

‘Can’t Stop The Signal?’

The Design of the Dutch *Firefly* LARP

Nicolle Lamerichs
PhD candidate
Maastricht University
Grote Gracht, 82
Maastricht University
n.lamerichs@Maastrichtuniveristy.nl

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyze the design of a Dutch live-action role-playing game (LARP), based on the television series *Firefly*. I discuss it as part of the recent participatory culture in which fans mediate existing fiction into other products such as games. Game studies have often bypassed types of gaming that are initiated by players themselves by taking professional and digital games as their starting points. By focussing on a local example of a fan game, I hope to provide new insights in game design and play. After disseminating between fan and game practices, and sketching some of the previous research thereof, I shall elaborate upon the design of the game in four ways by focussing on the designer, the context, the participants and its construction of meaningful play. I argue that the fan LARP displays a particular design perspective based on the co-creative ethos of role-playing and fandom itself. Whereas existing research isolates the actors that are relevant in game practices, designer, player and fan modes clearly interrelate here.

Keywords

LARP, role-playing, fandom, design, immersion, co-creation

INTRODUCTION

In academic theory, the mutual exchange between players and designers is often taken for granted. Games are analyzed as interactive systems that are necessarily co-creative because the player has to deliver physical input and, at the same time, has to make choices within a framework. This structure usually allows some forms of appropriation and free play. The ‘magic circle’ that Huizinga once invented as the game space – a symbolic circle in which we define the rules and the context of the game – has already been deconstructed. Recent research has shown the social affordances of games that also shape a player’s identity outside the circle (e.g. Castranova, 2004; Pearce, 2009). Moreover, studies have analyzed how these systems are manipulated by gamers to allow for more emergent forms of play (id.; Taylor, 2006).

Though this is one way in which gamers are engaged with play, it is important to realize that they also extend this appropriation beyond the game by creating new fictional products and performances that are inspired by it. This type of audience activity is generally captured as a fandom, which can be defined as the cultural domain in which an audience groups around certain fiction such as a game, a novel or a television series. A fandom is an interpretive community in which media products are analyzed and discussed. It is also a social community in which individuals establish relations with other aficionados. Lastly, fandom has a considerable creative function. Within fan communities individuals create their own fiction and artworks based on the narratives and games they love. These products circulate within the communities themselves and are provided with feedback by other fans.

Fandom has become a prominent social phenomenon online the last ten years. Jenkins (2006) sees it as part of ‘participatory culture’, which refers to a trend of online users becoming co-creators. Through online games, forums and other platforms, internet users have become more active in sharing their interest and creating products that are derived from it. Media fandom is however an older phenomenon that can be traced back to the seventies when ‘fan conventions’ were founded. At these venues fans meet up in large public spaces such as hotels where they can purchase merchandise or attend events related to fan practices and the original text (e.g. panels with the original author). Other fans get know each other at movie or music festivals, club meetings and even in shops.

Though in media studies this audience activity has received more attention, in game studies it is only applied to some fan and game practices (e.g. modifications). Moreover, the discourse of fans that produce their own games has never been critically connected to game design. Game design has often been understood in terms of overarching theories and typologies of production that are difficult to apply to all genres of play (Dovey & Kennedy, 2006; Elverdam

& Aarseth, 2007). By focussing on digital games that are professionally published, role-playing games initiated by players are generally neglected. To provide better views in how active gamers create their own play, I focus on a fan game designed and organized by Dutch student society The Knights of the Kitchen Table. The session is a live-action role-playing game (LARP), based on the science fiction series *Firefly* by Joss Whedon. The study draws from participatory ethnography as a player (see also Taylor, 2009; Pearce, 2009) and an in-depth interview with one of the designers.

As I shall show, this fan LARP provides valuable insights in the mediation of an existing story into a game. I argue that the LARP displays a particular design perspective based on the co-creative ethos of role-playing and fandom itself. Whereas existing research isolates the actors that are relevant in game practices, this case shows that designer, player and fan modes interrelate. Both fans and gamers appropriate existing content to fit their own standards and express intentions that are similar to those of designers. Though we may wish to identify relevant actors in our research and even draw dichotomies between, for instance, official designers and creative fans, we must bear in mind that the motivations of these various groups overlap.

Before I discuss the LARP, I first describe what kind of practices game fans engage in, what theories have been used to understand these and how this can be related to role-playing. Then, I analyze the design of the LARP by focussing on the designer, the context, the participants and the construction of meaningful play.

FANS AND GAMERS

Fans have a history since the seventies, and arguably longer, of creating their own products based on existing media texts or *source-texts*. There are various practices fans of media such as television series and games have in common (Burn, 2006; Newman, 2008). First, fans produce *fan fiction*: written texts that often make use of the same setting and characters as the source-text or elements of the plot (Pugh, 2004; Busse & Hellekson, 2006). Second, fans can base drawings or comics on the source-text, known as *fan art*. Third, some fans dress up as existing fictional characters, for instance in *cosplay*, a practice associated with fans of Japanese animations, comics and games. All of these practices expand the original narrative or source-text to some degree and are a token of a fan's engagement with the story.

Game fans also have medium-specific practices they engage in. Fans have long since undertaken many activities to explore video games that vary from making skins for their Sims to recording game footage and making a video thereof, a *machinima*. Historically, games flourished because enthusiastic gamers engaged in the industry and participated, for instance, in beta-testing

and inventing new software, patches or modifications (*mods*). They also directly influenced the industry with their independent games. Both role-playing games and adventure games are genres that were pioneered by motivated gamers and fantasy fans (Martin & Deuze, 2009; Aarseth, 1997, pp. 97-128). Nowadays we find that there is a healthy interchange between fans and producers/designers such as Will Wright (e.g. *The Sims*, *Spore*) setting the tone for a participatory culture in digital gaming where co-creation is embedded within the systems themselves.

When analyzing certain game practices, it becomes difficult to determine whether we are dealing with a game or fan practice. In some studies, for instance, walkthroughs or reviews are discussed as fan practices because they are products that are often made by fan with some creative and interpretive depth (e.g. Newman, 2008). This seems to be an easy distinction. However, as Wirman (2007) pointed out at an earlier edition of DIGRA, these supposed ‘fan’ practices are characterized by their instrumentality and serve the technical purpose of finishing the game and the social one of supporting the game community. In that sense, they differ from fan practices such as writing fan fiction which is an expressive action through which fans engage with the narrative.

Following Wirman’s argumentation, we can also reason that derivative games are fan practices because players often need to be familiar with the original narrative which, especially in role-playing games, they express in their own play. Kurt Lancaster (2002) for instance analyzes the licensed games based on the science fiction television series *Babylon 5* and conceptualizes player behaviour therein as ‘fan performances’. Still, some of these games (e.g. the role-playing game) only mediate the universe of *Babylon 5* and allow for original character construction and new story lines. They do not require additional knowledge of *Babylon 5* and can also appeal to the casual viewer as an interesting science-fiction game setting. The RPG can function as an entry point into the series that gamers may watch later on, perhaps even to enhance their play. What is called a fan performance thus can also be seen as a game practice. The types of investment made by fans and gamers – the first arguably more narrative-based and expressive while the latter invests in game play – overlap because gamers tend to invest in both modes.

Similarly, this paper complicates the relation between the fans/gamers and the designers. In many studies this relation is depicted as a dichotomy between the industry and its audience. When discussing fan/game products, scholars tend to get sceptical about the labour involved. Gamers or fans undertake unpaid productive actions while the industry clearly benefits from them (e.g. Bank & Humphreys, 2010). What is neglected in this view is that audiences engage in productive play because a text is valuable to them and because they enjoy the producerly

activities themselves. Fans and gamers want to join in on the worldbuilding. In this sense, their actions cannot be easily separated from those of the producers.

ROLE-PLAYING

In many games, taking part in the construction of the story world is already a given. This is why fans of less interactive media texts (e.g. television series) often feel inspired to create role-playing games based on the shows that they love. This genre is a form of gaming in which every player can partake in the storytelling. It can be traced back to the nineteen seventies, when the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons* was created by Gary Gygax and Dave Anderson as an amateur production that targeted war gamers.

In their definition of role-playing, Tychsen et al. (2006) underline the following characteristics: a) Storytelling with rules b) A shared understanding by multiple users (at least two) of what these rules consist of and how the game setting should be envisioned c) The control of a character to navigate through this imagined world d) A game master (GM) or referee of any other kind that is responsible for the management of the world and its players. Other studies (e.g. Hitchens and Drachen, 2009, pp. 12-13) have drawn attention to *character development* as an important element and goal of these games. The characterization of the avatar changes throughout the story, often due to the player's own actions.

LARP, then, is a type of role-playing that is performed in real-life, usually with game sessions spread over a long day or weekend. The genre originates from the late seventies and is based both on tabletop role-playing games and fantasy literature. Nowadays, LARPs are derived from diverse fictional genres (e.g. fantasy, historical, science fiction). In a LARP, gamers physically act out their characters and use real-life settings as a game space. Though the *Firefly* LARP was meant to be small-scaled and drew roughly 50 people, bigger games can have up to thousands of participants. Costumes and props that players create themselves are an important element of this type of gaming. Though some players and organizations may deal with this modestly, others invest a lot of effort in this. *Make-belief* is a crucial feature of LARP and role-playing in general. On the one hand, players adopt a character or persona and play that out; on the other hand, they imagine and co-create the story world which functions through conventions or symbolism. Within LARP, this threshold between fantasy and reality is limited by playing out roles in an embodied and actual way.

LARP is a good example of co-creative gaming, or participatory story-telling, in which players develop their own characters and plot. In the *Firefly* LARP, this narrative is based on an existing story world. Lately, such fan LARPs have become more common and draw from, for

instance, *Harry Potter* or *Star Wars*. These are usually unofficial and fan-initiated games that are not recognized by the copyright holders. Historically, table-top role-playing games based on existing franchises have often been well-received because, as opposed to much derivative digital games, they offer players a large degree of freedom to remediate the story worlds they love. Since their emergence, role-playing games have been created or appropriated by fans themselves. Nowadays, they also take place online at, for instance, character blogs (e.g. Stein, 2006).

When creating a derivative game, designers want to appeal to the fans of the original media product and do justice to it. They want to reiterate the same affective value of the original text so that fan gamers are satisfied. How can such an attachment to a game be fostered and upheld? What should a design offer to facilitate smooth, immersive play? We can gain some insights by looking at the fan gamers of *Knights of the Kitchen Table*, who made their own LARP.

REMIEDIATING *FIREFLY*

For players, the experience of the *Firefly* LARP is intrinsically linked to their affect for, or ideas about, the series itself. However, an entirely new story is created in this event that differs from the series and, as a game, is also played through particular rules and skills. Design here is understood through the accessible definition by Salen and Zimmerman: ‘Design is the process by which a designer creates a context to be encountered by a participant, from which meaning emerges’ (2004, 41). This definition highlights four elements that will structure the article and will be elaborated upon, namely, the designer, the context, the participants and the construction of meaningful play.

To understand how *Firefly* can be remediated, it is necessary to first say a few things about the series and the fan game. Although it was cancelled after one season, *Firefly* has been praised for its catchy writing, rich characterizations and unique combination of Western fiction and science fiction. Although the series only had 14 episodes, it managed to recruit a large fan following during and after its run. The franchise was expanded to the film *Serenity* (2005), graphic novels, and the *Serenity* table-top role-playing game (2005). The movie *Serenity* was a way for writer-producer Joss Whedon to finish the story line after the series’ cancellation and the result of much fan lobbying. Loyal fans known as ‘browncoats’ - a reference to the independence fighters from *Firefly* - still support the series with their website *Can’t stop the signal*. Online and offline, *Firefly* is partly embedded in the fan communities of Joss Whedon himself who is also known for series as *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* and *Dollhouse*.

Firefly takes place in a science fiction setting roughly 500 years in the future and focuses on the adventures of a small crew of rogues on board of the transport ship *Serenity*. Planet earth is abandoned after its people have migrated to another solar system. This habitat exists of core planets, outer planets, and a dangerous rim region that is not explored yet. Near the borders of the rim, dangerous creatures known as ‘reavers’ lurk that threaten the civilized societies. The core planets are controlled by the Alliance, a totalitarian regime. The series focuses on the adventures of *Serenity*’s crew on different planets and their conflicts with the Alliance.

The LARP takes place in a vessel located at the outer rim of planets, a place in the *Firefly* universe that has not been colonized by The Alliance yet. This allows for the construction of original characters and the imagining of parts of space that remained hitherto unseen in the series. The session starts when six ships have harboured at a colonial vessel, the *New Carolina*. Early on, it is already clear that the attending passengers have their own agendas. Some are interested in fair trade, others in gambling and a few are refugees. The crew that I am on consists of former Blue Sun employees, a reference to a fictional food company in the series. The owner of the ship comes in to welcome us. He is called Montgomery, a wealthy industrialist who is interested in a rare artefact. As players, we get the liberty to do what we want in the beginning of the game session. Some of us start looking for artefacts while others conduct their own play and set up shops or start to gamble.

Though some of these actions are small and shape your character, others affect the plot entirely. At some point, for instance, I see that a locked door near the engine core is open and let someone else stand guard, but when I return, this person is gone. The engine is clearly sabotaged and this leaves us at a disadvantage again. As players, we create the story not only by these choices that are followed up and through the construction of our characters, but also by making decisions as a team. Especially after Montgomery passes away under mysterious circumstances, the main plot advances. The Alliance takes over our ship and though some of us consider a coup, we team up with various captains and negotiate with the new regime. Rather than acting against our new leaders, as the game masters presumed, we decide to act politically sound and let our characters shape the plot.

Still, it becomes apparent that certain actions are meant to trigger the players. At some point, I get the choice whether or not I want to press charges against a priest who has done me harm. I decide to do so, hoping he will be punished, but he is executed grimly in front of many players in a large court room. My minor story line has clearly become a plot point for everyone. In other words, a player’s decisions can affect where the plot goes and that is where good game

design comes in. The role of the designer and/or storyteller is always negotiated in a role-play and depends on his willingness to adapt to the players.

DESIGNERS, FACILITATORS AND ORGANIZERS

Though the LARP is co-creative, the staff has an important leading role in the process. They are not only the designers of the system but also organizationally involved and the game masters during the play. It was the first time that they were going to organize a LARP session but their experience as players and game masters at other occasions had already given them insights in what constructs good storytelling and play. They divided the various aspects of the design amongst the four of them. Two took care of the plot, one of the organization and trading system, the other of the props and information systems within the game. During the game session, these roles were more or less maintained and each used his or her specific knowledge to guide the players as a game master.

The identity of the staff members as fans, who know the ins and outs of the story world, is important in this sense as well. Like the players, they had gotten into *Firefly* some time after its run and had been introduced to it by friends. Even though the designers can be seen as fans of the series, it would be wrong to only focus on this aspect of their identity. In fact, they came up with the idea to do a *Firefly* LARP during the Dutch *Star Wars* LARP where a few of them thought about organizing a *Star Trek* LARP. Their interest in science fiction is obvious but using an existing story world was a practical choice too. As staff member Jaap describes: ‘You don’t have to pick existing material but it helps. Here it was a point of reference.’

The staff had many other arguments for picking *Firefly* as well. First, it favours casual characters and features little to no exceptional heroes, as opposed to *Star Trek*, where the most important character is always the captain or a red-shirt and other crew members take up a minor position. ‘In *Firefly*, there is no epic hero,’ Jaap describes. ‘Yes, if you’re a ship captain you have to stand up for your fellow-crew members, but that’s it.’ Second, in contrast to *Star Trek* ships that have a huge bridge, *Firefly* features very small, regular ships that can easily be imitated in a LARP. Third, *Firefly* has a more interesting ethical dimension since there are many roles one can take up towards, for instance, The Alliance, smugglers or other parties. The ethical and legal gray zone of the series is well-worth exploring in a role-play. *Firefly* thus is not just a series that the designers liked as fans but also a text that had the right characteristics to facilitate good role-playing. In this conceptualization, the designers’ intent and their experience as players and fans already touch upon each other.

The designers wanted to communicate the unique, gritty atmosphere of the series that also leads to certain (ethical) plot choices. The game does not play out the plot or characters of *Firefly*, but rather leans in it to create its own interpretation of this existing story world. Within a game, a story world is somewhat different than in a television text though, where it refers to the overarching narrative setting and genealogy. As Chris Crawford explains the concept in relation to game design: 'A story world is composed of closely balanced decisions that can reasonably go either way' (2005, p. 54) Crafting a story world means creating opportunities for play rather than forging players into a specific story line. In a LARP, designers usually create a kind of *überplot*, as Tychsen and Anders (2006, p. 255) call it, that various players can participate in. The game masters might trigger an event but it is up to the players to react on it and determine the consequences. This original outline for the *überplot* was drafted by two staff members and one of them also made a *mission board* with various events that could be used at any time. These are rather generic situations - usually facilitated by one of the NPCs - that can be used to keep the setting vivid and the player occupied when the main narrative is progressing slowly or involves only a few players.

The LARP session was held indoors at the building that all of the student societies are seated in. Here, the identity of the designers and players as being students at a technical university became apparent. This particular indoor-setting was transformed and provided them more opportunities to create a science fiction setting. The staff had for instance invested considerable effort in making the props function as actual technology that one could operate. In manyLARPs envisioning the setting requires some active imagination (e.g. random tent equals castle) but the *Firefly* staff had built devices that could actually be operated through codes or hardware. When scavenge hunting, players had to look for the actual, useable items such as the hard discs of a computer. Through easy software and techniques, any player could feel like he was actually, for instance, repairing the engine core. This play was made possible through the technical expertise of the staff.

During the session, the game masters consciously picked background characters, or did not play at all, so that they could direct the NPCs and players better. Though game masters take up leading positions in many role-playing games to control the plot and keep an overview, these designers felt that they could help players more when they operated in the background and gave useful tips. One of them, for instance, was the bar tender on the ship which assured that he was always at a central setting where players and NPCs could find him and ask questions. This also worked out well for the organizational role he was assigned to, namely taking care of the trading system.

The primary goal of the game masters is to facilitate play and motivate players during the session. Though the staff scripted key moments, such as a space battle against the pirates, the players were encouraged to create the play as they saw fit and often got helpful in-game comments from NPCs. It was clear that the organizers had a good overview of the session and worked with what players offered them in return. Of course, this also meant that they needed to improvise as well. They let go of the scrip that they had planned halfway when players did some surprising things. For designers of such a co-creative game then, one of the challenges is to keep the plot at bay while still offering players opportunities to develop the game as they see fit.

SKILLS AND SYSTEM

Another important element of game design is to provide a clear game system. The structural elements that I shall analyze here - the game space, rules and skills – correspond with the context that Salen and Zimmerman mention as an important part of the game’s design (2004). Mediating an existing text into a role-playing game requires the creation of characters, skills and a set of rules. This section will focus on how the LARP designers give shape to this context.

As I already mentioned, the game setting is a re-envisioning of the student building that has been decorated for the play as a colonial ship. Essentially, the LARP does not refer to many story lines from the series, but echoes its socio-political aspects and resulting moral stature of its characters. The shift from a television text to a game text involves the founding of an elaborate, original rule system created by the staff. The system they use is a bricolage of existing content. For the character and vessels, the designers use a skill system inspired by the existing role-playing game of *Serenity* as well as other games such as the Dutch *Star Wars* LARP. The *Firefly* example holds a middle-ground between original ideas and borrowed ones that are transformed into a new system.

The skill system already conveys some of the tropes of *Firefly*. First, before entering the game, players are required to construct a character, a ship and team up accordingly. The players receive the handbooks in advance and are asked to construct their characters before the game, or develop them further if it is a new session. Since players also have to invest in their ship and a weapon, they only have a few ‘skill points’ to split over a very long list of abilities. These fall in the categories of ‘gun slinging’, ‘wealth’, ‘brawl’, ‘tech’, ‘scoundrel’, ‘pilot’, ‘medical proficiency’, ‘social’ and ‘other’. All of these skills have various levels and specialities and the game even contains special event skills. Furthermore, players are motivated to play things out that are not specifically included in the skills or rules if they want too.

The skills grant the player the authority to perform the character in a certain way. Of course, bragging is allowed. As Jaap illustrates: 'If you walk around carrying a two meter long gun without having the points, everyone will be extremely intimidated by you. 'Oh, he's going to blow me to pieces!' But when it comes down to it, you are the biggest coward in the game who has to hide because you don't have stamina and can't handle the gun at all.' Similarly, investing skills in one's ship gives a certain authority over other players. A player can illustrate to them what the ship (in the LARP, a ship was symbolized by a few chairs and couches put in a certain order) looks like and perhaps invite them to come over.

Crews can also invest individual skill points together to create a vessel. For the construction of vessels, the LARP uses the classifications of the *Serenity* role-playing game that have been adapted to fit their own skill system. When constructing our ship, my crew wondered whether there would be a ship battle as well, since one could invest in the weapons and technology. During the game though, the ships functioned differently than we had presumed. They were specific rooms one could retreat too and a kind of visiting card for characters. Moreover, as the staff also underlined, the ship functions as a storytelling mechanism that can give background to your characters and can be seen as a kind of participating character. Joss Whedon himself also called *Serenity* the tenth character more than once (Wilcox & Cochran, 2008, p. 7), a philosophy that also became apparent in this fan game.

As a result of having these specific abilities, the staff and players often try to help each other out and advance the main plot according to the abilities of the players. In one of the oldest accounts of role-playing games, Fine (1983) dubs this *task specialization* (p. 174). During the first LARP session, crews of the various space ships quickly started to team up and were forced to interact. Like most players, I had teamed up with friends in one crew. One played a technician, the other a merchant and I was our chemical researcher. Most crews had assembled players with different skills (e.g. pilot skills, or medical skills, or fighting skills). However, the more specific skills (e.g. electronics) were rare and forced players to interact when necessary. The limited skills that are granted to players in this LARP did not really pose a disadvantage in the first session. Rather, the system motivated cooperation and gave players the opportunity to define characteristics that form the basis of a character (e.g. kind doctor).

The LARP aims to be an actual, social event. Therefore, the game design does not feature many rules. It is based on skill checks that assure fair play and a role-playing ethos that is based on unwritten social rules (e.g. ask players out of character if they agree with certain actions). The game elements are not supposed to intrude the play and, as discussed above, the LARP therefore has a vivid entourage that includes interactive props. Likewise, it makes use of embedded skill

checks by means of playing poker. Even though this is still slightly disruptive, it fits *Firefly* more than going completely out of character or, for instance, rolling dice. Poker contributes to this imaginary universe since it is associated with the Western genre that *Firefly* draws from. Furthermore, the guns that are used during the battles are NERF guns that shoot foam bullets and have been customized to look less like toys.

A concept that Jaap often mentioned in this context is *sandboxing*, a professional term that describes how players are motivated to play creatively and without the hindrance of artificial game elements. Though the designers are fans, it is clear that they are familiar with many role-playing games and have tacit knowledge about what constitutes good gaming. To facilitate this, make-belief is limited by pervasive gaming. Obtrusive elements in the game play are filtered out to assure that the actions that a character undertakes in the game affect the person and facilitate a deeply immersive experience.

MEANINGFUL PLAY

The participants are not just players in this game, but can be seen as co-creators. The designers ideally want to facilitate play rather than create it. Though the designers create opportunities that players can take up, the actual play and the consequences thereof should be triggered by players themselves. The fourth characteristic of design, *meaningful play*, is innately tied up with this. The designers think that meaningful play emerges from player behaviour. Players should push each other to develop their characters and elaborate the narrative in unforeseen ways. Skills and resources should be a means in this, not a goal.

In this LARP, as in many other similar games, the task of producing the game and facilitating meaningful play is at the hands of the designer who gives the players a structure and opportunities. As role-playing game designer Hickman (1996) describes when explaining the role of the game master: 'He is primarily an entertainer who should be watching his audience carefully for signs of boredom or excitement. He is a referee who impartially interprets the rules of the game according to the current situation. He is an actor playing a thousand parts in the course of the drama. He is a game designer as he modifies his game to suit his players or drafts one from scratch.' Especially the last element of Hickman's definition is important. In a role-play, the game master should adapt to the players to facilitate good play.

Before the LARP session, we were all motivated to invest time in constructing our characters. The staff looked into the character sheets in advance for ideas. As players, however, we did not expect the same experience from the game session. Some players were clearly more focussed on character development, while others were fine just casually playing out their

character or taking up a minor role. Similarly, some were clearly *Firefly* fans who had invested time in constructing a background story for their characters while others appeared to be avid role-players who were interested in playing out certain roles and had built up a repertoire in these. To familiarize players with *Firefly*, the staff had even hosted a marathon of the series for those that were not en par with the content but were joining in nonetheless.

For any gamer, the story world of *Firefly* offers interesting opportunities whether one enjoys the television series or not. It is rough, gritty and often puts characters in tight situations such as bar fights, smuggling affairs and behind-the-door politics. As a result, characters think of their own survival first. The staff wanted to test the moral stature of their players by putting them in a colonial vessel that undergoes a change of regime. For players, this was an opportunity to construct new social rules, politics or a lucrative business in theft or smuggling. At certain points, player's morals were purposely addressed. Executions by the Alliance and even a suicide mission triggered them to act against the new policies at the New Carolina. The staff had hoped the players would eventually start to protest or stage a coup but they did not. 'If that doesn't work, what can you do?' Jaap tells, after describing the effort they put into pushing players to the extreme. 'Change your flow. I think it's a pity the game never really escalated and then it really would've been caused by the players.'

By tapping into *Firefly*, the LARP evoked a story world that would be fertile for conflicting political and moral actions. Still, because of the co-creative nature of the game, the story unfolded differently than expected. This is not necessarily a bad thing, though, since role-playing depends on the development of stories within a group and the particular group dynamics. The heart of gaming itself depends on interactivity and emergent play that can only be discovered when different players give their own input and thus shape the gaming experience.

CONCLUSION

By focussing on the amateur production of a role-playing game and showing how this process is embedded in fan communities, I have offered new perspectives in game design as part of a larger, co-creative culture. Game design becomes a more dynamic phenomenon once we pay attention to the participatory story-telling in LARP. Role-playing in general can be understood as a type of gaming that is interesting for fans because it allows character development and plotting within a group. The designer facilitates good play but does not have the overall impact on the story like in many digital games. Instead, the player's agency is up fronted. The goal of the LARP session was to provide good, immersive game play in which each player could contribute and shape the story. The game masters made the conscious choice to put themselves on the background and to let go

of their own ideas when it was necessary. Through many hands-on elements (e.g. poker skill checks) and interactive props they assured that players got an immediate game experience and stayed in the flow.

When analyzing the LARP, it became apparent that the practices of active gamers are a more troublesome subject than they first seem. I have mostly focussed on the distinction of various groups such as fans and designers in game research and also shown how these groups tend to overlap in my example. First, the LARP can be seen as a fan practice that is constituted by the audience itself, but the participants do not always see themselves as actual *Firefly* fans. The series is perceived as an interesting starting point for a game, a story world that can be explored further. Being a fan, who wants to do justice to an existing narrative, sometimes overlaps with being a gamer, who aims for the most entertaining play and original story-telling. It is difficult to categorize the membership of the players to a certain fan or game community because they belong to many communities and all have different motivations and experiences as fans or gamers.

Second, player and designer modes often overlap in this example and in role-playing games in general. Here, everyone contributes his or her share to the story. The game depends on its designers to facilitate the game play, its structure and the organizational tasks involved. As a derivative game, the LARP explores an existing text and successfully mediates it into a larger story world that is stripped of the original plot and extended into an overarching environment. The game masters used various official role-playing systems as sources of inspiration for this. The importance of other professional and amateur texts for this LARP shows the complexity of distinguishing between the reworking or ‘poaching’ of existing content and original products. The role-play thus transforms existing fiction and, at the same time, establishes a new event on its own accord.

Many thanks to the Knights of the Kitchen Table and the *Firefly* LARP staff.

REFERENCES

Aarseth, E. *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature*. Baltimore, London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Bacon-Smith, C. *Enterprising Women: Television Fandom and the Creation of Popular Myth*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992.

- Banks, J. & Humphreys, S. 'The Labour of User Co-Creators: Emergent Social Networks Markets?' *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 14 (2007), pp. 401.
- Burn, A. 'Reworking the text: Online fandom'. In: Diane Carr et al. (Eds.). *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006, pp. 88-102.
- Busse, K. & Hellekson, K. 'Works in Progress'. In: Busse, K. & Hellekson, K. (Eds.). *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Jefferson, North Carolina, London: McFarland, 2006.
- Castronova, E. *Synthetic Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005.
- Crawford, C. *Chris Crawford on Interactive Storytelling*. Berkeley: New Riders Games, 2005.
- Dovey, J. & Kennedy, H. *Game Cultures: Computer Games as New Media*. New York: Open University Press, 2006.
- Elverdam, C. & Aarseth, E. 'Game Classification and Game Design'. *Games and Culture* 2 (issue 3, 2007), pp.3-22.
- Fine, G.A. *Shared Fantasy: Role Playing Games As Social Worlds*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Hickman, T. *Ethics in Fantasy*. 1996. Last accessed February, 2011:
<http://www.trhickman.com/Intel/Essays/Ethic1.html>
- Hills, M. 'Virtually Out There: Strategies, Tactics and Affective Spaces in on-line fandom'. In: Munt, S. (Ed.). *Technospaces: Inside the New Media*. London, New York: Continuum, 2001, pp. 147-160
- Hitchens, M. and Drachen, A. The Many Faces of Role-Playing Games. *International Journal of Role-Playing*, 1 (1), 2009, pp. 3-21.
- Jenkins, H. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture*. New York & London: Routledge, 1992.
- Jenkins, H. *Convergence Culture. Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York & London: New York University Press, 2006.
- Martin, C.B. & Deuze, M. 'The Independent Production of Culture: A Digital Games Case Study'. *Games and Culture* 4, 2009, pp. 276-295.
- Newman, J. *Playing with Videogames*. New York, London: Routledge, 2008.
- Pearce, C. *Communities of Play: Emergent Cultures in Multiplayer games and Virtual Worlds*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2009.
- Pugh, S. *The Democratic Genre: Fan Fiction in a Literary Context*. Bridgend: Seren, 2005.
- Salen, K. & Zimmerman, E. *Rules of Play*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2004.

Stein, L. E. "‘This Dratted Thing’: Fannish Storytelling through New Media’. In: Busse, K. & Hellekson, K. (Eds.). (2006). *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*. Jefferson, North Carolina, London: McFarland, 2006, pp. 245-260.

Taylor, T.L. *Play Between Worlds. Exploring Online Game Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2006.

Tychsen, A, Hitchens M., Brolund T. & Kavaklli, M., Live Action Role-Playing Games: Control, Communication. Storytelling and MMORPG Similarities. *Games and Culture*, 1 (3), 2006, pp. 252-275.

Wilcox, R.V. & Cochran, T.R. (Eds.). *Investigating Firefly and Serenity: Science Fiction on the Frontier*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2008.

Wirman, H. "‘I Am Not a Fan, I Just Play a Lot’ – If Power Gamers Aren’t Fans, Who Are?’. In *Situated Play, Proceedings of DiGRA 2007 Conference* (2007), Available at http://www.digra.org/dl/search_results?authors_index=Wirman%20Hanna (Accessed June, 2011).