The *Epiphany* Experiment
Role-Playing for Personal Transformation

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Introduction

Analog role-playing games hold the potential to explore a vast array of facets of consciousness, and the human experience and spirituality is no exception. This article discusses the live action role-playing game (larp[1]) *Epiphany* (2017), which was designed by Sarah Lynne Bowman, Russ Murdock, and Rebecca Roycroft as a tool for personal transformation (Bowman/Hugaas 2019; 2021). Held near Austin, Texas, from December 15–17, 2017, this live action role-playing game (larp) was loosely based on *Mage: the Ascension* by White Wolf Publishing (Wieck et al. 1993). *Mage* emphasizes the role of one's paradigm and willpower in performing magic, similar to the concept of *manifestation* in neo-spiritual communities (cf. Auryn 2020: 18–20; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 57–58). *Mage* characters challenge modern understandings of 'consensus reality,' enabling them to perform the miraculous or impossible.

Epiphany was created as a vehicle for active imagination and individuation (Jung 1976; Bowman 2017b) through symbolic enactment, ritual, and play (Turner 1974: 62; Rusch/Phelps 2020). An extensive character design questionnaire asked players to include personal memories related to spirituality; belief systems; metaphysical or philosophical questions; and specific ritual practices that would activate the character's 'magic' in play. This design was intended to encourage **bleed** (Montola 2010), where the emotions, identities, belief systems, and other aspects of the personal or collective unconscious of player and character spillover to one another (Beltrán, 2012: 89; Bowman 2013: 4; 2015; Hugaas 2019; Kemper 2017; 2020. These contents are then available to participants post-game as insights, realizations, a felt sense of a self that feels authentic to them, and even potential action items for living a more authentic and aligned life moving forward.

1 In larp academia, the preferred spelling of larp is lower-case. While it started as an acronym, it has become a commonplace word like radar, both in its noun form (a larp) and its verb form (to larp).

In order for such insights to be concretized, *Epiphany* employed built-in structures for reflection, debriefing, and other forms of processing.

The setting of *Epiphany* is a spiritual retreat within which Mentor characters lead Initiates through ritual activities drawn from the players' own paradigms and practices. Examples from this run included exercises in shadow work; channelling/aspecting; divination through tarot cards and runes; mindfulness; a death salon; ecstatic dance; etc. This design is intended to provide a space for players to explore their spiritualities and philosophical questions within a community dedicated to validation, growth, and reflection. Documentation (Kim/Wong/Nuncio 2018) and anecdotal testimonials suggest that *Epiphany* was successful in its goals for some players.

In addition to our design philosophy and implementation strategies, this chapter will explore my personal experience as a designer and player of the larp, as well as some of the motivations and influences that inspired its creation. This work continues to inform my own design and pedagogical practices at Uppsala University, where I am helping launch the Transformative Play Initiative with Doris Rusch, Josefin Westborg, Josephine Baird, and Kjell Hedgard Hugaas. This Initiative is designing event programming and a graduate program in the Department of Game Design on transformative play to help scholar-designer-practitioners from helping professions create games to guide others through change processes.

Ultimately, *Epiphany* might serve as a proof of concept for future explorations of selfhood, spirituality, and transformative community within role-playing games. Therefore, this chapter concludes with thoughts on applications of similar design principles in design-based research, arts-based therapy practices, and other forms of research related to using role-playing games as vehicles for personal and social development.

The Genesis of *Epiphany*

The genesis of *Epiphany* emerged from several converging threads in the discourse and practice around analog role-playing games in the mid-2010s, as well as my own personal need for meaningful, deep play experiences that inspire lasting transformation (cf. Rusch 2017: 1). By analog role-playing games (or RPGs), I refer to games that involve emergent, spontaneous, improvisational co-creation of reality and identity. While such games are now commonly played online through video conferencing software due to pandemic or geographically-related necessities (cf. D/Schiffer, 2020; Piancastelli 2020; Reininghaus 2021), they are often played in physical space shared by participants. Larp in particular emphasizes the embodiment of such play, which can enhance players' experiences of immersion into a shared fictional narrative, environment, character, activity, game, and community (Bowman 2018: 383–390).

I have played larps since 1997, when I played my first *Vampire: the Masquerade* larp with the Mind's Eye Theatre organization. While others were engaging intently with politics, combat, and game mechanics, I was off in the corner with other characters discussing whether Jesus was a vampire and nursing a decades-old broken heart. In retrospect, this combination of romantic and deep, metaphysical and philosophical play has been my default mode of engagement in many larps, even if the themes of the larp do not explicitly

centre upon these themes. My sense is that larp and other role-playing modalities have allowed me enough freedom of creativity to explore existential questions and emotional dynamics that are personally relevant to my own evolution as a person, not just as a player embodying a role to contribute to a temporary setting or experience. Thus, my current research and design interests centre upon questions related to transformation: How can we use role-playing as a vehicle for processes of change that can have effects in our personal lives, communities, and society as a whole?

When immersed, players experience several **paradoxes** that can lead to cognitive dissonance but also potential epiphanies: a-ha moments of powerful realization (Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 52; Diakolambrianou et al. 2021). The first paradox is **fiction vs. reality**. Role-playing experiences evoke ritual-like spaces that are technically fictional and the mind recognizes this fact by carefully organizing in-game fictional experiences separately from off-game information (Harviainen 2012: 506). Thus, while alarmists have feared that players will lose touch with reality through immersion (Stark 2012: 91–106; Laycock 2015: 1–30), role-players may actually develop more complex meta-cognitive skills through repeated play experiences (Lukka 2014: 60–62). In fact, role-playing consumes a great deal of mental energy for participants as they actively pretend to believe (Pohjola 2004: 84–85), perform their fictional role, and interpret game experiences as both their character and their player identities (Lukka 2011: 164; Leonard/Thurman 2018: 11). In role-play theory, we refer to these in-game elements, mechanics, and setting constraints as aspects that make up the **magic circle of play** (Huizinga 1955: 10; Salen/Zimmerman 2003: 95; Stenros 2012: 1). The magic circle is cognitively delineated as a separate frame (Goffman 1986: 24; Fine 1983: 196; Vorobyeva 2015: 36) from daily life, in that players are mentally able to hold fiction, rules, and other ludic structures in their consciousness, while differentiating these factors from socially prescribed 'reality.' This delineation is further supported by the **social contract of play**, where the group engaged in the role-playing practice collectively agrees to treat behaviours and events as fictional.

At the time, the mind also interprets fictional stimuli as real on a more unconscious level. In larp, which is often a heavily embodied medium where somatic, emotional processes in the body are activated alongside cognitive ones, the mind and body experiences role-playing experiences as real stimuli and respond accordingly (Leonard/Thurman 2018: 9). For this reason, role-players may experience momentary moments of **bleed**, where the boundaries between fiction and reality blur or even briefly collapse, leading to a flood of sensations, emotions, memories, and other aspects of a participant's 'reality' into the fictional frame in a process known as **bleed-in**, or out of the fictional frame into reality through **bleed-out** (Montola 2010; Bowman 2013: 16).

Thus, the second related paradox of role-playing is **player vs. character**. Just as we understand and cognitively organize information based upon the difference between fiction and reality, we engage in a metacognitive process known as **dual consciousness** (Stenros 2013). Where participants experience themselves as both the player and the character at the same time (Sandberg 2004: 276). The level of immersion into character depends strongly on player preference and phenomenological orientation, as some players tend to immerse deeply into their roles, whereas others engage with more detached distance (Bowman 2018: 389). Regardless of the level of immersion, just as we

have implicit and explicit rules governing the social contract of play, role-players also have a degree of **alibi**, meaning they are able to obviate social responsibility for their in-game actions (Montola/Holopainen 2012; Deterding 2017). While alibi is an important component of the role-playing process as it allows players the ability to take risks and express their creativity, it can also become a constraint that makes it difficult for players to process their in-game experiences (Bowman 2013; Bowman/Hugaas 2021; Munier/JC, 2021).

Play cultures tend to have their own norms regarding the desirability of both bleed and alibi. Some play cultures strongly discourage bleed, consider it a liability, or even seek to deny it exists at all except in players who become overinvolved (Fine 1983: 217; Bowman 2013: 21). However, some role-playing communities have embraced bleed and even design in order to encourage it (Meriläinen 2011: 127), such as in Nordic larp (Stenros/Montola 2010: 291–297) and the jeepform collective (Jeepen n.d.). Some players even admit to being 'bleed-hunters,' seeking out larp experiences with ever-increasing levels of intensity to create the emotional flooding associated with bleed (Nilsen 2012: 10–11).

In addition, I consider role-playing an altered state of consciousness – one that can have profound implications on our ability to see outside of the bounds of our typical ways of viewing ourselves and our place in society. If we consider role-playing to be a ritual space within which even more rituals can take place (cf. Bowman 2015b), leading us into even deeper states of altered consciousness, the connection between role-playing and religion and spirituality becomes especially intriguing. Ritual anthropologist Victor Turner would likely label larp liminoid vs. liminal (Turner 1974: 68) meaning: a culturally significant activity that is not socially significant in the way that religious rituals might be. Alibi in particular can relegate role-playing experience more firmly into this liminoid category; we don't believe ourselves to literally get married in a church, even if we have a powerful scene in a larp of our characters getting married in a rented cathedral.

While considered not as socially significant, Turner believed that liminoid experiences can be evidence of an individual exercising their freedom, "growing self-mastery, even self-transcendence" (Turner 1974: 68). This description rings particularly true when we consider how intensely players can immerse into these roles, how much of their own sense of identity they often explore, and how much impact bleed can have on their experiences of daily life. I have played many characters who were healers in some capacity, often ones who hold an unshakable faith in the incorrupt nature of the soul and the power of love to mend wounds – convictions I still struggle to maintain in my daily experience. In this way, embodying the altered state of these characters has offered me a window into what being a person of unyielding faith might feel like, the peace that accompanies that faith, and the way that faith can then positively impact others around me as I give them support. In my own life, I struggle with debilitating anxiety, poor self-esteem, addiction, depression, trauma, and loss of faith in humanity. My characters have taught me I can be that person if I practice; role-playing in general is a known form of what psychologists call **behavioral rehearsal** (cf. Munday 2013). I have brought those lessons into my daily commitments to my own spirituality but would likely not have been aware that such mental states were even possible before role-playing them.

International Larp in the 2010s: A Convergence of Trends

It is from these personal experiments and revelations, as well the evolution of the discourse in international larp communities in the last decade, that *Epiphany* emerged. Key concepts in the discourse that have influenced larp design in the last decade have been:

(1) **Consent-based play:** An emphasis on calibration and implicit and explicit consent negotiations as alternatives to mechanics-based conflict resolution systems (cf. Brown 2016, Bowman 2017a).
(2) **Blockbuster larps:** An emphasis on attractive locations and high production values drawing a wide player base from around the world (Fatland/Montola 2015).
(3) **Designing for bleed:** An emphasis on game design that encourages spillover between the frames of fiction and daily life (Jeepen n.d.; Kemper 2017, 2020; Hugaas 2019).
(4) **Safety structures:** An emphasis on embedding emotional support and care into the structure of the larp through workshops and debriefing; safety mechanics; and play cultures in general (Stavropoulous n.d.; Brown 2016; Koljonen 2016).
(5) **Visceral, embodied play:** An emphasis on exploring personal edges in physical and emotional play regarding romance, sexuality, violence, and other taboo behaviours within a game framework that feels safe (Koljonen 2016; 2020: 5e; Bowman 2016).

Most relevant to *Epiphany* were two distinct strands of larps that emerged from these discourses and design practices that became popular: 1) Wizard colleges and 2) Nordic-style Vampire larps. Based loosely upon the Harry Potter universe, several blockbuster larps arose that drew participants from around the world interested in teaching or attending a college for wizards, including *College of Wizardry* (2014-) and *New World Magischola* (2016–2020). The design of these schools emphasized consent-based play where magic worked based upon agreement within the group rather than mechanics, as well as player-generated content, such as lesson plans, rituals, and other content. These larps often afforded an even greater degree of agency to players in a medium that already encourages proactive, creative participation.

At the same time, *Vampire: the Masquerade* (1992) larps from White Wolf's World of Darkness that were officially sponsored by the company became influential. These larps featured visceral, embodied play rather than abstracted mechanics. Thus, these experiences were often highly realistic, embodied, emotionally intense, and sometimes socially transgressive play exploring the monstrous within humanity (Stenros 2015: 75; Bowman/Stenros 2018: 411), including *End of the Line* (2016–2017), *Convention of Thorns* (2016-), and *Enlightenment in Blood* (2017). The goal of these larps was to create enough safety and alibi to allow players to take risks with their physical and emotional play (cf. Koljonen 2016).

I was heavily involved in co-developing these aspects of the design of *New World Magischola* and similarly helped create consent negotiation scripts and workshops for the New Orleans and Berlin runs of *End of the Line* (2016, 2017), as well as *Convention of Thorns* (2016). I also participated as a player in all of the games listed above, whether as a player-character (PC) or non-player character (NPC). Since my formative larp experiences were traditional *Vampire* and *Mage* games in the United States that were based upon the *Mind's Eye Theatre* system, I had the embodied experience of having played both

styles, enabling me to crystalize the elements I considered most useful when playing with the explicit goal of personal transformation. I had also witnessed how such tools could help transform the group around these larps as a form of memetic bleed (Hugaas 2019), foregrounding values of enthusiastic consent and inclusion within the community as a whole.

I was also part of the design team for *Immerton* (2017) by Learn Larp, a larp for people who identified as women, including women with queer gender identities. As a team, we explicitly designed characters based on player requests and encouraged participants to use any aspects of their own identities they felt comfortable incorporating (Brown et al. 2018: 45). *Immerton* focused explicitly on goddesses and incorporated altars and **mask work** (Johnstone 1987: 144; Holter/Boss 2012: 14; Bowman 2015a); characters not only dropped into deeper immersive and potentially spiritual states through in-game rituals devoted to each goddess but could also aspect these deities by donning the masks, experiencing a momentary and voluntary shift in consciousness where they would role-play personality aspects associated with the goddess in question. While these events were technically fictional, the embodiment of them within this all-woman space was powerful for me and also had a strong impact on some of the other players (cf. Jones 2017). As a player within *Immerton*, I was especially moved by the focus on spirituality, how deeply woven it was into these women's lives, how ritual deepened and infused the experience, and how the sacred existed seamlessly alongside the mundane due to the conceit of each character's devotion to their respective goddesses.

It was within the overall backdrop of these parallel design activities that I conceptualized and assembled a team for *Epiphany*. Experiences such as *Immerton* make it possible to conceive of a larp that focused upon spiritual, metaphysical, philosophical, and deeply personal content. Unlike other World of Darkness games, *Mage* emphasizes the potential present within humanity and human consciousness, as well as the responsibility needed to wield such power conscientiously. Taking this concept a bit further, *Epiphany* focused exclusively on integrating lived player experiences and beliefs into play as a means to explore and potentially transform their identities and life paths. Thus, the larp was designed to encourage bleed as a welcome and educational experience rather than an intrusion. If we consider the content of play as arising not just from fictional elements but also as a means to express and process aspects of our own unconscious, bleed becomes an understandable and possibly even inevitable phenomenon.

Through long-term immersive play, more concrete aspects of the conscious or unconscious mind may spillover between the frames of game and reality and substantiate themselves into the player's daily identity, a process Whitney "Strix" Beltrán (2012: 89) refers to as **ego bleed**. Furthermore, the ideologies that characters espouse can spill over into the player's psychology, a process known as **memetic bleed** (Hugaas 2019). Players can also steer toward liberatory experiences through a process known as **emancipatory bleed**, which is particularly potent for players who come from marginalized backgrounds (Kemper 2017; 2020). Finally, the larp fiction and mechanics themselves can be influenced by one's play experiences as well as the personal ideology of the designer, a process known as **design bleed** (Toft/Harrer 2020: 2). *Epiphany* was designed as a means to consciously push the boundaries of bleed in these various ways in order to explore the edges of not only what is possible within role-playing environments but also within players' spiritual-

ity, consciousness, paradigm. Although we did not have words for it at the time, we were attempting to build a **transformational container** (Bion 1959: 297–98; Winnicott 1960: 589–90; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 67) within which more authentic forms of exploration were possible and supported by the community.

Spiritual Yearning and *Epiphany*

I had previously co-facilitated a *Mage: the Ascension* game with Russ Murdock, which took place online via forum play and in-person, which to date remains my favourite published role-playing game in terms of its themes and metaphoric language. Russell and I not only played human NPCs within the Mage cabal with the other characters, but we each embodied the Avatars of the characters, which we defined as a spiritual being working in a symbiotic relationship with each character to fuel their magic. Avatar play and lucid dream sequences in particular led to deeply metaphysical, symbolic, and personal play, as we had alibi to inhabit deep forms of ritual, symbolic enactment in the game. While magic in the case of *Mage* can be viewed as metaphoric, role-playing and other forms of deep play are also comprehensible as psychomagic, as the fictional frame allows for psychological exploration and embodiment that might otherwise feel impossible (Rusch/Phelps 2020: n.d.; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 66; Diakolambrianou 2021: 95).

While *Mage* games can certainly become showcases of acts of flashy magic and dire consequences arising from egocentric and megalomaniacal power trips, we focused on initiates who were just awakening into their nascent power. Our version of the game focused explicitly on the development of one's paradigm: the way in which they view reality that permits them to feel empowered enough to change aspects of the world around them through magic. Canonically, these paradigms are often based upon real world spiritual beliefs and practices. To name a few examples, the Verbena are similar to pagan witches, the Cult of Ecstasy are similar to neo-tantra and other embodied mystical traditions, Hermetics are similar to occult esoteric communities, etc. While these paradigms were modeled directly on the authors' understanding of specific traditions and practices, the degree that people perceive these representations to be accurate varies from player to player. What I most appreciate about *Mage* is that it opens space to explore these broader spiritual philosophies and to potentially include aspects of one's own spiritual journey and practice into the role-playing experience.

Perhaps the most intellectually challenging of the World of Darkness games, *Mage* asks players to inhabit the headspace of someone who is capable of perceiving themselves as empowered to make concrete change in the world while also acknowledging that external forces may arise to try to disempower them. These forces may arise from the neutral physical world, such as gravity or the inevitability of death, or the ideology-driven social world, such as Technocratic government agencies aiming to enforce normative behaviours and discourage people from behaving as 'consensus reality deviants.' Therefore, the game provides useful terminology and symbolic frameworks for understanding the struggle of people attempting to claim their empowerment in a world that systemically and sometimes violently disempowers them. Thus, it is useful as a language for considering methods to dive deeper into the felt sense of embodied empowerment

and thus steer toward liberation and emancipatory bleed (Kemper 2017; 2020), especially for players who have experienced bullying and/or discrimination.

In addition to my lifelong interest in spirituality and mystical experiences, this game resonates strongly with me as someone who has often experienced social shame due to my gender and sexual behaviour. I grew up experiencing serious consequences for behaviours that others deemed deviant but felt liberating for me. For this reason, the Cult of Ecstasy as a concept has always resonated most strongly with my view of my life path. Similarly, as an academic, I often dabble in topics that are controversial or stigmatized, such as writing about role-playing games themselves, discussing emotional impacts of role-playing (2013: 4), and exploring the spiritual and/or unconscious elements of these experiences (2012: 31; 2017b; 2021: 160). Thus, the Order of Hermes also strongly appeals to me as an alternative academic environment focused on understanding magic as part of natural law, and thus validating spiritual experiences as powerful and meaningful. I played long-term NPCs over the year of game play we had for this particular *Mage* Chronicle.

By the time I started co-designing *Immerton*, I had already taken part in helping design the safety and calibration systems for *End of the Line* and *Convention of Thorns*. I also wrote some of the characters for *Enlightenment in Blood*, specifically characters who were interested in the occult or who were otherwise spiritually seeking in spite of their damned vampiric condition. I had co-organized a *Vampire* larp years before and was also playing in a local *Vampire* held at an AirBnB in Del Valle, Texas, called Tiny T Ranch. While I enjoy some of the themes in *Vampire* – particularly regarding the struggle to retain humanity, the inner struggle with the Beast/Shadow, and the search for enlightenment through Golconda – on some level, I think I always wished I was playing *Mage*, as themes of Ascension and personal empowerment are more resonant with me.

I considered options for running *Mage* in an immersive, collaborative style similar to these recent, embodied *Vampire* experiences. One idea was to start a theme camp at a Burning Man event where we played *Mage* pervasively (Montola/Stenros/Waern 2009: 12) throughout the festival; Burners tend to have similar flexibility in terms of costuming, identity fluidity, and spontaneous creativity that we see in larpers and would likely tolerate or even embrace playful activities such as pretending to believe (Pohjola 2004: 84–85) one can affect reality with one's mind. Such an idea would be cost-effective in some ways as well, since the setting would already be created atmospherically by other devoted campers. However, the logistics around trying to obtain tickets for several potential participants felt too daunting.

In addition, I deeply craved the opportunity to attend some sort of spiritual retreat, as I was deepening into meditation practices at the time. I had played Joani, a neo-tantra expert at the Nordic larp *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-) twice by that point, and through Joani, had found within myself a calm and faith that I wanted to continue to cultivate. I had also played a tantrika at *Enlightenment in Blood* and an artist in *Convention of Thorns* who were deeply invested in helping vampires live in the present moment and find faith even while being damned. I realized in retrospect that so many of my best role-playing experiences involved me exploring the intersection between romance, metaphysics, philosophy, and faith, such that even in larps such as the Nordic Vampire games, which were highly visceral, I preferred softer, more subtle zones of play for myself and others. And while these

zones of play were highly intense and emotionally moving at times, focusing on heartbreak and trauma and any number of other challenging themes, they also featured a degree of focus on intellectual engagement with existential and ethical questions. Thus, it became clear to me through these experiences that part of me yearned to immerse deeply into profoundly transformative experiences with a group devoted to such play.

Despite this craving, at the time, I felt that I could not take time and money away from the larp community in order to indulge in a weekend workshop for my own personal development. Instead, I reflected upon the other players who gravitated toward the type of play I enjoyed and who may feel called toward similar sorts of spiritual and emotional seeking through characters, ritual, narrative, symbolism, and metaphor. I recalled the depth of play our small *Mage* group had reached with one another, within which the most potent scenes were often subtle, relaxed conversations about paradigm and attempts to meditate or explore the inner terrain of the unconscious through imagery. I had been writing about how such practices were reminiscent of Carl Jung's process of **active imagination**, and how the insights gleaned from them had become important to my own **individuation** (Bowman 2017b: 160); over time, it became clear how aspects of the archetypal, fictional reality we role-played blended with my own sense of identity, my understanding of self, and my relationships with others over time through our shared mythos (Page 2014: 61). I considered how to extend the space of a larp into an intentionally-designed transformational container (Bion 1959: 297–98; Winnicott 1960: 589–90; Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 67), where players set goals for aspects of self they wanted to explore within the game and we collaboratively supported one another in feeling safe enough to touch upon such material with the group. I felt that such a space needed to be transparently designed from the outset with the goals explicit in the description. So, I contacted Russ and another designer, Rebecca Roycroft, with the suggestion that we run a *Mage* larp under the conceit of a spiritual retreat. They graciously took a leap of faith in joining me for the *Epiphany* experiment.

Setting the Ritual Stage

I sent a message to the AirBnB hosts of Tiny T Ranch and put down a deposit. The site was run by Spike Gillespie, a self-described 'Rock n' Roll grandma' covered in tattoos, who regularly rented it out to a local *Vampire* troupe, as well as to meditation retreat groups and wedding parties. It consisted of a three-bedroom house, an updated barn space, a field with horses, and a tiny chapel with stained glass. Spike's one tongue-in-cheek rule was, "You can do animal sacrifice and I don't care as long as you clean up after yourself." While she was kidding, finding a site that not only tolerates but welcomes with open arms larpers was a welcome change, as many non-larpers are suspicious of strange costumes and loud role-playing. Spike made one additional request: that her dear friend who was in his '90s and lived in the house, Bob, could use the front door to let his dog out while we were role-playing, to which we enthusiastically agreed. Apparently, Bob loved all the larping and was highly stimulated by the younger people in his space. (Sadly, Bob was in the hospital on the weekend of *Epiphany*, but we did our best to care for his home while he was gone).

Spike and I determined that the ranch could sleep 55 people if we converted the barn to sleeping space as well. Ultimately, we ended up having 43 players sign up and 33 play the larp. One of our players, Lee Foxworthy, volunteered to organize the kitchen team and made sure we had plenty of coffee and food throughout the weekend. Thus, we were able to run the larp for around $79 per person, while still finding an authentic, relaxed location with interesting spaces. This price point was substantially lower than higher-production value blockbuster larps that averaged $300-$500 for a weekend game, although still an investment, especially for our volunteers and players from out of town who made the pilgrimage to the game.

With the site established, we set to work creating the design document (Bowman/Murdock/Roycroft 2017: 1–28). Design documents had a common practice for **bespoke** larps in the Nordic tradition, meaning larps that established the setting, the rules, the meta-techniques, and safety structures for each larp according to the themes that specific larp aimed to explore. In my experience, thorough design documents spoke less about lore and mechanics like traditional RPG books and instead focused on the overall tone, themes, play expectations, and safety norms. Design documents not only help players determine if a larp is right for them, but they help set the container for the whole group with explicit aesthetic agreements about what sort of play is encouraged versus discouraged. For example, players would know ahead of time that all characters in *End of the Line* were horrible people in some way and that the larp would explore what it means to be both predator and prey as one devolved into one's baser instincts (2016). The same company, Participation Design Agency, produced *Inside Hamlet*, a larp based on the Shakespeare play and featuring larpers enacting scenes within it. Played at the real Castle Elsinore, the characters in *Inside Hamlet* are members of the court surrounding the tragedy, whose play focused on similar themes of excess, sexuality, violence, and eventual degradation of morality and death. Based on an earlier version in 2003 (Bergström 2010: 137), the updated 2010s version featured extensive promotional materials, communications with players before the larp, and mandatory onsite workshops and debriefs. These processes helped ease players into this setting and allowed them to calibrate play with one another toward the desired shared aesthetic experience.

Larps featuring such themes had become more commonplace, but would players be drawn to a more reflective, subtle, philosophical experience? If so, how could the design document be written to adequately prepare players for this unusual role-playing experience, where the majority of what 'happened' was in the quieter moments between characters? How could we avoid the plot taking on a life of its own through the **larp domino effect** (Bowman 2017c: 161), where players introduce content that inadvertently shapes play and can even hijack the narrative for many other characters over the course of the game? How could we encourage players to be brave enough to play with **thin alibi** – that is, to use their daily self and their life experiences as the primary basis for their character concepts – while still feeling immersed in a fictional environment? In the design document and subsequent character creation processes, we detailed several key decisions that attempted to set the stage for such play.

Design Pillars of *Epiphany*

The design document outlined the following features of the larp:

1) The setting was based loosely upon Mage: the Ascension 1st Edition (1994)

In truth, the *Mage* elements ended up being more of a shared vocabulary for play and a conceit rather than essential components of the larp.

Drawing upon information in the White Wolf Wiki, we focused upon the basic Traditions, changing the language to be more gender-neutral in some cases:

- **Akashics:** "Masters of mind, body, and spirit pursuing the arts of personal discipline" ("Akashic": n.p.).
- **Celestial Chorus:** "A Tradition united by their efforts to touch the Divine, as well as their belief in the One and Prime, from which all things originate" ("Celestial": n.p.).
- **Cult of Ecstasy:** "Mages and visionary seers who transcend boundaries and limitations through sacred experience" ("Cult": n.p.).
- **Dreamspeakers:** "Individuals who [commune] with spirits as part of their magic, and [exist] as intermediaries between the Mortal World and the Spirit World" ("Dreamspeakers": n.p.).
- **Euthanatos:** "A Tradition of mages intimately devoted to the forces of death, destiny, and karma in the world" ("Euthanatoi": n.p.).
- **Order of Hermes:** Developed in secret during the Middle Ages, a tradition drawing upon a potent foundation "of magical knowledge and has shaped occult history" ("Order of Hermes": n.p.).
- **Society of Ether:** "A group of technomancers who use scientifically-oriented magic" ("Sons": n.p.).
- **Verbena:** "Mages dedicated to preserving the ancient crafts and wisdom passed down over the ages by witches, warlocks, druids, druidesses [...] mystics, priests, and priestesses of the Old Gods" ("Verbena": n.p.).
- **Virtual Adepts:** "Focused on the Digital Web, the Adepts search for a way to reach the singularity: the point where mankind can transcend into something post-human" ("Virtual": n.p.).
- We also had players choose 3–4 of the Spheres that their characters have explored in some way:
- **Correspondence:** The relationship in space between separate objects ("Correspondence").
- **Entropy:** The principles of chance, fate, and mortality ("Entropy").
- **Forces:** The understanding of elemental energies: air, fire, water, earth. Additional forces include gravity and others ("Forces").
- **Life:** The mysteries of life and death ("Life").
- **Matter:** The principles behind chemistry, atomic, and subatomic particles ("Matter").
- **Mind:** Consciousness and unconsciousness on a personal and collective level ("Mind").

- **Prime:** The essence of magic within all things. Sometimes Prime is condensed as quintessence in an object, or in a Node: a location of great magical potential ("Prime"). The *Epiphany* Retreat is a Node.
- **Spirit:** Comprehension of otherworldly forces and interaction with its inhabitants in the Spirit Realm. The Spirit Realm is called the Umbra and contains entities, dreams, and other realms of existence, including outer space ("Spirit").
- **Time:** "Linear and nonlinear chronologies, including causes, effects, expansion, contraction, and potentialities" ("Time": n.p.).
- The vast majority of other *Mage*-related content was removed from the larp, other than concepts that added flavor to the setting, such as the *Epiphany* Retreat being located on a Node.

(2) The larp featured consent-based mechanics; a player-driven plot; and collaborative storytelling

As with the other larps described above, players had a strong say in the direction of their larp experience. We attempted to avoid the larp domino effect trap by asking players to **steer** away (Montola/Stenros/Saitta 2015) from play regarding the Technocracy, which are the scientifically-minded 'enemies' of the Ascension mages who attempt to keep everyone asleep and police 'reality deviants.' While we felt it was important to have the Technocracy as part of the backdrop, as it serves as a useful metaphor for understanding how society can systematically disempower people, we did not want the game to devolve into paranoia or planning to hide from or fight this shared enemy.

Instead, the play was focused upon player-generated content throughout the structure. While Russ, Rebecca, and I were facilitators, we played relatively inexperienced Initiates in the larp itself, as did around two-thirds of the other players. The rest of the characters were Mentors from specific Traditions: characters with expertise in a particular paradigm and ritual work that they then shared with the Initiates to help them Awaken. Similar to the *College of Wizardry/New World Magischola* model, the majority of play focused upon structured workshop classes during the day designed by the Mentor characters, and unstructured play at night, where characters could run their own rituals, classes, or private scenes. Ultimately, characters had structured ritualized experiences during Friday evening and Saturday during the day with opportunities for free play on Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon before the ending ritual, Reflection hour, and debrief.

(3) The larp featured black box play and player-run avatars

We converted the small chapel into a black box – sometimes called a meta-room – which is a space in larps such as *Just a Little Lovin'* (2011-) and *End of the Line* (2016–2018) that is set aside from the main play of the game. The black box allows characters to create short freeform scenes within the larp (Holter/Boss 2012: 1; Westerling 2014), either on their own or with a facilitator, that take place in other spaces, times, or even realities. Black box play involves player negotiation to create short experiences that enhance play within the larger experience of the larp. The chapel itself was tiny, with stained glass windows

and pew-like seats on the side and large candleholders. Adding lights and sound to the space created an ambience that helped players to feel magically transported.

In *Epiphany*, we used the black box for scenes involving more dramatic magical effects like astral travel, interaction with one's Avatar, and any scenes depicting harassment, violence, sexuality as agreed upon by all players in the scene. Players could invite others to participate in black box scenes by handing them a stone or crystal. Due to the magical setting, these scenes could take place in the past, future, or an alternate timeline, or even plane of existence. Black box scenes allow players to deepen into important aspects of their characters' stories, as well as interact with the more obviously magical content of *Mage*. Black box play essentially creates a temporary mini container with explicit bespoke rules and a social contract within the larger play space with specific goals in mind.

When Russ and I had run *Mage* in the past, we noticed that the intimacy of play provided by our facilitator-run Avatars inadvertently incentivized player-characters to seek role-playing interactions with us as game masters more readily than with each other as a Cabal. Furthermore, we found that such interactions not only generated expectations of performance on our part, especially in long-term Chronicle play, but also led to feelings of favouritism when players would perceive that someone else was receiving game master attention or special plots. To solve this problem, I was inspired by the Nordic larp *Knappnålshuvudet* (Gräslund/Krauklis 2010: 77), which features actors portraying angels following the characters, which in turn was inspired by White Wolf's *Wraith: the Oblivion* (1994), where other players enact each wraith's 'Shadow.' In *Knappnålshuvudet*, each character had an angel that only they could see assigned to them and who would occasionally interact with them privately. Instead of portraying these entities ourselves, we took inspiration from Story Games, where responsibility for creating the story is not generated exclusively by the game masters, but is rather distributed among the player base.

Thus, players were asked not only to play their character, but also to serve as another player's spiritual Avatar if they so chose to do so. That way, players could have negotiated, personal, intimate scenes with each other, rather than relying on the bottleneck that can be created when the story is delivered through a few key people. Avatars could interact with characters pervasively throughout the larp using the meta-technique **Bird-in-ear** (Jeepen n.d.; Holter/Boss 2012: 15), where the character hears 'inner voices' that other players may overhear, but their characters do not witness. These voices can help players steer scenes in response to this external stimuli or players can choose to ignore them. If players wanted to have more extensive scenes with these metaphysical beings, we asked them to use the imagination space afforded by the black box, as such scenes tended to be more fantastical and could feature rich symbolism through narration and symbolic embodiment typical of deep games (Rusch/Phelps 2020).

(4) The larp emphasized What You See is What You Get (WYSIWYG) and What You Know is What You Know (WYKIWYK)

Historically, *Mage* has been notoriously difficult to larp. Once *Mage* characters get to a certain level of power, they can essentially rip holes in consensus reality that dramatically affect the narrative for others. Some examples of fairly moderate levels of *Mage* powers include opening portals to the Astral Plane, shooting fireballs out of their hands, instantly

killing biological creatures with their minds, etc. Such effects are not only difficult to physically represent, but they tend to take over the game and make more subtle, nuanced play less possible.

We also noticed such outcomes occurring in the more recent consent-based larps like *New World Magischola:* whatever personal narrative players wanted to pursue was often overtaken by any number of epic plotlines or rituals that other players would generate. Characters were capable of any feat of magic they could imagine with the only exceptions that a) other players chose what effects that magic would have on them, and b) Teachers at the school were always better at magic than students and could thus negate effects if necessary. Thus, players could generate any scene imaginable, which tended to create imbalances throughout the larp in tone and intensity from scene to scene. I served as a safety team member at several of these larps. Players often told us how they felt pressure to abandon personal play – such as dancing with their date at the Ball – in order to show loyalty to their House members and showing up for mass rituals. Failure to attend such rituals or finding out that big scenes occurred without their presence often produced 'Fear of Missing Out' (sometimes pronounced FOMO) for larpers who wanted to feel connected to the story and other characters. While these scenes were mostly player-generated, staff would run special plots on request, which could lead to the same feelings of favoritism mentioned above when limited organizer resources are given to specific players over others. Such feelings often led to intense anxiety and even emotional breakdowns off-game, especially when coupled with lack of sleep, food, physical exhaustion, and other common experiences larpers have when immersed for many days at a time.

To avoid these pitfalls, we emphasized *Epiphany* as a space for introspection, shared ritual experience, small personal revelations, and deeply embodied realistic play. We wanted to keep the same empowerment offered to players in games like *Magischola* (see Clapper 2016), but to make the tone of the game more realistic to larper's daily lives and less epic and supernatural. Thus, although our game did have magical elements, we emphasized the design principle of 'What You See is What You Get' (sometimes pronounced WYSIWYG) common in the Nordic larp tradition (Koljonen 2010: 176), which focuses on a **360 degree immersive ideal** where everything in the scenography and costuming should be realistic to the setting. While Mentors were capable of magical effects that were hugely powerful, their play emphasized how to safely use magic and to focus on the paradigmatic basis behind magic. Thus, for the most part, magic in the larp was more of a backdrop than an explicit focus in most of the scenes. If players wanted to pursue more intensive magical scenes, those events could take place in the bounded container of the black box and hopefully not dramatically affect or hijack play for others.

An additional pitfall of both traditional *Mage* Chronicles and syncretic neo-spiritual practices is cultural appropriation. *Mage* is based on real-world spiritual practices, communities, and philosophies. While immersing oneself in a subjectivity different from one's own can often help create empathy (Meriläinen 2012: 52), it can also inadvertently offend people from that racial, ethnic, or religious background, especially when characters don culturally specific articles of clothing as costumes or sacred objects as props in play (Hodes 2020). Similar problems emerge in neo-spiritual traditions and cultural anthropological scholarship, particularly when people from White, Western backgrounds attempt to name, claim, or embody practices that originate from marginalized groups

such as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) communities. Whether in life or in larp, when people have a limited understanding of a practice, belief system, or culture, they tend to rely on stereotypes to fill in these gaps, which can be harmful, whether intentional or not. These problems can lead players from marginalized backgrounds to feel alienated and misrepresented in role-playing spaces that might otherwise feel liberatory (Holkar 2016: 95–96; Kemper 2018: 209–10; Kemper/Saitta/Koljonen).

We knew that we could not avoid the problem of cultural appropriation completely, as we acknowledged that as larpers, we all live within a colonized world, and thus carry with us stereotypes, implicit biases, and potentially harmful practices. Nonetheless, we wanted to acknowledge that participation in spiritual rituals or communities of all sorts can also be profoundly meaningful for players. We wanted to create a space where players could use the alibi of the fiction to share experiences and thoughts they had on metaphysics, spirituality, and philosophy that they might not otherwise share.

Thus, we added another immersive ideal of 'What You Know is What You Know,' meaning that players would bring their own spiritual beliefs, memories, and activities into play. Initiates could use their own background knowledge plus slight narrative divergences (1–5 years more of devoted study), whereas Mentors could base their backstories on the premise of devoting 5+ more years of study to a tradition or practice with which they are familiar off-game. The design document states:

> Let's say you are interested in playing an Akashic. Maybe you have read a bunch of Buddhist and Taoist philosophy. Maybe you have done years of karate since you were a kid. Maybe you have watched every Hong Kong action film that comes out. Maybe you regularly visit the Tibetan Buddhist shrine in your town and know people there. Maybe you took classes in Eastern Religion at your university. But you were not raised in a monastery in [Asia], so you do not play that particular background. (Bowman/Murdock/Roycroft 2017: 15)

Thus, players would rely on their own knowledge base rather than extrapolating about what another person's experience was like. To bolster this knowledge base, players were encouraged to engage in research before the larp and the design document featured an extensive bibliography sourced from members of the role-playing community, including players who took part in the larp.

Some of our players brought years of their own study and investment into particular spiritual traditions into their character concepts. If such practices were derived from cultural backgrounds different from the player's – for example, using sacred ceremonies associated with Indigenous Americans within a White, Western context – we asked that players discuss in character the privilege involved with enacting such practices. While we could not avoid the issue of cultural appropriation through this knowledge-based approach, we could at least seek to ameliorate some of its impacts by asking characters to openly discuss these impacts and treat such practices with the reverence they deserve. Additionally, we requested that characters openly acknowledge their own identities with regard to historical issues of appropriation. For example, if they studied sacred practices of interacting with the spirit realm in groups that were mostly White, participants were asked to have discussions of potential privilege and appropriation in-game. In the

above example about playing Akashic characters, players could, for example, discuss how their knowledge about Asian spiritual traditions is limited by their Western perspective and may in fact fall into stereotypes, such as the Ineffable Asian Mystic (Hodes 2019). We felt it was important for players to be able to express beliefs and practices that have been meaningful to them while also acknowledging that such experiences are situated in post-colonial Westernized societies with the pitfalls and tensions that entails.

Along these lines, we also asked that players not enact characters from a culture, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or race different than their own. The players could interpret this guideline as they chose, explaining their particular positionalities in the character creation questionnaire or to the designers. The design document states:

> While we know such experiences can help people develop empathy and self-awareness, this larp is about playing closer to home […] However, if you would like to express aspects of your own identity that you do not normally show society, such as alternate gender presentations or spiritual beliefs, we highly encourage you to do so. We want *Epiphany* to be a space where people can feel safe exploring aspects of themselves outside of social norms, rather than a space where people imagine inhabiting the headspace of another hypothetical person's perspective. (Bowman/Murdock/Roycroft 2017: 15)

Although we acknowledged that such enactment be beneficial when mindful, intentional participants engage in it, the risk of these practices causing harm to people from marginalized backgrounds was too great. Additionally, as we were focused on personal transformation as a goal, it made more sense to focus as closely to home on the player's identities. None of these practices can make sure every participant feels safe, but open discussion, attention, and intentionality might mitigate potential harm.

On the other hand, we strongly encouraged players from marginalized genders or who fostered alternative spiritual beliefs to foreground these aspects in the larp, as we intended to create a space where participants felt safe enough to reveal aspects of themselves that might otherwise be socially discouraged in other contexts. We knew that players often explore gender identity and sometimes eventually transition as a result of being able to experiment through role-playing (see Moriarity 2019; Stenros/Sihvonen 2019; Diakolambrianou et al. 2021). We also knew that players sometimes felt safer exploring unorthodox or radical religious or spiritual beliefs through the alibi of character, particularly players who have received social shame or who have been strongly discouraged from expressing such beliefs and experiences. In this way, we wanted to create a transformational container (Bowman/Hugaas 2021: 67) where the explicit focus was to openly share aspects of self, beliefs, experiences, and practices that normally would be unlikely to arise even within open-minded larp communities.

Finally, we anticipated tension between the 'fantasy' and 'reality' elements of play, as some people would be engaging in more 'pretending to believe' in the fictional world (Pohjola 2004: 84–85), whereas others would be sharing beliefs or experiences that feel more real to them. I wrote a series of design blog posts that explained key themes in the larp, one of which was to respect all levels of engagement and sharing. For some of the players, the magic of the game was more of a metaphor for their lived experience,

whereas for others, the practices and beliefs they were sharing were deeply grounded in their reality. Thus, while it was fine and even encouraged to have paradigmatic debates in-game, we emphasized the need for respectful engagement with these themes in- and off-game regardless of one's background.

(5) The character sheets and game activities were collaboratively co-created between players and game masters with a focus on personal beliefs, experiences, and ritual practices

Because we wanted to emphasize this close-to-home play, we required participants to reply to an extensive character creation questionnaire on Google Forms. This questionnaire asked *Mage*-related questions, such as preferred Traditions and Spheres, but also asked questions related to player's personal beliefs, metaphysical experiences, and existential dilemmas. Players were asked to list 3 close-to-home characteristics, with the option to also list 3 far-from-home aspects for players who needed more alibi. Players could also describe key moments in their character's life, including their first moment of Awakening when they realized they had magical abilities, as well as describing their Avatars. Thus, players were able to be creative if they wanted more distance, or were able to play with their own identities, as well as actual memories from their lives, such as near-death experiences, spiritual epiphanies, visitations from entities, entheogenic journeys, trance work, etc. Murdock and I took these questionnaires and designed 3–4 page character sheets based upon a particular core theme, i.e. The Paradox of Intimacy, The Ambivalence of Corporeality, etc. and collaborated with the players to tweak any necessary details.

Because we also wanted to encourage players to bring embodied practices into the game, we also asked them to detail preferred rituals for their characters that help them feel connected to their magic. Common responses included dance, singing, tarot card reading, meditation, martial arts, etc. We asked players to arrive prepared to take part in such activities and encouraged them to approach others to engage in group rituals. Players could also bring personal items of importance to them that could be used in ritual work and could set up altars throughout the space.

As a key element of the larp's structure, the mentors were asked to take ritual work a step further. Before the larp, we guided each mentor to create lessons for the rest of the characters at *Epiphany* retreat, which were scheduled to take place Friday evening and throughout the day on Saturday. In this way, players could share practices and philosophies that were meaningful to them and guide others through experiential processes. During free times, such as Saturday evening and Sunday morning, any character could create ritual activities and invite others to join in the main space or the black box.

Finally, we created 3–4 brief relations for each character so that they had multiple social connections within the game in addition to their Avatars. Each of these relations were focused upon moments of Awakening, when the two characters shared an experience of discussion or embodied experience together that helped them explore their paradigm in some way. While such relations can sometimes feel contrived or unbelievable in larps, we used the uncanniness of this interconnected web of people as evidence of synchronicity (Jung 1976), as each of the participants were drawn to *Epiphany* Ranch either intuitively or by explicit invitation by another character such as a Mentor. We did not emphasize

any romantic connections with these relations, but allowed players to negotiate intimate connections between characters during pre-game planning and workshopping.

(6) Our safety structures emphasized check-ins, consent negotiations, and debriefing.
Players all took part in pre-game workshops where we explained various safety mechanics, content boundaries, consent negotiation scripts, character relation development, etc. In terms of safety mechanics, players could Cut the scene, requesting that all action stops, or put the Brakes, requesting that actions decrease in intensity. We also included the Okay Check-In, a nonverbal hand gesture system where players could ask other players if they were okay and players could respond with a yes, a no, or a 'so-so,' which we treat as a no (Brown 2016; Brown/Koljonen 2017). Players then engage in a brief off-game conversation to see if the affected participant needs care or wants to **steer** play (Montola/Stenros/Saitta 2015) in another direction when they resume.

In the design document and workshop, we emphasized that no physical or magical violence, torture, or sexual assault was permitted in the main in-game spaces. Similarly, mental effects through magic were only allowed with off-game consent negotiations. We also reinforced that the Technocracy exists but should not be a subject of conversation at this relaxing retreat. Based on past experience, we found that such themes can not only lead to players feeling their boundaries have been crossed but can also derail the game away from the intended emotional and philosophical tone. However, since such themes are important for some players to explore regarding their life experiences and identities, such as racism or religious oppression, we allowed discussion or enactment of these themes in black box with scene negotiation between all players, a form of **zoning** (Bowman 2017c: 167–168). Zoning allows participants greater agency in opting-in and out of particular scenes and topics. If players wanted to opt-out, they could also use the Look-down, where they place a hand shielding their eyes to indicate they do not wish to interact and to ignore their character as if they were not there with no questions asked. During play, participants could also use the X-arms, a version of the X-card (Stavropoulos n.d.), where they could request to remove specific content with no questions asked. Finally, players were guided through the afore-mentioned consent negotiation script as a means to normalize and proceduralize off-game calibration.

We required the mentors to hold debriefs in-character after each lesson as part of the structure, as in-game rituals can often feel like a larp within a larp (cf. Bowman 2015b) that require their own level of processing. These ritual activities were particularly potent as they often involved altered state practices from the players' lived experience that might be unfamiliar terrain for other participants. Players could always step off-game to request support from our 3 volunteer safety staff at the larp, including myself and a player who practices as a licensed counselor, who were committed to stopping play and providing assistance if needed. One of the bedrooms served as an off-game Sanctuary space for this purpose during the larp. Also for safety, we specified that sleeping should occur off-game, so if players wanted to continue playing or off-game processing during sleeping hours, they could do so elsewhere, such as the black box.

Finally, we held a reflection hour and structured debrief after the larp. The reflection hour asked players to engage in some sort of silent reflection activity within the house or

talk quietly with others about the experience outside. We offered art supplies for players to draw and create artefacts, which many players chose to do. Alternatively, some players wrote journal entries during this time, took walks alone or in groups. The important aspect of the Reflection Hour was to serve as a bridge between in-game experience and off-game debriefing for integration (Bowman/Hugaas 2019). This hour gave players dedicated time to symbolically, physically, or verbally concretize and distil takeaways from their experience, similar to other arts-based post-larp practices (cf. Cox 2016; Seregina 2018; Kemper 2020).

The structured debrief was based on the standard script that I have used at several larps, including *New World Magischola* (2016–2020) and *End of the Line* (2016–2018) and is freely available (Bowman 2021). It is best led with one main facilitator guiding small groups of 4–6, where one group leader volunteers to guide that cluster through the exercises. In this way, we preserve the intimacy of small-group processing while making sure that the required components and time limits are observed as guided by the main facilitator.

Players are asked to take turns de-roling, placing a literal costume piece or an imaginary aspect of their character in the circle, then briefly describe what aspects of the character they would like to take with them and which aspects they would prefer to leave behind. De-roling is especially interesting in a context where players are enacting characters almost identical to themselves because this process can help them identify any key features of the game experience they might want to integrate moving forward. Further questions ask players to detail their most intense moment and their most exciting or intriguing moment. For this group, we were small enough that we could then enter the big circle and ask everyone to share how the experience felt as a group, which they could define how they wished: the larp group as a whole, their Tradition members, their character relations, etc. Players were encouraged to continue debriefing with each other on Facebook or other forms of communication after the larp.

Each of these post-game processes took place before we packed and cleaned up the space to ensure that proper time and attention was given, as processing, reflection, and integration are key practices that are central to transformative play experiences (Bowman/Hugaas 2019). In these ways, we not only designed for bleed, but included processes to both manage and encourage it.

Personal Gnosis: The *Epiphany* Experiment in Action

As the experiences of participants at such a larp are deeply personal and potentially revealing, I will primarily share my own account as a player-facilitator. Although I did need to step off-game throughout much of the larp to run logistics and help players in the Sanctuary room, I was able to have several powerful moments as Psyche Emerson, the Cult of Ecstasy Initiative. Through this account, I hope the reader can glean some of the themes and activities that took place at *Epiphany* without emphasizing any one player's journey. (For a detailed play account from three other players, see Kim/Nuncio/Wong 2018).

Psyche's core theme was the Paradox of Intimacy. She had spent her whole life seeking to find her **syzygy** – the Twin Flame or 'other half' of her soul – through ecstatic experiences and intellectual connections with other people. Her avatar was her **animus**, a Jungian term that refers to the unconscious masculine energy suppressed within a feminine-identifying person (Jung 1976). Implied in this relationship was a romantic attachment, as her animus served the purpose of companioning her when relationships ended up in neglect, abuse, or abandonment in Psyche's life. The Paradox of Intimacy refers to a lifelong question I have had regarding Separateness and Oneness, the way two people can seem to merge to become one through intimate experiences, but ultimately return back to their individuated selves. Thus, Psyche was exploring if the 'other half' she sought could ever be truly met by an external person, or whether relationships with others merely gave people glimpses into their own creative potential. I had prepared for this character by taking classes featuring a series of guided meditations on reclaiming one's personal power in the wake of painful relationship dynamics.

The game started with a silent ritual where each of us in turn walked up to the main altar in the house and placed an object that represented our character upon it. My object was a small sculpture based on an Alphonse Mucha painting of a woman resting her chin atop a dragon. This object represented for me my own struggle with my relationship with desire – whether to express it, contain it, control it, or come into balance with it. The main theme of my journey ended up being about my own personal power, gnosis (spiritual revelation), and commitment. Would I try to continue to pursue the search for the syzygy in other people, which led to me sometimes giving my power away to others? Or would I embrace my own path as a priestess and commit to further cultivation of the vital essence within myself?

Throughout the larp, Psyche engaged in a variety of fascinating experiences through structured rituals led by both Mentors and Initiates. After the ritual of the altar, and a brief introduction to the *Epiphany* retreat, we broke into groups where a Mentor led us through a ritual designed to help Awaken us further into our magical power. Many of these groups were still in the same larger spaces of the house and the barn, so we had the surreal experience of bubbles of vulnerability within the wider group field of the literal and figurative magic circle of the game. The design intention here was to immerse characters immediately into this 'ritual within a ritual' space of deep engagement with one another so they had a shared experience that would foster connections and lead to interesting play.

My character took part in a guided meditation where the group spiritually journeyed through the Umbra, or astral plane. This shared journey awakened in Psyche a powerful surge of ecstatic energy. In another ritual, she channelled the essence of a divine maternal entity similar to Mother Mary, speaking about Psyche from the perspective of this compassionate entity. She also took part in a Shadow work exercise, where groups of three allowed a part within themselves to emerge that are usually repressed or unconscious. Psyche allowed her sad, scared little girl to emerge, who received care from the other two people in her group. She was then able to hold space for them to reveal their own shadow parts, which led to deep sharing.

Another profound ritual called a **death salon** took place in the evening and was led by a Euthanatos Initiate. In this ritual, participants sit in a circle and share their experiences

with their own mortality, caring for others during their transitions, and their personal fears regarding death. The death salon ended up lasting a full three hours, with participants joining and leaving as they felt comfortable. For Psyche, it was powerful to hold space for the stories of others, as well as to share old grief related to caring for others with life-threatening diseases. Another Initiate ran an ecstatic dance, but Psyche decided to just watch and feel the energy of others energetically as she engaged in tarot readings. After the dance, many members of the group were led through a tarot speed dating exercise, where they would rotate between tarot readers and receive spontaneous divinations based on limited information.

Two rituals were the most potent for Psyche and affected her (and my) trajectory. The first was a workshop in which we were led to either discover our true name or a word of power. We were shown runes and tarot cards and guided to intuitively pick phrases that were meaningful to us. Psyche opened up her tarot deck and the first card she saw was the High Priestess, which made her laugh ruefully. To Psyche, this card indicated that the most important path was to further cultivate her relationship with her own power. Since we were basing our character on our own knowledge base, I chose a word from the only other language I know fairly well: the French word **prêtresse**. As the word **prête** also means 'ready,' Psyche interpreted the double meaning of this word to be 'ready woman,' as I became ready to step into this role. During the reflection hour, I painted this word with watercolours to further solidify this commitment.

The second ritual that helped set this course was an impromptu journey through an Umbral labyrinth that took place in the final hours of the larp on Sunday. A mentor placed dozens of cards from multiple tarot decks on the ground in a winding fashion. Some participants served the role as readers, helping to translate the cards for others, whereas the vast majority of other retreat members walked the labyrinth and chose a card. The fictional conceit was that within this Umbral realm, we were able to tap into various timelines for ourselves; whichever card we picked would set our course and choose a specific timeline. The card Psyche picked was Two of Cups from the Shadowscapes deck, which featured two lovers entwined. She briefly conferred with her animus – her Avatar played by another participant – about the meaning of this path. At first, she thought it meant that she would obviously find her other half and should continue to pursue relationships externally, but her Avatar asked, "Are you so sure that's what it means?" This indicated that perhaps on this Priestess path, her primary focus should be becoming whole within herself. Thus, the Paradox of Intimacy returned as a central theme at the close of the larp. We ended with each player walking up to the altar, taking their item, and narrating a brief epilogue for their character, in which Psyche verbalized her choice to pursue the path of the Priestess.

In my personal life, I was trying to reconcile this clash between the scholar and the priestess within me as well. Not long after *Immerton* and a week before we ran *Epiphany*, I committed to joining an online deep feminine mystery school, which invites weekly practice and participation in group discussion among people who either identify as women or who seek to pursue the deep feminine path. I also committed to weekly sessions with a trauma therapist who specializes in Inner Child and parts work. I still continue my work with both of these paths to healing and spiritual growth. I have also attended online and in-person spiritual retreats, as well as other women's spirituality circles local to me at

the time. Thus, I used my design and play experiences in *Immerton* and *Epiphany* to gain access to a deeper understanding of my own spirituality, which allowed me to have an experience of spiritual community that later translated into daily practice. I 'came out' to my other academics as pursuing the spiritual path, vowing to integrate spirituality more explicitly in my scholarly work. I would later learn that me choosing **prêtresse** as a word of power was a form of Claiming, meaning that was harvesting the **gnosis** – the personal, numinous understanding – from this play experience and set an intention accordingly.

Through other play experiences, I have continued to explore this concept of my 'other half.' The deep connection I have explored with my now-husband Kjell Hedgard Hugaas unfolded through other play experiences; he chose to engrave on my wedding ring: "To Sarah: my syzygy." We write articles on transformative play together and co-design games. (cf. Hugaas' article in this volume). *Epiphany* helped me Awaken into the understanding that I needed to strengthen my relationship with myself before I could fully be available to receive the love of a worthy partner. Each of these design and play practices were forms of integration that helped me streamline these experiences into my life path with intentionality. (For similar work, see Rusch/Phelps in this volume).

Caveats and Conclusion

In retrospect, no larp is perfect and *Epiphany* was no exception. Regardless of how we frame our play or do due diligence, it is impossible to ensure that no one from a marginalized background experiences harm from representations of culture or perceives the use of sacred objects and practices as appropriation. Thus, this tension will always be present when integrating religious and spiritual cultures into games; design and play choices should be handled with great care and an emphasis on harm mitigation (Hodes 2019). Some designers and players may consider the risk of harm too high to engage in this kind of project.

Another complication with using existing IP is copyright issues. Because we charged money for the event to cover the site and food for *Epiphany*, White Wolf ordered us not to run the event again without purchasing a license. In retrospect, *Mage* played such a small role in the design of the larp that it served as little more than a conceit and an organizing framework, although certainly, some players did attend explicitly because they enjoyed *Mage*. The players that had the most trouble connecting with the game were the more science-oriented characters who played in the Society of Ether and Virtual Adepts, which is something to address in future iterations.

Epiphany also requires a strong commitment from both participants and designers to move through the character creation process. Because the design focused on low alibi, close-to-home characters that are exploring some of the player's most personal beliefs and existential questions, the process involves a strong degree of emotional load, as players need to fill out the questionnaire and designers need to co-create custom-tailored characters that players find resonant. Some players did drop out of this process for various reasons, although many others shared with us that while the process was difficult, receiving the completed character sheets felt validating.

Finally, the replayability of *Epiphany* is in question. Although run as a one-shot, it could be extended to long-term Chronicle play, although I wonder if such a practice would dilute its potency. During quarantine, a small group of us ran a version over Zoom that was more tabletop-esque, which, while powerful, fizzled after a few sessions. My hunch is that players would need to commit to using role-playing explicitly as a tool for spiritual direction for such a group to continue in a long-term fashion. I also wonder if a more specific plot would be necessary for long-term play.

Ultimately, I offer my own experience here as an example of what intentionally designed, facilitated, and played role-playing games can do in terms of helping players find spiritual direction (see Cohen in this volume). *Epiphany* was an experiment that allowed us to play with personal content that might be difficult or even taboo in other settings. I have heard anecdotes from several players that the larp was life-changing, which is not unusual; many players decide to make major life changes or make empowering choices as a result of insights gleaned from role-playing games. Games allow us to experiment with our personal identities, our relationships, and ways in which we organize social structures, which can lead to profound insights about how to move forward in life. What made *Epiphany* unique were the deeply personal characters and the emphasis on spiritual, metaphysical, and philosophical exploration.

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