

Dagorhir costumes: Regulation, consumption, and power dynamics, 1977 to the present

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Live-action roleplay (LARP) is the adoption, embodiment, and performance of a fantasy character identity by a player (LARPer) in a collaborative, improvisational game. The player adopts the fantasy character identity, a distinct fantasy gaming feature that separates LARP from similar reenactment, tabletop, and cooperative games (Fine, 2002). In the game, LARPers react to different fantasy events and situations that center on a historic time period, a fantasy novel or film, or take place in an unrestricted setting with costume-wearing LARPers. LARP groups have gathered worldwide across Asia, Europe, Australia, the United States, and Canada (Meng, 2021; Tychsen et al., 2006) and have varying levels of documentation and online presence. In one of the most recent and comprehensive surveys on LARPing, about 29,000 respondents reported participation in LARPing activities (Vanek & Paddy, 2015); however, these responses may be limited or skewed due to stigma surrounding publicly sharing LARP participation (Mosqueda, 2016). Of note is that researchers have identified that LARP is often described as a safe place for gender exploration, in which trans, cis, and alternative gender identities can be experienced in various situations and encounters (Sandqvist, 2016; Seregina, 2019; Vorobyeva, 2015).

Dagorhir, established in 1977, is one of the largest and the oldest documented LARP groups (Figure 1). Since the 1970s, the group has published numerous handbooks, which include regulation changes with much emphasis on costumes. As the handbooks underwent revisions, the authors intensified the importance of so-called authenticity in costume. Here we use the phrase “so-called” as there is much debate and nuance around what is considered authentic, which we critically explore in this research (Erickson, 1995). The interactive, leisure activities described in the handbooks demonstrate how a LARP can facilitate community building, identity negotiation, and creative storytelling while intricately connected to appearance commodities in the capitalist marketplace in both formal and informal economies (Kaiser et al., 1995). The reversed causation of the costume and the identity of the LARPer is indicative of the performative nature of the Dagorhir LARP, in which “identity does not fuel expression, but rather that expression coalesces into identity” (Butler, 1990, p. 25). In our research, we critically examine: (1) how the costume regulations of Dagorhir influenced fantasy character identities and player identities; (2) how the handbook regulations influenced costume authenticity changed over time; and (3) how the handbook regulations engaged with power dynamics related to intersectional identities.



Figure 1. Outdoor Dagorhir One Army Summer battle. 1982. Photo courtesy of Dagorhir Battle Games Association, Inc. (2021).

We analyzed costume-related content in the three handbooks: Aratari Handbook first published in 1980; New Millennium Handbook first published in 2003; Dagorhir wiki first published in 2014, which is still in use as of 2021. Our examination included a thematic analysis of a) the costume-related text for both implicit and explicit meanings related to regulations and organization of the regulations and b) the costume-related imagery. We draw upon both content analysis and historical research methods. We used content analysis as the handbooks are a written work able to be categorized into themes and historical research method, which may be used for analysis of primary and secondary sources and crafting a historical narrative (Workman & Freeburg, 2009). During content analysis, we followed a grounded theory approach and drew upon open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 2009). The data was collected from the handbooks and analyzed, with the first iteration yielding open codes like “costume,” and subsequent analyses yielded axial codes with a focus on categories of costume. Selective coding yielded core themes. We organized the findings thematically and within a historical narrative.

We first identified that the handbooks prescribe *costume emphasis and reduced improvisation acting over time*. The Dagorhir handbooks all included basic requirements for when costumes should be worn and these requirements became more encompassing over time. In all three handbooks, costumes were required to be worn by participants “on the battlefield” and were “strongly encouraged when in public areas;” for example, when going to and from the battlefield and when taking breaks between battles. As costume was prioritized across time to enact the fantasy character identity, expectations surrounding improvisational acting decreased. The handbooks also emphasized that *costumes enhanced collective experiences*, that is, the costumes contribute to the individualized and collective atmosphere of the LARP.

Throughout this process of embodying the fantasy character identity through costume, the handbooks encourage LARPers to engage in an “ongoing dialectic” (Kaiser et al., 1995, p. 177) surrounding *defining so-called costume authenticity*. This so-called authenticity is not a static concept outlined in the handbook, and is described as depending on the LARPer *seniority*, the LARP *setting*, *commodity consumption*, and *rejecting of modern materialities*. For example, the AH 1980 and the NMH 2003 acknowledged that “those with the best costumes are also the best

(and most experienced) warriors.” Another component defining costume authenticity is the costume’s adherence to the “medieval” and/or “fantasy” setting (AH 1980; NMH 2003; DW 2014); however, these setting descriptors are subject to multiple and broad interpretations. The so-called authenticity was also often defined as *what they were not* and there were *practical concessions* that were considered. The extent of costume regulations in all three handbooks shows that the Dagorhir costume acceptance is wrapped in considerable complexity beyond aligning with the medieval or fantasy description. Last, it was evident that within all these costume regulations, there was apparent evidence of erasing marginalized identities.

Costume consumption in Dagorhir provides players with opportunities to navigate their fantasy character and personal identities. Costume creation and battle participation attracts players with identities that do not fit into the “mundanity” outside of Dagorhir. Since the players are often looking to experience escapism from societal norms and to negotiate new identities, when regulations do not consider and center the varied identities players occupy, the written regulations reinforce oppressive barriers permeating society. Costumed roleplay groups create shared worlds across time and space that offer players platforms for social experiences contributing to their individual and collective growth. These escapist spaces center on the costumed body, yet Dagorhir regulations throughout time reinforce a specific kind of body, one that fits the dominant narrative. LARP spaces are created to encourage creative storytelling through commodities; however, these experiences can contribute to erasure of historically marginalized communities’ intersectional dynamics while navigating fantasy character identities.

Our results can help inform societal understanding of LARP to reduce stigma around these practices (Mosqueda, 2016). Additionally, our work has implications to players and regulation writers to enhance equitable language and imagery in future regulation iterations; since previous literature describes LARP as safe spaces for identity exploration (Sandqvist, 2016; Seregina, 2019; Vorobyeva, 2015), these considerations should be considered in the formal regulations.

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