

leisure time activities of the middle class. War games no longer need referees and became increasingly popular and increasingly more complicated through the next fifty years. The end of the 1960's brought with it some radical alteration to war gaming that would lay the foundation for role-playing games.

Dave Arneson introduced war game players to the concept of playing scenarios where the characters fought in underground labyrinths and faced fantastic creatures such as dragons and hobgoblins. Gary Gygax authored a set of medieval warfare rules called Chainmail and asked for help from Arneson. When Gygax supplied an unreleased fantasy supplement (heavily influenced by the writing of J. R. R. Tolkien and Robert E. Howard) for Chainmail, Arneson utilized these supplements in his war games. Eventually Gygax was invited to join Arneson's war gaming group. The two men spent two years expanding and modifying gaming rules. This collaboration culminated in the January 1974 birth of what is considered the first official role-playing game, Dungeons & Dragons™.

The two authors thought the game would only appeal to a select group of war gamers. The rules were written under the assumption that anyone buying it would be familiar with the war-gaming world. However, the game was unexpectedly successful. The creators were completely unprepared for the emergence of a gaming subculture. This subculture developed a 'gamer terminology' which is widely used among those who LARP. "Anyone who has ever wielded a [Dungeons & Dragons™] 'monster manual' and dice is prepared to understand most of what is said at this [Borderlands] LARP, even me,

this is my first one.”⁷

The success of Dungeons and Dragons™ is the result of what sets it apart from its wargame predecessors: the built-in ability to create a detailed character. A preparatory process involving rolling dice and recording the results on a ‘character sheet’ is used to attribute strengths and weaknesses. This allows players to assume the role of their individual character (i.e. A character with a low strength is less likely to try and fight a monster than a character who has a high strength, forcing the character to find different solutions to the situation). While these characteristics tend to lean towards those applicable in fighting, other traits can be emphasized as well or instead, creating even more complex characters. More importantly, the game provides an opportunity to take on a persona and engage in battle without risk to life or limb.

By 1982 role-playing games had gone from an obscure hobby to a commodity found in major retail outlets. Established game companies became interested in joining the frenzy, but ultimately decided against it when the media made claims that the game had “occult roots and practices.”⁸ While the negative press caused many national retailers to stop carrying the games, it also sparked interest in others, if only to see what all of the fuss was about. Major publishers would not touch role-playing games for fear of attracting negative attention, so the creators of these games had to publish themselves.

A rapid transition is taking place, from the role-playing game on the tabletop to the enactment of the LARP. In role-playing games pencils, paper, boards and little

⁷ David Woodward, Interview (August 11, 2002)

⁸ Melissa Caruso, “Women in Live Action Role Playing” (Providence: Brown University, 1991) 13.

statues representing players are among the necessary components. In the “Borderlands” LARP, the primary components at an event are the characters as personified by the player, the characters created by the staff for interaction and plot movement, and the trappings of the world and character that have been brought along by the creators of these characters and worlds. The primary tool of the LARP is the mind.

LARP is considered a subculture within the role-playing ‘gamer culture’ due to the clear progression of influences, but this would be an inaccurate categorization when considering the “Borderlands” LARP events. Trying to compare “Borderlands” to a role-playing game is as useless as comparing reading Shakespeare to performing Shakespeare: The only things in common, really, are the words. The character development inherent in the “Borderlands” events far exceeds the possibilities for someone seated in a chair with dice and paper. In LARP, the addition of the physical aspects and actions of the character necessitates the transformation from player to performer.

This study of the “Borderlands” events will therefore be conducted utilizing the approach of performance analysis. The remaining connections between role-playing game practices and LARP practices are tenuous. Considering the origins of gaming and the similarities of influences, though illuminating, does not explain why people LARP or why the popularity of LARP is increasing. It isn’t helpful to examine LARP merely as literature-induced self-recreation. As other scholars have discovered, the language of theater and performance is not only helpful, it is necessary for an intelligible and accurate examination of LARP performance.

Schechner’s performance theory models examine a performance event in terms of drama, script, theater, and performance. These models have been utilized in the

Lancaster and Mackay approaches. This study combines these applications. First, I will define the Borderlands events by using Schechner's *drama/script/theater/performance* terminology. This is consistent with Kurt Lancaster's approach. I will then apply Mackay's structural approach with an emphasis on the aesthetic structure. Mackay's aesthetic structure correlates with Lancaster's discoveries of the catharsis to be found in role-playing.⁹ The essential function of myth in the attainment of the spiritual aspect of catharsis, as presented in the "Borderlands" sequence, completes the connections between these events, performance, and the sphere of social relevance.

Research methods will consist of compiling informational resource data (performance theory models and terminology currently utilized in LARP analysis) to provide a means for context and relevance to theater and cultural studies, and documenting (with field note observations and interviews) the activities of "Borderlands" epic participants. Statistical data for LARP research in the United States continues to be incomplete, generalized, or nonexistent. On-line/website resources will be used only when there is no other way to retrieve the most current and accurate information.

The cumbersome task of documenting more than 300 hours of performance time for each participant is impossible to achieve within the scope of this study. Therefore, the performance events will be described through a narrative of the specific activities of two playing characters. I will select one 'Warrior' character and one 'Mage' character, and describe their activities from a third person observational point of view. To fully

⁹ Kurt Lancaster. Interacting with Babylon 5: Fan Performances in a Media Universe (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) xxxiv.

comprehend the magnitude of plot development, keep in mind that this narrative barely brushes upon a tenth of the storyline that actually unfolds at the “Borderlands” events, and what actually occurs is about a tenth of what was planned by the core NPC’s and storyline writer(s).

The complexity and intensity of the “Borderlands” events is a direct result of the efforts of the LARP participants. As in any performance ensemble, the events could quickly degenerate into an outdoor fencing meet without constant commitment to plot and characterization. Such commitment occurs among people with full time jobs, full time school, and full time lives. Somehow they manage to create an alternate world in their spare time. The magnitude of participation in LARP events such as the “Borderlands” epic suggests a major socioeconomic formation when the amount of time, money, goods, and services committed to LARP is considered.

There has been ample negative attention in the media for years about role-playing games in general by “those who feel that fantasy gaming is a socially maladjusted activity.”¹⁰ This is ironic considering that the daunting LARP itinerary discovered in this study demands excellent networking, problem solving, collaboration, and cooperation skills. By examining what happens at a LARP, the question of ‘why LARP?’ can be approached with actual data instead of dubious, fearful, and uninformed speculation.

This type of criticism is not surprising to those who are familiar with theater practice. Such negativity has been directed at theatrical performances since the

¹⁰ Melissa Caruso, “Women in Live Action Role Playing” (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1991) 8.

beginning of recorded time. To extend the correlation of theater to LARP, continued observation of LARP practices suggest the formation and persistence of LARP as a cultural-aesthetic mirror of our post-industrial technological society.¹¹ The onset and increase of LARP participation directly correlates in terms of chronology and magnitude with the onset and dominance of the techno-industrial boom that began in the 1970's.

Much documentation and commentary exists regarding a subsequent decrease in activities that explore spirituality and morality. LARP participants have found a way to exist within a technological society without being alienated from their humanity. They are creating characters that engage in good vs. evil battles and complex moral and ethical dilemmas. A world is built, literally from the ground up, which pays homage to a shared ancestral past. In being removed from their current reality (that is often void of spirituality and creativity), they are able to create a "drama of living" in an attempt to fill that void.¹² The Borderlands LARP epic can show us, in the language of performance, what our culture values and what our culture is missing.

¹¹ Mikotowicz, Tom. (ed.) Introduction, Performing the Force: Essays on Immersion into Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Environments. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) xix.

¹² Eugenio Barba, The Paper Canoe (New York: Routledge, 1995) 3.

Chapter 2

THE PRODUCTION TEAM:

History and Organizational Structure of MASI

Maine Adventure Society, Incorporated (MASI) is a local example of a LARP organization. Peter McFarland founded the MASI organization with his son Truax McFarland in Jefferson, Maine ten years ago. MASI is one of eleven fantasy-based LARP organizations currently active in Maine, and it is the oldest.¹³

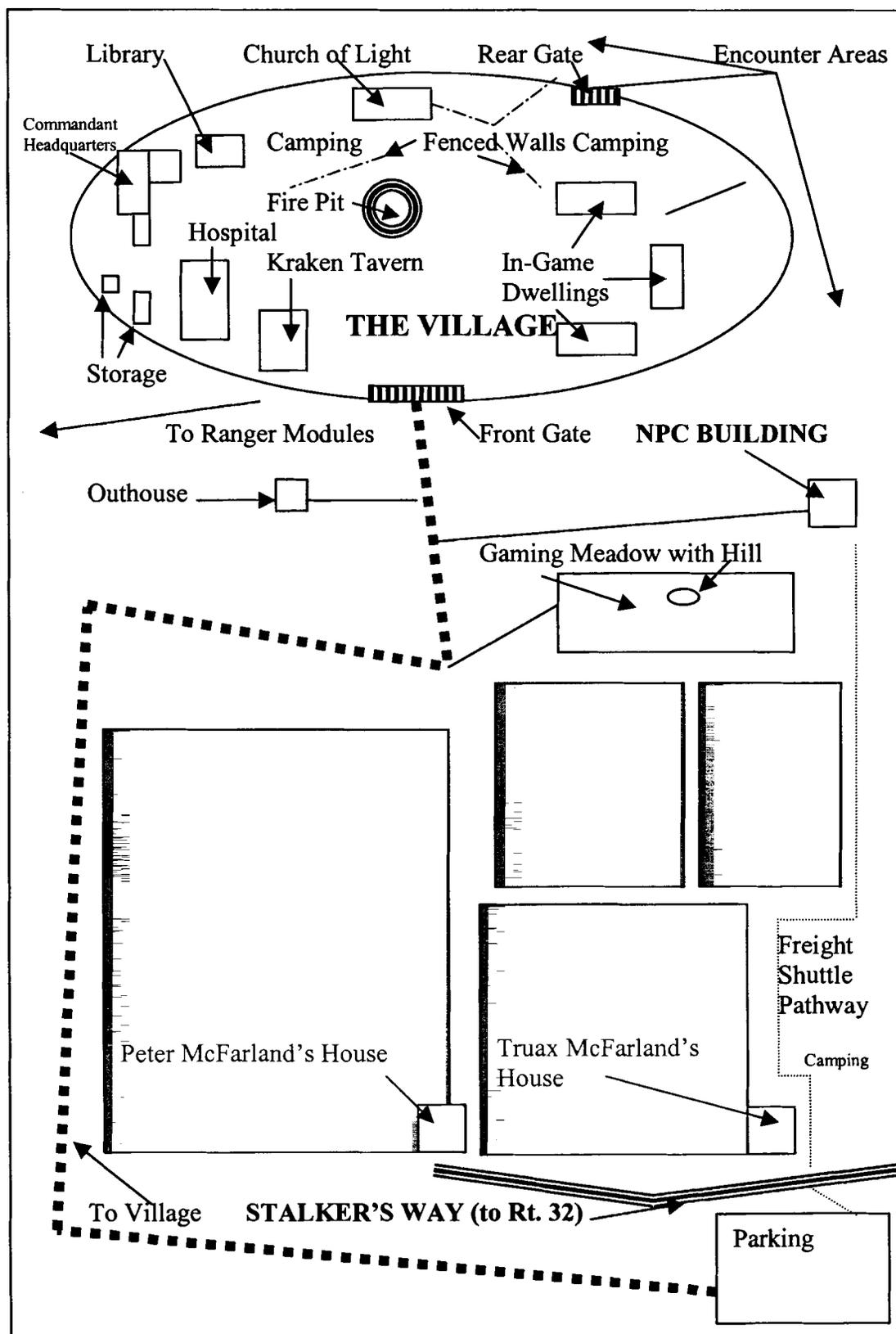
MASI, like many LARP organizations, prefers a site as remote as possible. A world as different from the mundane and “everyday” is created. Most LARP groups rely on renting campgrounds, which means more expense for the players and the staff and less privacy and ambience. The McFarlands found a way to make LARP more financially accessible and more immersive. On his 80 acres of land, there is ample room for a site beyond McFarland’s fields. Players park their cars on the perimeter of the property and hike ½ mile to get to the standing, permanent, medieval village. There are also gaming areas in clearings throughout the woods, and two of the larger fields are used for large-scale battle scenarios.

Construction of the site began modestly. With their own money, the McFarlands started with the construction of the primary gaming area, or village. A path was cleared from the farmland through the nearby woods, and approximately one acre of land was cleared for the village itself. With chainsaws and tractors, the area began to take shape.

¹³ “Shade’s LARP List” October 2002
<<http://www.larplist.com/mainlist.php?op=activelist>>

Figure 1: Map of MASI site.

Gray blocks are fields currently utilized for farming, which are out-of-game areas.



A circular fire pit was built with stones in the middle of the village, standing three feet high and approximately twelve feet in diameter. A roofed building with a loft was constructed nearby to house a gas range, a storage loft, tables and benches to be used as a primary eating area for players. A structure for staff organization and properties management, fondly referred to as the 'ops building' or 'NPC shack', was built nearby. A network of rough trails was cleared to provide areas for small group adventure scenes, with the village as a central area for larger scenarios. Recent improvements in the last four years include the 'keep', which is a gated stockade fence to surround the main village and several buildings with a second story.

Prospective players and staff members, generous with their volunteered time then and now, continue to work with the McFarlands to expand the village with donated resources. Fortunately, many of those who work on the village (including the McFarland family) have considerable building skills to bring to the village construction projects. With ongoing expansion and renovations, there are now over ten buildings at the main site. Running water is available at the tavern building, made possible by extensive hose extensions buried underground. The trail from the McFarland homes to the village is negotiable by rough terrain vehicles. For tax reasons, all but the tavern and staff buildings are designed to be temporary by having removable roofs of rolled canvas. With a few modern approaches to the practicalities of construction, and a rented portable toilet tucked discreetly behind trees and covered with a tarp, a medieval village has been wrought.

MASI, like many LARP organizations, tends to concentrate its events on weekends in the summer and autumn in response to work schedules and limitations

caused by weather. This is also in deference to Truax McFarland's schedule, as he prefers to schedule his LARP events during his summer break.¹⁴ Players and staff often spend the night in the village or in designated camping areas nearby. In the winter, role-playing 'revels' are planned as simple events that allow for performance within the parameters of a regular social gathering. There is less plot written, combat is minimized, and the events culminate in a medieval potluck dinner.

The very existence of MASI is driven by a desire to simultaneously socialize and interact creatively. When asked, participants consider their role-playing activity to be recreation.¹⁵ However, the structure of LARP organizations like MASI bears striking similarities to the methods developed to organize theater productions.

To manage the MASI organization, several members of the core staff form a board of directors. As the owner of the property, Peter McFarland is paid a lease fee by the organization to address development, taxes, and accessibility concerns. A liability insurance policy is also funded by MASI, who is in turn funded by player registration fees. MASI is a non-profit organization with a mission to provide a safe environment conducive to the creative process of live-action role-playing.¹⁶ This mission extends to local teens. As a science teacher at a local high school, Truax McFarland serves as an advisor for their sword club. Often, members who are old enough (insurance mandates a minimum age of 16 and parental permission) come to participate at MASI events.

¹⁴ Beth McFarland, E-mail Interview (February 4, 2003) 2.

¹⁵ Dave Inkpen, Kevin Hamor, Douglas Hale, and Lynne Stackpole, Commentary (August 11 2002)

¹⁶ Beth McFarland, Interview (July 17 2002)

Chapter 3

CASTING, CREW, AND SCRIPT:

Preparations for the Borderlands Epic

The Exiles stories are interconnected episodes of the ‘Third Age’ of the fictional world of Oceanus, as chronicled in the Exiles: Extreme Role-playing Rulebook. The “Borderlands” event sequence is a part of this ongoing series. According to the tales, which serve to delineate the setting of the world of the game, the ‘First Age’ of ancient forests ended in cataclysm and a great flood. The ‘Second Age’ of Elven Empire ended in civil war and the emergence of human warriors. The ‘Third Age’ began with the emergence of Northumbria, a multi-race center of trade and learning. Kargad, Citadel of Sorcerers, soon came into conflict with the kingdom. Though Northumbria had military success, Kargad struck back with magics that caused madness and creatures called Hunters who kill teachers and leaders while stealing the memories of old Northumbria from the minds of their victims. The Exiles players depict remnants of the people who managed to survive this dark time, referred to as ‘The Horror’. They share the ultimate goal of victory over Kargad and a return to Northumbria. In essence, the Exiles stories are ongoing episodes of survival of, and hopefully triumph over, evil.

To manage the events that shape the storyline, there is an ensemble of ‘core staff’ or key personnel who handle the primary aspects of the game. Truax writes the basic storyline for the Borderlands epic. His wife Beth maintains the logistics of the event such as registration, fee collection, and character creation/development. Jess Powers and Mike Booker manage small-group encounters, help coordinate auxiliary staff, and builds temporary gaming areas called ‘modules’ along the trail network for encounters unique to

each event weekend. Kevin Hamor, Missy Leask, Mark Tripp and Lynne Stackpole conduct intense small-group battle modules to support and augment the main storyline. The 'core staff' also develops colorful and complex 'main NPC characters' for player interaction. Other staff members, or regular NPC's, function in supportive roles.

The Exiles: Extreme Role-Playing rulebook also specifies the general setting and tone for the world of the game with extensive exposition and narrative tales. The different kinds of characters that can be created are delineated. Typical examples and behaviors are described with illustrations and sample scenarios.

Figure 2: Characters in all shapes, sizes and colors.

Shown here: Rangers, Sea Gypsies, Crugars, Golums, and Incanari.



Each player is able to choose a race, background, attributes, and skills. Often these choices are guided by a player's decisions regarding selection of a faith skill. The rulebook provides a pantheon of fictional gods that exemplify specific values and behaviors. When and if a player chooses to select a faith skill, other selections are guided by these chosen values and behaviors. After all the decisions regarding character development are made, the combat details, weaponry, inherent skills/occupations, and detrimental effects to characters (such as role-play of injury, death, and healing) are determined. A character worksheet is included in the rulebook, with many examples to assist in this complicated process of preliminary development.

Players are encouraged to develop their characters well before they arrive to their first event. 20 skill points are allotted at the beginning of character creation to 'spend' acquiring 'skills' that are appropriate for character choices. Opportunities for players to have more points to spend are offered by MASI through a 'game bucks' program. Volunteer labor, donated materials, and preparatory work that facilitates the MASI logistics (such as written character histories to fuel plot scripting) can earn additional skill points and/or discounts on registration fees.

The plethora of options that fuels the Exiles saga does have a down side: documentation of available character development options is a bit cumbersome. Describing all the character development options possible in the rulebook would necessitate reiteration of 66 pages of information. Fortunately, it is possible to get a sense of character construction by examining some of the basic character development options. A partial listing of basic options is listed in the following table:

TABLE 1: Character Development Table

<u>Options:</u>	<u>Advantages/Disadvantages</u>
Race	
Ogre	Strength, Industry, Crushing Blows/Slow Walk, Can't Lie
Elf	Extra Skills, Literacy/1 minute at zero HP='dead'
Geminian	Lend HP and MP to Twin/Shared detrimental spell dmg.
Shalorian	Six poison attacks per event/Can't shout or wear armor
Golums	HP double, Immune to Poison/no Heal, no Faith
Ogre-Kin	Craft skills, Thrown weapons/Can't lie or wear armor
C'Torian	+1 Armor, double MP at noon/No mana at midnight
Crugar	Claws, Pounce, Sniff/Hit with fire='Berserk' effect
Human	No makeup requirement, +1 spells/No Disadvantages
Background	
Courtier	Swashbuckling, 1 Renew all MP per event
Incanari	Ice magic benefits
Ranger	+1 with bows, crossbows, thrown axes, and javelins
Sea Gypsy	Drunken Fighting enhanced damage
Jenessari	Turbans, veils, Faith, two "Parry No Effect" per event
Lindasfarn	Heal by touch twice per event
Attributes	
Gifts	Special augmentation of character/Less HP or MP
Flaws	More HP or MP/character is disadvantaged
Skills	
Weapons	Asst. swords, thrown weapons, staff, disguised weapons
Armor/shields	Leather armor, Chain mail, plate, buckler, full shield
Spells	Spoken spells, 'packet' spells, talismans of protection
Faith	Asst. Deities Gifts, Extra 'Lives'=level of 'devotion' to God

Essentially, character development decisions and the expenditure of the 20 skill points determines how much ‘hit points’ (HP) your character can withstand before it ‘dies’, and how much ‘mana points’ (MP) your character has to spend on spells and special attacks. These variables are the foundation of characterization and set parameters for the improvised interactions and battles. With costuming, weaponry construction, and additional props to be constructed or purchased by each player, the preparation of a player’s character often takes at least two weeks for the average participant.¹⁷

While the players construct their characters, the MASI staff undergoes extensive and laborious preparations for each event. Most of the on site production work for Borderlands was done by the core staff prior to June 29th. The storyline of “Borderlands” was written during the winter of 2001-2002 by Truax McFarland. Design and construction of properties also occurred during this time.

Among the projects were a customized sign for the ‘Kraken Tavern’, deer costumes, bear costumes, ‘meat’ properties made with foam and craft paint, and twenty matching green tunics for the legions of ‘undead zombies’ that were scheduled to attack the playing characters. During the spring, new additions to the projects list included maroon tunics for the local noble/merchant and his servants, a costume for an ancient reptilian creature, and reconditioning of weaponry. A horde of trolls was written into the plot storyline, and massive foam costumes were assembled and painted. Special modifications were made to the heads so that they could be lit behind the eyes at night with glow sticks, which helps players locate the trolls and adds to the overall ambience of the encounters.

¹⁷ Truax McFarland, Exiles Extreme Roleplaying Rulebook (2002)

MASI's considerable stockpile of in-game weaponry is constructed through a process that has been developed and refined by LARP organizations all over New England and beyond over the last ten years. The ideal weapon is lightweight, somewhat flexible but not floppy, and padded softly on all surfaces so that there is no chance of injury. PVC pipe (or sometimes graphite kite pole) is covered with foam pipe insulation, perforated foam is added to the tips or ends of the weapon, and the whole unit is covered with duct tape. This technique is used to create two-handed swords, one-handed swords, physical representations of bows, 'hand held daggers' and small 'throwing daggers'.

Safety, durability and affordability are the primary issues for weapons construction among all LARP participants. These considerations continue to guide materials selection as well as the weapon construction process. Techniques for building suitable weapons are shared on the MASI website, and players often assemble weaponry in groups as they prepare for events. The weapons of every player are examined during the registration process to ensure safe construction. No sharp or hard edges are allowed, and it is essential that a weapon is sturdy enough to withstand the wear and tear suffered in combat. MASI provides staff with weaponry and often lends weaponry to players when necessary. Materials for repairs are made available to both staff and players when necessary throughout all events.

Weapon selection and construction is also an excellent way to augment and develop a character. Players sometimes create unique weaponry such as fancy spears to add flair to their characterization. A distinctive weapon design also makes a player stand out on the battlefield, which is helpful during group encounters and battle scenes.

Figure 3: Jericho of Hoyts Crew.

Rangers often bristle with weapons. Shown here, a Polearm and Throwing Axes.



Figure 4: Ankhadi the Golum.

This player brandishes a unique spear, accentuating his character race selection.



The Exiles Rulebook also delineates setting through a narrative of the history of the fictional world where the action of the game transpires. The “Borderlands” storyline features a primitive society being corrupted by evil mystical forces. The basic premise is that the players are to defend the Keep while trying to ascertain the cause of the disturbances, as the Keep is described as an important strategic outpost relevant to the ‘big picture’ of the Exiles saga. Among the players are ‘Exiles’ who have had previous adventures. The warrior narrative is an example of this ‘seasoned veteran’ i.e. experienced Exile player profile. There are also those who are in search of adventure and experiences, i.e. new players, as represented by the mage narrative.

The rustic yet somehow exotic locale featuring ‘barbarian hordes’ requires special costuming accessories such as bone and leather necklaces. Special weaponry such as axes, rocks, javelins, and physical representations of slingshots were constructed by the core staff during the spring of 2002. Selection and reconditioning of properties from previous MASI events completed the necessary inventory to achieve the distinctive microcosm of the Borderlands sequence.

The core staff is responsible for all aspects of the design of their characters, with approval and assistance from Truax when needed. Makeup and hair design and implementation is done on location at the staff building, fondly dubbed ‘the monster camp’ at such times, immediately prior to encounters with the player characters.¹⁸ Brush-on liquid water-soluble makeup is most common for the creation of animal characters, monsters, and the many Exile world races. Quick makeup changes necessitated careful planning of supplies. Preliminary organization of available supplies, assemblage of

¹⁸ Beth McFarland and Lynne Stackpole, Commentary (June 30, 2002)

makeup kits to take to the staff building and clarification of timelines continued well into the night of June 28. With the core staff spending the night on location to better prepare and plan, they were ready for the players to arrive on the morning of June 29, 2002.

Chapter 4

PERFORMANCES:

Fighter and Mage Narratives

Overview:

Players prepare for their participation in the “Borderlands” sequence on an individual basis. The preparations and performances of two representative player characters are delineated in this section in a narrative format. A warrior character and a magic-user character have been selected to present two manageable perspectives of the activities occurring at the four “Borderlands” events. They are referred to by character name, and their actions are described from within the world created by the “Borderlands” game.

In this world, each player begins with the hit points and mana points resulting from their character choices. They have been urged to write and submit a character history that incorporates their choices and illustrates the personality of their character. These character histories, when submitted, are reviewed by core staff and taken into consideration when plot is pre-written and when improvisation happens during the events.

Each day in the event is broken up into four hour ‘mana cycles’: at 12:00, 4:00, and 8:00, the mana points expended by each player are restored to their full capacity. If all mana is expended before the change in the mana cycle, abilities and skills requiring mana points cannot be used. If all hit points are expended, a character must role-play unconsciousness. If not healed (which restores the player to half their capacity of hit points) or restored by surgery (restoring the player to full capacity by role-playing the

skill of role-playing surgery) within five minutes of being reduced to zero (or sixty seconds if the character is an elf), that character is dead. The player must rise and role-play being a 'spirit', which means walking without speaking and with the head down, interacting in no way with any other player other than to mumble 'spirit' to clarify their condition. Players in this condition are to go directly to Judgment, which is an area just outside the staff building. There, a core member of the staff role-plays with the fallen character to determine the character's fate.

Each character has the opportunity to be restored to living three times by the graces of Dacea, the patron goddess of the Exile world. After these three restorations, a character is generally considered 'completely dead'. The player must then make arrangements with staff to decide if the character will perform with the staff as the dead spirit of their character, or if the player will no longer use that character and instead participate as an extra NPC for the remainder of the event. A completely dead character no longer exists in the Exile world. A player must then create a new character for subsequent events. This has only happened once since Exiles began, and that player was prepared for this: he created his character and returned right away to the village as a new player character until the end of that event.¹⁹ •

If a character has taken the faith skill and selected a deity to follow, there are opportunities to go before their deities for Judgment after their three chances at life by the graces of Dacea are expended. Each deity decides upon the fate of the character based on the values of the deity and the actions of the player when compared to those values. This greatly enhances a player's character development and is often a key factor in the plot of

¹⁹ Beth McFarland, Interview, January 20 2003.

“Borderlands.” Many warriors, including the Shannon Silverhawk character narrated in the following sections, went to Judgment before Dacia and/or their patron gods. Although none of the characters in the Borderlands sequence experience being ‘completely dead’, the possibility is always present. This means the desire to be successful in battle is equated with the survival of the character. Cooperation among players to facilitate in-game healing is highly valued.

Section 1: June 29-30, 2002.

Kirali Ringoren, an elf and magic-user, arrives at the Borderlands Keep. She has a character background to explain her presence, as she is a newcomer and arrives alone. Her parents are descendants of elves who survived a Great Flood that obliterated many lands. She has decided to come to the mainland in search of adventure and the glories of battle. Since she is an elf, she has a weaker constitution than other races such as humans or orcs. Therefore, she also bears a bow and arrow to protect herself. She also has the ability to heal and conduct surgery on the battlefield.

Shannon Silverhawk, the newest of the renowned Knights of Mawr (a devout, sometimes fanatical sect of warriors who worship Mawr, the god of night, death, dreams, language and scholarship), comes to the Borderlands Keep from the battles in Kitsune (a locale from a prior Exiles series of events). He is part of an elite force of bodyguards, originally trained to protect a group of female magic-users. The onslaught of the Kargad soldiers, mercenaries from the evil and ruthless Kargad Empire bent on destroying the world, overwhelmed the bodyguards and killed the magic users. Silverhawk's remorse colors all his actions. He has dedicated his life and sword to the protection of the Keep and the destruction of Kargad. As a follower of Mawr, he is committed to remembrance, particularly of his fallen comrades, which causes a rather brooding nature. According to Mawr, one of the greatest mortal sins is the creation of undead. Shannon Silverhawk has laid many undead to rest in the past, and certainly plans to continue such work.

As Kirali enters the village, Shannon is fraternizing with the other warriors clustered near the fire pit at the center of town. Two of the warriors encounter some hostile skirmishing on their way to the keep. They witness a messenger being pursued by

two assailants. The assailants succeed in killing the messenger. Though the warriors pursue these assailants, they evade capture. An encoded message is recovered from the dead messenger, who appears by her clothing to be affiliated with the Kargad Empire. Kirali is amused as the warriors who recovered the message admit to being unable to read. She encourages them to let her attempt to decode the message after a mandatory meeting: All the newcomers are awaiting the arrival of the Commandant, who will be issuing standing orders and, hopefully, advancing the new Defenders some pay for their services at the keep. Shannon makes a point of being extremely courteous to Kirali, notes by her equipment that she is a magic-user, and chivalrously pledges his shield in her defense.

The Commandant arrives in a huff, grumbling and at a quick pace. He is short-tempered, and dubious as to the effectiveness of the “motley crew of defenders” assembled before him. He assigns several warriors to guard positions near the gates of the Keep, and directs Kirali and Kat (a Crugar with a predilection for hunting) to patrol outside the gates of the Keep. They are instructed to be on the watch for possible hostile barbarians and any potential game animals that might be wandering nearby. A deer is sighted in the vicinity, and Kirali and Kat pursue it while firing arrows and throwing daggers. As the deer is brought down, several barbarians spot them and race forward while uttering frightening chants and grunts. Kirali runs toward the keep while shouting a loud alarm, and Kat begins to viciously protect his prey. Shannon is one of the first warriors to reach the scene. With Kat’s claws, Shannon’s shield and sword, and the swords of four other warriors present, the barbarians are defeated.

As the day progresses, other small skirmishes occur. An alchemist makes himself

known to all the villagers. His name, appropriately enough, is Adept. Much of the afternoon is spent discovering the details of the troubles in the area. He explains that there are dark forces afoot which seem to be agitating the wild barbarians in the woods, and indicates that these forces must be reckoned with so that the Keep can be successfully defended.

When two forest-dwelling trackers arrive to add their number to the Defenders of the Keep, Adept leads an expedition through the local forest in search of alchemical components and captured talismans that will assist in the battles ahead. Kirali decides to join the trackers on these expeditions. The rangers of Hoyts Crew also join in this quest. This search is lengthy and arduous, but ultimately several talismans are successfully recovered.

Later in the evening, the Commandant leads a small group of warriors on troll-hunting expeditions after receiving reports from local authorities that there are troll-related disturbances in the vicinity. Shannon accompanies the troll-hunters, and receives instruction on how to most effectively battle these hideous creatures.

Trolls are particularly large and cumbersome, but they wield massive javelins and axes that do hideous damage. They also have thick armor over most of their bodies, with the exception of a soft spot at the center of their short, thick necks. This important information comes in handy as the warrior group encounters a herd of trolls nearby. They manage to defeat a few, but the vicious onslaught forces a rapid retreat. The Commandant grumbles that more training and greater numbers of Defenders are needed to have a successful assault against a whole herd of the trolls. Shannon is struck down, but he is brought to the village hospital and has a successful recovery.

The foragers and warriors meet in the early evening to exchange information and items. A troll-hunting night patrol is formed, and Kirali's bow and arrow are called upon. Shannon is assigned to guard the perimeter and meet with a promoter for the local prize-fighting organization. According to this promoter, there is a wealthy benefactor who offers prize money for pit fighting. This is a popular evening entertainment in the region, and often warriors travel great distances to participate. A great deal of side betting is known to occur at these pit fights. The promoter takes note of those who wish to participate, and the warriors clamor to be on that list. After assuring the Defenders that the roster will be announced early enough the next day to encourage a healthy bit of wagering the promoter takes his leave.

Since the pit fights are geared towards bladed weapons, Kirali is not destined to join in the pit fights themselves. However, her healing and surgical skills are in great demand, and she is offered ample opportunity for employment in the next day's fights. She hesitates to place any wagers though, despite the efforts of a very persuasive bookie and the extravagant wagers proposed by an eccentric fight-follower that drifts through the village. Three kinds of currency emerge, and a visiting moneychanger is kept quite busy.

A late night assault on the troll encampment just outside the village ends in success. Five Defenders were called upon by the Commandant, including Kirali. Their efforts were successful, though Kirali's healing skills were certainly necessary. Shannon assisted by watching the trail, and by making quick work of a few undead zombies that could have been a potential threat to the five Defenders. As a follower of the deity Mawr, Shannon is deeply troubled by the presence of the undead.

The next day is spent in eager preparations for the pit fights with practice sparring

taking place throughout the day. A priestess of Zarlac comes to the village with a mission for Kirali. As a devotee of Zarlac (the deity of humor, laughter, and luck) she readily accepts this mission, which is to recapture the Hound of Zarlac: he has been kidnapped, his memories have been stolen by sorcery, and he was allowed to escape. The poor Hound is running about the forest, terrified and creating great amounts of havoc. The pathfinders and Shannon offer to help, and the Hound is tracked to a clearing. There, the hound is magically bound with a 20-foot circle of rope on the ground and lured to the priestess of Zarlac. The grateful priestess and the Hound, who has taken quite a liking to Kirali, depart.

The highlight of the day is, of course, the eagerly anticipated pit fight. Shannon performs reasonably well, though he is defeated by a famous traveling professional fighter dubbed The Azure Slayer. Several mysterious bodyguards dressed in black surround the wealthy patron, seated on a special raised platform for this occasion. She hires even more bodyguards from among the spectators. Her bloodthirsty ways, and a tendency to choose 'death' over 'life' at the end of each battle for the vanquished, causes concern among the Defenders. A total of twelve sword fights occur, and ten Defenders are defeated. Eight of those ten are sent to Judgment.

The next morning is rich with the sound of laughter, as the Defenders are in good spirits. The hunting throughout the weekend has been plentiful, so the upkeep for each player is assured. The money earned at the pit fights, as prize money or through gambling or both, has greatly enhanced morale. The Defenders discuss the information they have gathered, and make plans for the days ahead. The Commandant also seems lighter of heart, and a bit of a bonus is added to each of the Defenders' wages.

Section 2: July 13-14, 2002.

The Commandant is mysteriously absent throughout the day. There is no news from him, though there are several visitors arriving and departing from the Keep throughout the day. A merchant of Zarlac challenges players to a scavenger hunt, with money and magical items offered as rewards. A representative of a local landowner comes to find out information about the background of some of the Defenders, particularly warriors of Mawr. Shannon's suspicions increase, and he suspects that necromancy (a magic discipline that can be used for evil by forcing spirits of the dead to walk the earth as undead zombies and attack at a sorcerer's bidding indefinitely until the sorcerer is found and struck down) must be afoot near the village.

There are several new Defenders that come offering their services in the defense of the Keep. Among them are Avery, a fire mage like Kirali, and several more warriors. A mechanical Golum named Ankhadi (see Figure 6) also comes to join the Defenders. These reinforcements find plenty of work right away. Luckily, they agree to fight alongside the villagers instead of waiting to meet with the Commandant to settle upon terms.

Barbarians attack a library caravan just before it reaches the village. Many magics and histories of the Exiles world are almost lost, but the Defenders came and fought valiantly to defend it. The villagers share the hard work of carrying the books to the villages. A suitable building is found within the walls of the keep to store the books safely. The driver of the library caravan survives to tell of the priceless wisdom to be found in the books. He also speaks of a magic stone tablet, with an ancient language inscribed upon it, which has been shattered and scattered throughout the area. This tablet

is rumored to be the cause of the unrest among the barbarians, and related to the necromancy activity in the area.

The scavenger hunt goes well, particularly for Kirali. Several villagers are rewarded with money and magical items. Kirali receives an amulet of protection that allows her to receive more blows in battle than she would normally be able to withstand with her unfortunately weak constitution, and she is very grateful for the good will of her deity. She gives the gold she has won to Shannon and another warrior for their noteworthy assistance in her defense. A weapons specialist comes to town and has a healthy trade, as many of the Defenders are able to enhance the might of their weapons with the gold that they have earned at the Keep so far.

A terrified servant of a local landowner pounds upon the main gate of the keep in the early evening. Three sorceresses have encamped upon a hill in the middle of a large field, and the barbarians are coming out of the woods in great numbers. There is much chanting and chest-beating to be heard in the forest, and the roads are unsafe.

As the villagers attempt to calm the servant and decide what to do, Adept comes back to the village. He describes a tale that correlates with the stone tablets story told by the library caravan driver. He adds that the sorcery afoot is connected with these tablets. The sorceresses are rumored to be in possession of an egg that, if allowed to hatch, will become a powerful and monstrous creature likely to destroy the Keep and all its Defenders. Fragments of the stone are amplifying the power of the dark magic, and the Barbarians are being controlled by those in possession of the fragments.

After a brief council, the Defenders decide to launch an attack on the hill and destroy both the sorceresses and the egg. The adept advises that the egg can only be

destroyed by fire magic. A gruesome battle ensues, with vicious lightning bolts hurled upon the defenders from the hill while the barbarian hordes attack in endless waves of viciousness. One warrior, Aaron, leads a reckless but effective charge upon the hill and strikes down the sorceresses.

For this action, which turned the tide of the battle, he is elected to be the temporary leader of the Defenders until the return of the Commandant. Jokingly dubbed the Commodore in reference to his swashbuckling style, this new development helps to organize the Defenders and improve morale. At Shannon's suggestion, such organization efforts are reinforced by managing money earned by Defenders so that none will be in want despite the absence of the Commandant and, consequently, the stipend promised for defending the Keep. Now, all the Defenders turn their eyes away from their pockets and toward one goal: the destruction of the evil forces afoot.

A suspicious alchemist appears in the village, and seeks to sell various potions. Kirali makes a purchase, and notices that this alchemist bears Kargad currency. This alchemist, named Maven, is very curious about the messenger that was killed nearby. Though Kirali knows of the incident and has worked to decode the documents found in the dead messenger's hand, she discloses none of this to Maven. Instead, Kirali decides to continue to do business with her and attempt to find out more information about Kargad's involvement in the troubles of the Keep.

Since Maven doesn't keep her affiliation with Kargad a secret, other Defenders discover this and want to kill Maven immediately. Shannon in particular is eager for Maven to commit a violent act so he can dispatch her right away, since he cannot bring himself to kill her outright. Kirali emphatically defends her decision to continue to do

business with Maven. The Commodore, Shannon, and other warriors who have had dealings with Kargad before agree to tolerate Maven's presence with a great deal of misgivings. Maven rewards Kirali for her kindness with several potions that prove to be quite useful in the days to come.

The pit fights on the following day are more subdued, and the mysterious benefactor financing the events is even more quiet than usual. In fact, she leaves with her entourage before the fights are over. Warriors attempt to track the party after the pit fights conclude. They find that they have vanished into a series of underground catacombs.

With darkness thickening about them, the Defenders venture to the catacombs, leaving Kirali and two warriors to guard the keep. The night is long and bloody battles are fought. Those who return speak of hordes of undead and a warrior who lies in a tomb but speaks as if alive. A second attack is made, and the undead warrior is able to go to the spirit world in peace. The benefactor is still nowhere to be found, but several of the more vicious adversaries near the tomb resemble her bodyguards in dress and manner.

The third day concludes with a council among the villagers. The Incanari receive a visit from a mysterious ice creature of the North. They all leave with it, and are completely reticent about the encounter upon their return to the village. Their spirits, however, are considerably improved.

Several adventurers, searching in small groups, are able to find some of the fragments of the magic stone tablet. The fragments are entrusted to Kirali, and are hidden within the village.

Section 3: August 10-11, 2002.

There is much discussion about the “heart of the forest”, a tale which the rangers of Hoyt’s Crew have heard from hermits in the woods. This magical item is rumored to be hidden in the forest, and it is being used to turn the spirits of the trees toward evil instead of protecting the forest from evil as it should be. A small group sets forth, and finds itself quickly overwhelmed. Two more attempts are necessary before the magical item can be freed from its trap, and many lives are lost in its recovery. The hermits are very grateful, and a large contingent of magical wood spirits called Fae come to the village with generous magical gifts for the Defenders.

The days become a blur of skirmishes, as the Defenders labor to keep the Keep safe from relentless waves of undead legions and irate barbarians. Finally, one barbarian comes to the village with a limited ability to speak. From what Kirali (who spends a great deal of time with him and heatedly defends his right to be heard and not killed) can puzzle out, the barbarians are frantic because the stone pieces are being recovered and held in the village. He insists that if the stones aren’t returned, the barbarians will all be destroyed and the forest will die.

When Kirali tries to let him out of the village unharmed, he becomes hysterical. Shannon suddenly realizes what he is trying to say: if he goes back to the barbarians alive, they will kill him and his death will be without honor. To resolve the problem, Shannon challenges him to a battle of honor, which will allow the barbarian to die in battle and retain his honor. The barbarian eagerly agrees, and a very upset Kirali leaves the barbarian to his unfortunate but freely chosen fate.

Further upsets occur at the pit fight. One of the warriors confronts the promoter

and the benefactor. He insists that the benefactor expose her identity. The Defenders begin to agree with the protests, but the warrior's remarks become so inflammatory that the crowd begins to voice its disapproval. The promoter recovers a semblance of order, the tournament continues, and the troublemaker is slain.

Some of the combatants who arrive to the area are great warriors of legend that some of the older Defenders recognize. Among the combatants is Duvallis Darkthought, a powerful mentalist mage and warrior who knows of the magical stone tablet. He explains their origins and purpose, and insists that they be brought back into the spirit world. Speaking at great length, he explains that he is the only one who can and should handle such powerful magic. He says that if the tablet falls into hands that can utter what is inscribed upon it, the world will fall into eternal darkness and be destroyed. Of course, Duvallis wants to be the one to bear the tablets away.

Later that evening, there is considerable discussion about what should be done with the tablets. This discussion continues the next morning. Although Kirali and Shannon Silverhawk both favor giving the tablet pieces to Duvallis, those who are dubious of someone so arrogant outnumber them.

The hunting is not as plentiful during this time, and there is a suspicion that some of the meat has been poisoned. The animals in the area are also acting quite erratically, even becoming violent as if rabid. These developments lead to increasing suspicions that powerful dark magic is uncomfortably nearby. It is resolved that deeper forays in the woods may lead to some clues.

Section 4: September 28-29, 2002.

Undead spirits of the keep are joined by restless spirits of Defenders past. A long night of inquiry and guidance from local historians who have come to town unravel some of the mysteries of the stone tablet, the behavior of the barbarians, the local necromantic activity, and the fate of those who had tried to defend the Keep in the past. There is much confusion among the Defenders. All the fragments of the tablet have been recovered but there is no decision made about what to do with the tablet.

Parades of visitors to the village make it abundantly clear that the tablet cannot stay in the keep. Continued parley with the long-dead spirits of Defenders past reveals that the tablet corrupts those among the living that possess it. The disposal of the tablet becomes even more urgent as several of the Defenders experience serious adverse effects. Magic users like Kirali are afflicted with hideous pain in the head that eliminates the ability to think clearly or cast spells properly. A book discovered in the library turns out to be an evil curse that almost forces Kirali to be psychotic assassin. Avery and Shannon intercede, and Adept carries the book out of the village.

The pit fight is the most vicious to date, and none that fall survive. The mood among the crowd is almost mob-like, and everyone is on edge. A gigantic spider and vicious minions almost destroy the entire contingent of Defenders. The barbarian hordes are closer to the keep than ever. The next morning, several warriors sent on patrol are missing for far too long. More warriors go to Judgment in that night than in any other night in recent memory.

The debate regarding the disposal of the tablets becomes heated as a result of

mounting tensions and casualties. The villagers finally decide to send the tablet away with a benevolent undead spirit of a warrior who frequently appears when enough magic-users are in meditation for a manifestation to occur. He promises that he will be able to keep the tablet in the spirit world so that darkness will not descend.

A massive final onslaught of enchanted barbarians, including the missing warriors who are also enchanted, descends upon the Keep. The battle rages for hours, but in the end a battle weary Keep is ultimately defended. A local landowner comes in the stead of the Commandant, who is missing and presumed dead. He distributes the wages to the defenders and wish them well on their future adventures.

Chapter 5

PERSPECTIVES:

Drama, Script, Theater and Performance

The “Borderlands” LARP epic can show us, in the language of performance, what our culture values and what our culture is missing. According to Bill Lake, the creator of the character Shannon Silverhawk, “The game is what you make it...It is like being in a large play in which you write your own script...everyone helps to create a living community of characters who come together to enrich the experience... Where else can you straddle the body of a fallen comrade in an open battlefield while all hell breaks loose around you or experience a line of thirty plus men with shields and pole arms marching towards your formation for the battle of a hilltop on a moonlit night...when you call your friends by their character names and cannot remember their real names.”²⁰

“Borderlands” extends far beyond the recreational realm despite the fact that recreation is what each player interviewed cited as their motivation for attendance. A drama was created with moral and ethical dilemmas: Should Kirali have trusted Maven, who did in fact betray her in the end? Should there have been some attempt to save the life of the barbarian who begged for death? The answers are obvious in retrospect but when the characters are in the moment making the decisions the right answer never seems certain. The beauty of the drama that unfolds lies in what players discover about their own morality. Such questions are asked by the greatest stories ever told. These dilemmas lie at the heart of humanity itself. But is such dilemma resolution theater?

²⁰ Bill Lake, “Shannon Silverhawk, Knight of Mawr” (2003)

Schechner's definition of *drama* provides some much-needed precision to answer this question. "The boundary between performance and everyday life" that Schechner includes in his definition is evident throughout the "Borderlands" events.²¹ At no time did anyone confuse the actions within the context of the game with reality. Every participant is clear on the distinction between 'in game' and 'out of game'. The "Borderlands" *drama* emerges from a specialized *script* where the authors and the performers and the audience are one.

The *script*, or basic code of events, began as a general outline by Truax and the core cast. Attempts were made to control and manage the events as the core cast interacted with the players. However, it became clear as the events unfolded that players brought their own ideas to the story building process that was the "Borderlands" process. The outlines created by the core cast often became theoretical, and were considerably simplified and altered as the events transpired. "We had so much more planned...and we never expected some of the decisions made by the players..." muses one core cast member who wishes to remain anonymous.

The events as enacted by the performers, Schechner's *theater*, was both the manifestation of the storyline portion of the *script* and the sculptor of the player-derived *script* modifications. This means that the non-static nature of the *script* culminated in non-static *theater* events. Theoretically, the *theater* will last as long as the characters keep interacting to produce the *script*, indefinitely.

The *performance* continues long after the events transpire. Extensive email traffic between characters "in game" attests to the infinite lifespan potential of this type of

²¹ Richard Schechner. Performance Theory (New York: Routledge, 1988) 71-73.

performance. It is the challenge of the MASI organization to continue to manage the actions that take place among the characters so those players don't become bored. This is done by keeping the rulebook for Exiles essentially the same for years, but varying the scenarios and creating a plethora of entertaining new characters for players to meet as they spend only a few weekends in one particular locale. MASI is running a campaign for 2003 entitled "The Shrouded Sea" set in the same world but on the seacoast, rather far away from the 'locale' of Borderlands. Players who wish to continue with the *performance* of "Borderlands" can continue to perform as their character in this new location. Players who wish to revisit characters from Exile locales past can do so. Still another option is to create an entirely new character for "The Shrouded Sea" campaign. The stability and continuity of the *performance*-generating organization has, as in traditional theater, a great deal of influence on the potency of the performance.

The perpetuation of the *performance* is sustained by creating an organization like MASI with the flexibility and complexity inherent in the Exiles Rulebook. Currently, Truax is working on a revision of the rulebook that will eliminate less popular options, clarify confusing elements, and eradicate components that don't facilitate the action of the ongoing stories. Even these modifications are interactive, and there is a substantial exchange of ideas between players and core staff.

According to Schechner, activities related to theater include rituals, plays, games, sports, dance, and music. Together they comprise what he calls "the public performance activities of humans."²² If theater is to be understood and defined as "the enactment of

²² Richard Schechner, Performance Theory 54-55

stories by players” as he suggests, then the “Borderlands” sequence is most definitely theater. Ritual is evidenced by the premise of the Exiles world. Oceanus, the fictional world where the Exiles events take place, echoes settings found in the beginnings of European literature. These beginnings derive from what the Exiles Rulebook describes as ‘a religious ritual designed to ensure the rebirth of a dead world.’ Play, games, sports, dance, and music all occur on each day of each event in the “Borderlands” sequence.

The *drama* (scenario) of the “Borderlands” epic consists of moral dilemmas found throughout fantasy literature and mythology, depicted in a setting invented by the NPC’s who are involved in scripting the storyline and writing the rulebook. What the players, or PC’s, decide to construct as a character also has an influence on the construction of the drama.

The *script* (basic code of events) is a culmination of the storyline created by the NPC’s prior to the event and the improvisational dialogues and actions occurring during the events. All LARP participants are involved in this element of the performance as well. The plot is not predetermined by script. Instead, it unfolds as a result of the choices made by the NPC and PC characters as they improvise their reactions in the given circumstances of the storyline. There are no spectators or ‘behind the scenes’ operators present in the “Borderlands” epic.

The *theater* element (event enacted) is presented during the predetermined time and space parameters of what is referred to as “in-game” activity. This is primarily confined to the days of the event, though groups like MASI are also utilizing Internet listservs to conduct “in-game” interactions (email communications in character) between

events.

By manifesting the scripted moral dilemmas through character interaction, all participants guide the performance (all activity associated with and necessary for the enacted event). Maintaining its non-profit organization status, registration coordination, accounts balancing and liability insurance are some examples of activities that are an integral part of the performance of the “Borderlands” epic. The preparations of the NPC’s and the PC participants for the “Borderlands” epic are also a part of the performance of the LARP. The ever-improving technique of foam weapons construction involves a considerable commitment of time, money, and shared expertise. Sparring to increase safety and to produce convincing role-play takes place whenever possible. Infrastructure management, accounting and site maintenance are other essential components of the “Borderlands” performance. As the “Borderlands” epic is examined, other elements of performance that extend beyond the events themselves will be revealed.

Schechner’s *time/space/event chart*²³ specifies the limitations on what is, or could be treated as, *performance*. The *time* parameters of the *theater* of the “Borderlands” epic can be separated into real-time *performance* (performance at the four two-day events) and down-time *performance* (“in-game” character interactions and developments occurring between the events). *Time* parameters are regulated by the given circumstances of the world and the mutually agreed upon limitations of character and setting specified by the rulebook. *Space* parameters are separated into the *metaspace* of the performance world (the world delineated in the storyline and rulebook) and the *microspaces* (the actual area,

²³ Richard Schechner and Willa Appel, eds. By Means of Performance: Intercultural Studies of Theatre and Ritual. (New York: Routledge, 1990) 31.

real or imagined) where each scene-component of the overall epic transpires. It is the activity performed in the *microspaces* which, combined, forms the overall *performance*. The “Borderlands” performance is “*private*” and “*restricted*,” “*repeated*,” and takes place in “*outdoor/transformed/secular space*” (or virtual space in the case of downtime performances).

LARP performances are categorized, using Schechner’s chart, in correlation with “*private*” and “*restricted*” ordinary theater and dance. An example of an event that would correlate with this placement on the *time/space/event* chart, cited by Schechner, is “Theater on Chekov Street.”²⁴ He is referring to an ongoing series of performance events that are improvisational in nature while employing Stanislavski acting technique. This correlation of the “Borderlands” performance to an established theatrical form allows the inclusion of (and consequently examination of) these events as types of performance.

By letting go of the “ethnocentric preconceptions of orthodox theater” and by utilizing terminology useful to examining performance, LARP study can proceed with greater efficiency and accuracy.²⁵ Such study is key to understanding the sociological motivations for LARP performances. After all, the audiences producers would like to see in their theaters are out in a field somewhere, making theater on their own. Why? This is the question that those who study LARP performances seek to answer.

²⁴ Richard Schechner, Performance Theory (New York: Routledge, 1994) 53.

²⁵ Richard Schechner, Performance Theory (New York: Routledge, 1994) 6-7.

Chapter 6

PERTINENCE:

Performance, LARP Study, and the Interactive Aesthetic

At the heart of performance lies catharsis. Literally translated, catharsis means “purification” or “cleansing”. According to Aristotle, catharsis is a useful term to describe the social relevance of performance. He asserts in Poetics that if plot is correctly structured, the correct emotional response will be elicited. With repetition, correct emotional responses will lead to good decisions in life, which will lead to a virtuous existence. Thus, performance can execute an educative and moral function in proportion to the extent of catharsis present.

Once a LARP has been examined as performance, it is possible to determine the extent at which catharsis can occur as a result of that performance. It is helpful to envision a continuum. At one extreme is a minimal level of mental engagement, with resulting minimal catharsis. Examples include participating in dinner theater or watching a somewhat uninspired television program. Continuing along the continuum, addition of a physical engagement would lead to an increase of catharsis. For instance, participating in a fencing exhibition with an audience present would lead to a moderate level of catharsis.

Higher levels of catharsis are achieved when characterization occurs within performance. The mental and the physical elements are (ideally) maximized during traditional theatrical performances. Moving still further along the catharsis continuum, it is possible to make a connection with humanity by means of performance. This can also be described as a spiritual element of performance. This phenomenon results from what

Joseph Campbell describes as a “shared ancestral past.”²⁶ In the “Borderlands” events, moral and ethical dilemmas were at the core of the pre-written plot outline, character development, and improvised actions. Participants found, through the vehicle of performance, a morality connection. Mackay refers to this phenomenon as “the interactive aesthetic” of LARP performance.²⁷

Due to the rapid growth and expanding diversity of LARP performances, examination of LARP in terms of catharsis is in its infancy. It is important to acknowledge LARP performances as a widespread cultural phenomenon. Performances that don’t fall into a well-defined, time-honored section of the catharsis continuum are often dismissed as something other than art, and there is already a tendency to dismiss LARP performances as “just a game.”²⁸

If LARP study is not approached as an example of an interactive aesthetic, a hierarchy of form and content will continue to be insinuated. Traditional theatrical performances will continue to occupy a separate (and some might say higher) placement on the catharsis continuum. In one all-inclusive gesture LARP will be relegated by default to a lower place on the catharsis continuum at best and found to be ‘less than art’ and therefore not included on the continuum at worst. If this happens, the answer to the question “Why LARP?” won’t be answered. Worse, we will miss what this phenomenon has to tell us: what our culture values and what our culture is missing.

²⁶ Joseph Campbell, Myths To Live By (New York: Viking Press, 1972) 5.

²⁷ Daniel Mackay, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art (Jefferson: McFarland, 2001) 159.

²⁸ Melissa Caruso. “Women in Live Action Role Playing” (Providence, RI: Brown University, 1991) 23.

Mackay's "cultural structure" of LARP performance, defined as the relation of a performance to outside elements, is exhibited by the out-of-game profile of the typical MASI participant.²⁹ A common thread heard during commentary among the Borderlands participants is a lack of creative outlet in the workplace. The typical participant is a white-collar worker in a middle-class or upper middle-class income bracket. They live in a technologically driven society that has little to zero emotional connection in much of daily life. This creates a void. As Campbell states, "People must play various roles in order to survive spiritually... mythology gives us an array of roles to play."³⁰ In the Borderlands LARP, the players embody their myths and become each others' heroes.

LARP participants may be brought together for recreational purposes, and may be modeling their practices after a well-known gaming format, but what occurs in the environment of the game is theater. Mackay refers to this as the "formal structure" of the game. The shared language of the role-playing functions as an interpreter for people with wildly divergent backgrounds and experiences. Couched in role-playing game language, the mechanics of the game are pursued with emphasis on rapid communication of complex information. The participants are so immersed in the formal structure that they don't notice the moments when they transcend the mundane until after they experience their physical, mental, and spiritual catharsis. The "Borderlands" participants gather after each event to eat, rest, and try to verbalize the multifaceted dynamics of their experience.

Their out-of-game frame of reference, or what Mackay calls the "social structure"

²⁹ Daniel Mackay. The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) 15.

³⁰ Joseph Campbell, Myths To Live By (New York: Viking Press, 1972) 8.

is the degree and quality of social interaction desired.³¹ What brings the participants together in the first place is a desire to expose human relations and disclose social possibilities with other human beings, instead of sitting in front of a computer screen or television. A round of golf doesn't suffice, and table gaming is insufficient. LARP events are more than an opportunity to socialize and exercise. "Borderlands" taps into universal emotions with myths and rituals that have endured since the beginning of recorded time. Compassion, empathy, chivalry, and respect for the dead are a few of the examples exhibited by the performance narratives.

The community of staff and players compose a complex and dynamic narrative, or what Mackay refers to as the "aesthetic object."³² This object is the product of a meeting of minds, exertion of bodies, and the attainment of spiritual common ground. It has a depth and resonance that goes far beyond fun and games. Performance of this aesthetic object forms Mackay's "aesthetic structure."³³

The creation of this structure is necessary for those who find themselves in a world with no heroes and storytellers who remain silent. Our culture is missing emotional content. For many, events high on the catharsis continuum are necessary to compensate for what our culture is lacking. When given a weekend to rediscover the inner myths that join the participants to each other and to their inherent humanity, they

³¹ Daniel Mackay, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) 13.

³² Daniel Mackay, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) 136.

³³ Daniel Mackay, The Fantasy Role-Playing Game: A New Performing Art (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001) 16.

achieve what the cultural anthropologist Eugenio Barba refers to as the “balance in action” necessary for continued spiritual survival.³⁴ Participants achieve balance in the action of LARP performance as actors. They simultaneously achieve balance, as their own audience, from the performance.

³⁴ Eugenio Barba. The Paper Canoe. (New York: Routledge, 1995) 16.

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Shelley Wind Hooper was born in Farmington, Maine on November 13, 1971. She was raised first in rural Maine, then Fort Bragg N.C., then rural Maine again. She graduated from Mt. Blue High School in 1990. Sporadically attending the University of Maine at Farmington while working as an administrative assistant, security company dispatcher, gas station manager, waitress, journalist, seamstress, and cosmetics salesperson, she graduated with a BA in Theater/Arts in 2001. She continued her education at the University of Maine upon acceptance in the graduate program at the School of Performing Arts, Division of Theater.

After receiving her degree, Shelley will be moving to Providence, Rhode Island. There, she will begin working with Trinity Repertory Theater while attending Brown University, in pursuit of a doctoral degree in Performance Studies and Theater. Shelley is a candidate for the Master of Arts degree in Theater from the University of Maine in May 2003.