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Crossgender Role-Playing: Gender Attitudes in Russian and European Live-Action Role-Playing Games

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Introduction

Live-action role-playing games, or larps, are a type of popular leisure in many countries. Performance researcher Daniel Mackay defines role-playing as “an episodic and participatory story-creation system that includes a set of quantified rules that assist a group of players and a game-master in determining how their fictional characters’ spontaneous interactions are resolved.” (Mackay, 2001). There are three main branches of role-playing games (RPG): tabletop RPG, where characters’ actions and appearance are described by players verbally (in Europe and USA this was the first type to appear in early 1970s); virtual RPG, where computer virtual reality is the basis of game world; and larp where the characters’ actions and appearance are portrayed by the players physically (Montola, 2007).

Larp is therefore a kind of improvisational interactive performance where participants act out fictional characters in a fictional game world, but no professional acting skills are required from participants who perform and enjoy the performance at the same time; no separate audience is supposed or necessary.

Nowadays live-action role-playing is studied less than other types of role-playing (tabletop and virtual), especially larp as a hobby within specific communities, not role-playing as a mean of education, psychotherapy or any other external, non-playing goals. Research into larps is therefore important for filling in this knowledge gap.

Larps somehow reflect not only customs and traditions of larping communities themselves, but also cultural themes and attitudes relevant to the broader society to which a larp community belongs. Differences in prevalent societal attitudes to gender issues are reflected in game design and opportunities provided for players’ self-expression. That is why the results of this research are relevant not only for gaming studies, but also for gender studies, as well as contributing to cross-cultural comparison.

There is a number of works concerning or dedicated to the gender of players and their characters in tabletop and video RPG (Campbell, 2004; Brown, 2015; etc.). Some papers deal with gender issues in larps (Dzervite, 2007; Regitzesdatter, 2011; Brown & Morrow, 2015; etc.). Gender attitudes in Russian larp and anime fan communities are also described in a Master’s thesis (Kuldina, 2010).

One of the most representative gender issues in larp communities, which reveals gender attitudes, is so-called *crossgender playing*, or crossplay, that is to say, portraying a character whose gender differs from that of the player. In this paper I focus on this phenomenon, as well as on larpers’ attitudes towards off-game transgenders that appears to correlate with perceived acceptability of crossplay.

Development of larp communities

In this part I will define the larp communities that I will focus on more specifically. To this end the history of the development of this activity should be taken into account.

In Russia, current larp communities are territorial (Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ural community, Siberian community, etc.), but alongside the “mainstream” regional community followers of some specific larping style or game world may form their own community. When speaking about “Russian larps” I mean mainstream larps held by organizers from social networks covering Moscow and partly St. Petersburg. Larp events usually comprise from 50 to 300 participants, are 2 to 4 day-long, and belong to one of the three main genres: fantasy, historical and sci-fi.

In Europe, there are also dozens larp communities. Many countries have their larping groups, and normally more than one. Some features are common (for instance, all European communities I know have their historical source in tabletop roleplaying), but other aspects differ significantly.

European larps (at least all branches I know of) are directly descended from tabletop (verbal) role-playing games. The first “real” larp is considered English “Treasure Trap” (1981) (Hook, 2008) and larp communities started to appear all over Europe¹ in the late 1980s. At the same time the first Russian larps also took place, but they appeared absolutely separately from European ones (Semenov, 2010), as late-Soviet and post-Soviet people hardly had an access to foreign rule books for tabletop RPG. The first Russian larps (e.g. “Hobbits’ games”, 1991) were a sort of reenactment and interpretation of J.R.R. Tolkien’s books.

As the most popular tabletop system in Europe in that period was “Dungeons and Dragons” (abbreviated to D’n’D), the main idea of such larps was to represent events happening in a players’ imagination in a physical environment. Crucial features of D’n’D however, such as team playing, “gamist” approaches (focus on attempts to win a competitive game), sufficient meta-game communication and a large amount of game rules, remained. Later communities developed more or less separately, dividing “boffer”², or “fantasy” larps (gamist larps with combat rules), and larps focused on non-gamist values (drama, theatrical acting, character immersion, etc).

What is crucial is that this division does not coincide with Russian ones. Almost any Russian larp can be called “boffer”, as any larp, however immersive it is, has special combat rules. At the same time not all “boffer” larps in Russia are “fantasy” (they might be also historical or sci-fi), and the “fantasy” larps in

¹ Here I focus on Europe, but it should be taken into account that within the same trend larp communities in USA, Australia, New Zealand and other countries appeared.

² Boffer – light material for producing a larp weapon (swords, daggers, etc.); boffer larp is a larp focused on combat interactions between characters.

Western sense, which means “based on a D’n’D system”, do not exist in the Russian mainstream tradition at all, as current “fantasy” larps in Russia are based mostly on the works of J.R.R. Tolkien, George Martin, Andrzej Sapkowski, and J. K. Rowling. At the same time Russian larps were not gamist from the very beginning and it is more accurate to say that they began as immersive (implying focus on immersion into the character as one of the main values) with a strong gamist component. The Russian larp tradition therefore did not need development from a “gamist” approach to another – to be precisely, the development had some other trend.

In early 2000s larpers from Nordic countries with “non-gamist” approach began to hold an annual international larping conference (“Knutpunkt”, since 1999), where they discussed in English new larp trends and documented these discussions. Knutpunkt’s annual publication is therefore currently one of the richest sources of information on the development of a particular larp tradition, and this tradition is the only well-documented one. A new international larp community has therefore appeared, separate from local ones (Swedish, Finnish, Danish and Norway) but including larpers from local communities. There were ideas about calling this creation “experimental larps” or “progressive larps”, but the name “Nordic larps” has become entrenched. In the beginning this movement started as an alternative to “fantasy boffer” larps, therefore many rules and norms in Nordic larps oppose and contrast to those of “boffer” ones.

Two main trends have appeared within the Nordic tradition: “ordinary” larps, with dozens of players over several days, and chamber larps, for up to ten players and only a few hours of play. The trends had different implicit rules: “ordinary” larps focused on maximal visual realism (so called “360-degree illusion”, see Koljonen, 2007), while chamber larps allowed no props and costumes, or only very symbolic ones. It is confusing that both trends are called “Nordic larps” in international larping discourse, as “ordinary” larps are perceived by Nordic people as uniquely Nordic, and larpers from other countries are usually acquainted with the Nordic tradition via their chamber larps, as they are easily reproducible and do not require special props or skills on the part of the organizers.

Nowadays Nordic larp tradition is spreading and influencing non-gamist larpers all over the world. For this reason the second confusing point with Nordic larps is the uncertainty of their belonging: “Nordic larp” can be called a larp in a Nordic country, whether it is “progressive style” or “traditional”; a larp could also be arranged by Nordic organizers in other countries (the most famous of which are “Polish castle Nordic larps” held by the group “Liveform”, arranged by a Dane in Poland), or a Nordic-inspired larp in some other country arranged by local organizers.

Thus, in most European countries there are at least three layers of larp communities, if not to take into account geographical principle:

- “fantasy”, or “boffer” larpers who prefer “old-school” combat gamist larps;
- local non-gamist larp community with their own traditions and techniques;
- Nordic-inspired community supporting their norms, probably attending English-speaking Nordic larps and related events.

Sometimes some of “layers” might be absent (there might not be divisions between “boffer” and “non-gamist” or between “local non-gamist” and “Nordic”). This structure is crucial for understanding any aspect of the larp tradition in Europe, including gender attitudes and crossgender playing, as different levels of norms might contradict themselves.

Russian crossplay

The phenomenon of crossgender playing is not unique to Russian larpers. For instance, it exists in typologically similar youth subcultures, such as the anime community. It is noticeable that Russian anime-fans are much more tolerant towards crossplay than larpers (Kuldina, 2010). A crucial opinion is that of E. Kuldina who considers crossplay as “a voluntary experiment with one’s gender identity, legitimated in certain situations (e.g. office cross-dressing party, masquerade, stage performance) or in some cultural communities” (Kuldina, 2010). Her definition of crossplay thus covers not only a certain situation (in our case, a larp), but also general behavior within a certain community. Here I consider crossplay only as a feature of a character *within a larp as separate event*. It seems to have no connection with a player’s everyday gender identity, though it may be linked to this.

Russian crossplay appeared as soon as larps began in Russia in the early 1990s with the works of J.R.R. Tolkien. Most of Tolkien’s popular characters are male elves who are much more refined and “effeminate” than what is usually associated with “traditional” patterns of male socialization. A girl playing a male elf, or even male elven lord, which means a key character, was routine in the 1990s. It was acceptable, because the larp community was considered by its participants as a safe and friendly environment to escape the “larger world”, where eccentricities and oddities were welcomed. Therefore, like any expression of amateur creativity, be it writing songs or fiction, painting or making fancy costumes, unusual behavior was tolerated. In such an environment, crossplay did not look strange; it was just another way of creative self-expression.

During that period, “masculine” behavior of girls was not only restricted to larp events. Larpers and Tolkienists were widely engaged in so called “visuals-catching” (“глюколовство”), which was a sort of imagining related to “recollections of a past life” (see details in Barkova, 2009). Usually such “reminiscences” were connected with books which had a cult status within the

community: at first these were the novels by J.R.R. Tolkien, but also sagas such as “The Witcher” by A. Sapkowski and “alternative Tolkienesque reality” described in the Russian popular fantasy fiction work the “Black Book of Arda”. The process of “visuals-catching” mostly involved young girls aged 15-25 who associated themselves with particular character in these books (normally a male one) and started to behave correspondingly even in their daily life. As a result, many girls began to use displays of male gender not only when acting out a character in a larp, but also within off-game communication with larpers in the community, sometimes with attempts to extend such behavior to their entire social life and within all possible social roles.

Non-binary gender performance also took place: there were females who behaved more masculine with girls while remaining feminine while communicating with men. There is no research on gender issues into the Russian larp community during the 1990s, but from the interviews and some fiction literature created by the community³ it is possible to judge how widespread this phenomenon was.

This situation attracted a number of female-to-male (FtM) transgender⁴ people to the larp community, that is to say, women with male gender display and identity. As a result, within the community there were far more FtM transgenders than on average across society. In the late 1990s, this trend turned into a fashion, and the community called this phenomenon “nistanor” (pl.), which is a word from Quenya, an Elvish language developed by J.R.R. Tolkien, meaning “males born in a female body” (sing. “nistano”)⁵. Among “nistanor” there were both transgenders (one could suggest that their number was minimal, at least statistically), as well as girls temporarily using male display to play with identity, as an experiment, as a provocation etc. Transgender cases, although marginal, are especially important within this perspective.

Since the mid-2000s, “mainstream” larp community has switched from being a rather closed group to a public relations campaign aiming, among other things, at getting rid of negative media images depicting larp as an odd, sectarian activity and creating a more positive view for a broader audience. The details most suspected to contribute to negative attitudes were “visuals-catching” and “nistanor”. Activists attempted to create a new image of the community as “successful people with an expensive prestigious hobby”. “Male” performances

³ For example, a novel “A story about the stone bread” (2003) by Jana “Mirime” Timkova about larp community in late 1990ths shows a charismatic female leader of a group of larpers who treats the girls as a courteous gentleman while switches to feminine flirting behavior if sees a promising boy. Outer appearance and clothes thus do not determine behavior.

⁴ Here I consider transgender as “an umbrella term that covers a spectrum of people with nonconforming gender identities and expression” (Glicksman 2013), which includes transsexuals (people whose gender identity is opposite to assigned gender), cross-dressers (people who are happy with their assigned gender), genderqueer (people outside of binary male/female matrix), androgynous or multigendered.

⁵ Emic discussions of “nistanor” phenomenon in 2000-2003 is available here (in Russian) <http://eressea.ru/tavern7/index018.shtml>

as girls turned out to be old-fashioned. However, some female larpers still continue to use male features, both in their characters and in off-game communication within the larp community.

Gender issues in Nordic-style larps

Representations of the Nordic larp tradition⁶ in Knutpunkt books and talks at Knutpunkt conferences create an impression that crossplay is rarely found in Nordic larp communities. Here is a brief review of this literature and of what I have learned from previous interviews and observations.

First of all, Nordic larps are famous for the WYSIWYG (“what you see is what you get”)-principle (Stenros, 2014) and what is referred to as the “360-degree illusion” (Koljonen, 2007). It means that the visual aspect of larps is given much importance and detailed visual representations of the game world are declared a goal. No nail varnish would be acceptable for a Viking, and a castle is represented by a castle, a village by a village, and even a submarine by a real submarine, albeit turned into a museum. Nordic players try to represent their characters visually using the smallest details, even up to the use of “medieval underwear”, according to (Koljonen, 2007). Consequently, a Nordic larper of any gender can hardly imagine playing a character of the opposite sex in a “360-degree larp”, because he or she could not be sure of *looking* properly and having an appearance that is up to the standard.

Medieval larps are not often held in Nordic tradition nowadays, due both to difficulties with detailed representation of the game world and the fact that this game world involves positions for women that contradict the values of contemporary Nordic societies. As an alternative, they play a sort of fantasy larp where all social roles from ruler to craftsman are not gender-determined. Moreover, there are “matriarchal” larps where stereotypical masculine behavior is expressed by female characters, and vice versa: women are the heads of their families, rulers, counselors etc., while men have to obey, care for children and cook. A male participant of one such larp in Sweden remarked that male players are glad to take part in such “upside down” situations, but it can be difficult for some female players to take the leading role and to provide intense gameplay for their “subordinates”⁷. Interviews with Italian Nordic-style larp organizers also showed that in Italy crossplay is an almost unknown phenomenon.

The most dramatic situations occur when Nordic-style players participate in other style larps such as boffer larps. This is traditionally male territory, disregarding the feminist values of the Nordic community. Nordic female players complain that they can hardly find a suitable role for themselves in such

⁶ In this paper I consider “Nordic larps” as “Nordic-style larps” or “Nordic-style inspired larps”, disregarding the place of their run and nationality of their organizers.

⁷ I am grateful to Eric Pihl (Stockholm, Sweden) for this information.

gameplay. For instance, in Nordic Larp Talks-2015, Danish feminist Ann Eriksen presented a story about organizing a female fighting team within a boffer larp campaign called “Kriegslive”, based on the “Warhammer” game world⁸. The larp was not supposed to be historical and did not imply deep immersion⁹. Before 2009, girls could take part in this campaign in auxiliary roles only, for example, being a cook; there were no independent female fighters. As result, gender proportion was about 1 female to 30 males. In 2009, Ann Eriksen organized a female fighting team called “Girls in Armour” in order to participate in “Kriegslive”. At first they faced strong objections from and rejection by the male players, and only constant work with public opinion, particularly in establishing an official organization and creating a supportive social network, let them continue promoting their ideas of a comprehensive female presence in boffer larps.

“Kriegslive” was discussed by another Danish feminist, Jofrid Regitzesdatter, who uncovered new trends in Nordic gender issues within larps (2011). The author described some cases of what she regards as successes and failures in gender-related larp design. For instance, when she was offered to portray a male character in “Kriegslive” because there were no female characters, unlike a Russian player for whom this would mean quite an ordinary crossplay, she was outraged: “The scenario offered no identity positions that could incorporate my female body-type if I wanted to fight, and therefore my body would have to be disciplined or even restricted in order to “fit” the gender norms contained within the Warhammer universe” (Regitzesdatter, 2011). Thus, the set of characters did not suit her female body according to gender habitus, and portraying a man contradicted her beliefs. On the other hand, as positive examples in the form of larps “Hamlet” and “Carolus Rex” are listed in the publication. There characters were gender neutral (like “Kornelius/Kornelia”) which allowed for a more flexible distribution of characters between players and at the same time, in the game world, increased the probability of same sex relations between characters and thereby enlarged the in-game diversity of gender relations.

As a perfect solution, Regitzesdatter proposes a total “move outside the heterosexual gender matrix”, like in Emma Wieslander’s “Mellan Himmel oh Hav” (2003). Characters were divided not into men and women, but into “morning” and “evening” people, and the larp still involved sexual activities and even reproduction.

⁸ Access <http://nordiclarptalks.org/girls-in-armour-a-danish-feminist-movement-ann-kristine-eriksen/> (19.08.15).

⁹ Eriksen implies Nordic opposition between “boffer larps” with a goal to “win” the game, and “immersion larps” without combats, but with deep experience of social interactions. In Russia “combat” and “immersion” are not opposites: although there are “combat larps” without elaborated characters, “immersion larps” quite always imply deep social interactions and inner experience as well as combats.

Nonetheless the Nordic scene accepts crossplay as an experiment. Thus, the larp “Mad About the Boy” (2010, Sweden, see details in Edland et al., 2011) implied a setting where there was only one male left in the world. It had two runs, the first accepting female players only to play female characters, while the second run accepted both male and female players to portray women.

It can seem that crossplay as we know it in Russia is rarely if ever found in the Nordic traditions I have mentioned. Field research however has revealed that the real situation is rather more complicated.

Method

Collecting the data, I focused on in-game gender switching and also noticed that there are transgender people who take part in larps. I supposed that these phenomena might be different elements of a single aspect.

Speaking about the gathering of European data, I used participant observation in larps (5 in total, in Finland, Italy and Spain), semi-structured interviews with larpers and larp organizers, and an anonymous survey. The interview guide included questions concerning the functioning of the particular larp community, the process of larp preparation and accepting players into the roles, the organizational aspects of larps on the ground and the implicit norms about player qualities that represent the character, including questions about crossplay, transgender larpers, simulation of sexual affairs between characters and the proxemics of players during a larp. Many aspects of larping are constrained by community norms about limits to player’s freedom vs. the power of organizers.

The anonymous survey included the following questions:

- 1) City and country of your larp community,
- 2) Your gender (female, male, other),
- 3) Have you ever seen a larpers playing a character of another gender than his/her own? If yes, which?
- 4) If yes, is such a situation common in your larp community?
- 5) If yes, what do you call it (in your language + English translation)?
- 6) Have you ever played a character of another gender? If yes, which? How many times?
- 7) Are there transgenders in your larp community? If yes, which (female-to-male, male-to-female)?
- 8) If yes, what character gender do transgender larpers usually choose?

Both methods, survey and interview, have their limitations. Firstly, they both cover the most active, open-minded and tolerant participants of larp communities, while less active players have no motivation to participate in reflecting on activities of this kind. Secondly, Question 1 of the survey, no matter how detailed it is, did not clarify to which segment of the larp community the informant belonged. Thirdly, Question 3 has the following limitation: if some informants from the same country (larp community) answer they have seen some kind of crossplay, it may be that said that only at least one crossplay of such kind was really noticed, as we cannot determine if those people saw different cases or the same one. This also valid for Question 7: we do not know if it is the same transgender larper mentioned or different ones, in case of a number of similar answers. Those questions however may reveal the general awareness of the community about the existence of crossplay or transgenders among their members.

Question 4 cannot then provide us with comparable data, as we do not know with which situation informants will compare (for example, whether an informant considers one crossplay per year, per single larp or per every 10 larps to be “ordinary” or ten per larp), but is fruitful for deducing attitudes towards this phenomenon, as informants often used full answers such as “not often, but it’s not strange”, “not often, I’d like more”, “too often, I’d like less” or “it’s normal, but not popular”.

Question 5 is introduced to discover the normativity of the phenomenon: no term or descriptive expression or a term borrowed from English can individually indicate how regular the phenomenon is, but if there is a local term describing it this means that crossplay is already part of the larp tradition, even if rarely found in real practice. This question is not included in the Russian version, as in Russia there is a widespread specific term for this (“кросспон”).

Question 6 reveals the attitudes towards crossplay of the most active part of the community (i.e., participants of international larping conferences where the English variant was spread): for instance, if all informants of a certain country answer that they have never crossplayed themselves, it supports the information obtained from answer 4, and thus we can consider crossplay in this country to be very rare. Furthermore, answering “no” and “don’t know” to Question 7 does not necessarily mean that transgenders are actually absent. Speaking about Russian community, I was aware about the fact that some transgenders were part of the community, so this question reveals a community’s awareness of them.

During international larp events in 2016, 12 semi-structured interviews and 115 survey responses were collected. At the Polish larp conference (“Konferencja Larpowa”), I focused on spreading the survey; in larps, during the participant observation and post-larp interviews, and at the Finnish conference (“Solmukohta”, Finnish variant of “Knutpunkt”), on surveys and interviews. The Polish conference was attended mostly by the Poles, which provided me data on a variety of local Polish larp communities, with some lesser known foreign

(Italian and Czech) elements. The Finnish conference was international, so I obtained answers from 19 countries, including non-European states such as USA or Israel. Unfortunately, for the majority of these countries I did not get a significant number of answers, so I will focus on the first five countries according to the number of responses, not taking into account countries for which there were fewer than 7 responses, and thus the survey results of the following countries are considered in this essay: Poland, Finland, Denmark, Germany, and Norway.

Speaking of the technique used to spread the questionnaire, the most fruitful way appeared to be a pack of printed forms left at the registration desk with a box for responses. Although a possibility to fill in the form online was also provided, with QR-codes hanging on all the walls of common area and printed on the forms themselves, the number of electronic responses was surprisingly low (less than 10%).

In the interviews, I tried first of all to collect information about local communities in Nordic countries, in order to get comparative data about Nordic style and find out the differences. I also interviewed people from significant European larp communities as well as from some non-European communities. In general, I tried to get at least one interview per country, but sometimes I had to get more. As a result, I have representative interview data from Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Great Britain, France, Netherlands, Italy and Israel.

For collecting data in Russian communities (playing in Moscow and St. Petersburg), I had the possibility to conduct participant observation in numerous larps (about 20) during the last five years. I also conducted in-depth interviews with transgender and non-binary gender larpers, as well as interviews concerning gender aspects of game design with larpers who took part in projects in non-mainstream communities with alternative gender norms, and also with larp organizers (2016). Moreover, valuable data has been taken from Russian Internet larp blogs and forums, especially concerning conflicts and discussions to do with differing gender attitudes of participants (sources updated in 2000-2017). Finally, I conducted an anonymous survey adapted from the English one (2017).

The Russian questionnaire was distributed online. A link to the Russian survey was spread through the Russian social network “Vkontakte” and through the Russian part of “Livejournal”; as a result, I got about 500 answers to the same questions as those that were addressed to European larpers. The number of those who took part in the survey was surprisingly high; in the international survey, the majority of the data was collected only due to personal communication with respondents. This number of answers allows us to make some conclusions about areas such as perceived tendencies concerning crossplay in the community, distribution of transgender larpers and crossplay practice between Russian geographical areas.

Questions in the Russian survey were adopted from the European one but had some more localized details. First, instead of the country I asked about the city and specifics of the larp community, allowing for more than one to be stated, as I am aware that Russian larpers might have greater mobility and consider two or three communities as their “native” ones (e.g. Moscow and St. Petersburg). At the same time, in Moscow there are a number of “minor” communities loosely connected with the “mainstream” one, so respondents could state their own group within a geographical region. Additionally I dropped Question 5 in this case (see above).

According to the results, most people who replied belonged to Moscow communities (63% stated Moscow as a city of “their community”), St. Petersburg (33%) and the Ural region (19 % - Yekaterinburg, Chelyabinsk and other). The Central and Southern regions, Siberia and the Far East region were underrepresented (14% in total). Many respondents stated Moscow AND some other region or city (Ural; Voronezh, Krasnodar, Perm, Tomsk etc.), which is usually due to internal migration, for example if a person used to live in Yekaterinburg or Novosibirsk and later moved to Moscow (rarely St. Petersburg) to study or work. Playing in a provincial area only without mentioning Moscow and St. Petersburg is comparatively rare. Few people also stated other countries as locations of their larp communities (Ukraine and Belarus) along with Moscow.

Results

A deeper research of gender issues in Russian tradition revealed that in current Russian larps there are two different types of crossplay, which have different origins despite looking similar. These are, first of all, cases of male characters being acted by FtM transgenders, which is actually a realization of their gender identity and consequently, strictly speaking, is not crossplay for them, and, secondly, crossplay by cisgender females, performed as an experiment, creative self-realization etc.

Today’s FtM actually partly occupy the niche of “nistanor”. On the one hand, it gives them a regular, not occasional, opportunity to play males in larps as well as to behave as males within the community, because dealing with this kind of non-traditional gender performance is historically accepted by Russian larpers. On the other hand, it goes beyond mere eccentricity, and is perceived by some as a whimsy, something which is not serious: *“An external façade of tolerance (like “we are all larpers and consequently strange, so let those girls do whatever they want as long as it does not disturb us”) emerges instead of the real tolerance”*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Author’s field notes 2016, an interview with a FtM transgender larper.

It is also noticeable that FtM transgenders are in some way forced to act out male characters: if after a long struggle for a “male” position in the community they end up choosing a female character in a larp, all their efforts have failed as people would regard their male identity as a kind of peacockery and would argue that if these larpers can happily play female characters then in daily life they could also be regular females with their female body. The opportunity to try out a different gender role in a larp therefore seems to be open to cisgender females and, sometimes, males, but not to FtM transgenders, and these individuals are unlikely to try.

Mainstream larps in Russia accept players playing same sex characters and some females playing male characters, usually in secondary in-game social positions. Today the larping subculture is still attractive to FtM transgenders, as it allows them to legally conduct hyper males, at least in amateur acting and within a community more tolerant than “broader” society. During the last 8 years of my larping, the majority of larps I have attended included 2-10 FtM crossplay characters (sometimes more), 1-3 of whom were 1-3 crossgender players, including man-made transition.

Nowadays crossplay characters are rare in mainstream Russian larps compared with the 1990s, and the larger a larp is, the less likely you will meet crossplaying key characters. Apparently, in a small larp it is easier to gather crossplay-tolerant participants, while in a large larp the central figures are more “visible”, meaning that there are higher expectations of visual coherence between the character and its player. At the same time, in a large larp it is almost certain that there are some people among the players and organizers who hate crossplay.

According to the interviews and online forum analysis, there are still arguments for crossplay (at least the FtM variety). Besides the niche for transgenders discussed above, larpers consider crossplay as creative freedom; a tool for creating balance between a players’ and a characters’ gender (there are usually more interesting male roles than female, while the number of female players is equal or more than the number of males). Another way to neutralize gender misbalance in Russian larps is by making special rules and game mechanics, available to female characters only, in order to enhance prestige of female roles among larpers. There is also a stereotype that girls are better in larping social interactions, while males are interested mostly in combats, politics and economics, and do not provide females with intensive relationships. It may thus be more satisfying for female larpers to play with FtM crossplayers rather than (cisgender) male players.

The survey results showed a different gender balance between the community in question and Russian larpers in general¹¹. When discussing the results of the Russian survey I have used percentages rather than the number of answers.

¹¹ Access <http://larp census.org/results/en> (20.10.2015). The question was “What gender do you identify as?”

Table 1. Larpers' gender proportion in Russia

	Male	Female	Other	Total number of answers
My survey	39%	55%	6%	502
Larp Census 2014	54%	44%	>1%	3155

We see that in the Moscow-St. Petersburg region there are more females than average in the country (and than males in the community), and a significant number of transgender people. Such a balance might cause FtM crossplay by itself, taking into account the number of transgenders with female bodies and exceeding the number of female players.

Table 2. Crossplay experience in Russia

	Have you ever seen crossplay?	Have you ever crossplayed yourself?
Never	2%	51%
FtM	96%	36% (=61% of females)
MtF	26%	12% (=30% of males)
Other	>1%	>1%

The results of eye-witnesses to crossplay are predictable for FtM (almost all people saw it), but quite surprising for MtF: a quarter of larpers has seen a male playing a female character. It does not coincide with my initial impression that MtF crossplay is increasingly rare (interestingly, the opinion of respondents is the same: females play males often, while the opposite happens almost never). Actually, up to one third of male larpers have tried to crossplay at least once. Among the reasons cited for this by males are “total crossplay” events, when all players switch their gender; comic characters; temporary change of character’s sex because of some in-game triggers; playing a female as a bet; being a non-player character (aide of organizers), etc. When speaking about the “other” option, larpers also mention playing agender creatures such as animals, spirits, and artificial intelligence beings.

To explain the perceived frequency of FtM crossplay, let us look at how often people choose another character’s gender.

Table 3. Frequency of crossplay in Russia

	Never	Rarely (once-20%)	Often (50%-100%)
% of Males (195 people)	70%	29%	<1%
% of Females (273 people)	39%	48%	12%
% of Female body transgressors (31 people)	10%	30%	60%

As we can see, a majority of male larpers have tried portraying a female character just once or twice, while female crossplay, both occasional and regular, happens twice as often. At the same time, there are a number of transgressors with female body who often or always portray males, which is also perceived as FtM crossplay by the community. It leads to a perceivable prevalence of FtM crossplay, although one third of males also have crossplay experience.

As far as the information about transgender larpers is concerned, more than 70% of respondents know about them. All those who know are acquainted with FtM, and only 13% of them heard about MtF larpers (interestingly, all people informed about MtF do also know about FtM which means, those 13% are a subset of the 70%).

As for transgressors themselves, I was surprised to find out that there are comparatively few FtM; most of them consider themselves as bigenders (“bigender”, “it depends”, “androgynous”, “I haven’t decided yet”) or agenders (“agender”, “something in-between”, “I don’t feel neither male nor female”, “both are not mine”, “third gender”). I also got two answers from people with male body, one of whom declares himself as “male with a great incline towards female”, and another as “pangender”. Gender orientation becomes a means of flexible self-identification in a way comparable to roleplaying in general.

Table 4. Larping transgressors in Russia

FtM transgressors	Bigenders (f body)	Agenders (f body)	Male body
6	14	11	2

Most people acquainted with transgender larpers suppose that they play characters according to their identity gender. But some people (especially transgenders themselves) specify that not every larp organizer allows crossplay, so in such cases transgenders are forced to ignore the event or play their assigned gender, which might be hard and uncomfortable for them. Such attitudes demonstrate that many organizers do not make a difference between voluntary crossplay and a necessary realization of off-game gender identity. Additionally, people playing in more than one community (e.g. in Moscow and a provincial community) notice that in the Moscow community crossplay is far more tolerated.

Speaking of the European data, the most important result of both the survey and interview session is the fact that crossplay (at least the FtM variety) is present in almost all larp communities. The results, however, do not allow for an evaluation of the amount of crossplay and its normality/marginality (see the results of the survey below).

Table 5. Crossplay experience in Europe

Country	Your gender			Have you seen crossplay?				Have you crossplayed yourself?			
	M	F	Other	Never seen CP	Seen FtM	Seen MtF	Seen other	Never played CP	Played FtM	Played MtF	Played other
Poland	13	15	2	5	23	18	3	20	5	3	2
Finland	10	14	2	0	25	20	5	12	9	3	2
Denmark	8	5	0	0	12	10	0	6	3	4	0
Germany	5	2	1	0	8	8	0	4	0	3	1
Norway	5	2	0	0	7	7	0	2	2	2	1

As we see, only in Poland are there few larpers who have never seen crossplay. Supposedly, this result is due to the number of answers as well as community norms: the Polish answers were obtained at an all-Polish conference, while small local communities underrepresented at large international conferences might have their own norms that are much more strict regarding gender issues. Looking at the number of informants who have ever crossplayed, we can conclude that crossplay in Poland is really not very popular: 2/3 of respondents have never tried it, while in Finland, Denmark and Norway their share is less than half and in Germany half of respondent had never played.

Speaking about the results for Nordic countries, we imply that most larpers participate not only in “Nordic-style” larps, but also in local community larps (which may differ from the Nordic style), at least because there are not so many

Nordic larps that take place. Germany has its own community, including enormous annual boffer larp campaigns (“Drachenfest” gathers 4000 participants, “ConQuest” about 10000 players each year) as well as local non-gamist larp communities.

The second conclusion from this table is that male-to-female crossplay also exists. Except in Poland, one third to one half of males surveyed mention such an experience, and the number of people who have ever seen MtF crossplay is not drastically less than those who have seen FtM.

Question about a special term (preferably local) for crossplay reveals that in most traditions this phenomenon uses a term borrowed from English: “gender bending” in Denmark, Norway and Sweden, “crossdressing” in Germany, “crossplay” in Estonia (as well as in all English-speaking countries: Great Britain, USA, Ireland, Canada) and “crossgender” in the Czech Republic. Some traditions claim that they use both English and local terms: Finland (crossplay, crossaus, krossaaminen), Austria (crossdressing, hosenrolle), France (genre inverse). More than half of respondents in all traditions, except Finland and Austria, stated that there is no special term for it or they do not know it.

Speaking about transgenders, it seems that on average MtF are less frequent than FtM. Considering responses to this question from all the countries who participated, MtF transgenders (or at least one) exist in the larp communities of Finland, Denmark, Germany, Norway, the USA, Austria, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Great Britain, Ireland, Belgium, Slovakia and Canada. Based on this question, we can deduce not the percentage of actual transgenders, due to the small number of those reported, but the level of awareness about the presence of transgenders within these communities.

Table 6. Gender awareness in Europe

	Do you know any transgender in your larp community?			
Country	No/Don't know	FtM	MtF	Other/not specified
Poland	21	1	0	5
Finland	4	21	10	1
Denmark	5	6	5	1
Germany	2	2	4	1
Norway	2	4	2	0

As we can see, in Poland knowledge about transgender larpers is not widespread. Alternatively, in Finland few people do not know about them. This dramatic difference is especially significant, taking into account that the number

of transgender larpers present at the conference was the same for Poland and Finland (see table 6). In the German group at the conference there was a MtF transgender, which could influence the awareness of other German participants. In Denmark and Norway about 2/3 of respondents are acquainted with transgender larpers in their countries.

Almost all countries except Poland declared that transgender larpers may choose characters according to their identity gender. Some Finnish respondents also mention that not all larp organizers allow crossplay at all, include identity gender roleplaying by transgenders.

According to the interviews, FtM crossplay on average is more frequent and in some way more tolerable. MtF crossplay, if it exists, is usually played for fun with comic characters, if it is not a MtF transgender (the Netherlands), while FtM appears due to other reasons: experimenting with gender in game, curiosity, narrative ambitions of female players, lack of male players (Finland), and, finally, being a FtM transgender (Norway). Generally speaking, European crossplay is more a result of the larper's interest and curiosity than real necessity.

Interestingly, some informants accept the existence of crossplay in their communities for internal reasons (Finland, Netherlands), while others (France, Denmark, Sweden) claim that the idea of crossplay in local larp communities had been borrowed from other traditions, first of all from the Nordic style. At first glance, this seems absurd, as according to preliminary literature research Nordic style larps almost prohibit crossplay.

However, according to the developers of the Nordic style¹², Nordic larps actually tend to avoid unnecessary crossplay, and organizers, if asked, prefer to provide a transgender character instead of allowing crossplay. It is partly due to the idea of "360-degree illusion", and partly just a matter of tradition. But there are two important aspects. Firstly, within the Nordic style there are small chamber larps alongside "large" larps, which have alternative organizational implications. For instance, they do not support the "360-degree illusion" standard, which enables the introduction of elements far from realistic representation, this being crossplay in particular. Secondly, the experimental field of the Nordic style generates from time to time special larps based on crossplay or alternative sexual identity. The most exemplary cases are "Mad about the Boy" (see above) and "Just a Little Lovin'" (2011), a larp about the gay community in the 1980s (see details in Raasted, 2013). Normally larpers, if asked about the Nordic origins of crossplay, mention only these two larps.

To sum up the Nordic position, it might be suggested that during the 2000s Nordic style did not use crossplay as an artistic device, tending to keep to the in-game players' off-game gender identity or to totally change the in-game gender system (see above "Mellan Himmel oh Hav", 2003). The idea of "gender

¹² Expert interview with Nathan Hook (2016).

neutral” characters (a character’s gender is not prescribed in advance and coincides with player’s gender) also supports keeping a player’s gender in-game. In the 2010s however a new trend appeared: in-game gender switching started to be considered, at least in highly experimental projects, as a way to achieve a unique experience impossible in any other situation, and as a form of creative freedom available to players.

Larp communities therefore provide players with some opportunities for crossplay, mostly FtM. In the Finnish local larp community it is widespread, allowed by many organizers, especially within groups playing “Harry Potter” larps with almost all characters represented by female players. Informants explain it through gender imbalance, with female prevalence among larpers, especially in non-boffer larps. Actually, according to the International larp census (2014)¹³, gender proportion in Finland dramatically differs from the average one (44% males to 49% females in Finland vs. 62% males to 36% females in average).

The Danish community systematically allows FtM crossplay in “pirate” larps, and the Netherlands allows it in in fantasy games. In Sweden, in some larps players can even choose a character’s gender while filling in the application form. Some traditions considered the Nordic “gender neutral” approach as a possibility to choose character’s gender voluntarily whilst disregarding the player’s own (France), so nowadays crossplay exists there as a marginal and unpopular “foreign influence”. Also in many traditions, chamber larps without visual realism (Denmark, Netherlands, Sweden, Israel) allow crossplay within their community.

There are also communities where, according to my informants, crossplay is almost entirely absent: Italy, France, the Czech Republic and Spain. Local larp communities do not have dedicated slots for it, but it may appear occasionally, mostly under Nordic influence (as the Nordic tradition, as we can see, allows crossplay much more systematically).

Speaking about the attitudes towards crossplay, a dominant idea across the cultures consists of avoiding it: “not all consider crossplay as good roleplaying” (Germany), “not all organizers allow crossplay” (Finland), “crossplay is allowed in the same sense that Chinese players are invited: it is not prohibited but actually happens very rarely” (Sweden), “a transgender character is more likely than crossplay” (Nordic style, Denmark), “crossplay is frowned upon, but girls playing males are more tolerated” (Israel).

Some circumstances contributing to availability of crossplay can be identified:

- The number of female players being more than the number of male players (Finnish community) and/or is definitely more than the number of interesting female characters (Danish “pirate” larps);

¹³ Access <http://larp census.org/results/en> (20.10.2015). The question was “What gender do you identify as?”

- Larp implies social interactions rather than combats (Finnish community, Nordic chamber larps);
- Larp tradition allows for comparatively low levels of visual realism (Nordic chamber larps, Israel “Jerusalem larps”).

I consider these features not as the reasons for crossplay within certain communities, but as circumstances that coexist with its presence.

Comparison of Russian and European gender issues

Comparing Russian and European larp communities, we discover that crossplay, both FtM and MtF, is not a uniquely Russian custom, and it exists in all communities in question. Interestingly, European larpers play non-binary gender individuals more often than Russian larpers (agender, gender switch etc.).

Table 7. Comparison of crossplay experience

	Have you seen crossplay?		Have you crossplayed yourself?	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
Russia	98%	2%	49%	51%
Poland	84%	16%	33%	67%
Finland	100%	0%	64%	46%
Denmark	100%	0%	64%	46%
Germany	100%	0%	50%	50%
Norway	100%	0%	72%	28%

As the number of respondents for Russia, Poland and Finland is the most representative, I focus on them in particular. Poland seems the least tolerant community towards crossplay: a significant number of people have never seen crossplay, while in Russia and Finland almost all have seen it, and the share of people who never tried crossplay in Poland is the largest. In Russia and Finland their share is over half, and Finnish larpers perform crossplay even more often than Russians.

The Russian and Finnish communities also share other important features. First of all, the gender balance is similar. The most interesting points are numerical superiority of females and an unusually high percent of transgenders: in other Nordic countries it is less than 1%, according to Larp Census 2014.

Table 8. Larpers' gender balance in Russia and Finland

	Males	Females	Other
Russia (my survey)	39%	55%	6%
Finland (LC-2014)	44%	49%	4%

It leads to the same challenges that both communities face: a lack of males and an overabundance of females for in-game gender balance; significant number of transgenders always applying for “crossplay” characters according to their identity gender; certain organizers who are against crossplay and forbid playing males, even for FtM transgenders. In both communities crossplay appeared by itself, without external influence, due to their own internal necessity.

Moreover, both communities have subgroups playing in a particular game world, with few or no combats, but a lot of social interactions, where almost all members are females (or FtM transgenders), who play both male and female roles. For Finland it is the “Harry Potter” group discussed above. It seems similar to the Russian “Kamsha Club”, a small closed larp community consisting mostly of girls whose larps are based on “female” game worlds, mainly taken from the books of the writer Vera Kamsha.

Such similarity between the Russian and Finnish communities is surprising, as Russian and Finnish societies have almost completely opposite attitudes towards gender experimentation, transgender identity and other related issues, yet larpers to face similar problems within each of these communities.

At the same time, larpers' attitude towards female participation in combat larps in Russia differs from the European one. Above we discussed the experience of Danish “Girls in armour”, an activists' group who struggled for allowing females to fight in-game. Russian larpers who attended this presentation were astonished with this story, as in Russia there are no limitations restricting the participation of female players in any kind of larps, combat trainings and/or tournaments. Moreover, girls do not have to crossplay males as a result, because female fighters are also acceptable. The only requirement is enough motivation to develop their muscle strength and learn to handle a weapon, which is necessary because in Russian larps there were no light boffer or latex weapons until rather recently (see details in Vorobyeva, 2014). If a girl is not ready to fight against men face-to-face as a foot soldier, she can become an archer; and a bow is often considered a female weapon, as it does not require much physical strength and armour, and at the same time is a distance weapon which can result in a lower risk of injury. Nowadays, as boffer weapons spread among Russian larp communities, physical strength is no longer so important. Even this superficial comparison shows that the lack of female players in Danish boffer larps is only a matter of the traditions of the local community.

Speaking about the awareness of larpers about transgenders in their communities, the lowest proportion of these is in Poland. This correlates with its low tolerance of crossplay as well as its marginality. Finnish larpers are the most informed about their transgenders, while Russia demonstrates rather high rate similar to Germany and Norway. It also correlates with the fact that crossplay in these countries is a visible phenomenon (almost all respondents saw it at least once).

Table 9. Gender awareness in Russia and Europe

	I know about TG larpers	I don't know about TG larpers
Russia	73%	27%
Poland	30%	70%
Finland	86%	14%
Denmark	62%	38%
Germany	75%	25%
Norway	71%	29%

Transgender larpers are said to play their identity gender in all communities except Poland. Transgender people themselves in Russia and Finland however mention possible problems with larp organizers who may prohibit playing a character whose gender does not coincide with that of the player. Speaking about a comparatively rare situation involving transgender people with a male body, a German person claims playing female characters in accordance with their off-game identity, while a Russian bigender chooses their character's gender every time.

The reasons for crossplay in Russia are similar to those in Europe:

- creative freedom and experimentation;
- a desire to play a certain character or to get a certain experience (almost all characters in the Swedish “Mad about the boy” are females, while almost all in the Russian “To be a monk” are males);
- a lack of interesting female characters or a lack of male players for all male roles;
- fun (especially for males);
- being a transgender person, which is a very specific case – a kind of “necessary” crossplay, but for many larpers crossplay is a voluntary choice.

At the same time, crossplay is legal, but not very welcomed almost in all communities that were considered.

The circumstances accompanying crossplay in Russia also resemble those of foreign cases: there are more females than males in the community, such as in Finland; many larps allowing crossplay involve and imply more social interaction than combat, such as in Finland or Nordic chamber larps, and the level of visual realism does not imply “360-degree illusion”, such as in Nordic chamber larps.

In summary, the Polish community is the most “patriarchic” one: few people tried crossplay, transgenders have to play characters not according to their identity, and community awareness about transgenders is the lowest. The proportion of Russian larpers who have ever crossplayed is close to that of Germany and lower than in Nordic countries (but this point is debatable due to small number of respondents). The share of transgenders in Russia and Finland is higher than in other countries (according to the 2014 Larp Census), while the level of awareness of Russian larpers about transgender people within their community is closer to that of Germany and the Nordic countries, but less so than in Finland.

Conclusion

Portraying a character of another gender in a larp (crossplay) is a phenomenon known in almost all larp traditions with which I got certain degree of acquaintance. Normally it is not welcomed and not widespread but is acceptable within certain special situations, special larping sub-groups or for particular players. In most cases, when crossplaying, female players portray male characters (FtM crossplay); the opposite situation is rare.

Crossplay performs some important functions: it helps provide a necessary balance between male and female characters; it is a way of obtaining a unique playing experience unavailable for characters of a certain gender; it is a kind of a testing room for expressions of femininity/masculinity that are not available to players in everyday life.

Some other ways of solving the problem of gender balance have been developed by larp communities: special rules and aspects of play designed to enrich female characters’ experience (Russia), “gender neutral larp design”, where a character’s gender follows the player’s own gender disregarding the character’s function (Nordic style), “matriarchic larps”, with female characters performing male social roles (Sweden, France) or escaping the ordinary heterosexual matrix (Nordic style of 2000s).

Crossplay also provides transgender larpers with an opportunity to realize their gender identity, which is especially important in case of the Russian larp community, as Russian society is less tolerant than European ones towards transgender individuals, and playing a male within a larp is almost the only possibility for them to behave according to their identity. Interestingly, male-to-female transgenders are mostly found in North and Central European countries (Finland, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Netherlands, Great Britain, Ireland,

Belgium, Germany, Austria, France, Slovakia,), while for Southern Europe (Italy, Spain) and Eastern Europe (Poland, Czech Republic, Estonia) there is very few information about them. At the same time, female-to-male transgenders or bigenders with female bodies exist in almost all traditions in question, with the largest share of them being in Russia and Finland.

The final decision of allowing or prohibiting crossplay depends mostly on the tradition of a certain larp community and on the fact that it has some systematic position for it. The background of crossplay tradition may include focus on social interactions rather than on combat and low standards of visual correspondence between game world and its representation on the playground.

Finnish LARP tradition seems to be the most similar to Russian one, as it has a similar background (game worlds, gender disbalance between players and characters, relatively large number of FtM transgenders) and allows systematic FtM crossplay.

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