*J. Tuomas Harviainen**

Systemic perspectives on information in physically performed role-play

Distinguished custos, my esteemed opponent, ladies and gentlemen of the audience.

In this lecture, I explain the principles of liminality informatics for game studies, first developed by myself and Andreas Lieberoth (2012). It is a sub-discipline, through which one analyzes the information roots of ritualistic phenomena, in this case physical pretence games.

Games are social systems. They are temporary spaces defined by social contracts. In my work, I examine the information properties of such systems, and the way participants' information behavior in them is influenced by the social contracts.

For the purposes of this lecture, "Information" is defined as the potential message content in any piece of data, ranging from verbal statements to physical objects. It is selectively ignored or appropriated into knowledge structures by persons seeking or encountering it.

"Information environment", in turn, is a definition used in library and information science to denote the sum of situational and/or local factors that affect the seeking, searching, appropriation, distribution, and use of information by people or systems in that particular situation and/or location.

When we speak of role-playing, we speak of pretence activities. Some of them are performed for entertainment - as is usually my main focus among them, live-action role-playing (or more commonly, larping). Others have more serious goals, such as the religious exploration conducted through Bibliodrama and the political aims of certain larps. I have chosen to concentrate my research especially on larps, because their playful, voluntary nature makes both their information properties and their constituting social contracts particularly visible.

In order to conduct proper analysis on them, it is however necessary to separate the activities from their framings. Larp has many siblings, including psychodrama, the aforementioned Bibliodrama, historical re-enactment, sadomasochist role-playing and even some forms of post-modern magic, such as chaos magic. In some parts of them, people perform the same activity - larping - as they do in larps, but the context and purpose differs. The "game" aspect of larps and other role-playing games, I believe, is what makes them stand apart from these siblings, not any innate variation on what's being done. In Article Five of the dissertation, I define larping using three criteria - yet without the "game" component, as that is a part of the frame, or "larp":

"1. Role-playing in which a character, not just a social role, is played.

2. The activity takes place in a fictional reality shared with others. Breaking that fictional reality is seen as a breach in the play itself.

3. The physical presence of at least some of the players as their characters. (Harviainen 2011, p. 176.)"

In hermeneutical terms, role-playing therefore consists of the intentional evocation of artificial experiences through the use of fictional characters as masks, identities or personas. Personal and cultural play habits and identity theories determine the type of character use, and the relationship between a player and a character can strongly fluctuate during play. This affects the sources from which information is obtained while playing.

What counts as a "game" (or even "play", for that matter) is an extremely complex question, to which most answers are tautological - one first decides what to include into games, and then forms a definition that encompasses only those. This seems to be quite true of both philosophical definitions, such as those of Ludwig Wittgenstein (1953) or Bernard Suits (1978), as well as of the ones constructed for

a more practical use. Jan H. G. Klabbers (2009), one of the fathers of simulation/game studies, for example uses the following:

"A game is a form of play. It is an activity involving one or more players who assume roles while trying to achieve a goal. Rules determine what the players are permitted to do, or define constraints on allowable actions, which impact on the available resources, and therefore influence the state of the game space. Games deal with well-defined subject matter (content and context).

Play is a voluntary activity or occupation, executed according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy, and the awareness that it is different from ordinary life."

I have, however, chosen to sidestep most of the problem, as it is for the most part peripheral to the issue at hand. Following my esteemed opponent, Dr. Whitton (2009), I think we get the best result in a work like this by using a cluster theory of games: The more traits of a hypothetical "true" game an activity possesses, the more likely it is to be a game. Examples of such traits include rules, outcomes, voluntariness and competition - it is probable, but not mandatory, that a game would contain them, and many more.

All games contain roles of some kind, such as a "railroad tycoon" in Ticket to Ride. Klabbers claims that character-based role-playing is an accentuated form of this, but I disagree: The fictional personas make it different, as they create limitations to information behavior, by way of immersion. Role-playing games are, as put by Salen & Zimmerman (2004), and Satu Heliö (2004), in any case limit-case games, because they rarely contain obvious winning conditions. Like other games, they nevertheless contain their own temporary realities, with potentially differing rules and even moral systems. Because of this ritualistic quality, I have chosen to analyze them as the liminal spaces - steps beyond the mundane - which they essentially are. Religion scholar Andy Letcher calls such spaces Temporary Tribal Zones - TTZs. As stated by Letcher (2001),

"A temporary gathering of people in transformed space [...], the TTZ is a spatial arrangement of the neotribal. The TTZ also involves the transformation of space, albeit at a smaller scale, by the rules and conventions of the neo-tribe. Such is the strength of this transformation that it gives the illusion of autonomy, but in reality this is never achieved for the gathering is ecologically dependent on the

wider world for its existence. Hence it is a tribal, not an autonomous, zone."

This combination of temporary existence and pseudo-autonomy is the key focus point of my work. As shown by one of my external examiners, Suellen Adams (2009), in digital games, it is easy to break the TTZ while pretending that it is intact. Live-action role-playing, however, is by nature an embodied performance of sign-systems through a fictional role, but by the physical player him- or herself, limiting access options greatly. As noted by information scholars such as Peter Ingwersen and Kalervo Järvelin (2005), and game and simulation scholars such as Crookall, Oxford and Saunders (1987), information environments are never entered as vacuums. On the contrary, in order to function, they require information - both explicit and tacit - brought by the participants with them. As Michael Buckland (1991) states,

"Beliefs, values, alternative sources of information, and the resources with which to provide information all derive from the external environment."

No matter how strong the supposed "barrier" between the temporary tribal zone and the surrounding reality is, the TTZ could not exist without its boundary being at least occasionally broken. This is because, as put by Patrick Wilson, information gaps are inevitable, as our knowledge of the world is always limited. In the case of fictional, temporary worlds such as TTZs, this is even more likely.

While the play-space seeks an illusion of autonomy and the self-organization known as autopoiesis, participants need to access information sources outside the TTZ. This can be by invention, by consulting written material, or by asking another person, such as the organizer. Players - like ritual participants - do however have a tendency to try and minimize disturbances to the illusion of play, through the technique of berrypicking. Berrypicking, as described by Marcia Bates (1989), is the collection of small, conveniently available pieces of information, instead of executing formulated searches that would more likely provide what exactly is needed, but threaten the integrity of the fiction.

Berrypicking is a part of a larger process by which participants maintain the boundary around the TTZ, to which game scholars often refer to as the magic circle. The nature of that boundary, whether its name, adapted from Johan Huizinga by Salen and Zimmerman is accurate, and even

its very existence have been strongly debated over the years, most recently by researchers such as Gordon Calleja (in press) and Jaakko Stenros (2012). I believe it to be first and foremost a social information barrier, which blocks or alters data that crosses it. The participants' system of preserving the boundary, and thus the TTZ, is in systems theory called "boundary control".

Boundary control, in my view, consists of certain key elements: The aforementioned berrypicking, for instance, is a facet of a much larger process, the shared desire not to disturb the illusion. Another essential part are together the shared conceptions of what acts, objects and information elements are situationally relevant. The blunting - rejection - of unwelcome information is extensively utilized, often instinctively, especially by strongly immersed players, to protect them from potential content that would be disruptive and situationally non-relevant. That which is considered real inside the TTZ, i.e. diegetic, becomes the primary frame of reference, while elements outside it are disregarded or re-signified whenever possible.

Within a sufficiently strong boundary, re-signification becomes easier, reliance on second-hand information sources - especially cognitive authorities, "people thought to be in the know" - significantly increases, and their information is often treated as "knowledge" and appropriated without critique by many participants.

By for example seeking isolated locations, discussing key details beforehand and by keeping necessary non-diegetic materials (such as long character descriptions) nearby, players ease their own boundary control processes. Because game rules - as pointed out by researchers like Karl Bergström (2012) and Markus Montola (2012) - have a strong influence on how the play is conducted, they too get studied beforehand, so as not to cause unnecessary gaps. At the same time, through the negotiation and advance information seeking, players increase the likelihood that when they re-signify and interpret elements and events within the TTZ, the results are equifinal enough with those of other participants.

This interpretation process forms a significant part of physically performed role-playing: The players encounter situations where they need to make their own the essentially alien activities and elements around them, using their characters as interpretative lenses. They exercise their information literacy skills, by reading the meaningful actions of others as "texts", which they then add as potential

information to their knowledge structures. As the game progresses, the characters - each of them in a sense a "library index card" for the material from which they were created - start to refer to information from multiple sources, increasing the complexity of the game-system.

To keep the process interesting, larps manipulate information uncertainty, in the same manner as do many rituals. This takes place in the form of ASK, the anomalous state of knowledge, in which a person knows he needs more information to make sense of a situation, but not exactly what information. Games that want to create emotional arousal and excitement seek extended ASK. For most educational games, in turn, very low ASK is good, as that eases the learning process and lets the organizers guide it better. Tools for that are for example the increase of transparency recommended by Timo Lainema (2008), and the optimization of challenge and the limitation of excess fun suggested by T. D. Henriksen (2008). Some larp-like pretence game forms, for example Jeepform, which seeks to produce the best possible story out of the elements, use similar tools. Maintaining game engagement, whatever the direction of the manipulation, is at all times very significant, so as not to risk an Emperor's New Clothes effect, where everyone thinks that no one else is committed to the play either, and the whole illusion collapses.

The situation is helped along by the fact that certain persons, called Directive Sources, are allowed to alter the fiction-internal information properties of any document as needed, be they text, physical items, or even abstract concepts. Bluntly put, what the game master says is true, is true. Should he for example alter character history, or say that a piece of wood is actually an antelope, within the TTZ, it diegetically is. What this too comes down to is information processes.

With liminality informatics, we can explain new facets of the play experience, the potential nature of the magic circle, and the reason why TTZs function as strongly as they do. The exploration of information processes in game studies increases our shared pool of knowledge in both disciplines, and builds new, important bridges within our very department. Those bridges will enable us a few more ways of sometimes answering the "why", and not just the "what".

Thus ends the sermon.

Dissertation

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