

## On the Importance of Body Language in Live-Action Role-play

*Every now and then the same discussion appears on the larp mailing lists and discussion forums: acting versus immersion. Usually some participants in the discussion see these two as opposites that would rule out each other, as if there has to be a choice between them when the player is getting into character. This can seem very confusing, as they could also be seen as parts of one whole – inseparably dependent on each other.<sup>1</sup>*

Only 7% of human face-to-face communication consists of the abstract meaning of words. The tone and modulation of voice is 23% and body language 70%. Thus, a chimpanzee can theoretically communicate 93% of what a human being can.<sup>2</sup> The difference is in the IQ – the chimpanzee's maximum IQ is around that of a 12 year old child – and abstractions, which are impossible to communicate without words. Therefore, human beings have quantum physics and TV shopping, while chimpanzees do not.

Like those adorable cousins of ours, we also produce and interpret body language mostly on an unconscious level of the mind. If body language and words are contradictory, the listener automatically believes the former. As this process is usually unconscious, the result can be just a vague feeling that the speaker is being less than honest. Body language also works when we are silent. One threatening step towards a shy person might make her escape.

This also applies to role-playing. When a player's approach towards the character concentrates primarily on the character's thoughts and feelings, the physical output – body language and use of voice – might become contradictory or suppressed.

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<sup>1</sup> Although, with references, this text could become academic, such an endeavour does not interest me. The vague fact-like things in this article are from numerous sources read during three decades. My reading consists mostly of everything by Desmond Morris I have been able to lay my hands on, a few bookshelves of psychology and psychiatry and two NLP courses related to my studies. After a decade of larp I do, however, feel justified to speak with the voice of empirical experience. The reader should be warned that under the fact-like surface, this is actually an educated opinion.

<sup>2</sup> The reader might have seen slightly different percentages elsewhere, but the estimates differ only by few percentage points.

## Contradiction Between Body and Mind

If the character and the player are not identical, there will appear a contradiction in expression. Other players will automatically react to the body language of the character, if it contradicts the words the character uses. Thus, other players give the original player different feedback than would be expected in the situation. The player then reacts to this feedback, other players react again and a vicious circle is formed. The game situation will develop in an entirely different direction than the characters' personalities would suggest.

A contradiction between body language and verbal output can also give the other players a feeling that the character has mental problems. As this is probably not what the player intended to express, it could lead into another vicious circle of action and reaction.

In some situations, suspension of disbelief is stretched to the limit. A typical situation would be a tough gang leader portrayed by a player with a fearful and shy body language. Such a gang leader is not very good at getting people to obey, unless the other players note the situation on the meta-level and correct their behaviour accordingly. For some players, the need for a meta-level correction might limit the depth of their experience of their own character.

When the character's body language and use of voice stay unchanged, the player's own experience is also affected. If body language and voice remain unchanged, the difference between the player and the character is only 7% – and, therefore, the immersion experienced is also only 7% of its whole potential. This raises a question of how believable such a character is to the player herself.

## Playing With Body Language

Players who are young or new to the hobby often suppress their body language in varying degrees when getting into character. The character's body language can become minimalistic, and the use of voice very neutral, even monotonic. Some medical conditions and disorders, such as Parkinson's disease and autism, can cause this kind of flattening of physical expression. The player is sending a signal to the other players that there is something seriously wrong with the character. The other players again react to the body language and voice instead of the words, and another vicious circle is formed. Alternatively, they note the situation on the meta-level, correct their own behaviour, and perhaps limit their own experience of the game.

On the other hand, monotonic body language can be used as a part of character creation. It should certainly have some effects, as there is a very strong two-way feedback loop between body and mind: Thoughts and feelings affect human physical expression, but the physical expression can also affect thoughts and feelings. For example, it has been shown that a fake smile can make one feel better in minutes. This is also applicable

to other feelings – take, for example, aggression. By consciously changing posture one's body, it is possible to produce a genuine fight-or-flight reaction, complete with an adrenaline rush.

When getting ready to fight, we narrow our eyes to protect them from damage. Breathing becomes shallow and fast and the muscles tense. Hands can curl into fists and weight shifts to the balls of the feet. Taking this 'action position' produces effects very quickly: the pulse quickens and the stomach crunches, as digestion stops and adrenaline enters circulation. In seconds the body language changes even more, as the initially faked body stance gets more natural and one will begin to feel real aggression. These measures help complete the immersion in the character is, and make the character believable to others. Other players get a strong signal that one is ready and willing to fight. As body language is interpreted mostly on the unconscious level, the opponent automatically recognises a potential danger. Thus her reactions fit the situation and the aggressing characters intention.<sup>3</sup>

## Getting in Character

Getting in character is a matter of temperament. Some people might get easily in character by just by concentrating on it, and their body language changes accordingly with no extra effort. However, if one pays as much attention to both mind and body and considers them an inseparable whole, it would be natural to get in character by using physical expression. Observing different types of people helps when constructing a character. One can also make faces at the mirror and try out how different types of body languages feel.<sup>4</sup>

This illustrates a major difference between live-action and tabletop role-playing. It can be hard for some players to get in character while sitting at a table throwing dice. The 30% of expression that the use of voice and abstract meaning of words alone give might not be enough for the immersion to succeed. For this reason costumes and other

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<sup>3</sup> Another, although a much more difficult example, is being drunk. Personally, I have so far managed to do this only once, but the experience was very rewarding. After acting out all the signs of a developing inebriation for an hour and a half, I really did get into a state of mind that was very hard to distinguish from really being drunk. The more 'vodka' (water) I drank, the more drunken I became. The amount of water was about three times what vodka would have been needed, which was an extra bonus, as it simulated the diuretic effect of alcohol very convincingly. The only difference to really being drunk was that I could snap out of the state if I wanted. Transferring drunkenness from the physical to the mental level took a lot longer than transferring aggression. But then again, it also takes more time to get drunk than to get angry in real life too.

<sup>4</sup> I get into character through physical expression. It takes me up to an hour and a half to slip into the mental state of the character after changing my physical expression, but sometimes the whole process takes only fifteen minutes. In this process I naturally also use the thoughts and feelings of the character, but if I tried to get into character by just using them alone, the process would take hours or fail entirely.

props can also be considered to be much more than just the outer appearance of the character. Costume, hairdo, jewellery and other props strongly affect body language. The most obvious example of this is how the height of the heel affects the way one walks.

Parodies and humorous games are an exception from this holistic way of getting into character. These games concentrate on keeping up a certain genre of comedy, and the most important goal is the communal attempt to create humour, instead of experiencing the character or maintaining consistency or believability.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is a method used for many different purposes, from therapy to leadership training.<sup>5</sup> One of NLP methods, modelling, is a suitable tool for larps. Roughly speaking, the principle of modelling is that if one person can do something, it is possible to model it and teach it to others. Sales or leadership skills and successful sports performances are typical abilities that can be modelled. Modelling includes thought strategies, beliefs and values, physiology and the frame of reference the modelled person is acting in.

Modelling a larp character is somewhat easier, because most likely only the physiology – body language and the use of voice – need to be modelled from other people. Other aspects can usually be found in the character description, if the character is well-written. When the player pays attention to all four aspects, the character should become an experience in full immersion, as well as convincing to the other players. Along with personalities, emotional states can also be modelled. It is also possible to model personality types and characters without noticing.<sup>6</sup>

## The Meta-Level

It is not possible for a person with a normal psyche to completely forget the real world, or get 'stuck' in a character. The meta-level is always present. It is, however, possible that the player either does not have the necessary introspective skills to notice the meta-level, or has tricked herself into ignoring it.

If the meta-level was not present at all times, the player could not discontinue a traumatic event in the game or shout 'hold'<sup>7</sup> in a dangerous situation. Without the meta-level the player would so completely believe the illusion of the game that shouting 'hold'

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<sup>5</sup> To keep this text manageably short, I will not tell much about NLP itself. *Google* finds over 29 600 hits with NLP, so anyone wishing for more information can find it easily on the Internet.

<sup>6</sup> I can single out two characters during my ten years of larp which have been especially strong immersion experiences and also received a lot of praise from other players. These were both very old women, so I have probably modelled the body language of an old woman without noticing it myself.

<sup>7</sup> The 'hold' rule is quite widespread in Finland. If something dangerous is about to happen in a game, any participant who notices the potential danger is supposed to shout 'hold' and discontinue playing. Everyone who hears the shout should do the same, stop playing and spread the message by repeating the shout.

would not even be a possibility. (After all, one would not use it to try to avoid danger in real life.)

Thus, it is the player's own choice whether she pays any attention to the meta-level, and if so, how much. Developing introspective skills and reflective intelligence is the key to noticing meta-level or coping with it. Meditation and other spiritual practices can be of great help in noticing the observer inside. Finding that internal observer, the meta-level, is actually one goal on many spiritual paths and philosophies. The meta-level exists at all times in real world too, whether one notices it or not. This can be of great help in getting rid of unwanted automatic reactions and habits. It is a useful tool for personal growth, not just something needed in live-action role-playing.

According to some brands of psychodrama, it is impossible for a person to experience any emotion or aspect of personality, not already existing in her. Of course, that aspect or emotion can be minimal or suppressed from the conscious self. It is, however, possible to change the inner balance of emotions and aspects of personality, thus giving the player a chance to experience a mental state radically different from the usual. This is the basis of experiencing a character different from the player. The mind is a mixing table, behind which the meta-level sits observing the situation and adjusting the mix of parts of personality and emotions as needed.

## **Taking Other Players into Consideration**

A player must be able to follow the events on the meta-level even when it threatens the unity of her own game experience. When the player has learned that meta-level exists at all times anyway, and when she has learned not to let it disturb the game, the unity of the experience does not need to break down.

The meta-level is of course necessary. Safety reasons alone require it; a player who is unable to follow the game on the meta-level would be too dangerous to be let into any larps at all. Fortunately, the meta-level is ever-present, whether the player notices it or not.

It is not just allowed, but even preferable to act noticeably – to be physical, if such activity is not contradictory with the character's personality. Some people are louder and more noticeable in the real life, so such behaviour is acceptable in larp worlds as well. Even stereotypical characters can be natural, because some people are caricatures of themselves in real life, or constantly play a role. Humans are pack animals, and our experience of the surrounding world consists very much of the people around us. The situation in larp is not that different. Colourless or non-existent acting will make the game world colourless too.

Another way to utilise the meta-level is taking into consideration beginners and shy players. With one's own actions a player can create hooks, which others can catch if they want to in order to engage themselves in the game. Thus they can achieve more action and have stronger experiences than they otherwise would.

Again, the presupposition is that such an action is not contradictory with the character – a strongly introverted character would not engage another in conversation just like that. The simplest example of helping other players is starting a conversation with another character, however trivial the subject might be.

At its best, larp is a kind of social dance where players take each other into consideration on the meta-level without their own experience suffering from it. Solipsism, which does not take anything or anyone into consideration, is not that different from those “I could not get out of character after the game ended” claims. The meta-level is always present – it is up to the player to decide whether or not to use it.

## Conclusions

- 1 A human being is a psychophysical whole, where the feedback loop between mind and body works both ways. As people are different, the process of getting in character can move from mental to physical, or vice versa. It is essential for getting in character to ensure that both parts are present for the gaming experience to be holistic and the character believable to other players.
- 2 The meta-level is always present, and a player cannot get stuck in a character by mistake. The player chooses whether she makes deep enough an acquaintance with herself to be able to notice the meta-level and not to be disturbed by its presence. Solipsism and denying the presence of the meta-level indicate mental laziness and indifference towards other players.
- 3 The players' method of forming their characters and their characters actions and reactions towards other characters is an essential part of the larp. Larp is social co-operation where every player's responsibility is to help and enrich other players' experiences, whenever such action is not contradictory with his or her character.

## Further Reading

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