Sadomasochist Role-Playing as Live-Action Role-Playing: A Trait-Descriptive Analysis

Popular Abstract - This article describes sadomasochist role-playing which is physically performed by its participants. All sadomasochist activities have a role-playing component to them. It is a form of role-playing where people consensually take on dominant and submissive roles, for the purpose of inflicting things such as pain and humiliation, in order to create pleasure for all participants. In some cases, participants agree to emphasize those roles, or make them fetishistically attractive, by adding complexity and definitions to them, and then act them out in semi-scripted fantasy scenes. This paper examines that activity, commonly called "sadomasochistic role-play", as opposed to the more generic "sadomasochism" of which it is only one facet.

Furthermore, the article compares this form of play with live-action role-playing (larp). Its main emphasis is on the question of how closely related the two activities are. To determine this, the article examines sadomasochist role-playing as being potentially a game, the question of its goal-orientation and the issue of whether or not it contains a character in the sense of a live-action role-playing character. Based on this process, it comes to the conclusion that sadomasochist role-playing is not a separate type of role-playing, but rather one kind of live-action role-playing.

As its theoretical framework, this text utilizes studies done on both live-action role-playing games and on sadomasochist role-playing. Reliable material on the latter being quite limited, descriptions have been gathered from both academic works and practical manuals. The data gained from these is further supported by interviews of practitioners with personal experience in playing sadomasochist fantasy scenes. This article has two key purposes: The research of a relatively understudied form of role-playing, and the building of bridges from that to live-action role-playing research.

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ABSTRACT

This article describes sadomasochist role-playing in which the participants are physically present and perform their actions. All sadomasochist activities have a role-playing component to them. It is a form of role-playing where people consensually take on dominant and submissive roles, for the purpose of inflicting things such as pain and humiliation, in order to create pleasure for all participants. This article examines cases where participants agree to emphasize those roles, or make them fetishistically attractive, by adding complexity and definitions to them. They then act out their characters' actions in semi-scripted fantasy scenes. This paper examines that activity, defined as "sadomasochistic role-play".

Furthermore, the article compares this form of play with live-action role-playing (larp), fantasy play which also contains characters and physical actions. Main emphasis is on the question of how closely related these two activities – both easily recognizable as pretence play – actually are. To determine this, the article examines sadomasochist role-playing by analyzing its key traits as role-play. These include it being potentially a game, the question of its goal-orientation and the issue of whether or not it contains a character in the sense of a live-action role-playing character. Based on this process, it comes to the conclusion that sadomasochist role-playing is not a separate type of role-playing, but rather one kind of live-action role-playing with a particular, distinctive framing.

As its theoretical framework, this text utilizes studies done on both live-action role-playing games and on sadomasochist role-playing. Reliable material on the latter being quite limited, descriptions have been gathered from both academic works and from practical manuals. The manuals have been chosen from amongst those most quoted and considered reliable in academic works on sadomasochism. The data gained from these is further supported by the author's interviews of practitioners with personal experience in sadomasochist role-playing. This article has two key purposes: The research of a relatively understudied form of role-playing, and the building of bridges from that to live-action role-playing research.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual role-playing exists in various forms. It has been so far researched very rarely, and mostly just from a quantitative perspective, as a side note in studies concentrating more on other sexual behaviors. It is commonly believed that people play pretence games such as "plumber and housewife" in their homes, or "man picking up a prostitute" at bars, as a form of sexual play. Yet not a single research paper on this phenomenon seems to exist.[1] A likely reason is that it has been ignored as an "insignificant factor of foreplay" by sexologists conducting surveys, and thus never included in the questionnaires (Moser, personal discourse, 2009). Sadomasochist role-playing (much, but not all, of which counts as sexual role-play; Newmahr 2010), however, is a different case: It has been documented to some extent, and its central forms (including the popularity of those forms) are known well beyond anecdotal levels of evidence.[2]

In this article, I will examine sadomasochist role-playing in which the participants perform their actions for real (as opposed to using just verbal descriptions of them), as a form of role-playing. I will compare it to live-action role-playing (larp), a type of role-playing game where players adopt the part of fictional characters and physically act out their actions (see Brenne 2005 for an example). As

my tool, I use systematic trait analysis – a type of hermeneutic deconstruction – on already existing studies of both, supplemented with interview material (see Harviainen 2008 on using hermeneutics for the study of role-play, and Mäyrä 2009 on hermeneutics in game studies). This is a formalist, technical study, deconstructing and discussing traits and structure, as the meaning given to the activity is well beyond the scope of this article (see Newmahr 2011 for more on the significance of sadomasochist role-play to its practitioners), as are individual descriptions of sadomasochist role-playing scenes.

According to a widely (see Weinberg 2006 for details) accepted definition of sadomasochism – also called by various names such as BDSM and Leathersex, depending on connotation and practitioner identity [3] – coined by Weinberg, Williams and Moser (1984), there are five key components to it. Not all of them need to be present in order for an activity to constitute sadomasochism, but they are often found together. These are:

1. **The appearance of dominance and submission**; the appearance of rule by one partner over the other.
2. **Role playing.**
3. **Consensuality**, that is, voluntary agreement to enter into the interaction.
4. **Mutual definition**, i.e., a shared understanding that the activities constitute SM or some similar term.
5. **A sexual context**, though the concept that SM is always sexual is not shared by all participants.

The dominant partner in a sadomasochistic event (often called a "scene" or "session") is generally referred to as the "top", and the submissive partner as a "bottom" (Weinberg 2006). Other concepts also exist, depending on local and personal preferences, some of them common (such as "Master" or "slave"), others quite obscure (Rinella 2006). The playing of roles has a central part in sadomasochistic activities, as also the first criterion

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[1] This observation is based on the author's extensive database, sexological journal, and online searches for such between 2006-2010. It has further been confirmed as likely by sex researchers Elina Haavio-Mannila (personal correspondence, 2007), Osmo Kontula (personal correspondence, 2007), and Charles Moser (personal discourse, 2009). If such studies do exist, they appear to be extremely obscure and difficult to find.

[2] A second well-documented but contested example of physical sexual role-playing exists, in the form of paraphrased "gender roles" adopted by homosexual individuals. The study of those, however, is beyond the limits of this article.

[3] Even though some communities prefer different terminology, I will use sadomasochism and BDSM (an abbreviation of Bondage & Discipline, Dominance & Submission, and SadoMasochism) as an interchangeable umbrella concept here, denoting activities as defined by Weinberg, Williams & Moser 1984.

ties into role-playing (Siegel 1995). The whole activity can be perceived in some cases as an escape from normal gender roles, to various degrees (Nordling et al. 2006).

Since Gebhard (1969), many researchers have seen BDSM as a social activity (see Weinberg 1978 and 2006 for detailed literature surveys), which rises as an emergent property from the possibility of experiencing some pain as pleasurable (*algolagnia*). According to Gebhard, and expanding on him Weinberg & Kamel (1995), especially societies with both strong power hierarchies and a chance for mobility in such hierarchies give rise to this social sadomasochism, i.e. the ability and propensity to enjoy sexual scenes with a strong, yet consensual power dialectic. This means that according to these researchers there is a pretence play component to sadomasochism. (Studies which concentrate on psychophysiological reactions have a tendency to skip any analysis of roles played beyond the dominant/submissive dichotomy as insignificant; see Sagarin et al. 2009 for an example).

Furthermore, Mains' (1984) ethnography of gay male sadomasochists introduced a view of BDSM activities as "ritual psychodrama". Gebhard (1969), Deleuze (1967) and Weinberg (1978) also note that BDSM play is a fantasy activity, set in a temporary fictional world, and contains theatrical elements, yet is not theater. These observations, in addition to the playing of very obvious roles, raise the question of the extent of the similarities with larping.

2. THE BASICS OF BDSM ROLE-PLAY

Sadomasochist role-playing, like role-playing in general, can take place in any interaction environment, including subtle interactions in everyday life, not visible to outsiders (Dancer et al. 2006). Online BDSM role-playing has a lot in common with traditional tabletop role-playing games (Cross & Matheson 2006), and virtual environments such as Second Life have given rise to sadomasochist role-playing communities within them (see Sixma 2008 for an excellent example).

Physical BDSM role-play has several natural-seeming siblings, from re-enactment to psychodrama, but its closest correspondences are with larp. This is because at its core, sadomasochism, like larp, contains its own narrativity (Siegel 1995). The narrativity rises as an emergent property from pre-seeded potential, and thus very closely follows the outlines set by

Fatland (2005) for larp narratives. It contains a "script" only in the sense of sexual scripts, guidelines on the level of general scene and behavior, as opposed to the rather precise activity defined by formulas such as a theatrical script (Alison et al. 2001). And a template-like script is not necessary for the activity, simply a common element (Weinberg 1978).

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The types of scenarios that can be played are as unlimited as in other pretence activities, but quite naturally tend to gravitate towards situations with a strong power dialectic. For example, the Wikipedia entry for "Sexual roleplay" lists the following examples:

1. **Age-play** – where one player takes the role of an adult and the other a child.

2. **Animal-play** – where the bottom is treated as a non-human animal such as a dog or pony.

3. **Master-slave** – where the submissive is treated as the property of the master/mistress.

4. **Torturer/Captive prisoner –** where the top is a captor who abuses the bottom.

5. **Caught and punished** – where the bottom is "caught" doing something wrong.

6. **Authority figure/Misbehaving Adult** – where an authority figure threatens the bottom with exposure of a secret.

7. **Gender-play** – where one or more players take on roles of the opposite sex.

8. **Goddess worship –** where a woman is seen as a pagan deity.

9. **Hospital fantasies** – involving doctors, nurses and patients.

10. **Uniform fetish** – the female dresses as a submissive schoolgirl, cheerleader, French maid, waitress, and so forth, while the dominant male plays an authority figure (parent, teacher, coach, etc.).

11. **Rape fantasy or a ravishment** – where one player feigns being coerced into an unwelcome sex act.

12. **Owner/Inanimate object** – such as the bottom being human furniture.

While not an academically reliable reference in any way, the existence of such lists points towards a community acceptance of such activities' existence (this particular list appears to actually be a summary of activities described in Brame, Brame & Jacobs 1997). Sandnabba, Santtila & Nordling (1999) had the following categories of role-play in their survey on self-identified sadomasochists:

1. Master / Madame – Slave
2. Uniform scenes
3. Teacher – Student
4. Execution scenes
5. Hospital scenes
6. Rape scenes

Such scenes can be played as separate power-exchange encounters ("sessions"), as a series of those, or as a full-time system. In a single session, the participants create a fictional scene, where the dominant partner is given the permission to subject the submissive partner to activities such as humiliation or the induction of pain. Both take on character roles which either emphasize this power exchange, offer fetishistic pleasure, or do both (Mains 1984). For example, one partner becomes a Roman patrician and the other her slave. After the session has ended, the normal everyday power dynamic between the participants – which may or may not be equal – is restored.

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In a series, the participants continue a previously played fantasy, often playing the same roles as before. It fits certain types of role-play better than others. Examples of this type of role-play include recurring age-play scenarios, developmental themes, and sadomasochist role-playing based on suitably themed works of fiction, such as the works of John Norman (e.g. 1967) or Jacqueline Carey (e.g. 2001).

"In our role-play, my partner was a young student boy and I an experienced older prostitute (in real life I was four years younger than he). The young boy was insecure when he first arrived as a customer to the prostitute, an adult woman. She helped him relax, touched and undressed him, and taught him to pleasure her, with the determinate skill of an older woman. On his next visit, the boy was far more self-assured already.

We played variations of this for about a year. As time went by, the roles slowly changed and grew, so that the young man grew up into a determined man, a customer who wanted "his money's worth" from the whore, and used her to fulfill his own needs. If she resisted something, such as tried to refuse anal sex, he could use violence (agreed-upon, consensual, such as twisting an arm behind the back) to take her the way he wanted.

We played a lot with this theme of "one is inexperienced, the other one very experienced". the characters and roles changed, sometimes we were a schoolgirl and her teacher, sometimes a youth camper and a camp counselor, but for some reason the game of prostitute and client was such that we returned to it over and over. We did not discuss the play outside of the sessions, they simply moved forward on their own, guided by very subtle hints and tones." (Sara) [4]

Full-time sadomasochist relationships (often called "24/7") are based on a total power exchange (TPE), instead of the temporary power exchange of the other types. The classical example of this, contracts including, can be found in Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* (Venus im Pelz, 1870). In such relationships, the submissive partner gives a part of the control of his or her own life to the

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[4] Interviews translated from Finnish by author. The names of the interviewees have been changed.

dominant partner. This can include elements such as financial control in addition to the power to inflict pain, humiliation, etc. (Dancer et al. 2006). The continual nature of a TPE makes it very unlikely that the partners engage in very obvious role-playing (except possibly in smaller scenarios played within the TPE). There is, however, a subtle pervasive role-playing aspect present: The consensual nature of the TPE contract means that the participants are constantly role-playing the parts of a slave and an owner (or their equivalents), regardless of where they are.

> "I have the permission to hurt and fuck her against her will, whenever I feel like it, as long as I stay within the limits we have agreed upon in advance. At work, she wears an ankle bracelet which reminds her that she is mine at all times."

> "I really like it that he forces me to do things even when I am not aroused, for that act in itself arouses me. When I am not in his presence, I am still constantly aware of the fact that I am his willing slave." (Martin & Maria)

The continuity types of sadomasochistic role-playing are very much those of larp, ranging from the one-shot session to the campaign (a set of scenes set in the same continuity) and pervasive play (in the case of a TPE exchange). As Montola, Stenros & Waern (2009) note on the connection:

> A typical play session takes place within a carefully established magic circle with, for example, a dominatrix and a slave. It has a clear beginning, a clear end and a safe word. If this consensual power exchange is extended into ordinary life, this kind of (sexual) play becomes pervasive play, moving beyond sexual

encounters.

These are pretence activities which run the same range of frequencies as larps, even though the number of participants is usually much smaller. [5] Likewise, frequency cannot be compared, as no reliable data exists on how often the "average" sadomasochist participates in role-playing. Moser and Levitt (1987) and Nordling et al. (2006) do provide some data on what percentage of self-identified BDSM practitioners has tried such scenarios, but that is insufficient for any comparison.

Based on the small amount of research done on BDSM role-play so far (presented in the references of this paper), is known that people *do* play out fantasy scenes with fictional or semi-fictional roles. The roles in those cases are mostly just subsets of the dominant/submissive dichotomy, i.e. social roles comparable more to the social roles in multi-player online role-playing games than to larp characters. The role depth (i.e. the depth to which the player immerses into character) may of course vary, just as in online role-playing (see Copier 2007 for an example on comparable variance). Sadomasochism is innately theatrical, contractual and ritualistic (Deleuze 1967), as is larp. Furthermore, it is rather obvious that a *sufficiently complex* BDSM role-play scenario – with complex characters, plots and a credible fictional reality – would be indistinguishable from a larp. Where, then, is the defining limit between the two?

3. NOT A GAME

While BDSM role-playing is not defined as a game (or a sport) by its participants, it does fit the definitions of such activities. It in many ways exemplifies Suits' (1978) definition of a game, being a rule-bound activity, where efficiency is hampered by a selection of limitations taken on for the purpose of increasing the rewards of said activity. [6] The role-play itself is also such a rewarding limitation, as is the potential use of tools (or words) to inflict only certain kinds of pleasurable pain. The point is not to just hurt the submissive participant, but to hurt that participant in a very particular, consensual way. The initiatory basis may be in the participants' algolagnic urges, but the execution of

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[5] The number of people present in a given scenario may vary greatly – and many people at a BDSM event may hold individual role-plays within the same space. Furthermore, larger-scale events such as "Prison Camps" may be just as large (20-100 participants) as a larp. Little data on those beyond advertisements exist, however, but the author has personally witnessed several. BDSM events reaching the scale of a German or British "Fest" larp such as Conquest of Mythodea (nearly 7000 players; www.live-adventure.de) are so far unheard of, outside of movies and literature.
[6] It also fits very well Suits' (1978) assertion that "non-standard" sexual practices (e.g. satisfying sexual acts that do not contain an orgasm) may actually be considered games.

the activity is that of structured play.

Sadomasochist role-play also matches very closely the definition of role-playing games as limit-case games (i.e. gaming activities that can be framed as containing or not containing a quantifiable outcome) suggested by Salen & Zimmerman (2004). One could argue that the pleasure-seeking inherent in the activity would make it more goal-oriented than a larp, but that part can be equated with the way people tend to larp for fun (Harviainen 2006). Likewise, a pre-lusory goal (i.e. one existing outside the fictional reality of the play) such as orgasm, total exhaustion and/or crying can just as well be equated with the resolvable goals of an educational larp or a training simulation, up to and including the question whether those were a side effect or the actual purpose of the activity (as per Henriksen 2009).

BDSM role-play has rules, ranging from safe words to agreed-upon conventions (Moser & Madeson 1996), making it fit with Montola's (2008) definition of role-playing:

1) Role-playing is an interactive process of defining and re-defining the state, properties and contents of an imaginary game world.

2) The power to define the game world is allocated to participants of the game. The participants recognize the existence of this power hierarchy.

3) Player-participants define the game world through personified character constructs, conforming to the state, properties and contents of the game world.

[...]

i) Typically the decisive power to define the decisions made by a free-willed character construct is given to the player of the character.

ii) The decisive defining power that is not restricted by character constructs is often given to people participating in game master roles.

iii) The defining process is often governed by a quantitative game ruleset.

iv) The information regarding the state of the game world is often disseminated hierarchically, in a fashion corresponding with the power structure of the game.

It even has a game master of sorts: The dominant partner has a scripting power very close to that of a run-time game master (i.e. a person constantly monitoring and possibly altering the game situation), and uses it in interaction with a player, the submissive (Moser & Madeson 1996). It is also possible for the submissive to control the situation (Sagarin et al. 2009). While not a very highly evolved game master function, it is nevertheless extremely similar to the active game mastering described by Lancaster (1999).

It is possible to meta-play around the edge of the rules and control systems, but to break them is to break the social contract of the activity and thus to ruin it. This, too, is a classic sign of an activity's nature as a game (Suits 1978). Followed and accepted, a suitable set of constitutive rules increases immersion (Balzer 2010).

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A sadomasochist role-play scenario contains a similar set of frames and a system of keying (Weinberg 1978) as do larps (see Balzer 2009 and Brenne 2005 for examples). The participants seek to concentrate on the fantasy frame, but are also aware of the rule-frame (containing limits and safe-words) and the real-world frame. Likewise, 24/7 BDSM is frame-wise (Dancer et al. 2006) identical to pervasive larps (see Stenros 2008 for comparison).

4 A LACK OF CHARACTER?

BDSM scenario participants tend to focus on a facet of their own person rather than a complete fictional character, even if they have one. This is sometimes even seen as preferable, by persons who think it shows that a BDSM practitioner is made of "sturdier stuff" than most people, as he gives free reign to his inner demons in a controlled setting (Miller & Devon 1988). This catharctic self-analysis, however, has been contested by Baumeister (1988), Siegel (1995) and Nordling et al. (2006), who claim that at the core, the whole activity is an escapist fantasy from either social role pressure and rules, gender roles, or both. Regardless of the veracity of those not necessarily incompatible claims, the debate itself is highly reminiscent of the question of possible escapism in larps (see Harviainen 2006 for details), i.e. currently on the level of anecdotal evidence and debate on what exactly constitutes escapism.

While the characters of scenario participants may be indeed facets of the player more than full-fledged characters per se, the situation is not different from a larp. There may be a tendency to favor more holistic characters in live-action role-playing, yet as Hakkarainen & Stenros (2003) and Harviainen (2006) have noted, not all larpers necessarily play using a character-immersive approach. It therefore appears that no real distinction can be made on the basis of character depth, as both types of role-playing contain the potential for any character depth.

Physically performed sadomasochist role-playing actually uses less representation than many larps, due to the essentiality of the what-you-see-is-what-you-get approach to the situation. It can therefore be argued that as a play environment, BDSM role-play is actually more conductive to immersion than an average larp. Furthermore, the shared goals and raw physicality of sadomasochist role-playing makes it highly suitable for fostering inter-immersion, i.e. the feedback cycle where each participant's immersion enhances that of others (as per Pohjola 2004).

5. GOAL-ORIENTATION

> "SM roles are varied and complex, offering different things to different people, but the goals are the same: an intense sexual experience, fun, emotional release, catharsis." (Moser & Madeson 1996)

One of the key traits where the activities seem to differ is goal-orientation. Sexual role-playing is performed for the purpose of sexual pleasure, a goal existing also outside of the fantasy (Mains 1984), whereas a larp may not have any clear goals. The distinction vanishes, if examined from a broader perspective. While larps in many cases may not have such explicit goals, they contain multiple smaller ones, and participants enter them to fulfill goals of their own (Salen & Zimmerman 2004). Also, the play itself in both of them may be the main purpose for some participants: The playing of a certain role in a larp can be a goal in itself, or fulfill a fetishistic function in sexual role-play (Gebhard 1969), making such play a self-rewarding (autotelic) activity.

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Larps, as a generic category, are also no strangers to goal-orientation. Educational larps actually exemplify it. In them, the character is a tool for learning through play (Henriksen 2009). This is an obvious pre-lusory goal (as per Suits 1978).

6. ADVANCE(D) STAGING

The staging of a sadomasochist scenario is not that different from a larp, either. They may or may not need paraphernalia and/or pre-planning, depending on concept and individual taste (Wiseman 1996). And formal pre-scripting may or may not be necessary (Weinberg 1978). Due to the focus of BDSM role-play, the scenario concepts tend to be rather simple, being very specific and limited to the central theme. The scenarios do not therefore develop as randomly as larps do, as they are bound by a central concept that needs to be followed.

Their external parameters are very much alike, though. Both use upkeying (in the manner described by Brenne 2005 and Stenros 2008, based on Goffman 1974) to initiate the action. In sadomasochist role-plays, the start-up may differ heavily, depending on type of scene and the participants' preferences. For example, Wiseman (1996) suggests both starting and ending with the dominant's question about the submissive's willingness to take up the role of the bottom and to

leave it, respectively. In contrast, Mains (1984) describes how some leathermen with both dominant and submissive inclinations may begin their scenes by wrestling, and the winner gets to be the top. The range of options is particularly important in cases where sadomasochism is practiced in otherwise equal relationships, as the submissive may need to transmit signs of his or her willingness to be dominated to the dominant partner (Kamel & Weinberg 1995).

In a TPE situation, the constant pretence is typically kept active by small symbolic anchors, such as a slave collar worn at home and a necklace symbolizing it outside of privacy (Dancer et al. 2006). Similar practices are used in pervasive larps, to allow players to recognize one another (Montola, Stenros & Waern 2009). Symbols of the same type are also visibly worn by submissives at fetish events, to denote varieties of relationship status (Moser 1998).

The sphere of activity, i.e. the magic circle of play, itself in a sadomasochist role-playing scene is similar to that of larps. Their information environment is identical on all counts (as per Harviainen 2007): The illusion is preserved through a social contract, which both prevents the intrusion of distracting information into the session and makes the participants more dependant on each other in cases of information gaps. The illusion is furthermore sustained through semiotic re-signification, in accordance of the pattern outlined by Loponen & Montola (2004). And as Sebeok (1994) notes, fetishism actually eases re-signification: Items and/or behaviors enhancing sexual pleasure for a person are more easily re-signified by that person into objects of particular importance within the scene.

In a BDSM role-playing scene, the potential for reaching a ritual-like liminality is always present. In other words, the play can create a temporary imposed reality of its own, not just a fantasy (Brodsky 1993; Mains 1984). Larps have the same innate potential (Lieberoth & Harviainen, forthcoming)

7. DISCUSSION

This examination of traits leaves only two significantly distinguishing factors between the two sorts of physical role-playing. The first of these is ideology: Larpers may not want to be associated with "perverts", nor participants of what they see as "adult role-play" (in both senses of the phrase)

with something possibly considered juvenile. This is normal for any activity that carries a social stigma (Goffman 1968). Furthermore, some people want to keep sexual elements out of larp, so as to offer players maximal protection from potential trauma, and thus resist any connections between the two (see Borina & Martins 2009 for an example).

The second factor, the fundamental difference, is the basic framing of the activities. Larp is framed as a larp, a game played for the purpose of experiencing things such as fun or something interesting (Brenne 2005). Sadomasochist role-play is framed as a sadomasochistic activity, a sexual activity, performed for the purpose of sexual pleasure (Nordling et al. 2006). This is particularly significant, because whereas a larp stands as its own event, sadomasochist role-playing is a part of a larger activity, namely sadomasochism (Mains 1984). Performed on its own, a sadomasochist role-playing session would appear to outsiders to be both a larp and a BDSM role-play. This is because, in my opinion and in the light of this analysis, they are at the core the same thing.

It is, nevertheless, reasonable to also delve further into the differences. Why would sadomasochist role-play not be larping? And how do so-called *extreme* larps differ from BDSM role-play? In the author's view, the key – if it at all exists – lies in the aforementioned framing: Sadomasochist role-play takes place in a context of its own, as a larping facet of an activity which is not akin to a larp. It is done in a larp-like segment of something much wider. It would therefore not be unreasonable to claim that this lack of a defining structure related to the activity itself (in the manner of "larp" and "larping" being related) makes it essentially a different phenomenon.

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As for extreme larps there are similarities, but also a set of frame-related differences. Tobias Wrigstad's *GR* (described and analyzed in Montola 2010), for instance, simulates rape. It is not a rape fantasy play. This is a crucial difference, as the latter is a form of consensual transgressive gratification, the former a consensual depiction of non-consensual

violence (as per Zurbriggen & Yost 2004). The social contracts of those two simulations is fundamentally dissimilar, and altering the purpose of *GR* towards gratification would make it a different, less extreme scenario. *GR* furthermore uses rules of no touching, making it much closer to non-physical role-play than to the physical sadomasochist scenes analyzed in this paper.

Certain larps, such as the *PehmoYdin* series (described in Harviainen 2011) and *Blue Threads: The Sevent Circle* (Olmstead-Dean et al. 2010), in turn, were larps using elements from sadomasochism, not sadomasochist role-playing. The difference in their case is that their BDSM activities were game-internal, and even though they contained things that count as sadomasochistic, those took place between in-game characters. The primary fantasy frame was that of the game, not that of BDSM. They were fictional realities, within which existed sadomasochism, also in its non-role-playing aspects. It is important to note, however, that these examples do not preclude the aforementioned possibility of a sadomasochist role-playing scenario being simultaneously also a larp in any way.

8. CONCLUSION: NOT JUST SIMILAR

Geoff Mains (1984) wrote of BDSM role-play:

> Role play is undertaken because people enjoy it. Submission is voluntary with full awareness of it taking place. The adoption of distinctive roles is restricted to specific situations, and between specific individuals. Often, the individuals are flexible in their choice. Role play is at least in part a form of conscious auto-drama.

Physically performed sadomasochist role-playing is, in effect, indistinguishable from larping by its traits alone. For every variable, there appears to be a similar variable on the other side of the fence. The sole significant difference is the particular framing of sadomasochist role-playing as a part of other activities, i.e. sadomasochism, a field containing much more than just role-play. While there is no game master per se, the dominant's role includes a game master function. Both activities run the same gamut of potential character depth and immersion possibilities.

A sufficiently complex BDSM role-play, such as a hypothetical days-long prison camp where each participant has his or her own continual character and the play-space has an illusion of new reality, contains a definite magic circle of game play and is obviously also a larp. Any less thoroughly scripted sadomasochist role-playing session is still just that, very much like a low-preparation larp.

Sadomasochist role-playing is not just a sibling to larp, another part of a group of activities categorized under "pretence play". It is essentially the same activity, performed with a different sort of social framing. When we speak of physically performed sadomasochist role-play, we are actually speaking of larping done with BDSM elements in it, for the purpose of (often sexual) satisfaction.

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